

THREE RIVERS REVIEW

VOLUME THIRTEEN



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Three Rivers Review
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Three Rivers Review is a student-run literary journal that publishes the work of undergraduates from the University of Pittsburgh campuses and other Pittsburgh-area colleges and universities.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This latest incarnation of *Three Rivers Review* has us thinking about destinations. The stories, poems, and discussion contained herein transport the reader to places both foreign and familiar. Cory Tamler's prize-winning story "Wooden Ties, Metal Tracks" invites us for an uneasy ride on Russia's Trans-Siberian railroad. Hong-Thao Nguyen provides a harrowing portrait of a family struggle in her poem "On Hiding My Brother from the Recruiters in Viet Nam." In his interview with the magazine, author Don Lee discusses the Japanese-American divide and the heightened sense of American imperialism during the Iran hostage crisis in 1980. We are even offered fantastic shifts in time and reality with Elizabeth Barsotti's prize-winning poem "My Utility, My Vanity and a trip back to classical lore in Katheryn Christy's story "The White Calf." The influences of and for the bulk of the material in Volume Thirteen of *Three Rivers Review* promises a stark shift within both time and place, but the destination is always home.

The minds of the writers contributing to the magazine certainly seem to be on the time of this day, when events on the global stage prove to be ever more dramatic, immediate, and essential. Thusly, the thoughts of our staff are certainly with our former fiction editor and recent University of Pittsburgh alumnus Brian Scullion, who just this spring embarked upon another tour of military duty in Iraq. Brian contributed weightily to this edition of the magazine by interviewing Don Lee and helping to guide our fiction discussions with his impeccable literary taste. The makeup of our staff itself has a global dimension to it, with members having close roots to destinations as far off as Ireland, India, and Egypt. The people who work on all levels to make this magazine into a fine, tangible product possess a sense for a world that is being connected ever more closely by technology and media—a sentiment echoed in DovBer Naidtch's "Post-Modern Pringles"—yet whose common understanding is still kept at arm's length by histrionics and aggression—reads Peter Kosloski's "U.N. Beach Club," "like the sea or a sigh between/Words, we were friends once./Someone sighs again: This is the thirst which kills."

The stories and poems in this magazine send its readers out into the ferocious world with their brave imagination and skillful ply of craft, but they always bring us to our rightful destination—the heart-felt closing line, the much-deserved catharsis. For our magazine and its staff, that destination

is always somewhere ahead, always progressing. We have a new look to this volume and many new faces to our editorial staff. I hope they feel as much at home here as they deserve to, because their talent and enthusiasm has produced a fine thing to call their own.

Thanks go to Dean Stewart and Karen Billingsley in the University of Pittsburgh Honors College, on whose account we again have a little spot on the thirty-fifth floor of the Cathedral of Learning to call our home. Thanks go to our advisor Jeff Oaks for shrewd advice and confidence instilled, and to Jeff Martin and Deborah Bogen for their thoughtful judging of our fiction and poetry contests. My personal thanks go to our current poetry editor Joel Coggins and fiction editor Christian Tsu-Raun for showing our new additions the way forward, and to our last Editor-In-Chief, Jacquelyn Seigle, for almost single-handedly keeping the operation steaming ahead. Thanks go to Collision Magazine and the undergraduate writing community at Pitt as a whole for keeping a buzz and enthusiasm alive for these sorts of writerly endeavors. Thanks go to all of the writers appearing in this magazine for having the courage to share their work with us.

Thank you for reading Volume Thirteen of *Three Rivers Review*. Thank you for making these pages your destination, if only for a little while. Please read with a mind toward brave travels, thoughtful observations, and a safe return home.

—Patrick Smith, *Three Rivers Review* Editor-in-Chief

FIRST PLACE PRIZE IN POETRY

Elizabeth Barsotti

MY UTILITY, MY VANITY

LETTER TO IMAGINARY FRIEND

HUNGER MOON

This poet has a way with time, moving between past, present, and a sort of future-present with an immediacy that makes the poems come alive. In “My Utility, My Vanity,” the fluidity of the poet’s vision and voice shine, as she remembers being a three-year-old who wants to be either a taxi driver or a queen, and then proceeds to show us both the logic and connections those choices reveal. The imagery of the “yellow cab . . . golden throne,” and the “speckled eggs in a nest of mint” all point to a voice that looks and listens as it speaks, offering a cock-eyed insight I would not want to miss.

“Hunger Moon” with its dead-on report: “but at some point, we stopped kissing/on the mouth” is both tender and deadly—a danger-warning. “Letter to Imaginary Friend” closes with a line so at odds with the speaker’s earlier experiences of love that we are moved and a little afraid of losing a rough edge ourselves.

—Deborah Bogen

Elizabeth Barsotti

MY UTILITY, MY VANITY

I have no use for angles.
I am six curves along a plane.

When I was three, I wanted
to be a taxi driver or a queen,
my crown topaz and silver—
my utility, my vanity—
my mother's body dipped in green.

My attic is full of prayer-beads.
I am meant for Halloween.
Speaking with ghosts
nightly, calves collapse
into maple leaves—
a golden throne, a yellow cab.

Four pebbles in my mouth—
speckled eggs in a nest of mint.
I am my father's garden—
a moon child, night owl. Born
a water sign, a dip into my mouth.

LETTER TO IMAGINARY FRIEND

Late at night, we'd laugh for hours.
You pointed out constellations through
the window panes, and the year
of the meteor shower, we sat on the jetty
near the ocean and waited. You groomed
the sand with your long, thin fingers.
You traced my collar bone.
Your laugh was as hard and full
as an oyster shell, and I kept digging
for pearls. My mother told me you can
tell a real pearl from a fake by rubbing it
against your teeth. If it's gritty, it's real.
That night I left the beach grinding sand
between my teeth. Only now do I have strands
of pearls to wear to dinners at the shore.

HUNGER MOON

He says years are only for counting, but
at some point, we stopped kissing
on the mouth. Years like acres of wood.
Trees cut—years we needed the money.
Silt runs down off the hill where the trees
used to be, turns the bathwater gritty
& gray. On the front porch, moths
still dance. The floodlight imitates
the moon. On the back porch, a damp
rotting woodpile. He showed me how to count
years by the rings in the trunk, but
he didn't need to show me how to count.
Years by leaves in the gutters,
by the space between us in bed.

SECOND PLACE PRIZE IN POETRY

Kelsey Balance

BEING BAPTIZED IN ROOM 4

Although this poet offered only one poem, it is of such merit that I award it second place. The title and dedication, “Being Baptized in Room 4, for the Devil Dogs and the War Machines,” evoke religious ritual as they call out punk bands, setting off a sound poem that is a delight to recite—loudly. The careful choices in the repetition, the sound waves, the sound effects, and the syllabic control are all admirable and pleasurable. Here is someone who has taken what might be nothing more than cacophony and ordered it in a way that conveys its majesty.

—Deborah Bogen

Kelsey Ballance

BEING BAPTIZED IN ROOM 4

For the Devil Dogs and the War Machines

everybody.
everybody.
everybody in the room get
is everybody everybody in the room is
get everybody in the room and
everybody in the room body
heart beat stops.

to hear Triscuit's defension of what it means is
what it means is
what it means
is what it
this is what it
this is what it this
is what it
means this is what
it means this is
what it means
to get every body in the
body everybody in the
middle everybody in the
every body in the
middle of every heart is the
heart in everybody
of every heart in the
middle of every body in the
middle in the heart in every hand
in the middle in every heart pushing close in
the middle of every hand pushing heart close
in every body in the middle.

to hear You scream
You's face lighting up like the heartbeat

in the middle of the room
of the beat of the room of the screams
of every body
everybody in the middle of the room
every scream body in the middle
in the middle of the screams everybody's heart
and every heart in the body of every scream
beats heartscreams screambeats bodyheats
in the middle of the room
and every scream heats heart beats
screaming everybody in the room
every body beast everybody heats every body beats
to hear every body beat is
this is what it means.

HONORABLE MENTION IN POETRY

Nicola Pioppi

TO FIRST BLOOD

BLUE LADY

GRANDFATHER, PATERNAL

This poet won me over with endings that both satisfy and illuminate. In “To First Blood,” the complaints of the speaker could not be more ordinary, more mundane. The whining itself is not compelling (who doesn’t complain about a roommate?) but the studied pace of the early descriptions is interesting. Who is this character, half-asleep and unable to make her peace with the sharing of a bathroom? In the final three lines that character becomes not just a harmless complainer, but a hunter stalking its prey: “Now I study her weaknesses.”

Both “Blue Lady” and “Grandfather, Paternal” are admirable in their use of imagination to extend our understanding of someone whose nature and motivations are foreign to both the poet and to many of us.

—Deborah Bogen

Nicola Pioppi

TO FIRST BLOOD

My roommate and I fight silent duels for the bathroom.
We set our alarm clocks competitively; the snooze button
a modern rapier. Our sleepy, flopping hands and eyelids
struggle for the strength to rise, to wake.
Today she is victorious, celebrating in steaming water.
I lie motionless on the bed, eyes closed, defeated.

When I first moved in, I was so polite. I asked when she needed to get up.
I woke at 5 to bathe, crawling back into bed for an extra hour of rest. Or,
I went without. Even the hot water is tepid most days anyway.

Yesterday I woke to hear her rolling over, softly snoring.
I closed my eyes for a moment,
savoring the feeling of waking first,
when I opened them again,
the bathroom door was shut,
the water running,
her bed empty.

Now: she is drying her hair.
Now: the tepid water is cold.
Now: I study her weaknesses.

BLUE LADY

Her hair was not always so blue, her skin
not always so translucent and inelastic.
She did not always linger in the bathroom
before bedtime. She used to curl her hair.

When she was young and married she wore
blue every day—periwinkle skirts and
powder shifts and fat ribbons in her hair—
all to match her eyes, the irises now pale
and thin. In those days she curled her hair
in the morning, after he left for work.

For his fiftieth birthday they bought a blue
Cadillac. It sparkled like the diamonds he
never bought her; they made love on its soft
backseat, tangled in the seatbelts, radio on.
They planned to spend their golden
anniversary on a cruise through Alaska,
where there was no blue—only heather gray
skies and black water and muddy landscape.

After the funeral, she began to linger in small
spaces. The bedroom, the living room
were too large, the ceilings too high.
They swallowed her whole, digested her
slowly. She far preferred the bathroom,
the kitchen, the linen closet, rooms
she could fill without speaking.

GRANDFATHER, PATERNAL

Today I remember that I meant to ask my grandfather about the railroads, about the glory days of greasy engines and scalding steel tracks and heart-breaking whistles, punch cards and unions and night classes.

I remember because I walked past the old train station, with its two remaining tracks, its grimy closet of a waiting area, its single ticket window.

I remember the way my father struggled for his love, calling once a week, hour-long conversations to make up for time lost during childhood; a lifetime of an absent well-meaning father, storing up for retirement, a new house in Florida, the reaping of all he had sown.

I remember his moustache, the way he said my name, the crisp “k”, the uncomfortable way he joked with my brother and I, awkward weekend visits, generations of misunderstanding—the way I remember so little.

HISTORY

His father's morbid stories led to a superstitious
and anxious adulthood:

boy chokes on a latex balloon; man's bladder explodes,
slowly poisoning his insides; girl is crushed under
school bus wheels; grandfather is found dead on the toilet...

The bathroom, especially, was frightening: you must always
close the door, you must never open a closed door, you must
never speak of what happens behind closed doors.

...little girl is swallowed by a sinkhole; falling ice from a bridge
crushes a man's chest as he drives home; children suffocated
in a garage with the car running...

Even now he only half laughs at his fears
of being sucked down the bathtub drain,
or of spiders lurking in the damp corners, of
slimy things in pipes, sharp electricity traveling
through the faucet, a heart attack while shaving,
blood curling in the sink, the door
closed on his moments of vulnerability.

His wife acts disgusted when he ostentatiously
carries his newspaper to the bathroom;
it is his signal: come look for me if I am too long gone
a beacon in the fog of their understanding.

Peter Kosloski

U.N. BEACH CLUB

“Yes, we often thought as the barman placed the first frosted glasses of Heineken before us on a scorching mid-summer evening, there is a point to the United Nations.” —Patrick Bishop, October 2006

Insomnia—we all keep guard. In limbo,
Between lands, like the sea or a sigh between
Words, We were friends once.

Someone sighs again: This is the thirst which kills.
The Mediterranean seems to breathe
Yellow light on the pink stone of the International,
We list favorite whiskies, mourn
Each other’s lost virginities, nervously spool invisible film
Beneath our tables. Someone
From the Telegraph finally mentions the bomb. The thing,
He calls it. The thing that happened. The flash and
The oddly immaculate lemon and the Greek bartender’s body
In a bag as a man in blue phoned Gaza City: Thanatos, he said.
The thirst which kills...is that supposed to be funny?
Back to nervous spooling, I think. One wavering stroke
Of surf, my thoughts flee, What is it about binary?
The white rabbit, the brown, the fence and the severed head.
Palestine and the sea at night, when no boats sail.
People start to leave as children troll
The beach for scrap. A discussion of past lives, when we were women,
Architects, cacti in painted pots. I remember,
Once, a man carried me from room to room and, another time,
I overheard talk of a girl’s death. This spark
Of recognition is like a tonic, I could stay

Awake forever now. In a waking dream,
There are only two of us. I don’t know why
I say these things, why I question what happens.
Maybe I should sleep, maybe I should wake up.
In a waking dream, it’s just me and the ocean.

LUCKY CHARM

i

Telephone, the word rings
Traps, jungle snares, astronauts'
Wives learning to hate the full earth
Like I hate my speaking bone, black
Knuckle pressed against my jaw.
How I wish it were a bone, digits at last
Tuned to some dumb mercy.

ii

Radios are like polio: spinning
Wheels, paralyzing voice
From air, playing
A song I've always wished
Was bone. To grind it down,
To bake hard bread, to feel it in the gut –
One last time, like a pang of resurrection.

iii

Who is this boy, Television? His face
Is gone and here again – my dreams
Are his, hissing like an autumn fruit or old
Corks, stirring in the bottlenecks.
In a vision, we travel down the Amazon
Collecting necklaces of bone –
Never once do we stop our work.

iv

My instrument turns against me.
Oboe – from the French for high wood –
A tree built on a hill, an erection.

Panpipes are for Pan, god of trees,
Hills, divine tumescence – pan-pan, a call
One step below mayday, Don't save us, but be
Aware – from the French for breakdown.

v

This microwave cooks
And does not stop. I feed myself,
Wary of the radiation: skin melting off the,
Melting off the bone – I greet my secret scheme.
Organs dropping through my pelvis,
I jumble through the bargain bin: Something in a Heart
Of Texas or a Burning Fist of Revolution.

vi

Blueprints: the Blue
Forgot to wipe its feet – paws, perhaps.
It's like an animal, really, run rampant
In the house, filling my clothes with its scent.
The plumbing looks fine, the wiring new:
It's not so very old a house. Why should a thing
So ancient as the Blue park its bones here?

vii

Is this a car or a spaceship? I can't
Tell. The ozone is pudding here – blood in
The air, tang of iron on the tongue – Bleach Planet.
My pelt is so black, they can't even speak
My name. Lucky Number
Like a wishing star, a lucky charm,
A bone carried in the hand.

Hong-Thao Nguyen

TWO-WAY TICKET

Ma told me how religion covered her eyes so no one could sense

she was Asian
when she entered church,

and she explained that to the _____ community
(Dog-Eaters)

and Dog-Eaters applauded over self-hatred
since we looked alike anyway.

