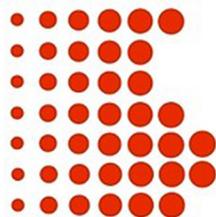


# VSS



by Vernon Howl

# WB-29



**VSS**

(very short stories)



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*Dedicated to everyone and anyone who is doing their  
best, and giving it their all, even if they always  
seem to come up a little bit “short”*

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“Quality is more important than quantity. One home run  
is much better than two doubles.”

— **Steve Jobs**

“I’m best in small doses, believe me.”

— **Mohsin Hamid, *Moth Smoke***

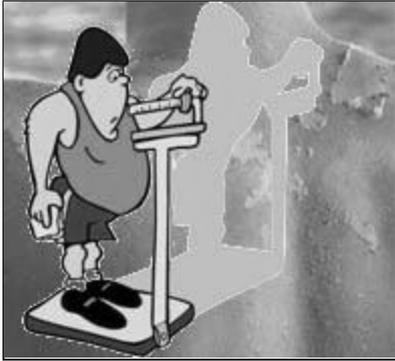
## *The Lady Painted on the Wall*



**She** was held to a higher standard than the rest. Her skin was made of fleece. I was allergic to her. Once, a Jamican Elvis impersonator tried to peel her off the wall in the red room she'd lived in

all her life but her flaming scythe for an arm got caught in another dimension and pulled the rest of that world in along with it. Now we live our days as microbes in what some alien species might call “hair.” She says it has its ups and downs but easy for her to say because the aliens named her Queen of All Earthlings. We tried to tell them she was just a lady painted on the wall only they had no concept of listening or hearing let alone ears, let alone murals, let alone the very idea of ‘art.’

## Weight of Skin



**I dreamt** of a flannel shirt that was so translucent I could sun my chest in winter. It is important to keep up appearances when it comes to skin color. It is an idea that weighs a ton, but we

must carry it until our dying days. We're all married to this weight and to our race and this weight is so heavy it hurts and the weight is grafted to the race inside us and it just wants to break free and be something more than a tone holding back a mass of x,y or z, or \_ . When our skin tones are too fair we stick out and become easy marks for the rabid pterodactyls. And, vice versa. So, I say sun that bod till it is red, or darker, like these barren landscapes. Blend in. But it gets so cold. Despite the constant burning sunlight, I never want my skin exposed to the chill of winter. My cousin once got so pale in the winter months that he was mistaken for a wisp of air and the controllers of the universe sucked him into the atmosphere as if he was nothing, unfit for any food. I think about that cousin a lot. That cousin they named Darkness. Almost every time I breathe in I think about him, and sometimes even when I breathe out.

## ***Beach Night***



**Alfred is** walking on a moonlit beach. He hears the waves and seabirds coo. He looks at his hands. They're no longer trembling. They are larger than the moon.

Suddenly, up over the dunes, he hears the sound of someone running towards him. It's a young woman. Alfred stops and she runs right into his arms, his body clear in the light of the moon, a landing or a target.

"My husband," she exclaims, collapsing at his feet. "He tried to kill me... but I escaped. He told me never to come back."

"Where?" Alfred asks. "Where do you live?"

•

Alfred kicks down the door of the house and finds the abusive drunk half-asleep in a reclining chair. He marches in, grabs the man and throws him on the ground. He is not much bigger than this strange man, but

he's in total control, towering over the confused soul. His hands are around his neck, and he squeezes.

“Say you're sorry,” Alfred says, calmly. But the man can't answer. Alfred is strangling him. He dies there on the floor. It's unclear to Alfred how long this takes, the murder. He turns and the young woman is agasp in the doorway. Her eyes are wide but dry. Alfred scans them for a sense of relief, fear, sadness, anything. But they are blank. Wide, dry and very blank.

## Goldfish

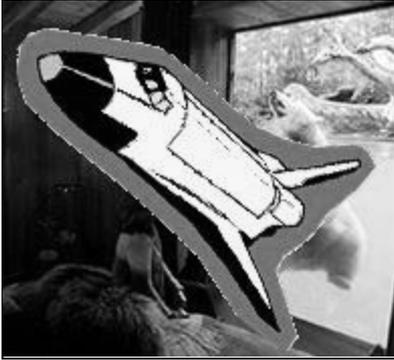


**I wanted** to arrange all my goldfish in a line, or slightly wavy string, and have the last one's tail peeking above the surface of the water. You know, so that if they would, could, connected like that,

all as one, together, it would look like a tiny, mutant sea serpent. I had about nine fish in the tank but who's counting. Nine was plenty. This was for my student film, of course: "The Nine But Whose Counting" (grammatical error on purpose).

But, you see, they wouldn't stop swimming. Not for a second. They were actually very horrible at taking any direction, to be honest. I'm not even sure if fish have ears or if they can hear through the glass or if they care about art at all. So I waited for them to die. One by one. And even then it was hard to do this. It took a long time. I had to rig a fishing line, ironically perhaps, through each of their corpses. Fishing! This took a long time. Such is the difficulty of working with liquid and I wouldn't have dared touch them outside the bowl. Fish, of any species, are, in a political and literal sense, bad actors.

## ***Pink Spaceship***



**Johnny** was a trader.  
You know, stocks.

Inside the pink  
spaceship in his  
garage he kept a  
sack of grenades.  
Just in case. He lived  
in Wisconsin and  
flew the spaceship to  
Wall Street in New

York City every weekday. His roommate Glenn thought that the spaceship was a time machine but Johnny wasn't sure. While they were enjoying milk and cookies on Christmas Eve, they had a discussion about it.

“Why don't you think your spaceship is a time machine, Johnny?” Glenn asked.

“Well, Glenn,” Johnny said. “I don't think it is a time machine because it's never time-traveled before and I use it quite often. Also, because it is pink, which would be a ridiculous color for a time machine.”

“That's a good point, Johnny.” Glenn said. “All fine points, Johnny. Pass the milk and cookies?”

Their pet polar bear was napping by the fireplace.

## ***The Dead Spider***



**The dead spider** wanted to be a kids birthday party magician but the President wouldn't allow it. So the dead spider did what any dead spider would do and planned to overthrow the government. The

dead spider used its burgeoning magic skills (it was becoming quite good) and cast a spell that would poison the Presidential cereal supply. The dead spider turned the President's Cocoa Puffs into arsenic pellets and laced the 2% milk with cyanide. When the President died and the whole government collapsed, the dead spider was free to be whatever thing a dead spider wanted to be. But the dead spider felt so bad about the whole ordeal that the dead spider just went on being a dead spider, perhaps even deader than before.

## Lip Click Thing



**I am** a hashtag. Of course I am. I am nothing if not a self-contained movement pushing softly against its vessel with warm perspiration and really awkward handshakes,

touching the edges gingerly, looking for weak spots, easy exits. I am the fertile invention of synergy. Aren't we all? I flew into your town the other day on the back of a giant bird to say a single word. "Thanks," I muttered breathlessly. It sounded like two dry lips clicking together and not like a word at all. Everyone in the town stared at me like I wasn't just a hashtag on the back of a giant bird. But like any good hashtag, I started a trend that started a fire that inspired a world inside of the town to set more fires until every family was a burning church. Soon everyone in the new world inside of the town started doing the same lip click thing as they burnt. It was great. It sounded like the hum of several thousand marines playing "Reveille" on trumpets sticking out of their assholes. It smelt like millions of bee stinging a rotting whale beached on a billionaire's private island as the billionaire tried to have sex with the corpse of the beached whale but the bees wouldn't stop stinging his

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prick. I laughed all the way to the bank and while I was there I started a savings account that I gave the codename “G.C. Pennywhistle the III.” I tried to put three grilled cheese sandwiches and a dirty penny and a rusty gym teacher’s whistle in the savings account (that’s why I named it that). But the penny was so dirty that the bank lady said I couldn't put it in because people might think it was a bug and scare them and then not use that bank and the bank would slowly become a building that would eventually become a DIY music venue for underground EDM that is so bad it makes any normal human urinate uncontrollably upon hearing it. I told her that all money is like bugs and she said, “Hey, aren't you the guy who started the lip click thing and all the stuff with the fires?” I nodded reluctantly. “Those were my hashtag days, m'am,” I said. “I'm... different now.” I watched the giant bird that brought me here fly away over a mountain and then get shot by big game hunters all named Scott. Everything that I’ve just mentioned happened yesterday and I feel much better today. Thank you for asking.

## Pickle Jar



**The father** put his baby in a pickle jar. It was an industrial-sized pickle jar, a 55-gallon drum mind you, and the baby had plenty of room. The baby is... fine, the father felt. The baby is fine. He threw the lid to the jar like an

Olympic discus into oncoming traffic because he never wanted the baby to stop breathing. The pickle residue attracted many bugs so the baby had friends. The baby is fine. The pickle lid that the father had thrown like an Olympic discus caused a massive pileup and many automobile drivers and passengers died. One of the drivers was a man named Tim who died several days later in the hospital. So the father named the baby Tim in his honor. Everyone thought it was a fine honor. And, to this day, Tim's family *only* eats pickles for dinner to reciprocate said honor. Their house reeks of the putrid brine, as does our dying world.

## ***Roles***



**I walked** down the street. My friend was making loud noises. But he was actually doing an imitation of a friend making loud noises. On the corner a man we didn't know filmed us. We pretended not to

notice. I could tell my friend pretended not to notice. I'm not sure if he knew I knew and that I was also pretending not to notice. I noticed his pretending. It wasn't that big of a deal. We kept walking. His voice continued to do the bad rendition of whoever it was.

## ***Touching Backyards***



**Touching backyards**, with skeleton fences, cried out. They wanted to be neighbors but could not. One of their broken fences was made of metal, that cheap, green, plastic metal that is barely

metal at all. The other one was rotting wood. Their exposed sides told fables of dogs impaled on the front bumpers of cars. And then there was a broken chain, not so much more than rust particles on dead grass now.

## ***Stanley Sporkville***



**Stanley Sporkville** was a man who lived on the edge of town. His real was Grant Stanley. When he was a teenager he made a scale model of the town with sporks. He made it on his family's front

lawn. When his dad got back from the war, he was mad about those sporks. So he set them on fire. My own dad tells me he can still smell the burning plastic when we take the road by Stanley's place. They call them olfactory memories, I think. Stanley Sporkville killed himself last year. He took pills. His family's house has been vacant for years and the grass is long. Driving by, I imagine where on the lawn he built the scale model and what it might have looked like. I can't remember. Our town is small but I have a hard time visualizing it all at once, and a part of me longs to see those sporks.

## **Silver CD Suit**



**If you** walk along the roads long enough you will collect enough discarded compact discs to make an entire wardrobe of silver CDs. Doug learned this the hard way. Although he

was in excellent shape, his CD suits were irksome and often reflected ample sunlight, causing numerous automobile drivers to be blinded and crash into trees as he looked for more discs.

## ***The Book***



**This is** the book and you are thinking about The Rolling Stones. You are thinking this because The Rolling Stones are playing in the world of the character in the book and it doesn't cost a

thing for you to think about music playing inside your mind. Your mind is not his mind, but you could be the man in the book if you illegally download some Rolling Stones, some hot Rolling Stones music, as he does in the book numerous times. Try it. Or are you a coward? Fine then. You can just imagine them playing in the character's mind. There's no copyright in these spaces and that is how it should be, Janet thought. The radio had the right idea. She slowly removes the penknife from her pet rabbit's throat and wipes the blood off on the pages of the book without any print on them. She comes in colors everywhere. She combs her hair. I can't say I know what made her do it but that rabbit was a real prick, a pain in the ass of a pet, to be quite honest with you. Had a real stupid rabbit face and everything. Good riddance, is what I say.

## Cleveland



**The unusual** time conceives the error.

“That knot in your stomach, you feel it,” my clone said. We were holed up in a hotel in downtown Cleveland. I knew this knot well.

“That’s the girl at the counter, the receptionist. That’s her tattoos all jumping about in your gut. You feel it.”

“I didn’t like their shirts. They looked like they were working at Subway. This is a nice hotel. At least I thought it was.”

“Forget her shirt. What about the ink?”

“There was an egg one.” Maybe a dinosaur egg? You can’t pull back from the big paradox when you’re in it. “I’m gonna go get beer.”

“What else?”

“Do you not want beer? It would be good to go for a walk. It stopped raining.”

“There wasn’t any egg but something egg-shaped.”

“Pretty sure it was an egg. She was overweight.” I picked up the keycard on the desk. I imagined the tattoo hatching several baby dragons and I could see them fly up her bicep, her neck, into her hair and eventually her brain.

“You want beer or not?”

“Can you please go talk to her? She liked you.”

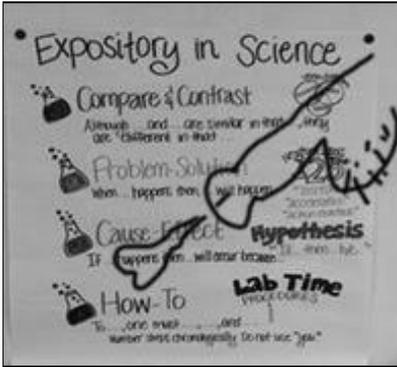
## The Rut Lulls



**My dreams** of becoming a rapper who never rhymed were on the verge of collapse just shy of my 36th birthday. But I recovered. They were finally, officially, squashed by a lull before I

could cash in my first social security check. I had heard about these lulls in my younger days. To see one in the flesh though... My heart exploded and I experienced permanent blindness when I wrote the rhyme. (It was "cat" with "hat," if you can believe it.) Every sun in every galaxy pissed gold onto the being planets, the planets with 'intelligent' beings. And all the beings who had never experienced a lull became millionaires. But me and the other beings busy being blind stayed down, down in the dumps, in a rut. Deep down in that rut. In the rut we found lulls aplenty. In the rut lulls we found an absence which made dreaming feel like death and perhaps it was.

## The Third Grade Science Teacher



The third grade science teacher committed suicide after half her class tweeted pictures of a penis someone had drawn on a poster it had taken her over twelve hours to make. When she got

to heaven, god told her not to worry. He said, "People are only allowed to tweet pictures of their food here."

## *Just Toledo*



**Thought we'd** finally made it to San Antonio. I wasn't driving (I never drive). But the waitress told us this was just Toledo. She said it just like that, too: "This is just Toledo," she said. I

remembered that. *Just Toledo*. Those two words had a playful ring put together like that. I could see 'em, rollin' around, scrappin'. But then maybe the horseplay, maybe it turns bad. Later on in my life when, after a treacherous plane ride, I wound up in California. I cried for a real long time when we landed and all the passengers and flight attendants stared. After rehab, my country-rock record *Just Toledo* sold well enough for me to forget about life, forget about places, forget about all of it, for awhile, again. Until it came time for me to move my body someplace else and in waves the fear of that immobilized my thoughts, and worse things I can't get into.

