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Editor's Note

A map, an arranged marriage, a snail, and a dream walk into a bar .

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— Laura Garrison

So, Below

Jeremy Packert Burke

Fed up with the distortions of the Mercator, the Transverse Mercator, the Mollwide and Bonne, the Tobler Hyperelliptical and Kavrayskiy VII projections, an enterprising mapmaker created a map that covered the entire world, to show the world as it was. After decades spent mapping every point of the Earth, mapping again, pulping biomes to make the paper, etc., the mapmaker hit “Print” and the map spooled out of his celestial printer, mummifying the Earth in its colorful scroll. From space, Earth looked almost the same, if a little creamier, a little more crumpled.

Some people took angrily to the streets. —What's the big idea? people in New York demanded of the sky. But Greg was fond of the change. The paper of the map was thin, and the sunlight that filtered through took on a sepial, old movie quality, with ghostly images of the city visible from the ground like a message written in lemon juice. —It feels so *Japanese*, you know? one woman on the street felt compelled to tell Greg. —Just really *spiritual*, in its way.

Fortunately the Map—for it took on proper noun, mononymic status, like God, Staples, or Chef—was suspended high enough that the water cycle and kite-flying were almost unaffected, and so life continued much as it had. Some jagged tips of mountain poked through the paper, but these gaps, like holes in the ozone, were avoided.

Greg sometimes saw children release balloons, which rose and bumped against the paper shell of the map, tiny, delightful, bouncing dots. Perhaps inspired by these, an enclave of angry

astronomers took to the skies in hot air balloons, carrying large pairs of scissors, and attempted to cut a patch of Map away. But their scissors were unable to find purchase against the expensive paper, and soon their arms got tired. They returned to their offices, to their tenure-track jobs at notable universities, opened bottles of scotch, put on Leonard Cohen records, and wept quietly as one.

Everyone else, really, liked the Map. People now had two homes—one on the ground and its mirror, its faint, two-dimensional echo in the sky. They looked skyward in moments of trouble, or longing for the past, as if they could see the motion of their lives on its surface, could work through their problems from their distance; or, as if the pasts they longed for were frozen, happily drawn to stillness against the sky. In either case, the divorce rate dropped fifteen percent.

Greg sold printers on the Lower East Side. People lined up around the block to buy them, now. —*Paper*, man, said one customer, —is like God's *skin*.

Cults developed: Flat Earth truthers had a field day (—How can it cover the Earth if paper is *flat* and the Earth *isn't*?); some thought the Map was a chrysalid shell, that we would all evolve to a higher plane of existence. Many book and television deals emerged out of these theories.

New observation decks opened at One World Trade Center and the Empire State Building, to admire the paper sky, to look up instead of down. Tourists, pilgrims, and locals waited for hours to get close enough to see their futures or pasts, whatever they might divine. Greg met Matilda at the Empire State Building. She had set a dozen expensive A4 sheets, folded into airplanes, whizzing around the deck, curving in dramatic, impossible ways. Greg

caught one. They got dinner. —My dream, she told Greg, —is to fold the Map into an airplane and fly it to Brazil.

Greg had no comparable dreams to share. —Your arms would probably get tired, he said, —folding it.

Matilda worked in a bookstore. —Sales have shot up, she said. —People are eager to get their hands on anything paper. Books, posters, wrapping paper. We started selling blank reams of it, even. People want anything that reminds them of the Map, that lets them feel closer to it.

—Paperliness is close to Godliness, Greg said, parroting his boss, Ollie.

Matilda's mother died later that year, and when home for the funeral she frequently found herself staring up at the faint image of her childhood home, imagining an echo of her mother—faint, two-dimensional, ghostly—wandering through it. She knew the Map was no paradise—it was just a map. But she was comforted to remember that, when the Map was drawn, her mother's life had been drawn into it. Back in New York, she cried into Greg's pillows.

Eventually, Greg and Matilda got married in Central Park, shaded by a lovely green swath of Map. Their two daughters were raised under their family's colorful plot of sky, familiar as a favorite rug. Greg was always able to explain the color of the sky to them, something his father had never been able to. The summers were cooler, the winters warmer. Everyone was happy.

