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Editor's Note

For our first issue of 2015, Ally Malinenko brings you "Terrible Scenes of Mutilation," a tragic story of escapees from the Central Park Zoo set at the turn of the last century. This is followed by P.K. Read's tale of growth and creation, "The Burp." Following Dr. Nick's advice for dangerously underweight individuals such as Homer Simpson, we've sandwiched these stories between two pieces that mention Pop-Tarts: Brent DeLanoy's "Date" and J.D. Hager's "Brontosaurus."

So grab your chewing bacon and your milkshake toothpaste and get reading.

— Laura Garrison

Date

Brent DeLanoy

She approves
of my filthy
language,

of pop-tart lunches
and fogged car windows.

She pays for the cotton candy—
insists on a fresh cloud from the bowl.

The kid in the booth,
blue stripe on his paper hat,
blinded by carnival lights,
gets it for her.

BRENT DELANOY received his MFA from New Mexico State University in 2006. His work has appeared in several journals in print and online and his novella, "Benediction," won the A.E. Coppard Prize in 2008. He currently teaches at Hartwick College in upstate New York.

Terrible Scenes of Mutilation

Ally Malinenko

When the rumor circulated that the lion had been prowling just below 59th Street, Joseph Dix loaded his revolver and, much to the chagrin of his hysterical wife, headed for the front door. She didn't comprehend the point in going out when *The Herald* reported that the mayor had the city on lock-down. But then again, Ms. Valerie Dix, née Blanchett-Sauvette, had only lived in New York for three years now and had yet to fully comprehend why Americans acted the way they did. The things she had seen below 14th Street would never be tolerated in her own, much missed, Paris.

Ms. Dix standing halfway down the staircase held up the newspaper report which read in bright bold letters AWFUL CALAMITY and A SHOCKING CARNIVAL OF DEATH, begging him once again to stay inside. "At least seventy animals are free," she said reading from the paper. "Joseph, you cannot go out there. This is madness."

He stopped at the door, peeking through the side lights and then feeding bullets one by one into his revolver said, "The wild animals of the park are loose and roaming my city, Valerie. What would you have me do?"

"Stay inside like a reasonable person!" Valerie shrieked.

But Joseph Dix took much pride in always being his own man and his tolerance for hysterics, especially female hysterics, was at an all-time low. He tucked the revolver into his waistcoat and warned his wife to stay away from the windows.

Besides he knew that already this freakish experience had transformed into an opportunity. And these days opportunity was a commodity he rarely traded in. No one had expected that the cages at the Central Park Zoo would prove so inadequate. The zoo had only been formally called so since the recent city charter, and already the city was threatened. The paper had reported forty-nine souls had been lost, with only half of them identified. The description of the rhino gorging was particularly grisly. Joseph couldn't help but question how the locks on all the cages came loose. According to *The Herald*, it was possibly sabotage. Regardless, he was incapable of standing by, not while Grant was fouling up the reconstruction and the depression that began last year still had her hot hands wrapped around the financial district. He had to do something. Joseph was keenly aware that his chance to do something profound was slipping by.

And in just the few minutes since he had begun talking he saw them passing by his door. One by one, walking in slow steady packs, silhouetted, sketched on the fog by the flickering gas lamps: men with guns.

Hunters.

The city was slowly transforming, in just a single day, from the center of urbanity to a world not unlike Livingstone's jungle.

"I'm begging you," his wife said from the steps. Joseph watched how her hands wrinkled the paper, clutching it tight. He despised panic, he found it characteristically un-American, but his wife touched something tender in him. Something unexpected. Without answering he slid back the lock and opened the front door.

The air on the street was static. In the fog, Joseph could see figures moving and he was barely seventeen steps from his front

door when the first crack of gunfire ripped through the air. He ducked and scooted towards the low wall buffeting the park. In the distance he heard men shouting and then the screech of something utterly unhuman.

“Dix!”

Joseph turned and saw crouching along the wall his neighbor James Thomas clutching a rifle. Joseph scurried back towards him and the two of them sat with their backs against the park wall like soldiers.

“It’s bad, Thomas.”

“Two hundred injured, they say. The police are nowhere to be found.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Quarter hour.”

“Seen anything?”

“Just you.”

Joseph nodded, his hand warm around his gun. The early November fog rolled slowly through the city, blanketing it in an eerie sea green glow. Joseph thought of his wife at home, imagined her pacing the upper bedroom, staying away from the window not because he had told her so but because Valerie knew, as he knew, that there was terror, terror as real as The War going on in the streets below her.

Things seen can never be unseen.

“Best of luck, Thomas,” Joseph said, rising.

“Where are you going?” Thomas hissed.

“To do what must be done.”

