The Corner Club Press

Where Poetry and Fiction Converge

AUGUST 2014 ISSUE

The Corner Club Press

August 2014

Volume III Issue XIV

Founder and Managing Editor
Amber S. Forbes

Co-Founder
Daphne D. Maysonet

Executive Editor
Kristina M. Serrano

Assistant Editor and Marketing Manager
Sebastian Starcevic

Poetry Editor
Mariah E. Wilson

Graphic Designer and Copyeditor
Rachelle M. N. Shaw

Front Cover: "Marlene Does the High Kick" by Alex Nodopaka
Alex Nodopaka originated from Ukraine-Russia in 1940. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, Morocco. Full-time author and artist in the USA, his interests in the visual arts and literature are widely multicultural. However, he considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations in independent films if only for the duration of a wink…okay, okay, maybe two!

Back Cover: "Asemic Seventeen" by Sheila Murphy
Sheila E. Murphy's most recent published volumes, *Yes It Is* (with John M. Bennett) and *2 Juries + 2 Storeys = 4 Stories Toujours* (with K.S. Ernst), feature collaborative visual poetry. She is widely known as a prolific textual poet, and over the past decade and a half has been working in visual dimensions as well. Murphy was trained as a musician and currently runs a consulting firm, emphasizing organizational and leadership development. Her home is in Phoenix, Arizona. You can read more about her on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheila_Murphy.

http://thecornerclubpress.weebly.com
The Corner Club Press, Augusta 30907
Copyright © 2014 by The Corner Club Press. All rights reserved.

Any resemblance to actual events, persons living or dead, or locales in the poetry/fiction contained herein is entirely coincidental.

LETTER FROM THE MANAGING EDITOR

Dear readers,

I am so happy to bring you all issue 14. I can't believe this magazine has survived for about three years, I believe—not to mention we're ON ISSUE 14! I hope all of you can forgive us for this late issue, as one of our staff members was basically taking a maternity leave. She is vital to our magazine. Its completion cannot happen without her.

In any case, The Corner Club Press becomes more and more popular with each issue released. A recent look at the stats suggests we've gotten certain influxes of views on certain days that topple over 1,000 unique views! This probably happened due to our last issue being published, but this tells all of you authors that you are going to see lots and lots and lots of views when these issues are initially released. After all, before bringing on the new staff, The Corner Club Press never received that amount of views. I know I've said this so many times before, but I was so lucky when I received the staff that I did. The selection process for the magazine was a lot more difficult when I chose the people I have now, so that probably explains why I have such a top-notch staff.

Once I graduate college, I am going to take a much more active role in the magazine as far as editing goes. I have to admit I miss it, but juggling school, work, ballet, and being an author is dizzying in itself. Rest assured, this magazine can only go up!

Sincerely,

Amber Forbes

Founder, President, Web Designer

CONTENTS

6 Poetry

18 Fiction

POETRY

Noah Hawke

Noah Hawke is currently a high school sophomore. His love of poetry was sparked by the great works of W.B Yeats. In particular, his favorite poem is "Sailing to Byzantium."

"Father"

I swallow down the last of my milk
My heart races, The white blur firing
away from the mailbox reminds me
of what may come.
I head down the long unending path
The blacktop reminds me of my emptiness
One letter, just one letter, is that too much to ask?
Just to know that he remembers me
His son
All my letters go unanswered
What can he possibly be doing?
He created me. He is supposed to love me.
My mind constantly wrestles with the concept of faith
Approach the mailbox. Not too fast.
What if there's nothing there?
I struggle with the handle.
The key to happiness is tucked away inside the very box it unlocks

"Back of Town" by Don Schaeffer

Kanchan Chatterjee

Kanchan Chatterjee is a 46-year-old male executive, working in the ministry of finance, government of India. He is from Jamshedpur, Jharkhand India. Although he does not have any literary background, he loves poetry and scribbles as and when he feels the urge. His poems have appeared in various online and print journals: Eclectic Eel, Mad Swirl, Shot Glass Journal, Jellyfish Whisperer, Bare Hands Poetry, River Muse, Decanto, Ygradsil, Off the Coast, Red Booth Review, Electric Windmill Press, Under the Basho, Oddity, Coldnoon, Randomly Accessed Poetics, *and* Cease Cows.

"FortyFive Minutes"

said the man
in charge of the funeral pyre

granny's face looked serene and dad was
going through the rituals

mechanically. . .

the priest was an old
man of 80 — looked outlandish,
with a flowing beard and red eyes

said he looked after the dead bodies
which arrived in the night
'night shift'
he said, we smoked
for a while. . .

it was the night of 25th Dec.

a few foxes were crying from across the river

me and dad
sat by the ganga

and waited. . .

Matthew Connolly

Matthew Connolly's poetry draws upon his experiences growing up in New York's Hudson Valley, where pastoral beauty meets rural and urban decay. His work has appeared in Boston's Burn Magazine *and* Literary Matters*, a publication of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers. Matthew is currently a resident of Columbus, Ohio, where he is pursuing a PhD in English at Ohio State.*

"Moon"

By chance of universe,
        Held against the earth,

She must bear witness
        To its nightly misery.

Sliding past slow
        Above the trees

In her wide eye men
        In need again of rest

Trade languages
        For troubled dreams.

Murrielle Telfort

Murrielle Telfort lives in Jacksonville, Florida. She has always loved reading and writing fiction but has recently found passion in poetry. After experimenting with Shakespearean sonnets, villanelles, and pantoums, her poems still have a narrative vibe. Her work has appeared in the Elan literary magazine and has received a Scholastics Honorable Mention Award. She hopes to pursue screenwriting in the near future.

"How Much for the Blanket?"

At the garage sale,
I see you loading packed bags
into a taxi. But, before leaving,
you walk up to me
and ask to buy our blanket.
The blanket we shared
when it got too cold
between mugs of hot chocolate
on a collection of pillows.
When the eviction notice
hung from our door
this blanket was a suitcase.
Tying our clothes and food
into a package of treasures
just for us.
Used soda cans in garbage bags
next to dollar store chocolates
we'd share under thin trees.
The soil beneath our
checkered layer of protection,
unable to reach us.
Then, its pattern of red
and white boxes stopped at
frayed holes. The white grew
tarnished, full of grassy smears.
I'd toss and turn as if I were
a boat atop stormy waters
and you'd sleep calmly.
Too comfortable amidst
bugs and weeds.
I moved back into my sister's house,

spending days with her old sewing machine,
patching up the spots of wear and tear
with old blue jeans.
When I showed you,
you said the blanket
didn't need any fixing.
Icy sweat drips down my neck
as your peer into my eyes
awaiting an answer.
"Not for sale."

Don Schaeffer

Don has previously published a dozen volumes of poetry, his first in 1996, not counting the experiments with self-publishing under the name "Enthalpy Press." He spent a lot of his young adult life hawking books and learning the meaning of vanity. His poetry has appeared in numerous periodicals and has been translated into Chinese for distribution abroad. Don is a habitue of the poetry forum network and has received first prize in the Interboard competition. He calls himself a phenomenological poet, devoted to exact description of experience. His poems reflect the transitions in his life. He currently lives in New York after spending half his adult life in Winnipeg, Manitoba Canada.

"Casino"

You go to Vegas
or the Riviera of France
in your best James Bond suit,
and the women
in their famous slinky
gowns rub their bare
shoulders against you
as you stand at the
table playing Baccarat.
The dealer has dark
flashy eyes but
doesn't care. You just pass.
You tinkle the ice
in your clear vodka drink.
It's a romantic cold,
a scarey worldly cold
that assumes your self-sufficiency.
You are lonely
but that's how you
are supposed to feel,
how you feel most skillfully.
You win, you lose.
The house takes you.
You try to read
the mind of God.

Sergio Ortiz

Sergio A. Ortiz is an educator, poet, photographer, and painter living in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He is a four-time nominee for the 2010–2011 Sundress Best of the Web Anthology and a two-time 2010 Pushcart nominee. His collection of Tanka, For the Men to Come *(2014) was released by Amazon and CreateSpace.*

"Transcendence"

in the middle
of the sunflower
I call Your name
and paint
the migration of geese

some things
breathe, exhale
and puzzle,
reminding us of vast
blue skies

grant me
laughter's bounty, and eyes
filled with affection
for the sun touches
deeper than thought

George Bishop

George Bishop's work has appeared in The Commonline Journal *and* Flare. *Forthcoming work will be featured in* The Avalon Literary Review. *Bishop won the 2013 Peter Meinke Prize at YellowJacket Press for his sixth chapbook, "Following Myself Home." He attended Rutgers University and lives and writes in Saint Cloud, Florida.*

"Opening Panacea"

Two nights ago—Panacea and its Christmas
parade of boats, a tree lighting and little girl

finding carols with one finger. I couldn't find
one complicated moment, not one question for

the part of me that questions all celebrations.
Tiny lights lit up every vessel, looking worthy

of the sea inside each captain towing them,
sirens at each end, Santa out there practicing

Yes and Yes. This year Miss Wakulla County's
long, black hair has me wrapping gifts for my-

self I'll never open. I couldn't live like this,
I'm too used to surviving peace, tending

the wounds of getting too close. Sometimes
it's good to be a stranger, the kind of present

that's easy to open and wrap again, to save
for your solitude. I feel at home. Somewhere.

