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Irreverent  
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Fish  
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Spring, 2008

The  
Irreverent

Fish



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# Ooligan Press

Ooligan Press is a student-run publishing house rooted in the rich literary culture of the Pacific Northwest. Founded in 2001 as part of Portland State University's Department of English, Ooligan is dedicated to the art and craft of publishing. Students pursuing master's degrees in book publishing staff the press in an apprenticeship program under the guidance of a core faculty of publishing professionals.

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# Contents...

<i>FICTION</i>
<i>NON-FICTION</i>
<i>POETRY</i>

Walworth's Orchard	Angel M.J.	1
Pushing Dildos	Chris Cottrell	6
Snake	Matt Walker	8
Rain	Serenity Morrison	9
Army of None	Jason Rellik	10
A Love of History	Josh Gross	15
restart.	Allison Faris	21
chicle! chicle!	Bran Bond	24
The Scorpion	Alex Behr	25
Pilar, I Confess	Carolyn Brazda	33

# Waltworth's Orchard

by Angela M.J.



Shay watched Eden paint her fingernails green. They sat on Eden's back deck. The sun boiled in the sky. Eden waved her hands to dry the polish. Sweat trickled down her face. It lingered on her collarbone, in little beads above the neckline of her green gingham shirt. Shay knew what these tiny droplets meant. This was the beginning of the annual season they treasured most, the beginning of summer. The grass dry and spiky under bare feet. Skin quietly baking. The sun weaving through trees. Open bedroom windows at night.

"Do you want to go over to the orchard?" Shay asked.

"Yeah, I just gotta wait till my nails dry." Eden stood up, still waving her hands.

It was a summer tradition to visit the fruit trees on Wesley Waltworth's property. The private acre stood at the end of a long dusty drive, a skinny road passing by the neighbor's dwellings. But it wasn't really about the trees; it was a love of place, a site full of familiar beguilement and mirth.

Wesley Waltworth loved his trees. He cared for that place with the gentle touch of a new mother. The trees, planted in perfect rows, precise lines at every angle, exempt from ugliness. Delicate trees, steady and straight matching parallel and plane. Only a dead oak stood out. Taller, thicker than its fertile companions,

it stood behind Wesley Waltworth's house and although dead, provided some shade simply with its immense height and looming, shadowy branches.

As for the fruit, after school let out for the summer, the cherries were tenderly plucked. Later in July, plums and nectarines hung heavy and full from draping branches. August's peach trees swelled in the final burning days of the year. And with that, the apples and pears of September quietly yet sweetly gestured summer drawing to a close.

High school graduation had stunned Shay. This summer felt incomparable to every other summer that had gone by. Ominous ponderings of the future and inner montages of the past sparked antagonism. Would it be her last summer with Eden like this? Eden voyaging beside her in a confident saunter. Eden finishing the last lime popsicle and laughing with a green tongue. Gripping hands together and jumping from a fallen tree into still waiting water. Pink streaked skies and fading screams. Late night meetings and bicycle rides. So many tiny memories swam among the big ones.

They began the half-mile walk down the parched road, a road with simple houses set far apart yet still settled with each other in a distant, relative way. The rural scene of their childhood marked so carefully by a redundant, permanent, atmosphere. The ardent air wrapped dry and silent around their arms and legs. While strolling a habitual road, a recognized afternoon sun hit their foreheads at a familiar angle.

"Hey you really should let me cut off your hair," Eden said as she swept short bangs out of her face. Her pixie haircut fluttered as they traveled and she squinted her eyes in Shay's direction.

"I don't know. Maybe." Shay shrugged.

"Shay, I did mine myself and I think it turned out good. Get those sweaty curls off your neck. Time for a change."

Shay sighed as she scuffed along the road. The familiar open pastures and clumps were so familiar that she detected numbness in herself. The numbness carried the power to eternally rope and trap her spirit, and she was beginning to realize this. Her family had lived next to Eden's for decades and the length of those years had recently started eroding Shay's sense of comfort. Rapidly her surroundings grew to represent a droning, repetitive existence. She saw the jaws of a monotonous monster closing around the environment where she had spent her entire life. Why now? Why these thoughts? Before, summer's surroundings marked adventure, hazards, and speculation; now, they threatened a useless deadly hum. A bare appeal so spent nothing can be scraped together. An indefinable emptiness hangs between Shay's thoughts and Eden's. Yet they walk along the same road, coming from the same place, and taking very different steps.

"Do you think Waltworth will be around? The cherries are ready, aren't they?" Shay asked as she swatted a fly from her nose.

"I don't know, maybe. I haven't seen him since we went for apples." Eden kicked a pebble with her big toe.

“Remember when we first went over there? We were eight or nine or something and we’d heard all those stories about him. It was our summer project to spy.”

Eden snickered. “It was all your idea, you were always reading those detective books.”

“Right, yeah, but you had fun too. You got to write the notes like: ‘lonely old man prunes branches from tree.’” Shay smiled.

“What, did you read them recently to refresh your memory? I make better observations now. I was only eight, then.”

“Oh yeah?” Shay chuckled and Eden elbowed her.

“If you hadn’t sneezed the dogs wouldn’t have heard us, and we probably would be spying on him right now.” Eden cracked her knuckles.

“Right...the dogs. Remember that one had a dead chicken around its neck? And we screamed cause the dog was barking and the chicken was swinging from the rope.” Shay laughed and put her hands in her back pockets.

“We screamed cause the dogs had us pinned against that barn!”

“Wasn’t he trying to train the dog to stop killing his chickens? The dog is supposed to hate the dead chicken after a few days. Is it the smell that gets them to hate it?”

“Yeah, probably. But my dad says that rope trick never works, once a dog tastes that blood, there’s no going back.” Eden cracked her knuckles again.

“Waltworth had pretty good hearing for an old man,” Shay mentioned.

“We were screaming, of course he came lumbering over. Turns out the dangerous scary old neighbor just wanted to give us lemonade.”

“But it was still an adventure—before we knew Waltworth, anyway.”

Shay wondered about Eden’s sense of reflection. Had their past summer days been a simple passage of time to her? Or was she too stubborn to admit that their ritual trips to the orchard had sentimental values to her too?

“We spent so much time just hanging out over there, all the days blend together,” Eden said.

“Do you think Waltworth will ask where we’ve been?” Shay wondered. “We didn’t see him all winter. I kind of feel bad.”

“Why? Oh, right, the lonely part. He’s lived like that *forever*; he’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, but I just feel like we used to spend more time around there when we were little.”

“He is *old*, Shay. He does his own thing. We’re just girls from down the road who come and eat fruit and climb the oak and talk. He knows we came to get away from the little kids or the other kids who were all afraid to go over there.”

“Does that make us heroes?”

“Weirdos maybe.”

They were quiet again. Shay reached for a tiny silver bell that hung from a plain cotton string around her neck. A silent bell with no ringer, it was a gift from Eden. She had accepted it on a

June night after sixth grade, the night her loyal dog had died of old age. They were in the oak tree at Waltworth's. In a rapture of adolescent pity and a fusion of closeness, Eden had removed the string from her own neck.

"Here," she had said as Shay cried into cupped hands. "It's a bell. It rings for you when you need it. Or when you want it."

As they walked, the memory made Shay miss Eden although they were walking side by side. It flooded her bones and cracked her, striking a longing for the past. She wanted to reach toward their familiar history and close her hand around it like a secret. But, like pocketing sand, she couldn't keep it from escaping. They continued in silence. Two barn swallows swooped across their path.

