

The Mark Literary Review

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Responsibility

Savannah Oler

I should not be ashamed to touch my own body. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed to leave my planned parenthood appointment. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed when I get into my car at night without immediately locking my doors. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed of the moisture streaming like honey down my face. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed to set my drink down in public places. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed of how I dress my body. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed of the cycle that causes me to buy over-priced tampons or pads. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed of the hair naturally growing on my body. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed of the voice escaping my throat when I look men in the eyes. It is

Mine

I should not be ashamed. But I am. And this shame. It is Ours.

The Goldfish

Steve O'Connor

The goldfish lasted for a week or two. My five-year-old son Alex and his friend Joey probably killed it by continually bringing it outside to oversee their Wiffle Ball contests, and by overfeeding it or feeding it things that a goldfish had little use for. The fishbowl grew cloudy with decomposing Saltines and Chips Ahoy! and though I changed the water a couple of times, the whole situation was probably traumatic for the creature, and before long “Goldy” was floating above the glass-bound watery world that had been its brief home.

Alex cried, and to alleviate his sorrow, I suggested we hold a funeral ceremony for Goldy. Together, we lined a little matchbox with felt and placed the dead fish in it. Alex led the solemn procession, followed by his three-year-old sister, Sandra, his buddy Joey, and Joey’s little brother Zach. Jake, our retriever, brought up the rear, tongue lolling. I waited with my hand trowel by the tiny grave I’d dug in the yard. Alex knelt beside it and placed the box in the hole. Then we all stood around for a minute, staring down at the matchbox coffin. Jake looked from the hole to the humans, expectantly.

“Would you like to say a few words, Alex?” I asked.

The maple tree stirred in a breeze, and the speckled shadows moved over his blond head. “What words?”

“Just some parting words, about Goldy?”

He nodded and thought for a minute. “Goldy,” he began, but he paused, and his upper lip began to quiver. “You

were a good fish!” he cried and burst into tears as Joey sniffled and Sandra looked about, confused. I wondered if the ceremony had been such a good idea after all. I said a quick blessing and filled in the hole. “Very nice, boys,” I said. “You did right by Goldy.”

In the house I put the ballgame on the radio while I continued some painting I was doing on the kitchen cabinets. A while later I looked out to see the children chasing each other around the yard. When my wife returned from shopping and asked how the funeral had gone, I said it was a sad occasion, but that Alex appeared to have gotten over it. We heard the children’s shouts and Jake’s barks from the yard. I concluded that Goldy had joined the forgotten dead.

After dinner that night, I read *Burglar Bill* to Alex while my wife finished reading *The Cat in the Hat* to Sandra in the next bedroom. Finally, I tucked him in, stopped to kiss Sandra goodnight, and joined my wife, who was reading a detective novel in our bedroom. She took off her reading glasses and smiled. One of the things she had purchased in her shopping that day was a black peignoir. She looked beautiful, and I kissed her and asked her the old question with my eyes. She feigned a sort of shocked expression, and whispered, “Wait. The kids are still awake.”

We read our books for a while—I was four chapters into *To the Lighthouse* and struggling to find a plot. I went downstairs to brush my teeth and get the coffee ready for the morning. As I headed back upstairs, thinking to share some intimate moments with my wife, I stopped. At the top of the stairs, I heard muffled sobs coming from Alex’s room. I opened his door and stepped into the boy’s room, dimly lit with a night light.

“What’s wrong, Alex? Are you still sad about Goldy?”

“No,” he said, but he was still crying.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I approached and sat on the edge of his bed.

He choked out the words. “Jake is going to die, too.”

“Jake’s only five. Dogs can live ten or fifteen years.”

“But he’s going to die. And Grammy is going to die, and you’re going to die, and Mom is going to die, and Sandra, and everyone is going to die. And I’m going to die, too.”

I felt as if my whole body, or my soul, if there is such a thing, were a lake, and his words were stones that fell against me and sank into my core. Those were fears I could not allay with philosophy or dismiss as unreal. I knew my wife, under such circumstances, would speak of heaven, and God and angels, and how we would all be reunited in heaven, and Jake too, and even Goldy, swimming in a big eternal fishbowl. But I didn’t want to say that, because I didn’t believe in that kind of heaven, in any kind of heaven really, and I hate hypocrisy above all things. What could I say? That life was beautiful, eternal in some way, but probably not for individuals? Should I tell him to enjoy the people and animals he loved and to be kind to them because it’s all over so soon, an ‘insubstantial pageant,’ as the poet said. Would that comfort a five-year old? I thought of the old cemeteries of New England, so full of gravestones whose fading names, if shouted, roused no memory among the living. And of the weeping families and friends who’d seen them lowered there, all gone and forgotten, too, and beyond that, back to the first humans who emerged from the plains of Africa some two million years ago—all gone without a trace.

I felt the bed beneath me shake with Alex’s sobs, as, for the first time, Death had shown his pale face amid the playthings of childhood and pointed a bony finger at everyone the boy loved, and he had understood. I sat there in the dim

glow of the night light, stroking his head, and finally leaned over and kissed him and said, “No matter what happens, Alex, we’ll all be together again someday in heaven.”

His crying ceased, and I heard his dear voice in the darkness. “Will we, Dad? Do you promise?”

“Of course,” I said. “You know I always tell you the truth.”

“Dad, will you lie down with me?”

“Sure, Champ, move over.”

By the time I got to bed, my wife was asleep; but my amorous thoughts had vanished. I heard a siren in the distance and wondered, as it faded, what trouble it meant for someone. Love is so terribly hard. With every ounce of your will, you want to protect the ones you love, and never let them be hurt by anything, but the reality is you can protect them from so very little. Maybe the best you can do is prepare them for the hard truth of pain and death, and I wished I had tried to tell Alex about the circle of life and that we are part of something so big that we, individually, are insignificant, like shooting stars that streak across the sky and then are extinguished and consumed to dust. I wished I had not filled his head with angels and eternal joy, with visions of his parents and his sister and Grammy and Jake and Goldy reunited forever, but it hurt me too much to watch the little boy ponder these separations.

I promised myself that when he was a little older, I would not hide my mind from him. I would tell him that his mother could well be right—that there could be a heaven—I had no way of knowing, but that I believed in the good sense of what Henry Thoreau had said on his deathbed, “One world at a time.” I would tell him I hadn’t wanted to lie to him. I would tell him that love is hard, and sometimes it makes the truth even harder. I would tell him I loved him, and that was truer than anything.

Transplant

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

1.

My Sri Lankan girlfriend wanted me to send her a birthday present, a pretty stone from the Rocky Mountains. She wanted me to send it by Facebook, not a picture of a stone, a real stone. I tried to explain the limitations of the Internet to her, but she wouldn't accept my explanations. It seemed she had determined to believe only what she wanted to believe.

Therefore, she decided I didn't really care about her, and that I was a lousy boyfriend and she broke up with me on Facebook, which I guessed was okay, though I had never laid my hands on her, never rubbed my dick on her thigh or put it in her. I guessed I never would, either on the Internet or in reality.

2.

A bleached robin pulls a worm from a brown spot on my lawn. I've applied *Revive* three times, but the blazing sun has its way. Drought has its way. I'm no tender green blade.

For five years, I visited the same fountain every year on my birthday. It was like tossing the I Ching, or asking God to write my name in the *Book of Life* on Yom Kippur. And the question was: *Will I finally be recognized as the genius I am and be hoisted in a chair above everyone's head like a Jewish bridegroom, or will I be in the mailroom forever, schleping mail?*

On my sixth visit, I decided the answers were: *No* and *Yes*. So I changed jobs.

3.

My next relationship was even more tragic. It was with a

woman whose face was later torn off by a chimpanzee. That was six years ago and she's still having serious problems living, even after the police shot the chimpanzee to death like it was any black teenager who was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Even after she got a face transplant, her life remained shit. You'd think a face transplant might have solved all her problems, but she's still got a lot of disabilities. They gave her some new teeth so she can eat pizza, but she can't chew the crust. She can eat chicken, but not steak. She can dream of dating, but can't date.

4.

I met my girlfriend Eppa on my new job. Her parents owned the deli. She was allegedly an employee, but only worked when she felt like it. One day she came in at about one-thirty, wearing a black and white checked skirt, a black blouse with lace at the throat, and a black beret. She sat down at one of the restaurant tables and lit a cigarillo. She looked like a French Jewess sitting in a café on the West Bank. She only needed an espresso to complete the impersonation, so I asked her if she'd like me to bring her a cup of coffee.

How about a Doctor Brown's cream soda, she asked.

5.

She called me late at night for a long time after the chimp's assault but before her transplant, hoping to renew our affair. I reminded her that she was the one who broke up with me, but I wasn't sorry about it. In fact, in retrospect, I was happy it was over between us. *If I didn't want her with a face, I asked her, why would I want her faceless?* However, she wasn't really faceless—what was left was worse than faceless.

At that time, I never imagined that doctors could transplant a face. I suggested that she try Match.com. Surely someone would be fascinated, eager to date a woman whose face was

torn off by a chimp, but she protested that that's not the kind of man she wanted to date. She wanted a kind man, a Zen Buddhist who didn't sweat the small stuff and who could find *her* kindness and intelligence behind her horrifying visage.

6.

I brought the Doctor Brown's cream soda to her, poured it from the can into a glass of ice, as I did for customers, then went back to methodically cleaning tables. The lunch rush was over, all the customers were gone. They were an ancient, sloppy bunch, oblivious that they were dripping mayonnaise and mustard, dropping pickles and pieces of tomato. Eppa watched me work with a thoughtful expression. I was soon back at her table. I swiped the rag around.

Raise your arm, would you? I asked.

She looked at me. *No.*

What do you mean, no?

My arm is comfortable where it is.

Oh, come on.

What do you mean, come on? My parents own this joint.

