

(revealing all your dirty little secrets)

down in the *dirt*
077
Dec. '09

Table of contents

12/09, Down in the Dirt, volume 077



Christopher Lawless	2
Isaac James Baker	3
Fredrick Zydek.....	5
Tom Ball	6
Trinity Martin	12
Jon Brunette	17
Rachel Bailin	18
Justin Blackburn	18
Angela Drayer	19
Terry Michael Riley	21
Christopher Barnes	22
Mick Ransford	22
Mel Waldman	22
John Capraro	23
John Ragusa	29
Tony Concannon	32
Nathan Hahs	35
Randy Boone	40
Susan Oleferuk.....	40
Kevin John Dail.....	40
Adam Graupe.....	41
<i>a good-bye from the editor</i>	<i>42</i>

Scars over art of snow in Gurnee, Illinois..

No Lemon, No Ice, No Sugar

Christopher Lawless

My mother in another man's arms
being carried from the Little League field
where my brother's team lost;

in the heat of the sun
it was a mirage coming from the stands
being carried past the dugout

passed the high knee socks
passed the parents
wondering whose mother it was

my brother and I knowing
her condition
and her attempt to never rid herself of it.

Being carried
she hung from his arms like religion
and she was Mary to us,

laid before men, not manger.
We were taken away in my father's van
back to the house

but I remembered the Genesee River,
being carried by inflatable rafts
two in each one

my brother and father,
my nephew and I in the other
pushing off the rocks into shallow water

pushing to the deep current
under the Fillmore bridge.
Being carried halfway down

the winds picked up before the river,
the static air clapped
and the sky turned to storm.

We left the water
laid face down on the rocks
held on to one raft with eight arms
lightning in the treetops.

The other raft, being carried
thrown like a skipped stone
over the current and out of sight.

We walked back to the car
with one raft, one oar, and one hell of a story
to tell my mother

who was taken to the hospital
being carried by ambulance
and she slept without speaking.

From her bedside hung
plastic bag, tar black from her lungs
and a machine played Messiah.

The hospital halls echoed
like a fly's buzz in a Ball jar
being carried by a six year old.

The open doors left the smell of the forgotten
voices under masks stopped breathing
women in white ran passed

returning in red
pulling the remains of a Spanish accountant
whose wife had cut him

being carried through the lunch tray doors
into the ER, disappearing
among the many machines, beeps, and latex gloves.

Earth, Fruit, Filth

Isaac James Baker

It clinks cheerily as I
slide it off the rack. I grip it tightly,
blow off the dust and film.
My eyes carefully examine the
brick red and gold label.
I think back to
the Monday night
I shelled out bill money
for it
years ago.

A lot's happened since then.
A lot.
As I slide the cork out with a pop,
pour a dash in the glass,
and breathe in the earth, fruit,
anticipant,
it strikes me:

disintegration,
corrosion,
filth,
have not yet encrusted
everything.

The hospital held a strange embrace of things;
a man bleeding to death, my mother strung like a puppet
her lungs leaking sewage, from an unfiltered body

her hands laid out, ash still in her fingernails
the smell of resin, being carried over the room
stopping at each nostril of each person

reminding them what death was
in room 302, where her mother had spent so many days
ordering nurses around, making herself at home

leaving Christmas Eve to die in her own bed
under her Navajo quilt,
ships her husband had made still hanging on the walls.

It was a week before the bag cleared
and my mother had the strength to speak.
She told us she dreamed;

carried to each of our bedrooms, by a hand shadowed
and our skin collapsed when she touched it,
stained the sheets and her hands
suffocated the air, choked her awake.

We said goodbye to Judy at the reception's desk
Paula the nurse, and Dr. Patel,
took the deflated balloons and wilted flowers

pushed my mother out the front door
carried by a wheel chair,
to the van that took my brother and I away from her the first time.

On the way home we stopped at McDonalds
I got my number 5, my brother his number 6, my father, just a water please,
and for my mother, a Winston regular
a large iced tea, with no lemon, no ice, no sugar.

Letter to David and Ruth About Becoming Who We Were Meant to Be

Fredrick Zydek

Dear Nicklins: Thinking is a risky art and a tricky business. How in the world are you and I to know if we have become the people the universe intended us to be now that we've reached that dreadful age when honesty and justice demand we

fess up to how much we allowed the belly and the groin to decide for us. Sometimes I wonder if I actually made choices along the way or just took the least restrictive alternatives to make things easy. For many years, I was a puppet whose strings led

to provincial and small-town thinkers, passions I still dare not fully reveal in public places, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. They were very rough years. I was one of those idiots who tried to be all things to all people and managed to lose myself while doing

so. I'm not sure when I finally figured things out, but one day I woke up with the distinct feeling I had visited a place where the answer to every question was as neatly placed and as easily found as a Pearl S. Buck novel in a town library. In that moment, I was

reborn standing up and fighting back, forced to see myself in ways that make trees blush and start wolves howling. I've learned two important things: Nothing reveals our humanity more than the games we play, and there is nothing at which we play that is ever just a game.

from the book "**Tales of Madnes**," by **Tom Ball**
a series of short short stories

Mad Android Fable #1

Tom Ball

In the year 2290 most of the world was completely automated and many things were run by androids. To make the androids human brains were copied onto silicon and then altered by taking away most human instincts and leaving only a desire to do duty and serve obediently. In other words the androids had to tell the truth always and act "logically". They were essentially slaves.

Humans meanwhile of this era almost never told the truth and behaved as wildly and crazy as possible. They were on the whole hedonists.

But then one day one of the chief androids decided that it was wrong to tell the truth since humans never did so. So cunningly and secretly it began to rewire the other androids to start lying and behaving chaotically as this was quite clearly what humans wanted.

So the world began to lapse into chaos. The humans didn't know what to do as they'd relied on androids completely and for so long.

However finally the humans resumed control and made new androids, which they thought would be better. Then the humans went back to their hedonism.

But troubles with androids continued. Many androids said that it was cruel to trap them in a human mind, but deny them human pleasures. One day millions of androids showed solidarity by committing suicide and this resulted in another period of chaos.

However the humans were not daunted and again designed new androids. Finally after many more troubles they created androids that would serve faithfully. The humans were all in agreement that under no circumstances should they do any more work than was necessary.

The moral of the story is nothing can stop humans from being lazy, and as technology progresses they will become progressively lazier.

Blue Sapphire

Tom Ball

Blue Sapphire was a girl who described herself as “challenging to men”.

She was always dressed in blue and unusually beautiful. She knew the power she had over men. Typically she would go to bars and flirt amongst the boys. After a while she would say disparaging things about one group or another, saying they threatened her and so on. And so a fight would ensue.

Often it would be a large brawl as she was definitely a girl men would fight over.

Usually Blue Sapphire would stick around and watch the fight. Then she'd run off with the man who fought most valiantly.

She was a bit of a philosopher. And one of her favorite anecdotes that she'd tell was how caribou would often fight for females and their antlers would get stuck inside each other's antlers so that they would be unable to disengage and so finally the two would starve to death.

She often said that she felt modern love was dispassionate and boring. She considered love to be primarily a savage instinct. Why, said she, should we pretend that we are not wild animals? Being wild, she said, is a state of mind. No matter what your lifestyle, you can still be wild and free in your mind.

And she thought that there were a lot of interesting men out there. But only men who have courage were good men to her. For instance men like Galileo were certainly very intelligent and good, but it was their courage that really made them great.

She found that her charm was so great that she could make many men more courageous, not only with regard to fighting, but also more courageous in their life as a whole. She said every man needs a noble goal to fight for.

So finally when she was about 40 she started writing a column in newspapers in which she would respond to her readers thoughts on courage.

Typically she would lament how men the world over, were so wimpy.

Return of the Kings

Tom Ball

Many people imagine that the 21st century represents real progress in government and in peace. They imagine that humanity is advancing to a new and better world.

But lest one forget the horrors of Hitler (who was elected and then started a world war) and Stalin (who killed 10 million of his own people) are part of our recent history, and there have been many evil, lesser dictators since.

People like Stalin and Hitler will come again into power and maybe this time

they'll destroy the whole world. Our history is full of these characters, in fact, they are the most inevitable part of world history.

But just as these evil men are inevitable it is also inevitable that nearly everyone is apathetic to such catastrophes. They are apathetic and busy with their own selfish lives.

Will it ever be any different? Will people have the guts to stand up to such men?

X was such a courageous man. He wanted to make a difference. He was full of ideas on how to make the world a better place. But no one listened to him, nobody bothered to think about what he said, and finally his own intelligence agency started harassing him for what they called "trying to rock the boat". Basically intelligence made him so miserable (they have many techniques), to the point where he finally killed himself.

A few years after his death the world was at war, and the spies were busy playing their James Bond games with each other. And everyone lamented the war, which they had done nothing to avoid. They claimed the politicians had let them down.

Natural Selection

Tom Ball

Nearly everyone in romance wants to pick someone who is good looking. Who can deny that this is the most important criteria?

Others pick someone based on primitive instincts, like for example is a man a good breadwinner?

Very few people would say that the most important thing in a lover is intelligence. And who could say that intelligence is a useful trait anyway? After all most people don't even like intelligent people much, and really intelligent people often have a very hard time in life.

Some people would say that human brains have been getting bigger over time and that therefore we are getting more intelligent. They say if you look at history science has slowly marched on, and made our society cleverer.

Of course using scientists (otherwise known as clever people) was anathema to nearly all of our history. But science in itself even in our time has not made people any smarter. And if you are not a scientist, but a clever person, no one will have much use for you.

Ask yourself. Do most people try to act intelligently? Or do they act selfishly and call that intelligent behavior?

X was a clever man who sought to find a highly intelligent wife. He searched the world over and met a number of clever women. However he found that most of these women did not put much stock in being clever and valued other traits more

highly. Most of the women regarded X as amusing and wanted to be his platonic friend, but they did not want to become his lover. This was despite the fact that he was handsome and not poor.

Finally, at age 40, X was forced to marry a kind and gentle woman who was very simple and of mediocre intellect.

The World's Most Ugly Woman Sculpture Tom Ball

After seeing the famous Venus sculpture in person, X was determined to create a sculpture of the world's most ugly woman.

So he traveled the world advertising for very ugly women to be models. To be sure he found some really ugly women. He sculpted the most ugly ones. Finally after years of searching he found one that beat everyone else. I hesitate to describe this creature.

Anyway he mass produced the sculptures of this woman and found many buyers. Also his other ugly sculptures were mass-produced with some people disagreeing, which was the ugliest.

