



# **Jersey Devil Press**

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## **Editor's Note:** Six of One Kind, Half Dozen of a Zombies

Twelfth issue, bitches! Despite having seen *Twelfth Night* in Central Park more or less a year ago at this time, I will not be making a Shakespeare reference here. I will, however, make up some ridiculous alliterations.

In this, our twelfth issue, we have six spectacular stories, three written in a way what would be welcomed by Wally West, two typed by talented 'turning 'tributors, and one utilizing a unicorn.

Yeah, that's right, I typed that sentence. And you can't unread it.

Anyway, we start with Nathan Blake's hypnotizing "Stupid." Blake's got a very distinct style and, honestly, every time I start the story I'm unable to stop. I'm assuming it's black magic.

We follow that up with two fantastic flash pieces: "How to Spend \$40," by Avery Oslo, and "Tesh," by returning writer Tom Mahoney. One involves revenge and the other involves John Tesh. I'm not telling you which is which.

Next on the docket is "Road Test," by Laura Garrison. She's a wonderful writer and I'm glad we finally managed to get her into our digital pages.

Speaking of black magic -- well, you know, earlier -- we've got Andrew S. Fuller's "Autumn Harvest." It involves a carnival and a loving family. What could go wrong?

Lastly, but never ever leastly, we have returning champion Mike Sweeney with "A Terrifying Moment of Contentment," a parable about commitment issues. With zombies.

So there you go. Six stories situated snugly inside some sort of space-age speriodical, just ready and rarin' to get read.

Yes, I know "speriodical" isn't a word. But it was either that or "spublication."

-- Eirik Gumeny

# Stupid

Nathan Blake

In his infinite douchebaggery, Mr. Branson wrote on the back of your paper that *legitimizing oneself as a writer is fundamentally dependent upon the ability to craft a fine narrative and that it is difficult, (though I personally think impossible) to even begin thinking of crafting a fine narrative if one (and I'm speaking about you specifically now, Daryll) has nothing important to say, no overarching vision or strategic game plan for the piece's relevance and lingering success in a capricious world of literature such as today's.*

And you're sure you were the only student to get a comment like that. Because apparently you really stink at writing which is, well, news to you.

So you boil. You steam. You stew at 250° Fahrenheit and bake at 400°.

You figure Sarah Keyes didn't get a comment like that. Not *the* Sarah Keyes who was asked to read her stupid piece aloud in class about how she voluntarily donated her stupid kidney to her stupid old dystrophied grandmother even though it means she can't play her stupid field hockey in college next year, because what is more important, the ability to excel and perhaps even dominate a particular sports arena or helping one's neighbor, let alone family member, who changed diapers lovingly even with dainty, crooked fingers?

Like Sarah Keyes is even going to get into college next year. Not with those braces, honey; who even wears braces anymore? For her own sake you hope she realizes they don't generally allow little stupid baby kiddies into college, unless they are some sort of foreign-born genius stupid baby kiddies, which she is not, as far as you can tell (at least on a closer second or even third glance).

And you know what? You got appendicitis in the 10th grade and missed the first half of the baseball season and never really got the timing back in your swing, which is why you couldn't keep up the following season and were cut from the varsity team before anyone else, despite your natural gap power, despite the way you rounded second-base and almost forty percent of the time made it to third. And let's not talk about your defensive positioning for cut-off throws from the outfield, because Christ, man, you could really do that very very well, at least in your own humble eyes and maybe even the most proud eyes of others. You really could.

But do we see you wasting everybody's time in Intro to Writing Non-Fiction Editorials Summer Session (Block III)? Do we see you complaining?

No. Not really.

You just wanted your next piece to tell everyone how things really are. The metaphorical meat and potatoes, but most importantly, the gristle. You wanted to shove stupid Sarah Keyes' paper down her stupid spoiled throat. You wanted to expose the world in all its fractured, raw glory and then maybe, if you just so happened to stumble along the path of good fortune, get a great recommendation from Mr. Branson and ultimately leave Harris Community College in order to move on to greener, albeit more expensive pastures at a nice writing program somewhere out of the state where the professors type and attach formal responses to student papers and blog at *The Huffington Post* and wear corduroys and have full beards and smell like cigarettes and broccoli. That's all you really wanted.

So you knew how important it was not to screw up the formal editorial: the pink crescent jewel in your burgeoning writer's crown. Because it wasn't going to be like the paper previous where you examined this dog named Rolf dying alone in a garage from heatstroke while his owners were on vacation in California. And that really

happened. But did it make any sort of difference? No. Mr. Branson said that your *presumptuous depiction of the canine's internal dolor was conceited and utterly banal -- emotionally constipated!*, and you suppose you felt much worse than what was at first expected because you had to look up most of those words in the dictionary before you even knew he hated it.

But that wasn't going to happen again. Learn from mistakes, you told yourself. Do not be fooled twice in this crazy interconnected world of cause and effect. The world is your oyster -- shuck it.

The sonic energy ripples alone emanating from your brazen ambition would cause Sarah Keyes' stupid grandmother to reject that stupid kidney and go on to choke Mr. Branson on his little femme Nutto-lite! bar right in the middle of class so that once recouped he would grovel and wail endlessly before you, supplicating, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I did not quite understand your genius at all, maybe you should stick around next year and shadow me for a while and, well, heck, why don't you teach my class for me, please just go ahead and do all of us one big giant favor by teaching my class for me because I am just so stupid and conceited and utterly banal in my emotional constipation and have so much to learn from you!* What a stupid asshole.

\*\*\*

It's amazing how even when you're naked people can still tell that you've pissed yourself. Just can't pull a fast one on anybody these days, it seems. Regular seasoned crime scene investigators everyone turns out to be when you've pissed yourself and don't think anyone will notice because you're completely naked and running top

speed down the street holding an artificial leg, which you would think might distract some from looking at one's naked body for just a moment.

