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Edited by – Emily-Jo Hopson
Rachael Bundock
& Erin Monteith

Cover designed by Ashley Bisson

Ashley Bisson was born and raised in California, but now lives in Arizona working a college-girl job while studying Animation and spoiling her chubby cat. She has been published once in *Gravity Hill*.

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The Nature of the World at the Bottom of Mount Olympus

by Kellie R. England

Aphrodite showed up at her parents' door that day, not with her husband in tow but rather a large black dog with a long tail. Hestia had spent the morning in her pajamas before the TV's warm glow and resented whatever reason brought her sister down from her particular Mount Olympus.

His name is Zeus, Aphrodite laughed, motioning with manicured hands to the dog. *Isn't that just lovely?* Hestia didn't know if it was lovely at all but she liked the dog when he nudged at her with his nose and stared with blank, friendly eyes because it meant he didn't know how his leash and the vet and his name had turned him impotent. Hestia patted the dog as Aphrodite swept about, looking at the house as though it had been years rather than days since her last visit. She had put on weight since her marriage but she wore it well, heavy on the hips in a sensual way. Hestia watched her sister's movements, waiting for the usual attack: *Why don't you get a husband? Get a boyfriend? Get outside?* But now Aphrodite said nothing, draping herself instead over Hestia's sofa and solitude.

What're we watching?

Whatever, said Hestia. At the moment it was a Victoria's Secret commercial, a bronzed girl posing in a white bra and black panties. Aphrodite groaned. *Oh, I hate it when they don't match, don't you?*

It's not so bad, Hestia said.

Kellie is a chemistry graduate student at the University of California, Davis. Her work has previously appeared in *Storylandia*, *The Medulla Review*, *Calaveras Station*, and other publications. She currently resides in Davis, California with her chubby cats, Patches and Francine.

7:00 a.m. King Dies in Tragic Accident
8:30 a.m. King's Brilliance Cut Short, A Country Mourns
9:00 a.m. Hollywood's Hero Speaks: On Losing King
9:45 a.m. Queen Mourns 'Trusted Companion and Friend'
10:00 a.m. King: Suspicions Shroud Accident
10:40 a.m.. Doubts Prompt King Investigation
11:00 a.m. The World Mourns King
12:30 p.m. King: Career Highlights
1:30 p.m. King Hailed: 'Most Significant Leader of 21st Century'
2:30 p.m. King's Children Respond to Investigation
3:30 p.m. King Accident Rendered Homicide
3:50 p.m. King's Doctor Going to Trail
4:30 p.m. Queen and Family Honor King
5:30 p.m. The World Remembers a Legend
6:30 p.m. Secret Behind King's Success
7:40 p.m. What King Never Told His Subjects
7:50 p.m. Prince Admits Suspicions of King
8:20 p.m. King Case Dismissed, Doctor Exonerated
9:00 p.m. King Exonerated for Alleged Ethics Violation
10:00 p.m. A Chapter in World History Ends
11:15 p.m. Childhood Friends Mourn, Demand Respect for King
12:00 a.m. King: Unseen Photos Discovered
1:20 a.m. King Memoirs Repressed by Family
2:40 a.m. Lover Sues Family, Claims Rights per Dedication in Memoirs
3:50 a.m. Scramble for the Truth: Public Claims Right to Know
4:00 a.m. King's Bitter Family Reunion
4:50 a.m. King's Burial Planned: A National Event
5:15 a.m. King's Ceremony Details: An International Event
6:00 a.m. Remembering King
7:00 a.m. What Happened to King?

E.F. Schraeder is a member of the New England Horror Writer's Association and her creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in the anthologies *Kicked Out*, *Whitechapel 13*, *Father Grim's Storybook*, and others. Schraeder's poetry has appeared in *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Bluepepper*, *On the Issues*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Haz Mat Review*, *New Verse News*, and other journals. She attended the 2010 Vermont College of Fine Art Postgraduate Writer's Conference working on a new manuscript of poems, and she prefers hanging out with her dogs to pretty much anything.

The Dog

by *A.M. Taureau*

They hit the dog very hard.

Beside her, in the passenger seat, he was jerked from his drunken stupor by the force of the impact. His head bobbed gently as she pulled the car over onto the gravel, bringing it to a stop under the overpass. She sat, swallowing fast gulps of air, with her hands still at ten and two – as though the proper hand positions could still prevent what had happened.

He said, ‘Do you think it’s still alive?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I don’t think so. I don’t know.’ They were both silent.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Of course. Yes.’ Her breath was starting to slow down, though she was still crying a little.

‘I’m going to go check – to make sure... to see if it’s still alive,’ she told him.

Simultaneously they both looked back down the shadowy stretch of highway, dim and still in the two a.m. glow. It was not necessary to check for other cars; their headlights were the only ones in sight. The pick-up that had been in front of them – the pick-up that had blocked the view of the dog until it had successfully swerved around the animal (giving her only the briefest reprieve) had long since disappeared from sight. The driver was already a mile away, continuing on in his steady, guilt-free progress.

They both opened their doors and she started down the road. He remained standing next to the car, noticing his own beery smell, watching her walk back the way they had just come. She had been driving at sixty-five when the pick-up in front of them had suddenly veered into the left lane, an abrupt movement that she had followed with her eyes. When she shifted her eyes back – it had been the merest fraction of a second that she had been distracted – the golden retriever stood directly in front of her. They stared at each other and she saw the dog’s eyes and she knew that they were brown and she also saw that she would hurt this dog. She understood that later – when she would remember this moment – she would think of herself as being alone in the car. Then the moment, which had been stopped, began again and the car crashed into the dog. She kept the steering wheel straight, as she had been taught, and didn’t veer (where was the pick-up – she didn’t see its lights) and hoped the car was okay. All the lights on the dashboard were lit up, and the car was shuddering.

As he watched her slowly disappear in the darkness, he stood next to the car, undecided about what to do. He was very drunk, which he recognized and felt bad about, but he thought that it would be worse for her to have a drunk trying to help. He wasn’t even sure what they had hit – a deer, maybe, or a raccoon. The lights on the dashboard – all but two – had gone off, but he was still concerned. To help, he walked around the car, looking at the hood and the grill. On the driver’s side the orange light cover and the bulb itself were broken, and the bumper was slightly dented in. He squatted down to see how bad it was and then he saw the small streak of blood that had been just below his sight. There was a travel pack of Kleenex just inside the door, which he used to wipe the blood off, throwing the balled-up tissues into the sparse grass next to the road.

The next day he would replace the bulb, taping the three pieces of the orange cover first together, then to the car with clear plastic packing tape. He would smooth the tape

down with his fingers so that there would be no bumps, and it would be hard to notice that there had been an accident. The tape would still be there a few months later when he would pick up his co-worker, a pretty girl with long hair and green eyes, from her apartment, being careful to take her to a part of town that was not so familiar. She would unfold the map from the glove compartment, laughing at his confusion as she sat in the passenger seat, but she would not notice the tape. Later still, he would leave the old station wagon behind, with its taped light – the tears of condensation from the rain clouding up the inside of the plastic – instead using a rented U-Haul truck to move his boxes to the green-eyed girl's apartment. He only felt this a little bit as he shuffled his feet next to the car, and she did not know it all.

She walked further than she thought she needed to before she saw the dog. She was frightened that it would be alive, that it would attack her, that it would be dying in front of her. She saw the shape of it next to the inner median, in the middle of the freeway where a broad, grassy strip separated the two directions of traffic by about thirty feet. No cars had passed yet, and she walked in the road for about ten feet, even in the midst of her fear enjoying the novelty of walking on the freeway.