Tyler Tsay

Tyler Tsay is a junior at Phillips Academy Andover from Encino, CA. He is an editor at Polyphony H.S., Transcendence Magazine, The Adroit Journal, *and for his school's main publications,* The Courant Arts Magazine *and* Frontline News Magazine. *He has won Gold Keys from the Scholastic Writing Awards, was a finalist in the Helen Creeley Poetry Prize, and has been or will be published in* The Traveling Poet, Metaphor Magazine, Rainbow Journal, Window Seat, Red Paint Hill, Red Dashboard, The Lake, The Courant, *and* Polyphony H.S. *Aside from writing, he runs his charity organization, College Companion, heads the golf team, composes cello pieces, and looks for a view whenever he can, though he has an acute fear of heights.*

"We Share Smoke"

In the droughts, our fathers
Ate deer and drank the blood; and

Our skin rang the
Tenor of orchards.

This is the story my mother told.
This is the color of nobility.

But soon the deer faded, and we paled.
We were forgotten – our scriptures writ on sand.

Here her fingers droop,
Limp cigarettes unclean.

Our veins do not run with pearls anymore;
They are stained vinegar.

Her eyes are entrapments –
For end, for lavender, for the ache.

It is quiet, methodical, and we revel in the thickness;
It will rot soon, like everything else,

But we don't care –
        It thins the red, if just for a bit.

Windy Guthrie

Windy Guthrie is currently a student in the Liberal Arts program at the University of Cincinnati, Clermont College. She will be graduating with her associate's degree this semester. She has had an avid interest in poetry since middle school. Down the road, she hopes to pursue a bachelor's in a writing-oriented career.

"Jellyfish"

Your anatomy is that
of a hollow spirit;
you linger o'er the depths
of the seafloor, in solitude –
not one heart, nor brain,
nor ounce of blood supply
to sustain your being.

You simply waver in cold silence,
as the strings of your parachute body
envelop the murky waters
with electric purple splendor.

Alice Saunders

Alice Saunders is a poet, writer, and editor currently residing in Tampa, Florida. Her work has appeared in the OW Newsletter and BLACKBERRY: a magazine. Saunders is also editor at TL Publishing Group. Her latest published title is Before the Epiphany. *You may visit her website at http://lyricaltempest.com.*

"Eve's Warning to Fairytale Women"

"Till death do us part," said the Tick to the
Tock with two fingers crossed behind his back.
Repeat it with me now because the black
graffiti on my heart…it gave me the
ink used to write this liturgy with the
intent of telling you about the lack
of grace that led to Charming's fall, right smack
before he stepped up to be at best the

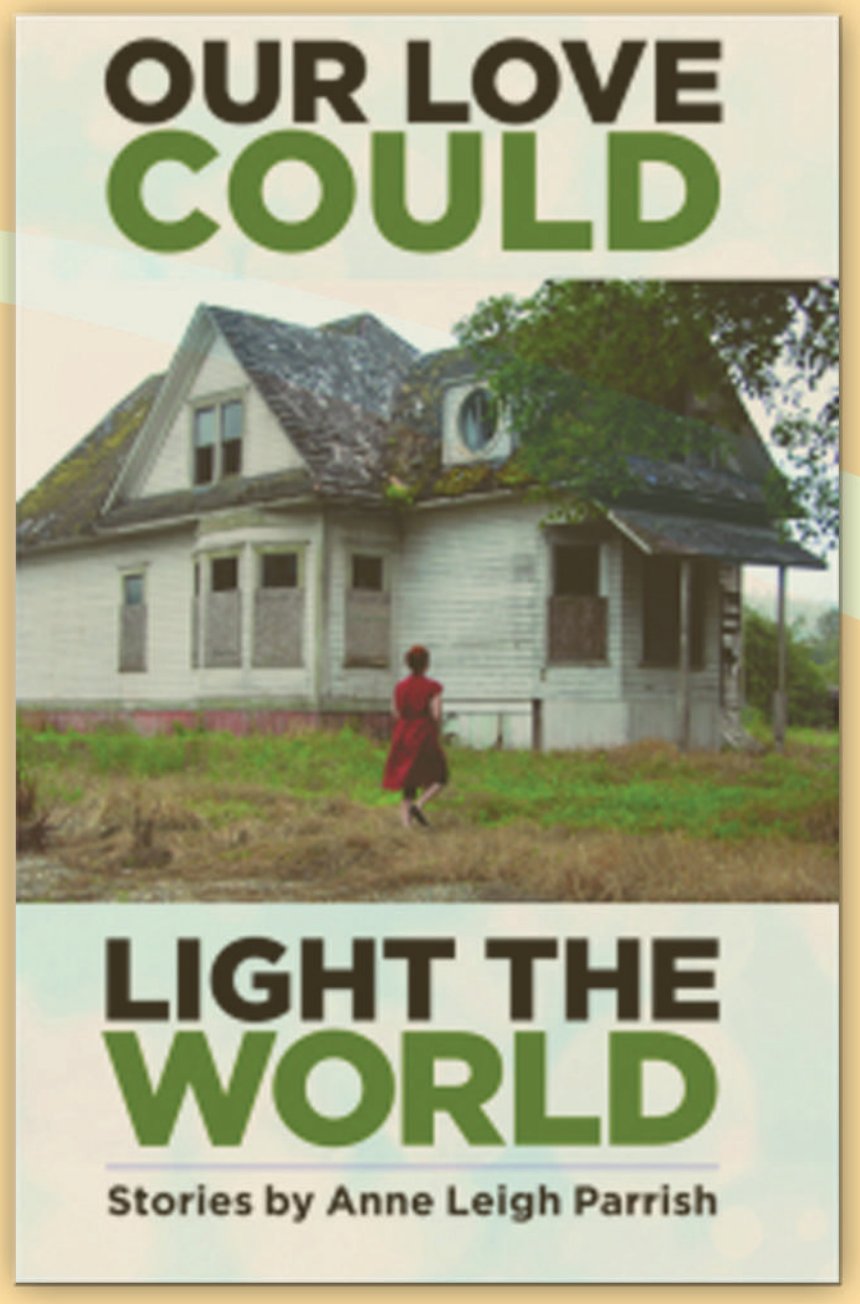
presence that brought me down, the prince who had
contributed to my bout with the lure
of opportunity. Yet and still, bad
is the heart that will keep warm and secure
the path to unrighteousness that's clad
in the covetous steps of men who tour

the shortcuts of romance just so they can
draw out seers looking to be led by
the blind thieves who pretend to be led by
sincerity. But they are sly men. Ban
imposters with seductive lure! What can
be said then…wherewith shall we find by…by
our standards a pure beating organ nigh
unto perfection that rests, calmer than

most, in the chest cavity of one who's
demeanor represents the Charming of
old days when chivalry was thriving? Lose
the strained notion that he is a part of
the same cloth those snakes come from. Don't abuse
your dreams and forsake your chance at true love.

★ 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

Maxwell Junge

Maxwell Junge is an instructional designer at an automotive-training organization in Phoenix, Arizona. He is a graduate of The University of Arizona's creative writing program, and his previous short story, "Gentleman For a Day," has been published by Spork Press.

"Al Eames"

She'd been his first kiss: under the pier of the boardwalk, she'd grabbed his shirt and pulled him in. She'd been his first time, when they'd stolen a bottle of wine from her parents' liquor cabinet and only made it to the couch. And she'd been his first heartbreak when she went to school in Minnesota and he stayed in California, leaving him first physically, then mentally, then emotionally.

He pulled out the card that said where she would be that day and tapped it against the back of his hand. There was only an hour left.

He took a deep breath and told himself he had to do it, then shuffled from his dresser to his closet with one hand shakily clinging to his cane. He fingered through his button-downs and suits until his wrinkled, tombstone-white hands pulled out a blazer, shirt, and pants. Al Davis Eames took these clothes into the bathroom and slid each piece on until he looked in the mirror, nodded, and told himself the only thing left to do was escape unnoticed.

On the inch-by-inch journey from Al's room to the front door, Madeline could usually be found gardening outside or knitting in the kitchen with the radio on. But today, as Al grabbed his cane and shuffled into the living room, he saw Madeline knitting on the rarely used loveseat next to the front door.

Al thought about turning, about crawling through the window of his room and running away before she saw him, but in his moment of indecision, Madeline said, "You look dressed."

She lifted her eyes yet let her head remain down and hands in motion.

Al paused. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"What's the occasion?"

"The store."

"You're wearing a suit to go to the store?"

"The suit store."

"You're wearing a suit to go to the suit store?"

"I wanted to get another one, like this but in a different color."

His wife let the words hang while she continued knitting. "And you didn't want to bring it in by hand? You had to wear it?"

Al paused and looked his wife in the eye. "Yes."

"Are you sure?"

His veiny hand gripped his cane, and the skin around his knuckles became taught. He hadn't been sure of anything since that gold-rimmed invitation.

"Al," Madeline continued, "I saw the letter."

"What letter?"

Madeline's hands stopped. "Al."

There he stood, immobile. He once had thought about telling her, but she wouldn't have understood. The subtle cues about social context were never within Madeline's grasp. It always happened that she would prod herself into situations when unwanted.

He still remembered nearly fifteen years ago when his dad had visited, knowing he wouldn't be around much longer, and Madeline had invited herself to their baseball game. Chip had said it was fine, and Madeline had said she wanted to spend time with Al's father too, but in Al's mind, baseball was a father-son thing. It'd been a memory thing when Chip snuck him his first beer at age sixteen, a private thing when Chip told him the truths about his mother and the divorce, and a guy thing where they could shout profanities and laugh at nothing. Baseball was not a father-wife-son thing.

The gold-trimmed invitation to see his first was not a wife thing.

"Al, you could have just told me."

The old man hung his white, thin-haired head. "I know."

"Well, you're lucky. I don't have enough time to get ready anyway."

"Do you want me to stay?"

