



Jersey Devil Press

SEPTEMBER 2012

ISSUE 34

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

September 2012, Issue 34

ISSN 2152-2162

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Editor's Note:

Maybe it's because we published two novellas last month, but for the September Issue we've decided to put the "short" back in short story. Twelve—count 'em twelve—lovely little tales, none more than sixteen hundred words and most considerably shorter.

But just because they're short doesn't mean they don't have big ideas at work: existentialism, transcendentalism, cultural genetics, time travel paradoxes, and the challenges of sobriety, to name a few. All that *and* alligator wrestling.

It's quite a ride, so make sure your jetpack's strapped on tight and you're wearing your sunglasses. Issue 34 of *Jersey Devil Press* is flashtastic.

— Mike Sweeney

In The Drink

Chip O'Brien

We were lounging on the beach chatting about Toofer's troubles—his wife had just left him and taken the kids.

The sea, I noticed, had begun to swell strangely, as if a great behemoth lurked just beneath the cold, blue-green surface and undulated with the waves.

"Hungry?" Toofer asked.

I said I could use a bite to eat.

"I'll get us something," he said and headed back up the beach to get us lunch.

I fell asleep on my towel thinking about my wife. It hadn't been easy for me to get away. She was busy at work and our little girl was sick. She'd given me hell about leaving but I was worried about him, afraid he might start drinking again. He'd been sober for almost a year.

When I woke, he was there beside me drinking a beer. I got a sick feeling in my stomach and wished I hadn't come.

"I got you a hoagie," he said.

I sat up and opened the bag. There was one sandwich and a bag of chips. I asked if he'd eaten.

"Not since they left," he said and continued to stare out to sea.

It was high tide and the water had crept closer. The small waves lapped at the sand maybe ten yards away from our feet, and a storm appeared to be brewing on the horizon. Rusted clouds flitted across the sky. And there was still the strange undulation of the water.

"You've eaten nothing?" I said. "They've been gone for almost a week."

"Maybe something. I don't know. I don't want to eat."

I ate some of my hoagie then looked in his cooler for a drink. There was one beer left which meant he'd drunk five already.

"You mind?" I said.

He shook his head.

I drank the beer with the rest of my sandwich.

Soon after, he rose.

"I don't like the look of that water," I said.

He nodded. "I'll be back," he said and headed up the beach. He disappeared over the dunes and came back a little later with several cases of beer.

"You really want to start this again?" I said.

He shrugged and sipped a freshly opened beer.

"Maybe we should move," I said. "The water."

"We'll be fine," he said.

By the time I'd finished drinking my second beer the water was lapping at my toes. The more the beer went to my head the stranger the sea became. It was as if a creature lurked there beneath the waves, just beyond the surf, some gargantuan beast that moved up and down.

"I'm moving," I said.

Toofer drank his beer and stared ahead at the water and the clouds that had begun to swirl and eddy on the horizon. It was as if we watched time-lapsed photography of the scene.

"I don't like this," I said and dumped the rest of my beer. He downed the rest of his. I looked back and saw we were alone on the beach.

"Look," I said. "I'm not kidding. I think we should get going."

"We're prepared," he said and just stared.

I was finished with him. I picked up my towel and magazine and trotted up the beach. When I reached the stairs that lead up and over the dunes, I stopped and turned back.

In horror, I watched as the water engulfed him. His head disappeared. Then an arm appeared but reached at nothing. I watched, helpless, as the water churned.

What could I do? Risk my life to save him? I had a wife and child. Tears filled my eyes.

And then he appeared on the crest of a massive wave bobbing, buoyed by a raft of six packs of beer and his Styrofoam cooler. He waved to me.

Stunned and a little ashamed for having deserted him on the beach, I waved back.

I prayed silently that he'd stay afloat long enough to reach shore.

CHIP O'BRIEN is a teacher, musician, and writer. He has had stories published in *Bartelby Snopes*, *Barbaric Yawp*, *The Fringe*, *Words of Wisdom*, *SlugFest Ltd*, and included in anthologies. Originally from New Jersey, he lives in East Nashville, Tennessee with his wife, Amanda, and their two boys, Gus and Patrick.

Dad's Barracuda

Tom Nugent

I don't know anything. That's what you should understand about me—I'm dumb as a hunk of moon granite, and the only thing I own is this little bit of music floating inside my head. And maybe not even that.

Talking to my old man. He's sitting in the wheelchair. He says: "Those two nephews, those two little shits—they swiped my barracuda and that's a fact."

"Dad, they're just getting it cleaned. They'll bring it back on Monday."

He looks at me. His eyes are bright, bright, my ruined dad. Blue eyes, glowing with the madness of his condition. I don't mind. It's what we do. I seem to remember a line from an old song: *I had to find out what condition my condition was in.*

"They're sneaks," says Dad. "They got my shaving lotion, too. Do you think I was born yesterday?"

I don't say anything. Believe it or not, I'm thinking about Toynbee, about his suggestion that the identity of the Western world was determined by a single fact: "The Franks gave up their language on the Romanized plains of Gaul."

"I want chocolate yogurt," says Dad.

"All right," I tell him. "And you *will* have chocolate yogurt."

Oh, the bright day. I'm watching a spangle of afternoon light inch across the nursing home carpet.

The thing is, I'm half-convinced that both Dad and I were hatched in a world ruled by owls. Bear with me on this. Our cultural roots lie in western Normandy—and in that very interesting region, the Roman influence came late. We converted (there's no denying *that* fact), but we converted late, and the rains

of the Atlantic coast continue to have a powerful impact on us. Sometimes, when broken sunlight checkers through rain along the Normandy coast, you can almost hear the owls speaking to you.

The leaves throw their idle shadows on the grass, and for a moment your grief is a bright dagger lapped by crimson blood.

“Well,” asks Dad. “When are we getting my damn yogurt?”

TOM NUGENT is the author of two novels and two collections of short stories, along with several works of nonfiction, including *Death at Buffalo Creek* (W.W. Norton), a book of investigative journalism about the U.S. coal mining industry. He lives in Hastings, Michigan.

The Tickets

Susan C. Ingram

Alexa Alexandra rose early in the dark of that autumn morning. After pouring a mug of black thick coffee from the dented copper samovar she had managed to procure for a small sum at the Sunday flea market, she donned her threadbare but well-cared-for No. 6 Mark Martin crew jacket and made her way bleary-eyed to the rusty but perfectly serviceable Ford Escort slumped in the parking lot of her graying tenement.