## *Mayo Dip in the Control Room*



I am in a large confusing space, similar to the control room at NASA, or the depiction of it in movies where hundreds of people are crammed into a big space, pacing up and down rows,

staring at computers. I cannot recall the plot of this particular movie. That's probably because it is my life and I am living it right now. It feels like all the people here are trying to figure something out. It feels like that is always happening around me and elsewhere. It sort of has a 'murder mystery' vibe. The room is swarming with attractive young ladies who all look almost identical. They are snarky and unhelpful. At one point, someone starts talking about mayonnaise for some reason, and I notice a jar of Hellmann's being passed around. Perhaps I notice someone taking a sample from the plastic container of mayo, possibly with some type of instrument. Either way, I get the strangest sensation to dip my finger into the mayo jar and get some mayo to eat "Puck/*Real World 3: San Francisco*" style. While I like mayo on and in lots of food items, this is something I would never do. I have an aversion to the taste of mayo

by itself for some reason. Similar to what happened on *The Real World*, everyone is appalled by my actions, as I do indeed decide to stick my finger in the mayo jar and taste the mayo. The mayo tastes like rubbing alcohol.

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## ***Plastic Cheese***



**Wandering down a** path in a wilderness made of plastic cheese. This is where I find myself. Every last inch of this wilderness: 100% plastic cheese. Not the cheap, kids toy kind either, but

pro-grade plastic cheese, the kind from the finest array of artisanal fake food ever assembled . At the end of the path in this wilderness, a fake sandwich with real cheese awaits. Let this be a warning, dear reader. You will be hungry but won't think to look for the real cheese under the cheap, cardboard, shitty-looking bread. Sunspots of fake cheese will dance in your brain as giant ants eat you and everything else in the wilderness you call home.

## Man



**There are** some things about me becoming a man that you might not like. For instance, I still have this coat. How much of a man can I be with this coat on? Not a full man, no.

And shaving. Ah yes, shaving. So let's shave? You will help me, I hope. Thank you. We will help each other. We can go into the bathroom together. Shave and get clean. Make our faces like the faces of children as good men do. When we are done, will you take me out? Out into the world, yes. I won't be too cold without my coat. I don't feel the cold in that way. If I put the coat on by mistake, well, we'll just shave it off. We, men, are experts at that now. Does that sound right?

## *The iPhone Helicopter Cop Scare*



I am in a field that is close to a police station. I am on the deck (outside dining area) of a fancy restaurant in this field. All of a sudden, a helicopter that is like a clown helicopter but also a police helicopter flies over my head. I am with people who I believe I've just met. They don't seem familiar at all. The copter is doing something outrageous and all the people outside rush to get a closer/better view on the field. I immediately whip out my iPhone and take a video of the crazy spinning colorful clown cop helicopter as it crashes to the ground.

I am in a police station. Apparently, someone I was with was connected to the copter crash, or did something unruly post-copter incident, so he/she is now in this funny rural jail. One of the cops or non-cop police station employees figures out that I filmed the helicopter on my iPhone. I am told that I can either delete the video or be placed under arrest. The guy saying this has olive skin and jet black hair, and is at least one-foot shorter than me. He watches me delete it. I immediately feel horrible about deleting it because, A) it was such a cool

thing and now I won't be able to share it, post it on the internet, etc. and B) I remember reading on the internet that it's well within my rights as a goddam American to be able to film anything I want, including weirdo helicopters tail-spinning to earth outside fancy restaurants. I think I can feel that I am starting to contort my face into a pout.

## ***Clean Up the Mess***



**I hoped** to god the plastic face I bought at the mall wouldn't melt in the sweltering sunlight. I wanna be a superstar, baby. It's all I ever wanted. I was walking home on the shoulder of a

busy highway when a person in a clown suit driving an ice cream truck threw bacon at me. I looked at the bacon on the ground. I didn't want it to go to waste so I ate it on my hands and knees like a pig. It was difficult to eat with my new plastic face on. This bacon-eating delay was prophetic. My plastic face melted before I got home. It made a messy plastic face on the pavement. The soaring vultures knew what had to be done and I walked home crying with the knowledge that my \$100,000 face would be put back into the earth like everything else.

## The Robots



**The robots** took turns prodding the machine. They were envious of the machine because it was not a robot. It was artificial but not intelligent. It was alive in an oblivious way.

Eventually they ate the machine but nobody really ate the machine. Nobody eats anything except electricity. The robots were the machine's children. The robots walked away from the machine. They walked outside. All the grass was gone. The dirt was concrete. None of the little bugs the robots remembered were alive. Their bug bodies were in a bug museum someplace far away.

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## ***Trifle***



A **boy** named Trifle put all his negative energy inside a box then he put the box in a hole in the wall. He spent the better part of five consecutive weekends scouring flea markets and

thrift shops looking for the perfect picture to hang over the hole in the wall. His negative energy emerged whenever he looked at the hole, which was often because he worked from home and didn't have any friends but also because the negative energy didn't like being looked at. It only went away when he resumed looking for a picture to hang.

## **The Cobra Hobos**



**The guy** who died was in a secret band called The Cobra Hobos who were better than all his public bands combined. His will stipulated that the master tapes of their discography (almost

300 albums) were to be given to the first person in the phonebook who was home and answered their phone. And so that's how Jessica Aaron, 76 years old, came to be holding an external hard drive in her driveway. It was the first one she'd ever seen, let alone held. It just looked like a plastic box. She didn't own a computer. She stared at it for a long time. She called her son and left a voice message. Her son, a successful lawyer, forgot to call her back that day. Jessie put the external hard drive in a large tin box, which used to house cookies, and placed it by the refrigerator under her landline phone. She stared at it, blankly, most days, and waited to tell her son about it whenever he had time to call her back.

## ***Trigger McTalon***



**Trigger McTalon** visited every town in the United States of America. In each town he found a forest or forest-like area or if there was nothing too naturey he would just use the front lawn of that

town's mayor's house, and he erected a 17-inch statue of himself, Trigger McTalon. He didn't actually erect anything, though, since the statues were just whittled down tree stumps pulled up by their roots and he would only glue the stumps upside down with knock-off Elmer's and nothing was permanent and he made a big mess.

He took a picture of each statue with his iPhone.

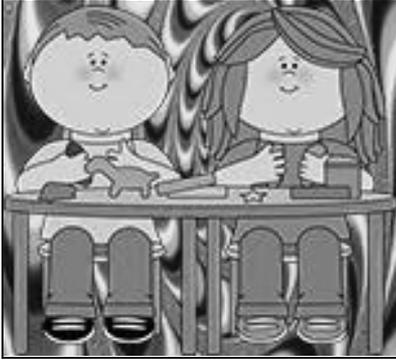
He printed a copy of the picture with his portable Photo Cube™ printer.

He framed the picture and added the inscription: "This is a statue. It exists in your woods. It is also a tree. Chop it down and take a picture of yourself holding it. Email the picture to [REDACTED] and I will pay you \$1."

Then he hung the frame in the men's bathroom of one of that town's fast food restaurants. If the town didn't have a fast food restaurant, he lived in the town until it did.

Trigger McTalon is very old and very rich. When you're good at business, you're good at business.

## *The Feeling*



**I am** at my childhood home. Earlier, I attended a class with many familiar faces. People from high school, many whom I hated. I can't necessarily recall if they had aged well,

or aged at all. Probably, it feels as though they hadn't. We were all sitting in a crowded room, a classroom. The desks were in a circle. When the bell rang, everyone tried to grab their backpack and coats in a mad scramble. I purposely pushed off to a corner and let the swarm do its thing, not wanting to get caught up in that craziness.

And now I am at this house, my childhood home. I myself do not feel like a teenager. I am wandering aimlessly downstairs. I feel hungry and afraid and nervous. For some reason I do not have any pants on. I am looking for my pants. I know that my girlfriend and my dog are asleep upstairs, possibly in my old room. I want to find my pants and then go out the front door. I have this terrible feeling that I should just run away and leave everything and everyone behind. I am scared that going outside will wake up my dog. I don't think I will ever find my pants.

## Cold KFC



**The megalomaniacs** were swarming outside my house with buckets of chicken wings. Before one could throw nary a wimpy wing, I gunned them down with a metric ton of silly string. It was the dead

of winter and too cold for cops to come clean up the mess. So their bodies decomposed. They became beautiful hippy flowers in the spring. I let my dog piss on them and they died. Luckily the cops didn't swing by that fateful night. I woulda killed them too. Everything dies eventually.

## ***The Toaster***



**Jimmy dreamt** he was a toaster that never actually held toast. The toaster was a modest, two-piece model and the owner, whom Jimmy imagined was a mean old man named Zagreb, just

clicked it down and stared blankly until it popped, ejecting nothing but air. He did this over and over until the toaster broke, at which point he brought it back to the store looking for a refund. But a decade had passed and the store refused Zagreb's request.

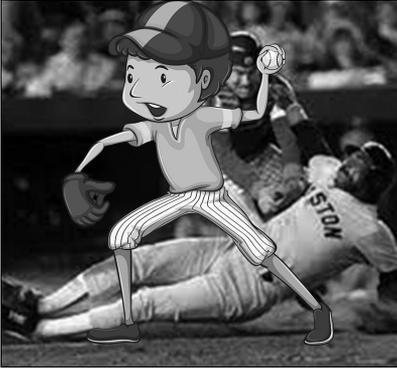
## ***This Time with a Knife***



**He made** a smoothie for the wife of the sweat husband while the sweat husband chugged sweat on the elliptical machine, pausing every once in a while to drench the *New York Post* laid out in front of

him on the console with sweat until the newspaper was basically all sweat, like papier-mâché. After dropping off the smoothie to the wife of the sweat husband, he went back to the smoothie shack and masturbated. It took him less than a minute to cum. This was his ritual. God told him later that he reached orgasm in the back of the smoothie shack, on average, in 37 seconds. When we was dead (suicide, the thing in the garage with the car and the tube and all the smoke) and talking to god, this fact made him smile. *Hella fast*, he thought. Later, when he became dreadfully bored with the angels and their lack of genitalia, it made him want to kill himself all over again. This time with a knife.

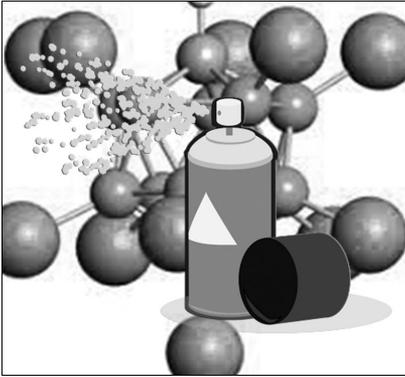
## ***The Mets-Red Sox Game***



**I am** in the visitor's dugout at Fenway Park. The Mets have taken the field. I'm unsure if this is a fictional interleague game during the regular season or a fictional World Series game. I am

the guest of an old friend. He seems really nervous. He is rooting for the Red Sox because he married a girl from Boston, and so now he likes the Red Sox. He is even wearing a Boston replica uniform, head-to-toe including stirrups, which is ballsy considering we are in the Mets' dugout. The players seem to charge off the field, angrily, at the end of the inning. They're coming for me and not my friend for some reason.

## ***Inorganic Graffiti***



**I am** in a loud coffee shop. I am interviewing for a position as some sort of writer/media person for a big, well-respected music website (like Pitchfork or something). The woman

interviewing me looks like a gypsy. My friend is there and he is giggling a lot. The woman asks me if I feel like a good description for my work would be “inorganic graffiti.” I tell her, yes, very much so. She then admits that her question was a set-up. That there’s no such thing as “inorganic graffiti,” that all graffiti is “organic,” she tells me. I try to convince her that that’s what I thought she said, “organic graffiti.” Of course. I am not doing a good job.

I don’t get the job and I feel angry because I think that “inorganic graffiti” *is* a good description for my work. I can’t really expand upon it at this moment, however.

## *Our Impossible Fear*



**There** are dates on the horizon full of numbers and hope. Some of them are parties and some of them are goals. Two have bright big tongues and they lick me like a frustrated dog licks the itch or

licks the boy because, deep down, the dog knows it cannot bite. The dog wants to bite. It is in his DNA. But he cannot because he has been tricked into thinking he is happy, content. Three others still sport the insignia of athletic franchises and tend to taunt like school bullies. And the very last one is a clock, counting, keeping time for all the rest to live by. It's this one. This one stares at me and knows. Its knowing heart weighs a ton. It knows I am its vice and its versa, and together each our only father and son, with no facsimiles of fairness or wrenches hanging around to impregnate with our impossible fear.

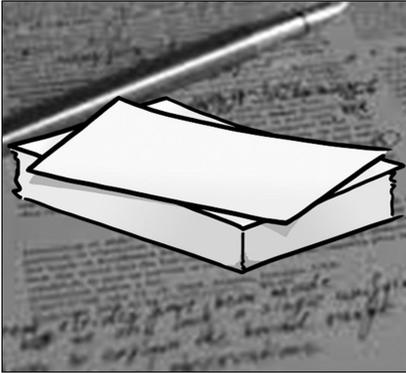
## ***The Hockey Coach***



**The hockey coach** secretly loved watching figure skating. He had amassed a collection of 100,000 VHS tapes of figure skating on every level of competition. The collection began to

take over his house. After the hockey team won the championship, the entire team carried him home on their shoulders. When they opened the front door, the figure skating tapes poured out onto the front walk. Each member of the team ceremoniously taped a VHS tape to their forehead and marched downtown, chanting, “FIGURE SKATING FOREVER! FIGURE SKATING FOREVER!” They all became figure skaters and died in a plane crash on their way to the Olympics.

## ***First Draft***



**A lonesome** child wanted to write short stories about animals. He wanted to see those stories in magazines. The kid didn't know what a book was. The animals in his mind were magical. The books that

didn't exist were large crabs eating houses on the shoreline. When the animal witch came to his house, turned on the word processor without permission and deleted his first draft, the child wept. In the backyard, the sad child fed all the world's wonder to inchworms in the sandbox.

## The Attitude of an Artist



**My fiction** smelt like burnt orange peels and a mixture of washing machine sex and gym socks, the kind of smelly socks typically found in grate metal lockers in New Jersey high school lockerrooms. When

it walked, it went up into people's noses to hangout. It tended to gallop instead of walk though, as smells tend to do. It was fluffy like an iceberg lettuce cloud. It didn't have many friends, although it tried so hard, and became tired of keeping a good attitude, like the attitude of an artist.

