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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	page 3
Jersey Fresh, Kate Delany	page 8
One Hundred Seconds of Solitude, Corey Mesler	page 10
Decisions, Stephen Schwegler	page 13
Manual Criticism, Noel Sloboda	page 16
Letters to Wolfhaus, Christopher Woods	page 21
Dog Days, Robert Levin	page 26
The Werebear Who Wished to Come in from the Rain, Mike Sweeney	page 32

Editor's Note: The Legend of the Jersey Devil

Welcome, one and all, to the inaugural issue of Jersey Devil Press. We've got some magnificent fiction for you, starting—pretty perfectly, I might add—with Jersey's own Kate Delany and the inimitable Corey Mesler. That's followed up by a story from Stephen Schwegler, a little taste of the collection he's releasing through us later this year. We've also got a surreal little number from Noel Sloboda, an insight into the wild world of hotel management by Christopher Woods, and an exercise in accidental existentialism by Robert Levin. We close the issue with the brilliant Mike Sweeney and a fairy tale I'm kind of jealous I didn't write.

We here at Jersey Devil Press are more than happy with the way this issue turned out. We feel like it's a pretty solid sampling of what we want to be about. We've got some Jersey attitude, some pieces to think about, and we've got werebears. You really can't ask for more than that.

If you are asking for more, however—or for those of you unfamiliar with the legend of the Jersey Devil—then may I present to you the definitive myth, based upon two hours of research and twenty-something years of living in the Garden State.

But first, a little history lesson: In the 1700s there was no electricity. There was no California, no Texas. Music involved your family members singing at you from the other side of your one room cottage. Magic was still a valid excuse for

teenage pregnancy, a farmer's inability to harvest crops, lost luggage, and pretty much everything else.

Which is why, in 1730, none other than Benjamin "Motherfuckin'" Franklin published an article in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on the witchcraft trials occurring near Mount Holly, N.J. And not in a "holy crap, you guys, you're not gonna believe this" kind of way, either.

Okay. So. Onto the story.

In 1735, Deborah Leeds, wife of Japhet Leeds and mother of twelve, found herself knocked up yet again. Mrs. Leeds briefly considered her options—which, at the time, involved only birthing the baby and then either raising it or selling it for meat—before throwing up her hands and shouting, "The Devil take this child!" and then joining her husband for a drink.

Lest you judge Deborah too harshly, you need to realize that the Leeds were not a rich family. Japhet was a local surveyor and a drunk, and Deborah was a woman. They lived, at best, a modest life in the Burlington area of southern New Jersey, on the outskirts of the Pine Barrens, and weren't exactly thrilled with the prospect of expanding their homestead.

The Pine Barrens, for those who aren't in the know, is a forest. A dark, desolate, scary forest, where the trees grow out of sand instead of dirt and actually need to be set on fire to reproduce. To this day it remains a largely rural, undeveloped area, in no small part because the crazy-ass ecosystem bankrupted a number of industries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and then actually, physically *took back the areas that had been developed*. That shit ain't right, yo.

In any event, Deborah Leeds went into labor on an incredibly dark, violently stormy night. Tradition has it that Japhet and his twelve children were huddled in a corner of their tiny house, spooked by the crashing wind and driving rain and terrified of Deborah's promise to the Devil. More likely, though, they were sitting at the table in the next room, playing cards and trying to stay out of the midwife's way. The Leeds lived in a coastal town in the North Atlantic, near a forest straight out of *The Lord of the Rings*, with a woman who'd already fired a baby out a dozen times before. No part of this was new to them.

Well, not yet, anyway.

The midwife delivered the baby and, with strained enthusiasm, handed it to a yawning Deborah, saying, "Congratulations, it's a... a... oh my God! Oh my God!"

The baby, born a completely normal boy, suddenly changed. It began growing in size in the midwife's arms. Horns inched out from its forehead and wings sprouted from its back. The midwife dropped the child and stumbled backward, watching as the infant continued its metamorphosis. It landed deftly on two cloven hooves; talons tore through its fingers and its face became that of a horse with glowing red eyes.

The midwife screamed in terror. Mrs. Leeds joined her. The creature roared.

Japhet got up from the table, ushering the kids beneath it. He grabbed the metal stoker from the fireplace and ran toward his wife in the other room, only to be smacked upside the head with the midwife's arm. A leg soon followed. Japhet, a slow learner at best, made it all the way to the doorway before realizing that the beast had torn the woman to pieces. He stood terrified, staring at the unholy creature and trying to process what was happening. Then the monster lunged at Deborah. Japhet charged at the beast, brandishing his fire iron. The

creature turned and bellowed at Mr. Leeds with an ear-piercing snarl, then threw him back into the other room and bounded after him. Seeing its brothers and sisters cowering in terror, it reared up before them, roaring and flapping its wings, before finally flying up the chimney and making its escape to the desolation of the Pine Barrens.

Again, as science hadn't been invented at this point, the above may be a bit of an exaggeration. There are some who argue that Mrs. Leeds' thirteenth child was, in fact, *not* a demon, but merely a disfigured, developmentally disabled baby, tossed out into the woods because people were assholes in 1735. Which may very well be true—and just as unsettling, in its own right—but it would make for one bullshit legend. And bullshit legends are simply not what New Jersey is about.

Since that fateful night, an untold number of stories about the Jersey Devil have been passed from generation to generation. Sightings of the beast have become almost as prolific as “What exit?” jokes and painful Italian stereotypes.

By far, though, the single most bitchin' tale of the Jersey Devil involves its becoming drinking buddies with the headless ghost of a pirate previously in the employ of Captain Kidd.

You see, in Barnegat Bay, in the late 1600s, Kidd buried a shipload of stolen cargo along the shore and then, as was custom, beheaded one of his crew members so that his spirit could stand eternal guard over the treasure. His corpse was left on the beach to, presumably, scare the crap out of potential looters.

