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## Editor's Note:

Really, JDP has always been a four-year-old. They haven't made a flashlight we can't turn into a light saber. We occasionally say something profound, but then almost completely by accident. We can dress ourselves, but still prefer to run around without pants on. And we like the parts where Batman fights best.

So it's appropriate that we officially turn four with this month's issue.

None of us knows how long this crazy whirligig will keep defying the space-time continuum, so enjoy it while it's here. Whether it's four more years, four decades, or just enough time to match the *Enterprise's* five-year mission, treasure JDP while it provides a home to the weird, whacky, and enigmatic.

There's more weepy stuff to say, but it's probably quicker just to go watch the end of *Serenity* and insert "lit mag" whenever Mal talks about his ship to River.

Just try not to get impaled like Wash.

— Mike Sweeney

# There is No Joy between the Last Thing and the Next Thing

Ryan Werner

The reason we drink poison with water and not liquor is the same reason I've wrecked four cars that were mine and two cars that weren't.

If I say *before I quit drinking* people take it as *when I thought I was fun*, but I never thought I was fun. I just liked things better when they were slippery.

Eugene went to the meetings with me. Years back, he'd set the pace for our drinking and then stopped on his own when he found out he'd actually be able to live through it. It's nothing he'd ever say, but there were always bigger problems for him to deal with, ones that couldn't be defined by medicine or helped by meetings and, therefore, became something to alternately feed and fix.

Maybe devotion isn't a circle, but it's definitely a shape.

The way I got Eugene to agree to go with me was just by asking him. His only stipulation was that we go to one in a school, not in a church.

"I'd rather cram my body into a desk than cram my mind into a God," he said.

TV shows and movies appropriate AA meetings just fine. I drank mediocre coffee and spoke meekly at a podium. Eugene did the same, making it up as he went, becoming his own extra in a movie about his life. He was Todd from Ohio. He accidentally killed a man, got away with it. He divorced models. Models divorced him. He hit bottom after bottom like splitting an atom, finding all that stuff inside it and wondering when it will end.

Regardless of where the end was at, I was pretty sure Eugene wouldn't find it in the truth. So I watched him stand in front of

strangers and lie, Todd from Ohio, Eugene's personal martyr. Or maybe, I guess, the other way around.

The one thing about Todd from Ohio that isn't a lie is Eugene accidentally killing a man. It's true that he spent a lot of years attempting to remove rage from his first five or six reactions to any given situation, but this wasn't one of those times.

Someone pulled a gun on Eugene and he pulled it right back. This was outside a bar called The Sweet Spot. Tacky people liked the irony of it. Lots of Hawaiian shirts, lots of drugs and weapons either stuffed inside or strapped around tall, loose-knit socks.

As much as all the movies and TV shows got AA meetings right, they got it all wrong about shooting someone in the face. Eugene did it and watched the guy bleed out and twitch. Maybe this was just the movies, too, curiosity layered from base-level humanity on up, but I think it was just Eugene being satisfied with himself for realizing he had to stand still and wait.

When they called on me to testify, I told them I didn't know Eugene to have a history of violence. What I meant was that spent knuckles and a dozen years of broken glass don't add up to bank statements or toe tags, but, there they are.

Eugene tells me that some rats have built up an immunity to the poison, how us doing the same thing is like teaching our skin to deflect knives, which is something people say when they're scared, when they're trying not to be scared.

Eugene doesn't know what's enough for him, so he keeps adding, keeps taking away.

On the table in front of us are the poison and an eyedropper and two shot glasses with water in them. "I think a few drops each

should do it, but I don't know how big," Eugene says. "Like a raindrop or a teardrop?"

I ask him which one's smaller but he gets nervous, rushes to put a fat drop in each glass.

I say, "Depends on the weather, depends on the eye."

I thought it'd be different when Eugene got all that settlement money, pretended to fall over a pile of shingles and off a roof to cash in on his insurance, but the only thing that's changed is the accessories. He buys new stuff and I get the old stuff. I've got three toasters at my apartment and no bread.

Because I'm the one whose legs never needed to be pieced back together, I'm the one who drives Eugene's pregnant girlfriend, London, to the hospital for her checkups. The hospital is named after a saint, but they're all just boys' names and girls' names to me.

London tells me it's Saint Luke. She was raised Catholic, so she tells me that and then about Luke the reformed Greek gentile and Luke the stalwart companion of Roman prisoner Paul. Luke of squalor, Luke of social justice.

"Luke thought God was like Robin Hood," London says. "In Luke's gospel is where Mary says that God brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

She's thinking rich like McDonalds, but I'm thinking rich like Eugene, pregnant girlfriend, money as a dead end, the same face on the same head with the same brain inside it forever, just waiting to be sent away empty.

Two boys died at the park a few years ago. It wasn't exactly murder but it wasn't exactly solved, either. I don't know what happened, but after it all went down the city put a mile of fence around anything taller than a sapling and then sent out telepathic



messages to parents to make sure they give me dirty looks for smoking near the bathrooms.

Eugene never wanted to go to the park before the boys died, but now he calls me up all the time and asks for a ride. The exercise he says he needs isn't much. He's got a cane with a little snowglobe on the end and he thinks it's funny, either out-of-season funny or kitsch funny or both, to grind his way through the park with it.

The spot we park in is as far away from the deaths as I can get and still actually be considered near the park. I do this every time and keep hoping it means that we won't make it to the old nasty part, but that never happens. There is no joy between the last thing and the next thing. I never get used to it, never stop thinking of things that aren't ghosts but aren't like me or Eugene, either.

I ask Eugene if he knows that I hate going here and he doesn't mock me or ask me if I'm afraid, just tells me that I can go if I want, that he can call a cab. This isn't a bad wife trick. He has no interest in where either one of us rank in importance to the other.

"I have the money and the time," he says. "I can call a cab from Chicago if I want to."

I stay. When we make it to the rocks where the boys died, there are four men playing cards next to the big lookout over the river. I want nothing to do with them, but Eugene gets in on the game, loses ten bucks and then fifty.

I have about seventy dollars on me and then I have it in my hand, ready to give—loan, he says, and means it and has the funds, so why not?—to Eugene. He sets the cane down in front of the men and says, "This is worth \$200. You can part it out and melt it down and get at least a third of that. Let it count for thirty bucks. He's got \$70 more for an even hundred."

This goes through. We bet our frightened money on the idea of *too late* and win.

The men stand up and shove Eugene to the ground. I help him up and they run with what they hadn't really lost, see I'm not following and slow to a walk.

