

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



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Editor's Note:

Spring! When a young person's fancy turns to thoughts of love and the rest of us...well, we mainly sit around wondering what the hell the cream filling in Cadbury Eggs is really made out of.

And because introspection shouldn't just be for Easter candy, our new issue has a definite metacognitive vibe as we turn our thematic focus on, well, us. We've gathered together five stories about literature, writers, writing, and words, plus, one short tale about art. It's a veritable feast of creative self-examination.

Also, there's a seventh story about a woman with a gun in her mouth. That one's probably a metaphor for something, but as we're about to find out in our first offering, sometimes it's best not to overanalyze these things.

Pass the Peeps. Issue 29 has hatched.

– Mike Sweeney

Epics Reduced to Sentences

Cloud Spurlock

After the initial shock and a universal feeling of inexplicable loss, the academic world met *Hamlet's* disappearance with an awkward confusion. When shelveers in the libraries across the globe brushed their hands over the faded spines, they might have felt a faint, tangible importance at their fingertips, but unable to place the origin of that sensation, they would have moved on. It was as if every literate person in the world had wandered upstairs and forgotten what it was she was looking for. That is what it is like to forget something that no longer exists to be forgotten.

The pattern was the same: a university student finalizing a thesis would emerge from study scratching his head and declare, "I lost my train of thought." Professors cried out in alarm during class while clutching honey-colored volumes to their breasts, but their words slipped through like sand and fell into oblivion. Scholars began to repeat the important titles to one another in a futile attempt to hold on to all they had left. A tweed-bearing lecturer crossed a campus with furious steps and muttered, "*Iliad, Iliad, Iliad,*" over and over until the title lost meaning long before the epic disappeared. One student, upon flipping past the newly blanked pages in her English anthology, turned to her classmate one afternoon and asked, "What is a *Waste Land*?" Their eyes scanned the tissue slate wiped clean and wondered at the symbolism of a poem without words. "Terribly depressing," one said to the other. "True," said her friend, "it's a bleak outlook. Besides, 'wasteland' is one word."

Several theories arose, not a few of which placed blame at the failing youth who were too entrenched in passive forms of entertainment to be bothered to read. Books have no value without

readers, they decided, and that is why they disappear. But increasingly there were more blank books on the shelvers' carts than there were on the shelves. The books being read were the ones dying. Was it possible, they wondered, to read a book to death?

A more popular theory emerged among a band of baffled scholars, all of whom had lost work in *Hamlet's* wake when the texts they studied disappeared and rendered their research ridiculous. They concluded that it was not the loose and convoluted interpretations from half-witted analyses that were at fault; rather, it was their own finessed and nuanced genius that welled up from centuries of criticism of the most examined works. If there is no mystery left for us to solve, then there is no value in the literature, and the stories disappear. Criticism takes on more importance than the text, the critic usurps the power of the author, imposes that power on the reader, and fully-interpreted books, poems, dreams, and histories fall away in defeat. And they fell. This was The Great Loss.

It was not just the universities and libraries that it touched. My great-grandfather, it is said, was a great actor, an epic pretender. He was in the middle of a successful run of shows with his company when The Great Loss began. One evening during the second half of his drama, in the middle of a speech, in what he remembered as a climactic moment, he simply forgot his lines. He stood alone on stage with a human skull in his hand and no idea what to do. With his mental catalogue blanked, he glanced at the prompter, protected by a shell just above the orchestra pit, and he saw that even this subtle hero sat flipping madly through marked-up pages of a blanked-out script.

My great-grandfather considered walking off the stage to end the production there, but instead he continued by inventing mere banter and jokes with his co-stars, whom he called back onstage. It was an eerie ending, he once told a friend, because he was sure that he was supposed to die but could not for the life of him figure out

how. The crowd still loved it, this theatre of the absurd, even though they could not remember how the whole thing began. They called for an improvised encore, a small excuse to avoid for a little while longer the rain that suddenly began to fall outside.

Everyone wanted someone to blame. Eventually, literature departments around the world closed. Those who most loved books were most afraid to read them. Criticism ended even before it was banned. Some librarians and professors with an aim of preservation took up a quick collection. They gathered all the texts that were not yet lost and threw them into the very library that housed their initial doom. They locked them up. The place was filled to the brim with volumes and volumes of literature. They threw in the dictionaries, the encyclopedias, the recipe books, the plays—everything ever written that still existed. No one was ever allowed in or out. To know that the books still existed was enough for those who had read them, and a real tragedy too, knowing that they would not be read again.

They burned the blank books. And in order to stave curiosity, they burned the criticism. They even sentenced to destruction the wide variety of vacant volumes being sold as annotated journals and relics worldwide. It was systematic and peaceful, born from understanding and not from malice. Families stood together and held each other with pride, in preservation of their human history. The smoke spelled out words in the air, imaginary ghosts of stories untold and told too much.

When they closed the library, there was no protest. No one tried to break in. The literary world patted its money-pocket and then forgot what it was that it had placed there.

CLOUD SPURLOCK is the receptionist for the English department at George Mason University, which means she's pretty much subject to any number of somebody else's whims on a daily basis. While earning her MA in literature, she keeps her nose in everybody else's business.

Winning for Losing

Troy Manning

“Don’t pick your nose or you’ll go blind,” my mother used to tell me.

Sure enough, by the age of eight, we were at Thrifty choosing frames for my new prescription lenses. I liked the green tortoise-shell frames. My mom warned me those were for morons, but, for my own good, she allowed me to persist in my folly.

