

# jersey devil press



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# **Jersey Devil Press**

November 2009, Issue 2

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## **Editor's Note: The Inadvertent Sister Issue**

Howdy. Welcome to the second awe-inspiring issue of Jersey Devil Press. In completely accidental celebration of the impending family-togetherness of Thanksgiving, we're bringing you seven fantastic pieces of fiction, all relating to sisters. Well, OK, only Meg Tuite's "Sister" and Julie Brown's "Foreign Exchange" actually deal with sisters in the sibling sense, but Sonny James Traylor's "Of Seagulls and Fishes" and Milan Smith's "Exodus" both feature other kinds of sisters. "English Degree," by Ryan Werner, is about an industry my sister at least once threatened to become a part of. Tom Mahony's "Thinking Man's Metal" was read by Monica Rodriguez, who has a sister. And I totally thought "Bound," by Richard Radford, used the word sister. It doesn't, actually, but you'll probably think it did, too, after you read it.

So, yeah. Sisters. They're awesome.

Maybe we should have just called this the Stretching Rationalizations for the Sake of a Vaguely Cohesive Intro Issue.

-- Eirik Gumeny

## Sister

Meg Tuite

When I actually got my own room I always kept the door closed. It wasn't like there was anything actually happening in there—I was usually reading—but the thought that something could or might be happening at any moment in my room made it a necessity to keep the door closed and everyone else out and wondering.

One afternoon I was lying on my bed reading a book that promised to launch me out of this reality into a place far, far away, when there was a knock at the door. It wasn't exactly a knock so much as a cautious little tap. In other words, it was my mother. I let her stand out there for a while before I opened the door. I was fifteen, after all, and if something was happening in my room I had to give myself time to hide whatever it was I wasn't doing, and give her time to conjure up the worst of worst fears about what I could have been doing. I slammed drawers, closed my closet and opened the window before opening the door.

"What," I said. It was my standard opening.

My mother stood before me with a shoebox in her hands. She appeared more frightened than usual. Her eyes blinked rapidly like she'd just been hit. Her mouth was barely a mouth, shaky and wafer-sliced and shriveled. Her tongue flickered over chapped lips.

"Help me," she said.

"What," I said.

"Help me," she said. Her hands were shaking.

"It's your sister," she said.

She handed me the box. I took it in my two hands, held it in front of me and stared down at it.

"I give up," she said. She turned and went back down the stairs. I watched her go. Then I closed my door, sat down on the floor with my back against the bed, and opened the box.

My sister was eighteen. I had two other sisters, but I knew which one my mother was talking about. Stephanie. No one in the family stirred up more frenzy. Sometimes she let me be around her and study her up close. One day after school she came home with a nickel bag of pot. She took me by the hand up to the attic, and said, "Let's smoke it all. Now." I did whatever she said. We sat across from each other on a window seat that looked out over the backyard and the alley beyond, and rolled joint after joint. Then we lit them up, one after another, and smoked and smoked and smoked every last one of them. I remember my mom coming up to the attic at some point and yelling at us. I don't know how many hours we were up there. All I could do was laugh my ass off while Stephanie talked. She ignored my mother and eventually my mother went away, as usual, while Stephanie kept right on telling stories. My sister didn't talk like anyone else. She was either a genius or a lunatic, I couldn't tell, but she had her own special language like no one I'd ever heard before. She'd say things like, "That girl was the tallest building I ever lived in," or after a date with some guy, she'd say, "I invaded the miserable casualty until he was a cornucopia of brazen limbs." I remember that line because I had to look up the words "cornucopia" and "brazen" after she was gone. I never quite knew what she meant, but I was sure it was something good. After she totaled my dad's mid-life crisis Spider-man sports car, she actually quoted from her favorite

writer, Djuna Barnes, while my dad beat the shit out of her. She stared him straight in his veined, purpled face and yelled, "Looking down the barrel of your eye, I see the body of a Bloody Cinderella come whirling up!"

I loved Stephanie. She was translucent and mad. She could say or do anything and no one broke her down. Not even our dad, and I was scared shitless of him. She wasn't. She stood up to him like some kind of hardcore warrior and I swear I could almost see a black cape flung across her back with her hands on her hips whenever she came into a room, daring my dad to trample her.

I could be trampled. I was sickly thin and pregnant with terror. My dad would lift his hand anywhere in my vicinity and I would crouch in horror and go spasmodic. I had a few friends at school who were no different. They would dare me to do stupid things like throw rocks through a revolving door into a store or tell this mean-ass teacher who had greasy, blonde hair, that the wet-head was dead. I did anything they asked me to do just to be in their group. Desperation couldn't be hidden. They saw it on me plain as my face. I followed them around like a dog begging for a kick.

Stephanie was of a different breed. She was the innovator. Everyone filed in behind her like she was the pied piper and I got in that line whenever I could. But she kicked me in the ass just like everybody else. When she was dangerous, she was ruthless. She beat me over the head with one of those miniature baseball bats they hand out at baseball games just because I wore a pair of her shoes one day. I wasn't a complete wimp, though. I'd bide my time and plan a counterattack whenever things had gone too far and it was needed. I would allow a certain period of time to pass after she'd nailed me for something. When she was way past the stage of suspicion, which could sometimes last up to a couple of weeks, I'd set my trap. I'd wait until the parents were out and

Stephanie was lying on the couch all comfortable with her feet up, reading a book or passing out. I'd stock the bathroom with peanut butter sandwiches, Kool-Aid, and some books. I'd make sure I was well supplied and able to survive until one of my parents returned, preferably my dad. She had these long, precious brown pigtails she cherished that I wanted to chop off, but I knew my dad would kill me if I did, so I knew I had to damage her, without permanent damage to myself. I would sneak up on her from behind when she was finally falling asleep and punch her in the face and yank that damn, stupid pigtail as hard as I could and run like hell. She'd jump up screeching and flailing to get at me, but it was too late. I'd race up those stairs three at a time with her close on my ass, screaming for blood, but I always got in there and locked that door before her body slammed against it. She'd pound for a while, and wail and tell me how she was going to kill me when I got out, because I couldn't stay in there forever. My heart would pump with her threats, just thinking of having to face her again. When our dad got home he'd tell her to shut up and leave me alone. That was the good thing about not being Stephanie. She always took the crap from our parents whenever she tried to tattle on any of us.

But I always got it back. At night she'd sneak into my room and smother me with a pillow or pound me with her fist or ravage me with an Indian rub till I was sobbing. I never got the last word, but knew I had to try.

I stared at the open shoebox and remembered the only other time I had seen my mother with that same ghoulish look on her face. It was about six months earlier. I heard screaming and yelling coming from the kitchen. It was Stephanie and my mother badgering each other, which wasn't unusual, so I didn't focus in right away. Then I heard strange words coming out of Stephanie, which also wasn't unusual, except those specific words suddenly held me captive.

“You’re damn right I’m a lesbian, and proud of it, bitch! So what are you going to do, throw me out?” Stephanie was threatening my mom.

“I’m going to tell your sisters! How would you like that? I’m going to go in there and gather them round and tell them just who and what you are. We’ll see what they think of you then,” my mom spat out.

I was the only sister home at the time. It was a Saturday night and Stephanie was drunk, but looked scared when our mom called me into the kitchen. I was scared too. I thought I knew what a lesbian was, but wasn’t sure.

“Your sister Stephanie is a freak! She has sex with her girlfriend Alexandra on those little overnights they do together. She’s what they call a lesbian—obviously not normal like the rest of us. What do you think of that?” my mom demanded of me. She studied my face to see which way I’d go.

“But then, look at you! Maybe you’ll be one of them too, following your sister around the way you do. Maybe you’re just another freak like her,” my mom screeched.

I had never seen my mom like this before. She would yell at us when we got home late or stole her cigarettes or money, but I’d never seen her so outraged. She scared the hell out of me. This was another part of her that didn’t show its ugly face much. This was more like my dad’s ugly face. I looked at Stephanie and she was different also. Her eyes were wild and they volleyed back and forth between my mom and me. The warrior was no longer the warrior. She was just like me, but then she wasn’t. I wanted to study her, but there was no time. My mom was waiting and she was waiting, and I didn’t know what to say.

I started to cry. I looked at my mom and sputtered, “She’s my big sister and I love her and she can do anything she damn well wants, so leave her alone.” Then I ran out of the room and slammed my bedroom door.