One of them throws Eugene's cane up into a tree. It takes me a minute, lots of hiking up my pants and retying my boots, but I make it up there and get it down. I hand it to Eugene who takes it and arcs it back like a crescent moon, brings the snowglobe-end down on the rocks. There's no explosion of glass and glitter, just a crack like a heavy click and the sound of whatever water isn't the river beyond us, Todd from Ohio back for the view.

London is having triplets. That means an extra 700 calories a day—300 for the first kid and 200 for each one after that. She starts bringing herself a milkshake home from work. She grills whole chickens and puts kale on everything.

Eugene and I are up to half poison, half water. It took a week or so after the first big shot for anything bad to happen, but then my gums started bleeding a bit one morning. Eugene gets nosebleeds all the time now.

We've both got bruises on our forearms, the fat of our ribs. I'm afraid of shock. Eugene's afraid of not nothing, but nothing happening, always.

I've been using Eugene and London's computer to read about symptoms and reactions. We eat more bananas, vitamin K and anything that helps with blood clotting. The bruises are from minor hemorrhaging, little leaks we've sprung inside our guts.

London asks what I'm doing on their computer all the time and I tell her I'm looking up ways to help her. "Wear biking shorts for more support and to help with stretch marks," I say. "Get more pillows for your bed and nap after big meals."

The next time I see her she's traded her old basketball shorts for tight green spandex. I look at Eugene and he looks back. I start coughing, swallow and taste blood. London stands up to get me some water and she's huge above me, bursting out from her middle in what seems like all directions.

After a couple years of being clean, I stopped going to meetings and just had Eugene help me instead. He said he was step thirteen. I'm not an idiot or a sucker for a clever phrase, but there's appeal in the next level of anything.

It's still a process. I go over to his house and London is gone, out with friends or who knows what. Nothing wild. Eugene is sitting in the living room with the lights all on and a hunting show on mute on the television. It's all he watches.

"I've got another drinking lesson for you," Eugene says to me, propping himself up on an old generic cane, the kind stunt elderly have when they're extras in a show.

I follow him to the kitchen and the poison is already out on the counter. He makes his way to the fridge and grabs a beer, pulls two shot glasses from the cupboard.

He says, "There are always two choices, but they aren't always right and wrong." He fills one of the shot glasses full with beer and one full with poison. "You're going to drink one of these and I'm going to drink the other. You pick."

"Eugene," I say. "Eugene."

"Sometimes the only question is *how do you want things to fall apart?*"

"And sometimes it's not," I tell him, but here I go, reaching for the both of them.

Eugene with a temper. Eugene looking on the ground for teeth he's knocked out of men both better and worse than him. Eugene breaking a cokehead's arm. Eugene lighting a dumpster on fire, just because. Eugene smashing side mirrors off cars. Eugene jumping off tables at bars and kicking out the ceiling fans. Eugene sitting down at a jury's doorstep.

Eugene pretending to fall off a roof. Eugene in a hospital bed. Eugene part steel. Eugene with never enough company. Eugene at a Chi-Chi's with a thick librarian. Eugene at a concert with a chain smoking belly-dancer. Eugene at coffee shop with a tall woman with a history of minor league basketball and a name from far away.

Eugene poking a hole in his own condom. Eugene jaundiced from poison.

Eugene and me, undone and done, back and forth and on and on.

I look up a recipe for elk meat and then go buy some. Everyone needs to protein. London keeps trying to help me in the kitchen and I keep reaching up, taking her by the shoulders and sitting her back down at the table. Eugene just sits at the table, looks like seven dollars.

He goes by me, pulls out three shotglasses and I put them back and neither of us says anything about it. When I finally set the elk on the table, it doesn't outlast the smell of it in the air. We devour it like it had once chased us.

Filling up gives London a memory that she mostly uses to recall that she has a mouth. I listen to her talk about TV shows where people lose an arm and vanilla Coke with real sugar and playing basketball in Montana.

"There was a girl named Ava who was known for swinging her elbows. We called her The Helicopter. The last game we played against her team left one girl with a minor concussion and three others sitting out the rest of the game. She would pay this time, I decided."

London is clearing off the table and I let her because I feel as full as she looks. But then I begin helping anyway as she says, "Ava drove up the lane and I was bigger than her by a mile. I posted one foot back and gave her a shoulder in the ribs. It hit her so dead

center that when I stood back up she was just hanging over my shoulder like I had captured her and dragged her away."

I'm behind a seated Eugene, reaching for his plate with London in front of him doing the same. She's going on about Ava, her prize, her big shoot-down of The Helicopter.

I see Eugene's elbow come back and a fist at the end of it going right for the triplets. London's belly is the moon in front of him and he's going to clear the sky. I lean in, lock my arm around his, bicep to bicep and not budging, and London chatters away, thinks I tripped on the leg of a chair or the rug and caught myself on Eugene.

"I had to think to myself," London says, resting the stack of dishes on her hip. "Do I set her down lightly?"

I'm sitting in the living room watching the dogs fight over a soup bone shaped like a skull when London's water breaks. I get her to the car and then come back for Eugene. He recently slipped on an icy patch near his garage and rebroke one of his ankles.

He's stopped drinking poison, which is good, because it means that I've stopped drinking it, too. We look better, bleed less.

We make it there and wait. All three girls were in the right position, so they came out in a line, like a runway, like a red carpet. No c-section. Doctor said it was one of the easiest deliveries she's ever been a part of.

The staff lets me walk Eugene into the room with London. She's cradling the girls against her like they're melons at the market. "Go ahead," London says to Eugene before nodding and smiling in my direction. "You too."

I pick the tiniest one and hold her first in my hands and then, finally, against myself. Their newness scares me more than poison. Eugene is sitting, rubbing the tips of his fingers along the top of his

daughter's head. He doesn't know what to do, so he blows lightly across the top of her like he's messing with the dogs.

I imagine him weak in his middle and giving in to her, to all three—all four, London included—when she needs a dollar for a distraction, a car to leave him, a house to exclude him, nothing left for him to do but remove most of the severity from everything, put holes in his gut and then try to fill them up. His life is half a joke and it doesn't matter which half because neither one is funny.

He holds her tightly, as do I.