Ma told me Jehovah's Witnesses rambled-jambled about the cross
around my neck

and I imagined securing debauched affairs with lovers of *Natural American
Spirits*
praising hushed smoke of hedonism

that bows to the almighty wooden pig-head,
because Apocalypses are bright and solitary.

Unlit lamps are dead.

The meeting
of Mormons chewing plans of probable ash,

igniting a plot from experiences and subjective biases,
plotted nuclear bombings against Scientologists

and I told them I was done being their subordinate
as a woman and a mute.

They ordered a crusade

against all gods

tired of being prayed for

while Can'ardlys and Nine Irons and Yolks
spoke of the differences in their eyes.

ON HIDING MY BROTHER
FROM THE RECRUITERS IN VIET NAM

We hear the rebels scurrying through Sài Gòn streets.
The bellies of mosquitoes fill red
through the netting hovering over our mattress.
In dark, I run my hands across the newly formed bumps on my leg,
feeling like Braille that reads, "You are in dark."

I sit up to see you jerked fast by Ma
and the roaches twitch from your hair and tumble onto Hồng Hà's lap
who does not question the disturbance of the greased night.
Ma drops you in the hollowed-out earth
of our home that has become your normal hiding.
She covers it with wood again and no one asks again.

That night, you stay within the earth waiting,
while Ma sits above you just watching for the black crow
to rest beside our open window.

INTERVIEW

Allison Joseph

Poet Allison Joseph sat down with TRR after appearing on campus for a reading and panel discussion on publishing poets as part of the Pitt Contemporary Writers Series in Fall 2007. Joseph, protégé of Pulitzer Prize winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa, is the author of five collections of poetry and has won a Word Press Poetry Prize. She is the editor of Crab Orchard Review out of Southern Illinois University.

THREE RIVERS REVIEW—Having heard your comments at the panel discussion today, I wanted to ask you about the challenges of running a press the size of *Crab Orchard Review*. It's not necessarily a small press, you have about 2500 subscribers, but your last issue's release was held up because your managing editor was ill—just one person goes down and the whole process can halt.

ALLISON JOSEPH—And he is the lynch pin of the whole thing, and he's also my husband, so it threw us for a loop. Because first of all the magazine is important to us, and also his health is important and we thought we should be honest and forthright in saying to the people that were dealing with that issue. We sent out a note saying, in case you didn't know Jon [Tribble] and I are married and this is what's happening to us right now, as a family, and we're really concerned about him and his getting his health back on track and that is going to be our priority for a while, but we are committed to getting your work into print. He was going to the doctor a lot and figuring out medications and all of that. And I'm happy to report that was very successful, he's lost fifty pounds and is looking a lot better and feeling a lot better and back to being the lynch pin I was describing. So sometimes life interferes with getting things done.

TRR—But on a daily basis, in day to day operations, being a writer, being an editor, being a teacher, being a wife, being a friend, how do you find a balance in your life for all of those things, considering the journal, how do you deal with that dispersion. After reading a poem of yours like "Soul Sweep," writing seems like your meditation

AJ—Every day you re-write the rules on how you are going to balance

all of those things. And Jon and I have found that the more you show competence in doing what you're doing—and this might be a virus found in universities—the more you are given to do, the more you feel you have to take on because you feel responsible for other people. In addition to editing the journal, I am also directing the MFA program [at Southern Illinois University] right now and have an ongoing project each summer with a camp for high school students, which is my baby; this summer will be the tenth year of it. So it's a constant balancing of all these responsibilities we feel we have to other writers. Sometimes it leaves you with very little time for your own writing, particularly for Jon since he really handles the production end of the thing—getting the cover art, deciding what font we are going to use, literally laying it out. It's funny, we've got years and years of experience doing this, but it still takes the same amount of time in many ways. We're not literally running the journal out to UPS anymore, but you're going to face software issues sometimes, and things like that you can never ever predict when you are in the midst of production on an issue. Sometimes things lapse, sometimes I'm not the best teacher I could be, sometimes I'm not the best wife I can be.

TRR—So from where do you slip first? Is it the job or the relationship? Is it where you can afford to slip most, in a way?

AJ—It's our house. It's literally our house. Our house is literally a mess, because neither of us is at home to maintain a household in the same way. It's that form our home takes. We need a new roof, we need to replace the bathroom, okay, whatever.

TRR—How has your identity as a writer affected the product of *Crab Orchard Review*? And also the submitted material that you read, how does that affect you?

AJ—The writer that I am affects what we publish specifically in a couple ways. I want to be supportive of new writers, and by that I mean people seeking publication for the first time, because I received a lot of support when I was coming up. I also want a journal that has gender diversity and racial diversity, because I know that when I get a journal in the mail that I'm published in, I'm often the only writer of color and I don't want *Crab Orchard Review* to be that way. I want as much diversity as possible, and that is gender and race, but also where people are in the country. We are based in the Midwest but we don't exclusively publish Midwestern writers. We also want people at the end of their careers, and I think all of those things are

reflective of our editorial vision, of who we are.

TRR—I wanted to ask you about the Pittsburgh writing community. You have two books through the CMU press, one of the most important poetry presses around, putting poets like Rita Dove on the map, and you were also published by the Pitt Poetry Series. Is it coincidence that you've been published so much here? And not to classify you as just an African-American poet, but Terrence Hayes at CMU is a rising star and there is the association with Toi Derricotte and the Cave Canem project at Pitt. What is the connection here, if anything?

AJ—I don't really know. I don't what to make of it that three of my five books were published in Pittsburgh. I think I just made a connection with two editors that just happened to be here. They were Ed Ochester and Jerry Costanzo and they are pretty Catholic in their taste, I think. They do not represent a particular aesthetic, but there was something in my writing that they identified with and I don't know if that particularly has anything to do with Pittsburgh. Other than both of those series having such wonderful reputations, and I'm just thrilled to be a part of both of those series. They are fantastic.

TRR—I really enjoyed the reading that you and Jan Freeman gave last night. A great thing about poetry readings is the diversity of styles and delivery that you can get and they way poets can play off of each other. Do you enjoy hearing other poets read, and do you look forward more to getting a new book from someone you love or to hearing a performance?

AJ—It depends on the individual poet. Sometimes if it's a poet I've followed for many years and saw their first poems and maybe had a hand in publishing their first poems and I see their first book and have the opportunity to first meet them, that's wonderful. Some of the disappointing times are when you meet one your literary heroes, and they don't read all that well. Really famous poet, terrible reader. Because poets aren't necessarily performers. Some people read their work very, very poorly and some read it very well. Sometimes a great reader can compensate for work that is not as engaging on the page and it's a very strange thing. You can't say one is preferable to the other, so I try to take it on a case by case basis and be receptive and open. But I do love going to poetry readings and try to encourage audience participation when I read.

TRR—This is a long question that may elicit a long answer. You made a

comment last night about not wanting to read any depressing poems, about not being in the mood. To me, your poems seem to focus on family and community with a celebratory sense, but also human tragedy is everywhere. Even in today's panel discussion, Jan Freeman commented on a Virginia Woolf book about illness, someone else mentioned a husband's illness, and your husband's illness was touched on. I also know that your father passed away from diabetes ten years ago, which I know can be an awful illness. Loss and tragedy are inescapable. How do you and other successful poet's navigate that terrain without coming across as being, as you said, depressing?

AJ—That's a difficult question. For me it factored into writing my first book, which had a lot of poems about my mother who passed away from cancer. She was very, very young, like 51, and she wasn't a smoker. To this day we don't know how a woman who was seemingly healthy one year had lung cancer the next year; we suspected it might be something in the environment. But the very fact that I wrote poems about her and about my father, as difficult and depressing and as hard as their situations were at the end of their lives, in a sense it's a celebration that the poem is even written, because it is a commemoration. It's something that brings them back from the dead and makes them a presence in this world. Without [these poems] no one would even know who these people were. I think that even the sad poems in subject matter are a celebration and commemoration hopefully if they do their jobs, they make us remember what we need to remember.

TRR—As a teacher of all levels of writers—undergraduates, graduates, high-schoolers— and as someone who encourages undiscovered writers to submit to your journal, how do you feel about this generation of writers and what it wants to discuss, how they distinguish themselves?

AJ—I think one of the differences is that this is a generation that has grown up on the internet, and these traditional ways of publishing books don't seem absolutely necessary to them. They are the first generation that doesn't think of a library as a place to go get a book. I don't know what that means for the future of something like poetry. I'm really old-fashioned and want books to be books and magazines to be magazines. I don't get a thrill out of reading a poem on a screen. I have to print it out and read it to really get what I want out of it. I'm not sure yet that I know how that is going to affect this generation of people who are, say, in their twenties and younger as writers. Are they redefining what being a poet means? Perhaps. The other thing that I see a lot of is the poetry that comes out of the performance world, that's intended to be on stage rather than on the page, and I admire the energy that

goes into that. One of the things I'm wary of is, it as crafted as it could be? But I don't really have any predictions. It does worry me that people don't seem as attached to books as they once were.

TRR—All of that shift in technology and media affects not just reading, but writing as well. No one writes with a typewriter any more and it's a different experience as compared to the magic of the word processor.

AJ—I can't write poetry on the computer. I still write by hand. Every poem I write I still write by hand, because I like the sensation of my hand on paper and I like the ink. And I think that is one of the few things left to us, ink, you know, and what we make of it is our own deal.

TRR—Last night and today you talked about the themed issues of *Crab Orchard Reivew*. Your upcoming theme is about adolescence. Where did that idea come from? I think that's a very evocative thing to focus on.

AJ—It came about because its something that I write about a lot, something that Jon writes about a lot. We see it a lot anyway—lots of coming of age stories in fiction and lots of first-experience poems. So it was definitely something that seemed of interest to us, and generally that's where the themes come from—something we're thinking about. They started out sort of ethnic, cultural-themed issues—Assian/Asian America, African /African American and Caribbean, writing of and from the Americas—then into different subject areas. We did stage and screen, we did music. One of the most popular ones we did was food—everybody has a food poem.

TRR—Yes, food! There are whole journals devoted to food.

AJ—Yes, literary journals for food-writing. One of the things we'll do getting closer to election time is a red state/blue state issue, taking America's political temperature. And we're gong to do in the future an Illinois issue because we are in the state of Illinois. So it will be writing from Illinois and writing about the Illinois.

TRR—You can be like the singer Sufjan Stevens and maybe you can have an issue devoted to every state . . . maybe not every state. Probably not every state.

AJ—Probably not every state, particularly Illinois. It has a great literary heritage between Carl Sandburg, Gwendolyn Brooks and a whole lot of

people. We don't necessarily plot it out well in advance, but we knock them around. One of themes we've been staying away from so far has been health and illness because we see so much of that anyway because doing a whole issue dedicated to essentially, umm, dying . . .

TRR—It's something that comes up in every collection maybe.

AJ—It's such a huge theme anyway that I don't think we're going to do one for health and medicine.

TRR—So the red state/blue state theme is something that fits it in with part of your project, your mission, to get work from all different regions.

AJ—Yeah, definitely, yeah, yeah. That'll be interesting. That'll be interesting to see what we get, whether we get people really seriously considering those issues or just mad political rants.

TRR—Either is good. Probably. Could be. We'll let you off on that one.

INTERVIEW

Don Lee

Fiction writer Don Lee sat down with TRR in October 2007 the day after he appeared and gave a reading as part of the Pitt Contemporary Writers Series where he was awarded the first Fred R. Brown Literary Award. He is the author of the novel Country of Origin and the collection of short stories Yellow for which he won an American Book Award and the Sue Kauffman Prize, respectively. A new novel, Wrack and Ruin will be published in April 2008. From 1988 to 2007 he was the editor of the literary journal Ploughshares.

THREE RIVERS REVIEW—When you were the editor of *Ploughshares* and you had guest editors, what was your role then?

DON LEE—The guest editor's function is making final selections for the magazine. We were getting about 1200 to 1500 submissions a month for the fiction issue. Mostly we would solicit students, instead of famous people like the editors wanted, so we had to whittle down the submissions. Clearly they did not want to read hundred of manuscripts like we were, so we'd get it down to twenty-five or so for them. We would do copy-editing, type-setting, design, proof-reading, distribution, sales, grant applications, all of that.

TRR—Did you look for a particular aesthetic with any of your editors?

DL—No. If we were working on two editors at the same time, sometimes we'd think this one might like [this submission] more than this one, but it was always hard to predict what they would like and not like up front. Like David St. John didn't want to see poems by someone who was trying to be David St. John. That's where a lot of writers would go wrong, they would think, "I write just like David St. John, he'll like my stuff." But no.

TRR—Did you teach before you became an editor?

DL—I taught when I was still getting my MFA; I began teaching undergraduate creative writing then continued as an adjunct. I taught a lot. Once I really started working full-time as an editor, I stopped, about six years ago. Then I started to teach one graduate workshop every couple of years.

TRR—How does it compare, reading submissions for a journal like *Ploughshares* with evaluating the work of undergraduates and high school age writers?

DL—Certainly in the work as editor I read hundreds of manuscripts, but a lot of times we would not read past the first page. Sometimes we look for a reason to say no and the letter could say this just wasn't right for us; you didn't have to invest much time. But of course with your students you do. You have to work hard, read through the whole thing, mark it up, talk about it, and take it seriously. Even if you think it's something that's not salvageable, that it's something they wrote in five minutes the night before, that it's something they don't really care about and they just want to throw away and forget about it, you have to give them the benefit of the doubt and think, no, they took it very seriously and really tried hard to do it. So it's definitely different and hard but I haven't felt frustrated thus far because I'm going into it with different expectations.

TRR—If you are teaching a senior seminar, something focusing on breaking down craft, what is a book you would want to teach for that purpose?

DL—Right now there is a text about writing by Rust Hills, who used to be the fiction editor at *Esquire* during the eighties and nineties and its called *Writing In General and the Short Story in Particular*. The problem with that is that it sounds like it was written during the eighties and nineties, but what he says stands out. And then I use Ray Carver's *Where I'm Calling From*, but there's another book I've been looking at, Robie Macauley's *Techniques of Fiction* and of course John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. As far as collections go, I use Lorrie Moore's *Like Life*. That I use to teach longer stories.

TRR—What do you consider a long story?

DL—Twenty-two, twenty-four pages. There's an interesting divide, [creative writing students] either write six page stories or fourteen page stories and the question is how you get beyond the six and the twelve and the fourteen pages into something that's fuller, more than just having more stuff happening. Having a more complicated structure so that there is extended flash back or back-story and just getting into the interior more. Then it also means having an extended passage of time. You go into intro of creative writing [classes] and what you see all the time besides the clichés and hackneyed phrasing is people writing one day or one scene stories.

TRR—When you go to write a novel, is there a particular author you think of once you get through that first chapter? Can you look to that person for guidance?

DL—You look for the same pacing or energy or narrative flow. For this most recent book [*Wrack and Ruin*], I was looking for things that were fast flowing, looking to get myself in the mood in a way. Not as much structure or technique, but to get in the same mindset. At a certain point in my writing, I find that I can't read fiction while I'm writing because I am continually thinking of my own book. So then I will start reading non-fiction or magazines—a lot of magazines.

TRR—At one point in your introductory comments last night you said [*Wrack and Ruin*] was a farcical novel, unlike *Yellow* or *Country of Origin*. Did you decide on this or did it develop?

DL—It developed. Actually in the first chapter, although I knew I brought up a Brussels sprouts farmer, I had no idea what was going to happen, like bang. Then things just started popping. I mean, Brussels sprouts are funny. You say Brussels sprouts and people just smile. Stuff was just going to happen and if I was going to do this it had to be a farce, with all of these wild things happening one after the other. But the challenge of it is how do you keep going from one outlandish thing to another so that it doesn't become anticlimactic, you have to keep building and building with the next thing more outrageous than the other and that was a challenge. I hope I pulled it off.

