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Editor: Eirik Gumeny

Assistant Editor: Monica Rodriguez

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Editor's Note: Guns, Revenge, and Sheep

Howdy. Welcome to Issue Eleven, sandwiched squarely between the launch of the [2010 Jersey Devil Press Anthology](#) and the [book release picnic](#). I think it's fair to assume you've partaken/will partake in at least one, so we'll skip over that portion of the intro. *cough* buy it *cough*

Anyway, hi. This month we've got some truly spectacular fiction, starting with the cover story, "Crawfish Noon," by Micah Dean Hicks. It's a Western involving crustaceans. You need to read it.

You need to read the other five stories, too, starting with Shea Newton's trippy "The Tools of Amputation." Then it's on to Isaac James Baker's punk-rock "Too Much Blood" and Leah Petersen's petty, hysterical "Theo." We switch it up a bit for the comically absurd "The World's Largest Jigsaw Puzzle is a Bitch to Solve" by the returning Brian Long, and then we close on "Thinking of Ewe," by Tarl Roger Kudrick, a story about a guy who is not Batman.

So there you go. Six stories, some serious, some not so serious, and some about sheep. Pull up a desk chair and dig in.

-- Eirik Gumeny

Crawfish Noon

Micah Dean Hicks

Three years past, Seven-leg and his troupe of hard-backed killers were knocking over settler wagons in the pines of east Texas. They had been in camp one morning, chewing rotten horse hides and Seven-leg dealing a round of cards, while they waited for one-antennaed Willy Moseley to get back with news about a job. Willy never showed, but the state militia side-crept on them and let loose with rifles. The bandits drew iron, swung their segmented bodies around, and shoved themselves underneath logs and rock piles. That day the dirt flushed with blue blood, scraps of shell and leg segments strewn like cards. They lost a lot of good crawlers in those trees before they could get away. But now Seven-leg had heard about Willy turning sheriff in a border town, and his claw itched to squeeze down on his Colt cannon and make meat of the mud-eater who had betrayed him.

A gambler, Seven-leg was bringing six leadslingers for the job, all crawlers who'd been with him in the pines years ago, totaling seven: himself, Greg Potts, Tom Boiled, Janey Flicker, Nate Sayers, Coy James, and Dean Mitchell. Some of those crawlers would go on to become legends of their own, and some would go back to the mud.

It was two weeks swimming backwards downriver, their tails thumping through the mud-waters and reed-beds making good time. Nobody carried much more than their gun, the duster on their carapace, and pounds of shells. Wouldn't need anything else.

They came to a little town on the riverbank, nothing but a few dozen badly stacked mud chimneys, and Seven-leg told them to have themselves a night of fun. There'd be desert tomorrow.

Nate, Coy, and Dean found a dark saloon with just enough light for their cards, and stayed at that most of the night. Janey Flicker took some old shells to a gunsmith and had him fill them up with powder and put a new lead cap on them. She wasn't one to run out of bullets.

Old Greg Potts wandered the town for a few hours, his eyes slowly clouding up like dishwater. He found Tom Boiled carrying around a tin bucket, putting out cook-fires, and shook his head. Ever since he'd tumbled into a hot spring, something had been off with the crusty son of a bitch. Greg took the bucket away from him. He said he didn't know if he was up to crossing the desert, old as he was and all. Tom's mouth fizzed a little. He told Greg that if he backed out now, Seven-leg would get off Janey just long enough to put a bullet in him. Then, Tom said, he'd eat every piece of Greg himself. Greg called him a flat-tailed crazy piece of shit and crawled back to the saloon, but he was afraid Tom might be right.

The next morning, Potts' eyes were solid gray with sick and he could barely see. Seven-leg asked him if he was going to be able to make it, and Tom grinned his burned grin. Greg spat and said that he could.

Out of the river, it was three days crawl across the heat wastes, nothing but sun and sun, and old Greg Potts died. That night, with a yellow moon heavy to fall in the sky, Seven-leg said some words over his shell. They sectioned up Potts, held the meat in their claws, and seared him red over the fire. That night, Nate, Coy, and Dean played cards while Janey Flicker fucked Seven-leg under the open sky, her five pairs of

spinnerets drumming on his shell and his claw tugging her antennae. Off away from the others, Tom Boiled stuffed his mouth with Potts' legs and sang every song he could remember. That night, Seven-leg whispered to Janey that they were six now and had lost their luck, but as long as she was with him, he thought he could do anything.

Morning came and Tom Boiled was up firing rounds off into the face of the sun, bright red splotches shining on his back and head. Coy spat and said they ought to kill him for it, and Janey said she was sympathetic to that. The shots echoed back and forth to the horizon. The town was an hour out, nothing but flatland, and surely Willy would know that they were coming now. Seven-leg told Boiled to get his shit straight, and Tom calmed down. Seven-leg pulled his hood over his rostrum, antennules checking the wind, and told them to get stepping. It would be a hot noon.

The town was a tiny hump on the desert, no more than a hundred crustaceans and larva taken together. Adobe burrows ringed a few good-sized rocks. There was a clump of wood buildings warped and sun-bleached and all sharing walls with one another. Seven-leg's mouthparts rubbed together and he thought how generous it was of the militia to hide Willy all the way out here. He stuck a seven of clubs in his hat-band for luck.

They circled around to the south, knowing Willy had heard the shots. Tom Boiled was steady babbling, revolver clutched in each claw, not making any sense. Nate was fed up with it, but didn't see anything they could do about it now, so he kept quiet. Nate, Coy, and Dean threw their serapes back off their claws and drew iron. The troupe crawled up the street in a line.

Seven-leg could see Willy's burrows on the north end of town, right where he thought they'd be. Bead-like eyes followed them from street windows, but no one moved until a larva ran out in front of Tom Boiled -- scrawny thing, not much past a

nauplius -- and Tom skewered it with one sharp foreleg, shoved it in his mouth, and ate that little bastard with his parents watching from their door. Shit got bad, then.

The town crustaceans screamed and drummed their claws on the walls. Willy spun around in his burrow, silver star gleaming on his carapace. He saw Seven-leg and his group down the street, and he and his deputies came boiling out, guns high and hammers dropping. Ducking into houses, Seven-leg and his troupe were some cold-water killers, and raked the streets with lead from one end to the other.

Seven-leg found himself alone in a doorway, a family balled up together on the floor behind him, and deputies sending gunfire his way. He shot back, and wondered where Janey was, but he knew he couldn't worry about that now. He got hit, a bullet cutting straight through his tail and shattering the chitinous plate above it. It left blue stars of blood every time his tail slapped the ground, but that wasn't going to stop a crawler like him. He cleaned out everyone on the street, their antennas lying limp in the dirt, and went to find Willy.

There was an awful sound back around a cluster of cabins, and Dean wondered what in the hell Tom was doing over there. He saw Janey start scuttling that way. Willy's men were filing past the general store to stop her, but Nate, Coy, and Dean shot the bastards from an alley, their heads settling like helmets in the dust.

Seven-leg followed the shine of a silver star creeping in and out of water troughs and barrels, squeezing off bullet after bullet, stripping the tops of railings and hearing the sound of shells sink into Willy's soft body. He finally caught up with him trying to climb back into his burrow on the north side of town.

Willy was walking in circles, his eyes gummed up with blood and dirt, antennaeless now, his sides dotted with shots. Seven-leg was glad he'd found him before he'd been able to drag himself into a hole and die. Willy flailed his claws, and

Seven-leg crawled right up on his back and clamped two pincers behind his head. He asked if Willy remembered the night Seven-leg dug him out of jail and gave him his life back. Willy vomited a necklace of blue froth, slurred that he hadn't had anything to do with the ambush, and asked what the hell this was about. Seven-leg clamped down, Willy's heavy head dropping into a water trough. It floated there. Seven-leg spat on him and went to find the others.

