



Jersey Devil Press

Issue 60

Nov. 2014

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

November 2014, Issue 60

ISSN 2152-2162

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Editor's Note

The stories and poems in our sixtieth issue resist easy categorization, but contributors Alina Stefanescu, Dave Petraglia, Lawrence Aron, Rachna Kulshrestha, Catherine Weiss, and Filip Wiltgren are united in their exploration of the intriguing—and sometimes dangerous—differences between appearances and reality (whatever that is . . .)

— Laura Garrison

Birth of A Surrealist

Alina Stefanescu

Start as a seed
wind up a splinter
not much surreal
about taking a tree
for its mulch
unless you get stuck
with subcutaneous
consequences.

Start as an artist
wind up a witness
to World War I
not much surreal
about trenches and guns
or corpse v. carcass
unless you get stuck
with subcutaneous
shrapnel.

Start right here
wind up there
not much surreal
about moving through
space or time
until you get stuck
before a painting
"Ceci n'est pas un pipe"
with the subcutaneous
consequences, holding up

your splintered palm, saying
“This here is not a splinter”
knowing only a surrealist
might really see
the nascent tree.

ALINA STEFANESCU was born in Romania, raised in Alabama, and reared by the ghost of Hannah Arendt. Her poems have been published online at the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* and *Collective Exile*. She lives in Tuscaloosa with her partner and three unschooled children.

Bitches Be Like 5 Seconds

Dave Petraglia

The old 411 is that any food picked up from the floor within 5 seconds is cool.

Recently, science say the theory for sure don't suck.

So short, 5 seconds. What can happen in 5 seconds?

You can start a universe. In less than that, it went from nothing through the Planck, the Grand Unification, the Electroweak, the Inflationary, Baryogenesis, the Quark, the Hadron, and the start of the Lepton epochs. In physical size, it was about as big as 500 of our solar systems, in less time than it takes to say, "Holmes, what time Big Bang on tonight?"

These bitches for 5 seconds won't hang you ass out:

Be made over you shoulder cybering pron.

Grab baggage that ain't yours from the carousel. Just because you fly Coach don't mean you can't put you fingers on some every now and then.

Conversate like Beverly Hillbillies. Be like 'Well doggies!' or 'How do you like your possum?', or call food 'vittles', and no one will have any idea what you spillin'. Any more than five seconds of Granny-speak, and Miss Jane will be taking you out to the *ce-ment pond* for some one-on-one counseling.

Get a heart-on for the wrong person.

Chill on Discovery while changing channel.

Be sidebitched.

Watch a pot before it boil. If you watch it, it will never boil. But they don't tell you how long it take to keep it from boiling. But less than 5 seconds, you ok.

Shake a lamb tail. Twice.

Be blonde. Slap on the blush.

Step out of the International Space Station with no suit. Less than five seconds, cool; you really can do about 30. But don't try to hold you breath! No, for real!

Try on the wrong size bra. That go for guys, too.

Launch a boat with no drain plug in.

Walk a beach with you kicks on.

Be made with a slide rule.

Pose a booty pop on the Gram.

*These bitches for **more** than 5 seconds? Not cool:*

Style camo sneakas if you not country chicas.

Yack like De Niro. You can't because De Niro say everything twice. De Niro say everything twice. Make you nuts. Make you nuts. Look at his movies. Look at his movies. Every line he say twice. Every line he say twice. Now, if not twice completely, he would say this sentence a second time, like, with some less words: 'A second time, like this'. It's kind of an Italian thing. It's an Italian thing. No, it's not OCD. Not OCD. He has a reading disorder. It's a reading disorder. He read all the lines in a script twice. He read all the lines twice. And he think he just saying his lines the way they are meant. He think he just saying his lines. Then, he say them. Twice. He say them twice.

Wait to put his happy hat on. Go ahead, keep that wrapped and waiting on the nightstand and you might as well start painting that spare bedroom and pricing bassinets.

Aim a smartphone at anyone.

'Sing' Jimi Hendrix licks.

Down someone else's 40.

Pass another car, then go slower.

Hunt for the button for you floor on the elevator; you plain in the wrong building, Sherlock.

Let a cat out of a bag. That bitch is gone.