And now here I was sitting in my room with this shoebox open in my lap, staring into the abyss of a new sister again—another one I didn't know. The box was full of strange women's credit cards and driver's licenses—hundreds of them. Where the hell had she gotten them? I lined up some of the cards, studied their faces and checked out their ages. There were blondes, brunettes, redheads, anywhere from 25 to 50 years old. What was I supposed to do with all these anonymous women? Apparently Stephanie had multiple, strange faces, just like her vocabulary. She really was some bad-ass criminal. She had always terrified me before, but now I was in awe of her. I put the box under my bed for a few days and didn't speak with Stephanie or my mother. It didn't seem like either of them noticed. I studied Stephanie at dinner or whenever she was around to see if I could find some sinister smirk or nervous tic that I hadn't seen before, but she appeared indifferent to any searing gaze I cut into her. How come she didn't notice the box was missing, and why the hell had she kept it around for my mom to find if she was such a genius?

I let myself wait until I knew what was expected of a warrior. One day I took the box out to the backyard when no one was around and got a shovel from the garage and started to dig. I just made sure the hole I dug wasn't next to our dead German Shepherd, Clem.

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## Foreign Exchange

Julie Brown

My sister has always had ridiculous good luck. It's become an inside joke in my family, though, to me, it's not really a joke so much as a long-running sitcom past its prime.

There is nothing creative about harboring jealousy in relation to one's sister. Believe me, I know. The lack of originality is, quite frankly, embarrassing. But you'd be jealous, too, if your only sister were beautiful, charming, witty and has led such a blessed existence that, when she eventually drops dead at the ripe old age of 97 (she won't look a day over 62), her heart will simply stop beating while she slumbers in the muscled arms of her middle-aged trophy husband. She'll have on a full face of makeup and she will most certainly not have drooled on herself. I've thought about my own death more than is generally accepted as healthy, and, while there have been wild variations in the cause, three details remain constant: humiliation, bodily fluids, and a crowd of horrified onlookers.

Naturally, I suppress these thoughts whenever we're together. Some days, it's a mindless exercise. Others, it's a game of Whack-a-Mole™ that I have no chance of winning, a rigged exercise in frustration. Today, I've only been in her presence for eight minutes: thus, the level of difficulty has yet to be determined.

We're sitting across from each other, waiting for the barista to call out our orders. It's 8:28 on a Saturday morning. I've got sand under my eyelids, bumper cars in my skull and a stubborn coating of bottom-shelf gin on my tongue. Meanwhile, my sister's freshly-shampooed hair gives off a faint whiff of

coconuts every time she shakes it out of her eyes, which is approximately every fourteen seconds because her side-swept bangs are always sliding down over her brow in a cute 'n' sexy way that mine do not.

"So." She's got one of those sad, leftover smiles on her face, the kind you see on people after they drop someone off at the airport. The kind on Elaine Robinson's face in that last scene on the bus in *The Graduate*. "Thanks for meeting me. I didn't mean to wake you."

"No problem," I rasp, fingernails tapping out a nervous rhythm on the laminate tabletop, every cell in my body desperate for caffeine. "What's up?"

"Well," she begins, "you know that Dave and I have been having problems recently." I don't know, actually, but I nod anyway. Dave is the kind of guy who plays ultimate Frisbee and bakes zucchini bread and who seems to have wandered straight out of an REI window display. "We agreed to go to couples therapy a few months ago, and, initially, it was going well... Dave said it was probably just a rough patch and that everything would be fine..."

"Double espresso and mocha latte!"

Her face brightens. "That's us! I'll get it," she says, touching my arm before gliding over to the counter.

What kind of problems could they possibly have been having? Did Dave forget to make the bed in the mornings? Had he been working too much? Were they arguing over the Netflix queue? I try to remember if my mother mentioned anything to me about it, but nothing surfaces.

"Thanks," I mumble as she slides the espresso toward me. Slightly vivified after the first sip, I say, "So, Dave said it was probably a rough patch..." as if willing her to continue.

“Right.” She dabs at her foamy upper lip with her napkin with the same care she uses to apply lip gloss. “That’s what we both thought at first. Unfortunately, things didn’t work out.”

*Things didn’t work out.* Had they actually broken up? I suppose it isn’t a terribly upsetting notion; I mean, it’s not like she won’t find someone else just as handsome and solid in a few months if she feels like it. She’s got symmetrical breasts and a laugh that isn’t accompanied by a persistent snort. She’s got options.

I swallow my unbecoming jealousy with a mouthful of burning caffeine, a punishment of sorts. “What do you mean?”

“It wasn’t a rough patch. I realized I just wasn’t happy. I was bored.” She shrugs as if to say, “These things happen.”

Twenty seconds ago I hadn’t felt especially invested in the outcome of my sister’s love life; I already knew she was going to live happily ever after, the question was only with whom and when. But that shrug—it *stung*. Sure, Dave wasn’t my cup of tea, but her blasé attitude about the end of the relationship seemed inappropriate at best. Didn’t she know that some people weren’t as lucky as she was?

Of course she didn’t. This point had been illustrated many times, in many ways, over the years, as she had attempted to help me with my regrettable lack of a steady boyfriend, as though I could saunter up and hit on that scruffily handsome guy who I’ve spotted at the newsstand the past twenty-six mornings, always wearing the same green hoodie, buying a copy of the paper and, weirdly, a pack of Juicy Fruit. He must really love gum.

My sister has always suggested, in complete earnestness, that I orchestrate ridiculous “meet-cute” scenarios in order to meet someone, like waiting around the corner until he’s approaching the newsstand, then reaching for the Juicy Fruit

at the same time he does. Then we'll catch each other's eye, laugh, and apologize, holding our gaze just a bit longer than is polite. He'll say, "You live around here?" I'll say, "Yeah, just up the street...You?" One of us will suggest getting a cup of fair-trade coffee, and then, a few mornings later, we'll end up in a tangle of sweat-drenched sheets in his loft with its exposed brick, hardwoods and framed cult movie posters. He'll trace his finger over my lips and murmur, "You were amazing."

This is the kind of thing that happens to her. She can't imagine that it isn't so easy for anyone else, particularly her older sister. I mean, we're related. How could we be so far removed from one another's realities? It's like I'm a foreign exchange student who was raised by a completely different family on another continent and, despite her best efforts to assimilate me into her culture, I never quite fit. I've got unfinished edges, weird shoes, an uncomfortable way with an idiom.

*Things didn't work out.*

It used to flatter me that she assumed that I could exist in the world as she does, like it meant that, at least in her eyes, we were on the same level. It gave me a comfortable nest of false hope to settle into, a belief that, one day, I'd blossom into the sister she should have logically gotten. Now it just felt like being poked by a splinter that, no matter how I tried, I couldn't remove.

"You woke me up at 7:45 on a Saturday morning to tell me that?" I finally retort.

She looks down into her cup, as though she's been caught ogling a stranger on the street. Guilt prods me back into my role as supportive sister—whether out of habit or a genuine impulse, I'm not sure. I mutter an apology.

"I slept with someone else," she blurts out. "I don't know why I did it. Maybe I needed to give Dave a reason to move on. He didn't want to accept the fact that I could just fall out of love with him, you know?"

As the meaning of her words register, a whirlwind of ugly, cruel, angry thoughts gather in my head, compete for space: I know that, despite my best efforts, one of them is going to make a break for it. I clench my jaw, set my tongue against the roof of my mouth, creating a physical barrier to hold it in.

*What the hell were you thinking Dave is such a great guy that's a disgusting thing to do to someone you should be ashamed of yourself you always get what you want anyway so don't lose any sleep over it I hope you're happy with what you've done don't expect me to feel sorry for you I'm embarrassed to call you my sister slut tramp bitch whore don't you know how lucky you are.*

I catch a glimpse of my reflection in a mirror across the room, and, though nothing is uttered or hissed or screamed, realize it doesn't matter because every word of it is scrawled across my face in the frantic hand of the self-righteous. She knows what I'm thinking, partly because I'm a terrible liar and partly because she's my sister.

Her usual expression of mild beatification has been replaced by creases of worry, regret, around her eyes and forehead. She is heartbreakingly human, ordinary and fallible, as she sits across the table from me. I notice that she's even missed the tiniest bit of foam at the left corner of her mouth. There's one gray hair, wiry and incongruous, peeking out from her temple. She's thinner, tired. A flash of recognition tugs at my features like an impatient child, coaxing a smile.

It doesn't matter. She's still beautiful. She's still my sister.

I reach across and rest my hand on hers. "It's going to be okay," I say with the certainty that applies to laws of physics, biology. "Sometimes things don't work out."

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## Of Seagulls and Fishes

Sonny James Traylor

John Finnerty was sinking to the bottom of the ocean. He could see the light at the surface grow dimmer as the fathoms swallowed him. The face of God stared down through the water, and God's lips were moving. It took a long time for the sound to get to him.

"...three ...four ...five," the voice spoke. Eons passed between each number. The counting was horrible.

Then God sounded like a woman.

"Get up and fight you lazy, Irish bum!" she screamed.

