The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

MAY 2014 ISSUE

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Cover photo by Ashley Lund. Ashley is a mother of two beautiful children. She spends the time she should be sleeping on writing and taking pictures. You can find Ashley on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ashleylundauthor.

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LETTER FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Dear readers,

It's been a very busy time for me. I've just finished my finals for the quarter, have a two week break, then will be starting school back up again. I'm also re-starting a book I had to stop because of school. (I have issues getting back into books once I've been away from them for a while, but I am committed to staying on a schedule with this one—no excuses.) I'm also going to be starting some YouTube podcasts and videos very shortly.

I am so grateful to have a marvelous staff who has been able to put everything together for this most recent issue. They are passionate and hardworking, and their ideas are absolutely stellar for pushing this magazine along and getting it to where we want it to be. Each issue keeps improving; thus, the future of this magazine is a bright one.

To close this letter, I have gotten several e-mails sent to my personal account regarding the release of this issue. Please e-mail thecornerclubpress@gmail.com for such questions.

Otherwise, I hope you all enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Founder, President, Web Designer

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by Sebastian Starcevic

POETRY

Adam Crate

Adam Crate is a word composer who weaves together the alphabet in such an arrangement it causes the eyes to dance (otherwise known as a writer). He is a lover of boxes, books, and creativity and currently has two novels in the works. More of his writing can be found at www.thegreatcrate.tumblr.com.

"Jigsaw Girls"

There's something odd about her
Something strange and new
A puzzle that he can't quite solve
And she never gives a clue

Image by Ashley Lund

Steven Klepetar

Steve Klepetar's work has received several nominations for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. Recent poetry collections include Speaking to the Field Mice *(Sweatshoppe Publications)*, My Son Writes a Report on the Warsaw Ghetto *(Flutter Press), and* Return of the Bride of Frankenstein *(forthcoming from Kind of a Hurricane Press).*

"Doesn't It Feel Nice"

to wrap your tongue in cloud,
feel snow up to your boot tops?
I like sunlight and razor winds;

I like how my fingertips turn numb
even buried in gloves. See how thin
the squirrels are this year? That means

a short winter, so enjoy it now before
all that melting and mud. Let's stand

in the cold and hug like lunatics, then
go and sleep. I'll see you on the other side.

Paul Strohm

Paul M. Strohm is a freelance journalist working in Houston, Texas. His work has appeared in The Lake, *HuKmag.com,* Deep Water Literary Journal, Really System, *and other literary journals. While a graduate student at UT Austin, he collated the unpublished correspondence of D. H. Lawrence. His most recent collection of poems, entitled* Closed On Sunday, *will be published by The Wellhead Press in November 2014.*

"We Aren't Robots, Yet."

The town clock is shouting it is late
Saying I was to be in bed with a mate;
A citizen's duty, obedience to the State!

Confined with all the windows barred,
Legal residents were blind to the guard
Checking passports in their backyard.

For some less choice, more control makes
Life less a game of chance with high stakes;
Now most merely want to ignore its fakes.

No matter if one thinks or feels these days,
Freedom is not the counting of yeas or nays;
State owns the rooms, organizes all stays.

The final bill is calculated on when you leave,
Better to exit sooner rather than grieve
The lost humanity clinging to your sleeve.

Our town clock is running down in rain,
It drips to where our open sores drain;
We aren't robots, we have soul and brain!

Ginna Wilkerson

Ginna Wilkerson completed a Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Aberdeen in 2013, which happily coincided with the publication of her first poetry collection, Odd Remains*. She was also pleased to receive a 2012 Poetry Kit Award for her poem "Dimensions." She currently teaches writing at Ringling College of Art and Design.*

"December Stew"

Tarnished gold held by blunt
tree-fingers falling
on a crest of wind.

Change comes hammer hard -
beaten flat lying
on a slate-grey slab.

Mingling with dead black,
dun-color living
aloft blotted out.

Darker each day, jaundiced,
web-thin, sinking
in the melded mold.

Ordinary steps approach -
booted feet treading
the stew of damp shine.

Katie Robinson

Katie Robinson is a professional writing student at Brigham Young University in Idaho. In her spare time, she loves to read, go to the movies, play video games, and take long walks.

"Sic Parvis Magna"

Inscribed to those who make their dreams so,
Thus realizing their own greatness.

All men dream, although not equally.
In the night, men conquer their shades and dreams
Yet in the daylight find them all vanity.

'Sic Parvis Magna': that was your creed
I took it on, never dreaming too small
Nor sailed too close to shore, all for your esteem.

You traveled far to answer the call
Certain that you would never be believed
Yet persisting to the end, you gained it all.

Without boulders, arches could not be.
In the beginning falls the foundation
Endured 'til thoroughly finished yields the mark.

Will I be remembered: my hindrance
Underneath your shadow but on my own
I try my hardest to find affirmation.

It's hard as a dreamer all alone
But real greatness comes from what you build
And realize with the hand you have been dealt.

I learned your solace, not without strife.
This I do as a dreamer of the day:
I can say that I've seen enough for one life.

David Walker

David Walker teaches, loves his fiancée, and is the founding editor of Golden Walkman Magazine*, a literary magazine in the form of a podcast. Most recently, his fiction and poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in* The Quotable, Stoneboat, Drunk Monkeys, Words Dance*, and* Cactus Heart*. He can always be contacted at dwalker8508@yahoo.com.*

"Instructions Not Included"

Inspiration is like a gun:
you need ammo, and the right kind.

Revise:
"it's like a hammer
pound
now
pound
that nail will drive
eventually."

Revise:
"backfire -
big noise, little substance."

You told me it doesn't fit in your pocket:
it isn't a gun, after all.

My mother used to clip letters from newspapers,
shook them like dice and tossed them in the air.
They fell like light from fireworks and I caught
them on my tongue like sulfur from an atom bomb.
Now all I can say are words that begin with b's
and s's.

I used to skip rocks beyond the bay:
bang, bang, bang against the sea.

Chrystal Berche

Chrystal writes. Hard times or troubled times, the lives of her characters are never easy, but then what life is? The story is in the struggled, the journey, the triumphs, and the falls. She writes about artists, musicians, loners, drifters, dreamers, hippies, bikers, truckers, hunters, and all the other things she knows and loves. Sometimes she writes urban romance, and sometimes it's aliens crash-landing near a roadside bar. When she isn't writing, she's taking pictures or is curled up with a good book and a kitty on her lap.

"Picnic of Ash and Depression"

I wish you'd come with me
Sit in fields where the grass waves
Feel the wind blow cool and carrying the scent of daisies
We could braid a chain to weave through your hair
Proclaim you the fairy queen of the meadow
Or maybe you'll just be an imp waiting to cause mischief
Can't you see how much fun it would be
To sip strawberry soda while staring at clouds
Bet you'll see a dragon if you look hard enough
Or a pirate ship with a hunchback captain
Or a chicken riding a cow over the edge of a rainbow
Anything's possible, when you leave the darkened tomb of your room
And venture into rolling fields dotted with gopher mounds
We can count how many pop up as we eat our sandwiches
Tossing bits of honey-wheat crust to see if they'll snatch it
It wouldn't be the same if you won't join me
So I packed your favorite crackers and that cheese you love
The one that squirts in squiggly lines from metal cans
I've teased you a million times that it isn't cheese
But you insist and so here it is, waiting if you'll answer my knock
when you do I can't help but smile and hold up the basket
you're red rimmed eyes skim over it, skim over me
and for a moment you say nothing and my hope blooms
'til you shake your head and sigh
step backwards into shadows where I'm not welcome
the door closing me out again
leaving me to trudge through tall grasses
displacing grasshoppers with every step
alone as I sit overlooking the valley
watching the river churning and winding
a whirlwind of water to match my whirlwind of emotions

that strawberry soda tasting like sand in my mouth as I think of you
without a cloud in the sky to distract my thoughts
while the gophers seem to mock me with their chatter
and the canned cheese sits a silent reminder
that though we're together, we're alone.

Catherine Simpson

Catherine Simpson is a cellist from Santa Barbara. Her work has been featured in over thirty publications, including Serving House Journal *and* Dead Flowers: A Poetry Rag.

"Gregory Street, South Side, Pittsburgh"

A late middle-aged man, retired but not elderly,
Who sat with a distended belly in a lawnchair
on the sidewalk of a snow-cracked street in July.

He wore an undershirt, a baseball cap, and
A terrycloth bib to catch the ashes and yellow spit
From his Cuban cigar smoking in an ashtray
on a small folding table beside him.

He kept his gaze down most of the time, a
Piece of cardboard in his lap, and when pretty girls
Passed by—only the pretty ones, he told me
Later, he didn't do it for every girl—he lifted
The cardboard to reveal what he had written
Down in Sharpie—You're Gorgeous.

On the folding table he also kept joke glasses
With plastic eyes that fell out on springs when the
Especially pretty ones walked by.

After he lifted the cardboard and waggled the
Glasses for me he explained that he would never call
Me one of them Victoria Secret type girls, but that
He had seen me around and had thought to himself
He'd like to have me sit in his lap one night, and
Together we'd watch the stars. Whujja
Thinka that? He asked me, his voice getting soft,
Whujja thinka that?

Christopher Barnes

Christopher Barnes' first collection, Lovebites*, was published by Chanticleer. Each year, he reads at Poetry Scotland's Callander Poetry Weekend. He also writes art criticism, which has been published in* Peel *and* Combustus *magazines.*

"Thinning Out"

I flame rashed cheeks,
Suffer the leaf blade to sink
From the calypso orchid.

"Once the diagnosis has been made"

Speech-sound is born too cut-and-run
Into my suggestibilities:
Embolism, thrombosis, trauma…

"A full blood count"

Verity rib-digs each of us,
A faker at happy endings
- As if nil could expose us.

"The ischemia is late, delayed and irreversible"

*

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By Christopher Barnes, UK

QUOTES: G.A.D. McPherson & John N.A. Wolfe

Kushal Poddar

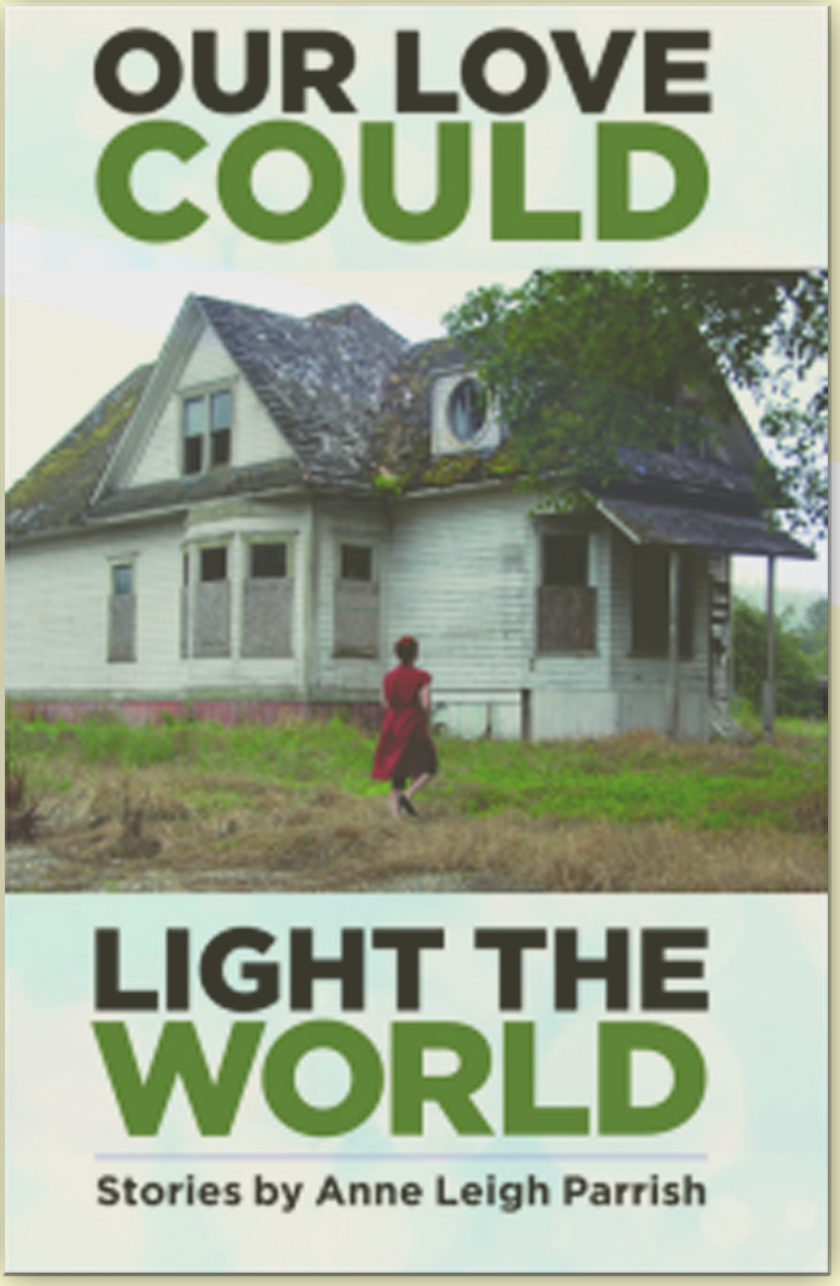
A native of Kolkata, India, Kushal Poddar writes poetry, scripts, and prose and is published worldwide. He authored All Our Fictional Dreams *and has been published in several anthologies in South Asia and America. His forthcoming book is entitled* Kafka Dreamed of Paprika*. More information about Kushal's work be found at https://www.facebook.com/pages/Kushal-The-Poet/166552613396144.*