7.

Nevertheless, in spite of my callous pose, I was sometimes jarred awake in the middle of the night feeling bad about the women I'd been with. They were real women, but I was never enough of a man for them. In fact, my two a.m. sorrow became so wide, I could not see across it. But then I took a hundred milligrams of Zolofit and my vision improved immensely.

I discovered that I was on a bridge in a four-wheel drive vehicle. My father was driving and he said: *I was kidding you,*

son. You won't always be a bum. I'm going to take you to the village in the Alsace Loraine where Albert Schweitzer lived. There he had the vision to go to Africa and work at curing the benighted natives. I'm sure you'll find something to do just as noble, now that you're on the bridge and I'm driving you in a Dodge Ram, the vehicle that's all about guts and glory.

8.

I temporarily forgot how strong Eppa was and took her by the elbow. She threw her arm back and sent me flying, to fall on my ass on the grimy black and white checked linoleum. She went back to reading her book, *L'Etranger* by Camus. She was reading it in French. On the cover was a picture of an elegant bistro, far removed from this dump, her parents' livelihood all through her growing up years.

Three Little Boys

Neil Randall

Jacob Fallada heard the boys long before he saw them. Their shrill, panicky voices carried all the way down the deserted dirt-track leading to the dilapidated caravan he called home. Jacob was unused to such interruptions. His was a very solitary existence. He rarely interacted with other people. The nearest dwelling was several miles away. If Jacob required any provisions, he had to hike across fields and through woodland to a remote village shop. At this time of year, the entrance to the dirt-track was overgrown, concealed from the road, the surface itself boggy and rutted with potholes, almost impassable. How the boys had stumbled upon it, let alone made it all the way down to the bottom end, was baffling, an impossibility almost. For this reason, Jacob abandoned his artistic work, pulled on a thick winter coat, and went outside to investigate.

Since early morning, patchy mist had been rolling in off the sea, enveloping the surrounding countryside in a wispy, shifting curtain of gloom. Through this curtain appeared three sturdy-looking young boys. They wore waterproof clothing, scarves, bobble-hats and wellington-boots.

“Look,” said one, pointing at Jacob. “A man. He’s sure to be able to help.”

“What’s the matter? What’s happened? How come you’re out here, in the middle of nowhere, all on your own?”

“We were with our fathers,” said the same boy as before, “on a daytrip to the seaside, a nature walk. They went down to the shoreline to see if it was safe for us to walk along the

beach. They told us to wait near the shelter by the slip-way. But they never came back.”

Jacob listened to all of this with a mounting sense of unease, scrutinizing each boy in turn, studying them at closer quarters, for they were the mirror-image of the three boys who had tormented him at school, who had teased, beat and humiliated him in front of the other children.

“What are your names?” he felt compelled to ask.

“That’s Shane. That’s Will. And I’m Zac.”

Jacob shuddered. Shane, Will and Zac had been the names of his tormentors. Not only did the boys now standing in front of him bear an uncanny resemblance to the bullies of yesteryear, but they had the exact same names.

“We’re scared,” said Shane, the slightly bigger, bulkier of the three children. “We want to find our dads. We want to go home.”

“I – I understand,” said Jacob, mastering his emotions, telling himself that this was no more than a bizarre coincidence, that his memory was playing tricks on him, that the boys didn’t resemble the Shane, Will, and Zac of the past as closely as he had originally thought. “So you were told to wait by the shelter near the slip-way leading down to the beach, right? Only your fathers didn’t return. You went out to search for them and couldn’t find your way back again?”

Each boy nodded earnestly.

“Okay. Perhaps it would be best if we retraced your steps, then. I’m sure your fathers lost their way in the mist. I’m sure we’ll find them without too much trouble.”

But Jacob knew how treacherous that stretch of coastline

could be in these conditions. In the past, he had heard stories of ramblers or birdwatchers going missing when venturing along the shore, never to be seen again.

“Follow me.”

They walked along the dirt-track, ducking to avoid overhanging bramble bushes, squelching through thick mud, stepping over rutted potholes full of dull, brownish water. Every twenty or so paces, Jacob would steal a glance at one of the boys. Each time, a painful memory rose to the forefront of his mind. He remembered the day Zac pinned him down and made him eat pieces of mouldy orange peel from the floor. He remembered the time Will had accosted him in the sports hall changing-rooms, stripping him naked and pushing him out into the corridor, so all the other children saw him naked. Or the time Shane slashed his forearms with a protractor, slicing his skin, drawing blood time and again. But what haunted him most of all, as they turned and made their way down towards the main coast road, were memories of those horrible bullies laughing at him, how much pleasure they derived from inflicting the utmost pain.

“Did you come this way?” Jacob asked them.

“I don’t think so,” said Will. “I’m sure we came over a railway bridge.”

“I see.” This baffled Jacob all the more. The nearest railway bridge was several miles away. If they had come from that direction, then they must have been walking for hours before they stumbled upon his caravan. “Right, we better cross over.”

They crossed the main road, and walked down a narrow, winding lane that led all the way up to the cliff tops.

“Right,” said Jacob, bringing them to a halt. “The lane up

ahead is always flooded. To get past, we'll have to walk along the grass bank. You must be very careful, though. The ground is saturated, treacherous, very slippery. If you don't display sufficient caution you could fall into the boggy pit in the field to your left. So perhaps it would be best if I walked behind you."

"But what if the boy at the front lost his footing and fell?" asked Will. "You'd be too far away to help."

"You're right," said Jacob. "Maybe I should be in the middle, then."

"But there are four of us," said Shane. "How can you be in the middle? Four, after all, is an even number."

"Of course it is," said Jacob. "What I meant to say is: one of you will lead the way. I will follow directly behind. The other two boys will bring up the rear, as it were."

"But why not have two at the front and one behind?" said Zac. "Surely that would make more sense. We're walking forwards not backwards. If we get into any difficulties it would be much easier to help a boy in front of you rather than behind, wouldn't it?"

"Okay, okay," said Jacob, losing patience at this point. "We can't stand here all day arguing. Zac, you go first. Will, you next. I will be directly behind you. Shane will be directly behind me."

This decided, they clambered up onto the bank and proceeded to edge very slowly, very carefully along the soft muddy grass. Halfway down, despite the caution displayed, Zac slipped over onto his backside, arms flailing.

"Ah!" he cried out.

Jacob lunged forward and grabbed hold of his wrist, stopping him from sliding off the bank. Startled, Shane lost his footing completely, and went tumbling from the verge, crashing through the adjoining bushes, plopping into the bog below.

“Help!” he shouted, splashing around in the thick quagmire. “Help!”

Jacob scrambled along the bank on all fours. “Shane! Shane!” But there was no response.

“Where is he?” asked Will. “Where’s he gone?”

Jacob called out time and again. But still there was no answer. Crouching closer, he stretched out a hand, searching for the boy’s body, but all he encountered was the boggy ground, the clinging, cloying feel of cold, sticky mud.

“I’m going to have to wade in.” He lowered his legs into the quagmire, inching deeper into the mud, trying to find the bottom. “It’s very deep. But I might just be able to get some kind of foothold.”

The mist was much thicker now; he could barely see a hand in front of him as he waded through mud up to his waist, doing a complete sweep of the surrounding area. But it was all in vain—Shane was nowhere to be seen.

After ten minutes of fruitless searching, Jacob hauled himself up out of the bog.

“I – I can’t find him,” he said, struggling to keep the tears from his voice. “He must’ve got dragged under, he must’ve –”

“How could this have happened?” said Zac.

“It was an accident,” Jacob replied, struck by the boy’s harsh, accusatory tone.

“But you’re an adult,” he went angrily on. “By offering to help us find our fathers, you took responsibility for our welfare. If one of us gets hurt or lost or whatever, then it’s down to you to put it right. You’ve got to try again. You’ve got to wade through the mud until you find him.”

“Impossible,” said Jacob. “The mud is too thick. If I risked another foray into the swamp, I may well be dragged under, too.”

“Then you must hand yourself into the police.”

“The police? Why?”

“Because you’ve failed in your duty of care towards us.”

“It’s not my fault,” Jacob argued. “I took you aside, back there, not fifteen minutes ago, and warned you of the dangers. I told you to watch your footing. I told you how slippery the grass would be.”

“What are we going to do?” cried Will. “What are we going to do?”

“Calm down,” said Jacob. “Look. We’ve made it this far. If we use the cliff tops to guide us down to towards the beach, we might just be able to get to the shelter. We might just be able to find your fathers. Agreed?”

The boys reluctantly nodded their heads.

“Come on. Follow me.”

On higher ground the wind was much stronger, the mist thicker still. To be extra safe, Jacob insisted that they hold hands as they walked along the undulating terrain, keeping to the grassy knolls, being careful to avoid the very edge of the cliffs.

“How much further?” asked Zac, coming to a stop, letting go of Jacob and Will’s hands.

Jacob surveyed the blank, blustery scene.

“Not far now,” he replied. “If my calculations are correct, the shelter should be just down this incline. There’s a car park of sorts, a concreted area. Once we reach there, the shelter is only a stone’s throw away.”

“What’s that?” asked Will.

Both Jacob and Zac swung round. Will had wandered over to the edge of the cliff, and was now pointing at something which had caught his attention.

“No!” shouted Jacob, darting out a hand to drag him away from danger. But he missed completely. Will tottered, swayed, and toppled into the misty abyss. “Will!” Jacob scrambled down on his knees, close to the ledge, staring into nothing more than a blank void.

“No!” he repeated despairingly. He couldn’t believe what was happening. An hour ago, he had been absorbed in his artistic work, thinking of nothing more than expressing himself to the full. Now two young boys had lost their lives within a quarter of an hour of each other. He sniffed and rubbed his eyes. He looked at the exact spot where Will had fallen. All that was left, caught in the tangled coastal scrub, was one of his wellington-boots.