Everything had quieted down. He found Nate, Coy, and Dean stacking bodies in front of the saloon. They were passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth, but Dean dropped it when they heard more gunfire at the cabins. Seven-leg raised the Colt in his right claw and went straight down the street while the others covered him. He came around the side of a building and saw Tom Boiled's bright-splotched head cracking apart under gunfire, some crawler standing over him and squeezing off their whole chamber into his body. Seven-leg didn't hesitate. He put a bullet down the center of her tail, blistering its way across nerve-bundles and burning out her head. Janey Flicker dropped her gun and fell down across Tom. Seven-leg howled and tore the dirt when he saw what he had done.

They found where Tom had smashed in the door of a nursery and stuffed himself bloated with little ones, then carved up those he couldn't eat. One girl's gray jelly skin was freckled with white spots where he'd tried to burn her.

Janey Flicker lay upside down in the dirt, her head a mess from gunfire, her spinnerets white and delicate and shining in the sun. Seven-leg lay down across her. He still had the seven of clubs in his hat. Nate, Coy, and Dean each took out their deck of cards, pulled the sevens from the stack, and dropped them beside the couple in the dirt. Seven-leg took her body in his claws and dragged it away, moving backwards down the street. They let him go, hoping he'd take his luck with him.

That night, it was a heavy moon over them all: Nate, Coy, and Dean playing cards and eating the dead in front of the saloon; Seven-leg watching the dark from the mouth of his burrow, Janey cold underneath him. He tore off chill pieces of her and ate them, each one a reminder of how much he'd loved her.

When Nate, Coy, and Dean came to get him in the morning, he was gone, seven needle-like tracks going off into the deep desert. They never met up with him again after that, heard later that he had gone further south and had run-ins with the army. They went back to Texas for a while, eventually went further west. They sowed stories wherever they went, shadows that grew larger with every saloon they passed. Though they never saw him again, every once in a while Seven-leg's stories would meet theirs around a camp fire, behind a hand of cards, under a yellow moon.

MICAH DEAN HICKS is a master's student in the Center for Writers at The University of Southern Mississippi. His work has been accepted to over a dozen journals, including *Shady Side Review*, *Brain Harvest*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Tryst*, and the *Smoking Poet*.

The Tools of Amputation

Shea Newton

We've been given a weapon. They are by prescription only. We've got a snub nosed revolver and ammunition.

We are plagued by growths, some more powerful than others. We have hands that will not take what we want, that will take what we don't. We have feet that pull opposite directions, mouths that speak louder than others, eyes that see too much.

Our handgun will cripple the growths, rapidly and violently as they occur. We could graduate to a more precise instrument, a scalpel someday, but now we have a handgun. We use it with little or no discretion.

It is peculiar to fight a weapon from our hands, hands that strain to point the barrel back into our heart. It is strange to hold the weapon in our hands and shoot, hoping that if there are other hands they will be different.

Though it's illegal to use recreational weapons, we do. With bats and knives we've hit our legs and arms and eyes in order to sit restful, blurry and numb. But the handgun is different, it keeps us safe. From eyes that don't see clearly and our hands. It has to.

There are others with growths. We've seen them, looked longingly at five legs walking in near unison, three hands embracing a lover. We can't walk in unison, it's exhausting to try. With the handgun we've grown accustomed to simply the legs that walk forward comfortably, eyes that look to the clouds on purpose and mouths speaking simple sentences.

It was frightening at first, aiming at our growths each morning, hoping that our feet were bad feet. But now our blood clots sooner and we don't often feel faint. We know that when we shake, the first shot will steady our aim.

We've let others use our gun, we have ammunition. They have lost their mouths and ears, sometimes they take weeks to recover. Maybe they only had one mouth to begin with.

We've been through heads. Recovery is quick. We've become accustomed.

SHEA NEWTON lives in Boise, ID, where he recently decided to never sing karaoke again.

Too Much Blood

Isaac James Baker

The air was warm and thick the night we became teenage killers, one of those sweaty, steamy ones when humidity covers Chicago like a wet blanket. It was the four of us: Sterling , Victoria , Whitey and me.

Sterling was the leader -- well, not really the "leader" -- we were all anarchists in those days and we didn't believe in leaders, authority, government, any of that shit. But Sterling was sixteen and he had a car, which meant he determined when and where we were going. To that extent, I guess you could call him a leader.

Victoria was too beautiful to be called Vicky or Vic or some other cutesy nickname. Just Victoria . We always joked with her that she should become the lead singer of a crust punk band and go by the stage name Victoria Victim. She didn't like that idea. She said she was nobody's victim.

Whitey was called Whitey because he was a Polish Jew and his parents came from Krakow or Warsaw , I don't remember which. We thought it was ironic. His grandparents had been through the shit with the Nazis. He told me stories about them, stories so fucked up that when I heard them I just sat there like a deaf mute. After we killed the Nazi, Andrew told me he wished his grandfather was still alive so he could tell him about it. He said his grandfather would've been proud of him.

Then there was me.

We were The Musketeers, plus one, and we were ready for Friday night. We all met at Sterling 's place and hopped into his rusty old Buick, Victoria in the front and

me and Whitey in the back. My crew and I were headed out for a great show, The Abused, a thrash punk band from New York. We were gonna drink some beers, sing along with the punk anthems, jump around, pump our fists in the air, slap each other on the back, maybe meet up with some other punks, drink some more beers. We all knew it was gonna be one hell of a night. Anything could happen.

We rolled down all the windows and lit cigarettes, looking out the sweating pedestrians trudging along the sidewalks. Sterling was playing The Damned on The Brick's CD player.

"Man, can't we change this?" I asked. I wanted something harder, something I could stomp my shoes to, and The Damned strayed a bit too far into that whole wimpy British new wave kind of sound.

"It's my car," was his reply.

Victoria said she wanted to listen to something else, too. Whitey, who was slouched in the back seat with me, was staring out the window at the passing apartment buildings and bodegas. I hit him in the shoulder.

"Yeah," he replied. "Something else."

"That's participatory democracy," Victoria said. "Sorry."

"This car isn't a democracy," Sterling replied.

Victoria scrunched up her brow.

"It's not?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Sterling, you've got to *be* the change you want see in..."

"Alright, alright!" Sterling huffed. "Spare me the political speech." He ejected the CD and Victoria slipped in The Exploited, which Whitey and I agreed was a better choice. The pounding music crackled from the speakers, muffled and scratchy from the countless hours of full-volume hardcore punk we submitted them to.

Sterling reached into a big brown paper bag shoved in between the two front seats. He threw a can back and I snagged it before it hit me in the face, a Pabst Blue Ribbon. We called it "Street Cred in a Can," and we drank as much of it as our teenage bellies could handle, and then some. Sterling told us he got it from his older brother and we should drink up because we were getting close to the Fireside Bowl, a decrepit bowling alley turned infamous punk rock dive. Victoria chugged hers faster than me and then stuck her head into the back seat to rip a belch in my face. I finished my beer and burped in reply, although mine wasn't nearly as loud. Whitey took a few sips of his beer and then threw it at a yellow Hummer parked on the side of the street. The can smacked the windshield and spewed frothy brew all over the car. I slapped him five.

Victoria scolded Whitey for littering.

"These are our streets," she said. "Don't shit where you eat."

"It was a Hummer," Whitey said in defense.

