

Jersey Devil Press



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Editor's Note

Well, it's 2024 now, which sounds suspiciously made up and futuristic, but we'll leave the calendar verification to the goblin particle astrologicians and focus instead on the dramatic unveiling of our one hundred twenty-third issue, which is stuffed with enough delectably weird stories and poems to sustain you through the cold, cold months ahead. Once you've bundled up and settled in with fiction from James Huff, flash from Jon Doughboy and Lydia Storm, poetry from Peter Dellolio and Patrick Meeds, and haiku from Nicholas Klacsanzky, you won't even hear those unhinged winter winds twistering through the pines outside your cave.

— Laura Garrison

Two Poems

Patrick Meeds

That Falling Sensation

I sat with my mother
for a long time before she died.
All night that hospital odor mixed
with the smell of microwave popcorn.
When I finally left in the morning
she looked like a candle that had melted.
There are people who no longer
worry about the hands of the clock
touching them, but that's not me. I have
reached the age where I go to more
funerals than weddings (same grey suit)
and I am absolutely positive that
the dead are laughing at us. And why
shouldn't they? We are ridiculous.
Take this for example. I have a scar
on the palm of each hand. The left one
I named Chain Link and the right one
Fence. But get this. Someone just told me
that all the honey bees aren't really disappearing
like they said they were a few years ago.
I don't know if that's true but it's probably best
if we keep operating as if they were.

There Is No Such Thing

I used to live on a street that had
a pay phone on the corner. One day
some guy beat it to death with its
own receiver. There's a lesson there
don't you think? We need to learn to die
better. I checked my mother's old copy
of Hints From Heloise but there was
nothing helpful there. Ask me nicely
and I'll show you my latest scar.
Ask me nicely and I'll go away. You know
how whales sometimes beach themselves
and no one knows why? It's happening
more and more. You shouldn't worry
when various appendages fall asleep.
They always reawaken full of promise
and white noise. If you still need more
evidence that evolution is true, the surgeon
who pulled my wisdom teeth said
they looked like they belonged in the mouth
of a dinosaur. 25 years later, slivers of bone
and teeth are still worrying their way out
of my gums. Here, look, I'll open wide
and show you.

PATRICK MEEDS lives in Syracuse, NY, and studies writing at the Syracuse YMCA's Downtown Writer's Center. He has been previously published in *Stone Canoe Literary Journal*, *The New Ohio Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Atticus Review*, *Whiskey Island*, *Guernica*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *Nine Mile Review*, among others.

If There Was a God of Salvation, the Thing You Need Would Not Evade You for So Long

Lydia Storm

Elm Street is rife with elms. And beater cars. And garbage cans and listing gates. Adam is a ninja. He disappears.

He's a nerdy guy, a sweaty guy, a young guy in a short-sleeved white shirt, a black tie, black slacks, shiny black shoes.

A salvation salesman going solo, his selling partner Ed having crawled into bed with the beautiful man who clerks at the convenience store.

"You don't have to take it so serious," Ed had said.

Adam will never tattle on Ed to their supervisor. It's one of several rules that makes this life possible.

Like being silent and invisible. Until he knocks on a door.

Adam picks a house with dry grass and tall stalks of some spare weed.

On the way up the crooked steps, he trips and makes a noise.

A dog barks behind the blue door.

The bark seems pitch-shifted down. A sound so deep and low it vibrates the bones of his pelvis. A sound that makes this house fit for a ninja's courage.

Adam pauses to prepare for the game that makes doorbelling bearable. He picks an odd word and resolves to use it in his presentation.

If he uses the word "kohlrabi" — works it into his sales pitch about eternal salvation, righteousness, truth, virtue, and so on — he can quit doorbelling for the rest of the day.

The park will be quiet and shady.

There will be girls in T-shirts.

Someone will be playing Frisbee.

A soaring Frisbee removes the obligation to suffer for the second or three it manages to maintain its flight.

The door opens.

A floppy-eared Great Dane the size of a Shetland pony.

Bucking. Flews flapping.

The smell of cannabis so strong it should have been visible as a billowing cloud.

"I'm here to tell you a story about kohlrabi," Adam says. He'll either get things going or get them over with.