TRR—I've always been curious about *Country of Origin's* 1980 location, writing from 2003, 2004. Was that political?

DL—It was political. First of all it was logistical in that that was close to the time I was there [Japan], so I could use it for just background. But a lot of it was that was when Reagan was elected and we had four years, no eight years, of Reagan. But there was a huge change in the political landscape at that time and a lot of it was because of the Iran hostage crisis.

TRR—And it's hard for people our age to know how intense that was.

DL—It was the most striking thing that had ever happened, so that was huge. There was a real difference in the country for a long time after that. We're not going to take shit any more. We're not going to be mister nice guy

anymore and that era of gentle diplomacy was gone. And it was all kinds of a Reagan cowboy mentality, and for me growing up, I saw a huge difference in the way the country fit into the world. That was a defining year for me . . . The funny thing about that too, speaking about doing research [for *Country of Origin*], is that all the almanacs and histories are on the U.S. side of history, so I had to make sure that nothing else was happening in Japan at that time. So I went to the library at Harvard and went through the entire year's roll of microfilm for the Japanese newspaper in English translation, and the prime minister had dropped dead of a heart attack, and then there was a temporary P.M., then the entire parliament walked out in protest over something or other, and there were big things happening there that were not even mentioned in any of the U.S. texts, not even a word in the U.S. history books. So I think it would be embarrassing if I wrote it and got it wrong from the Japanese side. But it got picked up in Japanese translation and I was always very curious what they did with. All those parts about Japan, wouldn't that be boring? It's like you being told what it's like to be a resident of Pittsburgh. So I was always puzzled why they translated it. I guess it did very well in Germany. I don't know why. I got a bunch of fan letters from Germans. They all asked the same thing, they must have been in the same club. They all read, "I'm such a huge fan of your work," and then, "please send me two autographed photos."

TRR—You mentioned in one of your Identity Theory interviews with Robert Birnbaum that your dysfunction becomes function, because you become an outsider on account of your heritage, and you've generated a career out of that. And a lot of authors probably create careers out of their various neuroses. Would you change that dysfunction if you could?

DL—Well I think that if I didn't have it I wouldn't have become a writer. Would I have been happier, who's to say? But I think John Gardner really coined it in *The Art of Fiction* when he said that every writer has to have some sort of psychological wound and you mine that for whatever you can. Mine was that kind of moving around and not feeling that I belonged or fit in, but I think I'm starting with this book to move on with that. The point of this novel, *Wrack and Ruin*, is that I have several Asian American artists and the last thing they want to talk about is being Asian American. They complain about it and in many ways it's a reaction to the way my first two books have been treated. I think it's mostly the media talking about identity and ethnicity all the time and myself being a sort of spokesperson for all Asians. That made me uncomfortable with *Country of Origin* when I would go on talk shows and be asked to talk about Asian attitudes toward sex like I was

some kind of sociologist. I was just kind of flummoxed and irritated at that. It was presumptuous on their part, like “well we have an Asian American up here and we should take advantage of that. This novel is less about identity than anything else I’ve written. For a lot of writers with an ethnic background, if you take that away, they might not have much left. You might expose yourself as a rather superficial writer without the gravitas of identity to talk about.

FIRST PLACE PRIZE IN FICTION

Cory Tamler

WOODEN TIES, METALS TRACKS

Through strong characterization, vivid details, and dark humor, this writer creates a wild train trip in which our protagonist, Mel, moves between those tough moments of ditching her old hopes, her old self, and searching for the new. The train's interior world—captured wonderfully and filtered through Mel's perspective—provides a psychological disorientation that, ultimately, invites a surprising visitor into this skillfully textured story.

—Jeff Martin

Cory Tamler

WOODEN TIES, METAL TRACKS

BRACK: The triangle is complete.

HEDDA: And the train goes on.

—Henrik Ibsen, Hedda Gabler

“It’s been three weeks since I’ve seen the Monongahela—”

“The what?”

“—one of our rivers...but in all my dreams I’m still in Pittsburgh.”

“I’ve never been.” The Bostonian tugged at the neckline of his dirty sweater, trying to loosen it.

“Yeah.”

He asked, “What’s it like?”

“I don’t miss it yet,” she told him. But she didn’t want to talk about it.

They were sitting in the dining car. Mel drank instant coffee with sugar and creamer premixed in the gold foil packet. The Bostonian said he’d kill for a cup of real coffee, ground, asphalt-black, but damned if he will touch this Coffee King bullshit. “Anyway, it has a picture of a monarch drinking a cup of coffee with an American flag in the background, and the ingredient list is in Russian. They’re trying too hard to please everyone,” he’d said, flicking the packet scornfully.

It tasted alright to Mel.

The Bostonian was talking about Dunkin Donuts coffee now—extolling, rather; the train licked the track lazily, slowing as they closed in on the dinner hour. Mel thought about last night’s dream, which had sent her wandering through the basement of a school building on the other side of the planet. The basement had a large square room in its center, bordered by a passageway; there were other rooms behind the doors on the passageway’s outer perimeters. Thick black pipes laced the ceiling, big enough to hug, and the lights said nothing about the time of day. In her dream the passageway had been an infinitely looping one, so that each corner turned would lead to a new stretch of hall, lined with unfamiliar doors, stacked with strange garbage, the only constants the pipes like silent black slugs with their bellies hanging pregnant and low, and the cold linoleum cutting up through the soles of her shoes as she walked. She’d been looking for something, or someone, or perhaps for an exit; whatever it was, it had eluded her. But she had been less shaken by the dream than by waking from it.

She considered trying to explain to the Bostonian how it felt to wake up from dreams of home. Like she had to leave again every morning: family, friends, familiarity. But he'd already told her he'd been traveling the world since he was fourteen, he had been to a hundred and twenty countries, if he found himself in Boston for more than three weeks at a stretch his legs began to fidget like grasshoppers. Mel doubted he would understand.

"So when do I get to meet this elusive traveling partner of yours?"

Mel laughed and shrugged, with, she hoped, nonchalance. The Bostonian had extreme eyes, eyes that he might, with his habit of coining hyphenated adjectives that she had already mentally flagged, describe as chlorine-blue. Mel instructed herself that she wasn't hoping he was hoping her traveling partner was platonic and female. She asked him if he was looking forward to authentic Chinese food, but the world of a train is one of the smallest, and Nicola wandered through the dining car soon enough, meeting the Bostonian's eyes before she met Mel's. She was in her striped boxers that lengthened her brown legs, a long-sleeved shirt that hugged her small stomach but dangled almost to her fingertips in the sleeves, so that as she stood swaying in her Adidas slip-on sandals and looking steadily at them, one hand delicate on the lip of the table to steady herself, she was smooth but tousled, aggressive-vulnerable, utterly relaxed. The one part of her that seemed forced was that smile. The muscles around her lips always seemed to Mel to be twisted up on the inside, caught on something, drawing the mouth too tight, as in pain. "Melanie," she said, "you must've got up early."

"There was barking at the ten-forty stop. Lots of dogs."

Nicola held Mel's look and she had the unsettling feeling that Nicola was watching, not Mel's eyes, but the Bostonian's reflection in them.

"We both came out to look," he said, "ran into each other. I'm in the compartment next to yours. Rained for a while on a lake we were passing, it was sexy-beautiful. It's a shame you missed it."

He introduced himself. Nicola squeezed into the booth next to him, her smallness managing to expand and fill the seat until her right knee brushed his left one. Mel saw these things over and under the table, let her gaze slide out of the window, trace the birches up and down as Nicola chattered. How did she manage it—these lull-less conversations with perfect strangers, the touch on the thigh, the lean-in, the shy, guarded laugh? Where did she learn it?

"So many birches in this country," Mel murmured, but Nicola was nodding away to the tune of the Bostonian's appraisal of Hillary Clinton, and neither of them seemed to hear. Between the slender forks of the mottled white trunk closest to the tracks, she caught a sudden glimpse of a thin, drawn face, with stretched features and a hungry mouth, watching the

train click by.

The Trans-Siberian has its own kind of time. It's no coincidence that Einstein used trains to talk about special relativity; there is already an inherent relativity of time to a train, a pact that the passengers will abide by Moscow time even when they are three time zones past it, or Beijing time when they haven't seen the city in forty-eight hours. It's a gentleman's agreement to temporarily discard reason and the evidence of the senses, to call it two o'clock in the morning even though outside the sun is rising. On the train it doesn't matter what time you leave your bunk, or when you sleep, or eat; what matters is whether you have the energy to use the bathroom within the next ten minutes, or the stamina to hold it for another hour if you don't go now because the conductors lock the toilets for a half-hour before and after each stop. It doesn't matter if you miss a moment of landscape through the dirty windows, because every moment is a moment of landscape, and you will never see it all. What matters is the miniature village you find yourself in: the strange politics of foreign neighbors and bunkmates, the hellos exchanged on the way to the hot-water samovar that would never cross your lips standing in line for a water fountain in the mall back home. A day spent reading the latest Michael Chabon novel, journaling, and buying piroshkis and Cyrillic-wrapped Snickers with crumpled rubles and bad Russian at the stations is a full one.

There was one empty bed in their four-bunk cabin, and one bunk filled by a richly bitter Irish girl, Jackie, twenty-eight and angry that her research into the effects of corruption on the Russian economy was not going as planned. "Fecking babushkas," she would mutter every time one of the wide-built conductors, all harshly blonde women with oak-trunk calves and shuddering strides, lumbered past the door of their compartment. Her Russian, however, was flawless, and Mel was thankful for the confusion it had saved them over the matter of the cost of the plastic-wrapped sheets.

"Where's the other one?" Jackie asked now, stirring her spicy ramen with a collapsible plastic fork.

"Entertaining a gentleman in the dining car."

"Oh, the fellow with the eyes I saw you with this morning? He seemed a bit off."

"He told me he's been to more than a hundred countries."

Jackie squeezed her forehead upwards. "Like I said: a bit off." She blew on a tangled forkful of noodles. Mel shrugged. "Well, long as she's enjoying herself," said Jackie.

"She usually does. When there's a man involved."

"Good friends, are you?" Jackie chuckled. Mel liked the way she said the word are, tight and far back in the throat, like air, and tonguing the

end a little: good friends, airrr you, good friends, airrr you. “Want up?” Mel nodded, and Jackie moved aside, clearing the fold-out ladder that climbed to Mel’s bunk, one of the top two.

Mel wrote in her journal, Nicola is in the dining car with the Bostonian. The ink in her blue pen was sticking again. The pen was from home; maybe it was the change in altitude. It made her letters come out choppy and half-blank. She wrote, For once on this trip I would have liked to have been able to make a male friend not snatched up by Nicola. Or for once I suppose I would like said male to not have been instantly fascinated by my so called traveling compatriot or to have contracted Nicolitis at first sight. If this is going to be the next four months of my life then, but the scraping dryness of the pen was too frustrating. Everything at that moment was too frustrating. She rolled over on to her stomach and looked out the window.

They were passing a small tricolored (pink, brown, white) village, where chickens scratched and pecked on the flat straw roofs and the thin bronze cross topping the single church glinted gold in the lowering sun. A boy rode jerkily down a dirt path through the village heart on his brown bicycle, likely rusty. He swerved to miss a cow with a corkscrew horn. There were gardens, and there was thin smoke curling from chimneys. It was approaching the sleepiness of suppertime (though by train time it was not yet noon). Running along the side of the train, for no apparent reason, was a man; Mel watched him as they slowly lost him; he reached his thin arms out as he faded into indistinctness, a gesture like supplication. Mel thought he looked familiar.

She slept without meaning to. It was easy to sleep on the train when it was moving, and sleep always felt unfinished at waking. She slept and the Russian countryside was gone. Bridges replaced birches. Mel was driving through Oakland, on a warm May day, windows all down, smelling the aftermath of rain. The road through Schenley Park twisted around and back on itself, mazelike, so that every time she thought she was leaving the park she found herself back at the ice skating rink, or the yellow-and-blue playground, empty. Boys and girls in white uniforms, tall, muscular, beautiful, ran across the golf course, juggling apples, kiwis, oranges, and silk scarves. As she drove in accidental circles, they would sometimes throw the scarves at her, and the scarves would grow and fill her vision in a colorful mistlike haze; when it cleared she could never remember which direction she had come from.

Now another car was driving in front of her. He was inside. She knew it was him by his laugh. A chain of scarves flew from his radio antenna like a flag. He was playing the radio, singing along full voice to a song he’d always told her he hated. All she could see was the shape of his head

silhouetted above the headrest of the passenger seat. There was no driver.

She wanted to catch him. She pressed hard on the gas pedal until it touched the floor of the car but the car wouldn't accelerate. The boys and girls in white ran in front of her car and she hit them, one by one, because suddenly the brakes weren't working, either. She screamed his name out of the window. It was going to rain again—it was always going to rain in Pittsburgh. The humidity hung around her neck, a tight cloak. She screamed his name again and again. The song playing on his radio was stuck, like a record, on the word goodbye, and he sang along: "Goodbye—goodbye—goodbye..."

Mel woke up sweating, with a sensation of falling, and with the sudden conviction that the man running next to the track outside the village had been the same man whose face she had seen through the forked trunk of the birch from the dining car. She scraped at the corners of her eyes with her fingernails to clear them and realized she must have dreamed the running man in the moments between waking and sleeping.

Nicola was back in the compartment, sitting on her bunk with the Bostonian. Jackie was talking at them, face wooden, hands alive. "Nobody can be fecking polite in this country," she was saying. "In Moscow you go to a hot dog stand. You order a fecking Star Dog. You say I want that one please. Do you think the babushka who owns the fecking stand, whose fecking customer you are, can give you the Star Dog you fecking asked for? Of course not. She's got to have her opinion. She's got to put her vote in. She's got to say, devotchka, that is, young lady, she's got to say, no you don't, you want this one. For Jesus sake. I know which fecking Star Dog I want. You feck." Seeing Mel looking down, sleep-eyed, she added, "Sorry." Then, "But, Jesus."

"It seems to me," the Bostonian said, "and correct me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me, there are only two Russian women. There are the bombshells, you know, stiletto-heeled with plunging necklines and the reddest lipstick and, oh god, the most sexy-beautiful faces. And there are the babushkas." His right middle finger was tucked into the naked crease of Nicola's left knee, under the leg.

Jackie said, "I don't think you know what the feck you're talking about."

The Bostonian said, "But it seems to me, there isn't any in-between. One day you're the bombshell and the next you're the babushka. You don't know when it's going to happen," he said, "but it does, to all of them, racecar-quick."

"Which am I? Babushka or bombshell?" Nicola asked him, with a crack of her painful smile.

"Pardon me, but you're full of shit," said Jackie.

They all noticed him at once: a man of about thirty, in khaki shorts and a coffee-stained white shirt, swaying in the doorway. "Hello," he said. He had a thick Russian accent and held an unopened bottle of Nemiroff. Mel couldn't tell if the uneasy motion of his body was due to the motion of the train or a seasick drunkenness. He tapped himself on the chest four or five times and said, "Yuri." Then he squeezed his face as if juicing it. "I..." Tighter and tighter, grating on the ridges of the juicer. "I...take...I..." Then he laughed, embarrassed, dry. When Jackie spoke Russian to him he looked as if he was letting out stale breath he'd been holding.

"He's from next door," Jackie said, "the other side. Wants to drink with us. A bit of craick."

"What?"

"Fun. The vodka's on him." Yuri beamed, gesturing with the bottle. The vodka inside was golden, some flavor or other.