"Across The Street Named Desire"

Your mistress makes you sleep
On your wife's side of the bed
And lies beside you, naked,
Wearing no intimacy
Perfume on her, plays with
The light that turns on and off
When someone claps. I hear you
From across the street, imagine
You clapping to the night game
Although it drew goallessly.
I begin to clap myself. Cheer
The silence. Here it flares.
Here it implodes, takes the house
As it goes.

★ Available on Amazon ★

Anne Leigh Parrish



"Parrish is in possession of such precise prose, devilish wit, and big-hearted compassion that I couldn't help but be drawn into the hijinks and mishaps of the Dugan family. I found myself one moment laughing out loud, and the next, overcome with emotion. I'd compare these linked stories to those of George Saunders, Elizabeth Strout, or perhaps even Flannery O'Connor if Parrish's voice weren't so clearly and wonderfully her own."

– Ross McMeekin, Editor, *Spartan*.

FICTION

Jennifer Roush

Jennifer Roush writes literary and genre fiction. She lives in Colorado with her amazing husband and their incredible children, and yet somehow finds time to write anyway.

"The Moon Was a Witness"

The moonbeam spreads its silver blanket across the nodding heads of wheat. A glowing duvet ripples as far as she can see, unperturbed by anyone's passage. Tiptoes and bitten lips don't summon him to the bed the moon laid…yet. *He will come.*

Ears strain for any sound beyond the crickets. Once, her head upon his chest, she heard his heart beat in time with the songs of the night. More than once. *He will come.*

The trees shush her, stopping a name on her lips. Her voice alone could not sing so sweetly as theirs together did. Songs of clasped hands and moonlight.

Stars swirl above her, passing the night. But without promises—"Forever. I'll stay"—the stars cannot dance. She swirls her hand on her belly instead, as big as the moon, as round as the paths of the stars.

The night slips away in memory: the silver moon kissed the horizon.

"She's coming," the girl told him. "She's coming tomorrow night. I know it. Are you coming, too?"

"Forever."

"And you'll finally stay in the morning?"

"I'll stay."

But the moon was gone from his eyes.

And the first lance of dawn struck them both. They shook off the grain beards and smeared their stickiness on the grass.

Like every dawn.

Like the dawn that broke across her locker. "Liar," it read in pusillanimous pink, the color of cowardice. Concealed behind masks of mascara, a push-up bra, and a cheerleader's sweater. The day girlfriend.

Her hand cradles her belly; the night doesn't lie. Nighttime love dances below the stars. *He will come…won't he?*

The moon rises, crests over the horizon of her belly, rising like the ache in her back.

Rising like the timbre of her cries.

She's coming. And he's not here. *Is he coming?*

She bears down, bites back the comments and whispers of the daytime. Whether

he comes or not, *she* is coming. The little one. Their secret. Her body opens to the night, wide and round like the moon, and she pushes.

Her cries silence the crickets, leaving only the shushing of the night breeze.

Then, a cough.

A small lump of squalling. Mouth round, singing like crickets.

"Luna."

Cries turn to keens, keens to whimpers, whimpers to breaths. The chest flutters. The moon sinks.

She knew their secret would not survive the dawn. No secret did.

The tiny chest stops. Lips gray like winter clouds. Like ashes of dreams.

A lance of dawn stabs eyes that can no longer see. Those first rays burn away her tears.

He did not come. The moon is gone.

"Luna," she whispers. "The moon was a witness."

Helen Rossiter

Helen Rossiter was born in Kenya, educated in England, and raised a family in New Zealand before immigrating to Canada, where she worked as a business writer and promotional copywriter before retiring to write fiction. Her recent fiction credits include first place winner of the 2013 Canadian Authors Association Short Story Contest for "Against the Wind" and first place winner of the 2013 Alice Munro Short Story Contest for "Map Reading." She also placed second in the 2011 NYC Flash Fiction Challenge and is a finalist in the 2013 NYC Flash Fiction Challenge (results still pending).

"Veronica"

There's not much hope of romance in a prison cell. Not unless you're one of them, which I'm not, and even then, it's not romance but lust and anger and frustration. They learned to avoid me early in my sentence. Perhaps my reputation, unjustly earned, had gotten there before me.

But it's a lonely place, prison, and you do what you can to stay sane, and my sanity came with a packet of charcoal sticks and the ceiling of my cell.

I was an artist before I killed my father. I'd exhibited in galleries from London to New York, and the warden, a cultured man who knew of me, gave me the charcoal and a pad of paper. "Don't draw on the walls," he said. So I didn't. I drew on the ceiling.

At first, I drew the faces of my mother and my sister, and I drew the graveyard where my father was buried. I drew the house where I was born and the flag above the front porch and the tree I climbed as a boy. I drew the river that ran through the town, and the shops and a church. I recreated the life I'd lived, and I'd lie on my bunk and imagine myself back there, free as a bird.

It was early summer when I first saw the girl from the narrow window of my cell. She rode her bicycle outside the fence that kept the world safe from the likes of me. Her hair was gold in the sunlight, streaming behind her in the breeze. I thought I'd never seen anyone more beautiful. I waited for what seemed like hours for her to return, but eventually I gave up and climbed up on my bunk, and I drew the first faint outline of a girl on a bicycle.

I called her Veronica.

She rode by the next day, and for the next five days, and in those brief seconds before she disappeared behind the guard tower, I studied the shape of her face and the impatient way she brushed the hair out of her eyes. I memorized the contours of her calves as she pedalled her bicycle and the smoothness of her arms as she steered along the road. And after she was gone, I climbed to my bunk and added form and shadow to my drawing, and I swear that by the sixth day when she was complete, I could smell lemon and crisp apple in her hair.

"Who's the girl who rides by every day?" I asked the guard who brought my meals.

"She's the warden's daughter," he said. "Delivers his lunch each day."

"Does the warden have a wife?" I asked.

"Yes. But that's enough. I've told you too much already." He slammed the door and walked away.

After I had eaten, I drew the warden standing outside a house and Veronica sitting on the porch. I drew her mother kneeling at a flower bed, and when I had finished, I could smell the earth, and bees buzzed among the flowers, and I heard Veronica laugh, a sound like spring water running over pebbles.

She rode past my window all summer long, delivering lunch to her father, and after she had gone, I lay on my back on my bunk, and I gave her friends, girls who were nowhere near as pretty as her. I drew her dancing beside a lake, and I drew her riding a horse through a mountain pass, and as summer ended and fall began, I drew a man running towards her.

At first, I hadn't wanted to include a man in my picture, but I hated that Veronica could be lonely, and so I gave her a lover, a tall, thin man who looked a lot like me. At first, he was wearing prison garb, the black and white stripes of a lifer, but I used my thumb and rubbed away the stripes so that he was dressed plainly in a shirt and trousers. I drew him dancing with her by the lake and leading her on horseback through the mountains, and I could smell the sweet scent of verbena tangled in the horse's mane, and for the first time, I heard Veronica whisper my name.

Fall turned to winter, and the snow was heavy on the ground, and the roads outside impassable. I missed her terribly at first, the girl outside my window. I wanted to ask the guard if she still came to the prison with the warden's lunch now that she could no longer ride her bicycle, but he had turned surly and didn't even respond to my greeting.

I returned to my ceiling, and for three months, I drew feverishly for as long as it was daylight. I drew a village and a school and children in the playground, and in every scene, I drew Veronica, and I drew myself beside her. My fingers ached from gripping the charcoal, and my hands were black, my face speckled with charcoal dust. My back ached when I stood up, and I could barely eat.

Veronica consumed me.

Spring came slowly, and I drew a couple outside a church, a girl with flowing hair, and a man who was tall and thin but dressed now in a dark suit with a flower on his lapel. I drew her arm through his, and carefully, with a sliver of charcoal, I drew a ring around her finger.

I was physically spent, emotionally too, and I dropped the charcoal stick to the floor and closed my eyes.

It was then I heard her say in a voice as clear as the water in a mountain stream, "I do."

Michelangelo took four years to complete his masterpiece. I completed mine in just six months.

Her name is Veronica.

Angela Hart

Angela Hart was born, raised, and educated in Massachusetts. This May, she graduated magna cum laude from Bentley University with her BA in communications and minors in law and English. Currently, she is working on developing several screenplays and novels that she hopes to complete in the near future.

"The Perfect Seat"

Come on! You want to know if that's the right size coffee cup? I can vouch for you that it is! A large is a large; it doesn't get any bigger than that. Seriously? Just take the drink that the nice lady prepared and move on.

Waiting impatiently for another profoundly ignorant person to place his drink order, Catherine begins to involuntarily tap her foot against the marble floor. After five minutes of agony, waiting in line for lesser people to move on, she finally receives that necessary cup of coffee. *Thank goodness.*

Walking past the trees, into the quad, Catherine's pace quickens. I have to get there first.

Entering the room, she sees it's entirely vacant, not even a fly for company. Finds two desks with squeaks, three with gum on the underside, and one with uneven legs. Seeing the sheer chaos in the classroom, it's a good thing that she came early.

This seat is too close to the window. I can't get distracted. I need a 4.0. The same is true for the seat near the door: too many distractions. Catherine realizes that she can't sit in the adjacent seat. It's dirty, or at least it was once.

Catherine moves two seats over before realizing that she can't sit there either. This is dirty fabric—a small stain on the chair near the right side leg. Bending forward, Catherine needs to inspect this scene. A few droplets from someone's coffee! *The last person who sat here must have been completely disheveled and oblivious to the fact that he is a failure.*

Moving along the rows, smelling the backs of the seats, she sits in one after the other. Finally, she lowers herself into the seat across from the podium. *This one is good.* What is it, the fiftieth one she's tried? *It's right near the board and teacher's desk. Is sitting in the first row too obnoxious? Why would I care what people think? I'm here to get good grades and go somewhere. If they want to go somewhere, they'll do the same. No, the desk squeaks. What about the one next to it? This is perfect. This is the perfect seat.*

As Catherine inhales through her nose and exhales through her mouth, she starts to organize her binder, portfolio, and notebook, creating headers at the top of each page. Soon enough, other people trickle in. They look ready to learn for the most part, some more so than others, especially those in pajama bottoms and sweatshirts. Seeing students filing into the empty seats around her, she dates her notebook page. The students, as far as she is concerned, might as well be performers in a poorly executed dance. For her the school year officially began this morning. Some students sit in the

front, others in the back row—to hide she is sure—everyone fitting in nicely.

