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Editor's Note

October is here! And it brought weird fetishes, infanticide, circling cats, unsettling eyes, piscine pornography, and unexpected friendships.

Gio Clairval kicks things off with a tale of a dental assistant who sends some of her patients home with a little something extra. Then Don Katnik cools things down with a wintry supernatural tale. Mark J. Mitchell reflects on the grim state of the job market in a melancholy yet whimsical sonnet, and Gary Moshimer sets spines a-tingling with a story of a babysitter with questionable taste in dairy products and a baby who is anything but helpless. Next up is Yvonne Yu, who takes a surprisingly candid look at sexy mermaid fantasies. Finally, Gregory J. Wolos ends on an upbeat note with a story about a crematorium explosion survivor and his furry neighbor.

Read it by a crackling bonfire, if you can. And don't forget the s'mores.

· Laura Garrison

Gräfenberg Fulfillment

Gio Clairval

Dental Assistant Letitia liked her men bald: the muscular and the skinny, the biologist and the forklift driver—any type would do so long as his genetic makeup had predestined him to lose his hair.

Bald is sexy, she thought. Bald is virile.

On the technical side, Letitia welcomed all dental conditions: periodontal pathologies, granuloma, edentulism. Her favorite, however, was the simple cavity. When a patient turned up for his first consultation, sweet expectation of what she might find made her tremble. Cavities opened the door to her wildest fantasies.

That day, as a bald man staggered into the dental practice, howling in pain, her head swam. She prayed for a carious process, hoping the decay had already developed, affecting the dental pulp. In her opinion, it was the best moment to start an odontoerotic treatment.

The man (Luka, an art gallery owner of forty-two—she read in his file) sat in the waiting room, hands gripping the armrests. Letitia sprayed him with nitrous oxide. Luka let go of the armrests as the gas weakened his socio-immune defenses.

Letitia's following move was to hypnotize her patient in order to induce a classical Lorenz's imprinting. Swing-pendulum-swing. After Luka was brought through from the waiting room, following her like a duckling, Letitia had him recline in a dentist's chair sprinkled with a rutting female bear's scent. The *dernier cri* in pheromone fragrance.

She had previously mixed the anesthetic with an aphrodisiac substance excreted in her own brain—namely, by the serotonin-gorged *epiphysis cerebri*.

The dentist, Mr. Heinz, proceeded to inject anesthetic into his patient's palate, in the most sensitive spot of hard cartilage. Luka, instead of wincing or groaning, let out little moans of pleasure.

"You're . . . er . . . very brave, sir." Mr. Heinz cast a puzzled glance at his assistant, who glanced back with Bambi eyes.

Letitia then handed a special amalgam to her unsuspecting boss. "Amalgam" was an old-fashioned word, dethroned by the modern "composite." She however preferred the vintage term, which evoked a scent of forbidden alchemy. The *mélange* consisted of the usual ingredients enriched with bits removed from her body. Letitia mixed the formula in her quarters. She had a range of specially tailored treatments at hand: the ovarian follicles she kept for her shiniest patients, while the men afflicted with patchy alopecia received fillings based on piliferous bulbs from her bikini line.

She liked to know that a patient would exit the dental practice carrying a little something of her. Eyes closed, she saw herself experiencing vicarious masculine lives: bar fights, flurries of dirty jokes, fishing tournaments, ball games and muscle car racing, not to mention porn and culinary feasts that even Babette, her favorite restaurant's cook, would never have dreamed of.

And there was more. Letitia sensed when someone touched *her* bald man. From the depths of the filled cavity, she partook in her patient's sexual interplay. The Sandrized men attained such erotic expertise they all became unparalleled lovers.

Was she content with her invasive practice? She still felt something was missing, a rough-edged cavity in her heart that her soul's tongue could not leave alone.

She sometimes ran into a man who'd been treated at the dental practice with her special amalgam. She would spot him treading High Street, or in a shop, or at a bus stop. The clue that gave him away was the sudden flash of tingling that blossomed in her nether

regions, progressed to her nipples and finally reached the scalp in a paroxysm of white-hot shivers.

Each time, the temptation to reveal herself and the secret of the odontoerotic treatment assailed her, although the dental assistants' strict deontology—already frazzled by her procedures—prevented her from crossing a further line.

Until that very day.

Luka was an attractive man, but it would have been another patient to receive amalgam enriched with the usual parts of her body, had she not noticed a singularity. To counter his receding hairline, he'd shaven off all his hair. She remarked a geometric implantation of the hair growing back on the shaven head.

A perfect rose, starting from the crown, unfurled clockwise, not unlike the pattern of sunflower seeds.

A star-struck Letitia leaned over her patient while, at the same time, tilting the chair back. Now, the dentist's chair had been designed never to keel over. Luka, on the other hand, could flex and contort his body. The generous chest that was drawing close, threatening to press against his face, triggered a sudden movement. The tray supporting dental tools tipped over. Luka, in an attempt to catch something, gripped Letitia's white coat, ripping it, along with the blouse underneath. Patient and assistant fell on the floor among the din of tools hitting the tiles like stainless-steel hail.

An unknown feeling washed over her.

In the dead silence that ensued, "I'm afraid of dentists," Luka murmured. "And I'm truly, truly sorry. Please forgive me, madam. It's my fault."

A few minutes later, Letitia reached for the tiny box that contained an amalgam never used before, a composite enriched with tissue excised from her Gräfenberg spot. The best ingredient. Sublime.

When Luka left, Letitia asked a colleague to stand in for her and exited the practice, scrubs still on.

On High Street, the men stared, perhaps made curious by the white coat open over a half-ripped blouse. But Letitia only ran after Luka. Desperately.

Their encounter, or collision, in front of his house, produced a series of shockwaves.

“You’re mine,” she said.

“I love you,” he replied, unaware of the G-spot inserted in his maxillary first molar (N. 26).

He elbowed the door open; she kicked it shut behind them. They ripped each other’s clothes off on their way across the apartment until they lay intertwined under a flashing skylight. Maxilla and mandible interlocked, impervious to the dentist’s burr.

The Gräfenberg Spot fired them up in unison. Transplant success.

GIO CLAIRVAL’s stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Postscripts*, *Weird Tales*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, several anthologies, and elsewhere.

Cold Spell

Don Katnik

HAMPDEN TOWN CRIER – FEBRUARY 2, 2014

HUSBAND AND INFANT MISSING – Laura Fennel, recently moved to Hampden, reported yesterday that her husband Aaron and their five-year-old daughter Ellie have been missing since Friday. Jacob Williams, the Fennel’s neighbor and a long-time Hampden resident, saw a plumber’s truck at the Fennel house earlier but nothing else unusual. Police are investigating.

Hoping for a miracle, Aaron glanced through the frosted kitchen window at the thermometer outside—twenty-six below zero. On the television, the weatherman said, “It’s b-r-r-risk out there, Mainers! Temps near minus thirty. That’s a record! It hasn’t been this cold on January 31st since 1870 when it dropped below minus thirty!”

The anchorwoman said, “That’s cold, Pat.”

“Well, Jen, that cold spell in 1870 only lasted three days, but our Weather-Tracker Radar isn’t predicting any relief that soon this time. So bundle up and think warm thoughts, folks!”

“And let your faucets tinkle a little,” advised Jen, “or they might freeze up!”

“Bite me,” Aaron said as he used Laura’s hairdryer to blow hot air under the kitchen sink. The faucet was wide open but nothing was coming out. Twenty minutes later the ancient gooseneck convulsed and coughed out a blast of air then spat out chunks of ice and water. After a few more spasms the flow strengthened to a steady stream. Aaron closed the tap handle. Once the water stopped drumming in the porcelain basin he heard it splattering

beneath the floorboards. He leapt up and raced for the cellar. Ellie started to cry. "Back in a minute!" Aaron called as he raced by. The infant wailed.