Madeline returned to knitting and shrugged her shoulders, giving Al the passive answer he had received so many times before. He waited for a moment but knew that was the end of the conversation. If he went, there would be some subtle move of retribution like when she'd left him sitting at the airport for a half hour because he hadn't mowed the lawn, or when she'd packed a bottle of white wine for their picnic (knowing he only liked red) because he hadn't refilled the car with gas the day before she needed to drive upstate.

But if he stayed, she had an uncanny ability to let things go.

He stared at his wife for a long moment and thought about all of her passive moves, about his first love and the boardwalk and how he never followed her.

With his head down, he grabbed the keys and left in his beat-up green station wagon.

The scenery transitioned from brown wheat fields and layers of industrial-white windmills to grapevines and green grass. It transitioned from open pastures with free-roaming cows to suburban homes and billboards along eight-lane freeways. It transitioned into a concrete city packed with skyscrapers and rolling hills, trolley cars, and fog horns and smog rolling in off the coast.

Al clutched the steering wheel and craned his neck to see the tops of the buildings. There was a moment when he patted the passenger seat to tell his wife to look up at that and remember when they saw that building just being started and look at what it is now. But he patted air and realized he was alone in the car.

When he found the building, it was tucked into a back alley paralleled by a con-

struction site and kids with piercings riding skateboards. He pulled the gold-trimmed envelope from his jacket, double-checked the address, and parked the station wagon.

Cane in hand, Al shuffled along the concrete sidewalk until half of a large oak door was opened for him. The inside of the building was shaded in a blue and orange tint from the stained glass on either wall, the benches were wooden and hard, and the altar at the front had been carved on by kids with pocketknives.

An open casket rested at the front, and inside this casket was his first kiss and his first time and his first love.

He couldn't bring himself to walk up close, so he sat in the last row and waited while stragglers meandered in. Most were old like Al, some were kids dragged in by their parents, and some, it seemed, were bums off the street looking for midday entertainment. After singing, praying, and silence, there was a five-minute video.

The video played with muffled classical music in the background and was shown to the dedication of Sarah Caroline Miller: wife, photographer, searcher. The slides went from young to old. It showed Sarah at her twelfth birthday party with cake on her face and tangled in her hair. It showed her in front of her old home before prom in a long blue silk dress and curled hair with a man's arm around her, the man cut out from the picture.

It showed her taller and more defined now with a large backpack on top of a canyon, dirt covered and smiling. It showed her with crow's feet and a professional camera in the middle of a jungle, smiling with a tanned man, a different man, at her side. This same tanned man was kissing her in a tuxedo while she wore a long white dress on a beach. This same slightly underweight, bearded man was shown tugging on her beads in Louisiana in front of thousands. And this same old man still looked young and vibrant.

He'd never smiled for the camera but instead did what came natural, even now. He walked in front of the church's audience when the slideshow ended and spoke a few words. "Sarah was put on this earth for a purpose." He paused and looked down to gather himself, then returned, "She's not mine or yours or anyone's. She is her own. She always did what she wanted, and I loved her for that. Sometimes, it was hard for us; there was a point in our relationship when I didn't know if we would be together.

"We had only dated for about a year when she said that she wanted to go to Costa Rica. She didn't have a plan or a job or an idea, but she said that she had a plane ticket and a calling, and if I wanted to buy one, I could, and if I trusted her and the relationship, and if I trusted that everything would work out, it would. So I thought about it for days, weeks even, and I waited until the day before she was leaving to buy my plane ticket. I've been on a ride ever since. She was—"

Al sat in the back and listened. He wanted to think that the picture now projected on the slideshow of an old woman smiling while rocking on a hammock between two palm trees wasn't the Sarah he knew.

He wanted to say that had he gone to Minnesota, nothing would have worked out, that things would have been different.

But that picture showed the same girl. The same girl that had stolen the bottle of red wine, knowing full well that her parents counted how many vintages they had left in stock. The same girl that had pulled him away from their high school field trip to kiss him under the pier until one of the teachers found them, and the same hopeful girl that buys plane tickets to foreign places, like Minnesota, whether he's going or not.

Al fiddled with his gold wedding ring and thought about the second picture. About how Sarah looked beautiful in that blue prom dress and had smelled like coconut that night and rested her head on his shoulder while they danced, and even though he kept a similar picture in a box under his shoes in the closet with the both of them smiling, he was cut out of hers. All that was left was half of his arm around her waist. And wherever she'd gone after that: Minnesota, the outback, the Amazon, who knew? All Al knew was he and Madeline went to Disneyland each year for cotton candy, Space Mountain rides, and smiling at cameras.

The man at the altar continued his speech: "While she was fighting against cancer, the one thing Sarah told me was that this wouldn't get her down and that she wouldn't let it get me down. She said that she would pass on soon but that I still had a lot more life to live. That she wanted me to find purpose, follow my heart, do what I need to do. She said that the universe is one giant—"

Al couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed his cane off the bench and pushed himself up before hobbling out of the church.

He found his car parked across the street between a brightly lit bar and a diner and meandered towards it. He pushed one hand into his pocket, grabbed his keys, and looked at the rusted car door. As he moved the key to the door, he thought about that man who stood up in front of the church and how that man was more of a man than Al could ever hope to be. That man had bought a plane ticket to Costa Rica when Al wouldn't go to Minnesota. That man had said he had more life to live even after Sarah was gone while Al stayed at home eating Madeline's lasagna that he'd never told her was too dry.

That man didn't smile at cameras.

That man, as he'd said, followed his heart.

And here Al was, about to go back to a wife that only wanted to leave the house for a dinner reservation. He was about to go back to a home where the most exciting thing to happen was looking at the mouse trap and finding out if it had caught or not, to a woman that knitted all day and planned revenge against him.

Well, no more smiling at cameras, no more dry lasagna.

Al dropped his keys back into his pocket.

He heard the base thump from the club next to him. He shook his head and walked in.

It was dark. There were a couple of young drunks on the dance floor pressed into each other. Two women in high heels and tight dresses smoked cigarettes at a corner table. The music shook Al's skin every time the base thudded and the beat kicked in. Al squinted and went to a bar stool. A bartender with a lot of cleavage and blonde hair

smiled and asked what he was drinking.

Al thought about Sarah and asked, “Do you have any wine?”

“Is white fine?”

“No. It has to be red.”

“The only bottle of red we carry is pretty expensive. Is that fine with you? Not many people come in here asking for wine.”

Al lifted a hand and motioned that cost didn’t matter. The bartender pulled out a bottle of red, poured it into a thin-stemmed glass, and put it on a coaster. After a moment of looking at the empty barstools, the blonde woman with a kind smile wiped the counter in front of Al.

“This doesn’t seem like your type of place.”

Al nodded. “I don’t know.”

“You ever been here before?”

He shook his head.

“You waiting for somebody?”

He shook his head again.

The bartender shrugged and was about to leave the conversation, but Al didn’t want this to get away from him. He held out his hand, and a couple of feeble fingers rose.

“You from here?”

The bartender smiled. “Indiana.”

“Do you ever miss it?”

“I had some good reasons for leaving.”

“What were they?”

The bartender looked around. “I’d rather not get into it.”

Al raised a hand. “I get it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Al nodded. He looked up at the bartender for a moment and saw her hands propped under her chin, her eyes patient and soft and caring like she actually wanted to hear what he had to say. He smiled and continued, “You ever miss it? You know, wonder what it would be like if you hadn’t left?”

“It’s kind of too late for that now. My boyfriend and my lease makes me stuck here for a little while, so I tend not to think about it. Why?”

“I don’t know. I just daydream sometimes, I guess.” Al paused for a moment and was about to continue, but the bartender looked towards the other end of the bar. A younger man in a button-down shirt sat at the far end.

“Sorry to cut you off,” she said, “but I have to help this other customer.” The blonde moved to the man in the button-down shirt and left Al alone on his barstool with the glass of wine in front of him. After the bartender poured the younger man a drink, she leaned in a little closer than she did to Al, propped her hands under her chin, and blinked a couple of times while asking where he was from.

Al looked away and swirled his glass of wine, knowing that the bartender just

talked for tips. That whatever fleeting hope of interest he thought she had was never there. She wasn't coming back to him. She didn't even look at his end of the bar when he lifted his hand.

He took a sip of the wine and cringed as the overaged vinegar slid down his throat. It tasted nothing like he remembered.

He swiveled to see the club with the dancers and loud music and flashing lights and cigarette smoke, and it all gave him a headache. He could feel the pulse on the side of his skull. He could feel his back hurt from the lack of support in the chairs, his elbows ache against the hard wood of the bar. All he wanted was to go home, to lie in bed with some calm music in the background, maybe read a book and fall asleep to the local news. All he wanted was to be home, to be somewhere familiar. He took a breath and swirled the remaining wine.

In a moment, he would put a twenty on the table, leave the spoiled wine, grab his cane, and walk out. He would drive out of the concrete city of skyscrapers and traffic, past the eight-lane freeways and the suburbs and the fields of grapes and avocados, past the cows and windmills and brown wheat fields, until he would pull onto the two-lane stretch of highway to the dirt path with the sycamore he planted however many years ago that led to his parking lot.

Madeline would be inside knitting, and she would have already thought about how to get back at him. Maybe she would give him a cold dinner, maybe a cold shoulder. Yet he would go up to his wife and tell her that he loved her and that he was sorry for not telling her about the gold-rimmed envelope.

Because on the bar stool with the loud music and flashing lights, the old man in the suit with the cane thought about cigarettes and baseball, about how on that one night when the Red Sox were losing eight to zero at the game that wasn't a father-wife-son-thing, his father, who may have just been talking about baseball, said something in a much calmer, more pensive tone than the divorced, beer-drinking, profanity-riddled man Al had come to know over the years: "Rather have this team than no team at all."

Scott Rooker

Scott Rooker is an artist, musician, and writer from Raleigh, North Carolina.