He had a point. After all, Hummers exemplified everything punks hated: materialism, upper class elitism, environmental degradation, macho douchebags, all that shit.

"Fine," Whitey said. "The next time I see a Hummer, I'll drink my beer and then piss on the car."

"Atta boy!" Victoria said. "Fuck with The System, but watch out for Mother Earth in the process."

Sterling slapped a curb with the front of the Brick as he pulled into a narrow parking spot. He threw the car into park and it groaned like the trip had worn it out. We got out and sat on the warmed hood. We all cracked open our second PBRs.

“To not shitting where you eat,” I said, raising my can in the air. The others said “Cheers” and we downed our beers quickly, hoping the alcohol would drain into our bloodstreams and cloud our minds a bit before the show. The Fireside Bowl was serious about not letting minors buy booze. Rules, regulations, identification cards -- in a punk rock club? What a bunch of crap. We hated their rules, but it was the best club in town to see street punk shows.

Victoria collected the empties in a plastic bag and, after searching up and down the street for a recycling bin, she threw it in a nearby trashcan.

“Goddamn city doesn’t give a damn about the planet,” she muttered.

Victoria led the way down the block to the club. A couple of punk guys sitting on a curb checked her out, eyed her up and down, but they didn’t say anything to her. I walked up beside Victoria to make them think she was with me. With raised eyebrows, they looked up jealously, puffing away at their cigarettes. Punks are good at not trying to steal each other’s girls. Maybe it has something to do with their left-wing, self-induced guilt for being part of the male gender, the gender of The Oppressor, the gender of The System. In the punk scene, if a guy got laid, most of the time it was because the girl fucked *him*, not the other way around. At least that’s what I’d heard. I would be a virgin for a couple more weeks. It’s kind of funny: I was a killer before I was a lover.

As we approached the club we could hear one of the opening bands slashing away at their guitars. I felt the asphalt below me pulsing with raucous beats, as if the punk band’s riffs were pouring life into the crumbling streets. We paid our eight bucks a piece to a guy with a nose and lip ring and pushed our way into the hall.

The place was already packed. A hot, heavy fog of sweat and cigarette smoke hung in the stale air. It smelled like beer and piss -- or maybe just cheap beer, which,

after all, smells like piss. There were no fans or windows in the Fireside Bowl. Everything was pretty much black except for a small bar in the back by the bathrooms and the lights on the stage, which flickered on and off chaotically, without rhythm, like a deaf person was running the system.

Once inside, we huddled near the back, assessing the premises. The four of us began moving together to the music, slamming our boots and bobbing our heads. The first band played decent street punk, kind of like early Casualties stuff, but not quite as fast. We were all feeling the buzz and the music. We slammed our shoulders together and punched our fists in the air when the bass, guitar and drums would all stop at the same time. We stomped our boots on the floor together when the music ripped open again. We jumped around, up in the air, sideways, ricocheting off of bigger punks, back to the ground, up in the air again. I was surrounded by tons of people I didn't know, thrashing around without a care, but I felt more like myself than ever. I was squished between punks on all sides, but I was unchained, free.

During the palm-muted intro to one of the opening band's songs, Victoria slapped me on the arm and motioned me to come toward her. I danced close by her and as I stuck my head in her direction she kissed me on the cheek. At first I thought it was an accident, like she had bumped into me and her lips just happened to come together on my face. But I looked at her and she smiled. I put my ear to her mouth, offering her the chance to try to yell something to me.

"Let's just do this forever."

The drums and bass kicked in and I had to scream so she could hear me.

"Do what forever?"

"This!" She held her hands in front of her, opening her arms before the crowd.

One kid was helping another up off of the floor. A fat guy was letting a skinny kid use his shoulder as a crowd surfing launch pad. Faces, jackets, patches with safety pins, spiky hair and piercings all blurred together into one, a punk rock rainbow rising from the surging crowd. The vocalist was screaming about unity and, during the chorus, he let six or seven punk kids jump up onto the stage and sing the rest of the song.

“Okay!” I yelled in affirmation. “This *is* it, isn’t it?”

She nodded. The band’s song ended and the crowd breathed in at once, everyone stopped moshing and stuck their heads up to try to suck some fresh air. I was already sweaty and we had just gotten there.

I think I was a little drunk from those two beers. I couldn’t feel much. When you’re packed in that tightly, smashed between so many sweating, thrashing punks, it’s like you almost don’t feel a thing. Almost.

I sure felt it when I was slammed forward onto the floor. My face hit the ground and a bright flash shot across my field of vision. I tasted blood in my mouth and felt throbbing pain in my temples. The force that knocked me down was so intense that I knew it wasn’t just some kid pogo dancing around. This was intentional. I was on the floor because someone wanted me there.

I looked up, stunned, disoriented, at a towering pillar of a skinhead. My vision was blurry for a few seconds, but I quickly realized what I was dealing with. He was the whole package: shaved head, black leather jacket (even though it was one of the hottest nights of the summer), jeans tight around his bulging waist, iron cross on his belt buckle, combat boots like waffle irons. His shirt said something in Old English script. I never got to read the entire thing. I’m sure it was just some racist bullshit.

“Heil Hitler!” the skinhead shouted. All the kids I was surrounded by had scattered like roaches, leaving me sprawled out alone on the floor.

“What the fuck?” was all I could think to say. It seemed an appropriate response.

“Salute! Take pride in your pure blood, white brother!” the man said, his jowls flapping like a bulldog’s. His opened hand jutted out firmly in front of him. A black swastika was singed into the skin on his wrist.

I looked around to see Sterling backed against the wall behind the skinhead. Victoria had her hands over her mouth, her leftist sensibilities no doubt rattled by this six-foot-something mound of muscle, fat and hatred. I couldn’t see Whitey anywhere.

Everyone else stood back as far as they could get, fear burning in their eyes. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of them. There was only one Nazi. He stood alone, defiant, his huge, oppressive shape demanding all the attention. He and I were now the show, and all eyes were on us.

“Salute!” he commanded again. “Now!”

Standing to my feet, wobbling, I spat blood on the floor. I remember being worried that I had lost a tooth. I remember thinking that adult teeth don’t grow back. I pondered this fact like it was some spectacular mystery I had just now finally understood.

I told the Nazi that I wouldn’t salute him, that I wanted no part of his hateful system, that he should go fuck himself. I did all this by saying, simply, “No.”

He didn’t ask me again. Pounding the ground with his boots, he stamped toward me.

That’s when my mates jumped in. They threw off their self-preservation instincts and dove in to protect me. I didn’t even know most of these kids, but they

knew I was in trouble, and punks protect their own. They leapt on the skinhead's back like a pack of wolves working together to take down a bear. The Nazi threw one kid off with a snap of his thick right arm, sending him sliding across the floor into a wall of other punks. Two others clung to his jacket, but he shook them off by thrashing his limbs.

Right before he was about to reach me, his fists readied in front of him, Sterling jumped up and gripped his arms around the skinhead's neck. The Nazi threw his arms back, trying desperately to pound Sterling hard enough to force him to loosen his grip. But Sterling was determined. Nothing could force him to let go. At that moment, two punks attacked the Nazi's legs, ripping them out from under him. The giant fell flat on his ass with a resounding thud. Sterling still held his grasp, refusing to budge, trying to choke the massive fascist.

The Nazi was down. We'd done it. But we didn't stop there. Hell no. The violence spread like poison through my veins, through all of us. We had tasted blood, and we wanted more.