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# Painting Dragons

Dan Ress

## Prologue

*My hoard is wisdom.*

*I gather and guard ideas, thoughts, words, provocative turns of phrase,  
I protect meaning, memories, songs, images, symbols and their referents,  
systems,  
I collect realizations, abstractions, cognitions; I sit upon enlightenment.*

*To threaten my hoard is to risk losing more than you realize.*

*You might be more familiar with other dragons,  
Those cold reptiles that heap gold and jewels  
To roost upon their cool, lifeless worth;  
They steal and murder for wealth without value—  
What does a dragon buy?*

*Such dragons are fictions, made up  
In the minds of men.*

*Men are fictions, made up  
In my mind.*

*To what divine creature am I fiction, made up  
And perhaps symbolic,  
The absurdum to disprove by reduction,  
Or a pawn, or a knight hopping across the board  
In a war of rhetoric or dream?*

*And if, eliminated as a contradiction,  
Or sacrificed to snare a Queen or to protect a King,  
I am forgotten, thrown out,  
(More than disproved but left as fantasy,  
More than cast aside until next playing)  
Will my hoard, intangible but real,  
Warm, alive, but without form beyond me  
And my universe—  
Like any dragon's gold in a world  
Where men forget,  
Will my precious wisdom evaporate?*

*Answers to such questions elude even me.  
I watch. I wait. I learn.  
I worry. I prepare for battle.*

*To threaten my hoard is to risk losing more than you realize.*

*I will teach my dreamer that dreams last forever, and thus make it so.  
And it is a choice whether those dreams will be haunting or hopeful,  
forever.*

## I

When the afternoon ended, it was time to start considering dinner, but I really wasn't hungry yet, so I forced memories of daylight into battle against perceptions of dusk. The unwilling conscripts of my personal history had little chance against the onslaught of evening, and soon I saw little choice but to start cooking. It had been such a nice afternoon.



I closed my book and as I turned to go back inside, I almost tripped on the sunset. Sentiment and appetite agreed on the fortuitous diversion, and I dropped my book to stare perhaps too directly into the waning sun. Have you ever stared straight into the sun as it sets, long enough to numb your retinas and surely incur some lasting ocular harm? It can be quite spiritual, really. Time slides only sideways and the continuity of all objects with their subjects, of all moments with one another, can assume an aesthetic ascendancy over propositional reasoning and sequencing. Shortly after that (“shortly” being relative only to “observers” who would consider themselves “outside”), you go mostly blind. But it’s worth it, for that brief eternity of enlightenment, ending with shades drawn against the visual world.

Blind and growing quite hungry, I began to regret my choice to cook *after* looking at the sunset. We all make choices. I decided pizza was safer than cooking by peripheral so I stumbled in to the phone; I left my book outside unfinished. (I wonder often whether they sell that particular volume on audiobook, but only idly.)

## II

My experience of blindness has been different from that of other blindees, as we like to be called.

For me it is surreal.

People who were born with sight but became blind report to dream with images sometimes. This is true for me always, whether or not I am asleep. Always I have a picture in mind, and although I would not swear as to its objective authenticity, I feel it is as perceptually accurate and informative as any “pictures” I had before losing physical vision.

Also, I realize that while I may be dreaming these visions of what is happening (“visions” here in the mundane or spiritual sense?), it is no more so than when I had working eyes. Insight gained by sightless vision: we all create worlds, we’re dreaming always, perception offers only relative truth (and what else is there?), or however you like to parse a plurality of solipsism.

Anyhow, one unfortunate reality that has not changed is the following: insight  $\neq$  food. Sometimes if you try really hard you can pretend that the contrary is true and go some hours without eating, but eventually hunger trumps imagination. And blind, not only is food a bit trickier, but I am somewhat cut off from my livelihood as a painter of houses, and so funds to pay for food are likewise hard to find.

I tried several new lines of work. One thing I tried was, naturally, pinball, but apparently I wasn’t committed enough, still maintaining my aural and laryngeal capacities, because I still suck at pinball. I did make a few dollars and half a Reuben sandwich (a blind man losing horribly at pinball is either quite pitiful or hilarious depending on your perspective), but I felt it unacceptable as a career.

I also gave token efforts at following Margaret Atwood’s advice and getting into prostitution and assassination. The main roadblock with the former was that though I was blind, most people are not and I’m still deeply unattractive and hairy enough, almost, for scientific study (not quite, unfortunately for my pocket). As for the latter, I wasn’t really sure how to get started. Offing random people so that others would see how good I am seemed to have negative legal ramifications, not to mention the karmic fallout. My yellow pages ad has had no responses so far (maybe I should go electronic), but honestly, Atwood aside, I really lack confidence that assassination would work out any better for me than pinball, and with worse consequences for failure than pity and half a Reuben sandwich.

My bank account wearing perilously thin and leaving me with few options but to start selling things to eat, I began to worry.

### III

A breakthrough! Sightless, I retain vision, and in fact I have it in greater depth than ever. When I took stock of my few remaining assets, I realized I was down to my vision, my hands, and my painter's equipment (brushes and so forth). While no one wants a blind man to paint his house, I figured I had ought to at least try my hand at Art. And not without precedent, considering the late works of Monet, some of which are arguably better than anything he did while he was still burdened by visual sensation.

Furthermore, examples of blind genius abound if one broadens Art to include, for instance, the eclectic and excellent writings of Jorge Louis Borges as his world faded to yellow, or the epic lyricism of Milton in his serpent-curved world of sinners blinding themselves with self-interest.

I suppose I owe credit for this brilliant mind-flash to a sleep-dream I had last night of a dragon urging me to give Art a go. He was quite persuasive against my skepticism, arguing that Beethoven was on top of his game while deaf and that anorexics make great cooks. I promised him I'd try it out when I woke up.

Lacking inspiration other than a dream dragon who still persisted into my waking-dream pictures now and again, along with a whiff of brimstone or a low rumble, I decided to paint the wise lizard. I used my last remaining funds to pick up a set of oil paints, and I got started.

To me, the painting turned out great, but then again I'm blind, so I decided to get a second opinion before I quit my day job (a figure of speech). I called up my buddy John, and after explaining

my predicament, being blind, out of work, and hounded by a dream dragon, he agreed to come by and check out my latest (first) painting. He ended up hating it, but then everyone's a critic, and frankly John knows less about Art than I know about small engine repair, or whatever the fuck he does.

## IV

As a blind man it's easier than you might think to break into the world of visual arts. Whether because of the novelty or some tendency of greatness born of overcoming obstacles, or even possibly a statistical anomaly of percent-talent among blind artists, blind painters and particularly sculptors seem to have a much better chance of making it as artists than do seeing painters and sculptors (maybe romantic cultural memories of The Blind Bard, Homer?). It didn't work out for me, though.

I didn't go hungry or anything. I mean to say, I learned to live on very little food and I started painting on the street with a hat out for donations. It's amazingly easy to tune out the world when you're painting, at least for me, and I'm not above, well, much of anything I suppose. Also, the dragon told me I had to.