I sat alone during lunch with my green frames for most of the remaining school year. Many children don’t learn until much later in life just how smart their parents are, and I was no exception. The deterioration of my eyesight increased in direct proportion to the stretch-marks around my nostrils. Though I was truly concerned for my visual welfare, there was so little else to do with my hands after finishing my lunch. And when one begins to feel like a perpetual loser, hardly anything compares with the satisfaction of picking a winner.

My father told me that carrots were good for your eyesight, so I began to sleep with one in each nostril. One morning, I forgot to take them out before going to school. I’m still not sure whether my parents didn’t notice or if they just let me go that way for my own good.

One of the carrots must have fallen out on my way to school, while the other held its ground until recess. I was hardly surprised my malicious classmates didn’t inform me of the conspicuous protrusion, but with the faculty, this was harder for me to fathom. I suppose they thought I was just doing it for attention and so ignored it for my own betterment.

By the fifth grade I was up to bifocals, and supports were installed in my nostrils to prevent their collapsing. I had begun to

take up writing and was learning other ways to occupy my hands. As might be expected my stories tended to be about misfits who were always learning lessons that everyone but them seemed to understand.

My first story about a girl whose parents let her suck her thumb down to the bone enjoyed some success. As a result, her popularity among the student-body grew immensely, and she expressed her gratitude by being my girlfriend until the summer before seventh-grade. Although holding her hand sometimes felt a little awkward, I paraded her around campus like a personified Pulitzer. She eventually said it wasn't in my best interest to be dating in middle-school, and left me for a ninth-grader.

Even though I wasn't interested in dating him, my next story was about a boy whose single mom grew weary of always telling him not to play with sticks. He eventually put out his eye and had to pay for a glass one with his own allowance. In just two days time, he lost it to a friend in a game of marbles. There was undoubtedly a lesson to be learnt as his mom made him wear a large yellow marble the rest of the school year.

By the tenth-grade the area of my face had grown enough to accommodate the circumference of my nostrils. My eyesight, however, continued to deteriorate and it was hard finding new friends, not having published in a while.

Gratefully, in yearbook club, a girl with no eyelashes took pity on me and wrote a feature about the boy whose parents let him pick his nose until he went legally blind. I showed my appreciation by letting her lead me around like she was my dog. She later apologized profusely to me for parading me around like her mascot, and I confessed to her the dog-thing. We clung together through college and ultimately married. We were a winning combination whose kids didn't get away with squat.

TROY MANNING is a graduate of Westminster Seminary California. He has recently been taking literature classes at San Diego State University & Cal State University, San Marcos where his stories have been published in the creative writing program's *Cat Ate My Chapbook*, *Fierce Notes 1 & 2*, and the Spring & Fall, 2010 issues of *Oh Cat*. Other of his stories have appeared in the webzines *Weirdyear*, *Daily Love*, & *Bewildering Stories*.

James Joyce, Herman Melville, and God Get Rejected!

Douglas Hackle

“But *Finnegans Wake* is a tour de force of linguistic experimentation, intertextuality, and recondite comedy,” protested the vapory-azure, bespectacled, mustached form of James Joyce’s ghost from its containment in the transparent bubble chamber at the center of the room. “You simply cannot reject—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Joyce,” interrupted Nigel Vekk, Editor-in-Chief for the Earth Literature imprint of Intergalactic Publishing Limited, “but your book was impenetrable and incomprehensible when it was first published back in 1939, understood only by a handful of academics with way too much time on their hands—the type of people who had never, for example, had the misfortune of being driven to cannibalism as a result of starvation. And that was 10,000 years ago! The book’s relevancy today? Forget about it. I do hereby declare *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce retroactively rejected!”

Nigel punctuated his declaration with a loud whack of his weighty gavel against the sound block on his elephantine desk. At the same moment the gavel fell, the intern assistant editor, Lanying Ichihara, began manipulating an array of buttons, toggle switches, dials, and touchscreens on the hulking, sprawling, mainframe-like workstation that stood embedded in the obsidian floor like some mechanical beast, not far from Nigel’s desk. Her rapid flicks and punches resulted in the permanent erasure of *Finnegans Wake* from every public, commercial, and private database in the known universe.

Finnegans Wake was effectively annihilated.

Lanying pushed a final button to send the ghost of James Joyce back to the Other Side.

“Noooooooooooo!” the spirit cried, arms outstretched as its misty, ectoplasmic form rapidly faded to nothing, leaving the Dead Author Summoning bubble empty.

The year was 12,011 CE. Over the past thirteen or so millennia, many great writers had produced many great books, not just on Earth but also in the seven other known star systems that were home to intelligent life forms. The problem was that this prodigious output never saw a break. After one generation made its contributions to the ever-expanding literary canon, the next generation of immortality-seeking scribes would put in theirs, and the next generation theirs, ad infinitum. Not only that, but each intelligent world was naturally curious to read and study the great and not-so-great literature of the seven other intelligent worlds—in translation. As an inevitable consequence of this situation, too many books came to be in existence, both in terms of classics and more forgettable fare. Too many to decide which ones should be taught in schools, too many to adapt into films, too many to even catalog.

Certainly too many to read.

To simplify life, the United Federation of the Known Universe established Intergalactic Publishing Ltd. (IPL) and, in doing so, abolished all other book publishers. IPL became responsible for the publication and dissemination of all new ebooks in the universe. However, IPL’s more important function was to oversee, maintain, and make occasional upgrades to a supercomputer that reviewed the universe’s known catalog of books to decide which ones should stay and which ones should go. And with the advent of advanced quantum-based, spiritworld-communication technology, it seemed only proper for IPL to take the time to inform deceased authors when their work was being retroactively rejected.

