

The Mark Literary Review

Edition Nine

August 2019

Contents

My hat	Doug Van Hooser	3
Unicorns and Fairy Dust	Megan Madramootoo	4
Interview in the ER	Robin Ray	13
Heist	Adam Gibbs and Shawn Van Horn	15
Dreams	Ananya Guha	37
I Hold Hope	Doug Van Hooser	38
Life in the Dream Factory	Alan Swyer	39
Eirene	Christopher Moore	58
Shoelace	Doug Van Hooser	65
Surplus, 1981	Marcie McCauley	66

My Hat

Doug Van Hooser

drips with the rain of years.

 Dissatisfaction an umbrella
 for the shower of thoughts
that end in puddles.

 The switchbacks up the mountain
 appear obvious
in the rearview mirror.

 Though accidents always occur in parking lots.
 Backing up, backing out.

The metronome of moving forward
 constantly needs winding.

 Reaching the goal goes in a circle.
Surrounded by hesitation,

 the gravity of resistance holds me.
 Dates too temporal to make decisions.

Can I say what others want to hear?

 Or am I deaf to happiness,
 a piece of the puzzle that doesn't fit.

I think I know the way home.

Unicorns and Fairy Dust

Megan Madramootoo

If you really want to know how a man truly feels about you, get pregnant with his child.

It was quite apparent that I learned absolutely nothing inside of the Southwest General Birthing Center as I gave birth to Caleb without his father present in the hospital room with me. I called Adam shortly after Caleb joined the world, using my calling card to make the connection between San Antonio and the Coast Guard Station, Annapolis. And he did sound genuinely happy to hear from me, as I was just excited to tell him about the surprising blue eyes Caleb had come with. Adam chuckled quietly into the phone and jokingly asked:

“Where in the hell did he get *those*?”

It was a brief conversation; Adam had to get back to work moments into the phone call. But his tender voice through the hospital phone made me momentarily forget that I had just completed my very recent pregnancy without so much as even a Hallmark card from him during the nine months that I carried our son. But I was 19-years-old, and I still believed in unicorns and fairy dust. Giving birth to Adam’s first child was supposed to miraculously open his heart, force him to finally see that he’d been wrong for abandoning me the whole time, and make him now want to do anything he could to make it up to me and our brand new baby.

Excuse me as I take a moment or two to laugh at myself...

A baby is not a magic potion, however, as was proven by the fact that Caleb was now three, and the last time Adam saw him was almost two years before. This fact was also further confirmed inside of the living room of my meager apartment, as I forced myself to watch the desperation inside of Ian's eyes.

"I promise you...when we get married, I'll *give* you more kids. I promise. You *will* be the next Mrs. Green. I love you, but...but..."

I continued to watch Ian through burning eyes, asking quietly. "But...*what*...?"

His Adam's apple moved with the strong effort he gave in order to swallow, and his eyes began to flit back and forth as he searched for the answer to my question. After a moment, he positioned his eyes back onto mine, and swallowed one more time before opening his mouth. Just for a moment, I was almost sure that I saw tears in his eyes, too.

"But my parents don't even know about Caleb, Megan. So, you see, we *can't* have this baby right now."

His truthfulness stopped my heart inside its ribcage, forcing it to trip over the intricate system of veins and arteries that it beat against each millisecond of the day. I swallowed, as well, as I began to process what was happening. I took my hand back from Ian, suddenly not wanting to touch him anymore. Hugging myself tightly and sniffing back the tears, I forced myself to ask,

"Your parents don't know about Caleb yet?"

Ian slowly lifted himself from the fake hardwood floor,

keeping his eyes on mine the whole time. But he couldn't continue to look at me as the guilt began to cast a dark shadow across his already dark features. Looking towards his left, he responded quietly,

“No. I never told my parents about Caleb.”

I cocked my head to the side and parted my lips, shocked by my own ignorance, but not knowing how to respond. Ian was my first relationship since I had Caleb, and though things weren't perfect between us, I had no idea that his parents never knew about my son. As I stared open-mouthed at Ian, I quickly began to feel anger, shame, pain, and deceit all at once, so I brought my lips back together, licked the dryness, and said the only thing that I could think of saying,

“Get out.”