The orchard came into view at the end of the road, with the oak tree in the background. Shay wondered if the magic of the orchard was under the same threat as the dismal surroundings of their walk. The lack of bewitchment in the air began an intimidating simmer in her blood. Wesley Waltworth's house sat behind his rows of fruit trees and all guests had either the burden or the pleasure of walking through the orchard. The girls stepped onto the property. Shay remembered a summer day in that spot two years ago.

"No, Eden," Shay had laughed. "Put your arm up to the branch that way and then don't make that face this time." A camera snap had been followed by the clap of thunder. It was a big warm washing rain, not gloomy. Big drops turned to streams flowing down their arms and legs.

They stood at the edge of the orchard again. The air was dry now. It smelled sweet, like the fallen cherries decorating the ground. But the air was unfit. It was jagged, sharp and crafty, deep like compass scars carved in a wooden desk. Something beyond time affected their orchard. They stood unmoving. Shay felt her uneasiness. It settled in her veins, a valid awareness.

Eden picked a cherry from a low branch and tossed it in her mouth. She blew the pit in Shay's direction and laughed.

"Don't you want some cherries?" Eden asked.

Shay picked a cherry and crushed it between her teeth. Skin broke and the fruit fell open around its pit. *Why did it taste so sour?* She winced.

"Good, aren't they?" Eden raised her eyebrows and went for more cherries. "I'm glad we came here, tastes like old times."

"Yeah, not bad."

They walked under the trees, Shay's perceptions multiplying. Why did Eden perceive the orchard as normal? Something had changed. Was it the place or her mind?

"Ol' Waltworth will probably be in his rocker on the porch, just waiting for us to show. Remember how sweet he made the iced tea? I hope he's got sandwiches or something," Eden chattered.

Shay put her arm up and brushed each passing branch with her hand, never gripping, only caressing. Eden squinted in her direction.

"Don't you want him to have sandwiches for us?"

"I guess," Shay answered. "But I'm not that hungry."

"I am," Eden began, her mouth full of cherries and pits. "Oh! Remember that time we went hunting for buried treasure behind the house out there? Then we got the idea to plant the time capsule? Do you think it's still there? I wonder if it is. We didn't really bury it, only sort of shoved it behind the ivy. It's a shoebox, isn't it?"

"Yeah, a shoebox."

"Shay, what's the deal? It was your idea to come out here today, so why don't you want to have any fun?" Eden stopped and put her hand on her hip. She tied the tails of her blouse into a knot above her belly button.

"I'm fine; I'm just not hungry."

"Ok, fine. Whatever you say. I just thought we could go looking for that capsule."

"Sure. Let's go."

They continued through the fruit trees and came to the house. Waltworth was not in his rocker. There were no sandwiches. The front door was closed. Was he home?

"Well, no Waltworth here. Maybe he's around back." Eden headed around the side of the house and stopped. Shay followed.

"Wait, I think this is where the capsule is stashed," Eden said in excitement, tearing ivy back from the side of the house. While she worked, Shay went around to the back porch. A box rested on the top step. It was a pastry box from the bakery in town.

She picked it up and lifted the top. A dozen doughnuts were inside with a note that read, "Sheriff, help yourself." The doughnuts were stale, and dozens of ants swarmed in their sugar. Shay stood dumbfounded, staring at the box and the note. Vaguely, through what seemed like an audio filter, she heard Eden come from around the side of the house. Placing the doughnuts back on the stoop, Shay turned to face her friend.

The shoebox had dropped to Eden's feet, spilling aged photos and news clippings around her toes. She stood ashen-faced, staring at the oak tree. In slow motion, Shay turned to discover what her friend had seen.

From the dead oak tree's strongest branch hung Wesley Waltworth. Flies swarmed his body. A thick rope collared his neck and an equally strong bond met the branch. His last outfit, a white t-shirt and coveralls, was soaked with the fluid of his decomposing mass. His face was puffy and dark. His swollen body hung bloated.

Eden and Shay stood mute and immobile, stiff and stagnant. Like a blackout, the noiseless air swallowed all notions of time and space. Then as if hitting cold water from a great height they awoke stunned and sputtering. Without a word they turned and fled. They ran as though they were being chased. Tearing through the soft grass, racing off the property away from the orchard.

# Pushing Dildos

by Chris Cottrell



What you aren't told in training is that you'll be the hit of every party, but you won't get laid. You will be filled with the kind of sordid tales that entertain, but only from a distance. You will discover at five in the morning that you are living in a world that has been stereotyped for decades, but really exists somewhere nobody thinks about, not even peripherally, until someone asks you what you do.

So you tell people about that time the eye-patch guy came in when it seemed like there wasn't another human being in the city and asked about animals and underage girls. They'll want you spurting like a computer in the arcade when you open with Eye-patch. Eye-patch said he wasn't looking for himself. He had a brother waiting in the van who wanted to watch animals or little girls—animals with little girls if he could find it. True, there was some kind of cargo van parked by the back door, engine running, lights on, and a shadowy figure in the driver's seat. But you want the story to sound funny, even though you thought, with chilling certainty, that you were eye-to-eye with a serial killer in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, so maybe you leave that bit out.

The guy was a stereotype, which is the attraction. Nobody is riveted by stories about working class guys picking up an

Andrew Blake video, herbal supplements, and a French tickler in the hope of seducing the wife. They don't want to hear about the couples who come in by the truckload between the hours of ten and one for tingling massage oil and tantric position books. They want to hear about Eye-patch the same way they want to hear about black criminals, dirty kitchens, or inept foreigners.

You'll tell them about Eye-patch, leaving out the serial killer bit and the part about keeping your hand on a weapon the whole time...or not, depending. Your response to the question about animals and kiddie porn will seem cooler than it did in your head at the time. How you looked him in his one good eye, ignoring the sweat dripping off his lip and the twitchy hands of the thoroughly gacked, and just said, "No, man, that's illegal," in your driest Peter Weller. How you saw his brain doing cartwheels at the word "illegal" as he tried to figure out whether or not you'd narc him out for his taste in smut.

If the crowd is right, you can say something about the guy who went to every store in the city so he could rent the maximum. He's a little guy with glasses and weird cologne. The punch line is that one of his arms is this muscular, wiry thing hanging off the side of his torso and the other—pasty, flabby, scrawny.

Maybe surprise them with the woman who bought a case of whippits and a new Pearlescence vibrator and took them into a booth every day before work. Tell them how she'd throw enough money into the machine for half an hour, how you'd hear the vibrator going, the sound of the cracker firing into a balloon over

and over and, finally, she would scream "fuck" a few times, then leave as if from a café. But you leave out the bit about how you, like everybody else in the store, tried to hang out as close as possible to the room, sporting a chub and listening for any additional sounds you might use to texture the vision in your head. A woman in the store is a surprise, because it's not a stereotype. The woman going into a booth to jerk off is a fucking revelation.

But what's the revelation?

You spray Airlift and Magnum degreaser into the rooms at about 5:30 in the morning and pull the contents of the trashcans out with tongs. Then you hit each room with a mop loaded with enough bleach to kill the ocean. If you find anything lying around like a homemade pocket pussy or a zucchini with a condom on it, you take a picture with the Polaroid for the other clerks and tell them which room it was in (always 12 or 13). If anyone pops in while you're doing this, they'll say something sympathetic not knowing that this isn't the shittiest job you've had. You've done nothing but rent videos or make change for ten hours a day, four days a week, two months straight—which isn't the story you tell at parties when someone asks you what you do.

Eventually you just work at a video store, a little mom-and-pop place in the middle of nowhere that nobody's ever heard of, with regular movies and no dildos. You don't tell the truth. You don't say, "I am a porn clerk." The truth doesn't get you laid.