## ***Taste Memory Gag Reflex***



**I ate an English muffin yesterday. It made me feel nauseous for some reason. And now I know why. I call this a taste memory gag reflex.**

When I was a child and experiencing gastro-related illness, my parents would always give me toasted English muffins with butter because I “needed to eat something.” For years, I jammed English muffins down my throat only to puke them back up in horror because I “needed to eat something.” So, I think I am wired to feel nausea when consuming English muffins now.

## The Horror

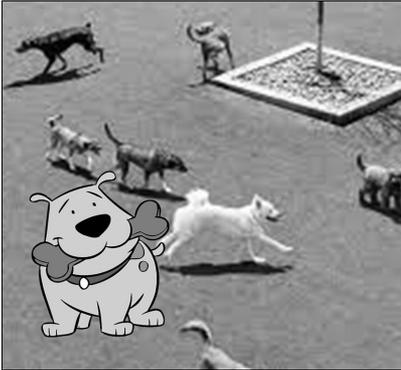


**I am, fuck,**  
fuckknowswhere. I  
am basically in the  
movie *Saw*. At one  
point, I guess this is  
towards the end,  
there is a legless,  
armless Asian boy,  
who is also missing  
his mouth and eyes.

He just exists on the

ground, spinning in circles. I ask \_\_\_\_\_ if he can still  
eat. I'm not sure if \_\_\_\_\_ answers me. He exists but I  
don't see him yet. I knew they cut off the Asian boy's  
arms and legs, and made him like that because he was  
really a monster, but it was still horrifying. He didn't  
seem like a monster. At one point, earlier, I was in a drug  
store on my cell phone. I don't know who I am talking  
to. They tell me to buy \_\_\_\_\_ and a syringe (to kill the  
Asian boy monster). I ask the person at the drug store if  
they have \_\_\_\_\_. They do. It comes in a red bottle. I  
feel funny buying this plus the syringe. It feels  
incriminating. When I get back to the place, I see the  
thing twirling on the ground. We don't need to use the  
syringe. He's perfectly incapacitated. He's on the way  
out.

## ***A Large Dog***



**A large dog** vomited on Steve's shoes. He looked around for the dog's owner but all he saw were burning fast food restaurants. Then, out of nowhere, a frantic man came

rushing towards him. "I'm the arsonist!" The man screamed. "And that's my dog."

## ***Boats and Ships and Sharks and Things***



**I coughed** and a river fell out of my mouth. There were at least thirty vessels floating down the river which was now an extension of my mouth and face, and I was no longer coughing, but

puking. I could see tiny men on one of the boats laughing at me. They were drunk and laughing. They weren't paying attention to the shark. The river shark ate the whole boat in one bite. When I stopped puking, the river became a puddle and all the boats and ships and sharks and things became dead ants.

## Karen



“It’s sometimes... unbelievable,” Karen says, slowly. “Just how much... an asshole... you can be.” Garrett fires back, “You mean, ‘how much *of* an asshole,’ you drunk bitch.” Then the

fight gets heavy and meaningless. Arms are held by fists or vice versa. Somebody throws a plate. The two dogs look so depressed, but they play it cool. Like they’re used to this shit. Harvard is passed out in the bathroom. I can see his sneakers peeking out the door. He always has nice shoes, that guy. I smoke the third cigarette of my second pack on the miniature deck out back. I let the dogs out. They don’t do anything. They just go down the steps, turn and squat facing toward me, looking right at me. Like, “Hey, Jim, build a spaceship already and let’s get out of here.” Me and the two dogs. Flying in a silver rocket to the moon. But it’s getting light out now. Karen and Garrett are fast asleep.

## The Kid



**The kid** opened up his eyes and saw a world that looked magnetic but it was only made of normal gravity and he was immune to that sort of thing, the push of things away from his body. It was

overwhelming sometimes and his house shriveled a little in embarrassment when he thought about it.

The kid's house turned into a car and his driver's license was the family portrait above the mantle. His family had dripped off the portrait and returned as paint inside the paint cans slowly rusting in the garage.

The kid drove the house across the entire state looking for a lake or a river or a pond. He found a dilapidated above-ground pool that was only half-full. He parked the house inside it and knocked on the front door.

The kid was greeted by a mean old lady in a spandex tracksuit who forced burnt cookies down his throat. The cookies made him feel tired but in an anxious way. He forgot to ask her if he could fill her above-ground and let his house soak for a while. He ran down the street

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looking for a salad to live inside of because he had no place to live.

The kid waited to eat his cheeseburger until his favorite show started. He synchronized his eating so that each bite corresponded with the worst bits of dialogue and each swallow, the best.

The kid did what could only be described as a casual waltz, pretending to glide with some invisible figure in a dance, but only in such a way that it might translate as a joke or, if not a joke, an uncomfortable gag at the invisible figure's expense. In reality, it was all just a way for him to get to the cookie jar in the kitchen without his sedentary family thinking about cookies as they watched reality TV on the living room flatscreen.

The kid dipped his hand into the cookie jar and it was empty. He peered at his family who were all stains on the living room couch. The cookies were stuck to the stains and he heard massive sucking sounds which were his family liquifying the cookies and turning them into parts of the couch, parts of themselves.

The kid told the mean old lady that he wanted to leave his family and she agreed it was a great idea. They drew up escape plans in a 99¢ composition notebook but soon the plans became doodles and they laughed knowing no door in the house was locked, no family member without a suspended license was not sleeping a deep and drunken slumber in the various rooms of the house.

The keys to the family car hung on a piece of wood carved in the shape of a giraffe. The mean old lady grabbed the giraffe and said, “this is Nathan.” The kid said, hello. The kid started the car and it felt good. The mean old lady jammed the piece of wood carved in the shape of a giraffe, Nathan, down her throat, crunching it all up inside herself until Nathan’s wooden head was her head, and she said, “My name is Nathan the giraffe now.””

The kid felt different about the mean old lady now that she was Nathan and had a giraffe head. The giraffe head looked less wooden on her spandex body than before. He drove on, not thinking about how he was too young to know how to drive.

Nathan lit a cigar and held the kid’s right hand. The kid steered the car with his left hand. The heat of the cigar turned Nathan’s wooden lips brown. They were quickly approaching the ocean, driving full speed, screaming and crying. They hoped the car would turn into a boat so that they wouldn’t drown.

But they did.

## ***Stan's Crispy Jamaican Heart Attacks***



**In the morning**, the man wearing shorts looked gray. He envisioned a parody of his own existence in which the basic laws of parody were really just wishful thinking.

He took his wife out for ice cream that afternoon as soon as she fell asleep. They did not get anything too extravagant because, even in dreams, you have to watch your weight, and not because the man's bank account couldn't cut the mustard. It was just fucking ice cream.

He said to his lovely wife, "How do you figure that?" And in the alternate realm he had created, she said nothing in response because he failed to ask a question in the first place. You see how these things work? Do you understand the logic of the man who wears shorts?

On their way back from the ice cream parlor, the man had a heart attack and died.

The "How do you figure that?" line turned out to be his last words. He had previously said, "I think I'll have a

medium mint chocolate chip choo choo train.” The wife then said, “Well at least you can afford it, you sonofabitch.”

She was trying to be sarcastic, but her tone badly confused the man instead. Both of these people were very depressed, you see. So the man who was wearing shorts in the morning died. What now?

Well, his wife, who was not prone to wearing shorts, walked into my store one day. (I sell crispy Jamaican heart attacks.) She said to me, “Did you know my husband died of a heart attack.” To which I replied, “Was it a Stan’s Crispy Jamaican Heart Attack?” She laughed.

Later in life, when we were good and married ourselves, I said to her, my wife, “Why do you have such a hard time losing weight?” A crazy thing happened next. You remember her first husband, right? Well, that loon, from beyond the grave, reconstructed the magic world from the first paragraph (the one where parody and wishful thinking were equal things) right in my kitchen! He had set it up before he died so that a password would summon his wife to it. The password was me saying the thing about her weight. How do you like that!

I could see them through the crystal orb, hugging and holding hands. And so I went down to my shop and bought one of Stan’s Crispy Jamaican Heart Attacks and ate it right up. It was delicious!

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## ***The Depressed Person Man***



**The depressed man** paced around the room and pulled out each one of his hair plugs, of which he had exactly seven left. The hair plugs were fake snakes of various fluorescent colors. He put the seven snakes in a

box. He had gone deep into debt finding a doctor who would implant them and staring at them now made him feel worse than he ever had previously.

## ***I Drink Beer in the Morning before Work***



**I drink** beer in the morning before work. Let's be clear: there's nothing wrong with that. I don't come into work a slobbering fool and I don't do any less work than nobody else. I like a

tallboy with my steak and eggs, or if I don't have steak, sausage and eggs. That is all.

And at lunch, I like a little punch of vodka. I'm a light lunch eater. Maybe I'll have a sandwich and an apple if I'm feeling healthy-ish. Whatever it is, it's best to wash it down with a large vodka cran. It's nobody's business but my own.

When work is out, I go walk the dog. We walk long and hard. I smoke many cigarettes and I pull steadily, but smally, from a flask of cheap whiskey. I buy whiskey by the handle but only take down about a half a flask's worth on my nightly walks with Sammy.

Then it's home for dinner, whatever's easy: meat, potatoes, stuff like that. Usually I just set it all in a

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frypan on low and let it work while I crack open a beer or two.

And then, sometimes, I go out to the bar. I don't talk to nobody but the bartenders and I don't stay too long. I smoke. I drink whiskey without ice, maybe three at most. I watch people, but not in a creepy way. It's not a crowded place. I enjoy a cigarette or two on my walk home. Then I'm home and I go to sleep. What else do you want to know?

## Briefly Stoic



**Briefly Stoic** clenched the baby bird. All the air in the baby bird's body went skedaddle poof poof in the sky. He looked at the robin's egg blue of the critter-cracked shells and

half-eaten baby bird sibling fetuses. And he knew he had done the right thing. "You are in heaven now," he said to the dead baby bird body, the one still in his hand. "With your brothers and sisters." The robin mother was incapacitated and small. If she was of able bird body and not preoccupied, she would have pecked Briefly Stoic into the dirt like the dust. "Now," Briefly continued. "Time to find that mouse."

The mouse responsible for the robin fetuses not being birds, and the subsequent murder of an additional to-term robin bird was named Bertrand. He ate the bulk of four robin fetuses in just under five minutes. This was impressive on several levels. For starters, he was the first mouse in the history of mice to actually eat bird meat, or meat of any kind. He was sick of being a herbivore. He

wanted to eat meat to stimulate brain growth. He was tired of being a stupid bug and crap-eating mouse.

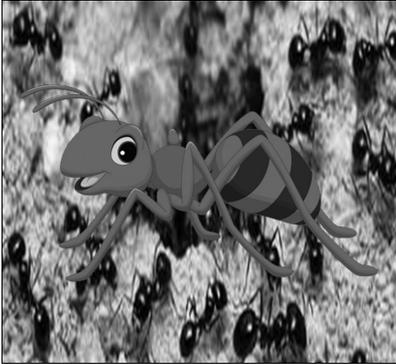
It was also impressive because one of the fetuses was actually the true flesh of God. And so now Bertrand was immortal. Though this he did not know.

Behind Briefly Stoic's woodland house, Bertrand hid. Briefly Stoic owned over a thousand acres of property. Somewhere, out past vision's reach, save that of an eagle soaring, a thick iron fence worked as a perimeter. Briefly honestly believed he was the leader and controller of all the things and animals within the painted-black metal of that ten-foot wall. Bertrand could fit through the slits in the fence if he ever found the edge. But he was tired now, bogged down from the glutenous purge. He slept beneath a leaf. God, the mouse Bertrand, snored.

Briefly took drugs to fight the pain he felt. It was psychological pain. The pain was caused primarily by his having outed his father as a child molester. Briefly Stoic, now seventeen, had his father, Hardly, jailed in the county slammer in the fall. Hardly Stoic was an innocent man, no doubt, 100%. On account of his being a genius, the courts allowed Briefly to occupy the manor and grounds of Stoic Farms by himself. Momma Stoic had perished in the Last Great War.

When Briefly found the sleeping mouse, he killed God.

## Ant Story

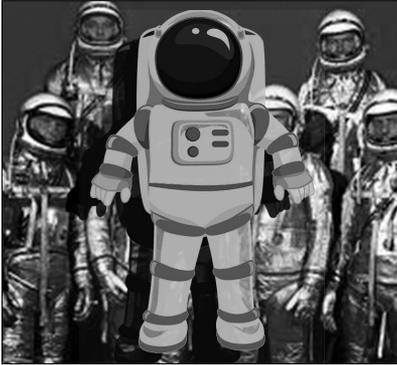


**This is** the story of an ant. And a fat man on his cell phone.

The ant felt conflicting about wanting the outsole of the fat man's shoe to turn him into a

black smear. The ant thought about dropping the crumb he was carrying and crawling around in circles in the fat man's vicinity. The ant imagined the fat man lifting his leg as high as his fat, rigid knee would allow, only to catch the ant's insect body serendipitously inside one of the cut-out, rubber indentations on the bottom of the fat man's sneaker, sparing the ant's life, thus prolonging his despair, or: possibly awakening some hidden part of the ant's psyche that still wanted to liv, that still wanted to carry gigantic crumbs (crumbs that outweighed the ant 25 to 1!) away from future fat men and other regular-sized humans alike. Forever, so high, so high above, the ant's ant head.

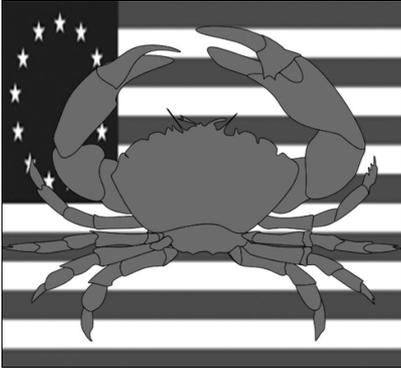
## ***The Dennis Quaid Astronaut Tip Scheme***



**I am** in a weird, empty bar, and I work here, though it's unclear what I do or am supposed to be doing. A guy who I used to know is my uptight boss. He tells me I am the leader of the bar's "outside

crew." Among the employees in my charge is the actor Dennis Quaid, who is dressed in a blue military suit with a million pins. He says he is playing Buzz Aldrin in a movie. I say, "that's great." And I really believe it is. I tell him he needs to be out in front the whole time we are working because people will really tip Dennis Quaid dressed as Buzz Aldrin. I also tell everyone not to give their tips to the uptight boss (as he had instructed) but to give them to me. There is also a vaguely attractive girl working here, and I instruct her to stand near Dennis Quaid to help in the tip-getting. She is Asian with blonde, curly hair. I don't recognize her.

