

# *Jersey Devil Press*



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## Editor's Note:

There are a few ways I can introduce this issue. On the one hand, there's a broad theme of resilience in the face of loss in these stories, of choices made early in life echoing down through the years, of people striving to build and retain connections.

Or, I could go with the old friends-new friends motif. We welcome Christopher Lettera, Dana Chamblee Carpenter, and Randall Martoccia to our pages for the first time, where they join returning favorites, K. Marvin Bruce and the indomitable Ryan Werner.

Then there's the literary and music reference angle. Springsteen, KISS, James Taylor, Hemingway, and even Lovecraft get their own shout outs in one form or another.

In the end, though, I decided to go with that most JDPish of invocations:

*We fucking survived the Mayan Apocalypse, people. Let's read some good shit.*

The January Issue of *Jersey Devil Press* is at your disposal.

— Mike Sweeney

# Together, We Can Save a Life

Christopher Lettera

Understanding that deserted shopping plazas are sometimes cemeteries for Cabbage Patch Kids: that's the first key to letting go. The second is this: John Wayne Carlson was eighteen years old when he told me his plan.

In another week he would have been nineteen. He was going to co-op, not college. Three months studying mechanical engineering at a private school outside of Flint, Michigan, and another three working the floor at a General Motors plant in Mansfield, Ohio. Four years of this set to rinse and repeat and he could have started at seventy grand anywhere in the country.

He had, as we all do, this life.

He'd play shortstop in the summer and fall. On weekends he'd move furniture with his dad at an H&R Block complex downtown. Every day after swim practice we'd smash at Taco Bell. That was where he told me—

“Do the math.”

He'd drink the same thing day in and day out. Always a large soda. Always a Baja Blast with lots of ice. Twice that week he'd won a free crunchy taco from the peel-off sticker on his drink and he'd told me, smiling, “Mike, you do this long and often enough and you'll win the million. Buy two large sodas instead of one. Drink what you can and throw away the rest but at least double your chances.”

Good-natured, skinny John Wayne.

Two weeks before graduation, a letter printed on thick and coarse cream-colored paper arrived at his house saying he'd won the million. He was going to be flown to California and crowned El Presidente at Taco Bell corporate headquarters, a hulking, labyrinthine tower of mirrored glass and steel where he'd be

handed a big floppy check and get photographed by the local news media.

When his mom found him, the blood seeping from underneath his hair had dried and clung-stuck his head to the floor in a dark crimson paste. A small piece of his skull was floating around in the open drain next to the washer and dryer. He hadn't been drinking. He forgot to towel himself off coming out of the shower and cracked his temple falling on the corner of the bottom basement step.

Some of our parents have been laid off. Last week, Gabby Braun's Dalmatian got massacred by a slow-moving tractor-trailer. Shit happens. But really, most of us don't understand the extent to which life in Hubbard, Ohio, is sacrifice to some strange mystery.

Shields Road. The clock on the dash glows 11:15 and the train rushes by against my headlights, carrying the smell of track-rust and pinecones. To the left—inky treeline that stretches out into forever pitch black. To the right—that house. 3359 Nowhere. Abandoned and alone under the mile-long shadow of the woods, a single porch light blessing chipped siding.

The blinking red of my phone, a text message:

Hal-eh shoma chatoor eh?

(HOW ARE YOU?)

"It's not always like this," Chad says.

"Sometimes a victim places his hand on your sternum, even close to your neck."

Chad is forty and balding and up to his chest in the chlorinated water of the Hubbard indoor pool, teaching us how to save lives. He speaks in measured beats.

"This is out of panic," he says. "Out of fear of drowning and dying."

"You have to be ready for this."

"Remember," he says with a practiced calm. "Together, we can save a life."

This is the motto of the Red Cross, printed in tall black letters on wallet-ready paper cards that prove certification in LIFEGUARD TRAINING AND FIRST AID and CPR/AED FOR THE PROFESSIONAL RESCUER. Earn one and you're licensed to save a human life.

There's five in this class, among us a fifteen year-old girl who plans to guard at a country club and a retired optometrist whose wife passed in her sleep.

"She just went one afternoon," he tells our lot.

When we're finished in the water we climb out and circle around a life-size, shirtless rubber dummy with bulging fake nipples and a hideously frozen smile.

"Michael, come over here and help me please," Chad says.

"Okay."

"Put your hands on the dummy's chest."

"Okay."

"Do you feel his heart? Do you feel the life left in the dummy?"

"Yes."

Always, lying in bed, there's the shriek of the train whistle in my mind, and later—louder—the silence of 3359 Nowhere standing against the woods. Born and raised in Hubbard and I've never noticed that house. Now three nights coming back from the pool and 3359 aches by the tracks, looming, and there's the desire to get out and go inside, to touch the walls and to walk on the floor, if there even is one.

CPR. Cardiopulmonary resuscitation. For cardiac emergencies. To be employed until more advanced medical personnel arrive. Thirty compressions and two breaths for an adult, child, or infant. To resuscitate them. To bring them back to life.



I repeat this over and over in my head: a mantra, a whisper to pray me to sleep.

"Do you feel it?" Rob asks.

"No."

*It is the sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. It is the corner of Liberty Plaza.*

"I mean, who knows what kind of shit they had going on back there that night?" he says. "Christ, could have been demons and shit, man."

Rob owns a brown S-10. The front cab is clean as a whistle. Spotless and lemon-scented. Pop open the back and you're liable to vomit in Technicolor. All across the truck bed there's a gruel of salt and cement dust and layered spots of something red and sticky. Rob's dad runs the local Culligan water supply store. Old ladies order salt for their water softener systems, Rob delivers it in 60-pound bags in his S-10. When he's not working Culligan, when he's not laying concrete sidewalks for port authority at the town airbase, he hunts small game and skins it right out of the truck bed on a blue tarpaulin he says used to be his baby blanket.

In high school he wrestled at 152. He's 190 now, a national qualifier in Olympic-style lifting. Tonight we're sitting in the deserted, vacant parking lot of an abandoned K-Mart shopping center chasing a sickness we both felt in our guts two months ago as we sat in the S-10, our eyes wide, our souls paralyzed.

"I mean, I know *that* feeling," he says. "That fucking panic of throwing 120 kilos over your head and thinking you're going to drop it on yourself. The fear of blowing out your knees. Scott, my lifting partner, he did that. He held his dislocated kneecap in his hand for a half hour before the paramedics came. Screamed like a bitch too, but don't tell him I said that."

"All that," Rob says, "was nothing compared to that night and that feeling."

He's rarely so eloquent. Two months ago we were driving out of Liberty Plaza, a rotten gathering of crumbling stores spread across an empty, weed-ridden lot. We came upon a corner, a little enclave where a dozen or so tiny shops might have thrived before everything shut down. In this space: a headless Cabbage Patch doll, an overturned shopping buggy, a plastic bag floating mid-air against moon-glow, graffiti ("Satan knows").

"I'm telling you," Rob says, "Something bad was back there."

He shines his brights against the greasy windows on the front of the old K-Mart, on what ten years ago might have been the entrance to an automotive section that offered cheap oil changes and vending machine Kit Kats.

"See that? Zombie hobos could slam up against those windows right now and I wouldn't budge. Rabid plague motherfuckers. But whatever was in that corner was bad. If you let your mind take a walk in places like that," Rob says, "you might get fucked up."

### I'M GOOD, YOU?

I text back in English a full day later.

E Street Radio is all Bruce Springsteen. Twenty-four hours a day. When they're not playing his records they're playing interviews and he talks about dreams and why he made *Nebraska*. For six years, it's been the cracked and dusty voice of Bruce Springsteen telling me everything's going to be alright, everything's going to be ok.

I burned Grace a copy of *Darkness* but she never quite understood.

She's an Air Force linguist now. Persian-Farsi. She spent last summer in the desert with her face wrapped in tight black up to her soft blue eyes. She picture-mailed me her military ID card once. In the tiny text she's 5'6" and 120 lbs. In the tiny photo she's country-

plain and beautiful, a rural school runaway with hair long and brown and a face that can save.

"You're afraid of things leaving," she said as she packed her bedroom into boxes.

"You're afraid of things changing," she said after her graduation from Basic in San Antonio, Texas.

There's two disposable cameras worth of glossy pictures taken at Lackland Air Force Base stuffed in my top dresser drawer. Five pictures of me and Grace. Forty-five of cloud stalled in Lone Star sky.

The Hubbard BAILEY'S HOMEMADE—once a veteran's hall—is now an ice cream shop. The new VFW opened next to the library and has MEMBER'S ONLY stickered across the front door in big-print camo lettering. The girls at Bailey's wear unflattering bow-ties and black aprons and never look as happy as something like Rainbow Rock-Pop sounds.

"What are you getting?" Rob had asked John Wayne.

"Cotton Candy Explosion."

"What the fuck is that shit?"

"Cotton candy ice cream with sprinkled rock pops."

"You fairy."