But eventually the novelty wore off, and the sun bleached all the color out of the Map. Most of the cults drifted apart, only getting together once in a while to shoot the shit and worship the Map. Divorce rates climbed; Greg and Matilda split up.

When there was no color left, when only faint outlines of lives lived years ago remained, the government passed a resolution to cut the damn thing down. They sent an army of vengeful astronomers up the mountains with garden shears, kitchen scissors, sharp knives, and lasers to tear it apart. The blue sky came back in ragged, patchwork squares over the year, astronomers cackling wildly, high above the Earth.

Opinion was, again, divided. Printers lined the sidewalks on garbage days, the robot refuse of human disillusionment. Many people bought and sold square scraps of Map, leftovers of a disappearing era, like pieces of the Berlin Wall in the nineties.

Chroma, her younger daughter, called Matilda from her dorm room upstate, where the sky was already clear. —I can't believe the *blue* of it all, Mother, she said. —It's like someone shining a flashlight in your eyes *all the time!* Matilda smiled and explained what sunglasses were; her daughters had never needed them before.

Matilda still worked at the bookstore. On her way home that day she bought an AUTHENTIC MAP-PIECE OWN A PIECE OF HISTORY!!! from a stand in Union Square. When she got home she folded it into an airplane, the simplest, most familiar shape she knew, carefully creasing the edges with the nail of her left thumb. Standing on the fire escape, she looked up at the enormous, tattered blueness over her, marred slightly by the white edge of retreating Map, and tossed her plane into the air. It would not make it to Brazil, she knew. But it was nice, all the same, just watching it twirl below her in the invisible wind.

JEREMY PACKERT BURKE once studied math and once read 120 *Goosebumps* books and now lives in New York, or Boston, or nowhere at all, depending on when this is read. He has previously had fiction in *Reservoir* and *decomp*, and writes only garbage jokes on Twitter @jempburke.

Mr. Senthil Chooses Love

Renuka Raghavan

Mr. Senthil met his wife, Mrs. Senthil, on the day of their marriage. It was a union that resulted after a vigorous process of matching astrological charts, personalities, professions, and ambitions, conducted and determined by the family units of the bride and groom. Mr. and Mrs. Senthil quietly obliged to the protocol, offering nary an objection, resigning themselves to fate, or their parents' selection, as it were. Numerous years of bucolic matrimony passed, during which Mrs. Senthil birthed four girls. Mr. Senthil worked hard, earning enough money and amassing enough land to wed each daughter off to respectable sons-in-law, each opting to move out of the village swiftly upon marriage.

Before long, only Mr. and Mrs. Senthil remained. As days passed, Mr. Senthil grew tired and resentful of Mrs. Senthil. One night after an arduous day harvesting crop, Mr. Senthil came home hungry. "What are we having?"

"I've prepared dosas with tomato chutney."

Mr. Senthil made a retching sound. "Again? Every week dosas and chutney, every week for the last forty years! Why didn't that mother of yours teach you anything else? She was too concerned inquiring about my income, is that it?"

"I make dosas and chutney every week because one month after our marriage you said it was your favorite meal. If you do not like it, why did you say otherwise?"

"At least I was able to choose my meals. Everything else was already chosen: my wife, my life, everything."

“After all this time, have you not loved me at all? You despise me like you despise my dosas?”

“I accepted my fate. That is all. Love was not a choice given to me.”

That night Mrs. Senthil packed a small suitcase and left the village. In the morning, Mr. Senthil found a note in his shed, which read in a neat scrawl, “I will not return. Go and choose love.”

So at the tender age of sixty-two, Mr. Senthil went to London, fulfilling his life-long dream to travel abroad. A short visit turned into a permanent residence, and before long, Mr. Senthil found work as a custodian in a local library. Through his children, Mr. Senthil learned that Mrs. Senthil was hale and hearty, working as a primary school teacher in Chennai, her hometown.

