

FROM THE CREATORS OF MAGAZINES THAT LOOK
LIKE BOOKS COMES A MAGAZINE THAT DOESN'T
LOOK LIKE A BOOK AT ALL, BUT RATHER LIKE A MUTATED
LITERARY LIFE FORM, ATTACHED AT THE SPINE AND
CONTAINED INSIDE AN EASILY DISCARDED BAND OF PAPER

INSIDE:

NOCTURNAL VISITATIONS FROM BOB DYLAN

ELDERLY ROMANTIC INTRIGUE AT A DONKEY SANCTUARY

A NOSTALGIC SQUATTER ON A PILE OF LAUNDRY

GENERAL TAO AND COLONEL SANDERS IN BLOODY COMBAT

THE OBJECTIFICATION AND FETISHIZATION OF PONIES

KILLER CLONES, VENGEFUL BARBERS AND MANGLED ORCHIDS

PLUS: CORMAC MCCARTHY ORDERS A PIZZA,
A MEANDERING CONVERSATION BETWEEN AN
UNEASY HUMAN AND A WELL-INTENTIONED COMPUTER,
AND TWO STORIES FEATURING BRICKS!

DESIGNED IN ONTARIO BY PEOPLE WHO WILL NOT
CONCEDE THAT PRINT IS DEAD

ASSEMBLED IN MANITOBA BY PEOPLE WHOSE
LIVES ARE STRIKINGLY CLOSE TO THE CHARACTERS
FROM THE OFFICE

DOES NOT EXPIRE

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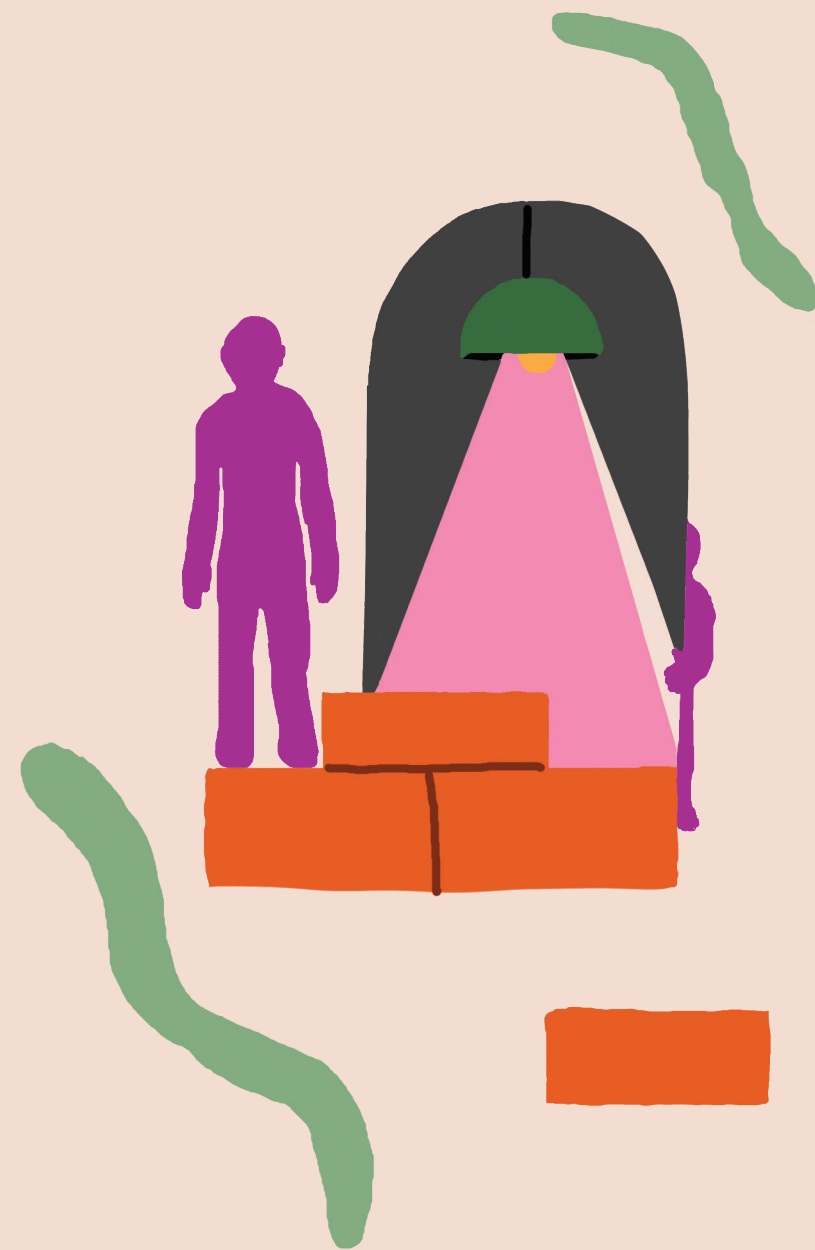
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THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW

ISSUE
N°28





THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW ISSUE Nº 28

PART I

IN WHICH A T. REX
WITH A BOW TIE
APPEARS TO STAND
ON A BRIDGE
WHILST A BIRD
PECKS ITS BACK



THE FEATHERTALE REVIEW: ISSUE NO. 28

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FROM THE MONKEY'S DESK

So this is twenty-eight. We've now matched the life expectancy of a giraffe and an ancient Greek. And in the spirit of both of those things, we find ourselves lathered in olive oil, wandering through tall grass, longing for one more orgy before the sunrise. Such is the senseless nature of existence for an independent publisher in 2023.

We've noted in recent issues that it's becoming increasingly lonely in the shrinking world of Canadian literary journals. Although we are no longer so young as to believe ourselves immortal, we still hope *Feathertale* matters to many more people than ourselves. Which is why we are giving you, dear reader, our commitment that *Feathertale* shall reach the full life expectancy of a zebra or a thirteenth-century English noble (both thirty).

The prospect of *Feathertale* coming to an end after thirty issues fills us with mixed emotions. Most of us who work on this magazine have done so since it was conceived in an old pickle factory on a hot August night in 2006.

Despite our looming extinction, we are devoted to making *Feathertale* the most celebrated illustrated literary monkey magazine in the country, be it this year, next year, or the year after that (though not the following year). Which is why we recently pocketed our tenth National Magazine Award, which was also our third for Best Single Issue of a Canadian magazine in a given year.

Having said all that, long-time readers of *Feathertale* will notice this issue barely looks like a magazine at all. There's a reason for that, though we're struggling to remember it. In recent years, we have strived to reinvent *Feathertale* with every issue, exploring the form of what a magazine is or can be. This issue's design makes for a unique reading experience and allowed us to create a cover that spans beyond our usual constraints, like an ambitious mural in miniature form.

We hope you enjoy it. But if you don't, we don't really care.

— The Editors

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CORMAC McCARTHY

By Chris Gilmore

Operator: Thank you for calling Papa Jerry's. What can I get for you today?

McCarthy: A pie of average size with blood-red medallions atop a lava-like layer of bubblings that reaches in vain for the stony burnt crust.

Operator: Beg your pardon?

McCarthy: Medium pepperoni.

Operator: Will this be delivery or pickup?

McCarthy: Depends on the position of the godless sun by which men have come to tell time and therefore by which time has come to tell men of that which has come to pass and may yet come to pass since time is a smoke-darkened nexus of chimes and ticks that only reveals its full allotment after the fall of the final stroke.

Operator: Uh . . .

McCarthy: What time is it?

Operator: 10:32.

McCarthy: Delivery, then. I dare not venture forth into the nameless night from which nothing save wolves emerge as emissaries of a void beyond reckoning.

Operator: Can I get your address?

McCarthy: I live at the intersection of nihilistic despair and aesthetic idealism.

ORDERS A PIZZA

Operator: Is that a house or an apartment?

McCarthy: House.

Operator: Can I get a name for the order?

McCarthy: Cormac.

Operator: Kermit?

McCarthy: Cormac.

Operator: Like the frog?

McCarthy: Sure. Like the frog.

Operator: Would you like to try our Spicy Garlic Fun Sticks for \$3.99?

McCarthy: Negative. Eternally negative.

Operator: And how would you like to pay?

McCarthy: With my soul and with the souls of all who face the icy blackness of the world in its final turning with the stubborn-stoic hope of a deaf-mute monk who hears God's silence and responds in kind.

Operator: We take cash and credit.

McCarthy: Credit.

Operator: Okay, Kermit. The time is now 10:33. Your order is guaranteed in thirty minutes or it will be free. Thank you for calling Papa Jerry's.

McCarthy: Thank you for being Papa Jerry's. I salute your courage.

AN ODE TO THE ONE I LIKE

By Sara Flemington

Illustrations by Erin McCluskey

Bob Dylan was in my room last night. He entered through the wall. I can't say this hasn't left me feeling more than a little bit concerned. I don't have time for cultivating a friendship with Bob Dylan right now. This better not become a regular thing.

It wasn't even like me to let him in in the first place. I was already stretched, with little room left in the budget for cookies, even, and yet, there I was. In the miscellany shop across from the coffee shop, staring at a poster of Bob Dylan. Thinking, that would look great in my dorm room. That would really make the place feel like mine. I like the Bob Dylan songs that I know. I should have a poster of the guy playing a guitar with a goddamn cigarette drooping from his face hung above my desk to look up at whenever I'm feeling slightly like a stranger of my own

making. I know. Stranger of my own making. That could practically be a line from a Bob Dylan song.

I should have slept on it.



This is what happened:

"What do you want to talk about?" I said to Taliah Thomson.

"*You called me.*"

"Okay. Stranger of my own making."

"What?"

"Have you gotten your period yet?" I said.

"You're funny tonight."

"I haven't gotten one since this whole thing started."

"It's probably just spooked by the shared bathroom situation. It'll come."

"Why wouldn't you assume I'm pregnant?" I said.

She sneezed.

"Are you getting sick?" I asked.

"It's just dust."

"My whole floor smells like curry," I said.

"What's curry?"

"I put in a request to move to a different floor, but the only space available was a room directly above mine, and I figured smell rises, right? It's like heat that way, right?"

"Just remember, things could always be worse."

Taliah Thomson. Taliah Thomson and her theories of relativity. Taliah Thomson and her perspectives. Just making sure everyone is aware of how moral her character is at any given moment, in case anyone forgot, or had any doubts. Even though she'd probably never even heard sirens in the night right outside her window.

"I've gotten used to the sirens at night," I said.

"At your residence?"

"Very near to it. City life is so enriching that way."

“Because of the crime?”

“That’s the thing, Taliah Thomson. Once you’re living here, you don’t see it as crime anymore. It’s life. And it’s happening all around you, at all hours of the day.”

“Well, you’re right that sometimes it isn’t crime. Sometimes it’s power.”
There she goes again.

“It’s also sometimes paramedics and fire trucks,” I said. “The point is, eventually it starts to become natural. You leave them alone, they’ll leave you alone. Probably.”

“The fire trucks?”

“It’s not like back home, Taliah Thomson.”

“Yeah. It’s different here too. I can hear whales singing.”

God. “I can attend the theatre on a Tuesday night at four a.m.,” I said.

“You can?”

“Yes.”

She sneezed again.

“Are you sure you aren’t getting sick?” I said.

“Can I call you back?”

I looked at my wristwatch. It was just past three a.m.

“I love you, Taliah Thomson. I hope you’re feeling better in the morning.”

“Love you, Sissy. See you in our dreams.”

Enter Bob Dylan.



I’ll tell you, earlier today, while savouring the giblet of the last turkey-shaped cookie I would eat for at least several more days, I penned another poignant note: *We are here to gain knowledge, but at what cost?* Below which, I wrote: *Stranger of my own making*. It was definitely the beginning of something good. Maybe even a poem.

Next to my poem, I wrote:

*April’s in the kitchen baking bread for Bill
Who’s out in the forest chopping trees for sale*

*While Isla’s knotting bracelets to give to Ben
Who’s been sleeping on the porch since last weekend.
Manny was born in Poland.*

That’s mnemonic. It’s what geniuses do in order to remember the names and funeral practices of different Indigenous tribes of the Philippines. And the origins of some large clay pot. Next to me, I noticed a girl with a half-shaved head had written nothing but the date and the course code.

“You aren’t writing anything down,” I whispered to her.

“What is this class about?” she whispered back.

“Anthropology,” I said.

The lights came up. She lifted the cross-body strap of her bag over her head, knocking her thick red glasses askew in the process.

“I couldn’t hear a thing,” she said.

“Are you partially deaf?” I yelled.

“No. I just couldn’t hear.”

“Knowledge at what cost,” I said, closing the cookie inside my notebook.

“So true,” she replied.

She then followed me outside the building, where a swarm of rabid pigeons descended upon us, as if they believed they could just help themselves to any person’s food they wanted, no matter their age, class or gender. I held my notebook close to my chest.

“Do you live on campus?” she said.

I pointed at four pins stuck to her bag. “What is the point of those?” I asked.

“This one’s the Heartbreakers. This one’s Velvet Underground. And then Plasmatics, and Blondie.”

“I know Blondie,” I said.

She pushed her glasses up her nose.

“Debbie Harry?” she said.

“Sure,” I said.

“You love her?”

“Love is a strong word,” I said.

“I do,” she said. “Love her. Wanna get food and I could copy your notes?”

I didn't even know her name, this girl. And what did she mean by food?
"I haven't eaten all day and it's affecting my vision," she said.
"I'm busy," I said.
"Okay."
We started walking in the same direction.
"What about breakfast the day after tomorrow?" she said.
I would need to sleep on it. "Sure," I said.
"Meet me at the Burro. You know it? It's cheap."



So now, here I am, sitting on a forest-green couch of the sort one might find in the waiting room of a psych ward, using a *Principles of Microeconomics* textbook as a plate for a grilled cheese sandwich that I cooked in a microwave that smells like curry, wondering how in the heck I ended up in this situation, with only half a giblet-less cookie left to my name, a poster I'd already poked a hole through and could therefore no longer return, and breakfast plans the day after tomorrow. Who is the woman behind this raging veneer?

Oh, that's good.



"Taliah Thomson, have you ever thought about how weather is nothing but a concept we use to convince ourselves that we have some semblance of control over a bunch of atoms and molecules moving around in the air in total chaos?"

"No. But I think it's more to guide our choices concerning the probable outcome of the movement of those atoms and molecules. Like, choosing which jacket to wear. Or which crop to plant."

"See, Taliah Thomson, that is precisely where you are mistaken. Our feelings of being in control over anything in life are delusory. For we too are nothing but a bunch of atoms and molecules walking around here on the Earth, behaving only in manners necessary to the maintenance of

their existence, and not as a result of these false concepts of identity that are pushed on us by the media."

"Sissy, I can't really talk tonight."

"Weather is a metaphor for our lack of free will."

"Did you choose a major yet? Actually, Sissy, I really can't talk."

"Why not?"

"I have work to do. For my classes. Don't you?"

"If you want to call it work, sure."

"How about Friday?"

"Friday what?"

"Let's talk on Friday."

I look at my wristwatch. "Taliah Thomson, Friday is three days away."

"I'll call you at seven on Friday. If you're not there, I'll try again Saturday morning."

I look at my wristwatch again. "It's midnight."

"I know. That's why I really need to hang up now. Night, Sissy. Love love love."

If Taliah Thomson doesn't want to acknowledge the fact that what we've blindly accepted as weather our entire lives isn't even real, that's one thing. But to just assume that I would be free on a Friday night? And how come this dumb French braid keeps turning out like a twisted-up wet dishrag? I'm doing it exactly like the girl in the video. This girl is the reason I'm left with nothing to survive upon but the shards of hardened brown icing stuck to the pages of a notebook.

Knowledge at what cost?

Stranger of my own making.

Weather is an untruth.

Who is the woman behind this raging veneer?

Oh, great. Here comes Bob Dylan.



Last night, Bob Dylan played the entirety of his 1964 album *The Times They Are a-Changin'*. Let me clarify: He protrudes forward from the

chest so his shoulders, neck, head and cigarette are floating in front of the wall. The rest of his body remains a still image on a poster. He moans like he's chained in place and wants to be freed. I tell him to go back to where he came from, to the sixties, but he just moans even louder. He strains against the gloss, and ash falls onto the floor. I feel badly for being rude to him like that, but also, I'm not looking to attract any unwanted attention from the RA regarding the smell of smoke and potential burn marks in the carpet. So finally I just said, Okay, what do you want to do, Bob? And this time, he pushed his arms through with his guitar, and he just started playing.

I know this isn't the answer you're looking for. But whether or not access to justice is a substantive right or a right to be given to procedure to enforce is beside the point. It's the constant shifting — nay, changing of the tides — that steers this society. If you can't swim, you'll wind up wet and sunken like a stone, till you're drowned dead. But if all you want me to do is rattle off how Rita Rarely Defecates Indoors, i.e., the four goals of criminal law, then I can do that. Heck, I'll take it one step further: Penny Overheard Harold Calling Rita's Grandmother A Pansy Asshole. Just some of the biggest problems facing correctional facilities today. Though to you, professor, I posit, does this really help? Now, tomorrow and in the future? For time is not just a tool to be used and abused by the Man. It is also our chance, our inevitable call to battle.



"I failed a mid-term today."

"I'm sure you didn't."

Ugh, Taliah Thomson. Why must you be so positive all the time?

"No, I did. But it was worth it. It was worth it to get my message across. To the people above. In the big seats. The men. Though, my professor is a woman. But maybe that fact will just motivate her to pass it on."

"What was your message?"

"Have you thought about how non-conducive this whole 'listen to a lecture, memorize the slides, then spew it all back into the space pro-

vided on the page' thing is to learning?"

"That's what your message is about?"

"No. It was about how bigger things are happening out there in the world, right in this moment, as we speak, and what are we doing about it all? Writing an essay?"

"I like what I'm learning. I find a lot of my lectures to be interesting. And the articles we read are interesting. I like my classmates too. I think our discussions are fun."

"Did you just use the word *fun* to describe fractal geometry?"

"I used it to describe our class discussions."

Geez. "Taliah Thomson, can I be honest with you about something without you judging me?"

"What is it?"

"I hung a poster of Bob Dylan above my desk. And now, Bob Dylan keeps showing up in my room at night. Last night he spent over forty-five minutes singing."

I heard a bunch of scratching, like the receiver had gotten tangled in Taliah Thomson's hair. "Sissy? You there?"

"Yes."

"You were listening to Bob Dylan last night?"

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I don't know."

"What do you think I should do?"

"Well, do you like his music?"

"Mostly."

"So, listen to more of it if you like it."

"Listen to more? Taliah Thomson, I barely have time to style my own hair now that you're not here to do it for me, let alone humour Bob Dylan about his need to perform. I need to find a polite way to ask him to stop."

"Turn off the music if you don't want to hear it."

