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Editor's Note:

What's five times seven?

Welcome to Issue 42 of *Jersey Devil Press*.

— Mike Sweeney

Storybook Romance

Eirik Gumeny

In the bright, garden-choked suburbs of northern New Jersey, there lives a princess. She is six-years old, a spastic fairy in a pink dress and a plastic tiara, dancing and skipping and waving her magic wand at everybody that walks by. And they all wave right back, smiling at the little sweetheart as she laughs and jumps and giggles and rolls across the lawn, playing with the boy next door.

The boy next door, with his cardboard sword and his broomstick stallion, her knight in hand-me-down denim. Doing his absolute best to defend her from the dragons they imagine and the Disney-diluted witches that might try to do them harm.

The parents stand shoulder to shoulder on the sun-porch, joking and whispering. Our brave knight, our little princess. Wouldn't it be funny, they say, see you at the wedding, neighbor. Whisper and kid about first kisses, holding hands, an immaculate prom night. Smiling and waving and never giving an honest thought to the kids in the basement-boxed costumes. To the princess and her unrelenting smile, the one that says she knows she will be beautiful. To the clean-cut knight and his attempts at perfect posturing, the noble stance he tries hard to maintain.

The parents laugh some more and sigh and walk away, back to half-filled ledgers and still-potted plants, to thawing chicken and a busted head gasket. Forget about the cigarette-stained bars and back alleys, about asinine ideas hatched in college dorms and coffeehouses; forget all the beds and couches and cars, the cops and courts and dead friends and ex-wives and the world that always got in the way. Laugh and sigh and walk away.

And the kids keep make-believing, everyone playing pretend right along with them. There are castles to build and trolls to fight

and daylight to burn. The knight doesn't notice the sugar-fed delirium in her tiny green eyes, the unstable fury proclaiming that one day, one distant day, all the men she comes across are in for a world of hurt. And the princess can't see the streak of idealism apparent on his face, the Boy Scout attitude that will get him knocked to the ground time and again.

And the passers-by keep passing by, never giving a second thought to the princess and her grass-stained knees, not concerned about the knight with the tangled hair. About the girl who wants the stars and the boy who wants to give them to her.

Smiling and waving and no one will look long enough to see the restless nights and the heated words, the void she'll try to fill with whatever and whomever she can find, the broken lamp and the bloodied fists and his inability to sleep in an empty apartment. No one will look long enough to see anything, except a princess chasing butterflies and the boy next door who sits there staring after her.

"Storybook Romance" originally appeared online at *amphibi.us* in 2010.

EIRIK GUMENY was a boxing kangaroo who died, tragically and violently, in the ring in 1923, fighting Teddy Roosevelt and a time-traveling Muhammad Ali. Find out more at www.egumeny.com.

Squirrel
Tom Hutt

It happened the morning of Halloween. I was standing on the platform outside Upsal Station, waiting for the train to take me downtown to the same old office job I've had for years and years.

And years.

And years.

I was looking down at my black causal jacket and blue oxford shirt, my black belt and black dress pants, my black socks and black shoes, and I remember thinking: "Is this all there is?" The next thing I knew I was up in a maple tree behind the station watching the other commuters through a screen of yellow leaves. My hands were gripping a branch, except they were no longer hands but paws, each one with four hairy digits and sharp black nails. A bit startled, I stood up on my hind legs and found that my whole body was covered with fur—white on my underside and gray with auburn highlights everywhere else. "How pretty," I thought. "This is an improvement."

And then I felt a strange sensation near my butt and discovered an enormous bushy tail emerging from the base of my spine. I twitched it to the left and then the right, and then gave it a little shake, and I was amazed by how perfectly it controlled my equilibrium. "I've *got* to try this out," I thought, and so I ran up the limb and hopped onto a small branch, and even though it swayed under my weight I felt no fear, no vertigo whatsoever. I scurried back the other way, jumped and clung like Spider-Man to the trunk of the tree. What superpowers I had!

I started scrambling all around the neighborhood, going up and down and across the trees, constantly testing the limits of my new body. At one point I lost my grip. But as I fell earthward my tail

automatically jutted out from my body and slowed my descent, and then just before I hit the ground it swung beneath me to cushion my impact. It was like it had a mind of its own. I was so grateful I gave it a kiss.

All this fun-and-games ended abruptly, however, when I encountered another squirrel who, in a rather angry tone, said: "*Chi chi chi chi! Cha cha cha cha!*" Roughly translated, that means: "Yo, asshole, this is my territory! Can't you smell my piss?"

Thus did I realize I needed to find my own piece of real estate. I started searching everywhere, and *sniffing* everywhere, but I couldn't find a single yard, or vacant lot, or copse of trees that didn't already have some other squirrel's pee sprayed around it. I feared I might have to resort to violence. And then it dawned on me: Wissahickon Park!

"Screw this crowded neighborhood," I thought, "I'm heading for the woods!"

I crossed Lincoln Drive and entered the park near the old paper mill and then made my way northwesterly along the creek. I soon discovered, however, that all the best trees—the oaks and the hickories—had already been claimed. I remember throwing my forepaws in the air and cursing: "There are too many damn squirrels in the world!"