"Milkman"

Sworn Deposition of Shannon Lane:

As assistant store manager at Green Foods Market, it was my job to interview potential job candidates. About six months ago, I first interviewed Milkman. I asked him, "So, what interests you about the dairy-buyer position here at Green Foods Market?"

He said the usual stuff people say. I asked if he could tell me of a time in the past where he went above and beyond to delight and satisfy a guest.

He sort of looked at me, chewed on his lips, and said, "I am afraid I cannot fully answer that question."

Anyway, he got the job. He struggled at first. His customer service skills weren't the best, but he worked really hard. He took the dairy-buyer position ultra serious. He quickly became one of our best team members. He sort of worked more in the back, receiving, ordering, stocking, that sort of thing. He was the kind of guy who flattened all of our cardboard. He also took out the trash.

Sometimes when I would smoke, I would see him throw gallons of milk down the trash chute, one after another. They would explode into white vapor. That was his favorite thing to do. He wasn't supposed to do that, but we managers turned a blind eye to it. We all loved Milkman.

We were totally shocked when he up and quit like he did. The timing was strange. It happened on the same day that Cameron's Fine Jewelry was robbed. All we know is that he was breaking down cardboard one minute, and the next, he just vanished into thin air.

The Interrogation:

Lieutenant Braxton lit an unfiltered cigarette under a dangling light bulb. "Let's go over this one more time," he said as he turned his chair around backwards and sat. He folded his arms. He took a drag and said to the suspect, "What do you know about Milkman?"

"Who?!" the suspect replied. "I never heard of him."

"Are you sure? What did you do with the stones?" said Lieutenant Braxton. "Don't act like you don't know. We have a surveillance video of you inside the jewelry store. We have several eyewitnesses that saw you walk across the parking lot and go into the Green Foods Market. We have more surveillance footage that shows you walking down the pasta aisle. It shows you go past the milk and dairy, through the swinging doors, and into the employee area. What were you were doing back there? Were you looking for your accomplice so you could hand the stones off to them?"

The suspect looked away at the pale green wall. He stared off into the one-way

mirror, at the policemen he assumed were on the other side. “I was looking for the bathroom,” he said.

“He’s lying,” said the detective on the other side of the mirror. “He was apprehended, on the loading dock, behind the store. We believe he gave the stones to the Milkman just before then. That would explain his sudden departure.”

“Look, I don’t know this Milkman,” said the suspect. “I am telling you the truth.”

The door to the room opened. In walked the attorney at law, Frank Jones Jr. In a southern drawl, he said, “Don’t say another word. This interrogation is OVER!”

On the other side of the mirror, the detective said slowly, “Frank Jones Jr.”

Attorney/Client Confidential:

In a darkened attorney’s office, Frank Jones Jr. sat behind a desk, surrounded by photographs of his prized hunting dogs. A green lamp cast light on the attorney and his client.

Frank Jones Jr. said, “As your attorney, I am sworn to protect you from prosecution. Anything you say to me is part of attorney-client privilege. That means it stays just between us.”

He had a ballpoint pen in his knuckles. He said, “Now I want you to tell me what you know about Milkman.”

“Nothing. Never heard of him,” said the suspect.

“What did you do with the stones?” asked Frank Jones Jr.

The suspect said, “I, uh, I stashed them. After the robbery, I walked fast, out into the crowded parking lot. I blended in with the shoppers and walked into the Green Foods Market. I pretended to shop, but all the while, I was looking for a place to hide the stones where I could come back and get them later. I knew the fuzz would be swarming the place in no time. I went through the swinging doors. I walked through the stockroom and then into a dead-end corridor. It smelled like death. I realized this was the trash chute. There was a box of rotten bananas in a shopping cart. I took the satchel of stones out from my jacket pocket. I crammed them into the bananas. I tossed the box down the rusted chute. It wedged itself in the fetid mound of garbage. I would come back for it later.

“In the meantime, I had to split. I had burned up valuable time, and the cops were no doubt getting close. I went back down the corridor and turned right into a freight elevator. It had two heavy doors that shut in the middle. I yanked the strap. I rode the elevator down. When I opened the doors again, I saw two policemen, one of which no comma had his gun drawn. I raised my hands. The other officer took the nine-millimeter pistol I had tucked in my belt. They made me get on my knees. They put my hands behind my back and handcuffed me.”

Frank Jones Jr. twirled the ballpoint pen in his fingers. Then, he said, “So you believe the stones are or were in the dumpster where you left them?”

“That’s right,” said the suspect.

“Okay,” said Frank Jones Jr. He leaned back in his creaky chair and lifted himself up

with his arms. “That’s good for today. I have to take a look at some police reports. I will contact you tomorrow.” He signaled for the officers outside the office.

Thirty-six minutes later, Frank Jones Jr. pulled his BMW into the parking lot of the Green Foods Market. He pulled around back and cut the lights, parking under the orange streetlight transformer. He was just in time. A Waste Management truck idled next to the dumpster. It was there for a scheduled solid-waste collection.

Frank Jones Jr. sprang from the car. He ran towards the cab of the truck. “Wait,” he said, waving his hands frantically. He opened his wallet and flashed his Harris Teeter VIC card at the driver of the truck. “I’m Officer Mahoney,” said Frank Jones Jr. “This dumpster is part of an official police investigation.”

“I don’t have time for this,” said the truck driver.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to do a quick search of this dumpster,” said Frank Jones Jr.

“Oh, all right,” said the truck driver. “But make it quick.”

“Thank you, citizen,” said Frank Jones Jr. as he rolled up his wool pant legs and dress-shirt sleeves. He undid his silk tie. He yanked the rusty green door open. He pulled his body up onto the ledge. He swung his legs inside and slowly dipped his penny loafers into the garbage. With a flashlight, he rifled through the refuse. He waded through rotten produce up to his waste. He came across a wax box. He lifted the lid and dug through the rancid bananas. To his dismay, there was nothing there.

The Anonymous Man:

Just north of North Myrtle Beach, an anonymous man pulled an old Mercury Cougar into the parking lot of an Applebee’s Neighborhood Bar and Grill. He stepped out onto the pavement with fresh sneakers. He wore brand-new pleated slacks with the crease in them.

He went into Applebee’s. The walls were adorned with sports memorabilia and old, broken trombones. The anonymous man approached the hostess’ stand. The hostess looked up. The man said, “I’ll just sit at the bar.”

“All right, sure.” She smiled.

The man walked up to the bar. The bartender said, “Hello. Welcome to Applebee’s. My name is Kyle. Can I get you something to drink, maybe some appetizers?”

The man said, “Can you bring me a cup of coffee, please?”

“Sure. Sure thing,” said the bartender. “Would you like milk with that?”

“No, no thanks,” said the man. “I don’t ever touch that stuff.”

The bartender returned with the coffee. “Do you know what you’d like to order?”

The anonymous man said, “I’ll take the chicken finger appetizer with blue cheese dressing as an entrée, please.”

“All right.” The waiter punched the order into the computer. A ticket printed somewhere in the kitchen.

Forty-two minutes later, the bartender brought the plate of chicken fingers. “Is there anything else I can get for you?” he said as he turned to walk away.

“Uh, yes,” said the anonymous man, “I was wondering if you might be able to suggest something fun to do around here?”

“What kind of fun you talking about, pal?” said the bartender with a wink and a raised eyebrow.

“Just like, sightseeing fun, you know?” said the anonymous man.

“Oh,” said the bartender. “Well, there’s the battleship. A lot of people seem to go to that.”

“The battleship,” said the anonymous man. “Tell you what, when you come back, can you bring me a to-go container and the check?”

“Sure thing,” said the bartender.

Minutes later, he returned with a Styrofoam container and the check. The anonymous man carefully put the chicken fingers in the Styrofoam. He drank the last of his coffee as he glanced at the check. Twelve dollars and sixty-three cents was the total. The anonymous man put sixteen dollars in the plastic tray. He slid the tray toward the bartender, placed his linen on the bar, and said, “Thank you. I don’t need any change.” He stood and pushed the barstool flush against the bar.

The bartender carried a rack of glasses. He set it on the beer cooler and began unloading the glasses into the rack above. He paused. He looked at where the man had sat. There, next to the crumpled linen, was the Styrofoam box. The man had forgotten it. The bartender put the money in his apron and tossed the box in the trash.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said the hostess. “What if he comes back for it?”

“Forget it,” said the bartender. “They never come back. He’s gone.”

Jamie Leigh

Jamie Leigh was born in the Midwest and educated in the United States, France, and England. She is an obsessive traveler, an avid reader, and an aspiring writer. You can find her literature review blog at http://the100greatestbookschallenge.wordpress.com/.

"Hands"

Sadness is heavy and thick. Grief is a fist that keeps on punching.

When I heard the news, the word "no"—one syllable, quickly and sharply inhaled—was the only breach of an otherwise thorough silence. My great-grandmother, abruptly and permanently in the past tense. It felt like losing the last purely good thing in the universe.

The shock wore off once it had done its damage, only to be replaced by an acute sorrow that gripped my heart with needles for fingers. It was only when I realized that she still existed in my own mind—that my memory had the power to bring her back to life—that an idea unfurled, and the fingers loosened.

I turned to my husband, pulled him onto the edge of the bed, and reached for my notebook.

"I'm going to tell you all about her, everything I remember," I said. "And I'm going to write it here."

Alex had met my great-grandmother a handful of times, but suddenly, it was vitally important that he come to know her as I knew her: a complete picture, a full story, a whole person, and a century's worth of the miraculous, harrowing triumph we call life.

He nodded and asked questions as I talked and wrote.

