

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



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## Editor's Note

The pumpkins are a-plumping, the cauldrons are a-bubbling, and the trees have made themselves all pretty: let's do this.

Jennifer Ruth Jackson kicks things off with a poem that perfectly merges season and mood, "Inertia of the Noon Wraith." I have no better hook for Seth Geltman's "Might Have to Lose It" than his one-sentence cover letter: "It's about a prickly flag salesman who gets attacked by a cat in a Subway restaurant." Next up Gale Acuff's speaker explains, "There's nothing I love better than Jesus" (with a few small qualifications), and Colin Kemp tells of a frugal liquor store patron's memorable encounter with "The Garbanzo Gangster." Joe Bishop delights with sound and unexpected imagery in "Medley for My Banshee," and L. Breneman shows how a glitch in the matrix isn't always a copy cat; sometimes it's "A Songbird Thing."

Isn't October just the best?

— Laura Garrison

## **Inertia of the Noon Wraith**

**Jennifer Ruth Jackson**

She weeps, waters the cornfield while cackling  
pilots swoop stalks for citrine pebbles. She will  
not move as beaks graze her broom-stiff hair.  
White dress crunches like footsteps on gravel,  
flakes of age and blood pelt her legs. Feathers  
festoon her shoulders, unnoticed. Her head  
rests in slender hands held at chest level.  
She awaits the workers in the mid-day sun.

**JENNIFER RUTH JACKSON** writes about reality's weirdness and the plausibility of the fantastic. Her work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Star\*Line*, *Apex Magazine*, and more. She runs a blog for disabled and neurodivergent creatives called The Handy, Uncapped Pen from an apartment she shares with her husband. Visit her on Twitter: @jenruthjackson.

# Might Have to Lose It

Seth Geltman

“You forgot the discount.”

Expressionlessly the Subway sandwich artist, a few flakes of lettuce clinging to her plastic gloves, cast her cold blue eyes at his receipt.

“The coupon—you didn’t credit me \$1.50 for the coupon,” Joseph said. He was used to scrapes like this, to the quickening of language and manner they called for. These were his daily proving grounds; he would not be victimized.

The sandwich artist pressed a few buttons on the register, mutely returned to him a couple quarters and a dollar, and asked over his shoulder to the next customer “May I help you?”

“I’ll take a—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” said Joseph. “How about some kind of ‘I’m sorry for the inconvenience’ here?”

Silently the air seemed to both sag and bulge at once. Then the sandwich artist muttered “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Joseph stood there, considering the sufficiency of the sorrow. His purposeful delay started to make things okay again. He had them where he wanted them, not just the sandwich artist, but the entire store, a gathering critical mass of attention, a nice undercurrent of trepidation. They were his now, momentary hostages, stuck until he decided what to do next.

“So if there’s nothing else I can do for you...” mumbled the sandwich artist.

“No, I’m fine, I’m fine,” he said, pocketing the money. “Just a little acknowledgment, that’s what I thought was missing there.”

He walked back to a table, took a seat, and quietly ate his sandwich. It was a dry, utilitarian concoction, despite all the care he’d lavished on it in line, directing in extra oil and scoops of olives that now fell freely to the table. It was as if the food felt compelled to rob itself of its own personality, just because it ended up in a Subway, as if it lobotomized its own texture and flavor, forcibly canceling any tomato-ness or pepper-ness or cheese-ness.

Or perhaps the sandwich artists designed it this way. Avenging his requests in line, they’d curated the most anemic bits of food they could find. No matter how softly he pronounced the ‘j’ of ‘Dijon,’ no matter how politely he requested ‘One more, please’ as they scooped on olives, they’d crafted something resolutely tasteless while still maintaining the legitimate properties of a sandwich. He took a bite or two more.