Yes, that's you running down Kingsley Street bloodied, completely nude, holding an artificial leg, pissing yourself with each fluid stride. Look at you go!

And yes, those are pornographic film producers chasing you down Kingsley Street bloodied, completely nude, pissing yourself with each fluid stride. Look at them go!

And you happen to have lived on Kingsley Street for, oh, to make a general sort of estimate, your whole life.

And there's Mr. Robertson and his big stupid white bald head watering his stupid prize-winning rosebushes, tracing your naked loins like you're the freak. No time to explain, and he probably wouldn't understand anyway because he's so old that it would be like explaining Mondrian to a circle. He'll just have to deal with it like you deal with his disgusting raw chicken hands.

Look -- coming up on the left is the primary school and oh lord it's recess and oh god there's your sister Sarah, oh wait, you don't think she, yes, yes she sees you and now she's staring at you and trying not to cry and now all those stupid little kids who piss their pants every day are pointing and staring and do we see you staring at them when they piss themselves? No. It's rude, those little assholes.

And here's your house, and you think you've lost those creepy coke-headed pornography guys, but then you get to your lawn and slip on the grass your gardener Benny cuts and ah christ there's Benny the gardener shirtless behind the garage with Yuengling-soaked chest hair, and you bet he's going to totally blow this out of proportion and end up quitting the job so that Ma makes you cut the lawn every



Thursday from now on, but you finally get into the house and lock the door and run upstairs finally to Ma's room. Finally.

And just like your first day of preschool, you end up naked, crying on some woman's floor.

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There's nothing wrong with it.

You repeat: there is nothing wrong with it.

Totally natural. Admirable, even. You had an idea and the idea had legs -- legs to put your paper so far out in front that none would come within even a fart-sniff of it, especially not stupid Sarah Keyes, whose paper, from what you could glean, was centered around her Buddhist uncle's traveling band of circus clown ice-sculptors.

Like, who the hell cares?

You had your own factoids. Brad Gavin's older brother, you heard, was home from college on academic suspension. Apparently, Brad once or twice saw him making porno videos in their parents' garage. Independent type deals. Real hush-hush.

And then it hit you like a frozen sledgehammer via some sort of cosmic intuitive perception mediated by an inner light of awareness: You had to blow the lid off of the underground suburbanite pornography ring of Fransten, South Carolina. And you had to become a porn star, too, but that went without saying. Like, how else would one pull off a daring and amazing feat such as this?

And looking back on it all, maybe it was pretty stupid to show up at Brad Gavin's two-story garage in a bathrobe.

And maybe it was stupid to just walk right in unannounced on a day when Brad's brother and five of his porno friends were doing lines of coke off a naked chick's chest.

Because it sort of got out of hand after that in a big kind of way.

Hey -- did they really have to tear the bathrobe apart? Like, didn't those stupid assholes know you were naked under there and that the robe wasn't even yours to begin with but on loan from Pop? And what was with all the vicious kicking and whatnot? Jesus, the nerve of some people. Any idea how embarrassing something like that is for such a young guy? What, with one of them grabbing your wrist and sort of trying to shove it into your own mouth? To eat your own hand? Pretty degrading, especially when coupled with all the maniacal laughter.

So you ended up puking on your fist. Big whoop. It's not like you've never puked before, on yourself or otherwise. But the poking? That really got your goat. Also the slapping, kicking, pinching, biting, choking, etc. etc. etc. Also the titty-twister, the one to spurn even the most callous masochist. Also the name-calling? That was, like, way out of line. "Dickfeeder" and "Shitterman" are names that add lame insults to sustained internal injuries.

So let's talk about shoes. Let's talk about how you're getting pummeled by six college guys and all you can think about is their stupid shoes. Eleven black rubber shower sandals and one steel-toed boot. Because, Christ, one of them has a steel-toed boot with an artificial leg attached to it, how funny is that?

You had no choice, you know. Everyone has his breaking point. It's understandable. You grabbed that damned fake leg and the beating stopped. So duh, right move geniuses (not running away!). The goateed fatty it belonged to looked

down on you like *did he really just do that? Did he really just grab this here fake leg?* as if you're the bad guy in all this, the stupid wank.

You did what you had to do and truthfully? It was commendable and should we dare say valiant? Let us go ahead then and dare say. Do not listen to naysayers. Because really, it opened a small window where you could give the amalgamation of metal tendons a good jerk and plop, off it came, and boom, down the goateed fatty followed.

Which was good for you. A small win is a win nonetheless.

You just sort of slipped out of the garage after that, naked, bloodied, pissing yourself, clutching so tightly that stupid fake leg, off towards your house four miles away on Kingsley Street.

So now we're all caught up.

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Your ma -- it should be noted, before the rumors start -- is a real lady if there ever was one. Pop's not much good though. When he isn't looking at the bottom of an empty beer bottle he's eyeing the top of a full one. Ma cooks and cleans the house and pays the bills. She taught you how to play baseball. She paints pottery and studies Chinese art on the weekends. Ma even hired Benny the gardener to take care of the yardwork because Pop lost your lawnmower in a game of poker and, besides, do we think he could get all 400 pounds of himself off the couch to even mow the lawn?

She has patience, Ma does, which is exactly why she doesn't immediately call the cops when you show up naked in her room, screaming and drooling blood all over her new oriental rug, the one with the intertwined Chinese dragon and goldfish on it, the

one she bought on QVC just last month as a gift to herself because she always says *Lord knows I got to treat maself sometimes, I got to treat maself*.

“Now what the HELL is THIS all about?” she screams down on you. There is a fire in those eyes you wish you had inherited. Instead you ended up with Pop’s cold, fish-eyed stare.