The seat next to Catherine, however, is vacant. *Why doesn't anyone sit there? It's nearly as perfect.*

Stanley B. Trice

Over a dozen magazines have published Stanley's short stories, and he is listed in Poet and Writers' Directory for Writers. He is a member of the Riverside Writers, the Virginia Writers' Club, and the North Carolina Writers' Network, which have been great sources of information and support. Stanley grew up on a dairy farm in Spotsylvania, VA and lived most of his life in the Fredericksburg, VA area. Currently, he commutes by train to Northern Virginia to work on budgets and legislative issues. On his commute and lunchtime, he writes.

"Just Average"

Donald used his last year of grade school as a chance to practice at being an average student. If he gained a better grade in one class, he fell in another. Donald kept this up throughout the school year and remained under the radar and outside of people's attention with no hope of achieving honor-roll stardom. Good practice for high school, he relished. He didn't think he could handle having any attention on him while trying to understand new school surroundings next year.

It was good enough having his older sister, a junior in high school, make honor roll. Mother liked this, and Glenda was Papa's favorite. Donald figured he could stay in the background, safe from family competition with Glenda's popularity at home and school.

On a Sunday evening in late April, Glenda pounded on Donald's bedroom door. He opened it before she knocked it down. "What do you want?"

"You've only got the summer to grow up before you get into high school. I don't want you embarrassing me. It's my last year, and it's got to be my best."

Finally, I'm almost as tall as Glenda, Donald thought. "I haven't even got there yet, and you're complaining."

"Every afternoon, you stand around in the parking lot waiting for your bus, not talking to anyone. I don't want to be known as the one with the loner brother. You've got to make friends, or people will think you're weird."

"Why? I've gotten along so far without them."

"You need to just go up and talk to people. It's important for you to make friends now. When you get into high school, it'll be harder."

"I'm just fine without friends. You stay with your friends, and I'll stay away. No one will know we're related."

"We are related. You can't avoid that. Do something about yourself, or else you'll end up like me, getting out in the world not sure who's your friend."

"Ha. So, you're afraid you'll end up without any friends after high school."

"You're being ridiculous. Just go ahead, then, and stand in that parking lot alone, waiting for your school bus." Glenda spun around, flipping her long dark hair through the stale air of their lingering breaths, like a saber cutting off further conversation.

All school year, Glenda could have picked up Donald in her car since their schools sat next to each other. She didn't do this, nor did she offer an excuse for leaving her brother at the mercy of an afterschool crowd, one of the reasons Donald kept to himself.

That Monday, waiting for the school buses to drop off their first load, the air felt more like fall than spring. Concerned about rising energy levels, a few teachers came out to referee a football game.With one ball, one field, and limited time, there could only be one game.

The teachers picked the team captains, who raced through the selection process until it got down to Greasy-Face Cliff, Too-Tall Hank, and Donald. The team captains hesitated. Donald figured he had a good chance to be selected next since he was average and not like one of these non-average boys he stood with. The Team Left captain selected Hank, saying he was tall enough to block something. Team Right captain took Cliff, muttering about being greasy enough that no one could hold him. Donald stood alone.

The captains watched one of the teachers flip a coin to see who got the ball first. The other teacher pointed for Donald to go to Team Left. Donald trotted toward the Team Left captain, who told him to go to Team Right. When he got to Team Right, the captain had already surrounded himself with trusted agents and ignored Donald.

Team Left took the ball first and made it halfway up the field with four complete passes. Each time, Donald moved around on defense, looking for an escape rather than stopping a pass or run. Boys ran in front and behind him trying to be a hero in front of the girls, who'd decided not to play and had formed a line between Donald and the school parking lot. After the fifth complete pass, Donald saw a break in the girl line where he could slip off the field and behind the teachers who stood guard. One more pass, even if it was incomplete, and Donald figured he could go away without anyone noticing.

As Team Left captain took the ball, Donald trotted back on defense close to his escape point. Boys ran back and forth in front and behind, waving their hands in the air to catch or block the ball if it came their way. Donald stood in one place and raised his hands over his head like the others, not caring where the ball would be thrown.

He figured it had to be behind him since that was where everyone started to run. Donald reached on his tiptoes to make it seem like he was trying hard. Really hard. He watched the Team Left captain throw the ball and slip on the grass at the same time. Too-Tall Hank with Greasy-Face Cliff chasing him ran in front of Donald, blocking his view of the ball. Donald watched them until something slapped into his outstretched hands. He pulled it down to his chest.

How Donald wished it had been wet underwear. Instead, he looked down at the muddy football. Everyone stopped running and stared at Donald, unsure of what side he was on. Donald stared at them, not sure himself what side he was on. Figuring it would be worse to be tagged standing there, he ran forward past staring eyes.

He ran past the old scrimmage line and kept on running with just a few boys

standing between him and the opposite goal line. What would he do if he scored? All he could think was to keep running. Maybe the end of the universe would happen very, very soon.

A push on Donald's back knocked him face forward into the wet grass. He let go of the football, deciding that he could avoid pain when he hit the ground. He was wrong. He did not think tag football worked like that.

Struggling to get up and looking behind him, a whole bunch of boys and some girls had been chasing him. From both sides.

Donald rose from the ground, waiting for someone to say "nice interception" or "way to go." No one said anything, and Donald walked off the field in his muddy clothes, not caring who saw him. Two plays later, Team Right scored the only touchdown of the game off his interception.

Donald didn't see it, but he heard the cries of delight coming from girls and boys at that end of the field. He sat on the parking lot curb, throwing pebbles at the spot where the bus would pick him up, eventually.

"Why didn't you finish playing football?" Glenda stood next to Donald.

"Average boys don't play football." Donald sat on the bus curb with grass-stained pants.

"It was a nice interception, anyway."

"No one noticed." Donald wanted to ask his sister where her friends were.

"Never mind. Come on home with me."

Donald thought that somehow he had been the hero of the game. Just no one noticed an average boy except his sister.

Paul McGranaghan

Paul McGranaghan was born in Derry and grew up in Strabane, Northern Ireland. He attended grammar school in Omagh and then went to Manchester, where he studied zoology. He worked as a microbiologist near Aberystwyth, Wales and as a neuroscientist in Manchester. He has traveled throughout Ireland and Europe, living for a year in Italy and two years in Spain. He currently lives in Dublin, where he enjoys receiving gifts. His writing has garnered awards from the BBC, has been published in anthologies, and, most recently, has appeared in Literary Orphans.

"Mass Trespass, 1932"

I could smell them before I could see them, their pipe smoke bringing with it the atmosphere of unassailable station offices. A gamekeeper was offering one of them a cigarette as they might feed a table scrap to one of their dogs. Some of them had removed their black pith helmets, and all of them had their coats unbuttoned. That's how it was: white pith helmets in the colonies overseas, black pith helmets in the colonies at home. Redcoats in the Hindu Kush, black coats in the Pennines.

"Here they come, lads," said a constable, getting up from the rock he'd been sharing with a gamekeeper. "Ready yourselves."

The gamekeeper with his pink elf's face looked like a schoolboy on the heels of the yard bully. His crook rested on his shoulder. The other constables began getting to their feet or straightening up from where they'd been leaning against the fence. One of the younger ones blew cigarette smoke through a downturned mouth. He looked as though he'd smelled something bad.

"Well, they wasted no time getting here," someone said. There was the cowbell rattle of tin mugs tied to backpacks as we walkers slowed to a halt. The long line of Ramblers was pooling, as though repelled by the sight of the police.

"They were on their way, mate," said another. "Don't think they weren't. As soon as that lot saw us, they were onto the station."

The constables began buttoning up their coats and putting on their pith helmets. Their silver buttons flashed, each one embossed with the crown. They began to form a line. A lot of us had seen this before. I could hear shoulder packs being rested on the grass. Then someone, maybe Rothman, was walking up to the pipe-smoking constable, saying, "Were you expecting trouble, lads? Because we weren't."

The gamekeepers watched him, watched the line of officers between us and them. Behind them, the hill sloped down to the vale of Edale. Behind us loomed Kinder Scout.

"Aye," said the constable in a voice raised for all to hear, his head held high and cocked to the side, "you've caused plenty, and I'm putting you under arrest."

Kinder Scout faced Mam Tor across the Hope Valley, its high back shaggy with a thick rind of turf, a reef of spent matter made from the heather and bog cotton that

matted the treeless moor. On that cloudless day, the moor baked, and many of the Ramblers had become scalded by the light. Only the slow breeze had soothed the prickling soil and our sweating brows. The soft earth felt strange after a lifetime of cobbled streets, and I wondered if walking on water felt that way.

Budding small white, pink, and purple flowers, the heather filled the plateau to the horizon. They were food for grouse: fat tweed game birds with red monocles and disdain in the corners of their downturned beaks. For many years, the moor on Kinder Scout had been nurtured to provide the grouse with as much heather as possible. They had been guarded and plumped for the shooting season when England's squires would gun them down in their hundreds. For generations, the moor had been the sole preserve of the grouse. The only people who walked there were the shooting parties, the gamekeepers, and the poachers.

That was until that morning, the 24th of April 1932. There were around four hundred of us: Manchester Ramblers from the British Workers' Sports Federation. With those that came from Sheffield, we were about five hundred, give or take. And the Derbyshire Constabulary were only a fraction of that, but then the police only ever needed to be a fraction. They couldn't lose a job by raising a fist or a truncheon, although they might lose a job if they didn't. We'd been expecting them, just not so soon, not so few.

That morning, we had gathered by the fence, a thin black line on a map, beyond which there lay another country, a country forbidden to us. Up until this point, that had been the limit of our world. Then, one by one and then in groups, we crossed the fence. The gamekeepers had come shouting, "No trespassing! You're trespassing!"

The fence didn't tremble as we crossed it. The wood felt rough against my rough palms. The release of my thigh muscles as they stretched, launching me over the fence, felt good and quelled the nervous chill in the pit of my stomach. Landing on the other side, despite my beliefs about the justice of our cause, I felt like a burglar who'd just entered his first house. The others stood where they had scaled the fence, and then we began laughing as we realised we were all thinking the same thing.

"No Trespassing! You're trespassing!"

"You can't trespass on your own land any more than you can be a foreigner in your own country."

"Now, look here."

"You can't trespass on your own land…"

"This is not your own land, this is—"

"If anyone's a trespasser, it's you. This land's as much ours as yours."

"Rot. Did you walk from Russia?"

"We won't stop you walking here. You won't stop us."

There was some shoving and pushing between some of us and some of them. The gamekeepers were strong men, as strong as us, and just as fired with intent, but we were across the fence, and the gamekeepers knew the game was up. We were passing them, climbing up, up, up above them, up the slope of Kinder Scout.

As we climbed, a cry came again and again after us: "Bloody riff-raff!"

We had affronted them by crossing the fence. We had affronted their masters and their ancestors. But we had ancestors too. We hiked following a stream, through great banks of emerald bracken. A few people began to sing the "Internationale," but they began to devote their breath to breathing as they climbed higher and higher. Soon, even our talk stopped, and all that could be heard was the rumble of rough boots on the track, the occasional sigh as a walker paused for breath, and the frequent swearing as boots struck against boulders, stumbled against roots, or clipped the heels of others.

When we had made our way to the top, we were suddenly silent. Halting mid-breath, the breeze stopped rushing through the heather and bog cotton. The sky's unblemished sapphire mirrored the stillness. If there were clouds there, they were clouds of stone, massive rocks carved by wind and rain until they seemed soft and yielding. I pushed my hand against one, but it was hard and hot to the touch. They were burning hot. We made a path amongst them, splitting and regrouping through fissures and around their roots.