"What are you getting?"

"Pink Champagne sherbet."

"Hi," this girl says behind the counter.

Homeless Steve in the parking lot of St. Pat's in Hubbard swears by the numinous feeling. "The numinous feeling," he chortles, "is that moment of realization, of truth, of recognizing something beautiful and the validation of self that comes with it." Homeless Steve will shake your hand after services and say, "Peace be with you."

"That is the most wonderful feeling of awe," he assures. "That is the most numinous of feelings."

That was GRACE (her nametag silver and bright).

"Fuck me sideways with a wrench."

"Nice. Fuck me sideways with a tractor blade."

"Fuck me sideways with a toothbrush."

"Gross," Rob says. "And not painful enough."

How we got into Pauline's Lounge across the PA line was Rob and I both grew patchy beards. 10:35 and he's put away six Millers against my carefully paced two. Robert James Godfrey seems placid but I can just imagine the alcohol coursing through his muscle mass.

"I'm Mallory!" a woman shouts.

She gulps a two-dollar shot of Black Velvet and sneezes. She's pretty but she's either twenty-five or she's forty and in the dim light I do not know.

"Where do you go to school?" she asks.

"Hogwarts."

"What?"

"I said I'm eighteen, Mallory. My best friend just broke his head and died in his mom and dad's unfinished basement. I have two hundred dollars in my savings account. Last night I sat in the dark and listened to *The Ghost of Tom Joad* on cassette. I'm on hiatus from fun. Do you understand, Mallory?"

"I went to Kent State!" she hollers.

Fuck me sideways with a roaring chainsaw.

The muddied slab of carpet in the doorway, the RC Cola pop machine from the early 80s, the stacks of Rotary flyers—everything about Hubbard Community Pool reeks of chlorine. Class by class, it becomes second in familiarity only to oxygen.

In the front office, chlorine mingles with mall-bought perfume. There's Krystal with a K on a swivel chair, her leg balanced on a metallic filing cabinet as she paints her nails a sour, glaring purple.

"You're late. How come?"

"The highway's jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive."

"What?"

"Nothing. Nevermind"

"I'm really sorry about John Wayne," she says.

"Me too."

"Chad is on deck with the brick. He says you need to shower before you get in the pool. You have to swim your five hundred first and then he'll sign you out after you dive for the brick in the deep end. Oh, and you can't be in here."

"Sorry."

"Staff only in the office. But happy early birthday."

"Thanks."

The men's room hasn't changed in the last twenty years. Navy blue lockers. Sky-blue tile on the shower floors. The toilets are teal. In the ladies', everything is pink. I took swim lessons here before I could read and wandered into the wrong locker room by mistake.

My dad would take me when I was three and four. When I got tired, when the muscles in my legs would cramp up and I couldn't kick anymore, he'd say –

"Swim to the other side. You can make it."

Last night, Rob had the windows down in the S-10. We're leaving a steak restaurant and there's this scream, this all-at-once exclamation of surprise and panic and I say –

"Rob, slow down."

"Why?"

"I said slow the fuck down. Those people might need help."

There's a woman in her eighties splayed on the asphalt. She's staring upward. At streetlights. At cloud loping across night sky.

On her face—a half smile. In her eyes—a glistening. Her cheeks are garish red and her wig is noticeably slipping off her skull. A man—her husband, maybe—kneels beside her, his hand placed on her forehead, his lips mouthing “Everything’s going to be all right, everything’s going to be okay.”

A woman in an over-sized hoodie bolts out of her SUV. There’s kids in the back windows, their faces and hands pressed up against the glass. She’s skittering, patting her mouth with her hands, her voice cracking as she says over and over –

“We called 911. We called 911. We called 911.”

“Michael.”

“Yeah.”

“Michael?”

“What?”

“Wake now. Go down there and rescue that brick.”

“Okay.”

Underwater. A waking, translucent death. The sinking away from reality.

*3359 Nowhere. One night you’ll get out of your car and go into that house.*

Twelve feet under. The tough skin of my heels hitting the grimy pool bottom. No air. The weight of the brick. Fifty pounds of rubber. A human life in my hands that I’m supposed to drag to the surface and breathe back to life.

*You’ll get out of your car and walk towards that house not out of choice but necessity.*

The tightening of my lungs.

*Out of reasoning real and clear only to you.*

I imagine their inward collapse and, for a moment, a suffocating panic.

*Inside 3359 there's darkness, metal and broken plastic, and a realization, a truth.*

The surface. Shimmering and crystalline. The feeling of emptying out. The absence of heart, of heartbeat.

*There's a smell rank and foul like dried piss and old paint and there's a sound, a faint and approaching noise like the crackling of footsteps in the hall.*

Maybe it's nothing. Maybe it's everything.

**CHRISTOPHER LETTERA** hears strange noises in the night woods. Voices on CB radios. Bats, maybe. He received his Master's in English from Youngstown State University, where he founded and worked as Managing Editor of *Jenny Magazine* for two years. He is the recipient of the Robert R. Hare Award for fiction and placed as runner-up in the Ohio River Valley chapter of the recent National Society of Arts and Letters short story writing competition.

# Monsters: A Series of Non-Chronological Vignettes

Ryan Werner

*College Apartment #3, December 21, 1999*

I just started a KISS tribute band with my friends. We're going to play our first show on Valentine's Day: A Kiss with KISS. My car is filled with their discs and I listen to them everywhere I go, trying to revisit the songs and learn them through repetition. The first one I break scraping off my windshield is *Psycho Circus*, which I won't necessarily miss. There goes *Lick It Up*. *Animalize* is shattered, flakes of the label mixing in with the snow on my gloves. It finally comes down to which disc of *Alive!* will be sacrificed. I decide that the girl will stay, she and I and Jesus Christ to save our issues for later.

*House-sitting, July 5-13, 2000*

We kiss for twenty minutes. Not a make-out session, but a kiss, our lips pressed together and held, as if in an embrace.

When we finally pull back from each other, I say, "I could live here."

"You do live here."

We spend most of our time unclothed and barely touching, flinching at the slam of a car door or ring of a phone not because of our nakedness, but because of our company. Of all the things we do in secret, the most enjoyable is the idyllic banalities of domesticity: she in a long dress trying to figure out how to make chicken cacciatore and me putting together a bookshelf without any instructions, stripping screws until we laugh and collapse into the couch, a half-built monstrosity on the floor next to us.

\* \* \*



*The Only Coffee Shop In Town, September 3, 1999*

After running it by her bible study group for a couple months, she decided to break off her engagement to her boyfriend of six years.

"He doesn't believe in the Lord," she tells me, drinking cheap tea and listening to talk radio.

I know him, and I like what little I know about him, his sense of humor and intelligence. "Charming guy, though, from what I can tell."

"Right, of course." She blows over the top of her tea. "When I first met him he charmed my pants—"

"Loose, right?" I'm unafraid of how I feel, like having a crush on a lesbian or a supermodel. "He charmed your pants loose, but not off."

"Right," she says, blushing. "Of course."

*Uh-O, April 18, 2000*

In the amusing way in which people set up their own personal barriers when defining right and wrong, she won't allow me to bring her to orgasm.

*Supermarket Sweep, November 20, 2000*

Using the vernacular of fathers on sitcoms, it's possible to get enough guys on third base and still get a couple runs. So it's not the absence of sex. It's the question of how much longer things can be sustained without having to come to terms with the nature of the relationship, how much longer her upstanding reputation as a good child of the Lord will be more important than the facts of the situation as it exists.

I go, "How will we ever go about moving in together? What if we want to get married? Will it have to be by a justice of the peace

in a remote town in Montana? Will our kids be homeschooled and sleep at the houses of actors we pay to pretend to be their parents?"

She starts crying, softly but immediately. She puts back all the items she was going to buy to make spaghetti, but I buy a Whatchamacallit. She doesn't go to the car and wait, just stands next to me trying not to make a scene. I want to feel bad, but instead I drop her off at her apartment and then go to mine by myself. Just like that, I know we won't speak anymore, and like everything else that makes easy sense coming together, I feel as if I had been bracing myself for such a schism from the moment I snapped that first KISS disc against the ice on my windshield: *Right. Of course.*

*Monsters, December 29, 1999*

She says she hasn't been dancing in years, since high school when her ex-fiancé and her went to prom. Within an hour my car is stuck in a cornfield. I was trying to find the perfect spot, and when I couldn't maneuver the car out of the spot I was in, I looked around and saw that the perfect spot had, in a way, found us.

She still has no idea what we're doing, but she doesn't press the issue. I leave the car running and turn on the high-beams. I get out and she follows suit. I take her hand about twenty feet in front of the car and for two hours, three hours we dance until the snow beneath us is packed solid and our cheeks are numb. Our shadows stretch off to our sides like monsters. She cranes her neck up to touch our foreheads together and the breath between the kiss is almost more important than the kiss itself.