Nigel extracted a Twinkie from his desk drawer. Elbows resting on her console and holding her somewhat sour face in her hands, Lanying waited impatiently for her superior to devour the snack cake and give her further instructions.

“Okay,” Nigel said, wiping Twinkie cream from his lips with his sleeve. He squinted over at a holographic screen projecting from an iridescent pinhole at the end of his desk. “Next on the docket is . . . *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville.”

Lanying worked the board—typing, tapping, pressing, punching, pulling, flicking.

A moment later, the blue-glowing ghost of Herman Melville materialized in the diamond-polycarbonate composite bubble. The apparition’s thick shock of hair was combed away from his forehead, his bristly beard roughly square-shaped just liked in his portraits and few surviving photographs. Dressed in formal nineteenth-century attire—frock coat, waistcoat, necktie, trousers—the spirit looked scared and confused, not to mention blue, both literally and figuratively.

They always looked scared, confused, and blue thought Nigel.

“Greetings, Mr. Melville,” he said. “On behalf of Intergalactic Publishing Limited, the universe’s last publishing house, I would like first to apologize for this sudden intrusion on your afterlife. But the burden has fallen on me to inform you that your book *Moby Dick* is scheduled for retroactive rejection. In compliance with said rejection, all digital and paper copies of your book will now be permanently wiped away from existence.”

His spiel always brought the spirits to the moment so to speak—that scared, where-the-hell-am-I look rapidly drained from Melville’s visage, replaced by an expression of shocked disbelief.

“*Moby Dick*? Muh—muh—my *Moby Dick*?” the phantasm stuttered. “Why you can’t do that. I mean, not to sound the

braggart, sir, but *Moby Dick* is one of the enduring classics of earth's literature."

Nigel leaned in toward his holo screen, familiarizing himself with the details of the case.

"Yes, that appears so, Mr. Melville," he concurred several beats later. "However, your book is not being rejected due to any lack of literary merit. Moreover, it's not on the rejection block due to any fault of your own. The culprit here, rather, is the organic, evolving nature of language itself. The specific problem that developed with your book is nearly as old as the book itself."

"You see, not too long after your death, the word 'dick' morphed into a slang term meaning 'penis.' Unfortunately, as soon as this happened, it spelled the inevitable doom of your novel. Granted, it's a testament to the brilliance and profundity of your symbolism-packed whaling adventure that it has survived as long as it has. But nowadays, there's not a high school teacher in the universe who can lecture on your book without the whole classroom snickering, giggling, or else engaging in full-force, pants-peeing laughter whenever the teacher or a classmate utters the *d*-word during discussion. Particularly among the younger generation, it's simply no longer possible to discuss *Moby Dick* seriously."

Upon uttering the word "dick," Nigel was unable to suppress a genuine chuckle of his own. He succeeded in stopping it from becoming a full-fledged giggling fit, but not before a Twinkie crumb shot out from his nose and bounced off his desk onto the floor.

"See what I mean?" he said. "Case in point."

"Well, that's no reason to annihilate my magnum opus," Melville said, a note of despair creeping into his voice. "Can we not just change "Dick" to—oh, I don't know—*Duck* maybe? Yes, yes, yes. Duck. Let's rename the book *Moby Duck*. That would be perfectly agreeable with me."

"I'm truly sorry, Mr. Melville, but it's a little too late for that. You see, there's just too many goddamn books out there, sir. The easier, faster, and cheaper solution here is to destroy your book, not revise it." Nigel then cleared his throat before raising his voice to sentencing pitch. "I do hereby declare *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville retroactively rejected!"

THWACK! sounded the gavel.

Lanying deftly manipulated the controls, zapping *Moby Dick* from the fabric of being.

"No, you simply can't do this! You mustn't! You . . . nooooooooooooooooooooo!" the ghost of Melville cried as it evaporated back to the Great Beyond.

Nigel yawned, glanced at the time indicator at the top of his holo screen. 11:17 AM. *Damn, the morning is just dragging*, he observed mentally. *I have to learn not to look at that stupid clock every ten minutes, that's my problem, I have to*

Nigel's eyes dropped a few degrees, honing in on the next scheduled rejection.

He'd heard rumors of the possibility of this particular retroactive rejection taking place sometime within the next few hundred years. But they were just that—rumors. He certainly had never expected it to take place under his own editorial watch.

Holy shit

"Um, er, next on the docket is . . . the Holy Bible by, um . . . God."

Lanying stared incredulously at Nigel.

Eventually, with his face contorted into a confused grimace, he asked, "Does the summoning module even have the capacity to do this?"

"Maybe," Lanying squeak-croaked.

The two sat in relative silence for a spell, the only sound the steady hum of the two neutrino-antiquark reactors attached to Lanying's station.

“Well, I guess we should probably give it a go,” Nigel said, straining to keep his voice steady.

“Okay,” replied Lanying.

Type, tap, press, push, punch, pull, flick

A bead of sweat sprouted on Nigel’s temple, gravity worming it down the side of his twitching face.

The entire rejection chamber began to shake as if struck by an earthquake. The usually unwavering volume of the twin reactors’ humming crescendoed as if the power sources were experiencing overload and on the verge of meltdown.

A few tense moments later, God materialized not inside the summoning bubble but in front of it. At first He/She/It appeared in the form of a spinning sphere of brilliant green and purple fire humming in sympathetic vibration with the reactors. The dazzling light dissolved as the sphere elongated, transforming into an anthropomorphic form: an elderly, white-bearded, white-robed patriarch, not unlike the Renaissance God pictured on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The room ceased shaking, and the whirl of the reactors fell back to normal volume.