After I cooled down and thought about things more rationally, I figured that perhaps the valley was just too popular, and that I should try my luck on higher ground. So I headed for the ridge and eventually came to a rocky bluff where there stood a large statue of a Quaker. He was wearing a wide-brimmed hat and buckled shoes, and inscribed upon his pedestal was one word: "Toleration." I took it as a good sign. Sure enough, within fifty yards of that statue was an unclaimed birch tree of medium height. I quickly circled it and peed three times.

I spent the rest of that first day foraging for food and then, as the stars came out, I climbed into my tree and curled up inside a

hollow. I was just nodding off to sleep when the distant hooting of an owl sent a shiver through body. "You fool!" I thought. "You forgot all about predators!" Horrific images of talons, and hooked beaks, and torn flesh assaulted my mind. I slept with one eye open all night.

The next morning I immediately commenced work on a proper and safer home, a type of nest called a "drey." I gathered up bunches of twigs, leaves, grass or moss and carried them into my tree, wove the pieces together and then headed back down for more. Up again. Down again. Up again. Down again. I was like a machine—a little furry machine working without fatigue or any sense of the passage of time. The crisp autumn air was flowing through my nostrils and the sunlight was sparkling through the leaves—ah!—it was positively transcendental. It was like being the main character in a book called *Zen and the Art of Drey Construction*.

Over the next few weeks I gathered food for the winter so that by the time of the first snowfall I had close to one hundred caches hidden around my territory. Then came the cold and dreary months in which I had little else to do but nibble away at my stores and nestle in my drey to conserve energy. Finally, the first crocuses popped out of the ground, the days grew warmer, and I naively thought I had survived the hardest part of being a squirrel. It turns out, however, that early spring is the hardest part because the food supply is still dwindling and yet the trees haven't produced anything to eat. Had T. S. Elliot been a squirrel he surely would have opined that March, not April, was the cruelest month. I grew frighteningly thin before the branches finally, mercifully, sprouted edible buds.

And then one warm day I heard the most wonderful sound, a raspy chirping that I instinctively recognized as a mating call. My heart fluttered. I leapt across the ground until I sighted her perched provocatively upon a limb. What fine fur she had. And what a tail! I was in love (or something like that) and was just about to climb up to meet her when I discovered I had competition. Two other

suitors were also approaching the tree and we all eyed one another suspiciously. It looked like a fight was about to break out but then the female took off running, leading us from tree to tree and sidling up and down the trunks at a dizzying pace. In the end she chose one of the others and I was momentarily heartbroken. I had to play this exhausting game many times over the next few days before finally winning the affection of a certain female with lovely, almond-shaped eyes.

The long hot days of summer were not nearly as eventful, although I did upgrade my living quarters by moving into an abandoned den atop an old poplar tree. Otherwise, I literally grew fat and happy thanks to an abundance of rain and the expansion of the food supply.

And then one chilly morning in the middle of autumn I awoke with an urge for adventure. Having grown a little tired of the same old seeds and berries I decided to head for the human neighborhood in search of a garbage can with something more exotic to eat. Shortly after entering the neighborhood, however, I was stunned by the sight of two odd-looking schoolgirls standing at a corner. One girl's face was covered with green and black makeup and the other was wearing a poufy pink dress and carrying a wand. Two women, presumably the mommies, were cradling travel mugs and chatting nearby. "Good lord!" I thought. "I used to be human! I used to have a family!"

I stood upon my hind legs and nervously twitched my whiskers as the faces of my wife and children flooded my consciousness along with a tidal wave of my old human obligations: *The house! The mortgage! The job! The walking of the dog!*

I took off running. I zig-zagged through yards, bolted across driveways, and sprinted up telephone poles. I flirted with death, scurrying across high-voltage cables thirty feet off the ground and making ridiculous leaps from tree to tree, and rooftop to rooftop. After a while my little lungs couldn't take it anymore and I came to

a stop in front of a maple tree. I was panting wildly and I looked up at the yellow leaves spreading out above me and, for a few brief seconds, I recalled the exhilaration of my squirrelhood.

Then I heard a familiar sound, a low rumble followed by the loud hiss of air being released from pneumatic brakes. The train had just pulled into Upsal Station and I was in the queue to board it, shuffling along on hominid legs while my nearly hairless hand clutched my canvas work bag. I entered the car, found an empty seat, and felt the heaviness of my humanity sink into the cushion. The train began to pull away. I looked out the window and, with a twinge of jealousy, I saw a squirrel in a maple tree leaping lightly from branch to branch.

TOM HUTT is a Master of Liberal Arts student at the University of Pennsylvania. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife, two children, and Cocker Spaniel. He sometimes finds himself envying small woodland creatures.

The Puzzle

A.A. Garrison

The first puzzle piece arrived on a torrid July afternoon.

Laura was outside in the summer heat when the piece rained from the sky, directly into her head. After some cursing, she snatched the offending thing from the sidewalk: a wooden jigsaw cut, entirely black. It gave off a light stench of sulfur and was very hard. She looked up, but saw only blue. The puzzle piece went in her hip pocket.

The second came the next day, in her change at the grocery. Laura separated it from the coins and held it dubiously to her face, remembering the first and its mystery. This one, also, was a night-black splatter of wood, of the same approximate size, and stinking quietly of sulfur.

She extended it to the cashier. "The hell is this?"

"Say?" said the elderly man.