Beyond them, our untrodden path led into the blue void. Sitting up there like a member of an expedition into a lost world, I could see all along the valley below. Small houses. Small farms. Distant lives. Our England.

Only that morning, we'd set out from Manchester. The city had been our enclosure ever since Kinder Scout had become theirs. This would be the last time that the plateau would stand empty, forbidden to all but those keepers of class and caste.

Barren, silent but for the distant croak of grouse, Kinder Scout seemed inhospitable to people like us: city people, modern people, people born and raised in the machine age. Yet, at one time, our people had lived here. They lived off the land, its animals and plants. Their homes hunkered against the wind and rain. They ate it, drank it; it clothed them. They obeyed its seasonal rituals and performed their own rituals as the seasons changed. This had been their life and livelihood, their universe, until they were driven away by the lords of the land to make room for grouse. They were forced from the uplands through villages, then towns, to Manchester. And there they and the bog cotton that flowered only in their dying folk memory became the brawn and sinew of the first industrial city.

They manned machines that turned the cotton into cloth. Their children crawled through tunnels of snapping gears, repairing broken threads. When maimed, they paid for cotton spoiled with their blood. Angry noise, a turbid atmosphere hazy with lint, endless toil for produce they didn't own, and around them was a world where hammering steam engines rumbled like distant waterfalls in the smog, where damp cramped hovels in galleries of ersatz streets bred cholera in the communal water pumps, crime in their tortuous alleys, and chronic illness, perpetual fatigue, slavery, and suffering in the listless hours of their dead days.

Yet, by increments, in the prison of the city, they had forged secret things, things with which they could escape. They made ideas of their own and organized until, by sheer weight of numbers and sheer knowledge of their necessity, they resisted and

pushed back. *They* had become *we*, and we came out of the city that morning, the 24th of April 1932, reclaiming our native land.

"You can't arrest us for going for a walk, you know," came a voice from the gathering crowd. The constable was still looking askance at the Rambler who'd walked up to him, the one he'd just arrested.

"He's not being arrested for walking, mate," came another voice. "It's because he pushed that bloke over. Him on the rock, the shepherd-looking bloke."

"So what? Some of them got a smack."

"Only for throwing the first punch, mind."

"What do you get for that, then? Hanging?"

Had it been a hanging offence, I'm sure the gamekeepers would have been satisfied. As it was, they were looking well pleased as five of us were escorted by the police down the green slopes of the valley with their comrades walking behind them. Our boots rumbled on the ground, reminding me of a herd of horses. I wondered how it sounded to the police, all those heavy boots following them, knowing they wouldn't be able to cope if we rushed them, and I wondered if they wished they were somewhere else.

The gamekeepers remained behind by the fence, but their spell had been broken. To do good deeds, one must break bad laws—so all improvement begins as a crime, and all improvers begin as criminals.

On that silent day, looking back out across a lake of white and violet florets, I had seen birds. Not grouse. Swifts. Their small sickle frames had arced and orbited in the blue space above the open land. I'd watched them, wheels within wheels, the swifts slicing and veering around one another. Through the lull in the breeze came the faint sound of their high cries, shrieks that layered upon one another until the vision of whirling swifts was giddy with shrill, spinning white noise.

It states the obvious. We had not returned to live off the land. Not to shelter in it. Not to eat it or drink it or clothe ourselves in it. We had returned to drink down this great epiphany. We had returned to the ecstasy of the swifts in the blue sky, for it was that which had been the catastrophic loss when our world had been stolen away from us.

Returning down the limestone staircase of Jacob's Ladder, a lone grouse waddled out onto the path. Its bubbling glottal croak and tilted head denoted aggressive enquiry: "What do you want? What are you doing here?" I walked past it and down the slope of the valley, my calves aching, across empty meadows to the thin black line and the smell of pipe smoke.

Anne Leigh Parrish

Anne Leigh Parrish's debut novel, What Is Found, What Is Lost*, will be published this October by She Writes Press. Her second short story collection,* Our Love Could Light the World *(She Writes Press, 2013) is a finalist in the 2014 Next Generations Indie Book Awards. Her first short story collection,* All the Roads That Lead From Home *(Press 53, 2011) won a silver medal in the 2012 Independent Publisher Book Award for best short story fiction. She is the fiction editor for the online literary magazine,* Eclectica*. She also reads fiction submissions for* Literary Orphans*. She currently lives in Seattle.*

"Along Came a Spider"

She was drawn to his watercolors. Gentle landscapes, ponds and rushes, and a sky so soft and blue she wanted to rise and just drift away. His work often had that effect on her, of eliciting a physical response. Later pieces, which featured animals and people, all with some sort of minor flaw, an odd skin tone, disproportionate limbs on a dog or horse, a woman's jagged hair made of harsh, black dots, could bring tears to her eyes. He wasn't particularly gifted; they both knew that. But he had passion. That's what counted.

Nonny wrote poems no one wanted to publish, so one day, in a state of exalted frustration, she published them herself online in a blog she named *I Give You My Word*. She didn't know how to promote the blog, however, so the poems went as unnoticed as they had before. Giles thought her poems were fine, well crafted, especially one which began with the line "A beam bears or makes light." He didn't know anything about poetry, though. He admitted as much one night, after too much to drink in the bar at The Duckbill Inn, where they'd first met and visited when they wanted a taste of nostalgia.

Nonny wasn't young. And she wasn't rich. But she was comfortable. Her father left her some money, which she invested with great care. She had no children and had never been married. These facts she attributed to being completely ordinary looking. Medium height, just a little overweight, brown hair that shined only when she had just washed it. Otherwise, it reminded her of a mouse's fur, though mice, Giles informed her, were, in his experience, usually gray.

Give it time, she replied. She was pleased with her wit. She was pleased by the quiet atmosphere in the bar that evening, several months into their relationship. She was pleased with Giles, who had about him air of unrelenting sorrow. She had always been drawn to moody men, perhaps because they reminded her so much of her father, an artist at heart who gave up a love of music to practice law, tax law, the dullest and probably most lucrative kind. What he learned from his clients, he passed on to Nonny, his only child. *Always play the market long, never short. Balance your equities with bonds. Pay attention to emerging markets.* Most of this went over her head, but she knew a winner when she saw one, and so far, she'd been lucky.

Giles had been married before, when he was much younger, in his early twenties.

By the time he met Nonny, he was thirty-eight. Nonny was forty-five. She was already going through menopause, something which apparently ran in her family. She would have asked her mother, if her mother hadn't left. Giles was sympathetic to Nonny's condition and even took it as explanation for why she didn't like sex. Maybe his ex-wife had been lukewarm about it too. He might be used to lack of initiative and passive acceptance, even the gritting of teeth until it was over and done.

They agreed not to marry. Neither saw the point. He moved in with her, though they'd considered having her move in with him. His home was deplorable. That was the only word for the cracked tile floors and strange smudges on the walls, as if in moments of sudden grief he brushed his hands over the uneven surface, the result of a "plastered plasterer," Giles said.

Giles was a tall man with a bad back, which made painting on his feet difficult, so he sat in a wicker chair that wobbled. In Nonny's small, charming cottage, with a full view of the lake from one window and into a deep, dense wood from another, the chair and his easel had pride of place in the center of the living room. Nonny once had her writing desk in that same spot, and she gave it up the moment Giles claimed it. She was happy to, and if not happy, at least unperturbed. Giles was like a large planet she became content to orbit around, though her orbit was hardly smooth or regular. He made demands which taxed her, and which he thought should be very easy to accommodate. One of these was his taste for sauerkraut, the smell of which Nonny found nauseating. Giles made his own brine.

Nonny kept churning out her poems, and Giles kept painting. He had a friend in the village who ran a little gallery where his work was sometimes exhibited. The village was a tourist trap, a scenic place fifty miles or so outside the city where day trippers came to eat, drink, marvel, and often part with their plentiful cash. Nonny took a dim view of city people. Giles rather liked them. He particularly liked one older couple who took a fancy to his rendition of a cow, a barn, and a tree that had been struck by lightning. Nonny didn't feel it was his best work and was stunned—even a bit jealous—to learn that the couple bought it for the requested price of five hundred dollars. The couple asked Giles and Nonny to join them for drinks at the The Duckbill Inn. Nonny was reluctant to go, yet she didn't want another lecture from Giles about her chronic lack of support. She supported him plenty, particularly in the matter of money since he seemed to have none of his own.

Nonny made an effort. She put dark shadow on her eyelids and rouge on her cheeks. She clipped back her hair, which gave her a severe appearance. She wanted to look in control, slightly cynical, as if the whole world were there purely for her own amusement. Giles also took pains with his appearance. He shaved and cut himself. The bleeding took time to stop. He fussed with a speck of Kleenex he pressed to the wound. Nonny said he'd be fine and that he should continue to get dressed. He didn't want to bleed on his new shirt.

Nonny didn't know he had a new shirt. He explained that it was shirt he had had for some time though never had worn. When he put it on, Nonny saw why. It was loud,

with wide black and white stripes. But when paired with a pair of black jeans, he looked rather dashing, she had to admit. Better than she did in her wool skirt that was too short, thus revealing too much of her thick thighs, which she tried to hide inside a pair of wool tights. Since the bar at The Duckbill Inn was so warm—an angry fire blazed in the two-hundred-year-old brick fireplace—Nonny found herself sweating almost at once.

The couple, Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, arrived late. Giles had already had one glass of wine and fretted that they might not come at all, which would mean he'd have to pay the bill himself. His mood turned sunny the instant they walked into the room.

Mrs. Baxter was old money. Nonny could see that right off. Her silk blouse and wool slacks were stylish though unpretentious. Her hair was short, iron gray, and nondescript. It was her jewelry that said what she was used to. All diamonds—nothing oversized, vulgar, or gaudy, just simply first-rate pieces that Nonny despised herself for admiring. Mr. Baxter looked like a man who spent a lot of time outdoors, probably on a golf course, which, given that he was obviously in his fifties or even sixties, meant he was retired. He had a bit more flash than his wife did. On his pinky he wore a ring with a thick gold band and a fine ruby stone, which Nonny also admired.

They ordered martinis. Nonny continued to nurse her white wine, which she didn't care for. Giles had a second, then a third glass of cabernet. His mood was splendid. He'd always been an artist, he told the Baxters. The Baxters were thrilled. Giles was clearly the real deal. The conversation grew livelier as time passed, though Nonny contributed nothing. A dull ache had settled under her rib after Giles introduced her as "my friend," which earned her a brief appraisal by Mrs. Baxter, a smile from Mr. Baxter, and not a single question about her from either.

She excused herself and escaped to the ladies' room, where she gave herself a long assessment in the floor-length mirror. She decided she was pretty, a conclusion she came to from time to time in moments of growing unease.

When she returned to the table, the Baxters proposed that she and Giles collaborate on producing a children's book. Giles had just told them that Nonny was a writer, and since Giles was such a fine artist, the outcome of their efforts would be brilliant. Nonny took a moment to consider if they were joking. They seemed earnest. She was pretty sure that Giles thought they were a couple of idiots, because how could he not? A book was a serious undertaking, or so she always assumed. Giles immediately accepted their suggestion and turned at once to the question of royalties. It seemed as though the Baxters wanted to bring out the book themselves, under their own imprint. They knew nothing about publishing but would learn, eagerly. Giles would receive fifty percent of any royalties received.

"Which means twenty-five percent for me," Nonny said.

Giles stared at her with bloodshot eyes. He seemed not to understand what she'd just said.

"Do the math," Nonny added.

Mrs. Baxter suggested that they order something to eat. She was flushed with gin.

Mr. Baxter looked like he'd overshot his mark too. Nonny felt like the only adult at a table full of sloppy children. Giles said that since they lived just a hop, skip, and a jump away (his exact words) that they should all repair to their house rather than continue occupying the bar.