After a couple dozen years, the ghost pirate got bored and went for a walk. Being a homeless spirit, he was, of course, drawn to the supernatural creepiness that is the Pine Barrens. He was just kind of hanging out there one day when this weird, horse-faced fellow came barreling toward him. The creature yelled and snarled; the ghost raised an eyebrow. The beast stopped in front of the ghost and they both stared at one another for a moment or two. Then they started laughing. They've been inseparable ever since.

There are plenty of other stories about the Jersey Devil, as well, involving naval heroes of the Revolutionary War firing a cannon at it, the former King of Spain running into it on a hunting trip, the fabled spree of 1909 that shut down schools and businesses between Atlantic City and Philadelphia, and a Long Beach fisherman who says he saw the Jersey Devil flirting up a mermaid.

In New Jersey, everyone knows someone who knows this guy who's totally seen the Leeds Devil. To this day, police in the vicinity of the Pine Barrens still receive the occasional phone call from drunken teenagers and lonely old ladies, claiming to have seen a winged creature with unearthly red eyes bounding through the forest. And to this day, police just laugh at them or politely assure them that they'll "get right on it."

Because they're all just stories.

Right?

-- Eirik Gumeny

Jersey Fresh

Kate Delany

You come home for a visit (your parents paid) and I pick you up at the airport, of course. We hug tight at the arrival's gate and I feel convinced and a little flattered. Right away, you want to eat, famished and indignant about the lack of anything fresh at the airport. You had pockets stuffed with plums but they took them away when you went through security. So we swing by the diner, which couldn't be more like coming home, you say. It's the same diner we killed so much time in as kids but now you revel in the kitsch, telling me you're seeing with fresh eyes. You just love how authentic and unpretentious everything is: the hyper-laminated menus, the dumpy wait-staff, the enormous windows with a view of the highway on one side, of a brick wall on the other. A mother in a nearby booth swats her whiny kid and you point, grinning, saying, no one would ever do that in Cali. No way! Now I'm definitely home! For several minutes, you marvel over the chocolate chip muffin on the menu which no one, you insist, would ever eat on the West Coast and that's what's so great about being back here! No one gives a shit! I place my order with our waitress, a girl you don't recognize but who went to school with us, who works here nights and weekends while her mom watches the kids. You interrupt my "just a bagel and cream cheese" saying, "wait, aren't you vegan yet? Why did I think you were? Still just vegetarian? Huh." After you order scrapple, eggs, toast, you say, really, I should do it. I should become vegan. It's so much healthier, so much better for the environment. When you get back to Cali, you're going to become a raw

foodist. Do I know about raw food, you ask? You tell me it's the new thing. Nothing above 114 degrees. So pure, so fresh! You tell me about a friend who made you a raw dessert the other day and it was so simple, so delicious. You can't wait to get home and get started, actually. You're saying this as your breakfast arrives. You dig in, shoveling in scrapple, blinding the eyes of the sunny side up eggs on your plate. Of course you don't actually have any cash on you so you put the whole thing—eight dollars—on a credit card. As for the tip, with a dramatic little flourish, you loosen your scarf made by some Tibetan monks and rope it around our waitress's neck, muttering shanti, shanti. After you head outside to bum a smoke off an old man leaning on his walker, who just looks so Jersey, you tell me, I press a fresh five into our waitress's palm. I watch her ball it up in her hand. Anything that fresh, she tells me, you gotta crumble up a little or else it sticks.

KATE DELANY'S previous publications include a book of poetry, Reading Darwin, published by Poets Corner Press. Her fiction and poetry has appeared in such magazines and journals as *Art Times*, *Barrelhouse*, *Chicken Piñata*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Philadelphia Stories* and *Spire Press*. She teaches in the English department at Rowan University in Glassboro, NJ.

One Hundred Seconds of Solitude

Corey Mesler

(English translation by Grabass Tellinghelme)

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Jimmy “Crack” Corn was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover magic realism. Jimmy wanted to write. It was all he knew about himself. His heart had proven to be a mystery, his mind likewise. But, his creative soul seemed as clear as the eye of a sea eagle. He wanted to write books, the kind of books he saw in his father’s impressive library, thick and thin, consequential books, books with titles Jimmy barely understood. But he would learn, if it cost him his life, he would learn.

In those days, in that country, it was dangerous to write novels. It was dangerous even to own them. This made his father’s massive library an act of the purest bravery to Crack Corn’s way of thinking. His first timid attempts to create characters out of gossamer embarrassed him. He showed them to no one. Jimmy would pick a novel at random from his father’s shelves and from that novel he would try to glean how to write. From his perusal of a chapter or two he would then launch another attempt at a whole novel. He used Faulkner, Bellow, Mailer, Updike, Flaubert, Kafka and Joyce this way. He used Murdoch, Woolf, Ellison and Louis L’amour this way. He used Machado de Assis. And, slowly, slowly, by accretion, like building a lake from dripping, Jimmy began to approach a story big enough for his ambitions. He had just about taught himself to write a novel.

As his manuscript began to grow like weeds on a tomb, Jimmy “Crack” Corn had all but decided to smuggle his manuscript out of the country where it might get read by a sympathetic editor and published to wide acclaim. It still frightened him. He went to his father for advice.

His father told him, publish it, my son. Without reading it, his father said, this is what you were born to do. You follow the footsteps of great men and women. I have seen it in you working away in the library like a wage slave. Publish it, my son, and the consequences be damned.

So Jimmy “Crack” Corn built a novel, a novel made from arcanum and lexicology. And he called his finished novel, *Again There are Night Questions*. It was quite an achievement. It was long like a novel should be and it was packed full of incident like a novel should be. And there was magic! Like sparkling sunlight off the Sword of Damocles, magic like the serpent-crest of the king’s crown on the pillars of Egypt! What Jimmy had lived for he had achieved.

And it was smuggled out of the country and it was sold to an American consortium with the power of worldwide distribution. And it became famous and celebrated and Jimmy’s name was tossed around in the same basket as Nobel Prize winners.

