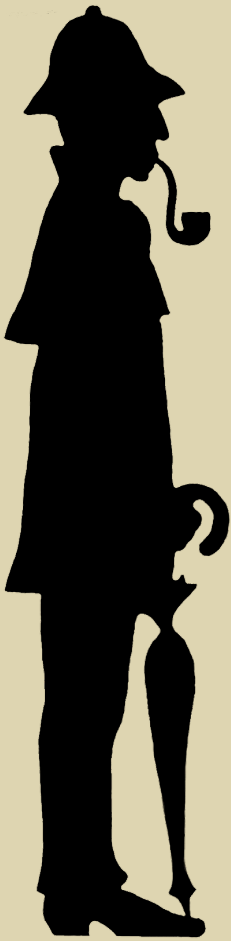
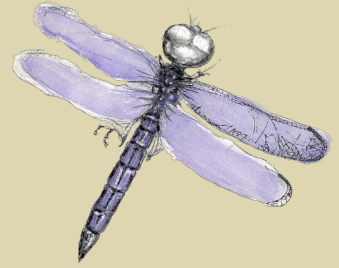


Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII presents...



THE JOURNAL OF UNLIKELY ENTOMOLOGY

Issue 2 - November 2011

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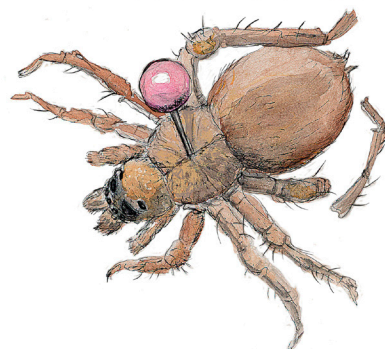
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Editors' Note

Welcome, gentle readers. It is with great pleasure, and very little humility, that we present to you the second issue of the Journal of Unlikely Entomology. That you are here once again, noses pressed to the glass that contains (if barely) the rarest of entomological specimens tells us that you have managed to overcome, or at least suppress, the aversion that so many two-legged creatures hold for those with six legs, or more. For that, we thank you.

As you may note, the tales gathered here speak largely of transformation - the journey from one place, or state, to another. We, being but humble collectors, can take very little credit for this theme. Rather, like a spider's web, the pattern emerges to the appreciative eye, and we merely stand witness to it. In these digital pages you will meet a strange, multi-legged girl traveling down a river with her faithful beetle companion; a carpet salesman who wakes to find he is not the man he used to be; a lonely centipede girl who craves nothing more than the comfort of human touch; a car full of unlikely, inhuman companions journeying to the quasi-mythic realm of Ferny Grove; a child, forced to grow up too soon by the circumstances of her life; and a woman who transcends humanity, aided by the ants, spiders, and other insects who share her home.

And so, without further ado, and again with many thanks to our most generous sponsor, Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII, we invite you to delve into this collection of tales and witness the wondrous act of transformation, which is fundamental to life – both insect and human.



Zaar

by Forrest Aguirre
Illustrated by Bryan Prindiville



The log rider sat astride an enormous, misshapen oak tree floating down the swollen and swirling River Zaar, her four legs wrapped tightly around the trunk.

“Four legs?” you say, not asking. “Does she have two . . .?”

No! She was, in all respects like every other girl, save for her four long, sinuous legs, each the color of faint firelight reflected in porcelain; warm to the eyes, cold to the touch. And by “like every other girl” I mean that she was like none other, try as you might to objectify young women and deny them each their individual dreams and desires.

She was unique, as was the fist-sized red, yellow, and black beetle (*Dicheros Bicornis*) leashed to her wrist like a circus clown’s painted poodle. The beetle was every bit as agitated as she was languid, pacing back and forth along the tree, racing up its longer limbs

to get a glimpse downstream as the torrent rushed on.

“Rocks ahead! Evasive maneuvers!” it chittered.

“Relax,” she said in a soft, rolling timbre that fluttered and descended from her like the curly golden waves of hair that brushed past her shoulders to cover her tiny breasts. “I am far too young to die, am I not, little Cascone?”

Cascone sighed and registered disappointment as best his chitinous frame could manage, scooting his front legs from side to side to emphasize that he was shaking his head, a movement that the girl could barely perceive.

“You are fragile, my young Cimbri, not invulnerable. Your naiveté might be the death of you before you reach maturity.”

“Navy-tay? What is that? Some sort of ship?”

“A sort of ship, yes. The sort of ship whose crew, on the advice of an enemy, unwittingly sets sail with a breached hull into the open sea while a thunderstorm looms on the horizon.”

“I thought that was foolhardy?” Cimbri asked.¹

Cascone again shook his head, this time in confusion, and so hard that the chitin of his head click-clacked against the chitin of his thorax.

“No, dear girl. ‘Foolhardy’ means, or at least implies, that those undertaking said action, in this case, the crew that decided to set sail under such conditions, had been forewarned or had gained enough experience to know that they ought not to have ventured forth, but did so anyway, whether out of spite, desperation, or a desire to prove their bravery. But, if you will recall, this crew set about their task unwittingly, unaware of the dangers that would likely beset them. Of course, you might argue² that these sailors were simply ignorant, which is necessary to the definition of ‘naiveté,’ but not sufficient. They had been advised by an enemy, and they trusted this advice, which shifted their situation from one of ignorance, which is no one’s fault, to one of naiveté replete with a victim and victimizer.”

“I have heard of misers,” Cimbri said.³

“Most misers are not naïve, my girl.”

“I am so very confused.”

“As I thought you would be,” he said sagely.⁴

1 She asked, not saying, or, rather, saying the asking, not stating a statement or, rather, stating a question or questioning the earlier statement.

2 She did not.

3 Or stated.

4 Here one must ask, or ought to ask, if one is endowed with any degree of intellectual curiosity, how a beetle, *Dicheros Bicornis*, could gain such wisdom. Let us simply agree that any beetle, even one the size of your fist, especially one the size of your fist, fitted as it would be with an obviously larger-than-your-typical-insect brain, who, or which, if you are uncomfortable with personifying a giant bug, has travelled from the jungles of the east, across the wide ocean, over the sterile mountains beyond the desert, weaving in and out of marshes, avoiding reptiles, raptors, and entomologists before braving the metro poles of the southeastern temperate climates where peasants with six-syllable last names composed mostly of consonants bungle along the roads, drunk in wooden ox drawn carts and, finally, being captured by a four-legged

A shadow overcame⁵ Cascone. He looked up to see what had cast it. To his surprise and abject terror⁶ he saw, above him, a bird, which had alighted⁷ on a branch⁸ of the floating tree.

It was a rook, incapable of swallowing him whole, but surely capable of rending him, then swallowing the pieces. Cascone skittered behind Cimbri, putting the girl between him and the bird.⁹

The rook wore a stocking night hat, which sprouted from its head like a stunted purple and black striped tentacle. It held, in its beak, a small postcard.¹⁰ It was a pretty, beige card with bright red lace around the edges. There were words on the card that Cimbri felt compelled to read aloud after removing it from the bird’s mouth. She said:¹¹

Streaming Clouds

Will take away

Your screaming aloud

For the rest of your days

You have been warned

The bird, who had been dozing, awoke and flew away.

“Whatever could it mean, Cascone?”

diva of innocence and purity . . . well, you get the point. Or you ought to. Such a creature learns a few things along the way.

5 Overshadowed, really. But to say so would be redundant.

6 Unnoticed by anyone else, since he could not twist his features to show emotion, no matter how strong he felt it.

7 You might say “a-darkened” given the birds black feathers, but no one asked you. Shut up and listen to the story.

8 A sideways branch, of course, which is, in some ways, like its own little tree. Insert some sort of clever symbolism from your belief system here.

9 Cascone did not want to provide an object lesson in naiveté, as much as it would benefit the child.

10 Like the one you should be sending to your mother or son or auntie. Shame on you for procrastinating!

11 Read, really, but to explicitly state that she read it would cause some consternation on the part of the reader of this story who, upon reading that the girl was reading, would have to take mental pause to regain his or her footing in reality, thus thrusting the reader out of their willing suspension of disbelief, much like . . . ah, never mind. Carry on.

The insect skittered about, twitching to and fro,¹² his antennae wiggling with worry. He ran up and down the length of the tree, stopping still, momentarily, to scan the woods on either side of the river¹³ for any sign of danger.

“Be wary, young Cimbri.”

“But I don’t see why . . . mmmf!” Her words were muffled¹⁴ by Cascone, who had bodily thrown himself over her mouth and nose. Her eyes bulged out in surprise.

A mustard-yellow miasma arose from both sides of the river, flooding the tree and the water’s surface with a sickly mist.¹⁵ Rabbits and deer convulsed on the banks, fish floated belly-up into the river’s eddies, and flocks of non-rook birds fell out of the sky in colors resplendent and dead.

The mist dissipated and Cascone fell from Cimbri’s blue-tinged face.

“I am sorry I had to do that,” Cascone excused himself.¹⁶ “But that gas would have proven fatal to you. I myself inhaled just a few particles and I can now feel one of my lungs collapsing,” he wheezed.

“I thank you,” Cimbri wheezed herself. She thought she might be allergic to beetles stopping up her air passageways. “I will be more careful, should I see such mists arise again.”

Cascone smiled.¹⁷ “I see that you are losing your naiveté already. This is a good thing, my child,” he wheezed again.

“Good,” Cimbri giggled. “Then I am learning.”

“Indeed you ah...!”¹⁸

Cascone stopped mid-sentence.¹⁹ Above him

12 Or fro and to, depending on your perspective, and I don’t know where your imagination stands.

13 Again, I don’t know where your imagination stands. He might have been looking right at you, for all I know.

14 And her mouth gagged.

15 Unless, of course, you are fond of chartreuse.

16 As if Cimbri were not sorry that he had to do that.

17 Not that you could tell.

18 “are” is the word, or would have been the word had Cascone been able to get it out.

19 Or, perhaps, toward the end of the sentence. We shall never know, since he did not finish. Which begs the

loomed the rook, who had slipped in during Cascone’s pontifications.²⁰ The insect again skittered behind the girl, who reached out to withdraw yet another card from the bird’s beak, at which point the bird fell asleep on the branch.²¹

Cimbri said, or read, with a growing smile:

Teeming crowds

Will Cover you

Like a funeral shroud

Into the blue

Brace yourself!

“Ha ha!” she laughed, or said, but did not read, “I think I am about to become very popular!”

Cascone, twitching with nervousness, looked to the sky, earth, water, earth, sky, buggy eyes wide open for potential trouble. Seeing nothing immediate, he relaxed for a moment.

Then the river up-heaved like a reverse down-pour²² sending droplets everywhere. The rook flew off under cover of the spray. When the right-side-up downpour ended, Cimbri and Cascone stared at a large

question: should it be permissible to use the term “mid-sentence” while referring to the cessation of something that never had a clear-cut end? What about “mid-life”? Can one legitimately know one is having a mid-life crisis before one has died? And after dying, how would one know, or, if one believes in an afterlife, would one even care, unless one believes in the doctrine of reincarnation, in which case one would most certainly care, if only for the simple reason that one would have yet another mid-life crisis to face in the next incarnation, though said “mid” in “mid-life,” speaking of the future state, would be indeterminate until the body dies, yet again.

20 Though the rook, wearing a hat, looked much more like a Pontiff than the beetle, who (or which) simply looked like a colorful bug on a leash.

21 Perhaps you wonder what rookish dreams the bird dreamed as it slept. They involved some sporting friends, a long strand of piano wire, and a pencil-thin prima donna with a beehive hairdo. I will leave the details for you to sort out, but the woman did not fare well and the birds obtained a new nest. It is not by linguistic accident that we refer to a group of crows as a “murder.”

22 Of course, the word “up-pour” danced about on the two-plank deep stage of your little mind for a split-second, didn’t it? Well, don’t be ridiculous. Gravity still works in this story . . . and how! (we call this foreshadowing, by the way).

house that had breached the water's surface and was now floating alongside their tree.

The windows opened up to a chorus of coughs, splutters, and hockin' loogies,²³ followed by the hoarse complaints of a score of different voices:

"Phewee!"

"Arful!"

"M'all wet!"

"Gitcheer paws offa me, ya horndog!"

Twenty or more tenants poked their heads out, exposing their balding pates, broken-fence dentures, and bulbous noses to the open air. The smell of stale tobacco and hot grease wafted over the breadth of the river.

"Lookee. Ain't she purtee!" one voice called out.

"She shore is!" responded another.

"Love them there legs, honey!" yelled a third, which was followed by cat calls and whistles from men and women alike.

"These must be my fans!" Cimbri said with glee.