"I'm afraid our cupboard is bare," Nonny said.

"Nonsense! I just went to the store. And we've got all that fresh fish, remember?" Giles asked.

The fish came from a neighbor who took his boat out whenever he felt a bender coming on. Being loaded on dry land seemed like a more serious affair than having a few on the high seas, he said with surprising candor, so when the urge hit, he made for the water. On that particular day, he offered to take Giles, and Nonny said it was fine if he went, but she would be the last one to notify the Coast Guard when they failed to return on time. The neighbor made the trip alone—and relatively sober, an unexpected benefit of getting a call, out of the blue, from his ex-wife to say she missed him. He came back with a freezer full of cod that he was kind enough to gut himself before passing about three pounds' worth to Nonny and Giles.

"Oh, I'm not really a fish person," Mrs. Baxter said. She looked at her watch.

Mr. Baxter was staring at Nonny. Nonny looked away.

"We need to devise the plot," Mr. Baxter said.

"What plot?" Giles asked. He'd been looking around for the waiter, who had disappeared.

"Of your wonderful book, of course!" Mr. Baxter boomed.

"Our wonderful book, you mean," Mrs. Baxter said.

"Plot?" Giles asked again.

"As in the beginning, the middle, and the end," Nonny said. Her mood was improving. She intended to give Giles a piece of her mind once they were alone.

"A remake of Little Miss Muffet," Mr. Baxter suggested.

"But, Horace. That's just a nursery rhyme," Mrs. Baxter said.

"That was Claire's favorite. Don't you remember?" Mr. and Mrs. Baxter grew quiet. Their silence continued.

Nonny moved her glass of wine a few inches along the smooth surface of the red linen tablecloth.

"You want us to produce a children's book based on a nursery rhyme? Is that it?" she asked. Like a gust of wind on a day that had otherwise been completely still, the idea suddenly took shape in her mind. A new portrayal of the spider as the victim of Miss Muffet's ignorance, a general exposé of the importance of insects and their place in the animal kingdom, maybe borrowing a little from Charlotte's Web, the idea of a spider as a savior and Little Miss Muffet as an ignorant, uptight imbecile. But then people who thought that little girls should be encouraged to achieve and be confident would object to that characterization, however subtly presented. Little Miss Muffet would have to be a heroine in her own right too. The spider and Miss Muffet could join forces and take on the world's problems—the spider with her ability to spin the truth

out of filaments of fact, and Miss Muffet the spokesperson for any number of worthy, humane causes.

"You look like you've had too much to drink," Giles said to Nonny. He made sure to put a little tease in his voice so it wouldn't sound like that rebuke it really was. Not a rebuke against her consumption of alcohol, of course, because she'd had only the one glass of wine. His displeasure came from what he read as a look of pure joy.

Though Nonny never spoke of her, she was often on her mind. The woman her father took up with after her mother walked out. Her name was Arabelle. Arabelle had a habit of getting fixated on something, a flaw usually, a smudge on the ceiling or a crack in a cabinet door, which caused her to stop what she was doing and consider. What was there to consider? Nonny never understood. Either you sought to solve a problem, or you didn't. Simple problems didn't get any clearer just because you pondered them longer. It wasn't what her eyes fell on that obsessed Arabelle, however, but what they represented in her own life. The hold Nonny's father kept on his money, to be exact. His reluctance to spend on niceties, pleasures of any kind. Not a Scrooge exactly, because he was decent to Nonny and allowed her the things she both needed and wanted. Her tastes were plain. He never had to dip too far into his accounts to accommodate her, except once.

Nonny had just gotten her driver's license. She was careful, even hyper vigilant, behind the wheel. She never had tasted alcohol or smoked pot. Her life was quiet and proper. On that particular day, Nonny's father let her drive herself to school. He owned two cars: a Lincoln Continental and a twenty-year-old Mercedes Benz. The Mercedes was a stick shift, so Nonny drove the Lincoln. Arabelle was put out, because she thought of the Lincoln as her personal car to use whenever she wanted, though she seldom went anywhere except into to town to look at clothes, add up prices, then prepare another campaign to persuade Nonny's father why she should have them. Arabelle had a little money of her own from a previous marriage but felt it was beneath her to spend it.

Nonny was asked to stay after school to go over an English paper she'd written—her very first attempt at poetry:

If you want me to, I will
If you force me to, I won't
for this is the law of a woman's heart
which beats for herself alone.

The teacher didn't comment on her literary brilliance but asked about the origin of that particular passage. Nonny was at a loss. Her teacher, Mr. Neville, was in his late forties, which made him ancient in Nonny's eyes. He was short and round, the kind of person who should have a jolly, cheerful air, but not Mr. Neville. His shoulders slumped, and his voice was tinged with sadness, as if everything he said might, at any moment, touch upon some great tragedy.

"I won't mince words," Mr. Neville said. "We are here to protect our precious students. I want to know if you have met with harm. If someone has harmed you or threatened to."

"Me? No! Of course not!" Nonny couldn't imagine that there was anything in her demeanor that would give that impression. She was pink cheeked and energetic, if on the quiet side. She typically kept to herself, but she did have one or two good friends, other serious girls like herself with whom she would sometimes giggle in class. She had to think, as Mr. Neville looked her in the eye, that his concern stemmed from knowing about her mother's abandonment. Her father had gone to the school to make everyone aware of the situation. He didn't ask the staff to do anything in particular, just to be alert to signs of unhappiness that he might overlook.

"You're sure?" Mr. Neville asked. He sounded exhausted.

"Yes."

"Well, then. You have the makings of a fine poet."

It was getting dark on her way home. Dead leaves rushed across the pavement. Drops of rain fell onto the windshield. Nonny turned on her lights. She kept her eye on the speedometer. The impact was so slight she didn't register it at first. Not until she was at the stop sign thirty feet beyond did she become aware of someone shouting, another person running, and the rain coming down much harder all of a sudden.

The little girl was only eight. She wasn't wearing a helmet. Her bicycle was new, with plastic tassels hanging from each handlebar. At first the blow to her head didn't seem too bad, then her condition worsened, and by the time a neurosurgeon had been flown in from Providence, she was gone.

One witness said she'd veered into Nonny's car. Another corroborated that. The question was, why hadn't Nonny seen her? She considered this at the police station with her father at her side.

"Something caught my eye," Nonny said. She was pretty sure that she was going to wake up any minute now and wonder what was for breakfast.

"What was it?" The investigator wore a tweed jacket, nothing like a regular police officer. That, and his patient voice—so like Mr. Neville's earlier in the afternoon, though really, it wasn't possible that all of this was happening on the same day—told Nonny to take her time and answer carefully.

"Something small and dark. It was there, then not there," Nonny said. It was all she could recall.

Later, in a private meeting with Judge Richards, a friend of Nonny's father, it was stated that Nonny had no history of mental disorders. She was not given to hallucinations. The meeting was held at the request of Nonny's father. Though Nonny hadn't been formally charged in the matter of the little girl's death, her name should be cleared, once and for all. And it was, the minute the district attorney declined to prosecute.

But the child's parents couldn't be kept still. They wanted to bring a civil suit of wrongful death. Nonny's father met with them and their lawyer and made it clear, as

their lawyer already knew, that they'd never win a dime. The child had just learned to ride the bicycle. She'd gone out, alone, at rush hour. She was clearly unsupervised, and though it pained him to say it, the parents were just looking for someone to blame for their own negligence.

Yet a few weeks later, the family received an envelope containing a large sum of cash. When Nonny's father was asked by a reporter if he'd been the benefactor, he calmly denied any involvement whatsoever.

"Just some good soul, feeling their grief, who wanted to be of help," he said. Nothing more was ever said on the matter.

Nonny never determined what the small dark thing was that caught her attention for that split second. In time she thought it was any number of things—a leaf, a bird, an evil spirit. It was Arabelle who suggested it was a spider, which Nonny found apt. Arabelle with her plans and schemes knew all about spiders, didn't she? Over the years, Arabelle came and went as her patience—or lack thereof—with Nonny's father's grip on his assets got the better of her. One day she went away for the last time, and Nonny was both saddened and shocked to discover her father weeping silently in his study.

Nonny's idea was that Little Miss Muffet and the spider should become fast friends and travel the world. Little Miss Muffet would provide a portable web for the spider, conveniently named Arabelle. The web would be housed in a porous piece of cloth around Miss Muffet's neck. The web, on a fancy wooden stand, would sit in the windowsill of whatever grand hotel room they occupied so that Arabelle could catch flies. When they returned home, the spider would chronicle their adventures in arachnese, the language of web weavers, which Little Miss Muffet would preserve for all time.

"It's retarded," Giles said.

"It has a message."

Giles snorted. He was drinking. His mood was bad. He'd had a postcard from his ex-wife asking for money. Apparently they came every couple of years. This one claimed the usual urgency. He read it to her: *Darling. This time I'm serious. PLEASE!*

"Darling?" Nonny asked.

"She's sort of melodramatic."

The card was from Athens. Nonny didn't see how someone who had gotten herself to Greece in the first place needed money. Giles explained that the last he'd heard, the ex-wife was working in a hotel over there. Maybe the job ended, or she'd gotten fired and couldn't find new work. Didn't she know by now that Giles had nothing to give her? Then the other shoe fell. He did have something to give her—the money from the trust account he managed on her behalf.

Nonny went into her modest kitchen with its plastic countertops and old appliances and poured herself a glass of the nice French wine Giles had bought the other day to celebrate the Baxter's patronage. The kitchen had a built-in banquette in the corner by a window that looked into the back garden. A deer stood there, nibbling the rose blossoms that had just opened on the only surviving bush. Four of the original five that

Nonny had planted, in an uncharacteristic fit of zeal, had died. They stood nearby a chorus of thorny brown stalks. Nonny had lacked the energy to remove them.

Giles joined her.

"I didn't tell you, because it's not my money," Giles said.

"Why are you in charge of it?"

He sat, crowding her on the banquette. It was a complicated story, he said. His wife, Meredith, had a history of mental illness. She had mood swings and was given to bouts of frantic anxiety. She was very young when they met, only eighteen. He felt protective of her. He couldn't help it. He supposed that was why he married her in the first place. She was attractive enough, but he wanted—he didn't really know—to make her *better*.

Nonny had trouble seeing this trait in Giles. He was hardly protective of her, nor nurturing for that matter. She had begun to wonder lately if she had made a mistake. She wasn't sure she was happy with him. Just the night before, she told herself to hang on long enough to complete the Baxter's project. Listening to him then, she was moved by his candor and the dark light in his eyes as he recalled it all, as if the world around him had just melted away and he was back in time, giving his heart to this wretched, afflicted woman.

Life with Meredith was no picnic, Giles said. The constant ups and downs. The creeping fear that she might do away with herself. She mentioned suicide more than once. Her family was glad then that Giles was in her life. It became his full-time job to keep an eye on her. Always a little uneven in the employment department, Giles willingly gave up working at a paint store to stay home with Meredith. While he hated advising wannabe artists on how to mix and blend colors, he found that he preferred it to endlessly trying to keep Meredith amused. Things between them quickly soured. Meredith was, by turns, manic, full of unstoppable energy, running him ragged with her schemes to redecorate the small apartment her parents paid for, a new hobby she took up like yoga or belly dancing; then she always collapsed, stayed in bed, refused to speak. Doctors were no help. Medication did nothing. Giles lost patience. They quarreled. They accused each other of not really caring.

Then came the physical part. The pushing and shoving. Meredith would get frustrated with some tiny thing, blame him, and want to hurt him. He didn't take it seriously at first. She was so small and weak. But then she hit him with an umbrella and left a painful bruise. He threatened to leave her. She went on a verbal assault about each and every one of his faults. He was stupid, talentless, would never amount to anything. She did him a favor by staying, because who else would want him? And he was stuck with her; he'd just have to go on taking it because he lived off of her parents. He'd better watch his step, too, because she could cancel the arrangement just like that. She even snapped her fingers when she said this. To Nonny it all sounded so childish and clichéd, but she could hear in Giles' voice how important it had been to him then, how important those words of Meredith's still were.