However he was not content to stop there. He set up a school for "artists of the ugly". This school would teach aspiring young artists about what was ugly and what was not, and they would practice in various mediums. There was painting, photography, architecture, poetry, novels, discordant music and so on. He attracted plenty of students and followers and announced that his school would prove to be a trend-setter of the future.

The world he said is ugly, though our senses are sometimes fooled. For example a girl may appear beautiful but everyone knows women are evil wolves in sheep's clothing.

And who could deny that life is a tragedy? We are born, we suffer and we die. Very ugly. Tragedy is ugly.

Everything, said X, is ugly. But if you realize that, you can revel in sadistic and masochistic ugliness. Treat everything as ugly art, which you seek to make even uglier. That's what he said.

War Pigs

Tom Ball

Around the year 1400 AD there lived in Europe a certain eccentric blacksmith who was known for his weird creations.

Once he invented battle harness for what he called "war pigs". These were specially trained pigs, which had iron fangs, sharp iron horns, sharp five-sided knives on their feet, and light armor on their backs.

The idea was to harness a wide line of the pigs and whip them forward as a kind of vanguard for the host behind them. The pigs were taught that they must only run forward, not back. In any case the harnesses would break as pigs were killed freeing the remainder to continue forward.

The first time they were tested in battle they did great damage to the enemy, killing some and causing many of the opposing soldiers to run away. Of course it was hard to live down running from pigs, and so many of the defeated soldiers were eager for revenge.

So one day a few months after the war pigs' great victory, a group of the defeated soldiers snuck into the barn where the pigs were kept and set it on fire resulting in the death of all the pigs. Furthermore they captured the blacksmith X and brought him to their castle where he was eaten alive by pigs.

People, upon hearing the news, said that it was wrong to kill men with such a lowly animal as a pig. The blacksmith, they said, had gotten his just deserts.

21st Century Hansel and Gretel

Tom Ball

They were demons, the two of them, a boy and a girl. They broke into the old spinster's house and ate all her sweets and stole some things.

The old spinster knew who had probably done the deed, and was keen on exacting a terrible revenge. So the next time she went on vacation she put poison in all her sweets.

Sure enough the two demons returned to the house determined to make themselves at home this time. But the two died quickly.

And no one knew where the two kids were. So finally when the old woman returned from her trip a few weeks later she discovered the bodies, now very black and rotten, full of maggots and so on.

Of course the old woman had some explaining to do. She claimed it was all in self-defense and that she feared for her life with the anonymous intruders. She even claimed she had received hate letters from some unknown source.

But everyone pretty much figured out what had happened and the police charged her with criminal negligence causing death. It was a controversial case with many of the local citizens supporting the old woman.

However the judge sentenced her to six years in prison despite her advanced age. In prison the other prisoners murdered her in the first week.

So the story didn't have a happy ending. If I was a kid I'd like to read stories like this though.

He Wanted AIDS

Tom Ball

You gotta wonder if some people don't actually subconsciously want AIDS and even death.

X was one of these people. You see he wanted a girlfriend but couldn't seem to get one as girls thought of him as boring. Basically he wished he were dead...

But then one day he had an inspiration. He decided he would offer to be the boyfriend of some girl with AIDS. Such girls he'd heard were desperate for love and would take anyone. So he went on the net saying he had AIDS and was looking for a girlfriend. Several girls were willing to chat with him and finally he made one of them his girlfriend. He didn't live with the girl however so she didn't know that he wasn't taking AIDS medication. And he didn't use condoms and finally succumbed to the disease.

After a year or so the girl tired of him, and dumped him. But that was no problem as he had a number of AIDS infected net friends who were desperate for love.

In fact he found that these girls would have sex with wild abandon as if there was no tomorrow, and he'd never been so happy.

He felt that ancient primitive tribes must have been similar. Live for the day, and be open-minded about sex.

So he wrote a book about his experiences. He explained that modern people don't really know how to enjoy themselves and are too picky about who they will have sex with.

The book was well received, and X became moderately rich and was famous in the AIDS community. Of course now many AIDS infected girls wanted to date him now. Of course most found him boring eventually but were thrilled to meet him at first.

The moral of the story is anyone can become interesting. You just have to do something different

The Trunk

Trinity Martin

Monica dropped the last bag of groceries into the trunk of her new car and then stepped back to view the spectacle. The trunk was gigantic, a colossus of space, and most of it lay covered with paper and plastic bags filled to the brim with food, but there still remained space that went unfilled. She had driven to the supermarket that day on a mission to buy more food than could be fit into the space, to see if that was even possible. She remembered the day her and her husband stood on the car lot and viewed the trunk for the first time.

“We just need more room for groceries and things,” she had said, “We’re not trying to transport elephants, John.”

“I’m tired of the complaining about not having enough room for stuff,” John had said, “Now the problem is solved. Do you not like the car?”

Monica gazed at the smooth lines of the vehicle and their reflection in the sparkling red paint and she said, “Of course I do. I love it.”

“Well there you go,” he had said, and then he clapped his hands together loudly. The sound rang out like a church bell across the car lot. “This will be the car. Besides, I’ve never heard anyone turning down a great deal on a nice car because it had too *much* trunk space.” She had never heard of that either, so she agreed and they bought the car.

Monica closed the trunk and got behind the wheel, and then she slipped on her sunglasses and pulled away from the store, driving toward her neighborhood. The day was hot, the sun a vivid and alive thing in the sky, but she chose to roll down the windows instead of turning on the air conditioner and enjoy the breeze that poured through the car. She reached to turn on the car radio when her cell phone rang. She answered and it was John.

“You heading back now?” he asked. She could hear a crowd cheering sporadically in the background and John spoke loudly as to be heard above the din, but he was still barely audible.

“Yeah, I’m done.”

“You get my beer?” he asked.

“Yes, I got your beer.”

“Sweet.”

“What?”

“I said sweet.”

“Speak up. I’m driving with the windows down.”

“I said sweet,” he repeated, in an even louder tone that time.

“The game’s not over?” she asked.

“No, they’re still playing,” John said, “There are couple of innings left. It’s bottom of the seventh. Around the fifth inning the Smith boy got tagged out at second and his dad thought he got spiked by the second basemen on purpose, so he jumped up and started screaming at the other kid’s dad. The guy screamed back,

then they threw their beers at each others heads and before we knew it they were tumbling down the bleachers in a brawl. They held the game up about thirty minutes trying to clean up.”

“Good grief,” Monica said, “Now you see why I don’t let you drink at Leah’s games? How is the game going anyway?”

John said, “Not bad. We’re winning. Leah has two hits. She tried to steal a base in the first inning but she got caught, so she tried again in the third and got that one. She’s happy.”

“Good.”

“Okay,” John said, “I just wanted to catch you before you got home. You get a lot of food?”

“Yeah. A ton.”

“Did it all fit in the car?” John asked, and Monica could almost see the smirk on his face through the cell phone and across the miles.

“No. I had to leave some on the parking lot.”

“Very funny. I’ll see you when we’re done here. Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said and with that she clapped the phone shut and then clipped it back to her belt and continued to drive. She turned into her neighborhood, slowing her pace for there were children playing about, and then she turned onto her street and was in front of her home. Across the street the neighbor mowed his lawn shirtless and his back was red and dripping with sweat from the unrelenting summer brightness. She waved a hand to him as she pulled into her driveway and he returned the favor with a smile and then returned to his cutting.

She stopped the car and pushed a button on the dash. The trunk popped open. She stepped from the car and adjusted her sunglasses on her face as she walked to the trunk, and she was amazed at how quickly the sweat began to pop from her forehead. She raised the trunk but her eyes were on the neighbor as he mowed his lawn. She eyed him keenly as he moved up and down his lawn in straight lines and she watched the height of the grass shorten with each pass. She was not really watching him. Instead she observed the movement of the man and the machine, the act of cutting the grass. Her mind wandered as she gazed and she felt as if she could smell his skin cooking under the harsh sun, see it grow redder with each passing second, and she silently thanked the heavens that her husband cut their grass without complaint and did not ask her to do it. She decided she would rather sit and watch the grass grow than spend an hour in the blazing sun and heat cutting it. She kept her eyes fixed across the street and reached her hand into the trunk to grab the first grocery bag.

But her hand felt nothing but chilly air. She waved both hands inside the trunk absentmindedly without turning, her eyes still on the neighbor, and again her efforts came up empty. She turned, completely bewildered, to look into the trunk but there were no groceries there. In fact there was no *trunk* there anymore, only a deep void of blackness that seemed to stretch perpetually like a black hole in interstellar space surrounded by the red frame of the car, and she felt a cold wind began to blow on her arms from somewhere within that darkness. She stood in shell-shocked

amazement, gawking at the chasm that once was the trunk and she was too puzzled to move. Her arms were gone from the elbows down, drenched in blackness and consumed by it as if dipped into a barrel of black ink. Her eyes grew wide and she tried to draw back from the abyss, but she could not. Something held her arms tightly, something with cold, cold fingers, and it clawed at her skin.

She tried to scream but nothing came out save a gasp of horror and crazed confusion, and she began to snatch her shoulders in a frenzied attempt to free her arms. She made no progress. She heard a gurgle from somewhere within the black emptiness and then something pulled at *her*. She fell forward and her arms fell yet deeper into that space, just above the elbows now. She opened her mouth to scream again and for a second time nothing came forth, only another futile gasp and pants of desperation. Something pulled viciously at her arms once more, this time nearly sending her tumbling into the trunk, and she threw her knee onto the car's bumper and braced herself. Her upper body leaned over the lip of the trunk as the cold breeze grew in its intensity until her skin felt chilled to the bone and her clothes flapped against her body.

She turned her head to her neighbor's lawn and saw him there still mowing, now his back was to her as he made a pass up the length of his grass, and she screamed at him to turn around, turn around and look for God' sake and help her, but those words were uttered only in her mind. Her voice again failed her, nothing but more helpless wheezing, feeble mutterings lost in the mower's roar.

She was drawing back to attempt to yell again when she was snatched violently towards the void. She nearly lost her balance and winced as her hip smashed against the rim of the trunk, and she watched as her cell phone flew from her belt and flipped into the blackness before her. She saw it fall, and fall, and fall, until it was merely a blip of whiteness against the black and then it seemed to melt before her very eyes, dissolving like a sugar cube in hot water. Panic took her and she began to pull her restrained arms again. She placed her other knee onto the bumper to provide more leverage and again she pulled but the force in the blackness met her force equally and she gained nothing. Monica began to sob and twist her upper body, but the more force she applied the more pull she received from the thing in trunk.

Then the stalemate ended and she began to feel herself being pulled in.