"No!" Cascone shrieked, "they only mean you harm!"

But it seemed that Cimbri couldn't hear him above the whistles and splashes of water as the redneck mob dove from the windows into the river and swam toward the tree, some dog paddling, others floating on whiskey barrels and kicking the water, others using a companion as a raft in a frenzy of waving arms and legs. Their sweaty, mud-caked bodies soiled the waters.

Cascone was upon them before they even reached their desperate hands out to touch Cimbri's enticing legs. He was a red and yellow blur of martial mayhem, sending a host of hoogers to a watery grave before their lusty thoughts could even fully form.²⁴ He

23 Cascone knew there was a better phrase for this, but he couldn't concentrate enough to think of it with all the ruckus.

24 Cascone was, it should be remembered, enormous for his species, fully five times the weight of a full grown *Goliathus Goliathus Albatrus*, at about 250 grams. Now, while entomologists will be quick to point out that *Dicheros Bicornis* is only loosely related to the true Rhinoceros Beetle, say, something along the lines of third cousins twice-removed, it can still be argued, and is being argued, that Cascone's relative strength was only

was a whirlwind of mandibles and wings, tossing his opponents around like ragdolls in a churning mess of bodies and limbs. Still, there were so many of them that he could not avoid taking a few cheap shots, including a cast-iron skillet to one of his legs, which shattered the appendage just before it was torn off by a bulb-nosed brute named "Lexington" (according to his caterwaulin', skillet-wielding momma). Unfortunately for Lexington, he was rewarded with a nostril full of pissed-off beetle, which didn't sit well with his frontal lobe. Lexington's mama was the next, and last, to fall, as Cascone disarmed her of her weapon and dislodged her consciousness with it.

"You are so very heroic," Cimbri said to her defender as the floating house crumbled into debris and sank to the bottom of the river.

Cascone felt very proud of himself, but was clearly exhausted. "Cimbri," he wheezed from his one good lung,²⁵ we shall have to have lessons regarding who to trust and not trust, not to mention the differences between adoration and simple assault."

The night-hatted rook returned again.

"Speaking of assault," Cascone implied, though Cimbri did not comprehend the implication.

"Such a pretty bird," she chirped, taking, yet again, the proffered card, after which the bird fell asleep on its roost, whistling snores.²⁶

"Such a pretty card," she said, then, just prior to reading it, "it says":²⁷

Cupid's arrows

Soon will fly

Like falling sparrows

Into the eye

You cannot escape

"It sounds like a love poem!" Cimbri said with a

nominally less than that of his distant kinsfolk. This means, in a nutshell, that he would be capable of lifting somewhere in the realm of 600 lbs and more than capable of taking on a horde of trailer trash and cleaning house.

25 Which was, incidentally, on the other side of his body from his missing leg.

26 Or, more appropriately, snoring whistles, since whistling is a voluntary act and snoring an involuntary act, if one is not faking sleep, like the person lying next to you now.

27 I had hoped that it would go without saying that she then read the card, but your unwillingness to enter the flow of the narrative has forced my hand. So, she read:

tone simply dripping with anticipation.

“That is no love poem,” Cascone wheezed, limping. “It is a threat.”

“Oh my,” Cimbri said, “should I feel threatened?”

Cascone reared up on the hindmost pair of his six five legs. “I shall do my utmost to protect you, my child.”²⁸ He wearily limped along the tree, looking for unseen danger.²⁹

Only the slightest sound announced the arrival of the next hazard, a flutter of leaves as a primitive obsidian-headed arrow flew out from the trees up the river bank, tracing an arc just over Cimbri’s head before skipping across the water and lodging itself in the opposite bank. The rook took flight,³⁰ as did a volley of arrows from either side. Cascone deftly³¹ struck at the approaching arrows, diverting them from Cimbri’s soft, supple flesh and into log, water, and riverbank.

All except one, which struck the hapless beetle directly in the center of his left eye.³² This caused irreparable damage to his left brain hemisphere. He

knew he must die soon, so he gathered his thoughts³³ and addressed Cimbri in a slurred wheeze, seeing that one lung had collapsed and the right side of his body was now paralyzed.

“Mah deah Shimbri. Ah am dyink. I shall not be lonk foh dis life. Lishen cayfully. You musht geh off dis rivah ash shoon ash poshible. Grave danker liesh ahead.”

He rested on the log beside her.

“Poor, poor Cascone,” she said, running her slender fingers along the crease of his wing casing.³⁴ “I know where I am going,” she said as the roaring of a waterfall manifested itself from not far downriver. “And it is where I have always wanted to be. Your sacrifices were, I am afraid, utterly in vain. Had I not wanted to step out into the abyss, to explore the other side of the wall you call life and security and comfort, I would never have come down the River Zaar. But I shall not have known life until I know death.”

She kicked the bug off into the river. He floated on his back, helplessly rushing ahead toward the waterfall. He comprehended a great deal in the moment he went over the edge, including the words of Cimbri as she, too, toppled over the edge toward the sharp rocks below:

“Cascone, you always were so very naïve.”

28 This is, of course, ludicrous. Beetles do not father humans. But the girl’s extra legs do make one wonder. The sheer mechanics of it all, not to mention the breach of social taboos that Cimbri’s mother would have to have taken, boggle the mind. Still, one does have to ask where Cascone’s fierce dedication to the girl came from.

29 Which he could not see. I grow weary myself, having to explain everything to you.

30 And used it, too.

31 Well, deftly for a handicapped beetle.

32 That’s center of left, not left of center, for you politically conservative types. There is no liberal bias that influenced the place where the arrow found its target, it simply did. Get over it.

33 Or, at least half of them.

34 Which lazily sagged on one side, due to the neurological damage that was worming its way through his entire brain.



Centipede Girl

by Ada Hoffmann
Illustrated by Linda Saboe



Says one Centipede Girl to another: *Are you real?*

Fleeting, that moment. Must be her reflection at the other end of the sewer, maybe in some metal, but she watches it just in case. Holding her breath, she gazes down the long dark tunnel. Wills her ‘pedes to stay still a minute, though they never do. Splish goes the stinking water, up to her ankles, as the ‘pedes scuttle up and down her legs. And at that tiny noise, her faraway reflection starts and darts away.

Breath rises in her chest, a smile splitting her invisible face. *Moved when I didn't. Means she's real.*

Not really a reflection, but someone looking like her, taking up space. Someone that can be touched. And Centipede Girl wants so bad to touch.

She dashes forward, splashing, panting. The ‘pedes squat, cling and sting, holding on for the ride. Splash goes the water as two or three of them lose their balance and fall, and they disappear with a fizz, becoming nothing.



Centipede Girl has hands, feet, teeth, a tummy, just like a real girl. Forgets they are there, sometimes. She is invisible, not through magic, but through layers and layers of ‘pedes. Scrambling, writhing, waiting. Human skin never shows through.

In her memories, at five, she still has a face, but even then, the ‘pedes crawl all over her. She drinks poison, when big looming parents say *Now, listen to the nice exterminator man*, and vomits blood for a week, but the ‘pedes remain. Doctors shake their heads. Big looming parents slowly give up hope. And the ‘pedes breed.

Lives in the sewers now, in their comfortable, dark stench. Tries going up in the light sometimes and is greeted with screams.



A horrible uproar of water, and a run that burns her lungs and sides, before she catches up to the reflection that is not a reflection.

Don't go! says Centipede Girl. *Wait! Wait!*

It turns to look at her, ‘pedes shifting and squirming in the vaguest semblance of a head. It speaks hissing, as though layers on layers of hisses have to be put together just right to make the words.

Why wait?

Because you are like me, says Centipede Girl. *Because you could be a friend.*

An infested silence, as the other girl looks her up and down. Not exactly like Centipede Girl, after all. Bigger. Taller. A grown-up Centipede Woman.

Friend, Centipede Woman says, as though tasting the word.

Friend.

You hunt?

I hunt, says Centipede Girl. More often she scavenges, faceted ‘pede eyes spotting some half-rotten thing. But fresh meat pleases her more. She’s learned to send one or two ‘pedes out a short ways, keeping her mind on them so they don’t disappear, luring in some hungry rat or lizard, then pouncing with strong human limbs.

Centipede Woman nods. Barely perceptible under the writhes of her face.

We hunt.



So long since anyone touched Centipede Girl. Maybe not since she was born. She has thought of it in her sweetest daydreams, the ones that hurt the most. Hands holding hers. Arms around her. Warm sides to lean against.

One time she climbs all the way out of the sewer. Tells herself the screams won’t stop her. She’ll hold him down, the first unlucky passerby, and grasp his hands in hers, just for a while, just long enough to remember she’s real. But the screams turn to gags and prayers and bestial howls as she chases him, and she can’t do it. Not brave enough. Lets him get away.

She watches now as Centipede Woman hunts. Centipede Woman gives gruff instructions. *Stand like this. Watch more careful. Never get full if not watch more careful.*

Centipede Girl half-listens. Other half longs for Centipede Woman’s hands. Centipede Woman won’t scream. Nothing to scream about. Nothing on her that isn’t on both of them already.

She asks Centipede Woman every evening when the hunt is done. *Will you let me hold your hands? Please?*

You don't want that.

Makes herself pitiful in the asking. Lets the tears creep into her voice, if they like. *I do. Please, I do. I want it so bad.*

No.

And the nights are silent. They sleep, on opposite sides of the tunnel, every day.



She is good a long time. Ignores the ache inside and keeps her hands to herself. Hunts and hunts. Does everything Centipede Woman says, till at last, after months, Centipede Woman hunts all silent by her side. Still moving, same as before, but out of words.

Two days. Three. No words. And the ache is a pounding raging thing inside her head.

Think we go two ways now, says Centipede Woman, after three days silent. *Think this done. Taught everything. Done.*

No, says Centipede Girl. *No.*

Yes. Sleep day, then in evening, go two ways.

And Centipede Woman falls asleep.

The thing in Centipede Girl's head pounds and rages, and though she knows it's a bad, bad thing, she creeps to Centipede Woman's side. Watches the rise and fall of the 'pedes on her chest. Looks up at Centipede Woman's writhing skittering face, down to the hills of her shoulders, down the throughways of 'pedes up and down her arm, over and under each other, down to the squirming brown mass that is her hand.

Takes a breath, and then she reaches down and plunges her hand into the 'pedes.

Centipede Woman's 'pedes skitter across the skin of her hand, probing it, tasting it. Shuddery, that feeling, even though Centipede Girl has 'pedes too. These ones aren't hers and she can't see through their eyes. But she brings her hand down anyway, right through the mass that should be Centipede Woman's fist, right down to the ground.

There is no fist. No wrist, no forearm. Just 'pedes and 'pedes and 'pedes.

And Centipede Woman screams. *What is this? What is this you do?*

Centipede Girl backs away. Doesn't know what to say, so just babbles. *I'm sorry. I only wanted to hold your hand. I wanted it so bad. I'm sorry. Please.*

You want my touch? says Centipede Woman, only half the 'pedes hissing. Other half screaming, eerie and shrill. *Have my touch.*

And just like hunting, Centipede Woman lunges.

Centipede Girl reels, bracing for the great slamming limbs of a woman, even though she knows better now. All that hits her are light little 'pedes, 'pedes upon 'pedes, until she staggers under the weight of such light little things. Centipede Girl screams, and the 'pedes scream, and blood billows in the filthy water.

Last she remembers, she is falling, collapsing, her limbs folding up into each other, and the bloody, mucky water rushing at her face.



Centipede Woman is gone now. Gone for a long time. Centipede Girl hunts alone.

Runs away now from mirrors, still water, anything to reflect her. Afraid of what she'll see. Once she does see herself, distorted, in a shiny metal panel. Looks the same as before. Just 'pedes. Feels different, though.

In her memories, she has hands, feet, teeth, a tummy, just like a real girl. But all she can see now are facets. All she can feel now is hunger. Sometimes she reaches through the 'pedes and paws at herself. Tries to remember her shape. *Be real. Please. Be like a real girl.*

But her hands go right through herself, and there are no bones anywhere. No more girl. Just 'pedes and 'pedes and 'pedes.



Such a Lovely Shade of Green

by Samantha Henderson
Illustrated by Danelle Malan



Redlands, then Banning, and U-Pick cherries, and the Riverside Freeway sign. Dirty pink, shabby green houses. The Morongo Reservation and the casino, orange and garish, a fake waterfall out front. The gray concrete dinosaurs. The windmill farm.

A tiny spider crawled up the passenger-side window, trailing a silk flicker behind.