Even as he left he could hear Thomas whispering his name, begging him to come back. But he wasn’t going to get what needed

to be done crouching alongside the park wall like a scared child. Besides, Thomas was a waste, a skin sack waiting to be filled with food and wine so that he could regurgitate more vile political nonsense. And if Joseph was going to be ripped to shreds by a lion it was not going to be at James Thomas' side. There had to be a nobler place to die. He had missed The War by just a few years. Instead he watched his brothers leave and die, one after another, to fight for the sanctity of this Union. His father had been wounded early on but never let a day go by where a story wasn't told. Joseph felt it, the way it dragged at his ankles, this need to do something. Something profound. Something right. Something, if not for his country, then for the city he loved.

The gas lamps flickered and every shadow transformed into a wild animal as he turned up Fifth Avenue. It was a stagnant foggy night, like a sea before a storm, the kind of night where you could smell the seawater wafting all the way up from the estuary. Valerie had begged him to vote against the expansion of the Menagerie. What nonsense she cried, wild animals in the heart of the metropolis. It was a mockery of Mother Nature.

She had not dared invoke God before Joseph. Valerie knew exactly where her husband stood on the eternal question of what lay behind the veil of mortality: firmly, though secretly, in the non-believer camp. God had left Joseph, that chilly September morning when the Lord stole through the window like a vengeful goblin in one of Valerie's fairy stories and took with Him the soul of Joseph's baby daughter. All that He left behind was a cold waxy pink shell. And when He did so, Joseph took back the part of his own soul that had been conscripted to the Heavenly Father and offered up

instead something black and dangerous. Something that Valerie did not dare rouse.

Things seen can never be unseen.

A scream erupted just to his right and Joseph swung his pistol towards the bush next to him, which shook ferociously. From it, a monkey leapt, its brown matted hair brushing right past Joseph's face. It stopped for a moment on the top of a carriage and observed Joseph, its face a rubbery distortion of mankind. The creature emitted another fang-baring scream and then bounded off down the street.

Its hands. Its hands looked so human.

In his head Joseph heard his own pastor from his youth telling him that God had made all these creatures for Man to have. To command at his will. But Joseph could not help but think that something that close to human was not a gift but in fact a terrible mirror.

A reminder.

Before he was able to fully collect himself, steady his own shaking hand, and continue down the street, Joseph heard the clatter of hooves and with a not small bit of relief realized the cavalry must be here. The police had been slow to respond to the emergency, but they must be finally here. Except what clattered up the pavement was not mounted police nor even the chestnut muzzles of harnessed horses but instead four panicked zebras clattering down the center of Fifth Avenue, their eyes wild with fear, nostrils flared, foam dripping from the corners of their mouths. They clattered past him, bumping into one another and then into carriage omnibus parked on the side of the street. From

the corner of his eye Joseph watched a wet shadow leap onto the park wall and race after the panicked zebras.

The panther was bigger than he could have imagined, even in his worst dreams. It leapt from the wall and pounded after the zebras, taking the smaller one down by the flank just a block north of where he stood. The zebra's scream ripped through the air sounding so vivid and so much like a dying child, Joseph was stopped in his tracks. The gun hung utterly useless at his side as he watched the blood spread like a blanket across the road.

Another shot was fired from somewhere, causing the hysterical zebra to scream again before the panther put it out of its misery with a quick bite to the neck. Then, as easy as pulling tender chicken meat from a bone, sunk its teeth into the creature's leg and tore it from its body. The panther took its reward and with the agility of an alley cat leapt upon the wall, disappearing into the park, dark as midnight.

Joseph raised his gun, not with any real purpose, as the panther was already gone but just so he could see it. It was a sign that he had some means of protection. A reminder that against teeth and claw he was not naked and weak. Valerie had been right all along. Coming out here was madness. What was his intention really? Two hundred were reported injured already. Forty-nine killed. He glanced again at the dead zebra, the wash of blood, lava-like, working its way towards him. In the stillness of the city Joseph felt something rise in him, something he hadn't felt in the years since he had reached into the bassinet and picked up his own dead daughter.

"How pointless," he whispered toward the carcass of the zebra. And then it seized him. He must return home immediately. Being

here on the street with this weapon in his hand, he was committing some sort of cosmic treason. There had been no place for him in The War and now there was no place for him in this manufactured city. Under the layers and layers of concrete there was still mud and earth—an earth that was teeming with life that cannot be hidden or changed or truly killed. Nature would always out. In the end it would find its way back up through all the cracks that man had felt so sure he had paved over. It would find him and remind him he too is animal.

Joseph turned and headed back towards 59th street, back towards home and Valerie and a life that had, at one time, made perfect sense to him. His hysterical heart told him there was a path back to that. He just needed to stay on it.

At the end of the street, the giraffe was just standing there, as bewildered to find itself here as Joseph was to see it, half wrapped in the fog that rolled down the street. It stood utterly still, its legs unimaginably long—a creature that seemed to be crafted from a child's imagination, sketched on paper and then breathed into existence here on street. Its neck graceful and arched turned toward Joseph and considered him for just a moment before it took a single careful step forward.