A year later, Mr. Senthil married a frequent patron of the library he cleaned, making her the new Mrs. Senthil, only she went by the name Mrs. Tammy Harris-Senthil. One night, after returning to their one-bedroom apartment, he asked Mrs. Harris-Senthil about dinner.

“I don’t know. But whatever you make, make enough for me, too. I’m so hungry,” she answered.

“Have you ever eaten dosas before?”

“Dosas? What is that?”

“It’s a thin pancake, similar to a crepe, made with batter which must ferment for hours.”

“Ugh. It sounds like a pain in the ass to make. Pick something else.”

“I haven’t eaten it in years. It tastes especially good with tomato chutney.”

RENUKA RAGHAVAN focuses on brief, dramatic narratives. Her previous works have appeared in *The Rio Review*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*, among others. She writes and lives in Massachusetts. Visit her at www.renukaraghavan.com

Lenny

Sarah Cimarusti

I am a mediocre ventriloquist. I move my mouth to speak on behalf of my backpack, Lenny, a stuffed pink snail with two long stalks balancing eyes the size of pool balls. We travel long school hallways together. One word to describe us: inseparable. When I leave him in my locker, I worry about him being alone in the dark that reeks of rust. So he's with me most of the time.

I don't have a packaged explanation for how he became my best friend. Like most substantial relationships, it was just meant to be. My friends purchased Lenny for me before I moved away to California with my mom and two siblings. At thirteen, I was perhaps a little too old to start fussing around with an inanimate friend, but for the most part Lenny was well received and my sanity was left unquestioned.

Lenny has a zipper and a pouch that drops deep into his cushioned shell. But it's important to remember he's so much more than storage for my makeup, cigarettes, and house keys.

He's also a secret keeper. Lenny is with me whenever I decide to ditch first period, sit on a stump in the woods behind my school. Lenny hates the smell of smoke, and I always apologize profusely for subjecting him to such a smelly habit. But I explain to Lenny that the alone time really calms my nerves. Lenny understands this.

Lenny was with me last year, when this kid Mike and I snuck away during a spirit building assembly to fuck in the hallway leading to the pool, which was being renovated my entire sophomore year. I wore a skirt, so I only had to peel off my

underwear, which I then stuffed into Lenny. Mike lay on the tile floor with his back pressed against a wall. I was worried about his ass getting too cold, but he said he was fine as he hoisted me on top of him, and I began to bounce up and down. I had rested Lenny on the ground. I noticed how his eyestalks drooped more than usual.

When people ask me questions, I first consult Lenny. Of the two of us, Lenny is the whiz kid. I have told him he is a borderline genius. At this, Lenny usually gives me a blank stare. I can't tell if he knows he is really smart or not. I have a feeling he doesn't know, even though I compliment him all the time on his intellect. Whenever my teachers call on me for answers, I will tilt my ear and say, "what's that you say, Lenny?" and sure enough, Lenny will know. A few teachers have prohibited me from speaking on Lenny's behalf in class. They find Lenny inappropriate and distracting. There are others who find my usage of Lenny as "creative" and refer to him as a separate entity like most of my classmates and I do.

I have come to realize that most of my fellow classmates are in constant need of good jokes and reassurance. Luckily, Lenny brings both.

We have this vending machine with little slots in the hallway adjacent to the cafeteria. I get a bagel and cream cheese from the machine some mornings. So, Lenny came up with an idea that I should swap out the bagel with something of my own. I rifled through Lenny and my fingers stumbled upon a tampon. I could hardly contain myself. Lenny and I were choking on our tongues as we rounded the corner, hearing the responses of amusement, awe, and distain behind us. One of the school's security guards pounded

down the hallway, keys banging against her thigh, and fished out a \$1.50 of her own wallet to rid the obscenity.

This year Lenny and I have decided to do a routine for the school's variety show. Lenny is working hard on his part, providing most of the inspiration and setups. We've been going straight to Ed's apartment to work.