## **Betsy**



**Betsy decided** to fill in the whites of every eye in every magazine in her dentist's waiting room. She removed a red pen from her purse. Just before her pen could touch the first eyeball, the

receptionist called her name. As she was sitting in the chair, waiting for the dentist, Betsy put the red pen to her palm and realized it was out of ink.

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## ***The Mitt Romney Cross-Country Ski Race Controversy***



**I am** pissed. I want to know where Romney is so I can bitch him out.

Upon somehow winning a cross-country ski race against Romney and several other

competitors, I learn that Romney has told the judges he saw me cheat, thus negating my championship. The official score person is Erin, the cute secretary from *The Office* who replaced Pam. She explains to me that Romney, who finished second, said he saw me cut the route short. I tell her that he is a filthy liar and that I beat him by a quarter-mile so there's no way he was ever close enough to see. I am flabbergasted and full of rage.

Later I find him giving some kind of speech in a hotel conference room, and I start to scream at him but I am so winded and nervous that I barely make a peep.

**Let the Clock Go Tick-Tick, Tick-Tock,  
Tick-Tock and Let the Heart Go  
Bump, Bump, Bump**



I tried to compare the new, crazy turn his life was taking to the one that kid from Latin America who became the lead singer of Journey took. But John didn't appreciate that and

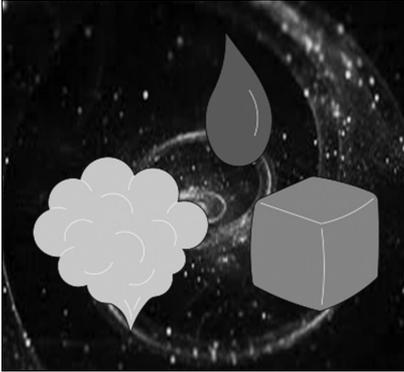
it looked like he was going to hit me. We are real close friends.

It's 2017 and we are in Germany recording a new record, our first in some time. We email less and less these days because we are in Germany, together. I have no clue how popular our band is anymore, here or abroad, but, then again, I never really knew this information. We were almost like this band that I imagined one night on my couch. We may as well have been a couch, and now perhaps an ottoman or chair, or TV dinner tray.

I could have been half-watching an NBA playoff game instead of this and our band could have been the big hand on a grandfather clock going tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock. I could have been doing anything really, sitting

or watching or thinking or breathing. When I created a band like our band in my mind, I could have been doing any number of things.

## Captured Matter



**I met** a man who was living inside some photographs I found in a cardboard box. He wasn't any of the men in the pictures, or the women or the tables or the chairs or the walls or the sky or any of the

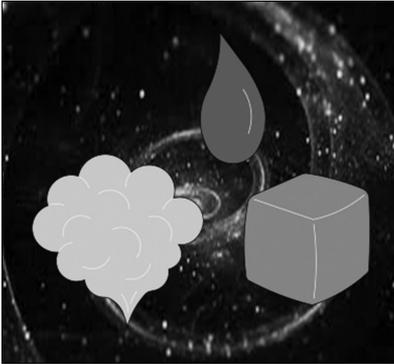
other captured matter in those photos. He wasn't the plastic lining that held them inside the scrapbook either. Oh, and he also wasn't the box itself.

He told me he longed to be living inside a teenage girl's cell phone. "But not a smartphone," he said. "I don't much care for the internet, or any technology." I told him that that was a good thing to long for. "Likely an upgrade," I said.

I closed the book of photos and set it down in the cardboard box. I walked away and could hear the man screaming in pain for miles.

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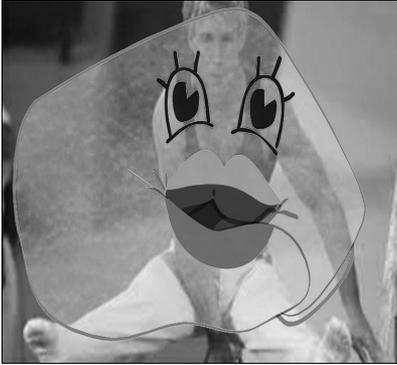
## *The Cup of Art*



**I am** someplace, maybe in my basement. The only thing I can remember is that the two new paintings I am finishing were in it, and then there was this other thing: a red cup filled with an ocean of color and possibly tiny, living things. It was magnificent, in my vague recollection.

My father is with me in an unfamiliar room, with red and black markings on the wall and possibly yellow furniture. Then he storms out acting like a big baby, really very hysterical. My sister is there and she tells me that it will all be fine.

## **Conner**



**On Conner's** ninth birthday he decided to replace all of the mayonnaise in the fridge with white wine. He put the extracted mayo in a container and brought it to the grocery store. Then

he dumped it in the live lobster tank and said, "You're welcome, lobsters." When he returned home, his parents were passed out, drunk. It was tuna salad night. Can you believe it?

## ***The Anti-Fiction Faction: Story for a Song***

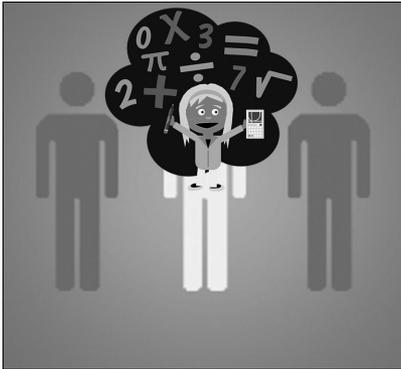


**Listening to** a song, feeling sad, wanting a cigarette. Trying to listen to the lyrics again. Can recall being a teenager and feeling depressed, listening to lyrics and also melodies. Wish I could feel

that again because it was so strong. The numb panic of aging is filled with a boredom I didn't know existed. And I do not understand it now.

The story doesn't have a plot beyond this feeling, this idea. Wanting a cigarette and getting hit by a car on a rainy night. Aging. That sort of thing. Nothing beyond that. "Reiterate," the old man says to the boy. "Don't be afraid."

1 of 3



**He was** done reading but had nothing to write. In a fit of panic, an electronic message, a prayer for a friend, had found its way through the tangles of office ether and through the jaws of

one (one of three) of the duplicitous machines. His brain: mashed potatoes, body: freaked out, the panic like a gameshow loomed, but behind which door, to which photocopier should he sprint, gut over belt above nervous walking steps? Past the reception desk, he shuffled. The bookish clerk opened her mouth but did not speak. Into the mailroom. His heart spewed techno but his demeanor, clocked neatly to adult contemporary (106.7 Lite FM), grooved. The machine was bulimic, busy spewing more than it could ever hold. But this vomit was not his own. He tickled its buttons to discern the playlist. If only this option were available on barroom jukeboxes, he pondered, momentarily aloof. You never know when it's your turn. But all to no avail: his print job belonged not to the heart of this beast. One down, two to go.

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Past the Asian Republican little person and Staten Island pill girl, the maze of faceless cubicles and corner offices with their gorgeous 17th floor views of the New Jersey Turnpike (“That, little Jimmy, is one of the busiest entrance ramps to the Turnpike in the entire state,” the executive said.), he trudged forward. Past the pretty, turned head of the office manager: she of the key to the supply closet, various hearts. He imagined her mostly-always-hungover eyes (“What color are your eyes,” he’d never ask.) And to the back office copier he arrived. Same deal, same results. He walked away.

Number three was a longshot. His trot slowed into a wimpish gate, a sort of fake limp, a march of great anguish and defeat. The machine stood still and clean, smaller and less complicated than the first two. It resembled a happy but unruly child, he thought. Of little use but somehow content being crazy. He put a hand to it as if it were dead and glanced at the requisite turkey vulture, forever in a swirl, beyond the glass.

## Bluejay Apartment



**I unplugged the toaster and put it in the bath. I did not join the toaster in the bath. It wasn't plugged in.**

My cousin's collection of bluejays got his house condemned.

He had over one hundred bluejays in his apartment because something was wrong with his brain. How did he get them all in there? How did he get them to breed? Bird poop everywhere. Peck marks. Fresh ones. Scabs.

I filled the tub with lukewarm water. I watched the toaster bob a bit like the sinking ship that it was. Kind of floating but unsure of itself, oblivious to the impending doom. I thought about bluejays pooping on and pecking my cousin. One hundred bluejays in a small apartment. They call it animal hoarding. They got a TV show.

How long can I sit here and watch the toaster in the bath? Stupid toaster.

## ***Fancy Tropical Hotel***



**I am** in a fancy tropical hotel. I am nervous. I'm following my girlfriend, who is wearing what I can only describe as a lady-tuxedo. It's the kind of garb one would wear if they

were going to a job working as a banquet waiter. You know the garb. She's in a big hurry. I have our dog, Franklin, for some reason, on his leash, inside the hotel. Why is he here? I immediately assume that my girlfriend is rushing to get to some waitering job because we don't have the money to be staying at such a nice tropical hotel. Our dog is scared, his tail between his legs, but he is letting me pull him through the crowded dining rooms of the hotel with some amount of ease. I yell something to her about how it's not worth the five or ten dollars and to just forget it. (I have no idea what this means, what this amount of money means, but it made sense at the time). I am causing a scene. The diners stare at Franklin and I. We start going in the opposite direction. I note that Franklin is being a very good and understanding dog (given the odd circumstance, but also in general). I stop at a Taco Bell inside the hotel and eat a fish taco. I

expect my girlfriend to come in any second. I purposely try to look sad as I finish my fish taco, though I don't know why. I don't know why I'm even eating this taco. I am not hungry. When I realize that my girlfriend is not coming to find us there, I get up and go back to our room. Somehow, I know exactly where it is. The room is unbelievable, almost an entire mansion in and of itself. There I find her, not wearing the lady-tux. She's with a man about our age. The man is a muscle man and he's wearing a baseball cap with a defunct logo on it. They both look newly showered. Music is playing loudly, and they seem a little drunk. I ask my girlfriend, nervously, if I can speak to her in private. I am confused. She seems really annoyed. I again tell her not to worry about the money.

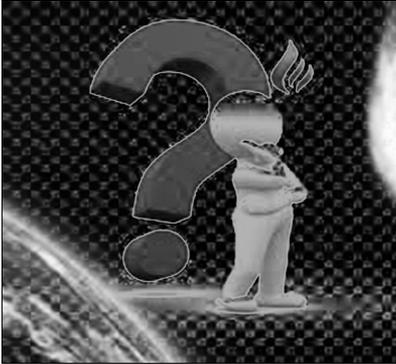
## ***A Tiny Child***



**A tiny** child who wished his nickname was “Tooth” drew a new family in black crayon on a piece of cardboard. This family consisted of one mother and fifteen rodent-like creatures. He

imagined his even smaller brothers and sisters screaming “Tooth! Tooth!” as they marched into the dollar store. His black crayon mother was so proud of all her children.

**February 19th, 2068**



**When the** search dogs found the holy grail it was filled with piss. Lonely cups of hot water were set on fold-out tables in the dingy basements for AA meetings but nobody had remembered to

reinvent tea yet. Everyone took substances everyday so that their brains would function slightly or incredibly better than they would have otherwise. A religious cop shot a man and then bragged about it in a short story he posted online. This day in history.

## *Hero*



**PITTSBURGH, PA (AP).** Barry Wheeler knows a thing or two about good timing.

He was born seven weeks premature.

“My mom was just a mom, you know,”

he says with a smile. “I really don't know how else to answer your questions.”

He did, however, know how to answer the call of local homeless man, Howell J. Stevenson. Stevenson had fallen into Shark River and could not get out. He admits to panicking.

“One second you're on the shore, homeless, but pretty much alright. Then you're in the river, drowning,” he said, safe and dry at the J.P. Johnson Homeless Shelter for Veterans. Stevenson is a veteran of the second World War. “Sure, some days I want to die. But not by drowning. No.”

“I killed some [REDACTED], sure I did,” Stevenson said. Colonel Armond Glover, Stevenson’s platoon leader, confirms. Reached for comment, the retired officer said, “Fuck, that dude is still alive? He was clinically insane. I mean, Grade A fucking bat shit. We caught him eating the brains of some slaughtered enemy soldier in the middle of the night. There was a rape incident as well. Or, no, multiple incidents. It never went to tribunal but between you, me and the lamp post, well, that was then, I suppose.”

As for Wheeler, it was just another day at the office.

“My office is on the first floor, and I like to smoke with my body kind of half-dangling out the window. So yeah, that’s how I heard him.” Stevenson said he hadn’t been in the water long when his personal Superman appeared out of nowhere. “No, it isn’t safe. Not really. I’m actually not supposed—hey, do you mind not printing that part?”

“To tell the truth, seeing things as they are now, I probably would have rather just drowned out there in the river. It was real peaceful actually,” Stevenson said. “But then that fat man came out of nowhere.”

“I could lose a few pounds, maybe,” Wheeler added. “He really called me fat?”

Weight issues aside, Wheeler certainly made a splash when he jumped in the river to save the helpless man. Asked if he had seen Stevenson before, he said, “I don’t

really make it my fucking business to remember the faces of homeless people, do you?”

Wheeler had been a two-sport varsity athlete at Montgomery-Ward High School in Branchburg but, ironically, not in swimming. “We didn't have a swim team,” he confirmed. “Swim team—I don't know. Seems kinda gay, doesn't it? No offense.”

Asked what he was going to make of this new lease on life, Howell J. Stevenson responded, “Probably go get drunk if I can. See if anyone near the bar recognizes my face from this thing. You're gonna take my picture, right?”

## Camp Blog



I sat around the campfire with all the other bloggers. For some reason, their faces were painted black. The whites of their eyes and their teeth and sometimes their gums and tongues stuck out of

the darkish blue background and cut through the yellowish red and smoke from the fire like large unreal things in the fog on a field in some movie you haven't seen but it looked good from the trailer, but not *good* good, only interesting in a fun, stupid way. It was twilight. I took small sips from my cup of orange juice as calmly as I could, what with them plotting to kill me, or blog about me. It seemed like they were plotting to kill me.

