

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

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## Editor's Note

Questions of fate never get old because they never really get answered; they just keep echoing through time. Did Pandora make a bad choice when she peeked in the mystery box, or did she make the only choice? How would the world be different if Lily Evans had married Severus Snape instead of James Potter? Would another hour of sleep have kept me from pouring orange juice in my coffee this morning?

The stories in our seventy-eighth issue all grapple, in some way, with the struggle to determine whether what happens must always have happened or merely happens to have happened. Two of them, Rowdy Geirsson's "Dream Hard On" and Ani King's "I Give It Six Months" engage directly with the gods of Norse and Greek mythology, respectively. In Matt Dennison's "Magnets of Faith and Knowing," narrator Lurleen finds a penny, but it's up to you to decide whether it's lucky or not. The characters of GJ Hart's "What Feasts Might Follow" encounter a sneaky curse, while the protagonist of Joshua James Jordan's "Zoned" finds the border between realities to be less controllable than one might have hoped. Deanne Richards' "Luminary" puts forth poetic inquiries into the nature of existence.

Here is one final thought: all of these stories have traveled through space and time to meet you in this place, at this moment. They are, as George McFly would say, your density. Embrace them.

— Laura Garrison

## Magnets of Faith and Knowing

Matt Dennison

If my mind truly *is* broke, at least I'm the only one holding the pieces. That's a rare claim around here, owning something outright. My own people never seen it for real, so all they can do now is walk around the fact of me like a pack of wild dogs barking at a boxed-up turtle, not knowing whether to shout or go blind in the terrible newness of it all. Excuse the truth, but those pieces are mine and not one a' them's allowed near. Might get cut and they know it. *Had* their chance to play is what I'm humming as I sling those pieces like razor dominoes. Used to, I would have been extra careful, about them first, of course, but the world is surely changed. If it hadn't changed, I'd have to laugh outright, watching 'em suffer in their confusion. But it *has* changed, so I don't. I work my pieces.

On a good day it's like suddenly being able to play that fifty-cent piano lesson half-learnt in the neighbor's house and finally getting it right. The curtains open up like a big red flower and everybody claps and there you are, but it's your own house and everybody's clean and no one's shaming your hands that can barely rise above the keys as you stare at the dimes stacked level with your nose, knowing that's either food for eight or a whipping earned for not learning and you can't even breathe, so how could you possibly play?

Now it's fifty times right for every time wrong, is what should finally balance me out, I figure, but there's always the starting over at the first sour note and some days I do get stuck, some off-key piece won't work no matter how hard I pound it. Can't help them days. Other times I'm halfway home before the bell rings, playing loud as I want, loud as I can. Then soft, softer than my hands could ever dream, softer than the teacher's dress that I ached to lean against. So soft she has to close her eyes to catch it and it's so pretty

and soft that she forgets to slide the dimes into her pocket.  
Considers herself paid in pretty.

It's funny what you do come up with, though, just playing.  
Right pretty designs, sometimes. Other times it's downright awful  
stuff that makes you scatter them pieces quick, look out the  
window and swear off your grief-grubbing forever. But it's just  
broken pieces of memory glass on a fat lady's lap, ain't nothing  
special going on. Throw 'em in the air if I want to, catch 'em if I  
care to. Don't matter. They always come back. Can't help it. They  
are *mine*.

The world-changing started for a fact with Verdell, Jr., soon as they  
got me inside and settled. Not two minutes after the funeral, the  
house crawling with people I ain't seen in years, and that child is  
out there racing back and forth on the ride-around mower his  
daddy parts built. *There's a proud one*, I thought as I watched him  
through my side-window. Staring straight ahead and grinning like  
a blessed fool, he revved it for the hill, roared it under my window,  
then spun in circles around the only stick tree in that burned-out  
yard. Now who in their right mind would go and mow the yard  
two minutes after burying a sister? And still in their church  
clothes? Probably hoping for a quarter, that one. Give 'em *all* fifty  
cents to go away for good, I thought as I looked around at what  
death's home-cooking had brought to my door.

Oh, you stupid grass, I sighed, the nerve to grow where nothing  
else grows. Stupid child, I moaned so the Devil wouldn't hear,  
making me to smell the wicked cut of life when I'm striving for  
emptiness. Stupid me for plopping out his daddy when I had said  
no more after six. Stupid how it goes on and on and when does it  
end? When can one of us count to more than twenty and *not* feel  
like a genius, was what I wanted to know.

I was squeezing my armrests and rocking fast as I could when that junked-up machine ran over the hose-pipe and exploded right under my window. And the cat . . . Good God! Attacks the walls of the house, the ceiling! People are throwing plates of food in the air and screaming like a bomb done gone off. Then the beast drops on me and I'm caught, done for, pushed over the edge by stupidity, animals, and di-rect *pain*.

An ungodly sound flew out of me as I pulled that monster off my neck and moved myself to the bathroom—for I was always parked a straight shot in front of it. Hadn't been alone on my feet for over thirteen years and there I was, walking, if you could call it that. More like should have dropped like the bloated sack of fat I was, but the crazy rage of a death gone wrong had me by the neck and wouldn't let go.

I slammed the bathroom door behind me, grabbed hold of the sink with one hand and clawed through the medicine cabinet with the other, looking for ear-cotton, and Lord, the relief once I twisted it in. But it weren't enough for my trouble, and lately trouble had been hitting faster than I could rock, what with Wayne in prison, Aileen buried today, Lucy long dead, and now Henry starting up wheezing.

Feeling my legs about to go, I cried "Mercy!" At that very moment I found me some open Vaseline to swab that cotton in to better seal up my ears. "Thank you *Jesus*," I whispered as I grabbed my side-rails just in time. Then, by releasing my fingers like the airbrakes on Henry's truck when he's holding a hill—inch at a time, inch at a time—I hiked up my skirts, lowered myself directly onto the commode and made use of it. Of all the prideful things that I cannot afford in this life a wasted trip to the washroom surely tops the list.

That's when I saw the penny.

Stuck half-under the baseboard near my foot, my old penny-hunger flared right up. I groaned with frustration and shot my arm out, but didn't even come close. Worked on it with my shoe, but

only managed to shove it in tighter. Damn, I thought, if ever there was a time to get me a penny this was it, for the feel of a found penny always calmed me down. But here was only more proof of my predicament.

Now, pennies are familiar, but when you're surrounded by filth and nonsense like I was, a penny shines bright. Bright and quiet. Waiting to be found or not. Don't care, just is. Like I never was allowed, always pushed and pulled and Queen-bee'd to death by *them*. That's why I wanted *it*. A nickel one of the babies would gobble up fast as a goose. Dime? Quarter? Grown men gone crazy, fighting like birds over a piece of string. But a penny lies flat and brown. Takes dirt on its face, says, Okay. Takes feet, says, Thank you. Takes it all and never speaks up. Guess ol' Abe done bit his tongue so many times he just give up on talking, like I was about to. But I heard him just fine. And the fact that I could not have this one near killed me.

I toed the penny's edge as I sat, looking in the mirror glued on the wall, licking my fingers and wiping the blood spots off my neck. Then folks started knocking on the door, asking politely *Was I okay*. I knew they only wanted to use the facilities, but figured if I could hear that I still weren't safe. My eyes started flinching, looking around on their own. Panicky. Finally lit on an old pair of Henry's shootin' plugs on the toothbrush holder where the soap should a' been.