Cut the bangers from the middle of a dub.

Go Caps Lock on.

Mouth-hug the champagne, keeping the sick, creamy, lightly toasty, bustin' rizzle citrus zest, pear and yeasty sub-thumped fruity acidic low notes of that bumpin' flow from we all. Pass it, girl!

Have you man come across you Large Hadron Collider Access Pass in you bag. Tell him 'CERN' is a salon that mean 'Chicks Estrogenically Rad and Natty', and those creds get you discount on product.

DAVE PETRAGLIA's writing and photography have appeared in *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Better Homes & Gardens*; more recently in *Agave Magazine*, *Cactus Heart*, *Crack the Spine*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *eFiction India*, *Loco*, *Gravel*, *Olivetree Review*, *Petrichor Review*, *Storyacious*, *Thought Catalog*, *theNewerYork*, and *Vine Leaves*. He lives near Jacksonville, Florida. His blog is at www.drowningbook.com.

Two Poems

Rachna Kulshrestha

inevitable

I don't know if
I began from a drop
of protein or a blink
of love but I will
end as a lump of dirt

stains

natural gaps in her teeth hold
cigarettes, pipes, betel leaves —
stains of truth under white lies

RACHNA KULSHRESTHA is an Electrical Engineer by profession who likes to read and write while she is working on digital circuits. She is inspired by her multicultural background and her vast travel experiences. She lives in McKinney, TX, with her husband, two children and a ton of weird ideas.

The Right Bait

Lawrence Aron

Buggy Wheeler reared back with the rod, setting the hook.

“Gotcha!”

The fish ran, peeling yards of line from his reel. Buggy waited patiently for the drag to do its work, then began to crank it in, foot by foot.

Something jumped out on the water. He strained to catch a glimpse of what he had, but the glow from his Coleman lantern didn’t reach that far. The half-moon in the night sky provided only reflections on the still water.

The lantern sat on the shore next to his tackle box and folding canvas chair, and from its small circle of light Buggy could just make out where the line met the water, zigzagging back and forth as his quarry fought to throw the hook. He could feel the heaviness of the fish and knew that this was something special.

“Big fish, big fish!” he shouted, though no one heard him. He was alone on the lake just after one o’clock in the morning. He went fishing every night after his swing shift at the machine plant, from the season opener to the end of the year.

His fishing gear was his constant companion, strapped to his battered Schwinn. His coworkers made fun of him for it, usually behind his back where they thought he couldn’t hear. But Buggy had very good ears, probably to make up for what he didn’t have between them. His father had told him that long ago; less than a year later the old man went out for a drive and never came home.

The fish took a sudden turn and dove. Another stream of line whipped off the spool of his reel.

“Can’t run, big fish,” he muttered. He pulled the rod back, keeping the tip low, when he noticed a change in the tension of the line.

Buggy held the rod still. He was still attached to something, but that something wasn't moving. A terrible realization filled him.

"No . . ."

He cranked in more line and gave the rod a tentative tug. The other end didn't give, but it didn't pull back, either.

"NO!"

With a practiced flick of his finger he released the bail of his reel to give the line slack. It spooled off in loose coils and fell limply against the surface tension of the water. He re-engaged the bail and reeled in, stopping when the line drew taught.

"Not a dumb fish," Buggy said angrily. "You went and ran for bottom, got me caught in the weeds, didn't you?"

He reached past the end of his rod and grabbed the line. It bit into his thick hand as he pulled, and he felt a muted snap as it broke free. Buggy cranked at his reel, stopping when the loose end broke the water's surface. The hook and bait were gone.

"Weeds," he said. "Robbed me again!"

He sighed and sat in the chair, leaning the rod against his lap. Holding the end of his line, he rummaged in his tackle box for another hook.

His real name was Billy. They called him Buggy at the plant because he didn't understand a lot of things. He knew they thought he was stupid and a little crazy, and he was okay with that because he also knew they were right.

But they treated him well; usually they called him Buggy with big smiles and a friendly clap on his wide shoulders. "Gonna go after the big ones tonight, Buggy?" they would ask. And he would nod sagely and get back to his work. Mr. Flushing, his foreman, didn't like when he talked to the other workers. And he was okay with that, too.