You aren’t sure how to explain it to her, so you say something like “Oh god, Ma, oh god, they just started beating on me, Ma, you gotta help me, Ma, they’ll be here any second.”

“You had better slow the hell down and tell me what happened, boy!”

Who are you even kidding? You stall. You can’t do it. You can’t tell her that her only stupid son tried to break into the porno business, even if it was only for a day. So you tell her the next closest thing to the truth you can think of.

“Ma, they beat me up because I’m stupid! They think I’m a mongoloid and they think you and Pop are too!”

Oh god.

“My son, a mongoloid? Chrissakes, no, not this, not this time. I went through it with your father and his drinkin,’ but not my only boy. Get downstairs and watch the damn door. And put some damn clothes on. This ain’t the Discovery Channel.”

It’s stupid of you not to think about what she might be planning, but you go on and grab your old, oversized Donald Duck t-shirt that reads *Get on the Right Quack! Don’t Abuse Our Hosing Facilities!* anyway. You slide down the stairs on your ass like you used to do when you were a kid and sneak up to the window softly, peering out at your lonely little street. On the horizon, ahead of the yellow row of docile busses, a speck inches closer to the house. It’s Brad’s brother. It doesn’t take a genius, you know.

Before you can say anything, upstairs some boxes fall with the accompanying “Chrissakes” and all 110 pounds of Ma comes storming down the stairs with a pistol. You are shocked. You have never even seen a real pistol before and here’s Ma, gripping that thing like some kind of stupid Egyptian amulet.

“Get the hell out of the way,” she says, like you’re the problem. “We don’t need any more trouble for this family.”

“Ma?” That’s the only stupid thing you can think of. It sputters out of you like shit from a baby’s butt. She pushes past you, or rather through you, and slams the screen door shut on your elbow which really hurts like hell but you don’t say anything because of the circumstances.

“Wait, Ma, wait, you don’t know what you’re doing!” you yell, but there she goes, down the street to meet your assailant head on like she’s a samurai in some stupid classic Japanese film. Does she listen? No. Should she have listened? Yes. Infinitely yes.

You follow after her sort of dazed, almost naturally, like a duck. You understand ducks to do things like this. You trust her, wherever she might go and whatever she might end up doing. Stupid.

She moves in on him quickly, which, unfortunately, ends up being pretty anticlimatic because Brad’s brother slaps Ma on her left jaw before they even parley.

And then it gets real quiet.

“See what you made me do? Do you see that, you bitch? I didn’t want to do that. You made me do it. You can’t just walk up to me with a gun, you crazy bitch!”

Ah, Christ. That was pretty out of line.

So there’s Ma, crumpled in the middle of the street, crying in a stupid gold tracksuit you told her not to buy in the first place. Already the neighbors are crowding

in front of their bay windows with binoculars, mouths open, dialing frantically on their stupid cordless phones with intent beaming white hot from their stupid tight faces.

This is the kind of trouble Ma was trying to curtail in the first place.

Brad's brother looks at you and snickers.

"All this trouble, for what?"

You legitimately don't know anymore. It's embarrassing how easily one forgets one's newly found life-purpose.

"Jesus, kid, just give me that leg or I'll make sure she doesn't get up. You really pissed Frank off back there. He's never going to get off the couch without his leg." He kicks Ma in the ribs to let you know he's serious and acting purely on Frank's behalf.

You piss yourself again, just a little bit, although this time you can really see it through the front of that big stupid Donald Duck t-shirt. *Get on the Right Quack! Stop Pissing Yourself!*

"I said give me that leg, you little shit." He kicks her again and that's when you hear the gun cock.

That's when you know Ma isn't kidding either.

That's also when Benny the gardener thinks it best to step in and handle the situation himself.

"Boy, you betta get yoself outta here fo they call the police," Benny says, cool as a friggin' cucumber, like he's rehearsed that line over and over again until the words are like white fish meat in his wet gullet.

Brad's brother womps him in the mouth, too, for good measure, and in the hustle and bustle that follows, the sound of the gun shot crashes through the fragile plane of your fake plastic suburb with deafening gusto.

And that's when your gardener Benny takes a .22 magnum to his sun-spotted left temple and flops down on top of your ma, who has somehow managed to crouch herself into and simultaneously execute the infamous Rice Paddy Prone position Pop would teach you in a drunken swagger every Fourth of July. Great job, Ma. Muy excellent. There's Benny the gardener, bleeding like a third-string quarterback, and Ma, spread out beneath his floppy pancake corpse, gold as glitter, shocked with this stupid blank expression on her face like you'd find on those little angels lining an old woman's mantle.

Stupid coked-out asshole Brad's brother flees down the street and cuts the median on I-585 before catching a pickup truck head-on headed southbound towards New Mexico. They find different parts of him all over the street across from the primary school and Sarah comes home that night crying, "His head was gone, it was gone!" which is, for someone so young as she, pretty morbid to notice. But she's right. His head is gone. It takes them a week to find it behind some old dumpsters as it has collected quite a protective mound of paper refuse.

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Later on, with the wind in the small trees, they drag a catatonic Ma to the county jail wrapped in some crappy orange felt blanket and ship both Benny and Brad's brother off to the morgue. Sarah Keyes writes her stupid paper about her stupid Buddhist uncle's traveling band of circus clown ice-sculptors, and Mr. Branson submits it for publication in the local paper's critically heralded "LiveLaughLove" section, praising its *intrinsically authentic Dickensian humanity*.

You miss the assignment and later drop out of Harris Community College to take over Benny's gardening route, which is normally safe and pretty easy to manage. Brad points out that Frank's stupid fake leg is still in your yard and so you two meet at his garage for a few quick beers before burying it in old Mr. Robertson's prize-winning rosebushes.

