

Neon

A Journal of Brilliant Things

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Second Coming

Rupert Merkin

Hyde Park is mined. There's barbed wire on The Strand. Snipers line up London Bridge and watch the Underground. Through the miracle of modern genetics Christ the Redeemer is back on Earth to save us from ourselves. From the brown curly lock, locked around the Papal neck, we managed to grow Jesus in a tube. His beard and sandals are way out of date.

Down the escalator, London Bridge station, Jesus addresses the crowds - Christianity the underground movement, now in the Underground. No more temptations, girls in black leather, politicians flip-flopping with broken words. Begone foul heathens (yes you I mean), here's some glue, a sticky Saviour, to bind our broken souls. He addresses the moon-men, the mad-men, the new-meeek, the bowing, kow-towing, where once there were millions all over the land now there's five hundred thousand. All armed to the teeth with middle-class values and Ford Mondeos, with cups and doilies and Moroccan rugs.

Over the Tannoy, Jesus calls out: "Life is an overhanging cloud. I am the rain that's come." He swigs from a bottle of fine red wine (a gift from the Smiths at the last dinner party). "I came in from the planting," he says. "Now it's time to reap."

A new gospel fresh from the fancy glass cabinet where you keep your (unread) bible.

What did we want? A change from the usual bills, circulars, life as junk mail? Isn't it enough being free to catch a

train, sit your wife on your lap; be a bird to flutter in and out of the open window of life?

"I had a trial once," says Jesus, then jabbing his chest with his finger. "Now I'm in the driving seat."

What we have is never enough. If it wasn't this it would be something else, a new bomb, a death-law, a James Bond villain in power. We're bound to destroy everything in the end.

We just can't help ourselves.

"I rose once, now I'm back again!" cries Jesus, arms V-ed up, the original zombie, now twice-removed from his grave.

And his followers, the Christians, the original bearers of sin, they rise from their status of 'deserted religion', they come with their purpose once more; they lift their middle-class gardening weapons, their hoes and rakes and outmoded ethics, and they take to the streets to burn London down.



Three Poems

Jenn Koiter

Dream I: Half-Awake

i am stirring the soup
she is cutting an onion
 she stops
 she licks the knife
 one side then
 the other
 slowly
 slicing her tongue
 i turn and grip
 the stove's edge
 bleeding
 she walks to me
 covers my mouth
 with her mouth
 her blood
 my hand
 warmer and warmer
 by the burner
 it doesn't
 barely doesn't
 touch

Wishing for Failure

Not a first choice, clearly,
but after a few polite nods
from success with no invitation
to join, I can't help wanting
something else, spectacular fall
from a height I thought
I could reach, finally rushing toward
something, even ruin, anything but this
yawn that won't come, chill
that won't run down my spine, stuck
at the back of my neck

Dream IV: Forgotten

The others tell their dreams at breakfast,
luring wakefulness with coffee, buttered bread.
But all day, something hovers
just beyond sight - you start
at a touch on the shoulder, a tap
at the door. At the park, at lunchtime,
you hear schoolgirls whisper
gravely to each other: *You dreamed
you were falling? You know,
you die if you don't wake up.*

Two Poems

Grant McLeman

To RS

he suffers
from people.
They have to bear
the weight of watching
deflation by their own hands,
although laughter often softens
the trial.

He tries hard, does
vulnerable Mr S,
to return the compliments
but they dissolve
on his own head
and he pulls
the barbs out
one

by

one

and slowly walks away

The Fall In

he was the name
who gives no reply,
the gap
in the parade ground,
the empty echo
across the square.

And for a second,
they thought of him,
wrote his memory
on the rice-paper
of the moment
and thanked God
it wasn't them.



*"The Fall In" appeared previously in the Spring 2006
Special Issue of Mindfire Renewed*

Two Poems

Jonathan Greenhouse

Alice After her Adventures in Wonderland

She's not obese, but rather overweight and wary of the scales.
In her closet, there's a mannequin
where pearls adorn its slender Styrofoam neck,
and a wide-brimmed fedora hat covers auburn ringlets.
In black ink, she's branded a rabbit
and a series of broken hearts upon the plastic skin.

At her office, she does clerical work
and reads horoscopes of celebrities and her Cheshire cat.
She has a crush on Tom, who is flaming and sweet.
When she works overtime, she slips highlighters into her
purse
and collects paper clips of varying sizes.

Her first boyfriend became a priest but now refinances home
mortgages,
and her septuagenarian parents live in Tempe, Arizona
and are extraordinarily fond of lawn ornaments.
One of her uncles is serving twenty years confinement for
armed robbery,
but he always sends her a card for Christmas.

She says it's lonely in her apartment:
No one calls her, and there are never any visitors,
but she consoles herself by watching soap operas

taped by pre-programming her DVD.

Alice comes from a very religious background and reads from the bible, but she no longer practices. As a girl, she dreamt of becoming a make-up artist, dressing up the stars of screen and stage and living in a way you would if you were famous... Now she dresses a Queen-of-Hearts mannequin in her closet and does it exceedingly well.



Colonizing Ants in the Desert

A ripe melon split through the center, seeds spilling
into the soil and sand, soldiers severing
the spotted rinds to drown
pointed teeth into their pulpy flesh,
smooth guns reflecting a sweltering sun
as ants marched untiringly
to greet the sugared detritus

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staining khaki camouflage and sun-tanned skin.

The army multiplied and lay down roots,
the fruit of slugs
spent in a shower of heavy gunfire, a harvest
of sanctioned murder on the masses
bearing these trails of hidden shrapnel
and barrels cocked.