"No thanks," said the Bostonian. "I don't drink."

Nicola said, "Me either," which was a lie.

"What about you, Mel?" Jackie asked. Mel smiled at Yuri's friendly, cheerful face, open, lined with interesting stories. The first thing to go when Mel drank was her memory. She shrugged, nodded. "That's the girl," said Jackie, with approval. The Bostonian and Nicola left for his compartment. Yuri made a face and said something. "He feels bad about that," said Jackie. Mel said, "Don't worry. I think they were happy for an excuse to go off on their own."

"Doesn't have a bunkmate, does he? Mr. Baby Blues?"

"I don't think so. Here, I got shot glasses in Moscow. We can break them in."

When she came down from the upper bunk she could smell the vodka already on him. Likely he'd finished a bottle on his own already, though he held it well. Jackie translated some of his story: he fit shoes to ladies' feet in a fancy Moscow department store; his wife and young son lived in Irkutsk, and he was only able to make the trip to see them every few months. "Jesus, how lonely," said Jackie. "I can't imagine," said Mel.

Hours later (and it wasn't, Mel was sure, the Nemiroff that made them slide by as they did, but the strange time-warp of the train), Mel and Yuri stood in the join between two coaches, smoking and banging elbows on the metal at either side of them. Jackie, who didn't smoke, had stayed in the cabin and Mel, without the cushion of translation, was afraid at first to talk to Yuri, afraid of embarrassing him if he couldn't reply.

"Do you ride the train every time you go home?"

He nodded and kept nodding through the silence until the words collected slowly under his tongue. "Za," he said, "yes. I am take train...often."

Good friends.”

“You and the train?”

“Za,” he agreed, though he looked confused.

After a while he spoke again. “Is world,” Yuri said, “little world.”

“The train?”

“Is little train world. Have own...have everything. He has food, he has drink, has—ah.” He clutched at his brow in effort. “Has neighbor. Bed.”

“I’ve noticed,” Mel agreed, “it has its own chronology, too—I mean—time, its own kind of time. Time’s different on the train.”

Yuri’s face broke with understanding. “Za, za, za.”

Late evening blew across their faces, tossing the smoke from their cigarettes around. They were passing great stretches of empty land now, grass and low rises of ground, and here and there a kestrel flying mournfully low in the sky, which was beginning to bruise with the onset of twilight. “We’re seeing stars,” said Mel, “and it’s only four-thirty.”

In the middle of the emptiness stood a man, arms reaching out towards the passing train, fingers straining, chest heaving under his thin, stretched face.

Mel yelled, swore, and dropped her cigarette. She leaned against the metal wall of the coach and felt herself shaking. Yuri’s confusion and surprise wiped the vestiges of English from his mouth and he stammered at her wordlessly. She pointed to where the man had been. “That man, did you see that man? Did you see him?” she asked. “He’s following the train.”

Yuri looked at her face and then followed the unsure line of her arm. “How did he get there?” she demanded. They had long passed him; there was nothing to see. “There’s nothing and nobody for miles around. Not even trees. Just train and birds. How would he have got there?”

The arm that Yuri draped around her shoulder was heavy with alcohol; when he spoke after a long pause, the lips that hovered near her ear to whisper tripped over themselves like feet. “Is little world,” he said. “Has many question. Has many, has many...”

But he was stuck, and as they stood there touching, Mel’s heart knocking at her chest like a woodpecker, the coach door behind her opened and Nicola’s voice floated over the asthmatic chugging of the wheels. “Looks like you should be in bed, Yuri.”

He straightened up carefully, as if piecing his jigsaw pieces together, and tugged at the hem of his stained shirt. “We drink,” he said, “together.”

“Yeah, okay, that’s great. Let’s do that tomorrow.”

He smiled widely, the lines of work popping out in every corner of his face. “Now,” he insisted, hoisting his Nemiroff bottle, now nearly empty.

“No, no, tomorrow, Yuri,” Nicola said, and took his hand. Still

grinning, his eyes sank into hers, and she steered his heaviness through the door of the coach—he kept hooking to the right, like a shopping cart with a bum wheel. Behind him she shut the door firmly to the click.

“Did you get tired of the Bostonian already?” Mel asked.

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, are you going to follow the fresh meat, or what?” She banged on the door with the flat of her palm. It was suddenly much harder to stand than it had been a moment ago; she wondered if the train had speeded up. “Or were you just bored and trying to ruin my fun?”

“Your pet Russian is drunk off his mind.”

“He’s fine. He’s Russian. All those guys do is drink vodka. He can hold it.”

“He was all over you.”

“We were talking.” Mel blinked as Nicola’s face grew gills and swam through the air, all wriggling fins, freckles, and scales.

“He’s thirtysomething and he’s got a kid, and he doesn’t even speak your—”

“Excuse me. Are you judging me? Are you judging me?”

“And you’re drunk, too.”

“No.” Mel clenched her hands into fists to keep her fingers from flying off. “Listen. How many men has it been since we left the states?”

“Go back to the bunk,” said Nicola. “Lie down. Have some water.”

“Tommy in the JFK airport. Peter and Volva from the club in Moscow. The man with the mustache from the metro, now the Bostonian—you don’t make friends, you make—trysts.”

Nicola stared. Her shirtsleeves slipped further over her fingers until they were hidden completely. “I told you why I wanted to do this with you. Have this summer with you,” she said. “You said, ‘I need to get out of Pittsburgh and forget things.’ You said, ‘I need to get away so I can get over it.’ And I said, great, because I want to have fun this summer, and not give a fuck.” Freed of its smile, her mouth had come unhooked at the corners, and wrapped around her words, propelling them, verbal bullets. “I’m just doing what I told you I’d do. I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. You’re the one who isn’t holding up your end.”

“That’s—that is—” stammered Mel; but Nicola went back into the coach, with emphasis.

Mel locked herself in the bathroom and sat on the metal toilet, pressing her forehead against the cool wall that was tight up almost against her knees. Water would help, but her Nalgene was on her bunk, and drinking from the faucet would be digestive suicide. She told herself her head wasn’t spinning. She told herself she wasn’t thinking about him, but she thought

about him, and knew she was giving in to thinking about him, like she always did. She remembered stepping off the plane in Moscow and how her first thought, feeling the wind cut through her fleece and bite her ears, was of an October day at Trax Farms, holding hands and picking pumpkins. Saint Basil's recalled their Disneyworld trip, the subway their New York visit. In the Moscow clubs she heard songs that she'd heard with him, or songs whose lyrics reminded her of him, or songs that sounded like songs that reminded her of him. Faces looked like his, faces with lips slightly too loose or eyes pale-lashed, gray. The underwear she wore was underwear his hands had touched. "How can I help thinking of him," she whispered to the blue rubber mat on the floor, "when he's everywhere?"

An arrhythmic pounding separated itself from the regularity of train noise: one of the conductors was banging on the bathroom door, shouting "Devotchka, devotchka," through the jamb. A stop must be coming. Mel splashed water on her face and walked back to the compartment, head down. The lights were on but Nicola, in the lower left bunk, was apparently asleep. Jackie was reading beat poetry. "What's the craick?" she murmured. Mel climbed up into her bunk without answering, wishing for a pen, wishing for a coffee, wishing she could dream about anywhere but Pittsburgh, anyone but him. Instead she stared up at the ceiling, the black holes in the white plastic vent, and thought; and time passed that way.

Night by train clock announced its presence by a sharp spike in speed. There was a knock; Jackie slid back the heavy compartment door to reveal Yuri. Only he looked different: his khaki shorts had been replaced by blue pinstriped pants, his white stained shirt hidden by a button-down and a suit jacket, a tie dangling from his neck poorly tied. "Yuri," Jackie stammered, forgetting her Russian, "I thought you went to bed."

He was looking at Nicola, who was still asleep, or pretending to be, her face in shadow. "I put on suit," he said, with intense focus, as if he'd rehearsed the words, "so maybe you like me better." His hair was even damp, slicked back.

Jackie guided him out with words and hands; when the door was locked behind him, she burst into a fit of giggling. "That poor crazy feck," she gasped in glee. "Think that's my cue for sleep. Your friend has really got that thing about her, hasn't she?"

Again, Mel didn't answer. Jackie turned off her reading light and in the dark cabin they slept. Mel's dream started with him, she didn't have to wait this time, he was there from the beginning; they were climbing Mount Washington, which had sprouted cliffs and drops overnight, in harnesses that bit off the blood climbing their legs; the city sparkled darkly below (it was

evening), the Ohio river pinching it between two large fingers. Mel climbed and scrambled, feeling him close behind her, hearing him, at last, cry, Mel, come back.

No, she told him. You don't want me. But she couldn't climb away fast enough and he wouldn't stop climbing. The mountain stretch upward forever. In the distance, the sky muttered of rain.

She woke with a start and an acute sense of a presence in the cabin. A smell of rotting grain, wet and maggoty, was crawling onto her bunk, nesting there. In the center of the room a man stood outlined against the dark. Her first reaction was that it was Yuri. But as her opened eyes grew accustomed to the newness of the dark she realized this man could not possibly be Yuri. Where the Russian was solid and broad, the stranger was gaunt, all shoulders, bone. He lacked Yuri's drunken confidence. Where Yuri's character-filled wrinkles would have been, this man had skin stretched so tight that it looked as if it might burst, like a blister, suddenly. It was the man from the birch branches, and the village, and the empty fields.

Mel's throat constricted slowly but steadily. The man half-raised his arms to her, a beg, a plead. "Don't leave me," he said. The rotting grain stench increased. Mel could not understand how Jackie and Nicola slept on. The man begged her and his hollow voice sang in his chest. He coughed. A trickle of blood pooled in the corner of his mouth. He said, again, "Don't leave me," and twined his bony fingers in Mel's sheets.

"It seems I couldn't if I tried," Mel whispered.

The man pleaded, "Don't run from me," and reached his hand up to her bunk. There was blood squeezing out through the cracked brown fingernails, but Mel let it twitch across her pillow, a nervous spider, and tangle itself in her hair. It had been so long since she'd been touched.

SECOND PLACE PRIZE IN FICTION

Brandon Porter

TALKING ABOUT NOT TALKING

She's a waitress saving for college. Her new boss is a pervert. She lives with her mom. She has a boyfriend, but he's in another city. The boyfriend and she talk often, yet the conversations are growing increasingly mundane. She works with Derrick. Derrick is thoughtful. He can talk, in person. Our heroine is stuck, it seems, but as you'll see, she is resourceful, smart, and commands our admiration. This writer has created—through the 2nd person point-of-view, no less—a compelling, vibrant character doing the best she can in a world that doesn't mind kicking her butt.

—Jeff Martin

Brandon Porter

TALKING ABOUT NOT TALKING

The initial interview lasts about thirty minutes but you probably have the job in the first thirty seconds, right after the restaurant owner gets a good enough look at your tits. Sitting across from him at a table near the bar area, you note his terrible comb-over, sagging eyes and large belly which uses the laminated wood for support. He asks you to describe your employment history, your work ethic. You answer each question mechanically, continually trying to keep his eyes level with your own. His hand shake is reminiscent of an impotent teenager. The man writes you a tentative schedule on the back of a napkin, and then heads into a back room, out of sight for only a moment. Just enough time for you to catch a breath and shake off the creeps. He comes back with two shirts and an apron. The cotton polo's are maroon and faded in spots. The owner tells you to keep them clean, "or else." He reiterates this point four or five times as you back out the front door, smiling and nodding. You walk to your car wondering what "or else" means, and add it to the list of things to tell your boyfriend about later.

That night after pizza with your mother, you sit in the living room with him, connected over a huge distance by the phone. You laugh about the luring restaurateur and he jokes about the man's desperate attempt to cling to his remaining scraps of hair. When he sees the guy he'll kick his ass for staring at his girl. It can be a bit much sometimes, but you secretly love when he acts all tough and protective. You talk about the new job at the restaurant. How it's going to mean more money, which you'll use to finally start paying your bills on time, and help your Mom out more. If things go well you should be able to take some classes in the spring. He says he'll help you write your papers. You bring him with you from the living room, down the short hallway into your bedroom, which is lined with pictures of you two; prom, graduation, the beach, the carnival, and other candid shots of smiles and kisses. You laugh and talk till your eyes start to sting and droop with sleep.

Days later you're wearing one of the ugly maroon polo's with old khaki shorts and some white sneakers you found on the floor of your closet, as the balding restaurant owner shows you around the place. Your hair is up in a makeshift ponytail with more flyaways than you'd care to think about, but you figure first impressions have already been made. Who the hell do

you have to impress anyway? The owner starts the tour on the dining floor, which takes up the entire front and right side of the restaurant, with normal divisions for smoking and non-smoking. The rest is devoted to the bar, front desk, and waiter area, which is pretty much just a small nook in the wall with a touch screen computer for sending orders, and a swinging door leading to the kitchen. He explains the numbering of the tables, pointing out how the first table near the bar is one and the table near the window on the far side is ninety-three. You smell his deodorant and swallow hard. You only assume you'll get used to everything eventually. Catching him checking out your legs you remind yourself to let him walk ahead of you as the tour continues. He introduces you to some of the other waiters and waitresses as you go. They say hello, forget your name instantly, and go about their work filling sodas, grabbing saltshakers and putting orders into the computer. There'll be time later to get to know these people. He calls one of the seasoned servers over to talk to you. "Derrick" smiles and admits the job is a bit hectic at first, but becomes "really fun" later. If you ever have any serving questions don't be afraid to ask him. You repeat his name in your head a couple of times, knowing that you'll need his help along the way.

Creepster drags you into the kitchen to meet the cooks and get you acquainted with the space. It's hot and sticky and reeks of grilled fat. You promise yourself you'll get used to it. A metal counter separates you from the ovens, grills, knives and chefs. You catch one of the cooks staring at you. He's some kind of Spanish, about mid thirties. He raises his eyebrows at you. "Hey chica, you think you're ready for this place? You look too cute to work a hard job like this."

With the owner turned to point out where the croutons go, you mouth "Go fuck yourself" and hesitantly flip him off. He looks at you sideways, then smiles and cracks up.

"Hey, this chick's got soooome balls!" he calls out, slapping one of the other cooks on the shoulder, who starts flipping everyone off with both hands mockingly. "I'm Geo kid, you need something you talk to me after work ay?" You've just passed a test, and mentally add Geo to your list of things to tell your boyfriend about when he calls after his night class. The rest of your tour goes by quickly and with little incident outside of the lewd stares from the owner. On your way out you wave to the kitchen staff. Geo flips you off with both hands, saying goodbye in the sweetest way possible. You hear some of the Mexican guys near the sink whisper to each other as they gawk at you, and you curse yourself for sleeping through three years of Spanish in high school. Before walking to your car you ask creepster if you'll get paid for the training hours. He says you get your hourly pay of \$2.83. You do some quick math. A bi-weekly paycheck will probably buy

you a tank of gas and a greasy dinner at Wendy's for you and your Mom. It won't be much but anything to get her mind off the pile of bills sitting on the kitchen table.

At night you lie in your bed resting on a pillow with the cordless phone balanced on your other ear. Your boyfriend tells you it will get better. The training is always the hardest part, and before you know it you'll be running that place. You're way too cute, you'll have all the old rummies tipping you hundreds and slapping your ass. He says you could've been a model.

"In another life," you say, "then I could get any guy I wanted."

He objects immediately, and with gusto. You squeak like a mouse and smile till it hurts inside. He goes on for a while about school; what classes he's registering for next semester, how the food at the cafeteria is, and something about his journalism teacher not understanding what he was going for in his last article. You tell him about how your Mom's doing, and joke about the future; how your kids will look one day, the house you'll live in, all that crap. He can't wait. After he graduates and gets a job, you won't have to worry about bills and you and your Mom won't have to move every two years. You laugh and silently pray for that day. He has to get up for an early lecture, so he says goodnight and that he loves you. You say the same and promise to call him during the mid-day lull at work. You stay on the phone until you hear him hang up.