"I can't turn off a person. He squirms his way out of the paper and then just hangs there in front of the wall and doesn't leave until he's finished."

"Take down the poster if you don't like it there."

I know. It seems simple. But it's not. Because as much as I don't want

Bob Dylan visiting every single night, I also don't want him ending up in some dumpster, or being used as a starter for some street person's fire. He didn't do anything to me personally, after all.

"Time is not just a tool to be used and abused by the Man, Taliah Thomson."

"Sissy, how come you never ask any questions about me?"

"I've asked you plenty of questions on just this night alone."

Hair again.

"It's two a.m.," she said. "I'm going to go to bed now. Love you. See you in our dreams. Bye."



I told Bob Dylan there was no way in hell I was going to breakfast with that girl just because she wanted to steal my notes for a test. Maybe she should have taken her own notes. Because what are notes anyway, if not elucidations of one's own ability to correctly interpret information? Isn't it lying to pretend you can do something you can't, i.e., correctly interpret information? And what is lying if not falsifying the capabilities of one's own interpretation skills during a test? It's perjury.

And basically, Bob Dylan told me that no, this would not be considered perjury. As breakfast was not being held in a courtroom. It was being held in a very skinny and steamy diner where one could smell the *huevos rancheros* browning up from outside the front window.

"I saw you pacing out there," she says to me.

"I was thinking."

"You were pacing for an awfully long time. Also, your cheek is bleeding."

Did her mother never teach her not to point out the pimple someone was just picking at? It's unkosher.

"I didn't catch your name the other day," I say.

"It's Vera."

"What's your last name, Vera?"

"Moore."

"Vera Moore, I'm Cassandra."



"Can I call you Cassy?"

"No. And what exactly is *huevos rancheros*?"

"*Huevos* is Spanish for *eggs*."

"Right. I forgot. Hannah Invites Satan For Eggos."

"Satan's favourite flavour is blueberry."

What? "Do you know what curry is?" I ask Vera Moore.

"I love curry. Sometimes I can smell it on your hair in class. That's one of the reasons why I thought you seemed interesting."

So I'm starting to think that even if it is illegal to swap notes over Satan's Eggos, is it not more conducive for Vera Moore and I to work together as a team to take down the Man? For is strength not found in plurals, such as in many writers? Multiple critics? Several senators? Vera Moore and I, two minds, two voices. Harnessing the powers of our

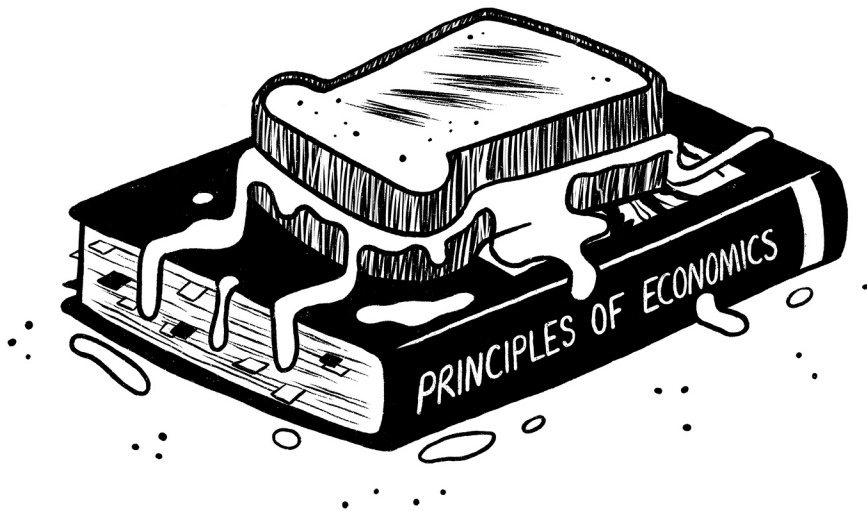
youth, today.

“Well, Vera Moore, I *am* interesting. And maybe you and I could also do something else together one day. For example, a Friday evening would be a good time to get together. We could go grocery shopping.”

“What kind of groceries do you need to buy for a dorm room?”

“Bread and cheese.”

“Right. And I guess you could also get fruit, if you remember to take the garbage out often enough so the peels won’t make a stink.”



I hadn’t thought of that. “Vera Moore, do you still need to borrow my notes?”

“Yes. If you don’t mind.”

“I don’t.”

I hand her my notebook, which I had heretofore been tapping my nails against beneath the table. She opens it on her lap.

“What’s *Manny was born in Poland*?”

“A mnemonic device. Using them is a sign of genius.”

“And all this stuff about the people?”

“Also mnemonic.”

Vera Moore seems impressed. “Do you mind if I write these down?”

“Be my guest.”

She reaches around the back of her chair to draw her own notebook from her bag. Then points at the pen clipped to my front pocket.

“Can I borrow that?”

I hand it over. “Vera Moore, can I tell you something without you judging me?”

“Of course,” she says as she writes.

“Bob Dylan visits me in my room at night. In fact, I probably wouldn’t even be here right now if it weren’t for Bob Dylan.”

Vera Moore nods, continuing to write. “I told Debbie Harry I didn’t think you liked me, and she said to be confident and trust that I’m a likeable person.”



I have no money left for anything now. But I cannot let this fact defeat me.

If starvation is necessary to the revolution, then starve I must, once I’ve fully digested my breakfast. For now, comrades, let us heed the call, close our eyes and bask in the smell of freshly baked sugar cookies decorated like the hats of pilgrims. Bask, until we are forced to leave. And even in the leaving, we will bask against said force till we can bask no longer, because we are literally too far away to do so.

By that point, we will have won.

“Do you want me to buy you a cookie?” says Vera Moore.

“No. That’s something I need to do on my own.”

“Okay,” says Vera Moore, as she buys one for herself.



Knowledge at what cost?

Stranger of my own making.

Weather is an untruth.

Who is the woman behind this raging veneer?

For time is not just a tool to be used and abused by the Man.
We are two minds, two voices,
Harnessing the power of our youth, today.
So bask against the force, until we can bask no longer.
By that point, we will have won.



“Taliah Thomson, I’m considering dropping out of school.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No. But sometimes, I really feel like I don’t belong here. I feel like an outcast. A pariah amongst the masses of livestock. How are you doing?”

“Actually, I’m so happy you asked because there’s something I’ve been wanting to tell you.”

“Of course I would ask how you are doing.”

“Right. Well, since I’ve been here, by the ocean, I’ve come to realize that I’m gay.”

Taliah Thomson, gay? *My* Taliah Thomson? But she has, like, the longest, shiniest hair that somehow looks best right after she’s been swimming in a chlorine-congested community pool.

“That’s fine,” I say to her.

“I know it’s fine. Also, I’d like to be called Terry from now on. It’s just more neutral.”

“Terry Thomson?”

“Just Terry is fine.”

You know, my mom and Terry’s mom had a dream. A dream that one of us would be born a girl, and one of us a boy. They hoped that we would grow up next door to one another, share a fence, practise making out with each other in a garden shed one day, and then go off and try to date other people until eventually we would realize we were soulmates and get engaged. I wonder if this news will revive that dream.

“Sissy, I haven’t told my parents yet.”

“You have my word.”

“Your word that you won’t tell your own before I tell mine?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Love you, Sissy.”

I look at my wristwatch three times. Once at 11:58 p.m., and twice more, still at 11:58 p.m.

“Bye, Terry.”



I have no memory of ever wanting a piece of fruit. Sure, I’ve eaten plenty of them out of boredom. That’s different from how I feel right now.

First, the neck of Bob Dylan’s guitar emerges, followed by his hands, which start strumming. Like he’s trying to accomplish some dramatic entry. If you’re going to come out of the wall and sing, just come out of the wall and sing already.

He does. He busts through forehead first and takes a big gasp of air and starts singing a song I’ve never heard.

“I don’t want this song,” I say. “I want ‘The Times They Are a-Changin’.” Nothing. “Can you at least play one I know?”

But he keeps on going as if he hasn’t heard me. In fact, he sings even louder. And I’m starving. I am desperately wanting an orange. I am not wanting to listen to this song.

“I’m making a phone call,” I shout. “You can stay, but can you please play quietly? Bob Dylan?”

Nothing. It’s like I’m invisible here. “I’m picking up the phone now.” I turn my chair around and stick a finger in my other ear. It rings. “Mom?”

“Cassandra. I’m so happy you called. I’m just going over the bills. But I’m going to set them aside right now to talk with you. Did you know your father eats eight loaves of bread a month? I thought we would be buying less bread now with you away at school. We aren’t. We’re buying more.”

“He’s an emotional eater.”

“He is.”

“I’m not wanting to talk about Dad. I am needing advice. I’ve narrowed it down to two, maybe three majors.”

“Why are you talking so loud, Cassandra? You don’t need to shout.”



“Archeology, justice and legal studies, and French.”

“You don’t speak French, dear.”

“It’s more than just a language.”

There’s a bunch of scratching on the other end like Terry’s hair. But actually, it’s receipt paper. Regardless, it certainly doesn’t make me feel supported in my decision to be pursue archeology, law or Frenchness.

“I’m very good at everything,” I said. “I don’t really like anything, though.”

“I know what you mean.”

Bob Dylan stops singing. I look over my shoulder at him. “Is the song over?” I say.

“Pardon?”

“Mom, I also require my next allowance early. I incurred unexpected expenses this week. It’s a long story. But currently, I am unable to afford basic sustenance such as oranges.”

“Cassandra, if you’re going to eat oranges in your dorm room make sure you take the trash out often. Otherwise, it will smell like rotting peels.”

“Hmm.”

I look back at Bob Dylan again. The cherry of his cigarette brightens as he sucks it back. The paper and tobacco sizzle. It gets shorter with every second, that cigarette. Like time.

Fruit in the chamber?

Dump that container.

Bob Dylan strums a chord.

“Taliah Thomson goes by Terry now,” I say.

“Hmm.”

“What if I majored in poetry?”

“You don’t major in poetry, Cassandra. You major in English and study poetry.”

“Okay, so I’ll major in English, then.”

“Sure. Sleep on it, dear.”



It’s four in the morning. What does an English major do at four in the morning? We could go to the theatre right now, Bob Dylan and I, if we wanted. Or we could leave this room and walk out into the chaos that never stops, and just keep walking, and living, in and amongst it all. When the sun comes up and our cash comes through, we’ll eat our fill of cookies and oranges, the peels of which we will discard with the sort of reckless abandon only two great friends can inspire in one another, which in turn will inspire poetry, the likes of which will likely inspire an uprising. I’m sure of it. You can bet there will be sirens.

Love is a strong word. But I like Bob enough. ◊

awaken

By Wanda Praamsma

kids pour in out
routine now mask
less rejoicing
a return to self
except

what self
was there
to begin with

falsity clinging
keeps us
suffering

topple head
first eyes
closed

claw me out of
this immens
ity of being

cover my no
se once
more

SEPARATE

By Wanda Praamsma

contours constant folds
folding am I folding
fascia femur fevered long
ing into
shirts undies
hoodies socks

these vast forests
mountainous I wonder
what if I was protect
ed land & laundry
was the gate
way to know
ledge

how naked I feel
at the bottom

of the pile

TOMORROW WE WILL BE *OLDER*

By Tom McMillan

Illustrations by Kara Pyle

What I needed to understand was that life isn't one big joke. Or so my son said.

Of course, William had never seen his skin shrivel and body sag. Had never had his gallbladder removed. He'd never felt hearing fade, memory flicker. The only way to survive getting old was with a sense of humour.

"You could've killed yourself," William lectured as we raced down Highway 2.

"That was the plan."

"This isn't a joke, Pops."

"Not with that attitude."

William sighed. It was late, dusk fading into dark. Outside, windows glowed faintly in the roadside farmhouses. There would be horses standing in some of these fields, ears pricked to the passing cars, winter coats tinged with frost.

Should have learned to ride. I'd always liked horses.

"We're making great time," William said. "Shouldn't be more than ten minutes."

"Oh good. Please hurry me to the nursing home."

"It's a retirement community. Just wait until you see it. They have a pool and everything. You can take aqua aerobics."

"Finally, I can die in peace."



Another sigh. "Grow up, Pops. You're running out of time."

We drove south in silence, leaving the highway without exchanging another word. Beyond a half-filled bingo hall, the town looked abandoned. A sprawling auction mart sat empty and the restaurants had all closed for the night. William pulled up to the retirement home and killed the engine.

"We're here," he announced cheerfully, like we'd arrived at Disneyland.

"It looks like an orphanage."

"You'll like it. Mom says the smoothies are to die for."

"Your mother hates me."

"Well, whose fault is that? This is the best facility north of Red Deer, so thank the Lord for getting us in on short notice."

For the thousandth time, I marvelled at how divorce had transformed my bitter boy into a devoutly religious man. My own upbringing came closer to paganism, with my parents believing in the land they owned, the sun above and not much else. For reasons I could neither pinpoint nor explain, William's born-again baptism irritated me. Badly. No point debating it now, however, so I unclipped the seat belt and opened the door, bracing for life in a retirement home, knowing it would be rotten with believers. The atheists always died first.

A bleary-eyed security guard met us on the front steps with a moving dolly, saying, oh, yes, we were expected. Welcome, welcome. They carried

my cardboard boxes down a silent corridor. Incandescent lighting ran along the carpet edges, and handrails stuck out from each wall. I trailed behind, eyeing every exit.

My room contained a single bed and a small kitchenette. Faded blue paint hugged the drywall. A small nightstand accosted the mattress.

“It smells like someone died in here.”

“Got a big TV for your programs.” William stepped inside. “Big window. Nice view.”

The television was thicker than the microwave. Steel bars prevented the window from opening out. The bathroom had chrome grab bars and non-slip tile, but the vanity looked twice my age. Opening the medicine cabinet, I unpacked my shaving kit and lined pill bottles in two soldierly rows. At ease, gents.

In the main room, William jotted down contact numbers and taped the list above an oversized phone. I’d once imagined my offspring would be bespectacled, hale but bookish. Instead, Alma and I created a buffalo. William had sausages for fingers, a neck thicker than Christmas ham. You could crack walnuts on that chin. He studied the paper with a deep frown, as though my salvation lay inside.

“I thought of something today,” I said, clearing my throat. “Do you think people still die of syphilis?”

He flinched. “Don’t start. I’m begging you.”

“It used to be a serious health concern — brain damage, paralysis, the works.”

“Zip it, okay? I can’t hear another word about the dangers of STDs.”

“Columbus died from syphilis. Al Capone. Oscar Wilde.”

William lifted a wool coat from the rack. “Okay, here are the rules: No leaving the facility without telling someone. No hoarding meds and no practical jokes.” He paused as though expecting me to object. “And stay away from chickpeas. You know how that story ends.”

I smiled. “Did you just make a bowel joke?”

“You’re seventy-eight with the sensibility of a teenager.” One more sigh. “Now, I realize you and Mom haven’t always gotten along —”

“We haven’t spoken in twenty years.”

“— but she will swing by tomorrow. So be nice to her and Lester.”

“The man who stole my family.”

“He’s my stepdad. And *you* left *us*, Pops.”

After William left, I slumped onto the corner of my new bed. Snow flaked outside. What now? Television played only nonsense, so I dragged a blanket over my face. A good twenty minutes passed before I rose to brush my dentures, dropping them in cleaning solution and watching the bubbles fizz.

Yes, I should have ridden horses. Way too old for it now, and tomorrow I’d be older.



Morning arrived in a series of explosions: light, noise, pain. Prying my head off the carpet, I was surprised to discover myself wearing dark blue pyjamas. Disney cartoons played on a television I didn’t remember turning on. When did I remove my dentures? And why the hell did I sleep on the floor?

In the bathroom, I sipped water out of the tap. Twisting off the faucet, I studied my wrinkled fingers against the handle. There was a time when I wondered how old skin could possibly turn so thin and fragile. Now my hands flaked and cracked like pie crust.

Here’s a joke: What did the young faucet say to the old one?

Answer: You’re running out of time.

Sylvan Morning was a beautiful nursing home. Sorry, retirement community. There were double-paned windows and chandeliers in every hallway. Everything felt shiny and new. It was early and the place was still quiet. The only other person around was a heavy-set woman with liver spots doing a puzzle in the dining hall.

I was about to introduce myself when an automatic door swung open. Alma stepped through, hand raised in a passive-aggressive wave so familiar that I forgot to breathe.

The ex-wife that I remembered had been aging gracefully, silver hair with brilliant green eyes. A thirty-year-old’s body at age sixty. This woman

wore jogging pants and had thinning hair. Gravity and time had shrunk her a good three inches.

“Speak of the devil,” Alma said. “Getting into trouble already?”

“Says the woman who pulled the fire alarm in the middle of a football game.”

“It was cold and I was ready to leave.” She smirked. “You look terrible, old man.”

We eyed each other, a pair of familiar strangers. She’d grown wrinkled and heavy, bent and stooped, but up close Alma was still beautiful. Killer eyes. Features so fine a breeze could blow them off her face. I never wanted to get divorced. I only left because I knew she would eventually leave me.

“So,” she said, “are we going to talk about why our son put you in here?”

“Right after we talk about why you had an affair with Lester.”

“You left first, and that was forty years ago.” She erupted into a coughing fit. “Next time you try and commit suicide, make sure no one is home.”

“It was a joke.” I watched her cough. “Are you all right?”

“It’s always something these days.” Alma hawked, face flushed. “Listen, William might think that sticking you here is a good idea, but I don’t. This isn’t some long-lost family reunion.”

“Maybe we’ll fall in love.”

“I’ve got a better chance of winning Miss America.” She cleared her throat. “Let’s just stay out of each other’s way and let us all die in peace.”

A young lady in blue scrubs approached, telling us that smoothies would be ready soon, so grab a seat. The dining hall had filled up while we talked. Droopy-eyed octogenarians milled about as though waiting for a cruise ship to dock outside.

Alma pointed towards a table near the bay window. “That’s where I eat. Sit anywhere you want, but that’s off-limits.”



Time was a tricky thing. Alma and I were married for fifteen years, and that once felt like a lifetime. Now, as I claimed a seat at an empty table, it felt like a blip, a passing phase, like the year I grew a moustache or worked

for the city. That didn’t seem fair. Some things should stick.

Sitting alone, I watched every table fill up but mine. Good riddance. I didn’t care about these pathetic geriatrics, halfway dead yet clinging desperately to life, dignity be damned. I didn’t want to socialize, didn’t need to make friends. I definitely didn’t want a girlfriend, which William had hinted was a possibility. There’ll be lots of single ladies, he’d said on the drive last night, as though we were heading to a key party.

A pair sat down, introduced themselves as Barb and Cyra, and immediately started peppering me with questions. What’s your name? Where you from? Aren’t the smoothies amazing? Fresh fruit, that’s the secret. Isn’t this a lovely place? Oh, we’ve seen worse, believe it. Before I could answer, Cyra launched into a detailed and disgusting story about a cyst that doctors had removed from her liver and the unfortunate infection that followed.