The Sunday following the incident, when Ma would normally curl up on the lawn furniture and read her second hand art textbooks, Brad and you mosey down to the shipyard to throw rocks at the stupid workers until the night creeps in and you lay flat in the gravel for a while singing songs you learned when you were just kids.

**NATHAN BLAKE** is a student. School him. He gets lost easily when looking for bathrooms. Play your cards right, and maybe he can find yours.



## How to Spend \$40

Avery Oslo

If you have a roommate that goes out every night in five-inch heels and who smells faintly of that burned smell cheap hair straighteners leave on split ends, prepare yourself to part with \$40. You'll know you need to part with the cash when every night in the past week you've found a different pair of boxer shorts roaming in your shared bathroom, wiping dirt on your towels, and "accidentally" walking in on you when you were changing.

You knew you had to do this when you caught a pair of striped Calvin Kleins eating your leftovers and backwashing into your carton of juice. When he saw you, he grinned, and pieces of your juice-soaked pierogies fell out of his mouth. He brought the rest back to her room, not even realizing that he's just robbed you out of tomorrow's lunch.

Next time, just force a smile and plop down on the couch to suffer through a few faked noises. Touch the \$40 in your pocket in anticipation. Eventually Mr. Leftovers will tip-toe back out of her room wearing a sheepish grin and clasping his belongings to his crotch. Politely hold the door as he leaves: your quarrel isn't with him. Once he's gone, slip into her room like a ninja so she doesn't wake up. Brush the condom wrappers off of the nightstand to clear a space for two twenty-dollar bills.

Consider adding a thank-you note from him.

Several works of **AVERY OSLO**'s have appeared in places like *Dew on the Kudzu*, *Alice Magazine*, *The Dead Mule*, and *Thirteen Myna Birds*. She's currently working on two YA novels and can be reached at [averyoslo.wordpress.com](http://averyoslo.wordpress.com). You can also follow her tweets at [twitter.com/AveryOslo](https://twitter.com/AveryOslo).

## Tesh

Tom Mahony

My lady and I were in love. There was only one problem: for years she'd harbored an on-again, off-again obsession with John Tesh -- the music, the radio show, the mystique. It was a barrier between us. No matter how well we got along, no matter how strong our relationship seemed, she could never quite escape Tesh's grip.

But things changed during a summer trip to a rustic lodge in the Sierra Nevada mountains. For a week we left society behind, a complete social and media blackout. We hiked through conifer forest, swam in gurgling streams, sunbathed on warm slabs of granite. We dined by candlelight and talked for hours about anything and everything and nothing. I sensed a turning point in our relationship, and it was time to cement it.

One afternoon, while she napped, I hoofed down the road to a general store and purchased a cheap plastic ring from a toy vending machine. I would propose at the next opportune moment. She'd love the quirkiness of the ring, and a proposal in the beautiful mountain setting was a perfect way to begin the rest of our lives together.

That evening, back at the lodge, we lounged on a couch drinking wine beside a roaring fire. We discussed our dreams for the future: a brood of kids, a big house on a leafy street, golden years spent together. I'd never seen her so happy, her eyes wide and playful, her mouth smiling and quick to laugh. As the wine and conversation flowed, I knew the moment was right. I excused myself and hustled to our room to grab the ring.

When I returned -- heart pounding with excitement, the plastic ring clasped in my sweaty palm -- I saw that things had suddenly changed. Her smile was gone. She stared out the window frowning and muttering, her brow furrowed and fists clenched. A vague desperation hung in the air. I walked over and gently touched her shoulder.

“Tesh again?” I said.

She nodded. A tear rolled down her cheek. I slipped the ring into my pocket. I knew right then we’d never be free.

*Damn you John Tesh, I fumed. Damn you to hell.*

**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. His first novel, *Imperfect Solitude*, is forthcoming from Casperian Books on December 1, 2010. Visit him at [tommahony.net](http://tommahony.net).

## Road Test

Laura Garrison

I had already failed it twice -- damn that parallel parking! -- and this was my last chance. If I did not pass the road test this time, I would have to wait a full year before I could take it again. I shuddered at the possibility.

The written exam was easy; I missed only one question. (A blinking yellow "X" over a lane means "Must Turn Left." Who knew, right?)

After I received my score, I joined my dad in the waiting room. Once upon a time, that room would have been packed with teenagers and their parents, but most of the seats were empty that day, just like the last two times I had been there. I sat in a plastic chair beneath the dingy glow of the fluorescent lights, waiting for my number to be called. There was a hole forming in one leg of my jeans, and I plucked at the exposed threads with my fingernail.

"Nervous?" my dad said, without looking up from his book.

"Nope," I lied. "Third time's the charm." With Mom gone, I knew he was depending on me to get my license. It would take a lot of pressure off of him if I could help shuttle Simon to target practice and pick up groceries during the week.

"Number four," the loudspeaker crackled.

"That's me," I said, waving my printed card.

"Good luck, Punkin Britches. Remember, hands at ten and two."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, Dad. I'll try to come back with good news this time."

I went out through the metal door marked "Testing Area." Outside, I was greeted

by a thin woman with a long nose. She wore red-framed glasses, and there was a small crack in one of the lenses.

"Back again, Miss Bramford?"

"Call me Kayla, Ms. Mulch. I feel like we're practically family, don't you?"

She snorted.

"Just get in the car. You know the drill."

It was not really a car; it was my dad's old pickup truck -- a two-toned, rust-spotted clunker that left a drizzly trail of oil everywhere it went. I hopped into the cab and buckled my seatbelt.

Ms. Mulch walked around to the front of the truck.

"You may start the engine, Miss Bramford."

I turned the key and the engine sputtered to life. The exhaust pipe farted out a cloud of blue smoke; I watched it rise and dissipate in the rearview mirror.

"Wipers?"

I turned on the wipers, counted to three, then turned them back off.

"Hazards?"