A can of soda sang a magic song
with a wind carrying supposed salvation.
Statesmen played high-stakes cards in backrooms
as kittens were kicked by steel-toed boots,
and men shot stray dogs to forget themselves.

The world blinked at the carnage
then continued turning,
as insects devoured invaders to defend their queen
and the well-trained soldiers stepped on anthills
and buried cables burst alive,
calling to the famished vultures
tethered to the drying sky.

They circled, feathers descending weightlessly
upon the wind of the desert graveyard,
before landing gracefully
on the rising mounds of misplaced men
deserted far from home.

Three Poems

Lynn Patmalnee

New Season

Summer tastes different
since your smutty-lipped kisses.

Sour cherry swears
splatter my tongue,

fireworks burst
in my mouth's dark sky.

I am cursed
to crave the tang of light.

"What'll it be?"

the bartender asks,
but I can't say;
not Bud, not Steam
can sate me as he pads
across the floor, arches
his haunches, grinds
his shiny face
into a stranger's neck.

I remember the silvery
prickle, whiskers,



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the whiskey purr
his embrace elicits
from me still. My
caress burnished his skin
until my hands slipped
from the sheen of him.

I know what it'll be.
Stools away,
what shimmered
blazes. A drunk
drops a match
into a glass.

Since I've Known

Lately,
since I've known, taxis
pass too close
to your toes, hell bent to crash
into our happiness, to summon sirens
red and wailing, leaving puddles
of flesh and dreams behind. Puddles
seem like sinkholes lately.
The watery mouths of sirens
open wide in the backs of taxis,
singing of other beds, other places to crash.
Stay close
to me while I tell you, close
enough for you to engulf me like puddles
surrounding a toddler's booted foot. You can crash
here. I've been up to my ankles in longing lately,

watching rain slicker yellow taxis
run red lights towards proverbial greener pastures, riling
sirens

shrieking at them to return. When sirens
sound, my chest tightens inside of me, clenches close
like fists pounding on the hoods of taxis,
scared couples splashed as they trudge through puddles.
Everyone is so damn careless lately.
They're going to crash

I tell you, crash
head on into barricades of regret. The sirens
will cry for days. Lately
I walk everywhere, keep close,
hug the curb until you arrive, sidestep puddles
swirling in the street, steer clear of careening taxis

headed places I don't want to go. Taxis
won't take me where I'm driven, to the crash
of briny tides drowning shallow puddles –
others' little ripples of desire. Sirens
lure some to rocks or emergency rooms, but I stand firm, close
to the edge, my toes dug into your footprints in the soaking
sand. Lately,

since I've known I love you, taxis pass too close to your
toes. Sirens
cry for days, still I'm driven to the crash of briny tides. Please,
stay close
to me, engulf me like puddles...I've been up to my ankles in
longing lately.



CROWS

Curtis Smith

I glanced back into our pickup's bed. Light was fading, and I couldn't fight the urge. Don't, my father said. An unanchored end of our tarp rippled beneath the faces of Mr. and Mrs. Hammond. The Hammonds had worked the land alongside ours for five generations. Mrs. Hammond sang first soprano in the church choir. Mr. Hammond often helped plow our drive in exchange for fresh coffee and one of my mother's biscuits. We sped toward town, my father's foot heavy and the roads our way deserted. Just over the creek bridge, we hit a bump. Damn squirrels, my father spat. The Hammonds convulsed, once, then again, before settling back into their rhythmic trembling. Hideous bruises circled their bloated necks, testaments to their pained, internal strangulation.

Son?

Yes, sir. I turned back in my seat. Think we'll make it?

We'll do our best. He squinted at the setting sun and stepped on the gas. The engine chugged and complained as the speedometer inched higher.

At the checkpoint we took our place at the end of a line twenty, maybe thirty-deep. Machine gun-toting guards marched up the shoulder, their thick-soled boots harsh and crunching over the roadside stones. Thank God, my father sighed when they passed. The guards took up a position behind us, the incoming cars and trucks turned back, the protesters dispersed with bursts of warning fire. Horns blew when the guards waved a garbage truck to the front, but then the guards turned their gunners' eyes on us. Since the Sector

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General announced the bodies for ration cards exchange, the municipals' garbage haulers and ten-wheel dump trucks had been swarmed by a misfit armada, entrepreneurs in delivery vans and pickups and shimmying, sardine-packed trailers. But we were country people, the Hammonds' silo only visible from our porch after the maples had dropped their leaves, and this was our first visit to one of the valley's biological disposal centers.

A crow descended upon the flatbed idling in front of us and began pecking at the cordwood-stacked bodies. Others swiftly followed. My father beeped the horn, but the crows wouldn't spook. The nearest one latched onto a tiny arm and yanked a doll-sized body from the pile. My father climbed out. He flapped his arms, yelled, but the birds, as familiar with death now as we were, refused to scatter until he began hurling stones. He stopped by our pickup's bed and pulled the tarp over the Hammonds. By the time he'd settled behind the wheel, the birds had returned. Their landing - its inevitability, the odd grace of flapping wings - disturbed me more than their heartless scavenging.

We tied rags over our faces, the stench worse than what we'd discovered in the fly-buzzing stillness of the Hammonds' house. The soldiers behind us smoked cigarettes, sometimes laughing between puffs. Twice I leaned out the window and vomited. My father



patted my back. We'll get through this, son.

