

The background of the cover is an abstract painting. It features warm, earthy tones of orange, red, and brown, with some cooler blue and green areas. The texture is visible, suggesting a thick application of paint. In the lower half, there is a blurred, organic shape that could be interpreted as a reclining figure or a large, flowing form. The overall mood is intimate and artistic.

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Editor's Note:

It's thrilling to consider the idea that any unassuming object or person we encounter may be something extraordinary in disguise. To this day, I cannot pass a wardrobe without opening it and climbing inside to see if it's a portal to Narnia.

If there's a theme that connects the stories in this issue, it's one of exploring wild secrets lurking beneath placid surfaces, of glimpsing faces under masks, of re-imagining things we thought we knew. First, Gary Moshimer gives us a whimsically irreverent (yet oddly uplifting) take on a living statue tale. Then Sloan Thomas explains why there's "Only One Good Reason to Get a Haircut," and Lucas Dylan-Frances demonstrates how to talk to girls. Next, Michael Schoch presents a tense battle of wits in "The Particular Human," and Alex Munkacsy recounts a traveler's chilling encounter with "The Grey Egg." Finally, Ian Sacks brings everyone's favorite office supply to life.

As you read these stories, you may start to wonder in the back of your mind if you remembered to leave the door unlatched. You might even ask yourself if that crunching under your feet is mothballs . . . or snow.

— Laura Garrison

Saving Jesus

Gary Moshimer

I picked Jesus up from the hospital where Cindy worked. He was in a corner of the basement with his hand broken off and his paint chipped, covered with dust, and I thought that had to be a sin. She planned to make him a new hand and paint him and return him to a place of honor. The maintenance man helped me carry him to my pickup. I wrapped his body in a blanket and left his face free so he could see the heavenly blue sky rushing overhead.

I stopped at a McDonald's drive-thru, and the kid asked me if that was Jesus, and I said, Yes, and he would like a free super-size, and we got that with no charge.

I put him in the corner of the kitchen, where the light from the glass doors would be good for painting. He had shoulder-length hair parted in the middle, a neatly trimmed beard. He had blue eyes. I looked into them for a glimmer of life, but they were dull. He wore a red tunic over a white robe. He had a golden sash. On his chest was the bleeding heart. He had his left hand over it. The hand had a bloody hole. The other hand, which was missing, was probably meant to be outstretched. He looked good standing there in the kitchen.

I got the Windex and paper towels and did a head to toe. When I was on my knees, I thought, Here I am washing Jesus's feet with Windex. I did his back and found a quarter-sized hole, something to do with the mold. I dropped a quarter in, but he didn't do anything.

Cindy had her paints and brushes on a little cart, and some putty for fixing blemishes. We filled the nicks and drank some red wine while it dried. We sanded a little and had some more wine. She got to work painting. Jesus was looking good, shining, like there was a light within.

She bent the wire and sculpted the clay over it. She fashioned fingernails with a little tool. Then she baked it in the oven. When the hand was done, she glued it on. She told me to hold it tight until it dried. I swear it warmed.

In the morning Cindy put finishing touches on the hand. She put shellac on his eyes to make them shine. She pecked my cheek. I promised to mow the lawn. After she left, I poured my Sugar Pops. There was not enough. I pouted. The box overflowed onto the table, Pops everywhere. I ate one big bowl, then ran out of milk. When I rinsed the bowl, milk flowed from the faucet. I ate two more bowls while looking at him.

I lay on the couch while my gut rumbled. I heard the back door open. When I looked, Jesus was gone. He was coming out of the shed with my rusty scythe, swinging through the overgrowth. He looked to the sky a lot, raising that new hand of his. A couple clouds moved in and he split them so the rays burst through. I started out but then saw my neighbor Mrs. Cox on her lawn looking over, hands on her hips.

When he was done, he went back into the shed. I went out, waving to Mrs. Cox. He had found the cigarettes I hid from Cindy and was having one.

“What are you doing?” I said.

He blew smoke rings. "What does it look like?" One ring circled his head like a halo, and he laughed. His voice was not a good Jesus voice. It was high pitched with a crack. "It can't hurt me, right?"

"It doesn't look good."

"Why do you think I was in the basement?" He flicked the ashes right on the floor. "I'm not a good Jesus." He put the butt out in his palm.

"Hey, my wife just fixed your bloody hole." I brushed the ashes off. I brushed the grass from his robes. I'd have to wash his feet again. "Come on, get back and stand in the kitchen. Cindy will be home."

"Fine. You're welcome for the lawn by the way. And the Pops."

"Yes, thank you. Can you do more Pops?"

"That's one thing I'm good at."

Mrs. Cox was like the neighbor on *Bewitched*. She rang my bell and poked her head in. "Who was cutting your grass?"

"Local teenager. Mower broke."

"A hippie?"

"Something like that."

"I'm sick. I could use some help." She stretched her neck to see Jesus as I closed the door.

I heard her behind the door. "I know that's Jesus in there. I need his touch. My arthritis."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Does Cindy know?"

I opened the door. Her painted eyebrows formed accusing arches.

“Fine.”

I led her in. She was faking her stiff-legged gait. “It’s amazing,” she said, placing her claw hand in his. She mumbled some prayer and after a minute started to shake, her bracelets jingling. “I feel it!” She fell like a tiny tree. I caught her just in time. Her purple eyelids quivered. I slapped her jowls lightly until she opened her eyes.

I walked her to the door. She jerked across the sidewalk like a marionette. I called after her: “I’ll tell Cindy myself!”

I got the Windex and wiped him down. I washed his feet. I got my box of red wine and asked him if he wanted some, but he stayed a statue. I drank until I had a buzz. I wondered if I was going crazy. I asked him if he wanted to go have a smoke, but he didn’t respond. Now I missed him.

Cindy came home, found me drunk and was angry. She’d looked at the lawn. “Why the hell did you chop it like that? Were you drunk then, too?”

“The mower didn’t run.”