It was impossible to tell if the dog was alive. The shadows and her own eyes lent the body of the dog the illusion of pulsing which she was wary to trust. Its back was to her, and she was afraid to walk too close. She skirted a wide circle around it, until she stood again facing the dog. It did have brown eyes, which were open and still. She was relieved that it was easy to see that the dog was dead, and even more relieved that it was still a whole dog – that she had not torn it apart in any way. She wondered if she should move it, but it was already in a safe place, and also she was afraid to touch it. She stared at the dog a long time, reluctantly noticing its collar, realizing that she would have to check for a tag. Creeping slowly forward, she put her hand on its back, poised to jump back if it suddenly reared up, baring its fangs, trying to bite her. The dog remained still, though, and its dry furry back reassured her, so that she took hold of the collar. Loosely running it through her hand, she tried not to touch the dog's head as she inspected the leather band. There was no tag. She would not have to call anyone.

She walked back to the car, wishing that she didn't have to check on him – she would have liked to have stayed next to the dog a little longer. It didn't seem right to leave it there alone. He was leaning against the driver's side door with both hands in his jeans pockets.

'Did you find it?'

'Yes. She was about two hundred feet back. On the inside median.'

'Is she dead?'

'Yes. Thank goodness.'

He opened the car door for her but she leaned against his arm. 'You okay?' he asked her again.

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm okay, I think. Is the car okay?'

'Yeah – it looks like it's just the light, and I can tape that up tomorrow. We'll have to explain what happened if we get pulled over about the headlight now.'

She looked at him, 'That's fine. We didn't do anything wrong.' She ducked around the door and walked to the front of the car, looking at the headlight. 'It's amazing how hard it seemed to hit her, but all it did was break the plastic. And there's not even any blood. It's hard to believe a car can hit a dog and kill it and there's not even any blood.'

‘Yeah,’ he said, taking her hand, guiding her back toward the door, ‘sometimes that’s just the way it happens.’

A Treat Fit For A Skin-bird

by Janine-Langley Wood

I've a friend on Marsh Avenue, the one that sweeps over the brow of the valley in a perfect arc, with big detached houses and sports fields opposite. I've played 'kerplunk' with them once, Jacqueline and her brother, up in his bedroom. I must have snuck in then, because, this time when I go round I never get past the kitchen door. I've been traipsing the streets all night in the gear, the Docs, the braces, waiting for someone to see. It's taken six weeks paper round and all my bank money but I've got the Crombie now. The Crombie's everything.

'Taste some,' Jackie says to me, cupping her hand under a bit she's just cut off. Her and her Mum have made a big cake thing with crispies in. Strings of caramely stuff trail off it like sweet spit.

'What's in it?' I go, giving them the rock-hard eyes, not coming on keen, but I'd gladly shag smelly Bob Gibbins for a bit.

Then Jackie, giggling like an idiot only starts scoffing the bit she's just offered me. I go beetroot. Her Mum smiles at me. She doesn't look old like my Mum. She looks like she's just had her cheeks buffed up with Mr. Sheen does Jackie's Mum.

'Go on - try a little piece,' she says, and cuts me off some more.

'What's in it?' I go again. But I don't hang about this time. I sneak my bubbly into the snot-rag in my pocket and bite in. And I stand at the door, all awkward like, just rolling it around in my mouth, tears welling up in my eyes, and ask myself how this can be done, while Jackie – perfect she is – reels off the ingredients with her Mum nodding away beside her:

'Three quarters of a pound of rice crispies. One quarter of a pound of toffees. A tablespoon of golden syrup. One quarter of a pound of butter...'

Nothing will ever taste the same.

When I walk in our door our Nidge thumps my head sideways, says, 'Skin-bird, eh? Ha!' Acting like the eldest him since our Robert's joined up.

The kitchen windows are blind with steam from the big tin pan and the braising steak in it smells like dog meat. I drape myself around the doorpost, still chewing the last bit of crispie cake that I tried like fuck to save so Mum could try it. So she'd know.

I say, 'Can we do this recipe, Mum? Jackie Ashdene told me. It's gorgeous, really gorgeous. All it is, right, is three quarters of rice crispies, a quarter of toffees... a quarter of butter...'

My Mum, sharp-eyed, clocks me sideways through the plastered down hair, goes, 'No, you bloody-well can't.'

Janine-Langley Wood lives in Leeds and has taught Creative Writing for over ten years. Her short stories and poetry have been published in literary journals and anthologies including *Even the Ants Have Names*, Diamond Twig Press, *Lyrical Laboratory*, Forward Press, the *Poetry-for-all* series, The 24th Street Irregular Press, *Braqemard*, *Hasty* and *Krax* magazines. In 2003 she received a Northern Promise Award (Northern Arts) and mentoring by author, Sara Maitland. In 2009, she was selected for the West Yorkshire Playhouse course *So You Want To Be a Writer?* and her short play was read at The Courtyard Theatre. Her first play *A Minor Catastrophe* was shortlisted for the BBC's national comedy-script competition *Falling About*.

à Passy (ligne 6), lundi 14h02

by *Adriana Tosun*

the inventory is a quick one: pointed chin, dark eyes,
short silver-thistled hair, a leather jacket,
a man's shirt and shoes. an envy I know well collects
in the hollow of my throat—the one I carried with me
through summer camps and after-school specials, when tomboys
ran by in cargo shorts, their scarred knees alluring,
and I, uncertain, wavered, my braid too long—
give me, give me, give me.

the leather is so dark it's nearly purple. I can't parse
your shape under its cigarette-straight lines, but what
need have we of discrete shape? give me, please,
the shape of your voice instead, or the shape of your history,
your fingertips, your mouth, the soles of your men's shoes.
I ache to know you.

Adriana Tosun is currently an American in Paris. Before that, she lived on a boat, which involved quite a bit more water but, sadly, much less plumbing. Her work has been published in *Divine Dirt Quarterly*.

Untitled #71-73-80-89-00

by *Walter Beck*

While everyone else under the Colors was praising Lady Gaga as the Queen/King of American Freaks, I was sitting in a hole jammed with books on sex, politics, the American Dream, booze binges, coke binges, old records, trashy films, with flyers, signs, flags from ten years in the underground, from dirty clubs and dirty streets, broken drumsticks, set lists scribbled on the backs of flyers and bar specials, promos from MOD, Eyehategod, Origin, Malevolent Creation stained from years of cigar smoke, cigarette smoke, pipe smoke, glass chains rattle on the shelf, homemade and mass-produced, electric syringes that send my fix to the outside world. I sat there shuffling through pictures of myself, I needed a picture to attach to an application for a national campaign and I couldn't find a normal picture. Did such a picture exist? Or would these people be happy with one of me on stage in makeup, on the street with a radical freak's burning eyes and a hand-scrawled sign in my hand, in the bar in a haze of cigarette smoke and a Hank Bukowski grin on my face? I kept feeding my political addiction, endorsing a crazed Republican who exposed those bastards in Utah for the dirty money they bet on the 8 ball.

I sat in this hole in the wall and studied the words and wisdom of the greatest androgynous freak who ever lived, Vincent Furnier.

Walter Beck is a poet/performer/activist currently living in Terre Haute, IN where he has become well established in the emerging Terre Haute poetry scene for his hardcore verse and often bizarre performances. He has received coverage in the ISU *Indiana Statesman* and the Terre Haute *Tribune-Star* for his poetry and activism. Mixing social commentary, personal opinions, rock n roll and a gonzo sense of humor, Walter Beck is emerging as the new face of the American poetry underground.

The Home for Unwanted Words

by Deborah Mantle

In the Centre for Rarely Used English Nouns, known in the Linguistic Dimension by its acronym CRUEN, Odium and Zephyr were deep in communication.

‘The last time was September. I got a few write-ups, even appeared in *The New York Times*,’ Odium said.

‘*The New York Times*.’ Zephyr caressed the words with her disembodied voice. The NYT was one of a handful of newspapers beloved by members of CRUEN for their wide vocabularies.

