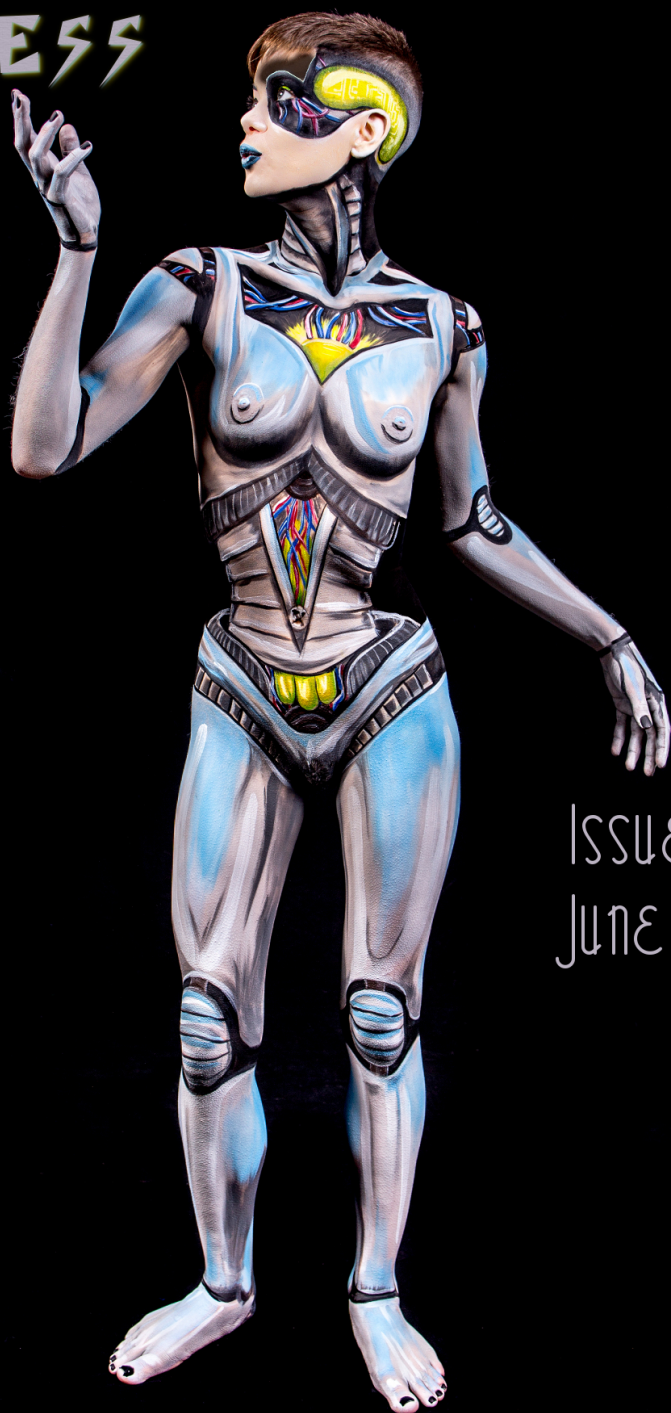


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Editor's Note

It's June, and we're sweating right through the striped knees of our old-timey bathing suit. Join us as we scuttle into the shade of a giant beach umbrella and let these beach reads tickle the sand off our toes. We've got art crimes of the future, poems that do yet don't add up, an aspiring Western hero, and a flaming car in reverse.

— Laura Garrison

Fifty Burghers

Josh Taylor

I sit on my hoverchair, fish the other half of my cheesesteak out of my drawer, and look up to see Brouwer with his elbows on my desk and his face in his palms.

"S'Met," he burbles into his palms. He can't have been there more than the second it took me to grab the cheesesteak.

"Again?" I ask.

He slides down his hands. "Another sculpture." I glance away to avoid seeing the pink under his eyelids. "I think they like the challenge."

"Done one Klee, done them all, I suppose." I try to sniff my cheesesteak without him noticing. It's still good. "Every sculpture's different."

He stands up and wanders back to his office. "Enjoy your lunch. They aren't going anywhere. Hell, a few more might show up."

#

The curator is standing behind a column in front of the museum entrance, peeking out sideways every few seconds. "Thanks for coming, officer," she says under her breath as I reach the top step. "Again."

"Maybe I should buy a membership."

She frowns. "No need. Membership is stronger than ever thanks to the sympathy we're receiving."

"I wouldn't call that a catastroKlee," I joke as she leads me through a portrait gallery and out to the sculpture garden.

"Overfunding crushes the soul of art."

Not a fan of Klee-slappers, apparently, but I can see why she feels that way. It's the most depressing garden, sculpture or otherwise, that I've ever seen. Then again, forty-nine identical Burghers of Calais will dampen the mood just about anywhere.

There are more burghers than people here, each with a bronze noose around its neck, each gloomier than a sculptor working in advertising.

"Looks like the 3D Print Gang," I say as I squeeze between two burghers. One has his anguished finger positioned to scoop a bronze booger out of the other's nose, a nice touch by 3DPG.

We stop in a gap between the burghers. Suddenly I feel like a sculpture: The Even-Keeled Art Inspector of Manhattan. "Any idea which one is the original?"

The Glum Curator points at my feet. I'm standing on a bronze plaque with the word 'Guess.' She says, "It used to be there. It could be any of them. Or none."

"Lowered in by grav-crane?"

"That's what the security footage showed until it went dark."

We work our way out of the burgher mob. I rap a few with my knuckles, each one as solid as the next. Kids play between them, hanging off their arms and crawling through their legs. Too many kids. The sculpture garden has become a depository so their parents can pretend to react to portraits.

We walk back through the galleries. Every painting has at least one museum guest within an inch of nose-contact. It's futile, of course, unless they happen to know the exact molecular structure of the original. We pass a docent saying, "The actual View of Toledo is one of only two known landscapes by El Greco," unintentionally stressing the word 'actual.' I cringe as we pass a few more cold cases.

"Any idea what you'll do with them all?" I ask the curator back in her office.