“April would like the dinosaurs,” said Tamara,

staring out the window, past the spider. She wondered if she should ask if she could turn the AC down. The minivan was comfortable, plush and new-smelling, but the cold air made her teeth ache, and her jaw where it got broken before.

The driver, dumpy, brunette, with varicose veins sprouting from beneath her pleated tennis skirt, tilted her head sideways like she had a crick in her neck.

"April's my daughter. She likes dinosaurs." Tamara felt a little spark of rage. She was going to make the woman say something. Two hours now, from the L.A. Greyhound depot, and three bare, grudging sentences.

The woman pushed her sunglasses up her nose. "I don't need to know about your daughter," she said.

Tamara looked straight ahead, trying not to cry. She was so cold. Outside hundreds of windmills whipped round and round.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure she's wonderful. But it's better if I don't know anything. Names, anything like that. It's for your own protection."

Tamara nodded, tears pooling hot, about to spill. Her lip trembled. The woman glanced at her, once.

She hated herself when she did this, when she cried like this. Sven hated it too. *Can't hardly blame the man*, she sang in her head, buzzing, singy-songy. *Can't hardly blame him*.

One fat tear painted a cold line down her cheek.

"It's going to be OK," said the woman. "You're safe now."

Tamara wanted to hit something.

The spider reached the top of the window, then slipped and fell halfway down. It swung on its thread and started crawling up again.

You don't know. You think I'm scared for myself.

She could smash the spider, easy, and leave a smear the woman would have to Windex tonight.

One day Sven would kill her. That's what she told herself. That's what she told Sylvia, whose name wasn't really Sylvia, who got women like her out of situations like these.

She told herself she sent April away to protect her, that April was safe as long as she didn't stand between Sven and Tamara.

But the real reason was that when April got lippy with Tamara last month, Tamara raised her hand and stopped just short of smashing her daughter's mouth.

Barely stopped, because she wanted to so bad. So enjoyed the thought.

Then she understood Sven. *Can't hardly blame the man*.

April's eyes widened, and they looked at each other long, mother and daughter, over Tamara's still uplifted arm. And Tamara lowered it, and backed away. And they both looked at the ground.

The next day, Tamara called the number the girl at the women's shelter gave her. Tamara knew that when she called that number a whole series of events would begin, like falling dominoes, and it took her a while to do it. Not when Sven broke her jaw. Not when she had to switch to a new brand of foundation that was thicker and better at covering up the bruises.

It was when she almost hit April, and realized she was still high on the idea of doing it.

She wondered if the others knew, if Sylvia-Not-Her-Real-Name knew, for she always had a look of vague, dispassionate distaste on her broad, strong, unlovely face. But perhaps that's all the expression Sylvia-Not could spare for a world of violence. In her world, women, desperate women, came to her and, given sufficient evidence of the danger, she would hide them, at the risk of her own freedom. Simple as that. Simple as an insect's world, to eat and be eaten. Sylvia-Not watched her with black eyes shiny as a spider's while she stammered out her tale. Sylvia-Not quizzed her clinically, without a shred of sentiment. Sylvia-Not agreed that April was best off with her grandparents in Utah. Sylvia-Not arranged for a midnight pick-up and a drive to the edge of town. Another car, battered and dusty. The Greyhound bus, smelling like dried urine. Then the mini-van.

The spider reached the top of the window again. *Stupid thing. What's it trying to do?* She would kill it (but the caterpillar writhing in the fire, and April's wide eyes, and Tamara felt carsick) and she looked away from the spider.

They were passing a dry riverbed with a big, blue and white sign. WHITEWATER.

"That's funny," said Tamara.

"What?" said the woman, startled.

"Whitewater. What is it out there, hundred? Hundred one? Dry as a bone."

The woman chuckled. "Yeah. It is weird."

It's cold in your damn car, bitch, thought Tamara, leaning her cheek against the window, feeling goosepimples pop out of her arms.



Palm Desert ahead, but before that an off-ramp, and a truck stop with a Dairy Queen. The van bumped over potholes, turned into the parking lot. The woman kept the engine running, the AC on.

She pulled her cell phone out of its little dashboard pocket and looked at it, frowning.

Late for tennis? But Tamara didn't say it. Wasn't fair. Woman was only trying to help.

Can't hardly blame the man.

Stop it.

A dusty pickup pulled up alongside. The woman dropped the cell phone back in its pocket with a soft clunk.

"Here we go," she said, more to herself than Tamara. Then, "Stay here a minute." Tamara froze, her backpack between her knees, while the woman got out and circled in front of the van and the pick-up.

Tamara looked at the dusty truck. There was a man in the driver's seat. Her heart thudded in her throat.

No, it wasn't Sven. But he'd found out. He'd sent one of his buddies, one of his fellow deputies, to get her.

The driver's side window rolled down and the woman, her legs orange-tan beneath the tennis skirt, leaned on the door and spoke to him. Tamara didn't know him. He had mirrored glasses, short-cropped, thinning hair and a moustache bleached pale by the sun. He looked past the woman's head, straight at her, and smiled, as one smiles at a shy child. He wasn't one of Sven's.

She could breathe.

The woman turned and gestured at her, and she opened the door. The desert heat sank into her chilled bones like a sauna bath.



"Got your stuff?" he said. He knew she had only the backpack she pulled from the minivan. Just a way of telling her they were here.

"Is this just a stop?" she ventured.

He waited until they were both out of the truck. "No," he said.

She followed him to the door of the little stone cottage, past a dry garden of sage. He scrabbled in his jeans pocket for the key.

When the door was open he moved aside.

"You'll find some supplies in the cupboard and the 'fridge," he said. "Once a week someone'll come with groceries, and you can tell her what you need."

It was dark inside, and despite the blazing day, a cool tendril of air touched her cheek.

"How long?" she said, not knowing what else to say.

The man shrugged. "Don't know," he said. "Until they find you a permanent place, an identity. Shouldn't be too long."

He gestured at the door. "Do you want me to check inside? Sometimes they want me to walk around, make sure nothing's there. Some don't want a man inside."

Tamara wondered if he got sick of being careful of wounded, delicate things.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm sure it's safe."

Safe enough, until they found her a local habitation and a name. Until then, she was in storage.



She liked to sit on the large, flat stone by the front door and close her eyes, feeling the sun beat like a great soft drum on her face. Even the sky was yellow: sand and dust kicked up in the air by the passing trucks caught the afternoon light and smoothed it out, featureless. And then, as she moved about, the acrid smell of her own sweat, rhyming with the sage. Cicadas chirped, chipping tiny holes in the night. Warm water from the pump told of the minerals beneath the surface, like she was drinking quartz, mica, gold.

She didn't mind the dirt or the sand or the

crumbling drywall inside. Nobody tried to hurt her here. Not the tiny desert birds or the coyotes or the rabbits that browsed the dead, brown garden at dawn. Flies: there were a lot of flies. The man said it was because of the watermelon fields, watermelon season. They split open, pink in the fields, and the flies feasted.

The fire ants would kill her if she stepped in a nest, but you couldn't take that personally. That's just what fire ants did. They didn't do it to make themselves feel better, or you so scared you couldn't move.

But when little black ants started marching across the rim of the bathtub, congregated in the chipped grout of the sink and explored her toothbrush, she felt enough was enough, and she dug a rusted can of Raid from the back of the closet.

A scattering of dead black specks stuck to the faded pink enamel of the tub, until she wiped them off with a paper towel. She knew she shouldn't waste paper like that, use the rags instead, that could be laundered. But she didn't like the smell of Raid, wanted to mop it up and throw it away.

Made little difference to the ants, who found different paths around the zone of death. Then she remembered you have to hit the nest — grubbing on her back in the linen closet backing the bathroom she found it, or its entrance: a pipe imperfectly sealed passed through the wall to the Court of the Ant Queen. She didn't want to open the wall, so she sprayed inside the closet, coughing at the fake-flower fumes.

Ants dispose of their kin's dead bodies, being like humans in that respect. Her ants deposited theirs in the damp corners where the tub met the wall: prickly black puddles. They were hard to clean up; the tiny body parts tended to smear, and as fast as she did it more appeared.

She'd give it another try. She'd get the whole nest this time.

Tamara crouched at the open door of the linen closet, can in hand. She could see the slit that led to the nest. She gave it a good, hard squirt.

Ants poured from the slit, carrying tiny white things. Eggs. They raced down the wall, slowing as the insecticide took effect, slowing and dropping and dying (and the caterpillar stuck to the orange coal,

coiling and uncoiling and coiling and the feeling she almost had of April's jaw against her hand) and Tamara backed away, still holding the can. Something hot and acid rose in her throat.

All the ants that had left the nest were dead. No more came. But there had to be more, a lot more. Ant nests were huge.

Tamara spoke to the slit under the pipe. "Just stay out of the bathroom, OK?"

Her voice sounded strange. She realized she hadn't spoken aloud for days.

She must be crazy, talking to ants.

"I won't do it again, but just...stay out. OK?"

No movement.

"All right, then."

She shut the door and looked at the garish, red-and-yellow can.

Stupid. She snorted, once, and put the Raid back in the closet.

For the most part the ants did stay out of the bathroom. Sometimes she'd see a little coil of them, marching in and out of the cracks in the wall. They never dumped bodies in the bathtub anymore.

Coincidence.



She didn't know the name of the little flying insects with the lacy wings. Their bodies were the color of the newest grass or the crocus leaves poking out of the snow, in the places where it still snowed.

Such a refreshing color in a place where the sun baked every ounce of moisture out of the soil, your skin, your lips. Such a lovely shade of green.

Some of the lace-wing flies clustered on the tiny space of ceiling above the kitchen sink, and she noticed tiny green specks. Upon examination, they proved to be tiny, oblong eggs glued expertly onto the peeling paint. She was about to rub them off.

They were so tiny and delicate, the same color as the bodies of their parents.

She let the eggs be. Like the ants.



A fly, slow and filled with rotten watermelon. Just meant to flick it aside, off the counter, but she hit harder than she knew and it lay, half-crushed, twitching on the stained linoleum.

Something thick and yellow was oozing from the split in its abdomen.

(she was nine years old at a camp in Tillamook Park in Oregon and the embers were glowing red and she sat on the ground to look at them and when she moved her hand close to it she could feel the relentless heat and her skin tightened until she felt it could burst she glanced down and saw a furry black and yellow caterpillar inching on the ashy stones at the edge of the grass)

"I didn't mean to," said Tamara, startling herself. The fly, big from its watermelon feasts, buzzed loudly with an angry desperation.

(she picked up the caterpillar and it twisted in her hand trying to gain a foothold it's so small she marveled so weak compared to this creature I am a god and she threw the caterpillar in the fire)

"I didn't mean to," she said again, stepping over it and tearing a paper towel from the counter top dispenser. She knelt and gathered the insect in the towel, feeling it buzz strongly inside the paper shroud. Closing her eyes, she crushed it between her fingers. It seemed to fight against her. Of course it did. It wanted to live.

(she expected it to flare up immediately be ash in a second not even aware of what was happening but it stuck on a coal stuck and it didn't burn wouldn't burn instead it *writhed* she looked at it frozen and horror-struck it writhed and twisted and would not die, sluggishly a part of her mind growled at her *grab a stick and smash it* but she couldn't thinking this must end soon *nothing could live so long that small, stuck to a coal* but it did it did it did)

"I didn't mean to," she said one last time, as she opened the dusty lid of the greasy aluminum trashcan and dropped the paper towel in.

"I'm sorry," she said.

(on the way home she had to ask her Dad to stop

the car so she could throw up potato chips and charred hot dogs at the side of the freeway they thought she was carsick she didn't tell them why)



The groceries came the day before, and she was unwary in the heat, the stone house with the sage and the mountains, and she let her guard down. So when a knock came at the door she opened it without thinking.

God. Sven.

He looked down at her and smiled, charming as always.

She backed away, as if he couldn't cross the threshold, as if the house had magic that would save her.

But it didn't, and he walked in, big and arrogant and handsome.

"Didn't you miss me, Tamara?" He cocked his head at her.

She shook her head, speechless.

He walked, not towards her but skirting her, like an animal stalking its prey. He glanced at the dusty carpet, the spider webs drifting on the ceiling.

"Charming dump they found you," he said, conversationally. He fake-lunged at her, like you would at a dog to scare it, and she flinched backwards, raising her arms to cover her face.

"Hon-ey," he said in that melting-sugar voice, sorry and reproachful at the same time. "I'm not going to hurt you. And you know what? You were right to leave. You did a brave, good thing."

She lowered her arms a bit and stared at him. He didn't come any closer, so she started to breathe again.

"I didn't know," he said. "I truly didn't know it got so bad. This has been a real wake-up call, Tamara. I swear it'll be different.