Alexa Alexandra drove alone the very nearly two hours from her very modest home in B— to the startlingly down-on-its-heels town of D—. Startling because one could only suppose that the grand race track with its equally, if not more so, grand casino, restaurants and hotels, would have in some small way at some time had a notably improved effect on the overall mercantile endeavors of the shabby little town. Alas, only the race track and casino seemed to be prospering.

As the sun rose into a perfectly clear-blue autumn morning sky, Alexa Alexandra pulled into the gigantic parking area and maneuvered into a grassy spot among the sea of shiny, mostly late-model, richly appointed vehicles.

She noted just how poorly her transport shaped up against the lot of sporty, low-slung cars and muscular pick-up trucks. She wished her tedious work at the doughnut shop would afford her the pleasure of even contemplating the purchase of a new vehicle or even a new paint scheme. Nevertheless, she took some small pride that she had earned every cent it had taken to purchase her homely, if reliable, little coach. And she took great care to keep it tidy and clean, as she did with the rest of her small, unremarkable life.

True, her life was so small that she had come to the races not to watch. She could never afford the \$50 ticket to pass through the gates. No, Alexa Alexandra drove the nearly two hours to the shabby little town of D— just to hear the giant engines roar, smell the tang of the racing fuel, and mill among the thousands of fans outside the track where she could at least for a day feel a part of something exciting, something monumental, something bigger than her solitary existence.

Strolling through the sparse early morning crowd outside the towering metal super-structure that corralled the mile-long stock car track, known to race fans as “The Monster Mile,” Alexa Alexandra began calculating how long it would take to save up for the down payment on a new car if she hoarded her measly tips, stopped treating herself to a movie once a week, and switched her cat Ivana from fancy canned cat food to bargain-store dried kibbles.

Just the thought of the many sacrifices she would have to make on top of the many sacrifices she already endured made her head hurt, so she paused at a small stall with a placard advertising Deep Fried Oreos and treated herself to a coffee and a paper basket of the batter-dipped, chocolate-cookie confections.

“Yum,” she said, strolling down the long lines of tractor trailers hawking every conceivable turn of driver and racing souvenir imaginable. “Deep-fried Oreos every morning for breakfast *and* a new car. Now that would be a life worth living.”

Alexa Alexandra popped the last still-warm Oreo pastry between her chocolate-rimmed lips, the crowd parted at the end of the line of tractor trailers, and there, shining in that crystal-blue morning light, was a fiery-orange 2012 Dodge Challenger.

A sudden fever struck her. It started in her eyes and she felt the burning heat ignite her head, then her heart, which was by now beating wildly under her shiny blue No. 6 jacket. Then it inflamed her whole being. The vision of the Hemi-orange pearlescent paint slashed with bold, black racing stripes made her light-headed. Alexa Alexandra could not now imagine her life without the car.

She would die, she thought, if she had to drive her embarrassing Escort all the way back to B— and endure the snickers of her fellow workers all of whom managed mysteriously, on their barely more than minimum wage salaries, to afford stylish transportation like Mustangs, Jettas, and Cherokees.

Like a spirit, the stricken Alexa Alexandra floated through the crowd toward the vision crouching like a tiger waiting to spring away from the black velvet ropes that tethered it. Arriving next to the display, she, somehow through her fog, came to understand that the young collegiates smiling in a nearby booth were helping the crowd fill out chances to win the car in a drawing that same day, after the race.

And so, hour after hour, through the whole of that perfect autumn day, Alexa Alexandra, dizzy with longing, filled out slip after slip, one hundred, one thousand, five thousand. Her pens ran out of ink. Her fingers cramped. People who couldn't spend all day filling out chances became hostile. Some berated her. One woman in a Kyle Petty T-shirt and matching sweat pants even spit on her. But the young collegiates, who had called their superiors after Alexa Alexandra had stuffed her hundredth entry into the Plexi-glass box, assured the restless crowd that nothing in the rules stated Alexa Alexandra could not do exactly what she was doing.

Eight hours later, as the echo of cheering race fans roared up and out of the track and onto the surrounding grounds where Alexa Alexandra had spent her day in furious determination to win the car of her dreams, the young collegiates rang a bell and not one more chance was allowed.

And in an unannounced surprise, none other than NASCAR driver Kyle Petty (who drives the Wells Fargo Dodge for Petty Enterprises race team) appeared out of the blinding sunset in his fireproof Nomex racing suit and helmet and stepped forward to select the winning ticket.

At that moment, Alexa Alexandra felt her knees buckle and she

sat down on the hot asphalt next to the Challenger, holding tight to one of the velvet ropes for support.

Without a sound Kyle Petty reached his gloved hand into the tightly stuffed box and stirred the chances like so much whipped cream. Then, lifting his hand out with one tiny slip clamped between thumb and forefinger, he held it out to one of the smiling collegiates and Alexa Alexandra stood up on shaky legs to hear her name called.

“And the winner is... Pinkie Pinkarov!”

The crowd roared and a woman wearing a Kyle Petty T-shirt and matching sweat pants glowered at Alexa Alexandra and, shrieking with delight, stepped past her to claim the glittering Challenger.

Incidentally, this perfectly true story is not yet at an end, for Alexa Alexandra, sick with fever from her day-long frenzy, swooned and passed out at that moment, her head coming to rest gently on the car's wide rear tire. When she awoke, the racetrack doctors were bent over her, pressing an ice pack to her pounding head and asking her who the president was.

“Hillary Clinton?” she slurred, and the doctors laughed and said she needed to stay still for a while longer because she had lost her senses in the heat.

An hour later, full of orange juice, saltines and headache powders, the doctors released her, and Alexa Alexandra made the long lonely trek back to her Escort, now looking quite alone on the dark, grassy field. Like an automaton, she climbed in, turned the key and pulled away for the very nearly two-hour trip home.

But who could imagine this was not all for Alexa Alexandra?

For as she drove across the vertiginous west-bound span of the Chesapeake Bay suspension bridge, something came over her. Caught in the reflection from the neon red lane markers she imagined for a moment she was at the wheel of her own Hemi-orange pearlescent Dodge Challenger and, feeling the tiger's power beneath her, she stepped down hard on the accelerator and waited

for the roar of the perfectly tuned 425-horse-power engine.

The humble Escort responded in its own fitful way and Alexa Alexandra, the tidy unextraordinary doughnut shop employee who lived a singular modest existence with few dreams and many sacrifices, rocketed along the empty bridge and for a few dizzying and exhilarating seconds she felt the weight of her life evaporate amid the churning salty air whipping through the open windows and ruffling her hair. And for once, she felt light, giddy, and free.