A couple tabletops away, he noticed a section of the newspaper he usually didn’t care about, Business. He reached over and got it. Who could extract what from who—that’s Business. Tearing away at each other’s money is as cannibalistic as we can get, he thought. I can’t pull your ear off, but I’ll slash at your money. Crisp men in crisp suits with crisp smiles pluck crisp dollar bills from each other—that’s Business.

His own work occurred in the mall a couple stores over at A House of Flags. It wasn’t a house. It was a hallway store in a strip mall, but it did sell flags. Over the years, he’d become extremely knowledgeable about flags, fussy and dismissive sometimes when people didn’t know about the flag of their own city. It was just good citizenship to know the colors and shapes of one’s city’s flag,



and the meanings behind them. And he thought his casual expertise about flags gave him a certain cosmopolitanism that sadly never had a chance to flourish on a date or at a bar, or anywhere except A House of Flags.

Suddenly a cat skittered into the Subway. People gasped and laughed. It was a puffed-up terrified tabby, rushing under one table, then another, then another. Teenage boys took flamboyant swipes at it. The woman who'd ordered over his shoulder went pale and shuddered. The employees gazed wearily at the scene as if it was just one more example of how crappy this day was.

Then the cat darted under Joseph's bench. This second turn in the Subway spotlight made him feel a bit awkward, like saying goodbye to someone, then running into them again later in the day. Amid the small chuckles rippling around the room, the cat hissed and snarled at him. Sitting with her own sandwich, the woman who'd ordered over his shoulder said, "So tough about the coupon. Now the cat's got his tongue." There was a scattered chortle or two.

He considered ignoring all of them and returning to his sandwich and newspaper. Or yelling an obscenity to the woman across the room. Maybe, though, he could get the cat into the broom closet four feet away, whip out his phone, call the Humane Society, have them pick it up, and triumph. He looked at the cat with softness in his eyes, and whispered to it warmly. It hissed. He did a stern stage-whisper; the cat bared its teeth, and its pupils were huge and black. He rolled up the newspaper into a thin bat. Showing who's boss might do the trick—a nice crisp smack on its hindquarters might restore the appropriate balance of things.

It was two feet away, under the bolted-in bench at the other corner of the table. Awkwardly, around the back of the bench,

Joseph swung. The cat shrieked a jungle cry, twisted, and with full raging force slashed its claws through the soft flesh of his inner forearm.

Hooked in, the cat pulled his arm and bit hard, puncturing it with four trapezoidal points. It all happened under the table. Then the cat sprinted out the front door, which another sandwich artist was holding open.

Riotous laughter erupted, and no one noticed his arm. Three people stood up and clapped as he returned to his sandwich. Oddly it became more flavorsome and the Subway's ambience more congenial as his forearm began to pulse. A canopy of respect and presence, like a thin translucent linen rustling in sunny wind, hung over him. Then he passed out on the floor from the pain and fear.

Fetal on the Subway floor, he woke to nervous faces huddled over him—the first sandwich artist, the over-the-shoulder customer, an EMT.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Joseph said as huskily as possible.

"Looks bad," said the EMT. "Ought to see a doc."

Joseph thanked him. Then he manfully got up and hustled over to A House of Flags. He'd gone way past his lunch hour.

Tyra, his boss, was tensely trying to fold up a large flag of Uruguay that a couple customers asked to look at, but balked at buying.

"Where've you been?" she asked. She was fifteen years younger than him and a half a foot taller.

"I was at lunch," he said. "Then—this cat." He showed her his arm. "I ought to see a doc."

“Doesn’t look that bad,” Tyra said.

“It’s getting worse. I’m going,” Joseph said.

The flag of Uruguay wasn’t folding up right. She should’ve seen that the customers were just homesick Uruguayans with no intention of buying it. And folding flags wasn’t in her job description anyway. It was supposed to be this little man’s chore. But instead of properly folding up flags, he usually regaled her and her customers with needlessly encyclopedic, highly irritating lectures on flags. And she finished her train of thought with “If you go, don’t come back.”

He left. She wadded up the flag of Uruguay into some kind of ball and kicked it against the counter.