# Snake

by Matt Walker

in my dream of six  
you glide  
through the garden  
a sine wave  
rustle  
snapping beans  
like the foot of God  
and mamma's voice  
a megaphone  
*stay back*

took years  
to shake the sound  
from my ears  
the name of the beast  
my first syllable  
for fear  
though I never  
saw a scale  
or tongue fork  
I draw a fat black swirl in memory  
and coil it at my feet

# Rain

by Serenity Morrison

Waiting for water:  
the mosaic clay of reclaimed parking spots,  
the city's unfurnished living room.  
In winter every tile crevice preserves dry space for ice.

The coming night exhales the sputter and buff of streetlamps.  
One-way commuters whistle with traffic helicopters,  
their collective echo dammed in by bookend office buildings.

Umbrella Man hails his perpetual taxi, his  
shirt-cuff trenches puddling dust particles.

Light rail lines spill over the horizon,  
fishtail, and slip past surface tension into the river.  
They reconnect with hydrated memories:

an afternoon drizzle in January, barely more than mist;  
humid bus rides packed with fogged spectacles,  
sweaty wool, cardigans, and steaming scarves.

# Army of None

by Jason Rellik



At age twenty-six, Matt Ralston joins the Navy.

This makes him different from the other eighty-five recruits in his division. Sure, some might be married, like Matt. Young marriages are pretty common. Some might have real-world experience. The Navy allows recruits as young as seventeen to join, with parental consent. And like Matt, some might have been born in Hawaii. But Matt has eight or ten years of experience on most of his fellow recruits. His real-life experiences will help him through the grueling demands of Naval basic training. After nine weeks he will graduate and go on to secondary school. He is training to be a Fire Control Electronic Technician, maintaining and operating computer and weapons systems. In a year that training will finish and Matt can begin his Naval career on a ship, sailing to exotic ports-of-call.

Except none of that happens. Instead, Matt leaves the Navy. He is twenty-six.

## HOW HE JOINED THE NAVY

It is spring of 2006 and Matt has just lost his seventy-ninth job.

Working for his father-in-law, no less, cleaning out car dealership offices during the graveyard shift. The job was initially his wife Diedra's, although since she is already working full-

time at the local Skippers, Matt offered to pick up the slack a few days a week.

Then he screws up. You get to the dealership, call a number and tell the recorded voice that you entered the building at such-and-such a time, you empty a few wastebaskets, vacuum a few carpets, and get out. Done by two a.m. Simple. There is almost no supervision, so Matt frequently tells the prerecorded voice that he has entered the building at nine at night—even if it is eleven and he’s still drinking at his apartment with me. Then one night he does the job, but leaves the keys dangling in the lock of a dealership. No general manager wants to come to work in the morning only to find a set of keys dangling from the lock. His father-in-law lets him go.

“They needed a scapegoat,” Matt tells me. But no matter what the reason, the Ralstons are back down to living on a single income. Everett, Washington might not have the same cost-of-living issues as Seattle, but Matt can’t ignore the fact that Diedra’s salary can’t support them for very long. There are bills to pay. Cigarettes to buy. DVD’s to rescue from the pawnshop down the hill from their apartment.

Up until this point Matt has not had a career. He’s worked retail, done bartending, been a customer-service rep for a few different call centers. Nothing lasts. But the Navy will change all that. He’ll have a contract. The GI Bill will pay for his college education, allowing him to finish up that AA degree he abandoned in 2003. He’ll earn at-sea pay while he’s assigned to a boat. The

housing allowance is \$1500 a month—three times their actual rent. There is talk of moving Diedra out to Illinois to live with Matt while he’s training for his specialty. The housing allowance they would get in Illinois wouldn’t go as far as it would in Everett, but they would be together.

It’s a question of the BBD—the Bigger, Better Deal. The Navy offers security, opportunities for advancement, health care benefits. When you’ve spent most your life working low-wage McJobs, free health care starts to look like the Holy Grail.

But I warn him that joining the Navy will be the hardest thing he’s ever done. His contract states he would be on active duty for four years, and inactive reserve for an additional four. I warn him about the stop-loss program, that even though he thought he would only be in the military for four years he was really going to be in for the full eight. There is after all, a war going on. He brushed me off.

#### A CHANGED MAN

I follow Matt into the recruiting office the day he has to drop off some last minute paperwork. This is mid-June, the last time I see him before he ships out. I walk in the door first, not realizing that Matt isn’t following me in. Instead he stands ramrod-straight at the door, salutes, turns to the flag on his right, salutes again, and says in a flat monotone: “Seaman Ralston requesting permission to come aboard.”

One of the recruiters, a large man with a cue ball haircut and a firm grip, grants him permission. Once Matt enters the office, I notice the sign posted next to the door. Apparently all recruits are supposed to enter this way.

Matt is a different person that last night. He quit drinking. This is no easy feat. Before he joined the Navy, Matt required a glass of Chardonnay to wake up in the morning. He went through a magnum a day until money started getting tight, then he switched to boxed wine. Matt gave up drinking in order to get himself into better shape for the Navy. Such was his level of dedication. Cigarettes are another matter. He had cut down but not quit altogether. Who was I to judge? Couldn't I wish him well? See he had given up drinking?

After drilling it into his head over and over again that this would be the toughest thing he had ever done in his life, but would reward him greatly if he stuck with it, I drive back to Portland, thinking that was probably the last I had seen of my friend of ten years for awhile.

Imagine my surprise. When I call his cell phone three weeks later, he's already out.

#### THE CALL

Since the last round of rationing, Diedra had been forced to give up her cell phone plan. The two of them are now sharing a phone. I knew that Matt wouldn't have taken his cell phone with him to Basic, at Boot Camp you're not even allowed to keep

your civilian clothes, so I had no way to get in touch with him. I figured I'd call Diedra, who could give me an address for Matt. Letter-writing has fallen out of fashion, to be sure, but a letter from a friend might have helped him.

Except that he answered the phone. It took me awhile to recover from that shock.

He's been discharged. That's a bit vague, I think. Discharged like our mutual friend Chris, who had been discharged from the Army for treating it like a never-ending frat party? No, no, no, he had been medically discharged. Oh, so it was like our friend Jim, who had his arm dislodged from its socket during Army Boot Camp. No, no, no, he had been given a psychiatric evaluation and deemed "unfit for duty."

Ah. Now there's the nut.

#### AT BOOT CAMP

Matt tells horror stories of abuse, both physical and verbal, from his Recruit Division Commander (RDC). Picture eighty-five recruits doing eight-counts (a mixture of jumping jacks, suit-ups, squats and thrusts) in the barracks until the room is so humid with sweat and body odor that it's raining indoors. The verbal abuse was more personal: Matt is called a liar, a failure, good for nothing, though not in so many words. Insults are made about his family, his mother, his father, his wife. Matt doesn't advertise the fact, but word gets out that his father had an illustrious career with the Navy. Matt's

ambitions are then questioned, his shortcomings called into account.

“I couldn’t take it anymore,” Matt says. “I needed to vent.” He can’t talk to a doctor—recruits aren’t allowed to go anywhere on base by themselves, besides, anything he says to a doctor would get back to his RDC. Likewise, he can’t talk to his fellow recruits. Recruits are prohibited from talking to one another while in line or out in training. His feet are blistered and bloody, but he isn’t allowed time off to heal. Sometimes the only recourse from the strain is to cry himself to sleep. “And I wasn’t the only one doing it,” Matt says. “There were a lot of guys doing it—big guys.”

But Matt can talk to the base chaplain.

One morning, after Matt is blamed for misplacing some paperwork, Matt tells his RDC that he has to go see the chaplain for “a Catholic matter.” Once there, Matt lets it all out. He says the workload is overwhelming, that he is being subjected to abuse, sleep-deprivation, pain of all kinds. He is allowed to wear his tennis shoes to training, along with three other members of his unit, due to the aforementioned bloody blisters, but his RDC has singled him out. “I think my RDC was racist,” Matt tells me matter-of-factly. “He was a big black guy and I was the little white recruit. I think he got off on the power trip or something.”