A thin layer of crust, composed mostly of salad dressing residue and hamburger grease, has started to form on your work apron. Derrick points it out, calling it a badge of honor. You've earned your wings and can fly solo. He lets you take the next table, an old couple, what the other waiters and waitresses call "chalk sticks." The two sticks are nice enough though. They order some soup and split a club sandwich. Before long you find yourself constantly saying "Thanks" and "How's everything working out for you?" while smiling emptily to them. During the afternoon lull you and the other waiters sit around shooting the shit. Derrick congratulates you on your "waitress personality," the tone they all use at work. Like a voiceover or the movie phone guy, hollow and soulless. Time goes by slowly during midday, and everyone decides to plant themselves down and bitch about life. Before long you realize your co-workers are actually kind of cool. Most are in the same boat as you; stuck and trying to earn enough money to get unstuck. Just about everyone in the restaurant has a screwed up life story filled with fucked up parents, bad boyfriends, and unwanted kids. At one point you find yourself chiming in with a slightly abridged version of your own. In this group, your Mom's job issues and the fact that your Dad had a whole other family somewhere in North Carolina doesn't seem earth shattering. This

catharsis of bitching and complaining among the waiters starts to remind you of old war buddies comparing scars. Against some of them, yours seem to be just flesh wounds. You thank god that, although you've been royally screwed over by life since the age of ten, at least you're not a thirty five year old mother of two, living in an apartment and working three jobs like Clarisse. That's what you'd call a landmine explosion of an emotional scar... shrapnel and all. At least you'll be going back to school soon, and before long you'll be doing something with yourself right?

After your bitch session with the others you sneak into the bathroom and call your boyfriend. The machine picks up, his voice soothing for just a moment before the beep interrupts. You leave a quick message; apologize since you probably won't be able to call him tonight. It's going to be a long day, a double shift straight through from lunch to the end of dinner. You'll call him when you get a chance and hope his day's good.

The bite of winter has come a bit early, you think, as you sit on the curb outside after your shift, smoking a cigarette. You flick the remaining butt into the parking lot and curse yourself for picking up the habit. At first it was just a reason to take a break from work and talk to Derrick and the others outside. Now you were smoking at home, and you Mom wasn't a happy camper. You reach into your apron and pull out a wad of bills and pack of Camels, handing one to Derrick, who sits next to you in the cold. He asks how you made out tonight. A pretty decent "wing night" if you don't say so yourself. It was strange how the days of the week were all different to you now. Monday, prime rib night, Tuesday, 50 cent hot dog night, Wednesday, dollar burgers, Thursday, 25 cent wings and dollar Mexican beers. Fridays and Saturdays blurred together into one day as just 2 for one appetizers, and Sundays just meant old people, which in turn meant no tips.

Derrick and a few of the others were heading back to his house for a few drinks and of course you ask to tag along. First a quick call to the boyfriend though, you tell him. He laughs and rolls his eyes.

"Whatever you have to do," he says. "Go check in and then come have some fun."

You stand up and walk away from Derrick to make the call. The boyfriend answers on the first ring, excited to finally talk to you. He says it feels like it's been forever. You apologize, express the same sentiment, tell him you love him, but you've got to run. You tell him your Mom needs some things from the store, and then the two of you are going to a late movie. The boyfriend says he understands and tells you midterms are coming, and he's busy too. Could you call him later tonight? You'll try, but you're already

feeling pretty tired. Love you, bye.

Derrick looks puzzled. He thought you were coming out with them? You tell him you are, you just didn't want the boyfriend to worry. His laugh echoes through the empty parking lot, and he tosses his cigarette into the darkness. He swears you're crazy.

The house is fucking freezing and you tell your Mom so as you walk passed her sitting in the living room, after a 2 for one apps night a few weeks later. So you strip down and change into sweats for the night. By ten-ish you're sifting through some dirty clothes on your floor, separating them into whites, darks, delicates and all as the boyfriend goes off for a while about this internship he's trying to get at a magazine. He asks you a question, something about coming to visit him and you fumble for an answer. You realize you haven't been paying much attention and apologize for it. You try to start another line of conversation but it's too late. He points out the big elephant in the room. Things haven't been the same between you two. A deep breath and maybe you're ready for this conversation. It's not him, assurances are necessary; it's just that you've been pretty preoccupied with work and things at home. He's so far removed, sometimes it's just easier not to bring it up. The boyfriend says he's busy too, writing his portfolio and trying to get some articles published. His job at the campus newspaper is going nowhere. You assure him again how talented he is. Together, you both apologize for not talking more, for not working hard enough. A half hour later you realize you spent most of your conversation talking about not talking. You tell him everything's fine; assure him it's just stress and that he's doing nothing wrong, but it's late and you should get some sleep. "Goodnights" and "I love you's" fly back and forth, mediated over miles by the phone. You quickly promise him that you almost have enough money to fly up and see him. He sounds more upbeat and tells you he's excited. "Me too babe. Miss you so much," you say automatically. Your tone brings feelings of déjà vu but you can't put your finger on it. Leaving the pile of clothes you absentmindedly begin to stare at the wall of pictures that surrounds you. The one of you two at the carnival last summer comes into focus. Both your heads are cocked towards each other and you're sticking your tongue out at the camera, blue eyes squinted and thin nose scrunched up to add to the silly face you were attempting. Your darker, tanned skin is in huge contrast with the soft white hues of the boyfriend's face. He's smiling and trying to ruffle up your long dark hair with his hand, which you always hated. The dial tone clicks on and it takes you a second to realize you haven't hung up yet.

Derrick is screaming your name now. "Where the hell have you been? Get out there kid!" He's poked his head around the corner of the

waiter's nook and motions to the restaurant floor. His face is glistening with a mixture of grease and sweat and a slight smile ruins his attempt at seriousness. You quickly send the boyfriend a text with a candy heart message; "Love u Cant w8t 2 c you!" and stuff your phone into the back pocket of your short khaki skirt. You tell yourself this makes you feel better, your attempt at making it work, but Derrick tells you you've been double sat and before you know it you're taking eight drinks to one table while you should be taking the order for another. Soon, all you can think about is which guy at table twelve ordered the Cajun chicken sandwich with fries, and who ordered it with chips. Before you can even blink, Geo is calling you to complain about the way you put your last order into the computer. In the kitchen you check the wad of tips in your now crusty apron. You're making good money and in the end that's what matters.

After work you untie the apron, stuff the money into your pockets and button back up the top two buttons on your polo. The bald owner stares at you from the hostess stand, trying to will the buttons back down. You go right on doing what you're doing. The constant sexual advances have become as much a routine to you as doing your side work, dealing out fake smiles and banter to drunken men, wiping down your tables and rolling silverware before you are cut for the night. As much a routine as drinks after work at Derrick's, as tying your apron into a double knot, as smoking that "last cigarette" every morning.

Thanksgiving has come before you knew it, and like you swore you wouldn't, you've forgotten to request off from work. Your Mom has already laid into you about it, but you spend the dead shift kicking yourself and bitching to the others about your lack of time with her. On the other hand, you tell them you have enough money saved up to register for classes in the spring. You might just put it off another semester to save up enough for a year, since you probably won't be able to work too much while taking classes. Time drones on and the holiday slowly ticks away. You're playing solitaire and cheating a bit when your phone buzzes silently in your skirt pocket. Ducking into the nook you flip open your phone. He isn't coming home for Thanksgiving break. The boyfriend's got the internship with that magazine... and just needs to stay and help them out. You don't remember the last time he mentioned you visiting him and you don't bring it up.

You walk out of the restaurant on a 50 cent hotdog night at around eleven. It's the end of November and snow blankets the parking lot. You hope your Mom's car will start tomorrow so you don't have to drive her to work again. She'll probably ask you to help pay for the repairs too if it breaks down. A message appears on your cell phone a second later. The boyfriend needs to talk to you. He'll be around his apartment all night and he needs

you to call him when you get out of work.

About an hour later you finally get around to calling him. You're sitting on the edge of your bed, still wearing your work clothes and jacket to fend off the cold of the house. As the phone rings a few times you look around and roll your eyes. Lying back onto the bed you start to take notice of the pictures all around the room, which you haven't looked at in a while. You can't remember the last time you saw the boyfriend, and start to wonder which picture of the two of you in assorted backgrounds was the last one you took. The phone rings one more time before he finally picks up. He sounds out of breath but exhilarated to hear your voice. He tells you not to speak and just to let him talk. You watch the clock as he goes off for fifteen minutes on how sorry he is that he has been so busy. He apologizes for not calling you more often, or finding a way to come home and see you. He tells you how much he misses you and how no other girl just "does it for him." Resentfully, you wonder if any other girl tried to "do it for him." He tells you he loves you and wants things to be ok again. He understands that you're working really hard to get to school and keep you and your Mom afloat, and he's also sorry for not being able to help with that. He says how hard he's working at his internship, and that he thinks after he graduates they might hire him and then he will be able to take care of you and your Mom.

Dry mouth. You have nothing to say. Then, like a marine switching into combat mode, you find yourself telling him that you will be fine, and that it's just a rough patch. You're in a new job, he's busy with school. You tell him it's going to be ok. It will be fine when he comes home on winter break. You're not worried. You'll see him and everything will be ok, just like he said. The words spill from your mouth before you know where they came from. And you realize you're smiling wide, feeling your face stretch and your teeth air dry for a split second. You can't help thinking about asking him if he wants dessert. "The Oreo Bash is delicious!" you think, and almost chuckle.

Silence on the other line. You begin to hate that feeling you get right before you know someone is going to speak. The intake of air right which can only mean one thing. Just then the phone beeps, the familiar sound of call waiting, thankfully interrupting the drama of the conversation. You tell the boyfriend you have to take the call, that's it's something important for your Mom and you promise to call him right back. He pauses for a second, and mumbles a "Sure." Disarmed for now, he throws in a quick I love you, which you think you return before hanging up.

Derrick waits on the other line. He's out of work and dressed if you're ready for him to pick you up. His upbeat, aloof voice relaxes you, and you sit down on your bed and lean your head back against the wall of

pictures. He tells you he has made some good money tonight and wants to take you someplace nice. You ask him for a couple of minutes. You pick out just the right outfit to dance in, and before long he's outside waiting for you.

It's around four when he pulls into your driveway. He was such a sweetheart to drive you home, and you let him know it. Walking you to the door, arms around you waist, he holds your drunken body up straight.

You get in the house ten minutes later, wiping the smeared lip gloss away from around your grinning mouth with the back of your hand. Within moments you're in your t-shirt and underwear, snug in bed. The house is still freezing but you can't feel a damn thing. You begin to slip off into inebriated sleep when your cell phone begins to buzz. Your heart jumps as you wait to hear Derrick tell you how much fun he had. The caller ID changes your mind and you silence the phone immediately. Tossing the still ringing phone, hearing it bounce off the carpet and land somewhere in the dark, you feel powerful. You'll call the boyfriend back tomorrow. It's way too late for you to be dealing with him right now. You know he'll yell and put you in a bad mood and keep you up for the next four hours talking about how much he loves you and how hard he's working, and how you don't appreciate what he does for you. That's a conversation you'll avoid for as long as possible, since it'll probably end with you hanging up on him anyway. For now, just sleep. Blissful, well earned sleep. After all, tomorrow's 25-cent wing night, and you'll need to get some beauty sleep if you want to make any money.

HONORABLE MENTION IN FICTION

Ross Rader

CHEW

Sharon is driving—fast. Sharon is also a narcoleptic. Our narrator rides shotgun. Things are, obviously, not good. And this tense situation is given additional weight as our narrator recalls specific people and moments from the past—connected by, you guessed it, smokeless tobacco. An odd, moving short-short in which deft imagery and character detail bind together this artfully fractured narrative.

—Jeff Martin

Ross Rader

CHEW

Sharon has narcolepsy.

Empty coke cans littered in her car, cold coffee in Styrofoam cups, two pairs of white sneakers, one, two, three empty packs of Parliaments, a few t-shirts balled up in the back seat, a small container of her father's chew and a mug with her father's thick coal colored spit slogging up and down the sides, wedged in the middle console. We are drifting, 50, 60, then 70 M.P.H. on the highway. Our talk is tired; we have nothing more to say and over an hour to go. Now listen.

We are drifting when I close my eyes and listen to the wind chop the car's windshield. A jolt, I open my eyes and we are flying across lanes. Traffic hurls our way and then we roll into a ditch, the ground our sky. Seatbelt's sudden pressure snaps my collarbone and digs into my neck, kisses my pulse. Sharon gasps; her father's spit Pollocked across her face and hair. Her nose, broken. I ask her if she's alright. She smells sweet. The blood rushes to my head and I hear a woman screaming, "Oh my God, are you alright?"

The smell of chew reminds me of a small Barbershop. Rocco cuts my hair, smells like an aspen. I worry that he will cut my ear, his scissors snipping my hair, the sound of two blades meeting, bantering, and saying their goodbyes. His eyebrows are thick, swarm above his eyes. Getting out of Rocco's red chair after having been sitting for a long time, I feel light, the blood rushes to my head.

The accident. Sharon cries and apologizes. She looks different upside down, her hair thrown up, as if she was in a cartoon and just stuck her fingers into a socket. I tell her that everything will be alright and reach for her hand. But it hurts too much. She looks at me, apologizes again. I try to move, but my legs are stuck, crushed. The glove compartment rammed against my thighs, I try to wiggle my toes. There are flashing lights outside; I see pairs and pairs of feet.

My father's friend chewed. Imagine: a boxing match and a party with potato chips and Sloppy Joes. My mother asks why a plastic cup filled with jet-black juice is sitting on the kitchen counter. Todd picks up the cup

and spits through his teeth. My mother loses her appetite.

My mother's best friend died of throat cancer. She never smoked. She slipped chocolates into my hands. She had no children to call her own.

Once, when I was in sixth grade, I pretended to chew tobacco. I bought a pack of shredded jerky at a small store owned by a wrinkled man who planted bamboo in a clearing behind the parking lot. I hid inside this tiny forest and tucked some jerky inside my cheek until the salt began to burn. Looking through the bamboo shoots into the parking lot, I remember thinking –Soldiers in Vietnam probably chewed tobacco to keep their minds off of food.

Sparks are flying. I look over at Sharon, but she's not there. She's probably wrapped in a white blanket, sitting in an ambulance, crying, all ten of her fingers huddled around her nose. Through the cracked windshield, I see pairs of feet. Six, seven, eight pairs of feet. It's dark outside and I'm getting cold. I spot the mug that Sharon's father spits into. Sparks fly again, a loud noise, metal on metal whack my eardrums and I clench my teeth. But even that, squashed molars, hurts. And I vomit.

My sister tells me a story. Her fiancé's best friend goes fishing on Lake Okeechobee. An avid tobacco chewer, he buys cherry flavored snuff. Tastes delicious. So much so, he swallows the tobacco and throws up over the side of the boat. Now, even the smell of cherries makes him sick. He does not like cherry pie, or cherry cheesecake, or cherry flavored cough drops, or cherry flavored gum. I have not heard my sister's voice for a long time now.

"Oxygen, he needs oxygen. Give me some room, quickly." The passenger side window is broken; a cold gloved hand straps a mask onto my face. The car has been quartered, ripped apart, but I'm still stuck. Like a wedged doorstop. This will be a funny story. I will be able to tell children, then grandchildren: Sharon fell asleep at the wheel, you should have seen her nose, and it was uncomfortable hanging upside down, crushed inside a car for hours. Children will gasp and then they will chuckle because I will have learned how to tell a good story with age. I will rewind and replay because all good stories should be told more than once.