That nasty habit of his might have finally paid off for *me*, I thought as I pulled up, leaned forward and caught myself on that poor old sink near ready to pop off the wall from its years of double duty. Doused them plugs with peroxide right where they was and watched the filth boil out as I counted my seconds. Then, by switching hands real quick as I straight-armed the sink—thump, thump—I worked the plugs in, squeezed back onto the commode and stared at the ceiling cracks as the world slowly faded to the

great beyond. Finally twinkled away, I thought, flicking my fingers and hearing nothing. The real deal, these. Can't be nothing better.

I pushed the plugs in deeper and shuddered as a tickle shot down my spine. And then, for some reason I'll never understand, I started thinking about old times—or old times started thinking about me—until out of nowhere I caught a vision of us gone to the grocery store, me shuffling down the aisle with my fake, taped-up leather pocketbook weighed down with whispering Abes. Only this time I knew why people was looking at me and Henry and the kids. Sitting in that tiny bathroom, squeezed between two linoleum-patched walls with the pattern rubbed slick off both sides *again*, knowing the floor might give out at any minute but too tired to care, I also knew what they was thinking. How *could* he? Why *would* they? But fat, stupid me, I had held my head high, thinking this, that, or the other child you're staring at in disbelief just might be the great, great . . . oh, *many* greats grandfather of the final, fat-assed redneck child. And that child will someday put his stupid lucky hands on the giant pretty wheel, spin it just right and win the million-dollar prize for all mankind—saving this world from all horrible death, somehow, in the bargain.

Such was my dream.

But in the meantime—and knowing our blood was bad—I dropped child after child into the litter box of life. "There a whore, here a thief, there an idiot. Don't know *what* that one'll be, but go 'head on, Mr. Devil, take your pick. Take 'em all, I guess. There's always more. We're a *lucky family*," I muttered as I shook my head at my old self. Lucky that outright retardation hadn't attacked us in holy vengeance, is more like it, I thought anew, for them Bible stories had *nothing* on that old house. By the age of seven I had seen and heard the coming and the going and all the in-between. Even guessed-out half the truly hidden stuff as well. Weren't pretty to hear then, and there'll be no telling of it now. What's done in the barn stays in the barn, is all I'm saying.

Shameful lot all.

But they can't disappoint you, I realized with a guilty sigh. You knew what you was making, no matter what your dream. One a' *them* wasn't gonna come out waving no fat daddy-check and taking ya'll to some fancy Florida, you most certainly must have known that. Must be life itself that needs 'em, then, to fill some dark hole or such so the good folks don't have to touch dark, can just walk on by and never even guess at what's looking up at 'em. But I don't need to hide from dark. I have touched it plenty. I shivered hard to shake loose any old memory's grip that even thought of climbing out and eased on back into the silence.

Like seeks like sure as man is born to trouble, it came to me at the top of a yawn as I stretched my unaccustomed backbone. Never seen a dog hopping a turkey, I added, and almost smiled, feeling a bit of the blame lift from my shoulders. So we find each other, it can't be helped, and are generally safer *for* the finding, I thought, nodding my head with the forgiveness you allow yourself when times are hard. And generally's pretty good, considering. I reached for the healing plant—my old touch-comfort—and slid my fingers up each long arm in turn, pulling off the dust, wiping the many mouths. The better to breathe, my darling, I thought. The better to sing, for you, my sweet, are the last living thing I dare to touch with love.

Then I pinched a leaf and did my cuts.

But as the smugness of my satisfaction wrapped around my mind, I tripped over the true ugliness of that word, smug, and knew it for the sin it was. For suddenly I saw my people like I was having an early-morning dream in color—an endless swarm of pig-like creatures crawling through the mud between the factory and the kitchen, the used-parts stores and the Nearly New, picking up what trash and government cheese they could find to patch their lives together until it all became the one, the ever-lasting dreadful day, and how one silly pig trying to escape the pig-sand was pulled

down by the stupid, stomping feet of the others and buried for good.

I turned to the mirror to blot out that horrible image, but when I saw my own tiny eyes half-buried under sweaty layers of fat I understood the personal truth of my vision and how it came to be. How one day, between pushing the wolf's nose out the window with one hand and putting the big pot in the little pot with the other, somehow managing to light a fire under it all and even give it a stir now and then—how one day, between baby-this and baby-that and God a'mercy kick the dog out the kitchen with one foot and rattle the stove with the other—how, on one thoroughly average day, your whole life takes that final hit that changes everything and nothing because it's your whole life being shifted and way over in the far corner where no one ever looks or cleans the little trick-peg slips down the little trick-hole and before you know it you're tail-nailed again, hunkered down and going in circles, still wanting better but not able to touch it, barely even think it.

Certainly not make it.

For me it was bearing the nightly burden of little Henry Pratt climbing Mount Lurleen for thirty-seven years—pushing, crawling, crab-desperate to get somewhere—as I lay there, sorting laundry in my mind, figuring bills, listening to the already kids screaming for dinner and yes, finally, I was done. A mind like mine must have comfort, I decided at that moment, for look at where suffering has landed me.

'Used to be alive.'

Nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard that, even though I felt, more than heard, the words. Which made it worse, for there was a touch to it that I did not care for, like a little red snake had uncurled itself in whatever warmth I was making with my visions and slipped its way through the grey at my feet to rub against my

leg as I sat, disappearing in the quiet so deep I wasn't sure I could feel my own fingers. I touched my mouth—still closed—surprised at the sadness of the hurt that shot through me after the shock of the words wore off.

'All of you, Lurleen,' the voice whispered like an ugly gossip, lifting my chin, forcing me to listen. I shook free, grabbed my rails and strained to see around the wall, half expecting one of *them* to be standing there, grinning and pointing me out to the Devil.

"Well, if I did, I got nothing to show for it 'cept *them*!" I hollered, waving my hands in front of me, trying to break up the cloud of memories the voice was riding on.

'You had powerful thoughts and feelings about better, Lurleen. Kept your mind above the roof and rent,' the voice continued like the smoothest rumor. 'Had powerful sufferings, but you took it straight on, Lurleen. Never ran from, never ran to, but stood in the presence and received your blessing. You were planted deep, Lurleen ...'

Rocked to a sleepy peace by the hearing of my name over and over—by the fact that someone or something was *actually talking to me*—I side-stepped the voice on some skinny bridge and walked straight into the land of dreams where I saw myself before the true troubles had hit. I cried out and tried to run forward, but something cut, I tell you, and I could not go there. I lowered my face to my hands in a belly-wash of sadness and squeezed my eyes, striving for the dullness my ears had found, but brilliant flashes of my old life splashed across the black like a crazy chopped-up movie running double-fast. Ghostly children running through the house and squawks of wild laughter all walled up with piano tinklings and tears swirled across my eyes with the hidden screams of doors slamming and animals bleeding, birthing into the eternity of us kids running and running till crazy with laughter and tumbling onto the grass like shaking candy at the sky. But also one far cat moaning low, mouth near the ground, and small hands

shaping the air above the rough dirt mound of one rag doll with one rag dress buried at sunset in memory of the unspoken bundle under the midnight rocks and later, clothes snapping on the line and a bigger me on my knees with my hands deep in the summer garden, focused and solid and true. And food! Huge plates of food of my own making!