Zac started to cry.

“Don’t, please,” said Jacob, getting to his feet. “He – He shouldn’t have wandered off like that. He knew we were walking close to the edge of the cliffs. He knew it was dangerous. I only let go of his hand for a second – a second. If anything, it was you who stopped. I –”

“I want to go home,” Zac sobbed. “I want my dad.”

“Yes, yes, of course you do.” He took the boy’s hand.

“The shelter is just down here. Come on.”

They set off once again. The waves crashing on the shore below frothed and fizzed, the stiff blustery wind buffeted them all way down to the car parking area, where the mist started to thin. Up ahead, Jacob could just about see the outline of a wooden structure.

“Look,” he said, pointing. “There’s the shelter.”

They raced over but found it empty. Jacob walked from front to back. Nothing. No sign of anyone at all.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone here,” he said, slumping down on the bench inside. “What do you want me to do? – walk down the slip-way, walk along the beach, call out, see if I can find your father?”

But Zac just stood there, directly in front of Jacob, head lowered, his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

“Zac? I said: What do you want me to do?”

In time, he lifted his head. “You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“I didn’t see what happened to Shane – not really. I’d slipped over. I was scared, busy trying to hold onto the bank, to stop myself from falling. But with Will, I saw you push him off the cliff.”

“What? No!” cried Jacob. “What are you saying? I rushed over to help. I didn’t get there in time. It was a complete accident. I –”

“Two accidents in such a short space of time,” said Zac, very calmly now. “I don’t believe you. I think you only led us down such a treacherous route so you could kill us.”

“Kill you! Why would I want to kill you? I was hard at work when you came shouting and screaming down the track. As I rule I never leave a piece of artistic work unfinished. All I’ve tried to do is help.”

“Some help! Just you wait. When our fathers return, they’re sure to want answers. I’ll tell them that I saw you push Will over the cliff top. I’ll tell them everything: How Shane suddenly disappeared like that, that one minute he was calling out for help, the next, you’d leapt off the bank, that in all likelihood, you drowned him in that muddy bog.”

“Wait just a minute!”

As Jacob stood up, Zac charged forward, beating him about the head and chest with his balled fists, forcing him back down to the bench. Unprepared for such a vicious and determined assault, Jacob took a few significant blows to the face, making his eyes flood with water. Blindly, he raised his hands, trying to defend himself. They grappled, struggled, fell wrestling to the ground, breathless, rolling from side to side. Gradually, Jacob’s superior strength overwhelmed the boy. He clambered on top of him and put his hands around his throat. As Zac gasped and gurgled and kicked out his legs, Jacob squeezed as hard as he could, until the thrashing desperate movements subsided, until the boy’s body went limp.

Slowly Jacob came to his senses, finding himself staring into Zac’s lifeless eyes. He had killed him outright. He had strangled him with his bare hands.

Approaching voices roused him back into the here and now. Thinking fast, he picked up the boy’s crumpled body, car-

ried it around to the back of the shelter and dumped it in a drainage ditch, pushing the corpse down below the surface with the toe of his boot, until it was completely submerged.

When he returned, three well-built men in waterproof clothing were standing in the shelter, stamping their feet and rubbing their hands together, trying to warm themselves up.

“Look.” One of them pointed at Jacob. “A chap’s just appeared out of nowhere, a local chap, no doubt, he’s sure to be able to help.”

“What’s happened?” said Jacob, struggling to mask his distress. “How come you’re out here, in the middle of nowhere, all on your own?”

“We could ask you the same question,” said the bigger, bulkier of the three men. “It’s not a day to be out for a stroll, is it? What are you doing here?”

“Me? I’m – I’m an artist. I was just out walking, trying to absorb myself in the scenery, trying to get some, erm...inspiration from nature.”

“An artist, you say?”

Jacob nodded his head. “What about you?”

“We’re on a daytrip with our sons, a nature walk. We didn’t realize the weather was going to be this bad. We wanted to check that it was safe to walk along the beach. We asked the boys to stay here. But we got lost. When we returned, they were gone. Have you seen them, three-nine-year-olds wrapped up in hats and scarves?”

Jacob listened to all of this with a mounting sense of unease, scrutinizing each man in turn, studying their famil-

iar features at closer quarters. For these men were grown-up versions of the three boys who had tormented him at school.

“No,” he lied with surprising conviction. “I haven’t seen anyone.”

“Shit,” said Will senior. “Where the hell could they have got to?”

“You are a local man, though, aren’t you?” Zac senior asked Jacob, stepping forward of his companions. “Could you help us search for our boys?”

“Erm, yes, I am local, and I’d be more than happy to help.”

Taking it in turns, the three men asked Jacob various questions about the likely route the three boys would have taken, and how far they could have ventured. Even though he was still reeling inside, Jacob offered useful pointers and advice; he managed to master not only his fear, but a growing sense of irritation, because these men clearly didn’t recognize him from their school days. After all they had put him through, the tears, humiliation, the sleepless nights he endured, still he was a complete nobody to them.

“So you think it’s best if we walk along the cliff tops, then?” asked Shane senior.

“Yes,” he replied, honestly – as much as he didn’t want to retrace his steps, there literally was no other way up to the main road.

“Okay,” said Will senior. “We’ll let you lead the way.”

As they set off, Zac senior made a grab for Jacob’s elbow.

“Wait. What’s that in your pocket?”

Jacob reached inside his pocket, pulling out a length of woollen material. He looked at his right hand as if it was somebody else's. Scrunched up in his palm was Zac's scarf.

"Oh this, I, erm...found it on the cliff tops, just up there."

He let the scarf fall to the ground.

Zac senior swooped down and picked it up. In that one moment, crouched, with the back of his head exposed, completely unknowing and defenseless, Jacob felt a dark impulse to strike him, to punish him for all the bad things he had done in the past.

"Well, if he lost his scarf up there," said Zac senior, staring at the cliff tops, oblivious, "they no doubt headed up towards the main coast road."

"Must've done," said Will senior. He turned to Jacob. "Come on. Show us the way."

"Erm, yes, of course." He darted a nervous look over his shoulder, in the direction of the ditch behind the shelter, but none of the other men seemed to notice. "Follow me."

As they picked their way along the sloping, uneven ground, struggling through long rustling grass, Will senior let out a cry and dashed over to the edge of the cliff. "Look," he shouted over his shoulder. "There's a wellington-boot here, on the ledge."

Inwardly, Jacob cursed himself. As best he could, he had tried to lead them away from the spot where Will Junior had fallen to his death.

"You don't think they've fallen over the edge, do you?"

Will Senior turned and asked Jacob.

“No, no,” he replied, feeling a mad compulsion to push this man over the cliff, to send him tumbling to his death, to kill him, to right many past wrongs.

“I don’t like it,” said Will senior, turning and addressing his two friends. “But it’s not like we can go and investigate now, is it? We’d never get down there; the tide’s all the way in. We’ve no other option than to get up to the main road, maybe hail down a passing car or lorry.”

“That may present us with a few problems,” said Jacob. “The track leading down from the main road is flooded. And even if we manage to circumnavigate it, traffic rarely passes through these parts on days like this.”

“Never mind,” said Shane Senior. “We’ll just have to climb up onto the bank and walk around the standing water. The boys have been gone for hours now. We’ve got to at least give it a try.”

When they got to the lane, they clambered up onto the grass bank, and slowly trudged through the soft, saturated grass. About halfway along, Shane Senior spotted something caught in one of the bare tangled bushes.

“Hey,” he said, pivoting to the side, arms outstretched, almost losing his balance. “It’s Shane’s bobble-hat. I’m sure of it.” He went down on one knee, leaned forward, and tugged the hat from the bush, freeing it up.

As he examined it in his hands, Jacob stood directly behind him. Vividly, he recalled the extremities of the swamp-like bog, the time he spent frantically searching for this man’s son, how, on more than one occasion, he nearly got pulled under by the overwhelming weight of all that mud. He knew how difficult it would be for anyone not expecting

to fall in to haul themselves out again, that, with one firm push, he could condemn Shane Senior to a horrible death, the kind of death a bastard like him deserved.

“This is bad,” said Zac senior, sidling up alongside them.

“Look at the thick pools of mud in the field there. If one of our boys slipped and fell, I don’t think they’d stand a chance of dragging themselves out again.”

“Granted,” said Will senior. “But we’ve got to remain positive. Just because we’ve found a few items of clothing, doesn’t necessarily prove that something terrible has happened. I mean, what are the chances of all of them meeting a bad end, within a few hundred yards of each other?”

“Exactly,” said Shane senior. “And boys their age are always losing stuff, aren’t they?” He turned to Jacob. “Do you live close by? Have you got a phone?”

“Yes. I live five or so minutes away in, erm...temporary accommodation, a caravan just up the road, the only dwelling for miles around. But I’m afraid I haven’t got a telephone or any internet access or anything like that. By choice, I might add. My artistic work is very important to me. I abhor interruptions of any kind.”

“Never mind all that.” Shane senior took a mobile phone from his jacket pocket.

“Damn! Still can’t get a signal. Maybe, on higher ground, maybe back at this chap’s humble abode, we might be able to contact the emergency services. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” his two friends said at one and the same time.

“Besides, we need to warm up. I take if you’ve got electricity? A kettle? I take it you can make us a cup of tea?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. And, like you say, maybe you can get a phone signal a little further inland. And, who knows, maybe your boys have stumbled upon my homestead, maybe they’re there now.”

They made their way up the winding lane, crossed the main road, and walked in the direction of Jacob’s caravan. Every twenty or so paces, he would steal a glance at one of the men. Each time, he remembered the critical moments that had just passed, when he had the chance to strike out at them. He remembered the back of Zac’s head, so inviting. He remembered Will kneeling close to the edge of the cliff, and Shane leaning over that quagmire of mud. If only he had been brave enough to grasp the opportunity, he might have been able to exorcize some painful demons, once and for all.