She glances at the definitely-not-real Brancusi on her desk. "We give out the forged paintings in the lobby and burn what isn't taken. But the burghers are a pain."

"We'd be happy to have one back at the station."

"Will you pay for the truck and grav-crane rental? Can your floor support a ton of bronze? How big are your windows?"

"Not big enough."

The Glum Curator laughs. She places her glasses on the physically perfect, fake Brancusi and rubs her eyes. "You know what the real tragedy is?"

I picture bronze burghers clogging the sidewalk in front of my apartment, in the park with gum stuck to their bronze robes, lamenting iniquity at the next urinal over. "It's all going to become so damn common."

"Yes, but not that many people actually find rapture in art. They'd just be depressed without it. The real tragedy is that enrollment in our classes is plummeting. Another few years of this and there won't be any new artists."

The resignation in her voice snaps something in me. If all of today's masterpieces are doomed to become multitudinous kitsch, then tomorrow's masterpieces never get made. It's time to melt down The Even-Keeled Art Inspector of Manhattan for scrap. I switch to Dull Gret-mode.

"Don't worry," I say, fingering the plasma blade tucked into my belt. The curator smiles at me uncomfortably. "I'm going to make an example of these 3DPG fuckers."

Graves is waiting for me in a booth with a gin and tonic. I can tell he was trying not to finish it before I arrived. I order a glass of Bordeaux at the bar and sit across from him. He smiles. He's always happy to see me, and he's a great listener, mainly because he likes hearing that the rot in my neck of the woods is catching up with the rot in his.

"How's life?" he asks, trying not to sound too curious.

"Want a burgher from Calais? I'll trade you one for a hundred-carat diamond." He sighs, but I can tell he's relieved we're keeping pace. I warm him up a little more. "I remember back when people

used to try pass off forgeries as authentic. Now, it's not even clear what authentic means. I doubt five percent of what's in the Met today is original."

"Bastards," Graves sneers, overdoing the disgust. He places a cherry-colored stone the size of a goose egg on the table. Light from a probably-not-Tiffany lamp glitters on each of its hundred facets, gathering like a flame in the center. A few people notice on their way to the bathroom, but none look twice. "Painite. Three hundred carats."

"Real?"

"As real as your Burghers. The seller gave it to me as a sample from their 'mine.'" He holds it between two fingers. "There used to be less than this in the entire world. Since a few years ago there's so much it doesn't seem to fit in the ground anymore."

"So what will you do?" I ask, feigning concern. I know he'll do exactly what he's done since cheap synthetic painite first hit the scene.

"It's my dilemma. If I deem this authentic, these frauds get a leg up. If I don't, someone else will and I'm out of a job." He sips his gin and tonic as if it's the only thing keeping him cool in the jungle. "I'm a prisoner."

There are real prisoners in the prisons and labor camps. Graves isn't one of them. He was the top diamond appraiser at Tiffany & Co. until Tiffany started exclusively selling flawless synthetic diamonds. They fired him. Now he makes more than ever freelancing for any meth lab that synthesizes gemstones on the side. He wears his guilt as a badge of his former decency, and to drive up bribes. He also has contacts on the synthetic side.

"You ever have trouble with the 3D Print Gang?" I ask, pretending he's honorable.

He folds his hands over the painite. His face looks still and dark without the reflected light. "How did you hear of them?"

"They escorted forty-nine burghers from Calais to the Met."

"I've dealt with one of their subsidiaries." So they have subsidiaries. "Don't go after them." He looks nervous. I think it's his first authentic expression of the night.

I sip my Bordeaux. "Who said I'm going after them?"

He tenses. "So you've gone Dull Gret." He finishes his gin and tonic and signals to the waiter for another. "Then you should know. The extra burghers sound like bait to me. 3DPG is big league."

That much is obvious given that they have a grav-crane, forty-nine tons of bronze, and, apparently, subsidiaries. "What's their next target?"

"Let it go."

"Dull Gret."

I grin. He winces. "Something big in Philadelphia. Asian buyers."

"Good to know." It's obvious enough. I finish my Bordeaux and slide out of the booth.

"They're just art forgers," he says, staring at the painite. "Not murderers."

"I'll be fair," I reply, still grinning. "I alKlees am."

I grab the rest of my gear and head to Penn Station. Sunlight falls though the restored glass ceiling and bounces off the New Bean, blinding anyone who isn't looking at the floor. Everyone on both sides got paid, architects, city officials, artist, but Chicago was nonetheless furious to see New York bootleg one of its landmarks.

It's nine at night when I get off the Acela on 30th Street. There are too many people around for 3DPG to act now, so I take my second cheesesteak of the day in the first place I find that also serves Bordeaux. New York still hasn't managed to make a better cheesesteak than Philly.

At eleven I start down Market Street. I'm not in uniform, but anyone who's been touched by the law crosses the street anyway. I walk slowly and arrive at Independence Mall just past midnight.

I sit on a bench and lay my arm across the back. It's a moonless night, but there's plenty of light from Independence Hall and nearby office towers. The Liberty Bell sits in its glass room like a sleeping zoo animal. Spreading a symbol of freedom around the world doesn't sound all that insidious, but I'm a cop and the law's the law.

Then I see her: a mime loping across the Mall like a gazelle, black and white-striped shirt, white face-paint under a black beret. She stops in front of the Liberty Bell and commences pretend-squeegeeing the windows. There's a mime on every block in Philly, but this one's a little too silky, and she's holding an optical tomographer instead of a pretend-squeegee.

She pretend-squeegees the other windows, nods with exaggerated satisfaction, and with a silent flourish of her hand slides the optical tomographer into her pocket. She skips twice, handsprings, and lopes back across the Mall.

I throw my vibrostar. Dull Gret. It slices through her knee in the middle of the Mall. The lower half of her leg bounces away like a football, and she face-plants on the grass and clutches her stump screaming. Definitely 3DPG: true mimes die in silence.

I get up from my bench and amble across the Mall. The vibrostar spins itself clean as it flies back to my belt. The mime writhes on the grass, screaming intermittently. Blood has splattered over her stripes and face-paint. She giggles, screams, giggles again, really more like a clown than a mime, especially with the spot of blood on her nose.