Giles wasn't proud of it, but the fact was, he started drinking. She had driven him

to it. And when he drank, his temper sometimes got the better of him. He never touched her. Instead, he broke things. Bowls, glasses, and a radio all got hurled at the exposed brick wall of their apartment. The neighbors called the police more than once. Giles was even taken to the station once and interviewed in a hostile manner. No one could believe that it was his wife who was the instigator.

One day, when Meredith was pouring it on again, he pushed her down the stairs right outside their door. He couldn't say he hadn't meant to. He didn't recall just what he'd been thinking at the time, only that enough was enough. Meredith landed badly and broke her collar bone. No one witnessed the fall, and later, she swore to the authorities that she'd stumbled. Her blood alcohol level lent truth to the story. Somehow, after all of her cruelty toward him, she couldn't bring herself to make a formal accusation. He took it as a token of the love which he knew had been there all along. Yet they couldn't go on living together. They both knew that. They separated, then divorced. Meredith's father was prepared to go on being the administrator of the trust he'd established for her years before, but Meredith insisted that control of her assets be turned over to Giles. The father took a lot of persuading, apparently, though Giles wasn't privy to the exact details of his difficult conversations with Meredith.

Nonny asked why Meredith couldn't handle her own affairs. She was an adult, wasn't she?

Meredith lacked the confidence to pay attention to money. She was afraid that if she had complete access to it, she'd run through it in no time. Her parents were dead. She didn't want to turn to other family members, with whom she'd never been very close. Giles was the only one she could trust. And he had to do it, because Meredith had kept his secret.

"But who would care now, after all this time, if she told the truth? You could always deny it. You weren't named in any report," Nonny said.

"You don't understand."

That was true. She didn't.

Nonny gave up on the idea of Little Miss Muffet traveling with the spider. Instead, she thought the spider should teach Little Miss Muffet to weave. Little Miss Muffet would become so successful that her tapestries would be known far and wide. Again, Giles expressed only lukewarm interest in this narrative. He was hard at work. He'd given up watercolors for the moment and was using charcoal. His time seemed to be spent on the spider itself. When Nonny suggested that he move on to something else, like a scene or setting, he told her to go write another one of her stupid poems. That stung. She demanded an apology, which he gave only because he wanted to be left alone with his easel.

Giles was contrite later that day and on into the evening. He said he'd been unfair to her, and he hoped she'd forgive him. He knew he could be a real pain. Hearing from Meredith had unsettled him. Nonny hadn't asked if he'd complied with her request for money. She assumed that he had.

That weekend, the Baxters were in town again. Giles invited them over. He wanted to show them his concept for the spider. Nonny was on edge. She was no good at entertaining. Giles told her not to worry. He'd been in touch with the gourmet food store down the road, and a nice plate of hors d'oeuvres was being put together for them. That sounded expensive to Nonny. She tried not to worry. If the book went well—when she finally pulled the story line together—it was going to be a big hit. She was sure of that.

Rather than dressing up as he had the first time around, Giles remained in his work clothes—old jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. He didn't shave. His hands were smeared with black charcoal. It was important to look the part. Nonny didn't change either. All day she'd been in a floor-length black skirt and a green turtleneck sweater that the advancing season made too warm. She added a heavy necklace of silver beads that had belonged to her mother. It had taken her years to find the courage to wear it. She'd worn it the night she met Giles, and she thought now that it had brought her luck, because they were going to be all right, after all. They were going to be better than all right.

Nonny went to get the hors d'oeuvres. She was disappointed to see some deviled eggs. She couldn't stand deviled eggs. The miniature quiches looked okay, and so did the selection of fruit and cheese.

The Baxters were at the cottage when she returned. They were already enjoying the very good French wine Giles had bought that afternoon. Everyone was happy. Giles had his drawings spread out on the table. Nonny put the food on the counter, said hello, and joined the others in their perusal of the pictures. The spider was in a variety of playful poses and settings. In some, she was in her web. In others, she was dangling from a single thread or scurrying across the floor. She had a human face, and always the same face, with round blue eyes, a pert nose, and full red lips. And she had human hair, a trim black bob. What the Baxters admired most was her tender expression. They were completely enchanted.

Nonny poured Mrs. Baxter another glass of wine. Mr. Baxter consumed a deviled egg in one bite. Nonny asked if everyone would like to move to the living room, where they could be more comfortable. Giles had thoughtfully put his easel away so the path to the sitting area was clear. Nonny brought out the tray of food and some cheerful red paper napkins. She lit the two tall candles on the mantelpiece. She put in a DVD of light jazz and wondered if she should open a window since she was feeling so warm at the moment.

Back in the kitchen, alone, she patted cold water on her face. Something flashed in the corner of her eye. When she turned to look, it was gone. Early in their relationship, Nonny had asked Giles about his ex-wife: what she looked like, how she behaved. Giles said it didn't matter. Nonny pressed. The woman he reluctantly described, with a definite frown on his own face, had blue eyes, red lips—because of her obsession with a shade called "fire engine"—and short black hair. Overall, she gave the impression of being something between a little girl and a grown woman. It gave her a certain charm,

especially when she was gentle, at peace with the world.

Even now, after all these years, Nonny thought. She dried her hands on a clean towel hanging in the handle of the refrigerator.

In the living room, Mr. Baxter asked Giles if he and Nonny were going to give the spider a name. Giles said of course they were.

"Any ideas?" Mrs. Baxter asked.

Nonny stole herself out into the welcome darkness of her backyard before she could hear Giles' reply.

Krystal Sierra

Krystal Sierra lives in Cleveland, Ohio with her son. She is a cat lady without the cats. You can view her current project here: http://cle20something.wordpress.com.

"Missing the Mark—Start Over"

I adjust the rearview mirror to see a tiny mass in the back seat. Nora. Held back by the seatbelt and in place by a booster seat, she sleeps with her head cockeyed and bent left. A loose curl has slipped down into her face, her mouth parted.

It's cold, and she's wearing a coat. Her tiny feet dangle over the edge of the back seat, socked and shoed. The nighttime sky is cloudless and black.

The pinprick lights of stars shine down. Flickering like a poor connection, they remind me that we assign meaning to what we see. We twinkle—Nora twinkles, I twinkle—with life that is as individual as it is our own. We fly, my foot pressing the pedal, and we're swaddled, crawling like a bedbug between cement walls built for us and because of us. I cower beneath the trees that tower overhead. With nowhere to go, Nora and I scratch the surface of the sundial like a fingernail.

This is a moment, like any other moment, that is full of so much opportunity we can hardly stand it. If Nora was awake, she would be giddy or cranky with that feeling.

We've only ever belonged to the moment in which we are situated. The future matters not, and our past owns itself.

David Bradley

David Bradley is a college senior and literature major attending Purchase College in Westchester, New York. He won the 3rd Annual Young Writer's Online Award in 2013 with his short story "Vile" and is an active contributor and moderator of the website www.youngwritersonline.net. Writing is his passion, and he hopes to one day be a published novelist.

"Vile"

I'm slipping into jeans and low heels when Jim cries for me. My husband's voice, a tired whine, is just strong enough to reach my ears in the bedroom. It beckons me to my feet, and as I hurry downstairs, I kick my shoes off and set them at the bottom of the stairs. The metal implants in my leg strain when I run; they're meant to hold me up, but too much movement, and they start to ache. In the basement, Jim paws at the TV remote.

"I want to take a nap," he says. "And I can't shut the damn thing off." He tosses the remote at his feet, huffing, and toggling the control stick, he rolls his creaking wheelchair away towards his bed. I recline the chair and set the remote on the couch.

"Can you get it closer to the bed?" I ask. As he fiddles with the controls, the chair jerks left, back, forward, then lurches over my foot. I'm seething and smacking the chair so hard my palm stings.

Jim curses under his breath, rolling off my foot. "I'm sorry, it's just…it's the chair. It's so sensitive." He goes quiet as I cradle my leg. He wants to cover his face and hide from me—I see it in the way he holds himself.

I squeeze his shoulder and say, "Relax. I'm a tough girl. I can take it. Do you still want to go to bed?"

"No. It's too much stress."

"It's really—"

He raises a silencing hand. "I'm fine, Jane," he says, slumping in his chair. "Really."

My aching foot wouldn't stop me from muscling him into bed. I should argue with him like I used to when we had an abundance of energy, so much I thought it might never run dry. Back then, I could sway Jim to my side no matter how much he kicked and screamed about it, even if it took three hours.

"Do you need anything before I head out?" I ask.

"Just the remote. You go and have fun." He smiles. Sometimes I can't tell if Jim's smiles are genuine or not, but, like now, I usually figure they're fake. "I'll be here when you get back."

I kiss his cheek and head back upstairs.

The old days don't have to be gone forever. Old paintings can be touched up. Broken buildings can be fixed. With the right means, Jim, too, can be healed.

My phone jingles as I'm coming up the stairs, and when I'm back in my room, I take it from the center of a king-sized mattress. The message reads:

I'll be there in half an hour. Be ready to go. Mister Tatsu likes promptness.
—Martin

My clock reads 5:30 PM.

I check my hair in the mirror, practice composing my face. It gets easier to drain hints of emotion each time. I tell myself I could beat a champ poker player.

I slip my Taser into my purse and clutch it, sitting on the living room couch until a black car pulls in front of my house at 6:00 and honks twice. Behind the wheel sits a tall black man with sunglasses—Martin. He grins at me as I ease into the back seat and says, "Prompt. Good girl."

"It's a navy habit," I say. "Once a schedule's set, you don't break from it."

"Pretty voice, too! Mister Tatsu likes that." His grin spreads so far over his face I can see it in the slim mirror. A shit-eating grin, but I chuckle for him to keep the atmosphere light.

"Thanks."

Martin gives me the lowdown as he pulls away from my house. "The club's called Raw Dog. When you get there, you just walk right up to the bouncers—never mind the line—and tell them who you're here for. And be honest. They don't like it when you beat around the bush."

"I was never good at bullshitting anyway."

"Good. Mister Tatsu will have the stuff for you. Just play it cool, and you'll be fine."

During the ride, I watch the scenery pass out the window, running different scenarios over in my mind. If I imagine myself falling back on instinct, those scenarios end poorly, but when I picture myself in control, I manage to concoct well-structured, well-acted plans that allow me to get the serum and get out without issue.

"Jane?" Martin says. "You're sure no one knows about this, yeah?"

"No one," I reply.

"I'm just seeing someone in the rearview mirror. He's a little close, and he's been behind us since we hit the highway."

"My husband's in a wheelchair, and he's not suspicious." I've been telling him I meet up with some veteran friends every now and then. He thinks it's good for me to get out, to be with people who understand me, though, like his smiles, I sometimes sense that he doesn't really mean it.

"So long as you're sure. It ain't my deal to fuck up."

"I'm sure," I say.

Martin drops me off outside Raw Dog. Even twenty feet away, the throbbing bass shakes the ground. I approach the bouncers, and when I mention Mister Tatsu, one of them escorts me through the club.

The music doesn't smother other sounds; it kills them. It feels like someone's driving a knife into my ears, and my ribcage is rattling so much it's hard to breathe. Neon lights gleam red, yellow, pink, and green, silhouetting dancers dangling from chains

above the audience.

Working around the perimeter, we pass through a soundproof wall at the club's rear. A small room is lit in dim orange and smelling of cigar smoke, and five men sit in a semi-circular booth, four white, one Japanese. A scar runs down the Japanese man's left eyelid and over his round cheek. He keeps the left eye closed, but as I draw near, he opens it, revealing a black sclera and red iris: a mechanical eye.

He raises his index finger, whispers something to the white men, and shoos away them with a wave. He beckons to me, again using his index finger. As I sit, his eye adjusts, dilating, shrinking, dilating.