The dog maneuvers its bulk half out of the door, positions itself against Adam's thigh, and leans, nearly pushing him over.

The man is tall and slender and brown-eyed and has thick, wavy hair tucked behind his ears. Although he's a bit disheveled and bleary-eyed, he smiles and cocks his head as if he's willing to listen, then ushers Adam in. "Did you see the meteors last night, dude? I hear they're even brighter in Colorado."

Adam balances his supply of brochures on top of the crop of beer bottles rising out of the coffee table.

Adam shakes the man's hand, which is callused and dry and warm.

The man smiles again. A good sign. "I'm Jason. Want a beer? Or a Coke?"

Adam's pretty thirsty, but he declines.

Jason rubs his eyes and flops on the broken couch. "What were you saying about Colorado? My girlfriend moved to Colorado. I've never been."

"I didn't say anything about Colorado."

"Oh. I thought you were going to tell me a story about Colorado."

"No. Kohlrabi. I said kohlrabi."

Adam pictures the park he has now earned several times over. T-shirts. Sprinkler rainbows. Spinning Frisbees.

"Isn't kohlrabi a vegetable? Are you selling vegetables?"

Adam shakes his head and answers reflexively. "No sir, I'm bringing you the good news of salvation."

"Oh. Religion. That's cool, man, but I'd rather hear about Colorado."

"In Colorado the sky is yellow," Adam says. Maybe the weed is affecting him. He feels giddy and sinks onto the couch next to Jason.

"That right?" Jason grins as if he's getting the joke. "In Wyoming the grass is purple."

Adam pictures purple grass and yellow sky and begins to cry. He looks at his hands. His knuckles are bruised from punching a wall. His fingernails are bit to the quick. How did he get here?

Jason pats his shoulder. Hands him a beer and a tissue.

Adam wipes away his snot and tears, then gulps at the beer like a hungry baby. It tastes bad and somehow good. Warmth fills his stomach. He imagines he's a beer-drinking dad. Someone with a wife and a house full of kids. Do invisible people have kids?

"Why are you sad?" Jason says. "Life?"

Calmer now, Adam shakes his head. "I believe my brain's default mode network happens to bend light in a way that turns me invisible. It's just physics."

Jason narrows his eyes. "Really?"

Adam stays quiet long enough to turn invisible.

"Whoa," Jason says. "That's amaze-balls."

Adam laughs. He's not invisible when he laughs, but he can't stop. Amaze-balls? Now that's a funny expression.

Jason says, "Do it again."

After several attempts, Adam manages to stop laughing. He's invisible again. Jason reaches for his hand. Finds it by touch.

With Jason's warm hand in his, Adam sees how distressed he's been, how starved he's been for simple human touch. He grasps Jason's hand while the dog barks its tuba bark, then gives a squeeze of thanks and lets go.

"Don't you like being invisible?" Jason asks.

"I don't know," Adam says. "I thought I didn't have a choice."

"When you talk, I can see you."

"Yeah."

"Keep talking, man. Or don't. Whatever works."

Whatever works. Whatever works. Adam leans back, rests. The tuba plays and the Frisbee rises and flies.

LYDIA STORM lives in Seattle where she writes stories, takes walks, listens to millions of audiobooks, and takes care of a small cockapoo.

Three Haiku

Nicholas Klacsanzky

lazy Sunday . . .
eye floaters mingle
with swallows

abandoned tracks
the whistle
of a saw-whet owl

borsch for dinner
no sour cream
but moonlight

NICHOLAS KLACSANZKY is an editor of *Haiku Commentary* and *Frogpond* journal. He lives in Burien, Washington, and works as a teacher of reading.