That's when Finnerty remembered he wasn't in the ocean—he was in a boxing ring. More accurately, he was on the canvas in a boxing ring. Carl Steadman put him there with a savage right hook.

"You must have walked into that one, Johnny," he said to himself. At first, his legs didn't want to move, so he grabbed the ropes and pulled himself up with his arms. His knees didn't buckle and he could see vague shapes through the blood that spilled into his eyes—shadows and blurs.

"Just keep punchin,'" he thought as he charged back in with his chin tucked and his nostrils flared.

Johnny landed a solid jab and then another. He dug hard to the body and rocked Steadman with a vicious uppercut that dropped the big man to a knee. The standing eight count was in effect, and Steadman tried to shake the stars out of his head, but you could tell there was nothing behind his eyes anymore. Johnny came in for the kill, and Steadman tied up his arms. The referee broke

the clench, and Johnny came right back with a hard left to the body and then leveled Steadman with a textbook right cross.

Anything seemed possible as he stood and watched the ref count the big man out. If he could stay away from the bars and string together a few more wins, maybe he could be a contender again. Maybe he could straighten up his whole act, and his wife and kids would come back to him. Anything seemed possible.

After the fight, the ringside doctor advised Johnny to go to the hospital for observation. The doc suspected he had suffered a concussion, but Johnny didn't want to hear about it. That was his night, and he was right in the middle of Las Vegas. All he wanted was just one night out to celebrate, and, afterwards, he'd get back in the gym to take care of business.

Then it was dark. Johnny wondered if his head was in a vice. An image appeared out of the darkness. It was an empty bottle of gin. That image dissolved and another replaced it. This one was of a busty blond in a negligee. The images started to move faster through his mind. A pile of coke in a crystal dish, a busted hand of black jack, a canary yellow Corvette ruined in a ditch, a red head, a brunette, snake eyes staring up from the green felt, tequila slammers lined up on the bar, the ringside doctor, big Carl Steadman sprawled out on the canvas, an old man in a black suit. No other images came to him after the man in the black suit. That one just stuck in his head, wavering in and out of focus. Who is this guy? Then he remembered.

"Oh shit," he said out loud.

"That's the understatement of the year, Johnny," a voice said from the other side of the darkness. Johnny opened his eyes. The old man in the black suit was sitting in a leather chair across from him. There were two big guys on either side of the old man.

"Mr. Adrianni, I don't know what happened. I walked into the punch just like we talked about," Johnny said.

"But you didn't stay down just like we talked about, did you?" Adrianni asked.

"I forgot. I got knocked down and I forgot everything."

"Let me refresh your memory, Johnny. You owed me one hundred and twelve thousand dollars. You couldn't come up with the money, but I'm a reasonable man. A business man, Johnny."

"Mr. Adrianni, if you just let me explain. . ."

"Don't talk, Johnny. We had an arrangement. I cancel the debt if you take the dive. Do you know how much money you cost me?"

"I can make it right. I swear on my mother's grave I can make it right."

"You already had your chance to make it right."

"Mr. Adrianni, you're a reasonable man. You said it yourself—you're a business man. I can't pay the hundred and twelve large if I'm in a hole in the ground."

"That figure is somewhat outdated now," Adrianni informed him.

"There's the additional loss of the wager I placed on Steadman. Then you have to consider that he was a two to one underdog, so there's also the profit I never made that would have paid double. That's a lot of money, Johnny. More than you'll ever see in a life time. And what about the other bosses who were in on it? The Kansas City guys, and the Pittsburgh guys, and the New York guys were all in on this thing. I'm gonna have to answer to them, Johnny."

"Mr. Adrianni, I wasn't thinkin' right. That big son of a bitch almost took my head off my shoulders. I thought I was drowning, for Christ's sake. Then all I remembered was I was in a boxing match. I just thought to get up and fight."

"I believe you, I really do. But business is business. I can't change the way things are."

That was it. John Finnerty was as good as dead.

"Are you gonna go peacefully, Johnny? Because if we have to, we'll do this right here in the hotel and cut you up and carry you out in suitcases," Adrianni said.

"I'll go peacefully," Johnny said.

The two big guys walked Johnny out through the back, and a black Cadillac pulled up immediately. It was night. They quickly bound his hands and feet with zip ties and duct taped his mouth.

One of the goons picked him up off of his feet and threw him in the trunk of the car like luggage. Darkness enveloped him and the sounds from the Vegas strip were reduced to whispers. The engine started, and the car began to move, and he could hear the tires hum on the pavement. Whenever the big Caddy stopped for a light, inertia would paw him forward and back again like a sadistic cat toying with a mouse. After a while the stops became less frequent until there were no stops at all—just the steady hum of the tires.

Johnny wondered if they had a hole dug for him out in the desert. Then he remembered a conversation he overheard between a couple of low level wise guys in a Brooklyn after-hours joint a few years earlier. They were both drunk, and they were chopping up big lines and snorting them right off the bar.

"You never want to bury anyone in the desert," one of the wise guys lectured. "It's too dry there. Preserves the body like a fuckin' mummy. The best thing to do is to get in good with a guy who owns a funeral home. You just cremate the body and dump the ashes in Central Park."

"And what if you don't know someone who runs a funeral home?" the other one asked.

“Then it gets a whole lot messier. Burning is good, but you still have to crush up the big bones with a sledge hammer. And you have to remember to pull the teeth and dispose of those too.”

“What the fuck you gotta pull out his teeth for?”

“They can identify a body by the teeth, fuckhead.”

“No shit.”

“Water works good, too,” the wiser of the two wise guys continued.

“Deep lakes, or way out in the ocean is best. Weight that son of a bitch down real good, and the fishes will take care of the rest.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. They’ll eat that mother fucker’s eyes right out of his skull.”

Johnny tried not to think about it, but the thoughts rushed into his mind like cold sea water through a cracked hull. A broken marriage, twin boys with no father, and a promising boxing career squandered. He pissed it all away, and there was only Hell to look forward to.

A memory of his third grade teacher, Sister Mary, bubbled up to the surface. She was standing in front of the class, hunched over and frail, holding a yard stick with her claw hand. She called young Johnny up to the front of the class. He clutched a piece of paper in his right hand, trying to squeeze it out of existence.

“Open your hand,” Sister Mary said. Johnny opened his hand and she snatched the crumpled piece of paper with seemingly inhuman speed. She smoothed out the paper and took a moment to consider the image. It was a childish drawing of a naked woman with large circles for tits and a shaded-in triangle for a bush.

“Did you draw this picture, Mr. Finnerty?”

“Yes, Sister,” Johnny lied. Frank Terreta was the actual artist, but he was three years older and thirty pounds heavier than Johnny. It was better to keep Frank out of it.

“Drop your pants, Mr. Finnerty. Hands up against the chalkboard.”

Sister Mary doled out ten lashes with the yard stick. Her arm swung mechanically, indifferently like a metronome, and her eyes seemed not to see, as if they were dead. But there was something burning behind those eyes—something demonic, and the other boys in the class saw this and they were afraid to even snicker.

“Does it burn, Mr. Finnerty?” Sister Mary asked when the beating was over.

“Yes, Sister.”

“Imagine your whole body burning like that. Imagine enduring that for all of eternity because, if you don't start being a good boy, that is what Hell will feel like as your immortal soul burns in flames.” Johnny didn't say anything. He was trembling.

“Pull your pants up, and go stand in the corner facing the wall. I don't suppose you feel much like sitting anyway, do you Mr. Finnerty?”

“No, Sister.”

Johnny left two sweaty palm prints on the chalkboard, and Sister Mary was careful not to disturb them as she wrote out the rest of the lesson's long division problems.

In the dark trunk of the big Caddy, Johnny thought long and hard about Hell. Was it a real place? Was there really a guy with a pitchfork and horns? He thought he could feel the sting of the yard stick just like he had felt it twenty-some years earlier, except this time it was spreading down his legs and up his

back. For a moment, Johnny really believed he was in Hell and flames were consuming him.

“You're imaging this, Johnny,” he said to himself. “Maybe you took some bad acid, or maybe you took one too many punches to the head, but this isn't real.”

After what seemed like a long time, the burning subsided. During the terrible hallucination, a layer of slime-sweat oozed out of his pores and coated his body. It smelled like cheap gin. All the sweating caused the duct tape to slip away from his mouth, and Johnny gulped in big breaths of air. He felt better then, like he could think.

The steady hum of the tires droned on and Johnny said to himself, “They're not gonna serve you milk and cookies when we get to wherever it is we're goin', so you better think of somethin.’” And then it occurred to him that he had his gold plated Zippo in his back pocket. He fished for the lighter for a long time before he finally secured it between his thumb and index finger. It was awkward, but he was able to flip open the lid and strike the wheel mechanism that sparked the flint. Johnny couldn't see what he was doing, and he smoldered flesh as well as plastic, and his thoughts returned to Hell. Finally, the zip tie burned free. He melted the tie that bound his ankles, and then he held the lighter up and searched around the confines of the trunk.