“Monsters: A Series of Non-Chronological Vignettes” appears in [\*Shake Away These Constant Days\*](#), a collection of short stories by Ryan Werner, published by Jersey Devil Press.

**RYAN WERNER** has got a body built for sin and an appetite for passion. He practices shameless self-promotion at his blog, [ryanwernerwritesstuff.com](http://ryanwernerwritesstuff.com).

# Of Lullabies and Lightning Storms

Dana Chamblee Carpenter

An old man crawled down the Ozarks from Elsinore to Gideon. He was dying and wanted to find his son. Six-year-old Sybil sat braiding the hair of a doll while the old man yelled his sad story through her window. Spit shot through the gaps of his missing teeth and splattered against the glass.

But in rural Missouri that was no excuse for a lack of hospitality. So around noon, Sybil's mom, Cassie, brought the old man some iced tea in a tumbler—the last of her grandmother's Georgian Lovebirds Depression glass. The old man never even looked at her as he took it and drank without pause, without breath, his eyes closed, but he cradled the glass's bottom as he handed it back, his wart-covered fingers wrapping over Cassie's, careful not to let the tumbler slip and shatter on the front step. Cassie almost smiled, almost spoke, but she didn't see folks much anymore and was out of practice—she spent her days caring for little Sybil. By the time Cassie had sucked in breath and courage, the old man was already turning back toward Sybil's window. For a moment, his skin stretched taut across his jaw. Cassie could imagine how he must have looked in his youth.

"Girl! God done told me to come here to you. He done said you'd tell me where my boy gone to," the old man hollered at Sybil. "Tell me where Levon at, girl!"

When he finally grew quiet and lay on the lawn in the late afternoon sun, Sybil wrote her answer on a piece of purified paper, folded the note into a triangle and slid it through the flap in the plastic at her door.

Everything in Sybil's life came and went through twelve inches.

The edges of the paper danced in the stream of sterilized air as Cassie reached through the opening on her side of the thick plastic at the doorway. Her latex-covered fingers squeaked as they curled around her daughter's note. She folded it again carefully before slipping it into the old man's hand, which was wet with the slaver of desperation and faith.

Cassie had been expecting someone to come sooner or later, ever since the women's Bible-study group had been to the house last month and peeked in at Sybil. They'd come to study the story of Jezebel, but they all made sure to take a trip to the bathroom, down the hall past Sybil's room. The newspaper stories hadn't had any good pictures and the church ladies had been dying to see for themselves anyway. There wasn't much else to do in Gideon.

Sybil had whispered something to each of them as they paused at her doorway, shaking their heads and thanking God for their good fortune. Sunday next, the women pressed their lips into tight smirks and, during prayers, cut their eyes to where Cassie sat at the back pew.

By now, she was used to the shunning and the smirking, natural consequences to having a baby out of wedlock in a place like Gideon where they still used the word *bastard* in an official sense; but when Bess Sanderson had come visiting the Monday after the church-ladies, Cassie was shocked. Bess, who'd been Homecoming Queen three years in a row and who wore white when she wed the mayor even though it washed out her fair skin and made her look like runny confectioner's icing in the hot August sun; Bess, who hadn't spoken a word to Cassie in seven years, had stood at the front door asking to see Sybil.

Cassie couldn't think of a good reason to say no, so she had hovered at the corner of the hallway and listened to Bess Sanderson ask Sybil if her husband was cheating on her.

"Blossom, it's been much too long a day," Sybil had sung in her high, sweet six-year-old voice, "Seems my dreams have frozen, melt my cares away."

"What's that? I don't understand." Her voice tight with needing to know, Bess had stepped closer to the plastic barrier. "They said you knew things. They said you'd tell me the truth." Her manicured nails curled against the sheathing. "What's that mean—'my dreams are frozen'?" Bess turned back toward Cassie looking for answers. "Do you mean—? Oh God. Is that girl saying—?"

But Cassie wasn't listening to Bess Sanderson. Cassie had slid slowly down the hall wall, her mind full of the sound of her daughter's voice. It was the first time she'd heard Sybil speak.

"Say it again, honey. Say something, Sybil," she had pleaded.

The little girl stood at the far side of the room, spinning round. Silent.

Resignation settled slow on a woman like Cassie. The first of it, when she missed her period at sixteen, had come quick like a shot. She had recovered once the worst of it, telling her parents, had come and gone. Through all those months of angry stares at her swelling stomach when she did the shopping at the Piggly Wiggly and of being sent home from school and then whispered to by the Reverend's wife that maybe Cassie should worship at home until after the baby came, Cassie had held to her dream of a life far away from Gideon, a life extraordinary. Cassie had always known she was destined to have a life like that.

Flashes of red and orange had flared in the hills that September morning in '78 when her daddy drove her down into the alluvial plain to the hospital at Hayti. He had griped about having to use one of his leaves at the Box Factory, but Cassie's mama was sick and couldn't take her. And that wasn't what her daddy was really mad about anyway. Cassie was six months along when the boy had gone off with some motorcycle gang out to the reservation in Utah

or Arizona; a spirit quest, he had called it, to find his Navajo ancestors.

The baby had come quickly and Cassie's father insisted on taking them back home to Gideon that afternoon. Cassie fell in love with her armful of sweetness and just knew that everything was going to be different now that she had someone all her own.

The New Madrid fault shook a little when Cassie introduced her mother to baby Sybil. The crystal drops hanging from the candelabra on the mantle in the den tinkled as yellowed fingers tugged at the blanket to expose the tiny face.

"Oh, Cassie, she's something special," Mama had whispered.

For a month Cassie had held her baby, bathed her and changed her diapers, rocked her to sleep, breathed in the smell of her newness. She battled what her mama labeled "the colic" with James Taylor and Carole King; Cassie didn't know any normal lullabies. Her voice grew hoarse with trying to soothe Sybil.

When the fever spiked, Cassie had sung to the bundled basket in the passenger floorboard for the whole hour-long drive to town. "Whenever I see your smiling face, I have to smile myself."

But a few miles outside Hayti, the baby got so suddenly still that fear choked Cassie. At the hospital, she got a last kiss on the hot forehead.

Cassie had an album up in the attic somewhere with all the clippings she'd gathered in those early years, an odd kind of baby book, full of pages curled with age and heat, the first with a snapshot in front of the house as people in white coats carried long rolls of plastic past a crowd of gawkers under a headline: *Gideon Gets Its Own Bubble Baby*.

In the picture, Cassie held the door.

\* \* \*

The sun threw shadows onto the front porch as Cassie handed the old man Sybil's note. He squinted as he read and mouthed the words like a child just learning to read:

"Once he reached for something  
Golden, hanging from a tree,  
And his hand came down empty."

Cassie expected the confusion in his pursed lips, but the horrible awareness that dawned in his eyes shocked her. He had looked at her then, his mouth slack with regret, but she had nothing for him. He slipped the note into his shirt pocket, quietly nodding to himself, and then he disappeared into the gap of yew trees at the edge of the yard.

"What'd you tell that old man?" Cassie asked her daughter, but Sybil ignored her. "You tell me what that meant."

Sybil just kicked her feet against the plastic that pressed against the walls of her bedroom. She lived in a bubble inflated by the air they forced in; her world swelled and dipped like a jellyfish played upon by the water. Sybil drug her feet down the plastic wall until the flesh on her soles rolled and squealed with friction like the rocks buried deep in the Reelfoot Rift.

A letter came weeks later from the old man's daughter.

Cassie sat on the front porch steps to read it. A saw-whet owl was calling to its mate in the dusk, its voice growing higher and higher with fear. Cassie didn't sleep that night. She sat in the hall and watched Sybil through the cloudy plastic.

Cassie took the letter to Reverend Dakin when the nurse from Hayti came for her bi-weekly visit. She told the Reverend about the church-ladies and Bess Sanderson, about how they had asked secret things and Sybil, who had never spoken, not to the doctors nor the nurses, not to Cassie, Sybil had whispered to each woman a Delphic answer.

"Gideon was a prophet, you know. In the Old Testament," the Reverend said as he pulled his thumb against the corner of his



leather Bible, drumming the pages like a flip-book and fanning the ashes of his cigarette.

"What?" Cassie asked.

"You know, our town Gideon and Gideon the prophet."

"I don't understand." Cassie tried to make the Reverend's words explain how Sybil knew that the old man's son had strung himself up in a tree half a mile from his deer stand in the backwoods. The old man's daughter had written to thank Sybil for giving her father peace of mind before his passing and a chance to bury his son.

Reverend Dakin spit his phlegm out the church window. "Folks believed in such things back then. That God told us what we needed to know. His mouth to our ears. Thought he used those what we'd consider afflicted now. Maybe that's the connection." He squinted at the letter again.

"You're saying that because we live in Gideon, God is using my Sybil to talk to us? With Carole King lyrics?"

"You just got to have faith, Cassie."

That Sunday after Cassie showed him the letter, Reverend Dakin preached about modern-day miracles.