"But honey, it's time to come home. It's time for us to be a family." He didn't move, keeping his hands low, below the waist.

"April, honey. Is April here with you?"

Tamara shook her head fractionally.

He smiled, his child-coaxing smile.

“That’s OK. Now, tell me where she is and we’ll go home together.”

He folded his arms and waited. Again, that little cock of the head that seemed so boyish, so mischievous.

“I’m waiting, Tamara,” he said, allowing his voice to get a little deeper.

Tamara held her breath.

“That’s alright,” he said, fake-cheerfully. “I know she’s with your parents.”

She shook her head, but her eyes gave her away. She was a lousy liar.

Sven spoke slowly, methodically. “I’m going to go get April now. Your folks’ll understand that a child needs to be with her mother and father. And then I’m coming back for you.”

Tamara found her voice. “Don’t hurt her, Sven. I’ll come back, I’ll do anything you want. Just leave April alone.”

He sounded indignant. “I’ve never touched April, and you know it. She’s Daddy’s little angel.”

And as he turned to go, she saw that spark in his eye, that spark that meant she was in trouble but that had never, never before been directed at April.

And she knew that now everything had changed.

“No,” she said, and grabbed his arm. He jerked it out of her grasp, sending her sprawling gracelessly against the wall.



Sven stared at his wife. Clumsy bitch. His irritation flared into anger, warm and familiar and good.

He backhanded her, and she spun into the cobwebs in the corner. Couldn’t even keep the place clean.

“Look what you started now,” he said, his voice low. He moved in and planted a fist in her ribs, feeling the cartilage give. She bent double and he started to slap her.

It went on a long time.

Can’t hardly blame the man.



Tamara lay smashed in the living room. The air was heavy with the heat and there was a sharp copper smell, which as the afternoon dragged on became dull and penetrating.

Her chest rose, once in a while, very slowly.

Flies came, attracted by the smell of blood, and crawled in the clotted forest of her hair. They found the blood seeping from the torn scalp, and laid their tiny white pearl eggs.

The ants came next, looping the floor with black marching coils until they found her. They crawled over her calf and up her body, examining the drying flakes of blood. Soon twin strands of ants marched from her to the nest. One strand ran along the length of her body, cleaning off the blood. The other marched directly to her mouth, each worker carrying a tiny, precious diamond of water. Each moved between her cracked lips to deposit it on her tongue.

The next morning the maggots hatched and nosed out the clotted blood. Bacteria was beginning to cluster in the raw flesh and this they found too, and ate.

The ants began to bring jade droplets of nectar, which they’d coaxed from their aphids. Sometimes Tamara’s mouth would move reflexively and an ant would be crushed. The others marched on.

The spiders gathered. They wiggled over her body, avoiding the ants. By now the maggots had cleaned the gashes in her head and the spiders crawled over these, ducking inside to explore. They wove thick white threads, smaller than surgeon’s silk, weaving the torn flesh together. Sometimes a spider, hungry from her efforts, would seize a maggot and suck its sweet juice.

Tamara was thirsty, terribly thirsty. She tried to rise and balanced on one hand, her body still sprawled every which way. Her eyes were crusted shut.

The ants hurried to her face and worked at the dried mucous. Presently she was able to blink each lid

free of its twin.

The pain sifted like sand throughout her body: no part was free of it, but it was diffuse, bearable.

Everything is bearable, given time.

Sweet dew from the ants, and the tickle of insects rooting in her, that was one day, and then she could move to the sink and drink, and she found a Coke in the fridge, and the ants liked the sweet sugar syrup too, and that was the second day.



The second day. Sven pulled over in a cloud of red dust, just past the California border. The freeway was ahead, and the occasional pickup or big rig rumbled by at intervals. He let the car bump to a stop on the dried-mud washboard by the side of the road and stared through the dusty windshield.

Everything would be all right if she'd only listen to reason.

He stared at his fist. It was still swollen and sore, and there was a small cut on the first knuckle where Tamara's tooth caught the skin. It was itchy.

Bitch.

Listen to reason.

Utah was a wash. Tamara's parents took April and moved almost two weeks ago. Someone else was in their old apartment. He asked the landlord for their forwarding address, but the old bastard, big guy, vet-type, just folded his arms and looked at him. No getting info out of him, and Utah was out of his network.

Never mind. He'd get it from Tamara. She'd have to know.

Reason.

Bitch.



The run-down cabin smelled like sage, and hot dried clay, and something else. Blood, thick and coppery, and over that a taint of something bright, metallic.

He saw the stains on the floor, and that frightened him, more than her bruises had before. He might have killed her this time.

But she couldn't be dead. Unless someone found her, moved her. But then there would be police, crime scene tape.

I knew you'd come back.

He thought the voice came from inside his head, or behind him; automatically he turned to the door. But in turning he saw her, in the doorway that lead to the rag-tag kitchen, a dark shadow: Tamara.

And then it registered: the voice was a buzz, a low-bass buzz that vibrated between his ears although it came from her...

...mouth?

She moved closer and the light from the open door illuminated her, he felt the hairs on his head rise and his breath deepen as his reflexes prepared to run or fight.

It looked like she was covered by an immense, metallic veil, like an iridescent *burka* — but the veil was moving. Beetles, thousands of them, and fat blue flies clung to her body, molded to it, crawled under and over each other but never showed a scrap of skin. They clustered on her face as well, and through them marched vines of ants in black streams. Maggots and spiders were woven into her hair, and they streamed behind her. Chains of tiny green flies wound around her wrists, about her neck, fluttering peridot.

As she stood, she hummed: her entire body vibrating with the incessant movement of insects.

She spoke again, and it was as if a giant June bug was lodged in her throat, buzzing at him.

They took April away before you got to her, didn't they? So you came back, to find out where. She's too clever for you, that Sylvia-Not. She'd never tell me. She knew I'd break and tell you. I only just figured that out myself.

The flies and beetles lifted off her face, and he saw the intricate stitching of the spiders and the tiny white worms that peeped between the threads.

A tickle at his ankle and he looked down. A red line of ants threaded its way beneath the cuff of his

pants. They were rising through the cracks in the concrete like a stream at flood.

Annoyed, he kicked them away. Something stabbed his foot, just at the ankle joint, like a red-hot ice pick. He yelped, startled.

Don't fight them, Sven, she buzzed. Let them take you. Let them change you.

The insects didn't let her lips move with the words.

They'll become your blood and your skin and your flesh. Red, like your anger. Let them change you, Sven. I learned that here. Change or die.

And for a few seconds, staring into Tamara's great, jeweled eyes, he was able to hold still while the urgent tickle of the fire ants crept up, up his legs, up his thighs, toward his testicles. He felt their heat, their bodies full of poison, but as long as he held still they did not bite.

But when the tickle brushed his scrotum he clawed at it, frantically slapping at the tiny predators between his legs, crushing them beneath his feet. A thousand ice picks, all poisoned, struck at once: he swam, waist deep, in fire. He kept on striking, spasmodically, and the ants kept biting, and at one point he was sure they must be laying his very bones bare. He fell to one knee amongst them, and they swarmed across him, cloaking him in a sheet of liquid red, striking everywhere with strong jaws, again. Again. Again.

(burning) How did she (burning) April with her, little bitch, should've (burning) reasonbitch.

In the corner of his eye, as Tamara bent close, a flash of spring green around her head. Color you could drink, could bathe in.

Death like cool water in a burning house.



Sylvia-Not stared at the smear on the floor. No sign of the woman.

She knew Tamara's name, once, but she'd become an expert at forgetting. It protected her, it protected the others, the women under her care.

She rubbed absently at her left forearm, the one with the metal plate still stitched into the bones.

It was too late, then. The husband found the safe house. Sylvia-Not allowed herself to wonder if the woman had gone willingly, or been dragged off.

Probably, as usual, a little of both.

Long ago she learned not to regret. Sometimes, mostly even, it worked. Sometimes it did not. She could not force people to save themselves.

At least the girl was safe.

What burned her was that the safe house was known now, useless for a few years at least. And it was going to be a bitch to find another one in Coachella.

Maybe on the Morongo Rez.

She'd find one. She always did.

She walked through, automatically. Least she could do was straighten up a bit.

There, in the kitchen, on the peeling linoleum floor. A bundle of newspaper, unfolding in the heat.

Another mess to clean up.

But when she knelt to look at it, it wasn't paper at all. Papery, like a wasps' nest. The thin grey stuff crumpled between her fingers.

Large, curved pieces of it. Like the empty husk of a chrysalis. Like something huge had nested here, then hatched out.

Strange.

Sylvia-Not straightened, and saw the little green flies, everywhere, on the walls, the counters, the greasy ceiling. Have to clean those out, too.

Pity, really. Such delicate creatures. Such a lovely shade of green.





Rebecca C.²⁰⁰⁷

@carpetsalesrep

by Brenta Blevins

Illustrated by Rebecca Coulthart

@carpetsalesrep Greg

It's Grete, one last time. Greg's eulogy in 140 characters: Beloved son, brother, employee. Tombstones = obituary tweets.

10 minutes ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I'm gonna stop using Greg's account. I'm now [@Grete_Violinist](#) if you want to follow me. I'm also on eHarmony, if you're looking.

45 minutes ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

[@rugs_fan](#) Thanks. In the end, it's a relief for everyone. My job at the store kept me from him at the end.

1 hour ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

We did everything humanly possible for him. Maybe he needed help other than human.

1 hour ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

[@fibers_buff](#) Yeah, a pet cemetery might work.

2 hours ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

The coffin situation will be awkward. I guess we'll have to find a sensitive funeral home. Very sensitive.

2 hours ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Hi, this is Greg's sister. I wanted to let Greg's followers know he died yesterday. He'd been ill a while.

2 hours ago

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Grete took a job in a store. I hope she still remembers to recharge my phone. I can't plug it in anymore. Twitter helps me cope.

1 Sep

@carpetsalesrep Greg

It's harder and harder to tweet. I have to jump up and down on the keys. I guess I don't weigh enough now.

24 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Can't sleep. Had a nightmare that the LOLCats were chasing me.

21 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

My parents finally learned to use Craigslist (!!) to rent out the apartment to replace my income. The renters saw me and complained, tho.

10 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Not sure what to tweet anymore. I don't do much but look out the window (raining), crawl the ceiling (dirty), and tweet.

18 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I'm shrinking! It used to be hard to get through the door. Not now! If I could sell my weight loss secret, Americans would make me RICH!

13 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

[@fibers_buff](#) It's okay. I hated traveling anyway. Work NEVER gave me any comp for travel time.

9 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

No, I don't think terrorists gave me this. Why target me? Flooring warfare? Doubt it.

9 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

[@rugs_fan](#) Yeah, they'd think I was a terrorist.

9 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

TSA would never let me travel this way.

9 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

On the internet, no one knows you're a bug.

6 Aug

@carpetsalesrep Greg

My sister thinks she could dip me in paint and I could create bug art and sell it on eBay. Would you buy?

26 Jul

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I spent all day looking at UC Davis's Entomology pages. You should have seen the antennae! Check out the feelers! Total bug pr0n.

16 Jul

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Here's something to make you feel better about your family: I just got stomped at by my parents. HOL! (Hissing Out Loud)!

13 Jul

@carpetsalesrep Greg

@rugs_fan Some prey on roaches! I always thought people in sales were supposed to be top predators!

10 Jul

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I just got a new follower: a wasp. Should I be scared?

10 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Don't you think they should let me work at home this way? I'm so fired.

[#jobfail](#)

8 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Think LOLROACH would catch on?

8 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I surfed the net, hoping the Swedes had invented easily assembled specialty furniture. But no. Ikea has nothing for Bugs of Unusual Size.

8 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Been lying under the couch lately. Don't know why. Just feel like it.

5 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I'll never get a date now.

3 Jun

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I tried watching TV, but an Orkin commercial freaked me out. It's not like I can run very fast. Roach motels? Terrifying.

31 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Would anybody believe me if I tried for disability assistance? I don't match my driver's license anymore.

22 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

It's great to Tweet with you. My parents can't understand me anymore. Guess I can't speak clearly. I feel kind of cut off.

18 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Want to know what I had for breakfast? No, I didn't think you wanted me to tweet that. It wasn't Cheerios. NOMMY.

15 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Or Viagra. I'm not even sure how that'd work for me. I still get spam for it.

12 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Look at my spam. Don't they realize I don't worry about Rogaine anymore?

12 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Could have been a virus I was exposed to from all the travel. The gossip office workers NEVER catch traveler's health woes.

10 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Maybe it was all the chemicals in the rugs.