I stomped on the downed skinhead's chest as hard as I could. I was a skinny kid, so I couldn't have done too much damage, but I kept kicking and kicking until my feet hurt. The Nazi kicked and punched in defense. His steel-toed boot slammed a kid in the face so hard I heard his nose break like splintered wood. The kid, blood streaming from his face, fell backward onto the floor screaming. His screams sounded oddly hilarious. While the Nazi's punches and kicks were heavy and powerful, he was slow, and the punks moved fast, hitting him with dozens punches and kicks each second. The whole time he kept screaming, "Bring it on you traitors! You scum! You white niggers!"

Each time he yelled at us we hit him harder.

Whitey, out of nowhere, entered the fray. Down on his knees, he smashed his fists into the skinhead's neck. Whitey slammed him in the temple, recoiled in pain, and screamed that he had broken his wrist. But wounds would have to be tended to later. The battle wasn't over yet. We kicked the Nazi in the ribs, the face, the neck, the legs, for what must've been several minutes, although I'm not sure. Amidst the pounding of flesh on flesh, time seemed to stand still.

Through the chaos, someone screamed "Stop!"

Several punks jumped back like their mothers had caught them doing something they weren't supposed to be doing. One by one, we stopped punching and kicking. The blood in our veins slowed. We all took breaths as the rage began to drain from us. It was Victoria who had screamed. She pushed herself between us and the Nazi, shoving and shooing kids off of his body.

When everyone backed off, I saw just how much blood was splattered on the floor. I looked at my shoes. The toes were smeared red. Nothing looked particularly special or pure about this blood. What the hell was the Nazi talking about? His blood was a dark, dirty red, just like the stuff that comes out of your nose if you pick it too hard.

Victoria pressed her fingers against the skinhead's throat, kneeling. "He's dead," she said.

I tried to swallow and almost choked. Now that the battle was over, I felt a thick, pulsing pain in my mouth. I ran my tongue across my gums. I *had* lost a tooth, one of the ones on the bottom. It was an adult tooth, I told myself, one of the ones that would never grow back. I cursed aloud and kicked the dead skinhead in the belly as hard as I could.

I got down on my hands and knees, searching around the club's floor for my tooth. I don't know why. It's not like a dentist could've stuck it back in. It didn't matter, though, because I couldn't find it anywhere. There was just too much blood.

ISAAC JAMES BAKER was born in Belmar, New Jersey, in 1983. He grew up surfing and causing trouble on the Jersey Shore long before words like “Snookie” and “The Situation” further diminished the Shore’s already terrible reputation. He writes poetry, short stories and novels, and is working on his master’s degree in fiction writing from Johns Hopkins University. His novel, *Broken Bones*, the story of a young man’s struggle in a psychiatric ward for anorexics, is forthcoming from The Historical Pages Company. He lives in Washington, D.C.

Theo

Leah Petersen

It really does look like a penis.

I read about that somewhere, that the steeples on churches are phallic symbols.

Now I don't spend a lot of time sitting around analyzing church steeples, but I'm parked outside a church with nothing much to do.

And, yeah, when you really look at it, it does look like a penis. Not as long as you think it should be, with a little mushroom-cap top. I wonder if the people inside realize their building looks like it has a hard-on?

Why people want to spend a beautiful day like this inside the penis building I can't figure out.

Then again, that God stuff's pretty important, if you believe it. I suppose if I thought my ass was going to roast forever if I didn't waste my weekend morning sitting under a giant dick then I'd be in there too.

I mean, I know my ass would get kicked out of my apartment if I didn't waste my weekdays sitting at work. Must be the same sort of thing.

And here I am wasting my morning sitting in the car. I've got the windows rolled down, so there is that. I haven't been sitting here long, and it's almost time for the people to come dripping out the front door.

Teddy's being patient too, so I don't have a screaming kid to deal with.

He's a good kid. I told my sister she was being a real bitch giving the poor kid a name like that. She trotted out the whole carry on the family name bullshit. Well

that's all fine and good if you're completely wrapped up in yourself like ol' Theodore. But you'd think having lived with a dumbass name for thirty five years you'd know better than to give it to a kid you supposedly cared about.

They could at least call him Theo. I tried calling him that but he'd look at me like he didn't know who the hell I was talking to -- makes sense -- so I call the poor bastard Teddy. When he gets older I'll explain to him that he has a dumbass name and that's why I call him Theo.

Anyway, my sister was more than happy to lend him to me this morning. Not that she knows what I want him for. She's just happy to get a break from the barfing. Teddy loves to tag her as soon as she's got a new shirt on. He never barfs on me. Damn smart kid.

So I'm out here 'cause I'm playing a trick on Martha's ex, Doug. He's the preacher in yonder penis building. Apparently some of them are allowed to do that sort of thing. Date, I mean. But no sex.

So why Martha was with him in the first place I'll never understand. She's always been in a guy's pants faster than he can say "Hey, baby." She says preacher-man let her in there but he wouldn't go in there if you catch my drift.

Anyway, he dumped her. Probably because he had blue balls with all her groping, but Martha says she was in love with him and she was willing to wait -- she's not the one who has to deal with the permanent erection -- but he dumped her and she wants to pay him back.

Good enough for me.

OK, doors opening, people dribbling out -- and yes that's what I'm trying to make you think of -- that's my cue.

Teddy's playing with the dirt in the floorboard of my car but he's happy enough to come along when I pick him up. And he's pretty damn cute so he's a good partner in crime for something like this.

I stomp toward the building, trying to look pissed off. Teddy's giggling 'cause it's bouncing him up and down but I figure that's a good thing.

Now I've never met this Doug -- I know Martha's my best friend but they only dated two weeks and it's not like I'm up her butt all the time -- but he's supposed to be easy to pick out, wearing one of those collar things.

So that must be him. Hmmm, not bad looking. Still.

I stop dead in front of him and plop Teddy right into his arms as he's going to shake hands with this really old man.

"It's your weekend, Doug, can't you at least take your own son ONE weekend a month?"

I figure it's polite not to cuss in front of old people at church.

Dougie's white as a sheet. Ha! I knew this would be fun.

"Excuse me, I don't know you and this is not my child." He looks around at the growing crowd. "Not that he isn't a lovely child. I'm sure you're very proud of him, Miss, but I'm afraid you're mistaken."

He must have figured the nicey-nicey bit would make him look better.

So I start crying. I can do that. It's a useful trick.

"How can you say that? And in front of God!" I wave my hand in the direction of the huge wanker.

"Miss, please, if we could talk about this elsewhere?"

Teddy doesn't look so good.

“No! We have nothing to talk about! You’re a heartless bastard and I never want to see you again! We’ll be just fine without you!”

And Teddy ralphs all over the guy’s suit.

It’s nasty too. Chunks of the cheese puffs I let him have in the car, mixed with formula. Oh, man, I want to laugh so bad but I can’t ruin Teddy’s moment of genius.

I jerk Teddy out of Dougie’s grip and stomp away.

“Serves you right!”

When we get back in the car I give Teddy a high five. He doesn’t know what I’m doing or anything, but he grins at me and he’s still got nasty little barf chunks all over his chin.

The kid’s got potential. Yep, definitely a Theo.

LEAH PETERSEN lives and writes in North Carolina when she can get some time away from her day job and her husband and two children. Rather than waste her life getting fresh air and sunshine, spending time with family and friends, or pursuing an actual career, she reads and writes. Her first novel, *MOURN THE SUN*, a sci-fi love story, decided it needed to be written and Leah obligingly took dictation. She is now seeking publication of said bossy novel. Leah runs a Five Minute Fiction Challenge each Tuesday at 1:30pm EST on her website, www.leahpetersen.com.