Finally, the guards waved us through the checkpoint gates. Just inside the fence, we passed the trailers common to construction sites, a lineup of portable toilets, hastily erected sheds. Overhead, crows circled and cawed, and as we neared the yawning pit gouged into the earth, I saw hundreds more feasting in the gruesome maw. Civilian workers made anonymous by ventilators and masks waved us to our place along the pit's edge. One of the men approached my window. Goggles pressed around his eyes, the plastic coated with a fine, dirt scrim. He handed me two ration packets and a government brochure full of cartoon pictures and simple sentences entitled Staying Safe in Times of Plague. Two pit workers clambered into our bed, and the pickup's worn shocks sagged beneath their weight. With a nudge of the passenger side's mirror, I spied on their well-rehearsed hurling of first Mrs. and then Mr. Hammond's bodies over the bed's gate and into the pit.

My father shifted the pickup into gear, our exodus halted as a trio of fire trucks rolled through the front gate. Their backing sirens chirping, the fire trucks jockeyed into position around the pit, the paradox of the new order confirmed by the arcing gasoline streams they rained down over the pit's stiff limbs. A low, black cloud of fleeing crows flapped over our heads. A sergeant barked orders while soldiers worked in pairs to strap on their flame throwers.

The checkpoint's gates swung shut behind us. Most of the trucks sped back toward town, nightfall's curfew looming, the dust swirling in their wake, but we joined another group that had parked on a hilltop a half mile from the pit. Some sat on hoods; most, like us, remained in their cars, all of us silent as the first angry fireball leapt skyward. Even at this distance,

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the fire warmed our faces, the dancing flames both horrible and mesmerizing. One of the circling crows burst into flames, a wandering spark colliding with gasoline-wet feathers. The bird spiraled down and disappeared into the pit.

Let's go, my father said and started the truck.

Two months later, on the day my mother and sister died, I helped my father drag their bodies to the field behind the barn. We each held a wrist, and with every bump and rut, their heads nodded, silently, knowingly, my sister's long black hair tracing the grass like a bride's silky train, my mother's right eye opened as if taking in the homestead she so loved one last time. We laid them side by side. I smoothed out their dresses and picked the grass and hay from their hair while my father folded their hands over their bellies and tried once again to close my mother's eye. We knelt by their heads and prayed, but now it was my turn to open an eye, my pleas to God undermined by the sight of their tortured necks, the memory of their gasping, desperate breaths these past four days. The sun, swelled and orange as it sank behind the ridge, cast a muted light as we retreated to the barn. Some folks will have a lot to answer for when this is over, my father said. He grabbed the gas can, kissed my forehead, and suggested I take a bike ride before bed.

I pedaled down our stone drive, then onto the deserted country two-lane that snaked toward the ridge. At a spot marked by a trailhead's packed dirt, I veered onto the steep, forest-hemmed path that led to the old fire tower. Pines and hemlocks and towering oaks knitted a green tunnel above me. The first fireflies blinked their welcomes. When the grade became too steep, I climbed off and walked my bike up the trail. Squirrels and chipmunks and toads bounded ahead of me. In the flickering spaces between the trees' trunks, I

spotted tan deer hides, and the retreat of trampled brush and snapped branches followed me up the hill.

I thought of my father's words and wondered who would have to answer for when all the dying stopped. Perhaps he meant the martial law police, men who'd enforced their brutal quarantines by blowing up bridges and barricading roads, who'd halted food shipments to towns they deemed beyond hope. Maybe he'd had the hospitals in mind, their doors locked to the flocking thousands but, it was rumored, opened to the powerful and wealthy, their arrivals made via helicopter in the dead of night. He could have meant the civil authorities who'd seized the radio and television stations, the airwaves flooded with lies repeated so often they evolved into ugly, hollow truths. Or maybe he was thinking of us, the survivors left to clean up after the last fires died.

Sweating, my heart thumping softly in my chest, I reached the hilltop's clearing. My father claimed the fire tower, a three-story cylinder of weathered stone, to be over a hundred years old. Bats crisscrossed the graying sky above the clearing. Firemen had stopped using the tower long before I was born, and in the pre-plague days, the cops had engaged in a running battle with the local teens, the kids breaking in and the cops applying new padlocks, the thick, wooden door layered with NO TRESSPASSING signs.

The door creaked open. The murky space inside stank of rotting leaves and stale urine. I stepped over beer cans and broken bottles, a stained mattress. Hello, I called, and my voice rose in feathery echoes. Spider webs broke over my face as I scaled the first set of metal rungs bolted into the wall. Yard-square stands waited at the top of every twelve rungs, concrete platforms hemmed by dubious railings, places

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where I could catch my breath before rejoining the climb. Each platform was marked by a slim, unguarded window, and wafting through these narrow openings ebbed the faint yet gagging smoke. The teary scent urged me on, my fears of slipping, of the solidness of generations-old moorings eclipsed by my desire to reach the top. The higher I climbed, the louder the bats became. They squealed their protests, flapped their leathery wings, and I cringed at the currents that felt like angry breaths upon my neck.

I emerged onto the fire tower's deck. Dark now, the valley a black moat surrounding me. Above, the smoke-smearred sky, the stars dimmed, and for a moment, a sense of vertigo, up becoming down, the star's shine usurped by the glowing beacons below. I remembered standing in this very spot the year before with my mother and sister, the valley pulsing with October's reds and golds. The breeze toyed with my sister's long hair, stirred crisp, scolding complaints from my mother's windbreaker. Amid the valley's patches of paintbox colors, we counted the slender white steeples that strained toward the endless blue above.

Now, I counted the flames. Roaring pit fires marked each of the valley's towns. The flames jumped and twisted, a trio of angry suns, and in the black spaces between, smaller stars flickered. I took my bearings and attempted to align myself with our farm. One of the night's fires burned in our field. It seemed important to pick it out from the others.