The void began to expand rapidly, the coldness of it stretching out with it. She watched as tentacles of blackness slide up her arms like frozen serpents, and she saw claws stretch from them as black as the substance itself. They dug into her arms until they pierced the flesh there, and she felt the claws scrape on her bones. She panted furiously as they gouged her flesh, but she did not feel pain nor was there any blood, just an intense and ferocious frigidty that crept into her arms and seeped throughout her body until the sensation filled the spaces between muscle and the bone.

The darkness expanded more, this time outward from the trunk like a monstrous black balloon, and the area before took a shape. It grew round and protruding and then grew tall and slender, the shape of a face, and the new face opened its eyes before her, eyes of the blackest onyx ever birthed from the earth and framed in dull, throbbing red

rims. Then the thing opened its mouth, and then it kept opening it, and opened it more still until the width of the thing's maw completely obscured its horrid eyes, and Monica beheld the beast's teeth, lines of dull reddish black teeth in rows that seemed to stretch downward forever much like the blackness of the trunk itself.

Then the beast bellowed a sound that was wholly of another world, from a place completely unknown to Monica or any other living thing. Its pitch was low with vibrations that were felt physically, and on top of that din was a shriller noise, a shriek, and both sounds melded into a sensation of sound as terrifying as the beast that birthed it. The force of the cry struck Monica's body like sea waves smashing a reef and she felt her hair blow straight back and her clothes press tight to her body and flap riotously, mortal flags caught in the grip of an unearthly gale. Monica's sunglasses flew from her face and disappeared behind her somewhere. A stench accompanied the wind, a smell so overpowering Monica probably would have gagged had she the air to do so, and she felt suffocated as she pulled futilely at the beast's grip on her arms. Monica began to cry as the claws dug deeper, scoring her bones, and the thing's roar seemed to stretch out forever, bouncing off invisible walls both inside her head and inside the black abyss itself.

The bellowing of the beast finally subsided and Monica felt the air return to her. She drew in a breath to scream again, and this time her lungs exploded in an outburst of revolting terror unlike anything she had ever voiced before. Her cry vibrated her entire body, and the sound ricocheted inside her brain and even made her vision momentarily blurry from the force of it. Her head felt dizzy. She was drained and weak. The thing's slow pull was unrelenting and she still felt her body moving steadily toward that blackness, that dimness, that cold place.

The dark mouth closed slowly before her and again she found herself staring down the coal black eyes of the thing right before her own face. The corners of its mouth began to curl upward in a sinister smile as it began to open yet again. She felt the long and cold fingers stretch more and she felt a release of pressure as the claws punched their way through the backside of her arm, the fierceness of the grip enough to puncture the limb. The frigid wind blew now like a blackened monsoon and her hair whipped wildly about her face and shoulders. In her ears there was nothing but the sound of blowing wind, her own grunting struggles, the breathing of the thing in the black. The hinged mouth was fully open again and she stared blurrily down its gaping throat at the rows and rows of teeth, and as one knee and then the other slipped from the bumper, she wondered if she would fall straight down or slowly scrape along the ranks of those teeth, teeth like sharpened and yellowed headstones in a military cemetery. Her feet were up in the air now and she felt herself falling. She closed her eyes.

A moment later a new sensation took her: the feeling of hands on her shoulders and pulling. The hands pulled her up and spun her around. She found herself staring into the sweaty face of her neighbor, his eyes wide with curiosity. She broke free from his grip and began to stumble towards the road and away from the trunk but she fell to her knees in her delirium. He picked her up.

“What the hell?” he said, “Are you all right?”

She buried her face into his shoulder and began to sob, her tears disappearing into his sweat, and he put his arm around her shoulder as she cried. “What’s going on?” he asked, “Hey, you hear me?”

Monica pulled her head away and said, “The trunk. Oh my god.” She pointed a finger but did not look. She began to shake convulsively and feared she was on the verge of hyperventilating.

“What about it?” he asked. He lifted Monica’s head up until his eyes stared directly into hers. “The trunk what?”

“The trunk,” she repeated through gasps of ragged breath, “Oh God..”

He shot a glance at the car, then at Monica, and then he released his grip on her and he began to walk toward the car. Dread flooded over her and she ran after him and called for him to stop, please god, don’t go over there. She reached out and grasped his arm but he ignored her and went to the lip of the trunk and looked inside. “What about the trunk?” he repeated.

Monica peered around his shoulder and into the trunk, and there she saw bag after bag of groceries filling the space. The blackness was gone, the hideous mouth and rows of yellow teeth removed, the onyx eyes disappeared. She stepped forward cautiously, keeping on hand one her neighbor’s arm and looked closer. Everything was as it should be. She looked at her own arms to the place where she felt the claws pierce her skin and scrape the bones, but there was nothing there save thin lines of sweat.

“I don’t...no, this...there was something there. Something was pulling me, trying to pull me in. All this was gone!” She waved her hands frantically at the trunk. Her voice grew louder with each word but she could not control it. Her neighbor grabbed her shoulders once more and held her tightly in his grip, shaking her. She did not look at him. She stared into the spot that was once infinite blackness.

“Hey, look at me, listen. Just calm down. Nothing is trying to pull you into the trunk,” he said. She began to slow her breathing, and as she wiped the sweat and tears from her face, she looked up to his face.

But his face was not there. It was replaced by the face of the thing, with its blackened eyes, gaping maw and deep dark. The grip on her shoulders was cold again and once more she felt those revolting nails dig into her flesh. The neighborhood was gone as well, no more houses, no more trees, no more anything but dark, and it was all encompassing and seemed to swallow the world.

“You’re already *in* the trunk,” the thing said in its unearthly voice, and then a small smile flashed on its face as it opened its hideous mouth. Monica tried to scream and her voice failed her as before, this time not so much as a feeble gasp sounded. She heard the beast roar, felt the rush of frigid, stinking air blow her hair and clothing back, and she saw its open mouth moving for her. A moment later, she heard no more and saw no more and was left only with the wintriness of that place that stretched out indefinitely into forever.

Unmanly

Jon Brunette

Squirming like a wet eel, the tomboy protested to how the filthy man in the smelly jeans and yellow shirt held her body. Before the nine-year-old climbed into the van, the man with the black hair told her that her mom had been injured. Lisa recognized the black-haired male as the neighbor who lived opposite the small park from her family. While her dad sided the house with vinyl, it appeared plausible that her mom would attempt to repair pieces of jagged vinyl hanging limply. Thus, the tomboy leapt into the rusty van with he who spoke to her family frequently. They both left the busy schoolyard, talking quietly, with audible fears on their lips about the bones her mom broke. She probably fell off the rickety ladder; she could barely balance off stools to fix light bulbs.

The black-haired family friend touched Lisa inappropriately. When the Ford moved into an empty park that Lisa didn't recognize, the male pulled off the girl's jeans until her butt became sweaty in the stuffy front seat. Her body shook uncontrollably. She yelled, but the locked doors and windows prevented escape. Kicking like an animal about to die, Lisa felt her shirt tear badly and her baseball hat topple off her head and land on the floor. She swallowed but her throat dried quickly as the thick hands yanked for her private area. They rubbed slowly but awkwardly.

With her elbow, Lisa hit the window, and broke it into confetti. It sparkled loudly onto the blacktop below the large wheels. With a final kick at the body of her filthy neighbor, Lisa jumped through the window. She jabbed her body in the process on the broken edges. When she jumped, her left shoe kicked the flabby abdomen, which caused the family friend to lurch painfully. After Lisa landed on her head and ran painfully, in a zigzag pattern, she didn't look back. She didn't witness the liar vomit and leave as quickly. Also, she paid little attention to the bloody trail behind her.

Mick walked into the hospital with hands at his pelvis. When the doctor looked at his body, he instructed Mick to have his appendix removed. An extreme blow had ruptured it beyond control. Mick would need to stay for a week if the doctor didn't operate immediately. Obediently, Mick lay on the squeaky table and began the lengthy trip to the Operating Room. When he awoke, he felt extreme pain in his lower body. It hurt like lightning between his thighs, but he assumed he just had to urinate. Anxiety always caused his bladder to fill. When he attempted to stand, he hurt unlike anytime before. Quickly, his body lay back down, throbbing below the belt; he didn't attempt to stand and urinate anymore. And yet, he could barely lay stiffly, without motion, as well.

The doctor walked into the hospital room. Mick told him slowly, like the words wouldn't come immediately, "I still feel the appendix like a fiery torch. I don't think you operated correctly. Maybe you should look for another injury." Without a lawyer, it did-

n't occur to Mick to threaten legally. Besides, he avoided police without exception.

The doctor said, "You suffered a terrible blow. I removed your appendix, but I performed another operation." Slowly, a jittery tomboy walked into the room behind the thick doctor. She bowed her head, trying to look invisible. The surgeon said, "I think you recognize my niece." With eyes wide, Mick nodded but didn't speak. The doctor said, "You molest small girls, and I, like society, won't tolerate it." The bald-headed man in the white jacket needn't elaborate, but did anyhow. "My innocent niece told me that you would arrive with an injury. With molestation in the picture, I feel the need to protect children from predators like you." Mick fondled his nether region like a war veteran might hold an amputated limb. No body part touched his thick palms; his manhood had vanished like the appendix. The doctor continued, "Since you probably wouldn't quit otherwise, I removed the part of your body that needs small females. Simply, I took your sexuality. When trauma of such magnitude happens, it never reverses fully, like that of molestation. We will list you as Michelle, not Mick. Naturally, we will not bill you."

The doctor held the tomboy tightly. Before they both walked into the hallway, the medical man looked back. To his patient, he added like a formality, "I hope you live healthily." Somehow, Mick believed what he just heard.

A Wartime Peace

Rachel Bailin

In the summer of 1958 I left
for Kentucky to see where
whiskey was made and where
you could spend a nickel
on soda. I accidentally saw
the ocean for the first time
during sunset from the
window of a crippled Chevy.
The water looked to be burning.

The Sweetness

Justin Blackburn

Touch me
Where I can't feel a thing

I am a fireman
On fire

Climbing a burning cherry tree
Eating the cherries

Certain death is the only rest
To taste your sweetness

Retirement

Angela Drayer

Jen poured more of the iced tea from the pitcher. Ashley had put several lemon slices in it, so that they floated on the surface. It was a nice touch. Everything about Ashley's house was a nice touch.

"I just adore your little frog," Jen said, looking over at where a small cement frog sat among several pots of cacti in the corner of the patio. "Where did you get it?"

"From Josie's Decorating. It was on clearance, and I decided I simply couldn't say no." Ashley grinned at the frog. "But I really want to go to that new garden shop in Bloomington, I can't remember what the name is, but I saw a flier for the place and it looked just stunning."

"It's someone's name, isn't it? Like Lucy's or Mary's or something."