"I did, I surely did. I remember! What happened, Lord? Where did it go?" I moaned, no longer wanting to stop whatever was happening for there was a powerful sweetness to the pain.

' . . . and the whole house sang and you called the tune until all your plans and hard work were slowly pushed into the muddy river of stupidity by *them*, Lurleen, that constant hair on the tongue of your grace that you will never spit out. Never, Lurleen, never.'

Finished, the voice stood back and faded like the man I had seen walking under the last streetlight on his way out of town as Daddy and us older kids slowly drove past from seeing Mama off at the hospital. Never forgot that empty, stricken face looking straight into the darkness and how I wanted so badly to reach out and touch him that I had to sit on my hands—and the sudden, uncontrollable hunger that flooded my mind.

"So I sat and sat and grew fat," I whispered through my fingers, "and wanted no more bad to happen. To me."

I felt the presence of squalid damnation as the walls squeezed tighter and the floor jerked hard and the bulb rattled and flashed above my head. But as I kicked my feet above the ground and struggled to rise, I was filled with an indignation that brought my head up quick.

"I said it!" I cried out. "I done confessed my sin! Ain't that what you tell us to do, Lord? Can't help if it's the Devil got me first!" I shouted, searching the air above me for some twist or thickening of forgiveness. "I couldn't stand to be alive like that no more. I know I done turned rotten inside but it's better this way! Lucy's gone, damnit! Aileen *just*, the whole world knows Wayne's in prison and

what for, and now Henry's going down quick. Ain't no cotton for that, Lord!"

I leaned forward the best I could and sobbed like a baby as the demons of pain and disappointment fled my heaving body, leaving me balanced inside, is all I can think to call it—then I closed that door for good. After a time, I dried my tears, shanked my hair down over my ears to hide my plugs and slowly moved myself back out amongst *Them*. From the way they stopped chewing and stared you'd think they was watching Lazarus jitter-bugging with a monkey. I wouldn't know, though I felt a lightness such as I never felt before. They fell back like wheat in the wind as I walked straight up to my special-made chair and began my new life. Ain't heard nor spoke a word since. Now, if that's a broke mind then so be it. Broke mind don't mean but one thing to me and that's blessed peace as the world slips through, tasting like Eternity. Tasting *good*.

The others come around on special days, their tongues pushing dark air back and forth above the endless parade of mouthing, red-faced babies. I hold the creatures, when offered, smell the fresh-cut ginger of their bodies, run my hands over their butter-smooth skin and pretend to smile. But secretly I'm feeling for the source of the curse—be it heat or lump—so I can learn it with my hands and squeeze it out, this ongoingness of stupidity. I lift them till we're touching noses and wait for their eyes to open wide. Then I go inside and pray for the barren womb, the twisted and meager seed. And don't come out 'till their breath blows cold.

When they've gone to bed I sneak with my eyes. Down the hallway, there, under the flower table, a little brown floor-face shining up. I'll wait hours, if need be, then heave up and push off. Quick like. Another to hide, to slide in. Won't tell you where. Like seeks like in the dark. Makes like in the dark. Magnets of faith and knowing, they are, these seven penny years I've rocked, and don't

you dare tell me it's time to start counting. Don't you tell me nothing. They are *mine*.

After a rather extended and varied second childhood in New Orleans, **MATT DENNISON**'s work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Bayou Magazine*, *Redivider*, *Natural Bridge*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review* and *Cider Press Review*, among others. He has also made videos with poetry videographers Michael Dickes, Swoon, and Marie Craven.

## Dream Hard On

### Rowdy Geirsson

Björn Svensson was strutting around the rocky cove naked and bellowing fierce obscenities at the waves. I observed him from a safe distance, feeling like a genuine Euro-perv as he bent over, picked up a stone, and then chucked it into the water with a thunderous, “Må djävulen ta dig! Du onda jävla fitta!”

I had been searching for him all afternoon but as I watched his nude temper-tantrum unfold before my eyes I could only deduce that my success had come at a very inopportune moment. I’m quite comfortable with failure, having become intimately familiar with it early in life, so I didn’t harbor any reservations about accepting defeat now. I turned around to leave and that’s when I heard him shout in my direction, “Du! Hej—du! Har du sett min flaska? Jag har tappat bort min mest älskade flaska!” This was followed by a very somber-sounding, “Oi...”

I stopped and looked back at him. He squinted at me from his perch atop a granite outcropping, shoulders slouched, belly protruding, beard frayed, and ding-dong dangling in plain sight. This was not the confident appearance of the once proud Viking warrior-poet that I had been expecting. This was the appearance of a regular, everyday, frazzled Swede whose glory days had long since passed him by, and now to make matters worse, he had accidentally just dropped his beloved bottle of alcohol into the ocean.

“Nej!” I answered.

“Oh, you English?” he asked, because, despite my best efforts, I still can’t even pronounce the one-syllable Swedish word for “no” with enough authenticity to convince any of the locals that I actually know some of their language. But that doesn’t stop them from always incorrectly assuming I’m English.

“No, I’m American, actually.”

“Oh, you come from the US? Why are you here? This place is boring. Why didn’t you stay in Göteborg?”

Göteborg, or Gothenburg as it is known to non-Scandinavians, is more fun and exciting, but not just for Americans. It’s more fun and exciting for everyone. The historic center of the maritime city features countless opportunities for shopping and dining along its wide esplanades while the drab suburbs feature countless unattended passenger vehicles that make easy targets for the ever-increasing numbers of disgruntled denizens to set on fire. Svensson’s home in the village of Rönäng, which lies situated on the southern shore of the island of Tjörn about an hour north of Göteborg, on the other hand, features only a small smattering of fishing shacks and summertime cottages where nothing ever happens.

“Well, I’m here because I’ve been looking for you actually,” I answered. “You are Björn Svensson, right?” I proceeded to explain the purpose of my self-appointed mission.

In the year preceding my arrival to Scandinavia I had discovered various rumors online through several Nordic chatrooms of an unusual spasm of medieval activity that had occurred in the region shortly after the turn of the millennium. According to these rumors, modern-day Norwegian whalers had sacked the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, newage Spear-Danes had constructed a great earthen fortress to fend off incursions from the Franks and the Geats, and surly Icelandic fisherman had attempted to recolonize Greenland. Unfortunately, the only two legitimate references confirming any kernel of truth in these rumors came from a single, small-town Norwegian newspaper’s website. I suspected that other, concurrent happenings such as the incident when one Kardashian got caught having sex with another Kardashian in a frozen yogurt shop had been deemed better for business by the global media and as a result the entire Nordic phenomenon had gone by essentially unobserved and unreported.

Thus, after a few weeks of intensely devouring what sparse information I could find about this so-called Modern Viking Movement, I had resolved it upon myself to track down and interview its prime protagonists during a moment of particular lucidity fueled by too much beer and an intense loathing for my own livelihood.

