

# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



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# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

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## Editor's Note

According to the calendar my three-year-old picked out—the first month has a picture of a feathery white kitten beside a black rabbit with striking blue eyes—it's 2022 now. I was hoping Jonathan Swift would write the introduction to our one-hundred-and-fifteenth issue, as his satiric sensibility is well suited to such times, but my attempts to contact him via planchette have turned up only a series of squashy loops. [Side note: it's possible that his comment on our present situation is "eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee." And if so, it's apt.]

The January issue begins with the delightful imagery of James Croal Jackson's "Little Cartoon," a poem that packs a lot into its twenty-two words. Next, Jessica Klimesh brings humorous subjects to life with "The Start of a Bad Joke." After that, take a surreal ride on Nikolaj Volgushev's "Subway" and find out what mysteries await "Inside the Last Cinnamon Raisin Bagel" with Benjamin Davis. Conclude your tour with Harsimran Kaur's poem "She," a celebration of ordinary pleasures that feels like a blessing for the start of a new year.

As always, thank you for reading. Try to be kind to strangers and animals. And strange animals. Leave books and neat rocks in unexpected places for others to discover. Take a walk, if you like walks. Or a nap, if you prefer naps. Make yourself a nice cup of tea and stare out the window for a while. Eat a spoonful of butterscotch sauce. You deserve a treat.

— Laura Garrison

## Little Cartoon

James Croal Jackson

our laughter  
snorts out

sunflowers  
but pushing

glasses  
up the bridge

of my nose  
how you

animate  
the room

keeps me  
alive

**JAMES CROAL JACKSON** (he/him) is a Filipino-American poet working in film production. He has two chapbooks, *Our Past Leaves* (Kelsay Books, 2021) and *The Frayed Edge of Memory* (Writing Knights Press, 2017). He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. ([jamescroaljackson.com](http://jamescroaljackson.com))

# The Start of a Bad Joke

Jessica Klimesh

A parakeet and a garden gnome walk into a bar. The gnome is twelve inches tall if he's a foot, with a venerable white beard and jolly blue eyes. He pulls a wooden sled behind him with a large, puffy snowman on it. Never mind that there's no snow on the ground outside.

Old Russ behind the counter says, "Hello, fellers, what'll it be?" Someone has put Rod Stewart and Michael Buble's version of "Winter Wonderland" on the jukebox, even though there's still corn to be harvested in the fields.

The parakeet, bright yellow, still echoing the colors of summer, chirps at Old Russ. "Why do people always assume birds are fellers, huh?"

"Well, I—" Old Russ stumbles over a non-apology and rubs his age-spotted hands over the bib of his overalls. He glances around to see if anyone is watching the exchange. But it's early yet, happy hour hasn't even started. Outside, the sun is shining. The only patron is a middle-aged man with a ruddy complexion who calls himself Hemingway.

"And why," the parakeet continues, "would you assume I'm here with *them* just because I came in with them?" The parakeet waves a wing in the direction of the gnome and the snowman. The parakeet's chirps are harsh and lacking the musicality one would expect from such a creature.

"Well, I—"

The gnome turns to the parakeet; his voice is deep, slow, and tedious. "It seems that...this...is the start...of a bad joke or...something. Just look at...the first line...of the story." The gnome then addresses Old Russ. "Is this...funny...to you, Mister?"

"Well, I—" Old Russ looks down, scratching absently at his arm. "I'm not the one writing this, you know," he says with more than a hint of defensiveness.

The snowman doesn't say anything, but small beads of water form a tiny puddle at his feet. The little pebbles that shape his mouth have drooped into a frown. He doesn't look quite as puffy as he did just a couple minutes earlier. Nor as large.

Old Russ neglects to serve the parakeet, the garden gnome, and the snowman, and the trio is illogically left standing there, their positional blocking made purposely incomplete by the author of the story.

