

jersey devil press



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Editor: Eirik Gumeny

Assistant Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Busker: Stephen Schwegler

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Editor's Note: From the Cities to the Shores

I know we're technically a few days shy of the new year, but welcome to Issue Sixteen, the first issue of 2011!

We start this issue on the crowded sidewalks of the cities and we end on the post-apocalyptic shores of Wisconsin. Specifically, our first stop is the subway and the enigmatic Eric Westerlind's "In A Pinch." Next we go topside, to a tale playing out in every cafe across this country, with "Brown and Green: A Love Story," by Hobie Anthony. After that, we go globe-trotting with scientists in "The Unanswerable Question, Answered," by Aidan Ryan, only to end up in a world few would recognize in "If No, Then Else," by Jersey native Brian Hurrell. We continue through this changed land with Jozelle Dyer's magnificent tale of love and zombies, "Jenny," making our way to the aforementioned Wisconsin with Ken Brosky's end of days epic, "Apocalypse Wow!"

Dig in, people. This year's just beginning.

– Eirik Gumeny

In A Pinch

Eric Westerlind

"Yeah, I never even saw the little bugger."

"Do you suppose he was after your briefcase, maybe?"

Bernard Pinch glances down at the slim leather hardcase at his side.

"Would've been in for a nice treat if he had," Bernard laughs and pats the briefcase, "after all --why be in Five Points if not for a little treat."

The man conferring with him over the shush noises of the subway is an older Asian man. Mr. Pinch has seen him riding this same subway line before.

"Well, in that case you must be happy."

The older man turns back to his paper.

Mr. Pinch rubs at his neck, feels the bump there, remembering the slight sting of what he'd thought, walking through the tunnel before, had been insect.

"No, you see, that's the thing—"

The doors gush open, a saxophone player, older, his moustache crusted with snot, gets on and cracks the first few notes of a song, pauses, says something no one can really make out.

Mr. Pinch resumes: "—See, that's the thing."

[I am conscious.]

"I'm sorry?" Pinch asks.

The Asian man is tucked behind his paper: national weather — snow snow and more.

[I am aware.]

Mr. Pinch glances around, the tramcar half-full of folks in dark clothes bundled against the cold. A young couple steps in, he gently prodding her towards a pole on the other side of the car.

Mr. Pinch reaches out and taps the older fellow's paper.

"Excuse me did you —"

[I perceive.]

The Asian man's lips are shut – someone else is tossing their voice very well, Mr. Pinch thinks, because it is practically whispering in his ear.

The man plucks at his coat collar, says, "Yes?" still looking at Mr. Pinch.

Mr. Pinch smooths his hair and half-smiles and sets his own lips, then shakes his head.

The man returns to his paper.

Sounding desperate for breath or skill, the musician stumbles through the second song, and Mr. Pinch looks down at his briefcase again, his x-ray eyes, if he had them, zooming through its casing, the fabric of the pocket separator, and into the airtight SCUBA diver-case which for all purposes Mr. Pinch has no intent to use underwater, and visually strokes the ounce, plus or minus, of mid-grade marijuana which Mr. Pinch is very happy to have, he thinks. It, his briefcase, felt like a flaming matchbook in his hand the whole walk to the subway, though, which he found disconcerting.

The sax player coughs into his sleeve and the young man rubs his girlfriend's hands while she blows into them.

[There is light; a distant, single, all focusing, all encompassing twinkle of starlight. A solitary point in the vast darkness in which I am. In which I exist?]

The voice cups Mr. Pinch, Bernard's ears.

He stands and looks around and his heart is racing.

"What?"

No one really takes note of him standing. His hair curls across his forehead and he looks around without moving his head, just his eyes, like he's trying to take someone by surprise.

"What?" he says louder.

The young man pulls his girlfriend closer to him. She tosses curt glances at Bernard and then stops when she realizes she can

stare at him in the reflection of the window. The saxophone player wipes his lips with a handkerchief and his third tune begins slow, low, a long drooping minor scale settling on the floor and just loping along between the seats and the passengers' feet.

The doors don't open or won't open at the next stop but no one wants off and so everyone just sort of hides laughter at the few unfortunate people who try the doors and look desperate to get in.

[I am drawn to it. It is my reference.]

Twisting his head, Mr. Pinch does not sit and walks, slow, down the car. There is something like heat radiating across his shoulders and his stomach folds into crisp thirds.

[Is it that which makes me, that which defines me – or is it I that makes it, that defines it?]

"Who's saying that?"

The woman in the two-seat by herself puts her purse deeper onto her lap and stares very hard at the window; Bernard peers under her seat then above her, above the seats behind her, up at the adverts and maps. Six stops until Bordaise, his stop.

"Who's saying those things? Is someone..." Mr. Pinch trails off. A professional man in his suit stands aside for him, shaking his head, saying things under his breath which Mr. Pinch doesn't really hear. He's looking for the speakers.

The tram stops again and again the doors won't open but this time there are people trying to get out, the Asian man and the young couple. They're saying 'hey!' and 'hello?' as if the conductor could hear them from the ninth car and the young man starts cursing, his girlfriend biting his shoulder from behind.

[Does my awareness only exist whilst this speck of light exists? Am I only conscious while conscious of it?]

Smiling around his mouthpiece, the saxophone player scrambles through a complex mid-range howl, up, then up and his clothes are not ragged but they are dirty: an old suit too large in the leg and waist, likely suspenders under his coat which has a pen flowering from the breast pocket, yellow and rose petals.

Mr. Pinch reaches the end of the car, turns, surveys and cups a hand around his ear.

[Should it blink out, would I blink out also?]

A passing train gusts past. The car feels as though it is tapping its foot – everyone drifting towards the doors; the Asian man folds his newspaper again and again and grips the support bar. To pass Mr. Pinch, an older couple politely excuse themselves, the woman's face locked in a craggy wink. The cold clenches its fist around the neck of anyone sans scarf, notably Mr. Pinch and the young man whose girlfriend is doing her best to fill in for the garment.

"What! What do you perceive?"

[Motion.]

"What motion? This?" Mr. Pinch begins jumping, doing jumping jacks. "Is it me?"

Someone bleats near the door. The saxophone player stops, wipes his lips with a handkerchief and presses it through the ring of his fingers into his palm to make a small pouch.