SUSAN C. INGRAM, Baltimore native turned Hollywood camera assistant turned suburban newspaper editor turned starving adjunct writing instructor, lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her cats Myrtle (RIP), Catwoman and Scamp.

El Legarto Gigante

Amechi Ngwe

In the Alligator Wrestling Federation Death Match that's being broadcast live from the Rio Grande Aqua Theater tonight, I'm taking on El Legarto Gigante. He's the alligator that's famous for killing Jerry "The Taxidermist" Connors, Sr., who was one of the great alligator wrestlers of his generation and also my father. I was there to witness it.

Sometimes when I dream at night, I'm back at ringside, seated between Mother and Grandma to watch Father wrestle for the first and last time. I see El Legarto playing dead, floating belly up on the surface of the water, like a turd in a toilet bowl. I see Father turn to face us and raise his hands in victory. I see El Legato suddenly flip over and leap at him from behind, his jaws swinging open and then clamping down on Father's head. I hear Mother screaming. I see Grandma, God rest her soul, put her hands over her eyes. I see the ice cream cone I was eating slipping through my fingers to splat on the ground as El Legato dunked Father underwater.

We watched and waited for Father to resurface but he never did. As his blood began to spread through the water I cried tears into the melting ice cream spreading around my flip-flops. I haven't been able to eat ice cream since.

Most of the ten thousand-strong crowd already know Father's tragic story but I spend twenty minutes giving them a recap anyway. My speech isn't scripted. I speak from the heart, using fancy words like revenge, destiny, and redemption. I even cry a little. I finish by shouting into the mic that when I'm done with El Legarto, I'll use his skin to make myself a wallet and a pair of boots, and I'll use his teeth to make Mother a necklace, and I'll grill his meat and make alligator po'boys for all my fans. The crowd cheers

loudest for the last line.

Mother is in the front row again tonight. She's dabbing at tears flowing from her eyes with a red handkerchief. Nearby spectators pat her on the back and tell her how brave she was to come. I hear the ringside commentators mention to the folks at home that tonight is actually the first time Mother's come to watch me wrestle. She didn't want her only son to wrestle alligators, but it's the only thing I ever wanted to do and this is the match-up that I've always craved. My whole life feels like it's been one long circular path that's brought me right back to where Father's death happened. I wave to my son Trey who is sitting between my wife and mother and wearing a t-shirt that says, "Go to Hell, Legarto." He's eating an ice cream cone.

I pick up a handful of sand from the canvas floor of the ring and rub it into my hair. I bounce off of the ropes a few times to make sure my muscles are loose and then flex my massive biceps. Then the floodlights dim. A spotlight shines on the murky water next to the ring, highlighting El Legarto's cage. It opens and he slides out and starts to swim just below the surface of the water. The bell chimes. The referee signals for us to begin. *It's time to regain Father's honor*, I think to myself. I leap out of the ring, wade into the river, and grab El Legarto by his tail. I drag him backwards out of the water and up into the squared circle. The crowd cheers.

I study my enemy. El Legarto looks smaller and thinner than I remember. His dull skin is covered in scars, and he's only got one eye. He also seems to have trouble lifting his head. But I'm not fooled by the outward appearance of this cold-blooded killer. I know what he can do. I spread my arms and yell, "Come on!" at him. But he doesn't attack. He just sits there. I run to the corner of the ring and grab a long, pointed stick. I use it to poke him.

"That's illegal!" the referee says to me. He starts to count to ten.

"You overgrown gecko!" I shout at my father's murderer. "You walking wallet!" I poke harder and harder.

“Seven!” the referee counts.

I’m two seconds away from disqualification when El Legarto finally responds. He opens his jaws and snaps at the stick. When his mouth opens I see he’s nearly toothless. I imagine he has trouble eating nowadays. His few remaining teeth look like round pebbles. The necklace I make with them won’t be so good. And his ugly, scarred leather won’t make good boots. I tell him these things to taunt him.

I toss the stick over his head. His eyes follow it as it sails out of the ring and splashes into the water. When his head is turned I jump on his back and use my hands to pry his mouth open. The crowd ooh’s. I hold his upper jaw open using only my chin. The crowd applauds. I’m panting now, and his breath smells like death, and it takes all my willpower not to vomit into his mouth. Then I pretend to struggle with him to heighten the drama for my fans but old El Legarto just sits there like he’s already been stuffed and mounted for display in the Alligator Wrestling Federation museum over in Baton Rouge.

For a moment, just one moment, I wonder if there’s any fight left in this old, worn out beast. Then I remind myself that he’s a sly creature and is probably trying to lull me to sleep so he can pounce when my back’s turned. The old rope-a-dope trick he pulled on Father. “I ain’t no dope,” I tell him, “and I’m about to send you to hell, Legarto.” I roll off of his back. He takes the opportunity to limp back towards the river, moving as fast as his arthritic legs will carry him. *This is such a mismatch*, I think to myself as I walk after him. He slides into the water and floats on the surface like a log. The crowd chants for me to follow him in. I point theatrically to my loving audience and shout my catchphrase: “Who wants gator soup?”

“Soup! Soup!” the crowd yells.

Cameras flash as I climb up on the top rope of the ring. I tap my right elbow twice with my left hand. People begin to stomp their feet. It sounds like an earthquake. They know my signature move,

The Gator Hater, is coming. I notice that the bloodlust has even infected Mother. She's chanting with the rest of them for me to jump. Her passionate support makes me happy. Forget the boots; to show her my thanks I'll make her a gator skin purse instead. The audience falls silent as I launch myself towards El Legarto. My elbow leads the way and strikes into the back of his head. I land on his back and dunk him underwater. He tries to flee but I grab the skin under his lower jaw like I would a man's shirt in a bar fight and hold him still. He is at my mercy.

When we resurface, the crowd, led by Mother, is chanting: "Finish that beast, so we can feast." Mother mimes eating soup with a spoon.

I prepare to strike the killing blow but make the mistake of looking into my enemy's one good eye. I find that he reminds me of one of those abused puppies from those super sad commercials that make my wife cry. An abused puppy that's got one big, ugly, Cyclops-looking eye, and is wet, and stinky, and won't roll over unless it's doing a death roll, which isn't cute at all. "That one'll never be adopted," I can hear her saying as she blows her nose into a tissue. I hate to see her cry. Just thinking about it now is enough to make my lower lip quiver.

The crowd calls for El Legarto's blood again but I can't bring myself to put the wretched beast out of his misery. Killing him won't bring Father back anyway, as much as I wish it would. I pull him close and whisper into his ear: "Get out of here. Don't you ever come back to my ring." I let him go and push him deeper into the water. He slips under the surface like a diving submarine.