"She was born in 1919. She met my great-grandfather when they were in school. I heard her tease him once that, before they met, he was dating *all the other girls*. And he came right back with, 'Well, *you* were dating the captain of the basketball team!'"

Alex chuckled, and I kept writing. "They lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War. My great-grandfather owned a farm with his best friend, so only one of them had to fight. His friend went to war for him, because my great-grandmother had just found out she was pregnant."

Alex murmured something I didn't hear. I wrote on and on. "She baked cherry pies and loved to fish. She taught me to knit when I was in high school. She made black raspberry jam that the whole family fought over and hid Easter eggs all over the farm for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

A pause. I had stopped speaking to let my pen catch up with my words, but when it did, I forgot to continue the story aloud. Instead, I wrote, because it was the voice I needed.

"What's the one thing you remember most?" Alex asked me finally.

I gave the question some thought. Memories surfaced that had seemed trivial at the time, but were now all I had. Card games. Stray cats, taken in and loved for all their

helplessness. My great-grandfather, sitting on the arm of her chair, patting her head and telling her she was his favorite. Riding alongside her in the mini home, all the way to Niagara Falls.

"Her hands," was the answer. "I would watch her sew, and it was—" I shrugged silently, awed even in nostalgia. "Well, it was perfect. I remember that she made my dress for my aunt's wedding when I was around six. It was all lace—itchy, but so, so beautiful. I stepped on the hem later that night, at the reception, and the dress ripped. I hid from her for hours, but in the end, my mom made me tell her I tore the dress."

Another pause as I wrote this down.

"And?"

"And she wasn't mad. Not a bit."

I scribbled the end of the story across a new page and then waved my notebook in the air to dry the ink.

"Whenever I went to her house," I told Alex, picturing the seven-bedroom farmhouse where family photos hung in every available space like Christmas tree ornaments, "I would sit on the carpet in front of her chair, and she would stroke my hair. She had the softest hands."

Her hands. They weren't small, delicate hands; they were strong, brave, steady hands. They were hands that held four infants but only got to keep two. Hands that wrote birthday cards and decorated Christmas stockings, tore up weeds in the garden, and prayed nightly. Hands that wore my great-grandfather's ring for seventy-five years.

After the first stroke, she was never quite the same. Her awareness would come and go as if it were controlled by an invisible switch. When she had clear, lucid moments—it was always her playful side that came back first—my great-grandfather's whole face would *light up*. There came a time when she needed us, but he always needed her.

I realized in a flash that all of us must have had the same secret, half-born thought: we all knew this day would come, but a small, unwise part of us still hung our hopes on the thread that she might live forever.

"It's nice to hear all the stories at once," Alex said, his voice tripping over my thoughts. "It gives a sense of the…*depth* of her life instead of just the sequence."

I looked up at him then, a clear image forming in my head of life not as a timeline—a beginning, a middle, and an ending—but as a galaxy. Flat, yes, and linear, when viewed from a distance. But from up close, life—her life—spreads out in infinite directions with each moment weighted, burning bright and near or quietly, invisibly, at an immeasurable distance. There are the ordinary, familiar, automatic moments, the washing-dishes moments and the hymns in four-part harmony, so immediate they are tangible. They are the combing-hair moments, the edges of the silverware laid out in a ruler-straight line, and the last paragraph before turning out the lights.

There are also dim, hollow moments of loneliness and loss that, with any luck, will be outweighed, outshone, by moments of spontaneous joy, of happy news and cherished friends, of games and hope and laughter and eternal, unbreakable love.

And then there are the moments that will outlast us, the unexpected, fragile moments of promises kept, even in war: a torch of faith passed to someone who doesn't deserve it; or a great-granddaughter watching swift, strong fingers sew a hemline that wouldn't survive the night but would teach a lesson about forgiveness. The lost moments—the instinctive, accidental ones, buried under piles of forgotten seconds like dirt on a casket—that define who we are when we're not paying attention to limits. The moments we'd never guess, against the odds, would be lit into memories. And they carry more meaning, shine bright and fierce and radiant, only because they live on.

"My great-grandfather said once that they woke up every morning and made the bed together," I told Alex. "And I remember thinking it's not something anyone would do anymore."

"Do you think they made the bed this morning?" he asked.

I reread the early morning message that my mother sent to tell me the news. It had come from the hospital. "Probably not," I said, my voice aimed at our tangled feet. "But I'm sure he said goodnight."

I looked back at the notebook in my lap, the now-dry ink spanning page after page. I never thought I would be a writer who wrote about death, and it turns out I was right. I could only ever write about life. About the last face in the window as I drove away from the farmhouse and the glimpse of a hand waving before it transformed into the sign for an "I" and an "L." About the subtle heroism of another meal on the table, another whispered word of encouragement. These are the moments stitched into my memory, covering pages in the notebook of my mind. And I swear, I *swear* when I reach for them, I can feel a tingle as each one burns like the sun.

Daniel Shea

Daniel Shea is a 27-year-old writer based in Denver, where he lives with his wife and their dog. He has written for various newspapers and magazines, and his fiction has appeared in Foliate Oak Literary Magazine. *He is currently working on a story collection.*

"The Cleaning Agent"

When I was twelve, my father lost his job to a cartoon. This alone would have been bad enough, but what made it particularly hard was the fact that he lost out to a cartoon version of himself—or, more accurately, a cartoon version of the character he had played for years in television commercials. He was never quite the same after that. It was the sort of ironic misfortune that few people ever have to face in life. An event that was almost impossible for anyone outside of his squeaky-clean sneakers to understand.

I tried. But for the longest time, I didn't quite know what to make of him.

You see, he was the actor who played the role of a famous cleaning agent in commercials. He—or at least his character—was practically universally known. An exceedingly odd, middle-aged man with a round, bald head and bushy white eyebrows and a gold hoop earring in his left ear. He wore a sparkling white shirt, along with matching slacks and shoes. I imagine it was intentional that the marketing team made him look like a genie, because he was known to materialize in homes during times of major cleaning crises. He simply could not stop showing up in people's dirty homes and offering to save the day. It was their blessing and perhaps his curse: a man doomed to a life of cleaning up other people's messes.

The concept was ludicrous, if you ask me, because really the man should be arrested at the end of every commercial for breaking and entering or trespassing. But no one ever appears alarmed in the commercials. In fact, they look relieved, like they'd been expecting him. I think it set a dangerous precedent: kids growing up seeing strange men appearing in random people's homes as if that were perfectly acceptable behavior—as if they'd be welcomed with open arms. But that is not how the world works. Believe me. At the very least, you'll get a can of pepper spray unloaded in your face or a few pots and pans thrown your way.

Anyway, the point is that he was everywhere we looked. I can remember on a family trip to Cabo, there were little kids in torn and soiled clothes running after us down the dusty streets as they pointed and shouted, "Don Limpio! Don Limpio!" And all the cleaning ladies in our hotel—actually in just about every hotel we ever stayed in, now that I think about it—were just floored by his appearance. Some fainted. Most of them just kissed his cheeks and spoke to him glowingly in Spanish, like confidants, though he didn't understand a word. This happened everywhere. People would wave him down on the street. He would stop and sign autographs and have his picture taken with disposable cameras. And he took a lot of pride in that. Upon request, he was even

known to go into homes and clean with particularly rabid fans—he actually cleaned their homes with them, these strangers.

And then very abruptly in 1988, he appeared in his last TV spot, looking in the mirror at a cartoon image of himself, a real human being—flesh and blood and bone, with a moderate addiction to painkillers and a thirty-year fixed mortgage—with a cartoon image on the other side, and its blue eyes stared back into his blue eyes, and then the room he was standing in turned to cartoon around him. The one in the mirror stayed real, and he was a real man standing in a fake room. The camera zoomed into the mirror and reversed itself so that it was in the real room with the cartoon version of my father. My father winked at the mirror's reflection, at the cartoon man, and turned and slowly walked off into the depths of the mirror, into a cartoon world, leaving a spectacularly clean and shin room behind him with white sparkles flashing all over the place—his job here was done.

There was some strong consumer backlash initially. For a while after the changeover, people would approach my father on the street and tell him they refused—absolutely *refused*—to buy that particular cleaning product anymore. Some said they'd lost their will to clean, told him their place was an absolute mess without him. At first, he'd go off with these people and put their homes back in order, back how it used to be, under the pretense that he did this to make them feel better. But then, after a while, people stopped approaching him.

The executives and the marketing team at the multinational firm that owns and produces the cleaning product told my father it was nothing personal but that it was pure and simple economics. You can't fight economics, they said. They said all of this through my father's agent. They told my father's agent, who relayed the information to my father, that the focus groups showed beyond any doubt that people respond better to cartoons. They simply prefer cartoons to real people. These are cold, hard facts, they said. It turns out there's simply too much emotion involved with a real person. It distracts consumers. And as much as they hated the results of the focus groups, as much as it hurt the entire marketing team emotionally and morally and just left a real sour taste in their collective mouth, they couldn't just ignore facts. Sales were expected to skyrocket with the new cartoon cleaning agent, they said. And as much as they respected my father and his dedication to the company, they would have to let him go.

My father was on his way to a home visit with a contest winner in Kearny, Nebraska when he got the news. He was in full costume in his hotel and was about to leave when his agent called. A camera crew waited outside to follow him to the home of one Jacqueline P. Muldoon, where he was expected to get down on his hands and knees and scrub her entire house. A lesser man may have refused, but my father was a professional. He helped Jacqueline clean that home to sparkling perfection, a huge smile on her face the whole time.

My mother and I picked him up from LAX the following night. He'd told my mother over the phone, but I had no idea. I'd made a sign for him like the ones chauffeurs carry to link up with their clients. It read: "Mr. Badass!" I thought it was hilarious, and I

couldn't wait for his reaction.