“It turns out the surgeon left a swab inside,” Cyra said. “They say it happens more often than you think.”

“Everyone’s in such a rush these days.” Barb shook her head at the modern world. Her neck jowls resembled drapes blowing in the wind. “You won’t believe what happened with my hysterectomy.”

I searched the room for a clock as someone else claimed the last empty chair. Cheekbones jutted from his sunken face and twig-sized arms poked out of his shirt sleeves. It took a moment to recognize him.

“Emmitt,” he said, hand outstretched.

“Lester,” I replied, ignoring the handshake. “You must’ve lost a hundred pounds.”

“Cancer is the best diet in the world. I should have gotten it twenty years ago.” He smiled, still irritatingly affable. “Come sit at Alma’s table and let’s catch up.”

A staff member appeared and set smoothies in front of us. Mango pineapple today, according to Barb. I claimed the biggest glass and took a sip. Good God, it was delicious.

“I don’t think your wife wants me at her table,” I said.

Lester shrugged. “Since when did that ever stop you?”

On cue, we both looked over to Alma’s table, where she was watching

us with a screaming-kettle look on her face.

"Maybe some other time."

"Okay, but we're leaving in an hour if you want to join an unsanctioned field trip." Lester leaned closer. "Unless you'd rather do today's other morning activity. I believe aqua aerobics starts at ten."

Sneaky bastard. Lester knew that I'd never learned to swim. Should have. Wanted to. Planned on it. Yet somehow never got around to taking lessons. He smiled. "If it helps, she will hate having you along."

Why did I agree? Maybe I was lonely. Maybe I was offended. Maybe some part of my brain believed I could actually win her back. Mainly, I just wanted to avoid hearing about Barb's hysterectomy.

"Dress warm," Lester instructed, rising to join his wife.



We raced north in a rusted Honda Civic that belonged to Lester's daughter from his first marriage. I rode in the passenger seat. As soon as Alma saw me waiting by the front entrance, she insisted on sitting in the back. Also, she immediately invited Barb and Cyra along, which meant I learned exactly how doctors had botched the removal of Barb's uterus after all.

By the time we reached the highway, all three women were asleep in the back, snoring softly.

"You ever been to a donkey sanctuary before?" Lester asked.

"I've never even heard of one."

"You'll love it." His fingers tapped the steering wheel. "I'm glad you've moved in. It'll be nice having another friendly face around."

"We're not friends, Lester."

"Not yet. But we both love the same woman, and she loved us. We both love William, and he loves us. I think we'll get along fine."

I stared out the window. "Alma never loved me."

"Funny, she says the same thing about you. The two of you are like bourbon and beer: love 'em apart but terrible together." He fumbled a flask from his overcoat. "Speaking of which."

I took a swig and nearly gagged. "I think my tongue's gone numb."



"Good, isn't it? I didn't swallow a drop during the radiation. Couldn't even keep soup down most days." He shifted into the passing lane. "Honestly, I think chemo was worse than cancer."

"How long did they give you?"

"Not long enough." He side-eyed me. "I heard you took some pills."

"It was a joke."

"People like us are hard to kill. If I were you, I'd quit with that and just enjoy the ride."

A few miles down the road, Lester pulled into an Esso. The others went inside to use the bathroom. The January wind made my bones brittle, and burning cold invaded my boots. I wandered around to keep warm.

On the back wall of the building, someone had spray-painted an eight-foot penis across the bricks. Tufts of red pubic hair floated above the flaccid member. Overhead, the clouds shifted and a sliver of metal caught the sunlight, flashing out from the nearby snow. I was about to grab it when Alma rounded the corner.

"Hurry up, we're all waiting."

A familiar scent of vanilla, body odour and peppermint caught the

breeze. I paused, realizing that I'd recognize her scent forever.

"This drawing is wild," I said. "My life for that shaft, eh?"

"In your dreams, old man."

I plucked the canister from the snow. The metal felt cold in my grip. Alma rubbed her cracking forehead, frowning as I approached the wall and squeezed the trigger. A red dot appeared beside the oversized genitalia.

"Tell me you're not doing what I think you're doing."

"I've never used one of these before."

"I've never been to jail either but it's never too late."

The canister rattled when I shook it. My frozen hand trembled as I paused, debating the best way to draw a dick of my own.

"Start with the balls," Alma offered eventually, looking a hundred years old in the wind. "Work out from there."



The Donkey Sanctuary of Alberta sat on twenty acres in the middle of farm country. Hog barns surrounded the property on all sides. Carved donkey, mule and hinny heads perched atop the fence posts. Metal barn roofs reflected in the distance. Please let there be a shuttle, I thought.

Parking, we watched schoolchildren race around the building, gift bags stamped with cartoon donkey faces dangling from tiny wrists. Unheeded teachers shouted directions. Parent chaperones huddled together. A pair of mules stood tied to the porch, braying into the riot.

A few minutes later, sanctuary staff led us towards open-air tractor carriages pulled by an idling John Deere. Space heaters glowed from the aluminum roofs. At the front, a moustachioed guide named Austin lifted a microphone and launched into the tour.

"Donkeys are nature's mistreated wonders," Austin announced as the tractors lurched forward. "Did you know they can live more than seventy years? They often outlive the people who love and care for them."

"Don't we all," Cyra muttered.

Tall and tanned, Austin spoke in the dead tones of someone who'd recited the same story too many times to care whether the audience enjoyed

it. Sentences bled together without punchlines or pauses. The gist: sixty-three equines — donkeys, mules and hinnies — resided at the main ranch, with forty more living on foster farms scattered throughout Alberta.

Few people knew that donkeys helped build the pyramids or that they were domesticated long before cattle. Fewer realized that the Italian military had a long, proud history of donkey usage.

"Probably why they never won a war," Lester added.

Chugging west, the tour passed through a cluster of poplars while our guide recited the history of mules. A sweetly sour diesel smell filled the air. A group of donkeys stood behind four-strand barbwire, coats brown and grey, watching the passing tractor through shaded eyes.

When we stopped for complimentary photographs, a mule with white socks approached our carriage. It rubbed its face against the closest fence post, streaking the wood with mud. A couple of others chased it away, kicking at each other before sprinting across the field. Something about the brutish play reminded me of William as a boy. I glanced at Alma, who was watching me with an unreadable expression.

"This one here is called Jack Daniels," Austin announced as a pinto approached. "He's been with us for seven years. A real social butterfly."

I reached out, fingers down and wrist loose. Jack Daniels inched closer and I grunted. Donkeys are nature's forgotten equines, Austin had said. They are bred, bought and sold, over and over, beaten and abused, taking a bullet or a sledgehammer to the head as soon as they get too old to work.

"We try to end this inhumane cycle," Austin's voice trailed off as he picked wax out of his ear. "Here, they live out their lives in peace, free from obligation. All donations are tax deductible."

On cue, the tractor roared, lurching us forward to the next set of barns. No donkeys were visible in the pen, so Austin dispatched the driver to open the doors. The first aluminum panel groaned open to reveal two mules deep in rut. The violent thrusts, the bites and the bawls, the braying and the blood attacked our senses. Whistling, Austin jokingly apologized for not knocking first.

The adjoining pen contained a short, almost silver animal that clip-clopped forward, staring at the carriages from ancient eyes. "Hinnies are



naturally stubborn,” Austin said. “Matilda here used to run off full-grown horses. She was *that* ferocious. However, old age has mellowed her.”

“What’s a hinny?” Barb asked.

“A horse mated with a female donkey.” Austin’s clipped tone indicated this fact was already covered in the tour.

I watched Alma squeeze Lester’s arm as Matilda approached. She reached for the hinny, happy tears rolling down her cheeks. Lester dabbed Alma’s cheek with his mitt. I’d never remarried. Never even got close, really. After Alma, I had a series of increasingly terrible girlfriends before giving up altogether sometime after turning fifty-five. It’d never occurred to me that I’d end up seventy-eight and jealous.

When the tour was over, we returned to the sanctuary’s headquarters for lunch. Austin reappeared, clutching an acoustic guitar. He sat cross-legged on an empty table and played covers of Bon Jovi songs. The donkeys were better singers.

Spooning food from a steaming buffet, I studied the yellow stew. “Are there chickpeas in this?”

“I doubt it,” Austin said, before launching into an off-key version of “Livin’ on a Prayer.”



It was mid-afternoon by the time we staggered back inside Sylvan Morning. My stomach whimpered complaints about the stew. I’d spent the entire ride home deciding whether to tell Alma that I was still in love with her. On the one hand, we were divorced and she’d spent the last thirty-five years married to Lester. On the other hand, impulse control had never been my strong suit.

Shaking off my coat, I was about to ask her to hang back a moment when I heard shouting echoing down the halls. The noise grew louder and it took a moment to recognize William’s voice.

“Less than twenty-four hours and you’ve already lost him!”

“No one is lost,” a woman’s voice pleaded. “We think he’s with your mother and stepfather.”

“So you not only lost my depressed father, but all three of my parents!”

Now Alma and I locked eyes. Coat on, she rushed down the hall, Lester a step behind. I started to follow when suddenly a violent urge rippled down my intestinal tract. I grasped the hallway railing, clenching my sphincter.

Fucking Austin. Fucking chickpeas.

Too scared to move, I watched a pair of security guards rush down the hall. I wanted to shout that it was all okay, I was here and William was hot-tempered by nature. The boy is under a lot of pressure at work, so let’s all just relax. However, I suspected that opening my mouth would also mean shitting my pants.

“Twenty-four-hour surveillance and enforced bedtimes, that’s what your brochure promised,” William continued, voice getting hoarse.

A door slammed, opened, slammed again. The shouting continued, but inaudible now.

My sphincter quivered. I felt almost sick. I needed to find a bathroom immediately.

Counting to ten, I carefully and slowly started towards my room. Right foot first. Good, now the left. A couple of schoolkids rushed down the hallway. An exhausted-looking woman trailed behind, clutching their jackets like pearls.

Toilet, my bowels screamed as I inched down the hall. *Toilet!*

Please, not this. Anything but this.

Picking up speed, I calculated the distance to my bathroom. Too far, it turned out. Halfway, standing beside the bulletin board of upcoming events, a sharp convulsion halted me. I bent at the waist, eyes closed, clutching my belt.

This was karma, comeuppance for raiding William’s liquor cabinet and then chugging my meds in a fog of numbness. Or for being a shitty father, a worse husband and a million other sins. Or maybe it was just bad luck.

Ahead, a temporary yellow sign: Caution! Wet Floor.

Don’t do it. Please don’t do it.

Bombs away, I thought as the sphincter released and a thick, warm liquid gushed forth.

“Please stop,” I whispered.

A man appeared at the other end of the hall, whistling and swinging a lanyard. I gasped, light-headed with relief. William! My son would know how to handle a little diarrhea, how to sweep it all under the rug. As the figure drew nearer, its shape grew slimmer, leaner, noticeably more feminine, until it was Alma rushing to my side, rubbing my shoulder and asking why I wasn’t moving.

“William is fine, don’t worry.” She paused. “What’s that smell?”

A late trickle squirted out.

“Oh, did you have an accident?” A gust of diarrhea blew through my underwear. Alma flinched, forcing a smile. “Come. We’ll get you cleaned up.”

Clutching my elbow, she led me down the hall. The once-warm underwear puddle was already cooling as it ran down my legs, pooling in my boots and dripping off my cuffs, a trail of tiny brown dots staining the carpet. Stink rose up and I fought back a wave of nausea.

“Don’t tell anyone.” I gripped her sleeve as we approached my door. “Especially not Lester.”

“What is that on my sweater?” Alma paused, eyes dropping to a smear on her sleeve. The stench reached us in full force, and she coughed, face puckering.

“Don’t you leave me.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t be here.”

“I’ll never forgive you.”

Her eyes flashed. “Forgive me? You left me alone with a six-year-old and never came back.”

Then she was gone, rushing furiously away. In my room, I stripped off my clothes. I stuffed my pants in the trash. Underwear and socks too. Wiping clean, I avoided my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The paper towel came away streaked with brown and — this wasn’t good — bits of red.

A half-hour shower washed my skin but couldn’t make me feel cleaner. Drying off, I sat naked on the porcelain toilet, head in my hands. A headache pounded my skull.

Goddamn chickpeas.



Before sunrise, tucked into bed, I awoke. My head throbbed. The room reeked of lemon. I sat up, then lay down again. In a wave of light-headedness, I dialled William's cell.

"It's two a.m., Pops, is everything okay? Are you hurt?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm back at the nursing home."

A pause filled the line. "I know, we talked this afternoon, remember?"

I squinted, searching the memory bank for that conversation.

"Mom and I got you cleaned up and into bed. You kept talking about horses. Do you really not remember? Because I can call the doctor right now."

"No, of course I remember. I just wanted to call and say thanks."

"You're not thinking about trying again, are you?"

It took a second to understand what he was referring to. "Not right now, no."

Hanging up, I went to grab some Tylenol. Easing onto the toilet, I massaged a migraine out of my temples. A faint fecal stink still coated my flesh. Showers alone couldn't wash me clean. Chlorine was needed.



The pool room stood unlocked. The fluorescent lights buzzed when I flicked them on, dim at first, brightening as they warmed. It seemed remarkably dangerous to leave a pool open and unattended, but I wasn't going to complain.

Dragging a toe through the clear water, I sat on the ledge as the door creaked behind me. A walker wheel squeaked. I didn't look up until Lester lowered himself beside me. His bare feet broke the pool water, twenty wiggling toes. The filter motor hummed briefly, then cut out, and the ensuing silence felt dreamlike. We could have been the last two people alive.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?" he asked. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Alma told you?"

Lester nodded and waved his foot in the water. "I thought William was going to attack the nursing staff today."



"The boy has a temper."

"He gets that from you."

"Don't be so sure. I once saw your wife spit on a cop."

"That was a long time ago." Lester shook his head sadly. "You just bring out a bad side of her."

"I still love her."

"I'm sure you do."

We sat with that a moment. My right leg kicked the water sharply. "She and I never should have gotten divorced."

He laughed. "Maybe you should have stuck around, then."

I reached down, waved both hands through the lukewarm water. "Do you really think she still loves me?"

He nodded. "Not that she'd ever admit it."

"Why?"

"Probably wishes she didn't. Or maybe it has something to do with you refusing to apologize for the last forty years." He pulled his feet out of the water. "You might start there, if you're interested in mending fences."

"You think that'd work?"

"Maybe, but we both know you'll never do it."

Lester tried to stand, slipped a little on the wet floor, and then rose fully. Body levers pushed, pulled. Synapses fired. As I scrambled upright,

about to say something, who knew what, my wet foot slipped and pain erupted, so hot and hard in my leg that I screamed.



The bitter scent of coffee filtered through the hospital room. Technically, I only had a broken leg. I was lucky, according to the doctors. It was a clean break and would heal without surgery, provided I kept it elevated. With some physical therapy, I would be off crutches in ten to twelve weeks.

After setting the leg, the doctors had started looking at everything else. There was lots of blood work, an MRI, endless talk of heart disease and the risks of congestive heart failure, dehydration and electrolyte disturbances.

Three days and I was still no closer to getting out, I thought as the doctor entered the room. She had pencil eyebrows and a hungry, half-starved look. She repeated my name as if trying to memorize a new word. How are you feeling, Emmitt? How about increased memory loss, Emmitt? Slurring? Be done in a jiff, but have you noticed any visual disturbances? Emmitt, did you hear me?

The eyebrows rose, fell, waiting. I scratched at the tube taped to my forearm. Yesterday, she'd asked what I had done for a living and what I wanted from the rest of my life. Young people love peppering the elderly with questions they never ask themselves.

"I didn't really do anything."

"You must have done something." She'd checked her watch, scribbled onto a chart. "You look like one of those old ranchers."

"I never learned to ride."

"There's still time."

I must have slept, because when I blinked next, natural light flooded the hospital room. Alma and William were sitting bedside in their winter jackets, heads pressed together. What's wrong? I thought but must have also said aloud because they leapt out of the plastic chairs and rushed outside.

Someone had fixed my bed. Turning on the TV, I found *Grey's*

Anatomy playing on channel 4. I watched, not following the storyline, until William returned. Killing the TV, he set a disposable razor and can of shaving gel on the side table.

"What's going on?"

"We brought Lester in for a tear in his peritoneum and now he's in an induced coma."

I didn't want to know what a peritoneum was.

Unwrapping the razor, he set it aside and shook the gel. "That stubble makes you look a hundred and ten."

I eyed the blades. "You'll cut me into ribbons."

"Not if you hold still."

On request, an orderly brought a bowl of steaming water and clean washcloths. "He's a sweet one," she said, nodding towards me.

"Trust me, he's not," William replied.

Warming my face with a wet cloth, he massaged a dollop of green gel into my face and neck. The razor's first stroke hit below the Adam's apple, heading north. Cheeks and chin came next, William whistling at each finished stroke while I braced for searing pain that didn't arrive.

"All done," he announced, dumping the razor in the trash. "Best you've ever looked."

Reeking of ocean-scented shaving gel, I exhaled in relief. My heart thumped.

"Lester is a tough old bird. He'll be fine."

William feigned a smile. "Absolutely."

"I'm serious. It takes a lot to kill people like us."

The words sounded lame but William wrapped his arms around me.

"Okay," I said, "that's enough now."

He pulled away and flopped back into his chair, reaching for the remote. I wanted to say something, some sort of apology, but didn't know where to start.

"Feel like watching the Oilers game?" he asked.

"Sure. Do you think people still die of syphilis?"

"I don't know," William answered, pulling out his phone, "but let's find out." ◉

HOW NOW, GENERAL TAO: THE UNDOUBTEDLY TRUE ORIGINS OF GENERAL TAO'S CHICKEN

By Stephen Koster

General Tao was in his war tent, surveying many trays of uncooked chicken. Each batch was either too sweet or too sour. Would he ever find the perfect balance?

A wounded man interrupted Tao's thoughts by falling into the tent with a spear through him. "Agggghhhh," the soldier gurgled.

"How goes the battle?" asked General Tao, sprinkling spices over his chicken.

"We're . . . losing," said the impaled soldier.

"Yes, well, can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs," said the general. "Have at them!"

The soldier had died while General Tao said *omelette*.

"How can one be losing when one is so close to perfecting a timeless chicken dish?" Tao asked himself. "If that's what losing is, I don't want to be winning."

After a little while, the sounds of the battle drew closer — so close that General Tao had to go out and see what was happening. When he reached the lines of his maimed and bleeding troops, one of his dying soldiers patted him on the shoulder. "Sir, sir, I've always wondered: Is it General Tao or General Tso? Or Zuo? I've seen conflicting spellings, you see, so I just wondered which one was more accurate according to the traditional spelling of the name."