Aaron Rodgers

Jon Doughboy

Home alone on Monday night with a jelly jar of heavy red zinfandel in one hand, a forkful of baked ziti in the other, I'm a Jet again, a kid devoted to his team of losers, always losing, an industrious factory of failure turning out losses and putting Jersey in a state of prolonged mourning since Namath retired with his rickety knees, but adult me is a reformed Jets fan who's given up on the Jets, football, sports—haven't I?—until now, here, watching the 2023 season opener and shooting out of the locker room carrying America's hopes and dreams like a tactical missile assembled in our heartland: behold, Aaron Rodgers, Quick Draw McGraw of the pocket, guzzling Ivermectin with that girl from those diverging movies, insurging, pledge of allegiant, to Jet Nation, on MetLife field, destined to be dodging blitzers and tossing touchdowns for all the green brethren out there, the green believers still trying to shed the Heidi Curse—Rodgers, rodger, we hear you, Aaron, we believe—and after four plays of an uneventful drive, the damp turf glistening, the left tackle throws a lame chop block and the anything but fleet-footed Rodgers is down like the White House, like a jet crashing into the Andes, not Sullying softly onto the Hudson, then he's up, then he's down, up to get down, “get up, get up,” I'm yelling with my wine and my cheesy ziti and astral projections of Rich Kotite and Boomer Esiason's stupid grin and Vinny Testaverde collapsing in a heap of pain and that little bully Ryan Zempier in 2nd grade, that sneering Giants fan, oh yeah, sticking a wet Slim Jim in my ear, and beefy juicy excitement, beefy

juicy dread, as we (I'll admit my reluctant, unforetakable, belonging), these despondent citizens of Jet Nation, rotten as gang green, as we hear not a hard knock, oh no, but a farewell to the season, and the hopes it had kindled in our gullible hearts, in the piercing snap — snnaaaaaaap — of Aaron Rodger's forty-year-old Achilles tendon.

JON DOUGHBOY was a Jet from his first cigarette. He's buried in East Rutherford under the fifty-yard line with Jimmy Hoffa and Joe Namath's white shoes. Listen to the cries of his ghost haunting these polluted digital meadowlands @doughboywrites

The Man Who Couldn't See Heads

Jimmy Huff

It wasn't even gory or anything. There was no blood. Just—nobody had heads. Just stopped at the neck. Above shirt collars: nothing. Stumps. It was the damned strangest thing. The walking, talking headless, however, carried on untroubled, unaware, filling their grocery baskets to the brim.

Gregory knew at once he was having another nervous breakdown, but because of the last time he knew better than to ask for help. He had asked for help then, when he'd started seeing cartoon characters milling around the store destroying all the expensive garbage, but all that had gotten him was a stay at the local rubber lockup for seventy-two hours. On the other hand, when Gregory returned to work, the cartoon characters had cleared out. So, he had been cured of that. But this time—nobody had heads. Who was he supposed to ask about it? Somebody without a head? Apparently, his was the last of them.

All day, hordes of headless customers came and went sanctimoniously, always in his way, always in a hurry. It was all Gregory could do to smile casually at them and say, Good day. He did so now as a woman with impressive breasts but no head passed by screeching at a headless adolescent. Their voices issued forth in a Morgan Freeman voiceover sort of way, as if from the overhead PA system.

Gregory swallowed dryly and looked away.

This was the part he didn't understand: where their voices came from—where to look when someone spoke. Meanwhile, the voices talked over each other in an awful cacophony. There was no

listening, only speaking, phantasmagoric platitudes all competing for the chance to be heard. The headless mother and son disappeared into the checkout lines still bitterly bickering. After a time, Gregory went back to pushing his broom.

He went about his day as best he could, only sometimes stopping to stare. He would beat it, he resolved. He would endure it. And, somehow, the day would pass and he could go home and forget about this mess.

"Maintenance to cosmetics with a mop," the PA system dinned. "Maintenance to cosmetics with a mop. Thank. You."

Gregory hung his head and veered his broom, doubling back through the excuse for a food court wondering what it would be this time. Broken glass? Spilled drink? "Service animal" shit on the floor again? *Ought to make a Bingo board*, he thought, somehow managing to smile.

"*There you are,*" said Mr. Walters without a head. "Did you not *hear* the page?" he asked in his nasally way. His detached voice, on account of his detached head, at liberty to say anything, pinned Gregory in place. "You're needed at cosmetics. And how many times do I have to tell you not to run your broom through here while customers are eating? You know, I wonder sometimes if you have any *damn sense at all,*" Mr. Walters' nebulous voice rose and broke.

This had to be how Mr. Walters lost his head in the first place: to anger. The worst kind: unprovoked anger. The kind kept on standby by people like Walters. People who enjoyed a reason to raise their voice. People eager to greet even the most uncalled-for situation with malice.