So we get an improvised chain of command. The base chaplain refers Matt to the Recruit Evaluation Unit (REU). He is

evaluated by a medic at the REU. The medic passes Matt up to a civilian psychologist. The psychologist gives him some tests and sends Matt back to his barracks, telling him they will schedule him another appointment once his results came back. Matt shipped out for basic training on June 21. The medical evaluations take place on Wednesday, June 28. He has been in Basic for a week.

#### THE WEEKEND

Matt can’t wait for the results. Relations between him and his RDC have broken down. “I was in fight or flight mode,” he says. “I was ready to deck my RDC, but I didn’t want to spend ten years of my life in the brig thanks to him.”

Sunday, July 2. Matt requests to see the base chaplain again. Request denied, Matt has more training to do.

Matt finally persuades his RDC to allow him back to the REU. The journey from the training grounds to the REU is not long, and both Matt and the RDC are double-timing it. Still, the barrage of abuse continues. “He told me that he wouldn’t let me go—that I would be in basic training with him for my entire career. And I believed him.” Not wanting to think about what would happen if he went back to his barracks, Matt asks to be put up at the VA hospital overnight.

Overnight turns into three days—in the psych ward. The psychiatric tests label him “unfit for duty.” He will be discharged. His medical benefits will be active for six months after his exit

date and he will receive all pay owed to him for the short time he was in the Navy.

Then he is put on a Greyhound and given three and a half days to figure out how he's going to tell his wife about this.

#### AFTER

"I wouldn't mind a nine-to-five desk job, doing IT for some company and making lots of money," Matt tells me. "But first I have to get my job history up."

He wasn't actively looking to get out of the Navy. But the military doesn't molly-coddle soldiers. Since he was only in the military for a week, it wasn't really that much of a loss for the Navy to discharge him as opposed to say, giving him psychiatric counseling. That might not have worked.

He is trying to change. For his wife, who sticks with him through all his job turmoil. And he's trying to change for himself. The Navy did help him quit drinking. He lost some weight, and him and Diedra paid the rent forward several months. They have an Internet connection now.

And Matt has a new job. Never one to let a job loss discourage him, Matt "took a week off" and immediately got a job at Taco Bell. The pay isn't great, but he's willing to put up with that in order to improve his job history. He wants to hold out with Taco Bell for at least six months. "I'm using the Navy as a fresh start," he says. "I want people to look at my resume and say, 'well he got out of the Navy but he immediately got a job

and held on to it.'" In July, after I learned about Matt's new job, I bet his wife five dollars it wouldn't last through Thanksgiving. She took the bet.

I lost.

# A Love of History

by Josh Gross



Rachel was a skinny girl. But not just plain skinny; the kind of skinny that the other girls at college described as disgusting, anorexic, or walking death, though she was none of those. She ate when she was hungry, and oftentimes ate more than her share. Still, her legs were two ice picks with softballs for kneecaps. Her skin was a fleshy shrink-wrap factory sealing her skeleton from the elements. She felt like a flamingo when she went wading in the summertime, and had dropped out of anatomy class due to the heckling she'd faced about the teacher planning to use her as a visual aid. Not because it bothered her anymore, but simply because it was disrupting the class. It wasn't her fault. She was just a skinny girl, and no manner or amount of junk food seemed to change that. So she endured, going from class to class, ignoring the condemning down-the-nose looks from hundred-and-fifteen-pound girls on diets. She closed her ears to the activists clucking their disapproval of her need to conform to the image perpetuated by fashion magazines, and to the concerned voices who pushed her to seek counseling for her illness. They might as well have advocated for people with asthma or congenital heart defects to seek their answers in Prozac. What others thought didn't matter to Rachel anymore, as her one and only success with weight gain had been a significant thickening of the

skin over the last several years, which had brought her to a grand total of eighty-five pounds.

Dan on the other hand did not have the same problem. He was a slightly pudgy boy with hair like an electrical storm and a complexion like the glaze on a donut. He blended in with the furniture, camouflaged by banality, disregarded rather than reviled. Like Rachel, his skin had also grown thick, as had the calluses on his ears, and the stacks of history books he took home from the library each Saturday night. His knowledge of World War Two was as deep as his classmates' desires not to hear about it.

"Quit bumming me out," his brother said to him over dinner one Thanksgiving. "That shit is depressing." Considering the vigor with which Dan discussed his analysis of American neutrality prior to the Pearl Harbor bombing, he was at a loss to understand his brother's sentiments. History cut out all of the mundanity of day-to-day life, and let one experience only the pertinent events, like the highlights after a sporting event, or the way films skipped over parts of the story where characters did things like going to the bathroom, washing dishes, or reloading firearms. Dan often wished he could live in a history book rather than experience the show firsthand with all the commercials and station identifications uncut.

That was why seeing Rachel walking between buildings startled him so much: she was the first thing in real life that he could recall having any interest in whatsoever.

The visible joint motion of her hips moving side-to-side as she walked enthralled him, as did the horizontal space between her thighs, which were thin cylinders jutting straight down from her pelvis. The bend of her knees was erotically familiar. Her shoulder blade jutted out from her shirt, a razor's edge threatening to rend the material in two like a prehensile wing. Her breasts were practically only a rumor, and you could have juiced an orange on her cheekbones. He was smitten, a rush of primal animalistic memory rose with his blood pressure. Dan couldn't explain it. He only knew that he liked her, that he wanted to approach her and profess his sudden and obscene desires to her with phrases plagiarized from the most lurid of publications. He closed his eyes and saw her naked body laid out on the ground, beckoning him, a dark triangle of grainy coloration nesting delicately on her thin frame, a spacer between tibias.

He thought it was crazy—that it would never work. He charged after her anyway, almost losing one of his books in his excitement to catch up to her, but recovering it with a move that would have made his football-loving family proud of him for a change.

Dan tapped Rachel on the shoulder awkwardly, his surprised lungs nearly exploding a blast of air on the back of her neck as he did so. She stopped and turned around, receiving him with the practiced skepticism of the butt of the joke.

"Yes?" she said.

Dan huffed in shock, not actually having planned a next step, or even the first one for that matter.

“Um ... I’m Dan,” he said extending his hand, this time returning shame to his family by dropping his copy of *Selected Letters of Winston Churchill*. Dan dropped to one knee quickly to recover his tome. He would need something to hide in later.

“Is there something I can help you with Dan?” Rachel said impatiently.

“No, not really, well yes, I mean...” Rachel recognized the classic lack of ability to follow through on some cruel joke he’d been put up to by a group of snickering meatheads hidden somewhere nearby.

“Well let me save you the trouble then. My finger doesn’t taste like chicken.”

“Excuse me?” Dan said, genuinely perplexed.

“Nor am I an albino Ethiopian,” she continued. “Or suffering from a gypsy curse, or working in a cornfield to pay my way through school. So if you’re done now, I’m going to be late for class.”

“Actually,” Dan said pathetically. “I was just wondering if you’d like to go out sometime...”

“Let me guess; for dinner?” Rachel snarled.

Dan looked at the ground and mumbled a barely audible affirmation of Rachel’s accusation. He continued to look at the ground as she whirled around and stomped down the hall, her bulk increased considerably by the fire shooting from her eyes. It was one thing to mutter things as she passed by, but addressing her directly was so childish and invasive, almost like missionary

cruelty. College was supposed to be different, but Rachel’s experience was that the clucking was the same no matter the henhouse.