Laura shoved the piece closer, enough to reflect in the cashier's glasses. "This! This puzzle piece!"

The cashier looked down, almost cross-eyed. "Yes sir. A puzzle piece, right there."

"You gave it to me. In my change."

The cashier shook his head. "No. Don't believe I did."

Laura sighed as only frustrated women can. She pocketed the puzzle piece and left with her foods.

A new piece came daily, all vaguely sulfurous and depicting darkness. One was lurking in the mail, thickening the pile. One came from a toothless beggar to which Laura had donated, the man only smiling and nodding when questioned. Another was discovered when Laura developed a clogged drain, the plumber fishing it out with a funny look.

Equal parts intrigued and terrified, Laura fetched a tray and began assembling the puzzle.

After three more days, in which the pieces invaded her laundry, a bowl of soup, and her cat's hairball, the puzzle was complete save for its very center, two pieces wide. The first came when Laura got in her car and sensed a tumor in the seat, harassing her tailbone. She felt around it and moaned, knowing the shape. She put it off as long as she could, then butchered the cushion with a knife and removed what she knew she would find. She inspected the seat for long afterward, finding no clue of the piece's origins. She went inside and clicked it home.

One left.

Days passed, and just when Laura thought the final piece wasn't coming, her left forearm took to itching. Within a day it had developed a plaintive and growing ache, like a bad tooth poked. After another, she could swear she felt something moving in there.

The next morning, Laura awoke to find a hard, calcareous growth just below the skin. She at once recognized its complex outline. "No, no," she said, shaking a head that had gone pale. "No, no." She prodded the growth though it hurt to do so. While making the doctor's appointment, her voice showed surprising calm.

The doctor was bald and smocked, with a school-principal intensity. His eyes became whiter during the examination, and he asked many questions Laura could not answer. The doctor scheduled emergency surgery, and after the patient was numbed and opened up, a gasp worked through the operating room, followed by a heavy clink. Laura made it a point that she wanted the excavated object. After more unanswerable questions, she was sewn up and discharged.

Laura studied the incomplete puzzle for a long time, considering its piecemeal arrival and her sanity. She would tease the final piece above its hole, only to draw back and think more; it felt like chess. When she at last fit it home, its instating proved

anticlimactic. Laura was left with a window-sized tableau of perfect black, and her questions.

A.A. GARRISON is a twenty-nine-year-old man living in the mountains of North Carolina. His short fiction has appeared in dozens of small-press zines and anthologies, both in print and online. His first novel, *The End of Jack Cruz*, is now available from Montag Press. He blogs at synchroshock.blogspot.com.

Hey, Brother

Zac Goldstein

When I was in the hospital watching my father die, I couldn't help but think of how much the old man reminded me just then of the first car I'd ever bought with my own money. I'd spent $200 and a case of beer to liberate a beat-to-shit Dodge Shadow from some hick's backyard. The car's hood and passenger door didn't match the rest of the body, and the interior was cracked and musty. It needed new brakes, new tires, new everything. "She don't look like much," the hick told me. "But she'll run." And run she did, often begrudgingly, frequently absorbing my verbal abuse, transporting me to and from classes and my job until I'd finally saved up enough money to put her out of her misery and get myself a truck.

In Dad's case, the only thing telling me *he* was still running was the steady beep of the machine he was hooked up to. I'd always remembered him as a stocky man, nearly neckless, stout-gutted, and wide across the shoulders. But in that bed, he looked like a half-melted statue of himself. The weight was gone, and the remaining colorless skin hung limply on his bones like a sheet. I could scream his name a dozen times and I knew he didn't have a prayer of hearing me. In that room, in that moment, it didn't matter who he was or what he'd done. The sight of him was damn sad to see, and I had seen more than enough.

Escape came by way of elevator ride to the hospital's cafeteria, which at that hour was a ghost town. I spied a cluster of nurses gathered 'round a rectangular table, but I knew better than to bother a nurse—even to say hello—when it wasn't her shift. Being married to one had taught me that much if little else.

The only other soul in the cafeteria was this biker-looking guy hanging around the coffee. He had one of those leather vests that

the bikers wore, and his hair was down to his shoulders (which, truth be told, could have made him any number of things besides a biker). Leaning against the wall, he sipped from a Styrofoam cup and stared steely-eyed at the cafeteria door as if it would burst off its hinges at any moment.

Like the nurses, he looked like someone best left alone, but I'd had my fill of alone. Besides, pissing off a maybe-biker was still an improvement over standing vigil in room 322, so I walked over to the coffee, poured myself a cup, and took up a post right beside him.

"Hey, brother," I said.

He gave me a look like he was trying to figure out if I was drunk or crazy or nothing worth worrying about.

"I know you?" he asked. His voice had a surprising twang.

"Nah," I said. "I'm just here watching my dad die."

"That's tough shit," the biker said.

"Yeah, well, he was a prick." I sipped the coffee, which was bad even by hospital standards. It took two sugars just to bring it to drinkable, and I doubted it'd have much kick. No wonder nurses were grouchy all the time. Although in my ex-wife's case, that may have had more to do with me.

"You know how it is," I told the biker. "Guy works a shit job for twenty years and takes it out at home. Everything's everyone else's fault. The world's out to get him. You ever know anyone like that?"