The World's Largest Jigsaw Puzzle is a Bitch to Solve

Brian Long

"The World's Largest Jigsaw Puzzle is a Bitch to Solve."

This was the headline smeared across the front page of Nebraska's largest newspaper, like a bold font slap in the mouth. Brannigan, Nebraska, which was hailed as being the home of the World's Largest Jigsaw Puzzle on all of its billboards, was a small town without much money to its name, and its citizens were tired of being mocked for their incomplete roadside attraction. The desperate need for a new tourist trap had been growing since the Great Fire of '66. Brannigan lost two attractions on that day, when the World's Largest Match was burnt down by the newly completed World's Largest Magnifying Glass. The oversized ocular assistant was taken down when it was deemed to be far too dangerous to Brannigan, and any oversized objects that might be constructed in the future. As time went by the town burrowed deeper and deeper into financial ruin. Brannigan's citizens were looking for any excuse to stage a political coup and with the printing of this article they were certain they had found it. The small town's mayor, Cal Janson, was certain the newspaper article would become his epitaph if he couldn't assure the people at the town hall that the puzzle would be finished soon.

"Okay, if we could refrain from throwing anymore bottles or shoes, especially those of you wearing high heels, we can continue with the questions," said Cal, nervously adjusting the tie that felt way too large around his straw-thin neck.

"We're the laughing stock of the entire county Mr. Mayor!"

"I don't think there was a question in there," Cal said. He dabbed his handkerchief, which was now soaked with liquid fear, against his charcoal hair.

"My question is, why on Earth didn't we make the world's largest dictionary instead!?"

The crowd began to murmur in agreement.

"People, we are only forty pieces away from finishing the puzzle! Now it's true, we still can't tell what the image on the puzzle is, but I am certain once the last few pieces are put into place it will all make sense. And I hope all of you will be coming out for the big celebration tomorrow where we will be finishing the puzzle; won't that be great?"

The crowd gave a tepid reaction, and then the mayor continued.

"Also, Mr. Cappello, they turned down your world's largest dictionary idea nearly thirty years ago, you've really got to let it go."

Cal began to survey the crowd for the next question when one of the townspeople exclaimed:

"He's only saying that 'cause he's porkin' the puzzle maker's niece!"

Cal took a nervous glance at his wife, Carli; she had recently been kicked out of her second attempt at anger management and things were always a bit sticky those first few post-therapy days. This time she had been kicked out for proclaiming that "This shit is for pussies!" in the middle of a group therapy session.

Carli stood up from her seat, gently brushed off her purple dress, tucked her brown hair behind her ear and stepped up to the podium.

"Good people of Brannigan, to make the claim that attempting to finish the world's largest puzzle is the result of nepotism because of my relationship with the

puzzle's creator is ludicrous. My ties to my Uncle Sebastian are strained at best, and as far as the newspaper article is concerned..."

Cal was amazed by his wife; she had always had a calm and levelheaded side that few people besides himself had the opportunity to see; he couldn't believe this was actually his wife, reasoning and keeping the peace with the crowd. And then she said this:

"Honestly? Who reads the fucking newspaper anymore, for Christ's sake?"

"This meeting is adjourned, thank you everyone," said Cal, grabbing his wife and bolting off stage while the sound of boos, shattering glass, and shoes thumping against the wall accompanied their mad dash.

At the ceremony the following morning, Cal remained nervous. It looked as though the entire town had showed up at the grand unveiling. Many of them had stopped at Fiscal Frank's Flea market before arriving, which was having a sale on angry mob supplies. They had all purchased bargain priced pitchforks, torches, or Molotov cocktails and each of them was prepared to handle their problems in the manner that their town was famous for: a good old fashioned mob scene.

Cal's attentions were split between the volunteers putting the last few puzzle pieces into place and his watch, which was reminding him with each tick of the second hand that Carli was running late. He still could not determine what the image was that the tiny pieces were supposed to make once they had been put into their proper position. The rabid gerbils that currently inhabited his stomach calmed a bit when he saw his wife approaching the podium alongside her uncle.

Uncle Sebastian had always been considered a pariah in Brannigan and he wore this small-town judgment proudly like a crown.

“Screw ‘em,” he always said. “If I want to be like those cow-humpin’-corn-suckers I would burn all my books and plant my ass on a tractor.”

Sebastian was never one to keep his thoughts to himself, but in the past few years he had stopped speaking. It was as though his voice was a mom-and-pop store in a run-down neighborhood, boarding up its doors forever. All he did now was read book after book about space travel. The idea of flying through the cosmos had always fascinated him. Everyone in Carli’s family always assumed it was because of his disdain for Earth and everyone on it. He collected every newspaper article he could about America’s first moon landing and hung it on his office wall; in fact, it was on July 27th, 1969 one week after the moon landing, that he was commissioned by the town to build the world’s largest jigsaw puzzle. Sebastian was a master toy maker and specialized in puzzles; while the town desperately needed some kind of attraction to get tourists into Brannigan. It seemed like the perfect match. Five years later, Sebastian completed his magnum opus. A 1,000,000,001 piece puzzle that was exactly the length of the open land on the outskirts of the town; and now, nearly thirty years after its creation, it was complete.

“How’s he doing?” Cal whispered to his wife.

“I dunno, silent Sally still won’t say a damn thing,” she said. “I don’t understand, he was always flapping his gums when I was a kid. Ah, damn it! I’m sorry honey; I just can’t keep my cool.”

“It’s really alright, dear. Once today is over I think things will get a lot easier for us.”

Cal loved his wife; some would say in spite of her rage fueled outbursts, but it was rather because of them that he fell in love with her. The two of them were like the

two halves of a black and white cookie; unimpressive separately, but once you put them together, they created something perfect.

In college, Carli was the president of the university's Cause of the Week Club which protested on behalf of a different organization each week, regardless of whether or not this meant supporting conflicting ideologies. In the span of one month they protested on behalf of the Vegans of America Group, the Meat Packing Labor Union, Mothers Infuriated by Lazy Kids (or MILK), and Nobody Asked You Mom, Now Leave Me Alone So I Can Play My Video Games, I'll Get A Job Tomorrow (or NAYMNLMASICPMVGIGAJT). The club gave Carli the perfect outlet for her pent-up rage. She could yell, threaten, burn effigies, and make signs that had both a social message, and some kind of pun.

Cal was the president of the Indifference Society. The majority of their meetings were spent discussing what they should do that week, but Cal always made sure that meeting time was always set aside for Carli, who came to their meetings in the hopes of recruiting more people for her next protest. Cal fell in love with the way her lips curled back when she snarled, and the way her small mole looked on her cheek when it reddened with fury. He went to all of her protests. It was on the day she punched out a cop to protect him while he was tied to a holly bush that he knew he was in love. Cal asked her to be his campaign manager for his bid at the class presidency, and thanks to her ingenious smear tactics he won by a landslide and finally gained the courage to ask her on a date. She said yes.

"I want to thank everyone for coming today," Cal said into the microphone. "The last puzzle piece is being put into place now and then one of the brave pilots from Fort Ramrod will be flying over to tell us just what exactly is on the puzzle! Yeah!"

A few charitable claps were given to the mayor as the final piece was dropped into its destined position with a click.

"Oh my God," Cal said, "oh my God, ohmyGodohmyGod."

"Shut up, honey," Carli said.

Cal spotted the jet plane a few short miles from the puzzle; he clapped his sweaty palms together in anticipation and turned on the walkie-talkie he had strapped to his belt.

"This is Mayor Cal Jansen," he said as the black square croaked with feedback, "are you in position?"