10 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

A woman on my last sales call said, "Quit bugging me." Could it have been a curse?

10 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Maybe I'll start a bug awareness group.

8 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Ever think about entomological-related insults? "Bugging me?" "Bugging out?" "Bug off?" Harsh.

8 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I thought the excuse for not coming into work because I was a bug was totally made of Win. But no. [#jobfail](#)

5 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Talk about a nightmare. I think I'm a bug. Not a computer bug. A bug, bug. Check out my twitpic.

4 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I've tried Googling, but nothing matches my symptoms. Hand-foot-and-mouth disease? Ringworm? Scabies?

3 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Woah!!! You're never going to believe this. I've caught some virus. More correctly, I've caught some bug.

3 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I know I'm late. I'll be leaving soon.

2 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Having trouble typing on my phone for some reason.

2 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Foggy. The weather and my brain.

2 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

I CANNOT get up. SRSLY.

2 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Worst case of the Mondays EVAH!

2 May

@carpetsalesrep Greg

Bad dreams this morning. It's rainy. Having trouble getting up. Late for work.
Must be Monday. I hope this is all just a bad dream.

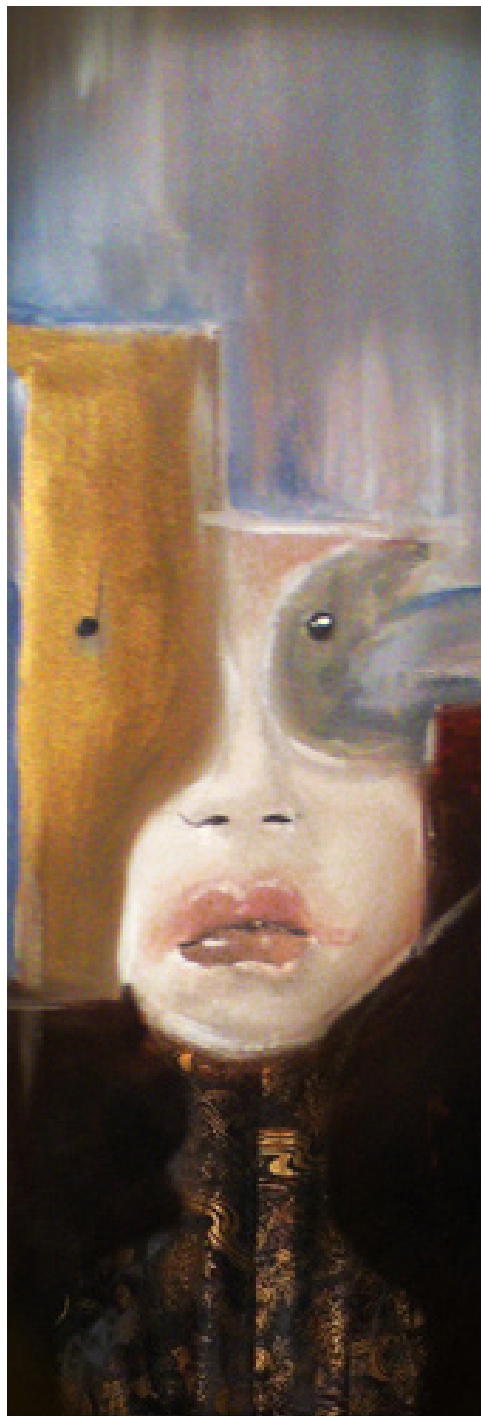
2 May



Abandoned in the Courtyard of Youth

by C.A. Cole

Illustrated by Noralie



The girl, like any girl of a certain age, of a certain time, is alone in the brick courtyard of her grandmother's manse; the susurrus of ivy covering the north wall soothes her the way the baby doll given to her by her well-intentioned relative does not. She has thrown the toy against the bricks. Dolls with molded plastic heads and unbendable limbs are for girls with no aspirations. Even at ten she wants more, more than babies with their guava-colored shit.

She has been relegated to this drafty courtyard with its rooty tree and black beetles with shiny wings, enclosed in a block of dead air, locked away from the leafy town. The tintinnabulations from the church at the end of the street fill her mid-afternoon aloneness.

She imagines cities sprouting where the masonry picnic table abuts the steep wall of her prison, the slithery bugs — darkling beetles — sedans on the road to the megalopolis of stone. The Betsy Wetsy with its cracked skull is a giant alien crashed to earth. The girl makes the doll stamp on the miniature cars like the automobile her father drives when he visits the woman in the room of crimson drapes, the crunching of shells like the sound of wrecks on the highway. Silky material blows around that woman's cataract of blonde hair, this woman who is not her mother, whom her father should not touch as if he wants to undulate into the satin with the woman and shun the little girl. She scoops up a bug to save in a plastic cup, which she'll set free in the woman's bed.

She pulls her sweater closer as the sun lowers behind the wall of ivy whose knocking echoes the sound of tiny bells, scurrying of insect feet.

Her brother, bigger, grubby in his tee-shirt, with a frown she's learned to fear, busts into her space.

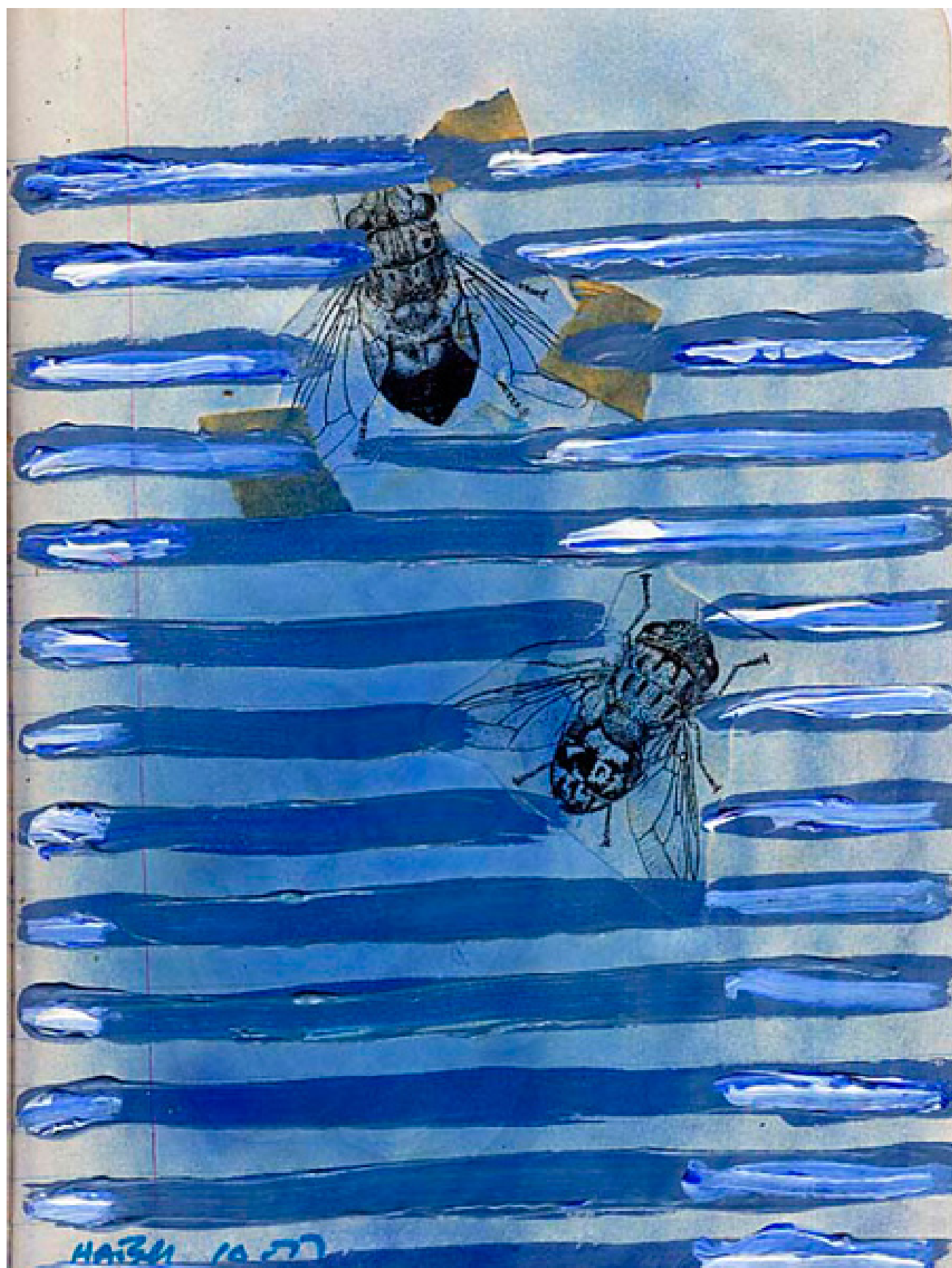
"That's mother's sweater." He yanks it off her shoulders, leaving her bare arms exposed.

"Give it back," she screams, but he runs down the alley into the last warmth along the street, hugging the yellow yarn with its handmade loops beginning to unfurl. She wishes she could douse him with a pail of water from a fissure deep in the earth. Before her he would deliquesce into a pile of oozing exoskeletons. With the tip of her fingers she'd rescue the sopping mass of yellow — almost guava — yarn and cocoon the damp sweater back around her body.



Abandoned in the Courtyard of Youth © 2011 C.A. Cole

Faceblind © Noralie



The Ferry Quick Like Rain

An insect tragicomedy

by Kirk Marshall

Illustrated by Ira Joel Haber

The car had many passengers. Imil, the indigo rhinoceros beetle with the cherrystone eyes, wanted to go to Ferny Grove. Words, hopeful footsteps, had flown off the hard-top, inciting an ephemeral debate as to whether Ferny Grove was as *ferny* as its name suggested, or if indeed it was a *grove* at all, and not merely another matchbook residential district, full of wet monkey mouths. Nevertheless she'd boarded the car, committing herself to such high adventure when her garden had been invaded by smaller editions of the creatures as graceless as cows and as large as trees. It had been all *those* terrific fright-making hands grasping at her from the safety of her rhododendron. Ferny Grove would *not* have fright-making hands, though, but coniferous branches as open and unclasping as the skies themselves, and it would be dense and grenadine green and each leaf would be a prayer; there, possum feet would inspire nightly cathedral choirs. Imil, old but knowing, black like the shadow of a nightjar, vivid with majesty like the moon's image behind closed eyes, understood that life passed quickly, and she needed that velocity experienced to end it as it *should* be ended. Hers had been a life of ideas and incongruity, of observations made about the world and its passing, and she was not to die in this car, just as she was not to die in a front garden of plants few and plastic. Her swansong was in Ferny Grove, and this car the sheet music. This trip made *sense*.

The car had many passengers. Quark was an angsty ladybird who impressed upon others his indelible knowledge fundamentally concerning EVERYTHING, but he hated talking at all, which meant that his illuminating diatribes philosophising upon the entire ball of wax would be yelled, angrily, with frustration and melodrama, at anyone possessing ear-shaped things. He got unconquerably depressed sharing the world with people who didn't know anything, didn't obtain opinions, and had only the capacity to express opinions about how they didn't

know anything. In an uncharacteristic effort, then, Quark pledged dominance over all conversations, despite and because of his loathing to converse. Quark, Imil felt, was highly amusing in his niche, personalised manner, and therefore memorable company. Quark was hoping that the convoy's trajectory would allow them to bear down on Slacks Creek because the very name was abominable, and he felt the necessity to hate it from close by.

The car had many passengers. Biff was an infelicitous gecko with a snaggletoothed hiccup. Little was known regarding Biff, as he had managed to express a cavity into the upholstery of the front passenger seat, holing himself amongst the buffy woollen innards, bristle and fabric exposing themselves as though the chair was attempting to divorce itself from a constrictive skin.

The car had *many* passengers. Lim, the religious and overzealous ghost moth; Hackles, the cockroach charlatan, master negotiator when it came to seizing a portion of food from any of the other occupants, often without service; Glenda, the self-pitying housefly in need of a holiday; and Cameron, the soldierly daddy longlegs who had known nothing but the car, always the car, its universe and microcosms, its temperament and noise, its secrets and dreams, and would have been broken lest he left its purr and plight. These were the passengers of the car. They were on the road, the M1 spindling off Woolloongabba, and they were surging with the torrent and bustle of nomadic clouds, in this womb, this car, this monster that Quark deemed a fast fast fast ferryboat — and thus they drove, were driven, drove onward, on to Ferny Grove.