The biker finished his coffee, pitched it in the trash, and turned his attention once more from me to the door. What or whomever he was waiting for hadn't shown yet, so he probably saw no harm in putting up with me a little while longer. "A few," he said, quietly, at last.

"The funny thing is I got the worst of it, but I'm the only one who's here. Mom's gone, of course, but my sisters? My brother? Forget it."

The biker said something that I couldn't quite make out on account of someone paging one of the doctors over the P.A. the moment he opened his mouth. It sounded like it might have been "answer," in which case he was fucked because I had none.

"Is it cancer?" he repeated after the announcement had finished.

"Oh," I said. "Yeah. Cancer. It started…I forget where, but it's all over him now. Man's barely even a man anymore, ya know?"

The biker nodded solemnly, and I thought that's all I would get out of him, that he'd go back to door-watching and threaten me to leave him alone. Instead, he leaned further back against the wall and stretched and drew in his breath.

"Listen, bud," he said. "I don't want to tell you your business, but if I were you, I'd go up there and grab a pillow and finish it. That's what I would do."

I waited for him to say more, but he didn't. His suggestion wound its way through the gears of my sleep-starved brain, setting off ethical tripwires by the dozen. Part of me suspected he was right, that anything short of that was just dicking around and biding time that needn't be bided. But could I really do something like that? *Should* I really do something like that? Did the beatings, the fits of rage, the drunken declarations that I was a mistake and would never amount to anything, the time he damn near broke my arm, the fact that he couldn't even lift a finger now, did all that make it mercy or revenge or some emotional chimera I struggled to define?

"Right," I said at last, suddenly anxious to leave the topic. "Anyway, what're you here for?"

The biker smacked his lips and shook his head. "Couldn't tell ya," he said. "Personal business."

"Personal business?" I asked. "After what I just told you?" I must have sounded like some kind of jilted lover, but fuck it, I thought we'd had a moment.

"That's you, though, innit?" the biker said. He stared me down with the same intensity he'd shown the door a moment earlier. It was a 72-point-font declaration that our conversation was finished.

Stung as I was, I knew, as I left the cafeteria, that he was right. That was me: forever drowning the world in my troubles. "It's like you have no off button for anything bad," my then-wife once told me. "It's not even your fault. It's not even something you know you're doing half the time. But Christ, honey, I just can't take it anymore."

Neither, it turned out, could anyone else. The elevator ride back up wasn't nearly as desolate at the ride down had been. I filed in next to a family of four, the parents young and fit, one tike cradled in the mother's arms, the other hand-in-hand at the father's side.

"Anyone ever been stuck in one of these?" I asked, the words fleeing my lips before I thought to lock them in. A post-chili bowel rush would have been a better conversation starter. As the ensuing awkward silence stretched the seconds between floors to eons, the mother's face went tomato red and the father pulled his child closer. My only saving grace was that the kids were too young to comprehend and panic at my suggestion.

Maybe I really couldn't help it. But then again, maybe the old man couldn't either. He'd been sick for weeks, if not months, before he finally called me; that's how stubborn he was. "Listen," he'd said, his voice reduced to a wheeze. "I know none of you want jack to do with me, but I need you. If this goes the way I think, then somebody's gotta settle my affairs." That was how he put it: no "I'm dying, son" or "I'm sorry." He knew I wouldn't want to come but that I would anyway.

Some psychologist—maybe Freud, maybe Jung—once said the most terrifying thing was to accept yourself completely. If the old man had truly crossed that bridge, then whatever choice I made when I got back to 322 wouldn't be any choice at all.

ZAC GOLDSTEIN is a New Jersey native turned Southern exile. He holds a BA in Journalism from The College of New Jersey and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, where he served as fiction editor of *The Greensboro Review*. He currently teaches at Guilford Technical Community College.

Bazaar

y.t. sumner

I didn't really think it through.

Not really. I just swallowed as many of Mum's sleeping pills as I could and lay down on the couch.

I bet they did one of those huge assemblies at school where the girls who called me a slut cried and hugged each other and the teachers handed out pamphlets on teen suicide prevention. I bet Trish Baker with her bruises and junkie dad wished she had the guts to do it too.

It doesn't matter now that I'm here. Like most things I did when I was alive, I kind of regret not thinking it through. Like having sex with Trish's dad. It wasn't so great but it was better than nothing. If I was religious I probably would of thought I would go to Hell because of all the guys I fucked. But I'm not religious. I kind of wavered in that grey shade of not thinking about it like most people I knew. I didn't expect this.

There was a moment, though, that made it almost worth it. There was no white light or spooky tunnels. Just the deepest sleep I'd ever had. It was like sleeping for the first time. Like all those other times had been practice to get to this real moment of sleep.

And then I woke up.

I finished all of my stories in English class with that. Every single one would have that last line. Mrs. Payne would make us read them out in class and when I read mine and got closer to the end kids would start to giggle. My mouth dried up and the words cracked my lips but I kept going. Mrs. Payne always wrote nice things on the stories I handed in and so for her I kept reading. Until I looked up and saw her laughing behind her hand.

I was surprised to see her here the other day. She looked older than I remembered and her throat had a bruise around it I'd seen on others here. She was browsing through a vintage broche section across from my stall. She was holding the pins to her chest and sticking it out a little to see in the mirror. She looked like a chicken. I remembered she had a kid with leukemia and that she left the school to look after him.