I wish I knew my grandfather. He would tell great stories. He would chew and show me his wounds from WWII and before delivering the epic point of his story, he would spit to gain my full attention, to make his words strike like missiles.

Or, he would be silent. He would chew and stare into the wall,

looking for a message in the patterned wallpaper. He would spit and when he was left alone, he would cry.

Before I am lifted onto the stretcher, there is a minute when I am left lying on grass and leaves and mud with a plastic mask fastened across my mouth and nose, pumping oxygen into my lungs and I think that I've died. This is what will happen: surgery, recovery, balloons beside a bed, cake and a party. A white brace holding the pieces of Sharon's nose in place. Her hair will smell like her father's chew.

DovBer Naiditch

POST-MODERN PRINGLES

There is an ad on TV, ostensibly for Pringles.

os-ten-si-ble (-st n s -b l) *adj.*

Represented or appearing as such; ostensive: His ostensible purpose was charity, but his real goal was popularity.

*[French, from Medieval Latin *ost nsibilis*, from Latin *ost nsus*, past participle of *ostendere*, to show : *ob-*, *ob-* + *tendere*, to stretch; see *ten-* in *Indo-European Roots*.]*

os-ten si-bly adv.

—The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language

The ad is a visual and musical feast. Perfect Pringles float and twirl to the beat. A hand picks a chip from a heart formed from pringles, a young woman—hair in two tight buns, with ruby red lips like strawberries, a yellow t-shirt and jeans—eats the Pringle. Joy lights up her face. The slowly escalating song bursts in ecstatic Pringle-oriented visions around her on a background of red. Pringles swirl in and out of symmetric designs, zig-zags and bird shapes.

The song is the Chorus to “Everlasting Love,” written by Mac Gayden & Buzz Cason, and performed by, among others, U2 and Gloria Estefan, though in the commercial it has been rerecorded by the Human Music House for WPP Group PLC’s Grey Worldwide, who provided the advertising for the Proctor and Gamble product.

The girl is unnamed, though it is worthwhile to note that she thinks her thighs are too big, and, sometime before the commercial was filmed, she deliberately threw up for the first time.

In Des Moines, Iowa, a young software engineer finds the ad to be incredibly sensual, so much so that he deconstructs it scene by scene, and writes a sometimes admiring, sometimes scathing article on the sexual semiotics of advertising, referencing, among others, Bill Hicks and Thomas Streeter, a little known professor of Sociology at the University of Vermont, and bringing up the works of Georgia O’Keefe and a recent Pepsi ad. Afterwards he masturbates in the bathroom, envisioning in particular the shapeliness of the young woman’s thighs.

Glenn Reynolds, the law professor behind the omniscient weblog Instapundit, reads the article and likes it. (He does not know that the man masturbated to the commercial, but readily owns that his personal politics don't discourage it.) He posts the article on his own site, and the Des Moines engineer wakes up to find that his server has crashed under the influx of new visitors, or an Instalanche.

Instapundit is a portmanteau of the words instant and pundit. Wikipedia lists Instalanche as a portmanteau of the words Instapundit and Avalanche.

Whether Wikipedia is reliable is in and of itself is a matter of contention amongst scholars. Detractors cite its ability to be modified at the will of "just about anybody," while advocates make a case for its ability to keep up with changing times. Semioticians would perhaps quote Napoleon Bonaparte, and argue that history, and by extension truth, is the version of events that the most people have decided to agree upon.

It is perhaps worthwhile to note that Thomas Streeter, a professor of Sociology at the University of Vermont, and Glenn Reynolds, a Professor of Law at the University of Tennessee, would not get along, and not only by virtue of their personal politics. Reliable statistical evidence shows that, in the event that such a relationship could have formed, it would have been ruined when, in a hypothetical 2005 Christmas party, Professor Streeter is 74% likely to have hit on Professor Reynold's wife and told a bad lawyer joke. It is 83% likely that he will have done both in a single instance. Hypothetically.

"Who's Georgia O'Keefe?"
"Google it."

Meanwhile, a child falls asleep in an undisclosed location. It's a baby, no more than 6 months of age, on a queen sized bed. Legs curled, she lays with her hands out, staring at her father in an effort to stay awake. She does not succeed, but her eyelids slide down and her hand uncurls just a bit. A small bubble forms beneath her upper lip. The father laughs out of a mixture of amusement and love he will later classify as pure joy.

Repeat the last paragraph, insert media superstar baby Shiloh for "the baby" and hunky new dad Brad Pitt for "the father."

Questions for examination:

1. How does your response to the paragraph change after inserting the names of this now famous duo? Do you feel different about the scene? Is it more or less intimate? Are you more or less interested?
2. How did Brad Pitt turn into such a pussy now with Angelina? Is the questioner the only one who remembers "Fight Club"? "Twelve Monkeys"?

Discuss.

"Now that was a brilliant movie."

"Fight Club?"

"That too, but 'Twelve Monkeys' was the Shizzle. Man. Bruce Willis was awesome."

"Bruce Willis."

"Yeah, I'll watch anything he's in now by virtue of that performance alone."

"He's kinda wussed out since then though hasn't he?"

"What?"

"You know, 'Friends,' 'The Kid.'"

"What? Your forgetting about 'The 5th Element,' 'The 6th Sense,' 'Lucky number Slevin.' If the man wants to increase his range with some lite comedy, so be it. So be it."

"He's in a lot of movies with numbers, isn't he? 'The Whole Nine Yards' 'The Whole Ten Yards'"

"'Four Rooms'"

"He was in Four Rooms?"

"Yep."

"Oh yeah."

"I told you I know him."

Almost two years after the Pringles commercial aired for the first time. The actress and the engineer will meet. They will even date briefly. It will not work. The actress will find the young engineer's blog, read it, and be disturbed by the indictment of her own image and his perception of it's use.

In a total inversion of the norm, an actress will find an average man's media persona worse than he is in person.

The engineer will not be too disappointed. Developing bulimia will have taken much of the joy out of the actress's thighs.

"Die Hard two?"

"What?"

“Die Hard Two?”

“Doesn’t count. Change the channel. I hate this band”

“Why not?”

“It’s a sequel.”

“So? Left. Turn there.”

“We’re talking about a series of random coincidences, Steve.”

“But isn’t ‘The Whole Ten Yards’ a sequel to ‘The Whole nine Yards’?”

“Yes, but it’s in the title.”

“True, but it’s not really that random a coincidence.”

The speakers are Steve and Jeff Goldstein, brothers riding to downtown Pittsburgh to see the Steelers game. Jeff got tickets from his boss. Steve is only 18. They are not on motorcycles but instead in the relative safety of their 1994 Camry. Both would agree that, were they to ride motorcycles, they would wear helmets. They would, however, disagree on the style of said helmets. Jeff has always liked the Shorty design, his chin sweats too much in the full face helmets.

It is worthwhile to note why that makes sense, it may also be worthwhile to know that the conversation immediately prior to Jeff’s and Steve’s, seemingly the beginning of their own, may or may not have been theirs, but instead, the quiet conversation between Steve Green and Tyler Wendel, spoken over homework and takeout in their frat room at WSU. The peculiarity—two Steves engaged in the same conversation—is inconsequential unless you choose to make it so.

Here’s another question or two (informally):

If you do—that is, do choose to make it consequential, and imbibe it with meaning—do you feel that you would be adding to or corrupting the author’s original intent? Explain your answer.

By answering the above, are you participating in the creation of this story? If so, would that make this story postmodern?

post-mod-ern (p st-m d rn) *adj.*

Of or relating to art, architecture, or literature that reacts against earlier modernist principles, as by reintroducing traditional or classical elements of style or by carrying modernist styles or practices to extremes: “It [a roadhouse] is so architecturally interesting... with its postmodern wooden booths and sculptural clock” (Ruth Reichl).

post-mod-ern-ism *n.*

post-mod-ern-ist *adj. & n.*

—The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language

Please e-mail your answers to beardedbear@gmail.com.

Post Script:

Beardedbear is the e-mail address of a guy named Barry with a beard. Barry regularly receives emails for gay cruises and camping trips because “bear” is slang for a subculture of hairy gay men and their lovers, and a beard is a euphemism for a woman in a public relationship with a secretly gay man. (As in the sentence “Katie Holmes is Tom Cruise’s beard.”) What does this mean?

Katheryn Christy

THE WHITE CALF

All things that live were once young and innocent.

She shuddered and screamed out in pain, howling as a wild beast wounded and bellowing out its last defiance to the world. The room's atmosphere was thick with a miasma of blood and the close sticky feeling of many bodies, old and musky with sweat and anxiety, the air clouded with murmurs in voices made asexual by age and exhaustion. Outside her husband lingered, a pacing, anxious presence, smelling of clean linens and oils, rich food, and civilization. He waited for his next child, a child that would be perfect, divine, shameless and beautiful as all the others had been before. There was no reason it shouldn't be.

Something tore and old women gasped at the fresh flood of blood that sheeted down her legs to form a black reflecting pool on the floor, soaking into the ebony wood of the birthing chair, staining the ankle restraints and making them slippery, pliant, and warm. She felt flesh part in a strange disconnected way no more personal than a pair of hands ripping cloth for rags, something that could be heard, vaguely felt, but not really sensed, the pain of labor, of twitching muscles and aching back sending her to a place divorced from the reality of the action.

As her body pushed, aided by wizened attendants, her mind wandered, thinking of the child she was bringing into the world. She'd known something was wrong from the first time it had moved within her, a warm gentle shifting that caused a simultaneous flow of love and anxiety. Her child. What was her child? She suspected she knew.

She'd flirted with the idea of visiting the women who lived on the edge of the city, the ones with faces like wrinkled brown leather and eyes as hard and cold as any sea creature's, those crones and their mysterious mixtures that would solve most 'women's complaints.' Flirted with and dismissed it. Whether it was fear of punishment, shame of discovery, or simple madness she stayed away from the women with doll's eyes and potions that smelled of dying and death.

With one last heave and groan she felt the child slide from her, but although the mother relaxed in triumph the screams did not end. Women on the edges of the room craned their necks in alarm and puzzlement while those nearer to her backed away like wide eyed deer, some

with their eyes closed and others moaning in fear. The midwife alone, apart from the mother, retained any presence of mind though her weathered face held no color or emotion and the arms that held the newborn trembled ever so slightly.

She laid the babe in the mother's arms as the husband, finally managing to fight his way past the wall of terrified servants, entered the room, panic stricken, expecting to see both wife and child dead. Years later he remembered the moment, the well honed edge of terror that, with his slow realization, gave way to a blunt horror and ponderous churning in his gut that brought with it the green taste of bile.

There on his wife's breast, silent but for slightly wheezing breaths, was a creature, not a babe, but a punishment divine in nature and horrifying in execution. Plump legs terminated in hard horny protuberances, the hands had only two short thick fingers and a thumb, but it was the head of a calf that surmounted the shoulders of the newborn that caused his stomach to roil and threaten to rebel against the sight. He fell to his knees, feeling the blood seep slowly through his robes of Tyrian purple.

Oblivious to her husband's reaction, to his very presence, Pasiphae gazed down at her child, her poor babe born to be wielded as a weapon. He was beautiful, much in the way his sire was. His pelt was soft and pure white, throwing back the little light that was left from the dying sun in a soft glow, and the strip of hair that ran from shoulders to tail was fine and downy. The muzzle that nuzzled her breast was velvet soft and gentle and his breath warm. His hands stretched and grasped aimlessly and when he opened liquid black eyes rimmed by long white lashes she fell into their depths.

Exhausted, hair dragged and sweat-soaked, blood still drying on her thighs and legs, she brought a trembling hand up to stroke his cheek and was rewarded by a soft low and a movement towards her and the warmth she represented. Holding him to her breast she turned her head towards the sliver of sky she could just see through the window. The blue was fading softly into black and there, just at the corner of her vision, was a small bright star.

"Asterion," she murmured softly, stroking her son's soft pelt, her lips bowing with his name. "The starry one. My poor little star." And though her lips smiled and her hands still moved gentle and loving, her eyes reflected the lonely star and she could feel hot trails burn their way down her cheeks and throat as her son moved to nurse and her husband moaned in a chamber empty but for one woman too old to surprise and too close to the death to disgust.

Rumors flew, inevitable. The hubris that caused Minos to dare command the Gods. His refusal to return Poseidon's great gift as was fitting.

His great punishment, his shame, that his wife, mother of his children, should come to lust after a beast in preference of her husband. That she should offer herself to it, degrade herself in the shell of a wooden heifer under the watchful eye of the artificer. Erotic, fantastical, stories began to circulate, quietly, among the populace filled with mentions of lust, of hot heavy breathing, of the rut, the musk, the horror of the action, the grunting bellows and screams as their king's wife was mounted in the dark of the night, aided and watched by the cunning fabricator, satisfied in a way her husband could not provide.

Perhaps the tale would not have spread so rapidly, would not have consumed the minds of the people had it not been so lurid, but Poseidon, in his divine wisdom and celestial cruelty, made of Minos the greatest cuckold, shaming him in a manner that was impossible to forget and just as impossible to ignore. He left a reminder, proof that the tale was not something created in the fevered minds of drug riddled poets and pornographers, left to rot in the corners of brothels and revered only in the safe sanctity of Aphrodite's temple, where all loves were sacred. He left the child, the minotaur, the bull of Minos, this appellation perhaps the greatest irony, the hardest indignity. He was the sign of the king's fall from grace, his shame, to be kept hidden away. Along with his mother.

In her isolation Pasiphae watched her child grow, hidden safe away from the eyes and mouths of the people. She kept him close and taught him to think and, when his tongue failed him, to write, to communicate. He was her solace in exile, her treasure, zealously guarded on the rare occasions that her husband visited. And in her seclusion she never learned of her husband's plans to erase her son's existence, Minos' planning of the great labyrinth, crafted by the same hands that engineered the workings of his own downfall. Minos was wise, creating of his shame a weapon, making it yet another symbol of his power.

Those in Athens heard stories of the labyrinth of Crete and of Minos' bull, a monster that, as the tales told, ate only human flesh and was contained only by the skill of Daedalus and the power of the Cretan king. When Minos demanded the sacrifice of fourteen Athenian youths as terms for peace between the nations the demand was readily granted, the country cowed at the thought of the creature loose among their populace. None who had gone as a sacrifice ever returned and none who had been spared thought that perhaps the labyrinth itself that was the devourer. Minos continued to send for groups of Athenians, seemingly at random, to maintain the myth and spread the story of the labyrinth's fearsome denizen.

But to hide a divine punishment, to think to erase the truth of it from the mouths and memories of men is further hubris. No man may

approach the Gods and there is only one outcome when one reaches beyond mortal right. Punishment would be exacted, but the Gods were patient, allowing Minos to, for a time, think himself safe, with his embarrassment locked tight away. It made them laugh, up in Olympus, to know that it was the very isolation in which he kept his shame that would be his downfall. Only this time his country would follow and they would ensure the tale would spread. They merely needed to wait, to wait for the madness of isolation to set in, to wait for a young man to mature, to wait for the sacrifice to be returned. And all of it by Minos' own hand.

All those who are young and innocent must grow.

Asterion, like most children, remembered little of his early years. Most of his memories were of his mother, a warm presence of love which he contrasted, strongly, with the sharp dark shape that sometimes visited them like a summer storm, sudden sound and fury that occasionally ended with a lightning strike of violence that left his mother's tears falling like rain and his ears ringing with thunderous echoes. The others who came, soft shapeless servants shrouded and veiled, were non-entities, as immediate as the faint call of the seabirds native to Crete and just as easily ignored.