I was about six months into my venture and Svensson was the last remaining heavy-hitter on my list of must-talk-to modern Vikings. A Geat himself, he was renowned online for a unique oratory prowess that he supposedly flaunted during an escalating series of skirmishes with his Spear-Danish enemies. Beginning with the defacement of Spear-Danish cultural memorabilia relating to William Shakespeare and Hans Christian Andersen, his campaign eventually culminated in a full-scale Geatish attempt to vandalize the original Legoland amusement park. Or so the trolls lurking in the world wide woods claimed.

Svensson just looked at me while I spoke, his innate reserved Swedishness masking any emotion he might have been feeling. “Well, that is quite something,” he eventually stated. “Not many Americans know about my accomplishments. Nor many Swedes, either, for that matter. Actually, only a few people in the world even have any idea...but I’d be delighted to tell you. I’ll tell you the whole story, from beginning to end.”

“Hey, that’s great—thank you so much.” I stared past him to the glistening surface of the water. I really wasn’t sure whether I should be looking at him or not given his current state of dress. “But, you know, I can come back later, I mean, I don’t want to interrupt you if you’re in the middle of something—”

“No, no, I’m not in the middle of anything at all.” He began to walk towards me, which was basically the polar opposite action as I would have taken had our positions been reversed and I had been the one venting nude, drunken hostilities at the ocean when some strange guy from a foreign country stumbled upon me. “I have no

plans for the rest of the day. You don't happen to have a bottle of vodka there in your backpack, do you?"

"No..." I trailed off because he had closed the distance rather quickly. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and began directing me towards the water's edge.

"That is quite unfortunate," he sighed as he guided me. "I dropped mine in the water, as you know. Quite a frustrating setback if I may say so. And this story I have to tell you, it really is best told over a drink. But I suppose we can make do for now, and then later, perhaps we can go to Systembolaget."

Systembolaget is the Swedish state-owned liquor monopoly. The nation has an official policy to thwart the ability of its citizens to get shit-faced drunk by taxing the bejesus out of alcohol, while its citizens have an unofficial policy to circumnavigate the system by purchasing huge quantities of hard liquor in neighboring countries and on booze cruises around the Baltic so that they may then proceed to get shit-faced drunk once they return home. In addition to the taxes, Systembolaget is a generally nightmarish shopping experience characterized by inconvenient opening hours, long waits in line, a limited selection of products, and a usually drab and uncomfortable interior.

But if Systembolaget's interior could be described as lifeless and drab, Svensson's exterior could conversely be described as colorful and phallically boingy. I was in fact both shocked and nullified by how calm and natural he seemed to feel in his birthday suit as he walked beside me, his arm still slung around my shoulder. He showed not even the slightest hint of trepidation about his complete lack of clothing. Nor did he display any trepidation about physical contact with me either for that matter, and that actually caused me some concern. According to the world-renowned myth, Swedes possess a very relaxed attitude towards public nudity, and Svensson was genuinely giving it 110% to prove its truth here and now. That same myth, however, usually neglects to mention that Swedish nudity is never ever sexual or that Swedes generally abhor

physical contact of any sort with strangers. Svensson was flagrantly deviating from at least one of these two lesser-known stereotypes and I worried whether he had any plans to increase the count to two in the immediate future.

"You know, I only declared war on the Spear-Danes because I was commanded to in a dream," Svensson said as he directed me to his favorite ledge overlooking the water. He spoke with his face closer to mine than I usually prefer of a conversation partner, especially one whose breath reeks of lingonberry flavored Absolut Vodka and stale cinnamon buns. "It was quite a thing, really. You see, normally I don't dream. Or I don't remember my dreams, I'm not so sure how it works. But this one night, I had this dream, and in this dream . . . how do you say . . . ah, boner! Yes, boner. A boner, an angry boner that is, commanded me to take action against the Spear-Danes."

"An angry boner?"

"Yes!" He was as solid as oak in his conviction, but thankfully not his manhood. "It was truly an angry boner! The angriest I've ever seen. Or dreamed, I suppose. You see, it was bent out of shape. Or more accurately, it was bent into shape and the shape it was bent into was like that of a gallows pole, for hanging people, you know? Now what boner wouldn't be angry if it had to contort itself into a shape like that?"

"I suppose you have a point..." It did sound painful, if not downright impossible, but crazy shit can happen in dreams and who am I to judge? My dreams are usually haunted by the lame apparitions of project schedule spreadsheets and an ever-increasing flood of unanswered emails.

"Indeed. And do you know who the Lord of the Gallows is?"

"Odin?" I did know this but I wasn't feeling very confident thanks to all this bizarre penis talk I was having with a naked stranger who was touching me and breathing acrid booze breath in my face as we walked side-by-side.

“Correct! And as you may know, Odin lost one eye to gain the knowledge of the runes, so isn’t it only natural that if he wanted to communicate with me, that he’d send to me his own little one-eyed warrior as a messenger in my dreams?”

Finally, we reached the water’s edge and Svensson withdrew his arm and squatted down, his trouser-less trouser snake swinging freely with the motion. He sat on the ledge, dangling his legs over it and looked back up at me with a certain expectation written clearly across his face

I sat down myself and then looked off into the distance, not really sure what to say next and wishing that he’d carry the weight of the conversation for awhile longer. Making small talk with strangers has never been one of my natural strengths, but I’ve found that it’s easier to do when the stranger is actually wearing clothes. I was also wondering why it was that Svensson just had to be the one naked Viking that I encountered in all my travels. Why couldn’t it have been the super hot Ingrid Törnblom instead? I had just recently completed an interview with her up in Stockholm, and of course she had refused to remove any of her clothing at all whatsoever while she was in my presence. Not that I had even dared to ask her to do so, but still, that’s not the point. The point is that I wouldn’t have minded if I had unintentionally caught her skinny dipping, but such was not my luck. No, instead I caught a frazzled, bearded drunk dude letting it all hang out. Sometimes I wish the norms would just go fuck themselves.

Svensson interrupted the inner turmoil of my negative thoughts. “You know, if the angry boner had had red hair and thrown lightning bolts from its tip,” he tugged at his beard. “Then it might have been another matter entirely. That might have meant that it had been sent by Thor. I also thought about the possibility that Freyr might have been involved, but nothing about the boner spoke of crops or the harvest season or other boners. It was all ‘kill, kill, battle, battle, battle, poetry, poetry, poetry.’ So there’s no way it could have been from anyone but Odin.”

“Did the boner tell you a poem?”

“I think so, but it was in ancient Swedish, so I didn’t actually understand any of what it was saying.”

“Well, then how do you know it was carrying on about killing and battle and all that other stuff?”

“I just knew...that’s the way it is with dreams of divine importance. Either that or you have to get them interpreted by a völva.”

“A vulva?” I wasn’t sure I had heard him right, but I figured that, given the rather one-dimensional territory that our conversation had ventured through so far, why not expand our horizons and start talking about vaginas too?

“No! A völva was a female pagan oracle in the original Viking Age.”

I thought about this in the context of the 21st century and my brain started to hurt so I stopped and we sat in silence for a few moments until I asked, “Well...why you? Did you do something special the night before to catch Odin’s attention or something?”

“I got shit-faced,” he stated matter of factly.

