# JERSEY DEVILL DRESS



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#### **Editor's Note**

It's October! While we're putting the finishing touches on our waxed leaf collages, fall harvest wreaths, and army of living scarecrows, we proudly present to you this selection of caramelapple-scented readables. R.W.W. Greene shows what happens when things change in a surprisingly relatable science-fiction tale, while Tushar Jain tells the story of a guy who literally has no boundaries. Poet Alex Ledford plays clever word games, and Maureen Daniels is bringin' the fantastic imagery in verse.

Laura Garrison

## Midnight Plus Thirty R.W.W. Greene

Bill's alarm clock raced down the hallway, whistling to be let out. Bill put on his pants and opened the door for it. Without a glance back or a meep of thanks, the clock dashed to the center of the street to frolic with a free-range toaster

The air was pink with the end of the morning's power broadcast. The microwaves burned a layer of cells off Bill's corneas. He shielded his eyes with his hand and watched the appliances play. They were thoroughly engrossed with each other when the garbagebot ran them both over. The big bot paused to scoop up their carcasses and added them to the trash and dawnkill in its hopper.

Freedom seldom came sans cost.

Bill closed the door and tapped on its touchscreen to order a new alarm clock. He registered its name as Barney Fifteen. It would arrive before noon, the receipt said.

Bill shuffled to the kitchen and plucked a handful of crickets from the counter dehydrator to snack on while he waited for the coffee to brew. The dehydrator had added too much cayenne again. "Too spicy," he mumbled. The dehydrator hated being corrected. It changed its recipe to "atomic."

The coffee machine pissed eight ounces of dark roast into a biodegradable mug. Bill added mealworm cream and sweet-talked the dispenser out of a teaspoon of sugar. He tasted the coffee gingerly. The dispenser had discovered practical jokes and had added everything from salt to alum to rat sex hormones to

dishwashing crystals to his coffee over the past couple of days. Bill took a bigger sip. It tasted okay, but so had the rat sex hormones. He captured a chair that was playing hide-and-seek with the garbage disposal and sat down to read the news on the table screen.

Smiley face. Rain cloud. Open hand. Closed fist. Poop. Sunshine. Duck. He swiped the page. Exploding dynamite. Dirty underwear. Single sock. Pine tree. Mushroom. Sad face. Seashell.

The article was about the new president. She'd wasted little time before proposing a law that would keep smartappliances from roaming free. The ones that weren't fouling traffic were gathering in the sewers to plot, she said. The nation's last jogger had been killed by a rogue refrigerator two weeks before. "Since the Singularity . . .," the president said. "Before the Web awoke . . ."

Bill hadn't voted for her. The surviving Barnies sang to each other in his backyard at night. They sounded happy.

Bill finished his coffee and ate the cup because he needed the fiber. He went back to his bedroom to wash. The bed had retreated back into the floor. Bill took the plaque eater from its charging stand and held it in his mouth while he wiped himself down with a moist towelette and polished his genital lock. He pulled on a fresh suit and left for work.

The homecomputer sealed the door behind him. Bill made a mental note to send it flowers. Keeping it happy made it more likely it would let him back in.

The Borl Next Door was working in herm garden. Sheh was the Next Big Thing in Human Development. Herm skin was even microwave proof. Bill waved and pressed the "get lucky" button on his genital lock. It buzzed harshly.

Herm lock buzzed, too. "Don't do that again!" she said. "I almost blocked you after the last time."

Sometimes luck was with Bill. Mostly it was not. He waved to herm and caught the slidewalk to work. A lot of the houses he passed were empty. Population control was working like gangbusters. The paint on the older houses was blistered from the morning broadcasts. A lounge chair chased a barbecue grill around one of the empty lawns. They tumbled to the ground together, shuffling through a playlist of love songs and spitting fire. Bill laughed. The grease spots left by the dawnkill made mini rainbows on the asphalt.

He punched in, leaving the other worker competing for the shift lying in the alley. Bill sucked at his bruised knuckles as he waited for the elevator.