Joseph didn't dare breathe watching it move slowly down the street. Its perfectly round belly, the way it lowered its head so that its long neck was horizontal, attempting to see eye-level with the man on the street. It watched him as he watched it. Naturally, Joseph meant the creature no harm, and yet here he was with a gun and no means to confess that special necessary sentiment. For a moment the giraffe bucked, rearing up like a horse, stamping a hoof against the city street and bleating like a goat.

It dared him. Or possibly just acknowledged him, a fact that Joseph embraced more fully than he had embraced the previous fifty-two years of his life. For the first time ever, he was really being seen.

Shaken by this, Joseph took a step back and broke whatever it was that had existed between them. The giraffe turned then, heading towards the avenue, away from him. It ran, galloping graceful strides, before stopping once and turning back to look at him warily.

It wasn't until the gunfire splintered the quiet that Joseph realized he had forgotten to breathe. The animal swayed, stumbled, its long legs now a hindrance, before it collapsed in a twisted pile. In the distance he heard men yelling, disjointed cries and the stampede of feet. Something somewhere screamed.

Joseph waited until the quiet returned before venturing towards the creature. Its long neck twisted and flopped on the street like a snake. By the time Joseph reached it, it was dead, a single bullet hole through its hide close to the heart. Whoever pulled the trigger was an excellent marksman. Joseph couldn't help but wonder if they had fought in The War. If they had taken down many others.

He kneeled down near the giraffe's head, examining the hard rounded horns on its head, the deep long nostrils, the velvety ears, not unlike a cat's. Tentatively he reached out and gently lifted its face. It was surprisingly heavy, the weight of this dead animal's skull in his shaking hands. He tried but failed to avoid looking into those two black eyes. They were not round and dark as lumps of coal as they seemed from a distance but instead a dark brown iris with a tender pupil. In it, he saw his own wretched reflection. Things seen can never be unseen.

With a careful hand he reached up, extended his finger and slowly brushed its eyelashes, letting each individual lash kiss his finger before standing, placing the barrel of the revolver against his temple and firing.

ALLY MALINENKO is the author of the poetry collection *The Wanting Bone* (Six Gallery Press), the children's book *Lizzy Speare and the Cursed Tomb* (Antenna Books) and the YA novel *This Is Sarah* (BookFish Books). She lives in the part of Brooklyn that the tour buses don't come to.

Burp

P.K. Read

Cassie came into the world much like anyone else. She slipped through opening between there and here, and then she was here and she was here to stay. She was a tiny thing from the very beginning, a wisp, a darling curl, a quick kiss. As she grew she remained wispy, slippish, the girl who could slip through keyholes, hide under mats, float up to the cobweb hammocks that swung lightly between the wall and the ceiling.

Cassie fit in anywhere, people took her everywhere like they took their thoughts or wedding rings, a part of life, she was a favorite photo in the wallet, not always highest in thoughts but noticed when absent.

As time went on, however, Cassie found herself ending up in the cracks and crevices of life, getting stuck in the line between the boards in the hardwood floors, in the grout between tiles, under the saucer with the tip money. She didn't take up much space, and there was a space where she was that was growing empty.

This didn't just happen in a day, or two.

And so Cassie began to eat. At first just a little. As the space inside filled out and the space around her retreated to make room, she ate more. She watched her stomach grow, she watched her breasts grow. People turned to watch her pass by on the street, women sighed and men began to sing. Before, Cassie had slipped in and out, now she slipped in and stuck. She liked the feeling.

This didn't happen in just a week or two.

She continued to eat, indulging in whatever caught her eye. Eggplant, gourds, suckling pig. Octopus, pigeon, purple broccoli, panna cotta. Artichokes, borscht, goose fat, purple potatoes. She grew round, she watched her arms grow thick from the top down until first her elbows and then her wrists disappeared beneath layers of expanding Cassie. She grew cracks and crevices into which she herself would once have fit. The space between her toes closed, between her fingers, her neck migrated south, her breasts north, until they touched when she spoke or laughed or ate. She could feel the skin touching, it felt like a caress.

People liked to watch her eat, they came and sat with her and offered her their own food—Take it, no please, I insist, I'll only eat too much and you enjoy it so much. Watching Cassie eat was better than eating itself. More satisfying, more filling, and the space between them diminished as Cassie glowed and grew with each shared morsel.

As time went by, Cassie didn't even need to eat all the food to keep growing. She found she could grow more by having people around her, pushing their plates towards her, but she didn't need to move the food to her mouth. She took their uneaten food into herself, uneaten. She was too large to fit through doors now, and when she walked down the street, traffic stopped, everyone watched, some people called out to her, Beautiful Cassie! And she laughed and grew some more.

Her knack for growing on the uneaten food of others became known far and wide. People came from all over to share their food, offering it at the altar of Cassie. She was far too large to fit into a house. She took over a small, abandoned baseball stadium so people could come visit her and she could have room to lie down

once in a while. It was delightful to have so many friends, but tiring to not eat everyone's uneaten meals all the time. Ever more people came, and if it had been up to them, Cassie would have been not eating their uneaten food around the clock. She had to get a bigger stadium, but as her popularity grew, even that grew too small.