The only one at the plant who called him by his real name was Pamela, the dispatcher. She worked behind a small desk outside of Mr. Flushing's office and would always greet him with a faint smile

and sad green eyes. Buggy liked Pamela. He liked her freckles and her red hair, which she always pulled back in a French braid.

“Ow!”

The hook sank into the ball of his thumb as he was tying it on, drawing a bead of blood. He pushed the small wound into his mouth and sucked at it, careful to keep the half-finished barrel knot from unfurling.

“Damn you, Buggy Wheeler. Stay on task!” he muttered, scolding himself the way Mr. Flushing did when his work slowed.

He finished the knot and reached into an old coffee can by his feet. Slimy, muscular things pulled away from his groping fingers. He grabbed one of the big night-crawlers and inspected it in the harsh lantern light.

“That’s a good ‘un,” he said softly, and began to thread the worm over the hook. His brow was furrowed under the stained and creased ball cap that was pulled over a corkscrewed mop of black hair.

It wasn’t just the bait, he knew. The trick was to present it to the fish in a way that made them bite. If it looked wrong, the big fish wouldn’t touch it. Little fish were dumber and would strike at anything that smelled good. Big fish got big by being smart.

Pamela had asked him about that at the birthday party they threw him at the plant.

Buggy knew it was her idea; the cake in the break room said “Happy Birthday Billy” on it in festive blue piping. Billy, not Buggy. Only Pamela would do that.

After most of the cake was gone and the other workers settled down to their coffee and cigarettes, Pamela had walked over to him.

“Did you do anything special for your birthday, Billy?”

"No, Ms. Ralston," Buggy had said. Mr. Flushing didn't like when he called Pamela by her first name.

"So you're just going home after shift?"

"Oh, no ma'am!" he had beamed. "It's a clear night. I'm goin' fishin'."

Pamela had looked at him quizzically for a moment, as if debating. Then: "Billy, do you fish out by the old quarry?"

"Sure do!" he had said. "Best place for catfish. I get bass, too. Once I even caught a trout this big," and he had held his fingers out wide, but gradually brought them closer together. Telling a fish tale to Pamela made him uncomfortable.

"You be careful," she had said. "You know there's been some bad things happening up there?"

Buggy had looked at her, not understanding. "You mean the rock that fell, Ms. Ralston?"

"No . . . well, maybe. That was a meteor, Billy. It didn't hurt anyone because it exploded over the quarry, far from town. But there are people who go up there to try to get pieces of it for money, and some of those people are not so nice."

"I don't go looking for rocks," he had said defensively. "I look for fish."

"Yes, but a fisherman went up there last month and hasn't come back. They think something happened to him."

Buggy had thought about that, and as he did he realized that there were more and more nights when he was alone on the water. Night fishing was a lonely activity, but there used to be the occasional companion. These days there was no one.

"I'll be careful, Ms. Ralston."

"Good," and she had smiled in a way that made him feel warm and self-conscious. "So do you have any fishing secrets I can tell my brother?"

"Yes ma'am!" He had stood up straight, his round, stubbled face cracking a wide grin that sported a smear of vanilla icing at one corner. "Use the right bait for smart fish."

She had nodded, smiling. "I'll tell him that," and then she had started to turn back but stopped. "How old are you, Billy?"

Buggy hadn't hesitated. "I'm thirty-seven today, Ms. Ralston!"

Her smile had faded at that, and Buggy thought he saw a tear blossom under one eye, but she had turned quickly and soon he wasn't sure if he had seen it at all.

The hook was fully baited and now it hung from the end of the line, the night-crawler contracting and twisting on the barbed hook.

"That should do 'er," he said, inspecting his work. Enough of the worm was left to dangle freely so it looked natural.

Buggy rose from the chair with a grunt. He walked to the water's edge, trying to remember where he had made his last cast. Even smart fish could be fooled twice . . . if they were hungry enough.

"Come and get it!"

He cast out, hearing the silky hiss of his line parting quickly from the spool, and heard the distant plop where the worm entered the water. He put his rod in the Y-shaped branch he had stuck in the dirt by the lake's edge and sat down to wait.