"You are like me," he says. "We aren't whole."

I'm suddenly aware of the machinery throbbing in my leg. I'd always thought of it in the opposite way, that it made me complete again.

His fat cheeks pronounce as he smiles. "I heard it when you walked in. My ear is slightly enhanced, too, but it was my eye"—the black sclera clinks as he taps it—"that spotted it for certain."

"Most of it got blown off in the war, but it's not entirely robotic."

He raises his eyebrows. "Then we truly are alike—warriors, the both of us."

I imagine a portly man like him charging through a battlefield in bulky armor. I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Are you saying we have a sense of camaraderie?"

"Perhaps. I think I'd like that."

"Good. It's easier to talk as friends."

"Then I'll approach you as such," he says.

Tatsu pushes a button on his watch, talks Japanese into it. "My men are bringing the prize and some wine for us. I'm sure you have the payment?"

"It's on a card," I reply, sifting through my bag, brushing against the Taser. My arm clenches, but I manage to slip the wallet out without breaking my rhythm. I slide the card his way; he inspects it, nods, and when his men arrive, hands it off. The suitcase is set between us, followed by the promised wine.

"Put on some music," Tatsu asks of the nearest man. "Jazz."

"Japan, twenty-second century?"

"Always." He makes himself comfortable and starts sipping on the wine. A few moments later, a koto begins plucking along to a classic chord progression. Tatsu seems to be enjoying himself, relishing the wine and atmosphere, bobbing his head to the music, breathing them in like they're all one, unified element.

"You're distant," he says after a silence. He touches his eyes again. "This, this makes us like family."

"Does it?"

"Family is unique. Sometimes it takes years to find and meet them. I didn't meet my uncle Minato till I was thirteen. Funny thing, he was the one who brought me into the gangs and the mob."

"Would you call me extended family, then?"

"Perhaps."

Before I can give my insight, one of Tatsu's henchman barges inside, scowling. "She's a fraud! The card's empty."

"That's not possible," I say. "Do you really think I'd try scamming you? I'm not an idiot."

Tatsu laughs. "No, I don't think you're an idiot. However, I do know something..." He lifts the case, holding it before me like a man teasing a cat. "You're not getting this."

"There has to be something else I can do. That account shouldn't be empty." My stomach bile sloshes, and a clammy sensation settles on my skin.

Tatsu tilts his head in consideration, sets the case down, and motions to his glass. "More, please. Jane and I are going to have a talk. An intimate talk."

I don't have to do this. I can accept Jim's disease. He was going to die down the road, eventually, and this vial would just prolong the inevitable. It's life. My mother's lived nearly ten years without her husband. She has her hobbies to keep her happy, and when the sadness bears down on her, all she needs are a few pills, and she's back to her old self, the chipper, energetic woman from my childhood.

But Jim is weakening, thinning, so much so that when I lay him in bed, he looks like a giant wrinkled baby. I see what's left of his heart emptying. He's not dying like you're supposed to, quiet and in your bed. Everything's being taken from him piece by piece.

"What kind of work would you be interested in?" Tatsu asks.

"What's going to get me that serum the fastest?"

"If you want direct, quick results, why not work directly with the boss?"

"If you want me to kill someone, I can't guarantee I'll be any good anymore," I say. "I was never much of a gunman anyway."

"I had something more personal in mind." His mechanical eye adjusts; I can feel his gaze snaking up my torso, coiling around my breasts. It's like sludge crawling over my skin. "Something better suited for a lovely woman like you."

I gulp down the rest of my wine. Just a little discomfort to save Jim and me from years of suffering.

And what if Tatsu screws me over? What if he's the one who took the money in the first place? Even if he did take my money, I have no evidence and no leverage.

The wine hasn't made me dizzy, yet, as much as I want it to. It would make it easier to say this: "Whatever gets the job done."

Tatsu has a car waiting for us outside in a dingy back alley reeking of puke. He orders his driver to a hotel, and when we pull into a hotel's entryway, a young man holds the door for me, then Tatsu. Golden lights are glittering from the ceiling, and a small statue of a smiling elderly man who looks like a business executive stands in the center of the entry's roundabout. Tatsu and the young man exchange words; he slips the young man a thick wad of bills, and the young man hurries off, counting them. Tatsu takes me by the arm and guides me through the hotel.

"I want to ask a favor of you," I say. "It's a small favor, and I don't want it to be cost-

ly or anything." Truly I don't give a damn, but feigning concern might win me some points.

"I don't believe you are in any position to ask anything of me," he says.

He takes me into an elevator, grinning, and hits the button for the twentieth floor.

"But I need to know what happened to my bank account."

The bell dings as the elevator eases into position. As we step into the hall, Tatsu stops, pondering. He continues ahead, unlatching from me, and unlocks a door to his right, disappearing inside. I guess that's my answer.

I follow him inside, itching to clasp the Taser.

The room is nearly the size of my house: two floors, two televisions, a kitchenette to the right, and a hallway leading to the bedroom on the left. Tatsu pops a bottle of champagne and pours two glasses, foam flowing over the lips. He tosses me his suit jacket. "Just throw that over the couch, would you? And come, have some champagne."

The champagne doesn't loosen me up, but at least I'm finally getting dizzy.

There's a solace to be found in inebriation. If you can give it, it won't be so bad. It'll be like another woman's hands working for you.

"Time for bed," Tatsu says, nodding at the bedroom door.

"One more glass," I reply, bottle trembling in my hand, sloshing liquid into my glass. Seven more wouldn't help.

My head swims as I stand, so Tatsu guides me to the bedroom, groping my breasts, heaving alcohol-tinged breath down my neck that tingles my skin.

I don't know if I've fallen back on the bed or if he's thrown me. I roll over, let my hair tumble in my face, arch my back. Tatsu giggles and licks his lips, his grubby fingers wiggling. I crawl over the bed and kiss his crotch, clamping the button between my teeth. Yanking, I rip it off and spit it at him. Tatsu's giggles grow to laughs as he runs his fingers over my scalp, sniffing my hair. He kicks his fallen pants across the room, unbuttons his shirt.

He rolls onto the bed, lying beside me. His erection, just as nubby as I imagined, pokes through his boxers. He groans, stroking it.

"How do you like it done?" I ask.

"I'm a lazy man," he says, beckoning with his index finger. "I want my woman to work for me." He sits up as I stretch over his expansive form, nuzzling the nape of his neck. His breath flutters. Acid bubbles in my throat.

Maybe if I pretend it's Jim, it won't be so bad. Maybe then it won't feel like cheating. I bite Tatsu's lower lip, twist his nipple; Jim loved that. Jim would writhe at my touch, his cheeks flushing, hands tracing my sides, following my outline past my hipbones until his fingers cupped the spot between my legs. Tatsu grabs my arms, squeezes so hard I have to bite back a yelp. I kiss him, and he relaxes his grip. Our tongues swim against each other. I pray he can't taste my bile.

When our hips meet, he bucks and grunts. "Naked," he says. "Now."

I unbutton my pants, and Tatsu slides them down my legs, slower than I thought he would, as if he suddenly wished to sip me instead of gulping. The panties come

next, and then he pulls me close, his gut heaving against me. I should've kept the Taser close.

He grips my side, and though his lips are shut, his eyes say: *But I* must *feel you.* The hand crawls up my torso, brushing more skin as my shirt recedes.

I am exposed, completely, lying atop Tatsu, guiding him inside while he grunts and squeezes my arms again.

I have to make believe, make it good for him.

Think of Jim, the first time he took you on a date back when you were twenty. You went to the movies, but a gang started a fire in the back, and you had to run for your lives. Jim held you as ash gusted through the alleys, kissed you for the first time against the orange and red flame crackling two blocks away. And when he took you to his apartment, you offered yourself to him, and the release you felt when you finished was like a flooding dam finally breaking.

On your wedding day, he stumbled over his vows, lip quivering, sweat glistening on his brow. He nearly fainted—you saw it in his eyes—but he composed himself, laughed, and just leaned in and kissed you, to hell with vows. He cradled you when your father died, held you all night and through half another day. He cried the night before you left for the war, silently, into a pillow when he thought you were asleep.

Tatsu throws me aside as he climaxes.

I gag at the sight. The sloshing in my stomach can't be ignored anymore. I've done it. I've given him the best damn performance I could have, and he's satisfied. I run to the bathroom and heave into the toilet, letting it all out of me. Tatsu finds me clinging to the bowl, crying against it.

"I'll have my men bring the suitcase."

"And my bank account?" I ask, spitting the last glob into the bowl.

"It should be here in fifteen minutes at the most." Tatsu lumbers into the main room, turns the TV on, sitting naked on the couch.

I thumb the vial during the ride home. Martin's behind the wheel again, but he doesn't talk this time, doesn't give me that shit-eating grin. I don't know what I look like, but it must be pathetic. He's not wearing sunglasses now, but he's so focused on the road that I can't see his eyes anyway. Is he afraid to look at me?

"Get some good rest," he says when we pull up to my house. "Maybe take some aspirin, or get drunk, very drunk. So drunk you can't hope to remember this night."

"Thanks."

Inside, the TV flashes against the basement walls. Jim's muted it and talks to himself, a habit he picked up during the lonelier nights.

I hurry upstairs and fall into bed, cradling the vial against me. I cry into my pillow for an hour. A scream builds in my chest, but I stifle it, let it seep out little by little until nothing's left but gaping blackness. I sleep a few hours, wake at three in the morning. I stand before the toilet bowl, rocking back and forth. My eyes ache, and makeup is smeared across my face. I clean myself and put on my nightgown.

The vial rests on the sink counter, and every few minutes I clutch it, assuring myself it's real. I sleep with it under my pillow. Come morning, it's still there.

By noon I haven't left the room, haven't eaten, haven't even thought of Jim or Tatsu. I lie there, daydreaming. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking. I open my computer, check through my networking sites. Tatsu has sent me an e-mail. It reads: *You weren't hacked. I checked, double-checked, triple-checked. We looked through everything. Someone had your money moved legitimately.*

My legs carry me to Jim, watching the TV on mute, talking to himself.

"Where's my money?"

Jim fidgets. He paws the remote, stiff, dead fingers unable to grasp. I close the TV for him. He turns his wheelchair to look me in the eyes. I tower over him, but his features are stern, his back as erect as it can be.

"I cut you off from it," he says.

"You can't do that. It's not *your* account. It's *ours*."

He struggles to talk with his hands, but he can only sit there, statuesque, conveying the story like a machine.

"I did it because I had to. Because I can't trust you with it."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you were cheating on me," he says as he rolls back, eyes lowering, "so I hired someone to follow you."

My throat tightens.

"This was months ago…I don't know why I was thinking that way. I don't know why I should have been angry about it, even if it were true. We haven't had sex since when…just after the war ended? You deserve to be with someone. But…God dammit, Jane, this is the mob! They kill people, and if you made a mistake they would…" He chokes up, clumsily shielding his eyes. "I didn't know what else to do."

I expect a new well of tears to flow from me, but it's been drained, so I just say, "When did you find out? When exactly?"

"Just last week. My guy read the e-mail from your friend 'Martin.' Who the hell is he, anyway? Were you cheating on me with him?"

"My mob contact," I say. "One of the boss's favorite drivers."

"Oh, great, that's great." He shakes his head, to the extent that he can. "You know, I almost want to know how you met him. I almost want to know everything that happened. But if—"

"You should know," I say. "Thanks to you, I could've been killed last night." I want to tell him what happened to me—it's stirring in my chest, working to the tip of my tongue—but it never comes out. I tremble for a moment, like I'm going to cry again, but the dam's all dried up.

Jim sits there, shriveled, unable to look at me.