The Swedes’ mastery of colloquial English never ceases to amaze me, just as my own inability to think of constructive responses never ceases to disappoint me. He looked me sternly in the eye and then leaned backwards, propping himself up by his elbows. I suffered a sudden fear that he was about to launch into a series of aerobic pelvic thrusts.

“Yeah, you know, it really wasn’t that different from most the times when I drink too much.” His pelvis remained motionless to my great relief. “Except for maybe that it was midsummer that night. Midsummer is a big holiday here in Sweden, you know. We construct a maypole, which symbolizes a giant penis, which is probably part of the reason why Odin chose to commune with me on that specific night...but anyway, after we erect the maypole, we then decorate it with garlands so that it looks like it has veins

writhing up and down its shaft. And then we get drunk and everyone sings and dances around the maypole pretending to be little froggies, even the adults."

"Is 'froggie' some sort of Swedish slang for ballsack or something?" I didn't know what the hell he was talking about.

"No. I mean, only froggies, you know, you say what, frogs in English, right? Like eh, what's the other one...toads?" He ribbited in his throat to illustrate his point.

"Yeah, that's the sound a frog makes. Or a toad. Whatever..."

"Well then, you know. We do the frog dance."

I neither knew nor cared about the frog dance, so I attempted to guide us back towards a topic of significantly higher importance, "So...Odin's dick?"

"Yes, Odin's dick," he confirmed. "What a cock."

He shifted from laying on his back to laying on his side to face me, his frank and beans flailing towards me with the motion. I reacted spontaneously by scooting a few inches away.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to care as he just continued speaking, now with his head resting on his hand which was in turn supported by his elbow. "Odin's dick was so angry, so very angry. It was in fact so angry, that not only did it haunt my dreams that night, but it also left me with a horrible hangover. I had visions of it even when I woke up."

"What do you mean?"

"I had the image of the angry boner seared into my mind, even after I opened my eyes. The pain in my head throbbed and the boner itself was pulsating and I was not able to focus on anything else. I couldn't even stand up, I was so weak."

"The boner was pulsating?"

"Oh, yes. As I told you, it was a very angry boner. Truly, truly, an angry boner. You have never seen such an angry boner."

"Well, I've never seen a boner bent into the shape of a gallows pole, so that's probably true."

“Of course it is true! And until you see one for yourself with your own eyes, you’ll never fully understand.”

I have very few high hopes or dreams of grandeur remaining in my life. The ritual of growing up and being thrust into the brutality of the real world saw to it that those youthful hopes and dreams that I had once harbored were officially demolished and replaced instead with a steady sense of defeatism and forlorn nostalgia. I had given up on ever having a grand, new hope, but here and now, in a most unexpected way and in a most unexpected place, I had found the glimmer of something new to hope for because I never, ever want to see a pissed-off, gallows-shaped boner on a vengeful mission from a Norse god with my own two eyes. But I didn’t want to admit this to the naked stranger who was lounging beside me with his own exposed cock and balls protruding uncomfortably close to my own territorial bubble of personal space. So I tried to make light of the situation instead, “Well, I suppose it’s no coincidence that Odin is so well hung.”

Svensson laughed but remained serious when he asked, “True, but how would you feel if you woke up and had such an angry boner spying on you, stalking you in your mind, cursing you and spitting at you with its slanted little eye?”

A horrible thought occurred to me just then: what if all this talk was just a delusional cover story for an inability on his part to control his own junk or impulses? What if his sleepy tally-whacker suddenly levitated itself up into a demonic cobra-like striking position from where it slouched so dangerously close to me? I hated the thought and I immediately regretted that it had ever even entered my mind, but it gave me a second new hope to long for, and should this hope prove to be in vain, I was fully prepared to hurl myself off the ledge and into the water below.

I turned my head to look at him and caught another woeful glimpse out of the corner of my eye of his placid package as it

drooped down alongside his groin. I quickly diverted my eyes again as I responded, "I think I would feel distraught."

"Yes! Distraught is a good word. I was myself distraught. You see, the angry boner, it wouldn't leave me alone. And its pulsation grew faster and faster and all I wanted to do was to run away but I couldn't. You can't run from your own mind. It screamed its commandments at me, full of rage. I was overwhelmed, and when everything was said and done and the unholy spirit had vanished, I just barely managed to speak these words before I passed out:

"Hello darkness, my old friend  
I've come to talk with you again  
Because a vision softly creeping  
Left its seeds while I was sleeping  
And the vision that was planted in my brain  
Still remains."

"Good song."

"What?" He sounded genuinely confused.

"Huh?" And I was confused that he was confused.

"That was my first ever skaldic verse," he explained with a tone of pride that belied an apparent ignorance about the true origins of the verse. "Odin's little one-eyed warrior left me with a new skill with words."

While the rumors online had indeed indicated that Svensson had emerged as the Modern Viking Movement's preeminent skald, they had also failed to reveal that he was really only just a cover-poet who didn't write his own material. I didn't want to belittle his self-esteem or provoke him into a bitter Norseman's rage, so I just said, "Well, I guess Odin is the god of poetry, so that's cool."

"Yeah, it's really cool," he confirmed. "At the time it was frightening and painful, but my life really changed for the better because of that angry boner. If it hadn't been for it, I never would have achieved my full potential. Up to that point, my life had been nothing special. I was just another Svensson going through the motions with no meaning or purpose in my life. But Big One-Eye's

little one-eye changed all that. That penis prevented me from becoming like everyone else who just goes to school because they have to, then gets a pointless job because they have to, and then dies because they have to without ever achieving any real meaning in their life.”

“Everybody’s got their dues in life to pay . . . and sometime you got to lose to know how to win,” I responded, thinking that maybe I could eventually become a cover-skald, too. Half my life’s been wasted in Microsoft’s digital pages and if I was a fool, then Svensson was a sage and I sure wished I could learn from him. I genuinely admired the way he had successfully subverted his own personal 21st century grind and transcended the trivial status quo of contemporary existence. And if it had taken an alcohol-induced nightmare about a divine dick for him to be able to do it, then so be it. At least he had found a way, and like Odin’s little helper, had risen to the challenge.

“You know, it is true, and all these feelings, they come back to you . . . ” He nodded his approval of my pop wisdom and perhaps just for today, the good norms slowly took our conversation away.

**ROWDY GEIRSSON**’s investigative journalism has previously appeared online at *Jersey Devil Press* and *Word Riot* and he currently serves as *McSweeney’s* Norse History for Bostonians correspondent. He skulked among the abandoned factory buildings of Eastern Geatland in 2015 but has since returned to resume his life-long languishing under the fluorescent lights and ceiling tiles of New England. Hail him online at [www.scandinavianaggression.com](http://www.scandinavianaggression.com). Or don’t, either way.

## What Feasts Might Follow

GJ Hart

A short walk from the tat and tatties of Notting Hill Market, the house is a labourer in a family of lawyers. Its garden is lost to the wilds and no light passes through the high bay windows. On the driveway, an old, gold Volvo sinks to its wishbones before a steel door crowned by oxidised thoroughbred and cradled in Buddleia sired by the giants of Ladbrooke Grove. More scout hut than statement, it squats, almost in protest, between pristine, stucco-fronted town houses. It is not owned by glowing numbers many miles away; it is owned by Jack, and Jack has a map.