His universe consisted of a small suite of rooms, simply appointed, the garden, walled on all four sides, his mother, his sole protector, and those small pleasures that she had bribed for him, a ball, vellum, ink, pens. Books. Asterion was aware, vaguely, that he was unlike those other presences in his life, but, even at age ten, a child's life centers primarily around themselves. His mother had only praise for him and that was, if not everything he needed, sufficient. For a long time that was his life. Soft, light, and quiet. Some might say that it was ultimately a prison but, as the only life Asterion had ever known, it was pleasant enough.

Shortly after his tenth year everything changed. He could smell it on her when she embraced him, something heavier and darker. Her heart would beat more quickly and she began holding on to him long after he became restless and uncomfortable. Her hands began to cling, to stroke over his shoulders and back, long fingers kneading through hair to find skin underneath or caressing with a feather light fingertip, tracing the outline of the muscles in his shoulders and chest or the curve of his horns. He didn't understand and he didn't like it, squirming to win free of the enfolding arms and gaze of glazed eyes that looked through him as if seeing someone else; he was afraid of the presence of hot heavy breaths whispered into a feathered ear and the overwhelming smell that filled his nostrils. Asterion's eyes would burn and he would begin to loom unhappily around a lump in his throat,

frightened by this stranger who looked like his mother but smelled, acted, sounded completely different.

It would bring his mother back. Her hands would change from grasping to soothing and her eyes returned to look at him, brimming over, tears trickling down his cheeks like falling stars. And she would release him to play with his ball or amuse himself in the garden as she stared into the sky. But eventually his distress didn't stop her, even when hands moved further, lips did more than murmur into his ears, and her eyes were no longer looking at anything physically present. Sometimes his mother would return, and she would cry and apologize and pray, but most of his days were now spent with this stranger, trying to appease her in order to escape.

One day, after a long time or a short time, the sharp person came, perhaps drawn by the unhappy lows which had developed into forlorn bellows. The sharp person left without a word but returned later with others, kept in hard shiny shells like beetles. They tore him from his mother, beat him.

As the blows fell he reached for her. If he could reach her it would be all right. The sharp man and his beetles would leave and they would be together and she would play with him like before. She would get better. Bellowing, he stretched out, tugging the edge of her robe. She looked down and his heart soared. It would be okay. She would wake up, she would be his mother.

But she simply stared at him with heavy eyes, neither smiling nor frowning, faintly puzzled by the activity around her. She pulled her robe from his grasp and turned her head away at the cry of an eagle overhead. Just then a particularly hard blow found its way to the back of his head and ushered him into darkness, the last image of his mother that of a remote stranger with blank eyes.

All those that grow must die.

When Asterion awoke it was in a strange place, dark and smelling of soil, stone, decay, and old water. The ground beneath him sapped his warmth and the stone surrounding him threw the echo of footsteps and running water from every direction. His vision, never that strong, was almost useless in the dark and as he climbed to his feet he stumbled over something that clicked and smelled of death. A fist clutched his heart and the pit of his stomach dropped out, leaving him lightheaded and queasy. A sweat broke out on his skin, quickly cooling and making him shiver. His hair rose all along his neck and the strip down his back to his tail. Tensing, he sniffed the air gently.

A metallic smell filled his nostrils, spiked with the rank smell of unbathed body and the sharp edge of fear. He turned to see a person staring up at him, eyes wide in a white face, holding a sword as the beetle people had carried. Tentatively he reached out a hand and bellowed in surprise when the person lunged at him. Turning to run he felt something catch and stop him.

Cold briefly numbed part of his back and shoulder before becoming a searing brand of pain. He fell to his knees, and hot blood flowed down over his back and dripped down over his shoulders and chest. Half turning he eyed the person staring at him from above. He didn't understand. Only monsters were killed in his stories. Was he a monster? Is that why mother had left? Low grunts and moans began to escape from him and tears dampened the hair of his cheeks, spiking his white lashes and drawing pure white trails through the grime he'd picked up.

Asterion's mind began to blur and fade away. Points of light appeared before his eyes, swirling like the constellations his mother had described but he could never see, his vision being much too weak. They were beautiful, dancing like that. Little isolated points in the black. Some of the stories he'd read said that there were heroes and animals in the stars. He wondered if he would join them. Lifting a hand, he reached towards them. If he could only stretch a little more...

Those that die are remembered.

The man looked down as the vast chest heaved, its noisy snuffles making faint marks of moisture on the floor where the muzzle rested. Slowly the eyes, deep and dark as reflecting pools, clouded over, closed; labored breathing seemed to be too much effort and blood continued to rush from the wound, staining the hide, the spattered flecks spreading out like red stars on a dirty white field. Gradually, as he watched, the great bellows of lungs slowed and ceased, the ears drooped, and even the outermost extremities stopped their feeble twitches. The flow of blood slowed to an ooze and began to dry.

Once he was sure the creature was dead the man wiped his sword on the thing's pelt and moved on into myth and legend, the cooling body he left behind in the dark a single episode in his long legacy.

But few things are ever remembered correctly.

Michael Hurley

TALK

I am sitting with my Father, in my old room, which is the new laundry room, which is soon to be the new bedroom for my Grandmother who is moving in when she sells her house. He asks me to look through some old boxes and bags, asking what I need, what I don't need, and what I don't need now but will keep in the attic until I do. There is a box full of old Chinese poetry notes and books from a time when the East seemed to be where God was. There are winter clothes, unopened gloves, a tourist hat used only in Prague, another pair of gloves that were bought, lost, and bought again, because a store far away was going out of business. He offers me a spice rack shelf, lying edgewise, rugged but collecting dust.

"I built that with a buddy of mine. Jerry. Not the Carey you remember, this was Jerry, and he had some wood-working tools and we had this idea to build all kinds of stuff like this, spice racks, key hangers, garbage can barrels, all this wood stuff thinking people would buy it, we could make a few extra bucks."

He thinks for a moment. I have nothing to say, I am waiting.

"You know, by the time you get all the stuff, take the time to build it, you gotta charge so much just to make anything. Nobody wants stuff made by hand anymore...or their not willing to pay for it."

I agree and go on about something I have talked about before; that there will be no antiques from my generation, or the one before me, or my children's. Things made in factories don't become antiques. They become junk.

My dad says that a stove from Pennsylvania that is an antique is ancient by California standards, as a result of the slow spread of colonization over the land. I tell him that Pennsylvania antiques are brand new to Brits. My last sentence is "I guess it all depends where people choose to start their history from," and I realize I am much less interesting than my Father. We rise, head out to the living room to carry a desk up the stairs.

FEVER

On the corner of Fifth and Lime, just inside the grease-smearred door of Butch's Original Hot Dog Shop, Officer Albert Grady stood watching the sparse midnight traffic. He stood tall, his hat pulled tight over his brown, bald head as he tapped a thick finger against his holster. He stared through the shop's big, dirty windows. He'd been posted here three months ago when a drug deal had gone down on the sidewalk outside and left a college kid shot and almost dead. The kid shouldn't have even been there. Of course the news made him out to be some kind of hero, but Ralph Elker was on duty that night and was walking by, saw the whole thing. Said the kid was some asshole frat boy trying to act tough in front of a bunch of girls, saw the two guys arguing in a car, some expensive, black European thing, and decided he was gonna break up the fight. Grady shook his head. Fucking snot-nosed college kids.

But that was three months ago and nothing had happened since. Grady just stood around every night, watching drunk kids come into Butch's to buy forties with fake IDs. He had tried to put a stop to that, but when he carted his first bunch down to the station, the chief just gave them warnings and sent them on their ways. Then he pulled Grady to the side. "This is a college town, buck," he said. "You really think we could slap every one of those little cocksuckers with an underage? Just make sure they don't kill each other, alright?"

So that's what Grady did, and it had been a long three months. He didn't even know why they needed someone on patrol here anyway. Ralph was still doing campus duty—they didn't need someone else just standing around inside this shithole. That drug deal was a once and done type of thing—those assholes were in jail now, and their friends wouldn't be coming around any time soon, not with the place on lockdown like it was. Butch had to put video cameras up around the doors and everything. Sure, the University had paid for it, but you wouldn't have known to hear the old man bitching from back.

"They're hurtin' my fuckin' business is what," he spat, throwing baskets of fries into the fryers. "Nobody wants to come in here and get themselves watched. Makes 'em uncomfortable. Fuckin' makes me uncomfortable."

Bullshit was it hurting his business. Nobody else would sell the

kids alcohol, not right on campus at least. The place was packed with the little shits every night.

At least Butch left Grady well enough alone, and Grady was happy for that. It was about the last thing he needed on a night like tonight to have the old man bitching at him. At six-thirty this morning, an hour after getting home from work, Grady had been woken up by the sound of his wife sobbing. He crawled out of bed, wanting to comfort her about whatever was wrong, but when he made it to the kitchen he found her in front of the TV, the news of some Hollywood break-up flashing on the screen. She turned, bleary-eyed, to him. “Isn’t it... isn’t it terrible?” she blubbered through a soaking tissue. “They... they were so... good together.”

Grady stared at her. “You... you have got to be kidding me. I just... you... I can’t—for fuck’s sake Joann, you don’t even know them! They’re fucking actors!” He slapped a clenched fist to his forehead. “I can’t honestly believe that this is what you are crying about. They’re celebrities! Hell, they’re hardly even real people!”

“‘Hardly even real people?’ ‘Hardly even real people?’” she shrieked. “They’re just like you and me, Albert! And if... if they can’t work out, then...”

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“...what’s to say we will?”

At that, Grady closed his eyes and sighed.

“Get a grip,” he said and turned around, back toward the bedroom.

But his wife followed him, wailing over how their marriage of seventeen years was doomed. He finally chased her out of the room after almost an hour of being bawled at, but he couldn’t fall asleep. He ended up taking her out to breakfast. Blueberry pancakes could fix anything.

Where did those assholes get off anyway? As if he didn’t have enough of his own problems to worry about, he was supposed to worry some celebrity’s problems too? Bullshit—that’s what that was. They had money enough to buy their way out of their troubles, and Grady was pretty sure that exempted him from giving a fuck. He pulled a crushed cigarette box out of his chest pocket and tapped out the last cigarette. He lit it with a match. The lack of sleep was starting to catch up with him and he knew a nicotine buzz wasn’t going to hold him through the night. He’d have to buy one of those shitty energy drinks from the 7-Eleven down the street. Four bucks for one of those things, but they’d juice you up serious.

Grady smoked his cigarette slow, leaning against the one of the shop’s large, streaked windows as he watched a battered brown Pontiac Bonneville pull to a stop outside. Its doors swung open and more kids fell out than should have been able to fit inside. They shoved each other,

laughing, as they pushed through the door to Butch's.

Four of them got in line to order while the other three, sat down at a table. One of the kids at the table, a skinny guy wearing a white t-shirt that said "Black Flag" across the chest, was yelling about something, gesturing wildly with one hand while the guy across from him, a tall lanky kid wearing a foam neck brace, grinning through the stitches ran up his one cheek, jingled change in his front pocket. Grady couldn't hear what he was saying over all the other noise in the shop, but the skinny kid was getting heated. Suddenly the change-jingler's pocketed hand shot out and slammed down on the table. Grady grabbed for the gun on his hip instinctively, but before he could even unsnap the clasp, the kid had lifted his hand from the table, revealing two shiny quarters. The skinny kid grabbed the quarters and stood.

Grady watched as the kid walked toward him, past him, to a little alcove by the door where three ancient arcade games hummed. The two left at the table—the change-jingler and a tall girl wearing tight black jeans—followed him. All three stopped in front of the first game and the short kid dropped in the quarters.

The machine blinked to life.

Four neon blobs chased a big yellow C across the screen one direction and disappeared, then reappeared, this time, the C chasing the blobs which had turned blue.

Pac-Man.

Grady remembered playing it when he was still a rookie back in the Eighties. Actually, he had been pretty damn good. He'd made it all the way to the 177th level at an arcade on the East Side one night before a fight broke out on the street and he'd had to leave the joystick standing. Grady didn't even think kids still played those old games. He surely hadn't seen anyone use those arcade games in ages. Hell, he didn't know they even worked anymore. Grady stubbed his cigarette out on the windowsill and watched as the kid took hold of the joystick and started.

He was good, the kid, real fast. He knew just where to be and how to get there. Efficient too, hardly ever wasting time running down the bare paths where the little white pellets had already been eaten from. The first level was over almost as soon as it had begun. No lives lost, even picked up the cherry. The change-jingler slapped him a hi-five and it was back to the game. The second level blew by just as fast.

And the third.

Strawberry, orange.

Fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh.

Grady watched the kid from across the room for quite a while, until his eyes started to blink shut. Around level 37, he guessed it was

time to head down to the 7-Eleven. Grady headed for the door, squeezing through a bunch of girls in short skirts and too much make-up, wobbling on their high heels. Grady shook his head, remembering how he'd have found them attractive at one point in his life. He pushed through the door and slipped out onto Fifth Avenue.

The air out here was cool and Grady zipped up his jacket as he walked. It was two blocks to the store, weaving in and out of drunk kids and homeless people, and when he got to the green and red neon sign, Grady ducked inside. He made his way to the back of the store and stopped in front of the huge refrigerator, debating what flavor drink to get.

"Adrenaline?...? 'Electricity'...?" he read. "What the fuck is all this? Where's 'Orange' and fucking 'Lemon-Lime'?" He turned and called to the woman behind the counter near the door. "Scuse me, ma'am! Do you have any of these energy drinks in Lemon-Lime?"

"Whatever's out is all we have."

Grady took another look at the drinks and turned back to her. "Well, then can you tell me what... 'Electricity' tastes like?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry, I don't drink that stuff. It's terrible for you. Eats away at your intestines."

"Yeah, it figures," Grady muttered, turning around. He opened the refrigerator door and picked out a silver bottle that said "Torque" in purple writing and featured a picture of a dragon with an engine for a body. He took it up to the counter. The woman looked at the drink warily, then up at Grady.

"This all?"

"No, give me a pack of Newports too," said Grady, pulling out his wallet.

The woman took a pack from the shelf behind her and put it down on the counter. "You're sure in a hurry, aren't you?" she said.

"Hurry for what?"

"To die."

Grady's face flushed angrily and he slammed a ten down on the counter. He snatched up the drink and the cigarettes and stormed outside. Still fuming, he unscrewed the top of the drink and took a swig. It tasted like cat piss and oranges. "My intestines, huh?" he grunted, looking the bottle over. He took another long swallow and shuddered. He started back toward Butch's, looking down to light a cigarette. As he tossed a spent match away and looked back up, he stopped dead.

Up ahead, a group of college kids were crowded around the hot dog shop's door, straining to see something, trying to push their way inside. There must have been almost twenty of them out there, pressed up against

the windows, and who knew how many were inside. Motherfuck! Away for ten fucking minutes and something had to damn well go and fucking happen. Grady starting running. “Hey! Get away from there! What the hell is going on?”

One of the kids at the window turned. “Huh?”

“I asked what the fuck is going on inside!”

The kid stumbled backward and fell on his ass. The others around the window now also turned and, seeing a policeman screaming and barreling toward them, decided it would be best to disperse quickly. They fanned out across the street, horns honking after them. The kid on the ground’s teeth were chattering. “Th-that g-guy—he just—the r-record—”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“The record! The v-video game! That kid j-just—please! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

Grady skidded to a halt. “The what?”

“P-Pac-Man,” the kid whimpered. Tears were welling up in his eyes. “He b-broke the record.”