I opened my mouth, but just couldn’t tell her about Jesus. She stormed off to the shower and then to the TV in the spare room. I put my head on the table. I drifted off and felt a hand on my shoulder. I knew it was his. It was strong and put me at ease. I slept.

Cindy woke me. It was morning. She was making her power shake. I sat up with drool hanging down.

"Make sure you rake the lawn today," she said. She touched up some of his paint. "He looks dull again. I don't get it." She sniffed him. "Smells like smoke." She gave me a dirty look and put the newspaper in front of me, opened to the help wanted page. She left for work.

"Bye," I said, opening the Sugar Pops. They overflowed into my giant bowl. Something else popped out too: a toy, a little plastic jet. I held it and saw the tiny pilot inside with his thumb up. It took off down the hall leaving vapor trails. It went upstairs. I tried catching it, following the sound, which was like a mosquito, but it dove and rolled and I couldn't come close. I finally gave up.

When I went back, Jesus was gone again. He was out back bending over, picking something up.

"Get in here," I said.

He held a baby rabbit. He had nicked it. It was barely alive.

"Jesus," I said. "Can you save it?"

"I don't know."

"Poor thing."

"I suck at miracles."

"You can do it. Just believe. I believe in you."

He sighed. He closed his eyes and waved his other hand over the bunny. It twitched a few times and then was still.

"Shit," I said.

A shellac tear coursed down his cheek. "I'm sorry." He bowed his head.

I found a shoebox to put it in.

"I need a cigarette," Jesus said.

"Let me check that the coast is clear." I peeked out. Mrs. Cox was doing jumping jacks on her lawn like crazy. We hustled to the

shed and lit up. He coughed a couple times and dust came out. "So when do you come to life?" I asked.

"Just for you. You picked me up."

"I can't tell Cindy."

"She'll think you're a loon."

"Right."

We ran back in and found the bunny squirming. I gave Jesus a high five and his hand flew off. "Fuck!" I said.

"Fuck!" he said, and we started to laugh. His face cracked a little, something we'd have to fix later.

"Some vino!" he said. "To celebrate."

We drank from the box. Most of it ran down his chin. We finished the box and tossed it across the room. A buzz circled our heads—it was the toy jet, and we giggled. We didn't notice the rabbit. It had escaped and hopped away. Eventually we passed out on the couch, and when Cindy came in she saw a wasted me with a heavy, handless, wine stained, smoky-smelling statue with a cracked face across my lap. She tore me a new one, talking about all her work gone to shit because I'm alone at home, irresponsible like a child.

"I'll clean him up," I said.

"You know you will!" Off she stormed again, just as the jet ripped by, inches from her face. "And get that insect!"

Jesus and I were laughing inside.

I filled the cracks in his face the best I could with putty before going to bed. I said goodnight and went upstairs. In the bathroom something brushed my foot, scared the hell out of me. It was the

bunny. It sat on my foot, trembling and so damn cute. I held it in my hand, watched the little nose twitch. It was too much. I wondered what to do with it. I put it in a bigger box, but in the morning it was in bed with us. It chewed my toes and then chewed Cindy's and she sat up and threw the covers off, burying the bunny in them. "What are you doing?" she said, flicking her feet. "I thought I'd try something different," I said. "You sick son-of-a-bitch," she said, and went off to the spare room. I heard the jet fly after her.

"Hold still," I said. I was gluing his hand back on, and he was fidgeting. "Can't you turn back to a statue until I'm done?"

He closed his eyes tight. "Nope. Guess as long as you're around I'm human."

"Well, you're not really human, because you still break." I pressed the hand on and held it there.

"I want to be a real boy."

"Very funny. Here, you hold this."

"This sucks."

I sprayed the Windex and polished him. "Damn, there are these tiny cracks all over you. It's from moving, I think. You're going to have to take it easy."

"I don't like that. I just came to life and now I have to be an old person? You don't know how many years I stood at that hospital and watched the happy young people, and the sad old ones. Then the young turning old, sick and dying and praying to me to save them but I don't think I did jack shit for them."

I cleaned his face. The cracks I'd filled were forming again. "I'm sure you did people good, just seeing you and believing. I'm sure you helped many."

"I don't know."

"Stop talking a minute."

The rabbit came from somewhere, hopped across the kitchen and started gnawing on a cabinet. It had grown tenfold overnight. "Holy shit. You helped him, or her. Look at the size of that thing."

"This calls for more vino."

"I'm out."

"Try the faucet."

I turned the knob and the wine flowed. "I don't think we should."

"Come on. I want to live."

"All right. But use a straw this time. Try not to move your mouth too much. And use the other hand."

"Blah, blah, blah."

"You know what I really want?" he said. We were sitting on the couch, quite wasted. He lifted his arm with a crackling sound and draped it over my shoulder. "Chinese food. I've seen so many people eating it."

"It is good. It's hard to describe."

"Let's get some. Right now."

The rabbit was sitting on our feet. He was now about three feet long and forty pounds. Somehow it didn't seem so strange to me. And the jet was still zooming around, growing with each pass. It was quite noisy now, about a foot long. I'd have to let it out soon.

There was the faint whiff of jet fuel. "Man," I said, "Cindy is going to kill me."

"That's why we should go out."

"You still have to be here when she comes home."

"We'll do takeout."

"Well, yeah."

I found the menu and called in an appetizer sampler and a couple combos.

"I'll drop the bunny somewhere. I know a nice meadow."

"Let's go."

"Wait a minute." I grabbed one of my tee shirts and slipped it over him. "And you stay in the car."

I picked up Bunny. Jesus held the door and we watched the jet fly out and climb into the blue. On the way to the car we saw Mrs. Cox running down the street. She had weights on her wrists and ankles. She looked a foot taller. Her shirt had a big "C" on the front.

Jesus didn't look good. In the car he was half man, half statue, like he'd had a stroke. His words were jumbled. "I shouldn't have taken you out," I said.

"Okee-dokee I be," he said.

Bunny's nose twitched between us, the whiskers poking my eyes and making me swerve. All I needed was a cop right now.