‘But 2008 was the last time I was spoken.’

‘In a sentence?’ Zephyr asked. To be used, spoken, in context, in the right context, was every noun’s dream. Some nouns were often used and never went out of favour. Zephyr and Odium were familiar with Jealousy, but they rarely socialised as he resided in CPEN – the Centre for Popular English Nouns.

‘No, not a sentence,’ Odium admitted. ‘But she said my name.’ In a quieter voice, he added, ‘It was word of the day on 27th October.’

‘It wasn’t an “Increase your vocabulary” calendar, was it?’

Odium’s essence wobbled slightly in acknowledgement.

Zephyr could understand Odium’s disappointment. To be uttered out of context like that was dissatisfying in the long-term, yielding only a momentary high. And that word, High, only used as a noun for a matter of decades and yet he lived in CPEN. Zephyr felt that life in the Linguistic Dimension was not always fair.

‘I was in a *Guardian* crossword two years ago,’ Zephyr said, wanting to make Odium feel better. ‘I got a few mutterings, but...’ If Zephyr had had shoulders, she would’ve shrugged them.

From CRUEN they could sense all of the Linguistic Dimension. At its focal point, CPEN with its oh-so-popular members was surprisingly small; the average person’s daily vocabulary was limited to around 500 words. Although the rarely used English nouns hardly ever mixed with nouns more popular than they were, the inhabitants of CRUEN knew all the rankings.

‘Time still number one?’ Zephyr asked.

‘Yes, spoken so much, and yet never enough of it.’ It was an old Dimension joke.

There was one diversion from obsessing about high-ranking nouns and that was to discuss others even less popular than themselves.

‘How’s Amarulence doing?’

‘He moved over last week,’ Odium said.

Their essences became still. The Centre for Never Used English Nouns, known more informally as the Home for Unwanted Words, or just the Home, was not a place nouns went to willingly.

‘Well, he hadn’t been used in... how long?’

‘Over four years,’ Odium said.

To be not written or uttered for that long... Zephyr slowly turned grey at the thought.

‘I can’t imagine,’ she said quietly. She didn’t want to.

‘No, and if he isn’t used in another five years...’ Odium let the sentence hang.

He didn't need to finish it. Zephyr knew how it might end for Amarulence, all nouns did. Long-term un-use meant removal from the Great Dictionary. There was no heaven or hell as such in the Linguistic Dimension, just eternal un-use.

'He's got some years left yet,' Odium said.

'Yes,' Zephyr said, and turned a pale pink, a colour she thought of as optimistic. 'There're always chances for use, always. He's not lost yet.'

Odium took little comfort in Zephyr's words. He'd been friends with Amarulence for centuries. With such a negative meaning noun, Odium could let his essence go and be what his noun-ness wanted to be. Sometimes Zephyr was just too perky for his liking, though she could glow a pretty shade of peach.

'What's it like, do you think, in the Home?' Zephyr asked.

'Pretty much like here, I'd imagine,' Odium said, and sent out tiny energy undulations because he could. Then he went purple, orange and purple again.

Zephyr noted Odium's colour changes with some concern. *Now, Stress, that's a popular word*, she thought to herself.

Though bitter by meaning, Amarulence had generally been a happy enough noun, never popular but he'd had steady use over time. But since entering the Home, he'd felt negativity seep into his being and start to overwhelm his essence. For the first time in his existence, he felt truly bitter which gave his energy a yellowish cast. What he sensed in the Home was beyond unhappiness or even desperation; the words close to un-use were almost translucent with hopelessness.

Being unused doesn't mean being useless, Amarulence thought. He hadn't developed a long friendship with Therapy for nothing. Classed as un-used, unwanted, these words had started to believe they had no worth.

'Being unused doesn't mean being useless.' Amarulence communicated it out loud this time, and then again, but louder, from deep within his essence. His message was a pebble in a pond. Amarulence could feel its effect rippling through the subdued conglomeration of essences.

The Professor of Medieval Literature sat at his large, slab of a desk and couldn't decide if he felt more angry than bitter or the other way round. He was angry at his students whose essays he was supposed to be marking. Most of them had signed up for the course on 'Literature of the Dark Ages' thinking that it had some connection to the 'dark arts'. They quickly realised that the old texts had nothing to say about wizards or wizardry and contained neither goblins nor unicorns. Their combined disappointment was reflected in the shockingly poor quality of the essays.

The greater part of his anger, however, was directed at his ex-fiancée who'd recently become engaged to a lecturer in the Economics department. Holly – and how she'd shown her prickles! – had told him on the night she packed her Fiat Panda and left that her departure was due to him dwelling in the past, whereas her new boyfriend – and only a month later, her fiancé! – was a man of the present and the future, her future.

In fact, the real reason Holly had broken off her engagement to the Professor and moved out of the semi-detached house with bay windows in Leamington Spa was that he let

his nails grow long. That wasn't the only reason, but it was the one that stuck in her mind and made her shudder. She'd admired his intelligence, his focus, and, for a long time, overlooked the fact that he never made her laugh. He was also unnaturally pale, the colour of uncooked dough; a result of spending too many hours in book-filled rooms. As for the sex – what she remembered of it – it had never merited a passing grade. Holly had felt it a waste of effort being completely blunt with the Professor so she'd fed him the line about the past and future. She hadn't mentioned that her new fiancé taught Economic History. *He studies the past but is definitely present to my needs*, she thought with a small smile.

The Professor decided to vent some of his profound shock and pain at Holly's unwarranted rejection by writing his former fiancée a hate poem. He got out his slim, black fountain pen, a tool he felt appropriate for a man of his position and academic interests.

'My love is...' he wrote on a page of creamy-white and satisfyingly thick paper. *My love is what?* he thought. *My love is a hussy who deserves to have an F for fornicator emblazoned on the back of her faux-Chanel suit jacket.*

He pondered, imagined looking down at himself pondering and thought what a deep and sensitive man he was.

He started again.

'My love is gone. No. ...my love is past.' Yes, he liked that, the double meaning, in the past and his love for the past. *Very clever*, he thought. And then he couldn't think of a good word to rhyme with past - fast, mast, dashed? He gave up and went to make a cup of the Women's Brew herbal tea that Holly usually bought for him.

'We all have meaning!' Amarulence bellowed.

'We all have meaning!' he shouted again. He kept shouting until his voice was joined by other voices within the Home, weak at first and then stronger.

'We all have meaning!'

Two hours, three cups of tea and two large Kit-Kats later, the Professor was flowing with poetic bile when he came to a sudden stop. There wasn't a decent rhyme for 'pestilence'. The Professor reached for his well-thumbed *Croutt's Medieval Thesaurus*. He wanted a word that oozed with venom, that was bitter to the core. Such a word was on the tip of his tongue.

'Bitter, bitter,' the Professor muttered, as if it were part of a dark spell. His index finger with its overly-long nail ran down the page. He focussed on the length of his nail for a moment, looked at his other long fingernails, considered cutting them and then banished the thought. Holly had complained about his nails a few times, but she was gone. He focused his attention back on the thesaurus with its small, curly typeface until he found the word he was looking for.

'A-ha! Amarulence!'

Amarulence felt a surge of heat through his essence. 'We all have meaning' was still echoing in his being when he found himself in the Centre for Rarely Used English Nouns.

‘You’re back!’ Odium said, and for a moment they blended their essences in spontaneous noun joy.

‘We were worried about you,’ Zephyr said, her energy shimmering gold.

‘No need to worry. There’s always some bitterness to keep me around.’

Amarulence was pleased to be out of the Home and yet regretted not having had more time to develop the self-esteem of its residents. He hoped they’d remember his message.

‘So, what have I missed? Time still on top?’ Amarulence asked.