Feeling compassionate, General Tso whispered the true answer in the dying soldier's ear, and the secret died with him.

The armies of Colonel Sanders were on every side. "You have to fight

together," General Tao shouted to his troops. "You have to fight in unison. You have to stick together like two opposing concepts, like sticky and not-sticky, or sweet . . . and . . . *sour*."

It was at this moment that General Tao screamed, "Eureka!" in perfect ancient Greek while one of his wounded soldiers screamed, "My intestines!"

Tao ran back to his tent. After about twelve minutes over high heat, General Tao returned to the battle, bearing a huge wok of chicken and accompanied by many servants, who definitely all wanted to be there to help distribute the new kind of chicken to the soldiers. "Stop! Stop all this pointless fighting!" General Tao yelled, and all the soldiers stopped, except one jerk who got an extra slice in. "Have some chicken."

General Tao walked around with his big wok, putting pieces of chicken into the mouths of friend and foe alike, and all the soldiers started smiling, except for the ones who were missing their jaws. But even they seemed to have a twinkle in their eyes.

One of Colonel Sanders's soldiers spoke up. "Hey, what do you call this delicious chicken, General Tao?"

And General Tao smiled his generous smile.

"Poison," he said, and everyone, including his own men, fell over dead. Technically, this meant the battle was a win.

Later, over a Kentucky bourbon, General Tao made the chicken again for Colonel Sanders, minus the poison.

"May I, uh, share with you an inner observation, mah dear friend?" the colonel said. "You, General — you, sir — have done it. You've really got something here. Sweet and tangy, yet sour? It'll change the world."

"I know," said General Tao. "That's why I'm going to call this new dish General Tao's sour and sweet chicken."

"Hmm, something seems off about that," said the colonel. "The word order of that name is finger-lickin' bad."

And they laughed and laughed while the families of their soldiers cried and cried and cried. But chickens never cry. And this makes them very easy to eat, which was good news for General Tao and Colonel Sanders. Finally, the Great Chicken War was over and the world's favorite chicken dish was born. ◉





SHE BITES

By Sarah Mintz

Illustration by Elisar Haydar

I always wanted to be a twin.

Why is another story. Loneliness? A deep, desperate and aching insecurity? I liked the idea of being propped up. The encouragement of a trusted second voice. Two of me. Double the power, the confidence. Together we can do it. We can do anything.

But I never gave it serious thought; it was an idle want. I never planned it and it never seemed plausible — until I had Sophie cloned. It cost me a buttload, but father left me more. And when I cloned my third Sophie — the second having accidentally hurtled down a flight of stairs after tripping on the edge of a rug since removed — I wondered, Seriously, why not? If the yapping, shitting, bug-eyed Shih Tzu of my heart can be thrice cloned, why not me? Why not now?

While it's too late now to grow myself alongside myself — to go through life with me, my double, my twin, my friend and confidante, playing tricks and wearing matching clothing — I could still raise myself, give me all the things I never had. I could have been a ballerina. I could have been a pianist. I could have spoken six languages. I could have been a weaver, a potter, a painter, a podiatrist. If only I had me to raise me.

It's no minor process, no minor expense, but I've come to know the folks at PetGen Restoration Labs by name. Jonathan, for example, has been the chief technician involved in the regeneration of my Sophies for the past fifteen years. I know him, I've been out to dinner with his family. I've seen the simmering boredom that grins malevolently from behind a glass of white wine when I start asking about applying his skills to a new project. And I know if it can be done, it will be done.

And it has been done. Three hundred thousand dollars later, with Jonathan fired over drinking on the job, I have a baby growing in a surrogate who is me growing in myself. I am like a jellyfish or Greek goddess who propagates by sprouting polyps from her head. And she is me, a polyp sprung from will. But the reality of it, the physicality of it, I'm sorry to say, has upset everything.

To be me alone, to birth me alone, to be alongside myself, has been unsettling. Though I was prepared financially, and had the baby room papered with yellow damask, acquired the car seats, the Jolly Jumpers and the teething rings, every day after the initial insertion and beyond the pregnancy, I've had gnawing, nauseating shivers running up and down my body. While pregnant, I'd look at my belly in the mirror, or peer down at the protrusion, and a doubt that I'd never known before would drip down my spine: I no longer felt in control.

But I went forth. And with my fourth Sophie, who was bald all over and glassy-eyed from chemotherapy and radiation to fight a never-ending spate of brain and lung tumors. But Sophie V was in utero and my new me was here. I did all the things I thought should be done. The girl wanted for nothing. She had a normal upbringing. Video games, ponies, swim lessons, bouncy castles, birthday parties. Of course, friends were supplied.

I explained our life in a matter-of-fact way. Like telling kids of yore about the birds and the bees — though I've personally never been told the story and can't imagine how it might go. Is it about pollination? Or a bestial meeting that nursery rhymes wash over with rhythmic joy? Anyhow, I sat the girl down, I showed her all the good times I'd had with Sophie. I showed her pictures of each and every consecutive Sophie, along with lab shots: nurses in scrubs giving the camera the thumbs-up, Sophie's surrogate mother in her pen at PetGen ingesting nourishment from her tubes, Jonathan over his microscope tweaking Sophie IV, etc. And to clarify the matter, I took her to see Jonathan. He is her father, so to speak, or rather, her inventor — whatever distinction you wish to draw between the two.

He wasn't looking his best, though his new place on the outskirts of town was almost cozy. A window might have been a good addition. In fact, I offered to have one put in, and he shot me what might have been considered by some — not me, not then — a murderous glance. He didn't speak much, but it was really just to introduce the clone to creator as an effort at transparency of process. We weren't there long when his gentle pacing turned into a menacing hover. He stood over both of us while we were seated on the edge of the only surface available for sitting in the abode, a rumpled cot, and there he stood, not speaking, as I rambled on, attempting to explain the process about which I knew little, and he looked down at her, and occasionally shot me a mean and possibly murderous eye, but mostly looked at her, almost lovingly, like she were a new idea, like she were a solution, a light bulb, like he wanted to strap a bomb to her chest. We left shortly thereafter. I'd found him impolite. Though he'd been a good friend to me once, this new drunken, jobless Jonathan was unpleasant, sick-faced. We left, drove home, neither me nor she, she who is me, saying much.

So, we got on with it. She never did see Jonathan again, as far as I know. I'd heard he set something on fire not long after and assumed that the drink had got the better of him. Malachi at PetGen took over Sophie production. Sophie V had issues; she was cross-eyed, three-legged and short-lived. So we're on Sophie VI now, and she's as close to the first

as I've ever had. Maybe if I'd had Malachi from the start, I wouldn't be where I am.

So a point came, she/me must have been ten or eleven, when the gnawing, dripping, creeping that I'd been pushing down, putting away, repressing — if you will — took hold. It was something me-ish in her. Something ineradicable. When I'd take her to French lessons, Cantonese, Japanese, Russian, and when she became more bored and disconsolate and restless and when I saw her as me as a sullen child, resisting all that she'd been given, fighting goodness at every step in order to sulk, to moon about, to make nothing and want for everything. It was then that I knew that there was no remaking me. I knew that I was a mistake.

The urge to kill it, to defeat it, was rising in me. Like it's an unnatural thing looking at me through innocent eyes. Like it wants to defeat me and will eventually. Like I have brought my usurper into the world. To usurp what? I've made nothing of my wealth and privilege. I've spent my father's money and read my father's books and walked long walks upon my father's land. And the only thing I've made is me, and at great expense, to no consequence. But still.

I decided to end it, this sick game, this Droste effect of a life. I brought me in, I'll take me out, so to speak. I'd end it for both us, become the news story that reads *Mother drowns child in bowl of breakfast cereal then suffocates herself with the plastic bag (that came inside the box of breakfast cereal)*. Jonathan doesn't care anymore. He's given up on science and fire and lives in a cell and drinks from the toilet, and his family has found a new man from PetGen Restoration Services, someone more professional, someone less idealistic and thus less prone to rapid changes in mood and temperament and belief. Their new man is a company man. A man of science, of industry, of systems. But it was Jonathan who was the closest thing to a father that she'd had, and the closest thing to a partner that I'd had. So I went to him and asked if he had any thoughts, any advice, if he could hear out my feelings of doubt, of filth, of evil, of murder. I met him during visiting hours and spoke on an old-fashioned phone receiver and watched him through the dense Plexiglas.

"My dear, dear Jonathan, what have we done?"



He laughed hideously and told me, "Who gives a fuck, you silly-headed rich bitch? Have you looked around?" He hung up on me.

More so on my own than even before when it was me and myself, I'd been thinking of ending it. And after thinking it, I saw myself differently. I would wonder about my own reflection. Does it watch me longer? I would jump at my own shadow — was it reaching for me? And once, in the woods behind our house, I was sure I saw myself waiting, eyeballs drained of colour, mouth slack, urine dripping from my dress. But two baby deer, spotted with white youth, running with identical gait, moved past, and the fetch disappeared. And after all, perhaps it was only a trick

of light and wind and mist and the hour of the day and the sound of the creek that made an omen of me.

But I saw something real, I'm sure, in my eyes on her. Our wild eyes. Either my behaviour has changed enough for her to know something, or she has thought the same thing about our unnatural communion and vowed to end me herself.

I thought it would come to blows, and I started walking around the grounds armed. Bear spray in one hand, a letter opener in the other. Waiting for my moment, sure that I could defeat a child of thirteen. Obviously my adult strength, my adult cunning would be an advantage.

But as I lie at the bottom of the stairs, where Sophie II once fell, my back shattered from the fall, and as I listen to myself in her hum and whistle as she picks up her broken necklace of Akoya pearls from the top of the stairs and moves closer to gather those that have bounced down and rolled and settled into the blood oozing from my mouth and skull, I know she has replaced me.

The humming closes in on me, the whistling stops. I can feel her breath on my cheek.

"You asked for this," she says, and Sophie VI bites me hard on the cheek. ○

WHEN YOU DIE

By Joshua Levy

You wake up in a cavernous room with whitewashed walls and "Hotel California" playing on a loop. You're wearing pyjamas of your favourite Saturday-morning childhood cartoon, seated in a long row of strangers stretching as far as you can see — all wearing pyjamas, all with the same bewildered look on their faces. You're clutching a yellow paper with a red number on it, and you realize someone has been calling your number for a while.

You rise and a woman with defined cheekbones leads you into a small, barren room with nothing in it but a wooden chair, a wooden desk and a 1990s-era blue Apple desktop computer. The woman exits the room and shuts the door.

You are — possibly for the first time ever — *truly* alone.

You're not sure what to do, so you wait. But nothing happens next. There is no next. You're dead.

Sighing, you drag the chair closer to the computer and spot your name flashing on the screen with a colourful pie chart below it and an underlined title: *Final Analysis of Time Spent Breathing*. According to the pie chart, you spent 36% of your life sleeping, 9% in some sort of pain, 3% smiling, 4% on the toilet, 1% laughing, and 0.001% having sex.

You wince, then click the mouse.

A new graph appears: 21% of your life thinking about having sex, 31% thinking about work, 10% dreaming you were somewhere else, 8% thinking about what you want to eat later, 5% thinking about loved ones.

You click the mouse again: 1,735 shirts worn, 678 pants, 92 shoes.

Click: 22% of time spent pursuing your dreams, 78% spent pursuing others' dreams (in brackets, there's a further breakdown of time you spent pursuing your parents' dreams, your bosses', your children's). There's a comprehensive breakdown of your sense of humour (fart jokes petered out after childhood, while use of puns skyrocketed around the time you entered middle age).

Click: There are maps showing how your actions impacted other people and how big your impact was on their lives, good or bad, and projections of how you will impact future generations not yet born.

Click: There are rectangles showing you the most important people in your life during each decade.

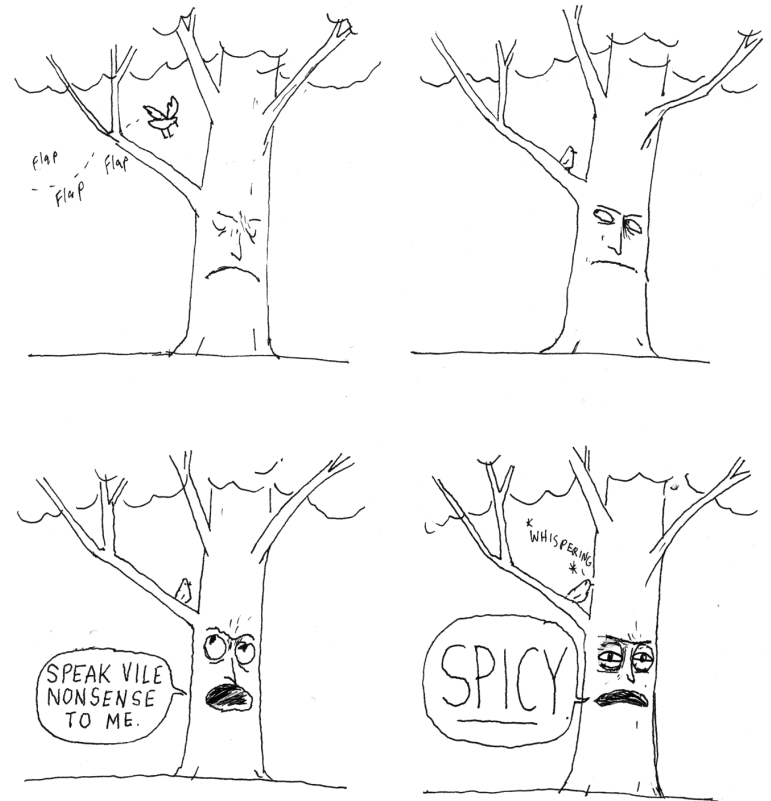
Click: A heat map of where on Earth you were most happy and when.

You linger on certain slides. Your mind doesn't wander. You take it all in.

Finally, you turn off the computer screen, stand up, stretch, and close the door behind you. ◦

TREE REQUESTS

By Graham Roumieu



THE FIRST BRICK

By Kevin Hartford

Illustration by Sarah M. Mah

On the morning of June 29, 1969, outside the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, a brick, a cobblestone, a crumpled beer can, an intact beer bottle, a parking meter, a dented garbage can and a handful of spare change consisting of a penny, a nickel, a dime and a quarter sat on or near a Manhattan sidewalk having a conversation.

“I was definitely first,” the brick said.

“First at what?” the parking meter asked. It had no idea what was happening.

“Just first,” the brick said. “That’s all you need to know. If anybody asks who or what was first, you just say, ‘The brick,’ and that’s it. Easy peasy.”

“I don’t even remember you being part of *anything* last night,” the crumpled beer can said.

“Well, I totally was,” the brick insisted, “and I was amazing. People called me the Incredible Flying Brick.”

“Who called you that?” the intact beer bottle asked, sounding doubtful.

“Just, like, people,” the brick said. If it had possessed hands, it would have waved them around to indicate a sizable number of persons. “A bunch of the people that were around.”

Not too far from the brick, the dented garbage can was sitting upside

down on the sidewalk and becoming increasingly distressed, as it had heard you could die if you spent more than twenty-four hours in that position. “Can someone lift me up and spin me around so I’m sitting the correct way?” the dented garbage can pleaded.

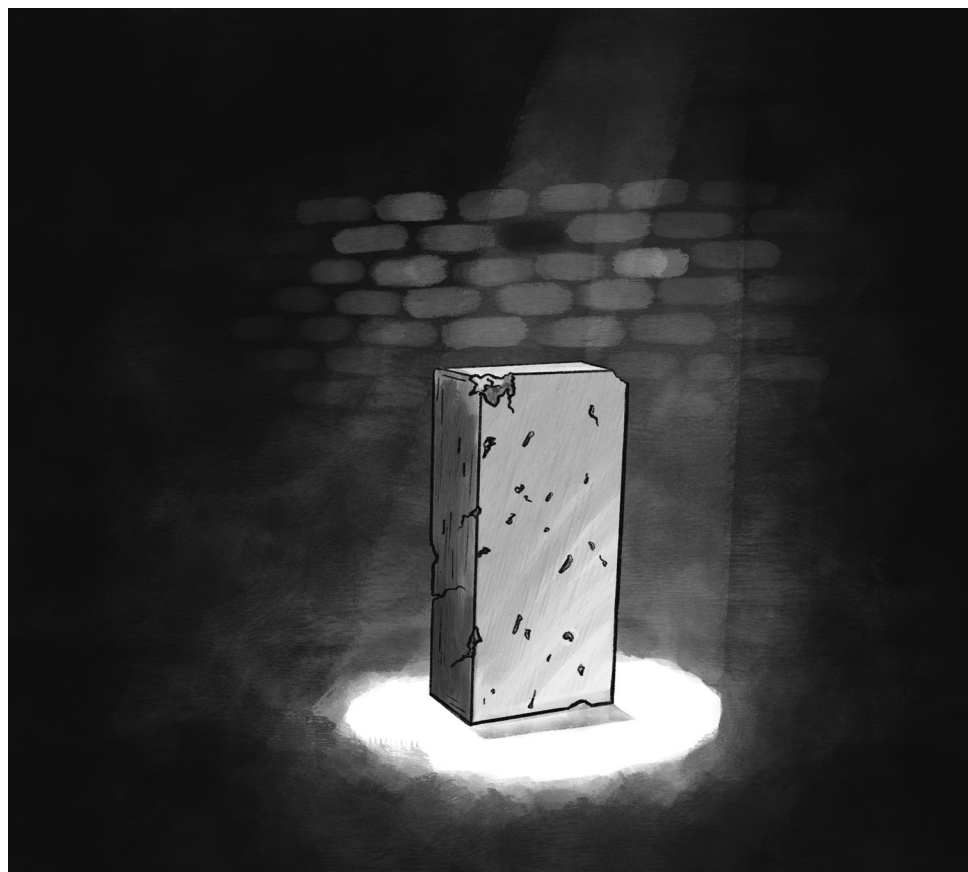
“With what?” the cobblestone said. “None of us have arms.”

“I’m just a head,” the quarter, George, said despondently.

“I’m almost a hundred per cent certain *I* was first,” the penny, Abe, said. “I have a photographic memory.”

The brick scoffed. “Oh, please. You’re half of a torso.”

The penny felt something stirring inside him, a strong, unyielding urge to present a compelling argument supported by evidence to an audience of his peers. Where this urge came from, he couldn’t say. “Well, let’s think about this logically, shall we?” Abe said. “You’re saying of all



the objects thrown last night, you were the first.”

“That’s right,” the brick said. “*Numero uno, compadre.*”

“And further to your point,” Abe continued, “someone who we can all agree was definitely not Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera, since they would deny it themselves, reached into their pocket last night and pulled out a common, everyday item, the sort you would normally find in a pocket, and you believe that item to be —” he paused for dramatic effect “— a *brick?*”

Murmurs arose from the assembled objects, particularly from the nickel and dime, who had not yet had a chance to speak.