A young couple, Jack and Jill, walk into the bar just as Old Russ serves Hemingway another mojito. Jack wears a suit, looks out of place. Jill wears jeans and a green hoodie with "STATE" written across the front. She carries an empty bucket in her right hand. With her left hand, she fiddles with her wedding band, using her thumb to work it up and down her finger.

"Water, please," Jill says, her voice pained and weary.

"Your best champagne," Jack says.

Old Russ snickers. "Two glasses of cheap wine coming up."

Jack nods. "Whatever." He turns to Jill and says, "Look, hon, it'll be okay. I'll reinvest, get our money back."



Jack then shrugs off his suit jacket, yanks his tie loose, and pulls it off over his head. He throws the tie like a lariat, and it falls neatly around Hemingway's neck. Hemingway salutes Jack and says, "Thanks, sir."

Jack proceeds to strip off his dress shirt and slacks. Underneath, he wears a clown ensemble. He affixes a big red nose to his face just as Old Russ brings their wine.

"I don't like this. Not one bit," Jill says. She stares at her empty bucket, hoping Old Russ might take a hint.

The snowman is shrinking. Before long, his top hat slides over his face, and his eyes roll away. Old Russ brings out a yellow "Caution: Wet" floor sign, sets it next to the snowman.

"So," the gnome says to Hemingway, "are you...named after...the writer? Ernest?"

"Who?" Hemingway says.

Jack juggles brightly colored balls.

The gnome points at Old Russ, trying to remind him that he hasn't taken their order yet.

Old Russ shrugs. "Sorry, fellers, but I just do what the author tells me to."

"There's that word *feller* again," the parakeet says with an eye roll.

"Well, I—"

"I know, I know. You just say whatever the author tells you to say. Maybe think for yourself for once?" With that, the parakeet

makes eyes at Hemingway, then chirps on and on—to anyone listening—about a beach, getting *soooo drunk* and hooking up with *damn near everyone*. She inches closer to Hemingway. Hemingway asks Old Russ for another mojito.

“Already?” Old Russ says.

Jill sets her wedding band on the table and sighs. She watches as the snowman’s carrot nose slides down his torso.

“Hey,” Jill says. The lights around the bar are whimsical, a string of pink flickering flamingos. The moon sets, and the sun also rises. The snowman offers the only indication of how much time has passed. Time, it seems, no longer exists except in the fiction of reality. Certainly not in the fiction of fiction.

No one seems to notice Jill, whose face has gone pale. Jack has given up juggling his balls. Now he’s attempting a high wire above the jukebox.

“Can anyone hear me?” Jill says. “Can I get some water?”

The walls of the bar implode. The ceiling lifts and disappears. Clouds coat the ground, and trees hang upside down from the sky. Old Russ does cartwheels across the floor.

“What the hell?” the parakeet says to Old Russ.

“The author’s whim, I guess,” Old Russ says.

The parakeet just shakes her head. “I guess I’m never going to get served, am I?”

“Well, I—”

The parakeet waves him away. “Just forget it.”

“Hey,” Jill says again. Almost a whisper now.

The snowman has turned to liquid, the puddle stretching beyond the yellow floor sign. An uncontainable mess.

“Can’t anyone see it?” Jill says, her voice weak. “There’s something wrong with the snowman.”

The snowman is no longer a snowman and is, instead, just a hat on a sled. The parakeet has given up on Hemingway, and the gnome has given up on getting a drink. The parakeet and the gnome move toward each other in mutual understanding. Together they dance under the flamingo lights.

Hemingway downs another mojito and asks if anyone knows any good jokes.

Old Russ leans against the bar, watching as Jack, standing tall on a barstool, swallows a sword. “Nope,” Old Russ says, “only bad ones. They always start with ‘so-and-so and so-and-so walk into a bar,’ but I’ll be damned if I can ever remember the punchlines.”

“Huh,” Hemingway says, nodding his head.

Jill stands, picks up her bucket, and gives a little nod toward Jack. Jack doesn’t notice her.