Odium felt his essence relax. All was back to normal.

‘Of course, she’s as popular as ever,’ Zephyr said. ‘And Evil’s moved up; Love’s moved down.’

Yes, all was back to normal.

Having worked in a number of countries and done a variety of jobs (teacher, cleaner, civil servant and seller of milkshakes, thermal underwear and electrical appliances), Deborah Mantle is now content to live in Cumbria, wear waterproof clothing frequently and write fiction and non-fiction. Her collection of short stories, *Changing Women*, is available as an e-book.

High Life

by Chris Stiebens

‘See that flashing,’ Bill asked, ‘across the water?’

I looked to where he was pointing. On the other side of the lake, up in the trees, a column of maybe fifteen mobile homes were moving in for the weekend.

‘What about them?’ I returned, struck slow and curious by their surgical-silver flash.

‘Makes me wonder...’ said he.

I cocked my head at him.

‘My great grandfather, Wandering Shade, told me once of mirrors on mountains. Yes, Little Big Man, mirrors on mountains.’

He was speaking to me in his *it is a good-day-to-die* tone of voice. It was sad. It made me think of his grandfather—not killed at the coming of the white man to Oklahoma—going blind now from diabetes out in San Fernando. Bill could not afford to go to see him.

‘The soldiers,’ he continued, ‘of Fort Sill, used them to communicate over the heads of my people, when they were trying to settle us.’

‘But they couldn’t probably see down in the lowlands, Bill,’ I replied, ‘—the Comanches I mean—and if they could, it couldn’t have meant that much to them—those mirrors.’

He didn’t answer me. He now had the can of *High Life* to his lips but was not drinking it. I got up and rotated our cobs of corn. Above the fire, even in the smoke, there were flies. I swatted at them, sending up black battle-puffs to the other encampments.

‘They were terrified,’ he finally said, ‘I know it.’

I turned to meet his eyes, my own squinted and wet, but his were off.

‘You want to go over to the City Lake a while, Bill, after we eat, or maybe back to town—we could get a free movie from the library—you’ve been wanting to see *Rain Man* again?’

‘No,’ he declared, ‘I want to go use a telephone.’

Christopher Lynn Stiebens is a college administrator, educator and writer raised in the rugged, rural township of Manitou, Oklahoma. He now resides in Lawton, Oklahoma, where he noncommittally practices woodworking, painting, jewelry-making and birding. His true passions are his darling wife, Mary Elizabeth, their dog, Maggie-Mae West, his parents, Ann and Jerry, and the reading and crafting of well-rendered fiction. Any comments or questions about his story, ‘High Life’, can be directed to his limited digital presence at stiebens@gmail.com.

He Had Not Shaved On the Day of His Death

by *Chelsea Burk*

Sometimes people die in swamps.

Swamps can be subcategorized into bogs. Bogs are decaying secrets. There are mosses growing in bogs, and dying in bogs. The water in bogs is usually acidic, and so the dead moss accumulates, and forms acidic peat.

Flies buzz around bogs, and beetles make the wet ground shiver. Bog water is dyed brown from the saturation of tannin.

Bogs are festering.

Bogs are beautiful.

Bogs are scary.

People walk near bogs. Maybe they stop to rest near a bog. Maybe this person takes out a pouch and withdraws some seeds to munch on. Look around a bit. Take in the nice weather, feel the sharpish breeze. Smell the wet rotting soil and almost stagnant bitter snippet of a smell of the bog's festering. Festering and breathing. Or maybe it's the same thing.

Maybe somebody comes up to this person, who is sitting, admiring the bog. Maybe they hit this person over the head with a blunt object several times. Maybe this does not automatically kill this person. Maybe this person lies dying with their face in the smooth, silty mud. Or maybe the person was killed farther away, drug to the bog at a later date. Maybe the mud squelches and glides and feels like sand when waves pull it. But usually people are chosen. Maybe they volunteer. There is a weird and long history of people agreeing to disagreeable thoughts.

Bogs preserve organic material. The water is highly acidic, the temperature is low and there is no oxygen. Bones decompose, but skin remains. It is tanned to black, and the hair turns bright red. Expressions are perfectly preserved on the faces. You are mummified for thousands of years, until someone stumbles across your foot while they are gathering peat to fuel their stove. Maybe they want to cook a pie. And they find you.

You have to be placed in the bog in the winter, when the temperature allows the bog to absorb you, when it is below 4 degrees so that bacteria cannot form, and try to decompose your organic matter.

In the Iron Age, they left gifts at the bogs. Gold and silver jewelry. Votives.

In the Iron Age, they left bodies in the bogs. Some think they were sacrificed and placed in the bog. Some think they were murdered and hidden in the bog.

Bog water is chocolate brown, the grasses around it are vibrant yellows and greens, these colors contrast sharply against the overcast gray sky of Germany, Ireland, Scotland. Trees

with white trunks rise quietly from the thin layer of lime green moss that floats on the bog's surface. Bog insects glitter and hum. Bog birds chirp. Bog toads wetly croak.

One man was in his 20s. He had cuts on his hands, along his spine. Since they were all near joints, they think he had arthritis, these cuts which turned into ritual markings, raised tattoos; these were spells to help his pain. They found fennel seeds in his stomach.

They found a noose around his broken neck.

They found his skull caved in.

They know he died in the spring, when fennel blooms.

Chelsea Burk is currently studying English and Art History at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. She is very homesick lately, and misses her mom. This is the first time her work has been published.

Think Like A Bullet
by *Cheryl Hicks*

the beauty of the system?
it allows an avid revolver man
to tinker endlessly
with his handloads
wringing the last bit
of performance out

a simple procedure
which allows a shooter
to swap his four-inch barrel
for an eight-inch

first pick up the barrel
and screw it into the frame
(the barrel goes nearly
all the way in...)

slide the barrel shroud over

male threads
and female threads
have a certain tolerance
between them
(if they didn't, you wouldn't
be able to use a wrench
to get them together...)

peace and quiet comes to an abrupt end
when someone smacks
the primer with the firing pin

all hell breaks loose

an erupting volcano
looking for relief
can only overcome
the crimp

and go forward
into the throat

the system works

a found poem from *Hand Gunning*, Jan/Feb 1993

Cheryl Hicks has been published in *Crate*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Southern Hum*, *The Best of the First Line: Editors' Picks 2002-2006*, *Families: The Frontline of Pluralism*, *The Remembrance Project* at Howard University, *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, *Other Poetry (UK)*, *Juice*, *Poems-For-All*, *Literal Translations*, *Toward the Light (Canada)*, *The Sigurd Journal*, *Ginosko*, *Eskimo Pie*, *Urban Spaghetti*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Heliotrope*, *Makar*, *Snakeskin (UK)*, *HerCircle*, *The Orphan Leaf Review (UK)*, *the delinquent (UK)*, *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *Silent Actor*, *Avatar Review*, *Word Riot*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Monkey Kettle (UK)*, *Washington Literary Review*, *Shakespeare's Monkey Review*, and *Unquiet Desperation (UK)*. She has been a featured poet at C/Oasis, is a previous recipient of the Paddock Poetry Award and presented poems from her series titled *Conversations with the Virgin* at the 2006 Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Conference in Tucson, Arizona. Hicks' art has been shown across Texas and in New York, and her collages have appeared in *Atticus Review*, *CELLA's Round Trip*, *Anti-*, *Blue Print Review*, and *Creative Soup*. Her mixed media work was featured at the Fort Worth Contemporary in July 2008.