Rachel caught another glimpse of Dan, as she rounded the corner to an adjoining hallway. He stood exactly where she’d left him, the waves of hurried students flowing around him like water smoothly circumventing an obstacle in the creek bed as if it isn’t really there, but in reality gradually wearing it down until it is absorbed into the stream. He looked from side to side dejectedly, trying to find an opening into the current. There were no high-fives, or jeering faces of compatriots, only the crestfallen features of Dan, his one interest in the present now history. Rachel’s realization that she’d met his sincerity with the same venom generally sent her way only caused her to miss one beat before she continued on to class. But it was the first beat she’d ever missed contemplating apology—one for the history books.

Dan trudged home and decided he’d been right all along. History was more accepting than the present. And no matter how behind the times he might be, he’d always be ahead of history. Simply having heard of the Copernican system put him ahead of Plato, and there were few who’d been able to pull the wool over *his* eyes. It was an accomplishment to herald in all corners of his private dorm room. And it deserved a celebration marking his return to his homeland—perhaps his favorite documentary. Dan put his love-worn copy of *Night and Fog* into the VCR, and hit play.

He settled back onto his cot to watch the delicate tracking shots between the abandoned buildings of Auschwitz, occasionally reciting the narration along with the video in perfect time, despite it being in French. He whispered grandly, imagining that he was giving a lecture on the subject while simultaneously terrified that his neighbor would once again take issue with his rehearsal. "Who needs girls when I have you," he said to the television. Its tube glowed warmly in response. Dan smiled to himself, content to be back into his world. And then he saw Rachel.

Well, not Rachel specifically, but his image of her: A grainy black and white body on the ground, pale with death and gaunt from months of starvation. He recognized the tantalizing joint motion of her hips, and saw her arm flop over limply, beckoning to him as a bulldozer rolled her into a mass grave full of matted grays, the only coloration belonging to grainy dark triangles of pubic hair.

Dan's first impulse was to run to the bathroom and vomit, punishment for his choice in pornography, but he stayed sitting where he was. Dan didn't feel sick at all. Instead, he turned off the tape and sat in the dark, watching people pass through the courtyard below his window for several hours, until his eyes could no longer stand the strain of forcing off sleep and he passed out sitting up. By sheer force of will alone, Dan didn't dream.

Rachel, on the other hand, did dream. She dreamt of all of the cruel things people had said to her over the years, all of the jokes they'd played, and how she'd tried to rise above it and remain

detached, letting her spirit float above her body to watch things play out rather than take the beating personally. They crowded in around her, a thick smog of disapproving glares and half-witted commentary. They formed a circle to block Rachel's escape to the world beyond their opinions. And disapprovingly watching the jeering crowds poke and prod at her delicate frame from the wings was Dan, a solitary face of pained sincerity. He looked like he wanted to say something to Rachel, but the crowd was too thick for him to break through, so he was forced to wait on the sidelines for the world to finish disapproving of the way Rachel was born. Then he looked up, and saw her floating above the fray.

"You're beautiful," he said sadly.

"I know," Rachel whimpered. "But no one's ever seen it before."

Dan looked down at his shoes. The color began draining from his face until he was just an ashen shadow steadily growing dimmer, being absorbed into the abyss beyond the crowd. Rachel shrieked, and found herself awake, still surrounded by judgment, but spread out over the whole country instead of in a steadily tightening noose.

She got out of bed, and walked to the window of her dorm room. Rachel looked across the courtyard and thought that she could just barely make out the dim image of someone sitting in a window looking right back. She stayed at the window for an hour, thinking about her history, and about her future, about how she had always wanted a boy to fumble at his books over

her, and how pitifully she'd faced that moment when it came. She went to sleep knowing that the next day would be a difficult one, but that it held the promise of opportunity.

Rachel had never visited the cafeteria before. Her impression of lunchrooms from high school was that they were noisy affairs, rife with giggles and scrutiny of the contents of her tray. She much preferred to take her lunch from a food cart, then find a quiet spot beneath a tree, or sit in the darkened back rows of the auditorium where she could hear the orchestra rehearsing from the comfort of obscurity. She was there today because she was looking for Dan, whose path she'd never crossed before yesterday. A place that most students other than her visited daily seemed the sensible place to look.

She scanned the area, and thought that while it may not have been the hotbed of pointing fingers and raised eyebrows she remembered, it was certainly dreary. There was no music or foliage, just rows of identical molded plastic booths and the dull hum of air conditioners and fluorescent lights. Blending right in was Dan.

He was sitting at a table in the back corner, hunched over both a tray and a thick hard-backed book. There was a small dribble of red sauce unnoticed on his shirt. As she approached him, Rachel couldn't help but look at his segmented tray and observe the remnants of a slice of pizza. Dan's attention was so focused on the book, that he didn't notice Rachel until she spoke.

"Hello," she said cautiously.

"Oh, hi," Dan replied, looking up.

"I'm Rachel," she said.

"Hi..." Dan was truly nervous now. One yesterday was enough for Dan's lifetime.

"What are you reading?"

"Um, it's about, well, you know when the concentration camps were liberated in Germany?"

Rachel nodded and said, "Yes," as Dan gazed at her.

"Well it's a book about the Jews trying to find their families afterwards," he continued. "When they were all scattered and a lot of them had changed their names and were pretending not to be Jews because they were still scared."

"Some of my family died in Auschwitz actually."

"I'm sorry." Dan noticed the polished silver star of David that hung around her neck for the first time. He suddenly felt very sick, and knew it wasn't because of the pizza.

"It's all right. I never knew them obviously. But my grandfather talks about it sometimes. He says that the Americans should have bombed the gas chambers or the rail lines leading to the camps if they really cared about saving anyone."

Dan's nervousness faded and he had to control a sudden burst of excitement, as this was the exact same thing he'd been trying to explain at family functions for the last year.

"They, I mean we, didn't, you know," he babbled. "The whole world knew about what was happening to the Jews in Europe,

but we only got involved in the war after Pearl Harbor was attacked. It was self-interest, not humanitarianism.”

Rachel looked at him, trying to pump her moxie reserves into active duty.

“So, I came to tell you that I’m sorry about the way I treated you yesterday.”

“It’s okay,” Dan said, looking back down and starting to feel ill again.

“No. It’s not. I just...” Rachel stopped, trying hard to pull out something sincere to match Dan’s attempt the day before. “I’m just used to expecting people to treat me a certain way because of my weight, and I was wrong to do that to you.”

“I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

“No, Dan, you should have. I’m glad you did, and to step out on a limb, if you’d still like to, I’d very much like to go out with you sometime.” The words were pained liberation for Rachel, the release of a near-lifetime of normal feelings that had been locked away behind layers of hyperbole for their own protection, now free.

Dan didn’t answer. He just focused on Rachel’s pendant, staring at it for what felt like an eternity, thinking about what it meant to him and to her, thinking about its overreaching symbolism to the entire world, how something as elemental as metal had forged complex divisions across the whole world, how something so shiny had transmuted to the grainy black and white of historical record, like reverse alchemy. There was

a sour acrid heat bubbling in his stomach, a cold understanding of what had drawn him to Rachel in the first place. It dared him to open his mouth and give it a doorway to freedom, to drench her tiny frame in morally sound remnants of pizza, to bathe her in judgment against himself. He had to say something soon or else he was sure his insides would be crushed to powder from the weight of his dilemma. Dan mentally recited the narration of *Night and Fog* over and over again as his eyes slowly traveled up her collarbones and the fragile lines of her neck all the way up to her eyes.

“Yes,” he said softly. “That would be nice.”

Rachel smiled, her eyes sparkling like her necklace.

“Let me give you my number,” she said and pulled a pen out of her pocket. “Do you have anything to write on?”

Dan looked around in a panic and found nothing. His napkin was soiled and torn from the pizza that had never reached his mouth.