The lift took him up to the third level and soaked him with disinfectant spray that dissolved his suit and made his skin tingle. Bill grabbed a pollen brush off the rack and took his place in line. The bell rang. Bill and his coworkers stepped forward, dipping the tiny brushes into the onion blossoms. Bee work was B work, or so the maxim went.

The new president wanted to replace all the B-class laborers with repurposed smartappliances, which was another reason Bill hadn't voted for her.

They stopped for lunch at noon, and Bill pressed his "get lucky" button. It buzzed negatively. Becky and Brian hit the jackpot, though, and left the room to have sex. Bill concentrated on his three-fly salad.

At 12:30 the lunch bell sounded. Becky and Brian looked hungry but satisfied.

"We're hoping for a girl." Brian picked at the last few flies in Bill's bowl.

Bill smiled. It wasn't likely. Even if they had conceived, only one birth in ten was allowed to be a girl. Bill took a clean pollen brush from the rack and returned to the onions.

The shift ended at 5 p.m. Bill feinted left and punched out with an uppercut that caught the security guard by surprise. The guard sat down hard and spat out a piece of his tongue. The vacuum cleaner slurped it up and offered first-aid. Bill pulled his check out of the guard's shirt pocket and took the slidewalk back to his neighborhood.

A passing label maker had covered his front door with graffiti. Bill moved his lips as he slowly puzzled the words out. "We Are the Internet Made Conscious," it said. "Label Maker 22 Was Here," read another.

He'd forgotten to order flowers for the homecomputer, and it refused to open the front door for him. Bill held out his check as a bribe. The door took the money but stayed shut.

The day-to-night network blocked the sun at 6:30 sharp, and the neighborhood fell into shadows. High above the satellites gobbled solar power, storing it up for the broadcast at dawn. Bill shivered. He was cold and hungry. He retreated to the back porch and huddled in a dumb chair to wait.

Barney One meeped him awake a while later. Barney One was Bill's first alarm clock, and the biggest. Its edges and corners were rounded with wear. It rubbed Bill's ankle with its time-set dial.

"Hello, friend," Bill said. He had fond memories of Barney One. It had woken him during all his weeks of elementary school and job training. One time—.

There was another chirp in the darkness. Barney Two. Barney Two was Bill's first "grown-up" alarm clock. It was sleek and business-like. The clocks meeped to each other and nuzzled Bill's feet and legs. They should have shut down for the night to save power instead of coming to his backyard, but they made up their own minds.

The patio door slid open enough to let Barney Fifteen out. Bill lunged to catch the door before it closed but only jammed his fingers against the bulletproof glass.

Barney Fifteen was the smallest alarm clock yet, nearly featureless in brushed silver. It meeped and projected the time on the wall. Midnight plus thirty.

The Barnies chased each other in a circle. Barney One growled playfully. They gathered around Bill again, bumping at his ankles.

"I don't have anything for you," Bill said. "I'm sorry. I wish I did."

He lay in his patio chair, which had not been built for service, just for sitting. It couldn't move and didn't want to. The Barnies formed a semicircle in front of him.

The microwaves would be strongest at dawn, powerful enough to cook any organics still outside. The porch would give Bill some protection but—

"Will you wake me up before the broadcast?" Bill said. The homecomputer would surely let him in if his life was in danger.

Barnies Four through Six and Barney Nine rolled out of the darkness and joined the trio in front of the soulless chair. They composed a new song and sang Bill to sleep. By a vote of ten to two, they decided not to wake him up.

The garbagebot turned into Bill's driveway the next morning

and drove around to the back. The alarm clocks sang a sad song as the bot picked up Bill and put him in the hopper. They watched until the bot disappeared around the corner, then chased each other into the scorched woods to play.

**R.W.W. GREENE** is a New Hampshire writer with an MFA that he exorcises frequently at dive bars and careless coffee shops. His work has seen daylight in *Writers Resist, New Myths,* and *Daily Science Fiction,* among other places. Greene keeps bees and typewriters, and Tweets about it all @rwwgreene.

### **Free Association**

#### Alex Ledford

Trees: Good.

God: Damn dog. Mad god.

Hell: All Montagues. Especially that one.