Two Poems

Anthony Frame

Don' t Blink

I've been googling an old friend
for three hours and so far found
nothing but a high school football player



who organized an origami club,
a Round Top, Texas firefighter who saved
a puppy, and a website with pictures

of Tony Danza nude, and all I want
is an email address so my friend
can know about my sick cat's broken



kidney and my friend will care because
I held his hand as his sick cat's
mis-wired brain gave up and I asked

my friend, who raps, who wears
dreadlocks, who carries a bat from his car
to school, I asked him why he



let me hold his hand and he said,
his Midwestern drawl spitting each p,
his fingernails digging my palm,

he said, Princess always purred for you,
right before he kissed his dead cat,

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let go of my hand, walked outside,

lit a smoke and stared,
stared at the sun.

Withdrawal in West Virginia: a Letter

Tony Hoagland -

Remember me? From Morgantown?

 You still owe me a cigarette.

The cold West Virginia air, the little cap
on your head as yellow as your Charlie Brown shirt,
 your voice almost a whisper -

 soft as snow on a lake.

You coughed after the first inhale, letting me know
 you'd just fallen off the wagon.

 You seemed frail, shivering
 and coughing and quoting Auden
 as if it would make a difference.

Next time we're lost in downtown Morgantown,
 looking for a café or diner,

one of us should ask for directions.

 See, if I get lost one more time

 I'm gonna lose it.

 Go Kung Fu on the city.

In the bad way, not the cool TV-show-monk kinda way.

 And I better have a cigarette,

 I can't see myself

drop kicking ATMs
in Morgantown
without a smoke hanging from my mouth like an I.V.

Say, where'd you

end up for lunch that day? I found
a Subway sandwiched
between two bars.

I read your book,
your first one,
the one I got in a fight over

whether or not you had faith in images.

I wanted to find a McDonalds
to remind me of home.

There are lots of McDonalds in Toledo. No Starbucks.

But I was out of cigarettes, afraid
of moonshine and none of the ATMs liked
my Ohio ATM card

so your book pissed me off.

Not because of faithless images.
Probably because

I was having
a Chicken Nugget
craving.

Rock on,
Tony Frame

Autumn Retreat for Southern Baptists, Florida

Brent Fisk



Off she goes on her retreat, away from the wild
lives of widows and has-beens. She leaves
the retirement community, her friends dueling
in the moonlight with darning needles,
lobbing skeins of mustard-yellow yarn
and poking fingers from the improvised eyes
of sock puppets conducting passion plays
in the muddy baseball dugouts of the past.

Visions of quavering chins, palsied hands

passing over milky-blue cereal bowls,
dreaming of how their lives once unwound,
how they wore their loves like comfortable sweaters,
how they listened to the Morse code of intermittent thunder
and double bed snoring. Some try to sweep
water from the sunken boats of their past.
They realize they can breathe liquid, become lucid,
speak in Shakespearean asides to the filmy fish.
They are beautiful, terrifying, like Shelly Winters
at the bottom of the river in Night of the Hunter.

Sometimes they speak to the butcher of tenderloins,
the high cost of meat. They fear the apogee
of swings on the playground but can't help but get excited
at the bright red caboose, children with fingers in fences.
The clouds hang low and gray like interactive hornets' nests.
Billboards peel away and reveal their hidden messages.
Missing children roam the underbrush.
There are toll free numbers if you have information.
There are times even now when she almost asks her dead
husband
to zip her up, to push the bright red lipstick deeper
into the cracks of her lips, never stop layering it on
until her whole head is candy-apple red and she is a blushing
bride
tearing at the grass like a white hen looking for the children
she
never had,
looking for the cause of hollowness, of barrenness,
in haystacks made of yarn and knitting needles.

What were the names she answered to then?

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What made timid men follow her
reflection in shop windows, bold men whistle brazenly?
The line she drew up the back of her leg when no one could
get their
hands on silk?
The cloud of perfume she walked through, that touch of
lavender?

It was her white teeth, the smile that never stayed on her face.
It was the way she held back her laugh until someone earned
it.
It was the way the dashboard lights lit her perfectly when they
parked
beneath the stars, the mimosa trees with spiders on eye lash
legs
threatening at every open window.

On the way back from this retreat she will fold up
the choral music, the racy jokes, the recipes with too much
butter.
She will store them in a sturdy box, shove them in the closet.
In the spring she'll call the Salvation Army, throw open the
dark
windows,
grab her handbag and drive her car off a steep embankment,
live upside down for a week eating Certs and lipstick.
Her face will flush red and she will dream of bats,
the lullaby of mosquito song, the moon obscured
by grapevine and trumpet flower. Her horn will die a slow
death.
She will flash her compact at passing planes, write notes to no
one