“No,” he said.

“It’s okay,” Rachel said and grabbed his arm.

She spoke her phone number out loud as she wrote it on the inside of his forearm, then walked away jubilantly. Dan’s stomach churned rapturously as he watched Rachel’s tiny hips happily wagging back and forth as she melted indistinguishably into the blur of other bodies crowding the hallway.

# restart.

by Allison Faris

i make no promises. i hold no weight  
in these words i wear like prized  
reminders of those good times,  
when you could afford to  
blow your paycheck on  
a pair of soft and black kidskin gloves  
or that ancient suit jacket you  
wore so well.

these mementos i will hold close to me  
long after you are gone.  
i will go into that forgotten closet,  
so needing of a good scrub,  
and i will touch the creamy, tanned hides—  
each eagerly awaiting the insertion of five presumptuous fingers—  
and the musty, green-and-yellow tweed  
that you bore with those shoulders  
like atlas.

i will hold these old relics in my hands,  
now wet with sweat and with memory of you,  
and i will inhale brusquely,  
rubbing the fabric between my fingers  
while i take in the reminder of a scent  
that i can no longer attribute to you,  
but that i want to, desperately.

i will forget your absence like the terrible ending  
to a book otherwise remarkable.  
i will regard the jacket you wore so proudly  
and elegantly, like a dandy, and  
recall why you put it away  
so many years ago:

the incriminating hole  
at the seam of the left armpit,  
the coffee stains surreptitiously perched on each lapel  
and the fraying silk liner  
that you bought that way  
but that degraded after so many brilliant days  
of your shine in its cloth embrace.

a spool of thread unraveling  
is what it began to resemble,  
only less ordered, less understandable.  
now, the moths have taken to it  
for they have a clear affinity with textiles,  
and i can't blame them for wanting to consume a part of you.

my paltry souvenirs,  
the ones i've guarded like a prize or a child  
and examine from time to time,  
are all i have.  
they are those i keep though they're worthless,  
those i touch though they're empty,  
those which allow me to remember.

i imagine how much money i could get for the both of them,  
for though you buried them here,  
while considering that vast expanse of your wardrobe  
unattached to a regrettable past,  
anyone would remark on the condition,  
the minimal, inexpensive alterations needed  
to make them wearable,  
desired,  
salvageable.

these things you discarded  
like a plastic wrapper,  
a soiled napkin,  
these things that once meant  
that continue to mean  
so much,  
the worth of which you never acknowledged.

i stand here while the decaying scent of death and forget  
greet and surround me like so much earth,  
carefully tuck the gloves back into their faded shoebox,  
the brand of which i can no longer read,  
place the coat back on its flimsy wire hanger  
loudly advertising the local korean dry cleaner  
and let it lose itself in an infinity of garments.

i reach to pull the light-string as a reflex,  
forgetting too late the bulb has long-since blown out  
and that i must replace it.  
i walk through the frame,  
pausing briefly to  
remember the man you were  
and the woman i am.  
closing the door,  
i do not cry.

# chicle! chicle!

by Bran Bond



Humidity replaces golden sunshine in the last hours of the day after Christmas. The air is thick with deep-frying, cigars smoking, and exhaust coughing. Big rusty American cars from the forties and fifties compete for space with horses and drays. Chopped-up cars hulk here and there as spare parts are rare; no abandoned cars here. Tired old men with thin cigars pursed in their lips stoop forward with straw fedoras pushed up high. They wear threadbare shirts and shuffle in worn leather shoes, leading sleepy horses around and out of the open plaza—as if an apron—before the Biblioteca Nacional. Emerging from cracks in the pavement, little weeds and flowers reach for sunlight.

A new car, a rental, pulls into the center of the plaza and stops. Children come running from all around with big bright smiles and clear dark eyes. Their gangly arms and legs all reach into the air, shouting and calling, trying to outdo one another, “chicle! chicle!” Girls wheel around, making their clean, pressed dresses of many colors twirl. And boys—clean boys, in solid and striped tees, race up to the car, all crying, “chicle! chicle!”

A window rolls down. A hand emerges and passes a candy bar to a boy whose eyes widen as he reaches for it, but as he takes the prized confection, the candy is withdrawn and broken in two. The candy bar re-emerges in halves with the plea, “Socialismo, socialismo, share with your brother!”

The car circles and leaves. The children linger, all laughing and cajoling, caught up in the dissipating cacophony of voices calling, cars honking, and hooves clopping, as the sky darkens over the motley-colored, decaying, and narrow side streets of Havana.

# The Scorpion

by Alex Behr



At a plastic table outside the motel, Barb Grantham dotted her nails with yellow polish. She tried to redo the daisies painted by the Vietnamese lady at the salon down the highway. The polish got chipped last night, but she didn't want to think about it. On her thumb, the yellow dot blurred into the white like a broken egg. Barb imagined her mother saying, "Make sure your cuticles are trimmed and your nails look pretty, so your boyfriend knows you care." She doused a cotton ball in nail polish remover and wiped off the mess. The odor stung like a line of speed.

Barb fanned herself with a local casino brochure. Indian gambling was about the only thing happening on this side of Clear Lake, California, besides hot springs and pot farms on government land. Ants scrambled over the dirt and weeds by Barb's feet, and the heat seared her toes. Normally she'd be inside the office, where she could turn on the AC, but it was too depressing today. She adjusted her butt in the plastic chair. A rubber ball lay in the tough grass. She should put it in the lost-and-found box, but the kid who owned it, a girl with a runny nose and a Malibu Beach Bum T-shirt, was long gone.

A rusty Ford Falcon eased into the parking lot from the highway access road. Even its turn signal blinked at half-speed. It hailed from the '60s—a two-door sedan with dog-dish hubcaps.

She'd seen them as a kid. She liked the Falcon's bull's-eye tail-lights; she pretended they winked at her. Caked-on bugs obscured the license plate, and the chrome bumper sagged.

The Falcon parked next to Barb's table. Barb took a sip of water and wiped her mouth. She pulled a scab from the underside of her wrist. It exposed raw skin that pulsed in the heat.

The driver rolled down the window and smiled. His red tongue poked out from between his teeth, which were stained tobacco-brown.

Barb squinted behind her sunglasses. The guy could be in his late thirties, probably Jake's age. His lank blond hair hung behind his ears. He picked a flake of tobacco off his tongue and flicked it out the window, as if he were dismissing her. But she hadn't done anything. Not to him. To Jake, sure, but it wasn't her fault. She stood up and adjusted her terry-cloth shorts. She checked her legs. Diamond grooves from the chair pinkened the backs of her plump thighs. On one leg, the lines crosshatched over a green and purple bruise.

"Hey, there," she said. "Need a room?"

"I'm looking for Jake Keating," the man said. "I'm Terrence Goode—an old friend." He got out of the car and grabbed an empty duffel bag. His thin cotton shirt was frayed at the collar, and he wore brown old-man pants. He coughed and cleared his throat.

"Hot enough?" she asked.

"When's he coming back?"

"I haven't seen him. Maybe he's at the casino or with his ex-wife. You can bet he's not paying bills on this godforsaken place." Barb kept her voice flat, but approachable. Her leg shook and quivered, so she jammed her hand on it to get control. She remembered her mother telling her about the dog biscuits she craved when she was pregnant with Barb; she'd even eaten some. Maybe that's why Barb turned out strange—more focused on her damned, twitchy leg than Jake. Misguided priorities. Poor Jake.

She wiped her forehead. She imagined Jake sitting here now, straightening his baseball cap. He was tall and had a dirty tan. He sucked the pulp out of a mango and licked his upper lip to capture loose pulp. Fidgeting, he tossed the green peel on the gravel for Barb to pick up later, after they fucked for what was surely the last time, for what she knew was the last time.