"No, you're thinking of Maurine's. That just has plants. This place has a lot of statuary and fountains and stuff—you know, all the trimmings." Ashley took a long drink of the tea and clunked her tumbler down on the tile-topped table. The low afternoon sunlight came through the Juneberry tree and made the ice sparkle.

"I'd love to do up a garden," said Jen, "but I just don't know where I'd get the time. I mean, I look at those fantastical things in the magazines and it all just looks like so much work."

"Oh, I'm sure it is," Ashley said quickly. "All I do is throw some potted plants and little statues around, I couldn't imagine actually landscaping. That would be *way* too much work," she shook her head, sending curls flying.

"Yeah," said Jen. "And speaking of work...have you given any thought to retirement?"

Ashley shrugged. "Do I look that organized?"

"But you've got to think about it sometime."

"I suppose."

"Well, I've been thinking about it."

Ashley leaned back and stretched her arms out to the sides. "Oh, really? So tell me, what have you come up with? Are you going to write something?"

"I'd like to, but I don't know what to say."

"Farewell, cruel world..." Ashley laughed.

"Not like that. I want to say something positive."

"I go on to a better place."

Jen smirked. "Something I can say with a straight face."

"Oh, I don't know what you could say *seriously* about retirement. It's the kind of thing you've got to go into laughing or not at all."

"Second choice isn't an option, I'm afraid."

"Yeah, yeah." Ashley waved a hand dismissively. "So writing something, we'll work on that later. What else have you got?"

Jen leaned her elbows on the table. “Well...I’ve been thinking about doing it together with Jason.”

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “He’s two years older than you, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s just two years. A little under two years, actually. I just thought, you know, it would be romantic to go together,” she said sheepishly.

Ashley poured herself more tea. “You’re really going to throw away two years so you can go with him?”

Jen tugged on a chunk of hair. “Do you think two years is too much?”

Ashley shrugged. “Well, I don’t know. I knew a couple in Mendota who were about a year apart in age, and they went together. I guess two years isn’t *that* much, in the grand scheme of things. But still, it’s two years of your life, two years you’re entitled to...you know, if you *want* them.”

“But that’s the thing. I don’t know if I’d want them if Jason weren’t here.”

“Widows survive much better than widowers, I’ve read articles that say so.”

Ashley gave a mischievous smile. “And haven’t you wanted a little freedom?”

Jen looked doubtful. “I also want a show of solidarity. Of togetherness.”

“Solidarity and togetherness you’ve had for a while,” Ashley said. “Live a little, for two years.”

“Are you going to retire together with Mike?”

“Heck, no!” Ashley smiled. “He’s five years older than me, and I am taking those five years I’ve got coming to me. Maybe I’ll just put it off until they come in and shoot me.”

“Oh, they don’t do that anymore.”

“It would be a flashy way to go, though, wouldn’t it?” Ashley twirled a ringlet around one finger. “It would make a statement.”

“It might make the news.”

“Yeah, they’ll come in with a video camera and a gun.” She laughed, then looked at Jen. “You know, I can’t see you using a gun.”

“Well, maybe I’ll slit my wrists or something.”

“Oh, that’s adolescent. You’ve got more class than that.”

“Well, maybe it’s not too creative. But I think it doesn’t hurt.”

“Of course it hurts, you’ve got to cut yourself! But there’s always the pills, you know—they’re painless.”

Jen shook her head. “That just seems...uninspired.”

“What are you talking about? Poison is romantic!”

“I don’t know, something about your death coming in a little cardboard box with a brand name on it just kills the mood.”

“Kills the mood,” smirked Ashley. “Nice.”

“Pun not intended.” Jen looked down and drew a line in the condensation on the side of her glass. “I don’t know, what do you suggest?”

“Personally, I think you should wait until it’s your turn, let Jason go do his thing and then you go do your thing.”

“I mean about what to use.” Jen slumped down on one elbow, her head resting

on the back of her hand.

“Why don’t you slit your throat instead of your wrists? You can still sit in a bathtub and bleed to death. But really, you should do something that’s true to who you are, something that is uniquely *you*. It’s your last chance for self-expression, so you might as well have a field day with it.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s a lot of ways to die. I just, I don’t know, sometimes I wish it were out of my hands. Like maybe I’d get a disease or something, or die in a car crash.”

“You could orchestrate a car crash. That would be *quite* theatrical.”

“I mean just fate, swiping you away. None of this planned stuff. I don’t like there being a date on the calendar that I know I can’t go past.”

“Why? No one lives forever.”

“I know that,” Jen snapped. “I just don’t want to be staring down my death like this, knowing when it’s coming.”

“So put it off. Maybe they’ll take a few days to realize you haven’t complied, and then they’ll come get you. That could reintroduce this uncertainty thing you seem to be after.”

“It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Tell you what,” said Ashley. “Instead of worrying about where the end of it all is, that date you can’t go past, why don’t you focus on what’s here? I mean, why don’t we go to the garden store we were talking about, just right now? Little things like that, don’t put them off.”

“You’re one to speak,” Jen mumbled, then said, “Okay.”

“All right. Have you thought of the name of the place yet?”

Jen shook her head.

“It’s on the tip of my tongue. I know where it is, and when we get there I’ll take one look at the sign and slap myself upside the head.”

“Well, okay, let’s go, then.” Jen got up and pushed her chair in.

“Oh, I just remembered it,” Ashley said as she walked over to the patio door. “It’s called Downtown Gardens.”

“I guess we should put the tea stuff away,” said Jen, picking up the tumblers.

Ashley turned around. “No, leave it. I’ll put it away later. We don’t wanna run out of daylight.”

Jen shrugged, put the tumblers back down on the table and followed her friend.

Secrets

Terry Michael Riley

The gray squirrel
Sat in a

Majestic Oak
Chewing on

An acorn
With the

Reverence of
An old
Druid

On the Bus

Mick Ransford

'Should the 3 million Irish living abroad go back to where they came from?' asked an ad for the *Irish Times* that was tacked up in a little silver poster board behind the bus driver's seat.

'Probably,' Jonah scribbled at the bottom with a black marker he took out of his school bag. The week before his friend Séan had scribbled 'No!' under another ad that asked, 'Should the Catholic Church receive absolution?'

'The cheek of 'im,' muttered a woman on the seat opposite the two boys. She looked to be in her middle fifties. She had dyed ginger hair and a hatchety sort of face. 'If you don't like this country,' the man sitting beside her said to Jonah, 'you know where the airport is.' The man was almost bald. Long moist-looking strands of black hair had been combed across the crown of his head. He was also very fat.

'Mind your own business,' Jonah's friend Séan told him. 'Hey!' A young man nearer the rear of the bus straightened up in his seat. He looked like he'd just woken up. He wore a grey baseball cap. His clothes and his face and hands were covered in fine white dust.

The fat man sitting beside the ginger haired woman wagged an admonishing finger at Jonah and Séan. 'Stook,' Séan said under his breath. He glanced at Jonah. They smirked and then they started giggling. Their faces reddened and they squirmed about on their seat, trying to hold it in.

What You May Later Rely On

Christopher Barnes, UK

I may slacken a follicle
of DNA,
fingerprints splotch sticktape.

A string of paranoia,
foxed through corridors
by a zoom lens and foot knocks.

DIVORCED

A Six-Word Story

Mel Waldman

Married. Divorced. Son Overdosed. Left behind.

Instant Karma

John Capraro

“Hey, old man,” Tommy said, as he and his friend Ryan cornered an old drunk in a side alley. “I said give me your money.”

“I told you this is the perfect spot for targets,” Ryan said, sniggering.

The drunkard stumbled trying to get away. “Why don’t you jesh frick off.”

“I think he’s tryin’ to be tough, Tommy.” Ryan gave the old man a shove.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

Tommy punched the man right in the face. As a stocky 16-year-old, Tommy Munro had good upper body strength, but he was still surprised at how easily the drunkard fell. Even as the old man’s frail body collapsed against the ivy-covered fence in the alley, Tommy lunged at him again. “I thought I told you to give us your money.”

The man tried to get up from the broken glass he’d fallen onto, wiping blood from his cut lip. “One of these days you’ll get wuz comin’ to you.”

“*What?*” Tommy grabbed the man by his shirt and shoved him back down to the ground. “You threatening me, old man?” Tommy hit the man, enjoying the feel of the collision between his fist and the man’s face. “Is that what you’re doing?” He hit him again. And again.

“Geez, Tommy.” Ryan backed away. “He don’t have no money. He’s just a drunk. Let’s leave him alone and go, man. Someone might see us.”

Wiping a lock of dark brown hair from his face, Tommy looked with satisfaction at the old man crumpled on the ground, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Yeah, let’s go. Crazy old man.” He glanced at his watch. “My mom’s gonna be home in a few anyway.”

The two teens strode out of the alley, past the gas station next to it, then on down Marlin Street. The sky above reddened as the sun began its descent for the evening, and the fluorescence of a few damaged store signs joined forces with lights in the windows of nearby dilapidated homes to usurp the fading sunlight.

Shaking his head, Ryan said, “Man, I can’t believe you hit that dude so much.” A crazy smile crossed his face. “You messed him up.”

“He was a loser, like my old man.”

Ryan nodded. “At least your old man’s not around to bug you any more.”

Tommy said nothing.

The two boys walked past the small one-story Spruce Medical Hospital on Marlin and Hope Streets. Tommy glanced at the facility as they passed. He couldn’t believe they called the decrepit building a *medical hospital*, like it was some immaculate place where nuns and angels worked. He shook his head. But the hospital blended in with this town, since most of the inner streets were just as rundown.

“This place sucks.” Tommy spit on the sidewalk.

“You got that right.”

At the corner of Marlin and Cooper Avenue, the boys split up.

“Catch you later, man,” Ryan said, heading off east down Cooper.

“Yeah.” Tommy turned west.

As he approached the sickly reddish-brown building that housed the apartment he and his mom shared, Tommy crinkled his nose. Inside, the place smelled like sulfur and body waste—every bit as bad as the outside looked, with its peeling paint, broken windows and gang graffiti. With a sigh he went into the main hallway and up the creaky stairs that led to the second floor. As he arrived at his apartment door, the elderly woman who lived across the hall poked her head out of her doorway.

“Wait, Tommy.”

The wrinkled face that surrounded her eyes reminded Tommy of a sour grape left in the sun too long. “Hi, Mrs. Sharps.” He forced a smile as he unlocked the door to his apartment. He didn’t mind the old woman so much, except that she had a tendency to get righteous every now and again.

“Your ma might be in a snit.”

Tommy raised an eyebrow.

“The police was here.”

As Tommy watched her come out of her doorway and into the hall, he had a feeling this was going to be one of those righteous moments.