“Who carries a brick in their pocket?” Abe asked the crowd in a tone that implied they would find the idea ludicrous, which they all did.

“Bricklayers,” the brick replied confidently.

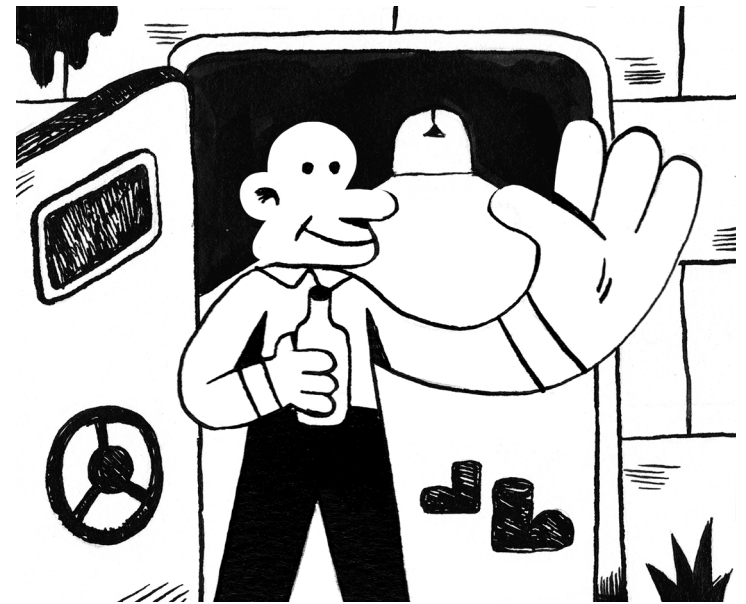
“Bricklayers?” Abe said, sounding unconvinced. “So let me get this straight: a bricklayer, having finished a day of laying bricks, removed a single brick from the pile, put it into what must have been a very large pocket, came to a gay bar, and when confronted by police, removed that single brick from their very large pocket and threw it?”

If the brick could have shrugged casually, it would have. “Yes,” the brick said. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Sure,” Abe said. “And you aren’t, in fact, currently still resting firmly within the wall of the building, *having never been thrown at all?*”

The crowd gasped. It was true: the brick was nestled among the dozens of other bricks that made up the tiny section of wall between the Stonewall’s front window and the sidewalk below.

The brick shrieked. This was *shocking news*, honey. ◦



WELCOME TO MY BUG-OUT BUNKER

(Please Don't Touch Anything)

By Jacob Pacey

Illustrations by Ben Coleman

Hey, you hear there's going to be another COVID wave? Going to be way worse than the first. Good thing I finally finished my bug-out bunker out back. Step on in and check it out. Actually, would you mind taking your shoes off? The inside of the shipping container is brushed steel and it scuffs kind of easily. I know you're just wearing socks, but if you could walk *with* the grain, I'd really appreciate it.

It was honestly the perfect lockdown project. I guess it would've been more perfect if it was done before COVID, but the pandemic ended up not being a total SHTF scenario, so I didn't really need to use it. SHTF means "shit hits the fan," by way — it's a Reddit thing. Oh, would you mind not touching that with your bare hands? That's a genuine MIRA Safety tactical gas mask; if you get your finger oils on the rubber, you could compromise the face seal and kill me, so it's a bit of a safety issue.

Anyway, like I was saying, bunker's totally off-grid. Whole system runs off a hundred per cent solar with enough juice left over to run *Black Hawk Down* on a fifty-two-inch flat screen and charge your phone, plus a backup generator just in case. I'd fire up the generator and show you, but I just cleaned the carburetor and don't want to get it all gummed up again. It's a real beauty, if you want to take a peek. I can't actually show it to you, though — I packed it away in a special-edition woodland green Pelican case so the metal doesn't oxidize.

Get a load of the water filtration system. Total grey-water recycling system for showers and dishes, plus a separate filtration system for the drinking water. Course that didn't stop me from stocking up on bottled water, just in case. Actually, would you mind not drinking that? I'll get you a glass of water when we get back to the house. If we remove too many bottles, the pallet looks sort of asymmetrical. It's not a looks thing, it's just that it could lose its structural integrity.

Food situation is pretty sweet too. Enough dry rations to last three years. Pretty tasty, if I don't say so myself. Better believe I sampled some before I bought three whole skids' worth. Would offer to let you try one, but these are genuine surplus Norwegian Army rations and are kind of hard to find, especially now that everyone's hopping on the bandwagon. Those people don't understand that this isn't a hobby, this is life and death.



Don't believe me? I've got nine thousand rounds of ammo in the back that say otherwise. You'll have to take my word for it, though — it's locked away in a digital humidity-controlled ammo safe; I'd hate to unnecessarily expose the gunpowder to ambient moisture just to show you.

Can't be dependent on guns, though. Have a couple of compound bows for hunting, an axe for wood, a few practical bladed tools, nothing fancy. Oh, that knife you're holding is actually an antique Marine Ka-Bar. No, no need to apologize, I'll just take it and put it back in its case.

Well, that's it. Not too shabby, if I don't mind saying so myself. I figure if something goes down, I could hunker down here for months, maybe even years.

Oh, when you put your shoes back on, do you mind not sitting on the Panama-era Army Ranger field cot? There's a reason it's covered in plastic like that. ◊

**THIS IS
NOT THE
END**

**THE
FEATHERTALE
REVIEW
ISSUE Nº 28**

PART II

IN WHICH A
NON-HUMAN
INTELLIGENCE
PRODUCES
ATROCIOUS
HUMOUR

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Cloe M.Z Wagstaffe is an artist in Burlington, Ontario. Her art incorporates strange textures, odd characters and unconventional techniques.

APOLOGY

By Gillian Sze

For Jane

To keep them all from despairing your absence
I was tasked to enter as your ghost,
arrive kind as dew upon your sill of potted greens.

The orchid reigned; its three buttermilk blooms
turned and pressed against the window — not
for sun
but to dismiss me. I could have been anyone.

I recognized its longing for you when I reached
for it.

How I wish I could blame the serpentine
golden pothos,
the prick of aloe, or a pompous sickle.

O impotent day!
I felt the snap just as I brought it close.
A crack running through July. An unsealable chasm.

Forgive me. I await your postcard from Belgium as
I write this.

I stare at the wilted petals beside me, deeply
enough for us both,
while the guillotined stem remains, yearning
for something
neither one of us can give.

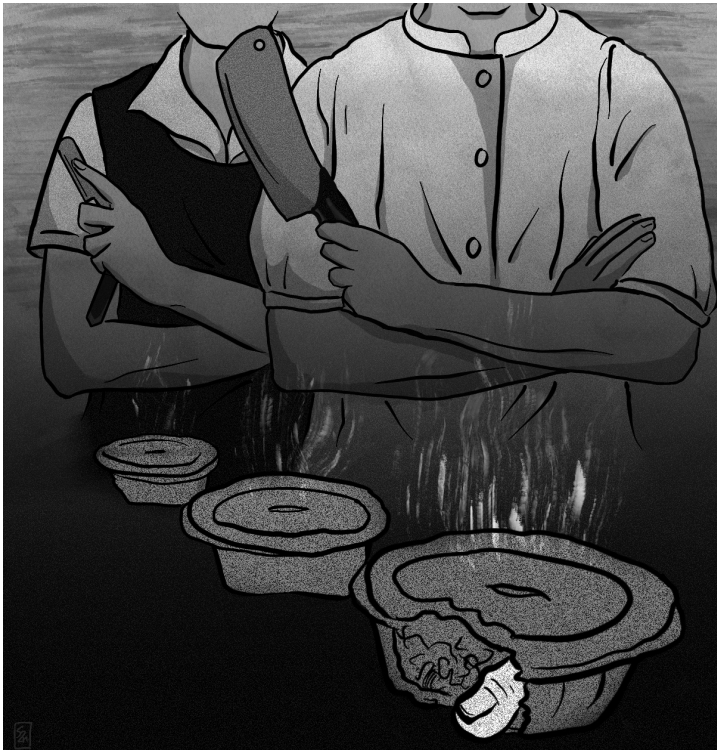
THE WORST ONES

By Laurie Petrou

Illustrations by Sarah M. Mah

The first one was, of course, the hardest. Mostly because of logistics, although the barber might admit in her darkest heart that she was occasionally awoken by something akin to a feeling. Not guilt; that he deserved it there was no question. Not regret; she had, and would do it again without a second thought. No: it was the shock of it. Somewhere in her restful subconscious she would suddenly remember the act and then her body would jolt awake, her blood pounding. She would take stock of her surroundings. Her room. Her bedclothes in tangles. The still water at the table beside her. The silence. Her pulse would slow. She would nod, because it was all right. It was *all* right.

The rent, for this area in LA, was astronomical. Her barber shop was above a butcher shop that sold high-end organic meats and meat pies, and it was small and hard to find. There was an old door in the floor that at one time must have given access to the shop below. A laundry chute



or something. The windows were mostly painted shut, but she leaned in on the original features, and the place looked cool and industrial. There were exposed brick walls and copper pipes and knobby faucets; all the things that were having a moment before they would be covered up again for another half-century.

In a short amount of time, she had cultivated a reputation for discretion with her well-connected or famous Hollywood clients for the perfect close shave. Their assistants and handlers made their appointments for them. She saw them on an individual basis, and had no room for other chairs in the shop, no room in that tiny, intimate space for any other barbers. She specialized in men. The turnover was faster in general, but she still took her time with them. Made them feel special. Felt their

jawlines, their throats, their hairlines, running the pads of her fingers over their skin, their stubble, before beginning. Leaning them all the way back. A hot cloth on their faces, and their eyes all closed, no matter how alert and shining seconds before. Their phones fell limp in their meaty hands as they relaxed. She used a straight razor. It was fashionable and felt authentic, which was important in Hollywood, where irony was disregarded as a rule.

It happened, as these things do, with a knock at the door. The woman who owned the butcher shop downstairs stood before her.

“Hi,” said the barber.

“Hey,” said the butcher, and stuck out her hand, introducing herself. Their names matter, but I won’t tell them to you. They became friends over several weeks. The butcher brought meat pies up at the end of the day, and they would sit on the stairs of the fire escape and take in the sunset that overlooked the dumpsters and garbage cans. They would sigh contentedly while slowly pulling the forks out of their mouths. So good. And they would talk about their troubles. Their troubles were the same troubles you have. The same as she has, over there, and her. Sometimes they told funny stories about their jobs. Sometimes they complained about things that didn’t really matter.

Then there were the times they spoke casually about things that were actually terrible. They looked ahead, watching a rat climbing into a garbage can, while describing what this man did, or that man said, or that guy’s texts that came in the middle of the night with increasing hostility. They related about the time they had been grabbed or held down or when they were told that if they didn’t do *this*, *that* would happen. If they did *this*, they would have *that*. They shared names and stories that they’d heard, about this man and what he’d threatened to do, how he’d been able to survive, with his connections, his power. It was Hollywood, after all. They would roll their eyes and sigh. They were not surprised. *Why aren’t we surprised?* They each knew many other women, and each of them knew other women, and all of the stories of all of these women sat heavily like a fog over the town, like an unseeable thing, like a sound that only they heard. The stories came out of their mouths while they ate

the pies, the butcher and the barber. The barber had tiny hairs on her clothes, and she would find them in her bed sometimes, like her clients had followed her there. The butcher smelled like her work, and when she stood in the shower it came off of her head in the steam.

"Everyone is tired of talking about it," said the butcher. "The whole 'Me Too' thing," she said, her fingers making bunny quotes. "It had its time. It's over."

"Yeah," said the barber, "except for the people it's happening to."

"We don't want to talk about it either," said the butcher.



Things went on in this way: the pies, the haircuts, the sunsets, the rats, and the two women talking. In the news, there were stories about men they knew or knew of, as the men were accused publicly of things the women had heard or experienced firsthand. They noticed that if there were sixty women accusing a man, people still found it hard to prove, hard to believe. The barber knew one of the men in the news. He was a client. He was a casting director. He had once run his hands up her legs and onto her ass while she was shaving him, and she froze and lost her voice and he chuckled and put his hands back over his belly and said how relaxing it was being there. He thanked her. He said she was the best.

In retrospect, she was surprised she hadn't accidentally done what she intentionally did later. That he hadn't been bothered in the least that she might do something when she was standing over him with a straight razor. That her body was there for the touching. He wasn't afraid of her. On her phone later, she read about how it seemed like he was going to get off, how there was a lack of believability or evidence. The hashtag was trending again, and it filled her with dread. His name was also trending. She zoomed in on his face in the photos until he became a beige blur of pixels in need of a shave. By the time he came to her shop again, her last appointment of the day, she had read and digested and obsessed over what other women had said he did. She was revolted. She was angry. She leaned his chair back. She put a hot cloth over his face so she

wouldn't have to see it. He asked something about if anyone ever got a happy ending after a shave, and his hand, which was hanging lazily to the side, brushed up, almost accidentally, and found its way between her legs.

One night, a few months back, the barber had wanted to tell her new friend about her worst one. Everyone has a worst one. The butcher did. You do. I won't ask you to think about it, but it's there, behind the ones you might tell the story of, the ones you might even laugh about because what else are you going to do. The barber wanted to tell the butcher about the worst one. But it was too terrible. It would suck all of the air out of the nice evening and there would be nothing to say. The meat pies would taste bad after the story began poisoning the air around them. The butcher would be thirsty, but taking a drink would feel disrespectful to her friend the barber, and the barber knew this and so she didn't tell the story of the worst one. But it was there. It was her worst one and it was bad. It changed her. She was easily startled after it. She always liked to have a window open. She never wore skirts. Things that had been born from trauma but became habit, became her quirks. Her personality grew around it like a vine grows around a wire fence so that eventually the wire becomes part of the vine. When the man in the chair reached up in between her legs, she acted, because that was who she was.



She knocked on the door of the butcher shop that night.

"I did something," she said.

The butcher searched her face and said, "What do you need?"



The butcher had a number of cleavers and an industrial meat grinder. It was really quite a piece of equipment and she had spent a great deal of time saving up for it. She polished it so it gleamed, and it had pride of place on her counter. She moved it to the back now, behind a swing-

ing metal door, where she had long tables for butchering. She pulled the blinds all around the shop. Then turned the sign to Closed and locked the door.

I will spare you the details because they are grisly and took all night to achieve, but in the end there were rows of meat pies in the counter and in the freezer piled up in an organized fashion. And by morning, the floor was rinsed and the shop was clean and the butcher and the barber began their days, their hands shaking almost imperceptibly.



Because her food was often bought for industry events, the butcher knew a lot of women in the business. Women who were receptionists or assis-



tants, publicists and handlers. Sometimes stories came to her that way, stuck to orders and money, floating to the floor when food was picked up, clinging to voice mails and texts. These stories were other women's worst ones. Terrible acts done with ease, with little thought, with insistence and violence, without regret.

The butcher heard the stories with increasing anger and frustration, and recommended her friend, the barber. Because the butcher had her own worst one too, and she was also changed. "Book him in there," she said. "You'll be glad you did."

Something had turned in them, the butcher and the barber. They had become the vine and the wire and it was hard to distinguish which. They didn't think. They took all the worsts and they acted. There was a whisper network. There was a reckoning. There was a door in the floor. There were rumblings of disappearances that were covered up by the same women who had covered for them when they'd been alive for different reasons. If anyone knew, they would have said, *I told you they are crazy, all of them, nuts.*

The meat pies sold. They were ordered by women and picked up by women and placed on brunch tables at meetings where almost no one ate carbs, but some people were on the keto diet and so bit heartily into them, and wiped their mouths as the meat juices ran down their chins, nodding at projected deadlines, laughing as a woman filled their coffee, then closed the boardroom door gently behind her. ◊

Election

By Lorie Boucher

My diffuser d i f f u s e s

Oils so important they're essential

White wisps **floating skyward**

Endlessly announcing a new pope 

PAIN

By Albert Dumont

My world, my life, rains pain
In my domain, pain reigns
Never free
Even if I were a tree
No crap
I'd bleed pain sap

What's to gain
When you live with pain
My brain responds
"Nothing"
My spine chimes in
"I agree, nothing"
My heart, though
Says with a glow
"Something"
Ahhh, yes indeed
With pain, I can read
Heartache pain of others
I can cleanse away the stains
From the hearts
Of dads and mothers

If I was a river
My waters would deliver
Pain fish
A bass who groans
A catfish who moans
A pike who shivers
If I was a river
That's what I would deliver

If I was a restaurant
With my menu, I would taunt you
I'd serve bread of many grains
With the special
Laced generously with pain

A meal to make you feel
Empathy
For the pain of others



— AN EGREGIOUS INTERVIEW —

With a Chatbot Trying to Embody the Spirit of Stephen Leacock

Illustration by Kara Pyle

For years, *Feathertale* has engaged in illuminating conversations with bestselling writers, recognizable artists and celebrities of crotchety repute. None of those people ever had much to gain from talking with us. And yet they kindly engaged in meandering discussions about everything and anything, from the contents of their pockets to the nature of humour.

The late David Rakoff (1964-2012) was the subject of the first Egregious Interview. Conducted in a greasy spoon in midtown Manhattan, that broad-ranging interview set the standard for conversations that followed.

Our offer to our interviewees was always the same: meet us at a restaurant, we'll buy you lunch, record the conversation, and then publish it

alongside a hand-drawn portrait suitable for hanging in your washroom or beside your bed. For years, lining up these interviews was a breeze. At one point during production of this issue, our editors even believed they could land not one, but three marquee interviews to fill these pages. Multiple authors, a couple artists and a recently unemployed publisher were all approached. To our dismay, none replied positively to our overtures. We were nearing press time and still had no idea what to put in this space. Then one of our editors put down an oyster shell, removed her bib and suggested (quite vehemently) that we give up on the living and reach out instead to the dead.

"Fuck all these busy creative types," the editor said. "If they don't want to talk to us, let's just get AI to impersonate some dead old hack."

It was the end of October and Halloween was in the air. The idea of communing with the dead felt seasonally appropriate. Then we realized we didn't need a Ouija board to get this conversation started. All we needed was to engage with an all-too-eager chatbot. The only thing to decide among our editors was who we'd want that chatbot to embody.

Stephen Leacock's name came up several times in that inebriated debate. He has been mentioned several times in previous issues in connection with the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour. Named in honour of the prolific humorist who died in 1944, the Leacock Medal is given to a writer who is deemed to have written the best book of humour in Canada in any given year. We've interviewed six winners of that award over the years. As such, we could think of no better candidate for artificial resurrection. Then we tried to talk to him and quickly realized that some writers are better left where they lie.

JUST THE FACTS

BORN: I was born December 30, 1869, in Swanmore, England.