"God is alive and among us!" he hollered to his indolent flock. "I ain't an educated man. I don't know nothing about absent clockmakers and the like. I'm just here to spread the word. God's word. And He come to Gideon to tell us to listen up!"

Folks from all over New Madrid County came to see Sybil then. Some wanted revelation; others came, like medieval pilgrims, to whisper confessions to the anchoress and seek absolution.

Sybil didn't write her cryptic answers anymore. She mumbled them and only once.

"Winter, spring, summer, or fall."

"Then trouble's gonna lose me, worry leave me behind."

"Footsteps in the hall to tell me I've been this way before, nevermore."

"Oil slick, slipping and a sliding and a slapping on. Kootcheroo."

Cassie sat cross-legged on the floor beside her daughter's door, gloved hand opening the plastic flap just wide enough for the string of words to slip past the high whistle of the machines. She studied Sybil's body language, waiting for a sign that she was about to speak, and watched her mouth so she could shape the words as her daughter shaped them.

Beyond those moments, Sybil never spoke.

Cassie never asked a question.

When Sybil turned thirteen, reporters and camera crews rutted the front yard. They hadn't come to ask Sybil questions; they just wanted her picture because she had lived so long. The bubble boy in Texas had just died.

"You can't expect more than sixteen," the doctors had told Cassie then. "And you should prepare yourself for it happening any time. Every day from now on is like winning the lottery."

Cassie had buried her parents that year. But not Sybil.

Students started coming from the state university at Columbia to study her. They sat for hours in the farmhouse chairs Cassie had dragged in from the kitchen. Year after year, they watched Sybil, their eyes oscillating from her to notebook. Scratches in the hardwood floor recorded Cassie's passage from Sybil's room to elsewhere.

"Excuse me," she'd say as she slid behind them, her hands full of dirty clothes or sterilized food.

They nodded as they scooted their chairs forward.

Then one day Cassie couldn't take it anymore. "I'll be out in the yard if you need me," she muttered under her breath.

They nodded, but they never took their eyes off Sybil.

Sybil lay on the floor rolling her head against the plastic until her hair arced with static electricity. She never looked at the researchers or her mother; she watched the stars on her ceiling. The Junior Astrology Club from Jefferson City had donated a kit; they'd heard about Sybil and wanted to do something for her. Cassie spent a week stenciling and pasting a glow-in-the dark galaxy while Sybil huddled in the corner of the room, her bubble world shrunk to give Cassie room to work.

The constellations warbled beyond the rise and fall of the plastic as it breathed. The stars of Berenice's shimmering strands fluttered behind the distortion. Sybil's hair, a shiny black gift from her father, stretched out around her; it had been chewed at the ends and crackled with energy that had nowhere to go.

The researchers scribbled in their pads.

Outside, Cassie stabbed her trowel in the dirt beneath Sybil's window. And then she heard the tires climbing the gravel of the steep drive. She turned to watch as the van veered onto the grass and stopped. A woman rolled down the window of the passenger side.

"Is this where the bubble girl lives?" she hollered across Cassie's yard.

Cassie nodded and turned back to planting the sunflowers that would grow tall enough for Sybil to see.

"Why this don't look no different from the houses back home." The woman muttered as she got out of the van. "Paul Delfoy, I thought you said there's a bubble. There ain't no bubble here."

"Woman, I told you just what it said on the computer. Come see Gideon's Own Bubble Girl and Eat at the Ajax Café." The man pushed himself through the driver's side door. Cassie couldn't imagine how he had managed to get himself behind the wheel in the first place. The man was huge.

"Ma'am, you sure this where the bubble girl lives?" he asked.

"Smackwater Jack bought a shotgun," Cassie said to the dirt. She nodded again and crossed the yard to the water hose. Mrs. Delfoy followed Cassie.

"We done been over to the river at New Madrid to see the Fault. They say the river run backwards and made a waterfall that sunk a bunch of boats and killed some folks, but there ain't nothing to see of it now." The woman stood over Cassie as she knelt to rinse the dirt from her hands. "We're on our way back down to Amos. In Arkansas? We done went to St. Louis and now we're stopping to see the sites on the way home."

Cassie stood and watched Mr. Delfoy move up against the house to peer in Sybil's window.

"So that poor girl done lived in a bubble all her life. My, my. That's tragic now, ain't it? Bless her heart. You her mama?" Mrs. Delfoy asked.

Cassie opened her mouth to speak at about the time Mr. Delfoy spun away from the house like he'd been popped.

"Mona, get in the car." He looked sickly and, as he passed the women, Cassie could see he was shaking; she felt the ground move under his weight.

Cassie knew Sybil must have said something to Mr. Delfoy, shouted it to him through the window. She went in the house, drying her hands on her pants, and asked a research student what Sybil had said, but the woman muttered something about subject confidentiality. Cassie pressed her lips in a hard line and went to make herself a pot of coffee and ponder Paul Delfoy's fate.

That night the lightning storm came. Sybil had paced her room ever since the Delfoys left. Around noon she started mumbling to herself, "Well, there's hours of time on the telephone line to talk about things to come. Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground."

So Cassie knew something was coming, just like the day before the Thanksgiving earthquake back in '96.

"I just lose control. Down to my very soul. I get hot and cold. All over, all over, all over, all over."

Cassie had tried to watch the Macy's parade with her daughter on the tiny TV she pulled into the hall, but Sybil wouldn't sit still. By the afternoon she was pounding her feet on the wall and screaming. "All over! All over! All over!"

Cassie ran outside. She stood beside the yew in the front yard where she knew Sybil could still see her. Breathing the cool air slowly as she tried to calm herself, Cassie felt everything change. The earth pulsed electricity in an effort to release the tension . . . but too late. Cassie stumbled across the heaving ground on her way back to the house. Her hands streaked red down the white hall as she worked to balance herself; she had been squeezing the yew berries and her fingers were coated with juice. She thrust them into the plastic gloves and reached for her daughter. But Sybil sat on the edge of her bed, calm and silent.

The quake passed; they always did.

The lightning storm would pass, too. And tomorrow would come as it always did. And Cassie would turn forty in the spring. Sybil would be twenty-two next month.

"I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend, but I always thought that I'd see you again."

Thunder pealed through the foothills.

Earlier that afternoon as the storm front rolled in, Cassie had checked the generator like she always did when there was a chance the power would go out. Some people could live in the dark but not Sybil.

The lightning struck somewhere on the hill out back of the house. And the lights died. The blackness suffocated Cassie as she waited for the generator to kick on. It never did. She felt her way to the hall closet to get the flashlight.

Sybil was by the door; the plastic sheathing deflated like an amniotic sack over her. Her breath came fast and shallow, lifting the plastic with quick pulses like a heartbeat. Cassie laid the flashlight on the floor and slid her hands into the gloves. She held her daughter, hummed lullabies, and waited.

The plastic rested on Sybil's face like a shroud. With the last of her air, Sybil whispered an answer for her mother though Cassie never asked a question.

"Wasted days and wasted nights," Sybil had muttered before the plastic sheathing dipped into the hollow of her mouth and silenced her.

It had been two weeks now and Cassie still didn't know if Sybil meant it as judgment or prophecy. Freddy Fender was just too damn cryptic, like Nostradamus. You could make it mean anything or nothing at all.

**DANA CHAMBLEE CARPENTER** armors herself in subversive t-shirts as she navigates the snares of a private university in Nashville, quietly encouraging students to side-step the conventional.

# Elephantine

Randall Martoccia

The landscape was a victim of blight and a dry season. The mountain rose up broad-shouldered and brown and highly flammable. A distant waterfall was a white trickle to the west. Looming on the east was Chimney Rock—bare, imperturbable, and phallic. Truly, no geologic formation was ever more penis-like than the Chimney. In the shadow of this protruding slab, the husband and wife sat at a table on the deck of Kritter's Restaurant and Gifts. They swatted mosquitoes and drank their iced teas.

The husband read from a brochure titled, "Chimney Rock: Fast Facts."

The wife wiped sweat off of her glass.

"Interesting," the husband said, "it says here that the chimney was formed by erosion of the mountain around it. It only appears to be thrusting upwards from the mountain."

"Is it granite?" she asked. The wife checked her watch. At noon, the blue law would expire, and she'd order her cocktail. That was twenty minutes away.

"Evidently, it's Henderson niece."

"Nice."

The husband turned his empty glass up and drained it. "It's just a rock, Joy," he said.

"That's how you pronounce gneiss. Not niece. Nice."

"Oh."

She looked up at the rock and put her lips on the straw. "Very nice," she said.

The husband tilted the glass and tried to jiggle the ice pack loose by tapping the side. It worked. The ice fell on his face.

The waitress came to the table. "Would you folks like a dessert?"

The husband asked, "Do you have banana pudding?"

The waitress smiled and said, "Day-old puddin', sugar. Would you like to try it?"

"Sure."

"Should I make that two?"

"Mushy bananas? No thanks." The wife said—not looking up—and slid the brochure closer.