Since he’d just been fired from the employer who issued it, it felt a bit weird to present his insurance card at the hospital. He’d sort it out later. Now the mission was to save his arm. It was feeling bulky and stiff, and flexibility was draining from his fingers. He kept making needless motions with both hands, comparing what they could do, and the right hand just wasn’t keeping up.

An emergency doc winced and inspected his arm silently. After a couple minutes, he stepped back, and nodding quickly and studying the arm, said, “Might have to lose it.”

“What?”

The doc said, “we’ll see what we can do,” winced again, and left the room. He was gone a long time.

The throb in Joseph’s arm got bolder and bulgier. He thought about all the little twists that landed him here. Usually he packed a lunch, but last night he’d stayed up to watch Leno, because some

comedian was on that his nephew had told him about. Then he overslept and didn't pack a lunch. But he kept a stash of coupons to justify any purchase he could, and the Subway mailer was the first one he found.

To think that the existence of his hand, his trusty innocent perfectly wonderful hand, was anywhere near in doubt brought on a tide of nausea, a horrible crumpling, hot and cold and prickly, and again he was fetal on the floor, sweating and shivering, with only the cool linoleum there to calm him.

The wincing doctor entered with a younger one. Neither showed any surprise that Joseph was on the floor. Professionally, they put him back on the table, and the younger doctor, Dr. Holly, inspected the arm. He pressed it, held it at odd angles, squeezed it.

"Next time you see a wild cat," he said, "you might not want to reach out at it."

Still woozy, Joseph ran through an alternate version of the previous ninety minutes. The sandwich artist missed the coupon, so Joseph pocketed it and saved it for the next time. Unnoticed, he ate the sandwich, which he knew would be plain no matter how many olives he directed onto it. When the cat came, he simply moved to another table, and returned to A House of Flags at the usual time. Tyra's contempt stayed on its usual low boil. He sold a couple flags and went home. His right arm went about its business.

"Dr. Cleland here was fairly alarmed by the state of your arm, and I can see why," said Dr. Holly. "We'll give it a bunch of doses of the heavy stuff and see what happens. Come back here every eight hours for the next four days. We'll pump this stuff into you. Maybe it'll work."

Joseph returned home to a message on his phone machine. It was the insurance company, questioning his coverage. He opened the fridge. A half-eaten jar of pickles, a quarter-inch of milk in a gallon jug, horseradish. The phone rang, and A House of Flags came on the Caller ID. It'd be Tyra, full of petulant details about clearing out what passed for his desk and collecting his final check. But instead, he heard her say a tentative "Sorry. Sometimes I'm just a bitch. Honestly, no one knows as much about flags as you. You'd be hard to replace." He finished the milk straight from the jug. "My cousin, she's a nurse," Tyra continued. "She said bites can be bad." She hung up.

The next hospital visit, on the eight hour cycle, was in the middle of the night. After that, he couldn't sleep. But he got himself to work on time. Tyra's tentative sorrow from the phone was gone. After glancing at his bandages, she took on a neutral courtesy. A few customers came in, teachers looking for classroom materials, tourists, and then the woman who'd ordered over his shoulder in the Subway.

"I work at the other end of the mall, at Sears," she explained. "I walk by here all the time, and see you explaining flags to people. How's the arm?"

"What do you want?" he asked her tartly. She'd played her part in the whole catastrophe.

“It must be hard for you to operate,” she continued, “— to fold flags and make meals and stuff like that. Can I make you dinner, something like that?”

For the first time, he took a real look at her. In the Subway, she was just a voice over his shoulder, a taunt across the room. Paunchy here and there, in the neck, the cheeks, but in good enough shape. Still, it wasn't as if she'd earned any kind of right to taunt him. She wasn't some expert in the way things ought to be and the way people ought to act. But he'd never had a chance to show anybody the 1903 City of Schenectady flag in the kitchen.

“Yeah, if you want to make me dinner, that's okay,” he said. There was only the pickles and horseradish in the fridge.