Unsure where to look while enduring Mr. Walters' overdubbed outrage, Gregory stared at his boss's badge.

Talbot Walters

General Manager

Super Save-A-Lot-Mart Club

Gregory wanted to barf on him, but then he'd have to clean that up too. "Jan just now made the page, Mr. Walters," he said as reasonably as he could. "I'm getting my mop now and heading there direct. I'll—have it cleaned up in a *jiff*," Gregory heard himself saying. Momentarily, his head wobbled and he experienced an odd vertigo. Swallowing his pride, he turned away and scowled in spite of himself.

Steering the broom, Gregory trekked past the tables, down the hall, and around the corner until, at last, he faced the maintenance room—his office, as he liked to think of it. He let himself in, traded the broom for a wheeled mop bucket, and set off for cosmetics.

It was slow for a Saturday, but then again, that new movie was out. The whole world would be at the matinee. Allegedly, people were paying to see the flick multiple times, *dozens* of times in some cases, unable to get enough of it—a puzzling fact considering what he'd heard about the film. Apparently, it was grotesque and disturbing, a combination of sex and violence, but it appealed to something in people.

Himself, Gregory hadn't been to the movies since he was a teenager. Certainly, he wouldn't be watching something branded *Disgustibator 3*, even if it was all the rage. No wonder everybody's heads had fled them. The insipid things people put inside their heads had insidious effects.

Reaching cosmetics and surveying the situation, Gregory said aloud, “B-9.”

“Hm?” said the walking, talking Abercrombie cutout without a head. The guy held a dripping, defective Starbucks cup over a puddle of sweet-smelling chocolate froth and said, “I’m *real* sorry.”

“It’s *fine*,” Gregory sighed.

There would always be a few spilled drinks throughout the day. A fact of life, he decided. A fact of *this* life. And yet, that was just it. The mire of it threatened to well up and overtake Gregory now, the sheer mundane stupidity of repetition, of cleaning up other people’s child-like messes all day. That was it in a nutshell: he was an undignified babysitter, the one they called on to change the adult diapers.

“Real, *real* sorry,” the guy repeated, lingering.

“*Really* sorry,” Gregory corrected him. Now, he felt unaccountably, uncontrollably annoyed.

“Yes,” the guy said, misunderstanding. “I *am*!” His oddly augmented voice grew louder wherever it emanated from.

“No,” Gregory barked, his head wobbling. “It’s “*really*” sorry; not “*real*” sorry. And what are you doing? Are you trying to help? Because you’re *not* helping.”

Peripherally, something caught Gregory’s attention. A streak of red. The man who’d made the mess was yelling now, but Gregory hardly heard him, temporarily blinded. The red remained in his field of vision like an afterimage superimposed over all else. Spinning to see, there she was at the check stands. In disbelief, Gregory gave the guy his mop and said, “You clean it up.”

With dignity and regained aplomb, Gregory strode toward the checkouts knowing precisely what he had to do. But he had to

hurry. Presently, the woman with the headful of gorgeous red — and more importantly, a *head* — passed through the automatic doors and departed.

“Ma’am!” cried a headless checker. She held a small, pink purse in the air and spun around frantically.

Gregory intercepted it. “I’ve got it!” he assured her. “I saw it all!”

He was jogging now, narrowly dodging displays of potato chips and candy bars and headless customers.

Outside, Gregory spun swivel-like on his feet, taking in everything, the expanse of people coming and going, all of them without heads, all of them except her. *There*. There she was. One head amongst a crowd of headless. All that crimson, like a storm. Red sky at night. But he was too late.

She got in and shut the door of her baby blue Subaru, turned the ignition, and the sedan lurched into motion. However, at the last second, she looked back. She was staring right at him. Gregory waved. Pausing, seeing him now, she waved back hesitantly. It happened unexpectedly, without time to think. Only after she turned away did Gregory remember, and only after remembering did he thrust the little pink purse in the air. But it was no use. The blue Subaru Outback pulled away, merging into traffic.

She’d be back, he decided. And he’d be there, ready to return it to her; that was the answer. Smiling, excited at the prospect of something going his way for a change, Gregory put the purse in the pocket of his smock and went back inside. Only as the entrance doors slid open did he remember what he’d done — telling that customer to clean up his own mess and all. Suddenly, Gregory felt foolish. Mr. Walters would be furious.