In her mind, Jake screamed at her to pay attention. To not screw up. Terrence was an opportunity, just like she'd read about in self-help books people left behind in the rooms. He probably had something to do with Jake's drug deals, but Jake gave all those guys code names. She couldn't guess just by looking if he was Squirrel, Grapehead, or Dead Guy.

"You look like a smart girl," Terrence said. "Jake owes me money, but it's nothing we can't work out."

The phone rang inside the office. "Maybe that's him," Terrence said. He walked toward the office door. Barb shoved her chair back and it toppled over. She hurried after him, brushing against a saguaro cactus. Its flower, white and gooey, bloomed from its side.

Barb answered the phone. She held the receiver slightly away from her ear. She watched Terrence, only half-listening to Gloria—the only other guest, if her pain-in-the-ass sister could be called a guest—berating her on the line. Terrence paced the room. He opened desk drawers and looked on the bookshelves. “There must be a pack around here,” he said. “You and me, we’ll get a game going. What do you play? Poker? Crazy Eights? We should do something fun till Jake gets back.”

A couple of nights ago, Jake had chased Barb around the desk and pulled her down behind it, not caring that her knees banged against the legs of the metal chair. He took out his Leatherman knife from his pocket and poked the blade through her shirt until it pressed against her nipple. “Don’t flinch,” he said. She laughed, like always.

Now, with the phone cradled between her neck and shoulder, she sniffed her shirt. It smelled like Jake—like motor oil and dusty leather. She believed him when he said she was beautiful. She missed his stuffy weight.

Barb sat on the desk, jiggling her leg. She had a clear path to the door. If she could only get the keys to the Falcon. Maybe she could play strip poker for the keys. Get her sister in on it.

Terrence opened a blind and punched a button on the AC unit. The machine sputtered to life, spewing cigarette smoke and a chilly whine. He found a pack of cards and tossed an ace on the floor.

The rug shimmered with broken glass and bits of plastic gravel from a smashed aquarium. A few black snails clustered on the

last damp shards. The jigsaw puzzles Barb had planned on gluing together lay on the rug. She didn’t have the heart to throw them out.

Terrence picked up the coffee carafe that held rescued fish. Black mollies swam in dim laps. “What’s going on?” he asked.

“Who’s that?” Gloria said on the phone. “Who drove in just now?”

“I’m helping a guest,” Barb said to her.

“But there’s a scorpion in the bathroom sink!” Gloria cried.

“I’ll help you with the goddamn scorpion,” Barb said.

She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece. “Sorry for the mess,” she said to Terrence.

“Some party,” Terrence said. He flicked a queen at her. “Does Jake cheat at cards? Yeah, he cheats,” he said, looking at Barb’s face. “You like cheaters?”

Barb got a key from a hook on the wall. “Here’s your room key. Your room’s by your car. Checkout’s at noon. Since you’re Jake’s friend, it’s on us.”

“I’m going to take a look around,” Terrence said. “Don’t go anywhere I can’t find you.”

After Terrence left, Barb picked up a splintered baseball bat from behind the desk. She wrapped a white guest towel around it. She didn’t want to alarm Gloria.

Barb headed up the iron staircase. Sweat soaked through the crotch of her shorts. She tried to wave it dry. A line of sweat ran down the front of her shirt, settling under her bra.

Her foot caught on a torn piece of green AstroTurf, and she clutched the metal railing. “Shit,” she said. She looked down at the pool and shook her head at a blue tubetop floating on the surface. Makes the place look trashy, she thought.

Terrence stood on the landing, smoking and holding a bucket of ice. “I thought you’d need my help,” he said.

He must have gone up the back way, Barb thought. She wondered what Jake would make of Terrence. She wished she could ask him if he was a threat or a pansy-assed gangster-poser.

Barb ignored him. Beige drapes covered the windows of her sister’s room. Barb knocked on the door though it was cracked open. She stepped inside, avoiding the bed sheets wadded on the floor.

Gloria waved at her by the bathroom door. She had brown hair, dark eyes, and pale skin. Her eyeliner raced under her eyelids to meet the half-moon of blue eyeshadow from above. Gloria had thick red lips and round cheeks. Her large tits squished into a low top. It looked sleazy, but Barb didn’t say anything.

Barb blinked and took off her sunglasses. She saw Gloria’s lips moving, but couldn’t focus on the words. She rolled the bat in her hand and forced herself to cross the room.

The heavy bat in Barb’s hand and the steam from the shower shrunk the bathroom. The faucet dripped in the stained sink basin. A towel, rusty at the edges, hung on a hook. When Terrence squeezed Barb’s shoulder, she brushed him off.

“Look,” Gloria said. “It bit me after I got out of the shower.” She held up a swollen finger. “My armpit hurts, too. I think my blood is poisoned.”

“Let me see your finger,” Terrence said. He dropped his cigarette and moved Gloria under the fluorescent light. “It could be a sting. You can’t usually see the entry wound. Sometimes scorpions bite when they mate.”

Gloria smiled at him and leaned forward, as if she’d fall into him. He dripped ice onto her fingers and palm.

The scorpion hunkered in the sink. It was about the size of Barb’s thumb, and its body was golden, like a piece of sap.

“What are you waiting for? Kill it!” Gloria said.

“Go bionic on the bitch,” Terrence said, laughing.

Barb slammed the tip of the bat against the scorpion. Its guts oozed milky yellow, forming a crescent that echoed the shape of its crushed body.

...

That evening, Terrence and Barb became drinking buddies. They sat on the patio by the Falcon with bags of ice cooling their feet. Barb sipped her special scotch from the Grocery Outlet. It erupted in her mouth like smoke. The bottle came in a cardboard box printed with a map of Scotland. It made her feel well traveled. She used to drink with her mother; that’s how they got along best. Her mother had cooked meatloaf every time a new

man came into their lives. One time she wore a new silk blouse, and the new man, who had red, splotchy skin, pulled her to him, stretching the blouse tight in the back and bunching it into a ball. Her mother turned up Willie Nelson on the radio and kissed this man with her tongue. The spices popped and exploded, and the ground beef charred in the pan.

Barb liked her scotch with ice and lemon. Terrence took a splash of Coke with his. “May I?” she asked, tipping the bottle toward him. She actually felt okay, maybe even human, but not exactly feminine. She tightened her bra strap and chewed on an egg-salad sandwich from the office fridge. She pressed the soft yolk against her teeth. “My mom told me, ‘I bet you’ll end up knowing a lot about scotch before you die.’ What a thing to say to your daughter, huh?”

He cheered her on to drink more. “So why didn’t Jake call?” he asked.

“This place is a dump. He’s selling it. He doesn’t care about us. He never has.” Barb swirled the scotch around the plastic cup.

“I bet I could turn it around—once I get paid. Jake’s a reasonable guy, mostly.” He tipped his glass toward Gloria’s room. “Think your sister will join us?”

“She likes to sleep a lot.”

Terrence grabbed her wrist. “Are you sure you don’t have more ideas about Jake somewhere in those curls?” he asked. He tore open a package of Good & Plenty candy and put a handful of licorice in his mouth. Barb looked up the stairs,

hoping Gloria would find something to watch on TV. Instead, she saw Gloria walking down slowly, gripping the handrail with one hand. The other hand was clenched, as if she were holding something.

“I can still play cards with you if you want,” Barb said.

Gloria walked to the table and opened her palm. She dumped out a handful of quartz pebbles collected by the creek. She stuck each one in a hole in the table. Some fell through and some stayed suspended. “Where’s my scotch, honey?” she asked Terrence. He dipped his finger in his drink for her.