Ed is this middle-aged man who lives alone and has the largest movie collection I've ever seen. He lets me come over whenever I want to watch his movies and eat his food. I'm usually there when he's at work. Sometimes, Lenny and I will ditch first period and chill out on Ed's couch and eat pop tarts. Ed is lonely, but he's never tried anything funny, though, once we slept in a bed together. We recited all the lines to *Dumb and Dumber* until we both trailed off.

Anyway, so Lenny and I have been have been working on our material, though sometimes we can't help but break character. We roll around on the carpet in agony whenever one of us comes up with a real kicker. A few times, I confess to Lenny that I'm a little afraid to go on stage in front of people. Lenny bashes me on the hand with one of his eyes, and says that we've come too far not to be brave lunatics. I hug Lenny tight.

Two days before the big show, Lenny goes missing. I tear apart my room, dumping my dirty laundry onto the floor, ravaging my drawers. I barrel into my mother's room. She's sitting on her made-up bed and smoking a cigarette. I ask her if she's seen Lenny. She says she gave him away to the Salvation Army, calmly, then blows out smoke. Tears sting my eyes as I demand to know why. She tells

me she's worried about me. I don't know what to do, so I pick up a candle from her nightstand and throw it against the wall. I flee. I hear her screaming after me, but before I can make out the words, I'm outside.

I sprint to the Salvation Army a few blocks away from our apartment complex. The door to the facility is no longer automatic; its tired mechanics drag and grind as I push it open with my shoulder. Musty air fills my nose, and I panic, thinking about what a treasure Lenny is, how googly-eyed and adorable he is, and how it may be too late. I have the urge to scream his name, but know how that may come off to people who don't have a context. I search the shelves lined with chipped knick-knacks for my best friend.

A man pushing his mop down an aisle calls out, "Closed, folks, fifteen minutes!" so suddenly he almost barks it. It startles everyone standing around him. A woman fumbles with a drawer she was pulling from a jewelry box, and it falls to the floor. She sighs relief when she realizes it didn't break.

I shuffle through all the spots I already checked once. I feel so fragile and small without Lenny. I keep remembering the naked spot on my back. I wish I were dreaming that I was naked instead. A reality without Lenny surpasses nightmare. How will I amount to anything without him coaching me through? He's so much a part of me, he could be my hippocampus. He stores everything. He's also the weapon I brandish on a daily basis. All the things that I don't like bounce right off that shell of his. Together, we dodge the world.

“Five minutes!” The man with the mop seizes these words. He slaps the mop to the floor in sharp, deliberate movements. His head is down, and his shoulders are scrunched tight to his body. If I were to guess, he’s holding it together like the rest of us.

I give up. I pick up a neon orange fanny pack with a grease stain that’s dangling from a rack and snap it around my waist. What I need is a hat, I think, and sure enough there’s a golf hat, green as AstroTurf. Wait. I need . . . beads. I saunter on over to the dusty glass counter and twiddle through the costume jewelry. The one with white marble beads the size of coal, with spiral seashells in between each bead, calls to me. Its clasps seem complicated. And the shells jut out like little daggers. I drape the heavy string around my neck. I put my arms on my waist and survey myself in a body mirror. I’m a demented queen, I conclude.

The woman who was messing with the jewelry box passes behind me, and does a double take. I catch her gaze, and she quickly looks away, her short bob snapping to the tune of her neck.

I turn around and face her, completely decked out in my temporary ware. She’s standing in line now, trying hard not to look at me. I suddenly want to challenge her. I want to ask her why everyone is so fucking afraid of each other. I want to ask her why we have these neat little roles, when we’re all messy and tangled. But most of all I want to ask her her name and fling it back at her like I’ve always known her.

“Hey, kid, we’re closing,” says the man with the mop, who is now pushing a shopping cart filled to the brim with odds and ends.

“And if you want what you’re wearing, you’re gonna have to get in line now.”

I shriek. Inside the cart the man is pushing there’s what appears to be an eyeball poking out at me.

“Lenny, is that you?” I suddenly plunge my arms into the cart. I’m a machine left to my own devices, craning toward the prize I will win the first time my hands touch it and grab hold.

“Uh, what?” asks the man, who looks around the store as if to call for a co-worker or help of any kind.