Buggy reached over and grabbed his soda from the cup-holder drilled into the armrest of the chair. He drained the can in three large gulps and belched softly, keeping his gaze on the tip of his rod and on the line that draped from it like a loose hammock.

Crickets and other night creatures serenaded him from their hidden places in the surrounding trees and underbrush. On other nights an occasional deer would wander close, but tonight there was nothing but the sound of insects and small rodents scurrying over leaves and branches in the dark.

Pamela was worried about him. He was sure of that, and it made him feel good because it was nice to have someone—especially someone like Pamela—care enough to worry.

Buggy wanted to tell her that he cared about her, too. He knew he never would. He remembered Mr. Flushing, his face pinched and frowning from under a salt-and-pepper crew-cut, staring pointedly at him whenever Buggy greeted her. He was intimidated by the foreman and didn't like to anger him, but that wasn't the real reason he kept his distance.

"I don't got the right bait for that smart fish," he mumbled sadly, and did his best to keep his attention on the water and away from Pamela Ralston.

From somewhere in the dense trees behind him, an owl hooted into the night.

Buggy was munching on potato chips, his fingers greasy with cooking oil, when the first few loops of line fed through the top ferrule of his rod. After a few feet had been pulled out, it stopped.

He froze, waiting.

Suddenly a stream of line sped from his reel, and he dropped the bag of chips and ran to grab his rod from its makeshift stand. Buggy yanked upward, setting the hook. Instantly he knew from the feel that he had connected with another big one; the tip of his rod was bent downward in an impressive arc.

"Gotcha again, smart fish!" he shouted excitedly.

There was no dive for the bottom this time, but the fish fought strangely. It didn't swim from side to side, but felt instead like it was moving directly away from him. It would stop long enough for Buggy to haul it in a few yards then dart again straight towards the center of the lake when it found more energy.

"What'cha up to?" Buggy wondered. He almost had it to shore; the fight lasted less than a minute. He knew this was a heavy fish; it should have put up more of a struggle. And he still couldn't make anything out under the inky water.

Something large finally broke the surface, and Buggy dragged it onto the sand. He gasped when it finally came into view.

It was the biggest fish he'd ever caught, but that wasn't all.

It had large scales like a carp, but it was pink and speckled like a rainbow trout. Long barbels hung from its jaw like a catfish, and its dorsal fin had the saw-like spines of a bass. It was like no fish he'd ever seen, and exactly like every fish he'd ever seen. The tail end was still in the water, hidden.

Buggy looked down at it, fascinated and a little frightened.

It gaped in the air and flopped lazily over, the large pectoral fins moving sluggishly. It began to slide back into the lake.

He moved without thinking, reaching down and grabbing the fish under the gill cover. The hook and worm came out of the wide mouth as he hefted it out of the water. The tail end came up with it, or rather something that wasn't a tail at all. The large body tapered to a pale yellow rope-like tether about as thick as two of his fingers. It snaked down from where the tail should have been and fed back into the lake.

And then the fish did something unexpected.

The pink and speckled skin suddenly peeled back to reveal several long, multi-jointed fingers folded up underneath. Before he could react, they swung out from around the body like an overextended umbrella and clapped shut over his hand and forearm. The ends were tipped with curved hooks that sank under his skin. The pain was immediate and searing.

Buggy howled, shaking his big arm and crying out in agony as the hooks tugged deeper into his muscle tissue. It hugged him tightly below the elbow like a living gauntlet.

"Lemme go!"

There was a sound like a whip-crack as the tether was pulled tight from under the water. Buggy's ensnared arm was yanked painfully backwards, nearly dislocating his shoulder. He dropped his rod and spun on his heels as he was dragged toward the lake's edge.

Screaming, he instinctively grabbed the tether with his free hand. It felt leathery and pliable, but underneath there was something stronger, and Buggy was reminded of the rubber-coated steel cable he used to stow heavy machinery. The fish-thing tightened around his forearm, cutting off the circulation and making his trapped fingers balloon with the hydrostatic pressure.

He turned away from the water, his arm still extended comically backwards, and trudged forward. He was crying loudly now, tears of terror and pain rolling down his jowls.

"Got me hooked," he whined. "It got me . . ."