But he didn't have one. He just walked over to us, and my mother grabbed his hand. I kept asking him, "Dad, did you see my sign?" But he didn't answer. My mother told me to just leave him be.

I was born not long after my father became the cleaning agent. I was the youngest of five and the only one of my siblings to know my father only after he'd taken the role. In some ways, I'm the only one who never saw him as two different people.

I'm told my father was overjoyed when the multinational corporation offered him the job. That was back in the seventies—sometime during the second Nixon Administration. He was one of almost fifty well-built, forty-something-year-old actors with no name or recognition to audition for the part. His agent advised him that accepting the role fairly well excluded him from taking on any other work as an actor ever again in his life. When all of America and much of the developed world knows you as a caricature, it's near impossible to get them to accept you as anything else.

My understanding is that this particular cleaning agent was supposed to be something like the human embodiment of bleach. And so everything about him was very shiny and very white—brilliantly white. The only things that weren't white about him were his blue eyes, a gold earring, and his skin, which was required to be a deep bronze. All this and more was outlined explicitly in his contract with the company, which had a tanning bed installed in our home to facilitate his darkening. They even measured his skin tone regularly to ensure he was adequately bronzed—this after the marketing team initially and catastrophically cast a musclebound albino in what would ultimately become my father's defining role.

The auditions were cutthroat. Here were all these middle-aged actors of little significance and dwindling prospects. They stumbled along from gig to gig like day laborers. This was their shot at something stable.

At the time, my family lived in Mar Vista. But soon after my father got the news, we moved to Brentwood because he said it was safer and the schools were better and that my mother had always wanted to live there.

A couple weeks later, the company flew my father out to its headquarters in Cincinnati to sign the paperwork. It was a big to-do, he said. People cheering. Clapping. Shouting. They played the jingle as he walked into the meeting with all the executives and the marketing team. He said he felt like a superstar. Afterward, they told him to start using one of their teeth-whitening products because his teeth didn't quite have the bleachy shine that American consumers expected from a quality cleaning product.

My siblings tell me it was odd seeing our father suddenly transform. They call it "The Metamorphosis." Overnight he became a different man—at least by all outward appearances. Almost invariably, it seems, men become what they do. People ask the question: "What do you do for a living?" The implication is that you are a person, first and foremost. But that's not how we respond. We respond by saying: "I'm an insurance

salesman…I'm a bank teller…I *am* a journalist." We are no longer people. We are employees. We are jobs. We are tasks. And for the longest time, my father was a man who acted for a living. My father was never an *act*or.

But after he was cast as the cleaning agent, all that changed. Every time he looked in a mirror, he was reminded of the thing he'd become, what he'd chosen to become. People no longer asked what he, my father, a man, did with his life. They already knew. They never even gave him a chance. They simply said: "You're that cleaning agent!"

All this took a long while to sink in, though. By no means was it immediate—at least, not for him. But for kids, especially young kids, a parent's appearance is the strongest association they have. So when it suddenly changes, and drastically, the storm can be profound. And while my siblings often recall memories of terror and confusion, I remember things differently. Maybe that's because my earliest memories are of his shining cranium, his bushy eyebrows, his soft face.

For me, this was a time when my life was happy and comfortable. My father and I got along great—better than he did with the rest of my siblings. We used to take long car rides out on the PCH. He bought a white sportscar—a Mustang—and would take me for drives up the coast, leave the smog and the city and everything behind and just drive west past Malibu, past the naval base and all the way up to Ventura. And whenever we got in the car, he'd put the top down and shake his head in the breeze as if he had hair. He would always turn to me and shake his head and pretend to run his fingers through nonexistent hair, and then he'd stop and look at me and laugh. And I'd laugh—I'd laugh so hard, just doubled over in the seat next to him and unable to get enough. Every single time. And it only got funnier.

When I was young, I found a buzzer and tried to emulate him by shaving my head. He was furious with me and insisted that I grow my hair long. And so he would have me stand up in the passenger's seat or have me stick my head out the side beyond the windshield and just watch as my hair whipped around like mad.

We would do this. We would just take off listening to Mellencamp or Billy Joel and howl our way up the coast. When we got to Ventura, we'd go straight to the In-N-Out Burger and then make our way down to the water, and he'd sit with the food and watch me as I played in the surf. I'd run up to him every once in a while with sandy hands, and he would feed me fries before I ran back into the water. Then we'd get back in the car around sunset, and I'd fall asleep as we sped back south.

I don't know whether my early memories of my father have changed, whether I've manipulated the truth to tell a more sympathetic narrative. Unlike the rest of my family, I tended to focus on the good things, like the drives up to Ventura. But that doesn't mean it was all good. It was entirely possible that I'd just latched onto the good out of desperation, out of some fading obligation to preserve something decent in the man. As I got older, this troubled me—this question of whether I was clinging to something that didn't even exist anymore or maybe never existed in the first place. But looking back now, I don't blame myself. We all deserve something pure, even if it is an illusion.

It wasn't until the multinational firm replaced my father with the cartoon cleaning

agent that I remember seeing the first hints that things were off. We picked him up from the airport that night and went home for dinner. He looked across the table at my mother and told us all not to worry, that everything would be fine. There was one more shoot and a year's severance. He put on a bold face for us, but he was never a very good actor. I still had my sign—the "Mr. Badass" one I'd made for him—and I kept flashing it up in front of my face. I thought it might break some of the tension, maybe make him at least smile. And so I kept at it, despite my mother's warnings. Finally, my father did react, though not as I'd expected. He slammed his hands on the table and snatched the sign from me, spilling a glass of milk in the process. He bunched the sign up, not looking at anyone, and tossed it in the trash. Quietly, I started crying as he resumed his seat. It was my mother who ultimately cleaned up the milk.

After the last shoot, he took out the earring and sold the tanning bed. He tried to grow his hair back out, only to find that most of it no longer existed. For a while, he seemed fine. He began to take advantage of the freedom. He figured it would be nice to have some time off. Maybe take up golf or something.

We spent a lot of time together. Drives to Ventura. Longer trips on weekends to Big Sur and Yosemite and J-Tree. Outside. We wanted to be away from the city and the corruption. I didn't really know what that meant, but my father said it repeatedly.

Over my spring break, we decided to take a trip down to Baja—a long drive down Mexico's Highway One. The idea was to make it back down to Cabo, to drive along the coast and up through the mountains, the vineyards, and the desert and all the way to the tip, where Cabo dives headlong into the sea.

Only we didn't make it very far. We got a flat somewhere south of Santo Tomas, surrounded by dusty red hills and wide blue sky. The spare was no good, and this was before cell phones were common, so we had to wait around for someone to stop and offer us a lift. The nearest mechanic's shop turned out to be nearly forty miles back the way we'd come. My father grew increasingly grumpy after learning the guy wouldn't fix it until the morning. We stayed in a papier-mâché hotel that night, but we ate like kings. My father let me try beer for the first time.

"Now, this isn't so bad," he said, trying to lighten the mood. "Looking out on the sea at night, drinking a beer with my boy. Who needs Cabo, right?"

"Who needs it?" I hiccupped.

"Did you know your brother has never sat down and had a beer with me?"

"Ahh, who needs him."

"Flat out refused one time."

"Who needs Cabo? I don't need Cabo."

"Maybe we'll go to Disneyland. What do you think of that?"

"Disneyland?"

"Could be fun. You never got to go."

I leaned in and rested my head on his shoulder. "I thought we were going to Cabo."

When we got to the car the next morning, we discovered the car's tires had been

stripped and the radio stolen. It was another two days before we were able to head back home. We never did make it to Disneyland.

My father quickly discovered the limits of his post-cleaning agent career. No one would take him. His mood deteriorated. My mother tried to be supportive. She went back to work but, as a nurse, was only able to bring in so much. Bills started to pile up: the mortgage, private schools, college tuition. He sold the flashy car, and we moved into a two-story standalone in Hawthorne. My father stopped inviting people over to the house.

He began formulating conspiracy theories about major corporations automating jobs so that real people were no longer needed—these people left subjugated and broken after having their jobs ripped from their very hands. He became enraged by ATMs, would only go in and use real, personal tellers at the bank, even to withdraw twenty dollars. One of the last times we ever flew anywhere together, to visit my uncle's family in Seattle, my father stopped dead upon seeing self-check-in kiosks. He stood around asking questions about what had happened to all the airline employees who'd worked for so long checking passengers in for their flights. No one seemed to have a satisfactory answer. We missed our flight and had to speak with one of the women working the desks to get bumped onto the next one.

"They didn't go easy, I'll tell you that," she told him. "It was a fight. I was one of the lucky ones. I still can't believe they'd just go and throw good people out on the street like that. Can you believe the nerve?"

"God bless you," my father said, shaking his head. I'd never heard him speak of God before.

A couple years out of the job, my father was informed that he had developed melanoma on his left ear. He was informed of this, though he didn't tell any of us. Around this same time, there was a series of decapitations involving cardboard cutouts of the cartoon cleaning agent—promotional displays that had been set up mostly in grocery stores. Only one of these was ever officially tied to my father, though it's my understanding that within the Southern California law enforcement community, he was always considered the primary suspect. The first of these—and the only one on record—took place at the large multinational company's headquarters after my father attempted to get his job back.

He told us he had an out-of-town audition that would fix everything and flew off. We later learned he had flown to Cincinnati. He entered the company in full costume and pleaded for his old job. He'd take a salary cut and even offered to increase his home visits, something the cartoon certainly couldn't match.

But it didn't take. Sales were soaring. There was no need for him anymore.