“I’ll get another bottle,” Barb said. She stood and swayed, jiggling her hips. She had to check Jake’s room. She unlocked the bedroom by the office and turned on the light. Jake’s blood and piss formed a misshapen angel on the rug. His body looked purplish-red with the settling blood. Barb squeezed her stomach under her shirt and tried to think. She leaned down and put her hand on the back of his neck. Falling to her knees, she grabbed the edge of the comforter, whispering half-words until bile came up in her throat. One time in the woods, by his property, he’d put a piece of sap on her tongue. It turned rancid in her mouth and she spat it into the creek. How she wished for that sap now, or anything he could give her.

The door opened. Gloria must have gotten the extra set of keys, Barb thought.

“Gloria, I’m sorry,” Barb said. “I didn’t mean it. I didn’t know what to do all day. What could I do?”

Gloria walked past Barb and Jake's body to the TV, bolted to a small table. She turned on a nature show and kept her finger pressed on the remote's volume button until the green volume bars crossed the screen. The narrator droned on about the mating habits of tarantulas. Gloria placed the remote on the TV, next to crushed cans of Tecate beer and Sprite. She crouched behind the TV set, wiping the rug with the corner of her shirt. "The ants. The ants are going to come in," Gloria said. "You guys spilled the soda. You didn't clean it up. Why didn't you at least put a towel down?"

"Gloria, honey. Look what's happening," Barb said. "Jake's gone." She wiped her bloody hand across her shirt.

Gloria knelt by Barb and rubbed Jake's hair. "How could you do this?" she asked softly. "Why are you such a monster?"

Barb pushed Gloria back. "He's mine," she said.

Terrence grabbed Barb's arm. "I'm getting tired of you girls."

"Let go of me," Barb said.

"Obviously, he can't pay me back now," Terrence said. "We need to think. I need his pot plants. I don't care if they're ready to harvest yet. Tell me where he's growing them." Terrence spoke in a deadpan voice, as if he dealt with dead bodies all the time, but Barb saw his hands shake. He lit a cigarette, most likely to disguise his panic.

"I can take you there," Barb said. "But what about him?" She pointed to Jake.

"We'll bring him," Terrence said. Barb pulled the flowered bedspread off the mattress and wrapped Jake's body in it, as if he were

her doll. She looked at the headboard she used to grip. Reaching her arms under Jake's torso, Barb asked Gloria for help. Terrence picked up his legs but Barb said, "No. Gloria's got to do it."

On the TV, a man in a blazer and jeans pushed a woman in a garden swing. She pumped her legs and threw her head back so her neck made a smooth curve. Her laugh boomed out of the speakers until Terrence pulled the cord from the outlet.

Gloria and Barb half-dragged, half-carried the body to the Falcon and lay him in the trunk.

...

A few miles from the motel, Barb told Terrence to turn down a dirt road. The Falcon rattled in and out of potholes that looked like ink soup. Barb sat with Gloria in the front seat, with Gloria half on her lap, comatose, her cheek pressed against the window. Barb didn't want to be in the back seat, with only a bit of stained vinyl, foam, and coiled springs separating her from Jake. Gloria smelled like lavender. Barb leaned into her. She wondered if Jake had liked the lavender.

Clouds of dust boiled under the car. A truck coming toward them flashed its lights. Barb reached across Terrence and turned the headlights on and off.

"What are you doing?" he asked. He pulled down the door of the glove compartment. "Get me another pack of cigs. Do you fucking want us to get caught?"

“It’s what we do to be friendly. It’s called being local,” Barb said.

Barb told Terrence to turn off the road by a gate. Barb entered the combination on the lock and swung the gate forward to let the car through. Terrence parked by a stand of oaks. He took out the duffel bag and a flashlight. He lit a cigarette and lugged Jake out of the trunk. Gloria and Barb held each other.

“I’d better not get a tick bite,” Gloria said.

“Honey, you’d better hope a tick bite’s the worst of it,” Terrence said.

They hiked in the darkness past spindly manzanita trees and tall ghost pines that swayed and whistled. When Barb’s arms ached from carrying Jake’s torso, she switched with Gloria, swapping for the bottle of scotch. Terrence held Jake’s legs, not wavering when crossing fallen limbs or moss-covered rocks. The heat eased, and Barb listened for the frogs’ mating calls and the creek to guide her. They trudged past hills blackened by fire, near a ridge that glowed red from a geothermal heat mine. The moon, almost full, was held in place by gray-green clouds.

On a hill above the creek, Barb pointed out indentations in the land, like small altars. In each one grew tiny marijuana plants fed by black irrigation pipes. Terrence and Barb lay Jake under a ghost pine, covering him with the motel comforter, now blood-stained with a map of a dead land. “This is the plan—we’ll prop him here like he was killed by a thief,” Terrence said.

Barb opened the flap to Jake’s tent. She stepped over some eggshells, a couple of beer bottles, and a porn magazine. She

moved a shovel near the tent opening and brought out a tin box of matches.

Terrence filled the duffel bag with the young plants, carefully preserving the roots. He stooped over, scooping with his hand and the end of the flashlight. To Barb he looked more like a goblin than a man.

Gloria paced in the dirt, shivering. “I want to get out of here,” she said.

Barb considered the shovel in the tent. One good whack and she’d have the car with Gloria. Two good whacks... she looked at Jake for a sign, but Gloria had covered his face with twigs and leaves, and Barb was too spooked to pull them off. She frowned. Last night, after feeding the fish, Barb had left the office to get some ice. As if fucking on an ice machine was anything to brag about, Barb thought now. Jake had Gloria hiked up against it so she had nowhere to fall but down on his cock. They didn’t see her—or pretended not to. She waited until Gloria scurried to her room to take her pills. In the office, Barb concentrated on a Springbok puzzle till Jake came to find her. She had to hold one hand with the other, it was shaking so badly. “Help me look for a piece,” she said. She swung the baseball bat at him and smashed the aquarium. He knocked over her puzzles, and she chased him into his room. It went further than she had wanted. She swung at him, but that didn’t kill him. He hit his head on the TV. Who would believe her? You don’t die from TVs, you die from wooden bats—blunt force trauma, she thought. She learned the damn term from TV.

She clutched her stomach and sat across from Jake's body in the woods, wishing they could trade places. Everyone wondered why her mother went crazy, worrying after Barb and the bad men she dated. And now Barb had to worry about her sister, not content to chase only Jake. Gloria hung on Terrence's arm and shuffled her feet in the dirt, begging him to feel for ticks on her neck and waist.

Terrence zipped up the bag and pointed the flashlight in Barb's eyes. "Ready?" he asked.

"Just a minute," Barb said. "I need to take a piss." She lit a match by a rock covered with green lichen and pulled down her shorts. Time to go back to the Falcon. The pee splattered on orange mushrooms, like gems of blood.

# Pilar, I Confess

by Carolyn Brazda

This rain can suffocate even the leaves here.  
Treetops choke on it

September (then) October (then)

We have fires, yes, but it is the leaves that burn:  
bright as blood,  
yellow as that spec in your eye.  
You cannot know

such shades as these. Your cactus blooms  
a desert yellow.  
I think often about those perfect thorns  
and their thinness.  
I think about the way they prick.

Santa Fe, I lived there too  
when it was so very dry.  
(The sand  
was on fire)  
Nobody wants to be called a coward,  
but I left there sun baked,  
dry eyed.

I remember when you said, people need each other  
in November. The aspens had lost their color,  
mountains were haunted by pale bark.

I am tired of being  
an aspen  
translated

## ERRATUM

A previous version of the Spring 2008 *Irreverent Fish* erroneously attributed the poem *Snake* to Sean Davis. This updated version correctly attributes the poem to author Matt Walker. Ooligan Press regrets this error.