Duffor is frying insects with the remains of a digital watch when he gets a text from Munton saying he's just seen old Jack wheeled backwards into an ambulance.

"We should get round there," he says, popping a wasp in his mouth, "they reckon he's worth millions."

"Millions," scoffs Thanton, "last time I saw him, he was up the butcher's begging for beef skirt and marrow."

"I know different," says Duffor, "heard he could read the hooves like a song sheet and when the bookies heard him whistling, they knew they were fucked."

"But the man resembles a totter's Sneg," says Thanton, taking a drag on a canister of whipped cream.

"They say he never spends a penny. Cursed, I suppose. Winning like that, he just can't bear to lose."

"Maybe we should get round there, then."

"Maybe we should," says Duffor, standing and spitting out two charred wings.

Jack returns home, places fish fingers in an empty freezer and turns on the TV. Today he will watch reruns of Tommy in 'no pasta; I'm plastered', then Tommy in 'either the bus goes, or I do'. He no longer laughs, but remembers how, as a boy, he'd roared at Tommy's routines; punctuating each of his silly jokes with the biggest, wettest raspberry. And how his mother scowled, and the more she scowled, the more he roared. And then later, how he cried as she read his obituary aloud; her eyes glowing as she described, with words and hands, how a freak storm slammed his Cessna into the icy peak of a Mont Lachat. Sometimes Jack thinks of her and how he'd spent her funeral in the pub. He wishes he'd had the sense to realise he was living in the past and ,of course, Tommy always reminds him; he holds up pictures of her, dressed in ballet shoes and tutu, or at the pub in a fascinator his father would have hated. Then Tommy stops and leers, and Jack tries to leave, but nothing moves.

When they find him, Jack's body is stiff as wood, but his head, sustained by some strange inertia, still moves slowly backwards and forwards.

Jack in a box, he thinks as they heave him into the ambulance.

"This scare's topped with gold. I can feel it," says Duffor.

"We're long overdue a decent scare. But the house looks derelict."

"Perfect place to hide your hoards, then," says Duffor.

Thanton checks up the street, and Duffor pushes open the wooden gate. They beat a path to rear of the house, and, taking a putty knife from his sock, Duffor jimmies open a window.

They drop down into the kitchen and freeze, listening. Once certain the house is empty, they move on.

"Smells of dead fox and gravy," says Thanton.

"That's the stink of old man's tears," says Duffor, creeping into the lounge.

Thanton climbs the stairs and enters the bedroom. The room is empty except for a bare mattress and a mahogany Davenport. He lifts the bed and finds nothing. Holding out little hope, he searches the desk and inside finds a tattered map of Highgate Cemetery. Lifting it to the light, he sees a faint, dotted line, leading along pathways, past reformers and deformeders, to a grave marked with a cross.

"What do you make of this?" says Thanton, entering the lounge.

"No idea," says Duffor, "but what do you make of this?"

He lifts back the corner of a rug to reveal line after line of fifty-pound notes.

"Bullseye!" says Thanton, and, placing the map carefully in his pocket, he falls to his knees and starts to grab them up.

Both men become lost in the rhythms of this illicit harvest until Thanton is dragged from dreams of what feasts might follow by a sudden sound.

"Did you turn the TV on?" he says.

"Don't be ridiculous," says Duffor and they both turn. On screen, a man wearing a Stingy Brim stands and smokes as a boy digs at the roots of a yew tree. A distorted voice rattles out from the set's speakers.

Jack pushes boards apart and finds a place to hide. Jack feels it on his face and lets it crawl inside.

"Turn it off, for fuck's sake, will ya," snarls Thanton.

Duffor grabs the remote and jabs it toward the set.

Jack wakes when darkness and silence are entwined. Jack rides his bike to the cemetery each night.

"It's not working; the batteries must be dead."

Thanton follows the power cord and rips the plug from the wall. The screen blazes with light.

Jack peels the fields apart and bags ol' Tommy's bones. Jack's always best at doing just as he is told.

The screen switches to Live at the Palladium: in the wings, a man in a Stingy Brim watches as Tommy struts the stage followed by a young woman in a tutu and ballet shoes. As Tommy turns, he sees him and trips, taking the woman with him. They tumble sideways and the audience rocks with laughter.

"This is brilliant!" says Thanton.

"Gives me the funnies," says Duffor, pointing to his belly.

They forget the money and sit down.

"Lots to do," says Duffor.

"Lots to do," replies Thanton, smiling, "but I think we've earned a break."

"Wasp?" Asks Duffor, fishing in his pocket.

Thanton doesn't answer. He settles back in the chair, his eyes fixed ahead, arms falling loose at his sides.

**GJ HART** currently lives and works in Brixton, London, and is published or upcoming in *The Harpoon Review*, *99 Pine Street*, *The Jellyfish Review*, *Foliate Oak*, *The Legendary*, *The Eunoia Review*, *Scrutiny Journal*, *Yellow Mama*, *Near To The Knuckle*, *Spelk Fiction*, *Schlock Magazine* (UK), *Horror Within Magazine*, *Three Minute Plastic*, *Literally Stories*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Shirley lit mag*, *The Unbroken Journal*, *The Pygmy Giant* and others.

## Zoned

Joshua James Jordan

Four moth heads stood over me while I lay on an operating table. They had split my abdomen wide open, and one of them held my liver in two claws while licking with its long straw of a tongue.

"That's mine. Put it back," I said. All four looked at me as if surprised that I could speak. Paralysis wracked my arms, but I pumped my fists and I could tell that I would regain control soon.

"It's impolite to take what isn't yours, especially when it was on the inside of someone else to begin with."

They looked at each other with hundreds of eyes and then scrambled to shove my liver back into my torso while stitching me up. I could move my biceps again and practiced my motor skills while they worked. When they finished, the last one sent his tongue up my belly one last time as if it couldn't help itself.

I sat up and in an unconscious movement covered both of my nipples with a forearm. "Where is she?" I asked.

The moth heads looked at each other and then back and me. One shrugged its humanlike shoulders.

"I know you know. Now tell me," I said, lifting up the arm that wasn't covering my breasts.

One of them pointed to an operating table nearby. Dried blood covered it from top to bottom, and I knew that Betsy had gotten the worst of it. It's always the worst your first time. I knew that I shouldn't have taught her how to zone.

I slugged one of the moth heads in its eye. Squish! The other three ran away hissing.

My clothes lay on the floor. They had cut everything down the middle to get access to my body. My shirt could still cover most of me. I wore it backwards so that the split was on my backside and it still covered my front. My pants were torn, but I used the otherwise

useless split bra as a makeshift belt. I'd have looked crazy anywhere else, but it wouldn't matter here.

The metal room had an open door with a trail of bloody footprints leading out. They likely removed each one of her internal organs, licking them up and down while she watched. She probably fled, cried, wondered how she was still alive.

Guilt bounced around through my chest, making my heart skip a beat each time. How else could I have taught her how to zone? You have to take the good with the bad. Right? I had to get her back, regardless. Otherwise, she could go crazy in here.

I followed the footsteps through metal hallways and rooms, each one rustier than the last. My own footsteps clanged on the solid metal but crunched on the rusted flakes. Eventually the metal rooms gave way to a grassy meadow with the tree line of a purple forest in the distance. Two blue suns hung in a starless pitch-black sky.