His slim face snapped back so that it was facing mine again. “Megan? *What?* No, no, *wait...* just let me explain...” He gently grabbed the sides of my arms with both of his strong hands and looked into my eyes. “No, Megan...it's not like that. You *know* how my parents are...you *know* how strict they are...”

As he rambled and begged—and begged and rambled—I thought about my three-year-old and how every time I was invited out with Ian's Haitian family, Caleb was always conveniently away with my mother for the weekends. I remembered the evening I was at Ian's parents' house celebrating his birthday a year before, and how I had begun to tell him about my attempt earlier that day to secure child support for Caleb. But Ian had quickly raised his index finger to his mouth, and with a subtle shake of his head, directed me to keep quiet. But I never put two and two together until this moment, right now.

“—but ultimately, the decision is up to you...”

Yeah right. I stepped away, not knowing the man who was standing in front of me anymore. His arms dropped by his sides. Turning away, I fixed my eyes on the living room’s small window and gazed at Ian’s black late model Acura sedan, parked parallel to the apartment—the prettiest thing in the run-down complex.

“Get out.”

I felt him hesitate behind me for a minute before he blew out a quiet breath and muttered *fine* softly and frustratingly. After some shuffling behind me, I was incredibly disappointed when I heard the jingling of his set of keys before he finally opened the door and let it close behind him. I didn’t want him to leave; I had actually wanted him to stay and to see my side of the story—to see my tears and see my pain—and to understand that what he was asking from me was wrong. I wanted him to stay until we figured everything out until we were *both* content.

But I had to be strong in front of him. I had to show him that I wasn’t going to let him knock me off my square. I was better than that and deserved way more than how he was treating me. I had to show him it was completely fucked up to ask me to kill his child.

However, when I watched him finally pull off from the side of the curb and down the street—back to his cozy home, far away to a reality that didn’t belong to me—I let the blinds close and headed to the only bedroom in the house, falling in a heap of tears upon the bed Caleb and I shared. Memories of my time with Ian over the past year and a half infiltrated my mind as I fought to understand why in the world he didn’t want this baby. Why in the world did he have to wait to marry me when he could just do it right now, if he really wanted to?

Because his parents don't know that you're already a mama, that's why.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to block the voice inside my head. Ian and I were both 22, we both had decent jobs at the time, he had his family home and I had my apartment (no matter how small it was). I wasn't doing so badly for having a small child. Ian and I could've gotten married, joined our two incomes, and lived happily ever after with Caleb and the new baby (even though Caleb was completely nonexistent to Ian's parents.)

There I go again—unicorns and fairy dust.

As the sun began to cast an orange glow across the bedroom, indicating the end of the day, my heart sank into the pit of my belly as I tried to figure out why nobody wanted me or Caleb.

Two weeks later, Ian and I were in the waiting room of The Family Reproductive Center—code for abortion clinic. The procedure was \$390, and Ian had already paid it. As I waited among the other young women who had obviously made the same mistake I had, my sandled foot tapped uncontrollably alongside the erratic beating of my heart.

I took slow deep breaths as the doctor pried my cervix open with a speculum, while silently convincing myself that I was doing the right thing because it made no sense to keep a pregnancy the father clearly did not want, not again. And I bit down hard on my lower lip when I heard the motor of the huge vacuum system switch on, making sure to hold my breath every time I felt the suctioning of my insides. I felt sick to my stomach with each forceful push of air into my uterus, but after five minutes, it was over.

Ian was waiting inside the adjoining recovery room, and

when I saw him, I immediately collapsed into his chest. He held onto me securely and let me cry out my pain and my regret in muffled cries against his dark blue t-shirt. I hated him for not having to feel the torture that only *I* had to feel, but I hated *myself* even more for getting pregnant, once again, and having no other choice but to kill an innocent part of me.