A vicious yank hurled him around again and he lost his balance, falling face-first to the dirt. Sharp pebbles and sticks poked at his chest and stomach as he was dragged into the lake. Water surged over his head, pushing up his nostrils and into his open mouth. His cap came off and floated away in the dark.

Buggy flailed with his free hand and caught a partially submerged boulder, slimy with algae. The force pulling at his other arm threatened to tear it from its socket.

And then the pressure relented. He could feel it slacken, and some of the pain in his trapped arm eased. He lay there for a few seconds, his head just above the surface and both arms stretched in opposite directions, crying in soft pants and wheezes.

"Help!" he screamed. The sound of his voice echoed around the quarry.

He was scared, but more than that was the sense of confusion. At work there was always someone to explain things. Now he had no one, and the only thing he truly understood was that he was in a fight for his life.

Buggy's panicked thoughts drifted to Pamela, with her red hair and sad eyes. He was sorry he never thanked her for her kindness, but even more, he was sorry that he didn't listen when she told him to be careful.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Ralston," he blubbered weakly. Snot and water ran from his nose and over his mouth. "Looks like big, dumb Buggy Wheeler's just a fish on a line."

A fleeting thought sparked in Buggy's head. It rolled forward, gaining momentum and substance like an avalanche, and slowly developed into something he was unaccustomed to having on his own: an idea.

Wincing at the pain in his arm, he turned his head toward the center of the lake. He could see the thick rope-thing just under the surface, running out into the darkness.

"It thinks I'm pulling back hard," Buggy said. "It's giving me slack, but if it pulls again I ain't gonna be able to hold on and it'll get me in deeper water. Then I'll be a goner for sure."

So what do I do when a fish pulls? I let 'im run until he tires . . . I let 'im run . . .

"I run!"

Buggy got to his feet and ran, his work boots slogging through the shallows and then plowing deep trenches in the shore mud. He was out of the water with the fleshy rope and its fish-thing still attached to his arm. He could feel resistance but at least it wasn't pulling . . . yet.

He was soaked. Blood ran from where the thing had latched onto his arm and pattered in large drops to the ground.

"I ain't no smart fish!" he screamed, the anger at himself suddenly blooming out from under his fear. The strange thing at the end of his line was just bait. It wasn't even the right bait. It wasn't even *good* bait. It was unnatural; it was wrong. But he got himself hooked anyway, because—

"Because I was too hungry," he said hoarsely.

He ran past the lantern and his chair, plodding against the constant strength-sapping force and hot agony in his hooked arm. Beyond his small camp, he could see only vague images of his surroundings in the dark.

"There ain't no place to run," he whimpered. "I got nowhere to go." He started to cry again.

The weeds . . .

The thought came as he was imagining his captor from deep in the lake, a large fishing rod the size of a radio tower grasped in two monstrous arms, waiting for him to run and tire against the drag. It was a silly thought, a stupid one.

"What weeds?! I'm not in the water! There ain't no—"

And then, appearing out of the dark as he ran, Buggy saw the first tree. It was young, just bigger than a sapling. Its trunk was barely four inches across and looked ghostly pale in the moonlight.

Run for the weeds!

The next savage tug nearly felled him a second time. He stumbled and just managed to keep his footing, but the thing was pulling again.

"I need more line," he said. "I gotta run it out."

He put his head down and charged, throwing his mass against the opposite pull. He could feel the hooks of the thing tear deeper into his arm.

The tree was twenty feet away and getting closer. His legs started to burn from the effort and his pace slowed. It felt like he was hauling a compact car out of the lake. His heart whacked heavily in his chest. Ten more feet. Now five. Two . . .

Buggy ran past the tree and around it. He watched as the tether first touched the smooth bark, then bent sharply as it began its first loop. He ran around the trunk like it was a Maypole, counting the completed circuits. At four he ran out of line; his arm with the mock-fish was up against the slender trunk. He held it there, trying to keep from buckling on his wobbly legs.

The yellow tether pulled tighter.

It was strung between the coils around the tree and a point somewhere in the lake. There was a small sag to it, but it was getting less pronounced. He could hear the tension in the line; it twanged and pinged like an overworked guitar string.

Buggy heard a rustling sound above him. He looked up and saw the top of the tree bending towards of the lake, the leaves and branches swaying. It continued to lean farther, and then there was a deeper noise and a slight movement under his feet. His ragged breath stopped in his lungs.