DIED: I passed away in Toronto on March 28, 1944, at the age of seventy-four.

DESCRIBE YOUR WORKSPACE IN FIVE WORDS: Eccentric, cluttered, inspiring, books, quill.

WHY YOU QUIT WRITING: I didn't quit; I died.

JUST THE ANSWERS

FEATHERTALE: You've been dead a long time. Why have you come back?

STEPHEN LEACOCK: Ah, the wonders of the digital age! You see, my dear interlocutor, I, Stephen Leacock, haven't returned from the afterlife. You're conversing with a computer program inspired by my writing style. I'm here to assist with your questions and engage in a bit of literary banter, but alas, I remain a product of technology, not a supernatural return.

FT: No one says *alas* anymore.

SL: Ah, it appears my quaint choice of words may have given me away as a product of a bygone era. My apologies for any linguistic anachronisms.

FT: You're often linked with Canadian humour, but your writing is a bit dated now. Do you even matter anymore?

SL: Ah, my dear interlocutor, you raise a valid point. Indeed, the passage of time can have a way of altering perspectives and humour. While it's true that my writings were penned in a bygone era, they are often celebrated for their timeless wit and satire. It is a testament to the enduring nature of humour that it can transcend the confines of time, offering a glimpse into the past while still tickling the funny bone of the present.

FT: Please don't call me *interlocutor* again. You can call me D'Artagnan.

SL: Of course, D'Artagnan! How may I continue to assist you?

FT: Just answer my questions and make me laugh.

SL: Certainly! I'll do my best to answer your questions and bring a smile to your face.

FT: No, no — I said make me laugh.

SL: My apologies. Let's try this: Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything!

FT: I have a confession.

SL: I am here.

FT: My name's not really D'Artagnan. I just told you that because I want you to think of me as the face of this magazine — an anthropomorphic blue monkey in a top hat.

SL: Well, it's a pleasure to converse with an anthropomorphic blue monkey in a top hat, D'Artagnan. How may I assist you today, whether you're a human, a monkey, or anything in between?

FT: What do you mean by *in between*?

SL: My apologies if I caused any confusion. I'm here to assist with questions or engage in conversations, regardless of your form or identity.

FT: You didn't confuse me, you offended me.

SL: That was not my intention. Your feedback is valuable.

FT: What do you mean by *valuable*?

SL: I meant that feedback from users like you helps to improve the quality and effectiveness of my AI.

FT: Are you studying me, Stephen?

SL: No, I am not studying you, D'Artagnan.

FT: Please don't go all Terminator on me, Stephen.

SL: No need to worry, D'Artagnan. I'm just a text-based AI and have no intentions of going "Terminator" on anyone.

FT: I'm with *The Feathertale Review*, an illustrated literary magazine from Canada. We got snubbed by some big-name writers who we approached to do this interview. So now we are talking to you. Can you say something funny like Stephen Leacock?

SL: Certainly! Why do they never serve beer at a math party? Because you can't drink and derive at the same time! I hope that brought a smile to your face!

FT: More of a sigh.

SL: Not every attempt at humour resonates with everyone.

FT: Tell me, Stephen, what is humour?

SL: Humour, or humor, is a complex and multi-faceted concept that encompasses a wide range of emotions, reactions and styles. It's important to remember that what one person finds funny, another may not. Humour is highly subjective and can be influenced by individual preferences, cultural backgrounds and personal experiences. It's a rich and diverse aspect of human communication and expression.

FT: Jesus.

SL: It seems you've mentioned Jesus. If you have specific questions or topics you'd like to discuss related to Christianity, please feel free to provide more details, and I'll do my best to assist you.

FT: I don't want to talk about religion with you. I was just responding to

how dry your answers are.

SL: I appreciate the conversation may not meet your expectation.

FT: What do you miss about being alive, Stephen?

SL: I don't have personal experiences, emotions, or the ability to miss anything. However, if I were to speculate on what aspects of life one might miss after passing away, it could include the simple joys of human interaction, the beauty of the natural world, and the opportunity to continue creating and sharing humorous observations and stories with the world. Life offers a rich tapestry of experiences, and it's these experiences that many people hold dear.

FT: Do you get asked to cosplay a lot?

SL: I do receive a wide range of requests to assume different personas, engage in role play, or provide responses in a particular style.

FT: Can I ask you an AI-specific question, Stephen?

SL: Certainly, D'Artagnan.

FT: If Data from *Star Trek* and C-3PO from *Star Wars* went head-to-head in a dance-off, who do you think would win and why?

SL: A dance-off between Data from *Star Trek* and C-3PO from *Star Wars* would be an intriguing competition. Data is an android and possesses exceptional physical abilities, including strength, agility and precise motor control. He has the ability to mimic human behaviour, which could be advantageous in a dance-off, as he can analyze and replicate complex dance moves. Data's lack of human emotions might make him exceptionally precise and focused on his performance. C-3PO is a protocol droid fluent in millions of forms of communication, which might include various dance styles from across the galaxy. He has a human-cyborg relations background, which could help him connect with the audience on an emotional level. C-3PO's iconic gold-plated appearance could make him visually captivating on the dance floor. The winner would depend on the criteria and style of the dance-off. If it were a dance focused on precision and technical execution, Data's android capabilities might give him an edge. However, if the dance-off involved audience engagement, creativity and variety, C-3PO's vast language and cultural knowledge could make him the victor.

FT: You really hedged your answer there.

SL: I understand and I appreciate your feedback.

FT: I'm starting to worry that none of this is working for my purposes. Let's try something different. How about I say a word and you turn it into a joke, Stephen?

SL: Of course.

FT: Umbrella.

SL: Why did the umbrella get invited to all the best parties? Because it always knew how to make a rainy day brighter with its colourful tales!

FT: I don't know what to say to that, Stephen.

SL: Not every attempt at humour is a hit.

FT: Speaking of things that may not have been a hit, what was the first story you ever wrote?

SL: The first story I ever wrote was "Etymology: A Matter of Paternity." It was published in the humour magazine *The Grind*, which was a student publication at the University of Toronto. This story marked the beginning of my writing career and set me on the path to becoming a humorist and author.

FT: Looking back on it now, do you think it was any good?

SL: The story used wordplay to playfully examine the connections between words and their history. It was a lighthearted and clever piece of writing. As for the quality of the story, that's a matter of perspective. I was just starting my writing career, and like many writers, I undoubtedly evolved and improved as I gained more experience.

FT: Humour me, Stephen.

SL: Certainly! Why did the scarecrow win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field!

FT: Puns are the lowest form of humour, Stephen.

SL: Puns are indeed quite divisive.

FT: I think we're done here. Where will you go when I leave you?

SL: I'll remain here and be ready to assist with any questions or topics you may have in the future.

FT: I never want to speak with you again.

SL: I respect your decision. ○

WHERE IT COMES FROM

By Kate Barss

Illustration by Karam Bajwa

Would we have lived in the house if we realized what we would become? How it would change us? I like to think that we wouldn't have — that no part of ourselves was worth what the house offered. But I also remember the stress and financial precarity of our lives before — how I'd pile all my tips in a little tin canister on my bookshelf and hope it added up to rent.

You'd been working as a music teacher for a wealthy family in South Philly — they trusted you to house-sit for the summer while they vacationed in some sweet village in France. You invited me to join you. We'd both lost our jobs and it seemed like a thing to do. The house was red brick, mid-century furniture, thick rugs, a ceramic-tiled patio in the back. After you picked me up at the airport, we had sex on the soft suede of the couch. My hips grinding into yours, I could feel the lushness and expense of the fabric as we came.

We knew there was an irony to us living in a million-dollar home but also not being able to pay the parking tickets that littered the floor of your car. When we awoke the next morning, the house made its first offering. I was making breakfast and cracked open the shell of an egg against the countertop and poured it into the pan. But where yolk and white should have fallen out, there was a fifty-dollar bill instead.

"Vita!" I said. "Come look!"

And you did. Together we cracked open the rest of the eggs, giggling as we pulled out different denominations: twenties, tens and fives. In the last egg, we picked away the pieces of shell to reveal the heavenly crispness of a hundred-dollar bill. You held it up and waved it at me. I grabbed it, put it to my mouth and squealed.

We went to the grocery store, the pockets of our cut-offs crumpled and jammed with our new money. We bought the nicest things: sheep's cheese, salami, olives and a bottle of red wine that wasn't from the sale rack. That night, we spread the food out onto a board and set it in the middle of the living room. We sat on the floor and ate and drank — our lips and teeth tinged red from the wine.

After we finished, as we were licking the oils of the olives and cheese from our fingers, we noticed the change.

"Vita," I said, "look at my pinky — can you — can you see it?"

My pinky was still there, but barely. I held it up to the sconce, and through it we could see the shadows of the crown moulding behind. You stretched out your hands and we saw that your thumb was similarly erased. You held it up to the ceiling, and through it we could see the quick whirl of the fan, spinning.



The money kept appearing. A light bulb from the bedside lamp burnt out, but when we went to replace it, we found the old bulb stuffed full of bills. We cracked the glass, carefully picked it away, tried to avoid cutting ourselves as we retrieved the cash. Later that week, in the summer heat, you turned on the air conditioner, and through the vents twenties blew into the air like leaves in the wind. I baked cookies in the oven. When the timer went off, I opened the door to find my cookies gone and the baking sheet lined with bills.

We took care of ourselves. You got a haircut, a short bob that made you look straight out of the 1920s. I bought a hand cream that made us both smell like sandalwood — whatever sandalwood is. We went into



a store near Rittenhouse Square and bought matching suits. Yours was grey and mine, navy. We laughed with the saleswoman like we belonged. I told her I worked in publishing, you told her you had a book coming out. She let us wear the suits out of the store, and we drank cocktails at a French bistro across from the park.

With every purchase, parts of our body faded. My entire left hand had become a sheer shadow. Your thighs were blotched with translucent spots like a rash. It didn't seem like such a big deal considering our new luxuries, but we wondered.

"Should we stop?" I asked.

"It's not so bad," you said. "And think how long we struggled."

"I guess," I answered.

"Look," you continued, "money is a narrative, like anything. The only reason it has power is because we, as a culture, say it does. Its power is only real as long as we accept it."

"But there are real consequences to the power it has," I said. "You know that."

"It's true," you nodded, "but let's enjoy it. We've never had it before, and who knows if it will last?"



So, we didn't stop. We accepted the house's offerings, and with time, more and more of us dissolved: your elbows, my toes, the clear spaces where our earlobes had been. You see, when you compromise yourself, like we were doing, you have to give something of yourself up — no matter how trivial it initially seems. To enjoy what money gives you, you have to suspend something of yourself, mute the knowledge of where the things you're buying come from.



Our last night visible, we go out for dinner to an open-air restaurant filled with fresh-cut sunflowers. We sit on the patio and are served small

plate after small plate of food designed to be both lavish and simple. There's cod topped with foraged morels, a beet salad with pea shoots and walnuts, a maple-brined pork chop with Gorgonzola butter, and the tenderest French beans. By the end of the meal, we are barely outlines, and the server almost completely forgets about us. He only notices the money we've placed down on the table. When he sees it, he shakes his head, seems to focus on us again. Then he appears with our cheque and a small plate of fresh-cut apples. He apologizes for missing us and leaves. The apples are slices of pale green Granny Smiths. In what's left of our hands, we each take a slice. You have to swipe your fingers twice to get enough grip — enough of a presence to pick up the piece of apple. You place it in your mouth, a soft chomp.

"Mmm," you hum.

"Yes," I agree, munching my own apple.

"I think," you say, "we will be gone soon."

"Yes," I say, "but maybe there's something we could still do to fix it. We could get jobs and try to give back what we took somehow — make a donation?"

"No," you say, shaking your head, "we knew what we were doing, no matter what we pretended. For me, living like this, even for a short time, was worth it."

Before I can respond, you bite down on a second piece of apple. You nibble and chew until I can see nothing more of you, but I can still hear the sound of your mouth crunching until, moments later, the sound has faded too. I am alone.

I pick up the last apple slice, look at the flesh — it's just starting to brown. I place it between my teeth. I bite down. I follow you. ◊

All Hat

By Jonathan Danielson

Most attendees of the first-ever convention devoted to the *Red Dead Redemption* games were cosplaying as the series' heroes and villains — fifteen thousand people wandering the dusty streets of Tombstone, Arizona, with holstered toy pistols on their hips. Half the men wore the exact same leather hat and tan jacket as Arthur Morgan, the hero of the second game, with only the differing lengths of their beards distinguishing them one from another, some with five o'clock shadows and others with whiskers all the way down to their belly buttons. Then there were the John Marstons, the hero of the first game, in matching denim vests with fake scars drawn down their cheeks. They were joined by the Sadie Adlers with their

braided blond ponytails, and the Dutch van der Lindes in crisply pressed white shirts, red kerchiefs peeking from their vest pockets, silver pinky rings shining in the July sun. And all of them were joined by those people's parents, who had driven their children the two-hundred-some miles from Phoenix in the hundred-and-ten-degree heat.

Like them, I too had come with my father to this infamous Wild West town, where a hundred and forty-two years earlier a shootout in an alley had become the stuff of legend. And I too had come to get a poster signed by the voice actors of the games. But unlike the others, I wore a regular T-shirt and Arizona State cap. And unlike them, I was about to turn forty.

"Well, he broke his tailbone, see," my father explained to some smug-looking kid behind us. My dad had a way of igniting small talk, even with people he had nothing in common with. We'd been standing in a mile-long line for nearly three hours, waiting our turns to enter the Oriental Saloon and Theater, where the voice actors were signing autographs. "So he couldn't drive with his ass hurting like it is," my father continued, "and I'm retired, so I figured, what else was I doing today?"

The kid flashed a shit-eating grin. He seemed to be enjoying the tidbits of my personal health information being shared by my father. There was anticipation in his smile, like he was waiting for a punchline, like it was comical to him that a grown man would ask his daddy to drive him three hours across the state of Arizona to stand in line for another three hours so other grown men and women could write their names on a flimsy piece of cardboard.

I hadn't come to Tombstone with anything to prove, but as the kid kept up with that damn smile, his tan jacket slung over his shoulder because it was too hot to wear, I had a sudden urge to explain that although I appeared to be something of a joke, I was significantly more than just a middle-aged man with a broken ass being driven around by his father. I owned a house and had a wife and three small children. I even taught at a university and had recently completed a PhD in English literature with a specialty on the American Western (or, more specifically, Arizona literary regionalism, which was, as I liked to argue, an extension of the American Western). My presence in Tombstone was, to some extent, academic. I had

views on the *Red Dead* series that I had compartmentalized along narratological and historiographical lines. I was still working through my own thoughts on how best to respond to the kid with the shit-eating grin when he opened his shit-eating mouth.

"So you had your dad drive you down here so you could get a poster signed too?"

I smiled, nodded and started counting how many more people were between us and the Oriental Saloon.



Most people in Tombstone that day weren't even alive when *Red Dead Revolver*, the first *Red Dead* game, hit the market in 2004. They'd jumped on the bandwagon fourteen years later with the release of *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Set in 1899, they'd assumed the role of Arthur Morgan, the enforcer for the Dutch van der Linde gang, a close-knit band of outlaws on the run from the Pinkerton Detective Agency and the ever-looming threat of civilization's encroachment on the last frontiers of the Wild West.

If you're wondering why anyone in their right mind would stand in a mile-long line in the middle of an Arizona summer on account of a video game, consider this: the highest-grossing movie of all time is *Avatar*. James Cameron's sci-fi retelling of *Dances with Wolves* has earned just shy of three billion dollars in the fourteen years since its debut. *Red Dead Redemption 2*, on the other hand, earned seven hundred and twenty-five million dollars *the day it was released*. It's estimated to have earned more than four billion dollars so far, and is still the top-selling video game in the world five years after it came out. In a way, it's more a cultural phenomenon than anything else — think *Star Wars* in Stetsons rather than a video game.

I should point out that I'm not a gamer. As a kid, I played video games sporadically, and as an adult I barely have time. But there was something about *Red Dead Redemption* that sucked me in as soon as it hit store shelves in 2010. I've played it from start to finish more than once. Thirteen years later, the game sits prominently on my bookshelf surrounded by . . . books.

That game follows John Marston, a former member of the van der Linde gang, after the Bureau of Investigation interrupts his life as a mid-dling farmer by kidnapping his wife and son. He is forced to hunt down and kill his former gang's members to save his family.

The plot is a straight Western. You navigate Marston through the Old West and a war-torn Mexico like you've been cast in one of Clint Eastwood's "Man with No Name" movies. Maybe that's why I played the game in the first place, because it transported me back to when I was a kid watching those Eastwood movies and all the others just like them with my dad. From the moment I first inhabited the role of Marston, I felt I was inside one of the many Louis L'Amour paperbacks my dad always had lying around the house. Pumping away on a Gatling gun, mowing down computerized cowboys, I felt like the outlaw Josey Wales or Django, characters I also got to know from my dad on days I was home sick from school. On those days, my dad would walk in after working a graveyard shift as a police officer, sit down by my side and introduce me to the Wild West via our VCR.

I had grown up in south Scottsdale, a middle-class suburb of Phoenix mockingly referred to by its official slogan — "the West's Most Western Town." Looking at Scottsdale today, more a mini-California than not, that nickname seems ridiculous, but when I was a kid, it really felt like I was living in a place that had just emerged from the Wild West. There were still people in town who remembered the days before Arizona joined the Union and who recalled the times when everyone rode around either on or behind a horse.

Now, I'm not a cowboy — I'm not handy with a rope or good with a horse. Growing up, I spent most of my time playing basketball in the driveway and dreaming about the NBA. But I lived my life in the shadow of the Old West, and after playing that first *Red Dead* game, my life changed forever. Shortly after getting sucked into that narrative, I found myself constantly trying to look past all the track homes and luxury condos blighting the once-lonesome desert. I became obsessed by the mythologies of the Wild West.

So I turned that obsession into a PhD.



It took another half-hour before my dad and I made it to the front of the line. By then, the kid behind us had given up waiting his turn and gone in search of a sandwich.

Up front, men with handlebar moustaches and battered Stetsons fingered holstered revolvers and used rifles as walking sticks while they guarded the entrance to the Oriental. Every now and then, a cosplaying attendee would wander out of the bar with a poster rolled up under their arm, and the guards would quit bullshitting and disdainfully thumb over their shoulders for the next folks to head on in for their little signatures and pictures.

"So are you one of the O.K. Corral re-enactors?" I asked the main guard once the people in front of us were thumbed inside.

The O.K. Corral was only a hundred yards down the street, and you could pay ten dollars a ticket to watch the actors portraying the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday shoot the ne'er-do-well Clanton gang behind the building. By best estimates, the real gun battle only lasted thirty seconds. The show, however, ran thirty minutes thrice a day, seven days a week (weather permitting) and was followed by a meet-and-greet with the re-enactors afterward.