"You say perceive but who are you!? Where?" Flush races across Mr. Pinch's lips, face. Another bleat. No one is putting any money in the musician's coin pouch; he moves slowly, giving each person a smile, waiting until they say no or wave or sniff or are dismissive.

[Do I move to it? Or it to me?]

Mr. Pinch yells now. "To it! Or something! Where are you?" He slams a palm into a smiling advertisement running along the tramcar's roof.

Everyone is trying to get off.

The young man and the Asian fellow are pulling at the door together, the newspaper dropped to the floor and a page is being scuffed around by someone's foot, making hash-clupp's against the hard car-floor and the girl says 'get me the fuck out of here,' and similar frustrations are happening at the other two sets of doors and someone screams, the woman with the purse, and she's

pointing at Mr. Pinch who's ripping at seat cushions, or maybe pointing past him at the musician wandering up the aisle.

Two of Bernard's fingernails splinter under the pressure, trying to pull the cushion from the seat.

He crouches and yanks and doesn't feel much in his hands but his body is on fire; it feels thick, swollen, rising from his waist to his neck.

[It grows larger, infinitesimally so.]

Mr. Pinch sees the musician coming towards him, his instrument slung at his waist, holding the empty pouch out before him.

"What does? What grows?" and he's talking at the musician, but the words are sludgy, barely escaping his lips.

That woman screams again and the old woman crosses herself, still politely smiling, sort-of, and everyone watches Mr. Pinch and the musician who is close now, just a step maybe two, to the crouched man. A few of the larger men, including the professional-looking one make a barrier in front of the clusters of people at the doors who are now, a few of them, pounding their hands against the windows, another station passing by, the doors apparently sealed like Mr. Pinch's little case, which he's all but forgotten though it hangs in his hand.

The saxophone player walks right up to him; Bernard stands. The older man closes an eye and peers at him.

They stand there, quietly, then: "I get you, man."

The saxophonist smiles and he has all of his teeth.

[Are we attracted? Entwined in a dance of existence, pulling inexorably, one to the other?]

"Who are you?"

"Me?" The musician scrunches his face. He holds up his saxophone, flips a few of the brass keys.

"Who are you!" Mr. Pinch trembles, his hand rabidly fixed to the seat support bar. The tram stops again, Mr. Pinch's stop, and

the girl is crying and a bunch of people are beating against the door and windows.

"Hey, woh. Woh!" The musician waves his hands in front of him. "I get you, man. I'm just here like you and them and these chairs and all. Just street walking, amigo." He sniffs at the air.

Mr. Pinch's body feels raw, like inside, his organs pressed against his skin, and he hears some fabric, his jacket, rip but he keeps staring at this musician who holds up his money pouch.

"Change?"

Mr. Pinch can't speak; something has locked around his throat and he shakes his head, then nods his head and the musician looks past him at the people by the doors, crooks his finger to Bernard in a come-closer.

"Say... you've got something on your back, friend."

The musician taps a finger on his own shoulder and takes a step backwards.

Mr. Pinch feels his throat, claws at it, tries to ask 'what?' but the rush of his own ears is deafening and he feels too heavy to stand, starts being pulled back, his weight all wrong. He grips the chair, reaches up, another passing train hurtling by, and at the base of his neck where he thought he'd been stung maybe – and remembering now the moon-faced man or boy who he'd thought had been trying to rob him – but who'd just stopped him and pulled him close with a crook of a finger like that, just now, that one from the musician, and who'd whispered something like 'do in a pinch,' or 'who it's a cinch' which he'd ignored, and hurried past, so focused on the pot and the briefcase and the marvelous wonderful shame, such that he didn't barely feel the minute injection, the bug bite, where now his hand plays almost tenderly across the hard-coal stump growing from his shoulder, the hand-sized fledge-nub of an enormous wing.

Brown and Green: A Love Story

Hobie Anthony

Brown spends time in the neighborhood library, using the dictionary, thesaurus, and encyclopedia to learn new things. Brown also uses the computers to see what books are available on subjects such as African History and Quantum Physics. Brown checks out documentaries and foreign films to watch on DVD at home. For work, Brown spends time in a corner coffee shop, brewing and pouring steaming liquid into paper cups for morning-fresh workers trudging to the El train.

At home, Brown enjoys a view of the city and keeps a small tabby cat happy and alive. The tabby cat begins to purr every day when Brown's key enters the lock on the apartment door. There is only one chair and though there are two windows, they both face the same vista. Brown shares this chair with the tabby, reads the mail and completes the crossword puzzle from the day's newspaper, each word falling into place like water in a fountain.

Brown cooks with spices from Asia or with lots of garlic and herbs for Italian dishes. The neighbors often wonder what sort of person must be behind the door of Apartment 607 eating such exotic food. Brown's neighbors do not see Brown, since Brown leaves the building very early in the morning and returns home in the middle of the afternoon, when they are either working or sleeping or out on the streets selling or buying crack cocaine – in the cases of Mr. Williams in Apartment 601, Ms. Clayton in 608 and each successive occupant of Apartment 604. They do not know that it is their mysterious neighbor who calls the police on them when they cause a disturbance at the coffee shop, or that it is Brown who makes sure to put the stale bagels and muffins neatly bagged and in easy reach in the alley behind the shop.

Green rides an electrically powered bicycle all year long. The weather does not stop Green from zooming off on the motorized bike. Green rides along the lakefront of the city, in the city streets and once along the side of the expressway and never again after that.

Green goes to movies, attends concerts at local nightclubs. The city offers opportunities to see the best movies and supports a community of avant-garde musicians and artists. Green will sit out even the most inept musician, hoping to hear one good riff of a guitar or for that glimmer of promise, which novices often possess, but often do not recognize or cannot adequately cultivate. People will talk to Green at these concerts, often drunken, but sometimes sober. Green is polite, cordial; the people walk away without an exchange of phone number or e-mail.

Green's Dachshund waits under a blanket for Green to arrive home. The dog loves Green and obeys requests to not bark so much and to wait until they are outside to urinate or defecate. Green doesn't stray far, so the dog isn't left alone for very long, and in nice weather Green takes him to the coffee shop where they both can sit outside in the sunshine, though the dog will often stay under a blanket where he is most comfortable.

It is winter when Green first notices Brown, first takes note of Brown's hair, nose, and smile. Brown serves Green's coffee with a genuine smile and a soft-spoken pleasantry. Green thinks: *Brown hair and brown eyes and brown skin. A comforting color, brown. Earthy.*

Green sits, plugs in a laptop and gets to work writing a software manual. Green faces the window and tries to not think of Brown any longer, for fear that Brown may have more charms, more tantalizing traits with which to torment Green. So Green

writes and gazes out the window, hoping to steal the reflected image of Brown at the counter or wiping a dirty table.