“Is that it?” said Zac, pointing at the rundown, mildewed caravan with boarded-up windows. “You actually live in a piece of shit like that?”

“Erm, yes,” Jacob replied, wincing at Zac’s mocking tones, reminiscent of all the times their younger incarnations had terrorized him. “I know it’s not much, but it serves my artistic needs well.”

Both Shane and Will were busy checking their mobile phones.

“Any joy?” asked Zac.

Will lifted his head. “No, nothing. It’s like being in a third world country out here.”

“Me neither.” Shane clicked his phone shut. “But I could certainly do with a hot drink.”

He turned to Jacob. “Put the kettle on, will you?”

“Of course, of course,” he gabbled in reply. “Please, come inside, take off your coats, try and dry off.”

Once inside, Jacob rushed over to the far end of the caravan and drew a thin curtain across his desk, the quiet nook where he worked so intently each day.

“I’d, erm...rather not show you any of my artistic work,” he said, in all seriousness. He hated the idea of being ridiculed by these three men, these enemies, his former tormentors.

“As you wish,” said Zac, stepping to the side, making room for his two friends.

“Please, sit down, over there.” Jacob pointed to a tatty banquette with torn upholstery. “There’s not much space, I’m afraid. But at least it’s warm and dry, eh?”

He then went over to the sink and filled the kettle from a wonky, rusted faucet.

“Is tea okay for you?” he asked, flicking the switch.

“Fine, fine,” said Will. “But do you really think the boys could find their way here? Not to question your judgment, but the dirt-track is almost completely obscured from the road.

The surface itself is boggy and potted with holes. I have grave doubts as to whether boys their age would be able to get all the way down to the bottom end.”

“Agreed,” said Zac. “And the fact we can’t pick up a signal here means this whole excursion has been a terrible waste of time. Our boys are out there somewhere, freezing-cold, scared.”

“You’re right,” said Shane. “We shouldn’t have come

here. We should've kept searching. We should've waited at the side of the road for a passing vehicle, someone who could've gone to the local police station, who could've informed the coastguard."

Cringing inside, Jacob listened to them shout and curse. To be in such close proximity to these men again, to see hands which had once clasped his throat, fists which had once pummeled his face, feet which had once kicked out and stamped on his body, appalled him.

"How far is the nearest town from here?" Shane got to his feet and walked across the creaky-floored caravan. "How far is...?" he trailed off. "Hang on." He picked an old letter up off the kitchen table and studied it closely. "Is your name Jacob Fallada?"

Jacob lowered his eyes and swallowed hard.

"What?" said Zac, standing also, "—the Jacob Fallada, our Jacob Fallada, the little pipsqueak from school, the smelly bastard, the freak who was always pissing in his pants?"

"Ha!" Will shot to his feet and clapped his hands together. "I thought there was something familiar about you."

All three edged into the kitchen area, rounding on Jacob in the exact same way they had rounded on him at school.

"Well, Jacob," said Shane, making a wide sweeping gesture, taking in the whole caravan, "you've certainly done well for yourself. Ha! Look at this luxury palace. Then again, you always were the most likely to succeed, weren't you?"

The other two snorted with laughter.

"So this is what you've been doing with yourself all these years? Christ! Will you take a look at this place, boys?"

Fallada is like a rat in his own personal sewer.”

Jacob just stood there with his head lowered, concentrating on the low rumble of the kettle, willing it to boil, willing them to leave him alone, to finally be out of his head.

“Remember that time you ate all that mouldy orange peel?” asked Zac, winking at the others. “Always been a man of refined tastes.”

“Or that time you exposed yourself outside the sports hall changing-rooms,” said Will. “Always were a filthy little pervert, weren’t you, Fallada, eh?”

“Or when he cut himself with that protractor,” said Shane. “Bloody attention seeker. Can’t say it surprises me: Shit living in shit.”

“You were such a pathetic specimen,” said Zac. “And what? You call yourself an artist now, do you? Bloody vagrant, more like. Where’s this artistic work, anyway? Over there, behind the curtain, in the corner? Best I have a little look; best I run a critical eye over it, eh?”

“No, no,” said Jacob, stepping in front of him. “Really, I must insist. I –”

“What?” shouted Zac. “Are you going to try and stop me?” He jabbed a finger into Jacob’s chest. “Are you going to raise your hands to me?”

Jacob took a few short, sharp breaths. “I’m – I’m glad I hurt them,” he blurted out. “I’m glad they’re dead. I’m glad they won’t have the chance to grow up to be evil bastards like you.”

“What?” cried Shane, pushing past Zac. “What are you talking about? Our boys? I swear, Fallada, if you’ve laid one

finger on them I'll kill –" Shrill, panicky voices sounded from outside.

"What's that?" said Zac, swinging round.

"That must be them," said Will. "Old piss pants Fallada was right, after all. They found their way here."

In complete disbelief, Jacob pushed his way past the others, threw open the door, and rushed out of the caravan. Through another thick curtain of mist appeared the three little boys.

"Look," said Zac Junior, pointing at Jacob. "There he is."

Jacob stepped forward, open-armed, relieved that his ordeal was over, that all the murderous nastiness of before had been nothing but a crazy delusion, that he hadn't hurt the boys in any way.

"Don't worry," he said. "Your fathers are in the caravan. They're having a nice cup of tea. Everything's going to be all right."

"Our fathers?" said Shane, pulling a shiny protractor out of his jacket pocket. "We haven't come here to find our fathers, Fallada. We've come here for you."

"What?"

House-plant

Alan Parry

I am tormented by your wretched
withering. I desperately need to
find the antidote to your waning
spirits, because I cannot live in
a house devoid of the verve you
bring, sans your sweet perfume.
Nor do I want to eternally carry
the guilt for your undue demise.

The Goth Girl on the Bus

Nicole Yurcaba

Sits facing forward her headphones inserted discreetly into her ears, which are covered by her raven-black straight hair; listens to HIM's *Razorblade Romance* every day on the ride home from school—in the mornings, she listens to Type O Negative's *October Rust*.

The goth girl on the bus sits in the very last seat— she's a junior and she can; sits in the front row of English class: she has a crush on our English teacher; he, like her, recites TS Eliot, Byron, those other sad, suicidal (or nearly) British poets; he, like her, wears black *all the time*.

The goth girl on the bus sketches wilting flowers, graveyards, crying girls sitting beneath trees—their fishnets ripped, their skirts tattered, their eyeliner streaked; sits alone at lunch, sketching & sketching using Prisma markers in a thick, spiral-bound sketchbook her grandmother bought her.

The goth girl on the bus once found a dead black snake in her locker—the football players put it in there on April Fool's Day; they never even got detention; the goth girl got sent to the principal's office for her ankh earrings (our history teacher found them offensive; she's a fundamentalist Christian), her black corset-lacing trench coat (our Trig teacher thought the goth girl hid drugs and guns in the coat).

The goth girl on the bus won first place in a writing contest at school for a story about a girl who lay lifeless by her family's swimming pool, observing her family's reaction for her this- life dead eyes; won first-place in a county-wide art contest for an ink drawing of a skull with a dead rose blossoming from the right eye.

The goth girl on the bus makes straight A's; studies alone on the gym bleachers during Community Morning time before we're released to homeroom; never receives a carnation on Valentine's Day from the Student Council fundraiser; only attends dances because her grandmother makes her.

The goth girl on the bus has two friends in school: our high school's lone black girl, our English teacher; has the highest average in Trig class— our teacher calls her "Sasquatch" because of her Herman Munster-like platform shoes.

The goth girl on the bus wears torn fishnets, a pair of Army jump boots she bought at Goodwill, a camo mini skirt with an Army airborne patch sewn on the left cargo pocket; wears a black leather choker with an o-ring hanging from the center and three studs on each side of the o-ring.

The goth girl on the bus lives at 119 West Market Street; gets off the bus at 4:15 PM; walks a small concrete pathway between two green metal posts stripped of their gate; at the porch, a small white dog licks the goth girl's hand, then barks twice to announce that the girl arrived home.

True story: I don't even know her name.

Mary and Eugene

Kristin Kozlowski

One hundred years ago, when my grandfather, Eugene, immigrated here, my house did not exist. This stub of concrete and wood that I call home, that I'm staring at and staring past, wasn't here, and this patch of grass that I'm lying on, looking at my house and past my house into the sky, wasn't here either. Before my house and town existed, this piece of earth that I call home was farmland, and in the warm months, errant bean plants poke through the soft soil as annual reminders of what came before my house and me. And before the farm, this land was part of the Great Plains. And if I were to lie on this same spot, beneath this same sky one hundred years ago, I might watch the golden heads of prairie grass -- stalks taller than me -- bow in the breeze, and the petals of white and violet flowers might close like eyelids against the setting sun. And Eugene, who lived in Chicago, in his own stub of concrete and wood, might be settling down for the evening, as twilight rang out with more finality when homes were lit by oil lamps.

Perhaps on this night, one hundred years ago, Eugene might pull Mary out of her own house to notice together the last stipe of pink in the sky, and he might point upward and say: see how the night devours the day, and how the day accepts this -- only he might say this in Italian because he was still learning English. And Mary might reply in English because she was born in Chicago and liked to watch Eugene learn, or she might reply in Italian because she spoke her parents' language also, but she might say: *the night doesn't devour the day. The day runs away because she has many things to do. But day will meet night again in the morning, because she loves him.*

Small Town Strange

Michael Bettendorf

I shove my hand deep into the bowl of ice and take a seat on the other side of the bar.

“Bet you won’t do that again,” my boss says and pours me a drink. A shot of bourbon. “You can clock out for the day.”

“Thanks,” I say.

It’s barely noon, but I take the drink anyway.

