



THINKING QUICKLY, THE CAPTAIN
ACTIVATED LIFE SUPPORT AND
THANKED HIS LUCKY STARS!

Jersey Devil Press

July 2017 Issue 91

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

July 2017, Issue 91

ISSN 2152-2162

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Table of Contents:

Editor's Note	3
What Child is This , Rachel Cassidy	4
Two Poems , Julie Bloss Kelsey	9
Thought Fox , Rob McClure Smith	10
The Air Conditioner , Todd Zack	12

Editor's Note

It's July, folks. Pop them tabs (or bust out them bottle-opener keyrings, if you only drink craft brews named after local landscape features), throw something on the grill, and kick back with our ninety-first issue. It's got tricky wordplay and trusty appliances. It has short-form sci-fi poetry. It also has a tentacular Christmas story, because we don't adhere to society's rigid and confining seasonal norms.

— Laura Garrison

What Child is This

Rachel Cassidy

The text message is nearly incoherent.

Either her mother has accidentally switched autocorrect to some previously undiscovered dialect or she's thoroughly plastered already. Madison's betting on the second. Mom doesn't usually descend into wheedling territory until she's well lubricated. And apparently there's a crisis at hand—they've run out of ice.

Maddie shakes her head slowly and stuffs her phone in her pocket | mixes a dry martini up with olives | swipes a credit card | wipes down the marble bar. Christmas Eve at the domestic terminal, and she's not sure where she wants to be less—here at work or headed for this family "soiree" when her shift is over.

The outbound passengers are staring into their drinks and studiously ignoring each other.

She brushes back her bangs with a tired tentacle | rings out the register | stacks the dirty glasses in a rack.

The PA barks, and the last of them shuffle off to gates. She shrugs off her uniform and pulls on six gloves. It's cold out. The cheap knit is frayed, and some of her suckers poke out. She tucks them tight to her body for warmth and makes her way to the staff parking lot.

Her keys are buried in the depths of a fringed hippie-throwback hand-woven bag, its fabulousness offset by the mundanity of the frozen 1987 Toyota Corolla that may or may not start. Her parents had offered her the old Audi, but no, she had insisted on earning

this piece of crap herself. Just like her rent. And tuition. And everything else this job barely pays for.

She gets in, stashes her purse | clicks the seatbelt shut | inserts the keys, and isn't sure which outcome she's hoping for.

She thinks about her little brother there alone with them, gives in to the prickly guilt of familial duty, and turns the key.

It starts.

The Point Grey mansion is a little too black. The streetlights illuminate the front door, but just barely. There are no lights on in the house, and the doorbell button does nothing. Candles flicker through the windows.

The strains of an out-of-tune violin crying "Silent Night" drift through the darkness, with some of the notes in the correct order. The Corolla looks sadly defiant parked between the aging Mercedes and Land Rover.

Madison pounds on the door and waits for an eternity for the violin to stop. The front door crashes wide open.

"Dad."

Edward Rafael Reich deHuitbras III balances a crystal glass of scotch | props himself up | tugs his bathrobe closed | seizes the bag of ice | embraces his daughter.

"Madison. Come in."

He pivots and strides towards the salon, a wayward tentacle drunkenly sending something antique and expensive crashing to the floor. Delicious smells of roasting meat waft through the air.

"Dad. Why is the power off?"

Edward waggles three arms nebulously, batting away her question.

“It’s of no importance. Peasants.”

The salon glows richly, firelight reflecting off precious objects and luxurious fabrics. Madison’s mother is draped on a chaise lounge. She examines a flute of lukewarm champagne in the firelight | taps the ash off the glowing tip of a long brown cigarette | trails several tentacles elegantly across the oriental carpet. The ashtray is overflowing and the carpet is pocked with circular burns.

“Darling. Merry fucking Christmas.”

The aroma is coming from the fireplace. A roasting pan is propped precariously on a burning stack of wood that probably used to be the dining room table.

“Mom. Where’s Eddie?”

Madison’s mother gestures vaguely in the direction of the hallway.

“Probably still playing those stupid games.”

“But the power’s off.”

“Whatever.”

Madison goes in search of Edward Junior. She knocks on his bedroom door.

“WHAT.”

“Eddie. It’s Maddie.”

“FUCK OFF.”

“Language!”

She pushes the door open. Eddie’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding a useless Xbox controller | pushing a truck around on the floor | picking his nose and inspecting the results in the candlelight.

Something's missing.

"Eddie. What the . . ."

Madison storms back into the salon. Edward Senior raises a topped-up glass of scotch | dons oven mitts | prepares a white china platter. Madison's mother downs her glass and flares her nostrils.