On, three-count, off.

"High beams?"

I flashed them twice.

Using the pencil that was chained to her clipboard, Ms. Mulch scribbled something on a sheet of paper. Then she went around to the passenger side, carefully avoiding the front bumper, which drooped at a melancholy angle and was attached to the truck with overlapping loops of barbed wire. She got into the cab next to me, wrinkling her nose as she settled onto the scuffed leather of the bench seat.

"Sorry about the smell. I spilled some soup in here yesterday," I explained

helpfully, indicating a greenish stain in the footwell.

She reached for the crank that would roll down the window, then thought better of it and withdrew her hand.

"You may now attempt to parallel park, Miss Bramford." Her pencil was poised over her clipboard; I could tell that she was itching to fail me yet again.

I took a deep breath, switched on my turn signal, and threw the shift lever into reverse, craning my neck around as I wiggled the back end of the truck towards a pair of orange cones that marked the edge of an imaginary parking space. After using up my maximum of four gear changes on back-and-forth maneuvering, I put the truck in park.

"How'd I do?" I asked.

Ms. Mulch opened her door a few inches and peered down at the curb.

"Acceptable," she grunted, reluctantly checking a box on the form.

"Woohoo!" I said, pumping my fist in the air.

"Not so fast, Miss Bramford. You still need to pass the rest of the exam. When you're ready, you may drive up to the gate."

"Oh, I'm ready," I said. I put the truck in drive and tapped the gas pedal with the toe of my sneaker. I pulled up to the electrified fence that marked the boundary of the back lot of the DMV and waited, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel.

"Are we forgetting something?" Ms. Mulch asked pointedly.

"Oops," I said. I used my elbow to press the button that locked my door, then I leaned across Ms. Mulch and smacked down the lock on the passenger's side door.

"There. Safe as cows in a barn," I said.

"I hope so," she replied. There was a remote control hanging from a string around her neck, like a plastic pendant. She aimed it at the gate and pressed a green

button.

The gate slid open with efficient speed. When the gap was wide enough for the truck, I pulled through it and stopped.

Ms. Mulch aimed the remote over her shoulder and pressed a red button.

The gate slid back into place, closing the electrified circuit with a soft *bzzzt* sound, like a beetle hitting a bug zapper.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Turn left and proceed to the traffic signal," Ms. Mulch said.

The traffic signal was five blocks away. I drove slowly to the stop sign on the first corner, avoiding the largest potholes. If the street had been in better repair, it would have been almost pleasant; both sides were lined with maple trees, and the yards, although full of nettles and thorny shrubs, were lush and green. I brought the car to a full stop, looked all around with exaggerated concern -- there was no one in sight -- and drove through the intersection.

Ms. Mulch clucked her tongue and wrote something on her clipboard.

Halfway down the next block, a large dog of indecipherable lineage ran into the street.

Reacting instinctively, I swerved and just barely avoided hitting it. It chased after us, running alongside the truck, snapping and snarling. Its fur was brown and wiry, but there were a lot of bald patches on its sides and around its muzzle. I drove faster, hoping that there were not any huge holes in the road ahead. My luck held, and by the time I reached the signal light, the dog had given up and gone loping back towards the overgrown yard from which it had sprung.

I glanced at Ms. Mulch. She was frowning and writing furiously. This was not good. She clearly did not trust me. I would have to do something really spectacular if

I expected to pass.

"Should I keep going straight?" I asked.

"Yes. Then make a left turn at the next signal," she said.

There was one car facing me at the signal light -- a Ford Armadillo -- and I waited for it to cross before I made my turn.

"Continue down to Thurston Street and make another left," Ms. Mulch said.

The front entrance of the DMV was on Thurston Street. That meant I only had about nine more blocks' worth of driving left in which to impress Ms. Mulch.

About twenty yards away, on the right side of the street, there was a lovely stone building that had once been a church. A small crowd had gathered on the steps, and a couple of people were leaning against the frame of the arched doorway. As we approached, they walked down the steps and along the short path that led to the road. Their movements were shambling yet deliberate, like a bunch of drunks getting ready to start a bar fight.

Ms. Mulch sucked in a breath of air and gulped it down like cough syrup. I knew she was thinking of the dog I had missed by inches.

I would not react on instinct this time; there was too much at stake. I twisted the wheel and floored the accelerator. The truck sprang forward, engine screaming like a howler monkey. Ms. Mulch and I both bumped our heads on the roof when the truck jumped the curb, and I nearly lost my grip on the steering wheel.

Most of the crowd had scattered, but one man was still standing on the sidewalk, mouth gaping, bloodshot eyes wide. He was wearing stained khakis and a pink polo shirt. I saw the embroidered alligator on his chest pressed against the windshield for a brief moment before he rolled back down off the hood of the truck, leaving a bloody smear on the tan paint.



There was a squishy crunch when the tires went over him; it was like running over a canvas bag filled with carrots and chocolate pudding.

I guided the truck back into the road, bouncing down over the curb. I could hardly believe what I had just done. Ms. Mulch must have been shocked; she probably didn't think I had it in me. I looked over my shoulder to see if any of the others were following us. I did not think they would be -- not with one of their own down -- but they were not always predictable.

"Eyes on the road, Miss Bramford. Use your mirrors," Ms. Mulch said.

I turned around and watched in the side mirror as the zombies -- who, as the stenciled letters reminded me, were closer than they appeared -- gathered around their fallen comrade, Mr. Pink Polo. I slowed to a crawl, watching as they crouched down and sniffed at him. One of them lifted his lifeless arm with both hands and began eating his fingers with quick, sharp bites, as if they were peppermint sticks. Another grabbed one of his ears, twisted it off, and stuffed it into his mouth. Two of them buried their faces in the man's crushed chest, lapping up the red puddles that were collecting there, while a fifth pulled off his loafers and began tugging at his socks, trying to free the soft flesh underneath.