**SETH GELTMAN** grew up in Boulder, Colorado, and graduated from New York University with a degree in film. He's a teacher in the Denver area. His crossword puzzles, constructed with partner Jeff Chen, have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. His stories have appeared in *The Oddville Press*, *Great Ape*, and *Mono*.

# There's nothing I love better than Jesus

Gale Acuff

except my parents and my dog and my  
favorite professional sports teams and  
favorite wrestler, Ricky "the Dragon"  
Steamboat, and Batman comics and pizza  
puffs and my dog—oh, I mentioned him—and  
I guess my sister and dinosaurs and  
the new bike I'll get for Christmas and  
clams with mashed potatoes and coleslaw and  
when we have corn dogs in the school lunchroom  
and that *Phantom* movie that nobody  
else ever saw, Hell, it wasn't *that* bad,  
and monster truck rallies and skateboarders  
falling on their butts—that's pretty funny  
and they always rise again anyway.

**GALE ACUFF** has published hundreds of poems in over a dozen countries and has authored three books of poetry. He has taught university English in the US, China, and Palestine.

## The Garbanzo Gangster

Colin Kemp

I often cook beans in my Instant Pot. What kinds? I have black turtle beans, red kidney beans, white navy beans. I have pinto beans, lima beans, fava beans. I even have garbanzo beans. But until recently, I wouldn't know a garbanzo bean if I came face-to-face with one in vodka aisle of Liquor Mountain...

I was at the liquor store, minding my own business, trying to find the cheapest vodka on a per-unit basis. I'm not fooled by fancy bottles and labels with pictures of old-time mustaches and words like 'craft'.

So there I was at the liquor store, minding my own business, doing the math, when I was approached by a short, corpulent, middle-aged man wearing round eyeglasses glasses—the kind once in fashion with crypto-fascists and jingoists. His skin was a uniform tan colour, and he wore tan overcoat that gave him a bland appearance overall, especially because his hair was also a tan-like colour—sandy blond, really—and his shoes were tan suede. Plus, he wore tan khaki pants, the kind with the permanent crease in the front—although they were also extremely wrinkled, so the prim effect evoked by the crease was nullified. His shirt—tan, linen, threadbare—looked like burlap. He wore gloves, leather—you guessed it, tan. At first, I didn't see him at all, but detected a waft of...it smelled *exactly* like my Instant Pot does after the steam is released. That was the smell—bland, earthy. Like beans.



I ignored it in case the smell was coming from me. Which it wasn't, but it was a distinct possibility. Anyway, I was holding a bottle of vodka with a black-and-white label depicting some guy who looks like hipster cult leader. It was called 'Rasputin's Revenge'. And it was craft vodka, of course. Which meant it cost about 1.82 cents more per milliliter than my standard go-to, Kirkland Signature American Vodka in a 1.75 liter bottle. Too bad they don't make a non-Signature version. Anyway, I was inspecting the hipster on the label when this bland man reached out with his tan glove hand and grabbed the neck of the bottle and started pulling!

"Hey!" I said. I'm inspecting that!"

I was just about to release the bottle—I wasn't going to buy it anyway—when he bit my hand! For a guy who looked like a large ball of wax, he moved like a cobra. I fell to the ground and screamed in pain and cradled my hand. The man stuffed the bottle into his overcoat and waddled for the door and disappeared out onto the street.

Meanwhile, the manager rushed over with a first-aid kit. I thought it would be cool if he opened a bottle of vodka and poured it over my wound to sanitize it, but instead he took a little iodine wipe out of the kit and applied it. Then he put a band-aid over the wound. "You're going to need to get a tetanus shot," he said.

The assistant manager helped me up. "I've already called the police, Mr. Holmes," he said to the manager.

"Thank you, Charles," Mr. Holmes said. Then he turned to me. "On behalf of Liquor Mountain, I sincerely apologize."