The newlywed Fennels had been charmed by the eccentric cellar door in their bedroom closet. Sometime during the Cape's two-hundred-year history, "Hobomok" had been scrawled over the closet door frame. Now Aaron fumbled through Laura's clothes and rushed down steep wooden stairs. He stopped short when the door slammed behind him, but he had greater concerns than a cranky door. The sound of gushing water was louder down here. Ducking under low joists, he pushed through spider webs to a big, red valve on the main water line. It squealed in protest, but grudgingly closed. In the sudden silence, Aaron heard Ellie screaming. He started back upstairs but paused on the steps again. This side of the door was gouged with deep furrows like claw marks. Had Hobomok been a dog? Christ, they'd kept it down in the cellar? Ellie wailed again and Aaron forgot about the dog.

Aaron and Ellie waited in the living room for the plumber. The wide pine floorboards were faded except for a newer middle section. The walls were thick with coats of off-white paint—lead-filled, no doubt. Aaron's initial enthusiasm for their quirky fixer-upper had faded as every simple home-improvement project had fallen into a deep, dark, expensive hole. When Ellie dozed off he swaddled her in a blanket and went outside to open the gate. Within seconds, his ears were burning and nostril hairs frozen. The houses along the silent street hunkered in stoic hibernation; the smoke spiraling from their chimneys the only signs of life.

• * *

“Ayuh,” Avery Cavendish said, “I’ve had fawty calls this mawnin’. Git a cold spell like this,” the plumber said, “an’ pipes freeze up quick.”

“We just moved from Miami a few months ago. This is our first winter in Maine.”

“I figgered you was from away. Where’s ya cellar?” Aaron led him downstairs where the bright beam of his flashlight reflected off cobwebs, corroded pipes, and cloth-covered wiring. “Gory, she’s an old one!”

“Built in 1820.”

“You git the water turned off?”

Aaron showed him the red valve on the main line. Cavendish followed the pipe with his light. It ran along a joist towards the huge, old furnace where a smaller line branched off and went behind it.

“That ain’t good,” Cavendish said. The pipe ran through a hole in a thick beam that lay across the top of a rough wall of mortared fieldstones. “That pipe might get to your kitchen from here, but we sure can’t.”

“What idiot built a wall across the cellar?” Aaron asked.

Cavendish laughed. “That’s your original foundation. Rest’a the house was added on later. Houses up here ain’t built—they grow. Probably another way down to the other side.” But they searched the rest of the house and even outside without finding one.

“So how did they get the pipes under the kitchen?” Aaron asked, blowing to warm his numb fingers as they retreated back inside.

Cavendish shrugged. “Put ‘em in from above before they put the floor down. Looks like you’re gonna have to tear it up.”

There was a large, cast-iron woodstove at one end of the kitchen. That morning, Laura had suggested making love there tonight in the hot, red glow of the fire. “I’m not tearing up this floor,” Aaron said.

“Then ya got some igging’ t’do.”

Aaron was gathering tools when the neighbors, Jacob and Lizzy Williams, appeared. They were nice but older than dirt. He wondered how their wizened bodies withstood the frigid air.

"Having some trouble, Aaron?" Jacob asked.

No shit, Aaron thought. "Frozen pipe."

"You should get that wood stove going," Lizzy said.

Aaron glanced at the cast-iron monster. "I haven't cleaned it out yet. It was my plan for today, but . . ." he threw his hands up.

Jacob nodded. "The house had different ideas. That stove used to be in the living room before this part was added on. It was built on an older foundation—the servants' quarters that burned down in 1850."

Aaron wasn't interested in a history lesson. "The pipe burst under the kitchen—but the only way to get at it is by either tearing up the floor or tunneling in from the cellar."

A knock at the door interrupted them. "Mrs. Gray," Aaron said. Her smile disappeared when she saw Jacob and Lizzy. The chill between his neighbors was colder than the arctic air outside. Ellie woke and started crying. Aaron fetched her from the living room. "Isn't she precious!" said Mrs. Gray. "How old?"

"Five weeks," Aaron replied. "She was born on winter solstice."

Lizzy clucked. "Winter babies are bad luck."

Mrs. Gray snorted. "Old wives' tale!"

Hoping to head off a geriatric brawl, Aaron said, "Well, I'd better get to work. At least I'll have Hobomok to keep me company down there!" he finished, explaining his theory that the cellar had once been a doggy's den.

Mrs. Gray surprised him by hissing. "Demon!"

"Hobomok was a bad dog?" Aaron asked.

Jacob shook his head. "A spirit worshipped by the local Chippikwaks. They believe he controls the weather."

“What’s that have to do with my cellar?” Aaron asked. No one knew. “Maybe I should pray for warmer weather!”

Mrs. Gray snorted. “I’ll be next door if you need anything.” She left them in another icy blast. Lizzy offered to take Ellie and they left Aaron to dig beneath a suddenly silent, empty house.

Aaron was examining the foundation wall behind the furnace when the hulking machine roared to life, hot and loud in the confined cellar. He yelped, then laughed at himself. He wedged a crowbar between two stones at the top of the wall just below the beam that the pipe ran through. He pulled on the bar, expecting the stones to pry out easily, but the ancient mortar resisted. When it finally gave way with a loud crack, Aaron fell and was showered with dust and sharp bits of rock. The loosened stones fell out and Aaron scrambled to avoid being hit. He cursed, got back up, and peered into the gap he’d made. Aaron’s breath plumed into the black void beyond it—no wonder the pipe had frozen. He reached through the opening, felt down behind the foundation wall, and touched solid earth. Apparently there was no cellar on that side, just a shallow crawlspace. He pried out more stones until he’d made a hole large enough to wiggle through. He wormed his way into it but saw that the ground ahead sloped up to within a foot of the joists. He would have to dig a trench to go any farther. He backed out and traded his crowbar for a shovel.

Aaron scooped dirt out, pitching it against the furnace, which it rattled against like graveyard earth on a coffin lid. He stood on the growing pile, reaching further through the gap between the stones until he could lie in the growing trench with his legs hanging out into the cellar. He pulled dirt towards him, shoved it under his body, and ejected it behind him. As he dug, Aaron considered the layout of the house. The master bedroom with the cellar steps was at the far end of the original structure. Next was the living room, which sat over the furnace. Beyond that was the dining room that

apparently had been added on later. The kitchen was past that.

Despite brand new batteries, his flashlight's beam was swallowed by the darkness. All Aaron could see were more low joists and the pipe hanging beneath them. There weren't as many cobwebs under this section of the house, but strange detritus littered the ground. White toadstools grew in patches like miniature stands of albino trees. Rodent droppings were everywhere. His nose wrinkled at the musty, noisome odor. When something skittered down Aaron's back, he dismissed it as loose dirt until it reversed direction. He jerked, trying to dislodge it, but succeeded only in cracking his head against a joist. While stars exploded in Aaron's brain, feet tickled across the nape of his neck. A mouse jumped from his shoulder into the crawlspace ahead. Aaron screamed obscenities at it, voice cracking in his dry throat. He considered taking a break and returning upstairs for a drink—getting out of this dark, dank crawlspace sounded wonderful. But he had work to do. Aaron sighed and resumed digging. He was too far from the cellar now to push the loose dirt back out into it, so he began pushing it out into the crawlspace on either side. It quickly piled up, making tight space even more claustrophobic. He worked his limbs mechanically—digging and pushing dirt, crawling forward, losing track of time until he realized that he could no longer see the pipe overhead. He backed up. The loose piles of dirt blocked most of his view. He backed up further and still no pipe. How far had he come? It felt like twice the length of the house but it was hard to determine distance down here. Panic fluttered in his throat and Aaron quashed it. At the worst he'd just back out to the cellar—and screw this and the friggin' floorboards. He wasn't going to have the energy to make love on them anyway.