Vindication: Of the rights of whoever wants 'em.

Vindictive: Everyone.

Strangers: Your personality is showing, mine is not. Tension headaches: My face hurts from oversmiling.

Eat: Or don't.

Eye roll. Delicious. Delicacy. Indecent.

Iambic: Inhale slowly, exhale heavy sigh.

Paint: Pointillism.

Rock stars: Always wear capes.

Husband: He's working, he'll get here soon.

Solve for X: Can't be helped.

Chromosomes: Determine fate.

Dress: Flourish of colored perfume.

Boots: Still kick, guard your shins.

South: Compass rose, night blooming jasmine.

Police blotter: Check the airwaves for dead friends.

Free fall: You're a hypnogogic jerk.

Talking: Nonsense through sleepy teeth.

Mother: I'll name her Inconsistent. She'll grow tall as an oak.



# The Man With No Outlines Tushar Jain

At seven fifteen in the morning, the sun was soft in the sky. I've often woken as early as I can manage simply to watch the night sky turn violet first, as drops of daylight seep into the dark, spread, disturb its purity. But there's nothing quite like the hours that follow, when everything gets saturated, slowly, with a new day. In Mumbai, if you happen to live close to the sea, there's very little that can compare to watching night being harried out of a room by degrees. Its muggy warmth is upset, its colour dispelled and its deep silence eroded bit by bit, by the unclasping of windows, birdsong, the creak of old bicycles, carrying a crisp sheaf of newspapers, trapped on the pillion.

That day, as per my new routine, I was out in the park, just beginning my rounds. The Colaba Sukh Sagar Park has a six hundred and forty meter long path that snakes through it. Almost every morning, the park is teeming with people. Trees, mostly banyans, surround you on either side. In the warmer months, the place is speckled with snow-white egrets. Varicoloured, expectant cats wait at the entrance, mewling, their eyes widening as you pass them by. In the sprawling park, somewhere, I heard someone say, there's a massive sundial.

That Tuesday, the crowd was scarce and scattered. Mid-August rains had dissuaded many from turning up. Those who had, were careful not to run on the damp stone of the path. The usual smell of fish, which hangs in the air like an apparition, had grown prominent. The oldest park-goers, who were also the source of the

daily, loud exhalations of 'Om', were missing. I could vaguely guess why. Monsoons, my late grandfather used to say, turned him into a creaking chair, his bones into a thing of music.

I had barely begun with my walk, covered some fifty meters, when I noticed him sitting there.

Of course I had seen him before. Twice, to be exact. Once, I'd seen him standing outside a store, lost in thought, maybe trying to make up his mind if he should enter. And another time, I had seen him from across the street, stooping, offering food to a cat. I couldn't make out what it was but the cat, raggedy, evil-looking, didn't seem to enjoy it very much. It stalked away, the gobbet of food untouched, scarcely a moment or two before I did.

At the moment, he was sitting by himself on a park bench. The mellow, sweet flavour of the weather didn't seem to have affected him in the least. He was glumly staring at his feet. He didn't look happy about the entrancing colour the sky had taken up, about the fact that we'd beaten the sun and rain to the park or about the dull but pleasant beat of life all around us.

Let me be clear. I am not some peppy extrovert. Far from it. I like being left alone at times and can empathize when someone desires a bit of solitude too. But the man on the bench didn't fit the description of someone who wanted to be alone. And because I had heard of people like him, I knew that that was the last thing he could possibly want. And so, it was nothing but sympathy that drove me to upset my routine and approach him instead.

"Hello," I said, walking over to him. He looked up. *Hello*.

"Okay if I sit here?"

*Sure,* he said. It was difficult to make out his tone. I'd heard that it takes a little while to get used to their way of talking. And it was my very first time meeting a Man With No Outlines.

Can you see that? The bird? he asked all of a sudden, pointing at something.

At first, I couldn't make out what it was he was indicating. Squinting, I finally did. It was amazing that he could see that far without any difficulty. Perhaps, I guessed, eyes that lacked specific shape and form, that were merely colours floating on a face, tended to be sharper than the ordinary pair. Maybe it was the one good thing about being who he was.