I caught a glimpse of the sock-tugger's face, and for one terrible moment I was certain that she was my own mother, who had left for work one morning two months before and had not come back. But it was not her; this woman's hair was too dark. At least, I thought it was -- it was hard to tell; a lot of it had fallen out in clumps, much like the fur of the dog that had chased us down the street. And I was rather far away by this point; details in the reflected tableau could hardly be trusted at this range.

I tore my eyes away from the mirror and focused on the street, which was pitted and strewn with branches and bones. I did not look back again until after I made the

turn onto Thurston Street, and by then the crowd was out of sight.

I made my way back to the DMV without further incident, and the armed guards at the entrance nodded to Ms. Mulch as I turned into the main parking lot. Nearly all the slanted spaces were open; I pulled into one at random and turned off the engine.

Ms. Mulch was tapping the clipboard with her pencil, lips pursed.

"Well," she said, looking down at her notes. "You passed, but I must say that I have some reservations concerning your braking, which is much too jerky, and you put on your turn signal too soon before..."

She kept talking, but I heard nothing after that, although I continued to nod seriously every few seconds. I had passed!

When Ms. Mulch finally finished her lecture about all the areas in which my skills were barely adequate, I bolted back into the waiting room, where my Dad was still reading his novel. He looked up, saw my face, and smiled.

"Congratulations," he said.

Thirty minutes later, I was holding my very own driver's license, still warm from the laminating machine. I read all of the printing next to my picture: Kayla Bramford; Height: 5'4"; Weight: 118; Eyes: Gray; Hair: Brown; Class C: Aggressive Driving (Kill/Maim -- Undead ONLY), Non-Commercial. I had not checked the box for organ donation.

There were already enough people after my organs.

My dad gave me a hug. "I'm so proud of you," he said.

I got a little choked up. I had secretly been preparing myself for disappointing him, and his words meant a lot to me. But I did not want to get all mushy about it. I wiped my nose on the back of my arm and jangled the keys.

"Come on, Dad. Let's go for a ride."

**LAURA GARRISON** grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, and currently lives in Maryland with her husband Justin. Some of her other work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Puffin Circus*, *Niteblade*, *5923 Quarterly*, *Defenestration*, and *The Northville Review*, among others. She likes reading by candlelight, chasing (but not catching) butterflies, and shiny objects. She is afraid of revolving doors and jellyfish.

## **Autumn Harvest**

Andrew S. Fuller

I do not know exactly when the carnival first tasted my son's blood.

I am protective, never hovering but always watching him. So I would remember any harm coming to him on the Ferris wheel, in the big top, or in the animal petting pen. I stood by him on the carousel, as he rode his favorite powder blue unicorn, which delighted him more than any birthday. I always walked next to him, even when he stopped holding my hand last year.

All it takes, I know now, is a prick of the finger. The smallest drop of red. There were no scraped knees, no bloody noses, that I can recall. But somehow they sampled his life.

Every year since Toby's birth, it became our family tradition to spend one October day at the traveling tents. Last year we returned to the carnival three times. I could not experience enough, taking days off work and insisting to my wife that we weren't done seeing everything. I never told her or anyone about the deep anxious ache that pulled me. Nor have I forgotten that insatiable feeling. True, I had never seen a carnival or a circus in my own childhood, and I rationalized with a need for some absent form of nostalgia. Such traveling shows seemed more and more a dying breed, and family outings were still a schedule challenge for us in our fifth year of parenting. Perhaps it was Claire who wanted to visit on the third day.

But this year, it was Toby who insisted we attend every single day.

Every single day for the past week. He rode the carousel thirty-three times.

After eight days of the carnival, we refused him. Gently... At first.

Then he refused to eat.

He bit Claire multiple times. And broke one of her fingers.

We locked him in his room two days ago.

We brought his meals and tried speaking to him in approaches both rational and scolding, without response. He ate just enough, staring at the two of us with a loathsome glare I've not seen before, while mocking calliope music through his open-mouthed chewing. Then he tilted his head and screamed. He hurled plates and food, and drove us from the room.

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He has been standing on the other side of his door for two days, screaming.

Exhausted as I am, I do not linger when Toby's angry shouts melt to screams of fear.

My hands tremble so much that I have trouble fitting the key.

A massive crash in his room. Glass shatters and something heavy enters the house. Then the unmistakable clop of hooves, an agitated whinny and angry snorts.

As much as I love my son, I back away from the clamor.

Claire arrives almost immediately. She looks at me briefly, before kicking forward and breaking the latch from its frame, splintering wood.

Her punches I can handle with practice pads. I once took a full kick of hers while sparring. I blacked out and woke on the mat moments later, and the doctor said one of my lungs was bruised.

She is often my strength, and I use her now to release myself from a huddle of trepidation.

There is little blood but my eyes are drawn to it. The floorboards are charred and still smoldering. His bed is broken in two. The room reeks of sulfur.

Toby is, of course, gone.

The porch roof outside his window is burned too. In another second, I realize that the blackened patterns are hoof marks. Coming and going. I remember the carousel, the overlarge and murky eyes of the unicorn.

We turn to each other, my eyes stinging, her face locked and low. We seem to remember it at once -- the purchase I made last week. The curiosity of a new hobby, and curious fascination with the deadliness of the weight in my hand, even unloaded. She nods now to forgive me for the argument we had about it, then tosses me Toby's softball bat. She heads to the basement, digging in her pocket for the key to the gun safe. We'll meet at the car.

And go to the carnival. One last time.