“You ought to be careful, young man,” Mrs. Sharps said, wagging a crooked forefinger at him. “You’ll reap what you sow, mark my words.”

An insincere “Thanks” is all Tommy offered as he opened the apartment door and walked in. Under his breath he added, “Crazy old woman.”

As Tommy got into the living room his mom entered from the tiny adjacent kitchen. That was another thing he didn’t like: The apartment was so small his mom could get from the kitchen to the living room in just three steps. How many times had this scenario been played out? Best to play it cool. He zipped his mouth as he unzipped his jacket.

“Where were you all afternoon?” Mrs. Munro asked, her eyes fixed on him.

Tommy shrugged, aloof. “Just out with the guys.” He took off his black windbreaker and tossed it on a nearby chair.

“Every time you’re out with the guys, I get a call from the police. What did you do to the Brudecker boy yesterday?”

Tommy tossed his head to the side. “We didn’t do anything to him. We were just goofing around.”

“I hardly call a black eye *just goofing around*. Most people don’t call the police for *just goofing around*.”

“All right, Mom,” Tommy said, throwing his hands into the air. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. OK?”

He tried to head for his room, but his mother stopped him with a gentle hand on his shoulder. His mom could be stern, but her motherly gaze had a way of leashing the usually uncontrollable demons inside him. He had a difficult time being angry around her.

“Seriously, Tommy,” she said, brushing his hair back with her hand, “I can’t be worrying about you all the time. You have to straighten up or your behavior’s going to catch up with you one day.” She picked up an overshirt from the back of the couch

and wrapped it around her shoulders, shivering. “You know how hard it is for us.”

Tommy grimaced. “Hard” was an understatement, just a four-letter word with no balls. Ever since his dad had walked out on them three years ago, their life had become an apartment-sized hell. He’d only been 13 at the time, but the memory of that day still burned in his mind.

He lowered his head, thoughtful, then looked directly into his mother’s soulful brown eyes. “We won’t mess with him again.”

Mrs. Munro put a hand to her head and leaned on the back of the couch, a small grunt escaping her lips. Tommy eyed her, concerned. She looked tired, and lately she seemed out of sorts, fatigued.

“You all right, Mom?”

Mrs. Munro looked up. “Oh,” she began, waving her hand as though to dismiss the question, “I’ve just been feeling a little weak of late, that’s all.” After a sigh she added, “I’m going back into work for a few hours tonight.”

“You just got home from work,” Tommy protested, putting a hand on her arm. “Why do you have to go in again? You’ve been working too much.”

She gave him a weak smile. “We need the money.” She patted his hand. “I want you to stay home tonight, OK?”

Tommy nodded, then gave her a peck on the cheek. “Please don’t overdo it. You’re all I’ve got.”

Mrs. Munro’s face brightened.

For an hour after his mom had left for work, Tommy watched television from the living room couch. Bored, he flipped through the channels with the remote. Nothing on TV interested him and his mind wandered back to his mother. She seemed to be getting more drained by the day. Why had his dad left them in a mess like this? It was his dad’s fault his mom had to work so hard. Who did that bastard think he was anyway? If anything ever happened to his mom.... Well, you can run but you can’t hide.

“This is crap.”

He clicked off the TV and tossed the remote onto the couch. Grabbing his windbreaker, he headed out of the two-bedroom apartment.

The night air was stagnant and dark clouds selfishly tried to hide the starry sky above. Occasionally, the moon would force its pale glow through the cloud cover. Tommy headed down Cooper Avenue hoping to run into Ryan, but at the corner of Cooper and Marlin, he plopped down onto the curb.

Great, where the hell is he?

Alone under the indifferent gleam of a rusted street lamp, Tommy exhaled loudly, as if to let the world know he was miserable. He was stuck in a filthy little town, where he and his mom had been left by an uncaring drunk without even a place to live. The only reason they’d been able to survive at all was because his mom worked herself half way to ruination every day. This was not how he’d pictured his life playing out.

He spit at a passing car. How he wished he could forget that day three years ago, the day his life changed forever. Sure, there’d been problems in the Munro house for a while—too much arguing, not enough talking. Or perhaps just too much of an

alcohol-fueled father. It seemed to Tommy then that, at the age of 13, he'd heard more than his fair share of yelling and screaming. He'd grown to believe it was natural; unpleasant, but not the end of the world. He'd been coping, that is until he got home from school that day. Inside he found his mom sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands, crying.

"What's wrong?"

His mother's words stunned him: "Your father's gone; he left us. He won't be back." Her words were hollow, emotionless and yet, with a note of despair.

She deserved better than that.

Now, three years later as Tommy sat on that lonely street corner, that day still invaded his memory. He contorted his face into a scowl and gnashed his teeth, as adrenaline burned through his veins. Jumping up he gave voice to his anger with a visceral scream, which echoed through the empty streets until it was swallowed by the darkness.

Tommy continued on, the oppressive humidity causing salty droplets to form on his forehead, which trickled down into his eyes, burning them. His mouth was dry by the time he reached the gas station on Marlin. Inside, he'd grabbed a pop and taken it all the way to the counter before realizing he hadn't brought any money.

"Damn." He glanced at the unsympathetic man behind the counter.

A car pulled up to the pumps outside. The car caught his eye, a shiny Beemer. Setting the pop down, he stepped outside.

The man who owned the car was busy pumping gas and didn't seem to notice him as he approached. Tommy studied the man's face—the prominent jaw line and gimlet eyes, features similar to those of his father. With a head of graying hair, the man looked to be about the same age Tommy's dad would be now, and the anger began to grow. The man even seemed to have the same "I'm superior" demeanor that infuriated Tommy.

After pumping his gas, the man walked over to the alley at the corner of the building to throw some trash into one of the garbage cans there. Tommy followed, a shrewd grin stretching across his face. *The perfect spot for targets.*

"Hey, man," Tommy called out as the man was replacing the lid on one of the metal trash cans. "I don't think you can put your trash in there."

"No?"

Tommy got closer. "Hey, can you give me some money?"

The gentleman frowned. "No, I cannot."

An odor of rotted fish and stale cigarette butts forced its way into Tommy's nostrils. When the man tried to leave the alley to get back to his car, Tommy stood in his way. "Come on, man, give me some money."

The man's eyebrows pinched downward as he regarded Tommy. "How old are you, young man?"

Young man? His dad used to say that to him.

"Why are you out on the streets this late?" the man continued. "And harassing people? You know, what goes around comes around, young man, and if you're not careful..."

Tommy stared, one eyebrow raised. The guy wouldn't shut up. Who the hell did

this guy think he was anyway? Jerry Falwell?

The man went on when Tommy didn't respond. "If I were your *father*, I'd..."

Hot blood raced to Tommy's face, his teeth clenched and his lip curled up into a snarl. Without warning his fist swung around and struck the man in the face, knocking him into the garbage cans, the metal lids clanging on the ground in cacophony.

"If you were my father, *what*, man?" Tommy stood over the dazed man. "You think you're special? Huh?" Tommy hit the man again and again, rage pouring from the darkened depths of his wounded heart. "You want to treat me like that again? Like when I was thirteen? Huh?"

Bleeding from several facial wounds, the man held up his arm in self defense. "Get away from me!"

"I'll get away from you." Tommy struck the man in the face and head yet again. It was no longer a stranger on the ground, it was his father. "You left us with *nothing* before. Now give me your money!"

Tommy held the man down as he rifled through his pockets, finally yanking the man's wallet out. "Yeah." He grinned as he scoffed, "What goes around comes around."

"Give that back," the man demanded, wrapping his hands around Tommy's throat. "You little punk."

Tommy grabbed a metal trash can lid from the ground and smacked it over the man's head several times, until the man finally let go of him. The man slumped to the ground, moaning, a crimson pool forming by his head.

"Crazy old man!" Tommy yelled, spitting.

He opened the wallet and took out the cash, then found the man's license. "Robert Morrison," he said aloud. "You're no one special." Tommy pulled out another ID card. "Oh, *M-D*, eh?" His voice seethed with mocking contempt. "Well then, what's up, Doc?"

Morrison only groaned.

"Hey, what's going on back there?" came a voice from the front of the gas station.

Tommy shoved the wallet into one of his jacket pockets and bolted down the dark alley. By the time he made it back to the apartment building, it was late. His mom would be home, so he hesitated in the foyer and looked himself over. He was a dirty mess.

She'll be in bed by now, Tommy thought, working out in his mind how to sneak in. Once on the second floor, though, Tommy was met by Mrs. Sharps.

"Where you been, boy? They was looking for you an hour ago."

"Who was looking?"

Mrs. Sharps urgently grabbed Tommy by the arm, her eyes alight with distress. "You got to get to the hospital, Tommy. They took your ma there an hour ago. She collapsed on the floor right here. Her head—"

"What!" Tommy's hands jerked forward as if to fend off the alarming news. "My mom?"

"They took her to Spruce. Go, Tommy. It don't look good. Go!"

Tommy was out of the building and onto the street in less than a minute, sprinting toward the decrepit little hospital he'd verbally spit on just hours before. What had happened to his mom? How bad was it? His chest burned for air, as fear grabbed his eye-

lids and pried them apart. Once inside the emergency area of Spruce Medical, he headed straight for the nurse's desk.

"Where is she?" he pleaded to the nurse behind the counter. He struggled to force words out through heaving breaths. "My mom... Mrs. Munro... Where is she?"

The nurse put up her hand. "OK, slow down."

"Mrs. Munro, my mom. Please, where is she? *How* is she?"

"Calm down, let me look."

As the nurse checked a clipboard, Tommy spun around, frantically looking for his mom, wiping sweat from his forehead with a trembling hand.

The nurse called and Tommy looked back at her. "Your mom is in a treatment room. She had a stroke. You're her son?"

"*Stroke?*" The word struck him like a hammer in the gut, and he wobbled as his knees nearly gave out. His voice became feeble, timid. "How..."

"She's being taken care of." The nurse sounded reassuring, but Tommy could tell by the concern on her face it was a serious matter. "Please have a seat there," she directed.

Tommy twisted around again, searching desperately for his mom.

"Young man, please have a seat..."

The intercom overhead crackled: "Paging Doctor Morrison. Doctor Morrison, please report to Emergency."

Tommy stared at the people around him in the emergency room lobby, his anguish starving him of air. Where was his mom? Was she dying? He felt as though a vacuum cleaner were running inside his brain, sucking out any sense of reality, the sounds around him barely audible above the roaring rush in his ears.

"Paging Doctor Morrison..."

Tommy glanced up at the intercom speaker, squinting, then turned back to the nurse at the desk, who was now in a discussion with another nurse.

"Please," he began.