And I could see the jet up there, flying low. The air force was probably on its way.

I pulled into the park, found the sunny meadow I had in mind. I stopped and opened the door and said, "You're free!" But Bunny just looked at me.

“Bunny b-bye,” said Jesus, lifting his new hand with difficulty and waving the fingers.

I went around, opened the other door and pushed. This Bunny would not budge. I went into the field and pretended to eat clover. “Num, num . . . ”

“Nummy,” Jesus said.

Bunny flopped over, looking bored. I sighed, closed the doors, and drove to the Chinese place.

I raced in, because there were a few people hanging around the sidewalk. I rocked on my feet, waiting in a line of four people. The cooks seemed to be arguing over their woks in Chinese. “Please,” I mumbled, and everyone turned to look at me. “Emergency,” I said. Just then there was an explosion outside, the shockwave scattering the other patrons and dropping them to the floor with arms over their heads. The boom was followed by the roar of jet engines. I knew it had broken the sound barrier at a low altitude. I was composed. I stepped up to the counter and gave the lady my number. “Thirty-four dolla,” she said, not missing a beat. I threw two twenties and darted.

Kids had gathered around the car, legs still wobbly from the boom, sticky hands on the windows. Mothers were huddled, speaking of the world’s end. Jesus was stiff, his forehead pressing the ceiling. The giant rabbit was the draw, of course, Bunny’s quivering nose smudging the glass under slapping hands.

“Break it up, “ I said. I dug into the bag and handed out fortune cookies, herding them to the sidewalk. I hopped into the car and

sped away. I thought about typing tiny threatening fortunes: *Giant rabbits will haunt you forever. And, Jesus is coming for you.*

He came to in a minute, his body crackling, easing to a sitting position. He'd left a big dent in the ceiling. Paint had scraped off on the glove box, and in fact a lot of his paint was peeling, like a skin disease. I had a bad feeling, like he was dying. "You can't die, right? I mean, being Jesus."

He talked more clearly now. "Of course. That's what Jesus is famous for, duh. Died for the sins of man?"

"But a statue can't really die."

"Well it can't really live, either. I'd say you're in a real mess."

"Let's not think about it. Let's eat our food."

Bunny was already eating the bag. I handed Jesus an eggroll and he chomped it with difficulty, shreds of cabbage and red pork product dribbling down the tee shirt. Bunny nibbled them off. Jesus writhed in agony and giggled. "What is this called?"

"I'd say you're ticklish."

"It's amazing! I do want to live!"

I felt tears in my eyes.

"And this is so good. What is in it?"

"No one knows. Chinese food is one of well-guarded secrets of the universe."

"Huh."

* * *

When I opened the front door of my house, the Sugar Pops poured out. They were to the ceiling. Bunny dove in and disappeared; we heard him crunching away.

“Do something,” I said, trying to kick a path.

Jesus held up his hand, glistening with grease. He was distracted and licked his fingers. “I can’t think straight,” he said. “This is so good.”

He closed his eyes, made the sign of the cross, but nothing happened. Mrs. Cox saw us. She was about seven feet tall now and wore gold tights with her giant red “C” and red cape, red boots. She came with her snowblower and blew a path, but then left, a half-assed heroine, saluting us and leaving me to clean the rest up with broom and shovel and Shop Vac. There was still Pop dust on the walls and windows, but fuck it, I heated the food so we could eat.

“I think this is my first and last meal,” he said. He could no longer lift his arms, so I had to feed him.

“Shhhh,” I said, holding a noodle up to his mouth.

“What’s this?”

“Lo Mein. Suck.”

He slurped those noodles and I tried to keep up with a napkin, wiping the flying soy sauce. He was in ecstasy. “This must be heaven,” he said.

“It’s close.”

He finished the whole container. I took off the tee shirt and wiped him down. He was covered with fissures now; it looked like he might just fall to pieces. I heard Cindy’s car pull up. “Better get back to your corner,” I said.

I did some half-hearted swipes with a paper towel at the windows, the table, but I was tired and didn't care. She came in, put her briefcase down slowly, looked around. "What did you do now?"

"I'm going to tell you the truth."

"Please."

"Okay. So earlier the house was filled with Sugar Pops, because Jesus can do that, and it just got out of hand. I got most of it."

"Really." She toed the torn edge of the carpet and looked at me.

"Oh, that's probably from the snowblower. Mrs. Cox—you should see her, she's like an Amazon now, and wears a costume, because Jesus cured her arthritis—anyway, she came through with her snowblower." I shrugged.

She toed something else, a big rabbit turd I missed. "This looks more like a Cocoa Puff."

"Oh, and there's this giant rabbit. Jesus brought it back life, and it just kind of grew. It's around here somewhere."

She took a slow, deep breath, the kind just before her head explodes. She walked past me to the kitchen and stood before Jesus. "What have you done to it?"

"I think he's dying," I said.

"What is this?" She pinched something from his hand and held it up.

"Lo Mein. He wanted it."

"You are a sick, sick man." She tossed it at my face. "I want you to take the statue back, or to the dump. I can't fix it. It's deteriorated too much."

"He's not an *it*, okay."

"I'm going to my mother's for a while, and when I come back I want *him* gone and the place cleaned up."

I helped him out to the car. Bunny hopped behind us. "I'm not taking you back there," I said. "We'll just go somewhere."

He couldn't answer. His cheeks split and I could see inside, hollow emptiness. For a second I thought I was hearing and feeling the roar of some sacred storm, some force within him that would suck me in. The ground shook, trees swayed.

It was the jet, landing on my street. Mrs. Cox was out there waving her long arms, directing it. The bubble opened and the plastic pilot waved us on board. "We can't fit," I said.

He pulled off his helmet. His tan plastic face grinned. "This is a special aircraft," he said, "with one mission. You will fit." His molded jaw was determined.

We got Jesus on with difficulty, jigsaw pieces of him hitting the pavement. I sat in the back seat with him, and the pilot mashed Bunny in front. He put his helmet back on and spoke into a little microphone.