"Something funKlee?" I ask as I take the optical tomographer out of her pocket.

"Only you." She throws back her head and shrieks. "Art cop!"

Then she starts to shrink, and I feel the perfect recliner chair support of antigrav. I reach for my heat pistol.

"We'll drop you!" she shouts between screams.

She has a point. I put away the pistol and enjoy the air until I feel my ass pucker up to the grav-crane. Another mime runs below and flash cauterizes her knee-stump, which is bad news for me. They were planning this.

The Mall slides out from under me. The grav-crane drops me in a dump truck full of trash bags, not a few of them leaky. I reach for my heat pistol, but another mime passes a sleepylizer over my face. I feel trash juice trickle over my lips as I lose consciousness.

I awake to soft LED lighting, an almost surely illicit Calder mobile hanging from the ceiling, and what I assume is the trashiest morning breath I've ever had. I try to sit, but I'm strapped to a table. The air vent over my crotch tells me I'm naked.

"He's up," I hear a man say.

The table tilts up to vertical. I'm in a well-lit, glass-walled laboratory like they used to have in fancy biotech companies. Through one wall I see an assembly line of canvases: first heat aging, then a dozen automated nozzles brush and dab and scumble paint, then more aging for ninety-second Turners, Morrisseaus, and Brueghels. Dull Garbage. Through another wall an autosculptor deposits a new Liberty Bell every four minutes, complete with crack and patina, while a carbon-stacker and wood-warper form the elm yokes. The yokes are the real bottleneck in the process.

"You know I'll get you eventually."

"Fuck off, art cop," a female voice replies.

I twist and see the de-kneed mime lying on a table like mine. A flesh-loom is reconstructing her leg. Behind her table another flesh-loom is performing something like a reverse vivisection on a twitching mound of tissue, obliterating the cheesesteak craving I woke up with.

"I'll leave as soon as you unstrap me," I say. I don't mention the pain in my rear, no doubt a memento of the grav-crane's kiss.

"Don't worry about him, Zala," says the man before she can respond. "We'll get what we need." They need the data in the tomographer for the Liberty Bells, but I don't see any value in forging my undies.

Zala pushes aside the flesh-loom and gets off the table. She hops on her toes and flexes her new leg. The mismatched skin accentuates her beautifully muscled calves. "We're fighting the good fight, not you," she says.

"By devaluing art?"

"By devaluing old art."

"What's wrong with old art?"

"It's the only kind the Premier tolerates."

"He's a man of classical tastes."

"Bouguereau!" she sneers. "We never target the work of living artists. By commonizing old symbols, we're spurring the demand for new ones."

"Then why is no one signing up for art classes anymore?"

"Maybe not at mausoleums like the Met, where they'll never see their own work anyway. The underground schools are thriving thanks to us."

"The ilKleegal ones," I retort, unable to resist.

"What was that?" asks the man.

"I said, 'The il-Klee-gal ones.'"

"I think we're good here," he says.

Zala smiles as she walks toward me. Her gymnast's gait is so elegant, her pale calf like a stripe in a Rothko. I smile back. The last thing I see is her baby-smooth heel speeding toward my face.

This time the wet slap of the Staten Island Sound rouses me. A boat vanishes into the night. I gurgle water and oil slick as I bob in the

wake of my new friends, 3DPG. It's a cold night, and I feel like there's a ten-cheesesteak pileup in my ass, courtesy of their grav-crane. I swim to the shore and sit on the mud beside cans and tires and spent grav cartridges until I finish shivering myself awake.

I need to go straight to the station to have a shot at stopping the Liberty Bells. I stagger up the shore, naked and slimy as man's first ancestor. Soon the Statue of Liberty comes into sight. Immensity is the only real protection against forgery.

Behind some oil drums a heap of paintings shakes in the wind. I break the backings off some Miro's and wrap the canvases around my hands and feet. Then I find a big O'Keeffe, punch a hole through the middle, and wear it like a poncho.

People smile as I come up to the ferry terminal. I'd smile too if a head poking out of a huge flapping vagina lined up next to me. I stand outside on the ferry's upper deck, opening and closing my hands on the railing, away from the other passengers. Frostbite is easy enough to fix, and I'm afraid to sit down given the agony in my backside.

I stand at the gangway well before we start to dock, to get off first and avoid the other passengers. I feel a tap on my shoulder. One snide comment isn't bad given the circumstances. I glance back. It's an older man, smiling like the passengers behind him.

"Thank you," he whispers.

The gangway clanks onto the pier and I hurry off. The sun is up. I won't get frostbite. But, everyone will turn to see at the huge fallopian tube hobbling up the sidewalk. "Happy to oblige!" I shout at the smiling onlookers. Some of them nod in a way I'd find encouraging under any other circumstances.

I clamber up the station steps. Each footfall is a thunderbolt in my rectum. I realize I'm weak with hunger when I struggle to open the door. At least I can do something about that. My colleagues are staring at me, gaping, not smiling. I should have heeded Graves' warning about 3DPG. This day will hang over me for years.

I head to the evidence room and pull open the freezer. It's gone. I can still taste trash juice and the fake-mime's heel, and my emergency cheesesteak is gone. I go Dull Gret. I charge into Brouwer's office, ready to rain a fury of lost Liberty Bells and cheese whiz.

Then I freeze. At first, I wonder if I'm looking at a blown-up photograph. The pain in my ass is so bad I have to prop myself against the doorframe. They both smile, but not like the ferry passengers. They leer as if I'd wandered out of the drunk tank.

"Kleefect timing," says the one holding my emergency cheesesteak.

I turn to Brouwer. "He's not me!"

"If he's not, he's better," Brouwer replies. "He stopped the Liberty Bell heist. You couldn't even stop a few burghers."

"Plus I'm not hiding an optical tomographer in my rectum," says the man who is indistinguishable from but definitely not me.

I go beyond Dull Gret. I go Kandinsky. I go Pollock. I'm an unfocused pointillist rage. I reach for my plasma blade, but all I grab is the breeze under my nuts. Then I lose consciousness, this time all by myself.