This didn't happen in just a month or two.

People around the world, even those who hadn't given any food to Cassie because they had none to give, were nonetheless bathed in the happiness that was Cassie. The uneaten food was distributed, everyone had enough to eat, any extra could be offered to Cassie and then passed on again. She was the perfect sustainability machine.

She grew and grew, she grew large enough that she could cross a continent in one or two steps, she could cross an ocean by letting go of one land mass and floating the short distance to the other side. The people of the world came to greet her, and they didn't even need to offer plates of food or trucks of food or warehouses of food, the transfer took place just by people gathering in the general vicinity of Cassie and she took whatever burdened them and grew from it.

This didn't happen in just a year or two.

Soon, the general vicinity of Cassie was pretty much anywhere on the planet at any given time, there were few places that were ever very far from Cassie because Cassie had grown to be almost everywhere at once. She who had once hung in the cobwebs betwixt ceiling and wall. Now her head bumped against the stratosphere and shortly thereafter she popped right through. The world kept turning with Cassie's shoulders and head in space, and then her belly grew around the waist of the Earth and then the

Earth was in Cassie and she was the heavenly body in gentle orbit around the sun. People on Earth were happy as clams, merrily turning around the sun in the sunny space of Cassie.

Cassie grew, one planet, two planets, three planets, the Sun, all inside Cassie, who no longer remembered her own name or nature or where she was, and she felt good.

This didn't just happen in a century or two.

Cassie grew, she drank the Milky Way from the Big Dipper, and grew until the universe was in Cassie.

There was nothing but joy in Cassie, because finally, finally, she felt one thing besides happiness, and what Cassie felt was sated. She was full. She couldn't eat one more bite, thank you, no.

Cassie burped, a great starburst burp, a burp of ages.

Cassie burped, it was the Big Burp, and the cosmos recommenced, born anew, a small cosmos, a slipping through the opening between here and there, born of joy, ready to grow.

P.K. READ is a French-American writer. Born and raised in California, she lives in eastern France.

Brontosaurus

J.D. Hager

Jacob spoke his first words at the breakfast table, the day after he turned six. On his breakfast plate stood an intricate double-frosted dinosaur made of pop tarts and banana, three dimensional and freestanding, a marvel of breakfast engineering.

“Brontosaurus,” Jacob said to his breakfast sculpture. A moment later he followed with “Tyrannosaurus” and then leaned in to bite the head off his poptartosaurus. Jacob sat back up and looked at his father snarling, his teeth covered in raspberry-flavored pop tart filling.

Higgins felt surprised, relieved, and slightly disgusted. He wanted to ask Jacob where he learned those multisyllabic words, but suddenly Higgins was the one who couldn’t speak. By the time his son turned six, Higgins had given up hope of hearing Jacob say anything and barely spoke himself anymore. He spent hours in silence wondering how his son would make it through life without the use of words.

Jacob always had a fascination with animals, but especially dinosaurs. Whenever he saw one in a picture book he would reach out and touch it with his finger. After his first words that morning Jacob began speaking the names of many other types of dinosaur. His entire spoken vocabulary consisted of nothing but dinosaur names, and eventually his father began to understand what each meant. Tyrannosaurus meant he was hungry. Iguanodon meant he was tired. Triceratops meant he wanted to go play outside. But

Brontosaurus seemed to mean nothing and everything at the same time. He said it whenever he was excited or throwing a tantrum. He would walk in circles repeating it over and over like a monk in a trance. Sometimes he would just look at Higgins with sleepy eyes and say *Brontosaurus*, and Higgins knew it was Jacob's way of saying *I love you*.

Things hadn't always been so quiet in the house. Higgins and his wife Lulu used to speak to Jacob after he was born, baby talk and other types of first-time parental pandering. Higgins' personal favorite was *who's got a belly button* as he poked Jacob like a little marshmallow. They doted and squealed the way most first time parents do, but Jacob barely noticed. They thought he might be deaf or mute, but doctors assured them his hearing was excellent. Perhaps there were other issues doctors told them. Perhaps he was on the spectrum. They soon noticed other complications. Jacob never laughed or smiled, and as soon as he learned to walk he started spending hours pacing in circles. Still Higgins and Lulu were hopeful, and she would sing and read to Jacob and talk to him daily. But one day something broke inside of her and her hope abandoned her.

Higgins often thought back to the night Jacob was born. Lulu's water broke minutes after they said their *I dos*, and Jacob entered the world in the lobby of city hall. Lulu's labor lasted only twenty-three minutes, and Jacob had practically leapt from her womb. But even more surprising, Jacob hadn't cried at all. Higgins had wrapped his son in a *Welcome to Ketchum* sweatshirt the presiding judge had provided and stared lovingly into his son's eyes. Jacob just looked back at him, no tears, no crying, nothing but Jacob's

cloudy blues gazing back at him like a mute little sage. For Higgins this moment was as vivid as if it was still happening.