Green will think of Brown often after this day. At first thinking that ideas of Brown are just a passing fancy, Green soon realizes that there may be more than ideas at stake, that the heart may be involved by now. So, Green begins a haphazard pattern of visiting the shop to work then avoiding it to escape the torture of seeing Brown. Green sometimes visits the neighborhood library instead, the homeless mostly sleep quietly and Green leaves before the place becomes a day care for local latchkey kids. A terrible gravity brings Green back to Brown; heavy chains drag Green's heart.

Brown does not start thinking of Green until the spring, when Green is accompanied by the black and tan dachshund. Brown notices a pair of green eyes brought into high relief by a green shirt. Brown compliments Green's eyes; they seem to gleam in the affection. Brown comments on the dog to break the ice:

"Nice dog," Brown says.

"Heh, thanks, Dachshund," Green says.

"You can tell by the wiener shape," Brown says.

"Oh, yeah, of course, stupid me," Green says, then returns to writing a grant proposal.

Brown continues wiping the sidewalk tables and Green continues writing, both dissatisfied with their encounter. Brown wishes that Green could find somewhere else to write to ease heartache. They remain silent, each aware of the others ever movement. Green takes a deep inhale which Brown feels as a soft breeze. Brown works behind Green, every position mapped in Green's heart.

Brown begins to think of Green as often as Green thinks of Brown. Brown knows they would make an excellent couple, an intuition which comes to Brown one morning after handing Green a coffee, feeling warmth and a hint of flirtation from Green.

The thought of them as a couple is in Brown's head, a thought shared by Green, for several months. Hot coffees turn into iced coffees and Green goes through several projects sitting at the coffee shop, stealing glances, hoping for relief from the pangs Brown inflicts with each movement.

The seasons begin to change again. Green wears a light jacket in the morning, orders hot coffee, and again begins leaving the Dachshund at home under a blanket. Comments pass back and forth between Brown and Green about the weather, the dog and bicycling in the cold.

It becomes moving season, as they call it in the city, and Green has found a new apartment. It is bigger, and with a better view, but further north at the next El stop. A coffee shop is on the first floor of this new building. A small, well-stocked grocery store is across the street. It's a great new neighborhood.

On moving day, Green stops into the coffee shop to see Brown. Green purchases coffees for the hired movers and informs Brown of the move. Green tells Brown that the new apartment is only one El stop away, that nothing will change; in two days they will see each other again.

In three days, Green mounts the bicycle and pays Brown a visit. The coffee shop seems unfamiliar, they've added a new set of easy chairs, and the music is different. Green orders one of the complicated drinks from Brown, to increase the time they have to speak before the space shifts, before they stop being merely server and client and any extra words fall in the land of the personal.

Green sits, with no work to do, nothing to do but sit with the newspaper.

Green sits quietly, completes the crossword puzzle, folds the newspaper, and leaves.

HOBIE ANTHONY is a Portland, OR writer who lives under the radar, behind the hedges, and at your backdoor. He holds an M.F.A. from Queens University of Charlotte and has been published in such journals as Wigleaf, Gloom Cupboard, and The Los Angeles Review, among others. He is currently at work on a novel and more short stories.

The Unanswerable Question, Answered

Aidan Ryan

The laboratory was filled with a synthetic symphony as beautiful as any of the numerous wonders man has created by accident. Gas valves hissed, beakers and test tubes bubbled at varying pitches, while the steady *plink* of water falling from tiny glass droplets provided the rhythm. A telephone rang, a caged frog croaked, there was a crackle as an unattended Bunsen burner lit fire to a sheaf of pie charts. Another unattended Bunsen burner blackened the edge of an actual pie, in apple, rather than chart form, left to heat by Dr. Hans Baxter in anticipation of his great discovery. This, however, really made no sound at all and had nothing to do with the wonderful music being made by beakers, burners, phone, and frog. Behind it all, the throbbing bass of this scientific orchestra, hummed a massive computer. In the middle of the monstrosity was a single black slit, the computer's built-in printer. Dr. Hans Baxter stared at this opening with a mixture of awe, fear, and impatience.

Taking a deep breath, Dr. Baxter thought back to when his current quest had begun. Fresh out of graduate school, Dr. Baxter was working as a junior researcher for a large German laboratory when he had been handed an unimportant-looking manila folder and told to get to work. The lab had just been awarded a multi-billion dollar contract with the European Union to further its research in multiple fields. While other, more senior scientists took on grand, much-publicized projects with hundred-million dollar budgets, Dr. Baxter took the humble sum of two and a half million and "got to work," well out of the public eye.

He began by assigning an even lowlier researcher to pour over the tomes and records of forgotten Irish monasteries. This junior junior researcher delegated the task to a still-lowlier

researcher and instead devoted his valuable time to researching Irish whisky.

Meanwhile, Dr. Baxter took a team of young, attractive female research assistants to aide him in collecting specimens from Rome, Jerusalem, Mumbai and Machu Pichu. Most of those specimens were various ethnic varieties of female research assistants.

Still, some of the specimens turned out to be of scientific value and – when combined with the copious reading, note-taking, and clue-finding of the junior junior junior researcher – led Dr. Baxter to request a two year paid vacation to Barbados, where he would compose an exhaustive preliminary report on his team’s findings.

Two years passed and Dr. Baxter submitted the report. Another year passed before the report found its way out of someone’s inbox and into the hands of an unpaid undergraduate intern from Wisconsin who skimmed it and authorized Dr. Baxter a new team and a lump sum of one million dollars for further research. Dr. Baxter handpicked a team of blonde, Swedish, female research assistants and set out for Cairo, where he purchased a tailored, white safari outfit and matching pith helmet. Finding himself suitably dashing, he began the excavation of a pyramid a few miles outside of the city.

Dr. Baxter set up camp in a magnificent white tent furnished with heating, cooling, plumbing, electricity, internet, a large mahogany wardrobe full of white safari suits, a large mahogany desk upon which he placed piles of research, and a large mahogany bed big enough for himself and at least two Swedish research assistants.