Laura Stout

Laura Stout lives in Manhattan beach, California with her husband and two teenage children. Her stories have appeared in Fiction on the Web, The Green Silk Journal, Literary Orphans, Blue Lake Review, Drunk Monkeys, *and* Writers Type, *where she won best short story of 2013. When not reading or writing, she can be found ferrying her two dogs to local hospitals to bring smiles to the patients and staff.*

"Keep Her Safe"

Paige jabs the needle into a vein furrowing under the skin between her knuckles. The last of the heroin glides into her body, melds through tissue and blood. She slumps against a wall inside her second-story room in the Royal Hawaiian motel. Outside, the noonday sun bakes the ugly stucco walls, the splintered pavement of the parking lot. But inside, the world around her falls away—the filthy gray sheets, the smell of old sweat, the couple screaming in Spanish in the next room—and a veil of euphoria swallows her whole.

Floating above the squalor, Paige inhabits a moment from a time before. She hovers above the periphery of her aunt Viv's kitchen. Heady scents of meat cooking and something frying mingle with lemon polish rising from the wood floors. Aunt Viv's laugh rolls through the room, catches and holds her in place. Paige lingers in the moment for a while, remembering. Eventually, the moment crumbles. She hears the pieces shatter and crack against the fouled cut gray corners of her mind. A memory roils from the debris as the scents of the kitchen wash into the smoke of her Uncle Rick's hand-rolled cigarettes and his carpenter smell of freshly cut lumber.

He had just hauled her sorry ass in the front door from the police station; she'd been caught shoplifting again. Aunt Viv wrapped her ample arms around Paige, smoothed her hair with calloused hands. "It's out of my hands now, love. You've made this bed one too many times. Now you gotta lie in it. I don't reckon the judge will be so lenient this time." Paige's chest heaved at all the stupid things she'd done, but her arms were like steel rods by her side.

A brisk knock at the door jars her out of the memory, and the sharp elation of the drug plummets, leaving her hollow and jittery. The light coming through the twisted blinds on the window has become shaded and dim. Another knock, and a maid calls out a final warning, tells her she has twenty minutes before she brings the manager.

Paige goes into the grimy bathroom. Mold swells across the walls, and black hairs clog the drain in the shower. But it's been days since she bathed, so she lets the hot water pulse down her back, thrum her stomach, where her rib bones lace like twigs across her skin. Afterwards, she faces the mirror, touches the bruise on her left eye, fingers the lumps of yellow and blackish purple. My fault, she thinks. Paige hadn't

wanted to walk into that liquor store, point Danny's gun at the clerk. She had never held a gun before. But Danny had insisted, been forced to punch some sense into her. How else would they have gotten the money to leave Vegas?

Danny's been gone since morning; sunlight had blazed through the crack in the door as he left. The itch of another fix is creeping into her skin. She's got to leave the room before they kick her out, so she grabs her bag and opens the door. Outside, she leans against the metal railing. Around the perimeter of the motel, sickly palm trees stake the ground, their shadows snaking eastward, long gray fingers telling her nightfall's coming fast. Interstate Fifteen stretches out north and south, disappearing into sky and earth. She's somewhere south of Vegas but unsure how far Danny drove last night. Not far enough. Danny's red Taurus is still missing from the parking lot. He said he was going for food, but neither of them had been hungry, so she's not sure he was telling the truth.

Two days ago, back in Vegas, she'd found Victor in the warehouse, his body already growing cold, his limbs stiffening. She'd closed his eyes with her fingertip before leaving him on the wet cement, his blood black, spilled from a cavernous wound. It wasn't her fault she'd arrived late for the pickup from Vic. Some cop had decided to hassle her for looking like a pathetic street addict, thinking he'd get her on a drug possession. Of course, she had nothing. When she found Vic, he had nothing either.

After that, she'd gone back to the dark, squalid apartment Danny shared with a few friends. He was packing up to leave for L.A., told her he was done with Vegas. L.A. would be better. He had friends who could give him a place to stay, maybe some work. She begged him to take her with him. She remembers the agitation in his face, almost disgust as she clung to his arm while he tried to walk away. But he gave in, told her he'd let her ride with him, and for that, she should be grateful.

Paige stumbles down the stairs and sits in the dry, dead grass bordering the motel's parking lot. Across the street, huge semis slide in and out of a truck stop, some pausing to gas up, others parked with engines cooling, their drivers popping into the diner for a meal. She knows some are heading to Vegas. She knows those streets, knows she can survive them again. Because Danny's not coming back. She supposes she was too much baggage. Maybe she would've done the same.

Next to Paige, a car pulls up to park, its engine lurching off. It's a lumbering old thing, wide and long, the kind that swims down the highway, the kind her Aunt Viv used to drive her around in when she was little. She'd sway back and forth, the whole backseat to herself, legs sticking to the red vinyl seats, feet kicking, sucking on her illicit candy, Aunt Viv smiling conspiratorially in the rearview mirror.

The car door opens and a woman hauls herself from the seat, skin like maple syrup, bountiful. Paige thinks what this woman must see: a scarecrow girl, eyes shot through with red, another piece of trash. The woman walks toward the motel office. Paige turns back and scans the truck stop, looking for a savior.

The sun slides below the mountains, black shadows distancing off from the motel. Sheets of wind slap sand around, working Paige's hair into a tangled windmill. She can't help thinking if she hadn't been late, Vic would still be alive. There's just enough good left inside Paige that this gets under her skin like a virus and burrows, breeds guilt. Victor's suppliers might think she killed him, took the drugs and ran. They may be looking for her. They know about her, how she'd worked for him, and what she looks like. She can't go back to Aunt Viv in a body bag. But if she goes back, she believes she can explain everything to them. The need exploding under her skin, from deep inside her bones, makes her convince herself they'll understand.

Page pulls herself up; her limbs tremble, her body aches for a hit, a high of any kind. She dumps out her bag, finds a cigarette, some matches. She strikes a match and lights one, and starts to walk downhill to cross the road. A hand, strong and warm, clamps down on her shoulder.

"Girl, don't go there. I know what you are thinkin'."

Paige turns. The woman looks at her with kind eyes. In one hand, she holds a white Styrofoam cup full of black coffee. She hands it to Paige. "Thought you could use this."

No one's been this kind to Paige in a long time; she can't remember when. "Thanks." She takes the cup, sips the bitterness, scalds her tongue. "I've got to go." But she stays. The woman turns back to her car, opens the trunk, and rearranges some things inside.

"This old thing likes to drive at night, overheats if I drive her in the hot sun. Had her a long time, so I like to listen to her, you know." Paige can't see her face, but listens to the cadence of her voice, the syllables as they spill from the woman's throat. She thinks of her Aunt Viv, who has a voice like a mountain stream.

The woman shuts the trunk, goes around to the passenger door, and opens it wide. Paige considers the woman for a moment. She wears white sneakers under a swirling blue skirt. Her blouse floats on her frame like a cloud. She grips the door frame, and her look is impelling and steadfast. Paige measures the length of her own desperation, the hollow orb of pain in her gut, its relentless grind. From across the road, engines rumble, doors slam shut. An empty fast-food bag skates across the dead grass.

"It won't be easy, but nothin' ever is," says the woman. "Life is relentless, always catching up on its debts."

At that moment, the sky is balanced between day and night, between beginning and end. Paige walks over to where the woman is standing. Every step she takes vibrates a kind of pain from her feet to her skull, and she doubts she will live through all of this. She presses her bag against her ribs and sinks into the passenger seat. The woman shuts the door, walks around, gets inside, and starts the engine. The car bounces and rocks down the frontage road, then shoots out onto the interstate headed south. A crucifix on a silver chain hangs from the rearview mirror, sways side to side with the rhythm of the road. The woman says her name is Grace, and Paige moves her lips and pretends she knows how to pray.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

with H.L. Dennis

by Sebastian Starcevic

How long did it take you to write your first novel?
Well, actually, my first published novel was not the first novel I'd written. I wrote three full-length novels trying to learn my craft. None of those novels were good enough to publish…but I learned so much through writing them! By the time I came to write *Secret Breakers: The Power of Three*, I was much clearer about the type of book I wanted to write. Because *The Power of Three* is the first in a series, it's hard to be sure how long that actual book took to write. I planned the whole series beforehand, and *The Power of Three* took a lot of adapting and changing and redrafting. I wrote several full-length versions of the first story…not drafts, but versions! And excitingly, I got to write all six books in the series before the first one was released in the shops. This meant I had the luxury of going backwards and forwards to book one and making changes. And in fact, I even made changes to the beginning of book one when the Australian publisher gave me some great feedback. So in all, the whole process of getting the very first book to publication took over ten years!

What do you think makes a good story?
Problems! Of course, stories need great characters and settings, but what I think drives a story onward is a really good problem. I think readers like to think about what they would do to solve the problem themselves…and to journey with the story characters as they try and solve it in the novel. In *Secret Breakers*, the problem centres around a book that no one can read, and I thought that was a fascinating problem!

What was it like getting published for the first time?
I cannot really sum up how exciting it was—and still is—for me to see my published books in shops! I had wanted to be a writer since as early as I can remember. I wrote as a child and all through university and even when I got a "proper job"…and the dream of being published was always there. So the day my first book was published was incredibly exciting. We had a huge family party, and there was a lot of celebrating. It seems clichéd to say it was a lifelong dream come true, but it was!

How do you prepare for writing a novel? What type of planning do you do beforehand?
Well, for me, the planning takes much, much longer than the writing. My stories are firmly grounded in reality and use real places and mysteries, so I have to do a massive

amount of reading and research first. I love this part! I read all sorts of books and articles connected to the themes of my story, and I keep lots of notes. I don't think any time spent researching is wasted. Sometimes I decide a particular avenue of research won't be any help to me after all…but I usually find that there is a nugget of information I've discovered that will prove to be useful someday, maybe many years later!

So once I have done a lot of reading, visits to locations, and note-taking, I begin the organising stage by mapping out the story. I have found it works well for me to map out literally what is going to happen in every chapter to get the overall arc of the story first. Then I break down each chapter and make notes about what must happen in each section to move the story on and tackle the problem I've set for my characters. Then I break each tiny scene down and perhaps play with the dialogue I imagine will be needed. And then I write the story! By this stage, I feel like I am actually retelling the story, as it has worked itself out by then for me to write down.

Of course, sometimes when I get to the end of a scene or a chapter, I decide it doesn't work, and I'll try again. And when the first draft is done, there is always a lot of redrafting and editing to do to make the scenes tighter and more connected, but even this writing stage takes less time overall than the planning. I know other authors don't work like this at all, but I have found this way works for me!

Where do you draw your inspiration and ideas?
My stories are based on real-life mysteries, so a lot of my inspiration comes from dipping into history books. I actually read much more than I write. I read factual books to give me background information, and I read novels to learn how other writers tackle ideas. I spend hours online looking things up and trying to find things out. I think writers are really story detectives, looking for story pieces to connect together. The idea for Secret Breakers came from connecting three stories I read about in history books: an unread coded book, a real team of code crackers, and a single rescued book from the burning of the Louvain library.

I am also very nosy, and I make notes all the time about interesting things I see or hear, or interesting people I meet. I am never without my notebook!

Lastly, do you have any advice for aspiring authors?
Absolutely! The most important piece of advice is don't give up! It took me decades to fulfill my dream, but it can happen for you if you just keep trying. Read as much as you can, and try to write as often as you can too! The biggest hurdle for me to overcome was actually finishing stories I started. I was always worried I hadn't found a good enough idea. But setting myself deadlines to get chapters finished by really helped. If you want to be a writer, you have to be very self-disciplined. So my advice would be to *set yourself deadlines*…and stick with ideas rather than abandoning them and looking for something

better. Ideas have to be mined and worked with. I think you have to really dig inside an idea and fully explore it before you get the best from it. So keep at it! And write the sort of book you know you would enjoy reading!

Authors and Artists in This Issue

Christopher Barnes
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David Bradley
Adam Crate
Angela Hart
Steven Klepetar
Paul McGranaghan
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Kushal Poddar
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Jennifer Roush
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