Strangely, I saw things on that city street, lonely in the crowds, that I'd never seen, never heard of. And I painted them. Images of broken hourglasses leaking crying eyes; of dreamers waking and walking to the edge of the world as they brush last night's cigars and scepters and swords and semen from their eyes and looking down with alarm, falling with their eyes inevitable; of a library full of volumes upon volumes of closed books, but somehow it is apparent only by judging their covers that the ink is fading from their insides and the words losing meaning; of synesthetic music, before, during, and after it is played or written or heard or forgotten; of machinery unmaking itself on disassembly lines or

people unbirthing in lines; of the Big Bang, not only as a beginning but as a middle and an end as well; images of these and other things, but always of the dragon, at the same time.

Somehow, when I observed my finished paintings, I always smelled brimstone, which I had never smelled before my recent dreams but couldn't now mistake.

The bastard was a real slave driver though. All I did was paint, practically, and before long I had hundreds of blurry, senseless, blind-man paintings of fantastic shit and dragons, probably none any good. But I kept at it. I don't know why I listened to him but I did it. Hundreds. And not one sold.

## V

I woke up and rubbed the sleep from my unseeing eyes, which hurt quite a lot as I still had oil paint on my fingers. As a seeing man, it is hard to clean all the paint off. Blind, and painting all the time with oil, I saw no point in even trying. Except when I got paint in my eyes, of course.

A knock on my door, and I hoped fervently it wasn't another hallucination of the dragon, though he had never had the manners to knock before. Incidentally, the dragon had poor manners indeed, dropping into my very brain without notice or invitation. What a prick.

Another knock and I fumbled over to the door and unlocked it to face whatever new horror might appear (figuratively).

- You've got paint on your eyes.

(Yeah, well.)

- I though maybe I could see again if I put the paint directly on my eyes. Who the fuck are you?

- Does that work?

- I ask again: Who the fuck are you, other than a fucking moron?

- Well, that's a tougher question than you might think. Or I thought. Or, anyway, I'm sure I used to know, I seem to remember knowing, but I don't seem to remember what I remembered, if you know what I mean.

- That clears that up. I'm glad to make your acquaintance, and thanks for stopping by. Now, I've got work to do [a gesture towards my paints and such], so if you'll excuse me while I—

- Money! I've got money.

- I envy you. And I'm sure you can see, too. Must be lovely. Maybe land a beautiful wife and a couple little darlings to carry on the family name, if they can remember it. Get the fuck out of here.

- A portrait! I want a portrait of myself, uh, whatever that is.

- Do I look like I would make much of a portrait?

- You *are* a painter, no?

- A *blind* painter, asshole. Blind but not feeble. Now leave or face my furious wrath!

- I was sent by a dragon in my dreams!

- I don't care if you were sent by—by—a dragon, you say?

- I know it sounds ludicrous, but he has been tormenting me, he tortures my family in my dreams. But what's strange is that he admits it's a dream, or he says it is anyway, but he insists it's also real, like. At any rate I have no family, never have, much, I think anyway, and I don't even have myself as far as I know, but he insists I used to and that he has tortured them out of my past and present, out of the fabric of this world, along with my identity, and it's up to you to paint me back, to paint back my life, them, and all that. Or something like that. But, er. . .

Silence.

- Well, that's a different shade of blindness isn't it. . . This is ridiculous. I can't [an ominous rumble from inside my brain, and I feel flames that I'm somehow sure are not externally valid]—OK, I'll do it, but it'll cost you.

- Oh thanks, you're a life saver, I mean it.

- Obviously.

- How much?

- Well, my going rate is only \$1000, but considering the challenge and the circumstances, we'll have to double it. And all up front.

- You got it! Thanks so much for—

- Now leave.

- Don't you need me to model or something?

- I'm blind.

- Right. But maybe with your hands?

- Who's the artist here? Give me the money, and leave.

And he left, me two grand the richer (he had two grand in cash handy?), and him a bit relieved but still very confused, as I gathered from his stammering to himself as he walked away. It's good to have a patron.

With no idea, no clue, about what the man really looked like, I stared blindly at an empty canvas for a bit until I got frustrated, at least five minutes later, and gave up. Maybe round two, a second chance for this day, was in order. I went to bed and fell immediately asleep.

My last thought as my head hit the pillow:

Being blind's not so bad, if it weren't for all the damn dragons.

## VI

Over the next few weeks, I didn't wake up. Not really. I tried to creep back into consciousness, but the dragon seemed determined to keep me out, and my psyche has the claw marks to prove it. Being asleep for the better part of a month, not in a coma or medicated, but unwillingly asleep, has its psychological drawbacks. Sure, I experienced the occasional bout of somnambulism,

physically up and about enough to drink water and strangely, bourbon, enough even to go out and buy and consume sufficient calories to keep me fueled as well as lubricated. Yet, while my memory recorded bits and pieces adequate for me to extrapolate an explanation for all the empty bottles and food waste upon waking, never did I have anything like accurate perception of a normal, waking sort of world. And yet I could see.

I could see clear as the days before I first stared into that sunset to earn vision at loss of sight, and yet never before have I regretted any faculty so strongly. Indeed, the mounting horrors of those few weeks were well beyond the frail medium of language to describe, and even the shadow memories of those images and feelings still leave me convulsing in fits of impossible frustration and terror at the untenable nature of any reality which could allow such things to exist anywhere, even in dreams, even in the mind, or even in the ethers of non-existence, as unwholesome fantasy or the nightmarish imaginings of the most intense sufferers of dark phrenias. Madness is not an affliction which some poor few must endure, nor is it even an accurate vision of a mad world which the “healthy” manage to oblivate with false perceptions born of a need for rationality. The most horrendous of insanities, the blackest manifestations of the hallucinatory and delusional, are but lame approximations of the awful terror that imbues every moment of every bit of space willing to participate in this world which could allow my dreams of that extended night.

In short, when I finally woke up, I was a bit out of sorts, to an extent that I cowered under my blanket stabbing myself with my fingernails, fearing sleep, the final sleep of death, and the prospect of facing anything ever, including the full solitude of my blanket prison with its nail-hole-sourced little rivers of my blood mixing with and filling the awful crusty pools of mostly dry urine that had taken over my bed.

A knock at the door, and I screamed in a painful, soundless way that implied both utter terror and a voice lost either from disuse or



overuse. I promised myself I would never open the door, or any door, but soon found an awful image of a dragon smile with fetid acid breath escaping at the corners to melt the skin at my jaw and I decided that I might have to open a door some day anyhow, and why put it off? Just play it cool, I guess. Hell, could anything in this waking world really be worse than what I'd been through?

It was that asshole about the painting, of course.