The crowd boos me for denying them a kill. I imagine those watching at home on pay-per-view are equally pissed off after shelling out a hundred bucks for a death match that didn't have a death in it, but I don't care. What kind of example would I be setting for my son if I kill an old alligator that can hardly move?

As I turn to get out of the water beer cans, hot dogs, and curses

begin to rain down on the ring. I make eye contact with Mother. She looks disappointed. Hudson “Rivers” McMillan, Commissioner of the Alligator Wrestling Federation, is probably mad at me too. I guess I’ll have to find another career. Maybe I can go wrestle manatees or beached whales or something. But first I’ll get to the mic and give a speech about compassion and forgiveness, kinda like how Rocky does in *Rocky IV*. If my fans won’t listen at least I’ve taught Trey—

I look at Mother again and realize that her face is not showing disappointment; it’s showing fear. I hear a splash behind me and then a low, guttural growl. My wife screams. Mother puts her hands over her eyes. And as a shadow blocks out the light above me, I see the ice cream cone slips through Trey’s fingers.

AMECHI NGWE lives in Houston, Texas. His work has previously been published in *Structo Magazine* and *Divergent Magazine*.

The Youguru

Jenean McBrearty

In the Himalayas lived a Youguru who would answer any question for a thousand dollars. Many people asked about the afterlife, wanting to be properly attired for their promised deliverance. If heaven is in the clouds, for example, they wanted to wear something that went with gray and white because those are the colors of the clouds.

The Youguru knew that clouds appear white because their ice crystals are large enough to scatter the light of the seven wavelengths (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet), which combine to produce white light. Break up the certainty of one color and combine its uncertain particles with the uncertain particles of every other color, and the result is purity. *E pluribus unum* of ideas produces purity of thought—an ideal. Ideals are never real, however, any more than clouds, so there is no such thing as perfection.

The Youguru underscored this truth by sitting naked on a purple pillow placed on a pedestal above the inquirer, and when the person (or persons) entered his yurt, he opened his legs and displayed his penis and his anus to the wisdom seeker. If the person wasn't offended by the truth of the body, the Youguru asked, "What is your question?" And always would come a typical question: Is there a god? Will I go to heaven? Will I win the lottery if I play the dates of my children's birthdays?

The Youguru would then begin to stroke his penis, and if the person was not offended by the truth of the body, he would deliver a typical answer: There must be a god because to say there is not would lead you to despair and you would have no happiness in life. There must be a place called heaven because there is a place

called Chicago and to say there is not would lead you to travel no more. If you have children, you have already won the lottery because you have beaten the odds that in any ejaculation most spermatozoa will not be strong enough to blast through the ovum if it can find one at all.

Everyone cursed the Youguru and complained that he was a cheat and fool because what he said was gibberish-double-talk. Said the Youguru, "I did not seek you out. If you would not be cheated, do not ask of others the unknowable or trust their answers." Then the Youguru would lower his head, roll back his eyeballs, protruded his tongue, gasp a rale, and fart as one departed.

"You're nothing but a nasty bastard," the person usually said—or a variation thereof—on his way out.

The Youguru always smiled. "You were not offended by my body or my behavior, only by words that did not please you. You'll tolerate anything in hopes of getting what you desire. And you call me a fool?"

Only one person ever returned to the yurt after meeting with the Youguru: a lawyer with a camera determined to recover his money.

JENEAN MCBREARTY is an overeducated, underpaid retired teacher who proves that those who can, do; those who can't, teach; and those who no longer teach, write. Which she does in a small town in Kentucky while pursuing more education online, drinking tea, and pretending she's a princess. Or, on cloudy days, Norma Desmond. Her website is Jenean-McBrearty.com

Slug Love

Dan Seiters

His official name was SLUG: 997 Quadrillion Plus 746, but most who loved him—and that was eighty-eight percent of the living slug population this year—just called him Horace, a one-name hero. But before he became Horace the Valiant, Horace the Legendary, he was simply an extraordinary army major with a brilliant future. Utterly spectacular as a young slug, he still didn't become a household word until he and his sluggish army surrounded and drained the blood out of Terence the Terrible, a gigantic slug-eating toad. The death of that warty executioner, experts estimated, saved as many as 10,000 slugs a year.

Skipping the rank of lieutenant colonel, Horace was immediately promoted to full-bird colonel. Basking in the triumphant euphoria of his new rank, the gallant Horace for the first time dared hope to win the love of the gorgeous Sabrina, the slug equivalent of Charlize Theron. He had watched Ms. Theron in *The Cider House Rules* one hundred twenty-eight times.

Barely a week later, Colonel Horace and his merry band of slugs accosted Nefertiti, the detested slug-devouring newt. They crawled all over this homicidal salamander, sliming her until she felt less like a newty Egyptian queen and more like a hawker hacked up from a coal miner's lungs. When she couldn't tolerate being herself, the sophisticated murderess bit off her left forepaw, then slowly bled to death.

Nefertiti had barely begun to molder in her grave when Horace was named major general. It was a small-enough reward because that evil hag had eaten more than 20,000 slugs in the last year. Could Sabrina resist a major general? Horace certainly hoped not.

Not one to depend on past triumphs to tittle the libido of the grand Sabrina, Horace quickly confronted Sally the Shrew, a grouchy old bitch who ate more than 30,000 slugs before she had the extreme misfortune of meeting the heroic slug general. The ingenious major general acted alone this time, filling her nostrils and mouth with slime as she slept, then waited for her to wake up and get serious about dying. With the death of the bloodthirsty Sally, Horace became Supreme Commander of Slug Forces. He had proved himself so spectacularly successful in battle that the army promoted him past the point where he could ever again engage in combat. Ideally, though, he felt he should take down Hecuba Hen, but she ate only a few hundred slugs a year. Besides, the thought of confronting that horrible hen—or any chicken, for that matter—left him quaking like a craven. No one ever found out, and his record remained unblemished.

“Wait till Sabrina sees what I can do as an author,” Horace said to himself, then set about creating the greatest oeuvre in the history of slugdom. Off on a Fitzgeraldian trip, he quickly wrote *The Great Slugby* and *Tender Is the Slug*. Next he wrote *The Slug Also Rises* and *For Whom the Slug Tolls*. These were followed in rapid succession by *Slime and Punishment*, *A Sluggish Tale of Two Cities*, *Slugs Lonigan*, *Finnegans Slug*, *Slug on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Sound and the Slug*, and the movie script for *The Slug from the Black Lagoon*.

“Ho, ho, ho, Sabrina,” he said. “Let’s just see you resist that.”