Something soft and greasy prods me awake. It smells incredible. I open my eyes. My doppelganger is poking the half of my emergency cheesesteak through the bars of my cell, smiling too earnestly for anyone over a day old.

I finish the cheesesteak in about seven seconds, avoiding eye contact until after I've pulled a Miro off my hand and wiped my lips. "What's your plan?" I don't ask why. I would have done worse to anyone in 3DPG.

"It depends on you."

"I want the other half of my cheesesteak."

"It's too late for that."

"Then I want my identity."

"That's mine now."

"My freedom."

"PotentialKlee."

I use the bars to pull myself up. I'm still wearing my cervical shroud, but the only thing in my ass now is poop, thankfully. "In exchange for what?"

"I'm a mound of tissue with a handful of your memories." I recall the reverse vivisection in 3DPG's lab and swallow back down a chunk of the cheesesteak. "I want to keep being you, that is, of course, while secretly serving the 3D Print Gang." He glances toward the corner of my cell.

I see my clothes, neatly folded, undies and all. "What's your game?"

"I'm just offering you your clothes," he replies with total sincerity. "One of our subsidiaries shipped the Liberty Bells an hour ago, by the way."

I'd need more cheesesteak to get really angry, but I can still withhold satisfaction. "Fuck off, mime."

"You prefer to remain dressed as female genitalia?"

"I still look better than you," which is totally false given that he's a healthier, cleaner version of me, but it's the best I can do at the moment.

"You won't even take the undies?"

"I like the freedom of my O'Keeffes."

He opens the cell door, which apparently was unlocked the whole time. "In that case you may go."

Since everyone thinks I'm a crazy clone, I use my exit as an opportunity to flip off some colleagues I never liked, press my butt cheeks up against the window on Brouwer's door, and wipe my greasy Miro napkin on the bulletproof glass in the lobby. Thus begins my midlife crisis.

I have no idea what I'll do as I step out onto the sidewalk. My identity is copied and meaningless. No keys or wallet. I can't go to my apartment, or the Met. Graves would be far too delighted if I called him up. For now, I bask in my comeuppance, marveling at its abruptness.

Pedestrians continue to smile at me as I roam the city. I smile back, having exhausted my spite in the station, and they nod as if I've done something good. Perhaps Graves and I weren't so different, the same images, polarized. He blesses the kitsch, squeezing out the non-kitsch. I damn the kitsch, but in turn banish the new and good. The experimental. The avant-garde.

I keep walking, watching the pavement in contemplation, until I feel something enter my left nostril: a bronze finger, belonging to the bronze hand of a burgher from Calais. I laugh. It's bizarre here, out of the museum, bronze noose under its anguished face right in front of a designer cupcake shop. Almost as bizarre as a man wearing Miro socks, a vagina poncho, and nothing else.

Then it hits me. All these people really are smiling, not leering. Approving. Appreciating. I'm performance art, and the illegal, distasteful to the Premier variety at that. At least I think I am, and so do all of them.

A grin spreads over my face. "Ha!" I start to run down the sidewalk, my gonadic cape whipping behind me, exposing my own genitals to hundreds of bystanders, when I trip and face-plant on the cement.

I roll onto my back, dazed. A mime in capris is standing over me, sticking out a well-muscled leg, which rather attractively contrasts the rest of her skin.

"Haven't you had enough fun with me?"

"Now it's time for you to have fun with us," Zala replies.

"You want me to join you?"

"We need someone with your experience."

"Do I have to dress like a mime?"

“Not if you have your own clothes.”

I look myself over. I don’t. But even performance art has its limits. “I guess I’m 3DPG now.”

She offers her hand and helps me up. “Up for a Kleesteak?”

JOSH TAYLOR is an engineering professor at the University of Toronto. This is his first fiction publication.

Two Poems

Veronica McDonald

Problem

One plus one is eleven (or oney one)
plus zero equals eleventy.

There is no such thing as oney one-ty.

One crocodile plus one dog (Conan) equals death
if Conan is in the creek.

It does not matter if you add the forty apples
Sally stole from Jimmy
when Jimmy had eleventy apples
and six oranges.

There are no such things as oranges
when you are looking for apples.

There are no such things as apples
in a battle between croc and Conan.

One Jimmy entered the water (searching for his apples)
minus one Sally who ran.

This equals zero children (if one believes in children)
running barefoot in a swampy land.

One twenty-fourth Jimmy plus one eighth canine
equals one full crocodile
submerged and swimming away
in bobbing blood apples.

There are no such things as blood oranges
when you are looking for Jimmy's fingers.

There are no such things as fingers (only ghosts of fingers)
when they're gone.

How many are left?

Old Woman

There was an old woman who caught a fly
She tried to eat it, I thought she would die
So I stood up and swatted it out of her hands
Gave it another good whack
to make sure it was dead
And killed the fly.

She took out her box of fabric scraps
Sewed the fly a tie of blue polka dots
Fastened it with thread
around its head
And clothed the fly.

She said a prayer over its wings
In rambling nothings and very nice things
Then swallowed it whole
Told me it's living inside her soul
in fly paradise
Of darkness, secrets, and lies.

I watched in horror, held her back
Tied her arms behind her back
Forced her to swallow a spider, a bird, a cat
perhaps they'd eat the fly in her soul
Bring her back.

She coughed up a hairball
laughed like a horse
And died of course.

VERONICA MCDONALD is a fiction writer, poet, and mom. She holds an MA in Literature from American University in Washington D.C. Her short stories and poetry have recently appeared in *Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal*, *Five on the Fifth*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, and *Gingerbread House Literary Magazine*, among others. She has a website: VeronicaMcDonaldAuthor.com.

The Next Great Cowboy Poet

Kate Sparks

Martin gasps, pants, and lowers his 380-pound frame into a chair carved from a massive pine stump. It is one in a long line on the Pinederosa Dude Ranch's wide wooden porch. If he is lucky, he is going into cardiac arrest. Five days into the family vacation, and Martin is considering all possible exit strategies.