The idea of giving up and getting out bloomed bright in Aaron's chest. His breath came easier. Then Aaron found the pipe. He could see now that his trench curved off to the side. He groaned and rolled onto his back, a scene forming in his mind—Laura

staring aghast at the demolished kitchen floor, her beloved old pine boards torn apart, asking, “How could you get lost under your own house?” The real question—“what poor excuse for a man are you?”—unspoken but hanging in the air between them.

Aaron signed and began following the pipe again. Sharp pain burst in his knee. Aaron felt down his leg and found something sharp protruding from the ground. He pried it free. It was a rusty metal knife. He squinted at a crude, dirt-encrusted engraving on the handle—a pentagram. The creepy blade was now wet with his blood. He wanted to drop it but loathed the idea of the bloody dagger laying somewhere behind him—between him and freedom—so he tucked it under his belt and resumed digging.

Again he lost track of the time but this time not the pipe. Finally Aaron came to a brick wall cutting across the crawlspace. The pipe went through it. If the house had been expanded in sections, then this was probably another growth-spurt foundation marking the end of the dining room and the beginning of the kitchen. He’d have to go through or under it. Aaron’s neck screamed from craning forward. He’d left the crowbar back in the cellar. Going back for it would end this project because once out into the open air, Aaron knew he wouldn’t be able to force himself back into this tunnel. So he sighed and began digging under.

Too tired to dig deep enough, Aaron tried to squeeze through a gap too small for his beer belly and got stuck. He would have cheerfully taken an axe to Laura’s fucking floorboards now. She was so skinny, she would have squirted through this crawlspace no problem. Why was he the one who always gets stuck doing this shit? Aaron wriggled and found he could just barely move. He snaked forward an inch at a time until he popped out on the other side. To his relief, there was more room in this crawlspace and he could scrape underneath the joists. He followed the pipe and was not really surprised when, after what felt like hours later, he came to another foundation—this one made of fieldstones again.

Aaron tried to reason this out even though he knew it was unreasonable. If he was at the back end of the kitchen then he'd passed the sink and the broken pipe, which he'd lost again. There were no pipes in sight, broken or otherwise. And the kitchen foundation was supposed to be cinderblock. Aaron had seen that when he and Avery Cavendish had circled the house looking for a way under it. So where the fuck was he?

Aaron flashed his light around. The joists were rough-hewn beams instead of the smooth pine two-by-tens that had been under the dining room. This section was older. White sticks littered this crawlspace. Aaron picked one up—it was a bone. Gooseflesh erupted on Aaron's arms even though the bone was too small to be human. The light flickered. Aaron turned, trying to avoid touching the bones, and retreated. The light went out. Aaron slapped it and got a feeble glow. He hit it again, harder, and the light flared, illuminating three carefully crafted, miniature stick people impaled on corroded, square nails protruding from a small rise in the earth floor of the crawlspace. Aaron stared at the Golgothan tableau. One figure was smaller—a child? Aaron saw that the bones surrounding him spiraled out from the crucified figures. Then the light went out again. He slapped it furiously to no avail. Aaron bolted in blind panic and immediately slammed into something hard. Stars exploded in his head and he sagged to the ground. When his head cleared, Aaron knew he was done. All he wanted now was to get out—to hell with the pipe, to hell with the floorboards, and to hell with Laura. He groped forward, feeling for the foundation. Once he found the foundation, he'd follow it around until he found his tunnel under the brick foundation. Then he'd wriggle back through it and all the way out to the cellar. As fast as possible.

First things first—find the foundation. Aaron started moving again. His hands and knees hurt from pressing down on strange,

hard objects that he couldn't see in the darkness but could picture horribly in his mind. Long minutes or hours later when he finally found the foundation, Aaron was so convinced that he never would that at first he didn't believe it was real. He placed one hand on the solid stones, sighed with relief, and began following them.

They went on forever. Aaron lost count of the corners he'd encountered—the kitchen above had only four, like any square room, but Aaron had passed at least twice that many. It seemed impossible that he kept missing his tunnel. Real despair—not the paltry uncomfortableness he'd felt before, but black, heavy, smothering despair—was settling over him when suddenly Aaron fell into his tunnel. He gratefully wiggled through.

When he came up on the other side, a strong, bitter wind numbed Aaron's face and he saw stars overhead. He was outside! His clothes, damp from hours of crawling through dank earth, steamed in the open air. After the impenetrable crawlspace, the moonlight was blinding. A structure loomed above him, but it didn't look like his house. Shivering so hard he could barely stand, Aaron staggered around it until he found a door. He knocked. No one answered. He tried the door. It was unlocked. His clothes were beginning to freeze so he opened the door and stepped inside. "Hello? Is anybody here?"

Silence that was not just a lack of sound but a deeper, darker emptiness was the only response.

The room he'd entered was hot. An orange, hellish glow flickered across it from a wood stove at one end. It was large, like the one from their kitchen, but new. The floor before it was new as well—freshly hewn, thick pine boards with a large ring of darker wood set in the center. More dark lines crisscrossed it, forming another pentagram. The extent and location of the whole ghastly design reminded Aaron very much of the section of replaced floorboards in his own living room. A hand grabbed Aaron's arm

and he screamed.

“Aaron! We have been looking for you.” The man wore a heavy cloak with a hood, but Aaron recognized Jacob’s voice.

“Jacob! I’m so glad to see you. Christ, what a crazy day! I hit my head under the house and now . . . well, I’m confused. Where am I?”

Jacob regarded him for a long time. “Where do you think you are?”

Other than the glow from the wood stove, there were no lights on in the house and none to be seen outside it. “Did the power go out?” Aaron asked.

“Power?” Jacob’s voice was strong and firm, not the thin and trembling old man’s voice from that morning. “The power is always here, if you know where to find it.”

“You have a generator? I only came in because I was freezing. Thirty below? Hell, it feels more like a hundred below.”

Jacob nodded. “We are going to do something about that. Look—the others are gathering.”

Aaron followed Jacob’s pointing finger through a hard-frosted window and saw candlelight behind the house. Shapes moved inside. “I don’t feel up to a party,” he said. “My head hurts. And I should check on Ellie.”

“Lizzy will bring the child,” Jacob said. The room suddenly was crowded with people who, like Jacob, wore hooded robes. Burning candles soon lined the shelves around the room. Jacob pushed his hood back and in the flickering light Aaron saw a different man. Jacob was young! Before Aaron could digest this latest insanity the crowd began chanting. He couldn’t understand the guttural syllables, but they chilled him more than the air outside had. “What are they saying?” Aaron asked.

“They are praying to Hobomok to end the cold spell,” Jacob

answered.

“Hobomok? The cellar dog?” Then Aaron remembered Mrs. Gray’s word for it—demon.

A fresh icy draft batted the candle flames as someone else entered the house. When the newcomer swept her hood back, Aaron saw that it was Lizzy. Not frail, gray, sweet Lizzy from the morning but a young, voluptuous woman who for all her beauty looked more evil than angelic. Lizzy opened her robe and brought out a squirming bundle that cried.

Ellie.

Aaron started toward her, but Jacob restrained him. Lizzy unwrapped the blanket around the baby and set her naked on the floor at the center of the pentagram.

“What the hell are you doing?” Aaron asked.

No one answered his question as they passed a goblet around the room. When it had made the rounds, Jacob nodded towards Aaron’s midsection. Bewildered Aaron felt there and his hand found the knife he’d picked up under the house only now it wasn’t corroded and dirty like it had been before but new and gleaming in the firelight. Jacob stepped behind Aaron and forced him down to his knees over Ellie and the pentagram radiating out around her. Jacob gripped Aaron’s hand holding the knife and raised it up as the chanting grew louder. “Hobomok, hear us!” he cried. “Take this blood as sacrifice and cease blowing your cold breath!”

The candle flames flared, brightening the room’s interior except over the floor where a murky shadow suddenly swirled over Ellie. The darkness congealed into a long face, its mouth gaping.

“Hobomok hears us!” Jacob cried.