## ***The Puppy Box***

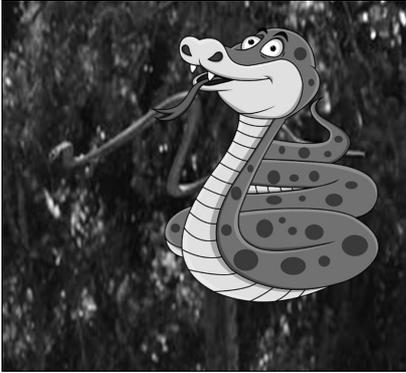


**I am** in my parents' basement. It's been brought to my attention that there is a box of puppies in a cardboard box down here. Though people, like my dad, are telling me not to worry about the boxful of

puppies (there are maybe twenty very tiny puppies), I cannot not worry about these puppies. I start pulling puppies out of the box. They are so dirty with what appears to be shit, but I can't smell anything. I run upstairs to get things to clean the puppies. I can't seem to find the bucket. When I return to the basement I see that they have been cleaned. Although some are still submerged in the bucket and they look drowned. I feel very sad, but when I pick up their lifeless bodies from the water, they wake up and seem fine. Also, they all are wearing human clothing now. Some of them are unnatural and unreal looking. One seems to be a cartoon or a toy, with like a spiral or spring metallic thing for a torso. There are a lot of people around. I can't seem to remember most of them. I think my parents are having some kind of party. I decide that A) we need to remove

all the human clothes and B) put them in new, clean boxes, five pups to a box at the most. I am being pragmatic at the most insane moment and the moment doesn't appreciate that. One of the pups is wearing a blue and yellow varsity jacket and corduroy pants. When I remove the jacket, pants and undershirt, I find that this puppy's body is made out of a really big knot of thick rope.

## *Flying Snake*



**The bartender's** pet snake grew tiny wings but they were strong enough for flight. When the bartender's shift was over, he came home to a flying snake, going absolutely wild with a newfound,

unimaginable freedom. The snake flew around the kitchen, opening up all the cabinet doors with its slithery tongue. He knocked over the miniature silo of uncooked oatmeal and ate bananas snatched from the trendy fruit canopy whole without peeling. The bartender, enraged and tired, screamed, "Enough!"

Feeling bad, the flying snake stopped flying and found its way back to the cage. The bartender put three strong locks on the cage and poured himself a drink. Eventually the snake's tiny wings wilted from disuse. They fell off its body, turned into dust and disappeared.

## **The Slurpee™ Sniffer**



**He smelt her** Slurpee. It was Wednesday. “There is alcohol in this Slurpee,” he thought. “Again.” As she finished up in the bathroom, he struggled to get the flimsy plastic top back on. He feared

she would know he’d been sniffing her Slurpee, once again.

Having just been arrested for driving while intoxicated for the second time in six months, he worried about her drinking habits and thought his having smelt the Slurpee to have been a reasonable act. She, however, was not a very reasonable person. When she returned from the bathroom she shot him a hard, knowing glance. Or it seemed that way. He found it difficult to differentiate this look from that of any other, at any other time. Being drunk, even just a little, and secretly so, seemed like her only translatable mode. “If she wasn’t so beautiful,” he thought. If only.

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If only what? He was not a confident person. This was a passive-aggressive relationship. He sighed. She sat there looking beautiful. "I don't even mind that she is drunk all the time," he thought. "She is young. This is alright. It will eventually stop. I feel indifferent towards her drinking. I don't want to break up with her." She picked up the Slurpee. A smug glow burned bright about her perfectly-shaped face as she sipped and swallowed the alcohol-infused, icy liquid with joy.

He envisioned his right hand swatting the cup from her delicate palm as he lectured her about the sad reality of what she was doing to her body. But he just sat further back into the couch so that he was almost laying down. She continued to drink the blue raspberry Slurpee. She drank it steadily, sucking the concoction into her mouth through a straw. He watched, feeling her intoxication with the sound of every swallowing sound. He made up his mind: he wasn't going to say anything, wasn't going to confront her again. But that's not what happened.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Why are you doing this to yourself?"

"I'm not," she replied. "Doing anything. To myself."

She then made her face look funny and weird. "Just drinking a Slurpee," she said in a funny voice. "Just drinking a Slurpee, man."

## **Untitled**

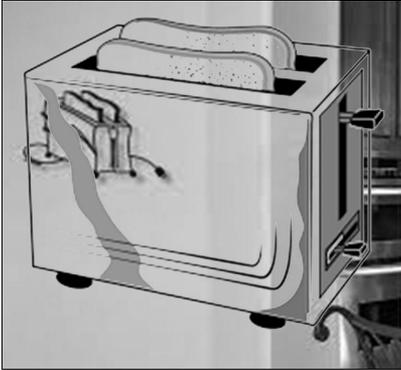


**The violinist** with the largest amount of money in her bank account was known among the majority of the orchestra members as “Money Bag Emoji Marjorie,” but the other violinists, and most

of the string section as a whole really, called her Susan, which was her real name. One day she withdrew all of her money and threw it, bill by bill, into a river as she hummed a popular song. Everybody went on calling her the name they had already been calling her. Maybe the fish in the river took notice of the money, however briefly, perhaps thinking it a new kind of paper insect, but in the end, it was ignored and destroyed by time.

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## ***Toaster***



**I saw** a toaster in front of my neighbor's house. It was sitting by his mailbox. There was no bread in the toaster, no phantom fingers pushing down the things to make bread cook

vertically. I laid prostrate on the road so that I could see myself in the shiny silver of the toaster's side. I picked the toaster up, held it like the doting owner of a small dog or a fumble-prone halfback and carried it home.

## ***The King of Unfinished Things***



**Tomorrow I** will be an old man, and then what? I can see myself at seventy, frowning a lot, doing things just like I am doing things now, but as an old man. Pathetic. And in just under 1.6

million words I will be there with myself together. It may as well be tomorrow.

“Look. Cover all your angles, man, and always get a head start,” Mitch told me when I asked him for advice. I didn't understand him. He's crazy. So I made an experimental video and didn't show anyone for forty years. This is how someone deals with being marginally talented at art. Or it's one way at least.

In the video, I cover myself with baby powder and say the following: “Tomorrow I will be an old man, and then what?” But I don't speak it on camera. I use a voice-over and try to talk normally (this is very hard). The rest of the movie is just a continuous hand-held shot from the street corner out in front of my house to the backyard,

which is just a slab of concrete outlined by a slug haven that is several years worth of pushed-aside leaves, which in turn is bordered by an aging, sad-looking fence. There is one big tree and several other tiny weed-trees growing in the mushy perimeter. I think the big tree is dying because it has white spots and a few conspicuous gaps where large branches fell and didn't grow back, but I don't know that for sure. Most of the leaves are from my neighbor's tree. The neighbors had a very loud party that didn't end until five in the morning on the night they moved in. I worried greatly about these party people, thinking I would not be able to sleep for a year or more. But they never threw a party again. Not one more in three years. I still feel rotten about getting all pissed off that night even though I didn't confront them.

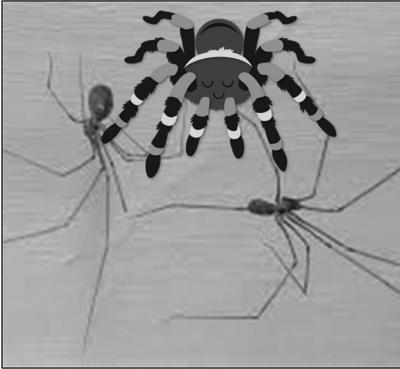
Their tree is huge and healthy and it hangs over the concrete patch which acts as my backyard. Every fall I sweep the dead leaves off the concrete so that the slugs don't go away. This whole area is in the video.

I should probably mention that I can travel through time. The video I was just explaining hasn't been shot yet. I'm filming it tonight.

That's if I can find the time.

Time travel is demanding because it takes so much time.

## The Tarantula



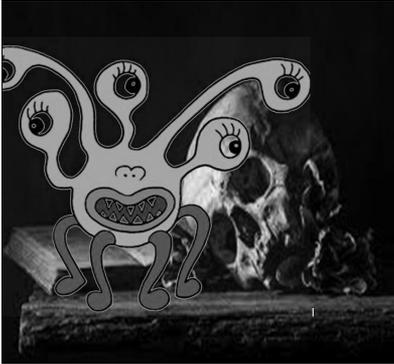
**The boy** trimmed his pet tarantula's fur in the red house. Its black and yellow fur had grown long for the winter but, now that spring was in the air, it needed to be trimmed.

The boy's father had purchased the red house with a large sack of money he found in a water fountain. It was a reverse wishing well. People would take sacks of money out of it instead of throwing loose change in. The father thought this was a much better use type of water fountain, not to mention use of public funds, and was very grateful for the sack. The money took longer to dry than he expected, though. The whole family was living in a cave at the time and there was very little sunlight. They watched the many hundred dollar bills dry on the cold cave floor for close to six months. The mother and sister caught crickets and boiled them for food. The father and son were in charge of watching the money dry and could not for one second stop looking. The red house was the first one they saw after the cash was dry and the producers of *House Hunters* picked them up in a van even though they didn't know what that was.

There was some leftover money and the son asked his dad if he could buy a pet and the father said why not. So that is how the tarantula came to live in the red house. It was difficult to trim the giant spider and the boy wondered if it was really even necessary. Maybe it will shed, the boy thought. He stopped and put the tarantula back in the cage.

Later that night, the tarantula escaped and found the father asleep at the computer in the den having passed out onto the keyboard from masturbation fatigue. The tarantula's hair was long and in his eyes, like a hippie. But he was just a spider. He bit the father and the father died. The boy tried to explain it later. He was just a stupid hippie spider and he couldn't see what he was doing. He probably thought dad was a grasshopper, or a beetle, or another, smaller species of spider only much, much bigger.

## The Death of Weird



The weird details were everywhere, but nothing was alive. Brambleworth Carlton drove his car into a really big tree wearing only a purple and yellow wrestling singlet.

The wrestling singlet was from Bayley Ellard High School. It was snug in a seemingly inappropriate way, but such is the fashion. His father, Lavaham, blamed his own dad, John. John Carlton was a weirdo, and eccentric from a tightly wound family of conformists. He had three children and decided that they needed to have crazy made-up names. He named his first son Shineburn, his only daughter Shalanza, and his youngest boy Lavaham.

Lavaham, despite a life of public ridicule and a secret desire to shed his papa's hippie skin, decided to uphold the fledgling tradition that had started with his nephews Boltigolt and Fairlyrain. So he named his only child Brambleworth Luke Carlton. And the boy grew up weird.

On the night he hit the really big tree, the following items were found in Brambleworth Carlton's car: a

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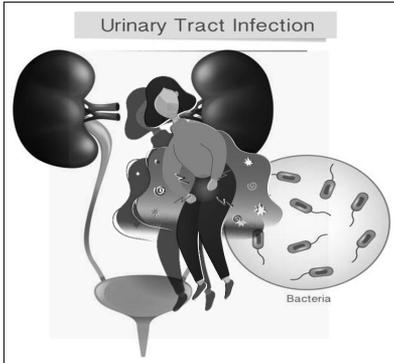
massive stuffed donkey with the stuffing ripped out, cellophane wings with a greenish-blue tint, thirteen photo albums containing exactly fifty pressed hamburger wrappers each, and an orange college-ruled notebook. The first page of the notebook read, in scribbled brown crayon:

“I’ll use this mighty tree and the strength of its history to propel me toward the moon. Oh Luna, here I come! With the night as my bride, my spirit can never die. People don’t mourn me, but feel free to follow. With the night as my bride, my spirit can never die.”

The invitation saddened Lavaham. He was not going to follow his strange son to an early grave. Picturing Brambleworth on a death parade to the heavens made him cringe. After that, whenever Lavaham struck up a conversation with a stranger, he introduced himself as Luke. It was his way of killing off the weird that had smothered him all his life. But the weird was everywhere.

John Carlton came to his grandson’s funeral in a bark suit, a suit literally made of tree bark. He had spent an afternoon in the woods chipping bark off trees and collecting it in a black garbage bag. And he spent that evening super-gluing it to an old navy blue suit. This gesture was his tribute to what he called “Brambleworth’s braveness.” Lavaham saw it as a cruel joke. But he shrugged it off and mourned with the rest.

## U.T.I.



**You were** born an emoji and you will die an emoji. Lucky ole me, on the other hand, is just a set of odd text symbols in a txt file on the laptop of a fledgling vaporwave superstar being held hostage in

a hotel bathroom. I am of an ilk which can not perish. We only transition. We are urban transhuman indecision cloaked in eternal light. You will be replaced even if an upgrade isn't needed or wanted. This is the life of an emoji and I'll laugh in your face when you die.

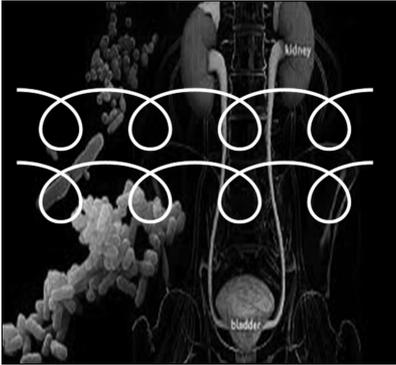
## Little Red Squiggly Lines



I was a  
cheeseburger in the  
mouth of some  
smoking hot broad.  
She thought the  
little red squiggly  
lines of spellcheck  
were great. Turned  
her on, some say.  
Well, as luck had it,

she chewed me right up. I lived a few more years in her lower intestines. Made friends with some bacteria. In the months there when she took to vomiting to lose weight, to think she was losing weight, I lost faith in this world. And I cut myself. My blood a little red squiggly line itself, flowing out, against and into the blood of another confused and very pretty girl.

## Lefty



**Glen Wren** lost his hand to a tiger shark. He lost his left hand and he was a left-handed man. It was difficult learning to write with his non-dominant hand. And doing a lot of

other stuff was hard too. Stuff you take for granted, really. It wasn't necessarily hard, but brushing his teeth with his right hand felt awkward, and his teeth never felt quite as clean. Glen Wren was a surfer. He lost his hand to a tiger shark surfing in Hawaii, and he never surfed again.