Which of his fellow guests will discover him, take one look, and go for the defibrillator? No doubt one of the few, like Martin, who, because of some deformity or another, is not out on the morning trail rides. Maybe the lady with bad knees, or the Fleeces, a family of four, who are allergic to everything, including horses, and medically proscribed from taking part in most ranch activities. Martin's dad, with whom Martin has had an improving relationship since early dementia set in, will be shocked and saddened by Martin's demise for about five minutes, until the details will slip away.

"That's my Frankie," Martin's dad wheezes from a nearby stump.

Martin watches a line of riders in the valley below, a parade of raisins on slightly larger raisin horses. One rider trots at the side of the lead raisin. That could be the Frank, who never keeps his horse in line, despite that being a rule posted at the barn and covered extensively in the mandatory equestrian briefing that Ginger, the owner's daughter, gives at the beginning of each week at the ranch. Frank has been coming to Pinederosa for thirty years. The rule never changes. The other thing that never changes is that Frank always breaks it.

"Look at Frankie go," says Martin's dad.

He pumps his arms. The sleeves of his baggy old-man jacket slip down and reveal a physique melted to skeletal form, as if he

has forgotten, along with everything else, how to metabolize food into body mass.

“Why aren’t you down there with Frankie?” he says.

“Remember, Frank’s parole officer won’t let him recreate with upstanding citizens like you and me after molesting that Daisy Scout,” says Martin. “It’s a shame. Especially because we used to have such fun together, though Frank hated that I was the better rider.”

A morsel of light glints behind the old man’s cloudy irises, and Martin knows he has gone too far. He enjoys how close they have become, bonding over the array of crimes and sins Martin invents for Frank—wife beater, thief, flasher of children’s playgrounds—but Martin has less success when he tries to rewrite his and Frank’s childhood. For their dad, it is easier to imagine Frank wagging his dick at Catholic schoolgirls than losing a horse race to Martin.

“Tell me again, why isn’t Frank in jail?”

Martin shushes his dad. The stories of Bad Frank are between the two of them. For everyone else at the ranch, Frank is the guest you want to know, riding the fastest horse, singing the funniest cowboy song with the guy in the kitchen who plays guitar, dancing the salty dog rag with the prettiest girl wrangler. Martin can dance the salty dog rag too, and the prettiest girl wrangler always asks him first, but he knows she has to. Martin won’t dance a contractually-mandated pity dance, certainly not with Frank there, sure to hoot out “shake it, brother” and distract everyone from noticing that he, Martin, knows the steps better than Frank, who always twirls the prettiest girl wrangler when he ought to do-si-do.

“Hey, Martin.” Ginger rounds the back of Martin’s chair.

“Want a Hershey’s with Almonds?”

Martin means to refuse but takes it and sets it on the armrest, because he can’t refuse a kind offer from Ginger, who is as pretty as the prettiest girl wrangler.

“I need your advice,” Ginger says, “about the Cowboy Poet.”

Martin hates the Cowboy Poet and hopes Ginger is going to ask him whether they should end the stupid tradition of having him read a poem in which some quirk or talent of each guest is featured. Pinederosa has employed different Cowboy Poets over the years, but for some reason, they all seem to have it in for Martin.

For a moment, Martin imagines what it would be like to take over as Cowboy Poet. He could live on the ranch, away from his dad who is always telling him to make a ham sandwich, even though Martin has just made him a ham sandwich and it is sitting right there on the plate. That would free up plenty of time for Martin to embark on his long-planned program of self-improvement and weight-loss, and soon he would be dancing the salty dog rag with the prettiest girl wrangler and coming back for an encore with Ginger. When his family's week at the ranch comes around again, he would make sure Frank's line in the Cowboy Poem is, at long last, accurate.

*There's a lot you don't know about the asshole Frank
His dimples may twinkle, but his soul is dank.*

Ginger interrupts Martin's silent elegizing. "We're thinking of having the whole poem be about the time Frank saved the wrangler. What do you think?"

"Frank would hate that," says Martin, knowing full well Frank would love that. As if Frank needs one more thing around here to incite worship. It happened, what? Thirty years ago? And the wrangler was fine, a mild concussion and that thing with the nose.

"Well, it was Frank's idea," Ginger says. "We want the whole family to sit up front with him and the Cowboy Poet. We've even figured out how to haul your special chair down to the campfire."

Three years ago, Martin had upended a wooden bench while settling in for Dale Evans trivia night. He was willing to forget the whole thing, even though he was almost garroted by one of the lassos in the rickety roping display into which he had tumbled. The weedy boy from France, who catapulted into the stand of fly rods and took a couple hooks to the cheek, bore up less stoically. The

Pinederosa lawyers insisted that Martin, for his own safety and that of others, use a specially designed chair when he reposed in public spaces on anything other than the stump-inspired furniture on the porch and the picnic tables cemented to the ground down by the river.

"Oh," says Martin. "Can't wait. You shouldn't have."

"No problem at all," says Ginger, pushing off Martin's chair and tousling his dad's hair. "See you tonight."

The lunch triangle rings. Martin's dad leaps the porch railing with the superhuman strength of the insane and trots toward the Olde Timey Mess Hall.

"Gonna sit next to my boy Frank," shouts the old man into the dust storm he kicks up as he runs. "He's a chip off the old block, except for the liberties he took with that little girl's poodle."

Martin smiles after his dad. Martin has never mentioned a poodle in relation to Bad Frank. His dad is starting to riff on his own.

"You going to eat that?" A voice floats up from behind Martin. One of the Fleece's teenage girls. She is pale and slight, a victim of her family's allergen-free-wheat-free-dairy-free-vegan diet. She is holding the Hershey Bar.

"Take it," says Martin.

"I am allergic to nuts, chocolate, processed sugar, and food dyes," says the girl.

"Then perhaps that's not the best choice for you," says Martin.

"My mom says I am allergic to those things, but I don't think I am. I think starving us is what she does because Dad won't let her work outside the home. She used to have a good job at a quilt shop."