"Don't we need helmets?" I asked.

"Where we're going, it doesn't matter."

He closed the cockpit before I could object, fired up the engines. Mrs. Cox held up a couple cars and waved us on. In seconds it seemed we were going straight up, my screaming head smashed against the back of the seat.

We shot through a bank of clouds and I closed my eyes. After the great boom the sound of the jet disappeared, along with my fear. There was utter silence. We were floating. A firm hand held

my shoulder, and when I opened my eyes Jesus was a man of flesh and blood, that heart on his chest beating, the tear on his cheek real. He took my hand and we stared into the bright light, unafraid.

GARY MOSHIMER has stories in *FRiGG*, *PANK*, *Monkeybicycle*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Eclectica*, and other places.

Only One Good Reason to Get a Haircut

Sloan Thomas

Trying to outrun my problems in a rusted 1972 Chevy Nova takes more than an eighth of a tank of gas.

There is only one gas station in town. It's next to the junkyard on the other side of the bridge. The bridge is currently blocked. The bridge is blocked, because the owner of the junkyard died—leaving behind a shed stacked with dynamite.

The amount of time it will take tribal police to remove the danger is up for debate. So I don't let my car idle. I sit at a full stop with like fifteen other cars. May sits beside me. We're waiting for explosions . . . and gas too.

Lately I think about cutting my hair—cutting it real short, spiking it up. May says there is only one good reason for an Indian to cut her hair. She's right, but maybe I'm tired of looking like her. Looking like me. When we fight, which isn't much, she braids our hair together. We walk around connected, but mostly we just smoke pot. Lots of pot.

That's what we're doing right now. May steals weed from her mom who sells it to tourists looking to worship ancient trees and mythical Indians. Her mom knows we steal it. May's mom beats her for the missing weed. I tell her, better to get beat than ignored. Sometimes she agrees.

I can't remember the last time my father asked me where I've been. Mostly he's drunk. Mostly he misses his wife. Mostly I just see his callused feet sticking out the edge of his bed,

but only when the bedroom door's cracked. Occasionally women come over. They toddle and trip into my father's room. In the morning they edge and slink their way out. They always forget to close the door behind them. *What are you born in a barn.*

I steal my father's keys. May shows up before I can leave. She shows up covered in dirt. It's crusted in her eyes, clogging her ears, falling off her like fat raindrops. Tears run down her face and I mix them with the dirt. It makes a mud mask softening her skin, hiding her scars. She tells me about the party, about the boy who tried to smother her in the dirt. She says, "I'm soiled."

We take side roads and back ways and expand the distance. We never make it past the bridge.

May likes to hot box the car, fill it up with smoke. But the sun is beating down on us and we have to open the windows. Because the windows are open, Wolfies steals our joint. His hand snakes in through the driver's side.

I'm related to Wolfies. Everybody is related to Wolfies. Nobody knows where he lives. If you ask Wolfies how old he is, he'll tell you, "My birthday was yesterday, but you can buy me a present tomorrow." If you're missing something there's a fifty percent chance Wolfies took it, and if you pay him there is a hundred percent chance he'll find it. Wolfies is like your favorite curse word—you only use his name when something bad happens, but man do you love to say it.

"I'm taking this as payment," he tells me.

"What have you found?" I ask him. He takes his time—smokes the joint—dances back when I try to grab it. I watch him scrape the embers across the asphalt and throw the roach in his basket. His basket is full of slippery eels . . . and other payments.

“You know the 2,000 pounds of dynamite downtown?”

I think it’s more like fifty, but Wolfies has never been one to be bogged down by facts, and I’ve never been one to stop a good rumor. I roll my eyes and tell him everyone’s already heard that.

Wolfies smiles, shows his teeth and whispers, “It’s not the dynamite I’m telling you about.”

I know and maybe May knows too, because she stops rolling the joint in her hand, that Wolfies isn’t just telling a story and we aren’t just sitting here and everything isn’t just a coincidence.

“They found bones. Bones under the dynamite.”

I don’t move. Wolfies digs in his basket. I know what he’s getting. May starts looking for the sack of weed we keep hidden for emergencies. I hold her hand. I hold her still.

She knows, just like I know, like everyone knows—when you ask Wolfies to find something you have to settle your debts. You have to settle your debts with what you promised.

I can smell the eels on the metal. May holds my hand or maybe I’m still holding hers. I remember my mother brushing my hair, braiding it up. “Never cut your hair,” she would tell me. “Always braid it tight.” And I never cut my hair. I always braid it tight. But I know the price for calling Coyote—even if it’s to find your mother—even if she’s only bones under dynamite. I can feel the scissors on the back of my neck. There is only one good reason for an Indian to cut her hair. I’m a good Indian.

SLOAN THOMAS lives on an Indian reservation in Northern California. She enjoys listening to not-so-tall tales of old Indians and small children. She has work published in *Word Riot* and *SmokeLong Quarterly* under the name R.S. Thomas.

Katelyn

Lucas Dylan-Frances

She had found me in the library waiting not-so-obviously. I had seen her come in. I had seen her pants, which were the green of Venus's coffin. Yet I pretended to become aware of her only when she walked closer. What can I say? I'm near-sighted in one eye. I try to make my half-truths align with my defects. I'm decent. But she doesn't know this.

She put her backpack down on the table. Four-person table. She chose the seat diagonally across from me. Backpack directly between us. Strategic.

"What are you working on?" she asked.

I told her what I was working on. I told her a lot, if you want to know the truth. I'm like that. I can fill up a whole conversation with neat little facts about myself and not really tell you anything.

"I feel like I'm the perfect height. . ." I said.

"Oh," she said.

"I mean, for a guy I guess I'm short, but I like it because I can run and hide and crouch behind things."

". . ."

"I'm dynamic."

I asked if she wanted to get coffee with me. A girl who had served me hot americanos at a coffee place downtown was sitting at the next table. For some reason I felt bad. I was talking loudly because she had set the volume of the conversation. No qualms

about letting the others hear us. But we were in a library. I was troubled.