The chanters exulted.

Aaron was so caught up in their insanity that he wasn’t prepared to resist when Jacob drove his arm down. The knife punctured Ellie’s tiny chest. Her eyes widened and she convulsed. She coughed out a blast of air, then chunks of dark, red phlegm and blood. After a few more spasms, the flow of blood strengthened to

a hard, steady stream. The shadow-face darted down as if to gobble the infant, but it passed through Ellie and the floor. Before it disappeared, Aaron saw a huge, evil grin stretched across Hobomok's murky face.

Lizzy scooped Ellie's steaming body from the floor and swept towards the wood stove, followed by the chanting worshipers. Jacob said, "I am sorry, Aaron, but it had to be this way. You brought this cold upon us with your winter baby. The sacrifice had to be yours."

Aaron was sobbing now. "How could you force me to kill my own child just to change the weather?"

"We live and die by the weather, Aaron. Folks can survive a few days of bad cold, but longer than that and it seeps through everything, freezing up wells and hardening the soil so deep we won't be able to plant our fields until June. The crops won't have time to grow and the people who didn't freeze to death this winter will starve next fall. Before you came here with your winter baby, all the signs showed this was going to be a mild season."

"I don't understand any of this! How can you be so young?"

He frowned. "Young? What do you mean?"

"This morning you were like ninety!"

"I won't be ninety until 1944," Jacob said. "Is that what year you think this is?"

"It's 2014," Aaron told him. "Or it was until I crawled under the house and everything went crazy."

Jacob smiled. "Fourteen years after the millennium? I'm going to live to see the turn of two centuries. Thank you, Hobomok!"

He nodded, and Aaron realized someone was still behind him. The knife he'd used to kill Ellie slashed across his throat. Bright, red blood sprayed out. Aaron heard its icy splatter as the droplets bounced off the pine floorboards.

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HAMPDEN TOWN CRIER – FEBRUARY 2, 2014

UNEXPECTED THAW BRINGS RELIEF – The recent spell of bitter cold broke overnight when a fast-moving storm from the south brought milder temperatures to the region. Subzero temps froze pipes across the state, but resulted in no weather-related deaths.

HUSBAND AND INFANT MISSING – Laura Fennel, recently moved to Hampden, reported yesterday that her husband Aaron and their infant daughter Ellie have been missing since Friday. Jacob Williams, the Fennel’s neighbor and a long-time Hampden resident, saw a plumber’s truck at the Fennel house earlier but nothing else unusual. Police are investigating.

HAMPDEN TOWN CRIER – FEBRUARY 3, 2014

PLUMBER MAKES GRUESOME DISCOVERY – The body of Aaron Fennel was found frozen in the crawlspace under his house yesterday. Laura Fennel, his wife, reported him missing with their infant daughter the day before. A plumber made the discovery while repairing pipes broken during the recent cold spell. According to police, Aaron Fennel died from a throat laceration. Although the injury could have been accidental, the Fennel child is still missing and police are investigating.

HAMPDEN TOWN CRIER – FEBRUARY 5, 2014

TRAGEDY STRIKES AGAIN – In a bizarre twist to a strange story, Laura Fennel, whose husband was found frozen under their home yesterday, discovered the bones of their missing daughter in the ashes of her wood stove. Police are considering this a murder-suicide but Laura Fennel claims her husband would not have killed their infant daughter and himself. Neighbor and long-time Hampden resident Jacob Williams said that Aaron Fennel was “a

nice young fella” and wondered whether there’s something to that old wives’ tale about winter babies being bad luck.

DON KATNIK is a wildlife biologist who resides in Maine with his wife Misty and three dogs Jedzia, Copper, and Noah. Besides writing he enjoys playing guitar, working on their 200-year-old Cape, and cooking. And drinking beer. Yes, he’s overweight—but who isn’t? He believes that words matter and despairs that full sentences may become a thing of the past. His writing is genre-challenged. If you want to see his published work, just Google him like everyone else does.

Long Term Unemployment

Mark J. Mitchell

After her failure as unicorn bait
she folded compass roses for lost maps.
Flat captains dropped them through their sailor's caps.
They sank and opened like abandoned freight.
Next came a quick attempt to rescue moons
from night's backdrop—she only slept through that.
She tried to polish used apostle spoons
until they cracked her tiny hands. White cats
began to circle her, counter-clockwise.
She couldn't count them all, but her pale fears
were blooming. Cool palms slapped against her thighs.
Her lips moved. Words slipped past criminal ears.
They tickled. She sat still, too tired to try.
Eons became days, hours became years.

MARK J. MITCHELL studied writing at UC Santa Cruz. His work has appeared in many periodicals as well as the anthologies *Good Poems*, *American Places*, *Hunger Enough*, and *Line Drives*. His chapbook, *Three Visitors*, is available from Negative Capability Press; his novel, *Knight Prisoner*, was just published by Vagabondage Press. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the documentarian Joan Juster.

The Baby

Gary Moshimer

So we had this couple at work, the Smiths, and they had this baby, a boy. We didn't know them that well; couldn't say they were really friends. They begged us, as a last resort, to watch their baby for the weekend. They thought it would be good practice, seeing as Amy was pregnant.

We asked what his name was, and they said they were waiting to see what kind of shit he did, to see what name fit. Amy looked at me, her mouth a grim line holding back a smile. For now we could just call him "The baby." I finally agreed, but let me just say I didn't like this baby. There was some cute babyish quality he lacked. He was quiet, I'll give him that; but his expression was set, never changing, as though he were analyzing and not approving of this life. And his eyes were creepy, blue and white like the sky and clouds, but with hardly any pupil. I waited for something to cross, like a bird.

They handed him off with an accumulation of breast milk and some jars of baby food and his feeding schedule. The sucker ate every two hours, even at night.

I placed his Jolly Walker thing in the living room, and the first thing he did was put his fingers in the electrical outlet. I watched him do it, and it didn't really register until his wispy blond hair stood up. I had the plug covers; I just hadn't gotten around to it. It didn't seem to bother him, though. He just headed for the coffee table, where I had his bottle. He picked it up, sucked for a second, and tossed it. It rolled under the TV stand. He rolled after it and flattened his fat hands on the screen. I said, "Cut it out."

I retrieved the bottle. Maybe it wasn't the right temperature. Thinking about the baby's mother, and her nice tits, I opened the

bottle and tried some. It was plenty warm, but seemed bitter. Amy caught me. "Maybe he wants food," I said, wiping my mouth, capping the bottle.

Disgusted, she took the bottle, grabbed the baby and sat with him on the sofa. He sucked away for her, and she bounced him gently. Now and then he turned his head and looked at me, and each time he did, I swear my gall bladder pain flared. I had this crazy thought: here was a baby that could bring pain.

Later we walked him by the river in his stroller. The ducks and geese flew away as we approached. The baby put his head back and watched them go. His eyes were the same as the sky, but the birds moved in the opposite direction. I didn't think about it. When we got home I studied his tiny pupils.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

I found a magnifying glass and examined his eyes. "It doesn't seem right."

"Do you think there's something wrong with him? They didn't say anything."

I didn't answer. Magnified, his pupils looked like crows.

Amy fed him baby food the rest of the evening. I tried a couple times, but he wouldn't open his mouth. The pain in my gut came back, and I couldn't eat anything that night.

Amy set an alarm for every two hours on her phone, and then she conked out and slept through the first one. "Won't he cry if he needs to eat?" But I was asking myself, and the answer was that he didn't cry.

I warmed a bottle, took a sip, and headed to the port-a-crib. He was wide awake, watching me approach. He moved his limbs, but just slightly, not in an excited way. I picked him up and sat in the rocker where we could see the bright moon and clouds through the open curtain. I offered the bottle and he sucked away. He didn't take his eyes off me. They were lit up, except for those dark spots.

When I looked away, and I had to, I saw the geese passing over the moon, and smaller birds; and then a large shape without a name, which scared the shit out of me.