"Maybe you should test this theory in a more controlled environment," Martin says. What if the girl starts to choke or

vomit? Will Frank rush in, give her the Heimlich, and force the Cowboy Poet into lyrical overdrive to come up with another stanza on The Hero of Pinederosa?

Martin, that idiot, fed the allergic girl nuts,

Save her, Frank, from the stupid fat putz!

"There's an Epi-Pen in the first aid kit in the office," the girl says, "If my lips turn blue, get it and stab it into my thigh. You have thirty minutes."

She takes a bite.

Martin stares at her lips. A bit of chocolate there but normal-sized and definitely not blue.

"I'm Abby, by the way," the girl says, taking another bite.

"I'm Martin," says Martin.

"I know," says the girl. "If you need to go for the Epi-Pen, yell 'Abby is in anaphylactic shock!' I don't want someone dosing my sister by mistake."

Martin watches Abby finish the candy bar. They both stand on the porch for a minute, then Abby says, "I told you so" and slips back into the lodge.

Martin, gilded in sweat, struggles up from the horse blanket on which he had been napping under a stand of aspens. Dreams of Frank with puffy blue lips dancing the salty dog rag on Martin's special chair have left him determined to tell Ginger not to bring it to the campfire tonight. He will sit on a bench, like everyone else.

Martin follows the chatter of the wranglers loading the Pinederosa F-150 in the ranch's gravel parking lot. They hoot and holler and whistle through their fingers as they shove tinfoil pans heaping with ribs into the truck bed. You'd think they were driving cattle down the Chisholm Trail and not just balancing stainless steel bowls of coleslaw on top of the spare tire.

Martin composes his entreaty to Ginger. You have always been so welcoming to my family, even though Frank is a black-hole-

dimensioned asshole, and Dad is no foxtrot with Fred Astaire, but I want you to know that, for my part, I don't need . . .

Ginger darts past Martin and around the truck, heading for the kitchen's screen door trailed by two wranglers, jangling in their spurs, one holding a finger wrapped in a red bandana above his Stetson.

Martin follows to see if they might need his help. His first aid certification expired about the same time he was discharged from the Webelos, but he reads WebMD. He makes it to the other side of the truck, and the sight of the special chair drives from his head all thoughts of fashioning emergency sutures from the buckskin stampede strap affixed to his Yankees cap.

The special chair stands five feet high and weighs over two hundred pounds. The wranglers built it from Western red cedar reinforced with iron bars salvaged from Pinederosa's defunct Cowboy Prison Play Yard. A few years ago, the fly fishing instructor, also a watercolorist, painted a western sun on the chair's back. Unfortunately, his palette was restricted to the mud-brown Pinederosa uses on its fences, and the spiky blob resembles an enormous anus more than a heavenly body. A lasso flecked with rubber cement twines along the armrest like a snake and winds onto the seat in a cursive "M."

"Hey, hey. A little help over here."

Except for the squeaky pitch, the voice could be the one in Martin's head, because he had just thought the same. A little help here. He could use a little help here. Help to explain to Ginger that this special chair, as much as it might be a legal requisite, is not a kindness, no matter how kindly meant.

"I think we need a gun. Definitely some fly swatters."

It's Abby. She stumbles down a grassy burn toward Martin. Her arms are swollen and black, pulsating and throwing off bits of what could be charred flesh. Oh dear God. An allergic reaction to the Hershey Bar with Almonds. She is burning up from the inside.

As Abby gets closer, Martin detects a low drone. Abby is not in the throes of theobromine-induced spontaneous combustion. She is covered in flies.

"A gun?" says Martin.

"I'm going to fire it in the air to disperse the flies," says Abby. She waves one swarming arm at two emerald hummingbirds dive-bombing her head.

"Honey," says Abby, as if Martin had asked. "My arms are painted with honey. I'm trying to get stung by a bee, but the flies are in the way."

"I hear they carry typhoid," says Martin. "Would that work?"

Abby frees her hand from her hair. "Not this time. I have my heart set on bee venom. You catch more bees with honey, as they say."

"Actually," says Martin, "they say 'flies.'"

"Whatever," says Abby. She beats her arms and bugs billow into the air.

She bats a few from her face and blinks at the special chair.

"Holy cow," she says, "What's that?"

"My special chair," says Martin.

Abby circles it. Martin would like to think she's impressed but knows she is, at best, stunned.

"'Special' as in 'extraordinary' or 'special' as in 'off?'" she says.

Martin places a hand to his forehead. "Off," he says.

When he looks back up, she has her back to the chair and is staring at him.

"You hate it," she says.

"Yes," he says.

"I hate it too," she says. "Let's get rid of it."

Abby twirls toward the chair, her fly-halo bobbing slightly in the mountain breeze. She places both hands on the seat's apron and scrabbles her legs in the gravel, kicking dust and stones back at Martin. The chair does not move, but he does not stop her. It's as good a plan as any.

“Oh shoot,” says Ginger, banging back through the kitchen screen door and planting herself between the chair and Martin. “We were hoping to surprise you.” She gestures toward this year’s emblazonry—a row of upturned horseshoes nailed to the chair’s top.

“Fit for the Sun King,” says Martin and thinks, fit for the Anus King. Ginger grins. Behind her Abby climbs on the chair and stands on the rope “M.” She scrapes honey and flies off her arms.

“We always load it last. It keeps the coolers from skittering around,” says Ginger.

Martin wants to feign great interest, as he feigns great interest in any words that drop from her cupid bow lips. But he is transfixed with Abby, who is peeling layers of golden goo off her arms. The flies desert her and swarm sticky around the wood and twine.

Abby hops off the chair and claps at a last fly buzzing at her hand. Ginger turns and gasps.

“What’s with the vermin? They’re all over Martin’s special chair,” says Ginger. “And where are your parents?”

“Annabel blew out her nebulizer,” says Abby. “They went into Antonito. Martin was just telling me that flies carry typhoid. Terrible situation.”

“That’s right,” says Martin, “A whole host of pestilence. Looks like they’re nesting in there.”

Ginger covers her mouth. “What about tonight?”