"Gregory," said Sal without a head. Clearly Sal had been waiting at the door to intercept him. "Glad I caught ya," he said sarcastically. "You were—having a little sabbatical, eh?"

"I was just—"

Sal cut him off. "Giving that stacked redhead back her purse? Yeah," he winked. "I know. *I know*. I run a tight ship around here, Gregory. Nothing gets past me. And when Mr. Walters is on lunch, I'm in charge!" Sal declared, holding out a thumbs up before touching the thumb to his chest for emphasis. Headless, his unfixed voice echoed from all sides of the vast storefront for all to hear—which was just how Sal liked it. Power had always gone straight to his head. While Mr. Walters was on vacation last week, Sal's head must have grown to unfathomable proportions before taking flight. Spinning on his heels, Sal said, "Come with me."

Ensnared, Gregory followed Sal to his office.

Pacing behind his desk, Sal said, "Close the door."

Here it comes, Gregory thought. He closed the door soundlessly.

"Gregory, I'm of the opinion that Mr. Walters doesn't need to hear about the little stunt you pulled just now—insulting a customer so that you could go hit on some broad way out of your league. You hear me, Gregory? Mr. Walters isn't as understanding as I am. Is he?" Sal shrugged. "Ol' Sal *gets* it. It's all *good*. Right? But you're going to have to a couple things for me."

Dimly, Gregory heard Sal laugh—wherever his head was. Gregory was sure he heard the expending laughter happening behind him, behind his back.

"You see that Easter Bunny suit over there," Sal pointed to the far side of the room. The store's obscenely low-budget Easter Bunny suit lay toppled over two folding chairs. "Bobby just went to

lunch. Now, Mr. Walters wants somebody wearing it at all times. He was very clear about that, otherwise I'd just wait until Bobby got back. *But*, since you owe me one," Sal laughed again. "Oh, and, before that—I almost forgot. First thing: I need you to clean up the Lost and Found. As a matter of fact, go ahead and add that to your list of daily routines. And make sure you feed them."

"Feed them?"

"Sal!" croaked the despotic voice of Mr. Walters via the walkie talkie on Sal's desk. "I'm back. Where the *hell* are ya? Have you seen the lines out here? I can't even go grab lunch without..."

Sal fumbled for the volume of his walkie talkie and turned it down. "On my way, sir!" Sal replied, holding the device up to where his head ought to be. Turning back to Gregory, Sal said severely, "See to the Lost and Found first. After that," he motioned to the Easter Bunny costume. "You know the drill. I'll be back by in a bit to see that you're *hopping* to it." Laughing haughtily somewhere else, Sal departed.

Gregory wasn't even mad. At least now he could wait by the doors until the woman with a head returned for her purse. At least it solved that.

The store's catch-all office space which doubled as the Lost and Found and tripled as File Storage was less than endearingly known as The Dump. Filing cabinets—the great big, tall ones—ran the entire length of one wall, and each was filled to the gills. Additional files and reports were simply added to already toppling stacks atop each. In the dim dark, the outline resembled a range of white-

capped mountains. *Mount Nimiety*, Gregory thought, flipping on the overhead light with a quick swipe of his hand.

On the table before him lay the most recent Lost and Found findings along with a ledger where each item was or wasn't logged—drivers licenses, passports, and cellphones, mostly. Purses, wallets, watches, trinkets... On and on. Detritus. Under and around the table, boxes, totes, and crates overflowed with endless other junk which had never been claimed. It was baffling that so many people could lose their phones and wallets and IDs and money and all manner of who knows what else and never come to claim any of it.

The IDs were chilling: there was nothing there where a picture ought to be, in any of them. Next to each name, a vacant space.

Behind Gregory, something stirred. Then, he heard a low murmuring, almost a whispering—or a whimpering. He turned. And that's when he saw them: the heads.

Beneath a table in the opposite corner of the cluttered room, a sort of kennel had been constructed from several pet carriers. The heads huddled together toward the back of the makeshift refuge, just out of the light. A couple of the braver, cleverer heads had escaped. They sat chewing on toppled over paperwork, ostensibly not eyeing the doorway—though clearly, they were, Gregory realized. Abruptly, they lurched toward the half-open door, plodding up into the air and then back down again, their mouths agape, their tongues out, their bare little—bottoms?—smacking the linoleum as they bounced.