“Greetings, guh—guh—God,” Nigel faltered. “On behalf of Intergalactic Publishing Limited, the universe’s last publishing house, I would like first to apologize for this sudden intrusion on Your, uh, divine affairs. But the burden has fallen on me to—”

“I know what burden has fallen on you,” God said, his stentorian voice resounding through the high-ceilinged, domed room.

“Um, yeah. I guess You would know. So it’s probably unnecessary for me to inform You why Your book is being retroactively rejected, right?”

“Wrong. I do not know why it’s being rejected.”

“But, uh, I thought you, like, knew everything?” It was a question.

“Far from it. I *could* know everything, sure. However, I choose to know most things but not all things, lest omniscience make My existence dull and devoid of possibilities and wonderment. But regarding this rejection of the Holy Bible, let Me take a guess. Is it being rejected because of the abundance of numerical errors found in the Old Testament?”

“No.”

“Then it must be because of the various factual inconsistencies and contradictions that exist between the four Gospels?”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Hmm. Okay. How about the unexplained shift in my personality from the vengeful Deity of the Old Testament to the loving God of the New Testament? That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, nothing like that.”

The Creator threw His arms akimbo, a look of perplexity crimping His face. “Okay, I give up then. What is it?”

“The Holy Bible is being rejected because Intergalactic Publishing has a strict policy against multiple submissions, at least in regards to holy writ.”

God’s bushy, alabaster brow furrowed even deeper.

“In other words,” Nigel continued with a dry gulp, “only one submission at a time. And at roughly the same time in ancient history, God, You divinely inspired more than a few individuals to write multiple versions of Your Divine Word. Hence we have the Holy Bible, the Torah, the Koran, the Hindu Shruti and Smriti texts, Buddhist scripture, the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and many other examples of sacred writ.”

“But I never knew Intergalactic Publishing had a policy against multiple subs,” God said, seemingly both vexed and genuinely surprised.

If anyone could have had the foreknowledge to know that Intergalactic Publishing would eventually come into being, and that it would enforce a policy of no multiple submissions, it would have been You, Nigel couldn’t help but think.

“Careful. I heard that,” God said.

Nigel winced and tried to retract his head back into his body like a turtle. It didn’t work. “I’m sorry. I meant no disrespect. I only meant—”

God waved him off. “Then I suppose you’ll have to reject all My other divinely inspired texts on the same grounds, won’t you?”

“Yes, God. But only the Holy Bible today. My holo file here indicates that our supercomputer wishes to minimize any potential negative cultural backlash by abolishing only one of Your divinely inspired texts at a time.”

“Makes sense. Well, that’s all fine and good with me, actually. You see, I have a new divine text. Though I haven’t yet picked the individual or individuals whom I shall divinely inspire to write it, I would like to plant its seeds in this universe as soon as possible. But it appears I’ll have to wait for all My other divinely inspired texts to be removed—or ‘rejected,’ as you’re so fond of saying. Is that correct?”

“That is correct.”

“Very well. My patience is infinite. Yes, I’m quite certain humankind and the other intelligent life forms in this universe will really like My latest effort. See, I’ve already introduced and inspired this new text into seventeen other parallel universes. As a matter of fact, in four of those universes, my hand-picked, divinely inspired scribes have already completed the physical task of writing the book. Even now as we speak, this text is helping to pivotally shape the histories of those four universes.”

Nigel hoped he wasn’t pushing his luck, but he was obliged to observe the duties of his post. “I wholeheartedly apologize, God, but we will be unable to accept this new submission of Yours.”

“Unable to? What do you mean? Why?”

“Regarding the Word of God, Intergalactic Publishing also has a strict policy of no simultaneous submissions. This means that we cannot accept a submission that has also been submitted to one or

more parallel universes. Also, since you've indicated that your book already exists in its complete form in four parallel universes, we would have to consider it a reprint. I'm sorry, but IPL also has a strict policy against reprints. However, if You would like to erase this book from both the matter and collective memory of those parallel universes—all seventeen of them—you can then submit it here. But that's entirely up to You, of course."

God appeared to be lost in divine thought for a time before he next spoke. "Hmm. So no multiple subs, sim subs, *or* reprints. Ah, well. Although that sucks, I would not presume to be above the rules that govern everyone else—even though, of course, I totally *am* above the rules that govern everyone else. Do as you see fit, sir—carry on with this business."

"I do hereby declare the Holy Bible by God retroactively . . . rejected," Nigel said in a wimpy near-whisper. He did not slam the gavel home with all his strength as was his habit. Instead, he barely tapped the sound block.

"Oh, there'll be no need for that," God said turning towards Lanying as she began to work the controls. God snapped his fingers. "There. I've done it for you. All written and digital copies of the Bible have been annihilated. Oh, and save your reactor fuel. I can show myself out."

With that God vanished from the room.

Dabbing his forehead with a tissue, Nigel sank back into his chair, leaned as far back as the seat would allow, let a deep exhale of relief escape from his chest.

Nigel took a moment to compose himself. His thoughts meandered. First he thanked God for not striking him dead for his lifelong sins of gluttony, lust, wrath, greed, envy, pride, and sloth. Then he found himself praying to God for forgiveness for presiding over the rejection and annihilation of the Holy Bible, despite the fact that God had been so cool and casual and such an overall good sport about the whole thing. Next, his mind wandered to his

customary workaday sexual fantasies with Lanying clad in a naughty schoolgirl uniform and wearing sexy cat-eye glasses.

“Mr. Vekk?” Lanying said a minute later, startling him.

“Oh, sorry,” he said perking up in his chair. “Okay, where were we?”