Still, Horace wanted to be sure. He wrote one more short piece—“A Slug’s Christmas in Wales”—then embarked on the massive historical tome, *The Rise and Fall of the Sluggish Empire*. Nobel Prizes followed, Pulitzer Prizes, and even an Oscar for his role in the classic remake of *Citizen Slug*. He held doctoral degrees in every subject from astronomy to zoology. Then, as if to enhance ice cream with brandy, he marshaled a towering assemblage of iambs to write *Two Slugs from Verona*, *The Slug of Venice*, *Julius Slug*, *Slug and Juliet*, *King Slug*, and the book and lyrics for the musical, *Kiss Me Slug*.

Finally, he learned a dozen languages while he was becoming the greatest slug ever to play tenor sax. Running down a golden saxophone at about a million notes per minute was gargantuan for a slug with no fingers. His fame reached such pinnacles that no one disputed that Horace was the greatest slug the world had ever known—or would ever know.

Thus it was that he approached the glamorous Sabrina in a royal carriage drawn by sixteen caterpillars. Slug nobles bowed down before him as he approached his feminine prize on Christmas Eve. Although he could not kneel because he had no knees, he stood before her and bowed gracefully. “Sabrina the magnificent,” he said, voice quaking for the first time in his life. “Will you marry me and be my slug?”

Sabrina looked infinitely sad, understanding the gravity of the situation and knowing that whatever she said on this day could never be unsaid. Finally, though, she answered. “Are you nuts, Horace? You are indeed the wisest, boldest, most handsome slug ever to crawl. But damn it, you’re still a slug. That’s all you are, all you can be. I’m sorry, sweet Horace, but I can’t spend my life married to a slug.”

Sobbing, Horace admitted that he had gone as far as a slug can go. That night the greatest hero of slugdom ate a small pillar of salt, melting immediately into a puddle of sticky goo on the sidewalk, a wet spot on the concrete mutely proclaiming that life is indeed slimy and that it’s bad luck to be born a slug.

DAN SEITERS was publicity manager for Southern Illinois University Press for more than two decades. He wrote jacket copy for about 1,500 books. His novel is *The Dastardly Dashing of Wee Expectations*. His nonfiction book is *Image Patterns in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Among his short stories are: “The Killer, Trained and Devastating” in *The Viet Nam Generation Anthology*, “The Untimely Demise of the Other Frank Sinatra” in the anthology, *When Last on the Mountain*, and “Bones and Blue Ribbons” in *Front Range: A Review of Literature and Art*.

Jetpackin'

Michael Awadalla

"Vidalia! What the hell are you doing?"

"Sorry, Dad. You weren't supposed to know about this," Vidalia told her father. She adjusted the dials of the metallic device strapped to her back, causing it to light up and make intense whirring sounds.

"What is that thing? Don't touch it!" her father shouted, running over to her.

"It's too late for that!" Vidalia replied. She saluted her father and dove out her window.

Her father's repeated shouts of "Vidalia! Oh my god!" were drowned out by the sudden boom of the jetpack igniting. Moments before she would have been impaled on a fencepost, the sudden force of the machine propelled her forwards.

"Holy shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!" Vidalia screamed, hurtling over the nighttime suburbs like a bullet. The wind stretched her face back and made her hair a spastic mess. Several insects disintegrated upon colliding with her teeth. The town below melted into a blurry sea of colors, as did the stars in the night sky above.

Vidalia tried moving her limbs, but the intense speed at which she was flying created a gravitational force preventing her from doing so. She shifted her weight and her trajectory changed slightly. She spent the next few seconds experimenting with this manner of steering and ended up flying in circles over the park in the center of her hometown.

She glanced down for a moment and spotted the location where she had discovered the jetpack in the first place. On her daily walk, the week after she had dropped out of college, she had decided to take a different route through the park. The rain the night before

had caused the park's muddy landscape to shift around, and up against a heavy, aged tree, she discovered an unearthed skeleton with the jetpack strapped to it.

Vidalia did not reminisce for long, instead deciding to continue her supersonic flight across town. She swerved and twirled and made patterns with the jetpack's glowing neon exhaust. The adrenaline of her excitement outweighed the intense nausea afflicting her body. Vidalia whooped and hollered with a big grin on her face, uncaring of the smashed insects dotting her smile.

Vidalia had circled the town completely and decided to head home after four minutes of flying. Upon turning around to make her way back, she spotted a set of glowing lights approaching her at a speed matching her own. A bit more familiar with the jetpack's controls, she jerked around and flew away from the unidentified object. As she shot over the town's outskirts, the lights caught up to her, and she was able to make out their source: a military jet, its wings lined with missiles.

"Uh oh," Vidalia tried muttering to herself. The wind slapping her in the face made it come out more as "nrfo."

The jet pursued her, and, after a few moments, fired a missile off in her direction. Vidalia attempted to twist herself out of the way, but the heat-seeking missile flawlessly followed her movements. The physical strain of going so fast began to make her bones ache. She looked back to see the tip of the missile inches away from her feet and turned the jetpack's dial to increase her speed to its maximum. The distance between her and the missile began to grow, giving her a feeling of relief. She looked back in the direction in which she was flying to see that she was no longer able to make out the town or the sky, but rather was in a multicolored void of colorful chaos. The temporary relief of escaping the missile slipped away. She attempted to scream, but remained paralyzed in the swirling rainbow vortex.

The jetpack's alarms began to beep. As the device began to slow down, Vidalia's vision faded back. Despite finding herself still flying over the familiar town, she was startled to find it was daylight. Upon focusing on the city below, she noticed it was not the same; there were fewer houses, and the cars were slower and clunkier.

Before she could ponder the reason behind this peculiar occurrence, the jetpack powered off completely, leaving Vidalia falling forward at an intense speed. She looked straight ahead to see herself approaching the park. She inhaled sharply and crashed into the ground, boring deep into the soil. Vidalia was spared the horrifying death of suffocation, as she had died upon impact. The jetpack sustained no damage.

MICHAEL AWADALLA has been writing since the first grade, in which he produced the early masterpiece, "Santa Claus Fights Dinosaurs." He attempted a career in making videogames, until he realized he only really liked the storytelling aspect and not the "programming things with math" aspect. He is in college, majoring in creative writing, and spends his free time writing (obviously), reading (everything from Faulkner to Green Lantern comics), fencing (yes, for real), and unicycling (again, for real). He has a mustache.

Ouroboros

Dan Kennard

Barbara was looking out the front window at her husband Dave, bent over in the grass pulling out weeds when she noticed—with horror and confusion—the cut-off shorts her husband happened to be wearing, and she nearly choked on the lemonade she was sipping.