She looked up from her pin clasped to her chest as if she could faintly hear the memory too and looked right at me.

It's a shame to see you at the Bazaar, Deanna.

I tried not to look at her purple throat.

Same, I guess.

She put down the broche and came over to my stall.

You have some beautiful dresses here.

I looked at the rack of theatre costumes. They were all labeled from the plays they were from.

Do you want one?

She recoiled and said that wasn't the way it worked.

I wanted to ask her what I was supposed to do but instead I blurted out something worse.

Is your son here too? Because I'm kind of hoping to see my Dad.

She stepped back towards me.

Deanna, I'm sorry about that time I laughed.

I said it was alright, but thought, why do people always say sorry when it's too late?

Then I realized what she meant.

My Dad isn't here is he?

She shook her head and teared up as she told me this place was just for us and then walked away in proper tears. I guess her son wasn't here either.

I didn't move from my stall. I decided I wasn't going to believe her and then I saw the boy I lost my virginity to. Jay did it in his family pool three years ago, just after Dad's car accident.

The amount of people I knew here was making me nervous. Jay used to write morbid poetry about death. He told me after we did it that life would never measure up. I didn't listen at the time. He was always saying weird shit and I was too focused on how gross and painful the sex had been.

When he passed my stall I wanted to take his hand and touch his pale blue face. I wanted to tell him I finally got it.

But I didn't.

I hid behind the rack of costumes from a production of *Streetcar Named Desire*, I hid and watched him pass and knew I was even more of a coward here that I was in life.

I spent the days sorting through the jewelry and the nights rearranging the costumes. Every time I thought about going out into the Bazaar it made my heart beat like crazy. And that was stupid, my heart had stopped in the ambulance on the way to the hospital but I had my fingers pressed to my throat trying to feel the rhythm when two little girls walked in to my stall. Blue dresses, ribbons in blonde hair. They even had black Mary Jane shoes.

One of them picked up a little ceramic horse I hadn't noticed. As soon as she touched it the words leapfrogged from my mouth.

Be careful!

She didn't look at me and I cleared my throat.

It's delicate. You'd hate to break him, right?

The girls shrugged together and she put the horse back on the ledge in an offhand way. They both stared at my wrists and the horse grabber asked why my wounds were closed.

I looked at my arms and thought it wouldn't be proper to tell children about the times I tried before so I told them they were from a long time ago.

We did it in the lake.

I felt my phantom heart almost stop at the singsong unison of their speech.

When Mum and Dad divorced they said they would take one of us each. The water hurt our chests but it was better than being split up.

I wasn't sure what to say. I felt as if I should somehow cover their shame and so I asked if they'd like a blanket, because I hadn't noticed it before, but their dresses were wet and smelled musty, like wet clothes left in the washing machine.

They said no and left the stall, but one of them turned and said I shouldn't worry about the horses because everything here was already broken.

I walked over to the shelf and saw the horse's mane had broken off. I sat down in the stall and made a little bed out of Blanche Dubois' dress. I curled up and wondered if Trish's dad thought that I did it because of him. If it was something that made him lose sleep. I wondered if Mrs. Payne still felt bad about laughing at me. I wondered if Mum would end up here too. I snuggled into the dress and thought that was a terrible thing to think.

So I stopped thinking and tried to concentrate on the sound of my stopped heartbeat.

YT SUMNER likes words and people that write them. People that listen to them. People that read them. Eavesdroppers. Stutterers. Silvertongues. She was born in the UK, raised all over Australia and settled happily in Melbourne. Her short stories have appeared in various literary journals, anthologies and magazines and she's currently coaxing a motley group of them into a collection. Visit her at lambeatswolf.wordpress.com and then send her a postcard.

Back and to the Left

Ryan Werner

Aside from his relations with Marilyn Monroe and being the most powerful man in the United States for a little bit, JFK wasn't the luckiest guy around. He was accident prone, more than anything. Still, he kept his humor. He'd call me a few times a year and say something like, "I just slammed my hand in a car door. First I get shot in the head and now this."

But he's dead now. For real this time.

A few months before that car ride in Dallas, John decided he didn't want to be president anymore, which would have been a hassle in and of itself, but he also decided he didn't want to be JFK anymore, either. There's a paper-trail a few miles long hidden away somewhere, but after it was all said and done, we managed to relocate him to Florida with fewer than half a dozen people knowing about it. He loved Scrabble and was big into anagrams, so he took the name John Zing, which, combined with the words "faked tenderly," have all the same letters as the name John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I can only imagine how long he thought about all this before he finally brought it up to me.

Part of this is a history lesson, and part of it is just history. The guy who got shot was an ex-marine who figured it was a service to the country to let JFK have his way. A little plastic surgery later and he looked good enough to be in public for a few minutes before we shot him. While Jackie was picking up what she thought was the top of her husband's skull, her husband was getting some reconstructive surgery of his own, reshaping his chin, filing down his cheekbones, bending his nose around like silly putty.