Nigel glanced up at the holo monitor. “Next up on the docket we have . . . Charles Dickens.”

Lanying sighed. “Again?”

DOUGLAS HACKLE likes to write stories that are bizarre, surreal, absurd, darkly humorous, satirical, horrific, macabre, veiny, vainglorious, childishly stupid or some combination thereof. His stories have [vein poppet] appeared in several online and print publications. Douglas resides in Northeast Ohio with his wife and little boy, and he’s not exactly sure how that blasted vein poppet be gettin’ all up in his bio n’ shit.

Sylvia's Kitchen

Robert Buswell

Sylvia has her head stuck in the oven again. "Don't try to stop me," she says.

"Don't worry, we won't," says Emily. "Although it's rather difficult to attend to this kidney with you in the way."

"Why dry your kidney?" asks Robert. "And is it safe to have a burner lit with all the gas in here?"

"I have this theory," says Emily. "I propose that when almost dry the human kidney will assume a certain plasticity, a pliability. When my kidney is leached of just the proper amount of moisture it will resemble modeling clay. Then I can use it to make beautiful sculptures."

Anne laughs. "Or you could package it in little yellow tubs and sell it to children. It would be all the rage."

"I'd rather keep it, thank you," Emily says.

"Suit yourself," Anne replies. She nudges Sylvia with the toe of her shoe. "Sylvie, be a dear and make room for me in there."

Sylvia jumps, hitting her head. "Damn, woman! I was almost there. Quit interrupting me. Go find a car or something, will you?"

"Well, you're no fun," Anne says. She looks over at me. "What's your story?"

Robert glances at me. "Yeah, I've been wondering the same thing. You think you have a right to be here just because we share the same first name? I won the goddamned Pulitzer Prize. Four times, Kid. Four times. What have you done?"

"I haven't won anything, but I do need some help," I say.

"And what help do you suppose you'll find sitting at my kitchen table?" Sylvia mumbles from inside the stove.

"I'm trying to build an accurate three-dimensional tesseract and then unfold it into the fourth dimension," I tell them. "Although I'm not sure that a roomful of poets will be much help."

Robert laughs, then grimaces and clutches his groin. "This damned prostate is going to kill me. Listen; don't think that my poetic ability precludes any scientific knowledge. You think that just because I deal mostly with rural themes that I'm some hillbilly hick?"

"No, of course not."

"Don't patronize me, Boy. You've got some nerve coming in here and telling me that I'm some two-bit bumpkin."

Emily turns from the stove. "Hush, Robert," she says. "It's ready." She holds out the kidney.

"What will you make?" Anne asks.

"A beautiful lady," Emily replies. "Then I'll cover her with flour so she'll be white and hide her in the cupboard."

"Wait," I say. "Maybe we can use it to make the tesseract."

"No," Emily says, closing her hands over it. "A tesseract is only a fleeting beauty and when unfolded we may find that parts have disappeared into another dimension. I'd rather the kidney stay preserved in the cupboard forever. In one piece. In one place."

"Don't be stupid, Emily," Anne says, grabbing the kidney. "This guy's right. A hypercube would be much more artistic than some flour-covered doll."

"Just let her keep it," Robert says. "We can use my prostate instead. Come here, Boy. Take this knife and do a little surgery on me."

"Nonsense," Anne says. "This organ already has a perfect consistency for modeling. No sense in fishing another out of your posterior when Emily has generously agreed to let us use hers."

Emily lunges for the kidney, but Anne knocks her down. She leans close to Emily's face. "Lady, I'm not the one you wanna mess

with, see? I'll strike you so hard that all you'll hear is a fly buzzing around your head."

Emily looks down. "I guess you're right. Let's build a tesseract."

"That's much better," Anne says, smiling. "Sylvia, get up and help us build, won't you?"

Sylvia doesn't move. Anne kicks her and she slumps out onto the floor.

"Stand back and I'll give her CPR," Anne sighs.

Sylvia starts coughing. "You don't need to. I'm not there yet. Just let me finish, will you?"

"Relax, Sylvie. You can finish up with that on Sunday, can't you? You have guests today."

Sylvia brightens. "Yes, I'm not expecting anyone over on Sunday. That might be a better day anyway, seeing as it should be rather bleak."

"Good, it's settled then," Robert says. "Why don't we go down to the park to build this thing? I know it's late and snowy, but the woods might be an inspiring place."

Sylvia smiles. "Robert, that's just the thing. I'll pack a nice picnic and we'll all go."

"No can do, my friends," Emily says, shuddering. "I'm not too fond of snow or woods or evening."

"So get over it," Sylvia says, stocking a hamper with food and silverware.

"I can't and I won't," says Emily. "You may all go without me."

"Hey, why don't we have the picnic right here?" I ask. "Despite some of us being rather fond of winter scenery, I'd just as soon stay warm here."

"Suits me," Robert replies.

Anne drops the kidney onto the table. Sylvia presents a charming little meal and we tuck in. "We'll start with a cube and go from there," I tell them through a mouthful of bratwurst.

"Go for it," Anne says.

"I wonder if Emily would be willing to do the honors?" I extend the kidney toward her. "It is hers, after all."

"She'll just make a damn doll with it," Robert says with a scowl. "You're giving our artistic medium to the one person who is most likely to misuse it and you have the testicular fortitude to call me an uneducated trailer park dweller?"

"I have never called you anything like that," I say.

"No, Robert, I will make what we agreed upon," Emily says. She begins molding the kidney into a cube. "What next?"

"Here's the part I'm unsure of," I say, scratching my head. "Now we must extend the cube at right angles to itself until it becomes a three-dimensional simulacrum of the four-dimensional object it will become."