Later, as the paramedics rolled Lulu and Jacob toward the ambulance, she grabbed Higgins' hand with desperate strength and told him she would never divorce him. For a moment he mistook this for an impromptu vow, but then she continued. She said she hated long goodbyes, and if there was ever a problem she would just leave.

On a Tuesday about seventeen months ago, Higgins noticed his wife's luggage and jewelry box were gone. He found her wedding ring sitting on the bedside table with no note. It took a while for the truth of the situation to sink in, and even now it was still sinking. He woke up every morning and looked out his bedroom window with a sad hope, imagining her pulling back into the driveway with a perfect explanation of the entire absence, so their tragic autistic life could continue as if nothing had ever happened.

After she left, the house fell into complete silence. The phone never rang. No vacuum salesmen or Jehovah's witnesses knocked on the door. All communications between Higgins and his son were done with hand gestures and facial expressions. At times they even approached telepathic communication, a powerful father-son connection beyond mere eye contact and sign language. They concluded each interaction with a silent fist bump, the brief physical contact bridging the unspoken distance between them.

Higgins got a dog, hoping the barking and other dog sounds might break the monastic silence, but the dog was just as quiet as his son. Jacob started calling the dog Brontosaurus, Bronto for short. Bronto was a mutt from the shelter, a fuzzy little teddy bear with a mullet. Jacob bonded with the dog immediately, and the two

of them would sit together and silently stare at things, especially Higgins. Higgins feared the dog might be autistic also.

But all those years of nonverbal desolation changed the moment Jacob spoke that first word. Brontosaurus.

Jacob found a tabloid in the back of the hallway closet buried under other forgotten and embarrassing items. He repeated *Brontosaurus, Brontosaurus, Brontosaurus* as he waved the old newsprint in Higgins' face. Jacob had discovered something exciting inside, wedged between stories of a Chupacabra epidemic and a dog elected mayor of town in Minnesota.

"Brontosaurus," he repeated, touching a tiny black and white picture of a dinosaur with his finger. It was an ad for *Real Live Dinosaur Eggs*. There was a photo of an oblong, polka-dot egg, and standing behind was a long-necked dinosaur in a graceful, symmetrical pose. The ad went on about *exciting new advances in genetics and authentic Apatosaurus ajax DNA*. It claimed *now available to public for a limited time*. There was a microscopic disclaimer at the bottom of the ad. **Eggs sterile—now guaranteed not to hatch*, as if there had been some accidental hatchings in the past.

"Brontosaurus," Jacob repeated, looking at Higgins with hopeful eyes, sending a telepathic message of desire. Hope and desire were something new for Jacob. It felt promising.

"Yep," Higgins said, "Brontosaurus."

Higgins wondered where his son learned those dinosaur names in the first place. He must have heard them watching the Discovery Channel, or remembered them from one of the dinosaur books Lulu had read to him hundreds of times. Jacob never had any

formal schooling, and couldn't read or write as far as Higgins knew. Lulu had plans to home school Jacob, educate him while protecting him from the indecency of public schools and special ed. But after she left, Jacob's home-schooling plans took a nosedive that mirrored Higgins' own descent. Higgins' job in scripts and hypertexts allowed him to work from home, and the daily distraction of work saved him from a total meltdown. He found refuge in the code. But Higgins had been so busy working and feeling sorry for himself that he forgot to register Jacob for kindergarten. After the deadline had passed, Higgins considered homeschooling Jacob himself, but suspected he was the worst teacher in Idaho. Together he and Jacob were less than hopeless, but apart they'd be even lower.

After a moment that felt more silent than normal, Jacob said, "Live dinosaur hatch." It dawned on Higgins that his son must be reading the words. Not only that, he had spoken a verb and an adjective. Perhaps he and Jacob were not as hopeless as he thought.

The dinosaur eggs arrived eleven days later. They looked smaller than Higgins expected and weren't even polka-dotted. They were leathery and squishy and reminded him of sea turtle eggs he'd seen in Mexico. He felt swindled, and stupid for buying three just to get free shipping. He wondered if he should even show them to Jacob, if Jacob would be as disappointed as he was. Just as Higgins decided to place them back into their bubble-wrapped box and never mention them again, Jacob walked in. He saw Higgins holding an egg and trying to stuff it back in the box. Jacob raised one eyebrow and gave his father a puzzled look, mimicking

perfectly the curious look his father flashed when Higgins wasn't sure what his son was up to.

Higgins just looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. Finally he said, "Brontosaurus."

"Brontosaurus?" Jacob asked.

Higgins nodded his head.

"Live egg hatch?" Jacob asked.

Higgins shrugged his shoulders.

"Brontosaurus!"