"Roger that, Mr. Mayor, I am in position," the pilot replied.

"So, what do you see?"

Cal proudly held the walkie-talkie up to the microphone so the rest of Brannigan could share in this moment.

"Well... uh... it looks to be... some kind of... some kind of phallus."

Cal gripped the podium tightly; the rapid gerbils had taken hold of his stomach with ruthless aggression and were spreading to his entire body.

"It's a what?"

"I'm pretty sure it's a big penis, sir."

Sebastian began to laugh hysterically like a man whose sanity was slowly slipping away. He made no attempt to hide his laughter at his nephew-in-law's expense; his wrinkled hands clapped together as he watched the townspeople growing angrier and angrier. Cal threw the walkie-talkie onto the ground and looked the old

man in his face, which was contorted from the swells of laughter that seemed unending.

“You spent taxpayer money to make a giant puzzle with the image of A PENIS?” Cal screamed.

The puzzle didn't actually contain an image of a penis. The pilot, Jack Trubee, had been seeing penises everywhere lately. These phallic phantoms were the product of his repressed sexual desire for Ring Pops and his recent completion of a community college course on psychological literary analysis.

“How are you not more upset about this?” Cal asked his wife.

“I think it's kinda funny,” she replied with a smirk.

The townspeople of Brannigan had had enough. With their weapons ready they rushed the puzzle in unison, all of their anger, frustration, and embarrassment being channeled into the burning light at the ends of their bargain priced torches. Sebastian's laughter was silenced by the sight of swift revenge heading for his masterpiece. He bolted down the grandstand's steps to throw himself in front of the wave of bodies that was about to come crashing down; if they were going to destroy his work, they would have to destroy him too. Sebastian thought about the exhausting evenings he spent working until the sun rose to cut each individual piece of the puzzle. There were beads of sweat dripping down his face as he stared into the angry eyes of Brannigan's citizens; they did not understand his masterpiece, despite the fact that he hoped they would.

At that moment, a black limousine came barreling down the dirt road that ran parallel to the puzzle's vertical edge. The limo, shining like spilled oil, stopped

directly between Sebastian and the mob. Everything was still except for the miniature American flag attached to the car's radio antennae, which was flapping violently in the mid-afternoon breeze. The flag's presence seemed to suggest that the car ran purely on America's can-do spirit. The silence was finally broken by the clicking of the limo's back door opening. A large man in a blue military uniform stepped out and gave a mini salute to the tiny antennae flag. If his body type had to be compared to a polygon, it would be a square; two squares to be exact, one large one for the body and a tiny one sitting on top for the head.

"Hi there, folks, sorry to stop you in the middle of what appeared to be an ol' fashioned mob scene. My name is Colonel G.T. Watts and I'm looking for a Mr. Sebastian."

Sebastian slowly raised his hand and stepped forward.

"Sebastian, I'm Colonel Watts, damn good to meet you," said the man, shaking Sebastian's frail hand. "The NASA boys noticed your little project here on one of their satellites a few months back, but we wanted to wait until the grand unveiling before we came to see ya."

Cal tried to intervene, still under the pretenses that he was standing beside a mural of a giant penis, in the hopes of saving his political career.

"Colonel Watts," he said, "I am so sorry about all of this; we'll have it taken apart immediately."

"No harm done," Colonel Watts said, with a hard smack to Cal's shoulder, and returned to speaking to Sebastian. "As for you, sir, I want to tell you that I've worked with NASA for a few years now. I've circled this little blue ball of ours more times than I can count and I came here to tell you that you're absolutely right."

Colonel Watts pointed to the puzzle as he said this. Sebastian's eyes filled with tears as he finally broke his years of silence.

"Thank you," he said. "I knew, that if you just took a step back and looked at it... all the pieces would make something great."

"I think the show is over, folks," Colonel Watts shouted at the slowly calming mob. "If you gotta burn something down, try the motel I stayed at off the highway! They didn't give me fresh towels this morning!"

After the crowd had gone their separate ways, Cal and Colonel Watts were left alone with the puzzle.

"It really is incredible, ain't it?" the Colonel asked Cal.

"I suppose," Cal said.

"I've seen and done a lot of things in my lifetime," the Colonel said. "I've flown at the speed of sound, I've seen the Earth from the Heavens, I overthrew the kingdom of the Radioactive Moon Chimps... Whoops, I'm technically not supposed to talk about that last one."

The Colonel chuckled to himself and went on.

"The point is, it's this kind of thing that really stands above the rest. An example of the things a person can accomplish when he just puts his mind to it. It's the only reason I've ever been able to fly anything, because someone simply thought humankind could do it."

"So..." Cal said, "it's not a penis?"

"No, no, no, it's nothing like that."

"So what is it?"

Colonel Watts looked at Sebastian.

“It’s a message,” Sebastian said.

A few weeks later, Sebastian passed away. He died peacefully and without pain, the doctors said. A short month after what became known as the Brannigan Puzzle Panic of 2010, Cal retired from the political game and opened up the Uncle Sebastian Memorial Gift Shop right next to Sebastian’s masterpiece.

Their most popular item is a miniature recreation of the world’s largest puzzle. Once it is completed, you can view the message that was originally intended only for the eyes of those who were miles above the Earth’s stratosphere.

It reads:

IT’S BEAUTIFUL FROM UP THERE, ISN’T IT?

BRIAN LONG runs the streets of New Jersey with a gang of literary street toughs known as The Broad Set:
<http://www.thebroadset.com>.

Thinking of Ewe

Tarl Roger Kudrick

The sheep problem began with graffiti on a men's room wall. "Muncie Harwitz loves sheep," it said, right where Gary was pretty much forced to stare while using the urinal. At the time, Gary was just glad the graffiti provided no further details or helpful diagrams. He flushed, washed, thanked the owner of the sports bar for use of the bathroom, got back in his delivery truck, and didn't waste one more brain cell thinking about Muncie Harwitz.

He did notice, though, that the clouds that April day were unusually white and fluffy.

Somehow or another, Gary had reached adulthood without achieving his childhood goal of becoming Batman. That bothered him more on some days than others. Today was one of the "more" days. His old Ford had broken down again and payday was next week, so he was taking the bus to the job he was too embarrassed to talk about with his friends who had remained in, or were still in, or who would probably end up teaching in, college.

While waiting for the bus, he tried not to stare at the very wrong sky. The only other person around was a tall Hispanic woman at least twice his age who smelled like the back of his delivery truck after a Volvo had rear-ended him and shattered a case of

Jack Daniels. She didn't seem like the best person to convince him he was still sane, but it was her or nobody.

"Excuse me," Gary said. "You notice anything weird about those clouds?"

She looked up.

"Nope."

"Don't they look an awful lot like sheep? I mean, like, realistic sheep?"

If anything, he was understating his case. The clouds had legs, tails, snouts, and big happy smiles. He counted eight of them floating like balloons in a Thanksgiving Day parade.

"Looks normal," the woman said.

That was the one response Gary hadn't expected.

"That's not normal."

"Course it is!" She giggled. "You ever been to the ocean?"

He'd grown up in California. "Yeah."

She leaned to him and whispered, "I hear it's *wet* nowadays." Then she laughed so hard, she leaned against the bus stop for support.

Gary didn't ask anyone else on the bus about the sheep-shaped clouds, but he mentioned it to a couple of co-workers, and after they thought he was joking -- like how could he *possibly* not have noticed clouds look like sheep before -- he stopped talking about it. It felt like too much like school. He continued, however, to look up at the sky once in a while. The sheep kept looking back down.