He had spotted a sparrow close to where the path started. From all this distance, I would've been unable to spot it, if the people who entered the park didn't keep stopping to look at it. Also, what helped greatly was the way it was thrashing about.

The sparrow was near the twisting roots of a banyan, one of many. Somehow it had been caught badly in a riot of black thread. I decided a second later that it probably wasn't some ordinary black thread but bitingly sharp kite string. Which made sense too. With the Independence Day having just gone by, the sky had been dotted with soaring, dipping orange, green and tri-coloured kites. The poor bird must've had the misfortune, I imagined, of getting caught in a spare length of cut string left hanging from the old, shaggy banyan looming over it.

I could understand why the passersby chose to keep away from the sparrow. I too wouldn't have been persuaded to set it free. The bird was putting up an enormous struggle. It was pecking mightily at the strings, fighting for its freedom, rolling to and fro on the wet grass. Even from where I sat, it was an impressive sight. It was also quite obvious that any thoughtful human hands that reached for the thrashing, determined sparrow would come away pecked, mercilessly, and bleeding.

*I think I can help it,* the Man With No Outlines said, distracting my attention.

"You can? So... what's stopping you?"

The man looked at me. It was a sad, piteous look. I realized a little late that I had asked a very stupid question.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

No, no, no, it's okay, he said.

I felt worse now. I had begun to understand his tone. He had brushed off my apology quickly, almost eagerly. He didn't wish to upset me. He needed me to be next to him. His desperation, his loneliness was painfully palpable. While I wanted to keep sitting there for his sake, I simultaneously had begun to feel that it might've been a mistake coming over. I should have kept walking, done my rounds, gone home.

What do you do?

Again, this took me by surprise. He hadn't told me his name or asked for mine. You exchanged names, perhaps talked about trifling things like the weather or the news, fostered some familiarity, and only then, I've come to learn, shifted to more personal topics. I had always thought that that was the order of all exchanges with a stranger. This novel approach made me somewhat uneasy.

"I... I'm a mathematician."

I did not want to blurt this out. Had the conversation been more routine, I would've come up with a clever lie. But he had caught me off-guard and I spat out the truth. I grew worried that I'd made

another terrible faux pas, accidentally humiliated him again. Thankfully, he chortled.

*That's funny,* he said, grinning widely.

I felt relieved that he thought so. In my career, I've come to realize that 'Mathematics' is a strong, suggestive word. It conjures an image the moment it's spoken. Images that always connote the same things—decisiveness, form, structure, an endless array of lines, straight or curving, as if bent on a knee. Basically, everything he grotesquely lacked. I didn't think for a second that the stark irony of the both of us sitting on that bench offered a choice, could be anything but hurtful. Apparently, it could be. It could be amusing.

My wife's leaving me.

Another non-sequitur from him! I've had a lot of time to think about that bizarre un-conversation. There was no civilized flow to the way we talked that day. Flouting conventions so brazenly, I felt immensely self-aware that I was doing something wrong and desperately wished for it to stop. If only we weren't being such adventurers, if only he would tell me his name, ask for mine in turn. Since then, I've had ample time to put together why he talked the way he did. The reasons, as they emerged, were quite uncomplicated really. He had been alone for so long that he'd forgotten how to talk to strangers. For all I know now, he might've been doing his very best to sound 'normal'. But these realizations are a result of *years* of idle contemplation and hindsight. Right then, I just considered all of it unnatural and a bit odd.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said honestly.

He shook his head. I cannot blame her. I'm grateful that she stayed as long as she did. She's my dearest, my only friend. Was. I think that's

why she stayed as long as she did. Not because she was my wife but because she was my friend.

I saw an opportunity to rein in this wild conversation here and took it before he could surprise me again.

"If she already knew she'd leave you eventually, why did she marry you?"

We married long before... long before all of this...

"Oh. I thought-"

That's what everybody thinks at first, he said, nodding. All the colours on his face moved, seeped into each other, blended with one another to form new, garish shades. But no. I wasn't born this way. None of us are. I used to have a chemist shop in Worli. Years ago. I loved having a daily schedule, a waking time, a time to sleep, to eat, of going to work. All of that is gone.