'It'll be replete with dunces, *don't you worry*. Idiocy absolution! That's what the creatures there'll possess! They'll all be as lethargic as their very own synapses are, sitting lookin' at walls for the daily increment of entertainment.' Quark's diminutive

smirk was historic, commander of the fleet. He was giddy, peering with enforced embitterment out the window, hiding the apples of cherubim excitement in his expression, watching the highway pool away beneath his triangular lamp-glow eyes.

Glenda rolled her own pair, as she persisted in her ingenuous efforts to head-butt the window's surface. She allowed herself to twitter about nothing particularly, caught in the ardour of the moment itself, her diminished lawnmower motor-speak concentrating wholly in her fervour to escape. 'I can't, I can't I can't I can't, I jus' jus' *jus*' can't leave. I want home. What was I thinking, was I thinking, I wasn't thinking, I certainly wasn't thinking when I wanted to run away from home, to holiday, to holiday from home. Oh foolish, I was foolish, now this fool, now, now this fool wishes to make good an error of judgement, an erroneous judgement, a judiciously wrong one, oh no, oh sweet, oh my, oh dear — we're moving.'

'Indulge me? Shut up?' Quark suggested, his gaze returning to the unfurling ribbon road.

'Glenda, dear, we're going to Ferny Grove remember?' Imil smiled benevolently, warmth immediately airborne, tangible. 'You wanted to get away? Just temporarily. It's just a gentle escape. See?' She cocked her quizzical head toward the fog-scoured porthole they had dominion over, as other cars (*ferries*, Quark insisted), ghosted away before them. Imil was suddenly sad.

Were they fools? Were they making a mistake? Was there a Ferny Grove? Was there sense in anything? Sense in having this tall man-thing, squatting in the prow, commandeer them to a place that sounded so thoroughly intoxicating?

Was there a right way to die?

'Ferny Grove sounds peachy.' It was Biff. His face was protruding from the cavernous interior of the snaggletooth-savaged seat upholstery. He licked his glassy, opalescent eyes agitatedly with an orange lightning tongue. It was the first thing he'd said since Imil, or any of them, had been there. 'Don't you worry, li'l' housefly. It's got a cadence now, dunnit?' He fluttered his webbed hands expansively. 'Listen to them words tinkle. *Ferny Grove*.'

'Lovely contribution,' Quark remarked curtly, nodding. 'Now, please, if you would kindly molest

your eyeballs in the privacy of your own den of sin.'

Biff pouted theatrically. 'Ain't you ladybirds s'posed to be all floral perfume and summery memories? You're *mighty* angry, there, for a member of a family of good'uns. Why don'tcha give us a, a, an innocent **SMILE**?'

Quark bit his lower mandible sourly. 'Okay, friend.' His face remained rigid. 'Did you see it?'

Biff frowned. He sighed dubiously.

'No? You need to open your peepers. Go back inside and lick those big ole' lugs you call eyes, Biff. You'll *certainly* catch it next time.' Quark, thinly grinning, was well pleased in not choking upon his own sarcasm; he consequently lent himself back to the vigil at hand, surveying the direction the vessel was taking.

Biff, unwaveringly nonplussed, persevered with his conversation with Glenda. 'You won't *regret* it, now, dear. Because. I can feel it in the pores. I can feel it in the pores.'

Imil saw that Glenda, less irritated and now relatively amiable, had stopped worriedly barraging the window with her juggernaut head. The housefly scurried vertically down the wall below the window-glass, rubbing her hands compulsively as she did so.

'Mm, okay... If you, you both agree that I'm merely being overly anxious.'

'You shall love it, Glenda. It'll be bowerbird blue, the sky.' Imil gazed at the phantasmic reflections cascading off the porthole. 'And we, you especially, shall all be fine.'

Hackles erupted with transcendental speed from beneath Biff's seat, peering up at the reclining gecko warily. 'Ha *ha*, the lizard who came out his shell. You be good, there, reptileboy. If we're to get y'all's scaly tookus over to this Grove, now, we all gotsta agree to be friendly, like. Friendly, yeah?' The roach coughed bodily, his chitin flesh shimmering. 'I like that we're all peaceable, I do. Still: you start messin' with this lot, see, and I won't hesitate. I will get defensive. I will go primeval on you.' Hackles stopped, watching Biff's noncommittal expression. 'I *swear*.'

The ferry pulled to a stop. Imil had been so engaged in Hackles' steely proclamation that she

hadn't been heeding the vessel's movement. Quark, disinterested in both, had seemingly closed his eyes. The iridescent light wafting off the ground (*asphalt*, Quark had declared knowingly, asphalt roadway), had dimmed. Now the ferry — the notion of a *car* translating as ignorance and myth under Quark's decree — had docked outside a new house. It was a grim, foreboding structure beneath the epiphanous night. The tall, callow beast-man, identical in all ways to every other tall, callow beast-man, had stopped. The man released himself from the nadir of their fast fast fast ferryboat, sounds immutable pouring from his mouth.

'They, mm, they do, they get like this,' Glenda offered in a whisper, stammering in her rhythmic fashion. 'Often, as I see it occur at home, they'll turn, turn increasingly angry at themselves. It happens moreso when they're alone. They work at something, exhausted from the hardship of the toil, and, and then they won't move at all. They won't work. They'll do something else entirely.'

Quark inclined his head. 'They work, then without completing it, say, they'll stop and work at something else? Then they end up, what, aggravated in regards to that *new* work — all over?' He held his head, bowed, whilst musing. 'Admittedly, I *do* tend towards being sceptical about new thoughts and developments. But, hurrah, despite my cynicism, that there sounds entirely **STUPID**.'

Imil flew from the passenger seat to the window, observing the furtive footsteps of the man-thing outside, who appeared to be emitting fluctuating cries from the wilderness within him, directing them toward the gothic, obeisant form of the house. He flung desperate arms about himself.

Glenda turned a sheepish gaze toward her own quivering hands. 'I, I *could* tell you what he is saying. If, if you'd like, of course.'

Quark exploded. 'You *know* what that, that *critter* is actually sayin'!? How is that even *remotely* feasible?! You're a, I mean, you're a housefly — does — doesn't it take intellect to translate...' He trailed off, his face a jigsaw of puzzlement. 'What *is* he sayin', Glenda?'

Hackles crowed with peals of roach laughter.

Imil smiled hopefully. 'How is this possible, Glenda?'

'Well,' Glenda clarified, becoming increasingly self-conscious, covering her fractal eyes with her hands with exaggerated dignity. 'I, I'm not sure. I jus' kind of ha — have to know it, now, don't I? It's, um, *in* me, I think. I spend all my life *inside*, sharing the same home. You know? If, if I was incapable of comprehending these — these people, then I guess I couldn't live, um. Fruitfully with them. But *honestly*, it, it must be the fact that I jus' intimate so regularly —'

'Okay, right, good: so, your point is?' Quark directed his avaricious grin toward the man-beast, presently standing indecisively, with much bodily shaking, upon the verandah and beneath the looming eaves of the gothic sprawler. 'What's he saying? *C'mon* then. Don't hold back. Tell us.' He waited an immeasurable moment — immeasurable because it was so impossibly quick. 'Tell us tell us tell us.'

Biff warmed his ivory palms by blowing onto his fingers. 'It'd seem the oh-so-nice ladybird *really* wants to know, there, li'l' housefly.'

Quark was so transfixed by the prospect of a new influx of knowledge to boast of that he didn't consider Biff with even a cursory eye. Hackles was beaming.

'Um.' Glenda pattered vertically up the glass, cupping her specialist ears to the thick-set pane. From on the verandah, the house's door groaned outwardly, admitting a further man-beast, this time quite obviously female, into the melty evening. She and the man were discussing something with brilliant, barbarian gesticulations. 'Right now he's saying to her —'



Arnold blanched, hands everywhere. 'I'm not killing anymore, Suze. I fucking *can't*. I was there, right *there*, I was ready to go, but it wasn't *proper* —'



Glenda shrugged dutifully, her face keen, eyes wide and probing. 'And *she* says, er: "Of course it wasn't proper, you, you goddamn—" Honestly, I'm not quite certain what the next word is, but: "You *knew* —"'



‘—what it fucking meant Arnold! You *knew*! You said to me, “Suzanne, this is what I *want* to do, this is what I *must* do.” *Must*, Arnold! *Must*!’ Suzanne was distraught, pulling at her hair. ‘Who, Arnold, please tell me, just who uses the word “must,” ever, when they’re fucking *undecided*?!’ She began to bawl.



“But babe—,” Glenda reiterated cheerily, failing to grasp the urgency of the exterior drama, ‘Oh, this is really quite fun, isn’t it? It’s a bit like, well, like a *performance*.’ She cleared her throat to better voice the man-beast’s yawping pleas. “But babe, you said, you said as long as I was *happy* — and I was, but now, now I’m *not*, Suze. I’m really *not*. I can’t just trespass into innocent—”



‘—peoples’ homes, with my piece, and, and pump them all full of holes! Whilst they’re *sleeping*, I mean, really—’ Arnold was pacing erratically up and down the tempered floorboards. ‘—*Really*, fuck’s sake Suzanne, it’s not natural. Normal people don’t spend hours before work scrubbing their hands in the bathroom sink-basin, their hands to the yellowing *bone*, just to abrade the flesh from their knuckles to make it easier to account for any errant trace of blood spatter that may smut up their skin during their next kill. Normal people don’t malingering onto half-inebriated Australian politicians’ properties an’ wait ‘till the *fuck-ing*, the fucking kid walks in—! The *kid*, Suzanne!’



Glenda affected a more wheedling, high-pitched voice as Suzanne. “But Arnold, *Arnold* isn’t *normal people*!” The housefly nodded rakishly toward the assembled chorus of other car passengers.

Hackles nodded appreciatively. ‘You’re doing it perfectly, Glenda girl! In’t she doin’ it perfectly, the translation? Eh? In’t she?’



Suzanne brayed, grasping Arnold by the shoulders.

‘Listen, Arnold: you told me this would be it. You said to me that all that wallowing, self-introspective crap, the cut wrists, the ringing me up at night to just cry at me, cry down the phone-line at me, the depressed drinking, you said to me that was finished. No more ethical dilemmas or existential mid-life crises, remember? No more showing up to my parents’ place with blood on your collar, all caked on your forehead, no more telling my work colleagues to “get fucked” because “she never sees *me* anymore, she’s *my* fiancée, and you’ve *got* to be abso-frigging-lutely barkers if you think I’m gonna let you hold her *back*—” Remember, Arnold?’ Suzanne let her arms fall to her sides, unclenching and then clenching them into balled fists. ‘Don’t do this! You told me you’d make a go of being an adult, remember — don’t do this now, Arnold. You claimed that you’d finally embrace the responsibility of holding down a career, that you’d assume some emotional distance from the role, that you’d locate a way to resolve yourself to biting the bullet to pay the bills. You promised that for the immediate future you’d choose *us* over your serial crises of faith. Arnold. Don’t do this.’



The interior of the car, once permeated with whooping, applause and intent insectile expressions speaking volumes, fell significantly quiet.

Glenda, attached amphibiously to the smoke-white ferryboat window, gasped slightly in an attempt to wrest the concluding sentiments of the outside conversation into something powerful, poignant, potent. But it hadn’t been, and she knew it. It could be illuminated with no other qualities than the ones it possessed, and they only spoke of sadness and torment. “Right. I see. Because if this relationship is to exist, I have to have work. Never mind that I finally felt some hue of clarity. Never mind that this work I’m supposed to be committed to, involves, and profits from a small kid, small kids like that small kid, dying. I had to sleep under the bed where my contract was sleeping, and d’you think it was *easy*.” Glenda, rising greatly to the challenge, hissed it. “No. I’ve told the right people, I told them, I rang ‘em up. Suze, I’m not doing this shit anymore. I’m relinquishing all contracts. Maybe

I'll go on and hate myself for leaving behind the only thing I'm good at. But I'd hate myself more if I didn't do this.'" The housefly paused, then she disjoined herself from the window's embrace, darting toward the upholstery of the seat. Her face was one of disdain. "'Sleeping beneath that kid, *no*: easy it was *not*. And I get that I've hurt you in the past, but I love you, I do. If you're not willing to let that harden, let it become *real*, then, then right now this *is* easy. And I'm, I'm bidding you goodnight.'" "



So saying, Arnold staggered off Suzanne's front-steps, his face warped with silent tears.



Quark would not be conscious of it when it occurred, but the ferry was entering Slacks Creek on its passage to Ferny Grove, cutting an incisive procession through swathes of tinsel-green cattle-fields, and he'd subsequently lose the ideal occasion to denounce the various unseen, but no doubt blatant, idiocies of the suburb's inhabitants. Both he and Imil would be too preoccupied battling to stoke the flames of Lim's dwindling life.