Gregory quickly pushed the door closed. Deftly, he wrangled the rogue heads, one at a time, careful of their biting. The first one was easy. It was distracted, pilfering through the variable boxes of

lost trinkets. The second head, however, was a willful little bugger. Click-click-clicking, it clacked its teeth, grumbling, gnashing terribly.

“Now, now,” Gregory said, ruffling its shaggy, yellow mop of hair. He trapped it in the corner beside the door, lifted it up gingerly, and held it beneath both ears. “What are we going to do with you?”

The head rasped in defiance, then, resigned, gave up fighting. Gregory quickly re-opened the swing door of the kennel and placed the head back inside with the rest of them, closing and latching the little gate behind it.

Surveying the heads, Gregory realized that one of them was Mr. Walters’ head—and he recognized a couple others too.

He tried not to think of it like that. It wasn’t that simple. When heads left some body, they had to go *somewhere*, didn’t they? He couldn’t blame them for the sins of their bodies.

On the table above the heads’ little hermitage sat a ten-pound bag of sugar with a tag on it in nearly illegible writing:

Store Use: hed food

In disbelief, Gregory checked the cage and, sure enough, there sat a series of bowls with sugar crusted rims.

“You *eat*—this?” Gregory asked, appalled.

In unison, the heads began chirping bird-like, whistling, hooting. They plodded up and down, tongues out, salivating.

Guessing, Gregory scooped a perfect cup into each bowl. Spasmodically, the heads turned violent. Each fought for the chance to feed first, and when they did feed, they fed ravenously, snorting and sneezing and barking and showing their teeth. Eventually, there was enough to go around, but it still wasn’t

enough. Each wanted the others' for themselves, and, if they could, *would* have it.

"Where's your head at?" said Sal's voice without irony. The headless assistant manager appeared now and irritably frittered with the Easter display. "We've been paging you for twenty minutes! What are you doing over here? And *why* are you watching the doorway?"

"Um," Gregory said. He started to remove the head of the Easter Bunny outfit, hot as he was. His glasses fogged. Sweat dripped from his brow.

"Keep your head on," Sal instructed. "And, actually, don't get sore," he chuckled briefly. "Bobby called; said he's not coming back. 'Had a flat,'" Sal laughed, closer this time. "I know what you're thinking: unlikely. Yeah—but here we are. So, I'm going to need you to go ahead and wear the Easter Bunny suit until close. Or at least until Mr. Walter's leaves," he conceded. "But, first, there's a, well, an, uh, a dog—you know. In jewelry. I'll need you to hop on over there and clean that up. And just—keep the suit on." Sal shrugged and strode away, undignified and headless.

Reluctantly, Gregory left the entranceway. It was already 4:30, but the woman with a head had yet to return for her purse. Probably, she wasn't coming back today. Or she hadn't yet realized, he decided, more frustrated than ever. And, on top of that, he had to wear this *fucking* Easter Bunny suit around the store. As if being the janitor wasn't humiliation enough. He was 43, single, had no children, was the last person in the world with a head, and

worked a dead-end job with no other prospects. *How did this happen?* Gregory asked himself, feeling, suddenly, claustrophobic. Inside the tight, itchy outfit, Gregory's skin crawled and his head wobbled insistently. He resisted the urge to lash out at somebody, anybody. Sal, a stranger; it was all the same in times like this. Catching his breath, Gregory retrieved his mop bucket and got to work.

Standing lamely in ladies' apparel, wearing an Easter Bunny outfit no less, Gregory finished the task at hand and now waited for the linoleum to dry. He waited and meditated and, more intrigued than annoyed, watched as a boy who still had his head flew a Skeletor action figure around the store in an unspoiled delinquent euphoria. The boy knocked things off shelves with the toy, just a boy being a boy, all imagination without giving any thought to consequence. After a time, he landed the action figure on the jewelry counter in front of his mother.