Astrid the Watch Tower

by Ainslie Hogarth

Astrid was in the third grade. Eight years old and taller than her teacher who had the expressionless face of a toad and flesh that hung in a quavering sack from her barely-there chin. Like all the meat and pretty from her face had dripped into it. Decorated in too much make-up and three long, frightened looking hairs, Astrid always felt the urge to stroke the old woman's soft undersack, mesmerized by the way it jiggled to the rhythm of her strange language. The teacher would lean over Astrid's desk, press a pink-nailed finger onto Astrid's open notebook, and drag it the correct way over Astrid's slanted cursive, and Astrid would stare, stare, stare at the teacher's throat and certainly the other girls noticed.

Because of her extraordinary height, Astrid sat in the back of the class out of everyone's way, with the empty fish tank and the stationary cupboard which only the teacher could open. The furthest corner of the room. From this faraway spot she thought about how unextraordinary her height would be in Almatcha Mississippi where her parents moved from a year before she was born. A place she'd never been to, but pictured as heavenly. Her mother assured her that Almatcha Mississippi was anything but heavenly, but Astrid felt that anywhere was better than Honduras. Honduras: where the girls were tiny and precious and could all be ballerinas if they wanted to.

Strange thoughts drifted into her mind back there as well, moving slow and coiled like cigarette smoke over the heads of everyone else in the room. Thoughts about the unimaginable softness beneath her teacher's sacked skin. How it longed to explode from her throat. How she, Astrid, would roll around in it if it did manage to explode, the way a dog might in another animal's faeces to absorb the scent. Then no one would look at her like a stranger anymore.

How she hated the teacher.

Every girl in Astrid's class took ballet lessons at the community center after school. Astrid, who was much too tall to be a ballerina, watched from a spot in the exact middle of the bleachers and the other girls called her a pervert because all she did was watch.

'Pervertida! Pervertida!'

Astrid was a tower.

A watchtower.

She'd trained her face to be an empty window. Which scared her mother. She'd say, 'Astrid, quit doing that with your face girl. Smile when you're happy, and go ahead and frown when you're sad. But do something for Pete's sake, because you're givin' me the creeps.'

But Astrid didn't want to let on. No one really knew her just like no one could really know a watchtower and if she couldn't be a ballerina then she wanted to be a watchtower. The inanimate white girl. A post. Among a sea of tiny Latina dancers.

One day while standing tall and alone in the playground, she looked up at the sky and saw a bird flying low with a brown mouse in its claws. Astrid was tall enough to see that the mouse wasn't dead yet. In fact it looked comfortable, the large bird's claws hanging in a tender, seat-like position. Like they were friends. And the bird was helping the mouse to see all of the things it couldn't normally see.

And Astrid wished to be the tiny mouse. That particular tiny mouse: smaller than his friend and privy to two worlds. The faraway world and the right up close world. So up close as to see every microscopic detail in everything that it got near; the dry lizard skin of the bird's claw, all knuckle and callous, and the outline of a tall watchtower with blonde hair on its head and a blank face, surrounded by miserable brown playground.

A tingling resonated through Astrid's long spine. Reverberations as though through a silver chime. She heard the tingling too. It filled her ears, pushing out the sounds of the Latina girl's laughing and playing. So loud now, she crouched down as low as she could go, puffs of breath from her nose startling warm playground dirt, and she examined the pink, clawed roots of a fluffy weed.

Variations on the Visitation Rights of Wolves

by *Sam Martone*

I. A wolf, at the Center for Recovering Storybook Villains

To call it the ‘The Center for Recovering Storybook Villains’ is, at best, misleading. If one uses the term ‘villains,’ I expect all manner of bad guys to be included. Contained within these walls, there is an admittedly diverse batch of beasts and ogres and other non-humanoid antagonists. But human villains rarely get sent here. Juries—always entirely human—are just more likely to feel sympathy for their own kind. Human villains get off easy, sent on their way. It’s not racism, but it’s something like it.

When I pointed out this injustice to Phil, the one nurse in here who treats me and the other residents like intellectual equals, he explained they haven’t yet figured out how to contain witches and sorcerers. But look, I told him, there are plenty of human villains who have no control over magic: pirates and serial killers and puppy-murdering fashionistas, and very few of them have served any time here. Bluebeard paid a fine and was given twelve hours community service, then went right back to his wife throat-cutting hobby, taking care not to leave any evidence this time. Meanwhile, I’m halfway through a twenty-year sentence, and all I did was break into an old lady’s house. I didn’t even get to eat her, or her granddaughter. The crime I was convicted of: Attempted Dining.

I stress these concerns to Spider as we sit on the couch in the lounge, but he’s checking the lunch menu. ‘No curds and whey today, Big,’ he says sadly, throwing the menu to the other side of the room. Spider’s a spider, but he’s gargantuan, bigger than any Little Miss you may know. He’s bigger than me, and I’m the Big Bad Wolf.

‘They never have curds and whey,’ I say, flipping through the channels on the new flat-screen television, all its car chases and cooking shows. The remote has been modified for those of us with paws or claws or hooks. ‘I’m not even sure what whey is.’

‘Doesn’t hurt to check,’ Spider says. Spider’s the closest thing to a friend I have here. He’s the only one who can have an intelligent conversation. Papa Bear, who took the fall for his wife and kid, growls if you come near him. The old pirate captain, one of the few humans here, doesn’t talk much; he’s always looking in the mirror, counting the wrinkles on his face, checking his watch. The trolls spend their time hiding under sinks in the bathroom, threatening you when you wash your hands, and Rumpelstiltskin will only ask you to guess his name, despite the fact that it’s on the plastic ID tag clipped to his shirt, albeit spelled incorrectly. We don’t know how they keep Rumpelstiltskin here, given that he appears to be some sort of inter-dimensional imp. Spider thinks it’s the free food.

It’s true, the food isn’t bad. We get three squares a day, which is better than hunting in a steadily disappearing forest, breaking into grandmothers’ houses, desperate for a meal. We have weekly physical checkups, as well as twice weekly therapy sessions—or ‘conversations,’ as Dr. Price says—in order to make sure our supposed evilness is decreasing at an adequate rate. There are plenty of activities to keep us occupied in our spare time, but nothing I find fulfilling. Recently, though, I’ve begun working on a series of paintings entitled ‘On the Architectural Flaws of Pig Houses.’ They’re very abstract.

And then there’s visiting hour, the one part of my schedule I truly dread. Nearly every day, I have a visitor who shows up, reminding me why I’m here: Little Red Riding Hood.

Of course, she's not so little anymore. She's a grown woman, but she's still wearing that red hood. It barely fits her. Moths have eaten holes through it.

Every day, she tells me she's in love with me, that she can't wait for me to be released so we can finally be together. She tries to sneak pieces of meat to me, and apologizes that it's not 'grandmother' meat. You know those visiting areas in high-security prisons, the kind you see in movies, where you have to talk through six inches of glass? The Center doesn't have one of those. They've just put a bunch of tables and chairs in one of the rooms. The hope is, Dr. Price explained, that the pleasant, unrestrained conversations will result in decreased villainous tendencies, reduced desires to commit dastardly deeds.

Unfortunately, this setup means Red is able to sidle up right next to me, slip her hand into my paw. I tell her she's experiencing a very serious case of Stockholm syndrome, but she doesn't listen. She insists we're supposed to be together, as one, that we are inextricably connected. Give me a break.

There's nothing on TV today—local news reporting a murder, game shows and soap operas that look even cheaper on the high-definition screen. I had been hoping the History channel would be continuing their series on famous canines. I glance at the clock. Visiting hour is upon us. I'd rather watch nothing on television than have to sit for forty-five minutes while a mind-warped twenty-two-year-old tells me what strong arms I have.

'All right guys, visiting hour,' Phil says. I sigh loud enough that he can hear and make my way toward the visiting area, but there's nothing he or anyone can do—Dr. Price insisted in our last session that conversing with the one I wronged is an essential aspect of my rehabilitation. Spider catches up to me, pats my back with three of his legs.