"Here, let me see the damn thing," Robert says. He begins extending it at right angles to itself.

"That looks good," I say.

"It better. You don't win the accolades I've won without learning a thing or two about sculpting."

I watch as he completes the tesseract and smoothes down the rough edges.

"Now how do we unfold it?" I ask.

"You got me there," Robert says, carefully lying the structure down on Sylvia's table.

We all stare at the tesseract. Finally, Sylvia jumps up.

"I've got it!" she shouts. "We'll fill the interior with gas. Gas expands. The gas will force the tesseract to expand outwards into the fourth dimension."

"Wait. Is the fourth dimension even real?" Emily asks.

"I think we're about to find out," Anne says. She digs around in Sylvia's kitchen drawers until she finds a long rubber tube. She places one end of the tube over the oven's gas nozzle and inserts the other end into the tesseract.

“Would any of you like to read a poem I just wrote about this experience?” Emily asks.

“I would,” I say.

She hands me a sheet of paper:

We who wait – patiently as it were
all – Strive to expand a
tesseract in Vain –
before Death – o’ertakes
and Light – fading –

“So you believe our efforts futile?” I say, handing it back to her.

“Of course not. But it has nice despairing poetic feel, doesn’t it?”

“It does indeed,” I reply.

“Feels more like an unhealthy obsession with dying to me,”

Robert says.

“Never mind him,” I tell Emily. “It’s wonderful.”

We fall silent and watch the tesseract.

And we wait.

ROBERT BUSWELL is a world-renowned operatic singer, although he receives little attention in his home country of Burundi. His vocal range has been mentioned by critics as “Truly something which must be experienced in person.” He repaints cathedrals in garish hues in his off time and is currently wanted by federal authorities in Italy and France. He ardently admires and inefficiently emulates his idol, Australian Timothy Minchin, although the feeling is mutual. He drives a Dodge Tomahawk and lives in Wyoming.

Bubbling Over

Chun Lee

It's not like I knew this was going to happen. I can't answer very many of your questions.

—

No, you won't be able to talk to my mom. She's trying to find an answer to this mess.

—

I can't tell you why it's not happening to me. Well, I can tell you why. I just can't tell you how. My mom didn't want to read me. It's a remarkable amount of forethought on her part. She normally has an idea and runs with it. Either that, or the fact that I've been a guinea pig for her for so long somehow vaccinated me.

—

A needle. I get poked and prodded a lot. It's just what happens when you grow up with my mom.

—

I can't tell you why she thought it was a bright idea. She never said and we know we can't talk with her right now. I think it has to do with a break up. She was dating John, who I think was a pretty nice guy. She was complaining about how men can never say what they really mean. And then I told her it wasn't just men. I was reading a comic book at the time and she noticed something about it that really interested her. She asked to borrow my comic book and then went into her lab, which takes up half the house by the way.

This isn't completely out of the norm for her. She often has these brilliant yet absurdly impractical ideas. She doesn't like spicy foods so she invented a pair of glasses to see just how spicy something is.

—

Three weeks. She would come out to shower and eat. But yeah, that's about all she did for those three weeks. I suppose I should've tried to get her to make up with John and this whole thing wouldn't be happening and the world wouldn't be about to explode.

—
I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Stop freaking out. I don't know if the world is going to explode, but I don't know what's going to happen either and it's a bit scary.

—
Maybe she's working on a way to change it. I honestly don't know if it will work or not.

—
I think the worst thing about it is how quiet everything is. I'm the only one making a sound. Even the animals are doing it. Hell even my answering machine is doing it.

—
What's he saying?

—
I don't understand what he's saying. It's just a bunch of random words.

—
Japanese? What does that have to do with it? I don't care which country he's from.

—
Right to left? Ohhh. Well that makes more sense. But you see how much of a pain in the ass this is turning into?

—
Stop yelling. I'm answering you the best I can.

—
Stop Yelling!

—
Because your font is huge right now! That's how I know.

—

You're yelling too!

—

All of you stop yelling, I can't see anything anymore!

—

Great. Great. Are you happy? All I see is "rabble rabble rabble" over your heads. Do you know how silly you guys look? Just chill out. Please?

—

Okay, good. Now let me try to explain. I think she was really happy with what she did at first. Some good things did come out of it. The deaf suddenly have no disability, though the blind are suddenly in a world of silence. Everything everyone said to each other is very clear. No one can screw up an order and let's face it; this is one way to make sure we have a 100% literacy rate. The weirdest thing? You want to know how to spell something? Just say it out loud. The bubbles know how to spell better than you.

My mother really thought she let people communicate more clearly with one another, but I think she first regretted what she did when she tried to play some music. A bunch of floating notes and lyrics just don't do the job and she really loves listening to Jethro Tull. My mom used to play the flute when she was young, you know. I'm not saying that's what made her decision to do something about it, but I think it helped. She probably also didn't like the sound effects. Those things can be downright dangerous at times. When I drive a car and just see a big "SCREECH" coming at me I can't see the car in front of me. That's not safe at all, is it?

My mother isn't one to feel guilty over her experiments. She just doesn't have the time for it. She sees a problem and then decides it needs to be fixed. Remember John? Well she made up with him. Not because everyone was speaking in speech bubbles all of a sudden, but because John's just a nice guy and way more patient with my mom than I am.

—

Oh yeah, sorry. I guess I got off my point. It's just nice to see her happy again. Okay so she realizes she needs to fix things and she goes into her lab with a box of Red Bull, she drinks the stuff endlessly, left over Easter chocolate from two years ago, and I don't see her for weeks. When she comes out she tells me to stay away from the house for at least two weeks. She's going to try something and it's going to be dangerous.