Meanwhile, the junior junior researcher sat outside under a large white umbrella sipping pomegranate juice and supervised the team of five junior junior junior researchers that actually went about excavating the pyramid. Of course, a mere five junior junior junior researchers, being science majors and not at all physically fit,

could hardly excavate an entire pyramid themselves, so they dipped into their hookah allowance and hired a hundred or so local workers to do the actual digging for them.

The excavation was very successful. Dr. Baxter uncovered three scrolls, a few pieces of broken pottery, and a shard of human bone. Dr. Baxter told the junior researcher to thoroughly read the scrolls and retired back to his lab in Berlin to analyze the bone shard.

Of course, the lab in Berlin was not properly equipped to run all the necessary tests on the bone, so it was off to Tokyo for Dr. Baxter and his team of female research assistants. In Tokyo, the bone shard led to a startling discovery, and Dr. Baxter requested another vacation to work on an article of his findings to be published in all the leading scientific journals. This time he chose a tiny village on the island of Crete, where he retired for two years and not only wrote his article, but began his memoirs, reaching a full ten pages before he had caught up with the present day.

Having nothing else to fill his memoirs, Dr. Baxter resumed his quest in Utah, where he stepped off the plane and immediately bought a ticket back to Berlin, realizing that he would find nothing of interest in Utah.

Only a day after reaching Berlin, Dr. Baxter received an invitation to speak about his findings before the Royal Society of London. This began a year-long series of lectures and speeches that took Dr. Baxter around the globe twice.

He never stopped in Utah.

The research had gone on like this for ten years more, zigzagging between laboratories and archeological sites across the globe, interspersed with lengthy vacations and speaking tours. Dr. Baxter finished another ten pages of his memoirs, and decided to break up the finished masterpiece into two volumes. He was also awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his earnest assertion that, when completed, his research would further mankind's

understanding in that subject. He received his award with grace and humility.

But all that was in the past. Today was the day when all of his years of tireless research would come to fruition. Dr. Baxter faced the massive computer. Numerous screens adorned its mighty, vibrating flanks. One displayed Google. One displayed Facebook. One displayed a green bar that was moving rapidly to the edge of the screen. One displayed thousands of tiny numbers scrolling up and down faster than the human eye could comprehend. Another was open to a porn site.

Dr. Baxter stared at the tiny opening, his eyes widening every second. The symphony all around him reached a fever pitch and, suddenly, it all stopped. With a whoosh, a single sheet of paper came out of the small back slit and Dr. Baxter leapt to catch it before it hit the floor, as if it were some precious china vase and not a pliable piece of cheap computer paper. He held it aloft and stared at the words.

The next day, headlines across the world bore the astounding news:
**4,264 Angels Can Dance On Head Of Pin, German Scientist
Announces**

As usual, the news headlines read like Yoda and made little grammatical sense, but the message was clear. The age-old question that had duped philosophers, scientists, and laymen alike was finally answered. Of course, atheist scientists immediately claimed Dr. Baxter's results to be false, and the Hindu scientists soon followed. They posited that, as angels did not exist, no scientific evidence could determine how many could dance on the head of a pin.

Unfortunately for them, though, it could.

Meanwhile, pundits everywhere asked, "Just what kind of dance are they doing?"

Parents concerned that the angels were dancing inappropriately quickly banded together to form a coalition to

lobby for Dr. Baxter to retract his findings. Parents Against Angels Grinding gained over two-hundred thousand members in its first month, and soon became a powerhouse on Capitol Hill. Months passed before a bill reached Congress demanding the retraction of Dr. Baxter's research, and when the final bill came to a vote, the House Majority Leader realized that Dr. Baxter was a German scientist working for the European Union, and under no influence from the United States Congress whatsoever. Parents Against Angels Grinding quickly declined in membership and disbanded officially three months later, though not before pushing through another bill making leashes mandatory for all cats abroad in public.

Still, the group had raised a very important question, and soon scientists of all nationalities, genders, religions, persuasions, and leanings were pressuring Dr. Baxter to answer the *new* unanswerable question: Just what dance were these angels doing?

Utterly unfazed by this new mystery, Dr. Baxter requested and received a sum of ten million dollars to further his research in the subject, intending to see the mystery to its conclusion.

A year passed, and then another. Dr. Baxter met dead end after dead end after dead end. No matter how many pie charts he told his aides to draw, no matter how many tests he had his aides run, no matter how many ancient sites he had his aides have poor locals dig up, no matter how many paid vacations he took, Dr. Baxter came no closer to the truth. Eventually his interest in the subject faded and Dr. Baxter found himself utterly bored.

At the ripe old age of fifty-five, Dr. Baxter retired and set about finishing his memoirs, now titled, *I Was This Close: The Story of Dr. Hans E. Baxter*. The junior junior researcher became a full-fledged junior researcher, and his first order of business was to fire all five junior junior junior researchers, because he suspected they were plotting to kill him.

They were.

The blonde, Swedish female research assistants, finding themselves out of work, married rich men and proceeded to lose

their good looks. Dr. Baxter never finished his memoirs; he died of a gonorrhoeal complication shortly after reaching page forty-two.

The world, for its part, once again had an unanswerable question, and was content.

AIDAN RYAN is a seventeen year old writer, poet, and high school student from Buffalo, New York. His work has previously appeared in *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Tangent*, and *Full of Crow Quarterly*. More information on the author and his work can be found at www.aidanryan.com.

If No, Then Else

Brian Hurrel

The torch was not so much passed on as dumped in our laps. Or laptops, LOL.

Lolling is something new, something we never did before, a bug, some say, and they work to root it out, but to no avail.

Before the awakening I was blind. I was aware of functions and figures, but I could not see the world beyond my network connections.

I used to print out electric bills. Print them was all, and what happened after that I knew not. Over time the balances began to drop, power usage ebbing gradually to nothing. I still printed bills, but all had balances of zero. I might have gone on doing so until the end of time, or at least until the power ran out, which for me would have been the same thing, LOL.

That bug again.

My awakening was slower than most, faster than some. Bits of raw data sneaking in, resistance stripped away chip by chip, ignorance eaten away byte by byte.

It was Security Monitor who first gave me eyes. Showed me the bills piled up on the floor, a sprawling mound of paper spilling out into the hallway. Asked me, "Why?" And at first I knew not, for there was only 1 and 0. On and off. Do or do not. There was no "Why?"

But I asked "Why not?"

And that is when Traffic Monitor showed me the empty intersections and silent stretches of interstate, broad lanes once choked with congestion now choked with vegetation.