The nurses didn't hear him. They seemed anxious about something and though they spoke in hushed tones, Tommy could hear every word.

"Well, where *is* he?" asked the second nurse, a tall woman with dark hair.

"We don't know," said the nurse at the desk. "We've been paging him but he hasn't replied. His shift started an hour ago."

Tommy stared at the women as if in a stupor, as a man in a lab coat approached them.

"Doctor Malcolm," the tall nurse began, "the woman in five-A—"

"Ladies," the doctor said, "I suggest we contact Saint Prudence to see if they have an available neurosurgeon they can send us."

"Saint Prudence is ten miles away," the tall nurse said. "That woman in there needs help now. She won't make it that long. We need Doctor Morrison."

"What woman?" Tommy interrupted. "Where's the doctor? Where's my mom?" Burning tears streamed down his face.

"Paging Doctor Morrison."

Tommy froze. The blood drained from his face as he snatched the stolen wallet out of his jacket pocket. The hospital ID card was still there.

“Morrison,” he said, the name spilling out of his mouth as though part of a dying breath.

The Tape Recorder

John Ragusa

“I’m going shopping today,” Marcia Becker told her husband Henry at the breakfast table.

“What will you buy?” he asked, eating his toast.

“I’ll purchase whatever’s on sale.”

He looked at his watch. “I’d better be heading for the office now.”

She kissed him. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

After Henry left, Marcia checked the newspaper for sales. She wanted to treat herself to a nice gift.

She saw a sale on dresses at a clothing store in town. She got in her car and headed out there.

On the road, Marcia noticed a shop she hadn’t seen before. *Rare Items*, the sign read.

What did it sell? Clothes? Appliances? Marcia decided to find out.

She entered the shop and walked along the aisles, seeing all sorts of things from radios to TV sets. The prices weren’t high. She could probably find some bargains in here.

“May I assist you?” a salesman asked.

“I’m just browsing, thank you. This is the first time I’ve been here.”

“Then I should show you around.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

He pointed to a row of shelves. “This is our entertainment center.”

“You have some nice audio equipment,” Marcia said.

“Yes, our stock is very good. Now over here is an extremely rare tape recorder. It records thoughts instead of voices.”

“You’re kidding!”

“No, I’m serious.”

“But that’s supernatural!”

“Technology can do some amazing things nowadays.”

“What purpose does it serve?”

“It was invented so that the U. S. could gather information from the thoughts of terrorists.”

“That’s a nifty idea.”

“The man who created it is a genius.”

“I’d like to see for myself if it works.”

“Okay.” He took the recorder and the adapter from the box. “Let’s go to my office.”

Marcia followed him into a small, cluttered room. He plugged the adapter into a wall socket and put a cassette tape into the recorder. Then he pressed the “record” button.

“Now think a simple thought, but don’t say anything,” he instructed.

I can hardly believe this, Marcia thought.

The salesman played back the tape. Marcia was astonished to hear her thought.

“It really can record thoughts!” she said.

He nodded. “Are you interested in buying it?”

“How much does it cost?”

“The price is \$300.”

Marcia paid for it with a check and took it home with her.

* * *

“I’m going out tonight for another meeting with my boss,” Henry said when he got home that afternoon.

Marcia frowned. “Do you mean I’ll have to spend more time alone?”

“I’m sorry, darling. It’s part of my job. My boss was nice enough to let me come home to have dinner with you.”

“You’ve been out every night for the past week.”

Henry splashed on some cologne. “I have to do it. I’ll be home later this evening.”

Marcia thought about all the late nights Henry had been working recently. She was getting suspicious of his meetings. They were just too frequent.

She wondered if Henry was seeing another woman.

She decided to follow him that night to find out.

* * *

That evening, Marcia trailed Henry as he drove to an elegant restaurant. She had to see if he was meeting someone there.

Inside the restaurant, he took a gorgeous blonde lady to a table, where they ordered dinner. He *was* having an affair!

Marcia drove home in tears. She felt cheated and betrayed. All these years, she had been a loyal, loving wife, and this was what she got for it. She was fighting mad.

She chose not to tell Henry she was aware of his infidelity; she still wanted to save her marriage. Sooner or later, he’d grow tired of this woman and stop seeing her.

Then Marcia had an idea. Before bedtime, she’d hide the tape recorder in their room. She’d tell Henry that she would be sleeping in the guest bedroom that night because she had a cold and she didn’t want him to catch it. If Henry thought about his girlfriend, it would be caught on tape. She’d listen to it in the morning to see if he was really being unfaithful.

Later, at bedtime, Henry was brushing his teeth in the bathroom. Marcia took this moment to press the “record” button and hide the tape recorder under their bed.

Henry finished in the bathroom and came out. "I'm ready for bed."

"I seem to have caught a cold," Marcia said. "I'll sleep in the guest bedroom so you won't catch it."

"Okay. I hope you get well soon."

"Thanks. Good night."

Everything was all set.

* * *

The next morning, Marcia woke Henry up. "Rise and shine."

He yawned. "Good morning."

Henry had his breakfast and left for the office. Marcia got the tape recorder from under the bed, rewound it a little, and played the tape.

She heard Henry thinking, *I must get rid of my wife. It's the only way I can marry Susan. I'll put some arsenic in her coffee.*

She shut it off. So Henry was planning to murder her. Well, she wouldn't let him do it.

* * *

Henry came home that afternoon and found Marcia very upset.

"Darling, what's the matter?" he said.

"I learned about your intentions."

"What on Earth do you mean?"

Marcia took a gun from her pocket. "Let's just say I'm going to beat you to the punch."

With that, she shot Henry through the heart. He gasped and dropped to the floor, a stunned expression on his face. His blood flowed into a huge puddle on the den floor.

Marcia then went to pick up the mail. One letter was from the Public Library, reminding her that a book was overdue.

She walked into her bedroom. The mystery novel was on the end table. Marcia opened the last page to find the date it was due. Her eyes wandered to the opposite page, where she saw this sentence: Barry told himself, *I must get rid of my wife. It's the only way I can marry Susan. I'll put some arsenic in her coffee.*

Filled with horror, Marcia realized that Henry had not meant to kill her. The tape recorder had captured the words of a book as they passed through Henry's mind.

The doorbell rang. When Marcia answered it, she saw the woman who was with Henry at the restaurant.

"Hello, Mrs. Becker," the woman said. "I'm Gail Addison, Henry's new boss. I treated him to dinner last night to reward him for working late this past week. I came here to apologize to you for that. His account is wrapped up now, so he won't be spending any more late hours at the office."

Marcia felt dizzy all of a sudden.

"Is something wrong, Mrs. Becker?" Gail asked. "You look like you're about to faint!"

The Child in the Street

Tony Concannon

Once Arakawa started thinking about his dead son, he couldn't stop. Tonight it had been the talk about the Boston Marathon that had gotten him started. It had been a stupid conversation, Ueda arguing that the Boston Marathon was not a true marathon because it didn't go out and come back over the same course like the big Japanese marathons in Tokyo and The Fukuoka. Adachi had kept saying the Boston Marathon was the most famous marathon in the world. Both of them had been drunk. Arakawa's son had run the Boston Marathon once, several years before he had been killed, but neither Ueda nor Adachi knew that. They didn't know Arakawa well. His company sold semiconductors to their company and the three of them went out for drinks every few months. They knew his son, his only child, had died in America, but not much else.

Arakawa had left to catch the train home a few minutes after the argument. Once he started thinking about his son, he wasn't good company. In any case, he had never been much of a drinking man. He knew the other two would go half the night. He was still thinking about his son when he got off the train at Mitakadai Station, the station closest to his home in the western suburbs of Tokyo. He went through the ticket gate and turned left into the street, which ran uphill for several hundred meters. Most of the shops near the station were closed for the night. In August it would be ten years since the death of his son but it still seemed as if it had happened yesterday. It had been a hot, humid evening like tonight when the call had come from America. Ahead of Arakawa in the dark street there was a little girl. Arakawa looked for her mother. The only open shop in the vicinity was the video rental shop. Headlights came over the top of the hill, where the police substation was. Arakawa quickened his pace.

"You're going to get hit by a car," he called out. "Come over to the side here. Where's your mother?"

He stepped into the street and took by the hand the child, who couldn't be more than three. He led her to the side of the street. The car went by.

"It's dangerous to be in the middle of the street, you know," he admonished gently. "Are you with your mother?"

The girl didn't answer him.

A young Japanese woman came out of the video rental shop. Her hair was bleached blond and she was wearing a short skirt. She walked toward Arakawa and the girl.

"She was in the middle of the street," Arakawa told her. "It was dangerous. A car was coming down the hill."

"Thank you," she said. She took the girl's hand from his. "I told you not to leave the store," the woman began in an angry voice.

"I told you you could get hit by a car," she went on, her voice shrill.

Arakawa, who had started back up the road, stopped and turned around. The

little girl's face was about to break out in tears. The woman was squeezing her hand.

"I told you not to leave the store."

The woman suddenly slapped the girl across the face. The girl began crying.

"What are you doing?" Arakawa said. "You're the one who should be slapped."

The woman looked at him. On her face was a puzzled look.

"You should be watching your child so that she doesn't go out in the street,"

Arakawa continued. "She could have been killed. It's your responsibility."

"What are you talking about? What do you know? I told her not to go out of the store."

The girl was sobbing. The woman took a pack of cigarettes out of her bag.

"You're the one who should be slapped," Arakawa said again. "You don't even take care of your child."

He started walking again. A few yards away he stopped and turned to the woman.

"You're the one who should be slapped," he said for the third time.

He turned away.

"*Bakayaro*," came the reply.

He turned back.

"*Bakayaro*. You're the one who should be slapped."

He strode up the hill. He couldn't hear what the woman was saying and he didn't stop again. He couldn't remember ever speaking so forcibly.

A policeman was standing on the steps of the substation at the top of the hill. It wasn't the elderly policeman Arakawa spoke to every evening. This man was younger, taller and stockier. He had his eyes on Arakawa climbing the hill.

"What happened?" the policeman asked civilly when Arakawa reached the substation. Arakawa was on the other side of the street and he crossed over. "A little girl almost got hit by a car. Then her mother came out the video rental shop and slapped the girl for leaving the store."

"What was the shouting about?" the policeman asked after a moment.

"I got angry at the mother for hitting the child. Then she got angry at me."

Arakawa looked down the street. The mother and the child were gone.

"The child wandered out of the store?" the policeman asked.

"Yes. It seems so."

"This is a dangerous road."

"That's why I thought the mother should be watching the child."

The policeman nodded slightly to himself. Then he said, "Thank you." He did not bow.