I sip my bourbon neat, my brother’s favorite. The burn in my throat not potent enough to distract me from the burn on my hand. A steam burn from the espresso machine. How I managed to burn my hand is less important than why, though both are simple explanations. Pressurized steam from the steam wand burnt the shit out of my right hand while I was frothing milk for a double latte to-go. No flavors. Whole milk. My kind of drink.

Distraction, explains why.

A girl is hunkered down behind a pile of books in the corner of the café. She’s been there for hours. Came in an hour after I opened the café. One latte. A double. Two-percent milk. We don’t carry two-percent, but she was polite and tipped, so I mixed skim and whole milk. That was four hours, a latte, and one drip coffee plus a refill ago.

I was staring at her, not paying attention, when I burned my hand. My fault, but I can’t shake the feeling that I know her. One of those strange small town kind of things. I’ve been trying to place her face all morning. I deduced it wasn’t

from college, though I couldn't be positive. The memory ran deeper, though, that I am positive about.

She paid in cash, so I wasn't able to glance at a name on a credit card. She's average height. Glasses. Wears a natural dirty blonde haircut. An adult style. Mature, my mom would say. No wedding ring. Nails clean and shiny, but not polished.

"Ask her out already," my boss says.

I rub the condensation that's formed on the outside of stainless-steel bowl and toss back the rest of my bourbon.

"Nah," I say.

"You've been staring at her all day, man," he says. "The heart knows what it wants."

I roll my eyes.

"It's not like that," I say. "I recognize her, but I don't remember from where. It's driving me crazy."

"You could, you know, ask her."

"Nah," I say. "She's got headphones in. A pile of books. People come to coffee shops for dates, not to find one."

"Whatever, man," he says.

I don't ask, but he pours me another bourbon.

Two bourbons, a drip coffee, a water, and a banana muffin later I remember.

Seventh grade social studies, seventh period.

But I still can't remember her name. It was something French sounding. La-something, I think or Le-something. We were studying the geography of Southeast Asia. The class was easy. Our teacher split our map tests in half. We didn't have to remember all of Africa at once. All of Asia at once. All of Europe at once.

An administrator came in during our work time. He walked over to the girl, knelt down and said something behind cupped hands, into her ear. She sat at the far end of the classroom. Four rows to the left of my seat, one seat up. The conversation was out of earshot, but I knew by that evening. Everyone knew by that evening. She left the room with the administrator, her face splotchy and red, tears and snot all over. I remember she was wearing a big knit sweater. I wondered if she still had it.

Her mother was killed in a bank shooting hours before the administrator showed up. It was one of the deadliest bank shootings in United States history. Made national news. A rare occurrence for our Midwest town. That was the last time I saw her.

I want to say something, but I can't think of anything that would make any sort of difference. Any impression to be made was already done so years ago.

She orders another refill and I catch her glancing at me. Our eyes meet, briefly, before I turn my attention to the fourth bourbon my boss places in front of me. It's almost six now. A cortado, another muffin, more bourbon, and a couple more waters since I pulled her from my memory bank to the forefront of my brain. No longer a wisp of unreliable recollection, but a solid, concrete cognizance.

I consider mentioning I used to mow around the memorial that was built after the bank was torn down. My uncle owned the property. I picked up litter and mowed and

weed-whacked summer after summer. Beer bottles. Trash. Dandelions. All sat among the vases of flowers and photos left by loved ones.

I consider mentioning that I understand. That my older brother was a teller at the bank. He called in sick that day. Wasn't sick.

I consider mentioning that it ate him up day after day, night after night, until he couldn't find a way to reconcile with himself any longer, no matter how often he went out of his way to do good deeds. No matter how often he saw his therapist. No matter how often his dose of anti-depressants was adjusted.

I consider mentioning that I was the one that found him.

But I don't.

I drink another bourbon because my boss is handing them to me and I have Uber and now that my mind is on this particular brainwave, nothing but a blackout will reset the frequency. A hangover spent sifting through the static until I find the right band again. Maybe I should tell her that the shooting affected the whole town, on some level anyway, after she moved away. It won't help. Maybe I should tell her the three shooters were given the death penalty and though they outlived both of our loved ones, they still ended up in the ground, just the same. But it won't help. Not that it matters. She picks up her books, pulls the headphones from her ears and leaves.

I lounge for another hour and decide if I ever see her again, then I'll say something. Justify it as one of those fate or coincidence kind of things.

Another latte. More water. More ice for my burnt hand.

Two-finger's worth of bourbon sits in front of me, but I

leave it alone.

I tell my boss I'll see him in the morning, "Going to call an Uber."

"It's on me," he says. "I'm the one that got you drunk."

After a while, his phone dings.

"Lealia is here in a white Toyota Prius," he says.

"Sounds French," I say and walk out the door, wishing I had the rest of the bourbon. Maybe then I'd keep my mouth shut. But I know I won't.

Cheated

Alan Parry

I don't recall her name, and I'm too afraid to ask, but still I can see her smeared eye-liner, those torn fishnet stockings and that spiky blonde mane as if she stands before me now. The image of her smashing her fists clad in fingerless gloves against our front door will never fade. Her anguished adult accusations, my old man's shouting and my mother's sobbing on the stairs, my sitting in the window of the front bedroom over the porch, it's all there. A tragic tableau, my earliest memory.

Intellectual Property

Alan Swyer

At noon on a hot Monday in August, two anomalous figures, attache cases in hand, flew in to Houston's Hobby Airport. Gazing upon the cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats that abounded in the terminal, glib Steve Levin turned to studious Norm Simon. "JFK this ain't!" he chuckled.

Once in a cab, Levin again faced Simon. "Remember," he said, "the algorithm sells itself. So less is more. Leave the yak-yak to me, and just answer technical questions. And no additional info, okay?"

"But if they're curious –"

"Let 'em buy the goddamn technology."

Less than an hour later, the two New Yorkers were huddled with Texas-style executives and engineers in a conference room at the corporate offices of Lone Star Computers.

"So your drive ostensibly increases computer speed by forty percent?" asked a tall, lanky Executive VP named Floyd Thurston.

"Forget ostensibly," responded Levin. "And consider forty percent a bare minimum, with noise levels also diminished somewhere between thirty and thirty-five percent. In a workplace with a multitude of computers, imagine the benefit for employee comfort as well as efficiency."

Seeing one of the engineers raise his hand, Thurston nod-

ded toward him. “Yes, Darnell?”

“A question for Mr. Simon. If you don’t mind my asking, how exactly did you arrive at your algorithm?”

“Well –” began Simon, who winced when kicked under the table by Levin.

“Let me ask you a question,” Levin interjected, turning to face the engineer. “Say you stop somewhere for ice cream and go absolutely wild over the pistachio, or maybe the salted caramel. If you ask the owner how exactly he arrived at that kind of yummy perfection, which in effect would mean getting the recipe, what’s the likelihood of getting the answer you’re looking for?”

“Slim.”

“Thanks for defining what’s known as intellectual property. So instead of simply relying on the paperwork and videos you’ve seen, how about you folks pick a computer at random, then see the results when we add our technology?”

“We got ‘em!” Levin announced gleefully once he and Simon were in a cab heading back to the airport.

“Because they said their lawyers would be in touch?”

“And asked for a window of exclusivity.”

“Was the six weeks you gave them enough?”

“Instead of the six months they wanted? I was tempted to make it four weeks, or even three.”

“Squeezing them makes sense?”

“As opposed to coddling? Negotiating is a contact sport.” Aware that Levin’s business experience was infinitely broader than his, Simon accepted those words as signs both of greater acumen and confidence.

“So why the silence?” Simon asked when he and Levin met for coffee ten days later.

“It’s the way the game is played,” Levin answered, again playing the role of worldly pro. “They want us to squirm a little.”

“And they’re succeeding.”

“Trust me, okay? It’s just them trying not to appear too hungry.”

“But you think –”

“That they’ll call? I’ll bet you a week in Hawaii.”

“Sure hope you’re right,” Simon mumbled, only somewhat mollified.

Three days later, Levin received a call from an attorney at Lone Star named Homer Barnes.

“So what’re you fellas looking for?” the lawyer asked after a couple of moments of chit-chat.

“The moon, the sun, and the stars.”

“And if I could give ‘em to you, I happily would. But tell me, what real world terms would satisfy you?”

“Mind if I call you Homer?” Levin asked.

“Be my guest.”

“Then let me ask you something, Homer. If I start out by giving you the exact terms that’ll satisfy me, what’s the likelihood you’ll immediately say, ‘Fine and dandy?’”

“Not sure I see your point.”

“Oh, I think you do. Whatever I ask for will simply serve as the point of departure for the negotiation, with the figure we ultimately arrive at necessarily less. So how about this? Since it’s your firm that wants an exclusive on our technology, let’s have the opening offer come from you folks.”

“I’ll have to get back to you.”

“And you know where to find me.”

Early the next week, Levin’s cell rang just as he was about to step onto a tennis court.

“Still nothing?” Simon asked, his belief in his business associate dimming ever so slightly with every new delay.

“If I had news, really think I’d keep it secret? Listen to me, okay? You’ve got to see this not as life or death, but as a poker game.”

“Only one problem –”

“Okay –”

“There’s no way in the world I’d wager my kids’ college tuition on a poker game.”

“C’mon, Norm. Bobby’s only five, right?”

“Almost six –”

“And Laura, if I remember correctly, is three.”

“Still –”

“Still, my ass. It’s going exactly as I expected.”

“Really?”

“Yup. And after all –”

“Yeah?”

“It’s not like we’re dealing with the faculty of MIT, or killers at Goldman Sachs.”

“I know, but –”

“Relax, okay? These are rubes. Texas yokels. But if you need help, take a Xanax.”

“So now you’ll be able to start sleeping at night,” Levin announced as he approached Simon’s table at Xi’an’s Famous Foods at noon two days later.