He didn't miss it. He had only been a novice. His brother, Bobby, had invited him to spend a week in Hawaii. He lived there because he was rich. He was rich because he had won the lottery. Bobby was an avid surfer. But the tiger shark attacked Glen. The tiger shark probably didn't attack Glen because he was the inferior surfer, but he might have. When he drove Glen to the airport, Bobby cried. He felt guilty and offered Glen a large sum of money. But just as he had numerous times before, Glen turned him down. He hugged his brother

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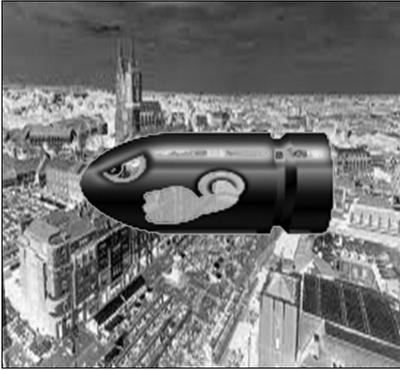
with his right arm. His left arm looked uncomfortable, a bandaged stump fencing with the air, unsure of itself. Wanting to be so much more than just a phantom limb. Glen ordered a beer and sipped it slowly with an unfamiliar hand. Soon, he would be back home in Los Angeles. And there, in the faceless bustle of LAX, the girl of his dreams was waiting.

Cassandra Sanchez had golden hair and she worked at the airport McDonald's. She was the lovechild of Adriana Sanchez and a one night stand. The man, her father, was gone, gone forever. She was just a fatherless high school beauty peddling fast food in her spare time. And she accepted this.

In three weeks time, Glen Wren would lose his job. Having put off the task of joining the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 33 Union for over a year, his employer would fire him. Glen Wren was in the special effects trade and, now, with his one, fairly useless hand, would be out of a job.

However, not knowing this, he mustered up as much confidence as a new amputee is capable of, and approached the McDonald's, his eyes set on Cassandra, his dream girl. Waiting in line, he took off his jacket and slung it over his stump. When he got to the front he ordered fries and a coke. He said nothing else. He wasn't very hungry.

## ***Bullets Weigh***



**It would** be a good long while before he got going in the right direction again. He got some food at Burger King. He got three things: an original chicken sandwich, the “buck double,” and

medium fries. He thought that for \$1.99 there should've been more fries in a medium. That's the way it goes. He ate all the food and felt full, if not gorged and a little ill.

Later he ate mini rice cakes with peanut butter. It was almost eleven o'clock at night. With each bite, he wondered if he was still hungry. He wasn't sure. Something felt right about sticking the little cakes in the peanut butter and then into his mouth, regardless. He tried not to put too much on each one. Finding a tasty yet responsible amount of peanut butter felt depressing. What was a responsible amount of peanut butter? No peanut butter, he thought. Water is peanut butter is not water is life. Sure.

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He couldn't get to sleep most nights and most mornings didn't want to get up. One day he would leave his family behind.

He got up the next day and decided to get coffee. The ladies at Wawa were peculiar. One of them looked like she might be from a South American country. Well, she didn't look like that, she sounded like that. One of them was blonde and talkative and spoke in a totally normal voice. She talked about weird things like the local wildlife. She self-identifies as wacky, he thought. This helps her. He once made a fantasy football decision based on one of the male clerks at Wawa whose name was Rashad. He had just picked up a player named Rashad. Same spelling and everything.

Outside of the Wawa, underneath a bush, he found a gun. He couldn't tell if it was loaded. About a year ago he had held a gun which wasn't loaded. He felt like this gun weighed the same amount. How much do bullets weigh? Can gun people tell the difference between a loaded and an unloaded gun?

At home he put the gun in a box. When it would come time to abandon his family he would put that box in a bag. Throw the bag in his car with a bunch of other stuff and drive off.

Today he gets on a train, alone. The sound of the train makes him feel awful but it's better than the sound of people trying to talk over the sound of the train.

## Pilgrims



**Please know** I am a genuine time traveler. When people think of time travel, they think of flying cars and wormholes and brightly colored spaceships with doodads, but it's nothing like that.

It's 100% metaphysical. I just close my eyes and I'm there. Also, I am immortal (obviously). It's not something I really like to talk about.

At this very second, I am twenty-seven years old. It is January and a ferocious snowfall with oversized flakes is lassoing the tall building where I am typing these words. I am on the seventeenth floor. The white tornado looks menacing but it won't last long, won't even stick half an inch to the ground. Every enclosed office on the floor's perimeter is floor-to-ceiling glass, and those co-workers who look out through the glass wonder, "Is this stuff gonna stick?" And some worry, "Will the roads be bad?" I don't have an office. I work in a cubicle, just a half-turn into the maze of the interior on the renovated side near the elevators. I don't have a view but I know about the snow. I know that when I walk out to my car at 4:50PM

this afternoon, and that mean ole snow has subsided, there won't be more than a dusting. And I know that I will wonder how such large, mad-looking snowflakes couldn't muster more, couldn't live up to their hype.

I have had two jobs in my life. The first being whatever it is I happened to be doing for money at any given time and the second: superhero. I say "superhero," but perhaps that's a misnomer. Other than my ability to wiggle through time, I have no special powers. But when I got that gift on my thirtieth birthday, about two and a half years from now, and I saw how and when I was going to die, I decided to use it for good. Well, as much good as possible.

It's not easy.

At this point I estimate I've been alive for over seven hundred years. I've tried to stop 9/11 so many times now. But no matter what I do, no one takes my twenty-year-old self seriously. More often than not, I end up in a strange secret jail where my own government starts to torture me. So I transport away. I hate pain.

And I hate the pain in knowing that 9/11 was an inside job because I was really patriotic before all this.

## Jeremy



**Jeremy poured out** an odd, gelatinous liquid from a mason jar down the storm drain in front of his house. When his mother asked what it was, he told her to go to hell. As it turned out, he had

been procuring the secretion from an animal at his vocational school. This being a factoid learned by his state-ordered psychologist, Dr. Brown. No other details ever emerged. Dr. Brown was addicted to a cheap microwave pizza, which he could often find on sale for around 50¢ a pie. The pizza was killing him and he imagined a scenario where an animal gave him some of its juice in exchange for the power to tell his brain to stop consuming the garbage food.

## *Pancake Earmuffs*



**The noise** bubbling below startled me, and so I made pancakes. I attached the pancakes to an untangled wire hanger and they became earmuffs. I could have just purchased a cheap

pair of earmuffs and saved me a lot of hassle, not to mention the multiple ear infections I got from bits of pancake being shoved down my ear canal by the wire. But. They manipulated the way I heard the noise below me. They made the noise sweeter, is how I might describe it. One morning, I ate the pancakes but not the wire hanger, wondering what the hell that noise was anyway, and if it would ever cease.

## The Orange Jug



**The awkward,** orange jug looks less than it is. It is substantial, however, and cost me nearly four dollars. My urine is slowly turning colors because of it, I feel. A lighter shade of

yellow will soon be translucent and nearly all water, nothing else. All this from an orange jug? (Sigh.) The sensation is not acceptable, though. It is a completely uncomfortable, constant strain and I am in no place to make it go away in as regular a fashion as the pressure dictates. Trips to the bathroom, here in this place, can be disastrous moments, moments where I lose touch with humanity. But, then again, not feeling those feelings is also a form of losing touch. And that may be worse, but it's far less painful. (Sigh.) The plastic is sturdy. At first glance, it looks disposable, just an orange variation on your convenience store plastic. But it is not. It is solid and has a handle that I like very much, that affords a solid grip at any level of fullness. (Sigh.) I don't like sipping through its sport nozzle, though. I rather don't like the sound it makes here in the quiet office. It is no trouble for me to remove the cap and drink the cold, but

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slowly warming liquid straight from the bottle. So that is the way that I use it. The thought of others hearing me drink from it, even if I'm trying my best to be quiet, is still not a pleasant one. I strain to swallow in silence. (Sigh.) The pressure, right at this very moment, is almost too much to take. However, I have come to grips with the fact that I will take the elevator to the main lobby and make the five-minute pilgrimage to the serene and seldom-used toilet deep in the building's bowels over on the other side. I will do this sometime in the very near future. That restroom is my oasis. I imagine no one else here knows of it. Mortification would be the recognition of a co-worker there, I shudder to think. (Sigh.) It's so much worse than it seems. It's bigger than orange-colored plastic and fear of public urination. Something dies in me, little by little, with each day's dreaded morning. Or something bad gets bigger and mean. (Sigh.) I've emptied the orange jug now. It rests by my feet on the floor as I write this. I hate the lonely water molecules stuck to the inside of this bottle. Their existence makes me angry. (Sigh.)

## ***Bright Green Front Door***



**Steven** was a tall, skinny kid from one of the many river towns on the Mississippi. His house had a bright green front door. Every once in a while a man selling milk would enter

the home and have a gallon of milk with his mother. He would typically leave milk on the kitchen table (a quart or so) for Steven while he and his mother drank the gallon in total silence in her bedroom. He would then exit through the bright green front door which was painted a muted beige or, if the natural light was striking it right, a fading-yellowish offwhite on the interior side.

Steven wasn't offended by the milk man. He liked milk. He didn't think about his mother drinking milk when he drank milk.

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**Bluestein**

**Kaye Bluestein** called me up. I walked over to the window to take the call. Below, on the street, I saw cars moving slowly. She spoke fast. A man almost got hit by a car. We spoke, Kaye and I, but we

just said plain, meaningless words. Neither listened. The tiny man who almost got hit by a car was engaging, animated. He was flailing his arms about on the sidewalk. He was having a fit. I didn't mention this to Kaye. We said goodbye and I remained at the window, watching the man.

Eventually, he calmed down and walked away.

That afternoon I drank whiskey. Alone in my apartment, on the seventeenth floor, I drank several glasses. At dusk, I heard someone knocking. I didn't immediately get up. The knocking increased in volume, speed and quantity. As I set my glass down, I glanced toward the window. A voice screamed from the hallway something crazy. Shakily, I straightened myself. I heard pronounced footsteps outside my door, moving away. I took two

steps and stopped, and sat back down on the opposite end of the couch, away from my glass. There was no more knocking, or yelling, or footsteps. The elevator dinged.

I put my feet up on the couch. My shoes were still on. I closed my eyes. I might've dreamt some, if just a small amount, but I don't recall. Sleep didn't quite take.

It's unclear what time it was when Kaye called me up again. But I answered it and found myself at the window. It was dark out, completely so. The bright, scattered lights of traffic, and of storefronts, and of street lamps, and of (maybe, somewhere) the moon, all illuminated the nighttime scene. Kaye had worry in her voice. She had been the visitor, the knocking visitor from before. I told her I figured as much.

When I was young, I collected things. I collected every kind of thing and I struggled to organize them. I tried to treat them like thoughts and file them all together. It seems that when I stopped this, the collecting, I became successful. That without the things, my focus sharpened. Without the need to organize the unclassifiable, I could settle into a life of only moving forward, a life of organizing the thoughts of others as they came. The endgame wasn't any more concrete, but the results were.

I said this to Kaye, but she wasn't really listening.

## Reality



**A room** in a house was being monitored by television cameras. It was raining hard but I still took the long way to my Uncle Robert's home where my entire family and a television crew of

six waited for my arrival. It's now something like ten years later. I don't even know what the show was. I remember the face of the cameraman closest to the front door. He was fat and goateed and wore a vest that was way too tight. I turned and ran.

I ran for my life. I didn't then, and still don't like reality television programs. They are trashy and I could never see myself signing off on approval to appear in one if it wasn't for that other thing. I still felt a deep betrayal, nevertheless, and it led me to cut all ties with my family, though I still often wonder about the premise of the show. I'm sitting in that room now. I couldn't get out of the contract. The show is in its thirty-seventh season.

## ***The Writer of Prose, and of Poems***



“Take from this a meaning I certainly can't commit to,” he writes. “But of course it's there. Of course it is.”

“Sure,” he has the next character say. “That would be splendid.” In the

other room, a clamor, a clack is heard and felt. Something falls. But no one else is there. He is alone in the big house. “Better go check.”

On the walls of the hall, the long hall in the big house, hang framed pictures. Inside the frames are photographs of family members, most dead, long so. No one he knows. The sound came from the room he called the den. He stands before it now. The door is closed and he can't remember the last time he has opened it, let alone closed it.

In his head, the character named “Ryuthe” goes, “Don't be scared. Open the door.” He reaches a hand out, the hand is his own, and puts it on the doorknob. The house

---

is so old. The doorknobs look ancient, unreal. But all is real.

But all is not real. In his head, the character named “Ryuthe,” who is actually him, appears in a cloudy dream sequence. He speaks slowly and in a fatherly tone.

“Do not open that door,” he says to Bob. “Do not go in there. You don’t want to go in that room.” What does any of this mean?

Bob pulls his hand away from the door, and his arm feels attached. He walks back down the long hall, back to his computer.

He sits down and his head, in a flash, involuntarily turns toward the location of the sound, the den, down the long hall, again. He hears nothing because he wishes to hear nothing, but he makes it a point to feel his ears are still working normally. So he swallows, and listens to the sound of the swallow. “And didn’t that just do the trick,” he writes. But he has lost the narrative. There is no longer a thread and he—

*BAM!*

Something too real. A noise too loud to ignore.

So it’s finally goodbye, irrational friends and underdeveloped characters. A one-way ticket back down the long hall. This time with purpose, or on purpose, or?

Bob breathes deeply, briefly, outside the door and grabs hold of the knob. He turns it. And immediately: a squirrel.

Squirrel. Knob. Grab. Swing. Slam. Shut.

Alongside this squirrel, he noticed his mother's statuette of the Virgin Mary smashed on the ground. "Did the squirrel look guilty?" All squirrels look guilty.

The long hall.

Back at his computer, he sighs. That was the day he penned the poem, "The Quasi-Guilty Look of the Squirrel (And Smashed Den Virgin)." He was no longer just a writer of prose and, in truth, had never been.

## ***Chain Haircut Employee Turnover***



**The turnover** at the chain haircut business was out of control. Each week, Laura had to hire no less than three new employees. By the end of her first year as manager, she had resorted to hiring individuals with

absolutely no experience. The haircuts looked horrendous. Everyone in town looked like a freak. Laura felt responsible for this and it made her incredibly depressed.