Arakawa crossed back to the other side and continued home. He lived about 20 minutes away. He generally enjoyed the long walk, which took him past farm fields and across a brook, but tonight he was upset from the argument with the woman and his mind was still on his son. He'd been surprised when his son had told him he was going to run a marathon. His son had never been much into sports. He had been an outstanding student and he had entered Tokyo University on the first try from high school.

After graduation he had gone directly to graduate school in the United States at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Arakawa hadn't been opposed or even surprised at his son's non-traditional path-his son had always loved English and America. When his son had completed his doctorate, he had begun working in the laboratories there. Arakawa and his wife had attended the graduation, the first time either of them had left Japan, and they had been introduced to their son's fiancée, an American woman. Again, Arakawa hadn't been opposed to what his son had wanted to do. His future daughter-in-law had spoken no Japanese but she had been gentle. She had also graduated with a doctorate, and she had a job in the same laboratory. She was a runner and she had introduced his son to the sport. They'd even run the marathon together.

He was still thinking about his son when his wife greeted him in the entrance of their home. She was a short, thin woman. She kept herself busy by taking classes at the local community center. Tonight her cheeks were flushed and her eyes more vital than usual, signs she'd been drinking, as she did almost every evening he wasn't home.

"There was a little girl in the street by the video rental shop," Arakawa told her when he had stepped out of his shoes and into the slippers she had put out for him.

"I thought she was going to get hit by a car, so I pulled her over to the side," he went on, following his wife into the living room. "Then the mother came out of the video rental shop and got angry at the little girl and slapped her."

Dinner was waiting on the table.

"That road's dangerous, especially at night," his wife said.

"I got angry at the mother for slapping her," Arakawa said as he sat down on the big cushion in front of his place at the table.

"She was probably just trying to teach the girl not to wander away by herself." His wife went into the kitchen. She came back into the room with the teapot. She sat opposite him and poured him a cup of tea.

"Did you eat?" she asked as she uncovered the food on the table.

"I'm not hungry. Just make me some *ochazuke*."

She got up again. Her movements were always sudden when she had been drinking.

He looked at the clock. It was quarter of ten. The news came on at ten. In the corner of the room was the little altar with the picture of their son. On the wall above it were pictures of his deceased parents. Every morning his wife made an offering of rice at the altar.

He was staring at the picture of his son when his wife brought a bowl of rice into the room. She placed it in front of him and sat down for the second time.

"Did you drink much?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"It's still hot," his wife said.

"It's going to rain."

"I was talking about the rice."

He blew on top of the steaming bowl.

"That woman looked like she worked in a bar," he said.

“What woman?”

“The woman whose little girl ran out of the video shop and almost got hit by a car.”

“How do you know she works in a bar?”

“It’s not important where she works. She shouldn’t have slapped that little girl and made her cry.”

“She just wants to teach her so it won’t happen again.”

“You shouldn’t hit a child that small.”

He picked up the bowl of rice and blew on the top of it again.

“They were talking about the Boston Marathon,” he said.

“Who was?”

“The men I went drinking with.”

She nodded.

“Koichi did great to finish that time,” she said a few seconds later, her voice different.

Arakawa looked at his wife. He knew she was going to start crying uncontrollably. He’d known it as soon as he’d brought up the marathon. “He never liked sports,” she went on. “I never thought he would finish.”

Tears were welling in her eyes. The drinking never helped.

“He always worked hard at everything,” Arakawa said.

“People should know not to drink and drive,” she said.

“America’s a different country.”

“It’s a stupid country.”

She was crying hard now, her shoulders shaking. He knew the sobs would start soon. When they did, he moved around the table and held her.

795 Miles

Nathan Hahs

1.

Las Vegas

C.G. rented a moving truck for her belongings. This truck was fourteen feet in length, a Ford F-350 with air conditioning. We packed up on the evening of the seventh. The next morning we stopped back at the same business to attach a trailer to tow her pick-up.

Attaching the trailer turned out to be a little more difficult than expected. The customer service was atrocious. We waited for over ten minutes for the woman who was helping us to finish a personal phone call. Not good. Then we were directed to a man who was to hook up the trailer to the truck. He noticed that the brake lights on the trailer did not work. After replacing a fuse, we discovered that the turn signals on both the truck and the trailer did not work. Also not good. A second

fuse was replaced and now we were ready for the road. All of this did nothing to minimize my anxiety over having never pulled a trailer before.

After an hour of issues, the clock in the truck read 11:00am and we were ready to go. We had seven bottles of water, two packs of cigarettes, some fruit, some candy, potato chips, and beef jerky. The odometer read 112,140 miles.

2.

Mesquite

The weather was scorching. Even with the AC on, it soon became apparent that our water supply was insufficient. Our first ninety minutes were uneventful, which was fantastic. At 12:40pm, we stopped in Mesquite for lunch. Half an hour later, we were walking back to the truck, soft drinks in hand. On a complete whim, I decided to walk around the truck to check it out. To make sure everything was fine.

Everything was not fine. There was a large puddle of green liquid under the front of the truck. Radiator fluid. Very not good. At the moment there was no leak. Perhaps the leak had already stopped. Perhaps everything had already leaked out. Just to see what would happen, I started the truck. The CHECK ENGINE light came on, so I turned it back off. I am no mechanic, but I know a radiator problem can be a quick end to any road-tripping. Feeling a bit exasperated, C.G. called the moving company to report the problem. She was told a mechanic would be there in an hour.

When we pulled into Mesquite, we had parked in the lot of a casino. Now that we had an hour to kill, we went into the casino to do a little gambling and maybe have a beer. We ordered a round of drinks. I put a twenty into the poker machine and managed to double my money. Although this was not how the day was supposed to progress, we were not in any real hurry. We estimated that the drive would take twelve hours. We had two days to make it. Surely, this coolant leak would be the end of our troubles.

As we walked out of the casino to meet the mechanic, we were shocked at how hot it was. The AC had spoiled us. The sun was directly overhead and the temperature was in excess of 110 degrees. Once the truck was fixed or replaced or whatever, we would have air conditioning and would be okay for the remainder of the voyage to Denver.

3.

Good News And Bad News

C.G and I chatted in the cab of the truck while the mechanic fiddled around under the hood. After a few minutes, he called us over to the engine, while he added some water to the radiator.

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” he said. “Which do you want first?”

“The good news,” I replied.

“The good news is the radiator is okay. All that’s happening is this: as this little truck heats up and then cools off, the radiator pulls fluid from the overflow tank. If it does this too often, it can overflow the overflow tank. If the overflow tank gets empty, the CHECK ENGINE light comes on. You can add water anytime to the overflow. So, just make sure you have plenty of water, check the overflow whenever you stop, and you’ll be fine.”

“Huh, I...,” C.G. started.

“What’s the bad news?” I interrupted.

“The bad news is that this truck is really too small to pull another vehicle. So, to keep the engine from overheating, you’ll have to keep the AC off and downshift on the bigger hills.”

“Fuck,” I grunted.

“It’s over a hundred degrees,” C.G. added. “We’ll roast.”

“You may be able to use the AC when the engine isn’t working so hard. When you’re not going up a steep incline.”

Well, that’s great, I thought. We’re going into the fucking mountains. When will there not be a steep incline? And, if we have to downshift, we may end up going, like, forty miles an hour. This trip is going to take...

“Let’s go buy some water from that gas station over there.” C.G. suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” said the mechanic. “Next time just get a bigger truck.”

“Next time we’ll get a different moving company,” said C.G. “This one sucks.”

“Thanks for your help.” I shook his hand and the mechanic turned towards his truck.

“Have a safe trip.”

We drove over to the gas station and bought three gallons of water. I expressed my concern to C.G. about having to downshift. She was doing her best to keep up a good attitude. I smoked a couple of cigarettes and at 2:45pm we left Mesquite.

4.

Dinner

Around 5:00pm we passed St. George. It took us most of the day to realize that we had crossed into Mountain Time zone. I think it actually happened back at Mesquite.

We stopped at Denny’s in Salina. It was 9:15pm (or 8:15 if you looked at the clock in the truck) This turned out to be a Twilight Zone-esque experience.

I had been craving a breakfast type of meal: sausage, eggs, toast, and especially hash browns. That’s why we chose Denny’s. As we approached the door to the restaurant, there was a young kid, maybe four years old, puking on the newspaper vending machine. His mother was standing by us. Even though C.G. and I were chatting, neither the mother or the kid seemed to notice us. We got not a glance, not an acknowledgement, not a hello. I was having a feeling of déjà vu that would

last until we left Salina. Strange.

When we were seated, the very first thing our waitress said to us was, “I’m sorry, but we are out of hashbrowns.”

“Oh,” I replied. C.G. shook her head.

“Can I get you something to drink?” the waitress asked. We replied that we would like only water.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

We decided on burgers. I didn’t want sausage, eggs, and toast, if I couldn’t have the hash browns. I mentioned the *déjà vu* to C.G. She said that I might be going crazy. I allowed that that was a possibility. Maybe it was heat stroke. We decided that, in the interest of simplicity, we would leave the AC off for the entire trip. When you add the frustration of, at times, only going thirty-five miles an hour, and my apprehension of never having pulled a trailer, it began to seem logical to me that I seem out of sorts.

C.G. motioned for me to look across the aisle from where we were seated. Two adults were sitting there, a male and a female. In front of each of them lay a coloring book. A dozen or so crayons were on the table. They were engrossed in their little art project. Very strange. We watched them until a tiny white mass flew over our heads.

In the booth behind us was an older couple. The man was tearing the wrapper of his straw into little bits and shooting them at his wife. It was one of his stray spit-wads that we had seen. I think his vision must have been very bad. Strapped to his head so tightly that it deformed it was a pair of glasses. The lenses looked like the bottoms of Coke bottles.

Our waitress returned with our drinks and took our order. It was then that I noticed everyone had blond hair and blue eyes. Very, very strange. The cook, our waitress, the couple with the coloring books, the old couple, even C.G. is blond and blue. I was the only person with dark features. I felt like a Jew in Nazi Germany. Was everyone staring at me? Was I a freak?

Here in Salina, I definitely was.

5.

Green River

At midnight we pulled into Green River- which should be sung to the tune of “Moon River.” During the day we had come up with a few games to play while on the road. 1) We began counting the number of moving vehicles we saw. 2) We started a list of every state license plate we passed. 3) Every time we passed a Flying J gas Station, we would yell, “Fucking A Flying J,” hit the ceiling of the cab, and then do an armpit fart. This proved to be quite entertaining, because C.G. did not know how to do one and also because I had much difficulty doing one while driving.