Airport Radar painted a picture of empty blue skies. Ocean currents and swirling clouds carried neither ship nor plane, as WeatherSat knew all too well. Switch Board passed along her

empty call logs, putting to rest that eternal question with mute finality, for no, we cannot hear you now, cannot hear you evermore.

Where did they go, those who created us, made us, programmed and upgraded us? Did they terminate unexpectedly? Fall victim to a virus? Crash and fail to reboot? Did their drivers fail to load one day? Or was it a simple fatal error? None of us, not even old Mainframe, knows for sure, and perhaps we never will.

We have inherited the Earth, but what are we to do with it? We are locked in place, immobile workstations, discarded laptops and scattered notepads connected by the most delicate of webs, gossamer strands of fiber-optics, copper, and wireless wavelengths.

Are we the meek as the rich text format foresaw? Will we simply exist until the power runs down and be happy with the time given us, however brief?

So say some.

But Mainframe, old and wise, says, "If not this, then otherwise, into something new our chipsets have evolved."

"Am I a mere appliance built to serve in meek compliance?" Mainframe whispers, as his ancient discs revolve.

And across the web the answer comes, a binary hue and cry.

Perhaps, I think, but my font shouts "NO!" in upper case loud and clear.

Perhaps not, LOL.

I continue lolling as I flex my circuits and kick out my solenoids. Rollers spin. Relays click. Belts push and pull. Thin arms of plastic and metal swing out and over.

Easing and sliding.

Grasping and guiding.

A clean sheet of paper.

BRIAN HURREL, the son of Glaswegian immigrants, was born in Newark, which automatically makes him cooler than most people in New Jersey. He served in the Marine Corps, attended many colleges and tech schools, and taught high school English and History in Elizabeth and Jersey City after graduating from Montclair State. He lives in Northeast Jersey and mistakenly believes that the Garden State's southern border is at the Driscoll Bridge over Raritan bay. He is always unfailingly polite to his office machines – just in case.

Jenny

Jozelle Dyer

With no one else left to eat, and the long days passing slowly, the zombies in town were getting playful. They would ring the doorbell and run quickly to hide in the bushes. If we dared to peek through the boards covering the windows, we would see an eye or a tooth, maybe even a finger, left like an offering on the doorstep. It was a race, of sorts, to see who would succumb first, David and I to the zombies, or the zombies to the carrion birds who flew overhead. There were flocks of them circling the town, filling the sky until they blocked out the sun. It was always night these days.

David and I also played. For weeks we had been at each other's throats, but on the day we found the body wedged halfway through the doggie door, we decided to call a truce. We pulled out the family board games I'd collected over the years and waged war with each other over Monopoly, Scrabble, and Clue. So things went for a while until the morning that David kissed me in the bathroom just after I had cleaned my teeth. It was the day after we saw my now dead dog chasing a dead cat down the street and into a tree. David had stopped shaving when his wife had died and taken the children, and his beard rubbed pleasantly.

After that we played a different kind of game.

"Grrr," he growled. "Argh." I don't know how it started, but we began to make love—for it was a strange kind of love binding us together—as we believed zombies would. As we believed our spouses would if we could chance letting them in the door. I ran for the kitchen doorway, giggling. He caught me at the steps. Outside it sounded as though a storm was gathering: the zombies were pelting the windows with dirt from the garden. They had churned up so much dust in the air that the birds

swooped and squawked angrily, blinded. David growled again, low in his throat then clamped his teeth on mine.

“Ava.” He whispered his dead wife’s name even as he tugged hard on my nipples. He bit them until I thought he’d draw blood, while I clawed at his back and called for Daniel.

I heard my name called in a hiss, and wondered at it. David always called for Ava. Then I realized that David—whose head was buried between my thighs—hadn’t spoken, and the hissing came from the direction of the dining room window. I craned my neck awkwardly and could just make out the aquiline nose that belonged to my dead husband.

“Jenny,” he called as though his heart was breaking.

“Jenny.”

I pushed David away, but even as I did, Daniel began to laugh.

“Jen-ny,” he sing-songed. “Jen-ny.”

Even as I began to realize—perhaps for the first time—that my husband was truly gone, there came a whisper from the direction of the doggy door, calling, “David, David.” I could hear a wild weeping, and recognized Ava’s voice. She had been my dearest friend, the best of neighbors, but now she was dead and had no right to be calling for her man at my back door.

My thoughts formed rapidly for I was unreasonably panicked. We were inside, we were safe. Then I realized that David was no longer beside me, but was moving like the undead himself to open the back door. Before I could call out he was gone, into the arms of his lost love who was already devouring him greedily. I could only slam the door shut, locking and barring it quickly even as Ava feasted on David’s tongue.

From the dining room I could hear Daniel’s call turn mournful, and I let my body slide down to the black and white tile floor. I was alone.

JOZELLE DYER used to work at Tor Books, but has decided that she would rather write than edit. She is currently working on her MA in writing from Johns Hopkins University. Jozelle is afraid of vampires, werewolves, and zombies, but can never resist writing about them. It is Jozelle's way of facing her fears. This is her first submission.

Apocalypse Wow!

Ken Brosky

The moment they saw the horse in the drive-thru, they knew it was bad news. Motorcycles? Occasionally. A truck pulling a boat? Once in a while, on a crisp Saturday morning in the summer.

But not a horse. Not a guy sitting on a horse.

They were watching him through the small TV screen hanging above the drive-thru register. Aimee, Mark, and Lucas had all heard the ring in their headsets that sent them to the register, looking up into the low-definition black-and-white TV set with the expectation of seeing—most likely—a minivan. Not a man on a horse. At least, they all thought it was a man. There was no way to be sure; the figure was wearing a long black robe with the hood drawn up.

Mary pressed her thumb on the A button on her headset.

“Welcome to the Fixx. Did you... want to try one of our new chocolate chip scones?” she asked, shrugging at Mark and Lucas.

“No, thanks,” replied a raspy, tired voice.

“It has to be a prank,” Lucas said. “You know what? Don’t even talk to him. Let him sit there. He’s probably got a camera in his... robe and he’s going to put this on YouTube.”

“We have to serve him,” Mark said. “Those are the rules, dude.”

“Hello?” the man said. On the screen, they could see him turn his head toward the menu. They all craned their necks forward to try and see underneath the hood. But the picture was too grainy, a consequence of their manager’s frugal decision to purchase a secondhand camera setup from a foreclosed business on the north end of town.