Grady stared at the kid for a moment, then slowly walked up to the window and peered inside. He could see, up in front of the mass of people, the kid with the glasses and the black t-shirt still hammering away at the arcade game in the corner. Grady laughed out loud. “Pac-Man... oh, fuck me.” He turned to the kid on the ground. “You almost gave my ass a heart attack.”

The kid stared up at him from the empty sidewalk, unable to say anything.

Grady ignored the kid and pushed his way through Butch’s door, still laughing to himself. Inside, another thirty or so kids were crammed together in the front of the store, trying to watch the guy in the tiny alcove play the game. Grady couldn’t see him through all the people, so he found a free bit of wall opposite the alcove and leaned there, gulping down more of his energy drink and listening to the blipping of the game in the now hushed shop. He turned and saw that even Butch had come out from behind the fryers and was silently watching the kid play. Impressive.

Then, suddenly, a gasp escaped the crowd. Then a long, low groan. Grady saw the people at the edge of the crowd cringe as they turned away from the game, shaking their heads.

“Ah, fuck,” came a voice from the front of the dispersing crowd.

It was the kid that had been playing. He pushed through the people with the change-jingler and the tall girl on either side of him, receiving congratulations from the crowd as he went. The change-jingler and the girl sat down with the rest of their friends, but the kid with the glasses stopped at

an open spot in front of Grady, turned back toward the people who were left and spoke.

“Thank you all for your support,” he said dramatically, “and you are all welcome for this, a historic moment, here at Butch’s Original.” He took a bow. The crowd cheered. “With the completion of ninety-six levels,” he continued, “I have broken the afore-standing record of seventy-three—”

Grady sneered. Ninety-six? That was almost a hundred away from his best, and he was supposed to be impressed?

“—and I challenge any of you who think you can uncrown me, the new local Pac-Man champion...” the kid reached into his front pocket, and presented in his open palm two quarters. “...to have at it.”

At this, the crowd went wild. The kid forced the quarters at them and they reeled back like he was carrying some sort of horrible disease. They shouted and laughed as they fell into each other. Grady watched from his place at the wall with a tight scowl pulled across his face. The kid wasn’t even that great, but everyone was acting like he was some kind of fucking hero. Grady snorted. He could do that with a hand behind his back and an eye closed.

“Will no one rise to the occasion?” the kid shouted. “Will no one even attempt to call into question my greatness?”

The plastic bottle in Grady’s hand crackled as his grip tightened.

“Nobody, eh?” the kid said. “I see how it is. Well, it’s alright...not everyone can be as great as me.”

That was all Grady could take. He stepped forward, and tapped the kid on the shoulder. “I can.”

The kid spun around. “Wha-h-hello, officer,” he stuttered. “Is there a... problem?”

“Yeah,” said Grady. “You’re a punk-ass little prick who needs to learn a lesson.”

“I-I... uh... w-what?”

“Give me those quarters.”

“W-what?”

Grady cleared his throat. “The quarters. Give them to me. I’m going to kick your ass.”

The kid took a step back. He was sweating. The crowd behind him had gone silent again as they stood frozen, staring at Grady.

“I’m s-sorry officer, if I did anything wrong, but I-I—”

“At Pac-Man, kid. Calm down.”

The kid let out a long breath. “Ohhh... oh shit, I thought you meant you were actually going to—”

“Just give me the quarters.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

The kid held out his hand and Grady plucked the coins from it as he walked through the silent crowd to the game flickering ahead of him. The crowd turned slowly, watching every step he took. He set his drink down on the ground at his side and lit a new cigarette, breathing the smoke out slowly so it filled the space between him and the screen. He rested one hand on the joystick as the other lightly trailed down the console’s edge. The crowd behind him stared as Grady took a deep breath.

He dropped the quarters in.

And it began.

Grady jerked the joystick hard to the right, then down, turning at the second path he came to. He rounded the bottom right corner of the screen and hung a left, knowing he could make his Pac-Man clear the long bottom pathway of little white dots before the ghosts in the middle knew what hit them. Then, he cut upwards through the left corner and grabbed one of the bigger white dots—a “Power Pellet,” wasn’t it?—turning the ghosts who had just begun to wander around the maze blue and putting them on the run. He snatched one up as he ducked a “U” back through the middle of the screen and its disembodied eyes floated away. Then he doubled back, dropping another “U” beneath the first, clearing the dots from there and snagging another ghost on the way. He jammed the joystick upward then, hurrying his Pac-Man up to the top left corner and repeated the pattern from below across the top half of the screen, snapping up Power Pellets and ghosts as he went. As he wound his way through the maze, it felt less and less like he had control over the game and more like the joystick was just moving itself. He wasn’t even thinking about his next move anymore, it always just came to him. Finally, he dropped down the right side of the maze, caught the bobbing cherries and snatched the last Power Pellet, clearing the level.

The crowd murmured behind him, and Grady heard a hushed whisper, the voice of the change-jingler.

“Shit, Andrew... he just raped you. That was so... fast.”

Whether Andrew responded Grady didn’t know, the next level had begun and he was back in the game. This one flew by just as quickly as the first. So did the next. And the next. At the end of every level, the sounds of the crowd got a little louder. They couldn’t believe it—they’d just seen the record beaten moments before, and if this cop kept going like he was, the new record would be smashed too.

Eleven.

Twenty-four.

Thirty-seven.

Forty-nine.

The levels disappeared like the little white dots in front of the chomping Pac-Man.

Behind Grady, the crowd was getting bigger and it was getting louder. The twenty people left from Andrew's championship run had grown to forty, with another twenty-five or so huddled around the windows, trying to see inside. Grady could hear them, he could feel their excited energy rolling like warm waves through the shop.

Fifty-eight.

Sixty-five.

Seventy-two.

Eighty-four.

Ninety-six.

And suddenly Grady was on top of the record Andrew had set no more than an hour before. Grady had no idea of course, totally engrossed in the game, his mind humming as his hand jerked the joystick back and forth—but the crowd had been keeping track, and when the last dot of the 97th level blinked away, officially pushing Grady past Andrew's winning run, they erupted. In a chorus of cheering, they hi-fived and hugged and toasted each other, spilling beer all over themselves and Butch's floor. Even Andrew and his friends were smiling and screaming along.

Grady heard the fray behind him, and, realizing what he had just done, raised a fist to the sky with a triumphant thumb extended. The crowd lost it all over again. They loved him. A nerdy-looking college kid beating a video game record was almost to be expected—but a cop? That was just ridiculous. And yet, it was happening right in front of them.

And it wasn't stopping any time soon. Grady was still blowing through the levels like a madman, the cigarette he had lit before he started playing now hanging from his lips, forgotten and turned to one long, grey ash. He wasn't paying attention to the people around him, but he could feel them there, he could feel how much they wanted him to win. He was their hero now.

One hundred twenty-three.

One hundred forty-six.

One hundred sixty-five.

One hundred eighty-one.

Grady blew by his personal record without even noticing. He was far too deep into the game to bother himself anything as inconsequential as numbers. He'd let his fans take care of that for him. His fans. That had a nice ring to it. Maybe he'd get a little respect around here for once. He was sick and tired of being treated like an asshole just because he wore a uniform.

He'd been a kid once too. Didn't they ever think about that?

In fact, they didn't. What they were thinking about was just coming out of Andrew's mouth. "Two hundred," he whispered. "He just beat the two-hundredth level."

"Holy shit." The change-jingler shook his head. He turned to Andrew. "How many levels are there?"

The entire shop fell silent and turned to hear his answer.

"Two hundred and fifty-five," Andrew said, his eyes never leaving Grady. "The right half of level 256 gets all fucked and you can't keep going. It's a glitch in how the levels are stored. The programmers used a number system called 'hexadecimal' that can only count up to 255. At 256 it rolls over back to zero." Everyone looked around at each other, confused. Andrew continued. "It's like that Y2K thing that everyone was so worried about when we hit the year 2000. A lot of financial firms and shit like that had been saving years in double digits, like just '85' for 1985, and they thought that when their computer systems hit '00' they'd roll back to the year 1900 and all lock up and crash. Only difference is, Pac-Man actually does it."

The change-jingler put a hand to his mouth, thinking for a moment. Then he lowered his hand and spoke, slowly. "So what you're saying is that he only has fifty-five levels left until he beats the entire game?"

"Fifty-four," corrected Andrew. "He just finished number two-hundred one."

The crowd turned and saw that Grady had just started a new maze. They exploded again.

The entire corner of Fifth and Lime was turning into a giant party. Bags of chips and pretzels had appeared out of nowhere and were now being passed around the gigantic crowd as they danced to music from a car that had pulled up in front of the shop and cranked its stereo. Butch's huge fridge was empty, the forties from it now also making their way through the crowd. The change-jingler had explained to them that if the cop finished his game without losing a single life, as he was looking to do, he would only be the second person ever to pull off a perfect game, and that the guy who had already done it was a professional gamer with half a dozen other video game world records under his belt. At that, someone had run off to get their video camera, and someone else had gone to find the phone number for the Guinness Book people. It was unbelievable. This guy—this cop—was going to tie a world record? And they were going to be here when he did it? Amazing. With every level he beat, the crowd surged, a powerful tide of flailing arms and alcohol, pushing into each other, mixing their sweat and spit and spilled beer. The floor was getting slippery with it all, feet skating on

the slick surface, trying to keep their balance with every thrust of the tide.

And then there was a crash. The sound of glass shattering. A scream.

The crowd turned.

Collapsed in the beer fridge behind them, broken glass all around her, was a girl staring at her right arm and screaming. The arm, it was obvious, had gone through the huge glass sliding door of the fridge first. Glass was embedded in the pale white skin, sending streams of blood down her arm, soaking her white low-cut blouse. Up near her shoulder, the girl was caught between three large shards of glass still mounted into the frame of the door. Scared and disoriented and still screaming, the girl pulled her arm back through the ruined glass. The silent crowd could hear the skin rip down her arm as the glass dragged against it. The girl heaved a choked breath and fell forward, her soaked red arm landing with a crackling splat against the tiny bits of glass on the greasy floor.

Grady had heard the initial crash, but it hadn't registered. It had just been a noise—a loud noise, but just a noise all the same. Andrew and the change-jingler had been counting the levels out loud as they went by, and between that and the game itself, Grady's brain was already swimming.

Numbers and dots.

Dots and numbers.

But when the crowd had fallen silent, Grady could suddenly feel something was wrong. Then he heard the screaming—shrill and frantic, tearing at its vocal cords. He'd had heard screaming all night, but this was different. This was bad. He turned around just in time to see a skinny, pale girl crumple to the ground, broken glass all around her, blood pouring out of her shredded right arm.

“Oh my...”

He moved for her but before his hand could leave the joystick, Andrew leapt in his way and shoved him backwards.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

“W-Wha—? That girl!” Grady exclaimed, startled. “She's going to fucking bleed to death if someone doesn't—”

“And just what exactly the fuck are you going to—look out for that!”

Grady whipped around and yanked his Pac-Man out of the way of a ghost just in time.

“Listen,” Andrew continued, “you just focus on that game and we'll all get this taken care of, alright?” He turned to the frightened crowd behind him. “Can someone call 9-1-1, please? In case you haven't noticed, we're having kind of a fucking emergency here.”

Grady watched Butch slowly pick up his phone and punch in the numbers, then turned back to Andrew. “But... I’m a cop. I have to help her—”

“Focus, will you?” Andrew shrieked, and Grady narrowly dodged another ghost. “Seriously officer, what are you going to do? Are you a trained paramedic? Do you know the first fucking thing to do here?”

“Well... you have to... staunch the blood flow,” Grady said softly.

Andrew threw his hands in the air. “Brilliant! I would have never thought of that! Ben, take off your shirt and staunch that blood flow!” he screamed at the change-jingler, who immediately fell to the ground, pulled off his shirt and began wrapping it gingerly around the girl’s raw, red arm. She stared up at him, red-eyed, tears rolling down her face.

“You,” Andrew turned to Grady, watching that he kept his eyes on the screen, “need to keep playing that game. You just beat the two hundred forty-fifth level for fuck’s sake! You’re on the verge of tying a world record! Do you have any idea what that means? Not just for you, but for us.” He clenched his hands into fists for effect. “We’ll get to experience something that virtually no one else in the world has. Just... just fucking play. Everything is under control.” He turned to face the crowd, “Right everyone?”

They gave a half-hearted cheer.

“Come on!” he yelled.

They cheered a little louder.

Grady looked over his shoulder to the girl on the floor. Her eyes met his, full of fear and helplessness. He gave her a hopeful little smile and turned back toward the game. What was he going to do anyway? Hold her hand? Tell her it was “all going to be okay?” What the hell good would that do? Plus, an ambulance would be here any minute. Why let something like this ruin his night? The kid said everything was under control and it certainly seemed to be. He looked at Andrew and nodded, then turned back to the game, trying his best to empty his mind of everything except the little chomping yellow blob on the screen.

Two hundred forty-seven

Two hundred fifty.

Two hundred fifty-three.

The party around him had slowly but surely grown again. The music that had been turned off when the girl crashed through the beer fridge had started thumping again. The chips and pretzels and beer had started their rounds. By the time Grady got to the last level, the entire corner was jumping.

The last level.

Two hundred fifty-five.

Grady could feel their energy. He could feel their love. As he took a deep breath and began the final level, Andrew spoke to the crowd.

“This is it! The moment you’ve been waiting for!” he bellowed. “Our dear friend here is on the cusp of world recognition! The last level of Pac-Man! Number two hundred fifty-five!”

The crowd burst into screaming cheers.

“And you will all have witnessed it!” continued Andrew. “Every last one of you will have lived this dream! You’ve all made this moment magical! We couldn’t have done it without you!”

He whipped around to watch Grady finally put the last level away—but as he turned, he saw that Grady wasn’t playing. He was leaning against the game, a confused look on his face.

Andrew gulped. “You... you didn’t... please tell me you didn’t...”

“What?” Grady asked. “Lose? No, I didn’t. I won.” He moved to show him the screen. The right side was a jumble of numbers and symbols. That was it. The 256th level.

“Oh,” Andrew said. “I... missed it?”

“I guess.”

“Hmm...” Andrew scratched his head. “Well, that was rather... anti-climactic.”

“Yeah,” said Grady. “That’s what I was thinking.”

The two stared at the ground in silence for a moment. Then a small voice piped up.

“You tied a world record though. That’s something, isn’t it?”

Grady and Andrew both turned. It was the girl that had fallen through the fridge. The shirt tied around her arm was sopping wet with blood, but she smiled up at them as the change-jingler held her in his arms, stroking her hair gently.

“Anyway!” Andrew’s face lit up. “You’re famous now! Just wait ‘til we show that video tape to the guys at the Guinness Book!”

The guy with the video camera nodded vigorously and gave them a thumbs-up. The crowd gave a cheer.

Andrew laughed out loud. “You’ll be doing talk shows! You’ll be on the cover of every video game magazine in the in the fucking country! You’re a celebrity, man! Congratulations!”

Grady looked around at the crowd. They were all smiling and applauding and screaming and laughing and crying. All for him. Him. And it wouldn’t stop here—soon, everyone in the world would know his name. He would be everywhere. People would want to know everything about him. They’d care about every single thing he did. They’d want to wear the

shoes he wore and eat the cereal he ate. He picked up the energy drink he had set on the floor beside him hours ago and chugged it down. They'd be first, he decided. Whoever made this shit, they'd be the first commercial he'd do. He couldn't have made it without them. And after that, who knew? He was a celebrity now, things would come to him.

A celebrity.

A grin crept slowly across Grady's face.

He couldn't wait to tell his wife.

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