The boy's mother was no stranger to Gregory or the store. She came and went near daily, a sweater-wearing poodle named Priss always in tow. Priss was one of a few repeat offender "service" animals on Gregory's literal shit list. Priss barked and barked merrily, even now. Between Priss and the way the woman rapturously studied herself in the table-top mirror at the jewelry counter, Gregory was certain he knew how she had lost her head: to money.

Lots of people lost their heads to money, Gregory guessed. At one extreme, the miserly came unglued over a few dollars. At the

other extreme, this. Gregory saw it all clearly from ladies' apparel where he had just cleaned up Priss' latest mess.

"Holy c-cow, mom!" the boy stammered. "Look at this! Can I get it? Can I get it? Please?"

His headless mother appeared not to hear him, intent on examining her new necklace. Above all those diamonds was nothing. Nothing at all. After a time, she spoke as if from some remote place where dreams went to die: "No."

Just like that, the boy deflated, reduced to nothing. "You *always* do this," he cried, his head going red, rocking back and forth.

Denied, defeated, he stormed away in a frenzy, his head looking like it might leave him. Then, all of a sudden, the boy flinched and brushed something from his eyes. Jumping into a defensive position, he swiped his hand at whatever it was, giggling now, reaching for it with outstretched arms.

Some flying insect? Gregory wondered. *Some game?* He didn't think so. He was convinced that the little boy saw something he, Gregory, could not. For a second there, he thought he *did* see it. A shimmer. Some trick of light. The boy chased after it.

Gregory erected an orange, expandable *Wet Floor* sign and followed the boy around the corner and through the hardware department. He wanted to know what the something was, or what it was like to chase after something so uncertain with such abandon. He resolved to ask the boy if it came to that. However, rounding the corner into the housewares department, Gregory ran directly into Mr. Walters who flailed, nearly fell, caught himself, and then lost his composure entirely.

"You damn *nitwit!*" Mr. Walters shouted. "We've been looking all over for you! This woman's looking for her purse. Sal thinks *you*

have it, that you're carrying it around with you so to give it to her *personally*. I swear to God," Mr. Walters' amorphous voice laughed ruefully, "for the sake of your job, you better *not* be wasting *my* time on half-witted schemes!"

It was all too much—too much, and too much at once. The whiplash of it, along with the embarrassment of the reprimand happening in front of the woman—that infuriated him more than anything. His head wobbled painfully. Dizzying, gritting his teeth, Gregory shouted, "I have it right here!"

Gregory's head dislodged itself then. It took flight, shouting, "You pompous asshole!"

Gregory watched in festering awe as his own head, still donning the upstairs of the Easter Bunny costume, bounced stupidly against the roof of the building repeating PSA-like, "*You pompous asshole!*" Eventually, it lost steam and descended somewhere on the other side of the store.

Going for broke, swelling with pride and growing dignity, Gregory heard himself saying to Mr. Walters, "And you know what else? You're a lousy boss. You run a shitty little grocery store and think it makes you God. You think you can do and say what you want and we just have to take it. Well, guess what, bub? Take this!"

Gregory shed the Easter Bunny costume and flung it at Mr. Walters. "And here's her purse," he said, fishing it out of the pockets of his smock. I tried to return it to her this morning, but she left before I could."

"That was you waving," said a woman's voice. "Nobody *waves* anymore."

Turning, extending the purse, Gregory realized with a start that she had lost her head. He couldn't believe it. Rage touched him once more. Embittered, he returned his attention to Mr. Walters who stood paralyzed and headless. Probably he had never had anyone talk back to him before. Usually, *he* did all the talking. The silence suited him.

"And guess what else? I *quit!*" Gregory shouted in a powerful thunderclap that simultaneously shook the building and filled Gregory, the man, with seeming superhuman confidence that made him *more* than just a man. He felt heroic, capable of anything.

Turning to the now headless woman, Gregory returned her purse, which she accepted gratefully. Then, he took her hand, pulled her close, and even briefly dipped her back, as if dancing. Somewhere else, they both laughed. That's when Gregory planted a kiss—not on her lips because she, like he, didn't have a head, but it was still somehow everything he had hoped it would be.

"Who *are* you?" the woman said in a note of stunned surprise.

"Name's Gregory," Gregory said gallantly.

"Greg-gory," she repeated. "Gregory, I'm Victoria. Call me Victoria."