—
Have you ever tried to figure out what these bubbles are made of? Have you ever grabbed one and tried to pop one? They disappear as soon as they come, but if you ever managed to grab one you will find that they very much exist in the physical world. They feel like rubber, but I find it's far stronger than any rubber I know of. You can stretch them out to who knows where.

—
It's important because that's how my mom plans to stop all this. I can't explain the science to you. I mean hell she invented a new science to make this happen, but she thinks if we can pop one of those bubbles then the entire system will break down. We'll go back to normal if one bubble pops. But like I said the bubbles don't last long and they seem to be made of a very stretchable and resilient material.

—
A bubble normally only holds a sentence or maybe two. We don't normally think in more than one or two sentences; our mind can't hold it all, but my mom found a weakness.

—
Think about it.

—
She wants to stretch one out. Stretch it beyond its limits.

—
Yup, she's going to say a sentence so long it'll pop the balloon. Or maybe end the Earth. That's what she was doing all those weeks

in her lab, constructing a sentence so long it will take her weeks to say it all. I can't imagine how big her balloon must be.

—
From space, huh? That's impressive.

—
I don't know.

—
I honestly don't know.

—
Either she's right and we go back to how it was before the bubbles.

—
Or the last thing we all hear is a big, big boom.

—
You don't have to say that to me.

CHUN LEE is dodging gators and enjoying amazing Cajun cuisine in Lafayette, Louisiana. His work has appeared in *The Late Late Show*, *Dissections*, *Sails and Sorcery*, and the upcoming anthology *Paper Blossoms, Shattered Steel*. He is a graduate of the WPF program at Seton Hill University and is currently earning a Ph.D. in English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

A Brief Survey of 19th Century North European Art

Steven Levery

Wishing fervently to pursue an artistic calling, Bernhard Schleiermacher had spent most of the year 1863 in Italy, painting the stony hillsides around Sorrento, the cypresses at Villa d'Este, until Vater wrote him it was time to come home and learn the family business. Lest his wishes appear ambiguous, the old man had cut off Bernhard's monthly stipend. Now young Schleiermacher sat in a dimly lit Hamburg café sipping his third absinthe of the waning dusk, exchanging glances with an attractive young woman at another table. Outside, mauve snowflakes the size of wolf spiders fell steadily onto Deichstrasse. She could be one of Rossetti's models, he thought, minus the Pre-Raphaelite hair; but what was she doing wearing a straw boater in December? In his mind's eye, he saw the two of them together in his rooms around midnight, going at it like a pair of thoroughbred locomotives working up a full head of steam. Her thinking tended more along the lines of mongoose and cobra. Minna Dorothea Krause was a beginning student at Klinik St. Georg, one of a few brave females trying to enter the medical profession at the time, and she was fresh from attending her first anatomy lesson demonstrated on a recently deceased corpse. She thought the boldly staring gentleman looked rather posh, thought he would look even posher eviscerated. She dissected him methodically with her eyes. Later that evening, as Bernhard slid himself discretely off the edge of a broken ice sheet into the freezing waters of the Elbe, Minna was headed in the opposite direction, strolling along Lange Reihe back to the St. Georg, when the sight of a child's lost mitten brought her to her knees, weeping, in the snow. The same day, Edvard Munch was born just up the road in Ådalsbruk, Norway.

STEVEN LEVERY was born and raised in Queens, New York. Some of his past writing has appeared in print journals such as *Spindrift* and *The Greensboro Review*; in a recent anthology of chess-related short stories, *Masters of Technique* (Mongoose Press, 2010, Howard Goldowsky, Editor); and in the 2011 Unbound Press anthology, *Story.Book*. Other fictions, photos, and random sociopathic jottings appear semi-regularly around the web at sites such as *Boston Literary Magazine*, *Word Riot*, *Litsnack*, *Everyday Weirdness*, *Postcard Shorts*, *100 Word Story*, and at his blogsite, <http://ninetyfirstplace.blogspot.com/>. He is currently employed by the University of Copenhagen, and lives in Holte, Denmark.

War Zone

Alex Aro

Her mouth was a war zone, with pistols for teeth and a knife for a tongue. She'd never been to a dentist, but was very familiar with gun polish and a rag. She didn't know the pain of a cavity but she'd be damned before she got rust.

She was the life of the party. Open windows and open booze, she stood on tables and danced. Thick black lines raced around her eyes while her hair fell in tangles that bounced against her puffy cheeks and her dress flirted with the air above her knees. Sometimes the boys would throw wine glasses in the air and ask her to shoot at them, and she would. Bam, bam! Broken pieces embedded in the carpet and everyone clapped and yelled.

"More! More!"

Sometimes they placed fruit on their heads and shoulders and trusted her in their drunken state. Apples exploded and oranges burst all over as she twirled; the bullet spewing ballerina. When she got too drunk her tongue lazily hung and cut up her lip. That's when she sat and the party would too, eyes off the table and to the floor, cans rested and slowly as the night wore on bodies would drift to sleep.

When the sun crawled in through the windows and spread across the floor, she woke up with blood clots on her chin. There was a haze across her eyes that made the room sparkle like empty snail shells glued to the walls. She looked around at the boys, how they curved around the furniture and rested in crime scene chalk fashion. There were other girls too, she didn't know their names but they followed the boys like thunder.