When they came to arrest him, Jimmy “Crack” Corn was sitting in his library (a simulacrum of his father’s more magisterial collection) leafing through old issues of Jackpot Magazine, reading the works of the post-post-modernists. Jimmy stood as the Guard approached his chair. He stood and received them as if he were a lamb being lead to the slaughter. Which he was. He smiled and said, For my book I am ready to die.

The trial was short and punishing. No one in Jimmy’s country stood up for him save his father, whose speech was eloquent and heartrending. But at the

end of a two-day hearing Jimmy “Crack” Corn was sentenced to die by the firing squad, as alluded to in the first paragraph of the testimony you are now reading.

In his last hours Jimmy eschewed the priest. He eschewed his final meal. And when he was lead into the yard he eschewed the blindfold. He stood fearless in the bright morning sunshine and said to his executioners, *Shoot straight, you bastards. My book will outlive you all.*

In the years following the execution of Jimmy “Crack” Corn the country moved inexorably toward an even more restrictive governing. More books, though, were written in secret and more authors were executed in the bright morning sunshine. All died saying, *Shoot straight, you bastards. My book will outlive you all.* The country was being slowly devoured by biblical winds, by a curse as solid as a cathedral, a fearful wind of dust and rubble being spun about by the wrath of its dying writers, because races condemned to one hundred seconds of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.

COREY MESLER has published in numerous journals and anthologies. He has published two novels, *Talk: A Novel in Dialogue* (2002) and *We Are Billion-Year-Old Carbon* (2006). He has also published numerous chapbooks and one full-length poetry collection, *Some Identity Problems*. His book of short stories, *Listen*, came out in March, 2009. He has two more novels due out in the coming year. He has been nominated for a Pushcart numerous times, and one of his poems was chosen for Garrison Keillor’s *Writer’s Almanac*. With his wife, he runs Burke’s Book Store in Memphis TN. He can be found at www.coreymesler.com.

Decisions

Stephen Schwegler

He looks to his left and sees a plate of toast, covered in butter. On his right, a plate of glazed doughnuts, glistening in the sunlight. Across from him sits a man with a gun.

"Pick a plate and eat it."

"Just one?"

"Yes, one."

"But they both look so good."

"Just one, buddy. One."

He looks back to his left: the crust was slightly burnt, but not enough for it to taste bad. He looks to his right: the doughnuts did seem a little dry, but the glaze would take care of that.

"Timesawasting, pal."

"I can't decide."

"What do you mean you can't decide? All you have to do is eat one plate. If you don't, you get shot. It's not that hard."

"But I don't know which one I want."

"I would decide fast because I'm about to lose my patience."

"Hmm... Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Which one..."

"Would I eat? Sorry, not helping."

"Damn."

"Hey, it's not that hard. Just eat one. It's not like one of them is poisoned. Eat one and I'll let you go."

"What kind of kidnapper are you?"

"Huh?"

"Seriously. You kidnap me and all I have to do is eat something and I can go? That doesn't make much sense."

"What doesn't make sense to me is why you won't just pick one and eat it so you can go and I can move on with my life."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know I was holding you up. You know, you're the one who kidnapped me."

"Yeah, I'm aware of my mistake. I've come to terms with it, I suggest you do the same and pick a goshdarn plate."

"What's the rush?"

"I have other people to kidnap."

"Ah, I see. Do they get the same choice?"

"No, the food will be different."

"Like to switch it up do you?"

"Yeah, well... Hey! Just eat something!"

"Can I eat both?"

"No, just one."

"How about just one slice of toast and one doughnut, leaving another one of each for your next hostage."

"What?"

"A little from column A, a little from column B."

"Fine, whatever. Just eat it and go."

He eats a doughnut and then follows it up with a piece of toast.

"Can I have something to drink?"

"Sorry, fresh out."

"Got a dollar?"

"Yeah, hold on."

The kidnapper gives him a dollar.

"Thanks. I saw a vending machine on the way in here. I could really go for a Mountain Dew."

"Sold out."

"Seriously? Son of a bitch!"

"Hey, watch your mouth. Just because I kidnap people doesn't mean I'm down with cussing. Now get out of here."

"Alright, fine. Bye."

"Bye."

STEPHEN SCHWEGLER is eight feet tall and made of candy. His short story collection, *Perhaps.*, is due this winter from Jersey Devil Press.

Manual Criticism

Noel Sloboda

Francis always took reviews hard. So when the local arts journal, *Ovations*, complained that his puppetry company, “Without Strings,” had become “rather staid, rather static, presenting work that was more slight than sleight of hand,” it really shouldn’t have surprised anyone that the puppet master soon after announced changes were coming. Still, the other members of the company did not know what to make of the direction in which Francis wanted to take their productions.

Trained by Old World masters, Francis had skills with mannequins none of the others had even dreamt possible before they saw him perform. The leader of “Without Strings” specialized in quadrupeds, from cows to dragons, wolverines to unicorns: creatures difficult for any but the most talented to animate. At his touch, a menagerie would trot, canter, and gallop across the stage. But the spectacles he produced went far beyond the work of other masters. In the hands of Francis, coyotes Cajun waltzed and raccoons Muay Thai kick-boxed. (He’d even been rumored to have performed a few after-hours shows during which arachnids coupled furiously.)

When the company assembled to learn about their new direction, a new addition to Francis’s bestiary was uniformly anticipated. But nobody expected Francis to unveil a giant left hand. Five feet long from its hirsute wrist to its sharp, yellow fingernails, the puppet was crafted with such singular attention to detail that it seemed the knuckles might crack if pressure was applied to them.

Francis insisted not only that the hand be worked into all of the company's productions, but that it would also replace his other creatures. It wasn't immediately clear to the other members of "Without Strings" how audiences would receive the hand, but they begrudgingly consented to Francis's plan. The tale of Jack and the Beanstalk would now feature as its villain The Fearsome Five Fingers, a fist that lorded over the land of Sky; Hansel and Gretel, lost in The Deep, Dark Woods, would meet a terrible thumb with a hankering for pinching children; Sir George would joust with stained, jagged fingernails with old onion skins under them.