"Call me Gregory," Gregory said, a warm invincibility washing over him. "What do you say we get out of here?"

"What about our heads? I lost mine with *him*," she said, indicating Mr. Walters.

"I'll take care of that," Gregory assured her. Taking her by the hand, he led the way.

Finding your head is easy if you take the time to look, Gregory mused, pleased to discover his own head among the others in the Lost and Found. He knew what to look for, for one thing. For

another, he had done such a damn fine job cleaning and organizing the room earlier that afternoon. Even so, already one of the heads had managed to escape and was wreaking havoc on Gregory's hard work.

"Look!" Victoria said, pointing.

In the opposite corner of the room, next to the filing cabinets, the escaped head had constructed a sort of nest. It was a grotesque, ratty effort. Among the indeterminable kipple the head had had at hand, there were fragments of legal documents, cigarette butts, paper money, parking tickets, pornographic magazine clippings, loser lottery scratchers, on and on, all of it shredded, chewed up by the head with its ever-gnashing teeth.

Beside them, Mr. Walters crossed himself.

Unimpressed, Gregory snatched up the head and returned it to the kennel with the rest. There had to be two dozen of them by now, more all the time. Dutifully, Gregory turned his attention and gathered up Mr. Walter's head, mindful of its biting.

"Here you are," he said ceremoniously, reuniting Mr. Walters with his head.

The man said nothing. He accepted his head but held it out in front of him like a baby thrust on a drunk uncle.

Now, Gregory sought out Victoria's head from the lot of them, spotting it at once. "I'd know that head anywhere," he said, gathering it up gingerly. Brushing away stray streaks of crimson, he placed her head into her hands.

Behind them, Mr. Walters whispered, sounding like he could cry, "Do you think the others will return for their heads?"

"They will," Gregory said. "Eventually. You can't go on forever only ever thinking with your body. It catches up to you."

“Mm,” Victoria purred, impressed. In her hands, her head, her mouth bit its lip.

Gregory reached into the kennel once more and retrieved, finally, his own head. It had been eyeing him for some time and was resigned. Standing then, cradling his head in one hand, Gregory reached out with his freehand and took hold of Victoria’s.

Holding onto their heads, Gregory and Victoria departed.

They had several rounds of drinks at a place called *Shangri-La*, a favorite of Victoria’s. Gregory loved the place. And the company. Between them on the table, their two heads sat perched alertly winking at each other from time to time and doing things with their tongues. Amused, Gregory and Victoria took turns pouring drinks into their little, wanting mouths. That went so well that after a while they got it into their heads to go see a movie. They decided on the worst flick possible, something violent and gory and oversexualized, as if to prove something to themselves—although, just what, neither of them, nor their heads, knew. But they wanted to know, together.

Later that night, it was already tomorrow. Gregory and Victoria stood holding themselves and overlooking the crib where they put their heads to bed. Reaching out, Gregory put the above-crib mobile into motion. Their heads’ miniaturized universe—letters and numbers, dollar signs, a little blue twittering bird, the two-tailed mermaid, on and on—it all turned and turned, jingling faintly. Half sleeping, half seeing, one of the heads giggled in delight. The other head groaned. Who knew which or why or what it meant. What did anything mean? Only bliss.

JIMMY HUFF is a writer, editor, and musician from the Missouri Ozarks, USA, with a warm place in his liver for scotch whisky. Jimmy enjoys subverting expectations, challenging conventions, and promoting vulnerability and personal growth, often

simultaneously exploring difficult subject matter and experimental forms. For more Jimmy, visit jimmyhuff.wordpress.com and skipjackreview.com.

Solar Birdseed

Peter Dellolio

Solar
birdseed punctures so silently
(bug adrift),
 leapt,
 so we earned the
 right to argue
 against Cartesian
 calculations.

Errol Flynn knew how to
pamper
his
 mustache.

PETER DELLOLIO. Born 1956 New York City. Went to Nazareth High School and New York University. Graduated 1978: BA Cinema Studies; BFA Film Production. Poetry collections “A Box Of Crazy Toys” published 2018 Xenos Books/Chelsea Editions and “Bloodstream Is An Illusion Of Rubies Counting Fireplaces” published February 2023 Cyberwit/Rochak Publishing.

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