"Dad? What exactly are you cooking?" Maddie peers at the roasting pan.

A tentacle, a small one, simmers in its own juices. A smattering of dried herbs speckles the surface and a few shriveled potatoes and carrots are browning nicely alongside. The suckers have shriveled into crunchy rosettes.

"Are you shitting me? Eddie?" Maddie's tentacles hang limp at her sides as she stares at her father in disbelief. Her mother looks pointedly in another direction and exhales a noxious plume of smoke.

Edward Senior raises a defensive tentacle.

"What's the problem? He'll grow it back."

"He'll grow it back? You cut it off him and *cooked* it and all you have to say is *he'll grow it back?*"

"So we wanted a nice evening. What's wrong with that? It's been a little tight lately. It's not like it's permanent. Stop being so bloody dramatic and show a little goddamn gratitude for once." Edward stalks out of the room with a dismissive gesture.

Madison is speechless.

"Mom?" Maddie turns at the sound of Eddie's small voice. He's standing in the doorway, still clutching his truck, one sleeve of his Christmas sweater hanging limp and empty. Their mother lurches

up from the chaise, tentacles flailing drunkenly, scattering lit candles and glass in every direction. A flame licks at the curtains.

“Eddie. Come to mother. We’ll have a lovely Christmas dinner.”
She’s slurring.

Enough.

Maddie shoves her mother out of the way | scoops up Eddie | reaches for her bag and runs for the door.

As they pull away in the Corolla, she can see the windows of the house in the rearview mirror, the flames growing hungry red and orange, and the black silhouette of Edward Rafael Reich deHuitbras III as he lifts the battered violin to his shoulder and screeches out the opening bars of another carol.

She wraps a tentacle around Eddie to hug him close | wipes away the tears blurring her vision | dials 9-1-1 | shifts into second gear and steps on the gas, hard.

RACHEL CASSIDY was raised semi-feral on the back of a horse in the Rocky Mountains, lived long enough in Portland, Oregon and Mexico to call both home, and now writes from Salt Spring Island, BC. Her short fiction has appeared online in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Out of the Gutter*, and *Cat on a Leash Review*. She can be found online at www.facebook.com/readrachelcassidy.

Two Poems

Julie Bloss Kelsey

late to work
the transporter
broken
again
I lose my head

learning to walk
among the natives
. . . my prosthetic tail

JULIE BLOSS KELSEY loves short-form poetry, iced decaf lattes, and the Oxford comma. Her poetry has appeared in *Scifaikuest*, *Frogpond*, *Eye to the Telescope*, *Seven by Twenty*, and *The Heron's Nest*, among others. One of her scifaiku poems won the 2011 Dwarf Stars Award given by the Science Fiction Poetry Association. Julie lives in suburban Maryland with her husband, three kids, one dog, and three fish. Find her on Twitter (@MamaJoules).

Thought Fox

Rob McClure Smith

She said the thought foxes ate Ted Hughes and how it was poetic justice and it was, except it wasn't true. She gets things backwards and pronounces it *sgniht*, which is also the Slovak word for sweet pastry and has led to more misunderstandings than you can shake a stick at.

Actually he was eaten by dream crows and by the hawk roosting in the forest behind my house with the big eyes. I'm glad I installed those eyes, more foresight than windows. Now my home is a looker.

I said she was too. I have my charms, bought from the witch in the gingerbread cottage and kept in a jar looks like a propped open door. I'd prefer she was a seer to tell you the truth, which I never do, honestly. I tell depressing lies. I make things down.

She signed a pledge of environmental irresponsibility, boycotted meatless Monday and threw plastic bottles and bubble-wrap into aquifers and reservoirs. The usual. She took her bike everywhere in the back of her smoke-spewing gas-guzzling muffler-denuded Ford Ram and dreamed of the day she'd drive a Prius off a cliff.

When I caught her extracting the corpse of the sustainability coordinator from the worm bin, I said 'enough is enough.' I like tautologies and Tanya Donnelly and those little sweet pastries from the Cheesecake Factory in Bratislava. She said 'Sweetie-pie, that thing you're basting looks like a human brain.' It was a human brain. I wanted the sustainability coordinator to be of some use. I

said, remember how Ted's bones were so usefully recycled by the badgers when they built their glockenspiel?

I saw them do it from my eye window. A thin and listless crowd gathered to watch, such as you see at a track meet. I shook my stick at them and they assumed I was a pole-vaulter. I'm actually German, although my name is Walter. I pulled a shade and winked. The street was doing that thing to the moon I like. Who is this Tanya Donnelly she asked? An ex-girlfriend of Ted's, I lied, who pulled her heart out onto a beating plate before him. She hated those TED lectures that much.