When word got out that "Without Strings" was presenting new material, its audiences—which, it must be confessed, had begun to dwindle—suddenly increased. And after a few weeks, the crowds attracted the interest of the critic for *Ovations*, the very same one who had so shaken up Francis. The critic visited the company one evening, in order to reassess its merits in light of the dramatic changes that were generating such buzz on the street.

Begrudgingly, the critic conceded the craft of the hand's operator; Francis's performance was called "a ribald but precise and exacting display of dexterity, unlike anything seen before" by "Without Strings." Yet the reviewer wondered if there wasn't something "slightly dishonest, just ever so slightly, about an art form calling for the manipulation of living hands to create the illusion of a living hand."

As Francis studied the review the next morning, his face burned. He immediately called another meeting of his troupe. He promised his fellows another new innovation, one that would be revealed that very night, something sure to win over the critic, whom he'd personally invited back to the show.

When the curtain went up that evening on a variation of Red Riding Hood in which The Big Bad Wolf was to become The Humungous Hairy Hand,

everyone was taken aback—including the other puppeteers—when Francis’s puppet hand emerged from the wings wrapped in black, glittering armor with foot-long spikes on its knuckles. The Humungous Hairy Hand that the company had planned to feature in this tale had become The Great Grim Gauntlet.

At first, it was fairly interesting to see Francis work the metal glove as it scraped and clanked through the trails of the forest, attempting to crush young Red. As the show progressed, however, the novelty began to dissipate. By the time Red drew close to her grandmother’s house, several repeat patrons were muttering that the armor concealed the far more expressive hand from view. By the time Red confronted Grandmother (really The Great Grim Gauntlet, who had who had pinched the harridan to death, then donned her wardrobe), a couple people had fallen asleep. And almost everyone else—including the critic from *Ovations*—was eying the clock, to see just how much time remained in the show.

Then suddenly everyone sat up when, in a flurry of plaid and unkempt facial hair, The Woodsman burst through the door of Grandmother’s cottage. The Great Grim Gauntlet, about to squeeze Red to death, jumped out of bed and threw off not just its disguise but its casing. The black armored glove flew into the air, revealing the familiar hand underneath. The Woodsman paused, as though stunned by the nakedness of the hand, which proceeded to catch the glove and turn it inside out, revealing a white liner underneath. The hand then flipped the liner upward, so that it soared almost to the rafters before dropping right onto the hand. Up again went the liner. Only this time the hand it had covered had disappeared. The audience was on its feet, cheering by the time the empty white liner descended, draping gently over Red’s head, like a bridal veil, as she moved to embrace her hero, The Woodsman.

The review in *Ovations* the next day called the performance “close to perfect.” The critic raved that nothing could top what he had witnessed

“Without Strings” do the night before. In fact, he noted, the company’s shows were now so good that it naturally followed they must soon fall off: after last night, “Without Strings” had “nowhere to go but down.” The critic vowed he would return to the theatre that very evening, and every evening hence, in order to mark the company’s fall. He wanted to be there to ensure that everyone who cared about the arts was apprised of the imminent decline of “Without Strings.”

In spite of its unfavorable intimations, the *Ovations* write-up intrigued enough people to fill the house the next night. Before a full-capacity crowd, Francis brought forth the familiar hand to the expectant patrons, all waiting for something to go wrong. They bounced in their seats with anticipation. Several licked their lips, as though preparing to suck the enormous fingertips. Yet those who had seen the hand before noted, as soon as it started to claw its way across the stage, that something was different about it. The hand wasn’t costumed, but naked, and it wasn’t clear what its role was, or even what story was being told. Neither scenery nor other puppets appeared on the stage to accompany it. The hand moved to the edge of the thrust, then stopped, falling lifeless before the audience. And then Francis stepped into view from stage left.

The puppet master silently surveyed the expectant faces, studying the white-knuckled fists clutching armrests and the knees bouncing up and down. Everyone waited for him to act. As he looked out over the house, Francis paused only for a moment when his eyes met those of the critic from *Ovations*.

Without a word, Francis dropped to the floor, his face contorting as his jaw expanded; first one finger, then another, emerged from his mouth, until finally a whole right hand had appeared. It didn’t linger over the now inanimate shell of Francis, but scuttled toward the fallen hand puppet. The new hand paused before its limp mate for just a moment. Then, ever so gently, the hand turned the mirror image of itself over, so that its palm was toward the ceiling. It

began to rise and fall upon the limp, imitation open hand, clapping in a soft, steady rhythm. Unable to move, the audience sat stunned. Everyone just listened to the unnatural but insistently regular clapping—everyone except for the critic from *Ovations*, who smirked as he began to scribble furiously in his notebook.

NOEL SLOBODA lives in Pennsylvania, where he serves as dramaturg for the Harrisburg Shakespeare Festival. He is the author of the poetry collection *Shell Games* (sunnyoutside, 2008).

Letters to Wolfhaus

Christopher Woods

Dear Manager, Wolfhaus Lodge,

As much as my wife and I enjoyed our annual stay this year, we couldn't help noticing that your pillows seemed unusually deflated. Esther said she was disappointed, as if our favorite hotel might be slipping a bit. I wondered if the pillows might be an omen of a downturn in the Maine economy. Nevertheless, we hope to see you again, God willing. As always, we appreciate the AARP discount.

Frank and Esther Totts

Eugene, OR

The Manager, Wolfhaus Lodge,

Call me obsessive, but I spend a good part of my vacation cleaning and disinfecting my hotel room. Hotels simply do not prepare clean enough rooms for me. I fear bacteria of any kind, and loathe the calling cards of strangers in this regard. Pillows, as you must be aware, are sponges for disease, and are also a launching pad for the spread of same. Philosophically, I do not believe in

hotels or their pillows, but I am also a realist who enjoys travel of the healthy variety. With this in mind, I wish to commend you and Wolfhaus for having such small and insignificant pillows. Because of this, my cleaning was completed much sooner than is usual. I actually had time to take a stroll through your lovely town before time for check-out and my flight home.