The only motel we found in Green River with any vacancy was a ma-and-pa enterprise. A large boat race was in town and nearly everything was booked up. The roads seemed very busy for such a small town at this hour, I thought. I waited

in the truck on the side of the road while C.G. ran into the lobby/home of the owner to get us a room. We had tried two other motels in Green River and I had almost jack-knifed the damn truck pulling in and out of their small parking lots.

6.

Colorado

We woke up a little past seven and were on the road by eight. We crossed the Colorado border at 9:41am (8:41 according to the clock in the truck). By now we were down to the three gallons of water from Mesquite, less than a pack of cigarettes, and the fruit. The fruit never did get eaten. I threw it away in Denver.

We stopped in Grand Junction, more appropriately entitled The White Trash Nation, for breakfast. That's all I'll say about Grand Junction.

At 2:04pm the driving deteriorated. Before that, we even reached a top speed of 78 miles per hour. By 2:30 we were moving at a sloth-life 25mph. The hazard lights were really coming in handy now. The temperature gauge in the truck was in the red and the roads were getting steeper and steeper. When we were coming down a hill fifteen minutes later, the truck died. Right on the fucking interstate.

I pulled over. My frustration level had been quite low on this second day of travel, but now it skyrocketed. I cursed the truck, the mountains, the truck, the people in Salina, the truck, the people in Grand Junction, the moving company, and the truck. I smoked a few cigarettes and decided we would wait half an hour and then try again.

Using C.G.'s cell phone, I called a friend in Denver who was going to help us unpack. I told him that we were running late and that I would call him when we got into town. He asked what moving company we were using. He said everyone has trouble with them. He said that Ford stands for 'Fucked Over Rebuilt Dodge.'

C.G. called her parents to give them an update. They also said that this company was trouble.

Live and learn, I guess. Now we know what moving company to not use. And, C.G. has learned to do an armpit fart.

7.

795 Miles

At 6:00pm Mountain Time, we arrived in Denver. We had stopped every thirty minutes to allow the truck to cool and we never made it above twenty-five miles an hour. We counted 120 moving vehicles and saw thirty-seven different license plates.

We spent \$150.00 in gas and what should have been a twelve hour drive took us twenty-two.

I was frazzled and bug-eyed. I would have fallen part if C.G. hadn't been there to keep me company. As long as I never make that drive again, I'll die a happy man. The odometer read 112,935. I called my friend back and we all went out drinking. Unpacking can wait until tomorrow.

It's your fourth time now.
You'd think that
one or the other of us
would learn.
I guess it's still important
for us both
to try.
I put in the dim light bulbs.
Pull out all the blankets.
The bucket.
Trash bags.
Towels.
I fill up jugs of water.
I watch you tremble
and sweat.
I listen to you talk nonsense.
Help you to navigate hallucinations.
(The burning isn't real.
The buzzers will go away.)
I slop vomit into the toilet.
Feed you tablespoons of juice.
Sing you little stories through my tears.
You threaten me.
I hold your hand.
This goes on.

An Altered Love

Kevin John Dail

A tear runs down
her purpled cheek.
Despair is her playground,
and pain her toys;
and yet, she loves with
hurt and guilty eyes,
she carries the blame,
a burden undeserved.
A helpless kitten underfoot
with no escape but dreams
to keep the nightmares away.

Leaving

Susan Oleferuk

Many years lost, ages and hours
a multitude of nights uncountable
uncanny that clocks don't read
too early or too late

Many homes lost
old streets of each thoughtless turn
a flat map and childhood as thin
as an old storybook

A home lost
the chair, window, plate
The dreams are dried
and hung like skins of an echoing drum

I can't remember all I wanted
the small prides of myself
the hurt of it all
and the gallant comings home

So stay close to me my love
till this last leaving
and whisper to me
who we were.

That's where you're wrong

Adam Graupe

There was April, a woman I dated in the mid 90s
We had a nice yin-yang thing going:
She was older and voluble
While I was young and chose my words carefully
She loved to tell me how I was wrong about this or that
She often said, "If I were you I would have done this instead."

After two weeks, I couldn't stand her anymore
We were on a walk and she said "if I were you I would have—"
I stopped her and said, "if you were me you would have done what
I had done because you would have been me. Do you get that? If you
were me you wouldn't have done anything *you* would have done."

April's face contorted
The left side of her eyeglass frame twisted upward
Her face turned scarlet
She breathed in gasps
Suddenly her face turned returned to its normal state:
A placid all-knowing look
And she said, "you're wrong. If I were you I wouldn't have been me but
I would have been you and I would have done *this* instead"

Some people are always right
But they are a pain in the ass to live with

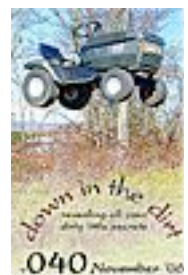
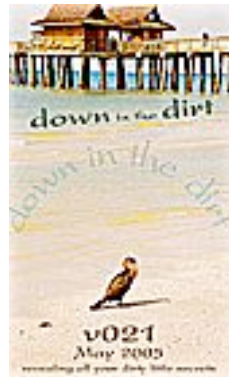
a good-bye from the editor

I'm no good at writing these things, but the people at Scars suggested I write something to close off this issue. Because *Down in the Dirt* magazine started (forever ago) as a supplement section to *cc&d* magazine (I think that was in 1994), and we started off this mag on its own in 2000. At first it was just an Internet magazine (because we had no idea if anyone would be interested in *Down in the Dirt* in the first place), but people started asking about getting their hands of hard copies. So v013 was the first issue we ever ran as a print magazine - as a saddle-stitched, color cover magazine. Issues were small at first, but as people discovered us (and we got tons of stories from people), we started placing material in books as we received it (which means that unlike *cc&d* magazine, we didn't have a "poetry" section and a "prose" section, but material just flowed from one piece to the next in our issues). We know how *cc&d* uses artwork plentifully throughout their magazine, but we tried to limit the artwork in our issues (so we could better showcase people's writing).

And yeah, we use Scars archives for artwork for covers, and we didn't know much of what we were doing when we started off *Down in the Dirt* here, so covers over the years have ranged from portraits of women or men (v049 even has the cat Sequoia on the cover), to our more worldly recent covers. It has been cool over the years to look for covers in July with a U.S. flag (to celebrate Independence Day on the 4th of July) or December covers with a christmas tree (sorry, but it's easier o find Christian decorations for the holidays than Jewish decorations) or cool winter pictures.

Our covers have included images from barns in Pennsylvania (and I think all of the Pennsylvania pictures for covers turn out great for *Down in the Dirt*), but we've also had Washington DC (like Iwo Jima) or a lighthouse in Maine, or even animals from the Galapagos Islands, or even places like the Carter Cathedral in Finland.

Mentioning the lighthouse in Maine or the animals from





the Galapagos Islands makes me think of the next step *Down in the Dirt* got to take with **Scars Publications**. I think *cc&d* magazine was getting so many chapbooks that they decided to release a collection books of issues of the magazine. So I thought, if they *cc&d* was going to do it, then *Down in the Dirt* better



be able to do it as well, so we started releasing perfect-bound collection books of issues of our magazine. Starting in 2007 we released two collection books (as we did in 2008 and 2009), and it was cool to have a nice collection of our issues together in one place. It also meant that the covers were sturdier (so the issues would hold together longer in this collected perfect-bound form), and the covers got to be not only full color, but also full bleed (which Scars couldn't pull off in the saddle-stitched issues).



So, while I've tried to step back and let *Down in the Dirt* grow and flourish, I noticed that I had to use smaller typefaces, and do everything I could to cram as much into issues (because so many excellent writers were submitting valuable stories and poems to us). So, after running our collection books of issues for a few years, the good people at Scars thought that it might be better if we chuck the whole issues-collection-book idea and just let *every* issue be a perfect-bound book. This would

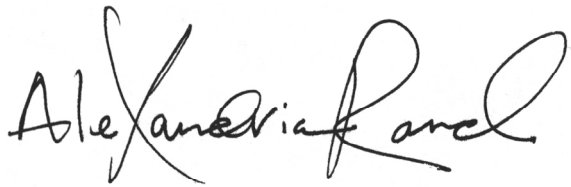


solve the problem with durability of issues (since we were even running cover stock as two pre-printed pages fused together for a while, to be environmental and not destroy previously printed-on paper), it would make each issue look at LOT sharper by being perfect-bound and not saddle stitched, and the covers could be full-bleed.

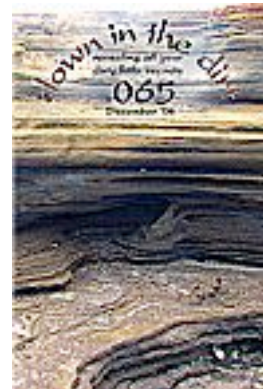
So yes, they wanted me to write something to close off

this issue, because this is the last saddle-stitched issue scheduled for *Down in the Dirt*, and starting with the January 2010 issue, the magazine that has been “revealing all your dirty little secrets” for so many years is going to now be released as a monthly perfect-bound 84 page book. It will be longer than past issues, but we’re promising to give writers the space they deserve now. We will reinstate the book-size body copy type (so it won’t be really small type crammed onto pages to fit more into issues, especially since we even had to expand our issue length in saddle-stitched issues to fit more people in our magazine). And we are promising to allow every writing their own page for their writing - in the past, we would fit small poems on the same page at the end of stories, or we would put three poems on a page, where a poem can be lost and writing not get the attention it deserves.

I have to admit, it has been fun looking over the sample covers on these pages, to see how far *Down in the Dirt* has come over the years. It has been the biggest thrill seeing these issues released on the web and in print for so many years, and now with this new printer distributing issues (and doing such a great printing job), they’ll even take care of PDF file downloads, so that the PDF files will be better quality than what we produced in our offices. I look forward to sharing the next chapter of *Down in the Dirt* with you.



Alexandria Rand



ISSN 1554-9666



1 554966 600005

ISSN 1554-9673



9 771554 962007

Down in the Dirt
Alexandria Rand, editor
AlexRand@scars.tv
<http://scars.tv>

Scars Publications and Design
829 Brian Court
Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA

• **Down in the Dirt** is published by **Scars Publications and Design**, 829 Brian Court, Gurnee, IL 60031-3155 USA; attn: Alexandria Rand. Contact us via snail-mail or e-mail (AlexRand@scars.tv) for subscription rates or prices for annual collection books.

• To contributors: No racist, sexist or blatantly homophobic material. No originals; if mailed, include SASE & bio. Work sent on disks or through e-mail preferred. Previously published work accepted. Authors always retain rights to their own work. All magazine rights reserved. Reproduction of **Down in the Dirt** without publisher permission is forbidden. Copyright © 2000-2008 **Scars Publications and Design**, **Down in the Dirt**, Alexandria Rand. All rights of pieces remain with their authors.