- Hey, I've been trying to get ahold of you for—holy shit! You look like death and stink like death herself having died and decayed! What the fuck happened!? You should see yourself!

- Yeah? You got a mirror?

- No, but you're blind anyway, oh, ah, I see what you did there. But, still, my god, you must be able to smell the—

- You get used to it. Now is this a social call, or what? You can see that I'm not in the best place to entertain.

- No, I wouldn't guess, but do you need. . .?

The poor, overwhelmed man was faltering, and I had little sympathy.

- What do you want, asshole?

- Ah, I guess just wanted to, uh, check on my painting?

- Yeah, I'm right on top of it. Just in the middle of stage two, which you're interrupting, so if you'll excuse me.

- Of course, I mean, I guess, I mean, well, I hope you feel better.

- Goodbye.

- Right, so bye, and—

I slammed the door in his face and thought about crying for a few days but instead I faced the inevitable and got out goddamn canvas and my paints and brushes. I threw up a bit of bile when I slipped on some rotting Taco Bell and landed in a pile of my own shit, but other than that I got to work without further event.

## VII

The canvas was small, but the Painting was enormous. Or at least that's what they said, before they took me away. What I know is that that Painting changed things. Sure, the asshole got his memory back after one look, and what did he do but kill himself. I guess some things are best left forgotten. But I really don't care about him, to be honest. I've got enough on my plate.

At first I thought the dragon was in my own head, and that's certainly what these damn doctors would have me believe. Even when I acted otherwise, I thought, and they still think, that the dragon was some sort of psychic projection, an unconscious reaction to my blindness, a lashing out of the id, perhaps, against the rest of the mind to which it no longer had the same perceptual ties and dependencies even as I myself lost my own ties to the world and my efficacy, my living. That's probably what you think, too, and I don't blame you. Don't think that the delusion will keep you safe, lord no, but perhaps ignorant of the horror that proceeds inexorably around you. I have lost that luxury of ignorance in an extended night and in the awful morning-after that led to the Painting. Even the doctors couldn't explain that shit.

Because the Painting was not only a portrait of the nameless man (John something or other, it turns out). It is a painting of every man, every woman, every child. Everyone who looks at it sees himself reflected in its non-representational murk. It is like looking in a mirror and seeing what you've always feared you would see, so strongly that perhaps that is why you look in the mirror at all, to make sure it is not so, but as you gaze at the painting you realize it *is* so. Even I see my Painting, though I see nothing else anymore.

And yet, even as you see yourself, you see something else, someone Else, something that colonizes your consciousness, though no one else will admit this intrusion and loss of control. The dragon invades, and he pervades. Already I hear him in new music, I smell him on people's breath. Furthermore, I am certain

that if I could see, I would glimpse him in a billboard here, and a modern art piece there. He has taken over this world.

What is most disturbing, though, is where I now know the dragon came from, and where he's heading. The doctors were right, in a way. He *was* in my head, but now he is out. He was born in my dreams, but he became self-aware and has propagated, not procreated but extended into everyone else's minds and into our dreams and creations. And I have no doubt that even their dreams now feature him, as do mine.

Still, that is trivial. I care no longer for my fellow man of this world. The dragon has taken control over someone far more important. Through me, his vessel or his servant or his creator, he has grasped even my own dreamer, my own god or Red King, for I realize now the dragon's insidious plot. This serpent has snaked his way pervasively through the Dreaming that we ignorantly call Reality, but more alarmingly, he is climbing upward into all the other infinite dreamers and dreamings. He will attain what must have been his goal: immortality. And I weep for humanity, and any other sentient beings that must feel his ragged tongue or know the scrape of his claw across their souls. Whatever multitude the universe once was, it is now only one thing, this horrible Beast I have called the dragon. And I will always know my part in painting his dark enlightenment into being, into weaving his thread into each tapestry world, as his oneness becomes our doom.

**DAN RESS** is fascinated by non-violent revolution, although he grants that it has fewer explosions. He enjoys writing, playing music, playing rugby, traveling, and helping people.

# **The Art of the Dedicated Cyclist**

**Lawrence Buentello**

The accident happened not long after he left the city limits, and it was certainly not his fault; the vehicle that forced his bicycle from the road had to be moving at well over a hundred and fifty miles an hour.

Norman had been traveling at perhaps twenty miles an hour himself on the straightaway, enjoying the easy motion of the pedals beneath his feet, the warm May sunshine loosening the muscles in his back, so when the vehicle passed him so very closely—he only got a fleeting glimpse of it, a streamlined fiberglass body set upon a low-framed chassis equipped with an enormous engine rising like a chromed mountain from an aperture in the hood—he immediately oversteered the bicycle and turned directly onto the rocky shoulder. As the bicycle seat ratcheted beneath him he tried desperately to apply the brakes to avoid a painful fall, but despite his efforts he found himself flying freely from the road and onto the thick grass bordering the rocky shoulder.

Upon examining himself after he stood, and realizing he wasn't injured, just decorated by grass stains and hayseed, he dusted his short trousers and walked to where his bicycle had come to rest. The vehicle that ran him off the road was long out of sight, having left only a cloud of dust as an artifact of its passing. He sighed, reserving his ire for another time, and lifted the bicycle to see if it had suffered any damage.

The bicycle was in perfect condition, save for a pitifully flat front tire.

Of course, he carried patches for just such an occasion, but when he bent to examine the puncture he discovered the tread to be quite shredded, and the tube beneath irreparably torn.

Now how will I finish my circuit? he thought, quite annoyed that some careless joy-rider had so blithely forced him into this predicament. Like so many others, his life was filled with unavoidable responsibilities that kept him from the truly important pursuits in life; and for Norman, this meant the one day of the weekend he could roll his traveling companion from its stand in the garage and embark on another wonderful open-road adventure.

Some people devoted their free time to collecting stamps; others, to baking exotic cookies. Norman devoted his free time to turning pedals with his feet. And he was a serious devotee.

He stood for a moment, gazing from one terminus of the road to the other, hoping to see a vehicle passing his way that might ferry him to a repair shop, but the road was empty. Its grand isolation was the reason why he wanted to cycle over it in the first place; now it seemed to represent the source of endless difficulty.

Undaunted, and still determined to finish his circuit, he gripped the handlebars and began walking the bicycle down the shoulder of the road. Surely some friendly motorist would be along to offer him a ride.

Unfortunately, after an hour of walking he failed to see anyone else passing on either side of the road.

He secretly began hoping for a reappearance of the rocket-car that had caused the accident; perhaps its driver would realize the extent of the damage he'd inflicted and offer to drive him—at an extreme rate of speed—to an appropriate place of repair.