It eventuated as it was always to eventuate.

Cameron, out of hiding, was eagerly ascending the yawning chrysalis of the passenger seat on joyous, elastic, breath-thin legs. 'My, my, it was a top show, a tophole show, Glenda. My egregious appreciations to you, young lass.' He strutted inquisitively about, thrusting out the tendrils of his longlegs. 'Forsooth, forsooth, what. How is the nancy doing, ho ho.' He peered about himself with a superior, satiric, thespian flourish. 'Aw, ho ho, just my little joke. That ghost moth knows well the careening tomfoolery of my wit. It's a special understanding, an empathy, as it were, between myself and he.' Cameron yawned magisterially. 'Yes, yes, I'm but a harlequin at the best of times. So, where is he, to whit, Lim?' "

Hackles elevated to his position of silvertongued peddler suddenly, without any classifiable progression of evolution. He sniggered. 'Look, look, the sycophantic harvestman has *finally* graced us with his convincingly *humble* manifestation. After a drinky, are we?' "

'Whatever are you implying, you decrepit animal?' Cameron remarked, chortling. 'I know not of what you speak, and I am absurdly confounded and dismayed by the tainting subtext of your foolhardy jibes — incidentally, if you have a little thimble of something about your person, I'd entirely forgive you.' The daddy longlegs whinnied in a loopy display of his present and prominent thirst.

Imil, accompanied by a solemn and atypical Glenda, was pondering the universe of the asphalt roadway as it ran wistfully through the window as wheat chaff through the wispy air. Little could be made distinguishable through the mantle of dark, but there was something adventurous and completing buried out there, in the fields where steers were resting. She hoped that Ferny Grove was as pretty.

'You're great,' Quark was hooting. 'You babbling madcase, you insatiable pissant, I'll never, never ever grow weary of your arch psychobabble and burps. Give the weirdo a drink — go on, Hackles.'

Hackles offered them a dissenting glance, as though to suggest that both daddy longlegs and misanthropic ladybird were in need of desperate emotional assistance; but in actuality it was as though the exchange had never taken place at all, because the cockroach was off within mere seconds, his body entirely vanishing at the tail end of the vacillating smile he left hanging in the air. Quark and Cameron whistled admiration at his shuttling, will-o'-wisp departure.

'That boy,' Cameron hung his head in the throes of sage cogitation.

'Yes?' Quark asked interestedly, always earnest to extract new personal wisdoms from those whom possessed it in minuscule amounts.

Cameron took it upon himself, then, to fall asleep somewhat throatily at this juncture. The remaining passengers were seemingly occupied with the proceeding course of the ferry as it sliced indiscriminately through the woodchime night. Quark empathised with this, and would have been curious to discover their present geographical location, but found that it was *arguably* more necessary to slap Cameron so as to awaken him. He did thus, with a degree of glee.

'Man the mizzen-mast, the pink pirates have

poisoned the battalion's milk!

Cameron was awake.

There was a ladybird before him with folded arms, the cheeks of its mandibles inflated in annoyance. 'What were you saying? About Hackles? I won't use the information against him or anything —'

The harvestman sat back in a soothing display of calm or perhaps unsinkable ignorance. 'I was talking? My *dear* friend, I do believe you have been exposed to the ill-effects of claustrophobic insulation, what. It does occur time and again in these vehicular contraptions, and I wouldn't be thoroughly befuddled to discover tikki-tikki fever on your person. Indeed, 'twould be elucidating and necessary of you, if you were to allow me to sever off the discriminating limb. Now, which one, do you presume, has acquired violet splotches?'

Quark, with a manic giggle of anxiety, decided at this time it would be uniformly appropriate to join Glenda and Imil in perusing the onwards-rolling black hills. The ferry's front lamps (bracketed to the prow, Quark postulated) were penetrating the sheet of night, bathing the prow itself, the metallic hood, with an eerie, glow-worm trickery.

'You get back here, young patrolman!' Cameron was bellowing pleasingly, 'That tikki-tikki fever threatens to eradicate us all! Look at you, your white shell is already plastic bucket red! Alack, this petulant submariner has deserted us to the teeth of an exotic purple gangrene!' The daddy longlegs, bleating joyfully through a slender smile, considered the required follow-up. 'Erg!' He barked. Cameron assumed that *that* was suitably dramatic, and subsequently fell to sleep once more.

In the prow of the journeymen's ferry, the man-thing called Arnold had begun to weep. It was loud and indescribable to the insects, his swollen face tainted with moisture and reddened with sleep deprivation, his head buried into the wheel. He'd seemingly maintained a silence the entirety of the trip since leaving Suzanne, but now he was blubbering inconsolably and this, in turn, disturbed the ghost moth ensconced behind the man's flattened sun visor.

For but an instant this Arnold saw nothing, teary stars precluding his vision. Unbeknownst and beside his left ear, then, was a large, unannounced albino

moth, and it was flapping aggressively, bizarrely battering the side of his clutched head. Then the ferry, unstoppable in its surge of adrenal momentum, quickened like the coming of rain.

The difference now was that it was upside down, careening off the highway, ploughing deep furrows into those distanced, ephemeral fields. And Imil, maybe for only a minute, failed to believe that there was any Ferny Grove.



The man's door swung open, and he was shanghaied to the ground. The ferry itself continued rolling sickeningly, the door snapping back shut, encasing the passengers within their speeding chimera on all sides. Then this fast fast fast ferryboat, embedding its nose into the loosened soil until vertical, hit a cow. This slowed the ferryboat's velocity with tremendous omniscience, but it assuredly didn't help the cow. The vessel continued gambolling about upon its side momentarily, groaning as it gradually righted itself. The cow, possibly crippled with a broken leg, pattered away a few metres before collapsing fitfully into the long grass. Arnold heard the incensed and agonised lowing as he came to.

Imil could feel the blood within her slow down until it was marzipan, liquid concrete, not blood at all. The ferry hadn't suffered any protracted injury, the upholstery and roof merely scratched and sagging a little more rebelliously, but the inhabitants were close to death. She'd claimed that for anyone willing to offer their loyalty to the cause upon this ferry, there'd be a unity that would endure through perdition and on to an apocryphal place of unending trees and pockets of sweet, sunny air, a place where she — well, she hadn't expressed to them *her* motives to seek out Ferny Grove. The general assumption was that it'd just be a better place. A better place. Those words had proven chocolate enough. Biff, Lim and Cameron, however, had always lived within the ferry, insofar that she knew; they had experienced no other place, and there would always be a tremulous difficulty in persuading them off the craft when finally they'd arrive at the grove. But these complications, her dwindling breath and stilling lack of conversation, they would be forgiven, all would be forgiven, once this Arnold took them to their manifest destiny. It had come to her

in her sleep one night, within the sprucing enfolds of her plastic weed. Ferny Grove had been sung of, was being sung of about her head and in her head. The sojourn had begun with the chuckle of a motor; now it was concluding with the hacking of one.

Lim was euphoric. ‘*Oh! Oh!* We welcome you, oh graceful spirit! We lay lips to the imprints your feet leave! We are your servants! We go when it is time!’ He was soaring in inebriated zeal about the passenger seat, impressing the opaque, vaporous window-glass with ineffectual, feeble fists.

Quark was squatting sullenly upon his haunches, arms about his knees. The cockroach — garrulous Hackles — had never returned with Cameron’s prospective drinks, which were often secreted and hoarded away in abandoned Coke bottles somewhere amongst the carpet in the prow, and the daddy longlegs himself was no longer attached precipitously to the seat whatsoever. Glenda, anguished, had realised such tragedy, throwing herself at the windshield porthole of the craft, lamenting loudly as though she was suffocating.

The sodium light from the centre of the vessel was agitating Lim’s fervent intensity further. In the emphysemic light, nothing was truly visible. Imil heard a wheezing, reptilian sound somewhere in the alcove of the night. She croaked, willing herself to remain alert.

‘*Biff?*’ she cried, aspiring towards alerting the miscellaneous passengers in his proximity as well.

There was a distended, self-indulgent snigger that was hollow and cavernous, and then the blinking central roof-light fixed itself, washing the grey depths with quicksilver illumination. Imil, in the membranes of dying, saw the gecko launch itself toward Lim. There were gossamer tentacles hanging from his taut, closed jaw, and Imil knew within a breath that Cameron had been murdered coldly, quickly, within the distorted madness of the ferry. He’d never command the troops again. He was eaten, and that was all.

‘*He’ll – he’ll kill you!*’ Imil released the words, her ember eyes smouldering closed.

Hackles had reappeared. He stopped, admiring the hyperbolic arc Biff’s body was describing as it thrust, inexorably, toward the crazed ghost moth and housefly.

Quark felt real unmanacled rage within. There were no irony-fuelled thoughts. *He* was just pissed off.

Biff hit the window with feline eloquence, but the door swung open as he did so. He dismembered the moth’s right wing as he passed, but he continued to fall, this time shrieking in humourless dismay, wrathful and savage.

Arnold caught the gecko on his shoulder, grunted and flicked the lizard off. He had to drive to a payphone to notify both the RSPCA and the farmer. No cow was dying today.

The door opened with such overwhelming suction, though, that Hackles flew out with it, over and beyond Arnold’s muttering silhouette. The other insects watched his passing, simultaneously closing their respective ears when they were met with a succinct crunching sound. Underneath Arnold, this man-thing’s shoe, was a cockroach. He wiped it on the long grass with a soured expression of distaste, before falling into their choking vessel, strapping himself in.

Arnold’s forehead was dribbling a capillary of dark blue blood.

“*Not seeing anyone fucking die today, not now,*” Glenda translated of the tall, callow beast-man, the housefly mumbling with nightmarish horror. Hiding the senseless pornography of the expiring evening behind tiny scared fingers.



They could say nothing revelatory, and for once this fact even prevented Quark from proffering forth a quip. Imil was shattered; how could you attempt to proceed forth after the deaths of much-loved, so necessarily *warming* companions? That gecko, that gecko had been mania-inducing from the beginning; she theorised that indeed, sometimes people avoided the company of others, murmured caustic soliloquies to themselves, continually played with their hands agitatedly, and murdered other people, innocents — with arbitrary, though nonchalant loathing — innocents who have done nothing but exacted the art of innocence. Sometimes people are simply messed-up. She’d like to believe that sometimes these messed-up people were canny enough to work out where they’d so blatantly, flaringly messed up; work out why they’d

ever consider bringing into fruition the perverse acts boiling as broth beneath the surface; and perhaps they'd then ensure that great efforts were taken to stop it, forever, with the utmost immediacy. To sorrowfully continue a life in an attempt to live down past sins, in a bittersweet tribute to eking a bettered life in the end. Sometimes messed-up people do work it out, she was sure of that. Sometimes messed-up people don't.

Later, Glenda was to inquisitively pledge her loyalty to the disillusioned minority and throw herself into Biff's snaggletooth-savaged den. She would find the disembodied heads of numerous mosquitoes fixed studiously to the inner fabric of the passenger seat. She would find a reptilian sheath of skin that Biff would have once expelled himself from. She would find methodical scratch marks, across the upholstery, of an indecipherable nature. Glenda would then sob with such attached meaning that it would move them all. Glenda was a housefly so thoroughly given to engorging on the wonderful possibilities of domestic life. She was always happy. Glenda never cried.

Lim would be clasped wholly to Quark as Imil enshrouded the militant ghost moth's quivering, sickened body with her roseate-black tarpaulin wingspan. And Imil would hang her head ashamedly, striving towards divining an ungraspable reason as to why things, sparrows, mayflies, eucalypts, Christmas beetles, cows, babies, love, solid objectives all died. And why these died *without* ceremony, to embroider the world with a festooning tapestry of sad, poor dead things. She'd been avoiding this for so long. Ferny Grove had not been, and would never equate to being a pragmatic destination; Imil felt, in her capacity to muse upon her past motivations, that this grove had provided for her the function of a safehouse, a sanctuary that would embrace her and keep her from committing to the prospect of dying, to sustain her from passing on. Nonetheless, death evaded no-one and she knew this, now, without any residual doubt. She was no longer indigo, but a coppery white; no mythological place of possum feet and uninhabited forest was going to prevent the inevitable. Even if she was in a ferryboat quicker than the congress of rainy clouds. Even if she had never slept, watching the car push the boundaries of morning to their glorious chrysanthemum zenith.

Imil was *old*, and she didn't feel as though she was allowably capable of denying this any longer.