Flash forward several decades and John dies of pneumonia. He was in his nineties. He had a pretty Cuban wife—his way of

making up for the Bay of Pigs, I guess—and some kids. (He'd send me some pictures every once in a while. That jaw. Goddamn.) Everyone got what they wanted, really. Jackie became a symbol of feminine strength and didn't have a philandering husband anymore. Lyndon Johnson swore in as president. John was free. This is all his rationalizing. He told me that even America got what it wanted: a tragedy to unite it. "Only when consumed with grief can people wrap their arms around one another and be complete," he said. "Like fingers rolling into a fist."

"Back and to the Left" 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.

Church

M.R. Lang

After the pastor who ran the church died, a local couple bought it and renovated it into a 24-hour diner. They took the crucified Christ down and hung a large reprint of Munch's *Madonna*. Under the painting is where the counter was built. The two small rooms to either side were converted into kitchens. The pews were all taken out and replaced with picnic tables. The couple added booths to the walls on either side of the church's main room.

I started coming here over the summer. While driving home from a party one night, I got a craving for a burger. I pulled into the old church's parking lot to turn around and go back to town when I noticed a sign above the doors advertising tuna melts for $3.99 on Tuesdays. I decided to check it out, and I've been coming almost every night since then.

During the day, you can see wooden boxes all around the church. Underneath the boxes is where the stained glass windows are. Inside the boxes are floodlights. After the sun goes down, the owners turn the lights on. Aside from a few lamps scattered around inside, there is no other light except for a dim spotlight pointed towards the painting.

The first night I was there, I went down the aisle to the counter and waited for someone to come out from the kitchen. The menu was written on a blackboard behind the counter. They never have any dishes all that special, your standard affair. While waiting, I looked up at the painting and started to stare. It's an odd choice of artwork for a diner. The image doesn't exactly inspire hunger. It didn't take long for a woman to come out of the kitchen. She was in her sixties and wearing an apron and a hairnet.

"What can I get for you, Sugar?"

"Burger?" I said it that way you do when you're somewhere new and not sure what they have.

"How you want it?" She had a weak smile on her. Genuine happy-like.

"Medium-well. No tomato."

"Be ready in 'bout fifteen minutes, Honey. Want anything to drink?" She wrote it up on a ticket without taking her eyes off me.

"Pepsi?" Again, more a question than a request.

"Go ahead and grab a bottle from the 'fridge," she said, pointing to a small refrigerator leaning against the wall. "That'll be five fifty. No credit cards or checks." I handed her a five and two quarters and she told me to have a seat wherever I found one.

Nicole was a punk rock chick in the mid-`90s. In the summer of 1999, when she was nineteen, she decided to give up her punk rock ideals. "Raging against the machine sounds good," she tells new friends, "but doesn't mean a whole lot when you're just waiting in line at McDonald's." She'd just finished her teaching degree the summer I met her. She decided to help her parents with their green house before finding a teaching job. She stops by the diner every night for a steak salad and glass of red wine and still dyes strips of her hair bright blue.

In the front of the diner, on each side of the doors, are confession booths. It seemed like an odd thing to leave in, so I went to check them out. The door where the priest would sit was locked, but the other doors were open. Inside were slips of paper and a few pens. It was set up so you could write a confession on a slip of paper and slip it into the booth behind the locked door. There was a laminated sign taped to the wall inside saying you could leave your name off. On the first of each month, the owners take all the confessions and stick them to a wall in the diner. If there was a name on the

confession, they'd cut it off. There are more than a hundred stuck to the walls of the church.

Dan was one of the diner's first patrons. He walked in one Sunday morning, not knowing the church was now a diner. He was only in town visiting friends and meant to go to church. The owners told him he was more than welcome to kneel at a table and pray to the sketched Madonna. He did. He comes in every Sunday to pray, then stays for the day. He wears an old Army jacket every time he comes in. If you ask if he was in the service he'll ignore you. But he still keeps his hair short and never slouches.

When my burger was ready, the woman brought the burger right over to me. She sat it down in front of me and waited. I thought she maybe wanted a tip, so I started to reach for my pocket.

"No, no. I want to know how it is," she said, still smiling.

"Oh." I took a bite, chewed, and stopped. "Wow." There was no emotion in my voice. The burger was so good, it stunned me of all emotion. I finished the bite and looked up at the woman, "This is excellent."

"Thank you, Sweetie. My name's Fran." She turned and walked back to one of the kitchens.

Tom won't come to the diner at night. He claims the bright light coming in from the stained glass gives him vertigo, even though he's never seen the diner at night. Nobody knows too much about Tom. Each time someone new asks him the same question, he gives a different answer. The only constant is that his name is "Tom." One night, he claimed to know a guy who did too much acid in the `70s and is stuck in a mental hospital now, because he believes he's

a full glass of water, and if you touch him he'll spill his water on the floor. Once, he told us he knew Robert Redford back when he was still cool.

I went into the bathroom before I left that first time. In the men's room, someone had been drawing a comic on the tiled walls. A detailed comic about a man attending Duke University's branch in Hell. He had friends in the form of devils and demons, and Satan taught English Lit. The man in the comic lived in a dorm but is originally from Ohio. There was enough art work on the wall to fill three full issues and the fourth was started. Either the original artist or someone else had started to go back and color the comic in. I think with small tipped Sharpies. I heard recently that the comic is being published by an independent company.