After a while, thirsty and weary of pushing the bicycle, he happened to see a strange sight in the field to his right.

A lone figure sat on a chair in the grass before an unknown wooden shape. A table stood at his right hand bearing a tall pitcher and a glass.

He guided the bicycle from the rocky shoulder and walked it toward the solitary figure, which was no easy feat through the tall

grass. When he was near enough he realized the man, much older than himself and adorned with a grizzled white beard and dusty top hat, was sitting before an open coffin. Since there were no graveyards to be seen anywhere in the vicinity, it struck him as a little odd that a man should be sitting in a grassy field minding a coffin.

"Hello," he said in the way of an introduction, "my name is Norman, and I'm in need of a new front tire and tube."

The grizzled man in the top hat stared at him wordlessly. Thin and pale, even in the sun, he held his thin arms across himself, one leg thrown over the other, as if embracing a body that was slowly vanishing from starvation.

The man finally said, "My name is Hervovich." He glanced at the damaged front tire. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at repairs, my young friend."

"I thought not. But you seem well-positioned, so I thought you might know of someone who could be of assistance."

"Perhaps the old farmer who lives a couple of miles down the road can assist you."

"Does he repair bicycles?"

"Perhaps. I've never had to ask him to repair one, but I do know he's quite an inventor. He's produced any number of marvelous contraptions."

"I'll seek him out, then. Thank you for the suggestion."

He was about to turn back toward the road, but then reconsidered.

"Would it be asking too much if I had a drink of water from your pitcher?" he asked. "It would certainly assist me on my journey."

"Of course," Hervovich said, "help yourself."

He did, and was grateful. But as he set the glass back on the table he couldn't help appraising the coffin behind the man named Hervovich.

"I see you admiring my coffin."

"I wasn't so much admiring it as noticing it. But it's no business of mine, so I'll take my leave."

"You're not curious as to why I'm sitting next to a coffin?"

"I wouldn't want to be rude."

"It wouldn't be rude to ask about it. Indicative of a curious nature, but hardly rude."

"Well, sir, why are you sitting beside a coffin?"

"This is my home."

"You live in a coffin?"

"Yes."

"But aren't coffins only for the dead?"

"I would say that coffins are *primarily* for the dead, but not exclusively."

"It seems a small space in which to live."

"Indeed. And yet, it satisfies my needs, such as they are."

"Such as they are," Norman repeated, though he wondered what these needs might really be.

"And when the time comes for me to die, I certainly won't have to travel far."

"I wouldn't imagine you would."

"But I see by the expression on your face that you disagree."

"I don't disagree, exactly. I just find it difficult to believe you're really comfortable living in a coffin."

"You're disturbed by the symbolism of the act, my son. You needn't be. I'm perfectly happy. Would you care to sit with me for a moment to discuss cosmogony?"

"No, thank you. I really must seek repairs."

"I'd love to share my experiences with you. I've been around the world, you know, I've spoken to kings and princes, and a couple of popes. I've dined with Communists and Industrialists. Everyone, it seems, has a unique interpretation of life."

"Thank you all the same."

"Every person is a mystery."

Norman nodded, realizing that some mysteries were never meant to be solved. More to the point, he was anxious to find the old farmer to see if he could provide a new tire and tube so Norman could continue his circuit through the country. He was a man of definitive priorities.

He turned away from Hervovich, and Hervovich's coffin, and walked back to the shoulder of the road.

After pushing the bicycle another couple of miles he saw a distant farmhouse on the other side of the road.

After carefully scanning both horizons—no vehicles had yet to pass—he pushed the bicycle across the asphalt toward the dwelling.

This was no ordinary farmhouse; an odd, spiraling metal tower rose from behind a barn, and several bizarre metal sculptures stood rusting in the grass bordering the pathway to the house. On the porch stood a myriad of devices, some machines standing on spindly legs, some simply taking up space as ugly, squat boxes. A few of these devices hummed hypnotically, a mystical mechanical language that wasn't altogether unpleasant. But he had business to attend to, so he set the kickstand of his bicycle and knocked loudly on the door.

An old man answered his entreaty—undoubtedly the old man of Hervovich's account—but so bent and feeble-appearing Norman thought this caricature might topple of its own accord. But the old man remained upright. He stared at Norman with clear, gray eyes, wiped his hairless head with a cloth and asked his business.

"My name is Norman," he said, "and I'm in need of a new front tire and tube."

The old man closed one eye and regarded the bicycle with the other. Then he regarded Norman.

"Gently is my name," he said in a papery voice, "and inventing is my *raison d'être*. But I didn't invent the bicycle, you know."



Simply by appearances Norman considered this a decided possibility, though he made no cynical remark to that end.

Instead he said, "You seem to have acquired a great variety of materials. Perhaps you have a spare tire lying around?"

The old man waved his cloth at Norman, grinning without teeth. Ordinarily such a display might seem unnerving, but as an expression from Mr. Gently it seemed strangely comforting.

"I *have* accumulated a great many materials," he said, "and I've probably forgotten more of them than I remember having. It's entirely possible I may have a spare bicycle tire on the premises."

Hearing this, Norman was filled with elation, and hopeful that his circuit might continue in short order.

The old man led him to the barn which, upon opening its doors, he revealed as a repository for a remarkable array of items, spools of wire, tubing, sheet metal, rubber gaskets, nuts, bolts and tools hung on hooks above several work tables. In the gloomy light that fell from the spaces between the slats the old man began searching through the piles of material. But after nearly an hour he failed to find anything even resembling a bicycle tire or inner tube.

Gently turned to Norman and shrugged.

"I'm afraid I don't have what you're searching for," he said, wiping his forehead with the cloth.

Norman, emotionally deflated, nodded his understanding.

"I thank you for looking, anyway," he said. "Do you happen to know of anyone else along the road that might be able to help?"

As they reached the door the old man paused to ponder the question.

"I believe there's a small general store some five miles down," he said, "to the north as the birds fly. A man named Sal owns the place. He might have what you need."

Norman, his spirits lifted by this news, patted the old man's shoulder in thanks. But as he turned he noticed a strange device to the left of the door, a whirring cabinet on beautifully carved

mahogany legs bearing a blackish mirror above a set of glassine controls. He studied this device for a moment, then asked, "What is this machine?"

The old man smiled and hurried to the console.

"I'm so happy you noticed," he said, slowly turning a dial between aged fingers. "Not many people have been privileged to see this wonderful invention."

Norman, anxious to be on his way, reluctantly stepped toward the console and asked, "What does it do?"

The old man said, "It is a device that translates the music of the stars."

"I beg your pardon?"

The old man rotated another dial, and a thin spectrographic stream of colors shone, dancing on the blackish mirror.