He asked them to at least pay for the cancer treatments; there were sure to be more. This was when one of the company's attorneys stepped in to express his sincerest sympathies, but there was nothing they could do. The contract had expired. They

were *bound*—simple as that—by the contract, and maybe my father should be talking to his agent about all of this, because that was really the proper avenue. I'm still not clear about when the cartoon cutout became involved and exactly how it lost its head, but I've been assured that it wasn't pretty.

My father never again took out the earring. It hung loosely from the cancerous ear. He worked with an attorney to file civil suit against the firm, eventually working out a meager settlement, much of which went to the lawyer. It was around this time that he began to isolate himself from my mother and my siblings, and eventually even me.

He began spending most of his time at home in the basement. My mother discovered him down there one day wearing the old costume. There was a big fight. He promised never to wear it again, but that didn't last. We noticed him wearing it under his regular clothes. Eventually he just stopped concealing it, even bleached his eyebrows again and used cheap, Chinese knockoff tan-in-a-can that he bought in bulk from Costco.

He would go out often, but we were never sure where—not until we received a call from the San Bernardino Police Department. According to the police, my father had been breaking into people's homes and cleaning them to sparkling perfection. People would return home to find a broken windowpane, but nothing missing. The place spotless. Even the glass from the broken window cleaned up. Their detectives had never seen anything like it. This happened for weeks until a woman returned to her home to find a strange man mercilessly scrubbing her kitchen floor. The worst part was that he actually placed his hands on his hips and introduced himself to the woman as the cleaning agent before she unloaded a half can of pepper spray into his eyes. He was charged with breaking and entering and third-degree burglary.

My mother cried for a full day after seeing the mug shot.

He wouldn't do any of the housework at our home, and so for him to go to these lengths to clean other people's homes did not sit well with her. It wasn't long after this that she left him. Which meant that we all left him. I didn't have much of a choice. I was old enough to understand that I couldn't stay with him. By the time I was in high school, my siblings had largely cut off relations with him. Acted almost like he didn't exist. They gave me a hard time for it, but I kept visiting him. I'm not really sure why. Not sure what kept me going. Nothing more than simple faith, I suppose. Simple, desperate faith.

My father died shortly before I graduated from high school. I saw him for the last time a couple of weeks beforehand. I'd been out with friends but left early and went over to the tiny ranch house he was renting in Gardena. The unit sat on a small lot of scorched earth at the end of a cul-de-sac. It was nothing more than a mobile home trapped in concrete, like that mastodon stuck in a tar pit in the natural history museum diorama. That night, I pulled up, and, as usual, there was a pale glow coming from the TV room. The cheap blinds were down, and thin horizontal stripes of pulsating light seeped out.

The metallic smack of the aluminum entryway announced my arrival. The place smelled of rot and mold. The TV room was immediately to the left after entering the house. All the lights were off. There was only the convulsive flare of the TV. Its icy light trickling over the coffee table, seeping into the furniture, casting shadows about the room. It reflected off my father's smooth head. He looked hypnotized. The volume was low—so low that you couldn't really be sure if it was the TV or if it was all a voice in your head.

My father never turned around to greet me. He just sat in his recliner, not reclining. "Did you make an appointment with my secretary?" he would moan. On my way to the couch, I had to step over boxes of VHS tapes, plastic cups, and discarded medical gauze thrown haphazardly about the room. Every time, he would make that remark about having made an appointment. He'd never had a secretary in his life. Just another joke he couldn't get enough of. I took my usual seat on the couch and told him I liked what he'd done with the place. This was always my response to him. Our little routine. He laughed a hacking laugh and looked me in the eyes.

"You come here to clean up after me again?" he asked. He frowned on it, but I usually did clean the place during my visits. Just tidied up a bit. I only ever touched the TV room. He'd told me not to worry about the rest of the house. It was a lost cause, he said, and besides, he only ever spent time in the TV room.

"No," I told him. "Just here for you."

The image from the TV flickered against our faces. It was hard to tell the full extent of it in that uncertain light, but the melanoma had formed on other areas of his face and neck and hands. Black blisters pocked him like boils. He had decided against treatment. "There's no fighting this," he'd told me in justifying the decision. After a few years, I had stopped trying to convince him otherwise.

"How's it all feeling?" I asked.

"Still pieced together. But glue can only hold for so long, my boy."

I looked him in the eyes but took in his whole body. His white shoes were scuffed and torn, worn down in the soles. His pants had developed stains that wouldn't come out and had busted at points along the seams. His white t-shirt, the armpits starched stiff with sweat, now stretched its way around a much fuller belly. The gold earring hung low in an earlobe swollen with cancer.

I sighed deeply and sat back. "What year's this?" I asked, nodding at the TV because I didn't know what else to say.

I didn't have to look to know what was playing. It was the same thing that always played: his old commercials. An endless loop of the commercials he'd done over the years with outtakes, blooper reels, and dubbed in all kinds of languages. That's what was in the boxes: VHS tapes loaded full of his commercials that had aired in different years in different markets all over the globe. I never asked how he'd managed to get hold of them. And what difference did it actually make anyway?

I can remember the first time I'd walked in on him watching the tapes. I was horrified. His glazed eyes transfixed on the screen, his emotions strung securely to each

movement, his face alive again. This was back at the old house, before the cancer and the decapitations and the arrest. He was in the basement. I crouched on the steps and watched from above. I saw him nodding and clapping, slapping his knees, laughing along with the fifteen- and thirty-second spots. I shifted my weight onto the next step down without realizing it was the creaky one, and it sounded off like an air horn.

The next morning at breakfast, neither of us said a word about it, but we talked incessantly of other things as if that would erase what had happened. As if I'd caught him masturbating.

"This one's, uh, Fall of 1986—Mexico," he said. I should have guessed. In Mexico, the cleaning agent was always represented with a thick, bushy mustache and a sombrero. This was back when marketing teams still considered ethnic stereotyping to be effective promotional material. My father scratched at a bandage on his arm and sighed deeply. We sat in silence for a while, me watching my father watch himself on TV. The excitement that I'd seen in him that first night was now gone, replaced by resignation.

"Does it hurt much?" I eventually asked.

"Does what hurt?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"Come on. They give you stuff for the pain," he said. "I barely feel a thing."

On the TV, a pretty Latina encounters a leftover mess of tacos in the kitchen. She shakes her head, doesn't seem to know how she'll ever clean it all up.

"How does it feel to be numb?" I ventured.

He looked at me as if the answer was obvious. "It doesn't," he said.

The Latina opens a bottle of the cleaning product, and my father materializes next to her. He puts his fists on his hips and winks at her.

"It looks really bad. It almost hurts to just look at it."

He forced a cough. "I know it's not pretty. No need telling me so."

Relieved, the Latina smiles and gives my father a knowing look. They both glance at the mess of tacos and laugh in disbelief.

"Yeah, sorry," I said. "Just kind of tough seeing you like this. Gets me distracted."

"Gets you thinking, you mean."

The TV cuts to them sweeping, scrubbing, drying. They're both smiling the whole time.

"Yeah. About the way things were back then, about the way you were."

The place is spotless in no time, and the two admire the sparkling, new-looking kitchen before them. My father's fists rest securely on his hips.

"Try not to dwell on it. Not a lot you can do."

"I guess I can't help it sometimes."

The Latina's family arrives home, and she again opens the bottle of cleaning product. This time my father is sucked back inside. None of the family members have any clue he was ever even there.

"Yeah, well, I guess we all get like that sometimes. Some deal with it better than

others. You just do the best you can. That's all."

Her family is amazed at how clean everything is. She smiles and then winks at my father's image on the bottle, and he winks back.

"You ever get mad at mom and everyone?" I asked. "Feel like they ditched you?"

"No," he said. "No, they did what they had to do to keep going. I can't blame them for that. Just like everyone else, they're scrambling to figure something out that works for them." He turned and looked at me in the eyes and said, "Same as you." His head went back to the TV. "Same as me."

The image fades to a bottle of the cleaning agent as the Latina's family begins to make another taco dinner that is sure to be just as messy as the one they just finished cleaning.

Then the next commercial started.

My father's mouth twitched. "This next one's real good," he assured me. "You're going to like it."

We sat there for a while longer, he and I, together. Neither of us said much more. We sat there in the dark with the sound down low.

I made sure he'd fallen asleep before I started cleaning up the place. I organized tapes, stacked boxes, picked up gauze and other tissues. I wiped down tabletops and dusted the TV and folded blankets. And for some reason that night, I picked up his dirty dishes and the food scattered around his feet, and I took it all to the kitchen instead of out to the trash. He was right: It was a mess in there. But I cleaned that up too. Scrubbed the dishes and the countertops and the floor. Put dishes and silverware and glasses away. And then I did the same with the bathroom and planned to do the same with the rest of the house.

But when I walked into the small bedroom, I couldn't believe it. It felt like I'd walked into a dream, because the room was spotless and so clean it seemed to let off a faint glow. It looked like it was true that he barely used it, but it was the cleanest room I'd ever seen. The carpet soft, the bed sheets clean and crisp. Not a stray smudge on the walls, no dust on the bedside tables or dresser. Everything neat and orderly. Everything shined. It just didn't seem real, didn't seem possible in real life. And then, all along the walls, covering most of the space from floor to ceiling, there were framed pictures. Pictures of us, the whole family. Tons of pictures in perfectly spaced rows, so perfect and ordered it was almost dizzying to stand at the center of it all—like standing in the eye of a tornado. There wasn't a spot of dust on them. Not a spot. And they seemed to span my whole life and well beyond.

There was one picture that I'd never seen before, a photo of him and me at the beach. He was looking at me with such joy and tenderness—a tenderness that I'd nearly forgotten. And there was one of these for all of my siblings. And of the whole family together, looking happy and whole. And one of him and my mother when they were young. So full of promise and expectation.