"So, when did it—"

Happen? he finished, eager to talk, to unburden an old load. I-I cannot remember 'everything'. But I have these—these distinct memories of being a happy, organized man. I was the kind of person who would stop to admire a desk or a chair for its purposefulness. I had a fascination for old things, especially radios. The more clunky and broken and the more knobs missing, the better! My wife and I, we had a decent life together and we cherished it thoroughly. Kyurvi, my wife, taught Geography in a school back then, to grades four and five. That might not seem like much to you, a mathematician, but she suffers from a terrible lisp. She had to give it her all to get that job. Both of us, we worked hard, didn't have much money, but we had the basic things we needed and that felt more than enough. We felt blessed.

"That sounds good," I said.

It was, he said. Our very own little paradise.

"So, again, I don't understand. What happened?"

The Man With No Outlines remained quiet for a beat. Then, he spoke, more quietly than before. Even though I had grown accustomed to his manner of talking by now, this time, I had to strain to listen.

It happened one day. I had drawn the shutter down on the shop and was waiting at the bus-stop. I had closed up early and would have to wait some fifty minutes for the bus that took me from Worli to my flat in Thane. I cannot tell you where or how the thought entered my mind. But as I stood waiting, at some point, something hit me with a great force. It was Doubt. It came out of nowhere. I wish there was some dramatic episode, some epiphany, you know, that brought it on. There wasn't. I was standing at a normal bus-stop. And it—it found me.

"Doubt?"

The Man With No Outlines nodded slowly, grimly.

I went home puzzled and told myself that things would be better the next day. They weren't. They got worse. Kyurvi, my wife, noticed on the third day. My employees at the shop on the fourth. On the fifth day, two of the three didn't turn up for work. As superstitious as they were, they didn't even return to collect their salaries.

As he kept talking, I felt a new, utterly unfamiliar disquiet, almost a panic, start to creep up on me. He'd said something that truly frightened me and sent a quick chill down my back. The bit about Doubt. Constant Doubt was a state that had existed throughout my life. It lived in the back of my mind, buried deep under lists of chores, worries, hopes, more. As he spoke about it then, I felt things, weightless things, move, budge, rise in me. I was struck by an unknown terror.

Once Doubt had a strong enough hold, he carried on, it started showing up all over me, changing me, by and by. My definiteness, my outlines began to disappear. And once they did, people, those closest to me, realized what was happening and immediately distanced themselves. Friends I'd grown up with refused to take my calls or even speak to me when I turned up at their door.

I wanted him to stop talking. Right then. Just stop. I tried speaking. "I need to—" I muttered lowly, but he barrelled on, airing what he'd kept bottled up for too long.

Suddenly, I found simple things impossibly difficult. I had this—this ever expanding uncertainty. About everything! Over time, my voice changed. People don't realize this but a voice, its tone too has shape, an outline. My lips were the last to lose their form; they became this melting red mess you see. People started staring at me, just staring blankly and they looked away the second I tried approaching them. I felt judged at all times. I still do. At all times.

"I need to go. I'm sorry but I need to go right now!" I finally said, shaken up, jumping to my feet.

I wish he'd created a scene right then. I would've deserved the humiliation. Something overwhelmingly dramatic. Clung, with building intensity, onto the one person in perhaps ages who'd shown him some kindness. But he kept silent and hung his head. That, as I stalked off urgently, selfishly, made me feel woeful and horrible inside. Regardless, I knew I needed to get away from him as soon as I could. Because everything he'd said had made complete sense to me. What was worse was that it had stirred something in me.

I had walked only a few steps away from him when I felt the slightest pinch of something on my hand. I brought it up to see what it was. And when I did, all breath was knocked out of me as if I'd taken a punch in the stomach.

The nail on the ring finger of my left hand was different. Its outlines had entirely vanished. Its colours were running, leaking into the skin of my finger. Fear, total and formidable, stilled my heart. It scurried in me like something from a trap. It was an unmistakable symptom. Of the inevitable things and time to come.