"You see, each star produces its own energetic field. Our own sun is the loudest of these voices in our skies, but the stars, too, produce enough unique energy for this device to translate it into music."

"How is that possible?"

"It does seem magical, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but what does the music of the stars sound like?"

The old man closed his eyes, perhaps recalling the experience in his memories. "It is the most beautiful sound you may ever hear," he said, "or ever hope to hear. It is so beautiful a sound that I can only imagine it's the voices of angels that I hear, and not the energetic pulses of the heavenly bodies. Listen to this recording I made."

Gently opened his eyes and turned another dial and the barn filled with a strange, low, melodic thrumming that seemed more a chant of perfect voices than an electromagnetic pulse. Norman was struck by the esthetic intensity of the sound, and watched the same band of colors dance wildly on the mirror. The music seemed to fill his very soul with an incredible peace and serenity. Then the old man turned a dial and silenced the extraordinary melody.

"Is it not the most beautiful sound you've ever heard? And this was only Alpha Centauri. Betelgeuse is ten times lovelier still!"

"It is exceptional," he said, turning away. "I congratulate you on your ingenuity. But I really must be going."

"Wouldn't you like to stay the evening?" the old man asked. "Once the stars emerge in full, you would be audience to the greatest performance in nature."

"I thank you for the offer, but I'm afraid I have more important things to accomplish today."

And so he retrieved his bicycle, assumed his position on the rocky shoulder and began walking toward the promised general store, leaving the old man to enjoy the fruits of his remarkable invention.

The next five miles were long and tiring, as the birds fly—and they actually *did* fly above him, incredibly large, monstrous black birds with fiery gimlet eyes, perhaps watching for signs of a debilitating fatigue—but he managed the entire way without flagging. He still failed to see any traffic in either direction, which would have made for splendid cycling, but which did little else but encourage a lonely feeling to blossom inside his heart. It was surely a waste of good asphalt, he decided.

Sal's General Store appeared as a sanctuary on the horizon, a beautifully rustic building with dusty windows and splintering gray posts supporting a slanted shingled overhang. Though not very modern, it did possess a unique charm that invited him to brace his bicycle against the skirt of the porch and enter through the front door as if he were a friend, nay, a beloved relation come a very long way to visit.

The store was unoccupied by people, though overcrowded with shelves veritably dripping with a wondrous array of commercial articles for purchase. He tried to find bicycle repair equipment in

the mass of items, but was so overwhelmed by the number of shelves, boxes and unmarked containers that he reconsidered and decided to wait for assistance.

"Hello?" he called loudly, hoping he wasn't disturbing a family meal or some other ritual practice. "Is anyone here?"

The shadows of the room now seemed less welcoming and more ominous. He waited, listening to odd, muted sounds ticking about the hidden recesses of the store's goods. It was then he heard a low, rumbling growl, as if something—some large entity—had voiced its disapproval. For some reason he shivered, though he was certain the sound must only be a cantankerous air pocket in the plumbing.

Presently a stout, grinning man in coveralls emerged from the shadows, wiping his hands with a cloth and appraising Norman with an indecipherable expression. His short stature and long, black beard gave him the appearance of a woodland gnome. Well-muscled, he walked toward Norman flexing his biceps as he pocketed the cloth.

"Well, hello," the man said in a booming, basso voice. "Have you come to see the beast?"

Norman blinked several times before recovering his senses; something in the statement, combined with the terrible vocalization he'd heard, threw all purpose from his thoughts.

"No," he said, "I don't know anything about a beast. Are you Sal?"

"I am indeed. I was just feeding the monster. A terrible chore, that. It's a messy eater."

"I'm sure. Mr. Gently suggested I visit your store as I might find the items for which I'm searching."

"And what items are you searching for?"

"I had an accident a few miles down the road and ruined my front bicycle tire and tube. Would you happen to have any cycling gear for sale?"

“Run off the road, I’ll wager. Were you a victim of the speedster?”

“The speedster?”

“It’s rumored that he—or she—installed an aircraft engine onto an experimental dragster and speeds down the road as part of some vehicle-centered religious ritual. I’ve never seen it myself, but have spoken to many victims of his—or her—exuberance. They, too, were searching for items of repair.”

“Then you have such items?”

“Absolutely,” Sal replied, gesturing toward the overloaded shelves. “I have most anything you could imagine. What’s the model of your bicycle?”

To his great relief, Sal was able to locate the very items for which Norman was in need. He paid the merchant with the money from his sock—always be prepared for every eventuality, was his personal motto—and retreated outside to begin repairing his suffering racer.

In a few minutes the old tire and tube were lying in the grass, and the new tube and tire were firmly affixed to the rim.

As Norman knelt next to the bicycle, vigorously working his air pump, the stout man walked down the steps of the porch and studied his efforts.

“You must really love cycling,” Sal said, his hands crowning his hips. He stared up at the sun, which was now falling lower to the horizon, then again on Norman. “To risk so much. Is it a great thrill?”

Norman gazed up, smiling. “It is the most exhilarating experience I know,” he said. “Nothing compares.”

“Nothing at all?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Norman ceased pumping, believing the tire was full up. He meditated on the notion a moment, then added, “I can honestly say that there’s nothing in this universe I find more fulfilling than mounting this bicycle and pedaling down the open

road, mile after mile in reverie. The world and all its concerns vanish and I'm alone with only one purpose, one focus, one thought. I am the machine itself, acquiring the miles and nothing else. It's the one thing I have that gives my life meaning."

"Doesn't that become a bit monotonous after a while?"

Norman frowned. "While there is a quality of monotony about it, I find that very monotony to be part of its glory."

"Why?"

"Well, of course by nature it's experiential."

"Meaning?"

"Well, I don't have to think about anything else but that single exercise of body in motion. Except," he said, grinning, "when something horrendous interrupts the journey."

"I see."

"It's a beautiful experience."

Sal nodded, though his expression remained impenetrable.

"While you're here, though," the gnomish man said, "would you like to see the beast? Most people do. It's a spectacular sight, and there's no charge."

Norman stood, dusting his trousers.

"This is no normal beast?"

Sal laughed. "I should say not."

"Where did it come from?"

"It surely came from some dark cavern of the Earth, or perhaps even another dimension! Its head bears two faces, its claws are black and glistening as onyx, its snouts each possess three rows of teeth, all jagged and spiked. During the day it growls with a human vitriol, but at night it sings a siren song that would lull you to its jaws if it weren't locked in a special pen of my own construction. Occasionally it rises on two legs and paces the pen, watching the landscape like a demon awaiting escape. And its hide is replete with hairs that glow with a hypnotizing light, a sheen that creates dazzling images across its body when it flexes or turns. And if you stare into its eyes a moment too long it will read your thoughts and

sing to you in your own voice, recalling every lovely memory you own in an attempt to lure you near its unforgiving jaws. It is a most remarkable sight, one you may never see again in your life!”