“I want to purchase this,” I say and smile like a two-year-old who just took a dump in the toilet for the first time. I can feel Lenny snickering into my hands. He probably finds the whole situation hilarious. I give one of his eyes a squeeze, then stroke the side of his shell.

I feel like I owe the man an explanation. “This belongs to me. It’s hard to explain, but it’s one of the most important things to me.”

“Just take it then. It’s yours. But you have to leave now.”

I look into the man’s eyes. They are foggy and desperate to shut. His long black hair hangs on his face, which is covered in acne scars, scars of his youth.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

Lenny and I go back to work at Ed’s place. We practice for a little bit, but are more interested in just staring at one another and being silent together. We want to say things but don’t have to. We stay up late watching cartoons. I open up Lenny’s pouch. My mother had removed all of his contents and left them on the kitchen table. He’s shrunken, emptier. I rest my head on Lenny as we hunker down.

It's opening night. Lenny and I beef each other up backstage before the opening act. I slap Lenny in the face, and he slaps me back. I pluck a stray thread stuck to the bottom his shell, and he checks my breath ("stank-free").

Our routine starts off bumpy. I choke on my salvia under the blazing stage lights within the first thirty seconds. Lenny saves the day by calling attention to it, asking me why I insisted on the last shot of bourbon back stage. Then we slide right into our bit. We take on the persona of Holden Caulfield, receiving a few knowing nods from fellow students in the crowd. We capitalize off our third-period English class, using especially wide-open classmates as inspiration and calling them all old phonies. It's pure roast material that gets some chuckles. This is followed by a moderated burping contest. Lenny and I are neck-and-neck, but he makes it all the way to the letter V. We hand each other ribbons for our success. He gets a gold one, and I get blue. Farts and burps never fail to entertain.

Like I said, I'm not too gifted at ventriloquism; actually, I'm the opposite. I widen my eyes. Annunciate my words. Open my mouth to reveal expansive gums and gaps between most of my teeth. Lenny doesn't even have a mouth, yet for some reason everyone can hear him loud and clear. He rattles off pure filth.

Then we go to our special place; we slip into our high. Lenny and I tell stories on stage like we're alone in my room—the only audience is my magazine collage of defamed celebrities on my wall. Eminem decked out with pink hair and a Hello Kitty tattoo. Amy Lee wearing a crown of thorns. The audience is not my peers. They are not my friends, competitors, enemies, or a mix of all three. They are the rustling of blinds, wind pouring in through my bedroom window. They know everything and nothing about me. Every now

and then I can hear a laugh from the crowd that's rockier, louder, fuller than the rest. It's not a laugh at a punch line; it's my mother screaming my name from the other room. It's me laughing while climbing out the window and thinking of her face when she realizes I'm gone. I have a laugh track always playing inside my head alongside my plan to get out alive.

I signed everyone's yearbook the same. I wrote, "I will remember you in my heart and in my pants." Then I scribbled a drawing of Lenny as my signature.

I went to college. The students had me pegged. The teachers knew what I was all about. No one was amused, rather they waited patiently for me to step aside or take myself seriously. I met a girl who escaped a war-fallen country. She came to the U.S. desperate, washed ashore with her entire family. She wrote beautifully; little symphonies. I met a guy who lived in a car whose poetry sawed me in half. A professor who tended the sick and dying alongside Mother Teresa.

I had an internship where I tutored elementary school kids whose parents had signed them over to the state. We watched movies with happy endings, learned about presidents, checked the butterflies in their cocoons, made farting sounds. These activities were punctuated by crisis intervention, which is simply one adult putting his or her body on top of a flailing child's body so that the child doesn't hurt anyone. There was nothing funny about restraining a child who has already lost everything. When angry little bodies went limp underneath my weight, I didn't feel like I won anything. It's amazing how allowing myself to be touched by other people's pain dulls my own.

I stopped bringing Lenny everywhere I went. A little part of me shriveled up and turned gray as I took my place in line.