I put the baby back and sat in the chair. I closed the curtain, but still saw his eyes, wide open.

I fell asleep in the chair, and the alarm went off in two more hours. "Please," I said. I peeked in at him and there he was staring at me, like he never slept. I did a terrible thing: I pinched his fat leg, hard, to see if he would cry. All that happened was that I doubled over onto the floor with my own twist of pain. "I see," I told him.

I warmed more milk. I drank half the bottle myself. Maybe I would be indestructible too, nameless, needing no sleep, capable of chasing birds away, of causing pain. Two more hours, two more bottles. One for him and one for me. She certainly brought a lot: she was one of those super-pumpers; I'd seen her doing it at work. I was wide awake now. I took the baby for a walk along the river.

We got in just as Amy was up. She was dressing to show houses. "You'll be able to handle him all day?" she asked.

"He doesn't sleep."

"Put him down now. And you can nap."

"I think he controls me."

"He's just a baby."

"I have ballgame tickets for today, remember?"

"Take the bugger. You'll have fun." And off she went.

I packed a backpack with bottles and some food, and a tiny Red Sox hat I'd bought for our potential boy, and baby sunblock, and diapers. I'd had my first diaper bout earlier, and it had weighed a ton, like some new kind of scale needed to be invented for waste generated by babies with no names, because they will weigh down the world with revenge, with shit so foul and perhaps non biodegradable.

“Third baseline seats,” I told the baby. He was studying the sky, as usual, maybe getting ready to signal birds or Batman.

I rubbed him down with the sunblock, put the hat on him, which was way too small. He sat there next to me in his little rocker seat. I gave him a bottle and I sucked one. A guy looked at me in disgust. But then he leaned forwards squeezing his temples, like he had a sudden killer headache.

I saw the swing of the bat, and half a second later heard the crack, and the ball sizzling, but I did not see it coming. People ducked. The line drive hit the baby in the head. The sound it made was terrible. He was surely dead. People didn’t dive for the ball as they normally did; they stood over me like I was a monster for not throwing myself in front of the baby. The headache guy spit on my feet.

But the baby was fine, looking around at all the faces.

“His eyes aren’t right,” a woman said. “He needs to go to the hospital.”

She started tapping on her phone, and I picked up the baby’s seat and my other stuff and sidestepped from the murderous crowd. They followed me, making sure I was actually going to do something. I was aware of some dried breast milk on my chin. I looked down at the baby and saw a nice welt forming between his eyes.

In the ER waiting room, the baby turned his head slowly, studying faces. It was creepy. The bump made his eyes further apart. People looked away, grabbing their heads or chests or legs – whatever hurt.

“I’m just babysitting,” I told the nurse that brought us back.

“Did you call the parents?”

“They’re away.”

She looked at me and shook her head. “This could be serious.”

“Oh no, he’s fine. Look at him. Just a bump.”

“You will take financial responsibility?”

“I’ll call them.”

After they did a CT scan the doctor came in. “He’s okay for now. No evidence of an acute bleed or fracture. His brain is large.”

“You mean, like, swollen?”

“Just large for his age. The parents should follow up on that.”

Ned Smith faxed a copy of his insurance card. “We’re having a great time!” he faxed on a separate piece of paper. “Glad the little guy is okay!”

“Jesus! How could you let that happen?” Amy took the baby from me. “He could have been killed!”

“I doubt it. He doesn’t feel pain. He makes pain in others.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Are you drunk?”

“I’m tired.”

“Good. Go to bed and stay there. I’ll take care of the baby. Take your sleeping pill.”

She took off with the baby, and he watched me over her shoulder. I wondered what was going on in that big brain.

I took the pill. As I was drifting off I said out loud: “Amy, don’t let him touch your belly. Don’t.”

I slept for many hours, but then I dreamed I got up. Or I really did get up. You couldn’t tell with these sleeping pills. Sometimes you did things. I went and got the baby from the crib. He was wide awake; Amy snored on the sofa. I picked him up and said, “Let’s do something.” I went to the fridge for the very last bottle, and we took it to go.

I didn’t take his seat; I just belted him up front with me. We shared the bottle and I tossed it out the window. Somewhere in there, four cop cars stopped me, accusing me of going 100 mph

through the city. "Impossible!" I said. "I'm asleep." But there were saplings from a median strip sticking from my grill.

They put me against the car and looked at the baby. "Jesus Christ," one cop said.

"That bump's from earlier," I said. "A baseball."

"That baby was crying," said another cop. "No, he was laughing," said yet another.

One twisted my arm behind my back. "You the father?"

"Babysitter."

He read me my rights and cuffed me.

At the station I woke up. An officer was saying: "Speeding . . . reckless endangerment . . . endangering the welfare of a child . . . possible kidnapping . . ."

My wallet was open on the table, and Amy was standing there, pale, holding her belly.

"I'm going to jail," I said. "I need to be there, and you need to get that baby back to them."

My cellmate was Alonzo, a tattoo artist in for bad checks. He had oil pastels and he drew the baby on my shoulder. "Most important are the eyes," I said. "Like lying on your back and watching blue sky and fluffy clouds roll by, but with tiny crows for pupils. Or ravens."

Alonzo trembled. He got on one knee and crossed himself. He said something in Spanish.

We looked at the baby in the warped metal mirror, his eyes even bigger.

Alonzo showed me the high chink of window in the tower. It was all we could see. Dusk grew, and Alonzo said look and listen. With a rush and some chirping sounds thousands of bats left the tower window.

* * *

What got me out was my gallbladder. Probably too much fatty breast milk. They thought I was faking, but the nurse realized I was turning yellow. So I got to go to the hospital. A scan showed I had large stones to come out. Amy had arrived, along with the Smiths, who were just getting home.

I said to the baby, "Hey buddy, I'm in your hands now," and everyone gave me a weird look.

A huge wave of pain broke through the meds. I tried not to cry. The baby smiled. I had a name for him.

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The First Last Mermaid Porn Queen

Yvonne Yu

1

licks her fingers and tastes herself. The taste is as salty as you might imagine but not fishy, not in the least. It lingers in the mouth like well-aged vinegar. This is one of many unknown things about the world's only (to the best of her knowledge!) mermaid porn queen.

2

smiles as the blonde bronze human swallows and tells her, *This is my first time. I mean, not my first time, but my first time doing this.* She strokes the side of his face like a mother and tells him it is easier than he thinks, that the motions and mechanics are mostly the same, that he just needs to spread his legs a little wider to make room for the end flaps of her tail. *I don't want to hurt you,* he says. *It's okay, I'll tell you if you are,* she says. And then they do things that no mother should ever do with their child, and it doesn't hurt or even seem awkward, really, and afterwards the mermaid porn queen feeds him some smoked kelp she had prepared as a snack.

3

already knows what you want to ask her. Yes, she has a vagina, or at least an opening that could be considered one; no, her tail does not split in two like legs to expose it. Under her navel, on the ventral plane of her tail, a patch of smoother flesh leads into a

gentle slit where penetration can occur. Her tail itself is a taut length of muscle, and can be flexed to open herself up to different positions.

The parts of her that could potentially house life do not fall on the human spectrum, so she has no need for birth control. She has ovaries but not the corpus luteum of the female mammal, which secretes hormones necessary to the maintenance of human pregnancy. If she wanted a child, which she does not, she supposes she would deposit her unfertilized eggs out in the water and find a mer-mate to ejaculate over them. It is not currently known if this would work with human males, or if it did, what the resultant conjunction would look like: would it divide in perfect fractions, becoming one-fourth fish and three-fourths human? Would it be outwardly all man, but soft-spined on the inside, unable to hold itself up above the density of the water?

These are questions that are easier not to ask. She has seen human children before, splashing in the low surf, and feels nothing but a mild sympathy when they discover the harsh sting of salt in their eyes.