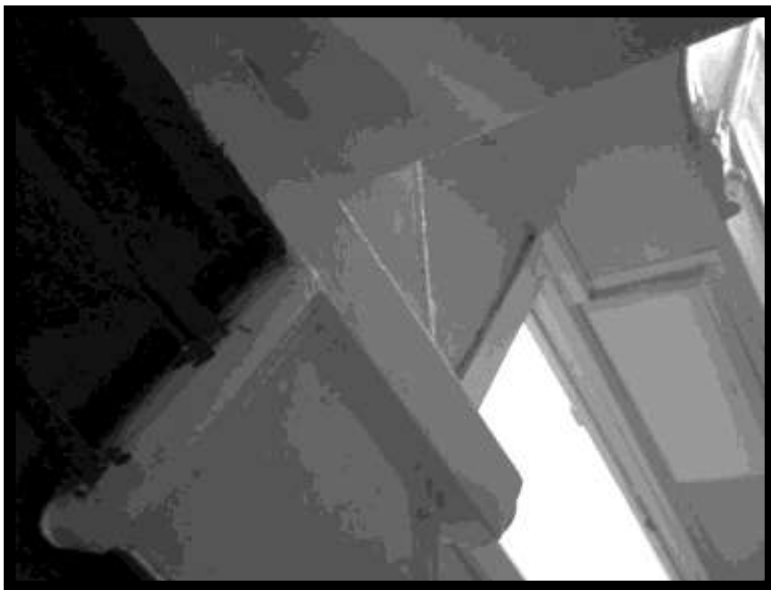
on the back of deposit slips. She will become deranged and still,
her sky the fabric ceiling of her car, birds pestering her like small children. She will taste the blood of cracked lips. Her dead husband will come back in his Shriner's cap, with his aluminum baseball bat, pork rinds and greasy ties. He will look at her in the fading light. He will call her the old names.
He will ask her for children. He will give them names, talk of tomorrow as if it were something solid like the petals of a flower, or a feather worked loose from a muddy nest,
twirling iridescent towards the earth.
All the words she's spoken in anger shake loose from the muscled tongue.
She dreams of clams in the riverbed, otter tails breaking the surface of water.
She dreams of rain on the asphalt, how it slips through the leaves of red maples in autumn. She dreams of Popeye, of Bluto beating the hood of her car.
Astronauts propel down the sides of mountains. Helicopters take root in the atmosphere.
There are dogs locked in the back seats of August cars. There are the floured hands of loved ones squeezing her cheeks.
The smell of latex gloves, the sun a pinpoint on the horizon. Floured hands are lifting her. She spins toward heaven like a leaf let go of a branch.
She's spinning and spinning toward buttercups,

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toward dog tongues independent from their bodies.
She is dying. She is being reborn. She is pain made whole and
flesh.

She is somewhere north of Kissimee, somewhere north of hell.
It is pronounced hell in the morning, and hell at night.
Someone turn down the radio, the walls of her past
are much too thin. Someone, for the love of God,
ask her to dance again.





Up Here

Sarah Hilary

There are mice in the attic but I'm not afraid; they've called me Mouse too often. I've made my nest among the Winter clothes and Christmas decorations. They put down traps, baited with chocolate instead of cheese. I share what I find with my new friends, they come right up and take it from my hand, tickling my palm with their pink noses.

Downstairs, they got noisy, shouting my name. 'Mouse!' they shouted. 'Mouse, where are you?'

'Up here,' I whispered. I've always whispered too much. 'Speak up,' they've always said.

I climbed here while Dad was checking the traps. He doesn't do it often. I saw my chance when he wasn't watching, crept up the ladder and hid until he shut the trapdoor.

It's warm up here and it smells of wool. I can rest my head on the stuff they put down on the floor, yellow and a bit scratchy but the mice don't mind. They've nested everywhere; I've to be careful how I move around.

Downstairs, they're quiet now. It's been a few days. They're too busy with the police to check the traps.

I think they'll sell the house, that's what people do who've unhappy memories of a place, sell up and move on. I've seen it on the news.

They don't call my name any more. I've tried shouting but my voice comes out as a whisper no matter how I try. The mice want chocolate from my hand, but there's none left. They have sharp teeth.

'Up here,' I shout. A whisper, 'I'm up here.'

What he Lacked was Commitment

J.A. Tyler

Passing the mirror on the way to the urinals, there was nothing noticeable. Nothing out of the ordinary. Really, it could have been anything underneath his loose knit hawaiian shirt. It could have been a swelled rash induced by strange contact with poison ivy. It could have been the thousand or so dried bloody stumps of a one-time only chest waxing. It could have been four, inch-long scars from a recent gall bladder removal. But it was none of those things. Instead, it was a homemade bomb guaranteed to dis-integrate his body in a million or so places. Made from grocery store procurements and failed home repair remnants, the trigger was pin-point on his chest, a tiny red button reminiscent of sugary candy just below the spot where his ribs dropped off into the chaos of sloshing-loose organs. Immediately beneath the third button on his black and bamboo short-sleeved shirt.



About when the construction had begun:

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He'd needed something to read. Eighty degree weather seemed to call for slightly sweetened iced-tea and a novel that turned its own pages. So he'd pulled into the shiny green summer of the local campus library. And every road, every entrance, every exit, every crevice and crack available to an even tiny automobile was marked with some letter or another. A lot. Z lot. W lot. H lot. Q lot. T lot. C lot. Each and every one like a sign posted: No Trespassing. Keep Out. Private Property. Violators will be Prosecuted. So he drove in circles, squares, ovals, and finally rampant bogus directions of contradictory roads. But each sign begged him to look elsewhere. Each of those reflective utilitarian rectangles asked him to drive away. Be gone you small man in your small car. So he drove and drove and drove. And eventually, the car guzzled the last fuming remains of gasoline and parked him forcefully underneath a gently swaying and gigantic tree hailing pine cones and gusts of pollen on the recently washed exterior. So he walked to the gas station, gritted his teeth through swipes of an almost shredded debit card, and ended up at his small home with a book about incendiary devices and a stretched full plastic sack of random elements all meant to piece together the fuel for a grand explosion.

He stood and stared into the bathroom's wall length mirror. The package was slim and mostly unnoticeable. Taped neatly and lovingly from armpits to belly-button, wrapped from love handle to love handle. He groped his cheeks with watery hands and opened his eyes as wide as they'd allow. There were bloodshot strands of red attaching each pupil to each tear duct, painted on a canvas of yellowing white not unlike peeling wallpaper inside a weathered and worn farmhouse on the dusty plains of Kansas. It repeated in his head: Now or never. Now or never. Now or never. So he

washed his hands one more time, checked them for stability, and found none. But when his dripping digits waved and waved and waved in front of the paper towel dispenser, all to no avail, when the plastic shape of the automatic unit seemed to invite his business but was callous and cold with its property like so many dumping and brow-knitted ex-girlfriends, things seem to solidify themselves. Calm anger returned.