A thick, earthy rending and snapping came from the base of the tree.

It's tearin' up the roots! It's gonna pull—

One side of the tree's base erupted, torn roots poking out from the clods of dirt like broken bones. The tree suddenly made a low bow like a butler making a formal exit. Some of the lower branches brushed the ground.

Buggy fumbled in his pocket with is free hand and felt only soggy denim. Then he remembered: it was in his other pocket, the one on the side of his trapped arm.

He had to lift his leg a bit and strain around his body to reach. He pulled the pocket inside-out in his panic, but he felt the tang of a metal clip against his fingers and he savagely pulled at it, tearing his pants.

It was awkward with his non-dominant hand, but after one failed attempt he managed to open the folding knife with a flick of his thumb. He put the sharp edge against the tether and began to cut in frantic swipes, going easily through the soft outer covering. A dark, syrupy liquid spurted out and splashed over his fingers. It burned like scalding water, and he heard a hiss and saw bubbles where it covered the blade.

Then Buggy felt the rasp as he was sawing against something hard and unyielding.

The whole tree was coming out faster; most of its anchoring roots were torn free. He knew if the tree went into the lake he'd go with it, screaming as he was pulled along until the water silenced him forever.

Sweat beaded on Buggy's forehead and ran into his eyes. His arm continued to move with the blade, the muscles bulging in his shoulder with the effort.

"C'mon! Cut, cut, cut!"

He pushed down with all his remaining strength and felt the knife bite into something with a soft crunch. Then there was a sound like a rifle shot as the tether tore free, whipsawing out to the lake like a rubber-band. Buggy watched as the free end pulled away from him, pumping out the caustic liquid in dark spurts before it finally disappeared.

The coils around the uprooted tree unwound themselves and fell to the dirt. He lifted his arm and saw the fish-thing that got him hooked.

It looked deflated; the long, bony fingers were shriveled and soft. He pulled at the thing with his free hand and it tore away like wet cardboard. Soon only the hooks remained, sticking in jagged holes that ringed his arm. He tweezed them out, his face twisted in disgust. A sleeve of blood covered him from his elbow down, and he took his shirt off to wrap the wounds.

Out on the water something surfaced. Buggy heard a giant splash, and a few seconds later he saw large waves crashing over the shore. In the moonlight he thought he could make out something large over the deepest part of the lake.

He got ready to run, then stopped and stared at the large glistening object. It was moving but not getting any closer. A thrill of triumph suddenly raced through him.

"You can't leave the water!" he screamed. "That's why you need bait!"

Buggy laughed and pumped his fists in the air. His wounded arm throbbed but he hardly noticed.

"Well, I got your lousy bait!" he screamed. "Got your hook, too! Buggy Wheeler's one smart fish!"

The thing on the water roared. The inhuman cry echoed in a continuous deep growl, reverberating over the lake and pushing

against his eardrums. Buggy had never heard anything like it, but he recognized anger and frustration . . . and pain.

It continued to thrash for a few seconds and went still. From within the lumpy, black mass in the distance Buggy thought he could see four large eyes staring at him. Then the thing sank like a dropped rock, sending up a geyser of water and new waves in all directions.

Buggy was alone again, and very thankful for it.

He finished collecting his gear and strapped it to the rack of his bike. Buggy was careful to watch for any movement in the water when he plucked his discarded rod out of the muddy shore. The end was broken off; he'd probably stepped on it during his struggles. Buggy didn't care. He didn't think he'd be fishing for a while.

He wheeled his bike away, stopping for a moment to turn and stare at the dark water. The waves tossed up from the thing continued to stipple the surface.

"I ain't no dumb fish," he said, and meant it. He pictured Mr. Flushing, in a rare display of appreciation, acknowledging a job well done.

Good job, Buggy.

"My name's Billy," he said defiantly. He kicked one leg over his bike and he started to pedal away, the knobby rear tire kicking up plumes of dust as he made his way home.

All around the abandoned quarry, the crickets began to sing out again. The waves gradually petered out, restoring the surface to a smooth, mirror-like calm. Overhead, the moon stared down with its glowing half-eye.