I should've seen the end of our relationship coming a lot sooner than it actually did. In the month following the abortion I became despondent as the world outside my apartment door seemed to recede further and further from my view, leaving me and Caleb inside of a darkness that was ours alone. I saw Ian less and less, and on the days that we did spend time together, he seemed impatient with me, as if being around poor, pitiful Megan was now an obligation of his. Like the morning we attended Sunday Mass, a tradition we kept for most of our relationship. As usual, after the service, we visited the crypt of the basilica, wandering around together as a family (the weekends that I had Caleb), stopping at each chapel to admire the statues and the small, but ornately decorated prayer rooms. But as I walked on that particular Sunday, I couldn't help but notice that Ian kept mostly to himself—and checked his watch every five minutes.

When we finally made it back to my home, my heart fell when he told me that he'd see me later. Another custom we kept on Sundays was to have lunch together at the apartment.

“You're *leaving*?”

His dark eyes took on that desperation look again as he leaned his head into my space to make sure I understood what he was about to say. “Megan, I gotta go. I can't always be with you all the time—”

“—but you always stay after Mass, Ian...”

He paused before rolling his eyes to the ceiling and re-treating his head, and my heart began beating faster inside my belly as my fear of his leaving me forever was quickly manifesting. He put his hands on his waist and blew out an impatient breath. “Megan...I can’t be there for you all the time. I just can’t do—”

“Can I have a cookie, Mommy?”

I looked down at my son, who was tugging gently on my dress, a pale yellow piece I had carefully picked out hours ago to secretly keep Ian by my side, knowing deep down that our relationship had already been doomed the very second I stepped foot inside the Family Reproductive Center. “Sure, Caleb, go ahead in the kitchen and get a cookie.” When I made sure Caleb was out of earshot, I looked back at Ian. “You can’t do *what*, Ian?”

“I can’t *do this* anymore, Megan!” He let his hands go and stepped away from me. He started pacing the floor, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he had rehearsed this scene before picking Caleb and me up for Mass.

He stopped in the middle of the living room and turned towards me. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t always be there for you like you want me to be. I can’t be your savior! And I *definitely* wasn’t ready for a family, at least, not right now. I mean, my God—I’m only 22 years old!”

“*What?*” My voice came out in a squeak, and I started to shake. I had to wrap my arms around my middle in order to keep my fragile psyche together because I was quickly losing it. The tears started, but I had to keep them in check because I wasn’t going to show my son—or Ian—how weak I actually was. I swallowed them down and pointed angrily at Ian, keeping my voice low. “You told me

that if I did this for you, you were going to marry me. You were going to give me more children. Why did you *lie* to me?”

He rolled his eyes upwards again and breathed out that annoying puff of air, failing to give an answer because there *was* no answer. This had all been a part of his plan. Making sure I got rid of the pregnancy because he knew that he didn't see a forever with us later on in his future. It was all part of his plan.

“I can't do this...you want too much from me. I mean, I'm not ready to be a father yet to Caleb, and yet, you want *everything* from me! Megan, I'm not even your *husband*.”

Wow. Suddenly, I felt like I was a nobody to him and to everybody else. I turned to the small living room window before the tears left my eyes and reached my burning cheeks, choosing to focus on Ian's pretty black Acura. The abortion was just the very beginning of an inevitable ending that I was too stupid to see coming. I swallowed, keeping my composure, and whispered,

“Get out then since Caleb and I are such a problem for you.”

I heard him take a step towards me. “So that's what you really want?”

He still didn't have the integrity to just tell the truth. The abortion was already done and over with; he was now a free man. I kept quiet and continued to focus on his Acura.

I heard him take another frustrated sigh (or was that a sigh of relief?) before he quietly opened and shut the apartment door behind him. He didn't even say goodbye

to Caleb.