It didn't take Johnny long to find what he was looking for. Tucked neatly away behind the spare was a hefty tire iron. He held it in his hands and it felt good, like it meant business. He lay on his back and clutched the tire iron close to his chest. He lay very still and waited. After an hour or so, the Caddy came to a stop and the engine shut off. Johnny listened as the gas tank drank up gallons of fuel. He guessed they were at a safe house rather than a regular gas station,

maybe in somebody's garage, or barn. A few minutes went by, and the engine was stoked back to life, and the steady hum of the tires filled his ears.

When the big Caddy finally stopped again, Johnny figured they had driven a total of six or seven hours on an open road. His math wasn't good, but he knew that was a lot of miles. He could very well be in Utah, or California, or Arizona by now. The car started to move again, but there were several more stops and a series of turns, and Johnny knew it was almost time. Finally, the Caddy came to a halt and the engine shut off. He thought he could hear seagulls. The car shifted as the goons filed out, and the shocks sighed as if relieved to be free of their ponderous bulk. Johnny heard the key turn in the lock mechanism on the trunk, and he thrust his feet upward, kicking the lid open like a cork rocketing out of a champagne bottle on New Year's Eve.

It caught one of the goons right under the chin, and the concussive force rattled his brain hard enough to knock him out before he even hit the ground. Johnny sprung out of the trunk like a rabid, life size jack-in-the box and caught another goon on the temple with the heavy end of the tire iron. He turned quickly and snapped a straight left jab into the driver's nose, but the guy had already drawn his .38, and he emptied the cylinder as he fell backwards on his fat ass.

One of the rounds hit Johnny in the gut, and he crumpled to the ground. Getting gut-shot doesn't happen the way it does in one of those Spaghetti Westerns. The lead turns your insides to ground chuck, and there's no hopping on your horse and riding off into the sunset.

When Johnny came to, he was looking up into the bluest sky he'd ever seen. There were angels circling above him in that vast expanse, and he could hear

them calling out to him in their strange and beautiful song, welcoming him into Heaven.

"I made it," Johnny spoke in a whisper. "See, Sister Mary, I'm a good boy."

"Fuckin' guy is still alive," one goon spoke through his bleeding mouth. He spit out a tooth and put it in his pocket.

"He's a tough son of a bitch, that's for sure," the other one said. He had a handkerchief packed into one of his nostrils. "Come on, give me a hand with him."

One goon grabbed him by the feet and the other got him by the hair. Johnny was wrapped in heavy chains and they strained to pick him up off the deck of the boat. They counted to three and heaved him over the rail. There was a splash, and Johnny saw that the angels were receding. He rolled gently, and then he was facing down into the dark fathoms—pressure building in his ears.

Johnny could make out something vague and sinister moving in the depths beneath him. The thing moved closer and he saw that it had a fishlike head that grew out of a human body—a mermaid in reverse. The body was naked, emaciated, and covered in barnacles.

Suddenly the thing closed in on him with tremendous speed and wrapped its bony arms and legs around Johnny with crushing force. The remaining air in his lungs escaped in a frenzy of bubbles.

The thing gazed at Johnny's face the way a passionate lover might, and he saw into its eyes. They seemed almost dead, but there was something smoldering behind them—something primitive and evil. Something familiar.

The horrible fish head opened its mouth and a sustained, guttural tone resonated through the cold water. The sound began to vary in pitch before

fragmenting into a series of strange syllables. Johnny realized it was trying to speak.

“I thought I told you to be a good boy, Mister Finnerty,” the thing hissed and gurgled. “I did my best for you, but you're a bad boy. A very bad boy.”

**SONNY JAMES TRAYLOR** has recently appeared on *The Drabblecast* (episode 116), and in *Robot Melon* (ninth edition). He has also dabbled in journalism and poetry. Irvine Welsh and Charles Bukowski are his literary heroes. Louise Erdrich and Eric Hoffer are also major influences. He likes to ride motorcycles and write short stories in his spare time. When he needs money, he works as a longshoreman on the Lake Erie Port of Cleveland.

## English Degree

Ryan Werner

I wrote the script for *A Midsummer's Wet Dream* a week after I got fired from the gas station and a month before I graduated college. I got drunk and sent it to the first adult video company that came up on the internet. Two weeks later I got a check for \$175. The day before I graduated college, I got a copy in the mail. I applied at the Adult Warehouse in the next town over and got the job.

Graveyard shift.

The clientele were nice. Not in the same ways that a glass of water or a nap are nice, but in the sorts of ways that make them socially upstanding within the context of a store that sells dildos. Virtuous people were everywhere, and I'd take notes on the inside of cigarette cartons as Ms. Asian-Woman-Buying-Imitation-Astro-Glide-In-Bulk told me what makes her feel sexy. She'd leave knowing that it's all for her when the typically demure Ishokino turns to the strong American Buck in *Cumzilla* and says, "Bring your white to my face." My parents told everyone I was in the self-esteem business.

I eventually quit and moved to L.A. Lots of people do it, I realize that, but most of them end up involved with sex on tape only after trying to be in the real movies or on television. I just wanted to see how many different ways I could sneak twenty minutes of story between two hours of fucking. I did the parody circuit at first: *Men In Black Men*, *Fellatio Gump*, *Schindler's Lust*. I did *Gummed With the Wind* and *Jurassic Pork* for the nursing home crowd. The studios kept buying. I was doubling up on my student loan payments. I bet they don't teach how to write a cumshot in MFA workshops. Not on purpose, anyways.

*Fucktasia* moved me away from just writing. I wasn't producing with names or anything—just amateurs who wanted to take a chance—but I was producing. I got calls from studios wanting me to come in and tell them how to shoot the reverse-cowgirl position. I even kept getting calls from home, mainly curious ones that stopped more than they ended.

"Are you eating well?"

"Yeah, Mom. One of the girls made me chili the other day."

My parents have an old phone, and I could hear Mom twist the cord around her finger.

"Is she clean?"

"Well, she didn't make it with her cunt, if that's what you mean."

She handed the phone off to Dad, and only when she was out of the room did I say, "Hey Dad, did you see *Fucktasia*?" But I know they don't care about that sort of thing. The sex, maybe, but not the craft. Most people are like that. Consciously, at least. If someone happened to look, he could see the wrench as Chekhov's gun in *Ballcock* or hear Carver's dialogue in the Vixen Vampire series. When the storm hit the dejected leading man right before the three-way in *Mother Nature's Muddy Fields*, he could see *King Lear's* pathetic fallacy, and know.

**RYAN WERNER** has got a body built for sin and an appetite for passion.

## Thinking Man's Metal

Tom Mahony

The plan was to sneak me into the Iron Maiden concert. I had no ticket and the concert was sold out. Joey worked concession at the amphitheater and had inside connections. We paced his garage, plotting and scheming. We hatched scenarios and scrutinized them and scrubbed away the bad stuff until one option remained.

"You hide in the back of my truck while I drive into the employee parking lot," Joey said.

"And then what?"

"I walk to my concession stand. You wait in the truck until the show starts, slip through the parking lot, and you're in. Easy as that."

I hesitated. It sounded simple enough. But nothing was ever simple with Joey involved.

"What if I get caught? I heard the security guards brutalize trespassers. Smitty's brother used to work there. He said they beat kids all the time."

Joey waved dismissively. "Once in a while."

"Once in a while?"

"So they bitch-slap you a few times. What's the big deal? It's Maiden, man. One night only. Sold out. This could be your only chance to see them. Ever. Who knows if they'll tour again?"

I hesitated. Fear versus history.

"Fine," I said. "I'm in."

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Joey picked me up in his truck the next evening. We drove to the amphitheater. Joey chattered away. I nodded nervously, sick with fear. But it was Maiden, thinking-man's metal. I had to do it.

As we neared the place, Joey pulled over and I hopped into the bed of the truck, covered with a mini camper shell and lined with storage compartments. I wedged into a cramped and sweltering compartment. It seemed to take hours to drive a couple of miles.

The truck slowed and stopped. I heard voices, probably the security checkpoint to the employee parking lot. I held my breath. The truck shifted into gear and accelerated. I exhaled in relief.

A minute later the truck stopped, the engine died.

"All clear," Joey said.

I poked my head out of the compartment. "We're in?"

"Yeah. Just stay here until the opening band is finished and Maiden takes the stage. There's a gate over there with a security guard." He nodded vaguely across the lot. "The guard should leave when the main event starts. Walk through the gate and you're home free."