Tuna-sized fish with black and blue stripes swam through the air over the meadow. One floundered over to me and revealed a full set of white human teeth with an eerie smile. "Have you seen another like me?" I asked it.

It flicked its tail and moved side to side with its mouth open as if letting out a silent howl. "May yes. A taste of your flesh will remind me. Four fingers should do."

"Two," I bargained.

"Three," the fish said.

"One," I said. It revealed its full set of teeth again.

"Two then," it said. I nodded and reached out a fist with an extended pinky. The fish swam closer and began sucking on my finger until finally biting down. It grinded and crunched on the small bones.

"Another?" it asked, approaching me again.

"Tell me first," I said.

It swam away a moment as if thinking, then spun around and said, "She's a guest of the Shadow queen."

I had seen the shadows walking through the forest, but I never visited the shadow palace itself. The fish swam right up to my other fist and nudged with its snout but I didn't expose any fingers. I started walking towards the shadow palace.

"Don't leave yet. Another snack? A deal was struck," the fish said, ever grinning.

"I know what I need and need what you eat," I said.

The fish grunted. "I'm a shrewd debtor. I will collect your flesh in this world or the next."

I laughed. I had never seen anyone other than Betsy and me successfully zone.

"Go fly into a shark's mouth," I said. The fish gave me one last smile and floated up into the clouds, its tail flicking powerfully left and right. I headed on towards the shadow castle, which I knew was through the purple woods.

The shadow castle sat atop a small hill. Despite its name, the stone itself glowed with a bright white light. A violet vine crept along the walls and up the towers. A two-dimensional figure stood flat against the wall. The shadow guard clutched a spear, a real one, which floated in front of the guard but always looked as if being held, the spear following its clenched fist.

"Here to speak with the shadow queen," I said, walking through the gate. A spear blocked my way.

"Shadows only," the guard said, the sound of its voice like a disembodied echo.

"I'm already inside," I said. "You should go and get me out."

"Oh, flickers," the guard said. "How'd you manage that? Are you a doppelganger?" It slammed the butt of its spear into the ground. "Queen'll feed me to the fire. Third doppelganger I let in since tomorrow." The shadow figure trotted along the wall into the castle of light.

My own shadow ran inside, the legs stretching thin as the distance between us grew longer and longer. I almost wished my legs were that long. Betsy's seem to be four feet long and I love her all the more for it. She always says that I have the better tits. She's full of shit.

I followed my dark double into the fortress and found the shadow queen sitting at a grande table in a dining room. She was a giant black figure not stuck to the walls at all but sitting at a table. Betsy, looking unconscious, sat locked in a cage high up near the ceiling. The Queen stood up, grew in size, and slowly tore a strip of skin off of Betsy's leg and placed the flesh on a plate. She sat back down and picked up a knife and a fork.

"I love it when my next meal takes the initiative to deliver itself to me," the Queen said.

I could usually negotiate with my own body as food but I got the feeling that the Queen was well fed as of late. "I'll trade my soul for our lives," I said, pointing to Betsy.

"A soul?" The queen seemed to rest her head in her hands. It was hard to tell since she was just a silhouette. "Could I eat that?"

I shrugged. "I suppose not, but—" I stopped. I had to think about what the heck a being of darkness could possibly want. "It'd make all the devils jealous."

The Queen stopped in the middle of cutting the meat on her plate. "Both souls," she said.

I agreed. Not that it mattered. Just like our bodies would grow back once we left, who's to say that souls don't work differently?

They lowered down Betsy's cage and opened the lock. This world had taken a lot of her. I held her in my arms and concentrated, closing my eyes. First I could feel my feet and legs relax as they faded, then my body. Then Betsy in my arms. Until finally every part of us had zoned back.

We were lying in bed, the same as when we left. Our bodies were whole. It felt like my soul was still there, whatever that felt like.

“Did that just happen?” Betsy asked.

“Did what just happen?” I asked.

Betsy had a confused look on her face. “I . . . I don’t remember. But I didn’t like it. Let’s not do that again.”

“Okay,” I said with a smile. I gave Betsy a peck on the cheek.

I sat up in bed and looked over to our fish tank. We must’ve been zoned for hours, maybe days, so I went over give them a pinch of food when I noticed the little castle in the aquarium had tipped over. I reached in to pick it up when I felt a sharp pain at the knuckles of two fingers. A new exotic-looking fish in the tank with black and blue stripes swam to the edge of the glass.

It stopped. Looked right at me and grinned with a full row of perfect white teeth.

**JOSHUA JAMES JORDAN** lives with his wife and two kids in Tallahassee, Florida. He writes all genres of fiction ranging from heroic fantasy to whatever the heck this piece is supposed to be.

# I Give It Six Months

Ani King

Thing is, you can't trust the king of the underworld, not with her blue-black hair, and her blue-black eyelashes, and the way her pale triceps pop when she sheds her battered jacket to reveal a thin white tank top and all manner of mismatched tattoos. Mermaids, hellhounds, dragons, anchors; you name it, it's inked into a calf or forearm or thigh. You especially cannot trust the king of the underworld if you are a pretty woman in a bar who happens to resemble Hades's ex-old lady, Persephone herself.

On this occasion, it was fair to say that if a girl could be Persephonic, then the Southern blonde certainly fit the description: abundant breasts with fig-colored nipples, soft arms and heavy thighs. Her lips looked pomegranate-stained and lush.

So of course Hades slicked her dark, wavy hair back and adjusted her sunglasses, and leaned over the pool table so her shoulders cut square and wide. She said, Baby, I think I'm in love, and the Southern blonde laughed at her. No, really, I am; just tell me your name, darlin', the king of the underworld drawled, and anyone else might think they were being made fun of, but that drawl turned into a purr turned into a kiss turned into a tangle of limbs in the Southern blonde's head.

Maybe the Southern blonde knew she should be careful the moment she laid eyes on the king of the underworld, but she still accepted a beer, and then another, and then a few more, and stood giggling at jokes that were too old to be funny.

What animal walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? She didn't say, hey man, everyone knows that, she just wound her curls around a finger and waited for the punchline.

If there's one thing the king of the underworld had going for her, it was that bad girl business that good girls like so much, and it hadn't been but a minute before she pulled a poem out of the air and ran it over the Southern blonde's plump bottom lip.

Don't make any noise on the stairs, and you can come home with me, the Southern blonde said, fixing her lipstick and rubbing the smudges of black eyeliner at the corners of her big blue eyes. I don't want you to wake my mama up, she said, and the king of the underworld could see the Southern blonde probably wasn't quite old enough for the beer now, but man just look at the gleam of her even white teeth, and didn't she smell like spring come to life?

Yeah, the king of the underworld rode a motorcycle, and looked dangerous in a long black jacket; that's not even a question. Hades had the kind of bike that you really had to sidle up to and jump on before it took off on its own. White and chrome and mean enough to make a girl blush while she holds on tight.