Some mornings when she was the only one awake, she would go outside and set up beer cans along the brick wall in the

backyard. This morning however, she just sat on the wall, whipped her feet across the grass back and forth while she rested her chin on a clenched fist and thought about what else she could shoot. There were birds dancing across the telephone wires and squirrels running across tree limbs. There was a rotting tomato garden and a statue of an angel that overlooked a birdbath. She looked up as a plane disrupted the morning silence and she traced its jet black trail with her mouth. When the smog cleared and the clouds returned, she wondered if she could ever shoot them down and blanket the world in white.

As she stood up one of the boys came out through the backdoor. He staggered over towards her; his hair disheveled and molesting the air. He leaned his hand on the birdbath to keep himself balanced and he smiled. "Hey,"

"Hi," she said.

"That was some party last night huh?"

She nodded. "Yeah..."

Slowly, he sat down on the grass. She sat down too, across from him and the edge of her skirt tickled his knees. The sun had climbed higher into the sky and the clouds moved like rush hour traffic. The rest of the neighborhood still slept. The morning song a slow and silent tempo and she listened as her hands pawed through her hair. She thought the boy's name was Eric, but she wasn't sure.

"I can't wait for tonight," he said.

"Mmmm," she hummed in agreement. Her hair was clumped together in tight twists and she fidgeted to separate them. He still sat with his arms at his side and he stared beyond her at the wooden fence at the end of the yard. She stood when the soundtrack changed to the early afternoon and she heard car engines starting, people walking on the sidewalks and music pouring from screen windows to fill the summer void.

She walked back into the house and everyone was awake, moving around on the couches and touching things that didn't belong to them. Some people patted her on the back as she made her way to the kitchen. Some yelled at her, "Yeah! You fucking shoot that shit!"

She sat at the kitchen table and wondered if anyone here even knew *her* name. The only name she had heard all night was 'that chick with the guns'. Sunlight dimly lit up the room, trying to push through the closed curtains. Life sprung throughout all the rooms of the house, girls showered upstairs while boys wrestled with the remote and outside cigarettes were lit over the excited banter of tonight's party.

The afternoon wore itself out and slipped under the shady comfort of a starry blanket. The moon was bright and bore its craters proudly. As the boys dragged in booze and the girls trampled down the stairs in skimpy outfits, she was still in the kitchen alone. She thought of shooting the legs off the table, shooting through the refrigerator door and damaging the cartons inside, she thought of shooting through the windows to let in the summer night.

Someone came into the kitchen and touched her shoulder. She didn't turn her head to see who it was but she smelled cheap cologne treading over a musty odor. Whoever it was squeezed her shoulder and asked "You gonna stay in here all night?"

She pushed the hand away and got up out of the chair. "Give me a beer," she said.

She was on the table in an hour as she danced to the deafening jams that erupted from the speakers. All around her everyone cheered, and then the boys grabbed one of the framed artworks off the wall. "Shoot it! Shoot it!"

She stopped her dancing and stood spinning. She looked at the piece of art in their hands, the intricate designs, the swirls and black smudges, the circles that might be eyes, eyes that stared through her, and the hidden message that was dried somewhere on

the canvas. She swayed and the more the picture moved with her, the more it made sense. The lines connected into the pattern of a heart and the eyes all around it watched. The black smudges like the boys and girls that held this art for her to destroy.

“C’mon! Shoot it already!”

The girls were as excited as the boys. They clawed at her feet and threw their arms into the air, the music never stopped. She felt like the art up on the table, all eyes on her as they waited for her to perform, to make her message seen and heard. The heart began to beat as the boys started to throw the painting into the air in hopes she would shoot it. Up and down, the heart and the eyes were alive with pastel flair and acrylic awareness.

“Fucking, let’s go!”

She opened her mouth and everyone cheered, the music stopped and they waited for the bullets to pierce the painting. It was the boy that threw the artwork, he was first. The bullets riddled through him and he flew back into the wall. She caught the painting with one hand before it hit the ground, and then laughed with gung-ho spirit.

The boys and girls panicked and ran circles around the house, trying to wake their bodies from their drunken stupors while the bullets Swiss-cheesed across the house. She couldn’t stop her laughter and each time a bullet hit, the painted heart pumped violently. There were holes in the windows and outside lucky footsteps raced up the pavement. She had never been as excited as she laughed and laughed, her head tilted back and gunning the ceiling. The glasses and fruit hadn’t run, they hadn’t screamed, they just broke.

Finally the house was silent and she closed her mouth. The heart was frantic and leaped on and off the canvas as she placed it back on the wall. She stuck out her tongue and licked the bouncing organ, slicing it open. She took a step back to admire it and wondered who the artist was.

An earlier version of "War Zone" appeared in *Parnassus*, 2007-08.

Alex Aro is a young and aspiring writer, artist and musician. He has been previously published in *Parnassus*, where he won the award for Best Fiction in 2007. You can find more of his writings at: www.alexaro.wordpress.com

On the cover:

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“Mademoiselle Ponceau”

Arbeiter11811

ARBEITER11811, whose name is borrowed from a character of Fritz Lang's silent classic *Metropolis*, is a 20-year-old art student from Brunswick in Germany. Born in Moscow but moved as a young child to the homeland of his ancestors, early on he found himself between the fronts of two cultures. In a country in which a random step into that house or street can lead to the remains of the historical past, of battles won and, in the end, lost. From this context, or from just the day-to-day events in his life, the never ending fundus of cinema and music and of course the girl he loves, Arbeiter11811 derives his inspirations for a varied field of art forms like Drawing, Painting, Photography, Collage or even Concrete Poetry with no hesitation of being critical in a sometimes very provocative way. Currently he is also open to commissions via his webpage: www.arbeiter11811.deviantart.com.