**ANDREW S. FULLER** grew up in Nebraska and other places, climbing trees and reading books. His fiction appears in *Abyss & Apex*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, *The Harrow*, *Blood Rose*, *Every Day Fiction*, *A Fly in Amber*, and *Ink-filled Page*. Damnation Books will release *The Circus Wagon* in September 2010. He is the author of two poetry chapbooks, a graphic novella, and editor of *Three-Lobed Burning Eye* speculative fiction magazine. His screenplay *Effulgence* recently won the Best Screenwriter Award at the 2009 H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival. Now he lives in Portland, where he climbs rocks and writes stories. Learn more at [www.andrewsfuller.com](http://www.andrewsfuller.com).

## A Terrifying Moment of Contentment

Mike Sweeney

“We got the name like this,” said the Old Sounder, holding up two rusted machetes and clanging them together. “Every time you entered a burned out house or abandoned building, you’d make some noise right off the bat. The Things aren’t smart enough to stay quiet. You step in, do some banging and if you don’t hear that God-awful shufflin’, you know you’re okay.”

Eddie always wondered about that. Sounders? Huh.

The Old Sounder told him that story that first night as Eddie lay feverish and twitching by the fire. His antibiotics saved Eddie’s life, keeping the stump of what had been Eddie’s left arm from turning gangrenous. Without them and the Old Sounder, Eddie was sure he’d be dead now, baked to death in that wretched dumpster.

Eddie still didn’t know how the old man found him. But that was part of the legend: the Old Sounder, Scourge of the Things, Last Hero of the West.

The next night, the old man told Eddie he thought his real name was Ben, but he didn’t like to use it anymore. Then he spent three hours telling Eddie the story of his life, or at least the story of a life before the world ended. The Old Sounder spoke the whole time in the third person, telling Eddie about a man who sold insurance for a living and had four daughters and a wife named Beth and three brothers that he grew up with in Iowa. He told Eddie all about that man and his family: who drowned young and tragically, who married well, who served in Vietnam, who was disowned

by Papa, who had the sweetest laugh, who gave the best Christmas presents, and, Eddie's personal favorite, who crapped themselves that one time in church.

As Eddie sat listening to the Old Sounder, he forgot about the Things for a while. That was the other gift the Sounders gave to one another: stories. Money and gold might be worthless now -- well, they could serve as toilet paper and slingshot projectiles, respectively -- but a good tale was more valuable than ever.

Eddie knew on this, their last night together, it was his turn. He surveyed the Old Sounder, a mass of denim, leather, and flannel hulking over the fire, and wondered what to say. Behind the old man, the last glint of sunlight disappeared over the Sierra Madres leaving the sky a dark blue bruise.

"Don't take too long thinkin' about it, kid, I'm pretty old," chuckled the man-who-used-to-be-Ben.

How old? Eddie wondered. Fifty? Sixty? Eddie thought the man-who-used-to-be-Ben might now be the oldest person on the planet.

"Okay," Eddie began hesitantly, still not entirely sure what he was going to say. He surprised himself with what came out next.

"There was this girl, Kerri. Kerri with an 'i'."

The Old Sounder nodded as he lit his pipe. Eddie still didn't know exactly what he smoked in it. It wasn't the tobacco Eddie's grandfather smoked after dinner on Thanksgiving; it wasn't the marijuana Eddie and his friends used to smoke under the bleachers Friday nights in high school.

"So," Eddie tried to start again, "there was this girl, Kerri. She and I were... friends.



“And... uh... back east there was this drive-in, outside of Baltimore. ‘Benji’s’ it was called. Like the dog in those old kids’ movies. And it was, I think, the last drive-in on the East Coast before it all ended.

“And Kerri... she had this thing where... she was a bit of an exhibitionist.”

Eddie stopped to check the Old Sounder, to see if maybe this wasn’t the story he wanted to hear. But the old man just sat transfixed on the fire, the pipe resting in one corner of his mouth.

“So, Kerri and I were dating and she had this thing where she wanted me to take her to this drive-in and... and the funny thing is my friends and I always went to that drive-in when we were in high school. And we were seventeen-, eighteen-year-old guys and not a one of us knew how to even talk to a girl, let alone...”

Eddie realized he was blushing but something made him want to keep going. The Old Sounder sat staring into the fire, not moving. Eddie could swear the old man was smiling, if just a little.

“So, this was when I was twenty-three and Kerri was about twenty-two, and the idea that she wanted me to take her to the drive-in... well, it felt like making up for lost time, all those nights my friends and I spent at the drive-in just throwing the football around or knocking on people’s car windows and running away... all the dumb stuff guys do when they’re wishing they were someplace with a girl and not each other.

“And the whole week before I was supposed to take Kerri, she was texting me.”

“What?” the Old Sounder said.

“Texting,” Eddie repeated. “It was a bit like email but you used your phone for it.”

“Oh,” the Old Sounder said and returned his gaze to the fire.

“So, uh, she’s texting me what she’s going to do to me and what she’s going to wear. She had this idea that she should wear a bikini under her clothes so if a cop or anyone caught us she could pull it up quick and just say she was hanging out in the back seat with me wearing her bikini.”

Eddie laughed at this and the Old Sounder laughed with him.

“These are the things that make sense to you when you’re young and want to get laid at the drive-in,” Eddie went on and to his delight the Old Sounder kept chuckling.

“Anyway, she’s texting me all week about these different bikinis she’s trying on and it’s to where I can barely keep focused at work. Friday night finally rolls around and I pick her up outside her job. There was no one around and she was wearing this big baggy sweater over her jeans and she pulls it up to flash me the red bikini top she’s wearing underneath.

“She had the nicest breasts.”

Eddie stopped checking the Old Sounder. He was telling the tale for himself now.

“We get in the car and we head out to Benji’s and the whole ride she’s playing with my hair and kissing my ear and whispering how hard she’s going to whatever me and I’m just about to burst and we pull up to the drive-in and I pay the guy and...”

Eddie sat for a moment till he was sure his voice wouldn’t crack when he spoke again.