She said honey pie this sweetness makes my mind odd, like a poet's. You could have roasted a duck in the trunk of her Ford Ram, and she did. It wasn't a good move. But it *was* a track meet, sponsored by the Sierra Club. Everyone ran in circles, like clocks in a washing machine. Tanya played the Star Spangled Banner on a bar mangled spanner and a badger won the high hurdles and donated them to the Salvation Army. I took my copy of Birthday Letters for a long walk in the forest and left it there like I did Hansel and Gretel that time. The dream crows scoffed the trail of pastry crumbs I dropped. Poetic justice. The forest smelled of thought fox and I could scarcely wait to leaf.

ROB MCCLURE SMITH's fiction has appeared in magazines like *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Barrelhouse*, *Gutter* and *Barcelona Review*.

The Air Conditioner

Todd Zack

For as long as he could remember, Billy Jenkins was only able to fall asleep while the air conditioner was on. It was a strained matter each evening for the air conditioner operated on an internal timer. It moderated itself, blowing cool air into the bedroom for fifteen-minute spells, then resting for a time in silence. On was good, off was bad.

Billy was comforted by the charming sound of the artificially motivated air blowing into the room. He enjoyed the steady sound of its operation, that gentile baritone humming in the walls. He adored and prayed for the cool soothing currents of air that ran so softly over his bed. Billy didn't like the silence, when it came, and it came many times throughout the night. This silence shattered all peace. The trick was to get to sleep early while the air conditioner still turned, to be fast asleep and therefore not to notice when, periodically, it turned off. Billy must find sleep while the air conditioner was ON.

Yes, he must.

The cool air was blowing now and the soft steady drone of the air conditioner moved behind the walls like a turbine lullaby. 'Move quickly' Billy thought. 'Go to sleep!' If the air conditioner ended its present spell, Billy would have to wait all over again for the next cycle to begin. The waiting was the hardest part, the scary part. Billy breathed deeply, counting sheep and a retinue of other farm animals as he clenched mentally at the precious gift of unconsciousness, drawing it towards him in the shape of a floating

menagerie. Sheep, horses, cows, chickens and pigs all went sailing in slow motion, one after another, over a white picket fence in the center of his mind's eye. The visualizations were working. At long last Billy Jenkins was close to the edge of dreams.

Suddenly, the air conditioner clicked off. Its tiny engine pattered away like a spillage of tiny marbles dropping off a slanted surface, falling away into a bottomless void.

Silence dropped into Billy's bedroom like an ominous anchor. There was nothing he could do now. He was still awake. He would have to *wait*.

The bedroom instantly sweltered with no air conditioner to care for it. Billy turned restlessly in bed. His skin was clammy and warm and his pajamas were sticky against his legs and arms like damp paper towels. How long before another cycle began? How long must he endure the silence now, eyes wide open, lashes shivering in the dark? He turned towards the white plaster wall, threw the bed sheet over his head. The farm animals had run off into the dark and the silence was echoing in his ears.

The window.

He shouldn't look. He knew he shouldn't look, but . . . just a peek. He pulled the covers down from his face. Hesitantly he turned towards the bedroom window at the far wall of his room. The window opened to the backyard and the stark empty night outside.

Sometimes the window opened to other things as well, Billy knew.

So he tried not to look. He tried, he tried he tried.

Billy couldn't help it. He looked.

Through the window, in the yard beyond, there stood the faceless man, watching him. Slowly, mechanically, he approached the window. Reaching the window, filling up the frame, the faceless man placed two large white palms upon the glass. The palms of his hands appeared like giant writhing slugs attaching themselves to the glass, poised to suck the window from the wall. The faceless man sprouted a mouth and smiled.

Billy closed his eyes and waited for the air conditioner.

TODD ZACK is a delivery driver, writer, musician living in southwest Florida. His Gothic-Reggae band, Tape Recorder 3, composes soundtracks for independent films and documentary's—most recently, the skateboard documentary 'No Hope Kids' (2016). His fiction and journalism pieces have been previously published in such venues as *Thrasher Magazine*, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, *The Bad Times Newsletter* and *New Haven Advocate*.

On the cover:

“The Incident Above Delta Vega”

FRANK CASEY is an artist and art teacher from Tacoma, Washington. He grew up on a diet of comic books, classic Doctor Who, and Surrealist art. His current project, *Incompletely Peculiar*, is a series of Steampunk and Retro Sci-fi images for coloring and fiction inspiration. His work can be found at www.etsy.com/shop/MonkeyHouseStudio.

Frank prefers Marvel over DC, cats over dogs, and Star Trek over Star Wars—sorry, but it’s just the plain truth.