When we enter, other patients are already talking to their visitors—a gnome's family brought a ceramic human for the lawn, and the old pirate captain is grumbling to a fluttering ball of light. Spider sits down at an empty-looking table where, if you look close, a regular-sized spider is waiting. Spider's cousin visits fairly regularly, but always tells the same story: 'I climbed up that waterspout again, but damn, that rain's a bitch.'

'You'll get there someday, Gerald,' Spider says.

I look around at the other tables, but there's no Red in sight.

'She didn't come today, Big,' Phil says, looking at the sign-in clipboard. 'Sorry about that.' I am surprised to find myself a little disappointed, but surely that is because of a break in the routine to which I have become so accustomed, nothing more.

I return to the lounge and turn on the news. More details about the murder. A helicopter films from the air as police surround a cottage, guns drawn. That cottage looks strangely familiar.

Oh no.

The police rush in and, for a moment, all is still but the beating of the helicopter blades. Then, a pair of cops emerges triumphant, the culprit handcuffed. I can tell it's her even from the sky cam. She's wearing her red hood, which looks bloody and bold on the sharp screen.

Later, when she is interrogated at the station, she will say she was cleaning and gutting her grandmother in order to bring the meat to me. She will say she loves me, that we are inextricably linked, and the detective, despite all the things he's seen and heard, will feel sick listening to Red as she recounts skinning her grandmother's arms.

For now, I sit and watch as the news reporter speculates on a possible motive, some part of me—not my stomach—feeling hollow as I realize that, when I am released, I will be the one visiting her, every day, because without her, I’m not big or bad. I’m just another wolf.

II. Another wolf, at the city zoo

It was almost the best moment of my life, but instead it became the worst, worse than when my mother stopped letting me suckle, worse than when I lost the fight to be the alpha male and part of my left ear along with it. The day had started off so well. Without the assistance of my pack, I cornered a delicious meal: an old human female and her grandcub, who wore a little red cape. I planned to eat the old one first, since she was likely to be chewy or stringy, and then I’d move on to the young one, whose succulent-looking flesh could not have been aged more than ten years. They were backed against the wall of the old one’s cabin, holding each other. I was growling and pacing toward them, appearing very menacing, when suddenly a male human burst in and hit me over the head with a piece of firewood.

When I woke up, I was here, in the wolf habitat of a city zoo, humiliated and trapped in a place where nothing ever happened. Human cubs taunted me through the fence, their mere presence a reminder that I could not tear their throats out with my teeth, gorge on their pudgy, delectable meat. The other wolves, they were all born and bred here, and they were all idiots. They didn’t understand anything about being a pack or hunting or howling at the moon. They were more like common domesticated dogs than wolves. I tried to teach them to attack the zookeeper when he threw meat to us. I told them stories about how a wolf should be, big and bad, but nothing worked.

After six mindless years eating the imitation beef they fed us and shitting it out, six years watching other members of my species embarrass themselves chasing their own tails, something happened. I smelled her, first, and thought I was mistaken. But no, then I saw her: my little red-caped one. Here for a visit to the zoo with a group of other girls. But something was different.

The girls, all with flesh aged between fifteen and eighteen years, were holding signs, painted sloppily. When they raised the signs high into the air, I saw hair under their arms that reminded me of wolf fur. They were all wearing similar shirts—shirts with pictures of wolves. And they were chanting something: ‘The city zoo is shit from bulls! We won’t quit ‘til you free the wolves!’ They were like a pack.

They continued chanting, louder and louder. Parents visiting the zoo covered their cubs’ ears and pushed them toward the bear habitat. A zookeeper came over and tried to get the girls to stop. Then, a female with a microphone, followed closely by a male with a camera, rushed up. The woman shoved the microphone in the red-caped one’s face.

‘Why is your group doing this? What do you hope to accomplish? What made you decide to become an activist? What might you say to younger girls who look up to you and want to join your crusade?’ the female asked.

The red-caped one seized the microphone. ‘I am doing this because when I was a girl, I was attacked by a wolf. I was saved by a woodcutter who not only killed the wolf, but cut its stomach open, filled it with rocks and threw the body in the river. I ask you: what kind of

sick monster does this? That wolf wanted to eat us for survival purposes,’ she said, and stopped to take a breath before beginning again. ‘For that reason, I have formed Women for Wolves, and we will stop at nothing to get these wolves, as well as all the other animals, released into the wild where they belong.’

Hah! The irony. The beauty of all of this. They must have told her a story as a girl so she wouldn’t get scared at night, a lie about my death to make her feel safe. Instead it drove her to join my side. All the better: she thought I was dead, so if she succeeded in freeing me from this horrible prison, she would never expect my deadly strike.

In the following weeks, the Women for Wolves group came and protested regularly. I made it a game, to try to get her attention, to catch her eye. Even though it would spoil the surprise, I wanted to see if she would recognize me, if she would realize that, soon, I would devour her. I came to enjoy seeing her face twisted in anger, a sign swung over her shoulder, yelling at passers-by.

When their protests did not convince the tyrannous zookeepers to release us, the red-caped one and her friends began taking more drastic action, committing mischievous acts of terrorism in the name of freeing the animals. She wore a red bandana to hide her identity but I knew her by her scent. She and her pack vandalized the bird sanctuary and hid zookeepers’ keys and threw water balloons filled with ketchup at visitors. It was exciting, seeing her running around, unwittingly working toward her own demise.

Then, one evening when she was dropping stink bombs in the reptile room, she stopped by the wolf habitat and looked over the fence, the red bandana obscuring most of her face. Her eyes met mine. I was sure she had recognized me, she had to have noticed the difference between me and the other wolves who were lounging around, their matted and dirty fur, their yapping barks. She crouched down and reached her hand through the fence. Here was my chance, at last. I wouldn’t even have to wait for freedom, and though killing her would ensure my continued captivity, this vengeance would be worth it.

I walked over to her. I licked her fingers. They were delicious. My lips pulled back in a silent snarl. And yet, for some reason, I could not tear at the flesh, I could not take her limb like I should have so many years ago. My mind told me to kill but my jaw would not act. Sirens were going off. The zookeepers were coming for her. She lowered the bandana to her chin.

‘I knew a wolf like you once,’ she said. ‘Same big eyes, same big teeth. I’m doing all this so the zoo will release you. So you can be free.’

She was the reason I was as big and bad as I was, and she didn’t even know it. She blew me a kiss from the hand I could not bring myself to bite, and, pulling the bandana back up over her face, ran.

She didn’t come back after that. Her scent lingered for days. I howled at a moon I could not see.

III. A Wolfe, at the maximum-security prison thirty miles outside of town

Big and bad. That’s what they all called me, the jabbering mouths in news reports and op-ed columns and inane late night talk shows and in all the retellings over and over again: Big Bad Wolfe. Funny. Hilarious. Thought I might choke laughing. I wasn’t all that big. In fact, I was downright scrawny, skin and bones. That detail didn’t matter though. With my

taste in women—girls, I should say—I was always big in comparison. But then there's the other thing: I wasn't all that bad. I didn't even get a taste. She had just finished undressing, her underwear abandoned on the bedspread, when that hunter broke down the door and became the noble hero he's remembered as now. They even built a bronze statue of him, right in the middle of town. Funny, because the only reason he knew I was there, cuddled next to that sweet girl, was because he was tailing her, too, hoping to get a taste for himself—I had sold him some pictures once before, little redheaded girls stripped of everything but their smiles. I knew what he was hunting, but of course no one believed me. I got life in prison. He got to marry her, when she came of age of course, and everyone turned a blind eye when he was caught with a thirteen-year-old Taiwanese girl at the brothel during a police raid. He's dead now, though. Swallowed his shotgun a few years back, so I guess I got the last laugh after all.