Ryan used to steal cars and move them to the next block. His crowning achievement was the night he moved all the cars from one block a block north in just under an hour. He never stole a car or anything from inside anyone else's car, except for a false nail that had fallen off someone's finger. It was black and had a skull and cross bones painted on it. He poked a small hole in it and put a string through the hole. He wears it around his neck to this day. His girlfriend once told me he doesn't even take it off in the shower. Ryan works as a teacher's assistant at the state college. He teaches students, and some teachers, how to cross wires and build remotes to open other people's garages.

Just before I left that night, I went into the confession booth and wrote down, "I didn't wash my hands." I didn't think it made that big of an impression on me. But at lunch the next day, I needed a burger. Two days later, I was back again. When it was time to go

back to college, I decided to find a job instead. I've been working for a landscaping company mowing lawns. Most of my money comes from tips. At least half of my money is spent on food at the diner. I can say in all honesty that this is the happiest I have ever been. Some days, I just sit at a table sipping a drink and watching the people hanging out. Some of them just watching me. Most of us regulars could tell you who wrote each confession on the walls, even if we've never spoken to everyone else.

A few of us are planning a party for some time in the coming months. Three days without leaving the church, without sleeping, and without any connection to the outside world. Meaning, no TV, radio, or cell phones. That's as far as we've gotten. We don't know what we'll do once we all get here. We probably won't plan anything, either.

If you're ever driving down the street and see an old church with wooden boxes stuck to the walls, advertising cheap tuna melts on Tuesdays, come on in.

M.R. LANG exists. He exists no more or less than any other. Except that one guy. He existed a lot. Man. His collection of fiction and poetry exists in two different forms on Amazon.com, under the title *Illiterate Sophism*.

Slow Betty

Jason Shults

Betty swept the streets around ten each morning because of the community service sentence. She was sixty-seven years old and lived in a big old house just off Main. She kept bees in her backyard and grew marijuana in a dozen bright ceramic pots on her front porch. It was a regular jungle up there. Some thought the fact she grew it on the front porch was a sign of defiance, but those who knew her knew she wasn't so much a rebel as a fatalist, who chose to keep her secrets on public view, since—in her experience, at least—they always ended up there anyway. The sheriff came by once every couple months to round her up.

Betty didn't mind the community service. Sweeping left her mind free to roam. She kept one eye on the street, spying whatever came within the purview of her broom. She would often find things of interest. There were the normal things, of course, like Cheetos bags and candy wrappers, and more used condoms than you'd think a town could possibly expend, but also there were nice things too, things that stoked imagination. Once she found a note that said only, "I called you, what happened?" which set Betty on a fanciful swoon that lasted her the whole day. And once she found a medical bill from the abortion clinic over in Clarkton that, clear as day, had Sylvia Bunton's name on it. Sylvia Bunton was the ugliest woman in town, both in looks and personality, and who in holy hell would get that woman pregnant was a mystery for the ages, Betty thought.

Today she'd found a wedding ring. It was a man's ring, square and heavy and gold with a nest of diamonds on top. She pictured the man who'd lost it. He'd be heavyset and swarthy, tallish and a little mean-looking, someone who thought himself a pussycat at

heart but wasn't, since the heart he had couldn't understand what love was or the responsibilities that came with it. She'd swept this same stretch only yesterday, and so the ring was new, tossed off within the past day, and she wondered if the man who tossed it belonged to the town, or was just some passerby who'd driven a week or more in a stupor, on the run from some injustice: marital, perceived, maybe real. She wondered if he'd happened upon the town as he was driving, happened upon Jimson's Bar, happened to drink himself to a state of resolution, so that when he'd left the bar near two a.m. and walked back toward his car, probably right this way, he fiddled with the ring without thinking of it, had been fiddling with it all night, slipped it right that moment from his finger, felt the weight of it in his hand, too heavy to carry another step, and let it drop to the ground among the gutter-bound leaves where it now lay.

He'd be asleep, still, in his car. She could go find him. She could tell him that he's better off, that his wife was better off, that people are a selfish lot, and it's good he found that out. She might go do that, or she might not, but she wouldn't give the ring back. She'd sell it at the pawn shop in Clarkton and buy a few new starters with the proceeds.

JASON SHULTS's stories have appeared or are scheduled to appear in *The Adirondack Review* and *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, among others. He has also been published in several anthologies.

Inspiration's Well

Kevin Tosca

Jamie Jones didn't know what he was, willful or weak, free or slave, but he knew he couldn't flatulate in public places, couldn't urinate next to other men, couldn't tell the middle-aged peacock women he served carcasses and martinis to go fuck themselves even when they made him hurt, and they always made him hurt, and the hurt wasn't like the hurt of those physical and mental blockages, either, but the inside kind of hurt, the kind of hurt that hurts in those un-locatable places where it always hurts the most.

The inspirations were always there, however, the thoughts about doing other somethings, acting otherly, striking off down the other paths. These equaled the life moments to seize or to shun but what did Jamie Jones do with these inspirations? Jamie Jones did nothing with these inspirations.

He thought though, and he felt shame. He thought often about his do-nothingness and he burned with shame.

What he wanted was freedom. He wanted to be free. He wanted to be a free man who could do those bodily things and more, much more, those things being, he knew, vulgar things.