“Why’s that?”

“We got an offer this morning.”

“Decent?”

“As a first step.”

“Do me a big favor?”

“Namely?”

“Remember that we don’t need to set land and sea records.”

“So you’re saying settle?”

“Not necessarily settle. But don’t push so hard that we blow the deal.”

“Trust me, okay? Just have a little faith and trust me.”

As the conversations with Homer Bonds that were reported to him increased in frequency, Norm Simon found himself growing more and more upbeat until one night, in a complete reversal, he woke up in a cold sweat. “We’re nearing week six,” he stated late the next afternoon when he and Levin met at a wine bar. “Figure we’ll close soon?”

“The next time you and I meet, it’ll be to sign papers.”

“And celebrate.”

“Only if you insist,” teased Levin.

On Monday morning of week six, however, there was no call from Homer Barnes. The same proved to be true that afternoon. When the silence continued through Wednesday lunch, Levin got a call from Norm Simon. “Why no word?” was the question asked.

“They’re toying with us.”

“But I thought the terms are set.”

“They are unless we flinch.”

“So what do we do?”

“We show the motherfuckers what we’re made of.”

“And if they still don’t call?”

“They will.”

But there was no word the rest of Wednesday, nor any sign of life Thursday morning. Ducking call after call from Simon, Levin waited until lunchtime neared, then reached out to Homer Barnes. When his call was not returned, he tried again at 3 PM with no greater luck.

Friday morning, Levin restrained himself until almost 11 before once more dialing Barnes’ number, all the while choosing not to take the panicked calls that came in from Simon.

At 1:45 he sent off an email: *Phones working in Houston these days?* That was followed by a text an hour later: *You alive?*

Not until nearly 4 PM did Homer’s number show up on Caller ID. “Go off on a bender?” Levin teased in an attempt to mask his exasperation.

“Meetings, meetings, meetings,” Barnes replied. “So I suppose you’re wondering about the contracts.”

“Who, me?”

“I’m afraid there’s been a little change.”

“Meaning?”

“I guess you could say we’ve reconsidered.”

“What exactly are you telling me?”

“That we’re going to pass.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Y-you can’t do that.”

“We can, and we did.”

Uncharacteristically shaken, Levin poured himself a shot of vodka, then another. Turning off his phone, he took several deep breaths, then took refuge in his Porsche.

Off he drove to his place on the Jersey Shore, where he drank and smoked himself into oblivion on Friday night, then stewed and cogitated the rest of the weekend.

“We’re gonna get ‘em!” a revived Levin exclaimed on Monday morning when he met up with Simon for breakfast at Barney Greengrass. “We’re gonna kick the living shit out of those motherfuckers!”

“How?”

“The moment they show their hand. This was all carefully orchestrated, but know what?”

“What?”

“They’re nowhere near as slick as they think.”

“And until then?”

“We watch every goddamn thing they do. Every announcement, every statement to the press, every ad, you name it.”

“And the technology?”

“We take it around to every other company worth its salt.” Despite his ever-increasing inability to share his colleague’s optimism or enthusiasm, Simon did not protest or balk.

Levin was surprised when the initial foray to another computer manufacturer was met with disinterest. That feeling rose to irritation when it happened a second time. But only after the third failed attempt did he finally explode.

“Now we’re gonna kill ‘em!” he told Simon. “We’re gonna make those fuckin’ cowboys rue the very day they met us.”

“You thinking collusion?”

“Much worse! Ever heard the term tortious action?”

“Not until now.”

“It means willful and intentional damaging of business relationships with third parties, causing dire economic harm. Thanks to something called the Clayton Act, know what it also means? Treble damages.”

“But why’d they do it.”

“Ten-to-one they did sufficient reverse engineering to come up with a reasonable facsimile of the technology. Then they promised it to all their competitors on the condition that no one do business with us. Which, by the way, is the textbook definition of conspiracy.”

“But I still don’t get why.”

“First and foremost to save themselves a fortune. Then to make tons off of each and every subsequent licensing agreement. But the key to the whole thing –”

“Yeah –”

“Nobody pulls shit like this for the first time.”

“What’re exactly are you saying?”

“While we’re waiting for them to make their next move –”

“Yeah?”

“We show this was premeditated by finding other people they’ve burned in exactly the same way.”

Ever more weary of the process, and of Levin’s palaver, Simon barely managed to acquiesce.

“I’ve got three!” Levin announced proudly as he stormed into Patsy’s Pizza, where Simon was sitting and waiting.

“Three what?”

“Three unhappy creative souls willing to go on record about being burned the way we were. Plus a fourth who’s on the fence about going public.”

“So what do we do?”

“Continue to monitor.”

“That’s fun.”

“And search for disgruntled ex-employees who can talk about how this was part of a master plan to profit from other peoples’ ingenuity.”

“But why would they do it?”

“Because they could. Why buy or license technology when you can possibly steal it?”

“But how do they get away with it again and again?”

“They figure – correctly, it seems – that nobody’s strong enough, or nuts enough, to be David against their Goliath.”

“And we are?”

“Strong enough? Probably. Nuts enough? Bet your ass!”

“What about attorneys?”

“Leave that to me.”

“They’ve made an announcement!” Levin heard Simon state several days later when he answered his cell. “They’re calling it the technological breakthrough of the year!”

“Thank heaven for grandstanding.”

“So what do we do?”

“Meet me at P.J. Clarke’s in fifteen.”

“A ‘white shoe’ law firm?” Simon asked once they had beers in front of them.

“You bet. And on contingency,” Levin added.

“That sounds great, but how?”

“One of us, as you may have noticed, has a pretty decent gift of gab. The keys, as you may recall, were words like tortious, conspiracy, plus the Clayton Act. Who said WASPs aren’t greedy? With the enormous scope of the computer market, all these country club guys started seeing dancing dollar signs. Happy?”

“So there’s no cost to us?”

“Not for the lawyers. Only for direct costs, which could be –”

When Levin paused, Simon forced the issue. “Could be what?”

“Somewhat significant.”

“How significant?”

“Enough that we’ll need some help.”

“No way we’re tapping into my kids’ college funds.”

“It’s a great opportunity for investment.”

“And I’m not hitting on my friends and relatives.”

“Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“Anyway, I’ve got feelers out to investment bankers.”

“They do that kind of thing?”

Levin nodded. “And not out of the goodness of their hearts.”

“The cowboys are scared!” Levin informed Simon when they reconvened just four days after the lawsuit was filed.

“Which in plain English means?”

“They’ve offered a settlement.”

“Decent?”

“Only as a sign that they sense we mean business.”

“How much is it for?”

“What difference? No way we’re settling?”

“Says who?”

“Says me, for one.”

“Wait a second.”

“What do you mean, wait a second?”

“What gives you that right?”

“Whoa! Haven’t I been the point man on all the business dealings?”

“Which doesn’t mean you’re the one who decides.”

Only after staring at Simon for several moments did Levin speak. “Norm, listen to me. We’ve got a chance at serious bucks here.”

“To be shared with the law firm, right?”

Levin nodded.

“And the investment bankers, if you come up with ‘em?”

“Which could be firmed up as early as next week. Look, I’ve spoken to people who’ve been through this kind of thing –”

“Oh yeah? So have I.”

“And?”

“Everyone I’ve spoken to says it’ll be a war of attrition the likes of which I don’t want to get anywhere near. The bad guys’ll stall, postpone, then come up with delays in ways we never dreamed of. They’ll deplete forest after forest, generating truckloads of paperwork, most of it irrelevant or extraneous. They’ll play every legal game and trick we’ve ever heard of, then invent a whole bunch of new ones. And if they somehow manage to get the venue shifted to

their part of the world, which of course they'll try –"
"Yeah?"

"We're even more screwed."

"But think of the upside."

"Forget upside. We're talking about years and years of our lives."

"For which we can bill the investment bankers."

"Well, maybe you want to live that way. But I've got better things to do."

"C'mon, for Chrissake! Isn't getting rich the ultimate goal? The only thing in the world that really matters?"

Simon studied Levin for a long moment. "You know," he then said "that's not the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Good."

"But it's pretty fucking close."

"You're telling me that money doesn't matter to you?"

"Obviously not like it does to you."

"Then what does matter?"

"Let's just say that one of us isn't twice divorced, and really likes to spend time with his kids."

"That's a cheap shot."

"But you didn't say I'm wrong."

"And that's all that matters?"

Simon studied Levin for a very long moment before speak-

ing again. “Strange as it seems,” he said at last, “I’m trying to do things that do some good. Maybe in some way even make the world a little bit of a better place.”

“You expect me to believe that cornball shit?”

“Know what? I don’t give a fuck what you believe,” Simon said before turning and heading for the door.

“B-but we haven’t yet reached a decision,” Levin pleaded.

“Oh yes, we have,” said Simon. “Oh yes, we have.”

Row or Wade

William Doreski

How can we cross the lake? Row
or wade? Flimsy wooden walkways
stagger across a hundred yards
of shallows, then end staring
into whorls of cruising eels.
It's too deep to wade unless
we splash along the shoreline,
which would take half a day.

You don't mind stripping naked
and dogpaddling to the far shore,
but what will you do for clothes
when you arrive at the landing
where in summer the boats refuel
and boaters eat sandwiches wrapped
in that plastic wrap you hate?
Let's row. Despite the breeze

wilting what's left of the forest,
the lakeshore looks delicious
as it compacts itself for winter.
In a month we could walk across
on ice as thick as a textbook.
But for now, this one-piece
fiberglass rowboat will suffice.
What do you think? Your mind

is an old magazine lounging
in a doctor's waiting room.
Thumbed through once too often,
its pages are limp with ideas
too tired to compel belief.
I can't ask anything of you
but to keep your clothes on
and row with the same effort

you've put into a lifetime
of cheating on your husband,
whose ashes we could scatter
on the lake if no one's looking
Aim the boat at the point where
perspective mates with desire.
Every stroke slices off a bit
of landscape, gnawing away

excess to reveal formations
geology can only imagine.
Doesn't the effort feel good?
Wake me when we get there.
The slather of the lake slopping
at the boat's a soporific
I have to honor for your sake,
subverting us both in a dream.