And one of my father as a kid, his eyes eager and hopeful. His whole life before him.

Jesse Sensibar

Jesse Sensibar loves small furry animals and assault rifles with equal abandon and still has a soft spot in his heart for innocent strippers and jaded children. He retired in 2010. In 2014, he earned his MFA in creative writing while teaching Freshman Composition at a large southwestern state university in the mountain town where he has lived since the late 1980s.

"The Lucky Shirt"

The burgundy 2007 Ford four-wheel-drive truck was traveling west from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Kingman, Arizona when the driver lost control near Winona, Arizona and rolled the truck. The owner of the truck was killed. We towed the truck to our storage yard where it was parked on the gravel in the back corner near the gate, backed in against the eight-foot chain-link fence.

In spite of the owner being deceased, I fully expected to hear from somebody about the wreck; family members would want to come and collect personal effects. In spite of being totaled, the truck still had significant salvage value. Insurance companies would be sending adjusters and possibly investigators to minimize risk, figure out cause and liability, pay tow bills, and arrange for the truck to be sold for salvage.

But nobody came. The truck sat in the storage yard for almost a month. I had a phone number for the deceased owner's parents, and finally, I had to call and speak to the father of the owner of the truck.

Now, I say how sorry I am for his loss and explain my situation. I ask if he knows if his son had any collision insurance on the truck, and he tells me that he did not. I explain to him as kindly as I can that the truck is sitting in our storage yard but offer that the bill could be paid if I could sell the truck. If he could send me the title, I would not ever have to bother him again with any of this. He tells me he will see what he can do. I tell him again how sorry I am for his loss, and I apologize for having to ever bother him with this sort of thing.

A week after this conversation, I receive a letter from the owner's mother, which details the "cold," "callous," and "heartless" phone call her husband received from a "representative" of the company. The letter goes on to say that her son was carrying "valuable collectables" in the truck and that if the towing company will send them to her, she will send us a title.

I look in what is left of the truck because nobody else wants to get anywhere near it if they don't have to. The closest thing I find to something of value is a center console full of change and a few dollar bills. I go back to my desk and fill out the paperwork to begin the lengthy process of filing with the state of Arizona for an abandoned title on the truck.

The truck sits forlornly at the back of the storage yard through the winter and into the spring. Ignored, but not completely forgotten. Sometimes, I look out the window and see it sitting at the back of the yard, quietly mocking me.

Mocking me for my failure to communicate with the dead owner's father. Mocking

me because, in spite of my best efforts, I still came up short. Still came across as callous and coldhearted. Mocking me by its very presence, sitting there taking up space, accruing storage fees that will never be paid. It laughs quietly at me and whispers, *You could have done a better job. You could have tried a little harder, could have been a little nicer.* But it only whispers, like so many other things in my busy life, and I am used to ignoring the quiet voices.

At some point in the spring, the title finally arrives, and I am legally free to sell what is left of the truck and finally mark the tow bill paid.

Before we drag the truck up from the back of the yard, I decide I want it searched. I've been doing this for years, and when things strike me as odd, there is usually a reason for it. This particular truck and the circumstances surrounding it strike me as slightly odd.

I send my girlfriend's eighteen-year-old nephew out to search the truck, and I send one of my employees out to watch him do it. The kid had a bad attitude. Wanted to be a hustler, but he didn't have any hustle. Wanted to be a player, but he didn't have any game. All he really did well was to smoke pot and get beaten up.

I sent Purcell, my employee, out to watch him, because the last thing I wanted was for the kid to find a bunch of drugs or a gun and decide to steal it and really get himself in trouble. I told the kid about the money in the console and said he could keep all the folding money if he brought me all the change. They disappeared and returned a half hour later.

"How'd you do?" I asked.

Purcell took off his shades and rolled his eyes. The kid was happy. He'd found twenty-six dollars and a bunch of clothes that were three or four sizes too big for him, just the way he liked them, along with one large knife. I told him he could leave the knife and sent him on his way. After the kid left, Purcell laughed and said if I really wanted that truck searched, he'd better go back to it. I told him not to sweat it.

Later that afternoon, I wandered out to the truck to check it out for myself. I noticed that the kid's idea of searching the truck consisted of throwing everything from inside of the cab through the missing back window and onto the bed, and in the process, taking out the things he wanted. That left everything else in the bed of the truck to be eventually picked up by the wind and scattered around my yard, where someone would someday have to pick it all up. This came as no surprise to me. I'd expected nothing more from him.

I started tossing the things he had left in the bed of the truck back into the cab through the missing rear window when I picked up the shirt. It was a burgundy and black plaid with thin yellow stripes, dirty from six months in the cab of a badly rolled pickup truck with all the windows busted out of it. The first thing I noticed was that it seemed like a heavyweight, possibly high-quality shirt. Once I shook the busted glass and chunks of dirt out of it, I looked at the tag. Not only was it an L.L. Bean shirt, but it was actually going to be big enough to fit me.

I checked the front chest pockets. When I squeezed one of them, something inside of it mushed flat between my fingers but then expanded like it had a little spring to it when I let go. There is only one thing in the world that does this, especially after half a year out in the weather, and from a lifetime association with pocketfuls of cash, I knew exactly what it was. I was expecting to find a few dollars, some twenties, a ten, and a bunch of ones. Maybe if I got lucky, a hundred bucks. If not so lucky, maybe seventeen or thirty-eight dollars.

What I found was nine hundred and forty dollars in new twenty-dollar bills. Forty-seven twenty-dollar bills folded in half makes a nice-feeling bulge in your shirt pocket. Too thick to put in your wallet, especially on a long drive from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Kingman, Arizona. It will make your wallet so thick that your back will hurt before very long. Sooner rather than later if you're a guy who already wears a shirt in size XXL-REG.

So you put it in the pocket of the shirt you are wearing on that day. That day you are going to die. That day you are going to get crushed to death by your own pickup truck as it lands on top of you in an icy ditch near Winona, Arizona on a freezing morning in January. You are not actually wearing that shirt when death comes for you, because if you were, it would end up in the morgue and then the Department of Public Safety evidence locker with the rest of your personal effects.

But it is the shirt you are wearing that day; otherwise, it would not have your nine hundred and forty dollars in it, which would become my nine hundred and forty dollars, because you took off your shirt before you were killed because the heater in your almost-new truck worked so well. And your shirt becomes my lucky shirt, not because I found nine hundred and forty dollars in it but because I have seen so much death up close. So many people die as you have died that I have become so familiar with it, perhaps too familiar with it. So familiar, so comfortable, that now the shirt you were wearing the day you died becomes my lucky shirt, because you died in it. Because I have seen so much, I know that it can and does happen to anyone, someone any day, every day, myself included.

But now, I have your shirt, and your shirt becomes my lucky shirt, because I know that the chances of two people dying in the same shirt are slim indeed. So I wear your shirt without any remorse, without any fear, in total disregard for our social norms of shying away from death and our dead, because I know that my chances of dying are high. But I know that the chances of two men, even two large men, dying in the same shirt are very, very small.

Sean Sam

Sean Sam works as a wage slave in the USA. He went to college somewhere and enjoys vagueness, the works of David Hume, and professional wrestling. His website is http://seansam.com.

"The Other Visitor"

Jake planned on telling Mrs. Fastuca tonight. He couldn't wait for their normal meeting time; he had to get it done for her sake, so he went over his speech again in his car, mumbling to himself the lines he rehearsed, telling himself the length of the affair had been his only fault, as if the passage of time eroded what was left of his will, like water creating a channel into the planet's core.

She'd told him her husband left her, so he crawled into that space, where affection became reflexive, never motiveless, and each individual ending, each session of practiced fondness, was just air bouncing between them. It's her daughter's fault, he thought. He didn't want Mrs. Fastuca to have no one. As near as he could tell, her daughter, her only other visitor, was never there.

He turned onto her street, situated in the middle of a suburban sprawl. As he arrived at her address, he noticed other cars—a red truck and a silver van—parked beside the gutter of her townhouse. He had never seen any other cars outside her house before. She warned him once, after they finished, if he ever saw a red truck, he should wait, because that meant her daughter was there. She told him not to ask questions about her daughter. The girl, she said, just didn't have herself together.

Maybe someone died, he thought. He brought wine with him in the car, the first time he had done that. He glanced at it and swallowed.

Light shone in the front window. She liked shadows—brightness gave her headaches. He turned around, walked a few steps back to his car, and then hesitated in the yard. The longer he stood there, the more he could hear his own heartbeat in his ears. He went back and knocked.

Footsteps advanced toward the door. It swung open, and a young woman's frame filled the space behind the glass. Her gaze passed over Jake. She was smiling, probably at something one of the many people inside had just said. Her smile resembled her mother's, and her arms were crossed over a belted jacket, which led into a black skirt suit. Behind her, he caught a glimpse of a party, someone's birthday.

And there, sitting on the red couch where he sometimes slept when she snored too loud, was Mrs. Fastuca, holding a baby he had never seen before, laughing in a way he had never heard before. She laughed as if the world loved her, loud enough so it rang through the living room and echoed in his chest.

Authors and Artists in This Issue

George Bishop
Kanchan Chatterjee
Matthew Connolly
Windy Guthrie
Noah Hawke
Maxwell Junge
Jamie Leigh
Sheila E. Murphy
Alex Nodopaka
Sergio Ortiz
Scott Rooker
Sean Sam
Alice Saunders
Jesse Sensibar
Don Shaeffer
Daniel Shea
Murrielle Telfort
Tyler Tsay

Don Schaeffer (artwork featured on page 6): Bio can be found on page 11 with his poem “Casino.”

Copyright © 2014. The Corner Club Press. All rights reserved.
You will not find a copy of this publication in the Library of Congress.