4

is a diligent worker. She does not drink on the job nor will she accept one without a contract, dated and laminated so she can keep a copy in her files beneath the sea. Any film crew she signs with must operate by strict ethical standards, including full consent and bargaining power for performers. She negotiates for combs, for French face creams, for DVDs. She is particularly fond of *Young Frankenstein*.

The mermaid porn queen is a good businesswoman, so good that sometimes the set crew forget she is a porn star and fall in love with her slick straight back. They vie to be the ones to rearrange her tail in between takes, or to spritz her down with a light oil-water mixture (for rehydrating, and to add a sexual glisten to the skin). But at the end of the shoot they always slink home to look for girls who have never bared their breasts in 4K high definition at a 19:10 aspect ratio.

She doesn't mind at all. It's their loss, really.

5

knows that one good thing about having a tail in this industry is never having to put up with the language she sees mapped onto other women's bodies. The one director who dared refer to her "vaj-jay" was quickly removed of that tendency; being the only mermaid porn star and therefore a limited commodity affords her a relative degree of power. The mermaid porn queen knows her sex is not a flower or a pussy but a three dimensional location that beats and breathes and consumes with ravenous delight. Because no one quite knows what to call it they switch from saying *Your cunt tastes amazing* to *You taste amazing*. This makes the mermaid porn queen purr with pride; it is she who moves her body, it is she who deserves the crown.

6

has been known to take lovers, too, although she is clear that she does not mix work with pleasure. There are not many mer-men in the sea, and even less who deign to swim where the humans gather, so more often than not she tends to take up with the human

kind. She takes them into the water and kisses their hipbones, lets her long hair hover in clouds around their naked bodies.

Sometimes she bares her teeth very close to their faces and flares her gills like fans on the sides of her neck, pretends she is about to bite into them. The way their eyes widen, as if all the legends of sirens and sea witches were true, makes her laugh so hard she almost forgets to let them up for air.

7

pulls her jaw open in front of a pane of polished sea glass until the corners begin to ache. Then she holds her lips apart until the whole structure of her face turns numb. It is becoming increasingly popular for directors to start their films with a close up of her performing oral sex, the screen tight on her head and back, then petering back to reveal the sudden curve of her skin into scale. From those first frames, they tell her excitedly, no one ever knows the difference.

She sloughs dull scales off of her tail and shakes it out to its full length. That difference, she thinks, is in pretty damn good condition for its age. Honestly.

8

uses the rough edges of seashells to file down her nails before lesbian scenes. By now she must have done over a hundred of them.

When girls are first sent to her, they don't know if they should treat her as female or fish. She does not swagger like the men they are used to but she still takes up space. In the beginning they stick mainly to her breasts, her neck, they supply shy kisses like new lovers. In return she teaches them how to dip their fingers to give her pleasure; she wraps her tail around their fine waists to offer support as they lean in to her touch. Some girls ask, after the shooting, if they can take a closer look. They peer into her body with unabashed curiosity, sanitized stares, keeping a careful distance as if these parts are now entirely new. As if what they'd just done was have sex with their eyes closed, with their mouths open, drinking in the core sensations but not their surroundings.

9

reads her latest fan mail, which is left bi-weekly under the southernmost rock on her shore. A man who runs an art collective expresses his deep respect and awe for the breadth of work she has committed herself to. He wishes to invite her to dinner (an indoor tank can be provided, of course) and requests she call him names while she sticks a kebab skewer up his ass. The mermaid porn queen pens a polite decline, which includes a cautionary line about hazardous materials for anal insertions.

10

is showered with semen for the last time in the day. The milky globules preserve most of their form where they land on her scales, glittering there like scattered pearls. Look at what you did, the mermaid porn queen laughs, lifting her tail to hold the jewels to her co-star's eyes. He laughs too, penis beginning to droop comically to his thighs. When the final cut comes out, it will not include this

scene; the way human and mermaid grin at each other over their ridiculous, beautiful intimacy.

The first and last mermaid porn queen watches the human dry translucently on her skin. *I am a work of art*, she tells herself, pulling the waterproof microphone wire from her back. *I am a job well done*.

YVONNE YU is a Brown University undergraduate and the co-creator of the hashtag BadBitchLipClub. She currently works as a sexual health educator and advocate. A fan of the obscure and the macabre, she keeps her wisdom teeth in a glass display case and would like others to believe that she once killed a man. Previously published in *The Molotov Cocktail*, she is learning to stop whining and just keep writing.

Karaoke for the Deaf

Gregory J. Wolos

Section 1.0: Cremation and Waste Ethics

(1.1) In no way can human remains be treated as waste.

(1.2) Even so . . . the environmental impact of cremation must be minimized.

—*The International Cremation Foundation
Guide to Cremation Practice, p. 3*

Gil, my neighbors' German Shepherd, is a retired cadaver dog. The Nelsons got him through some connection with the state police. Gil is in his prime—he's got thick muscles rippling under his glossy black and tan coat. I'm not privy to the career arc of cadaver dogs, so I don't know if he was entitled to an early retirement or if he screwed up and got fired. When Gil frolics with the Nelson children on their front lawn, his jaws gape with barking I don't hear—I've been deaf since the explosion at the crematorium two years ago. I'm sure you heard about it—the story hung in the national news for months. On mornings like this one when the two older Nelson children are at school, Gil lies on the family's gated front porch, and his amber eyes melt over me.

Before the explosion that deafened and neutered me, I loaded deceased loved ones into a cremator and poured the ashes into urns. I also took care of the grounds. According to investigators, the ninety-three-year-old former physicist I'd slid into the cremator had packed his intestinal tract with plastic explosives and detonating chemicals. 2100 degrees Fahrenheit set them off. The force of the explosion blew me twenty feet through a window onto the lawn I'd mowed that morning. I woke from a month's coma to find myself seared as smooth as a Ken doll between my knees and

waist. A permanent forest fire now roars in my ears. My survival was hailed “a miracle.” The crematorium’s two other employees were trapped in the front office and burned to death.

The cremator operator is not legally responsible for checking the guts of ninety-three year olds for incendiaries, so I’m set for life, thanks to my settlement with the corporation that owns the crematorium. The corporation, in turn, lost their own suit against the hospital that released the physicist’s body without an autopsy. The ruling determined that there’s nothing suspicious about someone that old dropping dead. My ex-wife, Linda, was entitled to half of my award.

While he stares at me, Gil rests his muzzle on his forepaws, the tip of his nose poking between the railings of the Nelsons’ porch. Now and then his tail lifts and falls. Linda and I had been having trouble well before the explosion. Our three-year marriage had been a mistake from the start, she said. We’d met at a party, and she thought she’d overheard me say something witty, when really it had been somebody else. For years she’d quoted the joke: “Did you hear about the fire at the circus? The heat was intense!” and I’d taken credit for it. When she told me I’d grown morose and didn’t say funny things like I used to, I confessed that I’d never told the circus fire joke in the first place. We argued about things like whether or not to have kids, which is something couples should get straight before they marry. I didn’t see the point—if nothing else, the crematorium job I’d held since dropping out of college had taught me that all stories end with the same flammable page. Kids are no different than everyone else: potential ashes. Just add fire. Linda told me I have a “botoxed soul,” but refused to explain what she meant.

Linda is a real estate agent and coordinated with federal and local authorities to find me a home in this neighborhood. These agencies don’t know what to make of me. They don’t really think the explosion was a terrorist attack, and they don’t actually suspect

that I had anything to do with the “percussive event,” but since the physicist’s motives have never been proven, I linger on their radar. The Nelsons’ house and mine are the only two homes on this cul-de-sac. The family knows I’m the guy from the crematorium explosion. They’ve received detailed information about me, and I have a written report about them: husband Ed, wife Nina, and the kids, whose names I’ve forgotten. I learned all about Gil from the report. The Nelsons have had him for a year. Everything has to be written down for me—I can’t read lips, and I don’t have the patience to learn signing.