Turmoil

Sarah Strutt

Climb to my feet hit the ground with a thud
World of magpies when in search of a dove
a smile on my face but my heart is misplaced
Fingers on my pulse unable to find a trace
My mind inflicts pain my thoughts contaminated
My skin the book of life using my scars I illustrated
Ashamed of the person who reside behind my name
Enraged that, for my hurt, no one on whom I can place blame
Like I live life squeezing tight the Devils hand
My thoughts and feelings a result of his command
The brutal beating the bears no bruises
The voice that belittles judges and accuses
Losing faith in the few that remain
The unwell brain once again is beginning to reign
I'm judging your actions judging your words
Searching for motives behind what I've heard
Declaring your love sharing how much you care
Yet in my mind I am convinced that soon you're no longer be there

A Cave Full of Treasure

L.A. Rivers

“Up there, those things, the no touch things. I want to touch them.” That’s the best translation I can give of the toddler consciousness my two year old self possessed. Having mild hyperthymesia can be a drag sometimes, remembering almost everything that ever happened in life, especially when it comes to trauma, can be a lodestone weighing you down. Yet, if you learn to sift and sort, make filing cabinets in your mind, then it becomes manageable. This particular memory is kept in a fancy treasure chest on the right side of my left frontal lobe. It’s where the best and favorite memories are held, the traumatic ones are in a lockbox in the back keeping them well away from my amygdala.

The memory is fuzzy like an out of focus film, probably because I needed glasses and no one figured that out until I was seven. What I see and feel is a bumpy floor rug, the heat coming out of the fireplace and a shaft of light coming in from a window up and to my left illuminating shelves holding my great grandfather’s books out of reach. This is how I met them, lifelong friends who educated me well for the 19th century.

Sitting on the family room floor, the antique braided rug warm and bumpy, perfect for running fingers over to explore the hard and soft cottony textures. The fireplace roaring, screen in front to stop the hot coals from jumping out. It was mesmerizing to watch the flames jumping and dancing yellow with orange tongues. I stared at the fire and ran my fingers over the rug finding threads to twist and twirl. For some reason I cannot recall I looked up and spied the shelves of books on either side of the fireplace. My memory

doesn't call them books, no, my recollection says they are "no touch things." Staring at them they seemed to beckon to me, asking me to greet them.

Lifting my bottom heavy frame from the uneven surface of the brown and cream braided rug, I toddled to the brown sofa to the right, it was close enough to the "no touch things" that I could if I climbed, get close to them and make friends. The brown couch was tall and slippery, I stretched as far as I could and pulled myself up, up, up on top of the big cushion. It was hard to get up on the brown sofa and I had to sit for a minute on the cool seat, much cooler than the rug, to rest. My fingers running over the cold slick surface of the couch, my nails catching on the surface made a funny scratching sound so I scritch and scratched, little white marks appeared where my nails scratched and I marveled at the patterns. Distracted by this new found experience I spent some time scratching marks into the smooth cool surface of the sofa.

Out of the corner of my eye the "no touch things" came to view and I resumed my disobedient expedition. I stood up and the floor seemed a scary distance away, so I quickly flopped down onto my bottom, then got on hands and knees. I didn't wobble as much that way, it felt more certain and solid, less scary. There was a big brown block like thing at the edge of the couch, crawling to it, it felt much more stable and hard like the floor. I crawled to it and turned around and lifted my bottom to sit on it like a chair, my feet planted on the cushion. The floor still looked very far away and I decided I didn't like looking at it and looked away as I turned on the smooth surface to face the "no touch things."

I couldn't quite reach them from sitting and the desire to touch the "no touch things" was stronger than the fear of falling to the far away floor. I flopped backwards onto the cushion and bounced a little, that was fun, so I did it again, and again one more time. The smooth cushion was soft

when I fell, so I felt safe to crawl back to the brown block on the edge of the sofa and gingerly get to a standing position holding the back of the sofa when I wobbled. I reached out a hand and touched the first “no touch thing” I could and it felt hard but soft. I leaned into the “no touch things” on the wall, my little legs stretching from the arm of the sofa, my bare toes gripping the edge. Suddenly I spied a bunny on one of the “no touch things”, I loved bunnies and I wanted to see it, so I moved my hand to the whitish brown “no touch thing” and worked it out of its place. I clutched it to me with one hand, then realized I was stuck. The floor was a very long way to fall and I didn’t want to bonk my head. Remembering that the couch was soft, I pushed back with my hand but not hard enough to fall backwards and bounce. So, I did it again, push, wobble, push harder, wobble, a lesson in physics happened as I pushed and built momentum so I could fall back and bounce. It seemed to take forever but at last I found myself flying backwards onto the sofa, “no touch thing” still clutched to me. I put it on the cushion and sat up feeling very pleased with the adventure. I picked up the “no touch thing” and turned it around in my hand and slowly it dawned on me that this wasn’t a “no touch” it was a book! It was different from my books that had colorful pictures and very few words. This book was black and white with lots of words and very few pictures, but the pictures were of a bunny. He was a funny bunny that wore a waist coat.

My memory goes fuzzy and fades out from there until what must have been on the same day and logic would say not long after I was tugging on my mother’s pant leg in the kitchen holding the book.

“Mama, I can read.” I tugged her at her leg.

“Uh huh” Mama’s reply.

I opened the book and began to haltingly read the words on the old musty pages. I can still see the opening lithograph

of the bunny named, Uncle Wiggly.

I don't know how much I read before Mama stopped me and took the book out of my hands then softly asked me to try reading from a new place. She had opened the book to the middle and pointed to a paragraph. I was annoyed, that's not how stories work, you read from the beginning and I told her so. She laughed and asked me to try it anyway, so I did, I read a few lines stopping to ask how to say certain words, I don't remember which ones, but I do recall the moment my mother walked slowly back from the stove and sat down on a chair. Her belly big with my brother inside obscuring the view of her face until she leaned towards me. "Oh Laurie, what am I going to do with you?"

This left me confused, I had felt excited and triumphant reading this book with few pictures, though I thought it should have more, and somehow my mama was upset.

The memory fades to black, and I know it's a real memory because I asked my mother when I was a teenager if this odd fuzzy memory actually happened. She assured me the part in the kitchen was, me climbing up to grab the book had to have happened because she would not have handed my great grandfather's book to a two year old.

It was this event that set my life path, because sometime shortly after Mama packed me into the red Volkswagen Bug and drove me to the Oregon City Library. I didn't know what a Library was so remember nothing of the drive or even arrival until we were perhaps three steps into the descent into the Children's Library which at that time was in the basement.

Holding my pregnant mother's hand we walked slowly down the steps and what I spied with my little brown eyes was branded into my brain. On the left was a big wooden counter, in full view were shelves packed with books. A feeling or knowing filled me, in this place was treasure.

Mama says she took me over to the librarian and explained that I could read and wasn't sure what to do. The librarian handed me a book, something like a Dick and Jane book and asked me to read it, I did so easily and asked for more. Like a hungry waif, I devoured what I called baby books sitting on the tiny chairs at the table in the little kid section while mama and the librarian discussed the best routes for my education. It was that day that I first heard the word genius. We checked out five books and I had one finished by the time we reached our house in Oak Grove.

The rest were consumed in a day and I begged to go back to the library. Mama says we went three times a week because we could only check out five books on her card. I wanted my own card, these library cards were made of magic. Salmon pink card stock with a numbered metal plate, it was used to stamp the books check out. There was always ink left after the stamping and you could transfer it to your thumb if you moved quick enough.

The librarian said if I wanted my own card I had to be able to write my name. I was puzzled, write name? I didn't know how to write, it sounded hard. The carrot on the stick was that children got to check out ten books at a time, if I got my card I could check out even more than Mama. Determined to be able to have fifteen books to read a week I begged Mama for the library card.

It took six long months to learn to write my name. My brother was born which interrupted the process, brothers interrupt a whole lot of things when you're almost three.

A hazy memory of sitting at the kitchen table with a hand-writing tablet, a pencil too fat for my toddler's chubby fingers, tongue between my teeth in concentration having finally formed my first name, L a u r i e. I had my last to write and I was tired, I was upset that I had two six letter names and asked why I couldn't be named Bob or Mary.

I tried to write the capital R of my last name and made a mistake and threw the pencil, crying in frustration. I just wanted the library card, this writing thing was horrible. Mama told me I was done for the day and if I wrote my name the next day we'd get the card if I didn't throw a fit.

After months and months of practice, and not until I could write my name without looking at it, I had finally earned the right to gain my very own library card. As in all great tales of quest and treasure the protagonist does not win in a straight line. We had planned to go get my library card on my birthday, however a bout of chickenpox delayed me getting the magic key to unlock my cave of treasure. After six months, a baby brother and a case of chickenpox, sometime in August of 1972, I toddled into the Oregon City Library with my mother and brother to get my very own library card.

I will never forget climbing the steps to the counter that helped little people reach the tall surface to check out books. The steps seemed huge and far apart to my little legs, but in reality it was nothing more than a wide solid kind of step stool. The librarian as always greeted us with a smile and her kind soft voice congratulated me with pride. She had been highly invested in my quest, always encouraging and very sympathetic regarding the difficulty of correctly shaping vowels compared to consonants. My name had four vowels in the first name alone, it was tragic, I often explained morosely. Yet through it all she was my champion, raven hair, soft spoken, with cherry red lips, she was my personal Snow White, and her pep talks spurred me on every other day for months.