The waitress turned quickly and disappeared inside the restaurant.

"Oh God, why do you make it so ha—so tough?" the husband asked her.

"I make it so tough," the wife said, "because the solution is so easy."

The husband stood and walked to the deck's rail. "Easy for you, maybe," he said.

"The procedure is not complicated," she said. She followed him to the rail.

"Oh yes, you told me. A simple operation."

She put her arms around him. "Right, honey." Then she leaned down and nibbled on his ear.

"And what about afterwards?"

"A few months of recovery."

"No, I mean, what about between us?"

"It'll be perfect. We're so close to happiness."

"A mere inch or two away."

She turned away from him. "Now who's making it hard?"

"Well, that's the truth, isn't it?"

The wife walked back to the table. The husband dropped a quarter into the telescope and looked at the mountain. Between the rock and the falls was a long wall of bare rock. Scratched or painted there were Greek letters, high-school abbreviations, and the catch phrases "Avoid the Noid," "Run and Tell that, Homeboy," "All



your base are belong to us," and "Hell to the No!" Amid these words of complaint and defiance, one message stood out. It was written in hot-pink blocky letters. The husband read it under his breath—"L'IL BIT I ♥ U." His eyes grew misty, and he repeated the words—this time loud enough for his wife to hear.

"I love you too," the wife said. She un-tensed her facial muscles, and the vertical lines that had been between her eyebrows all day suddenly disappeared. "And more, dear, than just a little bit."

"Then why—"

The waitress brought out the banana pudding. The wife checked her watch and ordered a *mojito*. The waitress asked the husband, "How about you, hon?"

The husband looked at the highway between the restaurant and the mountain. Traffic was heavy, and two cars turned into Kritters. He said to his wife, "After-church crowd, ugh" and then to the waitress, "Martini."

The wife stepped toward the man. She grabbed his hand and said, "Good idea. You'll drink and calm down and realize that it's all so simple. It's just to let some air in."

The husband, "There's a bit more to it than that."

"It's just like... just like.... Why it'll be just like ol' Chimney Rock up there."

The husband said, "It will not be like Chimney Rock."

"Yes, it will."

"You can't just look up there and say it'll be just like Chimney Rock and the noid will be avoided and we'll be happy."

"Can too."

"Okay. How? How in the hell," the man said and stopped.

The hostess led a family of four onto the deck. The father took off his coat and loosened his tie. He had a round face and a salt-and-pepper beard. His blue shirt had dark sweat patches under his arms, on his back, and around his collar. The mother smiled at the husband and wife. Her ears were sharp, not unlike a Vulcan's. The

children, a boy and a girl, both about seven years old, walked past without looking up. They had their father's ears.

The wife whispered, "Dear, that big ol' Chimney doesn't stand on its own. That's what the brochure said. It depends on cables and a steel truss."

"One big difference," the husband said. "When those cables were drilled into it, that big rock up there didn't feel a thing."

"Don't be melodramatic," the wife said and flinched as a sugar packet flew past her face. She spun around and looked at the family's table. The husband, wife, and normal-eared children hid behind their menus.

The man says, "Oh yeah, and don't forget the machinery."

"Machinery? You're just exaggerating now."

"There's the air bladder, the cylinders that run along the shaft, and the hydraulic pump itself. I'll have a goddamned public works project in my —"

"Dear, the children," the wife snapped. "Now you're just blowing things out of proportion."

The husband opened his mouth to speak. Then he closed it for a moment just before laughter burst out of him.

The wife looked at him warily.

The man kept laughing. He managed to get out "blowing things... out of proportion" between guffaws.

The wife then started to laugh, tentatively at first but soon with as little restraint as her husband.

He brought her close and hugged her. She kissed him. "So you'll consider it."

He then held her close, so close their crotches were touching. He whispered, "Hell... to the no."

**RANDALL MARTOCCIA** teaches composition and literature at East Carolina University and screens fiction entries (among other duties) for the *North Carolina Literary Review*. Several of his short movies can be found on YouTube. His previous publications are a parody of Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts," a short story in a now-defunct online magazine, and a poem in *War: Literature and the Arts*. Martoccia may not be a young writer anymore, but he is certainly obscure.

## Good for the Gander

K. Marvin Bruce

"The Canada goose poses a severe nuisance to our beloved university and community," Professor Allan shouts with specks of spittle backlit off the intense lumens of the projection screen. "Breck University has a proud tradition of a well-groomed campus where one should not be concerned about watching one's feet. Their droppings are not only unsightly, but also unsanitary. They form a disease vector and should be strictly controlled." He is pounding the podium now, in the reflected light of the two-story goose projected behind him.

"Do you mean murdered?" a long-haired, bearded student objects.

"Controlled," the vexed professor retorts.

"You want to assassinate geese?" a coed with bouncy yellow hair asks. "Last semester a goose had her nest under a tree on campus, and when she couldn't leave her eggs we brought her water and breadsticks from Sbarro. Now you want us to kill her babies?"

"Listen! The Canada goose has become acculturated—too used to human beings. This is not good for the geese nor is it beneficial to us. Nature works best when species are kept in balance." Professor Allan is sweating now in the hot light of the projector, a huge goose foot covering his whole face.

"We learn to seek mutually profitable solutions to international relations in poli sci, and you are suggesting we kill off another species in a preemptive strike! Like she said," the young man indicates the blonde with an approving smile, "we went out of our way to help mother goose last year and this semester you want to slaughter her goslings."

"Besides, the Federal Migratory Bird Act of 1918 classifies them as a protected species," another student interjects. The remarks are coming on fast now. Professor Allan looks like he ate something bad for lunch.

And so it goes on for some time. Public lecture series may not receive Academy Award nominations, but one of the few perks in the life of an adjunct instructor is the free entertainment. Then it is off to the classroom again.

"How many hours a week do you spend driving?" Dr. Patel asks me, his coppery-brown skin emphasizing the whiteness of his curious eyes. We exchange war stories whenever we cross paths in the classroom. He's packing up his laptop, while I'm setting mine up.

"About ten this semester," I reply. I always look forward to our conspiratorial conversation between classes. It makes me feel like I'm in a private faculty meeting. A professor who actually teaches is also an endangered species. He's off at five p.m., but I'm just getting started.

"That's too much," he shakes his head. "The university can't survive without adjuncts. When I was a student there was no such position."

"It must be one of those job descriptions that pops up like a musty-smelling toadstool in the shadow of a long recession," I muse. Smithing words amuses me. Free entertainment. But words get me into trouble too. And gestures.

This semester I'm double-dipping at Breck and Greathouse State. The campuses are a mere seventy miles apart, and my Beetle gets reasonable mileage. I need to get that sound from the rear of the car checked out, however. Adjunct life requires a healthy set of wheels above all else.

This evening my meal on wheels is supper on the way to Breck. I got a good start, so I'll have the luxury of eating after I've parked on campus.

Breck University offers ample parking for adjuncts. The administration long ago realized that if we part-timers refused to do our teaching-for-treats tricks they'd be up a very famous creek with no means of locomotion.

The final brown leaves have fled the dying trees. The Canada geese we'd been lectured about—the pigeons of the new millennium—are everywhere. Vast flocks of them cross the skies just about all year long as the late winter flank heading south wings past the early summer flank flying north. Thousands of birds.

I snag a parking spot facing the surreal green of outer campus. The lush lawn looks like the Garden of Eden. As I pull up the handbrake with its familiar ratcheting noise, I notice a single Canada goose. It stands stock-still maybe a dozen feet in front of my bumper. Numbers aren't my strong suit, but this bird looks disproportionately large to me.

I know that geese can reach fourteen pounds and have strong wings and uncompromising beaks—I paid attention to the public lecture. This one seems larger by at least one or two orders of magnitude. Unnerved when its tar-black eye fixes its unblinking gaze on me, I'm now glad the windows are rolled up.

I finger-wrestle my textured-soy sandwich from its fold-lock-top baggie—cheaper than ziplocks—and take a contemplative bite. The huge goose turns its beak my way, meaning that it is looking off to its sides, not at me. Illogical relief floods in. From this front angle I notice that it has distinctive white stripe down the center of its black face. Despite my lack of formal science training, I have always been a careful observer of nature. I notice things.

Canada geese thrive on their anonymity. Prey animals rely on natural uniformity to confuse predators. Since we've wiped out the wolves and cougars that would have kept goose populations down, we have opened a new lease on overpopulation to our feathered

friends, and mutants can survive. Stand out even. As it steps nearer my bug, I involuntarily flinch, but I notice that the stripe forms a rough cross shape. Great. A Christian goose.

He moves slowly. Automatically I think “he,” but I am clueless how to tell the difference. It must be his size. Guys and size; it’s a tired trope, but somehow appropriate in this case. After taking a solemn step closer, he stops and turns his Bible-black eye on me again. Perhaps he wants my sandwich—birds are always looking for handouts. My imagination begins to run wild. A goose this large poking his head inside my car window—and what would it try to grab after that? My supper is on my lap. That’s not where I want him looking.