For the record: I didn't kill the old lady, her grandmother. Of that I am innocent. She was dead when I got there. I simply undressed the corpse and hid it in a closet. I'm not ashamed. All in the name of satiating hunger. One day the rest of the world will come to understand my desires as a beautiful thing. For now, I spend my days here, rotting, getting my nose broken on a monthly basis, famous for being a failed pedophile.

I was surprised, to say the least, when Clancy, the day guard, came to my cell and told me someone was here to see me. It had been twenty-six years and I hadn't had a single visitor. Clancy unlocked my cell door and put shackles around my ankles, then led me down the corridor. Other cellmates called my name, said they hoped I was getting the chair, putting me out of their misery. I ignored them and made pleasant conversation with Clancy on the way, asked how his kids were.

'Fuck you, pervert,' he said, and opened the door to the visiting area. 'You got fifteen minutes. Last cubicle.' Always a pleasure, Clancy.

I shuffled down the row of cubicles, the six-inch glass between them smudged with fingerprints and the blurred ghosts of puckered lips. When I got the one on the end, I saw a girl sitting on the other side, already holding the phone receiver to her ear. Red hair just like the little girl that put me here. Little too old for my taste, but after years of only seeing women on crumpled pinups or through the snow of cheap cable, anything would do for these hungry eyes. I sat down and picked up the receiver on my side.

'Mr. Wolfe?' she said. Her voice was shrouded in the static of the phone, but I could tell with each syllable how moist her lips were.

'Please, my dear, call me Lawrence,' I said, grinning, showing her my teeth.

'I'm not really sure why I'm here, to tell you the truth,' she said. 'Things have just been difficult lately. Mom doesn't leave the bed since Herbert offed himself.'

It was her daughter. I said, 'I see, I see,' and 'Go on, tell me more.' She needed someone to listen. Funny, that it should turn out to be me.

'She really thinks it was a wolf, you know, in that bed with her. She even made Herbert hunt and cook wolves,' she said. 'She was really young, I guess, and blocked the memory or something. That happens, right? Traumatic stuff warping the mind? She's heard so many different versions of the story, I don't think she remembers anything that actually happened.'

I nodded, not having the heart to tell her all those stories of repressed memories were bullshit. If only there was some way we could be closer, instead of stuck forever in a world where six inches of glass separated us. She kept talking.

‘But I saw you on TV, obviously, when they did those annual specials revisiting news stories from the past. I tried to bring it up to Mom, but it didn’t work. I guess I just wanted to see you. You’ve been this shadowy monster looming over my whole life, even though I knew you were just a creepy man. I mean, you’re horrible, but you’re still just a person.’

‘People are capable of doing monstrous things,’ I said.

‘I just thought things would get better after Herbert was gone,’ she said. ‘I thought I would stop having nightmares. I can’t tell Mom, of course, but he—’

‘You keep calling him Herbert,’ I said, and stopped grinning for the first time since I laid eyes on her. ‘He was your father, correct?’

‘Yes, he was my father, but—’ she stopped and looked down. I had hit a nerve. I knew what had happened. He couldn’t even resist his own daughter. I would have made her feel loved, if it had been me, if it had been her all those years ago, instead of her mother. She dropped the receiver and wiped at her eyes, looked at me one last time before running down the row of cubicles to rejoin the world.

I hung up the receiver. I licked my lips. I leaned forward and pressed my hand against the glass, my mouth so close I could see my breath forming fog. ‘But if it hadn’t happened the way it happened, then I wouldn’t be here,’ I whispered to the glass, to the empty seat, to the red strand that fell from her head and lay curled on the mouth of the receiver. ‘And you wouldn’t be here with me.’

IV. A wolf, at the cemetery

I visit him every week. I pass by the farmer’s market and the new theater that’s under construction. Sometimes someone recognizes me, even though I no longer wear the hood, and calls out ‘Red!’ as though it’s my name. I walk down the road by the river until I see the rusting wrought-iron fence that surrounds the graveyard, and I wander through the headstones, past my grandmother’s and the woodcutter’s, until I find the familiar marker, tucked away in a kudzu-covered corner, just a rock with this inscription: ‘What Big Eyes You Had.’

He’s not really buried there. The woodcutter took his carcass, served him for dinner the very same night. But later I insisted we have a proper funeral for him, for the beast who nearly ate my grandmother and me. My parents, eager to please their beloved, uneaten six-year-old daughter, played along.

Years later, I’m still bringing him flowers—aconitum when I can find it, when it’s in bloom. I tell him about my day, about boys at school, about the usual tourists who stop by my house to buy souvenirs from my parents’ Little Red Gift Shop—snow globes and stationary, wolf dolls that you can unzip at the belly to find a doll of me, handmade red hoods. I imagine parents dressing their own children up like me, sending them into the woods, hoping they’ll find their own destiny of fame and folklore. I’m not sure if this happens, but I’m sure not everyone is as lucky as I was, and you never hear about the kids who end up eaten.

When I visit him, he does not respond to my stories, my whining, my questions. There are no growls that issue forth from the dirt. On late nights when I sneak out of my room, he does not howl at the waning moon. There is no more ‘All the better to,’ or ‘my dear.’

I cannot imagine what it would be like to be a girl who was not nearly devoured by a wolf. I visit him, even still, because without him, there would be no me. I go back home to my parents fighting over the profits, back to school to the boys with big fake grins. All I want is to be young again, to be before the story, in a world where wolf teeth were attached to wolf jaws, not strung on cheap necklaces.

‘Hey, Red,’ someone calls as I leave the cemetery. ‘Can I get your autograph?’ I flash a big fake grin and tell him of course, and he brings me a book of fairy tale retellings. I sign it ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’ because that’s who I am, because that’s what a wolf made me. I cannot blame him, for I, in turn, made him Big and Bad. We are inextricably linked, will always be together, leading a single life, shrouded in a red hood, swallowing each other, tossing and turning in the other’s stomach, now and ever after.

Sam Martone currently resides in Tempe, Arizona, but still calls Alabama home. His stories have appeared in children's night terrors and hallucinations brought on by a particular off-brand aspirin. As a child, whenever he would visit his grandmother, she would dress up as a wolf and act out her own version of the fairy tale with the young Sam Martone, at the end of which he would unzip the costume and rescue his grandmother from the beast's stomach. They stopped playing this game when his grandmother was tragically devoured by wolves.

Brown Boxes, Part III
by *Freesia McKee*

The floor wore a shawl of salt.
The closet filled with rags and brooms

drawer creased cloth
, dirty

mops; roof flew off. We did not
melt, but ignited
sixteen coals; we did not melt quickly, we

roamed. Rain filled

where the roof was, diluted
clean
like sheets, the four heat elements broke
apart. You took my soap

with you, the box of pins,
the glues from the shelf.
Water does not part

grease-stains. You filled the bathtub
with bleach, loaded a bucket
with slotted spoons. All this,

but I watered the carpet
for mold
to grow. All this,

but the first
salt of your filth(y home)

could have scrubbed the floor and refilled
you r bowl.

Freesia McKee is a page poet, slammer, and intersectional feminist. Native to Milwaukee, Wisconsin; she will soon graduate from Warren Wilson College with a degree in Gender and Women's Studies and Creative Writing.

Day of the Equinox

by *R.A. Allen*

He thought, How depressingly stereotypical it was to mark off days served on a wall calendar. But just the same, he drew an X through September 22. He now stood at ‘one day and a wake-up,’ meaning that around noon tomorrow they'd call him down to Receiving and Discharge where he would sign some papers and take possession of his personal effects. The van would then transport him to the downtown bus station.

His heart was dancing, but not, as it normally would for out-bound prisoners, for joy.

Her letters had slowed, and then, three weeks ago, stopped altogether. Her phone, dead; the landline to their house, disconnected. What could be wrong? He was only doing six months on a first offense. He'd left her enough money for rent, for the utilities, even her car note.