I’m not about to ask anyone, but I wonder if Gil, before his retirement, sniffed over the scorched rubble of my crematorium. Did he help collect the bits of the physicist? Would he have confused the bodies lined up for incineration with those of the freshly killed—Nick the manager and Becca his secretary? Would he have caught wind of their not-so-secret affair? Maybe Gil pawed at the ashes of my genitals and filed away my scent in his memory.

I’ve read about my event on the internet. Blowing up a crematorium didn’t make sense to anyone. The terrorism talk flared up, then burned itself out. The forensic experts concluded that the physicist had swallowed the explosives the day before his death and that his clogged system triggered his heart attack. Circumstantial evidence suggests that he’d intended to self-detonate the following evening at a testimonial banquet given in his honor by the tech firm he’d been retired from for twenty-five years. The physicist’s seventy-year-old daughter said her father had been “looking forward to the event for months.”

“The reception was to have been attended by some of the nation’s most pre-eminent thinkers,” the director of the tech company said. “The loss would have been incalculable. And tragic.”

I’m no scientist, but on sleepless nights I pretend that I’d been invited to that testimonial. There’d be a phone call canceling the event—the *guest of honor just passed away—heart attack—perhaps the*

impact of such excitement on an old man's system should have been considered. Then another phone call—an *explosion!*—and sobering gossip among my fellow invitees regarding the physicist's probable intentions. I would understand what it felt like to have a target lifted from my back that I never knew existed. I'd ponder the vicissitudes of fate and vow to take nothing in life for granted. When I get tired of pretending, I fondle the warm piss-bag strapped to my thigh and doze off to the purr of flames.

At first I protested splitting my settlement fifty-fifty with Linda. She threatened, only half-seriously, I think, to turn me in to the FBI. "I'll tell them you always had suicidal thoughts," she said. "I'll tell them about your obsession with the 'fire at the circus.'" She forgot the joke wasn't mine.

The Nelsons know I'm deaf, but the implanted catheter tube that drains into my piss-bag is information I keep to myself. Ed, Nina, and the two older children wave at me aggressively when they see me. They open their mouths so wide they must be shouting. My voice punches through my sternum when I answer "Hello." When the older boy and girl romp with the toddler, they mouth two syllables, so I think of him as "Eep-eep." Nina Nelson's bright red lips form the same syllables when she leaves the baby on the porch with Gil. Eep-eep spreads himself atop the lounging dog, his chin on Gil's head. While I rock in my chair and try to read the paper, their gazes tighten around me like boa constrictors.

This spring morning the sky is a sharp blue. Nina Nelson exits her front door with Eep-eep on her hip. She's holding a clipboard. When Gil rises to greet her, she says something to him, and he sits, tongue lolling. She steps off her porch, secures the gate, and crosses the grass between our houses. She's studying her clipboard as if it's a hand mirror. I don't get many visitors: a weekly nurse to check my equipment, grocery deliveries, a lawn service.

Smiling, Nina Nelson mounts my porch steps. She has the same china-dish complexion and blue eyes as the baby she jostles. She

hands me the clipboard, and mother and child look down at me like moon astronauts watching earthrise. The message is printed in italics:

HELLO NEIGHBOR!

We hope you've been getting on well. We speak often to Linda, and we've tried to give you time and space to adjust to your new home. We'd like to have you over for dinner soon. Maybe a backyard barbecue in the summer.

But today the Nelson family would like to ask you for a big, big favor. We're supposed to leave in two days for Disney World—it's the children's April break, and they've never been. But last night our kennel called and informed us that they're infested with fleas, and all pet-boarding reservations have been canceled.

I glance over at Gil, who's panting at us from the Nelsons' porch. When he sees me look at him, he lifts his head. Nina Nelson, guessing how far I've read, points at the dog, grins, and nods. I pick up where I left off:

We're keeping our fingers crossed that you could care for Gil during our week at Disney. All the other kennels are full, and you're our last hope. Our other friends are on vacation, too, or are allergic to dogs.

I peek up: Nina Nelson's eyes are moist.

Gil will be easy to care for. He's very obedient. We've measured out food for his breakfast and dinner. He only needs walks around the block in the morning, afternoon, and evening. He could stay in our house or in yours—we promise, he hasn't had an accident since we've owned him! Attached is a list of phone numbers: ours, the vet's, and the Disney hotel's. Also a feeding schedule.

So what do you think?

I sneak another look at Gil, then hand the clipboard back to Nina Nelson. My thumb lifts from my fist and my head bobs: my body has agreed to the proposition before I've had time to think it over. My neighbor's red lips stretch into a smile of relief.

"You need to enjoy vacations while you can," I feel myself say, wondering how much my injuries have changed my voice. Nina

Nelson nods gravely and pokes the clipboard toward Gil: she's going to introduce us to one other. She starts to hand me Eep-eeep before pulling him back and bounding with him from my porch back to her own to fetch the dog. The baby's eyes rise and fall with his mother's steps, but don't release me.

Gil is staying at my house. It's half the size of the Nelsons'. Both homes were built within the last decade. All of my interior surfaces—walls, floors, counters—are off-white. Everything seems laminated. Gil watches me connect a fresh piss-bag before I pull on my pajamas.

“Easier than a walk around the block,” I tell him. Gil's also neutered, like all cadaver dogs. It helps them stay focused on dead bodies instead of females in heat. The first night of his visit, Gil abandoned his bed and jumped up on mine. When my mattress heaved, I kept my eyes closed as the big dog settled his bulk against the backs of my thighs. I hadn't thought of marriage's casual contact for a while.

The exploding physicist didn't leave a suicide note. Nothing in his notebooks, nothing on his computer or in cyberspace. If a note had been in his pocket, the forensics experts who sifted the charred splatter of his entrails would have reassembled it. On the internet I find foggy pictures of the physicist as a young man. He holds a pipe and poses with famous scientists whose names are almost familiar. The same decade-old driver's license photo of me turns up again and again. There are Facebook selfies of my crematorium boss and his secretary. When I scroll through these pictures, I'm reminded of photographs of my parents from their wedding album: slim and youthful, they blazed with promise. Both died gently, Mom in a hospice bed, Dad a year later, stretched out on his living room carpet where I found him, white and cold as marble.

Tonight I dream of the Nelsons at Disney World. Though I've never been there, it's as easy to imagine as heaven: the family poses for pictures with Goofy and Mickey and Donald; they spin in tea cups and gawk at Cinderella's castle; they float in jungle lagoons and point at mechanized elephants and crocodiles; they crow at the escapades of Caribbean pirates. In fact, Nina Nelson texts often. "We're having fun!" she reports. "The weather is great! How's Gil?" I've replied, "Great. Nice. He's fine." My dream follows the Nelsons to "It's a Small World." The exhibit's theme song plays in an endless loop that out-roads the fire in my head and reminds me of Beethoven's last words: "I shall hear in heaven." The Nelsons and their fellow vacationers ride past frozen-faced animatronic children outfitted in international costumes. There's an explosion: all heads, human and animated, jerk up. The sky falls in burning chunks. The hall fills with smoke. Fake children topple from their pedestals. A burst of flame illuminates the shrieking face of Nina Nelson. Limp Eep-eep dangles from her arms. Everything shudders as the walls of "It's a Small World" implode. Then I'm outside, in the dark, watching from above. A cloud of glowing smoke blooms from the carnage and takes the shape of a gigantic, eyeless mouse head.

I wake to find Gil looming over me, his forepaws planted on my chest, compressing my diaphragm. "Gil—" I grunt, and pat my piss-bag—it's unpunctured. The dog sticks his cold nose in my ear, and I smell his fishy breath. Maybe he scented the Nelsons in my dream and wants to dig them out from under the plastic corpses of foreign children. Unless he's after something deeper. My smartphone flashes on my night table, and I push Gil off—he's as heavy as a boulder. There's a fresh message from Nina Nelson: "Mickey-shaped pancakes for breakfast!" Sunlight streams through my bedroom window. Nine o'clock already? We're an hour late for Gil's walk.