Perhaps she could consign herself to the persevering thoughts that death *was* escapable, but she knew that a Biff would always exist, flame-angry and petty and twisted, in a place of false peace, always a griffin of thorn and scale lurking in the dark, waiting to disembowel, waiting to mar the beauty that they, and people like them, could not see. There *were* always decapitated things and blood beneath a best friends' fingers, and that was the pained, true religion of the universe. One could flee a black storm by finding a crevice and holing oneself in deep; but there was no fleeing the black storm behind one's exhausted cherrystone eyes, and so Imil, maybe for only a minute, let go.



The farmer was bemused. His face was weathered with an influx of recent undulating uneasiness, but events seemed to have transpired for the better now. His wife was tapping towards him through the field, clenching a frosted glass flute of pink lemonade to give him in dainty hands, a lemony slice of resort life in this mud-splattered bourgeois paddock off Paradise Road. There was a lozenge-orange Japanese parasol in the drink, floating above the rim.

'What'd he tell ya? Go *on*, what'd he say?'

The farmer mopped his face, relaying his confusion in semaphore. It was an extensive process involving placing the swollen left palm of his hand on his forehead and slowly, with farcical relish, dragging it down the lower echelons of his equine face until it reached his chin, at which point he'd begin anew, interchanging hands. The farmer did this for a minute until his wife pinched the bridge of his nose.

'What'd he *say*, Neville?'

'He said: "I hope your cow's leg isn't too badly broken. In fact, I'll pay for the extended surgery so that it can, y'know, one day frolic about once more." Then he wrote me a cheque. *Then* he wrote me a further cheque for the trouble. "Once *again*, I hope Spottiswode pulls through. Here's my number." And, eh—'

The farmer stopped, in registered concentration. His face puckered up in the milieu of little children everywhere, a species of expression born of small mouths chewing on segments of watermelon.

‘Yeah, then what *was* it, Neville? What *else* did he say?’

‘Then he said — holy shit Emile — the most *strange* thing I’ve heard all year. “I’m sure glad I didn’t kill anyone today. I mean, you *can* confront the black spectre of extinction with a grin every day, but if you hold on, it *does* pay to run away from it. To keep it at your back. Mm, so... I won’t kill anyone today, and I won’t tomorrow, nor the next day. Man, this is great. I mean, shit: it starts with a *cow*.” He said something else, Emile, as he was walking away. “The windscreen didn’t even shatter. That’s a goddamn’ *sign*.”’

The farmer drank his pink lemonade, gazing impassably into the distance. When Emile took the glass back, the Japanese cocktail umbrella was gone.



They lurched ambiguously to a halt.

Quark saw the door to the man’s right open, gradually and finally. The man-beast with the wrangled monkey mouth did not move though. He simply sat like a carved effigy of sour times, permitting the vessel, the *car*, to idle. There was grass there, beyond the door’s enticing maw. It would be spiky and unwelcoming but green like the cicada’s wings, green and endless. It would be grass, then, all the same.

‘Er. *Well...* Let’s *go*. The “Arnold” oddity won’t notice us, hah — he’s, he’s too busy “thinking.” And look, this has *got* to be it. This has got to be the place. ‘Mean, well — smell that *air*. It’s real. Better air. It’s air to breed for. It’s air to flirt with. *This* is Ferny Grove.’

Quark lurched into the sunshine — and the ghost moth and housefly followed suit. Albeit Quark *was* incorrect, their ferry having achieved its edifying, final destination of Redland Bay, he felt as though he’d said something from a place not dictated to by his usual surliness or penchant for irony. It felt good, actually, to say stuff that people were inflated and buoyed by.

He’d try to keep it up.

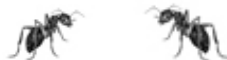


In the summer, Arnold fell into an industrious, thrifty mood and thus cleaned out his car. It had been a titan, this vehicle, a dedicated associate, and he found himself growing teary over its prospective sale. Still, he reasoned that he needed the money.

Pressing on and whilst scouring the back passenger seat with a cloth, Arnold found the small crystal corpse of an indigo rhinoceros beetle with cherrystone eyes.

Later, after he’d vacuumed the remnants of past meals from beneath the driver’s seat, he diligently packed his cleaning equipment into an old Samsung computer box. The dead beetle he put in amongst the feathery foliage of the thriving pot plant by the front door. He figured that it was simply too pretty to immediately throw away.

From there he decided to wait for the advent of the new year, at which point the insect and the ficus would marry. He couldn’t pretend to understand plants, but he had a sweet hunch that the soil would become black forest soil, bearing the fruits of the courtship.



Contributors



Forrest Aguirre's work has appeared in several venues including *Asimov's*, *The Journal of Experimental Fiction*, *Exquisite Corpse*, and *3rd Bed*. His work is forthcoming in *Gargoyle and Postscripts*. Forrest's early fiction is collected in *Fugue XXIX* (Raw Dog Screaming Press). He is currently at work on a novel, tentatively entitled *Sylostalgia*. He is agented by Scribe Agency, who are currently "shopping around" his other novels. Forrest lives in Madison, WI, land of cheese, brats, and protest.

Brenta Blevins lives and writes in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States, where she enjoys hiking with her husband. Her short fiction has appeared in such markets as *ChiZine*, *Daily Science Fiction*, and *Sword and Sorceress*.



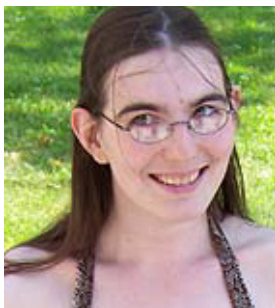
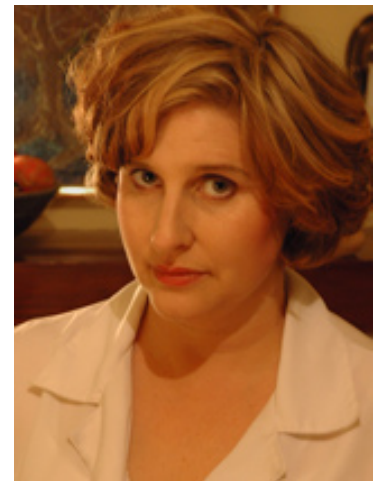
C.A. Cole continually struggles to get her computer and peripherals to work properly, although she has managed to have enough luck with them to publish stories and flash fiction both in print and online in such places as *The Broken Plate*, *Straylight*, and *Mud Luscious*, although she may have used a pen name for that one.

Rebecca Coulthart: "Nothing fascinates me more than fiction. One can say that I live in my own little world. But I'm not crazy, honest! I am very passionate about art and character design and have been so since I was a wee lass. Though only in training as of now, I aspire to become a cartoonist and director of cartoons and animated films. I'd love to spread my ideas to the world and see them in motion." A link to my Deviantart gallery is batterypoweredpotato.deviantart.com"



Ira Joel Haber was born and lives in Brooklyn, New York. He is a sculptor, painter, book dealer, photographer, and teacher. His work has been shown in group exhibitions in the USA and Europe, and is in the collections of The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York University, The Guggenheim Museum, The Hirshhorn Museum, and The Albright-Knox Art Gallery. His paintings, drawings, and collages have been published in online and print magazines such as *Rock Heals*, *Melancholia's Tremulous Dreadlocks*, *Barfing Frog*, and many more. Haber has received three National Endowments for the Arts Fellowships, two Pollock-Krasner grants, an Adolph Gottlieb Foundation grant, and a grant from Artists' Fellowship Inc. Currently he teaches art at the United Federation of Teachers Retiree Program in Brooklyn.

Samantha Henderson lives in Covina, California by way of England, South Africa, Illinois and Oregon. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Goblin Fruit* and *Weird Tales*, and reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Steampunk II: Steampunk Reloaded*, and is upcoming in *The Mammoth Book of Steampunk*. She is the co-winner of the 2010 Rhysling Award for speculative poetry, and is the author of the Forgotten Realms novel *Dawnbringer*. For more information, please see her website at www.samanthahenderson.com.



Ada Hoffmann is slowly conquering her fear of bugs. Today: 'pedes. Tomorrow: the world. When she isn't dealing with the fruit fly larvae and speedy spiders of her apartment, she goes to a graduate school in southern Ontario, working towards a Master's degree in computer science, which is terrifying in a whole different way. Her short stories are published or upcoming in *Expanded Horizons*, *One Buck Horror*, and the Innsmouth Free Press's *Future Lovecraft* anthology, among others.

Danelle Malan is a fine artist and illustrator from the city of Cape Town, South Africa. She has a BAFA (2010) from the Michaelis School of Fine Art (UCT), having majored in painting. She has a great interest in animals and the mysteries of human nature, and enjoys working an edge of humour into her art.

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Danelle-Malan/332683301255?sk=info

DeviantArt: dwuff.deviantart.com

Profile on State of the Art (with interview and more bio info, plus fine art listings): www.stateoftheart.co.za/Artists/14



Kirk Marshall is the Brisbane-born, Melbourne-based author of *The Signatory* (2012; Skylight Press); *Carnavalesque, And: Other Stories* (2011; Black Rider Press); and *A Solution to Economic Depression in Little Tokyo, 1953*. He has written for more than sixty publications, both in Australia and overseas, including *Award Winning Australian Writing*, *Wet Ink*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Voiceworks*, *Verandah*, *fourW*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Word Riot* (U.S.A.), *3:AM Magazine* (Paris), (Short) *Fiction Collective* (U.S.A.), *The Seahorse Rodeo Folk Review* (U.S.A.) and *Kizuna: Fiction for Japan* (Japan). He edits *Red Leaves*, the English-language / Japanese bi-lingual literary journal.



Noralie is a graduating illustration student at St. Joost Academy for Design and Fine Arts in The Netherlands. Her work explores the boundaries and intersections of different disciplines -- Where does 2D become 3D? How do you translate music into something visual? Can film be non-narrative? In her traditional illustrations, she combines different media to create mysterious settings. You can find more work at www.noralie.nl.

Bryan Prindiville is currently an Art Director for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) where he has also worked as a designer and illustrator since late 2000. In his free time he has had a hand in a number of web-comics including *Bassetville* and *Hello with Cheese*. Traditionally published work can be found in *Rum and Runestones*, Tee Morris' *All a Twitter*, and others. Less traditionally he can be found as a member of the live art entertainment show *Super Art Fight*. More information and work are available at his sketch blog, bryandprindiville.com.



Linda Saboe is an artist, grassroots herbalist and nature-lover. When she is not making colorful messes with paints and clay, she volunteers her time feeding and caring for baby and/or injured raccoons, skunks, squirrels and other critters. Although she rarely feeds insects, she does like them and encourages them in all their endeavors. She resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia with her husband, Bernie Mojzes and their dog, parrot, iguana, and a couple of cats that suddenly appeared and have decided to stay. To see more of Linda's work, please visit www.lindasaboe.com.



Afterword

Well. Ahem. Good day! Pardon my surprise to see you here, on this last page, this page of what the editors of this fine journal so pithily call ‘filler.’ I was quite content, you see, to pack my pipe, replenish my brandy, and spend a while reading before the fire, but no matter. It is *not*, after all, such an unpleasant task to take a few moments with that most rare of creatures, the Thorough Reader. Certainly, I have no doubt that even the most careless, butterfly-like of readers should find themselves enthralled by these tales, attention flitting from one to another with graceful randomness. But it is a dedicated soul that reads straight through, and through the authors’ and artists’ biographies, and from thence, arrive here. Allow me then, if you please, to provide some information that may pique the interest of a Reader such as yourself.

I have, of course, been instructed to remind those who have come in late that as this is Issue 2, there must, of necessity, be an Issue 1. This issue (by which I mean Issue 1 and not Issue 2 as might have been misapprehended) is available in the archive section of our web site, and contains a fascinating array of entomological expeditions rendered into prose by such luminaries as Mari Ness, J.M. McDermott, Sylvia Spruck Wrigley, John Medaille, Steve Barber, Simon Kewin, and Nathaniel Lee.

On Valentine’s Day, 2012, there shall hatch a suitably themed mini-issue, Issue 2.5, while a full issue number 3 shall swarm in May. Issue 3.5, another mini-issue, will crack its chrysalis on August 28th, 2012, commemorating the first appearance in 1974 of the ‘hello, world’ computer program. The editors have asked me to remind writers that submissions are open, and that prospective contributors to our cause should look to our submissions page on our web site for guidance.

I believe that is it. The editors just shrugged; they are at as much a loss as I. You are, of course, welcome to warm yourself a while at both the fire and the bottle, before setting out through the arthropodical gardens surrounding this humble estate as you venture to reach your home. My friends do enjoy a hot meal.

I remain, as always,
Your most Humble Servant,

Sir Reginald F. Grump XXIII, Figment



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