She did not want to get coffee herself but would go with me. She was a Mormon. Mormons could not have caffeine.

"So can you *do* drugs?" I asked.

"No."

"Bummer."

She laughed. We walked to a cafeteria in which I found no coffee.

"Where's the coffee?"

"How should I know?" she said. Good point.

I got my coffee from the other cafeteria and told her there was a coffee place in the city on Lafayette that sold coffee that tasted like cigarettes. "Irrelevant," I excused myself.

I could not go back into the library because of the coffee. "But your things are in the library," I said almost sotto voce, looking at her very seriously.

"But my things are in the library," she said and went into the library.

I walked to a trash can and drank almost all of my coffee and walked back to the library. She was walking down the hallway from the library and I could see her and her green pants and orange backpack getting smaller as she walked in the same direction as I did. I shouted her name.

She turned. "Back so soon?"

The expression struck me as rather hackneyed and strange. It was not her expression, but she had used it with aplomb. Made it work. Whole cultural histories were issuing from her mouth. Obviously she was powerless against this.

"Do you want to go this way?" I pointed.

She did. We went down a stairwell.

"What do you know about me that I don't know you know about me?" I asked.

Apparently she knew a lot. I ran a couple miles a day. I was a loner. What more was there to say? Her friends had sent her pictures of my car. "I know it's black or dark blue," she said.

"Dark blue," I said quietly, feeling intruded on. "I don't know anything about you."

Her last name was of Swedish origin, and she hated the color brown. Her mother was a redhead. She took photographs. Portraits. Somehow I felt I could have inferred all of this.

I started talking about myself. I told her I was a bad person. I was unequivocal about this. I almost wanted to say, "Don't get mixed up with me."

"What does that even mean?" she asked.

I started talking about something else instead. We went to our different classes after that.

I backed up quickly in the parking lot and the principal held out a prohibitive hand. I moved my car toward him. He held out the same hand. He wanted me to slow down. I smiled and drove. I am a poor driver.

At night I called another girl. I told her I was fucking up too much and didn't feel like myself. I knew she was tired of me. I would've been too if I had to listen to this. I said I understood the pantomimed nature of my phrasing. I could've been anybody right then. A stricken lover. A rebel whose veil is rent. I couldn't go on talking to her.

She wanted to help. "Are you sure you really want to stop talking?"

I hung up and let her figure it out. Then I walked back inside my window from the roof. When I talk on the phone, I do it outside on the first-floor roof. The window leads directly out to it. My feet track in the detritus of roof and leave it all over the windowsill and bed.

I sat and checked my phone for the fourth time in thirty minutes. She did not care. I rubbed my face. I checked the fat on my stomach. None. Good. I listened to the French television program in the next room. The wood floor outside my room showed the extenuated traces of its blue light in the dark of the hallway between the rooms. A shunted theatre outside my door.

I went back out onto the roof and looked inside my warm room. I was shirtless and it was October.

If you want it, here it is. Here's every girl I've ever been with. I never look at her until she's already made up her mind about me. I don't know her until she totters in front of me and insinuates herself into my day. Then we get to know each other. She is leggy and long and maybe taller than I am. She wears curvilinear eye makeup. Cat eyes. We communicate fiercely for the first couple months. I am always the one who forgets to respond. She feels like a transient attraction but in reality her insecurity works for the both of us. She doesn't know that I will stop being interesting. And then, like the incitement of revolution, it happens. We explode quietly and internally. She realizes I was helpless in the most abject way. How I needed her. But any version of her. Interchangeable legs and makeup. That's the cruelty. At some point she realizes that I am retreating to a white and expiating coda. I do not come back.

And when you tell them you're a bad person they never know what you mean.

LUCAS DYLAN-FRANCES lives in New Jersey. He writes and runs. He is young but has ambitions. He hopes to live fast while he still looks good and go out in a three-piece white suit like Charlie Parker.

The Particular Human

Michael Schoch

The shortcut pierced straight Westbound into Abenaki County, past West Mousam and the on-ramp for I-95, eventually jutting down into New Hampshire. Kauders and I took that road on weekends to avoid traffic. Nobody knew about it. We bought junk at the wholesale lots there (paying no sales tax) just so we could haul it back to Mousam and make fifteen percent on the mark up. The downside was the weirdos and clowns fucking with the transit.

For example, somebody smashed a heap of bottles on the road, then glued the glass sharp side up to spike strip us. They laid it like a police trap just before a stop sign, and about two hundred feet shy of a Hahmwhole SnakShak.

We barely rolled to the Hahmwhole SnakShak—smoking, ragged bits of tire forming a C-shaped trail from the road to the parking lot. Night had fallen hours ago. The moon hung off to the edge of the sky, obscured by something: clouds, the mushroom exhaust of smoke stacks across the river.

I couldn't stop sweating. Not because of the flats, but too much coffee. I made the same mistake every time I drove across state lines, buying Maxi Brews to stay alert when all they ever did was make me sweat and chew my lips to pulp. Kauders wasn't built that way. He'd never had a shaky hand in his life. The two of us

walked into the Hahmwhole, huddled under canvas jackets with our fists up to our mouths for heat. We tried to make the most of the situation while we waited for the tow truck. The tow truck driver, coming all the way from Kennebunk proper, was expected to take an hour and forty at best.

Everybody knows the colors and contours of a Hahmwhole SnakShak.

None of the fans worked, and a few hung crooked from the particleboard ceiling. The floor stuck to my soles, and bits of Product clung to the chair legs and the tile grouting. Just one employee stood behind the counter, but the employee was attentive and still, ready for us before we had opened the door. This employee was a particular kind of human being.