About when the hardware became hard-wired:

The ingredients had been a bubbling mass for a few days. Then they'd subsided into a shapeless gelatin, rimmed with foul smelling juices. Later, the concoction had hardened into a waxy substance. He'd carved his name into the top of it with the sharp end of a bent safety pin, waiting with each letter for his life to burst into thousands of particles and an endless pool of blood and guts. But nothing had happened. He'd carved his first name. Then his middle and his last. Then his address. $E = MC^2$ in quotes. And lastly, a little winking happy face. But still. No explosions. What it needed was a proper trigger. Casing and wiring. A shell suited to its every need. He could build it. He knew that. But he didn't really feel like. At least not until

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he'd opened a twelve-pack of eggs on the lower shelf of the fridge and found three of the white shells badly cracked and the contents grown hard as rocks. And when he'd gone to throw them away, he'd found the garbage overly-full and disgustingly scented. And when he bundled it properly and opened the front door a black metal hinge-pin on the screen door snapped letting the door first crack against the side of the house, denting and scratching the boards, then flipping its direction and smacking him straight in the forehead. So he'd finished the trash run smiling. And then returned to the house. And wandered into the garage. And started sifted through shelves and drawers and cabinets for those perfect bombshell and trigger components.

As he walked out of the bathroom, the shoddy dirty linoleum squeaked with each footstep, prodding him faster and faster down random aisles. Nervously chasing him like squirrels after each other in wibbly-wobbly trees. He looped the outlying spaces at least three times before slowing down. And when he stopped he was facing the stacks of chips. Corn. Potato. Fried. Baked. Bags. Cylinders. His hand automatically pulled a sour cream and onion canister from the metal shelf, popped the safety seal from its circular hole, and shoveled a generous pile into his mouth. He crunched as he returned to walking. He ate nearly half the can before discarding it discreetly behind a pair of size ten loafers at shoulder height in the shoe aisle. There. He'd done it. Stolen. Thieved. Pilfered. It was a step in the right direction. A small, incremental movement towards the big gas bag explosion that would, he hoped, demolish the shoppers, clerks, and himself down to the very last zippers on every pair of faded and holey blue jeans. Maybe even implode the ceiling. Bust the joists. Crinkle the airplane hanger walls of the greedy everything you could ever

want depot. Maybe. He really didn't know its capacity. This was all just wishful thinking.



About when he'd decided to strap it on and go forth:

After the shell and trigger were completed he'd taken time to sew it all into a vest structure, something easily taped to a body in need. But he hadn't tried it on. Didn't even know if it fit. Instead he'd stuffed the whole thing underneath his kitchen sink. In those small, mostly useless cupboards. He knew it was a risk. Putting it next to the Ajax and Windex, the Dawn and Jet Dry. But he truly didn't care. It was done. Toil toil. Completed, prepared, fixed, and adjusted. But the anger had simply run out. Now it ticked softly beneath his surface layers, waving his hair in cowlicks and pockets of growing baldness, agonized the joints of his knees and propelling his back pain down each and every vertebrae. Resting there. Growing. Taking deep breaths down in his inside insides.

At the grocery store that morning, he'd priced the deli sliced turkey. The packaged stuff ran somewhere between 3.63 and 3.78 a pound, roughly. He'd checked all the little tags, the fine print, the details that breed details on the freckles of details left

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too long in the waning summer sun. The counter meat, the stuff you had to contract via the hatted butcher who wore dirty rubber gloves, permanently tussled hair, and the store's collared shirt rather than a bloodied white butcher coat, it was only running around 4.12 or so a pound. Not much more for what was less packaging, less plastic, and more sandwich meat. He'd approached the curved glass counter and proposed:

"I need some turkey. Like for sandwiches."

"Alright. You got two choices. This stuff, the oven brown, and this regular."

"What's the difference?"

"The oven brown is a little more money but you get more turkey than the regular, which is more processed."

"Oh" he replied.

So as he stood, bomb strapped on top of his innards like a hapless bra covering meaningless flesh, he thought about that morning's conversation. This turkey has more turkey in it than that turkey. That turkey doesn't have as much turkey in it as this turkey does. He couldn't understand. Wasn't it all turkey? How could one kind of turkey have more turkey in it than another kind of turkey. In the end he'd bought the turkey with less turkey because it was cheaper. And his lunch bread had felt watered and mushy. But all he could do, all he could muster, was to strap up, carefully place the trigger, and wander the streets. And here he was. In all his glory. Standing in the toy aisle looking at the board games and puzzles. Looking at so many boxes filled with cardboard, plastic, and one slim sheet of instructions telling you how to lose and how to win based on someone else's arbitrary set of rules. It was all there. How to gain a monopoly. How to crush your opposition. How to spell correctly. How to communicate.

How to how to how to. But the cards, relegated to an end-cap with the red eggs of silly putty and the tangled slinkies, those were the exceptions. Cards had no value until you decided the game. If it was poker, jokers weren't allowed. If it was blackjack, aces had two values. If it was hearts, the queen of spades was hated. Cards allowed for thousands of games. Thousands of rules. Thousands of combinations of this and that and the other. He dropped a pack of red, wax coated bicycle brand cards into his sweaty palm and walked quickly to the register.