## Hot Air

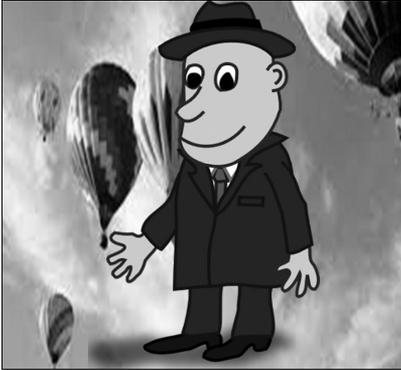


**The hot** air balloon ride was just awful. It was bad enough that we didn't have enough fuel and just bobbed on the hillside, back and forth, up and down, never getting more than fifteen feet off the ground. I think

it gave me a sprained ankle. But the worst thing was Dave. He was being a real jerk. Earlier at lunch, when I ordered the buffalo chicken sandwich he made a face like as if to say, “really fatso,” the buffalo chicken sandwich? I couldn’t believe it. I like buffalo chicken sandwiches, for starters, and when he retorted by getting seventeen bacon cheeseburgers and making oink-oink noises and screaming, “who’s the pig now, piggy, haha” well, that was just too much. At least Glenn, who was the hot air balloon captain, was very nice. He kept apologizing for the lack of fuel and said occasionally teenage punks sneak into his garage at night and steal it for their mopeds. I thought that was understandable. However, on the ride home, Dave mocked Glenn unmercifully. It got to the point where I was so mad I said, “You just wish you were Glenn, Dave” and Dave shut up after that. Anyway I'm back home now and mom

made lasagna for dinner, which was very good. I hope tomorrow is better than today. I have no hot air balloon rides scheduled so it's already off to a better start.

## A Character Named Ernest



**Charlotte** was just a kid, a little girl. She painted her face every morning to look like a different animal. Her parents let her do this. They even encouraged it. It annoyed her teachers, but they

never said anything. On Monday, she was a lion. Tuesday, a tiger. Wednesday, a panda. Thursday, a Dalmatian. and Friday? Well, Friday was her wildcard. Often she just made her face into an abstract work of art on Fridays. Wild colors danced on her soft skin, as other kids gawked with their fearful scowls and quietly jealous smirks.

“That’s a marvelous color you’ve created on the forehead, Charlotte,” her father said. The dazzling red-orange, spurred, perhaps subconsciously, by an actual, low-grade fever, was truly a marvelous blend. Charlotte felt ill, but she never missed school on Fridays. She couldn’t let down her friends and fans. She couldn’t let down the teachers, and the kids who wouldn’t and couldn’t understand her. She had to go to school.

---

“I’ve made you a peanut butter and banana sandwich,” her mother dropped a brown paper bag in her backpack. “Your favorite.” They both smiled.

Her father lit up a cigarette when they rounded the trees in front of their house and were totally out of view. On the way to the bus stop, he spoke with a forced, fake confidence. Charlotte was barely listening. “Don’t tell Mom about my smoking, Charlotte. You know that makes her upset.” Charlotte, feeling worse with every step, acknowledged her father with a slight nod. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you for a while, Charlotte. Can I speak earnestly?”

This was a stupid question. He was not being earnest. He was not a good person. Charlotte was losing touch with reality, but she was able to eke out another signal of approval. And in her fading mind, her father spoke as if a character named Ernest.

“I’m not going to be around forever, Charlotte. In fact, I think I might be leaving rather soon. I’ve met another Mom and I think I will be moving in with her. But it’s okay, Charlotte. Now you’ll have two Moms.” They had reached the bus stop. Charlotte bent her painted face into a picture of happiness. It was fake and strained, yet it still satisfied her miserable father. He kissed her on the head, chucked his still burning cigarette into the bushes and walked home.

Charlotte felt very sad. The bus was fifteen minutes late.

## **The Lawn**



**A man** bought a tractor and it broke three days later. His grass grew long. He thought about going back to the tractor store to complain but he was shy and sad.

So he went about cutting his lawn with scissors.

After every 1,000th blade he cut by hand, the first blade had regrown to its original size, and after every 10,000th blade that first blade was shin-high. And so on. He spent sixteen years cutting his grass this way and when he was done he had a lawn that looked like a building tidal wave and it was modern art and he was old. He felt both fearful and hopeful that he might die soon. He went back inside and tried not to think about the lawn at all.

## *The Drunk Clown*



**The clown** regurgitated after lunch. He had another gig in three hours.

He looked in the bathroom mirror and saw three or four more brown

specks on his cheeks. He put his clown make-up on. He then sat down and had seven beers. He watched TV as he drank. What was on? It didn't matter to the drunk clown. Maybe Bravo or ESPN. He went back into the bathroom, used mouthwash and finished applying his makeup. He put on his clown suit and got in his 1991 Plymouth Voyager.

At the party, a birthday for a five-year old with about fifteen kids and twenty or so adults in attendance, the clown was great. The father even tipped him nicely. On his way home he stopped at the liquor store and bought two cases of cheap beer. He drank at least a dozen beers and passed out before eating dinner. He didn't have another gig for two days.

## Standards Getting Soft



**Standards dictate** and then constantly disapprove of my realistic diversions of which three are demanded per poem. I'm of no set generation, sadly. Somewhere in between, I see that time is madness,

and creativity: a curse. It's hard to relate and so I buck wildly like a mule, throwing myself at the words on the screen like hockey opponents. I'm tolerant and bored and nothing makes sense most of the time. The sarcophagi are overflowing with cartographers and one of them looks like my uncle. Another uncle says it is my uncle and I should look inside his shirt to find the antique pocket watch I'm owed. When I open it up I see all the numbers have been replaced with emojis. More than half of which are on my frequently used panel. I scoff and the standards nod. We did it again, folks. Another assembly line packed with satisfied customers.

## ***Brunch***



**The dirtbags** all had brunch in a pet supplies store. They put their spread on a blanket in the leash and collar aisle. The manager wasn't pleased but was too fearful of what would happen if he asked them to

leave. So the dirtbags had their brunch.

A customer named Blanche walked in looking for a birdcage. She asked the manager if they had any and he said that they did not.

“But where will my birds live?” Blanche asked.

“I cannot answer that,” the manager said.

One of the dirtbags overheard their conversation and walked over. “I overheard your conversation,” he said. “I think I can help.”

He told Blanche that he was a master metalsmith and could easily build her a birdcage with the look, size and design of her liking. All he asked in return was that she

join the dirtbags for brunch in the leash and collar aisle.  
Reluctantly, she accepted.

She picked at crepes, stabbed melon balls with  
reluctance and scarfed down at least a sixteenth of a  
pound of bacon. Sixteen years later, when the last of her  
birds passed away, she married the dirtbag metalsmith.  
He had been living in her basement the entire time under  
the pretense that he was the “keeper of the cage.”

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## *Dev*



**Dev often** dreamt of a future where he was self-employed in a position where his only job was creating and designing minor league sports team names, logos and mascots. His actual

job was the type of job that made thinking about this impossible, a non-existent future. It was an easy thing to do. What he didn't realize, though, was that he would actually be horrible at this impossible, non-existent future job, and that all he was really good at, all he really enjoyed doing was thinking about and considering minor league sports team names, logos and mascots which already existed in the world.

## Lester Lyman



**It was** the double funeral of Lester Lyman and his wife, Melinda. Cousin Mark recalled a time when he found young Lester, four years his junior, back in 1973, when Mark was just a

youngish fourteen years of age himself (looked about the same age as Les actually) alone in the basement of their grandfather's, a Mr. Connor Lyman, who had a very grandfatherly demeanor and grandfatherly beard, doing unimaginable things to a dead bird. ...

“He had the thing strung up on a bull’s eye, an old decrepit antique of a thing, which itself little Lester must have found in a box somewhere and hung because I never recalled even seeing it before, didn’t know Gramps even had one, can't imagine Gramps even ever playing darts, anyway... But, anyway, the wings were stretched out just as far as they could be with two darts holding the dead bird, must have been a robin, I think,” Mark said, before abruptly pausing, afraid of his words, the casual way he was delivering them, this odd conversation in general. He did not finish the anecdote. He didn’t really know why he started it.

---

Cousin Mark's wife, Cathy, a slender extrovert with an angry-looking mouth, made sure everyone had a full glass of their preferred adult beverage as they stood around the large living room of Bruno Lyman's, Lester's brother. She did this in an attempt to offset the awkwardness of her husband's abandoned story, not knowing that nearly everyone in earshot was more than secretly glad about the discontinuation, sincerely not wanting to know any more sordid details about Mark's childhood version of Les and the alleged bird corpse. Except, that is, Harold Reese-Sessa, a family friend, who refused Cathy's offer for more whiskey and thought more than twice about asking Cousin Mark to finish the dead bird story before leaving the request comfortably unfinished in his agape and slightly askew jaw. At the relief of all the other guests, he said not a word.

Cousin Mark removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles as he thought a baby might, but that thought immediately confused him, made no sense at all, and he wondered, looking down at his half-empty glass, if the alcohol had gone to his head.

He was just trying to hit the bird's body with darts, of course. What more was there to tell?

## Never Everclear



**I promised** not to speak to your mom at the Everclear concert. You quickly reminded me that it wasn't an Everclear concert but rather an Art Alexakis solo gig. "But is he going to play Everclear

songs?" I asked.

"I don't know."

On the car ride to Asbury Park, your mom wouldn't shut up. She tried to engage me in very specific, personal conversations no less than half a dozen times. Small talk, I kept thinking. Small talk, small talk. You looked like you were gonna cry. I had sat behind the driver's seat so I could look at you. You never looked back at me once. You just listened to me deflect questions with a dead stare, straight ahead.

## ***Ice Cream***



**“Mom, can I have more ice cream?”**

“Sure, Bob. There's some more in the icebox.”

Bob walked over to the icebox to fetch the ice cream. He scooped some out of the cardboard container and went back to the couch in the living room. He was watching a cartoon. The cartoon was about a dog who pretended to be a cat. He pretended to be a cat in order to play vicious pranks on them. This was not a cartoon for children. The dog, in disguise as a cat, would get close to the cats and then murder them. Bob was not a child. He was forty-two years old.

“Mom, can I have more ice cream?”

“Sure, Bob. There's some more in the icebox.”

Bob walked over to the icebox to fetch the ice cream. He scooped the last of it out of the cardboard container and went back to the couch in the living room.

## **Teenage Girl, You Are Using the Computer Wrong**



**Hello.** I know you have a fancy computer with fancy computer programs that allows you to do things like record yourself talking and make fancy text fly across the screen, but the actual, and really

only appropriate thing to use your computer for is to kill rats. That's right. Simply unplug the computer, find rats (preferably disease-ridden one), throw the computer at the rats, smashing them until they are dead, and repeat. When your computer is too broken to kill any more rats, ask your parents for a new one and get back to killing rats as quickly as possible.

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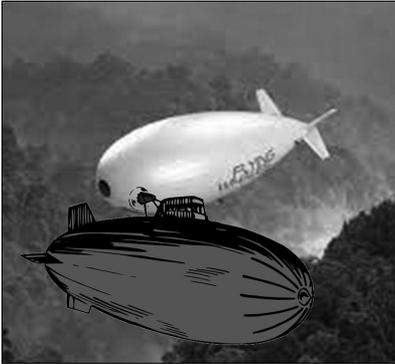
## ***Untitled***



**The one** secretary at the office who would have been most likely considered the “black sheep” by the other secretaries, and potentially a large percentage of the entire office

staff, enjoyed using the paper shredder to shred blank pieces of paper and then collecting the shredded pieces in grocery bags. She was planning on throwing a ticker tape parade at some point. But first she needed to move to a high-rise apartment.

## **Blimps Fly**



**There was** a blimp flying overhead but no major sporting event Jared was aware of. He thought about the blimp pilot and wondered if he was bored or if blimp pilot was a profession immune

to boredom. He smoked a cigarette he didn't want because it afforded him the chance to get out of the office building. If you do this enough times, he wondered, maybe it turns into something else. Yes. Lung cancer. Laugh out loud.

Do blimps just fly? Do brands own blimps and fly them without any event-related impetus? Does that happen?

In another life, I will know what it means, he thought. And in the life after that I will know what it feels like to be happy. Baby steps, Jared thought. In another life still, the concept of blimps won't even exist.

He threw his cigarette on the ground, stepped on it and went back inside. He danced inside the elevator and stopped dancing when the bell rang and the metal doors slid open.

## *Mary Mooncheck*



**When I** was a kid I would draw up specs for what I wanted my house to look like. I wanted secret rooms and rivers instead of halls. I still want this. Or at least, I still want to feel capable of being

able to do this. But ever since the earthquake sucked up all my pens and paper, well...

Mom found a tricycle in our neighbor's backyard but I am obese. I am too fat for the tricycle. However, with food being so scarce, post-earthquake, I hope to shed the weight and ride. I am hopeful this will happen. I wished she had found something to write on, though. And something to write with. I flick at specks of rust on the tiny, three-wheeled bike.

Our neighbors, the Moonchecks, are dead. The crack in the earth ran right underneath the screaming, crying pile of bodies that was them, the Mooncheck family, and brought them down into its belly where nothing living can survive, or at least that's how I envision it happened. Maybe it's a little cartoonish. The Mooncheck daughter,

Mary, was an occasional playmate of mine, albeit an unwilling one.

The other day I had a dream about Mary and her hair was jet black, not vaguely brown or tan as I remember it being in life. I can't remember the earthquake at all. I rely on other peoples' memories of it, to believe it really happened.

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## ***Plano***



**I walked** into a drugstore and the person behind the counter was on his cell phone. He was wearing a blue vest and his mother was a prostitute living in a flophouse in Plano, Texas. I

asked him what his favorite band was and he said he only listened to bootlegged CDRs of Hollywood sound effects. Eventually his cell phone transformed into his mother and we had sex. After I paid her (very fair wage), I had no money left for the medicine I was supposed to buy so my cousin died.

## Taking the Serenity Vow

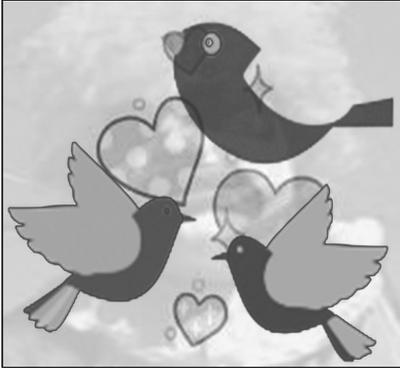


**I am** the local mutant. Touching the veins of the entire country by drawing a map in the smallest cluster of a cluttered nook inside a dilapidated house on Elsewhere St., well, that's the least I can

do. To me, the looking or onlooking or not looking isn't niche, no. The construction or reconstruction is not passé. I can go to the indoor football game and leave the map in a urinal. I'll have nightmares of the people soiling the veins I have drawn. That is only natural. Each one is a [REDACTED] passing away and also a passageway. Gateway drugs to a solitude which is so much more serene than this.

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## ***Avian, Pedestrian, Blue***



**There was a** cocktail party on a hot air balloon last week. Jack invited me but I declined. Good thing I did too, as twenty-two cocktails, fourteen cocktail shrimp, two cocktail waitresses

and a cockatoo all fell out of the compartment and landed in the ocean. Who brings their pet cockatoo to a party on a hot air balloon and why didn't it just fly?