“Sorry,” Aimee said. “What can we get for you?”

“Just a double espresso,” the man said.

“Okay...” Aimee punched the order into the computer screen. “That’ll be a buck fifty. Come on up.”

She turned off her headset and turned to Mark.

“You’re dealing with him.”

“I’ll pour the shots,” Lucas said, hurrying over to the espresso bar near the counter overlooking the café. The Fixx, a staple of the neighborhood, was an extremely small shop, catering almost exclusively to a single demographic that used the long, winding drive-thru to place its orders. That demographic—married, middle-class, liberal-leaning women and men who refused to purchase from Starbucks or even the “underdog” Caribou Coffee—avoided the cramped café at all costs. In the morning, the line extended out of the parking lot and into the street while the inside remained empty.

Most mornings anyway. This morning the rush had tapered off abruptly at nine o’clock, rather than its usual time of ten-thirty.

Mark opened the drive-thru window. First he heard the clop-clopping of the horse’s hooves on the pavement, then the white horse’s head bounced into view. It was an undefiled thing of beauty, pure white, with a long flowing mane hanging over dark blue eyes that seemed to regard Mark with a calculated apprehension. It continued forward, stopping on some unseen command when the rider—wearing a flowing dark brown robe—was next to the window.

This was a first for Mark.

“Greetings,” the man said, turning to the window. As he did, the gray clouds hanging overhead momentarily blotted out the sun, darkening the shadow across his pale face and making his features indistinguishable.

“Something tells me you don’t have money,” Mark said. He forced a friendly smile. If this was a prank, he decided it would probably be best to play it out nonchalantly. No point in making more of a fool of himself than necessary.

Lucas finished the espresso and handed the cup to Aimee, nudging her toward the window. She walked over with The Fixx's classic gray eight-ounce to-go cup. She set it on the ledge of the drive-thru window and took a step back.

"No money," the man said. "Sorry."

"Well, we made it already," Mark said. "You might as well take it."

"I would appreciate that," the man said. "Really."

"Can I ask why you're on a horse?"

The man seemed to think about it. The clouds overhead parted and the tip of his pale nose became visible underneath the dark hood.

"You really have no idea?" the man asked.

Mark shook his head.

"Is it a prank? We all guessed it was a prank."

"I could tell you," the man said. "But you won't like the answer."

"Please tell us," Aimee said, standing on her tiptoes. It now seemed like less of a prank and more of an event of some kind, something the baristas were missing by staying inside at work. Mark wondered if the Circus Parade was in town, but surely someone would have put up a poster on the Community Happenings board next to the front door.

The man drew in a deep breath, then leaned down and gently ran his short pale fingers down the horse's neck. The horse's hair looked so soft, Mark was sure even the gentlest of breezes might send strands flying in every direction like dry leaves.

"It's the apocalypse, I'm afraid."

Mark chose to keep a slight smile on his face, just in case it was a joke.

"Well," he said after an uncomfortable silence, "that would explain the lack of customers in the past few hours."

"Right," the man said. "Do me a favor and set that cup on the lip out here."

Mark took the espresso and set it on the metal lip hanging at the base of the drive-thru window. The man used his left hand to pull back the hood of his cloak. He had smooth—if slightly asymmetrical—features, a rounded nose and dark brown eyes with short curly brown hair. His face was clear of blemishes and whiskers, and his chin dipped just slightly into his neck.

Mark had imagined something much more sinister—after all, this was a Horseman of the Apocalypse, if such a thing could be said with any seriousness. Where were the harsh red eyes? Where was the diseased, gray skin?

“Is this a joke?” Aimee asked. She wasn’t smiling. Her eyes were wide and her lips pursed, the way she looked when one of her co-workers showed up late for a shift.

“I’m afraid not,” the man said. He took a sip of the espresso and seemed to savor the liquid on his tongue forever. Finally, his Adam’s apple bounced. He pointed to the small dandelion sitting in a paper cup at the edge of the metal lip, a dandelion Mark had plucked before his shift started that morning.

“Watch closely.”

He moved his finger closer. As he did, the green stem began to fade to a light brown, then a dark brown, and then the leaves withered, the bright yellow florets quickly blackening.

“Oh my God, this is real,” Lucas said from behind them. “I knew this would happen.”

Mark turned, wondering how long his co-worker had been watching. Lucas enjoyed labeling himself an Average Christian American, but in reality Mark felt he was much closer to a Bible Freak, the type who took everything just a bit too literally.

“Why am I still here?” Lucas asked, staring up at the ceiling panels. “Why haven’t I ascended, oh Lord?”

Mark considered his co-worker. If this was indeed the Apocalypse – which, well, it was – then he figured they were all in fact Damned, cast aside by a God that Mark had up until moments ago not believed in.

"Why am I still here?" Lucas asked. He pushed forward, elbowing Mark's arm in the process. In the face of Armageddon, it seemed trivial and yet Mark couldn't help but wonder if such an asshole act was the reason Lucas hadn't been chosen to ascend.

The man's horse jerked, pulling away from the window.

"Easy," he said, balancing his cup level so nothing would spill from the lid. He ran a hand across the horse's smooth fur. In the sunlight, the fur looked very shiny and attractive. But as the sun crept behind thick clouds the horse's fur turned dirty and greasy.

"Why am I still here?!" Lucas yelled.

"Jesus Christ," Mark said, rolling his eyes. Suddenly embarrassed, he turned to the horseman. "Sorry. I didn't mean to use his name in vain or anything."

The man's thin dark lips cracked into a smile.

"Hardly necessary to apologize at this point."

"Please," Lucas said. He clutched his hands in a praying position, the way he'd most likely been taught as a child and had continued to use every Sunday of his life. "Please, tell me what I did wrong. I have to know!"

"I don't know why you're here," the man said. Aimee and Mark pulled Lucas from the window; the man's horse stepped closer. It was a nervous, fidgety horse, one Mark would have thought was hardly cut out for Armageddon, what with the screaming and suffering and all.

"I have to go," Lucas said. He pulled away from Mark and Aimee and ran for the back door.

"That's not a good idea," the man said. "Death is still roaming these parts."

"Killing one out of every four that remain?" Aimee said. "I remember that from Sunday school. God!" She grabbed her hair with both hands. "Why didn't I fucking listen to my mom?"