At home, he rested a dripping glass of iced-tea on his shorts and watched the darkening ring swell almost unnoticeably. He heard a bird chirp from its camouflage inside a leafy tree. The neighbor's dog barked. The ants built onward around a small weed growing mightily in the crack of patio cement. He flipped the deck of cards near his cheek and felt the tiny breeze it produced. He smiled even though the tape that wrapped across his back was growing itchy and hot. And the weight of the bomb restricted his breathing ever so slightly in the reclined position that the chaise lounge chair required. He shuffled the cards on the fly of his shorts and pulled the top card. Six of diamonds. Meaningless. He shuffled again. Four of spades. Again. Two of diamonds. He nodded off around the second eight of hearts. Also meaningless. And in his restless sleep, he scratched a clumsy finger across his tickly chest and exploded himself and his patio cover into millions of tiny, meaningless pieces.

Three Poems

Phil Gruis

A Life Well Spent

The bunk's bare steel straps
caress his back.

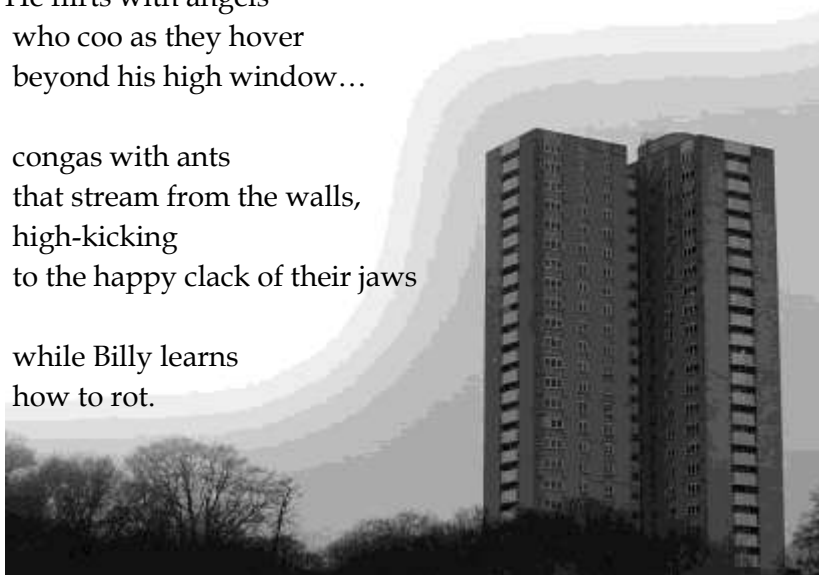
Powderfood lingers
pleasingly on his tongue.

He's moved
by the night-cries of butchers,
the tenderness
of his fist.

He flirts with angels
who coo as they hover
beyond his high window...

congas with ants
that stream from the walls,
high-kicking
to the happy clack of their jaws

while Billy learns
how to rot.



Scanner

I sure wouldn't want to be 17 again,
said Dorothy
 (who was safely four decades beyond)
as she scanned
with expert swoops
my dish soap and dog biscuits
at Wal-Mart's till number nine.

It was too scary, she said.

Yeah, I mumbled, I was lucky to survive 17,
thinking but not speaking of
 serial wrecks in my parents' '55 Pontiac

 the boozy night I broke this asshole's jaw
 before he could swing a chain
 he'd festooned with padlocks

 the cockroach leg in my jail spaghetti
 and the guard we cellmates called
 (never to his face).

 Tucker Tucker the Big Fat Motherfucker.

Dorothy instantly nailed me as an Aries
because Aries people challenge life,
she said,
and I was likely still doing that,
she said,
scanning my brain for vile thoughts
polluting a scrubbed family store.

Kitchen Scene

His heart thumps
head clangs
as he stares
at the tiny pool on the tile.

Creeping dawn turns it
from black
to furious red.

He reaches with aching arm,

scrubs.

It's gone.

He's free

until they bring
the dogs
to sniff and bark
and root
in their wretched garden
left so long untended.

This is What the Robots do

Jarod Rosello



There is a man and he is looking at books and opening the books, flipping through the pages, then closing the books and putting them back on the shelves. He is doing this and he is not doing anything else. A second man sees him doing this and says, "Excuse me, but you've got to put the books back correctly. If not no one will be able to find them again," and the man flipping through the books says, "There are footnotes in these books." The other man says, "There are footnotes in a lot of books." The first man says, "But these books shouldn't have footnotes. These footnotes weren't always here." The second man takes a book from the first man, flips through the pages, finds a footnote, reads the footnote and says, "You're

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right. It seems these footnotes have been added." The first man says, "We shouldn't put these books back on the shelf." The second man says, "This could be dangerous." A long time passes and what happens in that time is that the first man takes a book off the shelf, flips through it, finds a footnote, but does not read the footnote, then passes the book to the second man who reads the footnote, determines whether or not the footnote is correct, and if it is incorrect (which it always is), puts the book on the floor, stacks the book on other books with the incorrect footnotes. Throughout the day several other people, men and women, one teenager, and no children, join the men in the library. They also find incorrect footnotes and add to the pile.

After a very long time the first man says, "It seems all the books have footnotes." The second man says, "Who would do this? This is inhuman." A woman who hadn't been looking through the books earlier but joined the effort more recently says, "These footnotes don't make any sense." The first man looks at the second man and the second man says, "Ma'am, please, we've been dealing with these footnotes all day. You can't include yourself in the operation at such a late stage and say something like that—about the footnotes—and think you've made a great discovery." The first man says, "A very old woman, a couple hours ago, said that same thing, except she said it first. That was her contribution." The woman says, "Well, I was just trying to help." The first man says, "You're not helping, though." A third man walks over after hearing the dispute and says, "Maybe she's helping a little bit." The second man says, "Maybe. Maybe she is helping a little bit."