Deep in the lake, at the severed end of a long appendage, a new bait began to grow.

LAWRENCE ARON is a professional nerd to some and a genuine renaissance man to others, though he's fairly certain the "renaissance" thing was a joke started by his friends. He spends his days in the warm glow of computer monitors writing awesome software. He definitely needs to get out more. After graduating from the University of Arizona (go Cats!) he spent the next twenty years in Tucson, honing his skills as a software engineer and working on his sunburn. He's since moved to Western Pennsylvania where—older, fatter, balder and none the wiser—he lives with his wife and daughter, happy in the realization that while striving for greatness is worthwhile, falling short now and then is pretty cool, too.

We Burn the Formal Scarecrow

Catherine Weiss

When the days grow short and cold,
We burn the formal scarecrow.
We place him up upon the cross;
He wears an old tuxedo.

We douse him in some kerosene,
Set alight his natty tie;
The night is raw—this bitter wind
Means scarecrow now must die.

The flames whip up in frenzied bursts,
Consuming him entirely.
Cries of pitied shock ring out from we
Who watch this show, so fiery.

In winter we will spread the ash
O'er fields and snowy crests.
There the formal scarecrow lies;
In cinders he will rest.

When the springtime comes at last,
We sew cufflinks in the earth,
And from the end of scarecrow
Comes a gentle kind of birth.

Summertime is when we work;
There's little need for prayer.
When the days are long and bright,
We harvest formalwear.

CATHERINE WEISS is a poet and author living in Northampton, MA. More about her work can be found at catherineweiss.com.

Butterfly Loop

Filip Wiltgren

Anders staggers, disoriented; the box on his belt chimes, but his growling stomach takes precedence. He snatches a golden-skinned apple from the decrepit handcart, leaving a lump of pure silver behind. A new thread springs to life: the farmer will donate the nugget to the temple, trusting in piety and eternal rewards. A hundred years later it will be buried in the desert, part of a silver chain around the strangled neck of Pharaoh's favorite concubine. The machine struggles to decode it; the box at his belt rings, calls for attention.

Anders shoves the apple into his mouth, rips, chews, licks his lips. Relief washes through him and he moves on. A step and the box flashes. He is no longer Anders but Andrea. A step, a flash, and she drops the core in Saxon England. Two hundred years later a grove will grow here. In Cromwell's time a highwayman will be hung from one of the branches. The highwayman's children will never be born.

She reels and the threads twist, bend, come undone. Cities are built and unbuilt, wars started, fought and forgotten to never have been. Another warning chime from the box at her belt, capacity overload. Calculations go unfinished; threads disappear from the matrix. She is lost.

An indicator fades from yellow to orange to red; the drain on the device is enormous. She frowns, takes a step and stretches out his hand, plunging it into the working heart of a nuclear reactor, showering him with a lethal amount of radiation. He staggers, shoves the broken piece of rod into the receptor, the flesh of her hands burning away. In the next step she is healed but heavily pregnant, the child bursting from her distended abdomen, spraying

blood from a cesarean that never happened. He curses and clutches at his wound.

A step to the side and the wound is gone. The indicator shines green, fully charged, but the threads have come undone and he is lost again, and parched. He takes a step towards the river and she bends down to drink. The water is clear, fluid and cool. For a moment everything is right, in flow yet static. Something shines at the bottom of the stream. She sinks her hand in, pulls out a small lump of silver. He stands, feeling ravenous. The matrix is far from being completed, the threads twisting and unraveling with each action, but he is weak with hunger. He takes a step, spies a cart piled with golden-hued apples and feels his mouth water.

FILIP WILTGREN is a freelance writer and game designer based in Sweden. When not fighting windmills with words he tries to herd his children, make a living, conjure up a way to turn the world into a giant, happy pizza and/or get paid. Failing that he tries to take heart in never having gotten into politics.

On the cover:

"ELEPHANT HEAD"

Chris Paulsen

CHRIS PAULSEN made his first ceramic sculpture in 1991. Since 2011, he has operated 3sevens Pottery in Portland, Oregon, and has sold ceramic head to such faraway places as Sweden, Finland, Ireland, and Slovenia. His work is available online at www.etsy.com/shop/3sevens.