Anticepta Gutierrez

Chlorox City, MN

The Manager, Wolfhaus Lodge,

This is to notify you of our intention to file suit against you, your owner and the staff of Wolfhaus. Because of your hideously inadequate pillows, our necks have suffered terribly since our stay. The pain is unbearable, I tell you. In addition to calling our regular lawsuit lawyer, we have also contacted a Boston firm specializing in tourist-related injuries, maimings and deaths.

You will be very sorry.

J. S. Peters

Culver City

Dear Manager, Wolfhaus Lodge,

I hope this letter goes directly to you, you wimpy smart ass with your effeminate red goatee. If so, this is for you, you damned sissy. First of all, I'd much rather take my girlfriends to a "clothing optional" retreat. But my last girlfriend, Cholie, the one I don't see anymore, begged me to take her to Wolfhaus. Nice guy that I am...

Let's cut to the chase, prickhead. I am a sexual machine, a coitus perfectionist, and my stamina is unmatched. I depend heavily on pillows to assist myself and my partners in acquiring positions which lead to absolute ecstasy. Imagine my surprise when I tried to put those pansy pillows of yours to use. My love life and my reputation in satyr circles and chatrooms have been severely maligned.

Cholie won't even speak to me. She *is* telling others about my poor performance, however, as she is a spiteful bitch. Thanks a lot, buddy. For what it's worth, I've seen better pillows carved out of pimientos. I saw you eating a pimiento sandwich in the Wolfhaus office. That says it all, sissy boy.

Chip Longa

Palm Springs

The Manager, Wolfhaus Lodge,

Just a cheery note to thank you for your pillows. I know they might seem inconsequential to some sleepers, but believe me when I tell you they were a godsend to my husband, Poppy. Perhaps you might recall Poppy. My husband

lost his head in a tragic hunting accident several years ago and is no longer in need of pillows. Most hotels stack pillows high on the bed, and it is work for Poppy to remove them all. His vision was lost in the accident, as you might well imagine. Imagine Poppy's delight and surprise to get into bed and doze off without having to first locate the pillow, and secondly, to remove it.

Kudos to Wolfhaus. See you next year.

Dottie Graham

Eureka Springs, AR

CHRISTOPHER WOODS has published a prose collection, **UNDER A RIVERBED SKY**, and a book of stage monologues for actors, **HEART SPEAK**. He lives in Houston and Chappell Hill, Texas. His photography gallery, which he shares with his wife Linda, is **MOONBIRD HILL ARTS** - www.moonbirdhill.exposuremanager.com

Dog Days

Robert Levin

I wanted to be invisible. Out of nowhere, with, I swear, nothing in my history to predict it, I'd done something people regard as sick and disgusting and I wanted to disappear.

I should say that at first I wasn't so sure what I'd done was all that awful, and I certainly didn't concur with the character judgment implicit in such a definition. It didn't seem in my case to be fair. I felt this way because I'd always had an exceptionally inquisitive mind, a mind that, forever in search of the deepest truths, often compelled me to challenge things (the assumption that boundary lines in nature are fixed and inviolable for example) that others never questioned. And that was a good thing, right? What's more - and who would argue with this? - when you call your dog "Maureen" you're clearly asking for trouble. And not only that, hadn't Larry Flynt confessed to the SERIAL RAPING OF CHICKENS without suffering one iota of damage to his reputation?

But I stopped protesting pretty quickly. It was impossible for me to deflect for long the look on the face of Maureen's owner (and my now erstwhile girlfriend) when, on the evening in question, she came home unexpectedly early.

Preoccupied, and with the stereo at full volume, I didn't pick up on the fact that Annie was home until she was suddenly big in the room. Maureen, I realized afterwards, was aware of Annie's untimely return before I was. I saw one of her ears rise and I saw what I also understood later to be a look of apprehensiveness on her face as she turned it towards me. But, and probably

because her countenance was open to several interpretations at that moment, her heads up went right by me.

In any event, I hadn't seen the expression on Annie's face since my mother caught me barfing into the family "Important Documents" chest when I was five. The horror it conveyed seemed, in its breathtaking proportions, to have issued from the gods themselves. No, try as I might I couldn't deny it. Diddling Maureen had been an egregious crime that was in no way mitigated by the fact that it was unpremeditated and, for me, unprecedented.

And in the following months (and along with a discombobulated Annie's exclamation: "My God, she's just a puppy!" echoing in my head) I was seeing similar expressions everywhere. Were guilt and shame working their poisons on my psyche or was it true that no one was liking me anymore? I mean no one SEEMED to be liking me anymore for shit. Total strangers I passed on the street all but recoiled at the sight of me. And dogs. What was up with dogs? Dogs had always been as indifferent to me as I was to them. But now, straining at their leashes, they growled deep guttural growls when I walked by. Was it possible that dogs - in ways we've yet to appreciate - were able to communicate to one another, and over great distances, the indignities humans perpetrated on them?

In all manner of torment and confusion, I spent my days scouring my brain in a frantic effort to uncover the reason for my... well... BESTIAL behavior.

What had dispatched me to such a forsaken place?

Could the fact that Maureen had been bathed that morning and that her shimmering coat smelled a lot like Rive Gauche - a fragrance widely known to be irresistibly seductive - been at the bottom of it?

Had the philosopher in me simply chosen a less than auspicious moment to take the leap from rumination to hands-on investigation?

Had I been trying to tell Annie something? Our relationship not going so well, had I been saying to her, "See? This is what happens when you deprive a person of sex."

Was it conceivable that - strict dosage instructions included for a reason - the extra teaspoon of Nyquil I'd taken for a vicious post-nasal drip had caused me to lose my species bearings for a minute?

But nothing I came up with rang true for me. All I knew for sure was that I'd become, say it, the definition of "pervert." I could not have descended to a much lower depth if I'd done so intentionally.