The corrections officer wished him good luck at the station. He was on his own. Freedom had a queasy, unexpectedly oppressive feel to it, like a new set of problems. He felt small, naked. On the bus, he took a window seat near the back.

The sky was overcast, and at the horizon he saw zips of lightning. The fields were deserted. Well, naturally they were deserted, moron—nobody wants to be electrocuted. They passed a boarded-up gas station and then a chimney rising from the weedy foundation of a burnout.

At the next stop, a guy wandered back and sat down in the seat next to him, some kind of hammer-and-chisel nomad in a bowling shirt. He smelled of the road. ‘How is goin’?’ he said, grinning.

‘Fine,’ he said. He had things on his mind.

‘You just get out of that slammer up the road?’

Was it that obvious? ‘What makes you ask?’

‘Ha-haw.’ His laugh was somewhere between tuberculosis and a goose honk. ‘Yer skin is the same color as the inside of a oyster shell. What were you down for?’

‘Growing marijuana.’

‘That's a federal joint back there. Yer patch musta been on gummint property.’

‘Your guess takes the cake.’ It was true. He had had a university grant to study owls in the Ouachita National Forest and, while checking some of his nests, had stumbled across a natural clearing. He couldn't resist the temptation to grow a few plants. He'd fucked up.

‘How much time?’

‘Six months, plus two years probation.’

‘Not too bad. Fed time is better'n state time in these parts.’

‘That's what I hear.’

‘I pulled a deuce in the Monroe County lockup. It was full of roaches and black widow spiders, and sometimes they fed us boiled dog food. And, buddy, that ain't no shit.’ He finger-fished his sock and came out with a wadded-up truck stop napkin. Inside were some white rectangular pills. ‘Zanzibar?’ he offered.

‘What?’

‘Xanax.’

‘Uh—no, thanks.’ The last thing he needed was to arrive home high.

‘Suit yerself,’ he said as he swallowed one of them. He stowed his bindle back in his sock.

The guy leaned back, closed his eyes, and drifted off into a smirking memory. Five towns later, he got off across from a storefront Pentecostal church with a sign in its window that said ‘Welcome Sinners.’

It started to mist. It was the kind of mist that's so fine it's almost fog. Self-replacing legions of raindrops the size of pinheads blanketed the window and then raced toward the rear of the bus.

They passed the auto salvage yard that marked the outskirts of his town.

The clouds were gunmetal gray and they met the horizon like a fallen curtain—maybe like what he'd heard called a ‘lowering’ sky.

Why had she not written? They'd made love every night for two weeks before he went in. He couldn't make it without her.

In a minute, they would pass by the six-house cul-de-sac where he lived. He would be able to see their place from the highway. He prayed that a light would be on. The bus window was smeary with road grime and mist.

He strained to see his house through the darkness and the streaking droplets. Oops, he bumped his nose on the cold window glass. It was really coming down now.

There was a loose cluster of rooftops; the individual buildings still obscured. He would see Billy Strayhorne's converted doublewide first—yes, there it was, and parked in the side yard, Billy's Freightliner, slick with rain in the glow of a pole-mounted security light. His own place would be just beyond. There it was! His house! Home!

There was a car was parked in the driveway.

He squinted. With his hand, he tried to wipe the bus window clean, but the obstructing blur was on the opposite side.

It looked like his house was melting.

It *was* melting. He was sure it was melting.

The roof was bleeding down on the walls, and the walls were collapsing, and the whole thing was dissolving like a mud hut and running in rivulets down to the street.

Truth is

Perception.

by *Troubadour Kaul*

the times

when logic demands
a mutiny of the senses
by reminding me of
virtue and vice;

Imagination never aches
until reality begins to bite.

we kiss:
enduring
an eternity accessible to
infinite moments of life.

What's wrong with a gutter
from where you can see the stars?

Troubadour Kaul is a collaboration project between the two Indians exploring poetry, travelogues, prose, photography and music. Their poetry has appeared in *Asia Writes*, *Short Fast and Deadly*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *Nether Magazine*, *Fleeting*, *Loch Raven Review*, *Subliminal Interiors* and others. Despite being a Best of the Net nominee, Winner of the Asian Age Poetry Contest, Best Short Writing in the World finalist, their ranking in the Indian arranged-marriage-market remains dismal. While Vineet Kaul rents out his vocabulary to his partner-in-rhyme, the Troubadour brings his imagination to the table. Neither of them, however, is bringing any bread to the table. Maybe that is what happens when you collaborate with your alter-ego. Always looking to collaborate with other artists you can contact them at: vineetkaul85@gmail.com

Devotion
by *Theodore Carter*

R.J. looked at his hands folded in his lap and wished he could vanish, escape the room without having to get up and cross it. He raised his eyes and saw John in profile, standing with his head bent down and rubbing his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

‘Thought you was on board. Why didn't you tell me you weren't on board?’ John said.

‘I'm on board. Just in that picture, I don't see it.’

‘Shoulda said before, R.J.’

The blow-up photo sat perched on an easel next to the living room couch, prominently displayed for the TV crew that'd just left. In John's estimation, it showed a bigfoot peaking out of a dense forest. R.J. saw the shape, but when put on the spot, he ‘couldn't be sure’ if it was a bigfoot.

John collapsed onto the worn, floral-print sofa, his head tilted toward the ceiling so R.J. could see the underside of his chin. ‘Christ, R.J.,’ he said.

‘I'm real sorry, John.’ R.J. wanted things to be like they were years ago, the two of them loading the pickup with a couple of folding chairs, a cooler of beer, binoculars, and a thirty-five millimeter camera. Out there in the mountains, they'd sit for hours talking and joking, letting the beer take hold.

That changed once John got some photos out on the Internet. People asked him to meet, to speak, to travel to Tennessee for a convention where he and R.J. had shared a hotel room. John at the vanity mirror each night meticulously taking off his watch, stacking his change, taking off his wedding ring, unaware of R.J. watching him, studying the sway of his broad shoulders, the way his hair lay over the tops of his ears.

Then the TV crew. Finally, this.

‘It's gonna get out,’ John said. ‘It'll get out and people gonna start askin' 'bout you, whether you for real, and I'mma have to answer.’

‘Say whatcha need to, John. Don't matter to me none.’

John exhaled and held his arms wide, palms toward the ceiling. ‘Thing I wanna know is...’ He sat up and looked R.J. in the eye. John's eyes looked soft, pleading. ‘Do you even believe in bigfoot?’

‘Think what you did, how you got that website up, talked at that convention and everything, it's remarkable is what it is. I'd follow you to the enda the earth, tell you the truth 'bout it.’

‘So?’

‘Not for me to pass judgement on. Just go along wit you, how I think 'bout it.’ Fishing, hunting, watching football, anything would have done. John liked hunting bigfoot.

‘Hell, R.J. What the hell you been doin' all these years then?’

His eyes bulged and he waited for a response. R.J. couldn't answer, but thought at some point, John would figure it out. He waited for it now, waited to see his eyes soften in realization as he answered his own question. The thought of it frightened and thrilled R.J. But, as much as he liked to imagine John's sudden understanding, he couldn't picture it. It wouldn't come into focus and lurked in the background defying clear identification. He could say he saw it, lay out an idealized version of what would happen next, but he'd be

lying. What he saw more clearly was the reality, the here and now, he and John stuck in the living room and him unable to vanish.

Theodore Carter's fiction has appeared in *The North American Review*, *PANK*, and *A cappella Zoo*. He has been published in genre mags and themed anthologies focused on humor, horror, erotica, super powers, and Jimi Hendrix. His book of stories is forthcoming from Queen's Ferry Press. You can find out more about Theodore and his work at www.theodrecarter.com.

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