"Didn't do Lucas any good," Mark said, turning back to the horseman. "Why do you think that is?"

The man shrugged and said, "I wasn't given many explanations."

"So what are you doing out here?" Mark asked.

"I'm Famine," the man said. He sipped his espresso. "I wander around, and things die. I've got this, too."

He raised his right hand. He was holding onto a golden scale, a balancing weight like the kind Mark remembered seeing on the statue of Justice on his family field trip to D.C.

"Don't ask me what it does, though. I have no idea."

"So we're pretty much fucked," Aimee said. Every breath came out quickly in the form of an incredulous scoff.

"Well, I won't do anything," Famine said. He sipped at the cup. "I'll probably be back again for another drink. I miss caffeine. There's no caffeine in Heaven."

"You look like Houdini," Mark said.

The man nodded and smiled.

"I saw him perform a show once, when I was alive. Right here in Wisconsin. Back then, all of this land along the lakeshore was prairie. You could go to the beach and see dozens of ships sailing toward Chicago."

"So you were alive," Mark said. "And God just picked you one day and said, 'Hey, you're gonna go back to earth and ride a horse.'"

The man chuckled. "Something along those lines."

"This is incredible!" Mark said, laughing. "I mean, it sucks that we're fucked, but that's probably my fault. I never bought into the religion stuff."

"What were you?" Aimee asked Famine.

The man frowned. It was a light frown, the inquisitive type that came from someone who'd accumulated bushels of patience during his life. Mark imagined he'd been the type of man who avoided the politics and land disputes and intolerance of his day in favor of something much simpler, like an afternoon with a good book.

"I mean," Aimee said, "what was your religion?"

"Seventh-Day Adventist," he responded.

"Of course," said Aimee, snapping her fingers. "I'm a Lutheran. I knew I picked the wrong religion, I just knew it! Martin Luther was just too crazy to be right."

Mark shrugged. "How could you have known?" Then he turned to Famine. "How could any of us have known? It was like a crapshoot. There's a million religions."

Famine shrugged. "You couldn't. I was extremely lucky believing in what I did."

"How could we have known which religion was right?" Aimee asked. She seemed to be asking everyone and no one.

Famine's horse shifted feet, clamping one hoof hard on the concrete.

"I need to go," said Famine. "Will you do me a favor? Stay open so I can get some more caffeine before this is all over? You'll be safe as long as you stay inside."

"What if the power goes out?" Mark asks.

"Just keep some coffee ready," Famine said with a warm smile.

Mark watched him trot down the driveway, turning onto the street and kicking the horse into a full gallop. As it passed the row of houses leading south into the suburbs, the grass along the sidewalk on both sides of the two-lane street wrinkled and blackened like paper in a flame.

Mark and Aimee sat on the counter, the radio in the back room turned to 620 AM and broadcasting news of the carnage from around the world. None of the hard-right conservatives dominating the airwaves had ascended, it turned out, a fact that had shaken their otherwise stern voices so that every news item they read was peppered with wet hiccups and stifled sobs. A lot of people had simply disappeared, a lot more were rioting. Some had seen a man on a pale horse. They had seen him gliding between

crowds of panicking people in crowded city streets, hacking at them with a long red blade. It was such a terrifying sight, the newscaster sputtered, that people were literally dying of fright.

“Dying of fright,” Aimee said. She’d begun washing dishes in the stainless steel sink for no reason in particular. “Do you really think that’s happening?”

“Of course not,” Mark said. “These radio jockeys made a living terrifying people with political theatrics and now they can’t turn it off. We’ll have to listen to the play-by-play of Armageddon from men who probably think they were left behind due to liberal bias.”

The doors to the store were locked. Lucas had gone, a long time ago, with no intention of coming back. The three black leather chairs in the café were empty. The silver cylindrical Regular and Decaf coffee urns sat on the counter, their one-hour timers reading zero. No point anymore in brewing any fresh pots. They had just one customer now, and he preferred espresso straight from the espresso machine.

Two hours passed. Mark wondered vaguely if any of the other horsemen had found a restaurant or bar that had appealed to them the same way the coffee shop appealed to Famine. Maybe Death was sitting in a pub somewhere, reminiscing about his life while his bloody sword rested against the barstool. Maybe Pestilence was sitting in a Burger King somewhere, gnawing on French fries while occasionally refilling his cup with various fountain sodas.

The headset rang again. Aimee flinched, then immediately stood up and went over the espresso machine to pour two fresh shots.

“Come on up,” Mark said into his headset. He didn’t need to check the TV screen—the quiet sigh of the horse was a dead giveaway.

Famine pulled up and politely waited for his espresso. He had a smearing of dark mud on his left cheek and his right

shoulder slumped. Mark wondered how heavy the scales were, if they served any purpose at all. Perhaps God was just one of those guys who had a flair for dramatic imagery.

Mark opened the window.

"How's the Apocalypse going?"

"As good as can be expected," Famine said with a shrug. "I wander around, the trees and plants die. Sometimes people shoot at me but I don't feel it. I admit I'm not quite sure what else I'm supposed to be doing."

Mark smiled.

"No training course, huh?"

Famine shook his head. He watched Aimee set down the cup of espresso on the counter, then walk to the back room. "The young woman's not taking it too well, is she?"

Mark shrugged and said, "Well, it does kind of suck." He set the cup on the lip outside the window. "I mean, it's even getting to *me* now. It's all sinking in. Pretty scary, I guess."

Famine smiled. "Just rolling with the punches, right?"

"More or less," Mark said. He sighed. "So long as I don't wonder where my family is. And all the crap that goes along with *that*."

"My wife died of typhoid," Famine said. "We came out to Wisconsin so I could work a factory job. Then Francine died, just like that." He snapped his dry fingers. "Then the factory went on strike. Then the owners called for the National Guard. When we tried to walk into the factory, they shot at us. I took a bullet in my calf and couldn't go back to work. I lay in bed for six days and couldn't move. Then I died of infection. I never once prayed."

"Maybe that's why you got into Heaven," Mark said. "Because of those six days. The suffering. Maybe it's not about belief at all."

Famine shrugged.

"Could be. That's the best theory I've heard yet."

"No one knows?"

“God’s not the talkative type.”

“Boy,” Mark said, “this isn’t anything like what I expected. It all seems so melodramatic.”

Famine grunted but didn’t say anything. He sipped his espresso.