By now I had regained my composure. "That's alright," I said, "It's not your fault, nor is it Liquor Mountain's. It was that strange

man...he seemed to really like that brand of vodka. Me, I'm indifferent."

Shortly, two uniformed police officers arrived to take my statement.

"So, he was short, round, had tan-colour skin, a tan trench coat, tan gloves, tan shoes, tan hair, and round eyeglasses, like a fascist? Is that correct?" one of the officers recapitulated.

"Yes. Or a jingoist," I said.

He wrote that down.

Just then a third police officer joined us, this time a detective. "Hello," he said, "My name is Detective Yob. I've been trying to track down this suspect for months."

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"Yes, we call him the 'Garbanzo Gangster'. We'll have to review the CCTV security footage, but it sounds like this is our man."

"Garbanzo Gangster?" I said.

"Yes. It's because he is described by his other victims as looking exactly like a large garbanzo bean."

"Oh." I said, scratching my head. "If you ask me, he looked more like a chickpea."

The detective stared at me intensely, his steel grey eyes scrutinizing me, negatively impacting my well-being. Then he sighed. "It's the exactly same thing," he said. He shook his head disapprovingly and then addressed one of the uniformed officers. "Doesn't anyone know their beans anymore?"

When I entered my apartment after returning from the hospital for my tetanus shot, I was temporarily overcome with a wave of

panic—until I realized that the smell was not the Garbanzo Gangster, but simply my Instant Pot, which was had entered its Keep Warm holding pattern. I opened the lid and savored the earthy chickpea aroma. Then I went to my computer and googled ‘chickpeas vs. garbanzo beans’.

Detective Yob was right—they are exactly the same thing.

**COLIN KEMP** lives in Ottawa, Canada, where he works as a social scientist. He is currently taking courses in the Creative Writing program at the University of Toronto.

## Medley for My Banshee

Joe Bishop

Your keen wakes goldfish.  
Your voice picks my ossicles,  
Octaves purple with lupins.

You pitch banker's lamp  
At my dodging noggin.  
I fear for the alarm clock.

Watching *Wheel of Fortune*,  
I howl mad guesses  
Just to make you laugh.

You wear your mermaid gown,  
Clutch a bunch of black roses,  
Your freckles powdered,

In a photo on the mantle,  
Protected behind glass.

**JOE BISHOP**'s work has appeared in journals such as *The New Quarterly*, *Plenitude Magazine*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Innisfree Poetry Journal*, and *Riddle Fence* and is featured on the League of Canadian Poets' website. He is a recipient of a Newfoundland & Labrador Arts & Letters award for poetry. His first chapbook of poetry, *Dissociative Songs*, was published in 2021 by Frog Hollow Press. Joe has poems forthcoming in *The Puritan*.

# The Songbird Thing

L. Breneman

We knew we were living in a simulation when the songbird thing happened. One moment the songbirds and their dawn chorus, the next moment song squirrels instead. Bushy-tailed mammals standing upright in the trees, trilling to welcome the sun. Same idea, different animal.

The next day there was a giant door ajar in the sky, an invitation. The Secretary General ordered a squad of drones sent through.

All the video showed was purple sky, lavender sand, and pale creatures resembling three-legged brains moving about like ants.

These were the creators? We wanted to be more impressed.

And what were we supposed to do? Ask for accommodations and guarantees? Demand the return of the songbirds? Anyway, the songbird thing was likely just a small demonstration. What was next? Were people going to be replaced too? Or would the creators finally eliminate war and poverty?

Besides the creators, it was only the comedians who saw the humor.

*You call that Earth 2.0? Song squirrels? Give us a break.*

**L. BRENEMAN** lives in Seattle. Breneman's poetry, creative nonfiction, and stories have appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Ascent*, *Litro*, *Burrow Press Review*, *Del Sol Review*, and other venues.





**On the cover:**

*“Dark Monster”*

**D1/THE ONE** is an artist and graphic designer from Macedonia.