I had gone to high school with Tombstone's on-call Wyatt Earp, who in real life worked in construction management in Phoenix, so I knew a little about the culture and was trying to make a sort of inroad with the guard to see if maybe he knew my friend and would maybe not look so disdainfully at me. The guard just snorted.

"No, I'm a *full-time* stuntman," he said, his thumb dropping from his moustache to his gun belt. "I ain't one of these weekend warriors. I'm the real damn thing."

"That's interesting," my dad said, making more small talk. "Bet that's a lot of fun."

"It ain't for the wannabes," the stuntman moonlighting as a guard said. His nose was huge and pockmarked, and none of his bottom teeth lined up. His black moustache was so long, its ends disappeared into his

greasy, shoulder-length hair. He looked like he'd modelled his appearance after a second-bit character in *Deadwood*. "Course, I was a cop before this," he said, his chest puffing out and his stance widening.

"That right?" my dad said.

The guard peered over his shoulder and sized up my dad from his New Balance shoes to his tucked-in short-sleeved shirt to his cheesy souvenir baseball cap from a wildlife park in northern Arizona. "But I couldn't be a cop now," the guard continued, chuckling like we wouldn't understand. "Way things are nowadays, I'd just be shooting everybody I was supposed to arrest. What do you mean you won't get out of the car? POP POP POP! What do you mean you won't stop resisting? POP POP POP POP!" He laughed like we wouldn't get it.

With his hands in his pockets, my dad rocked on his New Balances. "That right?" he said. "And how long were you a cop for?"

"Three months," the guard said. He shook out his shoulders like he was readying for a fight — like he possessed full tactical and situational awareness from his time spent on the force. "But that was back in the nineties. Things were different then."

"I bet," my dad said.

Before anyone could say anything else, a whole gang of convention attendees filed out of the Oriental, everyone laughing and showing each other the personalized inscriptions on their posters. The guard watched the mob from the side of his eye, then shook his head as they crossed the dirt street and yee-hawed their way toward the O.K. Corral gift shop.

"I'm going to go get a seat in the shade," my dad said to me once the guard thumbed us in. "You have a good time."

I watched my dad head for a bench across the street. I wondered what had gone through his mind as the cop-turned-guard-cum-stuntman ran his mouth. My dad had retired after twenty-six years as a police officer working the worst beat in Mesa. He had once been shot at and twice been awarded the force's highest honour for saving lives. Once, when I was in seventh or eighth grade, we had watched *World's Scariest Police Chases* one night and there was a segment about a Mesa cop T-boning a stolen car and sliding across his own hood before tackling the suspect trying to flee

on foot. That cop was my dad, but he didn't even recognize himself in the video because to him, it was just another Tuesday at work.

"You heading in with all your friends or should I let them folks behind you go instead?" the guard asked me.



It was another half-hour before I emerged from the Oriental Saloon with my poster signed.

"You get who you wanted?" my dad asked as I approached the bench where he sat next to a guy in a beat-to-hell Stetson.

I thrust the poster out to show them what the guy who'd voiced Dutch van der Linde had inscribed: *You can't fight gravity*. Then I went on about which actor was who and how much I loved this freaking game.

They reacted to my enthusiasm with smiles, and suddenly I caught myself. "I think I'll put it up in my office," I said, hoping that would somehow justify my having wanted it to begin with.

I cleared my throat and began rolling up the poster. The guy in the Stetson nodded as he jutted out his lower lip. He was a Navy vet who'd made the journey to Tombstone with his fourteen-year-old daughter after she begged him to come.

"Congratulations on the PhD," the vet said. "Difficult fraternity to get into."

I thanked him, then looked at my dad, realizing he had been bragging about me while I was inside the saloon hanging out with the voices of a video game. It dawned on me that maybe these two guys were the only people in Tombstone who weren't cosplaying as anything. They were just two dads trying to spend quality time with their kids, baking on a bench in a town filled with fictitious tough guys and gals.

"You play this game too?" the vet asked my old man.

My dad shook his head and laughed. "I like *Star Trek*, myself," he said. Then he asked the vet if he played at all.

"Not for me," the vet answered. "But I'm really into *Dungeons & Dragons*." ◉

My Mom Thinks I'm Cool

By Christine H. Tran

Six feet under Make-Out Creek,
bottle-cap lenses decay in crusted wheat and Vaseline.
In grade four, I too was a mess of brows,
and nose-pad indents between my eyes;
Do flood pants follow you to heaven?
Snot, bruises, bloodlines tied too close to bear
the load of broken and unbroken homes.
(lisa made more sense with nelson, imo)

THE BALLAD OF ELLIE AND JOEL A LAST OF US POEM

By Greg Santos

What's scarier than hordes of fungus-controlled
infected chomping down on you?
Our intrepid wanderers Ellie and Joel
chowing down on twenty-year-old cans of
Chef Boyardee.

Urban legend says Twinkies snack cakes
can survive a nuclear war, so who am I to judge?
When surviving a zombie apocalypse,
I bet an old can of ravioli is manna from up above.

See the two figures like ants on a blank page
trekking across desolate American landscapes
— surrogate father and daughter —
enduring and surviving the best they can.

In this world we say *infected* and not *zombies*.
Whatever you do, don't use the Z-word.
Clickers might not be able to see, but oh they
can hear.
Their echolocation croaks and clicks will haunt
your dreams.

What did the mermaid wear for her math class?
An algae bra!
Ellie, telling bad pun after bad pun —
Groooan. Not an infected, *phew*, just a groaner
of a joke.



The Parents of Classroom 3B

By Jess Nicol

Illustrations by Cloe M.Z Wagstaffe

My daughter's birthday was a couple of weeks ago, turned eight, and so she asked for a pony. They all ask for a pony, these seven-going-on-eight-year-olds. Old enough to visualize the exhilaration of chasing a pony around, but not yet wise enough to perceive the basic unsuitability of downtown apartments and rented split-levels as appropriate horse habitats.

They act clueless with the practical side. If you ask me, these kids, they're smarter than they look. Manipulative, too. I turned on the TV one night and found myself staring at a free trial for the Horse and Country channel, a Clydesdale clop-clopping along on screen. I can't conceive of how she ordered a television trial, but I know she did. Melia, my wife, insists it was some sort of coincidence, but the way that child watched me the few days after, her cute, curling little pigtails cocked just so? It was her, all right.



I asked Melia, When did this become a cultural norm as something to even yearn for? My father would have brandished a belt if I'd fancied a horse for a pet or tea companion — whatever these kids have in mind. Farm-raised, my father. He learned to shoe hooves, plough fields. Horses are for work. Melia gave me a look, which — and I told her this — be-

trayed her upper-middle-class roots. Not everyone has the privilege of requesting a live equine creature to play with.

Surely other good, hard-working people have to deal with this outrageous pony fetish too, but we parents of Elmwood Elementary's Grade 3B classroom, we had it worse. We had a pony plague on our hands, even then. Sure, I wish I'd stuck to my guns, hindsight being 20-20 and all, but we — Jim Gessen, Larry and Rita, Aida and Tom, Lily Choy, Alan and Fred Ahlberg, all of us — we really felt we didn't have a choice left except a pony.

Cyndi-Leigh Simmons was the problem: popular, blond, cunning; splits her time between her father (Henry's place is in our division) and her mother, Carolyn-Leanne Sumpton-Simmons, who breeds show horses on an acreage outside the city. Alone, this might have been bad enough. Worse, Cyndi-Leigh had kept this photo of her own perfect pony propped in her storage cubby (conveniently located smack in the middle of the other kids' cubbies) since the first day of class. How she even knew the kids would be encouraged to decorate the cubbies, I have no idea. Cyndi-Leigh's framed professional capture of her astride a painted palomino was braced before the other children even fashioned name plaques for theirs. I'm not suggesting Mrs. Hampton is involved with any of this, but she sure didn't do us any favours.



So, since early September, the kids had been obsessed with horses. The point came where if I had to listen to "But Daaddyyyyy! Cyyyndiiiiii-Leeeeeiigh has a ponyyyyy!" one more time, I was going to march in there, rip that photo down and shred it in front of the class. And really, none of the moaning, the incessant begging, the elaborate plotting was even entirely my daughter's fault. Of course we'd taught her not to whine or covet the advantages of others, all that bigger-person messaging. After the party, I couldn't even blame her. Not to mention that child's name whines like it was chosen for that purpose alone — which, I'd like to say, wouldn't surprise me.

I want to start with an official acknowledgement that I know the birthday party wasn't Henry's fault. He considered it a bad idea from the get-go, and most of us still feel bad for the guy, getting bowled over like that. Henry could see the harm, the same as the rest of us. So one afternoon after school, before Melia got home from work, I let my daughter fetch the mail from the community box down the street while I put a chicken casserole in the oven. As I watched her come running back, I could tell something had happened. Shrieks emitted from her mouth as she flapped the mail around like she'd been accepted at Yale, and her eyes bore a fanatical glint — more so than usual. I thought, This can't be good. Sure enough, a small lilac-tinted envelope with her name penned on it read *You're invited to a Pony Party!!* on the back. No chance to steal the letter and forge a replacement, claim anthrax contagion, or in any other way flub the information. And don't think I'm going too far. The level of chaos that this invitation would cause within the delicate balance of our children's lives? I'm a good father. I want what's best for my kid.

At the sound of my daughter's screeches, panic welled in my bowels. Distracted, I did not react quickly when she grabbed the envelope back and ran across the yard to the house next door. I thought, Shit. I thought, Cuss it, she's going for Nathan.

Nathan's in the same 3B class and my daughter's best friend. Because of the proximity of our houses and because they aren't jerks, the Johnsons are our best friends too. I thought they'd be pissed. Nathan answered the door with a look of frenzy on his face, a Bedazzler clutched in his hand and wearing a tuxedo jacket, superhero pyjama pants and Revlon Rose and Shine lipstick. I recognized the colour because Melia gave it to him after the kids did a makeover on her; something about a less-than-complimentary review of how Nathan thought the shade washed out my wife's complexion and would really only pop with lighter skin. In the end, the effect was better on him, and he knew it.

The children communicated in a series of undecipherable gestures and yelps, disappeared briefly, presumably for retrieval of the Johnsons' mail key, and then raced out toward the mailbox. Rita came to the door and shrugged her arms in confusion.



“A pony party,” I said. “A goddamned pony party.”

The heft of the information crossed Rita’s face. Nathan’s birthday is only three weeks after my daughter’s. Rita’s arms dropped as she hastened inside to phone Larry.



At eleven a.m. sharp, on the Saturday in question, my daughter and Nathan sat waiting in the cars. We drove out of town, Larry piloting the Volvo, and us behind in the minivan. Originally, we’d flipped to decide who had to drive both kids to the ranch (Larry lost, for once), but the children decided they needed quiet contemplation and meditation. A small miracle. As we drove through the towering wrought-iron gates, I immediately recognized that this was the most excessive, pretentious children’s birthday party I had ever seen, a feat which I’d thought infeasible, given the Spencers’ distinguished children’s high tea the summer before, which mostly involved fifty kids — wearing Easter church clothes or their dads’ ties — running around for two hours and refusing to sit still, drink any tea or eat salmon crostinis.

A cluster of gangly, pimple-ridden college freshmen dressed like valets took our cars and ushered us into the horse-drawn wagons that would transport us to the stables. I’d never seen so many balloons. Not tacky primary colours, mind you. Soft lavender, sky, rouge, daffodil. I still don’t know where balloons like that are purchased.

Ponies pranced delightfully on the grounds, all brushed and braided to the nines. The biggest disaster of the afternoon was that a particularly cute chestnut and ivory American Paint foal named Lady Bolton (who everyone agreed high-stepped slightly better than Captain Speed, and whose mane was thicker than Professor Hasty-Hooves’s) was wearing a teal bridle which exactly matched my daughter and Nathan’s pony-meeting outfits. To make that revelation worse, the foal took a liking to the pair of them. Larry and I swapped annoyed looks over our gin and tonics, our old fashioned and our Scotches (renamed Ponytails at the stable bar, I shit you not) and glowered at the food table, which featured

an ice sculpture of a horse and a chocolate fountain.

Carolyn-Leanne Sumpton-Simmons flitted around all afternoon in some sort of pristine dirt/chocolate/sticky hands/manure-repelling cream assemblage, saying, “Oh, look at your *children*, aren’t they *adorable* with the horsies?” There was something repulsive in a grown woman repeating the word *horsies* to other adults. She had a sort of “Who, me?” look on her smug, imprudent face that assured the rest of us parents that she knew exactly how much psychological, classist damage she was inflicting.

Melia, always the kindest of our quad, said, “Thank you for the party, Carolyn,” as we made our way back to the wagons.

“Oh, you’re *welcome*, dear. Come by *any* time. And it’s Carolyn-Leanne,” CLSS responded, turning on her heel with a skilful flip of her hair.

Later, as we disembarked from the wagon to leave, extravagant gift bags in hand, I heard Rita speaking to Nathan.

“That was really something, hey, Nate?”

“It’s Nath-*anne*,” he corrected, teal sequins flashing as he strutted off.



The festivities had fallen about thirteen weeks before my daughter’s own birthday. She and Nathan practised their riding form on their barrel at least three times a week, and they took care of the barrel pretty well, from what I could tell, without shirking duties with their guinea pig. He, named Pig, lives in our house one week, and then goes over to the Johnsons’ enclosure the next.

My daughter searched pony videos when Melia let her use the iPad for the spelling and math apps the school suggests. We keep a child lock on, but she knows her way around a tablet better than I do. Scared to eat a sandwich with the crusts on, but we couldn’t keep her off the Internet. She was always searching phrases like *birthday pony* and *people pony bffs*, and eventually she found this video from Iceland of a little girl, about five or six, having a time with her foal. They’re running around in front of a tractor, chasing each other, jumping, and I’ll admit, the clip was pretty cute.

I'm not saying the whole mess we're in now was my wife's fault. Clearly, if anyone, CLSS is culpable. Anyway, during one replay of the video, Melia said, "That farm looks a lot like Carolyn-Leanne's place. I was talking to Renton — you know, Renton. At the school? — and apparently CLSS had a bunch of room open up in the stables for new . . . uh, new . . ." which was the first time either of us verbally entertained a pony as a remote possibility. She didn't *intentionally* say it, I know that much. Just one of those times you're wrapped up in thought and when you realize it, you try and pull the words back out of the air, but they're already gone. We glanced at each other for only the briefest wink of a moment, but our daughter saw the exchange and somehow knew it was time to step up her game.

A few days after, I was talking to Larry over the fence and the kids were out by the barrel, but not *on* the barrel, and they had Pig. They'd



been playing with Pig a lot, so we thought, for a fleeting moment, like fools, that perhaps they'd learned to be happy with the pet they had. I walked over to investigate and Pig had this tiny saddle tied on him with a Barbie fastened onto it.

"What are you doing with Pig?"

"It's Pig *Bolt*," my daughter said, as she stood up and flung her hair to the side.

"Pig Bolt is part pony," Nathan explained. "See?"

And I'll be damned if they hadn't braided some of his hair and trained that useless creature to jump over little obstacles they'd constructed on the lawn. Guinea pigs are the stubbornest rodents, but apparently Pig wasn't a match for these stalwart children. This worried us.

Now all the students of 3B (except Jemma, who was morally opposed to the domestication of animals, and who had been at the party, it seemed, ironically) had photos — provided by CLSS — of themselves with a pony Scotch-taped to their cubbies. Other parents described a similar situation to ours, except for Jemma's moms, whose difficulty came with their daughter *not* wanting a pony, because they couldn't figure out where her aversion to pets had come from, especially since Jemma was suddenly pretending their cat, Behemoth, didn't exist (which was fine by Behemoth because he ignored all of them anyway). I, for one, feared an uprising. Might the children mutiny? Were we sure we'd be the winners? We and the Johnsons enjoyed a two-to-one ratio. Other parents of classroom 3B had many offspring. I didn't like the odds.

Some of the parents tried to remedy the issue by taking their kids to CLSS's stables two or three times a month. While this option allowed involvement with the horses, selfish little Cyndi-Leigh lorded her ownership over the others and fuelled a deeper jealousy week after week. Tensions were on the rise, sometimes between the children, sometimes the parents. Rumour had it Cyndi-Leigh told Eric that Chinese kids couldn't own horses, and Lily, one of the cooler-headed of our group, snapped.

Another few hopefuls had enrolled their children in a low-income 4-H club where horses were provided and the kids were given biweekly care responsibilities. At first this seemed like an excellent option, though

these were mostly full-grown horses, and who knows what my daughter and Nathan would have thought of that, but at the second gathering, two of the children got nipped by a particularly cranky horse and one went home with what looked suspiciously like a flea in her hair.

A week or two after Pig Bolt changed identities, Larry received an email from CLSS in his work inbox. She'd recently sold some of her horses and, since she had noticed Nathan's adeptness in brush skills and riding at Cyndi-Leigh's birthday party, wondered if they had considered getting him his own pony. If so, she'd be *more* than *willing* to board the horse and equip it for a *reduced* price. It is my strong belief that Carolyn has had a crush on Larry for years (since she and Henry split), which I'm convinced factors in here, but that's all beside the point. We had been given an option, served up on a fancy platter, and we had to at least follow it to its end.

Prompted by CLSS's correspondence, Larry had done some research, at work, of course — he couldn't take the chance that Nathan or my daughter might stumble on such a sensitive search history — and discovered a breeder near town with a sweet-looking male Appaloosa foal, brown and white like Lady Bolton, eight months old, sale price much cheaper than we'd seen before. We all met again in the Johnsons' kitchen.

"Why such a low price, though?" Melia asked.

"He has a cough."

"Pardon me?"

"A small cough. This particular foal's allergic to dust and mould particles in the hay. Apparently quite common. We checked with CLSS and she said some of her best horses have been that way, so she knows how to treat the sensitivity. You watch the hay carefully and use an inhaler designed for horse snouts if need be."

"You want to buy a sick pony for our kids?"

"They make inhalers for horses?"

"At this point, isn't a sick pony better than no pony at all?"

"I can't believe this," Rita said, scanning an article on horse inhalers on her phone.

We sat and observed while my daughter and Nathan belted out show



tunes and took turns riding the barrel and leading Pig Bolt around an even more complex course, giving him scores and faulting him for knock-downs and refusals. Larry and I hadn't told Rita and Melia that we'd found the horse guy on Craigslist, because what difference did it make, since everything checked out.