“And there’s kids all over the place. Kids playing whiffle ball in the back by the swings, kids riding on their fathers’ shoulders, kids sitting with their parents in lawn chairs in back of their family minivan, kids eating popcorn and cotton candy.

“Kerri and I just look around and we know there’s no way in hell we’re fucking in the middle of all these families and it was just... it just made you laugh. A whole

week of building up to it and her texting me about the thong bikini she's going to wear and then, bam, it's a Munchkin convention at the drive-in.

"I mean, I guess, it always was even back in high school, but I didn't think of it like that back then."

Eddie's voice trailed off, but both he and the Old Sounder knew the story wasn't finished. Eddie smiled and started again.

"It turns out they show movies at the drive-in too.

"It was a triple-feature, one of those bizarre combinations you only get at the drive-in. The first movie was just ending. It was one of those Pixar flicks, *Cars*. Then next it was a *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, I honestly forget which at this point. Finally, the late show was *Vampire Circus*, which was my favorite horror movie as a kid, probably because the station out of Philly forgot to cut the nudity out the first time they aired it.

"We walked around a bit before the pirate movie started and it was like everyone was giving Kerri and me the eye, the one that wants to know when you're going to have your own kids.

"When you go places on a Friday or Saturday night as a teen -- whether it's the mall or the movies or wherever -- you and your buddies are the outsiders. But when you start getting into your twenties and you show up at the same places with a girl -- a woman -- it's like you're becoming part of the inside, of the community.

"There was this one moment where I went off to the men's room. Kerri and I had been splitting a cotton candy -- the blue kind, I remember, because she insisted it tasted better than the pink kind, even though I told her it was all the same, just different dye.

“My hands were all sticky and my Mustang was brand new. I didn’t want to get the steering wheel or the shifter sticky when we went back to the car. I know, I was ready to fuck all over the leather seats but now I’m freaking out about my sticky cotton-candy hands.

“So I come back from the men’s room and Kerri’s there with her friend Ella’s little girl. She was maybe three or four and just a little blob of pink: pink jacket, pink pajamas, pink socks, big clunky pink sneakers that lit up on the soles when she walked.

“And Kerri lifts the little girl up and hands her to Ella and then she turns and watches me walk towards her. Just as I get there, Kerri reaches up and brushes a little piece of blue cotton candy out of my stubble. Then she slipped her arm in mine and we walked back to the car. I remember looking up and seeing all the stars, the ones you used to not be able to see in the city. And I had this moment where I could see it all: me and Kerri and the rest of our lives with the three little girls we were going to have and how we’d come back with them and our minivan and our lawn chairs and they’d have sneakers that lit up when they ran too.

“And it scared the shit out of me. I was content and happy and it filled me with absolute terror.

“God help me, I was relieved when they showed up.”

Eddie didn’t look to the Old Sounder for a reaction. He didn’t look at the fire or up at the sky.

“When they first started creeping out of the woods, I thought it was a stunt. Like the drive-in was having a Romero triple-feature in two weeks and they wanted everyone to know about it.

“I think that one guy thought the same thing. He was standing outside his SUV smoking a cigarette. He just had that look: his wife wouldn’t let him smoke in the car, so he’s standing out in the cold smoking fast because he needs to.

“And three of the Things lumbered up behind him and it was like he was playing along, like he was in a spook house at Halloween, the kind that is really lame but where the dad fakes being scared so his kids will laugh.

“That’s just what he was doing: making a fake scared face when they grabbed him. He had a second to get pissed off before one of them bit right into his shoulder. Then he was screaming and so were his wife and kids in the back of the Blazer. And there weren’t three of the Things anymore, but somehow there were sixty of them.

“Kerri had sent me back to the concession stand just as the pirate movie was starting. I told her I didn’t want her eating in the Mustang. But she said what she always said when she wanted to get her way: she told me I could fuck her in the ass later. It was like a running joke with us. ‘Honey, you can buttfuck me if we can have Chinese instead of pizza,’ or ‘Baby, if we can watch the Sandra Bullock movie instead of *Saw*, I’ll totally let you buttfuck me tonight, maybe twice.’ It always worked even though she never let me. I think I just liked hearing her say it.

“And that’s why I wasn’t in the car when they came for her. That’s probably why I’m alive today.”

Eddie coughed something like a hoarse, hollow laugh.

“Alive because of false promises of buttfucking. That’s me.

“I started running as soon as I saw them bite into that first guy. Dropped the popcorn and took off straight for the Mustang. There were four of them around it when I got there and I could see Kerri banging on the windshield looking for me. Her eyes found me just as one broke through the passenger window.

“I know she saw me as I turned and ran away.”

Eddie didn't try to stop his voice from cracking now. He just wanted to finish.

“I don't know that I could've saved her. I'm pretty sure I wouldn't have. There were no weapons and we didn't even know what we were dealing with those first few days.”

“But I didn't try. And what bothers me, even now, is it's not that I was scared... I mean, I was. But I wasn't scared of the Things. I think it was I was more scared of saving her.”

Eddie expected to sob, but nothing came. The only sound was the warm desert wind blowing through the cool night, stoking the brush, and the soft crackle of the fire.

After a few minutes, the Old Sounder's boots creaked as he stood and crossed to Eddie. The old man put a hand on Eddie's shoulder. He stood like that for a few minutes, then stamped out his pipe and set his bedroll down for the night.

In the morning, the Old Sounder was gone. Standing there shivering in the cold desert dawn, Eddie felt more alone than he had in some time. He supposed he'd get used to the loneliness again soon enough.

Eddie turned his back to the sunrise and decided to keep heading west. Once, a long time ago, he promised himself he'd see the Pacific before he died.

**MIKE SWEENEY** lives in Central New Jersey where he writes constantly but never quite enough.