"Okay."

Joey walked off.

The opening band started playing. I sat in the truck listening to the distant rumble. The set ended and the place went quiet again. The minutes crawled along. Agonizing. Unbearable.

Then the amphitheater went dark. The crowd roared, drums started pounding.

Showtime.

I slipped from the truck, crouched down, and searched for guards. All clear.

I trotted through the parking lot. The music thumped in the distance. I longed to be there, just one last obstacle. I saw the gate up ahead. No sign of the guard.

Perfect.

Maiden blasted through their first song. My fear vanished and I surged with anticipation. I had visions of front row seating, multiple encores, gorgeous heavy metal tramps whored-up in full concert regalia. Maybe, just maybe, I'd score more than a free concert this evening.

Almost there. Twenty feet. Ten. Five.

As I reached the gate someone grabbed my shirt and yanked me backward.

"What the hell, kid?"

A security guard spun me around and shone a flashlight in my face. I froze.

"You trying to sneak in?"

"No."

"You work here?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

My brain wasn't functioning. I panicked. "No."

"Then what are you doing?"

I shrugged.

"Fess up."

There was no weaseling out of this. I could only beg for clemency.

"Okay, you caught me. But can you cut me a break? It's Maiden."

He lowered the flashlight and fixed me with a cold hard glare.

“C’mon, man,” I pleaded. “What’s the harm? Let me go and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

He kept glaring but in the flashlight glow I saw the first trace of pity in his eyes.

“You must’ve done something like this as a kid,” I said, the groveling coming easier with my desperation. “Let me go, just this once. It’s Maiden. A once in a lifetime experience.”

His face softened. A faint smile spread across his lips, perhaps harkening back to his own halcyon days of concert tomfoolery. Youthful indiscretions. This guy got it. He’d grown older but hadn’t forgotten what it was like back in the day. I felt a burgeoning bro-moment, an intergenerational connection.

A passing of the baton.

The pass was completed by his fist crashing into my jaw. I folded to the ground. He yanked me up by the hair and marched me to the exit gate and shoved me through and slammed it shut.

I trudged home five miles in the dark. There would be no Maiden that night. No gorgeous heavy metal tramps. The pain and disappointment and humiliation might conceivably offer life lessons, broad in scope and crucial to personal evolution. Revelations about responsibility, honesty, better strategic planning. But all I came away with was one insight, narrowly focused, that served me well in later years:

If you want to score heavy metal tramps at a Maiden concert, you have to buy a ticket.

“Thinking Man’s Metal” has previously been published in *Cantaraville* and Tom Mahony’s *Slow Entropy*.

**TOM MAHONY** is a biological consultant in California with an M.S. degree from Humboldt State University. His fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in dozens of online and print publications, including *Surfer Magazine*, *Flashquake*, *The Rose & Thorn*, *Pindelyboz*, *In Posse Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *34<sup>th</sup> Parallel*, *Diddledog*, *Foliate Oak*, and *Decomp*. His short fiction collection, *Slow Entropy*, was published by Thumbscrews Press in 2009. He is looking for a publisher for several novels. Visit him at [tommahony.net](http://tommahony.net).

## Bound

Richard Radford

Bernie Goldstar™ leaned heavily on his cane as he crossed the stage, and by the time he made it to the middle he almost gave in to gravity. The audience was rigid with anticipation. Leaning one hand on the podium, Bernie turned slowly to face them. There were sixty-eight attendees, and his eyes rapidly scanned and assessed. The gangling man in middle, half of his body hanging limply to one side. The androgynous child with the greasy hair and thick glasses being clutched to his mother like a purse. The obese lady in the front row in the wheelchair, and next to her a woman with frizzy hair, Birkenstocks™, and a frown. He let his head sink forward a little towards the microphone.

He waited till the perfect moment—maybe a second or two too long, he decided, but they weren't going to notice—before bolting upright, casting the cane to one side, and making his signature Quantum Bound™ across the stage. It was actually more of a little hop to the right, but judging by the resounding applause and delighted gasps, it worked miraculously. Bernie flashed his smile, and bowed. He waited for the conference room to quiet before speaking.

“Thank you, thank you,” Bernie said, plucking the microphone from the podium and pacing around the stage. “It’s wonderful to see so many faces out there tonight. You all look like you’re ready to change yourself...and the world!” They cheered. “Friends, I am here to tell you that you are about to find out a secret that until tonight, nobody knew.” He nodded to Steven in the back. The room dimmed, and the spotlight above him shone off of his silver hair and gold jewelry. He waited until he was sure all eyes were on him.

“A few years ago, I was just like you,” Bernie said. “I was fearful! I was angry! I was ugly! I was crippled! I was poor!” He waved his hand at the cane laying on the stage. “I gave into my fate, and said there was nothing I could do about it!” He looked up to the ceiling. “I prayed, I begged, I crawled like a dog, blind and stupid! And what happened?” He paused.

“Nothing!” he yelled. “Nothing. I kept myself unhealthy and unsuccessful and unmeaningful.” He looked out among the sea of bobbing shadows. “And then one day, after I just lost another job, my house was foreclosed on, my car was repossessed, and my wife had left me for the mailman, it dawned on me. Somewhere, out there in the cosmos, there must be a better life awaiting me. And suddenly, I discovered something.” He waited while someone finished up with a coughing fit.

“Now, I know what you’re saying,” he added reassuringly. “Bernie, I’m not like you! I’m not a scientist! I’m not an award-winning millionaire speaker! Well, ladies and gentlemen, I’m here to tell you that you’re *wrong*! You are a scientist! You are a millionaire! You are a erudite orator! In another dimension, that is!” Bernie went back to the podium.

“Now, I’m not gonna bore you with the details. For one thing, you probably wouldn’t understand the technical aspects and quantum principles that go into this. For another, I don’t want to put you to sleep,” he said, pretending to nod off and then look up in surprise. “This isn’t a cure for insomnia lecture!” The crowd burst into a torrent of laughter.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, it may surprise you, but until a year ago, I never knew one scientific principle. I thought the sun went around the Earth! I thought that a macro-quantum particulate could not bound from a superpositional state!” The audience mumbled. “I don’t expect you to understand that last one. I’ll break it down for you in a minute. The point is,

until then, I was clueless. And then, using my patented Quantum Bounding System™, I was able to bound into another dimension, one where I met...me!"

A few people actually said "Huh?" or "What?" audibly. Bernie held up a hand.

"I know, I know, I thought I was certifiably insane," he said. "I went to the country's most famous psychiatrists. Some of them thought I was crazy, too. Kind of like the pot calling the kettle black, if you ask me." They remained silent. Too vague, he thought, and reminded himself to cut that joke. "Anywho, I finally went to the last greatest psychiatrist in the country, and he said something very important to me. 'Bernie,' he said, 'what if you're not crazy?'"

"Well, I went home that night, feeling like a bull in a china shop. I sat in my chair, with my cane, and closed my eyes. I repeated the mantra to myself, Another You™, Another You™. And then it happened. I bounded," he said. "And I met...me, again! This was a different me! This was a me who didn't need these...these coarse walking aids! And so I asked him, 'How is it you do not need this cane?' And do you know what he said? 'Look in the Bottom Drawer™, Bernie. It's Quantum Secret #8™.' And so I did. And so I did." He looked around the room, wondering if he had lost them. "When I returned to this dimension, I looked in the bottom drawer of my desk, and what did I find there?" He reached into his breast pocket, and pulled out a tennis ball. "You see, I didn't know that I used to be a tennis pro... in another dimension. That night, instead of sitting around in my house like a bump on a log, I blew the dust off my racket and went out to the nearest court. A month later, and not only had I not touched the cane again... I had won the state championship. And now it's your turn!" he shouted. The ball flew off the stage, and was met with wild clapping.

After the presentation, Bernie made his way through the crowd, who gazed upon him with wonder. There was a long line at the merchandise table, manned by his flunky Steven. They exchanged nods. Bernie smiled. If ten people bought the first volume of CDs of the Quantum Bounding System™, priced at a very reasonable \$59.99, it paid for his trip and hotel room. Any more purchases, and it was all gravy. Already, twenty-two people were lined up, and another fifteen were still struggling to get their brains or bodies functioning enough to stand up. It was likely some of them were bound to bite.

At the front of the line, the obese lady in the wheelchair lolled forward with a wad of wrinkled bills in her hand. The woman in the Birkenstocks™ was hissing out of the side of her mouth.

*"I know it's your money, Nancy, but you don't have to throw it away on this garbage!"* she said. The lady said nothing, and handed the money to Steven, who looked like he had just been given a used tissue. As Bernie was walking towards the exit, the obese lady latched onto his suit jacket with her swollen fingers. He recoiled. She felt her way over to his hand and held it. Her skin felt clammy and cold. Everyone around the table froze, except for the woman in the Birkenstocks™, who scowled at him and shook her head. He put on his best showman's smile.