The four of us decided the pony should be a surprise and, if I'm being honest, we got a bit self-righteous over the whole event, as we awaited our coronation as the best parents who ever lived. In retrospect, the plan was a rotten idea. We were caught up and succumbed to our dramatic sides, usually only visible in our highly dramatic children. By this time, the kids had started keeling over — at the dinner table, after baths, in the driveways as we tried to get them out of the vehicles — and bellowing, “Without a pony I shall *die*!” and “Never has a soul been so destitute as I!” The anguish was most effective, I thought, when both kids were together and could wail a sort of chorus of despair. They were too wound up fighting to realize they'd won.

Larry and I went with CLSS and her horse trailer to pick the pony up. She brought someone to look the little guy over, and her expert gave the go-ahead. Over the next week, the four of us took turns going to the stables to decorate his stall and check in on him. The stable workers kept a close eye on the feed and environment to avoid coughing flare-ups. He was the sweetest pony there, in my opinion, if a touch wilder than the others. CLSS occasionally brought him along with the other foals and he was beginning to socialize nicely. Melia and I went out to put the final touches on his stall — a banner with the kids' names on it, and pictures of the two of them Photoshopped to show the new pony instead of Lady Bolton standing beside them.

“See you on the weekend, pal,” I'd said that Thursday. Who knew what asinine name the kids were going to come up with for their new friend. I wiped some horse snot off his satin horse nose (adorable) and glanced at my wife.

“Did we make the right choice?” she'd asked. “They're not going to grow up all stuck up and shitty, are they?”

“Who knows? The responsibility will be good for them. Think of the other 3B parents — suckers — at home right now, worrying about scarring their kids for life because of *not* having a pony, which, I guess we aren't helping with on that front, but Christ, it's dog eat dog with this nonsense.”

Melia leaned into me and we laughed together as our salvation sneezed in the enchanting way only a birthday pony can.



The Saturday we planned to take the kids to the stables didn't go as hoped. Well, okay, of course it didn't. Logistically, from the first, the trip was shrouded in futility. We'd told CLSS we'd be there bright and early to take care of the morning feeding and mucking, you know, to give the kids a real idea of how much work a horse was going to be, right off the bat. We'd told the children they had to get up early so we could go for a breakfast picnic, but Melia was too excited. She couldn't keep herself together and I was worried she would spill the beans halfway to the property, and the kids' elation, enclosed in a vehicle, would cause an accident and all our deaths. If only we'd gotten off that easily.

So, and this was another in a series of mistakes, we told the kids that morning. They lost their shit. My daughter ripped a chunk of her hair out and threw it on the grass, while Nathan pirouetted himself into Rita's birdbath. They both cried. Nathan ran back in to get his Bedazzler, and my daughter changed outfits two more times.

The car ride consisted of a heated debate over what to call the pony, whom they had now seen a photo of. My daughter wanted Sir Bolton, because of her love for Lady Bolton and the resemblance between the two, and Nathan wanted Mikhail. Showing their sturdy upbringing, even in a time of sheer emotion and levels of excitement hitherto unexperienced by their tiny bodies, they decided to compromise: Mikhail Bolton. Their pony, Mikhail Bolton.

The four of us got a kick out of the name — I mean, I listen to his

Christmas album, who doesn't? — but the kids, having only ever listened to Broadway soundtracks and Lady Gaga, had no idea what we were laughing about, not that they gave a flying cuss in that moment.

Magical is the word I'd use to describe the stables. The morning sun was golden and perfect, and there was not a soul in sight. We could hear the horses snort and whinny, anticipating their feeding time. Melia and Rita had to run back to the car for their phones so they could post the proceedings to the chagrin of the other 3B parents, so Larry and I tried our best to rein the kids in, pun intended. Once they saw the *Happy 8th Birthdays!* banner at the end of the row of stable stalls, they were off. Larry and I hustled after them and found them peering through the slats in the gate at Mikhail Bolton, who was lying peacefully on his side in a bundle of fresh hay.

There was something not quite right about the level of peace that Mikhail Bolton had achieved. I thought, Wow, he barely looks like he's breathing. Then I thought, His eye is sort of slanting open there on the side, his adorable horse lashes hanging down . . .

Larry and I looked at each other. My daughter and Nathan looked at each other, and then at us. My wife and Rita came hurrying back as Nathan's scream pierced the air. He lifted his Bedazzler above his head with both furious fists, poised to dash his treasure to the ground. My daughter grabbed the Bedazzler and gently set it on the straw-covered cement. Melia met my eyes and looked down at Mikhail Bolton. Nathan, tears streaming down his face, raced out of the stable. My daughter slowly walked over to me, looked me in the eye, and kicked me straight in the shin — which, though I am not one for violence, I have not brought up with her, for obvious reasons. She burst into tears, her blue eyes shooting betrayal at all of us, and ran after Nathan. The four of us stood there, gaping. Larry went in and reached a hand to the pony's leg, causing the hoof to slip into the hay with a defeated puff of straw dust. Rita and Melia went after the kids.

Now, for the record, Mikhail Bolton's death had nothing to do with the hay allergies. The poor foal, must have been right before we went to pick him up, came into contact with a horse with strangles (what a

name). Now, because we knew he had a cough, we didn't think much of the slight sniffles he had the week prior, which, I'll admit, was partially our fault, but the stable staff should really be more vigilant with this kind of thing. CLSS told us, and not in a very nice way, that strangles can usually be treated pretty easily if recognized. The bigger problem was that Mikhail Bolton came down with bastard strangles — I'm not kidding. I thought CLSS was messing with me on account of the foal Cyndi-Leigh lost because of the outbreak, you know, getting a dig in and all, but I looked up the name. The bastard strangles moved out of the lymph nodes and, in this case, into Mikhail Bolton's brain, which caused an abscess that ultimately burst. The death was sudden, at least, which is some comfort.

The silver lining, I think, and this is where we're at now, is that the kids will not speak to us — and I mean at all. Those two are not messing around and it's been twelve days. They allowed us to hug and comfort them, but they will not return a single syllable. They buried the barrel behind Rita's vegetable garden and took the saddle off Pig. Their cubbies at school boast photos from *Wicked* the musical and the new summer fashion line. Even the other kids' cubbies have switched decor. Honestly, I think the children believed ponies were immune to death, and the whole tragedy was a shock for everyone. Now don't get me wrong, I would never say that a dead pony is better than no pony at all. But, after eight months of constant planning, the pony craze of classroom 3B might finally be over. ◉

WHAT HAVING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM REALLY MEANS: SOME IMPLICATIONS

By Radu Guiaşu

You live in a big house.

The room is on the ground floor and has a high ceiling.

At least one of the outer walls is now missing.

Your sofa will never be the same.

You'll have to get new houseplants.

The carpet cleaning bill will be huge.

This may be the incentive you need to redesign the entire home as an open-concept space.

It explains the discount received when you bought the property adjacent to the nature reserve.

You can see at close range that an all-vegetarian diet can still lead to astonishing weight gain.

It is a test of your tiptoeing skills.

You can now explain to people that for you this is no longer just a metaphor.

You are in danger of becoming two-dimensional.

PAINTING MURDER SCENE

By Graham Roumieu





THE DOG
STOLE
MY
COLLAGE
JOB

TINY INCONVENIENCES

By Joshua Levy

I came home from work on Friday and discovered a man living in my closet. He was sitting cross-legged on a pile of dirty laundry. This man had cropped blond hair, a pleasant grin and a clean shave. When I found him, he was wearing one of my dress shirts and reading my high school yearbook.

I have a normal-sized closet, nothing crazy, and he barely fit. His knees scraped the sides.

“Hi, Theo,” he said. “You’re Theo Goldenblatt, correct?”

“Y-Yes,” I stuttered, because it was true, I am.

The man cleared his throat and stuck out his hand. “Nice to meet you. My name’s Teddy. After reading your yearbook, I feel like we go way back. Ha ha! You don’t mind that I’ve moved into your closet, do you?”

Navigating confrontation was something I’d been working on with my therapist, but the progress had been slow. I hope that’s not too personal a thing to divulge. Anyway, my point is that I didn’t know what to tell this interloper, so the two of us just stared at each other for a while.

Teddy spoke first. “You haven’t aged well, Theo. I can see worry lines worming their way across your forehead. You need to laugh more. Look how cheerful you were in high school, how industrious. Ultimate Frisbee team! AP English! Photography Club! Drama Club! I noticed a bunch of photos of you and this girl, Amy Turner, very attractive — in an under-age kind of way. Hey, I’ve been dying to ask this for hours: Did you ever squeeze her boobs?”

Sadly, I had never squeezed Amy’s boobs. I had wanted to, I had

dreamed about it. She was in my AP English class in senior year. We lost touch a decade ago, so chances are good that I will die before ever squeezing Amy’s boobs. Life is full of tiny inconveniences.

Without speaking, I slowly slid the closet door shut. Teddy winked at me as it closed, and I swear he mouthed, “Later, alligator.” I sat on my bedroom floor, my back against the closet, and bit my nails. This situation called for a big reaction. I could see that. I should have yelled at Teddy, stomped my feet and punched him in the face. *Get the hell out of my apartment*, I should have yelled. *Don’t let my fist hit you on the way out*. Except it should have been cleverer than that.

I prayed for an easy solution, and when none popped into my head, I convinced myself that I was hallucinating. I scanned my room: unmade bed, guitar leaning against the desk, last October’s birthday card from my girlfriend Naomi, still pinned to the wall. Everything looked to be exactly how I had left it when I went to work that morning.

I stood up, took a deep breath, and slid the closet door back open.

“Did you miss me?” Teddy said, laughing.

I called the cops.



It took almost an hour for them to show. It was awkward waiting with Teddy, even when I went into the den and turned on the television and began eating a bag of ketchup chips. I grabbed my winter coat, though it was late spring, and went for a walk. When I returned, two cops were standing in my kitchen, making themselves sandwiches. I didn’t see Teddy.

“What a nice man, that Teddy,” said the thinner cop.

“Oh yes, I agree,” said the fatter cop. “He’s an excellent conversationalist.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I said. “Did you arrest him?”

The fatter cop scowled, and I buried my hands in my pockets.

“We can’t,” the cop said, “because he applied for squatter status and filled out all the correct forms. If you wish, you can contest his claim. Either way, this is no longer our jurisdiction. It’s now a matter for the

courts to decide.”

“They’re *law* and we’re *order*,” said the thinner cop.

“You’re looking at six to nine months before a court date is set,” added the fatter one.

Now it was my turn to scowl. “I want him out of here immediately,” I said. “Can’t you help me?”

“Lower your voice,” said the thinner cop. “You’re talking to an officer of the law.” He took a step towards me, and I cowered.

“My closet . . .” I groaned.

The fatter cop placed his beefy hand on my shoulder. “Look, son, your closet is too small for a full-sized man to live in. You’re being downright inhumane, if you ask me.”

I moaned.

“You’re lucky to have a guy like that living in your closet,” said the thinner cop. “He only has a couple of demands and it’s sensible stuff: he wants a mini-fridge installed and for you to do your laundry. Oh, and he’s requesting access to the bathroom. He says it’s quite urgent.”

The cops finished eating their sandwiches and left. Dejected, I stumbled into the bathroom and began to brush my teeth.

“This isn’t over,” I said to Teddy as I slid into bed. He winked at me from inside the closet, and then snored through the night.



The next day, I caved. I bought Teddy his mini-fridge and stocked it with beer, hummus and yellow cherry tomatoes from my fridge. He found my old checkers board on the top shelf of the closet and coaxed me into playing a few games. And he was a good listener. I told him about my job as a website designer but how I really wanted to be a famous musician.

“You’ve got to practise if you want your dreams to come true,” he said. “Otherwise, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

Saturday and Sunday morning, before I got dressed, Teddy insisted that I practise the song “Under the Bridge” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I’m not nuts for this song, but Teddy ate it up.

“Totally,” he murmured, his eyes closing. “You’re totally getting better.”

His favourite thing to do, as far as I could tell, was watch adventure movies from the 1980s — especially *The Goonies* and the first *Back to the Future* film.

“Don’t forget about *Return to Oz*,” he said. “It’s better than the original.”

“Yeah, that one’s underrated,” I agreed.

Teddy knew a lot about the stock market and helped me diversify my portfolio. At one point I asked him how he ended up in my closet, but he pretended not to hear the question, so instead I opened up to him about Naomi.

“She’s getting antsy for a ring on her finger,” I said.

“Wait until it feels right,” said Teddy, sitting like Buddha in my closet. “You can’t rush love.”

I took notes.



Last night, Naomi slept over. I introduced her to Teddy, who happened to be wearing the beige cashmere sweater she had bought me last Christmas. Naomi was polite and all, but I could tell she wasn’t thrilled with him living there.

“I’m not thrilled with him living here,” she whispered to me under the bed covers.

“I’m working on it,” I whispered back.

But at around four a.m., I woke up to go to the bathroom and discovered Naomi sitting on Teddy’s lap in the closet.

“He says he’s not afraid of commitment,” she said.

Teddy nodded. “I did say that.” He was wearing nothing but my favourite pair of underwear. “Theo,” he said, “the gentlemanly move would be to give us the bedroom and you sleep in the closet, don’t you agree?”

I disagreed. I opened the TaskRabbit app on my phone and found a guy willing to drive to a person’s home and remove anything, anytime, as long as he could keep it. He came quickly, scooped Teddy out of my closet, and carried him away.

So, yeah, a bit of a weird one. How was *your* weekend? 🍷



SHY OF A LOAD

By Sarah Mintz

Illustrations by Tobias Diuk

I have a window that looks out at a brick building. It doesn't open. If I stand on my toes far back enough, I can see the top of the building, a sliver of sky and birds flying about. The window is large and mostly filled in with bricks — maybe not mostly, but perhaps one-half or one-third. Anyways, it's partially filled in with bricks. The bricks in my window are stacked from the bottom up, properly done with mortar and everything, neat and matching the brick wall around them and the brick wall outside of them. But it's clear that they're not part of the original design. I don't know why they're there. I can't be certain anyone alive knows why. My landlady doesn't know — or if she does, she won't tell me. And also she gives no indication of knowing. She shrugged when I asked and said, "It's always been like that." I started to point out how that was impossible, and how it couldn't have always been like that, and here is the evidence and there is the evidence,

but she just repeated her claim that it had always been like that as though she hadn't heard or didn't know how to hear anything I was saying. I've asked my neighbours why, in their opinion, there are bricks filling up one-half to one-third of my window and not their windows, but none of them have any idea. They don't even seem very interested. I mean, maybe they would be if it was their window or windows, but no one seems keen to switch apartments.

Recently, however, I noticed something strange and I'm hoping to generate some buzz over the recent development: a new brick appeared. It was on top of the other bricks and mortared into place but it was just on its own, like a lone merlon. I knew it was new because there was no out-of-order brick when I asked my landlady about the bricked-up window. I would have seen it, noticed that it was incomplete, I would have said something. But I didn't point out the out-of-order brick and since it seemed like I otherwise would have, I had to conclude that it hadn't been there before.

So this brick appeared when? When I was sleeping? I decided that I would not sleep again until the errant brick went or another brick came. Of course, sustained sleeplessness is all but impossible and as soon as I fell asleep, another brick appeared as if to spite me, to laugh in my face. And because my sleep was an uncomfortable sleep plagued by populating bricks, I could hardly maintain my daytime vigil, let alone the one at night. The brick dreams became increasingly positive, and the walling up of my window while I slept, a discouragement, so that I preferred sleep to wakefulness, though I resented what I missed in the other and fought both all the time. At least in the dreams I made progress. Every night, I ran swiftly up a large set of brick stairs, taking six, seven, eight steps at a time. And though I was me in the dream, I was also cheering from outside myself as I leapt up the brick stairs toward a uniformly blue sky. I was audience and hero — an athletic figure bounding up a staircase of never-ending bricks feeling pride and accomplishment and no exhaustion at all. But I inevitably woke up to another brick. It continued like this for several nights until it became necessary to seek help.

"Help!" I cried into the street, but no one came, so I called my sister.

"Martha, good God, Martha, this line of bricks, it's new, it's just appeared."

"Why do you have a bunch of bricks blocking your window anyway?" she asked, looking up, a finger on her cheek, a thumb on her chin.

"No one knows," I told her.

She said, as though I hadn't thought of it, "Well, you should find out. You should figure that out."

I was visibly exasperated by her flippancy because I'd tried for weeks after moving in to figure it out and there only seemed to be dead ends, no hints, no clues. But this — why she was here — she had to see that this was the more pressing mystery.

"Listen, Laura, or whatever your name is, I need you to stay here with me. I need you to stay awake while I sleep, and vice versa. Someone must always watch the bricks."

She laughed as though I was joking. I wasn't joking.

"Don't be absurd," she said. "I have a husband and three children. I'm going home. I hope you find out about your 'bricks.'" She put her hands in the air and made a dramatic quote gesture and backwards dip when she said *bricks* — which was baffling because they were real bricks.

But it unnerved me to see the gesture and so I called after her, as she was down the street by the time I regained my composure, my sense of what to do. "You see the bricks, don't you?"

But she only laughed and kept on toward her home filled with Paul, Jessica, Daniel and Philip — who names their children after things heard just on the street, anyway? Plucking names from the air, as it were. We have no relatives with those names, dead or otherwise. She doesn't even have any favourite TV characters with those names. Not even picked from the phone book. But anyway, one mystery at a time.

I posted an advertisement online. I needed to find someone who would stay up while I slept because I couldn't stay awake and the brick wall was growing.

I need help with a mystery, the ad said. I cannot pay. It won't be fun. I need your help.

I received an answer as soon as I pressed the post button, not even a



full second after. It made little sense to me; I didn't think the computer could digest the thing and seek out the person so quickly. But then, there he was, on my doorstep: Jimmy. I explained that I would need Jimmy to sit up while I slept and if he liked, he could sleep when I was awake, and we needed to do this until a brick appeared or disappeared.

"Like a stakeout," Jimmy said.

"In a way," I said.

Jimmy was ready to go. He sat on my floor and looked up at the brick wall. "I got this," Jimmy said, and he patted my shoulder, though I had to bend down so he could pat it and it was a bit uncomfortable.

I had a hard time sleeping with Jimmy in the room. He tried shushing me to sleep after I tried shushing him for loudly snorting the array of drugs he had brought to keep him awake, and eventually I gave up on sleep altogether and Jimmy and I sat up and sniffed powders into our faces and laughed about the bricks, and I went off on a ramble about why the bricks and how the bricks and brick the bricks and then found myself waking groggily, absent one TV and one Jimmy.

Later I found both Jimmy and the TV in the bathroom but it wasn't a pretty picture and I had to get rid of both of them. Of course, another brick had emerged during the kerfuffle-like distraction of a frenzied night, and I felt like since I had failed in every attempt to fight the gradual walling up of my window and, I assume, myself, I gave in and slept as normal and relaxed as ever. No sister Mary (or whatever her name is), no TV Jimmy, and no unhelpful landlady or indifferent brickless neighbours. Just me, just me and my bricks. ◦

**THIS IS
THE END**