“I need water,” she says, her voice raspy with thirst. She edges her way around the liquid remains of the snowman seeping out the door.

No one looks at her as she leaves.

“I need air,” she says, opening the door.

**JESSICA KLIMESH** is a US-based technical editor and proofreader with an MA in English from Bowling Green State University and an MFA in Creative Writing from Cedar Crest College. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Brink*, *The Café Irreal*, *Bending Genres*, *Ghost Parachute*, and elsewhere.

# Subway

Nikolaj Volgushev

I was to meet my friend on the subway.

Does our town even have a subway? I asked, surprised.

My friend said yes, yes it does. There's a subway stop close to your flat, in the alley behind the Burger King.

But where do I get a ticket? I asked. I had never been on a subway before but I knew that without a ticket you got a fine.

My friend said check your books, you are probably using it as a bookmark for one of them.

But I don't own any books, I objected.

Well, then check the library.

So I went to the library and asked the librarian for all the books I had ever borrowed. She came back with a box containing barely a dozen novels.

Are you sure that's it? I asked. I feel I've read more than that.

The librarian said that it was common to overestimate one's accomplishments. She said it with a facial expression that made me think of a hangnail.

I sat and tried to come up with a book I had read that wasn't in the box. I wanted to show the librarian that my accomplishments were in fact estimated just fine, but I couldn't think of one.

Then I remembered that I was meeting my friend on the subway in an hour, so I got to looking through the books for my subway ticket.

I found it eventually, on page 56 of *Crime and Punishment* (this was as far as I had gotten in that book which reminded me that

among the dozen books in the box, I hadn't actually finished all of them, which meant that the librarian was even more right than she knew).

The ticket was a monthly pass, crinkled and smudged. It had seen better days but I guessed it would do the trick.

In the alley behind the Burger King, I bumped into a strange man. He was very tall and wobbly and dressed in a heavy trench coat. He was wearing a Fedora and shades. I asked if he knew where the entrance to the subway was.

The strange man squeaked.

I realized then that it wasn't a man at all but a hundred rats, standing one atop the other, masquerading as a man.

The fake rat man wobbled past me, towards the Burger King.

I imagined the plan was to go and order a Double Whopper or whatever and hope that the Burger King employees would not figure out the disguise. I was curious to see how that unfolded, but I was already late so I rushed down the steps to the subway and barely made it on the train.

So where are we going? I asked my friend, once I had caught my breath and displayed my ticket to the impatient conductor.

My friend shrugged.

I have absolutely no idea, he said and so we just rushed on through the bouncy, roaring darkness, with no clear destination in mind.

**NIKOLAJ VOLGUSHEV's** fiction has appeared in the *Cafe Irreal*; *Hoot*; *Cleaver Magazine*; *Cease*, *Cows*, and other journals. He currently lives in Göttingen, Germany, where he writes, programs, and does other things along those lines.

# Inside the Last Cinnamon Raisin Bagel

Benjamin Davis

I'd been living the same day over and over for nine hundred and forty-one days before I finally turned to my co-worker and said, "Hey, Kevin, I have been living the same day over and over for nine hundred and forty-one days."

Kevin didn't look up from his desk. He nodded and said, "Yeah, man—me too."

I touched his shoulder, something I never do, but I wanted him to know I was serious. I felt like crying. He looked into my eyes. "No, Kevin, I have been living the exact same day for nine hundred and forty-one days. The sixth of March. This day. No matter what I do, nothing changes."

Kevin looked at my hand and rolled back a bit in his chair so that I couldn't reach him. "Yeah, man, lower your voice. I know. We all have. Don't you read the news?"

I looked up over the edge of our cubicle and out the window. The sky was dumping rain, and someone honked outside.

"But why *this* day? Why not a day with some adventure? Don't you remember adventure, Kevin? That feeling like something might be different just around the corner?"

Kevin shrugged and went back to work. "Get over it, man," he said.