*"Well, hello there, my dear,"* Bernie said. *"And what is your name?"* The lady's face contorted, and her immense mouth wrapped around the sides of her cheeks. *"Well,"* he said, leaning in close, and tapping the shrink-wrapped box on the table, *"you are certainly on your way to a better life."* He leaned in close and in a stage whisper said, *"Say goodbye to all of your woes. Say Hello to Another You™."* The lady emitted a gurgle, and squeezed Bernie's hand. As delicately as possible, he shook it off like a slug, bowed to the room, and strode out of the door, listening to the unmistakable sound of cash being pulled from wallets.

As he headed down the plush carpeted hallway, he snapped a bottle of Purell™ from his breast pocket. He squirted a large dollop on each palm and rubbed them together furiously. After rounding the corner to the alcove of elevators, he ran his hands along the wall, leaving long streaks on the stucco. The elevator hummed upwards, and he began to feel better. It was all in a day's work, after all. People who weren't revolting didn't need his aid. He applied another round of the Purell™ and smelled his fingers. He loved the stuff. He reminded himself to get a bottle—a small one—for Steven as his bonus for the night.

Back in his room, he took a shower, and put on a new suit from his luggage. He felt refreshed, and whistled as he walked around the room, stopping to admire the poster he had thumbtacked to the wall. It was a picture of him doing a jumping jack in front of a backdrop of stars. Say Hello to Another You™, it said in golden letters.

"Looking good," he told the poster. He went to the window and drew the curtains apart, exposing a landscape of flat, unsightly nickel casinos and strip clubs. The Denny's™ sign across the avenue winked at him. Whistling back through the room, he picked up the telephone book and flipped through the Verizon Superpages™. Running his index finger across the page, he stopped it next to a large advertisement for Angels of the Falls™, the best service in town, as he recalled. He picked up the telephone receiver and dialed the number.

"Hello, this is Bernie Goldstar™, and I would like... ha, ha, yes, that's right, I am a frequent flyer... I'm at the Marriot™. Room 432... no, no, tonight I want something..." he said, waving his hand through the air, "something extra-special. I deserve it. Well... I know. Send me the most expensive escort you have!" He beamed at the poster.

"You take Discover™, right?" he added.

Twenty-five minutes later, the escort arrived, and forty-five minutes later Bernie was once again stepping out of the shower, whistling. He donned another new suit from his luggage, and straightened his tie at the bathroom mirror. The escort they had sent was a black. He wasn't a racist, but he really didn't prefer blacks as much. He reasoned that at an escort service in Sioux Falls would be understandably short of them, however, and so they must be the highest priced. He would have preferred an Asian tonight, he decided, but he knew it was his fault for not being more specific. He splashed some Old Spice™ on his cheeks. Well, black, white, or yellow, he thought, it still feels great to be Bernie Goldstar™.

The escort—who said her name was Xena—was stretched across the bed naked, her nipples erect from the cool air conditioning sweeping through the room.

"I'm sorry, Miss... Xena, but would you mind terribly getting dressed?" Bernie asked.

"Fine," Xena replied, rolling her eyes and slipping on the silver dress that had crumpled on the floor. She began to gather her belongings, but Bernie held up a hand.

"No, no, you shouldn't leave yet," he said. "I just would prefer you to be covered."

"Whatever," she said. "Sugar," she added, a moment later. Bernie tossed a twenty-dollar bill onto her lap to help smooth her ruffled feathers. Xena held it up, then stuffed it into her purse.

"So what you do?" she asked, pointing to the poster. "You a astronaut or something?"

"Ah, no, well, heh heh," Bernie said, sliding onto the comforter next to her. "You see, I am a spiritual scientist."

“A what?”

“I help people when they’ve lost their way,” he said, taking her hand and looking into her eyes.

“Oh yeah? How you do that?”

“Well, it’s complicated, but basically I help them bound through the convoluted paths and avenues of the cosmos, jumping through time and space to find alternative versions of themselves in alternate dimensions, where they, uh, learn to, uh, live again.” Bernie’s eyes shifted to the floor, and Xena looked at him skeptically.

“You for real? Sounds made up.”

“Ah! No, I assure you, it is very real. Why, there’s a dimension out there where Xena is the mayor of Sioux Falls!”

“Ha! OK, sugar, why don’t you jump me?” Xena said, smiling.

“You want to see how it’s done?” Bernie said.

“Give it to me.”

“Well, first you need to sit still and close your eyes.”

“Lemme see you do it,” Xena said.

“Hmmm, OK. Well, see, first I close my eyes, and concentrate on where I might like to travel, what version of myself I would like to bound into. You become at one with the cosmos, you become one with yourselves.” Bernie was silent for a moment, squinting his eyes together.

“You haven’t gone anywhere yet, sugar,” Xena said.

“It’s not like hopping on a bus,” Bernie said. “It’s more like getting on an airplane. Takes a while to get through security. You say to yourself Another Me™, Another Me™... and then, just like that...”

For a sickening moment, Bernie thought he was having a heart attack. It felt like every bone in his body was resonating to the point of shattering. He

tried to scream, but nothing came out of his mouth. He had no tongue, no teeth, no voice. He was being clawed apart, turned inside out.

“Help me, Xena!” he tried to yell.

In moments it was over, and he could feel his heart beating in his chest. He opened his eyes, and looked out across a decrepit sitting room. It was sunny outside, but the room was full of shadows that gathered in the corners and along the stained carpet. Bernie sat in a corner with his cane clutched between his knees, dressed in a dirty jacket and baseball cap. He tried to speak, but no words came out. He couldn't move. He felt bound to the chair, his hands adhered to the cane.

The room had a few other chairs, and two long tables covered with bits of food. There were others there, one mumbling to himself, his hand moving in a repetitive arc in front of him. Another was laughing hysterically at a stuffed animal.

A woman entered the room and walked by Bernie.

“Good morning, Bernie,” the woman said loudly. Bernie tried to speak. He recognized the woman, her frizzy hair and Birkenstocks™, but he couldn't remember from where. Had he slept with her? Was she an old escort? What had happened to Xena?

“He just sits there all day,” the woman whispered to the man in the kitchen at the far end of the room. “Doesn't say a word to anyone. I wish my boyfriend was more like that.” The man laughed.

“How did the outing go, Lila?” the man asked.

“Oh, God, you should have been there,” Lila replied. “It was awful. All that bull about improving yourself by ‘soaring through the cosmos.’ It would have been funny if Nancy hadn't been conned into buying that trash.”

“You let her do that?” the man said. Lila shrugged.

“It’s not my money, Steven. I tried to convince her not to, but it’s not my job to be a parent. There’s a reason I have dogs instead of children. I just made sure she didn’t roll off the curb or get mugged or something.”

Bernie tried to turn his head towards them, but his neck was fused. He was stuck looking at the opposite wall, where a stack of battered Springbok™ puzzles and board games was balanced on top of a stereo.

“OK, everyone!” Steven shouted from the kitchen. “Time to get washed up! Dinner will be on in fifteen minutes. Who wants Manwich™?” No one in the room responded, but the laughing woman laughed harder and began to passionately kiss the stuffed animal.

A lady in an electric wheelchair rolled into view. She stopped at the stereo and pulled a package from her backpack with an unsteady hand.

“Need some help with that, Nancy?” Lila asked. Nancy said nothing, and ripped the cellophane from the box with her teeth. She extracted a CD, and the rest of the packaging slipped from her lap and onto the floor. Bernie could see the cover, a large galaxy with gilded lettering across it. It said “Celestial Traveling™—A Journey to a Better You!™ by the Award-Winning Scientist Luther Stargilt™.”

“Oh Christ!” Steven yelled, running from the kitchen. “I think he’s having a seizure!” Bernie was shaking in his chair, his cane rattling between his legs. After a minute, he stopped quivering. He tried to make eye contact with Steven, who was kneeling by him.

“He’s fine now,” Steven said. Lowering his voice, he added “I think he’d be a lot happier if he kicked the bucket today, though. Guess we would too.” Lila laughed as she pulled out paper plates and plastic utensils from a cabinet.

Across the room, Nancy had finally managed to put the CD in the stereo, and slipped the large headphones over her ears. Bernie saw her face contort with

delight, her eyes pointing up at an angle to the ceiling, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. After a few minutes, she closed her eyes, squinting hard. Her enormous body rippled. She seemed like she was trying to squeeze something out of her, or molt. For another five minutes, Bernie listened to Lila and Steven banging around in the kitchen and making more acerbic comments about the occupants of the room, the cackling woman with the stuffed animal, and the man mumbling and circling his hand over and over.