As you can see, I very much needed to get out of this dreadful situation and the first exit I thought of was suicide. But while destroying my body, which was making me much too noticeable, was certainly an attractive idea, a large problem that I have with dying discouraged me from acting on it. I'm not trying to be funny. Transforming into something comparable to what Maureen might leave on a curbside is a prospect that weighs very heavily on me. In fact, to make it hard for the gods to find me when my time comes, I've endeavored even in normal circumstances to not stand out too much, to be, you know, as anonymous as possible. (This explains the "C" average that I've steadfastly maintained throughout my life.)

And if there's any substance to the reincarnation thing and the immortality it promises, suicide posed a very serious risk. The gods, everyone knows, tend to frown on people who take their own lives, no matter how wretched their conditions may be. That made it unlikely - especially after the way I'd comported myself this time around - that they'd send me back as anything better than a water bug or dental plaque.

Passing on suicide, I contemplated surgically altering my appearance or moving to another city. But these choices were cost prohibitive and the latter would also have involved a lot of heavy lifting, which I really hate.

Finally I considered going insane. Well within my budget, what this option offered was the opportunity to stay alive AND lose my body (my unrelenting self-consciousness anyway) at the same time. But to achieve a genuine psychosis - to, that is, retreat into the bowels of your brain, live in a world of your own invention and become completely oblivious to what's going on outside of it - isn't so easy.

I know because I tried. Thinking that I could maybe connect to madness by faking some emblematic symptoms (and sufficiently desperate by now to chance still more humiliation) I ran an experiment. It was the middle of August and wearing a tattered overcoat - and with a week's growth of beard and my hair wild - I stood on a street corner and commenced to babble unintelligibly at various decibel levels. After a few minutes of that I shouted, "Fucking motherfuckers, I'm gonna break your fucking hearts and shove the fucking bits and pieces up your hungry assholes." Then I babbled some more and then, kicking and swiping at the air, I snarled, "PILLOWS? What else you asswipes got in store? The armadillos shat in your cereal shit? THAT crapola again? That - ha ha - GRANOLA crapola?"

But my face crimson with embarrassment all the while, my act (with its admittedly lame material) never stopped being just that and my self-consciousness was only heightened. (If I needed confirmation of my failure to accomplish my objective it was more than adequately furnished by a woman who remarked to her companion, "Must be some kind of fraternity initiation.")

So it became evident that even the fact that I was doubtless more screwed up than I knew I was when I realized exactly how screwed up I was didn't give

me an advantage here. However odd the angle at which I protruded from it may have been, I was as mired in reality as anyone else. I mean, despite my preoccupation, I still worried a lot about real world things. I worried about losing my job. I worried about getting to the laundry in time to collect my shirts. I worried that I might have picked up a dose of heartworm from Maureen. And if that wasn't enough, I couldn't stop caring about what people thought. It was possible, in fact, that I'd come to care more about what people thought than Louis Harris and George Gallup put together.

So I could do no more than envy the real thing - those guys who've established permanent residence in a fissure between their cerebellums and their medulla oblongata. Yes, I know THEIR weird and terrible utterances can be, in their obvious authenticity, very scary and lead you to conclude that even in the worst of times only a schmuck would want to take refuge in the kinds of worlds they inhabit. But long before my interest in the subject got personal I discovered that if you were willing to pay close attention you could sometimes pick up indications that where they live is not without a recreational dimension. On one occasion I was actually able to make out, in the background of a nasty mix of epithets, cacophonous outbursts and sundry other emissions, the strains of a tinkling piano and the clinking of glass and ice cubes - persuasive evidence, you'll agree, of a party in progress.

I wanted to find that party guy now and see if I could get him to show me the ropes. But I knew that I had as much chance of prying instructions out of him as I did of getting the name of his caterer.

So what did I do?

Well, standing as I was on the corner of "Terror Street and Agony Way" (as the poet described it), what I did then was what's left for you to do in this circumstance.

I resolved to - what else? - redeem myself.

I mean what choice did I have at this point but to try to get the gods to FORGIVE me?

Now I certainly recognized that the level of depravity to which I'd sunk made redemption a tall order. The gods would hardly respond to a less than stellar effort. But after thinking long and hard about it, I finally came up with something I thought was near to perfect in its symmetry. Something that they'd just have to applaud.

With the help of donations I opened an animal shelter.

Forget what you're thinking. Okay? I never went into the kennels. I functioned - it's the truth - in a strictly administrative capacity.

Anyway, it turned out that I was nothing short of brilliant in this role. Under my supervision the shelter quickly became a huge success, and, sure enough - it could not have worked out better - with each rescue and adoption of a mangy dog or one-eyed cat my Maureen burden grew lighter until, just like that, it was gone.

With that monstrous problem behind me I felt, as you can imagine, something like great. But this wasn't the only reason for my high spirits. No. They derived as well from an even bigger reward that my act of redemption yielded. In the delirium that develops from the knowledge that you're successfully making amends with the gods - from the certainty that you're pleasing them and earning their approval - you get to feel that you're atoning not only for the crime at hand but also - they become one and the same - for **WHATEVER YOU DID TO WARRANT THE DEATH SENTENCE YOU WERE HANDED AT BIRTH!** In turn you can feel that your atonement actually makes you eligible to **SURVIVE YOUR DEATH** - that it's your **TICKET TO HEAVEN!**

This, you'll have to concede, is some spectacular shit and it occurred to me one night that it was right here that the answer to the question that had been eating at me might be found.

Had I maybe set the whole thing up? Was it possible that my problem with mortality was even more serious than I realized and that (ingeniously exploiting the simultaneity of a bitch in heat and a simple, random hard-on) I'd deliberately committed an appalling but ABSOLVABLE crime in order to fashion an opportunity to experience my ULTIMATE redemption?

Was it possible, that is, that I'd FUCKED A DOG TO GET INTO HEAVEN?

(I should note that I flashed on that after an evening of heavy drinking with a bunch of veterinarians. It came to me while I was crawling on my hands and knees up three flights of stairs, just moments before I puked on my welcome mat.)