Outside, Dave paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his arm then looked around, squinting in the sun. He looked towards Barbara standing at the window with her lemonade and waved to her, smiling.

She didn't wave back, even though from his vantage point outside she appeared to be staring right at him. She could only see the cut-off shorts, and she realized after a moment that she was shaking, and the hairs on the back of her neck were standing up.

First off, the shorts used to be cotton dress pants with spaghetti-thin vertical lines of light blue and white. Dave cut them one summer afternoon when, for some reason or another, he was in need of a pair of shorts. If you asked him, he would say he was low on shorts at the time and that he never once wore the pants or the matching blazer that went with them. Besides, he could still wear the blazer with other pants, or jeans, he reasoned.

"They were never meant to be shorts," was one of the things Barbara always said to him. That was just a general criticism; there were, of course, other things she said about the shorts based on the situation. He would always retort by saying that just because something was originally designed to be something else that it could still be turned into other useful things, or something like that. Then he would emphasize the twenty-or-so dollars they saved by not having to buy new shorts "all the time" and all of the various

environmental footprints they weren't making as a result. Dave had always been environmentally conscious, sometimes to a fault.

The shorts were cut uneven, which drove Barbara the most crazy. On any given day, because he wore them so often, she would plead with him to "even them out at least," and to his credit he would try to trim the longer leg, but they always seemed to remain slightly uneven, like a picture on a wall that is barely, but noticeably, not level. And they were cut short too—a few inches above the knee. Short-shorts on men was not the style of the time, which, paradoxically, was a fact that each of them used to justify their own positions regarding the social symbolism of the shorts.

He had the shorts for several years initially, before Barbara finally got rid of them. Over time, the shorts began to fray at the bottoms and thus got increments shorter with each wash and at some point the inseam began to split so that you could see the bottom of his boxer-brief underwear. Sometimes he would wear them in public like that, to go grocery shopping or to pick up take-out. It drove her crazy, and with tender firmness she would say things like, "You can't go out in public like that. Can you not wear them out in public? At least with me?"

Of course, he would respond by saying, "Who cares what other people think?" and it would go on and on like that. He had a retort for everything; some philosophical shit that she often thought he just kind of made up on the spot, but she managed to repress her harshest criticisms of the shorts for several years because in a strange way she accepted that Dave liked them.

To him, though, the shorts were a subtle expression of self in addition to being comfortable and practical. He said a lot more than that actually, and she plain stopped listening at certain points, when he was being redundant, to look around the room or out a window or to check her phone, but that's what it all came down to when you distilled everything he rambled on about in defense of the shorts: they were an expression of self. He would often say that he was practicing purposeful non-conformity and end up talking

about transcendentalism and she would tune out during those parts too. In his mind, there was an intention to the shorts, like long hair on men in the Sixties or something. Of course she developed her own retorts to his retorts, and would sometimes respond by asking him what kind of expression he was making by wearing such embarrassing shorts to the grocery store.

One day he finally sewed the inseam back together with neon green thread and they both felt better about the shorts in their own way. Barbara was simply glad that the inseam was no longer wide open so that anyone could see his underwear when he was sitting down, while Dave figured now that he had fixed the inseam he might wear them that much longer.

Years continued to pass and Barbara's strategy regarding the shorts changed: she stopped bringing them up altogether. The shorts were still in his dresser drawer, she knew that, and he wore them almost every weekend and sometimes after work until one day, to her glittering delight, he came home from work and changed into a pair of blue gym shorts instead. Normal shorts.

She noticed immediately, as soon as he came back out of the bedroom, and her eyes lingered on him as he passed back into the living room. He said, "What?" and she said, "Nothing," and turned on the sink. "I feel like you're looking at me funny," he said, and she said, "You look good. You look thinner," and he said, "Well I've been drinking less lately," and she would say, "Yeah, babe, you've been good with that lately."

She continued to monitor how often he wore the old cut-offs and for some reason or another they were appearing less and less in his rotation of shorts, seemingly replaced by the blue gym shorts that she never knew he had. He had even started wearing normal shorts to the grocery store, shorts that were meant to be shorts.

Finally, one morning after he left for work, she decided to get rid of the shorts once and for all so that she could be sure she would never have to see them again. It was a day she had waited

years for. She waited a few minutes to make sure he wasn't coming back, and then she dug them out of his dresser drawer and burned them in a metal bucket on their back deck. Then she mixed the ashes with some old soil to get rid of any evidence and spent the rest of the day planting a small tree in the backyard, just along the edge of the deck. Dave was always saying how he would like to have his ashes be mixed in garden soil and used to grow a garden. She thought that by mixing the ashes of the shorts with the soil, it might soften any kind of emotional blow if she ever had to tell him the truth about his shorts.

But Dave never mentioned the shorts again, never brought them up, and after a few more years passed even Barbara seemed to forget about them. Then came the day where she was drinking lemonade at the front window, watching Dave pull weeds.

DAN KENNARD is an English and American Literature instructor at Keiser University in Fort Pierce, Florida who graduated from Florida Atlantic University with his MFA in May 2011. He is currently working on a variety of writing projects, and also maintains a fiction blog at www.litcoms.com in which he tries to essentially write literature-sitcoms, individually referred to (by him) as "txtisodes" that follow the same group of characters the same way a television sitcom does, even including commercial breaks.

For Kylie

Matthew Burnside

#1

Eliot was not like other boys. On a dare he once ingested a firefly, having been told he would gain its power by a bitter girl who had a crush but found her affections unreciprocated. Within the week his toenails began to pulsate like electric milk beneath the bed sheet at night and sometimes very early in the morning. It being winter, he found it easy enough to hide the contagion of the glow—which had begun to spread like neon wildfire from heel to clavicle—from his parents and students at school with layered clothing, scarves and hoodies, and by generally avoiding the lightless places of the world. In time he learned that it was the darkness itself that triggered his affliction to expose itself. Crying himself to sleep in a well-lit room became his ritual, and he began to believe he would die alone with the knowledge of his embarrassing deficiency, until the night the bitter girl never came home, having slipped and tumbled into a cave. The neighborhood search party came up short except for when a naked, glow-in-the-dark scrawny boy ascended the hill carrying her in his arms, alive and safe.