“Dinner!” Lila barked, and dropped the soggy paper plates around the table. The woman with the stuffed animal got up, and the muttering man followed, his hand continuing its ceaseless revolutions.

Nancy squinted harder, and pressed the headphones to the sides of her head. Suddenly, she opened her eyes, a look of wonder on her face. She took in her surroundings, the beat up furniture, the dirty carpet, the shadows crawling across the room, the cacophony of voices speaking to no one. The wonder disappeared. She looked down at her large, broken body, and then at Bernie, who could do nothing but stare back. Their eyes were locked across the room. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she began to sob with quiet gasps. After a brief pause, she started to howl.

“All right, you two,” Steven ordered. “You better come have your Manwich™ or you won’t get any Jell-O™!”

**RICHARD RADFORD's** fiction has appeared in *The Ampersand Review*, *Pear Noir!*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Hackwriters*, *Hearsay*, and is forthcoming in *A Cappella Zoo* and *Writers' Bloc*. A photograph of him was once inadvertently included in an issue of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. Currently Richard lives in Juneau, Alaska, and can be reached via email at: [raradford@gmail.com](mailto:raradford@gmail.com).

## Exodus

Milan Smith

And so the sun set and the day grew dark, and Brindle turned from the others, who remained in the field, and walked to the barn. And inside the barn the stalls were empty and she was alone. A ray from the setting sun fell through the open door where she had entered, and there was no other light.

And as she waited, the sunlight died away, and Brindle was left in darkness. But it didn't last, for a light now shone upon Brindle from above. It started small, and then it grew. The light was of a golden color, and the light spread through the barn. And no others saw it, for it was meant for Brindle only. The light grew to blind her and she looked away, to the door she had entered, but there was no darkness or shadows there, and the light still grew.

"From where comes this light?" Brindle asked. "Is there anyone there?"

Brindle heard whispers in the barn, like voices in the stalls, but she knew the stalls were empty. Then the whispers grew loud and clear and they became words. "It is I," said the words. And the words were a woman's. "Brindle," the voice said, "I have come to you."

"Who is it?" Brindle asked. "I cannot see you. Are you a friend, or other?"

"It is the Lord your God," the voice said.

"God?" Brindle said.

"Yes."

And Brindle lowered her head.

"Oh, God, you have come? How may I serve you?"

"I have heard your prayers and your cries and the cries of your people," God said. "I have heard, and now I come."

"Oh, great Lord, have you come to set us free?"

"Yes," the Lord said. "You will lead my people from this place, to a land of thick grass and sweet water. You will tell my people that their time for freedom has come, and that you will lead them from this place of death, through barrier woods and groves of trees, over river torrents and hills, and those that believe in me will escape to the valley of thick grass and sweet water."

"But my lord," Brindle said, "I am not worthy to lead my brothers and sisters. Surely there is another more able."

"You are the leader of the people," God said. "You shall lead, I have spoken. You shall go from here and speak to your people. Soon, a sign will come, and when the sign comes, you must leave this place. "

"My Lord, what if they will not listen? They will not believe me. Nothing like this has happened before in memory. What should I do?"

"You shall tell them, and they will listen. Go."

"Yes, Lord," Brindle said. Then the light faded, and Brindle could see the darkness again. Moonlight poured through the faraway door, and she stumbled toward it. She moved into the field, where the others of her herd rested. The field stretched out to all sides, with a forest and a pond, and a fence that crackled bound in the herd.

For a moment, Brindle looked up into the clear sky, at the rising moon and bright stars. The only other light came from Farmer's house. Then Brindle looked down to her sisters, dark shapes in the moonlight.

"My sisters, come to me, come, listen to my words," Brindle shouted. Her sisters looked up, and saw Brindle. "My sisters, come." Brindle stood among them, and the others, without haste, came to her.

"What is it, Brindle?" one asked. "Are you unwell?"

"No, I am well," Brindle said. "I am better than I have ever been, my heart is filled with joy. In the barn, God has spoken to me tonight, and she told me the most wonderful thing." Those in back pushed forth to hear, while those, in front, closest to Brindle, snuffled.

"Behind me," Brindle said, "is the place where Farmer has sucked away the fruits of our bodies for his own desires. And beyond us," Brindle turned her head toward a large building, half a mile away, "is the house from which none return. There they slaughter us and feed upon our substance. For all our lives we have been slaves, beaten, sucked dry and used for the good of Farmer and those others who walk on two legs. But soon that will change."

A scattered lowing rose from the crowd, a sound of disbelief.

"My sisters, God came to me tonight. She came and said to me that our sufferings will soon end. That she will give a sign, and that we must leave this place, and that we must cross wooden barriers and groves of trees, and cross mighty river torrents and climb hills, and at the end of the journey we will come to a valley with thick grass and sweet water."

The lowing rose again, stronger than before.

"Brindle," someone said, "perhaps you are sick. Perhaps you dreamed all this."

"No," Brindle said. "A sign will come, then we must go."

"Brindle, you are unwell. We will never leave this place."

"You are wrong," Brindle said. "There was a time before the slaughter that we were free. A time before the memory of our mothers, before the memories of our mother's mothers. And there will be a time again that we will be free, and will be safe from the slaughter, as will our daughters and their daughters."

The others looked at one another, at the ground, but not at Brindle. One near Brindle twitched her ear nervously, and many tails swished in the darkness.

Then one stepped forward from the herd, and her name was Jersey. "Brindle," she said, "we are afraid, we do not know where you would take us. We eat well here, we grow up and have children here, and here life is easy."

"But we are slaves," Brindle said. "Can you leave when you want? Can you live a life unfettered by the devil's children?"

"No, but there could be worse fates," Jersey said.

Brindle turned away from Jersey and gazed over the others. "I have heard many of you moan over life here, about the cruelty of Farmer. You have all wanted to leave, and now is the time. Are there any who would follow me?" Brindle asked the crowd. "Any who seek to be free from the cold hands of Farmer? For themselves and their children?"

"No Brindle," another voice said. "You are foolish, here life is easy, we are cared for, why would God want us to leave? Why now, after so long?"

Brindle had no answer, and a wind passed over the crowd. No sound, not a voice, nothing could be heard for a long time. Then a voice broke the silence.

"I'll go," said one. And Angus, younger than most others, stepped forth. "I'll go," Angus said. "Lead, and I'll follow you to the valley of thick grass and sweet water."

Brindle snuffled in joy. "Any others?" she asked, and looked over the herd. No answer. "There must be others. Let there be others." There were none. "Oh Lord, what can I do? They will not listen."

Many of the herd snuffled, turned away and scattered again over the field. A few stayed behind to hear more, but at the call of the others they too wandered away, and Brindle was left alone with her daughter and Angus.

"I'm sorry, Brindle," Angus said. "They know not what they do."

"Be sorry for those that will not follow," Brindle said, with great sadness. "For they will be the ones to suffer." After many moments of silence, Brindle turned away. The herd had dismissed her, after so many years of complaint, of waiting to be free, the herd had turned its back upon Brindle and the hope she offered.

Brindle stood alone, while her daughter and Angus huddled together and spoke of the great events that were coming. The moon traveled across the sky as they spoke. Soon the night grew cold, and a wind pushed clouds that covered the stars, and the rest of the herd huddled together in the field for warmth. Brindle worried about the herd. Would they follow if the sign came, with proof that she spoke true? If they didn't, could she, her daughter and Angus escape alone, could they break through the fence? And what would happen to the herd if they didn't escape, would things never change?

An hour passed as Brindle thought, then Brindle's daughter went to her mother. Brindle's daughter stood near her mother for a long time before she spoke. "Mother, will the others follow?" she asked. "When the sign comes, will the others go?"

Brindle turned from her thoughts and to her daughter. "That is for them to decide," Brindle said. "The sign comes soon, and then we will know. Our people's minds have been broken by years of slavery. They don't know a time without it."

"What happens if they don't come?" Brindle's daughter asked.

"They will remain, and suffer, and their children and children's children will suffer."

"Why not go to Farmer, and ask him to let us go? Tell him he's done wrong, and say, free us, and become one of God's children?"

Brindle snuffled. "I have often gone to Farmer, to say, 'let my people go,' but he does not listen. He laughs, then taps me with his crackle stick. Many times he has done this, many times I have asked him to join the fold, and many times he has ignored my pleas."

Brindle's daughter stared into her mother's eyes, and Brindle saw that these things were hard for her to understand. Brindle leaned down her head and nuzzled her daughter. "Remember," Brindle said softly, "God made us in her own image, with hooved feet, and she set us among her creation, with the grasses and streams, a creation meant for harmony, and told us to live long and prosper. And we did. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, mother."