Now I don't want to leave the impression that I was entirely free of issues. Although my guilt and shame had evaporated there was still something pertaining to Maureen that bothered me a little. Whenever I thought of her, I would find myself wondering how she'd, you know, rated me. If, you know, she wanted to see me again.

But male ego aside, I felt in all other ways terrific. And, indeed, when I was interviewed on Animal Planet on the occasion of my shelter's first anniversary, I was fully at ease with being visible, more at ease with it than I'd ever been before.

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The Werebear Who Wished to Come in from the Rain

Mike Sweeney

There are innumerable jokes to be made about the Garden State in some quarters, but if you've ever seen Central Jersey in late July, just after the azaleas have bloomed and just before the cicadas come out to sing in August, you'd have no problem believing why the nation's third state was nicknamed so. Read the letters of the Revolutionary War soldiers – Colonial, British, and Hessian alike – for their description of what New Jersey once was before industry and chemical. An earthly paradise where anything would grow, it was said.

And, today, in Central Jersey – the part that identifies with neither Philadelphia nor New York – that's still true. The land is rich and green like in the days of old.

Well, it is in spots, anyway.

There is no better time to observe the lush greenery of Jersey vegetation than during a summer rainstorm, the kind that move in from the south and berate the coastal counties before sweeping off into the Atlantic just as quickly as they appeared. The water soaks the carpet of green grass that covers the rich horse farms and the small suburban homes alike. The rain renews the ubiquitous red oaks, the stately yew trees, and the solemn weeping willows, replacing what the day's heat has wilted away.

It's a moment of reverence.

Time seems to slip away and the land is what it always has been. Things that once were are again, things old and unseen. They roam the earth they called their own long before there was a New Jersey or even an America. They wander

here and there and, occasionally, when the ashen sky cracks and opens, they ask to come in from the rain.

Little Ashley May Rue was by all accounts a well-mannered and polite little girl. Quiet, but strong, it was said. She was her mother's rock in the days and weeks after her father's death. Her teachers all thought she would do well and the neighbors all thought she would keep her mom – and her little baby brother – anchored and sane in the difficult years that lay ahead.

It was a lot to ask of an eight-year-old, but Ashley May never complained or cried. It was like she knew something the others didn't.

But even if she hardly ever showed it, she missed playing whiffle ball with her Daddy and her cousins in the backyard, where the above ground pool was a home run and the swing set was a foul. She missed her Daddy holding the back of her bike – the pink sparkly one with the Power Puff Girls seat – as she wobbled and wavered along the sidewalk before lunch. Mostly, she missed the trips down the shore and the long walks with her Daddy in the sun, while Mommy sat feeding little Ben his bottle.

When she felt sad about not being able to do those things with her Daddy anymore, or when she just felt sad about all the things that had happened, the one thing that could always make her feel better was the rain.

It was her Mommy's own daddy who taught her to sit with the garage open on the late summer afternoons when the thunderstorms would roll in from the south and drench the world for one half hour or maybe two. Grandpa showed Ashley May just the right distance – the length of an old picnic-table bench – to sit from the end of the garage so that you could feel the rain passing

by without ever getting wet. They'd sit side-by-side in the rusty old beach chairs, the webbing frayed and yellow, and hum a song as they watched the water fall in sheets. Or sometimes, they would say nothing at all, and Grandpa and Ashley May would just hold hands and let their arms swing lightly as they stared off into the deluge.

It was where Ashley May learned to think of nothing when she wanted to think of everything. It was where she learned to find the calm even when everything around her made her want to cry.

Of course, her Grandpa was dead now too. From the cigarettes he smoked, they told her.

But Ashley May still loved looking at the rain.

It was three o'clock and almost as if on schedule, the slate sky began to crack and patter and another afternoon thunderstorm commenced. Little Ben was upstairs sleeping and Ashley May would have at least an hour to herself before she needed to change and feed him. She hoped the rain would last the whole hour.

She stopped using the beach chairs to watch the rain, as it didn't seem right to sit in them without Grandpa. So she stood – and occasionally twirled a little like a ballerina – exactly one picnic-table-bench-length from the edge of the garage and let her eyes and mind drift off into the sheets of rain and the occasional streak of lighting.

In truth, Ashley May wasn't quite thinking of nothing as the Werebear approached. She was concentrating on the poplar tree that dominated the front lawn of her family's house. She was earnestly trying to decide if it was called

“poplar” because it was a popular type of tree. At least two of their neighbors had one as well, so it didn’t seem that strange of an idea. She was just deciding her theory might have merit when the Werebear’s nose poked around the corner of the open garage.

Ashley May had seen a great many animals – deer, wild turkeys, raccoon, and, of course, bunny rabbits – while watching the rain. But this was her first bear. The turkeys – loud and brazen – had given her quite a start. The bear didn’t alarm her quite as much, as he was quiet. But he also was quite big and uncomfortably close. She took three steps back and looked to the door that led into the house at the back of the garage.

The Werebear cleared his throat and spoke. “Please don’t be frightened, young miss.”

Most people would be more than scared not just by a bear, but by one that spoke. But Ashley May had seen a great many things in her eight years and she wasn’t frightened. Not quite, anyway.

“You can talk?” she said. It seemed a good idea to her to get that out in the open straight away.

“Yes,” said the Werebear, in a deep, smoky baritone. “I can also catch cold.” He let his eyes drift up to the rain pouring down on his snout and shook himself a bit to show that his fur was getting quite inundated.

Little Ashley May Rue furrowed her brow. This was a pickle. Her mother had been quite clear on what she was supposed to say to any visitors while she was away at work. Ashley May had repeated her mom’s words exactly – to the social worker, to the mailman, to the college student who tried to sell her cable TV. But she didn’t know what she was supposed to say to a bear, let alone a talking bear.

The Werebear cleared his throat again. "I don't mean to be forward, young miss, but might I – just for a few moments – come in from the rain?"

"You won't eat me?" said Ashley May, asking what seemed to her an honest, if slightly rude, question.

The Werebear's snout twisted into a frown. He exhaled disgustedly and turned to head down the driveway.