“Don’t worry about me,” Martin pats Ginger’s shoulder, tries not to gawk at the fly crawling into her ear. “I don’t need to sit up front.”

Martin digs into his third Pinederosa Pork-a-Palooza Platter. He has chosen a picnic table as far as possible from the soon-to-be roaring campfire and the birch-bark podium, where the Cowboy

Poet is already warming up with yodeling scales. Next to Martin, his dad pushes posole into a tiny Indian burial mound.

Since lunch, the old man has rejected Martin's every attempt at conversation. He got no rise even when he broached the possibility that Frank's bestiality proclivities might be taking a reptilian turn.

When Martin's dad finally does speak, it is with a velocity and volume that startles them both: "At lunch today, Frank asked me to come live with him."

Because the old man has not said anything sensible in years, Martin does not try to make sense of this. But his dad speaks again quickly, as if, like Cinderella's carriage, his uncharacteristically cogent train of thought might at any moment morph back into a pumpkin.

"Frank wants me to live with him. My room will have shag carpet. I'll have a waterbed. I can get a ferret."

The old man drops his head, winded. Martin stares at his dad, and his dad stares at his sauce-slathered ribs. Martin doesn't believe it. And then he does. Frank must want to take over, thinks Martin, because, for once, I'm good at something, maybe even better at something.

And as he thinks it, he knows it's not true. Just the opposite. Frank probably believes he's doing Martin a favor. Doing Martin and his dad a favor. Who would want to live with either of them?

"Are you sure you want him around a ferret?" says Martin. "You know, after the poodle?"

"I know it's not real," says Martin's dad.

Martin nods. His dad pushes his ribs as far away from his posole as he can. Martin crumples a red and white checked napkin and drops it on his Yukon Golds. His dad dribbles limeade onto his plate, and a green lake spreads around his piles of food and drips onto the grey wood of the picnic table.

"Yahooweee! Whoop-ee-ti-yi-o, it's time for the Cowboy Poet. To the campfire, everyone." Ginger passes by and swipes her arm in the air. Martin's dad shambles after her, a Wet-One dragging

from his cowboy boot, and reaches for her hand. She doesn't recoil, which is impressive, since his grasp is clammy and limp. Martin knows this from leading his dad away from the garbage disposal he is forever putting his cellphone down because it has failed, again, to connect him with his dead wife.

Martin struggles out from behind the table and lifts his eyes to the crest of Heartbreak Hill, where the lanterns hang along the eaves of the lodge's porch. It is a hell of a hike back to his room. But if he rests at the plateau where the corral sits, maybe checks to see if there are any leftovers from the Cowpoke PB&J ride in the barn fridge, he might be able to make it.

At each switchback on the trail up to the corral, Martin captures a glimpse of the flickering campfire below and hears the Cowboy Poet droning on, his cadence punctuated with dramatic strumming from that guy in the kitchen who plays guitar. To block out the noise, Martin works on a new story of Bad Frank, though for whom, he does not know. This one will involve a petting zoo, a tiny boy in a wheelchair, and Frank caught stuffing baby rabbits down his pants. He feels sorry for his dad, missing it.

When Martin finally reaches the corral, it's empty. He feels he has been climbing for days, but the lights from the lodge seem as far away as when he set out. He leans on a rail fence.

After a few minutes, a crash from inside the barn interrupts him mid-pant. Another moment, and Abby Fleece emerges pulling an oversized saddle. She is shoeless and the hem of what appears to be an old-fashioned white nightgown drags in the muck.

"Come on and help me," Abby says. "I'm going to ride a horse."

Martin looks around, "The horses aren't here."

"It's the logical next step in my allergen experiments," Abby continues. "At dinner, I ate a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread: Nuts, cornstarch, corn syrup, refined sugar, a number

of preservatives I cannot pronounce. Not even a hive. And I'm wearing 100 percent polyester," she pauses to indicate her tattered and muddy nightgown. "I stole it from the guest laundry."

"The horses aren't here," Martin says.

A faint cheer rises from the fireside below where the Cowboy Poet seems to have finished up. This is good. It means people will start coming back up the hill. Martin will be able to find Abby's parents. But this is bad too. People will start coming back up the hill, and they will find Martin, red-faced and panting, and Abby in a torn and dirty nighty.

Martin swivels his head from left to right, not sure what an escape route might look like. He stares back down at the campfire. Someone else is talking. Frank. The guests are not moving away, and for once, Martin is grateful for the thrall in which Frank seems to hold people who are not Martin.

"We need to get up to the lodge," Martin says, but Abby has abandoned the saddle in the mud and disappeared. Martin trots toward the barn, cursing his luck, her idiocy, and Frank, out of habit. Past the barn, he spots a flash of white polyester flapping beyond the rail fence around the rodeo ring.

"I found the horses." Abby dances toward two Belgian draft horses, Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon-sized animals, which regard the white scrap fluttering in front of them with eyes as dark and passive as shot puts.

Martin trundles into the arena and follows Abby toward the beasts.

"You can't ride those," he says. "They're for pulling things."

"Can too," says Abby, tossing herself at one of the horses, her outstretched hand barely reaching its back. The horse stands still, not even a tail swish to indicate it registers the girl's assault. "I saw it at the kid's rodeo."

And so had Martin. He had sat on the bench of their rental van, not wanting to get any closer than he had to to Frank's kids' methodical capture of top prizes in all events. After they had

collected their ribbons, Ginger guided the two draft horses out, boosting squealing children on their backs to be bounced around the arena led by a wrangler. The Fleeces had parked next to the van, sealed tight in their station wagon, Abby and her sister's faces pressed to the backseat window.

"Come on, help me up." Abby hops next to the horse.

"We've got to get back to the lodge." Martin wonders how long Frank can go on, trusts it is a good while, but still, it will take he and Abby over an hour to make the last leg of the climb.

"Not until I ride a horse," Abby says.

Martin presses bunched fingers to his hot face, grabs Abby's waist, and boosts her onto the horse, almost tossing her clear over, she is so light. He grips the rope around the animal's neck and starts jogging along the fence line. Anything to get her to leave the corral.