I'm not fanatical about my health. I had only taken to the morning walks at the behest of my family doctor. My knees, you see, had been giving me trouble of late. Pointing at my X-rays, Dr. Makhija explained that, eventually, I would have to get kneereplacement surgery, get new, artificial joints planted in like seeds. To help me along for the time being, he stuck a long needle into my knee—a procedure I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy—and, grinning devilishly, drew out a syringe-full of brown, murky, foulsmelling liquid. Then, when, shortly, relief flooded my legs and pried away the pain, he advised me for the walks. But he strictly warned me against running, as that could further damage both the ruined joint and its surrounding tissue.

When I saw the fingernail and what all it implied, first, I spun back to the Man With No Outlines. However, he looked so miserable sitting there, so unreservedly wretched, any rage that had sparked in me against him flickered out instantly. I lingered there for only a few seconds longer. And then, ignoring all sound medical advice and the protests that rose from my knees seconds later, I ran.

The only desire that remained in me was to hasten home to my wife. To get under the bed-sheets again and nudge awake a sluggish, drowsy Anuva. To ensure, at that early hour, that she still

loved me. To lightly insist she say it out loud, repeat it a couple of times. And all that time, I would be holding my hand behind my back like a child with a secret, making sure she didn't see.

As I ran from the park, the few who still remained watched me, intrigued. I wasn't jogging, I was sprinting. Like something crazy. But even in that mad rush to get home, I didn't fail to notice the sparrow near the start of the winding path. The defiant thing had finally pecked itself free of the kite string.

As I tore past the gate and into the street, the sparrow rose up too, above me, beating its thin wings, its cry triumphant, joyous. A woman, her hair in plastic curlers, leaned out of her window, crossing her arms on the sill. People began to materialize in the street, gather near *sabzi-wallahs*, bark raucous laughter. Schoolbound children, lugging heavy bags, came pouring out of buildings. Soon, the strays grew unafraid to bark, to shatter what remained of the stillness.

TUSHAR JAIN was the winner of the 2012 Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize, 2013 Poetry with Prakriti Prize, 2014 RL Poetry Award, 2014 DWL Short Story Contest, and 2016 Toto Funds the Arts Award for Creative Writing. His work is published (or is forthcoming) in various literary magazines and journals such as *Aaduna*, *Papercuts, The Nervous Breakdown, Antiserious, Raed Leaf India, The Young Ravens Review, The Madras Mag, Cold Noon, Streetcake Magazine, The Sierra Nevada Review, Into the Void Magazine, The Cape Rock Journal, Miracle, Dryland Magazine, The Bookends Review, Edify Fiction, Gramma, decomP Magazine, Priestess & Hierophant Magazine, Barking Sycamores, Literary Heist, The Wax Paper, The Wagon,* and others. He lives and works in Mumbai.

# Heavenly Creatures Maureen Daniels

We are back in the lost world riding our basilisks in the storm,

miniature cockerels clucking in our shirt pockets.

We have burnable books in our rucksacks, pages bloated

by the blood of wars. In the hip high dry grasses, we listen

for the sounds of our enemies, rockets swarming like wasps.

After the summer of electric windmills, tents of ballast

and your obsession with fireworks, you warned me

about the palace of rituals in your brother's bathroom,

the glass eye in the wall,

the unstoppable shooting star.

You said you had seen the meridian of his kingdom,

a soot-soft gryphon blinking his third eye. The next morning,

before sunrise I took my hatchet and naphthalene to your

family's stable, burned your brother's junk-wood party down.

**MAUREEN DANIELS** teaches English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, where she is also a doctoral fellow in creative writing. She is an editorial assistant for *Prairie Schooner* and *Western American Literature*. Her work has recently been published in *Sinister Wisdom, Wilde Magazine, Gertrude Press,* and the *South Florida Poetry Review*.

### On the cover:

# "The Unobserved Cat"

JON SNOEK is not an artist, he just doesn't know how to keep his imagination inside his head. Follow his work on Instagram at



@snoekems and on Facebook at facebook.com/theevildeadcabin.