I impotently fling out my arms in the universal shooing gesture. Undeterred, the goose continues its slow approach, not ducking his head to nibble at the grass, the way geese generally do. I sense menace in this animal, affirmed by its peculiar behavior. Sure, Canada geese are habituated, but they’re generally herbivores, so what’s the problem? I shove the last of my sandwich into my mouth and decide to skip the chips. Lays. No one can eat just one. Might push my uninvited companion over the edge.

Taking his time, the fowl stops and turns his coal-black eye toward me once again. A goose that stares.

He is now at my front bumper. His head seems to be on a level with mine. It is a very large head. Suddenly he gives an exploratory peck at the hood of my car. Startled by the swift movement, I drop my pear onto the dirty floorboards. A single sandwich won’t hold me until nine o’clock when class is over, so I duck down and feel around in the antiquarian, accumulated floor grit until my fingers close around the errant fruit. A Bosc pear. My favorite dessert. Pears taste like lilies smell.

Wriggling like an aged Mummenschanz, I wedge back into a sitting position to find the goose standing at the passenger window, its unwholesome black eye regarding me with a sinister

aspect. The fact that the bird is so large is itself enough to unsettle me, but this unnatural behavior is growing intense. Whatever happened to the healthy, innate fear of humans? Our hard-won superiority? A jittery shudder has settled between my shoulder blades. Glancing around, I see no one else in this remote parking lot. I tap the subdued, meeping horn to shoo the bird away, but in response he brays a strident honk, as if challenging my little car to a duel, wagging his head up and down in a fencer's riposte.

I worry that I will be late for class. My overstuffed canvas briefcase sits contentedly on the passenger seat. It is heavy and unwieldy; so heavy that I have to buckle it in to get the idiot light to go off. Usually I have to climb out first and draw it out through the passenger door. Attempting to pull it over me and then dislodging us both from between the driver's seat and steering wheel is a clown's routine that sometimes lands me on my indignant backside outside. Pratfalls are fine and good, but only if there are no students to see them. Or geese.

Adjuncts have to carry their environment with them. We're worse than infants in that regard. At least I don't have to haul my projector to Breck this semester. The classrooms are smart. Smarter than me, most of the time. The laptop, however, goes wherever I do, my backup brain. I can't teach class without it.

Gray clouds have started to creep over the late afternoon sun. The sudden lack of light reminds me of the Cardinal Fowler incident. I forcefully thrust the thought from my head—I've got to get past this transgressive goose and into my classroom.

The goose is at my right rear quarter-panel now, pecking belligerently at my tire. I'm glad it has a rounded beak rather than a pointed one. I decide to make a bold stand. Reassert human superiority. Grasping my briefcase, I slip my left fingers through the door release, take a breath and count to three. In an acrobatic roll, I tug the fat briefcase after me and land on my feet facing the rear of my Beetle. Elated at my stylish escape, I shove the door closed and back away, pressing the remote door lock. The huge



goose has wandered to the driver's side, his head high enough to drive the car. His manner is aggressive and wild, and I really don't know what damage a mad goose can do.

As I back off, I realize with a sinking feeling that I forgot to place my hangtag on the rearview mirror. Although generous with parking, Breck University is equally generous with parking tickets. It is the most unforgiving university in the state. With my meager salary we really can't afford unexpected fines. The goose fans his massive wings next to the driver's door and hisses angrily. I continue to back away, wondering how I will explain this to Britta when I get home. She's not afraid of anything. Except poverty.

Darkness has settled over campus by the time my classes are over. I had to stifle several yawns during my own lectures, drawing them out to expanded vowels so as not to encourage student desertion or imitation. I try to keep them as interested as Eliot will allow. The goose nearly forgotten, I see from a distance that my car is unguarded. Ticketed, but goose-free. I climb in and fire her up. That peculiar rattling in the back begins as I shove the Beetle into reverse and creep out of my spot. A glance toward the front to ensure myself of clearance from the next car and I see with a shudder a huge goose nested down in the unmown grass near an ornamental tree, its black eye firmly on me.

I decide not to tell Britta about the goose. She already believes me half insane after the Cardinal Fowler episode. I'll take the blame for the ticket. "Sorry about the expense, I just spaced as I went off to class."

"We'll make do," she frowns looking at the offending paper. She's had to take on a thankless full-time job at Wal-Mart to cope with the rent. "Just try to be more careful."

"That's the first and last time it will happen," I assure her. "I never waste money."

"What about the noise you said the car was making? Shouldn't you take it to the dealer?"

"Dealers charge too much. There's a sign in the service office declaring that 'auto technicians' now charge \$120 per hour! That doesn't include diagnostics and parts. There's a guy out on Lovcraft Drive that works on VW's. I'll give him a call."

"I liked Beetles better when the engine was in the back. I love that putt-putt sound they made. Who ever heard of a Beetle with a trunk in the rear?"

"Well, that's the way they make them now. And only a specialist can fix them. Regular garage can't even change the headlights. I'll give Henry Proctor's a call tomorrow."

"After Greathouse," she reminds me. Not a bad idea; with different schools on different days, I sometimes forget.

"After Greathouse," I confirm. Tomorrow is my long commute.

We're lying in bed, each lost in our own thoughts. I never promised Britta the moon, but I thought I might have something better than this to offer. Who plans on ending up as an adjunct instructor? Loving literature is a crime against society. In the darkness outside I hear the flapping of massive wings and a powerful honking in the night.

This morning I am groggy, but I get a good start. I kiss Britta goodbye and step into the lingering darkness. Dawn breaks on a gray morning by the time I reach Greathouse.

Grebe Lot is already filling up, but there's a spot over there at the tree-line. Thankful for small mercies, I quickly pull into the last space. Before I forget, I fish out the correct hangtag and slip it over the rear-view mirror stem. Legal this time. About to pop open the door, I do a double-take through the windshield. A Canada goose by the trees. A large Canada goose. "Nah," I assure myself.

“Impossible. It must be just another big goose.” I look around with the sinking feeling that so close to class time, no one is lingering around the lot. The other cars are empty. A strange silence pervades this vehicular wasteland. Not a breath of wind. The clouds are oppressively low.

The goose is in profile, and I quickly reason that I’d just never noticed how large geese could be, close up. The solitary fowl begins to waddle nearer my car. Its face turns straight toward me—that white cross is evident, even from this distance. The goose has followed me? Impossible! Nevertheless, the thought of this bird waiting outside our apartment all night is distinctly unsettling. Not to mention the thought of the mess.

Birds are excellent navigators, I’m sure, but from Breck to Greathouse? Why these two universities? Why on the days I teach at them? Why specifically in front of my car? The coincidence races beyond uncanny into threatening. The look in its avian eye is malevolent as it slowly stalks toward the Beetle.

The passenger seat is shared by my heavy briefcase and bulky projector bag. I need both for class this morning, and if I hesitate, I will be late. The fiendish goose is definitely approaching my car. I decide to run for it; the goose didn’t follow me last night. Fumbling the keys out of the ignition, I swing the door open as quickly as I can and scramble out, grazing the top of my head on the door-frame. A second later the rasping pain hits, but I shove the door shut and round the trunk, eager to open the passenger’s door between this crazed goose and me. Smoothing my rumpled hair, soothing the slow ache, I snatch the straps for briefcase and projector, and haul out the ponderous bags, careful not to bump the car next to me. I slam the door and am relieved to see the goose is not behind it. I turn to cross the lot. A flash of lightning. An ominous peal of thunder. A black, webbed footsteps from behind the trunk, followed by a large, black head on a snaky neck.

Opening its beak wide, the lone goose releases a terrible din above the echoing thunder.

I back away to the front of the car and duck down to slip furtively along the front line of vehicles, out of his line of sight. At the edge of the lot, I continue my crouch, waddling like a proverbial penguin with the projector in one hand and briefcase in the other. Infernal honking punctuates the strange silence. Innocent bird calls to any but me. A cold rain begins to fall, drowning out the sound of its beak pecking at my weathered finish.

My lecture on *Wuthering Heights* emphasizes the ghostly a little too much this dank morning. The spirit of Cathy seems to be covered in down in my mind.

After class, I walk to Ecology and Natural Resources. Science buildings feel like an alien universe to those of us in the humanities. Steinen Hall smells like chemicals when you step inside. Serious and potentially lethal. What goes on here can impact lives in immediate and direct ways, deconstructionism be damned.

I'm not sure who it is I'm looking for. A faculty member who's in his office, I guess. On the third floor I find crowded signs indicating I've crossed into Ecology. A door stands open to my left. Dr. Altamira, the sign announces. Tentatively I knock on the doorframe.

"Come in," a female voice startles me. I'm no sexist, but I always think of scientists as men.

"Dr. Altamira?" I ask, submissive. Scientists intimidate me. Actually, anyone who has a full-time position earns my awe. They must know something I don't.