Brindle nudged her daughter with her nose. "Then the devil made our tormenters in his image, those who stand on two legs, to enslave us and others of the world, to thwart God's will. And the devil set her children in the world and taught them to kill for fun, and to enslave us and steal the fruits of our bodies and even devour our substance. And they spread across the world and killed what they found, and they killed each other, they were so cruel, but mostly they killed the others, and made the waters foul and they cut down the forests and poisoned the fields. This is the devil's work, and the devil is strong. Do you remember all this?"

"Yes, mother," Brindle's daughter said, "I remember it all. But couldn't they turn from the devil, couldn't Farmer choose God?"

Brindle stood silent a moment. "It is hard to turn from what you were made to do," she said. Then Brindle turned aside and fell silent, and her daughter walked away, for she saw Brindle was again deep in thought.

For many seasons Brindle's sisters moaned aloud over their captivity. And in silence they moaned for those that entered the house from which none

return, and so were lost to the herd forever. And yet, with a choice, none would leave the farm. How could this happen?

The air grew still colder, and the herd gathered closer. The clouds grew thick in the sky, and the moon and stars were covered, and a great darkness fell on the field. The only lights now came from Farmer's house. Several of the herd rose their heads and lowed into the air. Brindle still remained apart from the others, and many hours passed. Then Angus came to speak with Brindle, and Brindle turned to face her.

"It's growing dark and cold," Angus said. "These are the hot days, yet it's cold. Is this the sign, Brindle?"

Brindle looked up into the sky, stared for a long time, then looked down to Angus. "No," Brindle said. "We will know the sign, there will be no doubts when it comes. And Angus, when it comes, you must move among the crowd and bring all together. All those that will come. We must leave together, and we must run. We must take care that the calves are not forgotten. So when the sign comes, go among the herd."

"Yes, Brindle," Angus said. Brindle fell silent and Angus stepped away. Brindle was tired, but she did not sleep. If they ran, Farmer would be angry. What would he do if he caught the herd? And when would the sign come? God said soon, but what was 'soon' to God? Brindle hadn't thought of that before. 'Soon' to God could mean something different that it did to the herd.

As the night neared dawn, the wind stopped and the herd fell silent. Brindle looked to her daughter. The first rays of light broke over the trees, and Brindle saw the night had slipped away. Her sisters lay scattered over the field, and soon she could see in outline even those farthest away. Then Brindle felt something strike her and fall to the ground. Then something hit the ground near her. The things were round and rolled on the grass. Something loud struck the

barn roof, rolled off and landed on the dirt below. All around the things dropped. And Brindle saw the hailstones, larger than chicken eggs, and she knew. It was time!

Brindle lifted her head. "My sisters, my sisters, listen to me. Listen to me, the sign has come," Brindle yelled across the field, so all could hear.

"Angus, run," Brindle said, "run."

Angus had slept, and now Angus awoke to Brindle's cries, and she ran through the herd yelling, "It's time, it's time, the sign has come. We must flee."

Brindle ran to the edge of the herd and inside it. She looked about as some stumbled to their feet, and others approached her. The hailstones continued to strike the ground or members of the herd. "My sisters, hurry, the sign has come," Brindle said. "We must leave this place now. The reign of Farmer is over."

Many frightened cows stood and murmured and they spoke with fear. Some stumbled from side to side, unsure what to do.

"What is it? What is this?" someone asked, a young cow.

"It's hail, water from the skies," someone older said. "It falls often."

"Is it the sign?" someone asked.

"No, this is no sign, it's only hail. Don't be fooled."

"Listen," Brindle yelled, as many of the cows lowed in fear. "Listen, the sign has come, we must go."

"No, Brindle's a fool, ignore her."

"She may be right."

"It's only hail."

"Listen to her," Angus yelled from the edge of the herd, "listen."

And the cows lowed, the younger ones in fear, and many older ones snuffled in irritation. Far away, the sky was clear, and Brindle saw the sun was almost above the trees, and she was afraid.

"Oh Lord, what can I do?" Brindle cried out, eyes to the sky. "They will not listen."

The noise continued, a snarl of cries and lowing and hoofbeats.

Then a spark arose behind Brindle, and the spark grew, and the field brightened. And then the light threw dark shadows, and then it drove the shadows from every corner of the field. The light grew so bright that it blinded all. A low whistle rose, a quiet sound that carried in the air from afar, and it grew louder and became a whisper, but none could hear the words. Then the whisper grew louder until it became a voice, and the voice was a woman's, and it was cold and harsh. As it spoke, several of the herd screamed in fright, they rumbled from deep in their throats, then they fell silent, and bent their necks until their noses touched the earth, and they listened.

"These my people are thick-necked herd," God said. She spoke slowly, and all heard each word. "Brindle has spoken true, and you have not heard. I have said I would give you freedom, and send you to a valley of thick grass and sweet water. To this Brindle will lead you, and her you will follow. I said I would give a sign, and then you must go. You are my people, my chosen ones, and I will free you from the devil's hand. These things I have said. I sent a sign, but you ignored it. I sent a prophet, whom you do not hear. Now listen or face my wrath. The sign has come, obey my words, and go."

None spoke, and the field was silent as the words echoed inside them. Then the light faded to nothing, and all were left shivering, and silence filled the air. Then the rumbling began.

A lowing came, from deep in the throats of the herd. First few, then many, then all. The lowing rose up from their bodies and filled the air. It was deep and strong and had the sound of one single throat. The lowing carried over the fields, past the barns, over trees and bushes and past Farmer's house and down the roads. And in his home, Farmer heard. And Farmer went to his door to listen. And Farmer heard the lowing of the herd, but he heard not many voices, but one voice, loud and strong. And Farmer was afraid.

Then the lowing ended, and the field was silent. The herd turned to Brindle, and a voice rose up. "Lead us," the voice said. "God has spoken, lead us, Brindle."

Brindle snuffled in joy. "Come," she said. She turned to find her daughter, and she nudged her along. Then Brindle led the herd to the wooden fence near the road, and a loud, scattered lowing rose up. The herd was strung out over the field, but Angus nudged them from behind, and they began to crowd close to Brindle.

At the gate, Brindle turned to the herd. "We must push together on the gate," Brindle said. It was a wooden gate, and Brindle pressed her chest against it. "Help," she said, "together we can break it." And others put their bodies against the fence and pushed. Then others behind pushed on those in front. The fence creaked, and swayed, and more pushed on those behind, and the weight broke the boards and the herd poured through and onto the road.

Brindle stumbled forward, then turned to look back as the others came behind her.

"Farmer sees us," someone yelled. Farmer stood on his porch and watched, then he ran across the yard and got inside his red beast. As the herd ran onto the road, the beast growled, then moved forward on its four round feet. The herd had passed through the gate and followed Brindle on the road and left

clouds of dust in the air. Farmer drove toward the broken gate and through it. The hailstones continued to fall, but none of the herd noticed.

The herd continued past the field where the bulls were kept behind a wire fence. The two black bulls watched the herd pass, and they stood silent. Brindle looked at them for a moment, then stopped. The others continued down the road, and Farmer came closer.

"Come with us," Brindle shouted. "Leave this place."

The bulls rushed to the fence. The sun had completely cleared the trees now. "We cannot," the eldest said. "The fence here is too strong, and it crackles."

"Is there no way out?" Brindle asked.

"God will provide," the younger bull said.

"God be with you," Brindle said, turned to run. She saw the young ones of the herd, including her own daughter, stumbling forward, and the mothers nudged and lowed.

The herd had passed the bulls, and Brindle ran to catch up. She looked and saw Farmer coming close. She saw the red beast's eye shining in the rising sun. Brindle feared the beast would run down some of her people, and so frighten the others into returning. Brindle could now see Farmer behind the great eye.

The hailstones fell harder and faster, in a swarm too many to number, and they battered the beast. Many hailstones struck the top and fell away, but some smashed the great eye, and the eye fell into pieces. Blinded, the beast ran off the road and into the fence that held the bulls. Then the beast stopped and sat unmoving, and Farmer remained still behind the great eye.

One of the fence posts were knocked down, and when Brindle looked back, she saw the bulls step through the hole in the fence, then run to catch up to the herd. As the sun continued to rise, the hail stopped, and a wind blew the

clouds away. Now the day was warm, the sun bright, and lo, Brindle saw clearly the road ahead.

**MILAN SMITH** has published 31 short stories in various magazines, including *Pearl Noir*, *Everyday Fiction*, *Midnight Times*, and *Crimson Highway*. After he got his B.S. degree in business from the University of Florida, he worked in the business world for two years, and hated it. Then he got job as a reporter for a year, and hated that. Finally, he decided to try writing, and now works part-time at night and writes during the mornings, and he loves it.