When she handed me the slip of paper to sign my name, I stared at it intently and was determined to write my full name well enough someone might think I was five years

old. It wasn't easy, I had to use a pen, I had only used pencils before, but I managed with tongue between teeth, to sign my whole name.

My library card smelled of mimeograph ink, the metal numbered plate was shiny tin, and freshly made it was warm in my hand, unblemished. Standing on those steps at the counter I had full view of my new domain. Shelves as high as the ceiling lined the "big kids section" that's where Nancy Drew and Sherlock Holmes would guide me to my inner detective and where Call of the Wild and Three Musketeers egged me on to adventure, though much later, I was eight when I discovered those gems. The other rooms held picture and story books, those were much more to my liking as a big girl of three.

I checked out faerytales, a book on bunnies and joke books that day to read them over and over to my mother because I loved to hear her laugh. "What's black and white and read all over?"

"I don't know? Read me the answer." Mama would say.

I giggled each time I read the answer, "A newspaper." Funniest joke ever written, 47 years later I still make people giggle with the telling of it.

That day I vowed every book in the children's library would be read by my eyes and I was determined, it only took six years to achieve, then graduating to fight the dragon guarding the adult library upstairs, but that's another story.

It was this love of books and reading that led to writing, something I've never been able to stop doing, maybe because it wasn't so easy in the beginning, or maybe it's because I learned so young that words are magic things. Words hold power, they unlock knowledge, create worlds, absorb you into magical realms or take you back in time, they teach, they cause laughter and often they cause tears,

and they make friends you can visit again and again.

Gaining access to my cave of treasure opened the doors to world travel, adventure, romance, education and my vocation. Having by-lines from the age of twelve, I can say it never gets old. Though I write using my initials it's not because I find my name too long to write, it's an aesthetic choice, however I'm grateful now for not being named Mary. I do still sort of wish they had named me Bob, it would be a funny name for a girl.

Dad's Crying Again

Paul Beckman

I don't know why my father cries. I asked my mother and she said to take my little ten year old tush into the living room and ask my father. He was watching a ball game with his beloved Tigers beating the hated Yankees. During the commercial, after I got him another Schlitz, I said, "Dad, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," he said. "Ask away."

"How come you cry so much?"

He looked at me and his happy Tiger face morphed into a sad no hitter face and the tears began to flow—slowly at first and then wracking sobs. He handed me the Schlitz and walked into his bedroom and closed the door. I could hear the springs on his bed and his low moaning working up to loud wailing and I ran out of the hall to my mother who was in the kitchen.

"Dad's crying," I said. "He was okay until I asked him why he cries so much."

"What did he say?" Mom asked.

"Nothing, he started crying again."

A car horn blew and mom checked her makeup, adjusted her dress and put on her hat. "Don't wait up for me," she said and ran out of the house and down the walk to the waiting Buick. She hopped in and the man in the car hugged her and she gave him a long kiss and wrapped her arms around his neck.

They drove off and I sat down to watch the game but I was too sad so I finished the Schlitz and went up to my room, lay on the bed and, feeling like my father, the tears started coming.

A Mushroom Array

John Grey

It rains
then the temperature drops,
the chills suck mushrooms
from the earth –
red-spotted umbrellas,
grey skulls,
poke through grass,
leaf mulch,
decaying wood,
tree roots,
some edible, some toxic,
all sudden as wind change
in New England Octobers –
the squirrels avoid them,
birds don't nibble,
it's left to the humans
to bend and gather,
to harvest this abrupt plenty –
no daily watch
through changing seasons,
no wait for more fattening,
mushrooms don't need to ripen –
they already are.

Why We Aren't Together Anymore

William Doreski

Remember when you applied
for that nursing job in Halifax?
They handed you a thirty page
application, and stuck me
with two hundred pages to fill out
to determine if I qualified
for Canadian citizenship
or belonged in the old stone prison
near the mouth of the famous harbor.
Afraid to even print my name,
I ducked outside where smokers
clustered in soggy little cliques.
The chat of seagulls alerted me
to the long arc of air time
to Iceland, while nearby
a graveyard ripe with remains
of Titanic victims simmered
in degraded autumn sunlight.
They offered you the job
but warned that I'd be imprisoned
for failing to complete the form.
No problem: they'd provide you
with a fresh new spouse endowed
with a hefty government grant.
You accepted the offer and rushed
to entrap me with the news.
So I caught the bus to Boston,
my tombstone of a suitcase

banging against my knees.
As the bus hissed and grumbled
through the low-slung suburbs
I gradually shed myself
and everything you'd made of me,
and faced the long night of travel
with my senses reignited
by the kind of absence I love.

My Oh Mother

Orlando Clark

I prayed thee I pray thee, now mend this my oh mother.

For it seems as if our god has forsaken us.

Pen ultimate life giver you be. I beg thee oh mother,
free your child from this misery of harsh reality.

I beg of you, mend this my oh mother.

For if the knife that perforates my flesh cometh from these
hands of mine,

I will be shunt from the gates of heaven and barred from nir-
vana, if there be such.

Oh mother, you can suckle me in thy'ne bosom until my last
breath disintegrates.

You can adorn my last meal, the one you know I love so much,
so I may see god with a full.

Whatever method it be, make it quick, for the world is getting
grim, time is getting slim, and my patience runneth thin.

The heart of man is dark as the valley of death. I have faced
many evils. I prayed thee I pray thee, now mend this my oh
mother, for my cup has runneth over.

Contributors

Paul Beckman was one of the winners in *The Best Small Fictions 2016!* His latest collection of flash stories, “Kiss Kiss” (Truth Serum Press) is available on Amazon. He has been published in: Literary Orphans, Matter Press, Spelk, The Lost Balloon, Gravel, and Pank. Paul had a micro-story selected for the 2018 New Norton Anthology on Micro-fiction. He hosts the monthly FBomb NY flash fiction reading series in KGB’s Red Room.

Michael Bettendorf earned an English degree from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln in 2012. He currently mentors children in Language Arts for the Lincoln Public School district. He’s busy juggling a couple of novels and a podcast he’ll record one day. He lives in Lincoln with his wife, where he tries to convince the world that Nebraska is too strange to be a flyover state.

Orlando Clark is a Jamaican international student currently studying at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He is an aspiring poet, author, entrepreneur, and professor.

William Doreski has published three critical studies and several collections of poetry. His work has appeared in many journals. He has taught writing and literature at Emerson, Goddard, Boston University, and Keene State College. His new poetry collection is *A Black River, A Dark Fall*.

Mitchell Grabois lives in Denver, Colorado, has had over fourteen-hundred of his poems and fictions appear in magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes, and was awarded the 2017 Booranga Writers’ Centre (Australia) Prize for Fiction. His novel, *Two Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a

state hospital, is available for Kindle and as a print edition. To read more of his work Google Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. He is recently published in the Homestead Review, Harpur Palate and Columbia Review with work upcoming in the Roanoke Review, the Hawaii Review and North Dakota Quarterly.

Kristin Kozlowski lives and works in the Midwest United States. Some of her work is available online or upcoming in the Longleaf Review, Pidgeonholes, Occulum, Flash Frontier, and others. She is currently and always working on a novel.

Steve O'Connor is a writer from Lowell, Massachusetts. He has published stories in over thirty literary reviews, including The Massachusetts Review, Aethlon, and Sobotka Literary Magazine. He has published three books with small presses (*Smokestack Lightning*, *The Spy in the City of Books*, and *The Witch at Rivermouth*).

Savannah Oler is a junior double major at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. She is majoring in Biology and English. She grew up in Wisconsin, and moved to Iowa to continue her education, while the rest of her family currently lives in Florida.

Alan Parry is a poet and playwright from Liverpool, England. He is an English Literature graduate and has been writing creatively since his teens. Alan is a proud family man, who hopes to train to teach in the coming year. He cites John Cooper Clarke and Alan Bennett as his biggest inspirations.

Neil Randall is a novelist and short story writer. His debut novel *A Quiet Place to Die* (Wild Wolf Publishing) was voted e-thriller Book of the Month for February 2014. His historical novels, *The Holy Drinker* and *The Butterfly* and

the Wheel (both Knox Robinson Publishing) have been widely praised. His latest thriller, *The Girl in the Empty Room* (Crooked Cat Publishing) was released in September of last year. His debut short story collection *Tales of Ordinary Sadness* (Knox Robinson Publishing) has received much critical acclaim: *Darkness Reigns at the Foot of the Lighthouse* was short-listed for the prestigious Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2009, and *Hands* long-listed for the RTÉ Guide/Penguin Ireland Short Story Competition 2015.

L.A. Rivers spent her youth gathering tales of adventure while writing marketing copy and training manuals for companies around the globe. Her travels took her to West Africa, The Persian Gulf, The United Kingdom, and on 100,000 miles of road trips in the Western USA. Under a pen name she's authored six books, 1600 blog posts, and countless email campaigns for creative small businesses. Some would say Rivers took being Hemingway's birthday twin a little too seriously and her writing career really did commence at the kitchen table in the quest to attain a library card. You can find her latest musings at 1001lanights.wordpress.com

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel 'The Beard' was recently published by Harvard Square Editions.

Sarah Strutt writes poetry about her life experiences mostly relating to her diagnosis of borderline personality disorder and the loss of her sight. She has experienced self harm and suicide attempts and likes to use her poetry as a way of connecting with other people who may be in a similar situation. It is her aim to reach as many people as possible to convey a message of hope and to reach out for help.

Nicole A. Yurcaba is a Ukrainian-American poet and essayist, teaches at Bridgewater College where she also serves as the Bridgewater International Poetry Festival's Assistant Director. Her work has appeared in journals such as *The Lindenwood Review*, *Chariton Review*, *Junto Magazine*, *Artemis*, *Still: The Journal*, and many other online and print venues.