"Wait!" Little Ashley May Rue cried. "You...you can come in."

"Are you sure?" said the Werebear in his rich rumble of a voice.

"Yes," said Ashley May. "For a little while, anyway."

The Werebear nodded and lumbered into the garage, blocking out Ashley's May's view of the rain – of everything – before sitting on her right.

Ashley May didn't like this. It was where her Grandpa used to sit. She wasn't sure she had done the right thing.

"Grizzly," said the Werebear.

"What?"

"You were wondering what type of bear I am."

Ashley hadn't been but she didn't say so. Instead, she asked, "Do all grizzly bears talk?"

"No," laughed the Werebear. "I'm special. And I'm not entirely a bear."

"Not entirely?" asked Little Ashley May Rue.

"I used to be a person. A long, long time ago. Or at least I think I was. That's how I learned to talk."

"But now you're a bear?"

"A werebear is the precise term. You see, something happened. I used to be a human, then I was a bear and a human. After a while, I just stayed a bear."

"Do you like it?"

“It’s all I know now,” said the Werebear. “It’s been so long since I was a person.”

“What’s the best part?”

“Eating little girls,” said the Werebear. Then he turned his head to look at Ashley May and laughed a loud and hearty laugh. He sat back on his hind legs and rubbed his belly with his front paws as he guffawed to show the little girl what a good joke he’d made. Ashley May laughed with him though she didn’t quite know why.

The Werebear shifted back onto all fours and walked around the garage a bit. He sniffed at the old rusty snow shovels, pawed a bit at the stacks of bound newspapers, and cast a disparaging eye at old the picnic-table bench Ashley May used to mark the correct distance for watching the rain.

“Where is your mommy?” he asked after a fashion.

“At work, but she’ll be home in a few minutes,” Little Ashley May Rue replied dutifully, saying exactly what her mother had told her to say.

“And your daddy?”

Ashley May was quiet for a full minute before answering. She waited until the Werebear moved back to her side before speaking.

“My Daddy’s dead,” she finally said.

“I see,” said the Werebear. “Well, I am sorry to hear that. It must be hard on you being here all alone.”

Ashley May didn’t say anything more. She stared off into the rain. She remembered that the rain made things better, made her feel safe. She wanted to be safe. She wanted the Werebear to leave, didn’t want to hear his breathing through his thick fangs, didn’t want to listen to the way he subtly sniffed at her. She liked the silence with her Grandpa, but with the Werebear it just made her

more uneasy. Ashley May desperately searched for something to say. She blurted out the first thing that came into her mind.

“Do you know Winnie the Pooh?” she said somewhat sheepishly.

“You know, I could eat you all in maybe three gulps,” said the Werebear

“What?”

The Werebear stopped looking at the rain. He moved his bulk full round Ashley May, blocking out her view again. When he spoke, his voice was still deep, but had an edge to it.

“I said, ‘I could eat you all in maybe three gulps.’ Shall we find out?”

“You said you wouldn’t eat me!” cried Little Ashley May Rue.

The Werebear laughed and it was not a nice laugh.

“I said no such thing. I never answered you. I was walking away when you stopped me. When you invited me in from the rain.”

Ashley May took two quick steps backwards and the Werebear lunged forward positioning his snout an inch away from her nose. “Going somewhere, young miss?”

Ashley May tried not to cry. She said the only thing she could think of to save herself.

“Do you like babies?”

“What?!” growled the Werebear.

“Do you like babies?” repeated Little Ashley May Rue.

The Werebear nodded slowly. “Of course. Babies taste best. So soft and tender. One big bite.” He clamped down his jaws to show Ashley May just how he would eat one.

“My brother...my baby brother. He’s upstairs.”

“Mmmm-hmmm,” said the Werebear. He turned his nose to the air and sniffed hard twice. “Yes, yes he is.”

“You could take him – instead of me.”

“I could,” said the Werebear.

“He tastes better than me.” Ashley May’s voice was small and cold.

“Why shouldn’t I take you both?” asked the Werebear.

“Because I have the key to the door to the house,” said Little Ashley May Rue. “It’s metal and you can’t break it down.”

“Can’t I?” scoffed the Werebear.

“No, you can’t,” said Ashley May. “At least not without making a lot of noise and attracting attention.”

The Werebear nodded. “All right. You open the door for me. And I won’t eat you. But I want to hear you say it again.”

“Say what?”

“Say, you want me to eat your little baby brother and not you. Say it for me again.”

His snout was right next to her cheek and Ashley May could feel the Werebear’s breath, wet and foul.

“You promise you won’t eat me? For real this time?” Ashley May said.

“I promise,” said the Werebear. “For real, I promise.”

“My brother,” Ashley May whimpered. “I choose my baby brother. Eat him.”

The Werebear laughed his dark, edgy laugh again. He didn’t rub his belly. “Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Little Ashley May Rue reached into the pocket of her shorts – the denim ones with the SpongeBob face on both back pockets – and pulled out a small key. Her breathing was shallow and fast and she tried to slow it. She stepped to the door, placed the key in the lock and turned it. She felt an almost instant relief.

“There,” she said, stepping aside.

The Werebear brushed passed her and placed his paws on the door. A smile, if you could call it that, played on his snout. The Werebear didn't normally go out of his way to be cruel, but he didn't like this little girl very much. He couldn't quite help himself.

"You know," he said in his thick, smoky voice, "it's really too bad your Daddy's gone and left you here all alone."

Ashley May swallowed hard and said what she said to all the others – to the mailman, to the social worker, to the man selling cable TV.

"I said my Daddy was dead. I didn't say he was gone."

She heard the door to the house open and covered her ears as the Werebear growled in agony, his roar echoing like thunder in the garage before trailing off into whimpers and the limp scratching of claws on concrete as he was pulled into the house.

Little Ashley May Rue still very much loved her Daddy, but she hated to watch him feed.

She turned her back and forced herself to focus on the downpour, the way her Grandpa taught her, and thought of nothing till everything just drifted away.

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