Higgins didn't want to get Jacob's hopes up, but the look of joy in his son's eyes was more amazing than Higgins ever imagined. Jacob even displayed a slight upturn at the corners of his mouth that Higgins recognized as a smile despite its repressed and fleeting nature. Higgins decided the eggs were worth every penny whether they hatched or not.

Jacob found purpose in those eggs. He took them to his sandbox and buried them with exaggerated care. He constructed a small protective structure out of twigs and acorns, and guarded and doted over them like he himself had laid them. Higgins knew the eggs would never hatch, and wondered how long Jacob's focused protection would continue. Would he give up hope? Would his next emotional lesson be disappointment?

About a year after Lulu left, envelopes of cash started appearing in the mailbox. Normally it was \$200, twenties and tens double wrapped in plastic. Higgins pretended to wonder who was sending the money. *What angel of mercy has blessed us?* he asked the universe, looking around like the angel might be lurking nearby. The

envelopes never had a return address, and the postmarks came from different locations every time. Once it was Lone Pine, CA, and next it was Salem, OR. Usually they came from Nevada, which convinced Higgins his wife was back in Vegas and dancing again.

The latest double-wrapped stack of cash arrived sealed in a blank envelope with no visible marks on the outside. No address, no stamp, no bar codes or tracking numbers. His wife was close, probably watching in the bushes with binoculars and a cigarette. This just fueled Higgins' delusions of her eventual return.

Soon after the first envelopes arrived they also had a visitor from the *Idaho Coalition of Home Educators*, a social worker whose glasses and haircut made her resemble a female Harry Potter. She'd come to investigate a complaint of inadequate homeschooling curriculum. Higgins asked who filed the complaint, but his question was ignored. She instead asked to speak to Jacob. Higgins took her to the backyard where Jacob hunkered down in the sandbox, protecting his eggs.

"Hello, Jacob," she said. "My name is Marcy. I'm here to ask some questions about what you're learning at homeschool."

Higgins looked at Jacob guarding his eggs, wondering what Marcy must think. Jacob's T-shirt was filthy, and he wasn't wearing any pants, only saggy, old underwear. He started every day wearing pants and then somewhere along the line, no pants. Higgins also noticed how long it had been since Jacob's last haircut, and his son's tangled blond mop made him look feral and untamed. Jacob squatted over his nest in his underwear and looked at Higgins and the social worker like they were lunch. He jumped up and let out a high-pitched noise that sounded like Godzilla on helium.

“We bought some dinosaur eggs,” Higgins said. “He’s very protective.”

“Do you like dinosaurs?” she asked. Marcy took a couple steps toward Jacob, and he coiled back like a serpent preparing to strike. “What’s your favorite dinosaur?”

“Brontosaurus!” he said, followed this time by a series of noises that sounded like the mating call of some large, possibly extinct species of bird.

What were the chances she would ask Jacob the only question he could actually answer? Higgins decided to say something before things turned even more awkward.

“You know he’s autistic, right?”

Marcy turned and looked at Higgins for a moment like she didn’t understand. She scribbled something in her notebook and then turned back toward Jacob.

“What else have you been studying besides dinosaurs, Jacob?”

“Brontosaurus.”

“Are you learning any math, Jacob? Numbers?”

“Brontosaurus, brontosaurus, brontosaurus!”

“That’s how he counts to three,” Higgins said. This wasn’t true, but it sounded good.

Marcy turned and gave Higgins another look, and scribbled into her notebook again, only this time she wrote more. “How old are you, Jacob?”

“Brontosaurus, brontosaurus, brontosaurus, brontosaurus, brontosaurus, brontosaurus.” Even though he could barely speak, Jacob always seemed to understand.

Marcy looked back to Higgins like she needed a translation. "I was told he was seven. Is he actually six?" Higgins decided he should just keep his mouth shut and nodded like a bobblehead.

Higgins learned the state of Idaho didn't require either home or public schooling until the age of seven, which gave him six months before it officially became a case of child negligence. Marcy gave him the brochure for an academy in Boise for autistic children. She left information about the rights of students with learning disabilities and an outline of curriculum expected for home-schooled children. As Jacob walked in circles around his sandbox squawking like a bird, Marcy promised to return in six months to check on his progress.

Higgins knew something was amiss. He first heard Bronto barking, induced into a surprisingly loud barking fit by some sort of evil presence in the backyard. Then Higgins heard laughing. The joyous laughter of a child, in particular his child, which was more shocking than the barks of little Bronto.

Higgins hurried into the backyard to investigate. He noticed the eggs in the sand box, the leathery shell left behind like wads of crumpled tissue. He followed the barking and laughing to the back corner of the yard, where Bronto had something pinned against the fence while Jacob laughed and clapped his hands hysterically.

"Jacob?"

His son and the dog both turned and looked at Higgins, cocking their heads to the side in unison. He wanted to take a picture of that moment, put it on a postcard and send it to his wife, wherever

she was. "Brontosaurus!" Jacob yelled, between his squeals of rapture.