The Particular Human's appearance as noted from beyond the Hahmwhole counter: Five feet, eleven inches. Narrow but muscled shoulders. Overweight by anyone's standards. A strong but saggy chest that took up the slack of its violet t-shirt. Wide, hairless forearms scaled over in dry skin. Medium-sized hands that narrowed at their tips; fingernails painted black. A stomach that strained laterally against the black pants containing it, instead of medially against the buttons and zipper. Hips at once fat and powerful, but sexless. The face seemed as young as it did incongruous with its body. Its cheeks were hollow and gaunt and hung off of the sharp bones of its eye sockets, clinging to its jaw. Its skin looked like the rubber on an expensive Halloween mask. It wore its hair in a tight ponytail capped beneath a black baseball hat. Baby teeth—endless baby teeth stabbing through the gums in

rows like a shark. Its default expression was total restraint. Not quite a squint, nor a smile, nor a frown. It looked like a gigantic five-year-old deciding whether to giggle or cry. It looked like an unfinished wax statue, on which the sculptor forgot to include any signs of age or sex. It looked only superficially like a human being at all, except that it looked definitively lonely, standing there, silent, behind the counter.

I asked, "Can I get a Double Mammoth and medium fry?"

"I will get to work on it," The Particular Human said.

It typed my order into the register but did not tell me how much I owed. I stood, looking at the register's screen, waiting for a total. I took out my wallet and opened and closed the Velcro, ran my finger up and down the edge of my debit card.

"I didn't catch the price," I said.

"Oh. I'm sorry. After 12:30 this establishment doesn't accept cash or card."

Kauders slapped the counter. "Like it's free, you mean?"

"The manager has told me that this establishment, between 12:30 p.m. and 3:00 a.m., accepts as payment, the customer's participation in a semi-competitive arrangement involving both rules and objectives."

Kauders let his hand slide down the edge of the counter, back to his side. "Fucking kidding me," he said.

"Why can't I use my card?" I asked.

"I—" The Particular Human stuttered and debated a point in its head, "I guess it is an old and familiar excuse, sir. I do not make the rules."

I nodded, even though I was pissed, because The Particular Human had a point. Kauders, however, was overexcited and hungry. He'd had enough. Having enough was a state Kauders reached pretty quickly, even without being denied food or breaking down at night.

"Bullshit, kid. I worked at a sandwich place once and I'd throw a freebie here and there to people I liked. I'm not saying you have to like us, but look, we got two flats on the car and need to wait for the tow truck. I'm not saying special treatment. I've got cash."

The Particular Human shook its head. Its face never wrinkled. Its expression never changed from nothingness.

"I've just begun this job. I'm sorry. Maybe if I were a little more familiar with the protocol I could make an exception. But as it stands."

I nodded. I understood that feeling of starting a job and knowing that the axe could come at any moment. In fact, I'd just finished up a job where the axe came at the wrong moment. Also, I've always believed the whole thing about getting more flies with honey, so I thought that if I kept nodding the kid would realize we were cool, or I was cool, and cut a deal.

Kauders didn't feel the same. Instead he snatched a paper cup from the counter and ran over to the soda fountain. I wasn't good in those situations, probably because I was so shaky. I couldn't think quickly like Kauders, so I stood nodding at nothing. The Particular Human leapt the counter and approached Kauders; I saw the whole, awful situation unfold. The Particular Human wrapped Kauders up in its arms and made him go limp. Then The Particular Human poured out the half cup of cola Kauders had stolen into the

drain of the fountain. It turned around and looked at me, holding the cup to eye level. I was still nodding.

"I'm sorry about the confusion, but I could get in considerable trouble if the manager found out I let a customer steal from the establishment."

I nodded. Kauders lay on the floor on top of the crusty, unmopped Product.

"I would rather not subdue you as well, as an accessory to this theft. The only way I can justify not doing that is if you agree to participate in the aforementioned arrangement involving rules and objectives."

I nodded.

The Particular Human pulled out a marked-up sheet of construction paper from behind the counter. It started reading in a bored, rehearsed voice.

"The rules are as follows: when I say 'go' we must talk and keep talking for an hour. Pausing for more than two full seconds counts as not talking. We can talk about any subject or subjects, and can change subjects as often as we like. We must respond, in some way, to one another's comments. Which is to say that a total non-sequitur, if not justified, counts as a disagreement. If, however, one of us disagrees with the other, then the disagreeing party must give the other a belonging of the disagreeing party's choosing. A belonging is anything on your person. The objective is to receive as many of the other party's belongings as possible within the hour. I will assemble the hamburgers and drinks you ordered and hold it

so that it counts as one of my belongings. Do you understand the rules and objectives?"

I nodded. While I nodded the Particular Human placed some pre-wrapped hamburgers into a bag. He came back to the counter.

"Ok. Ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Go."

"Should I talk first?" I asked.

"That sounds like a great idea," The Particular Human said.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Let's talk about your food."

"Ok."

"You can't have it. No matter what. I will never give it to you."

"That's not fair."

"That is a disagreement. You must give me something of yours."

"What? No. But you're saying you won't play right."

"We can say whatever we want. That was also a disagreement. You must give me something else."

"Wait, let's clear up the rules."

"You are disagreeing to giving me your things. That is another disagreement."

"I'm not disagreeing, I'm saying wait."

"That is another."

I stopped myself from saying no again. I looked down at myself to think of what I could give.

"By the time I finish this sentence you will have gone two full seconds without saying something, which will count—"

"Are you an adult or a child?"

"That is immaterial to the conversation."

"So you won't agree to answer?"

"My comment on the immateriality of the question is an answer."

"So you disagree that it doesn't count as an answer?"

"You didn't make a statement. I can't disagree with a question."

"You agree that you are an adult."

"I agree that that is an entirely possible statement."

"You're not agreeing with the statement."

The Particular Human paused for a half second, then tossed its hat to me.

"You're a child."

"At heart, anybody can be a child."

"I'm going according to the definition of children as human beings who haven't reached maturity, which in this state is the age of eighteen years old."

"You are refusing to answer my question about what you think about my previous statement. You must give me something."

"The way you say that means you disagree that my statement was an answer to your question. You have to give me something."

The Particular Human shook its head. It handed me the bag of food.

"You can have the food. Not because you won the game, but because I've realized that it is a very imperfect game to begin with. I will have to tell the manager. We are done."