This morning, Gil is uninterested in our usual route and strains at his leash toward every side street. He looks back at me with eager eyes, and I imagine his voice:

“Burr-nee—” he begs. Bernie is the nickname my ex-wife gave me because of my job. I’m Ethan to the nurse who checks me for infections. She met Gil yesterday. “Nice doggy,” she wrote on the dry erase board I use for messages. She showed the note to Gil and bared her teeth in a laugh. The woman looks to be about as old as my mother was when I was in grade school—about the age I am now. She’s my second nurse. The first had long legs and wore a short skirt. She knew I was some kind of celebrity. She wrote me a note after checking my catheter: “Your wound is like what some of the boys back from Iraq have. But more exotic.” Her printing was childish and barely legible. “Exotic” might have been “erotic.” I emailed her supervisor and requested a different nurse “for personal reasons.”

My father was shot through the hand in Korea. He couldn’t make a fist after, but his clawed fingers were perfect for throwing a knuckleball. One flew over my glove once and smashed my nose. Is it south that Gil wants to go? All the way to Florida in search of the Nelsons?

“They’re fine,” I tell the dog. “I got a text message.” But he’s so insistent that I give in and follow his lead.

My next message from Nina Nelson is “Thunderstorms,” followed by a sad face made of a colon and parenthesis. Here, the sky is a spring blue so crisp it hurts to look at. Since I stopped resisting, Gil has settled into an easy trot.

“Florida is a long way off,” I say, and he flicks me a glance. We’re on a quiet suburban road. Only a few cars pass, but we encounter other pedestrians, some also with dogs. A round woman with an enthusiastic poodle makes a face both apologetic and accusatory and hoists her pet to her chest. At the next corner we meet an old man, coincidentally led by a German Shepherd. The

old man's dog is heavier and less handsome than Gil. We let our dogs touch noses. The guy twitches fingers at me as if he knows I'm deaf, and his hand reminds me of my father's. The night Dad died alone in his house, he called me at two AM.

"I'm all backed up," Dad whispered, as if he was sharing a secret. "I need Ex-lax."

He wanted me to go out and buy him a laxative. No, he hadn't called a doctor. Unless the woman next to me in bed was pretending to sleep, Dad's call didn't wake her — this was a few years before Linda.

"Everything's closed," I said.

"I'm going to blow up," Dad whined.

I told him I'd be there by noon the next day.

Gil and I have walked a long way. Front lawns are greening. Yellow forsythia brighten some yards, and there are beds of daffodils in others. A few houses are decorated for Easter: cutouts of colored eggs are taped in windows and plastic ones hang from trees; an adult-sized, inflatable Easter Bunny lurks under the flaming blossoms of a crabapple tree. Soon I'll need to replace my piss-bag. I always carry a spare. The road we've been on comes to an end at a park, and Gil pulls me onto the gravel path leading into it. Around us are monuments. A cemetery? It's drawn my cadaver dog like a magnet. But I don't see any headstones, and the monuments are actually plywood silhouettes of dogs about the size and shape of Gil. Maybe this is a pet cemetery. Gil pauses at a nearby cut-out dog, lifts his leg, and pisses on it. It looks like he's marking his own shadow. As we move on, I remember what these dog silhouettes are for: they're spread around the park to keep flocks of geese from shitting all over the green space. The crematorium manager found "Decoy Dogs" like these in a catalogue once and asked if we needed them for our grounds, but I told him geese were the least of our problems.

The park's grassy fields end at a forested hill. Steel towers carry high-tension wires up and over its crest between pines and

budding oaks. The path Gil and I follow connects to a grassy swath beneath the rising progression of towers. The trees would provide enough cover for me to switch in a new piss-bag. It occurs to me that Gil has honed in on the scent of something dead. Maybe behind the next tree, the next bench, the next dog silhouette, we'll run into something horrible. Maybe a crow dropped whatever was left of my prick way out here. "Please, Gil," I pray as we hurry forward, "don't find a baby."

If a cadaver dog had led forensic experts to the few ashes I left at the site of the explosion, might my little pile have been mistaken for more of the physicist's remains? Maybe the experts would have found bits of a shopping list I'd had in my pocket and guessed it was the old man's suicide note: "Bread . . . butter . . . bacon . . . beer." Maybe they're struggling even now to break the code.

Abruptly, Gil stops and sits, his nose in the air: he's looking up at something. Hovering far overhead is an orange hot air balloon with a small black gondola. The balloon drifts through the cloudless sky toward the forested slope, and Gil lifts his rump and follows. The balloon seems to be descending, but perspective is difficult. I don't know if it's a full-sized balloon. The gondola looks empty.

After my nose stopped bleeding from Dad's knuckleball, he washed me up and drove us to the Dairy Queen. We licked vanilla cones in the front seat of our station wagon and listened to a baseball game on the radio. I couldn't taste the cone and resisted an urge to plunge my throbbing nose into it. We could see the car dealership next to the DQ through the windshield. Tethered to a new pickup truck was a miniature hot-air balloon, orange, with "BEST DEALS" printed across it. The balloon floated maybe a hundred feet over the dealership. It shifted in the breeze and looked like a fishing-line bobber on the surface of a lake. I'd never been fishing with Dad. He said there were no good places nearby.

Through teary eyes I watched my father watching the balloon: he had tears in his eyes, too. God, he loved me.

My phone hums in my pocket—a message from Nina Nelson, no doubt. Maybe the storms have moved through Orlando, and the family has joined the others strolling down Disney World’s Main Street. I envision the crowd as a battalion of black cut-outs of moms and dads and children— human versions of the dogs Gil and I have passed through. But to my surprise the marching shadow families cast colorful reflections in the puddles I see them stepping over.

The phone stops buzzing. Gil sits again, and I almost stumble over him because I’m watching the orange balloon angle toward the wires and towers—it will miss them, at least on our side of the hill.

Sing along with the bouncing ball! That’s what jumps into my head when I see the balloon so close to the wires—from musical cartoons older than my parents I watched on Saturday mornings at sunrise. A ball hopped along the words to a song played by goofy animals, and I remember joining in, though I’m not sure I was old enough to read. The music led me. But now I wouldn’t hear the melody. It’s tough to imagine karaoke for the deaf.

The balloon is gone. I look down at Gil, and he’s squeezed his eyes shut. His ears lie back, and his jaws sip at the empty sky. *Burr-nee*, he howls—the sound buzzes through his leash into my palm like audio-Braille: *Burr-nee!*

If the balloon had fallen into the towers and wires on the other side of the hill, wouldn’t there have been a flash of light? At least some smoke rising over the crest? Gil spins me around with a lunge, and I almost lose my grip on his leash. He’s taking me home. We race over the gravel path and through the pack of shadow dogs. No chance to change my full piss-bag or answer my phone.

“Gil—” I pant. *Burr-nee*, hums in my hand, then up through my wrist and arm to my shoulder. Whatever amount the Nelsons demand for this dog, I’ll pay. If my crematorium money can’t buy him for me, what good is it?

GREGORY WOLOS's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *A-Minor Magazine*, *JMWW*, *Yemassee*, *Post Road*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *PANK*, *The Baltimore Review*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Superstition Review*, *Jersey Devil Press* ("What's Yours Is Yours" a few years ago), and many other journals and anthologies, both online and print. His stories have earned two Pushcart Prize nominations and have won both the 2011 New South Writing Contest and the 2011 Gulf Stream Award for fiction. Two recent collections were named as finalists for the 2010 and 2012 Flannery O'Connor Short Fiction Award. He lives and writes on the northern bank of the Mohawk River in upstate New York. For more information regarding publications and commendations visit: gregorywolos.com.

On the cover:

“HORROR HOUSE”

Yuri Shwedoff

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