#2

Eliot was not like other wolves. Born without a tail, the wolf shaman foretold he would be a great blight upon his tribe, and so he was exiled from the forest forever, carried in the jowl of his mother as a pup to the edge and told he was forbidden to behold the trees. It was assumed he would die very quickly by all in the tribe, who knew what the curse entailed: a tailless wolf was also a toothless wolf, and without teeth you might as well not call

yourself a wolf. The outside world, so full of humans, would claim him, as Mother Night claims the long light of day. A young gatherer, collecting for his village's supper, found him curled around the trunk of a tree starved but still alive, and believing him to be anything but a wolf, took him home. This is no wolf, the village elder confirmed. And so the young gatherer was allowed to keep Eliot as a pet. Within the village the wolf was loved and cared for, fed leaves and soft bugs. There came a day the village declared war on the wolves of the forest. The night before the hunters were to set off, Eliot slipped back into the sea of trees. You are in great danger, he warned the wolves, who now looked upon Eliot with revering eyes. But what can we do? The tribe knew there was no place else to go. So Eliot instructed them to cut off their tails. When the hunters poured into the trees they found not one wolf to slay. Come home to us, the wolves then begged Eliot, but he refused. I am not a wolf, he reminded them, and returned to his loyal gatherer boy.

#3

Eliot was not like other clouds. He neither puffed nor could he bend his body into impossible shapes like the rest of the flock—all of them great and venerated artists of the sky. His coat was not white but an ignoble gray. All day alone he hung in the atmosphere while the others attracted wind, parading through the kingdom of the sky a majestic caravan of cumulonimbi contortionists, the gazers gathering below in awe of their elastic splendor. I am without a use, Eliot finally decided, and began to drift dangerously close to the sun. At that moment, his skin began to bristle and he began to thunder. All the other clouds and gazers trembled to behold him, but they couldn't take their eyes off of him either. Not all clouds are meant to be artists, he then understood: some are meant to be warriors, and the sky needs both.

MATTHEW BURNSIDE's work has appeared most recently or is forthcoming in > *kill author*, *Gargoyle*, *PANK*, *Juked*, *elimae*, *Contrary*, *Pear Noir!*, *decomp*, *NAP*, and *Danse Macabre*, among others. He is managing editor of *Mixed Fruit*, an online literary magazine (<http://mixedfruitmagazine.com/>). Beginning in the fall, he will be an MFA fiction candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

The Guitarist

David Gill

The man wasn't sure what to expect as the transom machine began to hum. Inside the portal, the man could see a kind of shimmering and lots of delicate hardware moving nimbly around a glowing ellipsoid at the center. He heard a change in the machine's sound, a drop in pitch, and the shimmer began to fade. In the shimmer's place, sat a slender young man dressed in a purple velour jumpsuit, oversized sneakers with the laces undone, an unkempt afro, with a black stratocaster slung over his arm.

The partition evaporated and the man, now nervous as company was rare in his quarters, managed to say, "Hey."

The guitarist in the machine responded, "Hey." And he moved his head in a way that the man recognized instantly from watching hours of concert footage.

Suddenly the man smelled the guitarist: intense and earthy, it stung the man's nose, and yet he found it pleasant—familiar.

The guitarist rose from his stool and entered the man's quarters. "So this is your crib? Far out, man."

The man responded, nervously, as if he were being interrogated by a patrolman at a checkpoint. "Yes. I'm sorry for the mess. I don't have many people over."

The guitarist spotted the man's gear, a stack of amplifiers set against the wall. Now he was excited. "Hey man, let's jam!" And with that the guitarist headed towards the amps, extending a long cord in his hand, ready to plug in.

"It's too late to play...neighbors." The man said gesturing vaguely at the walls and ceiling of his cramped room.

"Why'd you bring me over if we can't jam?"

"I never even thought about it. I guess I just wanted to see if you were, you know," the man paused, "real."

"Listen, cat, you know I ain't real, what you wanted to know was, how real am I. And you're only gonna find that out if we jam."

"But I want to know what it feels like, to play like that. Can't you tell me?"

"Man, you can already hear how it feels, that's the blues. Problem is you don't got nothing to be blue about, sitting around in this *a-part-ment*." The guitarist mockingly overstressed the syllables in the last word. After a moment the guitarist said, "You don't have a lady, do you?"

"No."

"You ever had one?"

"It's not the same now; there's a registration process. I'd really rather not."

This seemed to interest the guitarist. His eyebrows rose, again, in a way the man recognized from a thousand black-and-white photos. "What's it like now?" the guitarist asked. "How do you *reg-is-ter*?" Again he overstressed the syllables, this time putting air quotes around the last word.

"Well, you have to have a good computer," the man said, "and I don't make enough money to buy one. Slower computers are limited to certain tracts of the net, mostly burnouts, enfeebled, or destitute. No one you'd want to meet."

"Don't be so sure," the guitarist said slyly.

The transom machine emitted a pleasant tone, indicating the visit had two remaining minutes unless the man had more money to deposit, but he needed to eat.

"So where do you go next?" the man asked, at a loss.

"No idea, but I hope they're ready to jam," the guitarist said pointedly.

"Yeah, right." The man looked down.

“Listen to the records, you can hear how it feels, and look inside yasef right now, you can feel it, can’t ya?”

The man sort of checked his insides, his guts, his heart. Nothing.

With that realization, the guitarist dematerialized in a dazzling shimmer, leaving only a funky smell.

DAVID GILL teaches writing and literature at San Francisco State University where he specializes in the life and work of Philip K. Dick. He blogs all things Dickian at totaldickhead.blogspot.com and spent last summer helping annotate Dick’s religious notes published as *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick* by Houghton Mifflin. David lives in Oakland with kids, cats, and guitars.

Super, Not Nova

Magen Toole

Jimmy felt like a star some days, he said, always burning under his skin. Sometimes light shined from behind his teeth when he'd get to drinking, licking his lips with syrup in his eyes and laughing like he was about to fall out of his shoes. Jimmy always said things like that as long as I'd known him. That there was a nuclear bomb locked up inside him, ready to burn. Set the whole world on fire and melt people's faces off like when you put Playmobil toys in the microwave, or like some spinning Fourth of July firework from hell. Everything but me, he always said, because at least I was still pretty cool. I never believed Jimmy, not really, but I never corrected him either. There was no point to it. Jimmy was just like that.

We both finished art school with a whimper. Jimmy sold most of his paints and supplies for rolling papers and beer money. He moved out of his mom's house to some gross basement apartment his cousin Denny owned and put plaster over the holes where the previous tenants had hid their crack. I did an internship at the Guggenheim and then wandered off half-way through the summer to do street art with this tattooed sitar-player that I met at a rave. It wasn't as exciting as it sounded.