"Once around," he says.

"Okay," says Abby, giggling and letting out little cowboy yips. Martin sneaks a look at her. He is doing a good thing here, a heroic thing. He's giving a little freak-child a normal-child experience, something she will always remember and cherish after they lock her back in her bubble. Someday, he might even convince Ginger to have the Cowboy Poet write about this:

*Martin gave the weird allergy girl a ride on a horse,
He's a prince of a man, a cowboy hero, of course.*

Concentrating on getting his Cowboy Poem lines to scan, Martin does not notice when Abby's whoops and giggles stop and are replaced by low moaning. As they come around the final bend of their lap, Martin turns to see if Abby might like to trot the horse across the finish line.

Her bony fingers are entwined in the horse's mane, her arms outstretched, her head buried in its back.

"Abby," Martin screeches.

She lifts her head slowly and through purple, puffy lips, whispers, “Epi-Pen.”

No. She is allergic to horses. Not chocolate. Not nuts. But horses. Martin has killed her. He has put her on the biggest horse on earth, and now she is going to die, all swollen and purple-mouthed.

Martin runs out of the rodeo ring and toward the road up to the lodge. He puffs three steps up, slides two back. His legs cramp.

Martin labors back into the corral. Frank has to be done talking by now, and people will start up the hill. But below, the guests still huddle around the fire. Frank still stands before them. It’s been over two hours, yet they are frozen, entranced.

“Help! Help!” Martin yells and waves his arms. He is crying now. “Shut up Frank, shut up.” But Frank doesn’t shut up. No head turns from Frank to Martin.

Martin flails back toward the arena and looks out at the woods around the stables, considers hiding. But he knows he won’t do that. He’ll stand here and watch Abby die. As Abby’s parents wail, as Frank screams at Martin, as all the guests howl, “Why couldn’t it have been Frank who found the girl? He would have saved her like he saved the wrangler. He would have ridden his horse...”

He would have ridden his horse.

Martin runs back into the arena and vaults the draft horse. He grabs the mane in one hand and wraps an arm around Abby, eyes shut but still—thankyouFrankthankyouyouasshole—breathing. With a mighty kick, which Martin notes could not have been executed by a less substantial man, he propels the horse up the hill, galloping in a spray of rocks and dust, toward the lodge and the Epi-Pen.

KATE SPARKS is a farmer in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Her short fiction has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Citron Review*, and *WhiskeyPaper*, is upcoming in *Jellyfish Review*, and was recognized in the New Millennium Writing Awards. She received her MFA from Queens University in Charlotte. She's currently working on a novel about cowboy poetry and the obese pet mortician who loves it. Tweet at her @OnTheFenceWrite if you want to publish her book or buy eggs.

Prior to a Burning a Dodge Dynasty Falling With Grace

Zack Stein

Jim shades the edge of the cliff with the front bumper and puts the car in neutral. We watch the fire swathe the metal, spread quickly to the trunk, then trickle to the engine. The airbags deploy and begin to melt into marshmallows; two tires blow, giving the car momentum to slowly dip off the cliff.

This land is stark and unbound and things can get lost in the margins. The sun rolls downward trading three shades of sultry orange for an obsidian chill by the time we reach the summit.

Knickknacks of Christ surf the dashboard. Jim circles for beer with his right hand, corkscrewing around traffic with his left hand, leaving helixes of rabbit blood, squinting past rain falling syrupy like bird droppings, skidding on buttered-down Goodyears through intersections. When we break and turn off the main road, we split the seas, and 65 feels slow again.

We stop at a gas station. Stock on beer, sweets, and protein bars. Jim goes to the bathroom. From the pump, I hear him scream, followed by a release of sorrow that crescendos on the wave of the echo. A cop steps out of his vehicle as Jim exits the bathroom, and Jim stops, so the cop stops. Ay, buddy, I say, and inconvenience trumps intuition. Jim floors it and gulps down his first beer.

* * *

I tell him, a real small town or a real big city, or whatever first ticket out is. He says nothing, except, got no gas.

He's carrying a small red suitcase. I tell him, do not go outside until you change. I put the suitcase in the trunk of the Dynasty, and he shortly follows with wet hair and a fresh t-shirt.

Jim leaves a message in a succession of wheezing sentences that ducks and dodges the point—asking for me.

When he bites off his last nail, Jim begins to stockpile, accumulating things, picking up small things, big things, examining them and deciding if it would suit this new life. He spots a small red suitcase and thinks it will be big enough.

While Jim watched Grace, his sister's waddling and whirling toddler, waddle and whirl, he became drowsy, and dozed off chin into chest. He didn't feel her tiny hands, (her barely visible fingernails painted pink), reach into his coat pocket for the mysterious pearl object that gleamed inside. Delicate fingers set off a delicate button, ejecting a three-inch blade through an air socket between Jim's ribs, shooting his right leg off like a bucking horse. In the twinge between breath and shriek, Jim was reminded how gentle things can so easily curl.

ZACK STEIN lives and writes in New York City. He was known as "Shakes" in prison for writing love letters for fellow inmates. He's a man of the people, just not your type of people. Don't listen to rumors of his brilliant, life-changing masterpiece, a 2000-page poem with crayon illustrations, buried in a nearby cemetery—they are unsubstantiated.

On the cover:

“Android #3”

JOHN SABLE is a lifelong learner. He spent the last 30 years enrolled in various public university and private college programs. Currently he owns and operates Sable Park Photography, a wedding photography business in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife Anna (sable-park.com).

The android project was John's submission for a figure study assignment at Madison College. He collaborated with body paint artist **DAWN MARIE HARMS-SVANOE**

(facebook.com/dawnmariesvanoe). She was a colorful contestant on Skin Wars season 2 (facebook.com/SkinWarsShow/) and is the co-founder of, and lead makeup artist at, Glitter to Gore, a cosmetic supply store in Mount Horeb, Wisconsin (facebook.com/newglittertogore/).

The full collection of android photos is available for viewing and purchase at photos.sable-park.com/android