"Do I still have to give you things for the disagreements I made at the beginning?"

"That seems only fair. You disagreed four times, I believe."

I gave him three pennies and a nickel out of my wallet. “What an awful game.”

“It has potential. Maybe I misunderstood the rules. I will have to check with the manager.”

I nodded.

While we had been talking, Kauders woke up. As the Particular Human handed me my food, Kauders scooped up a piece of Product and pitched it at its back.

“I want my fucking soda,” Kauders said.

“Here you are. A medium soda is included in the meal you ordered,” The Particular Human refilled the paper cup with cola and set it on a table.

The Particular Human returned to its place behind the counter, staring again at the windows to the parking lot. I took the Double Mammoth, cold by that point, to a table near the front door, and ate. Though I knew The Particular Human wasn’t paying attention to me, I got shaky at the thought that it could see me.

I felt horrible and sick and icy cold on my skin. Outside, there wasn’t anything to see except garbage flipping end over end. When I looked hard down the road, I could see a little bit of moonlight glinting off the broken bottles. They were still glued in spike strip formation, now decorated with big hunks of shredded tire.

“Did you put that glass there?” I asked The Particular Human.

It didn’t realize I was talking to it at first. It fiddled with the register then went back to looking attentive.

“Hey—you. Sorry, but you don’t have a nametag. Did you put that glass down on the road outside? Did you see us get that flat tire?”

The Particular Human's shoulders slumped a little at that. Its head craned forward a hair, like the weight was too much.

"I thought we were having a rather reasonable time here," The Particular Human said. "And I even gave you the food, even though the game didn't work out as expected. And this establishment doesn't except cash or card between 12:30 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. anyway. And I have let you sit here and wait for your tow truck, even though your friend attempted a theft," The Particular Human's thin, contourless lip started to quiver then puff outwards over its chin. A hitch came into its voice. "Still you accuse me of foul play, twice."

"Now, hey. I understand. I'm not trying to be ungrateful. I just don't see anybody else around."

"You ask me that question twice, after the other questions you have asked tonight."

"Well, we were playing for food. I wanted to win. I wasn't trying to get mean on you."

"And you won't even ask me my name."

I nodded, even though I didn't know why. My stomach hurt and I felt nervous. I looked at The Particular Human's chest again for a nametag.

"Your name—"

"Because my name tag broke."

"I know. I didn't even know what to call you—"

"Because the manager hasn't showed up for his last three shifts. There is just me. And I am not even familiar with the protocol."

The Particular Human began to tremble, its belly hiccupping. It made a sound I had never heard before. Like a sigh or a rasp. A

sound of deflation. It didn't move from the register, but held out its left hand, palm up, shaking.

"Couldn't you just, couldn't you just?"

I nodded. I nodded.

MIKE SCHOCH lives in Belchertown, Massachusetts, where he attends the MFA program at UMass Amherst. Before escaping to grad school he worked as, among other things, a butcher, antique-hauler, janitor, bellboy and, most recently, pizza delivery boy. He especially disdains jobs with "boy" in the title.

The Grey Egg

Alex Munkacsy

On his way across Anderville Bridge, a traveler stumbled over an egg. Sunlight pierced its pitted, translucent surface.

The traveler turned the warm, grey, gelatinous egg around in his hands. His foot had dented it. There was something bony and sharp inside, so he held it up to the sun. In the center, the traveler saw a pointy chin and a crooked nose. A small mouth cracked open, yawning.

"Where are *you* going?" it said.

The bony face shifting around in the egg's jelly reminded the traveler of dung worms slithering across dirty pans underneath lukewarm water. The traveler sucked air and held it in his lungs. Years of washing dishes in seedy taverns had hardened his nerves.

"I—I'm going to the next town for work," the traveler said. The egg squirmed.

"I have a job for you," it said. "If you are interested."

"No," the traveler replied. "I don't know what kind of thing you are. But you seem dangerous. I'll just check the next town."

"You will not find work there."

"Why?"

"Because *you* seem dangerous," the egg said, grinning. "And nobody knows what kind of thing *you* are."

The traveler fidgeted.

"I suppose that's true, in a way," he said. "Because they don't know me. But you're a disgusting egg. I'm a person."

The egg sniggered.

"A person, all right. A greasy, disgusting person." Its pointy nose twitched. "You've been fooling with trash. Digging for food. Haven't you?"

The traveler frowned. The egg smiled.

"Who am I to judge? You're trash. I'm fooling with you because I'm digging for food." The egg yawned again. "Anyway, since you are the kind of trash that can walk, you might as well carry me to the next town. I'm tired of eating the sun."

"The sun? But—what else do you eat?"

"People. Clean people! Not like you. Now take me to the next town before I lower my standards."

The traveler shoved the egg under one arm and plodded on to Anderville. He'd never been, but he knew places like it. Just another rat hole.

From the top of a grassy hill the traveler sighed and surveyed Anderville. Like most castles, Castle Anderville was really just a big shack. The villagers lived in smaller "lean-to" shacks propped up against the castle. Everyone thought that the town would collapse if the peasants didn't lean their shacks against the castle walls, but the opposite was true.

"Who dares approach the throne?" the King of Anderville demanded as the traveler approached the rocking chair. A paper lantern flickered overhead, dangling from the low ceiling.

"A traveler. I'm here to request an audience."

The king wore a purple sackcloth bathrobe. His dripping wet hair was slicked over his bald spot.

"Really? Well—that's flattering." The king rocked back. He kicked his feet in the air, revealing a pair of smooth, pale calves.

Then he rocked forward, flicking water into the traveler's face. He arched a fuzzy eyebrow, causing his monocle to pop out.

"Hmmp. But. You appear to be poor. Dirty. *Unshaven!*" The monocle swung under the king's frowning face like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. "Nope, sorry. Go away."

"Wait," the traveler said. "I found something valuable. I'll sell it, if you let me work."

Shadows danced on the particle-board walls. The King smelled of peppermint shaving cream.