Gary was loading crates into his truck and trying not to think about sheep when his sales manager, Carol, handed him a printout.

“Hey, good driver.” She called him that. She didn’t call the others that. “You’ve got a new client. Make sure you deliver this one before noon.”

More clients meant more money, so this was a reward. He read the sheet -- some new bar and grill on Ovis Street. He didn’t recognize the address and their trucks didn’t have GPS.

“Where’s Ovis street?”

“About six miles south, as the sheep flies.”

Gary put the paper down. “As the *what* flies?”

But Carol was already rushing towards a ringing phone in her office. It was almost certainly the district manager, who called at eight a.m. every day, and Gary wasn’t stupid enough to interrupt that conversation.

Gary turned on his smartphone’s maps program. Ovis Street was right where, just last week, Adams Street had been. Major streets in downtown Phoenix were named after early US presidents: Jefferson, Washington, and...Ovis? On a hunch, he looked up “ovis” in an online dictionary. “Ovis” was part of the scientific classification for sheep.

He still didn’t think about the bathroom graffiti.

Gary completed his wine and beer deliveries, including to his new client, the Shropshire Bar and Grill. Before going home, he went back to Carol’s office, but it was

locked. A poster on her door showed a sheep wearing a black leather jacket and Terminator-style sunglasses. The poster said, "I'll be baa-aa-aack... tomorrow."

Gary went home to clear his head. He found the lamp on his living room table was now a ceramic sheep sitting cross-legged, staring at the ceiling, with a light bulb in its mouth.

Four objects stood between Gary and the bathroom: his sofa, a bookshelf, a doorless archway, and the bathroom door. He banged into all of them on his way to a sink where he could splash cold water on his face.

After drying off, he noticed his t-shirt no longer said "Budweiser." Now it had a picture of a grinning sheep standing on its hind legs with a beer in one hoof while the other front hoof formed a remarkably good thumbs-up sign. Text underneath said, "This Bud's for Ewe."

If Gary had learned anything in college, he'd learned he wasn't the smartest person in the world. But he knew mixed-up crazy when he saw it, and this was it.

His head pounding, he grabbed a basket of dirty clothes and rode the elevator down to the laundry room. He shoved his clothes and some detergent into a dryer, shut the door, put the money in, turned the dryer on, went back to the elevator, stopped, and asked himself what the hell he had just done. Then he ran back to the laundry, found it was too late to retrieve his money from the dryer, yanked his clothes out of it anyway, found a washing machine, and started over.

Through all of this, a little girl in the laundry room sang off-key: "Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb. Mary had a little --"

Gary couldn't take one more wrong note.

"No she didn't!" he shouted. "She had a dog!"

The girl cried and ran off. Gary rubbed his temples. He felt like his brain was a driver's seat and the little girl had been kicking it for five hundred miles. He went back to the elevator, leaned against its door, and fell in when it slid open.

He slept poorly that night, but never even considered counting sheep.

Gary woke the next morning feeling worse than Michelangelo might have if, after finishing the Statue of David, someone had said, "You know we wanted him to be wearing clothes, right?" He tried to find solace in the shallowness of early morning cable TV.

MTV was showing children singing "...and on this farm he had some sheep, E-I-E-I-O! With a Bah! Bah! here..."

Cartoon Network was running a "Sheep in the Big City" marathon.

On ESPN, the commissioner of the National Football League was declaring that all NFL teams would now be called the Rams.

Gary called in sick and dug out his copy of the Yellow Pages. The "S" section was much thicker than he remembered. He didn't dare look at it. He dialed emergency mental health care centers until he got an appointment with a counselor for that afternoon.

Now the TV was showing highlights from last night's baseball game between the Texas Ruminants and the Chicago Wool Sox. He turned it off and looked outside.

In the space where he'd parked his old Ford last night, an even older, different car now sat. He went out and took a good, long look. It was a mid-1980's Dodge

Aries. His car keys fit it perfectly, and its motor wasn't making any funny grinding noises. It was, in fact, in perfect condition.

Gary began counting the minutes until his mental health appointment.

The counselor was a tall, prim woman who reminded him of an old-fashioned schoolmarm, not a sheep. Her name was Dr. Ammon.

Gary sat down and wondered how to begin.

"Lately," he said, "everything seems to be about sheep."

He rattled off examples, including the "sheep-pedestrian accident" the radio had announced as he'd driven to her office. He was about to mention the swimsuit issue of "Sheep Illustrated" someone had been reading in the waiting room when the counselor's phone bleated.

Dr. Ammon said, "*Please* excuse me."

She picked up the phone and said, "Hello? I'm with someone right now... Yes, I'll see you tonight. Goodbaa."

Gary rocked back and forth in his chair. "Dr. Ammon? That phone? The sound it made?"

"Yes?"

"Didn't it sound... like..."

"Like what?"

"And the way you said goodbye!"

She leaned forward. "Good *what*?"

Gary twitched.

“Gary, are you telling me you don’t *like* sheep?”

Her stare seemed more threatening than an onrushing bus. He couldn’t stand it, and stood up.

“Um, I’ve got to go to work. Sorry...”

She didn’t try to stop him. Instead she picked up her phone and punched a red button. As he left he heard her say, “I need to report an emergency...”

Gary ran out of her office, dashed down two flights of stairs and through the glass doors, and then... then he couldn’t find his car. He was so used to his Ford Escort, he passed the Dodge Aries twice before remembering. By then, white cars with darkened windows had screeched into the parking lot, and men in white wool suits and white sunglasses were climbing out of them.

Gary smiled and put his hands on his head.

“Now officers, I’m not going to cause any trouble.”

“You sure aren’t,” one of them said. They pulled out spray cans and blasted a white fluffy fog into his face.

Gary woke up tied to a chair. He was outside, at night, in the middle of the desert. Two huge generators chugged along, providing power to a row of theater lights at the top of a makeshift stage that seemed to be hundreds of wooden crates placed together. A heavy-set man with white curly hair, wearing a white curly fur coat, was on stage, bellowing into a microphone. Stacks of speakers large enough for a Metallica concert blasted out his voice: “Even in kindergarten, they called me mad! Of course that was my name back then, so I changed it!”

The audience, which was mostly about a hundred men in white suits and ties, applauded. The only other people around -- a husband and wife with two little kids, and an elderly gentleman holding a sign Gary couldn't read -- did not applaud. The white-suited man kneeling next to Gary clapped politely. He had a generic, office-supply-store nametag on his suit jacket. It said "Stanley," and that name was handwritten in black marker. The handwriting looked familiar.

The man on stage continued.

"I'll admit, not all of my ideas have worked out. Especially my patented health plan, 'Cure Your Peanut Allergy by Eating Lots of Peanuts.' Oh, the lawsuits! But now peace and happiness will be ours. The sheepification of the universe is nearly complete!"

Batman would have known what to do. Gary didn't. He leaned towards Stanley and said, "Who is that?"

"Dr. Harwitz," Stanley whispered.

Gary remembered the bathroom graffiti and understood why he thought he'd seen Stanley's handwriting before.

"Muncie Harwitz? The guy you write about on walls?"

Stanley smiled. "Yup! The graffiti was his idea. He said traditional advertising doesn't work in a world where children wear shoes."

"That's insane."

"Normal people like us can't expect to understand a genius."

On stage, Harwitz kept yelling.

"Tonight, my brilliant mastery of science, combined with the natural alignment of every star in the universe..." Harwitz licked his thumb, held it up against the sky, and squinted. "Yes, *every* star, will solve all problems forever!"

The wife of the four-person family called out, "Where's the food?"