And yet, I refuse to throw Lenny away. Rather, he sits propped up on one of the shelves in my closet. He's brown and worn from the years of upside-down and cross-eyed love. I notice him whenever I pick out anything from my closet. He tells me what to wear, to dress the part of myself. He winks three times, which means something in the language we once created.

SARAH CIMARUSTI is an editor for a plumbing/HVAC publication. She lives in Roselle, Illinois with her boyfriend who is a videogame enthusiast, two rabbits, and a green-cheeked conure who bathes while her owner tries to do dishes. Cimarusti writes, reads, and dances in her living room with or without music.

Provision

David S. Golding

I drink coffee watching the sun rise. In the reflection of the glass, I find that my eyes are no longer young. Wrinkles crease my cheeks. I must be dreaming. Out the window, which is now shaped like a tilted trapezoid, are hills of yellow grain. I see myself exploring their crests and trails between fields of wheat and maize. Someday I will pull up life from the fertile soil of those hills, give my mother a reason to have ever raised me. Knowing there is work to do, I wake.

I'm driving on a highway with no cars, the stereo playing every song that ever gave me chills. There is a thread that weaves together everything I will do in my life, the horizon tells me. I barely notice that the car pulls me onward, careening towards the coast, even though my feet do not touch the pedals. When I crash, my seatbelt grips me back, but my mom's body continues through the windshield and soars out over the evergreen trees, a falcon before the sun.

It's nighttime in a place where day never was. I tremble under the branches of a leafless tree. The ground is bare, the leaf fall long decayed, except for something that moves at my feet. A white claw pushes the dirt up, which I realize isn't a claw but a hand with no flesh or muscles, followed by a skull that sees me with one red eye

and one blue, alternating colors that flash so fast they encapsulate everything around me. I kick at the skeleton but it's no use. It comes up from the ground until it's free from the soil and I am the one who's dead, or close to dead, although my body seems intact, and my fingers flex imperfectly. They must not be real.

There is only chatter, corridors, slams, crowds moving shoulder to shoulder. White comes down from above and blares out all color. Electricity courses the hallways above us and below us. Its currents form a system of interlocking circuits. Any of us nameless ones could, at any moment, find ourselves at the nexus of this machine's powers, silent lenses closing in to surround, a light intensifying for a split second, just long enough to strip our body of its skin.

I'm outside and there's not a cloud in the noon sky. In the dry storm drain at my feet, I remember that I haven't seen the stars in far too long. I hold my flattened hand above my eyebrows and stare at the distant walls in every direction. Some people sit at a table, and another group gathers by a motionless tower. This is all I have left. I make my way towards the dark interior and get lost somehow, even though I do this every day. I end up in a tiny room with no sound and no door. My mother stands there. She has grown impossibly old and tall. I run to her and she picks me up, holds me for the first time in thirty years. Her fingers clutch my balding scalp, her other arm under my knees. She wants to sing to me but she doesn't, nor does she look at me, because she doesn't want me to see her tears.