I left to have a bagel in the breakroom. There were no onion bagels, so I snatched up the last cinnamon raisin bagel, and, as I brought it to my mouth, a breeze hit my nose. I looked down and saw that right there, in the hole of the bagel, there was a cold, blue

and white light. I held it up to my face, and sure enough, it looked right onto a winter wonderland forest of deep green and virgin white. I checked around the back of the bagel and found it to be the same awful kitchen that smelled of old Tupperware and whatever stuff of myth and hell they make office breakroom tables out of.

I sat down in a chair and peered back through the hole in the bagel. It was a beautiful forest, and the sky was vibrant with purples and oranges and greens. I poked my finger through the hole, and it came back chilly—it even had a tiny flake of the most perfect snow on it.

“Hello!” someone called.

I looked in the bagel, and out of the trees popped a young man. The bottom half of his body was covered in fur. He had hooves and a sword at his waist—a centaur.

“Hello?” I called into the bagel.

The centaur turned and squinted at me.

“Hello?”

“Hi! What are you doing?”

The centaur puffed out its chest and said, “I am looking for the chosen one.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. A child of Earth.”

“I am a child of Earth,” I said.

The centaur frowned and moved closer to my bagel hole, or whatever it looked like, on his side. “How old are you?” he asked.

I scowled through the bagel and said, “Why does that matter?”

“No—no,” the centaur held up his hands. “Not meaning to offend. If you are the chosen one, can you come through? The

Green Prince has taken over the lands and sits on your throne. His men have been chasing me, trying to keep me from finding you.”

My heart leaped. I stood up. “Yes! Yes! I am coming!” I stuck my finger into the bagel, then two. Boy, it was cold in there. As I tried to fit a third finger in, the bagel began to break, and I panicked. I pulled my hand out and looked back through. The centaur was looking around him, hand on his sword.

“Hey! So, I can’t fit through this bagel! Is there another way I can get there?”

The centaur turned and smiled, “Yes, of course. But wait, what is a bagel—”

At that moment, a man on horseback galloped by and decapitated the centaur. A droplet of blood flew out of the bagel and landed on my nose. Then, there was silence.

“Hello?” I called. No response came. “Hello? Hey! Who is there? Hey, tell me how to get there. I don’t give a damn about the Green Prince; just tell me how to get there! Hey, buddy on the horse? He buddy!”

But the man on horseback didn’t return.

I sat back in my chair and looked up. Jane from the marketing department stood in the middle of our crumby little office kitchen, watching me.

“Hey—uh, you alright?” she asked.

I buried my face in one hand and tried not to cry. I couldn’t think of anything to say. A moment later, Jane asked, “Hey—uh, is that the last cinnamon raisin bagel?”

I looked down at it, cracked a bit from where I’d tried to get in. I nodded.

“Can I have it?” she asked.



I held it out to her.

She took a bite and said, “Some kind of day we’re having, huh?”

**BENJAMIN DAVIS** is a recovering fintech journalist, folklore addict, and author of a novella-in-verse: *The King of FU* (Nada Blank 2018). His stories can be found in *Hobart Pulp*, *Maudlin House*, *Star 82 Review*, *5x5*, *Cease*, *Cows*, *Bending Genres*, and elsewhere.

# She

Harsimran Kaur

She rises from her gentle bed,  
With thoughts of kittens in her head,  
She eats her jam with lots of bread.  
Ready for the day ahead

She goes to the farmer's market  
and buys herself apricots  
and eats them by herself  
and remains happy all year long.

**HARSIMRAN KAUR** is a seventeen-year-old author of three books. Her work has been recognised by The Royal Commonwealth Society, Oxford University Press, and the International Human Rights Art Festival. Her website is [www.harsimranwritesbooks.com/](http://www.harsimranwritesbooks.com/). She is currently a senior in high school in India.



## On the cover:

### “Jersey Devil Press”

This issue’s cover art was created using the **Wombo Dream** AI-generated art app. We typed in “Jersey Devil Press” and chose the “Etching” style, and our future machine overlords cooked up this image for us.