"Yes. Can I help you?" A middle-aged woman, unexpectedly attractive, looks at me from over the top of a cheap Dell monitor. The drunken E canted upward on the back looks juvenile and superfluous in this heady environment.

"Maybe. I'm actually an adjunct with the English Department." I introduce myself and explain I have a question about animal behavior.

"I might be able to answer some of your questions. The real specialist on marine fowl is Dr. Tannenbaum, but I have studied animal behavior over the years." Her eyes are deep brown and curious. Her hair is black and thick, pulled into a ponytail that hangs back over her white lab coat, making her look like a coed. I am thinking how fun it might be if I were a specimen to be studied.

"Have geese been known to follow a person?"

"Do you mean imprinting? Like in the film, *The Man Who Walked with Geese*? Like most animal young, geese are susceptible to imprinting. They will follow a person if they believe that human to be their protector. Do you have a nest in your yard?" The question pierces me with a sudden, inexplicable fear.

"No, no. Nothing like that. I was wondering if adult geese sometimes just follow people."

"They are thoroughly habituated. It doesn't help that people feed them—a frequent problem on college campuses. Geese can eventually become quite aggressive." Now we're getting somewhere.

"How dangerous are they?"

"They can pinch pretty hard when they bite. Their wings are powerful, but they require them to fly. I've never read of a goose risking flight to get a few table scrapes or a Twinkie." She winks at me. "They don't carry concealed weapons."

I laugh off her joke at my own expense. "Would an adult goose ever target a specific individual?"

Dr. Altamira lets out a genuine chortle. "It is about as likely for one of them to recognize one of us as it would be for one of us to recognize one of them. They do not have the upper-level brain functionality to distinguish individual humans. We all look alike to them. We're walking food banks."

Knowing I'll regret it, I press on. "Could they be trained to attack someone?" I am a twelve-year-old boy with a crush on his teacher, but who hasn't read his homework.

"Goose assassins?" Her stunned face, beautiful and intelligent, breaks slowly into a smile. A smile that quickly turns strained. She's probably trying to remember the number for campus security. Just like at the Cardinal Fowler episode. I thank her for her time and slink out with my dignity between my legs. I try to convince myself. I am not being stalked by a bird.

The long drive home has become so familiar as to be annoying. The same stretch of highway with the same innocuous interstate scenery. I occasionally lean forward and glance through the smeary windshield into the sky above me, wondering if I'm being followed. More worrisome at that moment is the unexplained rattling that comes from the back. What if I break down fifty miles from home? I make a mental note to call the mechanic out on Lovecraft Drive as soon as I get home.

"How about four p.m. Friday?" he asks. "I should be able to get it done by six."

Tomorrow's my Breck day, so it must be Tuesday or Thursday. I've been there already this week, so tomorrow is Thursday. "You can't get it done tomorrow?"

"Not if you need it back by five. Sorry, but I'm swamped at the moment."

"That's okay. Friday at four, then."

Night begins to settle in. I can't relax until Britta is home, so I nervously begin to pull some supper together. For some reason an omelet sounds good. I pull out the textured cardboard egg carton. The sun has dipped below the garage roof to the west, casting an ominous shadow across the drive. The architect designed this

house with its detached garage modeled on an old-fashioned carriage house.

That eerie span between house and garage casts an unhealthy aspect over the back yard. Maybe it's the diseased look of the gnarled trees, or the many shadowy places that would easily shield an intruder from view. Maybe it's gothic defiance of the antiquated garage design or the sickly grass that overhangs the edges of the gravel drive. When I have to pull the car in at night, I always feel eyes on me.

I pull out a green pepper and onion. I think I hear a flock of geese honking as they fly north over the house. The sound sends a shiver down my spine as I pull open the knife drawer and search for an implement really too big for the vegetables before me. The ticking of the clock is too loud. I glance at it. After seven already. I crack the first egg. A loud flapping of wings pulls my gaze back to the window. Nothing. I stare into air as gray as the ocean, deeply shadowed with irregular patches of blackness. What's that sound?

The familiar grumble of the Falcon motor. Relief floods over me. I realize that I've been sweating, despite the chilly evening. Anxiously I watch in the twilight as Britta pulls the car in and laboriously makes several k-turns to get it facing the right direction to leave the next morning. Unaware of what's been happening, she swings the door wide open, not seeing the huge goose that suddenly darts its head from the open garage door. I shout, but the storm windows are already down, insulating the sound.

I snatch up the large knife and head to the back door, pure emotion, no thought of consequences. I turn the brass knob and swing it wide. "Britta!" She's fumbling in her purse for her keys.

"It's good to see you too," she responds, ironically eyeing the knife I have before me. I lean over to kiss her and pull her inside.

"I was just getting some supper ready."

She pulls off her coat. She wears Wal-Mart casual. "How was your day?"

"Typical Greathouse day," I prevaricate. "Lots of driving, sleepy students, lots more driving. How about yours?" I turn back to the kitchen. Wal-Mart is a place of no interest. To either of us.

"For a job in an evil corporation, about as to be expected." I hear her shoes hit the floor in the bedroom. I'm looking at the garage out the window now in the growing gloom. Britta didn't mention the goose at all. Am I imagining this? I think I see movement in the shadows.

Brit shuffles in with slippered feet. "You should pull the shades when it's dark out. It gives me the creeps thinking anyone can see us and we can't see them." She twists the drum in her delicate fingers. I don't take time to appreciate her charms any more.

I turn back to the eggs. I crack another one and I think I hear furious flapping wings. "Did you hear that?" I ask.

Brit is shuffling through the mail. Mostly bills. "Hear what? That gust of wind? Boy, are you jumpy tonight."

Crack. Flap, flap, flap! Crack. Flap, flap, flap! I'm not imagining this! The Christian goose objects to the kinds of services offered in this establishment. Just like the Catholics outside an abortion clinic.

Catholics make me think of Cardinal Fowler. His visit to Breck University to bless the opening of the Catholic Studies Center was a huge affair. Media from all over the city—the state even—were there. Hundreds of folding chairs set in theological precision on the quad faced a temporary stage erected for the occasion. Festive bunting hung lugubriously from the monkey bridge. In the center the Papal flag was unfurled. A large, very serious crucifix had been affixed to the back wall of the platform, as if they were expecting a flock of vampires. The Vatican seal graced the front of the podium. Dignitaries from other churches, as well as the government, were milling about importantly. I spied my fellow adjunct, Homer Evilsizer, near the front of the crowd. He teaches part-time in the religion department. We had a running bet for which department could draw the largest crowd that year: English or Religion. This event proves I owe Homer a beer.



Every Catholic priest in a hundred-mile radius must have been there—such a sea of black! The crowd was on its feet when the bright scarlet of the Cardinal's robe flashed in the sunshine. Homer turned from his front row seat and gave me a wanton wink. Without thinking I flipped him the bird. A hush fell over the crowd. I felt eyes. Thousands of them. In the silence I could hear the shutters and sliders of the cameras. My upraised arm with middle finger extended, I had intended toward Homer, seems to be aimed at the Cardinal on stage. Homer is doubled over with laughter. I am redder than the prelate's robes.

Dr. Brad Berry, the head of the English department, had never noticed me before. Now there I was in his office. My own private Inquisition. "You flipped off the fucking Cardinal!" Subtly is obviously not his strong suit.

"Again, I'm sorry! It wasn't aimed at him. It was a private joke between me and a guy in the front row. I'll apologize to the Pope, if it'll make you happy."

"Who's the guy in the front row? Who were you 'aiming at'?" The air quotations feel forced and unnatural coming from a department chair.

"I don't want to get anyone else into trouble, as I explained before. It's bad enough that I'm in this mess without dragging someone else in." Homer owes me big-time for this.

"The Diocese is furious! You know, I had a letter demanding your resignation signed by three monsignors, two cardinals—"

"And a partridge in a pear tree?" I shouldn't have said that.

"This is serious! The university has explained that you're only an adjunct, not officially part of the staff, but I think the church is still fuming. Watch the jokes—private or not!"

Even thinking about it still makes me flush. I feel a new bath of sweat.

"You want me to chop the veggies?" I jump. Brit scrutinizes me. "I don't trust you with a knife this evening."

I need to tell her. I feel the urging in my chest. She'll think me crazy, but I can't let this goose go after her with no warning.

"Honey, I thought you should know..."

I'm beating the eggs now. Am I the only one hearing those great wings flap? "Yes? What is it?" Her voice lilts with juvenile humor, feigning impatience. Her slender fingers handle the knife adeptly, mumblety-peg on the cutting board.

Tell her! My heart is beating ragged. Tell her! "I...I couldn't get an appointment for the Beetle before Friday." Everyone already supposes me to be crazy. I can't give any more reasons. I sigh. When did I stop being honest with her?

That night I hear honking emanating from the gothic garage yards away from our house.