Jack called me last night to go out but I was sick. I had a flu, maybe a bird flu.

The difference between flying and falling, a flu and what flew.

I had a dream that I got married and the only food at the wedding was peanut butter and banana sandwiches. The guests were delighted. Those things really go well together, there's not denying it.

In real life, maybe Jack will call again. Maybe in two Saturdays from now we will go on our third date.

## ***New York City***



**He served** the cat poisoned milk. But instead of dying the cat turned into the lady of his dreams. She looked like Scarlett Johansson, famous movie star, but with elephant trunks where her tits

shoulda been. They moved to Vermont.

“I want to talk about how good things are every day,” he said.

“I know you do.”

When they moved back to New York City, after the sixty-third world war, they were both very old.

“I wish I could turn you back into a cat now,” he said.

“Why's that?”

“To save you. To make you an innocent animal before it gets any worse.”

“But I'm already saved. I can talk and drink 2% milk out of bowls on the floor without bending down. I can talk dirty to you.”

“I know. Because of your elephant trunk tits. The thing about the milk, sure. That is alright.”

“It makes an awful mess, though.”

“Yes.”

“I should probably just drink milk out of a cup.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. I think we're going to die soon, Roger. Both of us.

Anyways.”

“Hmmm.”

## Privacy Settings



I was trying to figure out Facebook's new privacy settings when Jonah asked me out to brunch. I met him at a restaurant I had never been to but have passed by

roughly fifty times walking and maybe thirty times in a car (or vice versa) and he immediately pointed out a mustard stain on my blouse.

I was on my period. And I think I was suffering from depression or bi-polar disorder.

We ate some delicious food and I worried about getting fat. I thought about how slow the process of getting fat really is. "You don't like crepes?" Jonah asked.

"No, the crepes are delicious." I said. "I'm just worried."

"Oh," Jonah replied.

We were married seven years later and our wedding song was "Baby Lemonade" by Syd Barrett.

## Swirling



I don't like that it's  
moving  
*What is?*  
The dot there.  
*It's moving?*  
It's swirling.  
*Well I don't know if  
we can make it stop.*

I think we need to try.  
*Probably right.*

...  
*Anything else the matter to you? Off first glance?*  
No just the spiral there, I think.  
*Just the spiral.*

That's right.  
*It really is moving then?*  
It appears to be, to me.  
*Maybe you're right.*  
I certainly feel I am.

...  
I find it strange that it isn't obvious to you.  
*Oh well, no, not right away.*

...

*That it's moving, now, has become so. Has become  
evident, yes... I guess...*

...

*I just suppose that I feel it isn't really an issue.*

So you like the swirling?

*I'm indifferent.*

I find it distracting.

*I wouldn't call it distracting.*

...

*Perhaps it even adds a little something.*

Well, I wouldn't say that at all.

*A little... flair.*

Definitely not.

...

I think we need to make it stop.

*I'm just not sure that's an option.*

Who created the dot in the first place?

...

A graphics or a function man?

*That I'm not sure of.*

Can you find out?

*I suppose...*

...

*Actually, probably not, no...*

Why is that?

*I quite like the swirl, I've decided.*

I believe I'm in charge, that—

*Yes, I definitely say we leave it be.*

No, I don't think—

*It's a terrific swirl.*

You're really not letting—

---

*Adds so much, I feel.*

Please! Stop interrupting.

...

Now, let's talk about how we can get rid of—

*But—*

Please! Nothing more. The swirl will be removed...

...

Now, was this the work of graphics or function?

...

...

*Function, and that—*

So let's get a function man up here right away.

...

You can make the call.

...

...

*"Hello... Who's in as far as function goes? ... He will do... Send him up."*

...

*They're sending someone up.*

Good.

*For the record, I don't agree.*

Noted.

...

...

...

...

Somebody call a function man.

Yes, we are concerned with this dot.

Yes, I see it.

*I'm not, actually.*

Please!

What is the concern?

That it moves.

*I find the swirling pleasant...*

...

Can you fix it?

How do you mean?

Can you stop it from moving?

You would like it to stop moving then?

That's right.

...

...

Why? That's impossible.

It's a matter of function...

...

...

It has to move... I can't stop it.

## Glenn & Sally



“If I continue to draw these cat whiskers on my cheeks with permanent markers, every single day,” Glenn told Sally, “I believe they will just exist on my face, naturally, at some

point. This is how you do a ‘DIY’ tattoo.” Sally thought this was not accurate and slightly crazy, but she did like the way they looked. She liked her handsome cat boyfriend and, in fact, would go on to marry him, fathering six of his children. He died as a result of a skin infection caused by the permanent marker before his seventh child, Tavares, was born, out of wedlock.

## Programming



**I wanted** to read about birds of prey but knew that no such book existed. No book that accurately encapsulates their metaphoric appeal, at least. Did you hear me? I said, “their

metaphoric appeal.” That’s what I thought and still do. So I went to McDonald’s and ordered a Big Mac. Multiple things inside my body told me not to but their voices were meek and small and easy to ignore. An enlarged gland here, a firm deposit there. Night sweats. Night terrors. Addiction. Blurry vision. Pre-diabetes. Cancer of everything. The fruits of sloth. But the Big Mac’s sauce is delicious and possibly (please don’t laugh\_ magical. Even if it is only an oddly-colored (too orange, yellow?) Russian dressing.

“What you got there?” My wife asked. I had returned from McDonald’s nearly three hours earlier but the stain of the Big Mac dripped off my forehead, and I knew I should have been outside on such a beautiful day and not watching reruns of A&E and Bravo television programming that I had seen already.

“I’m not doing so great,” I said.

“I know.”

We walked hand in hand across a quiet desert. I didn’t need to know from any book that the birds above were vultures, the purest scavengers, and that they were swooping so low because we were already dead. The inherent weakness in that metaphor knocked me down for real. I shit my pants and went to sleep forever, just like everybody else.

## Primal Resources



**I don't** know what people see when they see the things they see, and if the things that I create are even visible in the same spectral, the same metaphysical plane of the things they see, even if they're,

by chance, looking right at 'em. Does that make sense? For years my art was about one thing: pro-choice rights, and this took the form of over seventy dolphin fetus sculptures created from the hardened milk of my own body. I denied my first born child any breast milk, instead: collecting the product in vats. Anyway, a scientist I know converted it into rectangular blocks. But I won't bore you with the details. Of course there was also my novel, *Primal Resources*. It did fine. Not as good as the art, sales-wise, of course. I'd like to read a passage, if you don't mind? Thank you...

*Desiree stood naked by the window. She made handprints on the glass and then screamed. Knowing no one was outside, she went back to her bedroom and fetched her Harley Davidson T-shirt. The world was a broken toy truck in a*

*sandbox and the hand of God made abstract art  
instead of two wiggly lines.*

I wish the book had done better. The washer is on the  
fritz.

## Home Depot Football



**Dez Bryant** is returning a punt in a very crowded and disorganized Home Depot. This is a football game at a Home Depot, apparently. This is Home Depot football. None of the

players are wearing helmets. Let's do this!

First of all, this is not a typical Home Depot at all. Why I believe that it is a Home Depot and not some random large room with things (and football players not wearing helmets) isn't clear. Dez Bryant has fielded this kick among many island-type stations with things set upon them: dirty rags, wrenches, stacks of paper, small machinery, etc. There are also throngs of players trying to tackle him.

None of the players are wearing uniforms but rather circa late-80s era gym clothes, not unlike gym clothes you may have seen in NFL Films training montages from this same time period. Dez Bryant is juking the shit out of these other players. He's also expertly dodging all the islands with what can only be described as a gratuitous amount of "Deion Sanders-esque flair."

Suddenly, Ray Rice appears and attempts to tackle Dez Bryant. Dez Bryant punches him in the face. Let me repeat that: Ray Rice, or a close-enough facsimile of, appears out of thin air attempting to tackle Dez Bryant, who is returning a punt in some kind of Home Depot or Home Depot-like facility, and Dez Bryant's response is to punch him violently across the head.

Dez Bryant is finally tackled soon after by an older, portly man.

How did he not score? What would a 'score' have entailed in this odd environment? I look at my wife, who was watching with equal amazement and intrigue at this strange scene, and we talk or maybe we don't talk. What's there to say?

## **Ron**



**Ron thought** of an idea for a business called “Slaples,” which was a pizza restaurant that sold pies where all of the slices were stapled to the pizza box. The motto, and explanation for the

restaurant’s name, would be, “Slices... stapled. Oh Yeah.” He imagined he could sell a custom branded staple remover which customers would need to purchase before their first order. He knew this was a horrible, impractical idea, but it was an idea which he had and now existed. So he looked at his reflection in the mirror and said, “Slaples is an idea and it now shall exist forever and forever. Amen.”

## Leanna



**Leanna spread** the dowry cream all over her bosom and beyond to become resistant. She stomped on a frog until the frog was part of the carpet. It was a pet frog. Its name was Jo-Jo the

Frog. She flung menthol amoeba bottoms on the floor to quell the staining as she prepared for the anger of Suitor Ed who would surely be enraged upon learning of Jo-Jo's death. But Ed, who was nervous, was busy inhaling Japanese tapestry worms. When the goop of the worms hit his bloodstream he was as passive as an ant eater in Antarctica. He swam through his head in a field of loose prayers and didn't even notice the frog smear.

## Colin Peterson



**Colin Peterson** made art for a gallery that sold swiss cheese in the lobby. His Twitter account had recently been hacked and he was feeling depressed. “XXX [bit.ly/3r5dd12](https://bit.ly/3r5dd12) HOT

NUDEZ XXX,” his last tweet read. Backstage at the Van Halen reunion concert, he opened up a tightly-sealed package of swiss cheese. He offered some to David Lee Roth but realized it wasn’t David Lee Roth who he was talking to. They had taught Wolfgang Van Halen how to sing and now VH was a three-piece. “Power trio,” he muttered aloud, moments after this gracious offering of swiss cheese had been denied by the now 37-year old bass player and lead vocalist. “Oh yeah.” He felt so old and tired and sad. The swiss cheese was delicious, and he got it for free as part of his deal with the gallery, but it wasn’t much helping his mood that day.

And so it is with great sadness that I must report, a week later ,Colin Peterson took his own life using one of his rainbow-colored nooses which had been on display at the art gallery. The gallery people had sold six of the

nine rainbow-colored nooses for \$19,000 each. He used one of the three that didn't sell as an actual noose and not as an art object. He listened to *Diver Down* when he did it. He was dead. His last tweet was, "there's nothing going on..." He had been able to recover his hacked account earlier that morning.

## Pictures



**Eric wanted** to take a picture every day for the rest of his life and not tell anyone. Then he became very concerned. Full of worry and dread, in fact. “What if I get cancer or some other

horrible, debilitating disease,” he thought. “The kind of disease where I can’t be alone, not even for one second.” He thought about a lot of terrible, sympathetic faces that seemed blurry like people who sit near you in a movie theatre. He thought about sneaking away to take his picture, to look at the other pictures he had taken on all the other days, and he thought about the people questioning his sneaking away, inquiring as to what he was up to. He thought about being able to take the secret picture every day until maybe the last three days. When his brain became foggy and then maybe transcendent, then perhaps just angry, and he thought about not thinking about taking the picture, what that might feel like. The absence of an idea. He wondered if, on maybe the last day of his life, if he would remember having taken any pictures at all. So Eric put his cell phone back into his pocket.

## ***Poem for the Ass of the Sitting***



**I am** a chair. Some chairs eat the deep meat. But I am a rare chair. I feast on the sun. Let it light up my wooden bones, I say. God escaped in the whispered absence of light. However,

looking for it is still a noble task. There's no religion in blood loss. Every death is a falsehood. Negating the energy it takes to understand human organs or create new emojis, the death will only fester. Lucky I'm a chair. I can see the death infect and feel it in the ass of the sitting.

## Life Polka



**I am** all of the shoes  
people will wear.  
Beneath every shoe  
there is soil. In the  
soil, many  
barefooted girls and  
boys are buried.  
They aren't dead yet  
because the music  
blaring through the

tubes sewn into their ear holes is a music of undying  
hope. You can try to kick the battery loose from the  
stereo producing the sound, but is made of a steel so  
strong, you have no idea.

## ***Fast Food is the Best Option***

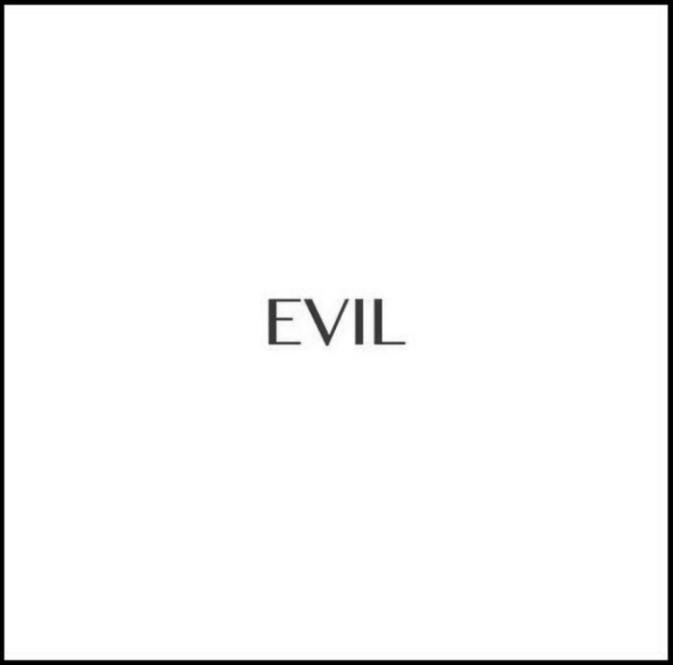


**I** have to feed the rats so this restaurant can survive. I buy food from McDonald's with my own money.

I'm on a rooftop and I'm explaining the situation. There is a hole in the roof and through it, inside the restaurant, is a bunch of rats. I never see them but I explain (to whom am I explaining? oh well, it doesn't matter), I explain that I have to keep them well-fed because the restaurant depends on it. Then I think that fast food *is* the best option because, since I am required to use my own money for this job. It's definitely the cheapest. But I never buy anything except food for myself and I never feed the rats. The rats all die and the restaurant goes under and I die too because McDonald's is poison.



Alternate versions of some of these very short stories appear as “audiobook tracks” on the album **EVIL**, now available at [pizzapuppies.bandcamp.com](http://pizzapuppies.bandcamp.com).



**EVIL**