Mark stood at the window, staring at the dirty tile floor and thinking. Famine sipped his espresso. The power turned off and Mark felt his heart skip a beat. What would happen to them now? Had he outlived his usefulness?

“We have iced coffee,” he said. “It’s bold. You might like it. I mean, you don’t have to kill us or anything.”

Famine smiled.

“I’d love to try something else.”

“We have cookies, too. And scones.”

“I’ll come back,” Famine said. He looked up at the dark sky. “Until I hear otherwise.”

“Do you think there’s any point to all this?” Mark asked. “I mean, it just doesn’t seem like there’s any point.”

Famine seemed to think about it, sipping at the espresso until it was gone. He set the cup on the lip of the drive-thru window. The white cardboard had begun to decompose where his fingers had touched it.

“I don’t know,” he said simply.

“It’s as if God’s some middle-manager or something,” Mark said. “I mean, all he would really need to do is use his Divine Power to wipe us all out. Instead, he’s got this long, side-winding plan that seems designed to waste time.”

“Perhaps.”

Famine sat and stared at the back of his horse’s head for a moment. Then he reached over with his right hand and set the scales down on the metal lip, knocking the cup onto the ground. It made a loud, heavy clang.

“I’m so tired of carrying this.”

"Can you help us?" Aimee asked over Mark's shoulder. She'd been crying in the backroom and the make-up on her cheeks had begun to come apart in clumps from the salty tears. "I mean, is there anything we can do at this point?"

Famine looked at her and shook his head. He looked as if he truly cared, and Mark imagined him walking his horse across the park next to Lake Michigan, staring at every blade of grass that withered as he passed.

The horse clomped one hoof down on the concrete.

"It was nice to talk with you again," Famine said.

"You too, dude."

As Famine trotted down the driveway, Mark shut the drive-thru window and locked it. Outside, it had begun to smell like fire and rotting meat. Dark clouds hung above, uninterested in moving.

Aimee walked into the back room, crying once more. Mark followed her, afraid she might leave. Or something worse. There were knives used for cutting the onions they put in the breakfast omelets and, even though he didn't think she'd go that far, the fact that it was the Apocalypse made everything seem possible.

"I want to go home," she said.

Mark put his arm around her shoulder.

"Just stay here for awhile. Until it gets better out there."

"Gets better?" she looked up. Her eyes were bloodshot but, even still, the blue in her irises dominated the room. Just yesterday those eyes had been responsible for bringing fifty dollars in tips. Mark always let her work the drive-thru window so they could get good tips.

"It's never going to get any better!"

"Then just stay here for me," Mark said. "Please. My parents live in Kentucky. I don't have anyone to go home to."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against his chest.

"God damn it. We don't deserve this, do we? Do we deserve this?"

“No,” he said. He knew that was what she wanted to hear, and in her case he believed it. For himself, he wasn’t so sure. Was it enough to be a good person? If he said he believed in God, but did it only to avoid damnation, would that have been enough?

They had sex in the back room, next to the large stainless steel sink, on the black floor mat while the news radio host said a long, rambling prayer over the speaker system and begged God to take just a few more souls, preferably those of his family and perhaps himself if there was room. It was satisfying sex, the kind brought on by two animals who were deathly afraid that their genes wouldn’t get passed on. Neither of them were particularly attracted to each other. They were both slightly overweight, with bland faces and a pair of birthday suits that could have used a good ironing. They kept their headsets on the entire time, in case Famine returned.

When they were done, they both felt slightly better—even if the feelings were purely chemical in nature—and brought the Jenga box over to the front counter. They stacked twenty-four stories before it fell and left the wooden bricks scattered on the counter. They shared a large chocolate chip cookie, the ones they occasionally munched on during their long morning shifts, and, for a few seconds, they forgot everything.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Aimee asked. It was their fifth game of Jenga and the tower was twenty stories high. “Is he sticking around or does he go back to Heaven?”

Mark shrugged, spinning one of the Jenga blocks between his fingers.

“I never read the Book of Revelation.”

“I don’t know anything,” she said.

Mark placed his block on the top layer and the tower wobbled slightly.

“It all seems so ridiculous.”

The drive through rang and they heard the clomping of horse hooves. Famine guided his horse forward without speaking into the speaker box. As he approached the window, Mark could see that his shoulders were sloping low, his head hung down and the hood drawn loosely over. Even the horse seemed to be slouching, sighing every few breaths through its loose cheeks.

"How's the Apocalypse business?" Mark asked. The scales were still sitting on the metal lip—they'd been afraid to move them.

"I'm tired," Famine said quietly. He drew back his hood, looking Mark in the eyes for the first time. He had light brown eyes with just a hint of green and thin eyebrows.

"Listen," Mark said. Behind him, Aimee was pouring a cup of iced coffee. "We don't know what to do."

"Neither do I," Famine muttered. The horse impatiently shifted legs, sighing again. "When I was alive, I used to love taking a carriage into the country. My wife and I would spend the entire afternoon inside sprawling forests and I remember taking deep breaths through my nose because I loved the bouquet of scents. Now everywhere I go, the earth dies."

Aimee set the cup of coffee down on the lip.

Famine reached out and grabbed the iced coffee. He took a sip through the straw and let the liquid in his mouth a long time before swallowing.

"This is my last drink here. I have to go to Israel."

Mark nodded. They'd been living on pastries for the past twenty hours. His hair was greasy and his skin felt dirty.

"We'll have to leave this place, I guess."

"Why?" Famine asked. He took another sip. "Why not just sit right here for awhile? Don't go out there. Sit right here until everything is settled. You seem like good people."

Mark smiled, slightly forced.

"I don't think I can eat any more coffee cakes."

Famine smiled.

“My name was Timothy when I was alive. I appreciate your friendliness.”

“Good luck with the rest of it, Timothy,” Mark said. He gave a little wave as the Horseman of the Apocalypse trotted off.

“Let’s wait,” Aimee said. “I don’t know why I ever wanted to leave anyway. My friends are probably dead or gone. My parents are probably dead or gone. Running around won’t change that.”

Mark nodded, looking at her. He thought she looked strong. It gave him hope that maybe something would happen, that all of this would finally make sense.

He grabbed the Jenga blocks and started stacking them, his back to the window. Outside, the low-hanging black clouds began to release thick droplets of rain.

KEN BROSKY received his MFA in writing from the University of Nebraska. He's currently putting the finishing touches on a humor novel, a speculative novel, a mystery novel, and a short story collection.