One day, after a particularly horrid lunch shift doused with plenty of thinking and hot shame, and after he had ordered and consumed a particularly good triple Americano at Marino's, his favorite café, he was driving east along I-84 when a sad song came on the radio from when he was a sad teenager, a tragic song he had loved when he had first discovered the tragedy of love, and the mountains off in the Washington distance looked amazing, looked so green and high and triumphant, looked so much greener and higher and more triumphant than usual, and he wanted to yell *merde* at the top of his lungs and he did it. Just like that. Just like

that he did it and it felt so good in his lungs and in his brain and he felt so strong and right and peaceful afterwards that he did it five more times and he only thought, just the tiniest bit, about how silly he must have looked to the other drivers. He only wondered for the quickest of quickly passing seconds if they could hear him and how mortifying that would be if they could.

Hmm, he thought, as he shed work clothes onto his apartment's floor. That was interesting.

By yelling the French word for shit as loud as he could on an otherwise unremarkable Wednesday afternoon he realized he hadn't, for once, killed the moment, the thought, the inspiration, with words or interpretive, analytical nonsense. He hadn't let the passage of time stomp his inspiration out of existence, hadn't let it, his inspiration, be ground into the endlessly tramped sidewalk of do-nothingness.

That night a phrase came to him. One phrase came to him and kept on coming to him in that inexplicable way the words and the phrases always come to a man. It stuck, this phrase. This phrase came to him and it stuck to him and, one could say, it haunted him.

It was, yes, another inspiration, and Jamie now wondered if this was how inspiration worked, if, once having given yourself up to one inspiration, no matter how juvenile or absurd, the others would just burst on through.

He could make sense of the words of this new inspiration, the sentiment therein, but he rarely used them, absolutely never assembled them in this way when he did. It was, furthermore, vulgar, even more vulgar than his first shouted and inspired word had been. And though he did want to tell the middle-aged peacock ladies to do lots of vulgar things with their vulgar rear ends he believed vulgarity a cheap and cowardly form of expression, one he wanted to rid from his spoken repertoire. But wanting, in his usual ways of doing things, involved much mental to and fro, much deliberation, much list making and much death of inspiration.

The phrase in question, the vulgar phrase rifling through and picking at Jamie's brain was this: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

There was something subversive `50s about it, something Beckett might have scribbled down in a notebook and later sold to collectors, something that appealed to Jamie from head to toe. It pleased him, the him him, so he gave himself up to it and became the phrase's puppet, as it were, using it in every interaction with strangers that followed. It was all he could say. It was all he wanted to say.

At New Seasons, to the warm-hearted cashier after the receipt and groceries had been handed to him: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

At 7-Eleven, to another cashier after picking up a Kombucha Tea and a candy bar: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

In the library, with a stack of foreign films next to his armpit: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

In the restrooms of Hawthorne restaurants and bars (urinating freely next to whomever!): Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

In the waiting room of his hairstylist, his dentist, his doctor: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

When a telemarketer, when anyone, called: Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

He said it everywhere and everytime to everyone. Yes, he got fired the first day he used the phrase at Enoki, the restaurant where he worked (the word combination does not scream, does not even whisper, customer service), but there was compassion in Cindy's eyes when she did the firing, and Jamie consoled himself by imagining how creative the inspiration followers of this world needed to get with their employment options anyway.

He continued to speak and he continued to use the plural, baboons, always, and he always said it so matter-of-factly, so earnestly, that not once did someone ever again take offense. Plenty of funny looks, sure, but those looks were never the angry kind.

Rather, they were the loveful, hopeful kind of looks, the kind of looks closer to love and hope. Yes, love *plus* hope. Longing!

It occurred to Jamie in an instant, just as the phrase had come to him instantaneously, that this was to be his calling. It was a strange calling, true, but all callings, by definition, probably were a tad cracked.

He would have liked to have known the mechanics and the rules of this new inspiration business, but there were no manuals and no managers to weigh you down with them. This, too, was probably a good thing. What he had learned was that the flood of inspiration had not come as he thought it might, nor had this particular inspiration run its course as *merde* had, so he told himself he needed to open himself up wide and profit fully. It could be a long, long while before inspiration number three.

He would wait, but in the meantime he would act.

Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

He didn't know if he were one hundred percent free but the world felt like a better place.

Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

He still thought, but the shame was almost gone.

Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

The important thing was that he was needed in this world.

Shit on you you cocksucking baboons.

He imagined the universe, and all its mysterious laws, smiling.

KEVIN TOSCA's stories have been recently published in *Midwestern Gothic*, *The MacGuffin*, *Thin Air*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *The Legendary* and elsewhere. He lives in Europe. Read more at www.kevintosca.com.

On the cover:

"Forgotten"
Octavia Hunter

OCTAVIA HUNTER, an award-winning photographer, received her BFA degree from the Film Department at the University of Oregon. In high demand for her portrait, wedding and food photography, she is based in Portland, OR as well as traveling all over the United States and abroad. Devoted to the environment and healthful living, Octavia made a bold move in 2011 and traded in her car for a bicycle and has immersed herself in viewing her city through a new, less-rushed perspective, one that allows photographic opportunities at every turn.

Combining stop motion animation has allowed her to blend art forms beyond the still, and she is currently a film Director of Photography, working on an interactive portrait series and book, titled *Letting Go*, and an awards ceremony in New York. Her website is octaviahunter.com