The three men and the one woman get back to work, looking through books, stacking them, although, after so many hours it just appears as though they're taking books directly

off shelves and putting them on the floor. The only books that do not have footnotes are books that already had footnotes and what happened to those, as a man who is not very old noticed several hours before, is that those footnotes – correct footnotes – have been removed.

The first man takes a book looks at the footnote, reads the footnote and says, "It seems these footnotes aren't incorrect, they're just on the wrong books." The second man says, "That's peculiar. What will we do?" The first man says, "We'll have to write new books. All of these are ruined." The second man says, "We could probably relocate the footnotes, maybe put them back into the correct books." The third man says, "Maybe we could white out the footnotes on the wrong books, and just write them back into the correct books." The first man says, "No. Don't be ridiculous, please. That would take even more time than writing new books." The woman says, "Who would do this?" The first man says, "Ma'am, please, we've already asked that question, too."

Outside, the robots are sleeping in people's beds. People's beds. That's gross. Rust on the sheets. Some people don't clean their robots carefully enough.



Contributor Notes

After leaving the States a lifetime ago, **Rupert Merkin** has now settled in London with a quill, two dogs, and a monkey. But sadly no ink. He has most recently had publications somewhere, somehow...

Jenn Koiter lives in Wyoming, where she recently leapt out of the frying pan of academia into the fire of nonprofit work. Her poetry has appeared most recently in *Relief*, *Ruminate*, *GHOTI*, *Fickle Muses*, and *The Eleventh Muse*, and she is a winner of the 2006 Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Poetry Prize.

"My name is **Grant McLeman** and I was born in 1952 Glasgow and now live on the Ayrshire coast I started writing in the 1970s, was published in a few anthologies, won 3 diplomas in the Scottish Open Poetry Competition and then stopped writing. I restarted in 2002, collaborated with U.S. photographer in doing some work for a U.S. cable T.V. station, have been on-line published by Whitehouse Poetry Revival in Limerick City and have guest read for them (this year).. "

Jonathan Greenhouse: "I travel the land as a Spanish interpreter and translator, but my true love lies in the intricate architecture of poetry, with its capacity for epiphany and its concomitant potential for extraordinary failure. I gladly partake in the pain and ecstasy of straddling that dizzying territory between the two.

My poetry has recently appeared or is forthcoming in numerous publications throughout the States and abroad, including *The Bitter Oleander*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Interim*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and *Nimrod*."

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Lynn Patmalnee has studied at the Writer's Institute at Sarah Lawrence College and earned a degree in English from Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her work is forthcoming in *Monkey's Fist* and has appeared in *Blood Orange Review*, *The Orange Room Review*, *The Fairfield Review*, and *Knightscales*. She works in the music business and, as Lynn Crystal, hosts the long-running Carnival of Song radio show on WFDU FM in Teaneck, NJ.

Curtis Smith has published over fifty stories and essays in literary reviews (*American Literary Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *William and Mary Review*, *West Branch*, *Passages North*, *Hobart* and many others). His work has been cited by *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Mystery Stories* and *The Best American Spiritual Writing*. His latest book is *The Species Crown*, a collection of stories and a novella from Press 53.

Anthony Frame's poetry has recently appeared in *Heliotrope*, *Conte Online*, *Lullwater Review*, *The Bare Root Review* and *Clockwise Cat*. He has work forthcoming from *The Toledo Review*. He is also the co-editor of the online poetry journal, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*. He currently lives with his wife, Holly, and their two cats, Lucy and Gwen, in Toledo, OH, where he teaches composition at Owens Community College.

Brent Fisk: "As far as my own work goes, I've had a good year. I received my fourth Pushcart nomination, honorable mention in Boulevard's Emerging Poets contest, the Willow Award from Willow Review, and the Sam Ragan Prize from Barton College's literary journal, *Crucible*. My work has appeared in *Rattle*, *Fugue*, *Southeast Review*, and many other journals. I love the work of Charles Simic, Theodore Roethke, and Louise Gluck, although I wish Gluck would

stop reading her own poems and pay someone else to do it. She has the energy of a dead snail.

Sarah Hilary won the Fish Historical-Crime Contest with her story, *Fall River, August 1892*. Her story, *The Eyam Stones*, was runner-up in the Historical Contest. Both stories will be published in the Fish Anthology 2008. Sarah's stories have been published in *The Beat*, *Neon*, *Every Day Fiction*, *Idlewheel* and the *Boston Literary Magazine*. Her short story, *On the line*, was published in the Daunt 2006 anthology. The Subatomic 2007 anthology features her story, *LoveFM*. She won the Litopia Contest in 2007 with *The Chaperon*. Sarah lives in the Cotswolds with her husband and young daughter. Website: www.writewords.org.uk/sarah_hilary/

Among sixty or so other publications, **J. A. Tyler** has work recently with or appearing soon in *The Feathertale Review*, *Thieves Jargon*, *Underground Voices*, & *Word Riot*. He is also founding editor of *Mud Luscious*. Check out more at www.aboutjatyler.com.

Phil Gruis is a former newspaper editor who began writing poetry in 2002. His work has since appeared in many journals and anthologies, including, in the UK, *The Wolf* and *The Journal*. His chapbooks *Outside the House of Normal* (2006) and *Bullets and Lies* (July 2007) were published by Finishing Line Press, Georgetown Kentucky, USA. He lives on Kootenay Lake in British Columbia, Canada, and in North Idaho, USA.

Jarod Rosello: "I am a graduate student in the creative writing MFA program at Pennsylvania State University. I have a forthcoming publication in *Gulfstream literary magazine* and was the recipient of the 2006 Florida International University Literary Award for Fiction."