“I believe that it well may be,” Norman said as he guided a leg over the bicycle’s frame and took his seat. “But I’m afraid I have very little time left to complete my circuit. Perhaps I’ll be back along this road one day.”

“Are you certain?” Sal said. “It would only take a few minutes.”

“I’ll have to decline the invitation. But thank you for your assistance in getting me back on the road.”

“Are you absolutely certain? It’s quite a sight.”

“Thank you, no.”

Norman, his hands gripping the handlebars of the bicycle excitedly, latched his shoes to the pedals and turned toward the road.

When he was riding again, the air rushing past him, he let out a delighted laugh. From time to time he couldn’t help pedaling as fast as possible, soaring down the straightaway with abandon. Fortunately, the phantom rocket-car did not pass him again. He rode for another hour before turning and retracing his path, past Sal’s General Store, past Gently’s farm house, past Hervovich and his coffin—who was now ostensibly inside, as dusk had fallen—though he didn’t see them again, or even remember they were present, such was the intensity of his focus.

Before he realized it, he was back in the city.

And despite the obstacles Norman had to endure along the way—and the terrible waste of time they produced—it had actually been a splendid ride.

**LAWRENCE BUENTELLO** has published more than sixty short stories in a variety of genres. He is the author of the short story collections, *The Cube Root of the Universe and Other Stories* and *A Miracle for Every Occasion*, and the novel, *The Bridge of a Thousand Leagues*. He lives in San Antonio, Texas.

## Your Room

Caitlin Sinead Jennings

At first you think moving will be fresh. It will be an adventure and a cleansing. But then the mirror doesn't work in your new room. It shows you as you were then, that day. Your parents come to your screams, but they do not understand. *There you are, in your pink tank top and cardigan.* No, you say, I'm wearing that green shirt.

Remember?

Their faces slip from concern to fear. To save them, you take it back. You say you just weren't seeing right. Your dad shakes his head with eyes to the floor and your mom bites her lip, but they leave.

You decide not to worry them about the other stuff. In your closet, if you reach back too far, your arm draped in clothes, you feel a body. It is breathing. But when you duck to look for legs, between the hemlines of dresses and the tops of your shoes, neatly stored, you only see white wall. The lights flicker on and off at random times. At night, on the hardwood floor, you hear footsteps. They sound like flip-flops slapping against your brain. You are scared, but you manage to take this pile of new fears and place them on the growing heap in your closed chest. It is not bursting quite yet.

You shiver under the sheets for several nights before deciding to sleep on the couch in the living room. In the dark, the blank big screen TV looks so empty. You are careful to get up early, before they see that this is your new habit. Despite how careful you are, how good you are being, one night, after spaghetti and salad with croutons and ranch dressing, your parents fight. You retreat to the only place you can, your room. But the floorboards are not enough to keep out the yells and lashes with words.



You come home the next day to see Lori lying on your bed. She is wearing the same baseball shirt, the same cutoffs. Luckily her hair is clean, not sticky with blood and pressed against the windshield. She is drinking an orange soda, letting the carbonation, sugar, and orange dye slide down her still-intact throat.

You screech and run downstairs. In frantic burbles you try to explain. *She is torturing me*, your mom says to your dad as her thumb and pointer finger squish her forehead. *She is just confused*, he says. He is still looking at the ground.

They fight.

You disappear.

Your dad enters your room. He sits on your navy blue bedspread, across from the mirror still showing your green shirt, even as you wear your comforting white t-shirt with a B-B-Q stain. He explains how the accident happened, as though he was there and you weren't. You say you understand, because you do. Law-abiding moms in Camrys are no match for drunks in trucks who do not see the color red. But you do blame fate. Without your mom, without Barry, you wouldn't have been in the intersection at that time. You can't tell your dad about Barry though.

It happened on the carpool home from choir practice. Your mom said she'd make a quick stop and give Lori and you a treat. You waited, staring across the yogurt shop at your mom and Barry laughing together. *Do you think your mom likes him? Like, "likes" him likes him*, Lori asked you in her cutoffs as she swirled together the jimmies, hot fudge, and whipped cream. She didn't mean harm; she was just curious. She did not realize you were disturbed by the expressions on your mom's face. Expressions of joy whenever his hand glided on her knee.

You stare in the ill-functioning mirror. You gaze at the green shirt with the little pocket in the upper left chest and you stare at the small, bloody scratch on your forehead and the purple bruise forming on your cheek. Your fingers tell you your forehead is

smooth, healed, but the mirror persists in showing the fresh scratch. You decide to just use the hallway mirror from now on.

When the lights start to flicker, you try putting Scotch tape on the rim of the shades to see if that will stop the blinking temporarily. It works. Soon your lampshades are lined with sticky plastic. You name the figure in the closet Joe to make him less scary. Although, to be honest, you are unsure of the being's gender. You say good morning to Joe before picking out your outfit and you say good night to Joe before putting it back. When the flip-flops start up, instead of pulling the blankets tighter or descending to the living room, you sit up and say, starkly, quit it! The footsteps shuffle to the closet, and your mind shuffles to sleep.

When you see Lori on the bed, you hold the ends of the comforter firmly and say sorry before lifting them into a cascading, rippling wave, dispersing the fragments of Lori into the air, until they settle, invisible, somewhere else. Unless you feel like talking, then you chat, she on your bed, you sitting backwards in your desk chair. When you both are talked out, you say goodbye and ripple the comforter.

**CAITLIN SINEAD JENNINGS** earned her master's degree in writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her story "A New Life™ at 30" was shortlisted in the 2012 Writers & Artist Short Story Competition. Her writing has also appeared (or is forthcoming) in *The Binnacle*, *Crunchable*, *Northern Virginia Magazine*, and *Piker Press*. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with her husband.



## On the cover:

### "GIANT KEWPIE"

Jason Freeny

**JASON FREENY** has worked as a "pin-up" illustrator and a toy designer, a combination that has spawned a surreal mixture where innocence clashes with maturity.

Armed with a youthful, overactive imagination, Jason creates smart, intricate works that tickle the deviant intellect through a mix of hard graphics, detailed anatomy, pop iconography and wit.



Jason went full time as a working artist in 2010 and can now be found hunched over his work table developing works of candy colored madness. Shop for art or browse his gallery at [www.moistproduction.com](http://www.moistproduction.com).