"Live egg hatch?" Higgins asked.

"Live egg hatch!"

"Brontosaurus?"

"Brontosaurus!" Jacob smiled. He squealed. He raised his hands above his head like he had won a prize.

Crowded into the rear corner of the yard, atop pine needles and pollen cones, stood three miniature brontosauruses, each about twelve inches tall, dark brown and slightly iridescent, shining like oily little mud puddles. They bleated like lambs in eerie unison.

The scruff on Bronto's neck stood up as he approached the little dinosaurs with canine caution. He craned his head toward the dinos, inching his nose closer for an olfactory inspection. The little dinos reached their necks forward and met Bronto's sniffing directly, and the four touched noses in a momentary huddle, like a team coming together before a play.

Bronto's little tail started wagging back and forth, and so did the dinos'. Bronto barked once and the little dinos bleated back. Bronto took off running across the yard, and the tiny brontosauruses followed behind in a scuttling pack, surprisingly nimble despite their recent hatching.

Meanwhile Jacob never stopped laughing and squealing. He started clapping when the little dinos took off running behind Bronto, and chased after them himself. Eventually Bronto began chasing Jacob, with the little dino pack following Bronto, and of course Jacob following the dinos. They spent many minutes chasing each other in circles around the backyard. Finally Jacob stopped running and looked at his father.

“Thanks, dad. Brontosaurus.” Jacob smiled.

Higgins felt a jolt of something in his chest, a surge of pride zapping life back into the numb collection of muscle tissue formerly known as his heart.

Within a month the little sauropods towered over Bronto. With their long necks they stood as tall as Jacob, but still Bronto was the top dog, the one in charge. The dinos proved gentle and affectionate, rubbing their heads up against Higgins and Jacob, nuzzling in like cats. They romped across the lawn like typical baby animals exploring the coordination of their limbs. Higgins thought they would be lumbering and plodding, their enormity causing them to move in slow motion and shake the ground with each step. Instead they were nimble and athletic, jumping and running with the dexterity of a horse or antelope. They began developing plumage, a fine, yellow fuzz that grew fuller and more vibrant with each day. They seemed happy consuming rabbit pellets and grazing on the lawn, and every day Jacob’s spoken vocabulary grew more expansive and impressive, growing just as fast as these creatures hatched from the strange marriage of genetic engineering and tabloid classifieds.

To Higgins the dinos looked identical, but Jacob learned to discern their uniqueness and provided them names. Bolstered by his expanding vocabulary he named them PopTart, Macaroni, and Potato. They eventually added monikers to describe each one’s personality—PopTart the shy, Macaroni the loving, and Potato the brave.

Those first two months were magical. Every day the dinosaurs grew a little more, and so did Jacob. Higgins wondered if the

dinosaurs were imaginary, or if it might just be a long, complicated dream. When would the dream end?

The trouble started with a broken latch on the dinos' makeshift pen. They wandered out because they were hungry, their growing appetites sending them in search of more and more food. They had stripped the plum and apple trees completely, and trimmed the giant oak as far as their long slender necks would reach. They didn't like pine needles and the turf and rabbit pellets weren't enough anymore. Potato had reached for the blooms of the neighbor's rose bushes and leaned too hard into the fence, sending it toppling like a pile of toothpicks. Before long all three wandered into Mrs. Maccabee's garden as if it were a salad bar buffet.

Mrs. Maccabee was washing dishes and looking out toward her garden, and almost fainted when she saw her prize peonies and roses getting gobbled up by monsters. After she caught her breath she dialed 911. The operator wasn't sure whether to inform animal control or the police, so she called both just to be safe. The call from the police dispatch got picked up by a local news crew that used a scanner to gather leads on slow news days. The *News7 News Van* was the first to arrive on the scene, and they were already readying their equipment when the deputy pulled up.

But Higgins knew none of this. He had slumped out of bed and stepped to his window, hoping to see his wife like he did every morning. What a surprise to see the *News7 News Van* and Sheriff's patrol car blocking his driveway. He saw his neighbor, upset and serious and standing on her porch in a flowery apron. She waved at

the deputy to get his attention. The deputy waved back at the woman, which upset her even more.

“Deputy, I got a monster in my garden eating my peonies.”

Outside the *News7* News Van a cameraman balanced a large camera on his shoulder while reporter Dan Dandy straightened his tie and cleaned his teeth with a finger. Hearing the woman’s plea they looked at each other, and the cameraman started shooting. Higgins got an empty feeling in his gut and decided he better go out to the backyard and investigate.

Higgins discovered the open pen and followed the trail of bare vegetation to the hole in the fence. Pop Tart and Macaroni lingered near the opening, and the path of destruction lead him deep into Mrs. Maccabee’s garden.

“No Potato, no!” Jacob said. Bronto barked and ran in circles, nipping at Potato’s front toes, trying to herd him back home. Perturbed, Potato reared up on his back legs and let out a roar like an angry sheep.