Now we were just waiters with fake leather vests and bolo ties over at Wydell's Steakhouse downtown, slinging ribeyes and whiskey-and-cokes to dress-up cowboys in expensive hats and designer jeans. After work we went back to Jimmy's place most nights to get high and play X-Box. He always beat me, and we would drink off the stink of fake Country and too many *Dallas* reruns. There was nothing special about us that was made of stars or touched by light. Get a few beers in Jimmy and he swore he was the stuff of science fiction movies. Some space-age Jesus Christ

made of sunshine. Then he'd get to glowing under his fingernails sometimes, and I'd almost believe him.

"I'm gonna blow up some day, man," he'd say, lazy from the joint we'd just shared and looking dead in the eyes. "You'll see. I'm like God with a magnifying glass, and you're just ants. There won't be shit left."

"Yeah, yeah," I'd always say over the noise of killing zombie hookers with chainsaws. "Just don't stand next to me when you go nova."

One night Jimmy and me were at a party for this girl Beth I knew from the video store, drinking cheap beer from red plastic cups. Half the people there were from the restaurant, the rest were all heavily-pierced baristas and tattooed hairdressers. It was like college all over again, a sweaty hipster fiesta in somebody's studio apartment. I didn't care. I was in the corner talking to Beth about French horror films and vagina dentate. Jimmy was nowhere in sight, having wandered off to score off of the bus-boy TJ or try his luck with that bartender again. It was then that I heard him shouting.

"Hey, Greg! Hey, hey, Greg!"

In the bathroom I found Jimmy hunched over the toilet, pointing and laughing. There was light shining behind his eyes and between the lashes, but I ignored it.

"Dude, it's called a bowel movement," I sighed. "You didn't win anything."

"No, man, look. Look."

Taking a hesitant step toward the bowl, I saw that the whole thing was lit up, bright like Christmas lights.

"So, what, do you pee radioactive now?"

"No, man, it's finally happening." Jimmy was glowing from his fingertips, a dim burn like cigarette ash growing steadily brighter. "My whole body's going nova. I told you this was coming."

Quick as a shot Jimmy ran out of the bathroom, elbowing his way to the patio. He climbed over the rail and hung over the edge

three stories over the street. I tried to stop him, to pull him back but he wouldn't budge.

"Don't be stupid, Jimmy!" I shouted at him. "You're not a star. You probably just had Mountain Dew pee or something. You know how mine gets fluorescent orange when I drink too much Code Red?"

"No, this is totally happening," Jimmy laughed, wriggling dangerously over the concrete. "I'm going nova."

"Jimmy, you need to stop. Get back inside."

"I can't, man. I'm going to burn up. All that's left will be my good-looking corpse."

Just like that, the light started to shine. It came out of Jimmy in a wave that swallowed up the patio, bursting out of his chest and from his fingers and skull. The apartment shook and inside the hipsters screamed, gathered at the patio door in horror. I felt helpless as I watched Jimmy, engulfed by the light that tore out of him from every orifice, knowing then that I should have believed him all along. That maybe he was touched by something beautiful, by something divine. That maybe he had touched me, too.

In the end, as far as super-novae go, Jimmy's was more of a taco burp. The hipsters all lived, even if some of their feather earrings and trucker caps were singed in the process. Nobody's faces melted and reality didn't collapse, at least not in any immediately notable way. Jimmy lived too, after I peeled him from the ledge, white-hot and glowing all over, the corpse of a blown-out star. It was kind of hard to keep a job like that, but it was okay. Beth was so impressed by my horror film knowledge that we started dating, and she was cool with letting me and Jimmy stay at her place. Jimmy still drank and told stories of the time that he went nova and killed all the city's hipsters in a perfect blast, but we all knew better. Still we let Jimmy have it. He was happy.

MAGEN TOOLE is a writer for Fort Worth, Texas. She likes dinosaurs, black holes and writing stuff. When she grows up she wants to be the tambourine player in a psychedelic revival band. You can find more of her work at her website, <http://www.eonism.net>

The End of a Day

Sean Daly

You're working on staying clean so you keep your emotions in check. Don't want to over react when your boss asks you to work late. Your soft-boiled anger gives you a few seconds, a buffer, just enough time to not react. When the boss asks you to change some rotors, that *this car has got to go*, you put your time card down and smile because this is what you've been told to do. Others come first now, even him, even the faceless customer that is so important. Everyone.

You walk back into your bay and the boss drives the car to the lift. The day's light has transformed into a shroud of winter darkness. You think of your daughter at home alone because it's your night to have her, nothing on the table for dinner, so you text but she doesn't respond. The rotors feel weighty in your hands like all those crimes smelt into smooth circular metal. Feeling uncomfortable triggers drinking, triggers using, triggers lying, triggers thieving. Jail. Then it starts again.

Now you feel the sagging weight of omission, of not showing up. You check your phone but she has not answered. So you're left with the most recent of life's lessons. Change. It's not just a slogan but something that stirs in you, something real. You have a new lease on life; it just doesn't feel like it all mixed up with exhaust. Still, you loosen the lug nuts, remove the wheel, slide the part into gleam of your greasy hand and fasten the new brake pads. Sometimes repetition isn't all that bad—slipping into the routine of doing things the same way, learning from mechanics before you, the masters that showed the way.

Your boss stands in the blackness outside your bay. Above his head the stars rattle. So what? You tell yourself you're getting paid,

and by now the rotors and the brakes and the car are one with matchbox cohesion. You torque the lug nuts again for good measure and the boss checks his watch like you were the one keeping him. You pull the lever that lowers the chassis. You mark the absence of speed like the turning of the earth. Your phone vibes. Your daughter has texted back, *there's chicken noodle soup dad don't worry*. You can see her in those words, the gaps between her teeth, a can opener waving over her red hair in triumph.

Your boss nods his head in acknowledgement, finally, and the customer is an outline with hands in his pockets standing by the gate. The car drives away, and you pull the time card from the sleeve and feed it to the machine. You scrub away the grime with a nail brush tearing at your skin but it feels good in a way. Everything gets washed away. Then you bag up what remains of your limbs, place them in the driver's seat, and head home. Guided by the trail of red lights on the freeway.

SEAN DALY works in a body shop in Santa Barbara CA. He is married, has four children, a dog and two cats. He attempts to write humor but nothing funny ever develops. He has taken 1st place in a flash fiction competition Frontlip.eu 2011 and 2nd at the Ventura Art Tales 2009. He has seven published stories and is part of the Ojai Writers Workshop.

On the cover:

"Writer's Block"

Justin McElroy

JUSTIN McELROY's portfolio is available on his website: justin-mcelroy.daportfolio.com/