"Well, now you're talking. Let's have a look-see. If you've got something, I'll let cross-eyed Ordolf find something stupid for you to do."

The traveler presented the egg. The king extended a pruned hand.

"Give it."

The king turned the egg beneath the paper lantern.

"Hm. Mmmhmmm, hmm—wait. N-no."

The egg squirmed.

"You fool!"

He hurled the egg at the wall. It split in half and translucent goop oozed, gathered and formed into a thick, grey slug. It curled, like a half-baked cinnamon roll.

"Bang pots. Pans. Go get—somebody," the king said, rising. "Wake up everyone! Do somethi—"

The slug torpedoed off the wall into the king's shouting face and shivered down his throat. The traveler bolted out of the castle but when he returned with help, nothing was left of the king except an oily stain. The slug was gone.

"Welp. You seem smart enuff," said cross-eyed Ordolf, plopping

a chicken bone crown on the traveler's head. "All hail the new King of Anderville!"

Anderville grew rich under the reign of the traveler. He ordered the villagers to harvest wild grapes and showed them how to make wine. What the town of Anderville couldn't drink, they sold.

All the villagers agreed that the traveler was the wisest and cleanest king that Anderville had ever had. Years passed and the traveler lounged in his enormous bathtub, sipping wine. Word spread about the "Great Grape King." Each time an attractive woman passed through Anderville, the traveler married her and extended the rickety castle. After the castle quadrupled in length the citizens of Anderville started calling it "Wife Castle."

One night, the traveler was lounging in the tub with seven of his wives. They began to sing:

*"Oh the big fish slicked all the li'l ol' fish,
an' the fish got squished in the big fish dish.
And the fish they drank and they ate and they kissed,
While the time ticked by on the watches on their wrists."*

"Jolly good," the traveler said, clapping. He sipped wine, burped.

Under the water, something slimy slithered across the traveler's thigh. He yelped and jumped out of the tub.

"Clumsy traveler," the wives said in unison. Grey mucus bubbled from their nostrils. "Remember me?"

The wives' eyes were ashen, swirling clouds. The king's trembling wine bottle slipped from his pruned hand and smashed on the ground.

The seven wives yawned simultaneously. One extended a long forked tongue and licked the wooden floor. They began to chant:

"Garbage picker, garbage licker. Clumsy and so rude.

"Garbage picker, garbage licker. Brought me all this food."

ALEX MUNKACSY is a writer and a photographer from Honolulu, Hawaii. Find him online at alexmunkacsy.com.

Amazing Human Post-It Note

Ian Sacks

I was the amazing human Post-It Note. I had paper skin and money hands. Prisha was the pretty woman who worked in the cubicle across from me. She was plump and wore a cinnamon perfume. I ran calculated risk analytics chained to my desk on our gray forty-seventh floor. Prisha spoke into a headset with a put-on smile on her face.

I was born at Synthique, Blacksite 17. Prisha was the daughter of an Indian man and Irish woman who moved here two decades back and opened up a pottery store. I was raised Ed P.R. Schumann, after the doctor who had often frowned and shown me presents he'd bought for his teenage daughter. He had taken his own life with a .22 during the raid.

One day I was sitting at my desk whittling down my paper money fingers on the keys of my computer; I was worried because three more George Washington faces were almost gone. I etched notes into the expanse of my flat, light yellow body until it was almost black. Prisha spoke into her headset and rubbed her eyes. I could see her crying. I could never hear what she was saying. That morning, she'd brought me coffee, and I'd put my flat, cartoonish face against my glass to drink it through my diamond-patterned air holes—twenty-seven total, I had counted—precision-laser-cut.

Then there was the accident. A bomb. A terrible thing. Red-haired Denton had become disgruntled running base relative value reports for Robert McKinley. He had made a homemade death

mixture of soap and gas and set it off the floor below. I guess he felt life wasn't worth living any more. It killed thirteen people. It tore a hole in Alberta's young-at-heart. It split our gray-tiled floor to pieces so it looked like a scattered deck of cards.

I could see Charles, who worked next to Prisha, killed instantly from a jagged piece of metal in his skull. I was sad because I'd always quite liked Charles. The force hurled Prisha through the windows of the forty-seventh floor, and she must have felt like she was being lifted by the unseen hand of God her parents always argued over. It may even have seemed fitting, in the end.

The explosion broke my glass and singed the edges of my paper abdomen. I picked up a piece of ceiling tile. I broke the rest of my chains off my paper wrists.

Well, what do you think I did, among the smoke and fire? All the stillborn screams? I could hardly tell you; I could barely think. What I did was I dove out the broken window. I unfurled my body and felt the wind streams take me up. I felt like a flying squirrel. I pulled my paper arms toward me and plummeted. I understood now why I had been made this way.

I grabbed Prisha by the shoulders with flexible paper feet. I grabbed her hands in mine, and they felt soft and slick. I struggled to hold on. I parachuted down across the cityscape. Money leaflets tore off from my arms and legs and fluttered down over the buildings like a ticker-tape parade.

Prisha's eyes lit up with horror and excitement.

I guess we were falling.

"Don't drop me," she said. "Don't drop me!"

I was there to lift her up. She was there to ground me.

In other words, we started a traditional relationship!

At EllianceLife. In 1992!

I said, "Guess I'm worth something after all!" Money kept on peeling from my arms and legs and fluttering to the streets below.

She looked up. "At least you're letting me down easy!"

I was flaking bits of paper. They were pouring down around us. My arms hurt. My body was being torn to pieces.

We landed and looked at one another and we smiled.

I was torn to ribbons on the grass!

I set her down. She picked me up.

We watched the sun set over a blackened skyline, beyond the soot-choked hills, burning scraps of paper money raining over the poor houses in the north.

IAN SACKS is a 2012 creative writing graduate. He has lived in Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, which makes him the most accidentally Midwestern person he knows.

On the cover:

"GUTTED"

De Anne Hodum

DE ANNE HODUM is an artist, vlogger, and taco aficionado in Austin, Texas. She will probably paint for the rest of her life and make no money at it.