On the shorter drive to Breck I decide that I'll use a different parking lot. I've learned that geese are animals of habit. If I park beside Jay Hall, I won't even walk near the lot where I saw the goose on Tuesday. Jay Hall is in the middle of campus, so there will be other people around. If I'm confronted, I can call for help.

"Do you want to hear something amusing?" Dr. Patel asks, rolling up the cord to his laptop as I pull mine out. I nod, desperate for a joke. "Some of the grad students in the sociology department are saying the Catholic Church has hired a hitman for someone who offended the diocese. Is not that a scream?" he asks with his perfect diction, articulating every syllable. "The Catholic Church hiring assassins! What do they think this is? The Middle Ages?"

My smile is strained. "Religion leads people to some pretty bizarre behavior," I muse. The joke doesn't make me feel any better.

My Breck classes end at nine p.m. That's just when most university students are beginning to awake, but they aren't to be found on central campus. Some stragglers hurrying back from their classes, but otherwise, long stretches of rustic campus paths

cloistered in shadows lie between my car and me. In the dark with occasional sickly yellow sodium vapor light diffused on my path, I feel vulnerable. Taking a deep breath, I continue toward Jay Hall, knowing that my nemesis is out there, somewhere, unseen.

Passing by the gothic recesses of DeKoven Hall, I hear a honk. I stop, listening intently. No, it was just a truck horn. Sound travels from the highway on cloudy nights. Is that a footstep behind me? It sounds like a rubber boot. A swim fin slapping the pavement. I quicken my pace. There is the car, bathed to a peach color under the baleful light-post. No other cars nearby. I dash for it, hearing flapping sounds all around me. I fish the key fob from my jacket pocket. Where's the damn unlock button? I can't see and accidentally jab the red panic button. The Beetle winks and beeps comically. I slide my thumb over the fob until I feel another button. Unlock! I dive in the car to see the goose, lurking in the stygian shadows outside the cone of light from the lamp-post. His white cross blazes into my memory a detail from Dr. Patel's conversation. A Catholic hitman. The Christian goose? Preposterous!

The huge bird makes no move, just skulks in the umbrous darkness. He knows where I live. A sudden panic wells up like nausea, I plunge the key in and twist. The goose just stares wickedly.

Poe had his raven. Coleridge had his albatross. I've got a fucking goose.

Friday, my early drive to Greathouse State begins groggily. Halfway to campus I realize I forgot to bring my projector. The kids will just have to learn about *Jane Eyre* without any illustrations.

The rattling from the backseat is louder than ever, as if something is about to burst out in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. The metal-on-metal sound makes my teeth grind together. I just have to make it to the garage at four o'clock today.

I decide to park as far from the tree-line as possible. It is a clear, sunny morning but I'll take no chances. I know that goose is out there.

But not being able to see him makes it worse. I crank the bug into reverse and creep toward the same spot as Wednesday, just by the trees. Creatures of habit. I am alone in the lot. The goose is nestled in the shade of the trees. He knows I see him—he's staring right at me. We are well acquainted now, mortal enemies with a mutual respect. I am learning the rules of engagement. He just watches as I step out of the car and back my way toward campus. I have the length of a football field to cover. The goose rises. How long will I run from this bird? Another car pulls lazily into the lot. Not in any hurry, my nemesis saunters back into the shade. He knows my every move.

My *Jane Eyre* lecture is always one of my favorites. This morning, however, in my mind Pilot has sprouted wings, and the burnt Edward Rochester honks rather than speaks.

Low clouds have colored in the October sky and a cool wind has begun to blow. I have a map to Henry Proctor's VW Garage open on the passenger seat. I've only ever driven past Lovecraft Drive before; it is out on the west end of town. I make the left turn and begin watching for something that looks like a garage. A few lonely houses stand here, unkempt and dilapidated. Some look abandoned. Tattered white curtains hang dejectedly like suicidal ghosts in vacant windows. An empty swing-seat blows fitfully on its corroded chains in the listless breeze. Bits of undefined paper and old glass bottles litter the overgrown lawns. The gray clouds press lower. Not a soul to be seen. After only two rundown blocks, even the weary houses exhaust themselves and the sensation of being watched crawls up my back.

An oppressive feeling settles in—maybe this isn't a good idea after all. Maybe I should just bite the bullet and take the Beetle to

the more expensive dealership in town. The road is neglected and I hit unexpected potholes with a sickening thud.

I am about to turn back when I spot the garage, perhaps another half mile, off on the left. It looks like an oasis to me. Carefully avoiding the sudden drops in the road where the tired asphalt is cracked and sore, I finally reach the garage. The large folding doors are down, probably against the chilly wind. A couple of very rusty Volkswagens are parked at odd angles on the broken pavement like huge, corroded warts.

Not wanting to prolong my stay in this godforsaken place, I hastily fling open the driver's door and pull my jacket tight as I head to the office. An offensively loud honking erupts behind me. I freeze. The wind chafes with its icy breath, spitefully gusting against my exposed skin. I don't dare turn around...

I must turn around.

Very large Canada goose. White cross on its implacable face. His scheming black eye locks onto mine. Despite my education I finally have to admit that this is not an ordinary animal. It has followed me since class on Tuesday, and now, in this derelict stretch of road, I have come to face it alone. The showdown.

The goose steps closer, and I think I see pure hatred in its avian eye. My car is closer than the garage. I begin to back toward it. Grit blows in the desultory wind, striking me full in the face. The goose increases his speed. "Hey!" I shout, hoping to get the proprietor's attention. "Help!" My cries enrage the huge animal; it opens its large beak in a fearsome hiss. At this distance I see that the edge of the rounded beak is serrated for snapping tough, weedy stems. Its enormous head reaches to my chest.

I don't want to turn my back on it, but in a panic I do. I dash to my car and it is on me in an instant. I feel the fierce beat of its heavy wings as tiny bits of down get caught in the icy breeze and fly crazily away like insane snowflakes. I smell his fishy breath.

My fingers fumble with the latch as I see that head racing toward me, white cross flashing like a crusader's shield, black beak open and hissing. I am pummeled by his massive wings as I jerk the door open. Maybe I can slam its snaky neck in the door—decapitate the monster!

His head bobs and thrusts like lightning. Its hideous hissing is deafening, and the beating of its wings disorients me. I try to slam the door on him, but he is surprisingly strong. The massive head wedges behind me, his Herculean neck flings me tumbling onto the pavement.

Stunned, I watch as the huge bird ducks his head into the backseat of my car. With a speed and frenzy I wouldn't have believed possible, his beak flings foam from the back seat, spongy and gray, out onto the desolate pavement where the wind whisks it away.

A grotesque honk blasts from the beast as his head jets into the rocking car and emerges swiftly with an angry, saber-rattling Saracen assassin struggling in his enormous beak. The man is tiny, the bird massive. In shock, I gaze as the aquiline head flicks the impassioned Bedouin fiercely from side-to-side, whiplashing the raging mercenary into submission.

Fixing an eye as black as space upon me, he beckons me to look. I observe the subdued saboteur. I have finally come to face the hitman of rumor. It was all true. Taking a great leaping bounce toward me with a flap of his incredible wings, the goose hops over my supine body and climbs rapidly. He disappears into the clouds, assassin firmly in his beak.

A cheery bell rings as the office door swings open. "Are you alright?" a man wiping his hands on an oily rag asks. I'm guessing it must be Henry.

"Yeah, I just tripped getting out of my car." I stand, trying to recoup a little dignity.

"Back seat's a little torn up," he says, poking his head into the bug. "I got a junker the same year out back. Take me an hour to

swap the seats. That could be the source of your rattling noise right there.”

I stand silently and nod, my eyes searching the gray skies above the mechanic’s head as a final gust of wind buffets past and an unexpected calm settles in the autumnal air.

That night I drive to Breck University, although I don’t have any classes. I sit next to the decorative catchment pond on campus and share my sack supper with the geese.

**K. MARVIN BRUCE** makes a living as an adjunct at Rutgers University and Montclair State University in New Jersey. He has published fiction in *Jersey Devil Press* and *Danse Macabre*.







## On the cover:

### "My Headphones"

Dasha Shleyeva

Born and raised in Moscow, Russia, **DASHA SHLEYEVA** moved to the United States when she was nine, two years after the fall of Communism. Her upbringing within two separate cultures has shaped her art, music and poetry strongly in an attempt to understand her own identity, perspectives on living, culture and people. Within her art, she focuses on the coexistence of humanity and nature and how people can pose a threat and create need for adaptations within nature, as well as the beautiful intermingling and contrast it sometimes creates. She adores folklore, exploring and expounding on traditions and stories people carry with them from generation to generation. Through her art, she yearns to move people into weaving their own story, to get lost in their environment and organic shapes and forms. She utilizes motion and reacting emotion in hopes of making it a perhaps thoroughly vulnerable experience for the viewer, or perhaps for another story to unfold in turn. You can view some of her work at her website, [dashadraws.com](http://dashadraws.com).