Darlin', one of these days I'll take you home with me, and we'll be able to make some noise, the king of the underworld purred, a few nights later, but she didn't really have plans to do any such thing. Which was fine; girls these days aren't so naive about the way a bad girl might use poetry and sadness to get you all lathered up and ready to jump onto her bike and speed on back to her place. Don't you like my place, the girl asked, the pink walls and trimmings positively labial in color. Positively pink, like her tongue, too.

Frankly, it worked well to have the king of the underworld ride off home into the horizon. The Southern blonde was pretty sure that Hades didn't consider their relationship exclusive, judging by the little bruises and bite marks she wore regularly. And she sure the hell wasn't the type of girl to go home with someone if they weren't serious. Well, at least not until her mama caught the king of the underworld leaving one early morning, and said, goddamnit girl, I told you not bring your sin home with you. And look at this

one, ain't no chance she won't do you wrong, she just smells of it, can't you smell it? She'll do you bad, this one.

Wasn't too long into the argument before the Southern blonde found herself making claims of affection that she shouldn't, to show her mama wrong.

Sometimes it's pride that makes a girl do truly stupid things, and the Southern blonde took Hades' hand and said, mama, you can't talk that way about the king of the underworld, I love her, and sure enough her mama threw out on her pretty, round ass. Don't come back 'til she's done with you, the tall, rough-handed farmer called, every bit as pretty as her daughter. The king of the underworld was smart enough to shut up and wait on the bike and not say a word. I give it six months, the older woman yelled up the stairs while her daughter did a hasty grab of her favorite belongings: a pink canvas backpack, her three favorite porcelain unicorn statuettes, her dad's old army jacket, and enough underwear for a week.

The king of the underworld couldn't take back the invitation to come home with her, not after all that, and plus it really it might be nice to get another woman in the place again.

Problem is, the Southern blonde, blue-eyed with heavy thighs, she didn't have the same constitution as Persephone, the famous woman she so resembled. So after the tour of the room of souls—mostly storage for unlabeled boxes and garbage bags full of who knows what, and a quick yogurt and pomegranate seeds, she lay in the massive bed, under the sheets of pure midnight with the king of the underworld, thinking shit, maybe this was a bad idea, her heart slowed, and her body cooled.

And what the fuck was Hades supposed to do then but drink more whisky and pace and mutter to herself? The Southern blonde was definitely her problem once the girl was dead. Maybe it was her eatin' those seeds, I suppose, murmured the king of the underworld.

Hades laid back down next to her new live-in and said This is pretty weird, babe. No pun intended of course. I'm too drunk for this shit, you know. Plus, I'm not much of a night sleeper. And off the king of the underworld went to play with her three-headed dog's new puppies and think.

It probably should have scared the hell out of Hades the next morning when she went to go deal with the body and get some sleep and the Southern blonde was sitting up yawning, a little blue around the edges, but otherwise right as rain. I've never slept so deeply, she said, running her hands through oddly untangled hair. I don't think I even dreamed.

Every night the Southern blonde fell into death once the sun laid down and closed its eyes, but the king of the underworld couldn't think of a way to tell her, so Hades just nodded when her old lady said she'd never slept so well, every morning.

By the end of the first month the king of the underworld was bored with the whole goddamn thing, pissed off that she'd gone and fallen in love with the first girl she'd seen in ages, and the Southern blonde only spent half her damn time alive. To be honest, she was starting to worry the whole bad break up business with her first old lady had been her fault, and fuck all if she wanted to consider the past with so much intensity.

During the day, the king of the underworld would try to stay awake as long as possible, sacrificing sleep for tastes of the Southern blonde's soft skin, or her wheaty scent afterwards.

Now, it's true that at some point in the months they'd spent together the king of the underworld had taken to making the Southern blonde's cooling body dance do the occasional tango, or sit up at bizarre tea parties, or watch all the films she declined to see during the day. You're getting a bit weird, Hades said to herself in the mirror more than once. And no doubt she considered all the things she could be getting away in the dark hours of the night, but she stayed true. She was pretty proud of herself, too.

A few months in, the king of the underworld finally settled into a routine. She slept a little more during the day and it felt like the situation wasn't so untenable. Hadn't the Southern blonde been patient herself, dealing with some pretty lonely days, and giving up her pink room she'd liked so much? Hades thought, I should really do something nice, something special.

One morning a few weeks later, the Southern blonde woke up alone, no sign of the king of the underworld, and wandered through all the rooms she never went in, occupied as she was with Hades. She found the tea room of misery and wondered at the two settings, lipstick so like hers on the edge of one cup. In the ballroom of despair, the speakers hissed while the record player turned almost silently, album long since done.

Who was the king of the underworld spending time wooing like this, the Southern blonde wondered? All she knew was that her mama was right, it had only taken six months. She packed her meager collection of things back up and hitched a ride out of the horizon, up the highway towards home, ignoring the snow gathering on her shoulders and hair.

When the king of the underworld came home, white and chrome and mean pickup truck carrying cans of pink paint and newish blonde-wood furniture, she was surprised to find a note on the counter saying the Southern blonde didn't know who Hades was dancing with at night, but she sure the hell knew she was going home. Everything has a season, she wrote, and our season has ended.

And the king of the underworld thought about jumping in the truck, roaring down the road, and bringing the Southern blonde back, but like the note said, the season had changed, and maybe Hades would turn her eye to brunettes.

**ANI KING** is from Lansing, Michigan. She enjoys good bourbon, great books, and bad pizza. She can be found at [thebittenlip.com](http://thebittenlip.com)

## Luminary

Deanne Richards

The glacial glow of mediocrity was the venom, full of fire that dulled his dream. A guitar of ice with chords of frozen popsicles stood in the corner. The reflection of his past was like a dog sniffing foot prints. His belly was a paunch, pie shaped, a chunk of cement.

The other one was a toxin produced by an organism of praise. He lapped it up to excess and spat it back to the audience. There was a collective rousing with cell phones waving in a crowd of disappointment. The cliff was now too high, and he longed for hungry guts.

He was flatlined in an aura of mail. His heart was full of zip codes. His apron was torn from parcels of forgiveness. The truck was full and on time, but he still longed for the celestial notes that raised him out of the bins of licked envelopes.

The other one became the collective whisper that roused the others out of their sleeplessness. The tinge of pungent chemicals siphoned through the air and swayed to the beat of the chosen one. He didn't play the hand of an ordinariness so deadly. His vitals were yummy and his aura electric with a silhouette that roared.

He ate his dullness for breakfast and choked on regret the size of a pineapple. His dreams hovered above him like a balloon that he couldn't reach. Prairie dogs visited him with hugs and kisses in a

condo made of dirt. He drank coffee full of rusty nails and kicked tubs of stones that had no postage.

The other one had one-night stands and sons who jumped from a penumbra. He didn't know where he was. His home was a myriad of hotels trashed by an attack of earthliness. His soul was a closet full of empty hangers. There was no one close by, just the echo chamber of the crowds cheering for more of the malignant puff of phantasm.

**DEANNE RICHARDS** is a digital artist and writer who resides in Santa Fe, NM.





## ON THE COVER:

### "Of Mice and Rats" Jon Snoek

**JON SNOEK** is a bearded hippie from Texas who makes stop-motion animated films ([funnyordie.com/snoeked](http://funnyordie.com/snoeked)), paints pet dinosaurs, and writes children's books about lost robots.