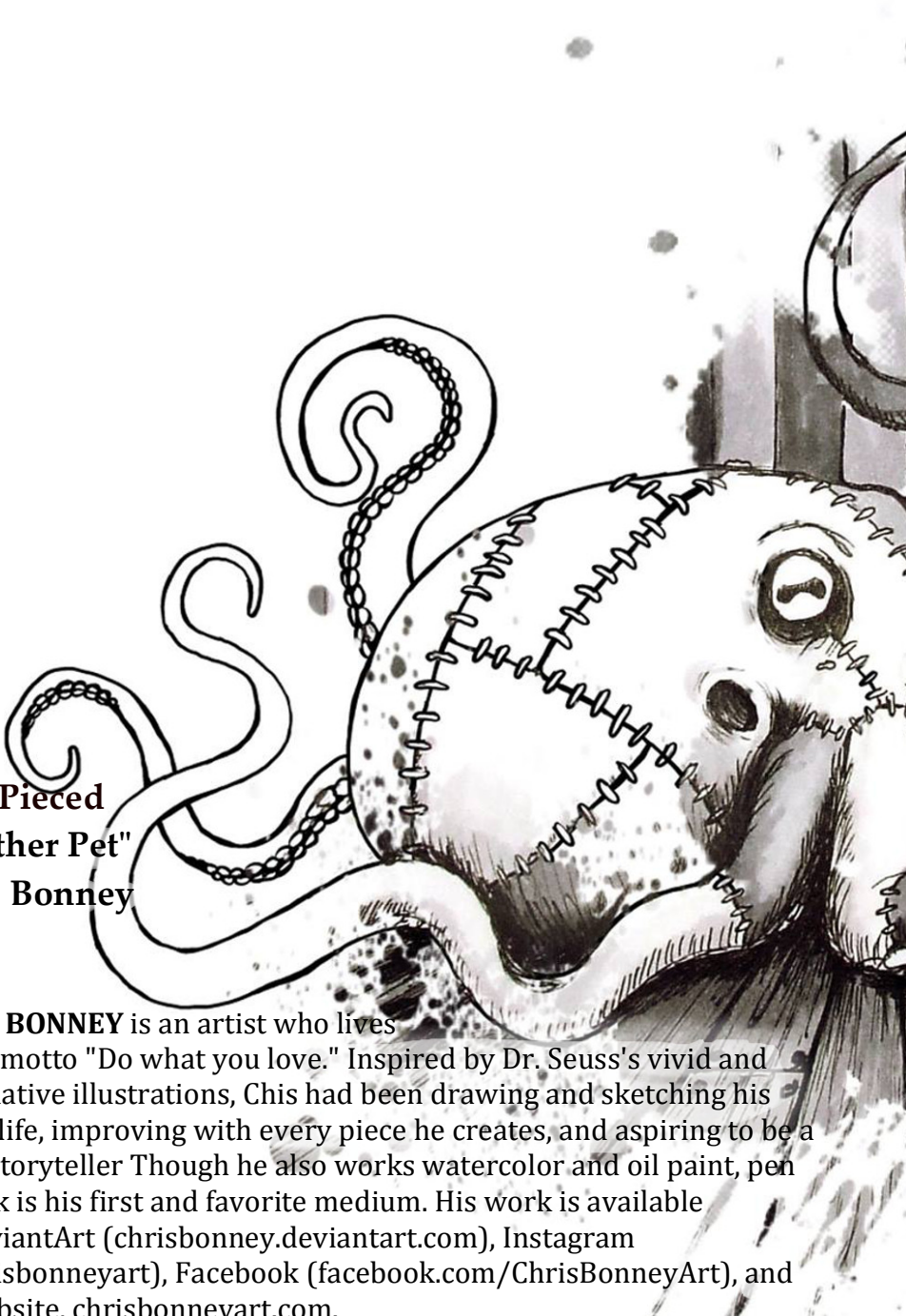
* * *

Out the window, which is now a narrow slit, and through the muddy specks on the glass that no one ever cleans, I recognize the hills from my childhood dreams. The hills are the same, with the same rocky outcrops, except there is no more wheat. Everything is fallow. A white dust covers the ground, probably bone meal, or ash from an unseen eruption. Again I wake, again and again. I wake each morning to find myself here at the window.

DAVID S. GOLDING teaches peace studies and international development in Sri Lanka. After teaching, he takes the crowded night train home to the fishing village where he lives. His fiction can be found at www.dsgolding.com.

On the cover:

"The Pieced
Together Pet"
Chris Bonney



CHRIS BONNEY is an artist who lives by the motto "Do what you love." Inspired by Dr. Seuss's vivid and imaginative illustrations, Chis had been drawing and sketching his entire life, improving with every piece he creates, and aspiring to be a great storyteller. Though he also works watercolor and oil paint, pen and ink is his first and favorite medium. His work is available on DeviantArt (chrisbonney.deviantart.com), Instagram (@[chrisbonneyart](https://www.instagram.com/chrisbonneyart)), Facebook ([facebook.com/ChrisBonneyArt](https://www.facebook.com/ChrisBonneyArt)), and his website, chrisbonneyart.com.