Mrs. Maccabee and her entourage appeared in the back doorway. “See, I told you there was a monster,” she said.

“Mary Mother of,” said the deputy, stepping onto the rear porch. He pulled his gun and pointed it at Potato, trembling like he had never fired it before. Still standing upright with his front legs flexed slightly outward, it looked like the deputy was getting ready to arrest the dinosaur.

An animal control agent walked up behind the Deputy, holding what looked like a large butterfly net. The patch on his shirt read Troy. “Holy shit, is that a dinosaur?”

“I don’t know, Troy. I thought you were the expert.”

“Well Deputy, aren’t you going to do something?” Mrs. Maccabee asked.

“I got some tranquilizer darts in my truck,” Troy said, and he hustled off to retrieve them.

Higgins felt sluggish from lack of coffee, and paralyzed by the velocity of events and the chaotic blossoming of thoughts in his head. What legal ramifications were involved in the ownership of dinosaurs? Were they livestock or exotic pets? Was the neighborhood zoned for sauropods? Could dinosaurs be considered assets, and could this impact his home owners’ insurance?

More importantly, would this incident affect the ICHE’s view of proper homeschooling curriculum? And who had registered that complaint with the ICHE in the first place? He imagined his wife and Marcy were in cahoots, hiding in the bushes together, snapping photos and documenting child neglect. Higgins knew that one of these days he would look into his driveway and see Lulu standing there like a sad apparition of past failures. With his son’s help he finally realized that they didn’t need her after all. Higgins just wanted a chance at closure, a chance to tell her they didn’t need her. He didn’t need her.

Meanwhile, Jacob approached the deputy with his hands up like he was surrendering, and for a moment it appeared both Jacob and the dinosaur were getting arrested. That was when the cameraman arrived, live broadcasting the entire scene to the viewers of the *News7 Wake Up Ketchum Show*.

“Mister policeman,” Jacob said, “Don’t hurt Potato.”

Jacob then proceeded to direct Potato through a series of maneuvers with the confidence of a seasoned animal trainer,

starting with a 180-degree twirl while still balanced on his back legs. Jacob used hand motions, a twirl of his finger, a clawing motion, a repeated pointing gesture toward the hole in the fence. Jacob was, after all, a master in the art of nonverbal communication. Bronto tried to help out by barking and nipping at Potato's tail. Together they had him sauntering back toward home in no time.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," the deputy said, putting his gun away.

"What did I miss?" asked Troy, holding a large plastic tackle box.

"We have just witnessed something remarkable, folks," Dan Dandy reported.

Mrs. Maccabee just fanned herself on the back porch and didn't say anything.

Jacob approached his father, flashing a smile and shrugging his shoulders. Higgins held up his fist and the two shared a bump. Higgins couldn't speak, so proud of his son in that moment his speech centers felt overwhelmed. Luckily Higgins didn't have a clue about how quickly his life would change, with the viral YouTube video, the Good Morning America interview, and the endless calls pouring in from scientists, movie producers, and various legal entities. Instead he had this silent, peaceful moment to enjoy to himself, his pride swelling to proportions beyond any attempts of verbalization. Some feelings were so big they couldn't be placed into words. Sometimes when he felt this way Higgins wondered if autism was contagious.

Before crossing the threshold to join Macaroni and Pop Tart, Potato reached back to grab one last snack for the road, a large,

perfectly sculpted rose that could have won a blue ribbon at the county fair. Having witnessed the final indignity she could stand, Mrs. Maccabee fainted, but the deputy was able to catch her before she hit the deck.

The cameraman followed Potato back to the fence line, finding Higgins standing there dumbfounded in his house slippers and bathrobe. He hadn't shaved in days, and his robe had no belt or fastener around the middle, revealing a chasm of bony, white chest and black hair descending to striped boxers.

"Excuse me sir, can you explain what we just saw?" Dan Dandy stepped toward Higgins with his microphone.

The cameraman pressed forward also, pinning Higgins against a rose bush, which caught hold of his robe, tugging on the fabric and biting into his skin.

Higgins pulled his robe a little tighter and looked into the camera, clearing his throat. How could he possibly sum up the emotion, surprise, and pride he felt? He took a deep breath.

"Brontosaurus."

J.D. HAGER lives in Northern California with his wife, his dogs, and a small collection of farm animals. He spends his days working undercover as a middle school science teacher and school garden coordinator. His fiction has appeared in the *Porter Gulch Review*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Cease Cows*, *East of the Web*, and is forthcoming in many other places.

On the cover:

“STONE UMBRELLA”

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is an architect and a design enthusiast, interested both in graphic and product design. As a graphic designer, she has enjoyed freelancing on various projects from branding, to illustrations and print design. In her free time, she re-designs everyday objects for my personal project [The Uncomfortable](#) (© 2013). That project is available and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/theuncomfortable>) and tumblr (<http://the-uncomfortable.tumblr.com/>). Her personal website is www.kkstudio.gr.