Harwitz looked at the audience. "What?"

The woman shouted, "The guy said there'd be a buffet!"

"Wait a minute." Harwitz's head snapped back and forth as he surveyed the crowd. "Where is everybody? This is my crowning achievement! Where are my adoring fans? It's just you guys!"

Stanley stood up, cupped his hands, and shouted, "We couldn't sell any tickets!"

Other men in white suits were saying similar things.

"I don't believe this," Harwitz said, marching back and forth on stage.

"There's no buffet?" the woman asked.

"No, there's no buffet!"

The elderly gentleman with the sign shouted, "Pigs!"

The woman said, "Well, we're hungry! The guy said there'd be food!"

"I, Dr. Muncival Harwitz, the greatest intellect in human history, have finally solved all problems everywhere by aligning the universe with sheep, and you want food?"

"Yeah!"

"Pigs!" the elderly man shouted, louder. He waved his sign.

Gary writhed against the sheepshank knots keeping him in the chair.

The woman shouted, "What are you talking about? What aligning?"

Harwitz screamed into the mic, "Haven't you noticed how everything in the world relates to sheep now? Look at the moon!"

Gary looked up. The moon was round, white, and fuzzy. Right in front of his eyes, it was growing legs and a snout.

The woman's husband shouted at Harwitz, "It's always been like that!"

“No it hasn’t!”

“Yes it has! You think we’re stupid?”

Harwitz stamped his feet. “I did that! Me!”

The woman laughed. “I’m pretty sure the moon was there before you!”

The elderly man wailed, “PIIIIIIGGGS!”

Harwitz yelled, “Will you shut up about pigs?”

“I want to know where the pigs went!”

“You can’t have pigs in a sheepified universe. The math proves it.”

“But pigs are beautiful creatures! They’re smarter than dogs!”

The woman, flustered, said, “What are pigs? What are dogs? Are you even speaking Sheepish?”

“I want pigs!”

Harwitz shouted, “Silence that man!”

A dozen or so of the white-suited men came for the elderly gentleman, who ran in circles, fighting them off with his big sign that Gary could now see said, “Pigs are people too.” The men in suits seemed a lot less tough to Gary than they’d been when they’d surrounded him in the parking lot. They ran off when the man bashed them with his sign.

Gary wasn’t sure why he wasn’t hypnotized like almost everyone else. Maybe he wasn’t smart enough to be hypnotized? He thought of an idea.

“Stanley!”

Stanley was still at his side. “Yes?”

“Do you know how much danger we’re in?”

“Oh, no, Dr. Harwitz thought of everything! All of our problems will be solved any minute now.”

“But haven’t you heard? There’s something wrong with the sheep. Don’t you think we should tell Dr. Harwitz?”

Stanley stared at Gary as if he were the only person on Earth.

“He’s busy! Tell me. Tell *me*.” Stanley grabbed him by the shoulders. “We’ve got to save the sheep!”

“Okay! Look. I’m not what I seem.” Gary took a moment to think. “I’m an undercover operative. For the NSA.”

Stanley blinked. “*You* work for the National Sheep Agency?”

Gary was so glad he’d chosen an organization with an S in its acronym.

“Yeah. See, uh...”

He had to keep it sheep-related. Anthrax? That came from sheep, but it hurt people. Did it also hurt sheep? Stanley was shaking him again, begging him to say something. All he could come up with was, “It’s Dolly!”

Stanley let go. “You mean the first cloned sheep?”

“Yeah!”

“She died years ago!”

Gary had forgotten that. “Uh, no. No, that’s what we wanted you to think. She’s alive, see, and she’s gone rogue.” The idea in him kept building. “You don’t really think science has advanced to the point of cloning, do you? It’s all part of the invasion!”

Stanley’s wide eyes were bigger than the moon. “Invasion?”

“Yes! Everything in the universe is becoming sheep, right? Even aliens! But *these* aliens were *already* sheep!”

“Already...?”

“They’re using the sheepification plan to hide their invasion! Dolly was created by their alien science and...”

Stanley’s voice went up two octaves. “Alien-sheep hybrids!”

“Yes! And... and they’re robots, too! They’re going to replace all sheep on Earth! And then...”

Gary hoped Stanley could think of something, because that was all he had.

Stanley was quivering like a struck tuning fork. “But... Dr. Harwitz was so careful...”

“I’m telling you, it’s an alien invasion! Why else do you think I dropped out of college?”

Stanley just stared and stared. Then he said, “It makes perfect sense.”

Gary almost said, “It does?”

Stanley untied him. “C’mon!”

They raced to the stage, as Harwitz screamed insults at the men in white suits who were now scared to go anywhere near the elderly pig man. The pig man shouted, “Oink! Oink!” and whirled his sign around. The family of four was heading back to their car, which was parked next to a row of white limousines.

Gary leaped onto the low stage. At the back of the stage, a beagle-sized glass statue of a sheep glowed like a light bulb. Wires connected the glass sheep to one of the generators. The sheep was pulsing like a heart, giving off even brighter light with every beat.

Harwitz said, “Don’t touch that!” and raced towards Gary.

Gary hurled the glass sheep at the nearest generator. It cracked like an egg. He felt his mind tingle a bit, but everyone else, especially Harwitz, flew back like the stage had just exploded.

Gary ran to Harwitz and listened to the man's ragged breaths. Harwitz was okay. He leaped off the stage and checked out a few others, especially the family of four. They were all unconscious but alive. The only person still standing was the pig man.

"What a bunch of hooey," the pig man said. "Now they've all fainted."

Gary looked at the moon. It was round, legless, and snoutless.

Gary asked the pig man, "Do you have any idea where we are?"

"Just north of Yuma, maybe twenty miles or so. I'm goin' home." The pig man pointed at a Harley Davidson "hog." "You need a ride?"

They were probably a hundred fifty miles from Phoenix. Gary'd never ridden on the back of a motorcycle for a hundred fifty miles before, but he was willing to try.

It took Gary a few days to convince himself everything was normal. But it was. His car was a Ford again, and still parked by the row of little offices where Dr. Ammon had been. Except now, the sign on her door said Dr. Westerly. Gary's delivery route took him to the same addresses it always had, plus his new one, now called "Irish Tom's." The world was no more sheepy than usual. And none of his co-workers seemed to remember anything about it.

His boss told him he seemed more at ease with himself.

"Did you do something good?" she asked.

"Yes," Gary said. "I think I did."

When he felt the threat was truly over, Gary searched the Web for “Muncival Harwitz” and found the man’s blog. He read it from the beginning. Entry after entry ranted about the magnetic resonance of the Earth, human brainwaves, quantum probabilities, molasses, and the world’s largest paper clip collection. One entry was an extended argument with some other blogger about which classical composer -- Beethoven, Brahms, or Bach -- could belch the loudest.

Gary skimmed entries until he found one dated three weeks ago that said, “Of course! The answer is sheep.”

That was the second most recent entry. The most recent had been published just four hours ago. It said, “My previous attempt at saving the world contained a critical error. The true answer is walruses. Giant, cybernetic walruses.”

Gary read that entry a second time. Then a third. As he read, his sense of dread surrendered to an almost pleasant anticipation.

He looked out his bedroom window, at the world that so desperately needed him. He had to wonder if he felt the way Batman did on those evenings when the bat-signal lit up an otherwise dark and empty sky.

Yes. Yes, he did.

TARL ROGER KUDRICK's short fiction has been published in Chizine, Anotherealm, the Town Drunk, and others. Since 2006 he has been the chief editor and co-publisher of the web fiction magazine "On The Premises" (www.OnThePremises.com).