I continued to watch through the window, silently praying that I wouldn't actually see him leave the front of the building. Praying that he would think twice and return back to the apartment. I never wanted him to leave because I *needed* him to fill that huge hole in my life that was left when Adam and the rest of my family and friends ditched me when I got pregnant with my son. I didn't know what else I was going to do because being alone meant that I was a nobody. It meant that no matter how hard I worked to provide a better life for Caleb, I was never going to be good enough to meet anyone's standards because the 'single mom' mark was going to be branded to me for life. But I told Ian to leave because that's what any woman with even a *quarter* of self-esteem inside of her would say. I had to show him that I was strong. He was supposed to realize that he was wrong for lying to me this whole time. He was supposed to realize that he didn't really want me out of his life, and that this was only a game.

I still lived in my idealized universe, though—unicorns and fairy dust...

I watched as Ian finally emerged from the entrance to the apartment and into my line of sight. He walked with his head down low and his hands stuffed into his dress pants, never looking back.

Interview in the ER

Robin Ray

How can we help you today?

Finality is its own reward. To profit from misunderstandings, the greatest division. Night sky, fluorescent stars, twinkling beacons to the early dawn of displeasure, manifests into soap bubbles, cleansing the soil of dishonesty. Bearing witness from a glass cage, it's too soon to tell if justice has been spoiled.

Where do you hurt?

Once, a kingdom suffered for want of an able farrier. Who imagined glass slippers for mares? Surprisingly, twists in the ether are softer than guilt, quietly delivered, trapped between the doors of suspicion. I'm left to revere supplication when I'm charity-bound, fortified in truth.

Do you need a doctor?

Elegant tales from proselytizing solicitors and telemarketers frustrate the envelope of belief and sympathy: conspicuously malformed, formaldehyde injected, laying waste to the playpens of soot-shrouded indignities once thought improbable, tricky. Their lies make me murder myself.

Do you have insurance?

Cancer is what cancer does. See it twirling in the moon-baked desert amongst the French [Foreign Legion]. Rhonda, there's no better time to help than the present. I dress mistakes in ermine fur or sable to elude the press. In return, grant me an obelisk of fortitude.

Would you like to see a nurse?

This morning, I woke cocooned in the old Persian rug I'd spent two paychecks for. Supple still, cleanly manageable, odor of tzatziki sauce and Persian spiced lentils in the elaborate woolen threads. I used to chew chamomile till my gut flowered in a field of chive blossoms, purple, not the bright daisies they've been known to mimic.

Heist

Adam Gibbs and Shawn Van Horn

If only they paid me by how long I *felt* I'd been here. The thought lingered in Frankie's mind, and not for the first time. Second shift hours on weeknights could drag. Not many people hit up the Kwik-Stop in tiny Melville on Saturday night, much less at 7 p.m. on a Thursday.

Since coming on shift at 4, Frankie had only occasionally looked up from his phone, and then only long enough to ring up some soccer mom buying juice for her kids on the way home from practice or a grizzled factory worker buying cigarettes. Sometimes, like tonight, it got so quiet he could hear the buzz of the neon lights in the window.

Frankie laid his phone down on the counter and ran a hand through his thinning blonde hair. He'd seen everything there was to see on his Facebook newsfeed. He'd liked every dumb post about what some former co-worker had eaten for lunch, every family photo of classmates he hadn't seen in ten years because they'd been smart enough to move away. He sighed and looked down at the new Storm Trooper tattoo on his wiry forearm, part of a growing collection that twisted up from his wrist and now reached his elbow.

"Hey, do you want me to stock shelves?"

The sudden explosion of noise right next to him made Frankie jump.

"Shit, Derek! I didn't see you there," he said with a mixture of annoyance and relief.

“Oh, sorry,” Derek apologized in that nasally, flat, atonal way of his.

“Uh, yeah, go ahead, we’re dead tonight,” Frankie shrugged. He couldn’t believe that Derek, who had been working here for years, still needed to be told what to do on a nightly basis by a guy who’d only started last summer.

Derek hurried back to the storeroom adjacent to the counter as fast as his corpulent frame would carry him, as if he needed to do what was on his mind as quickly as possible before he forgot it. For someone who thought and talked so slowly, Derek was the fastest walker Frankie had ever met. He emerged a few moments later pushing a hand cart stacked with boxes of chip bags, packages of cookies, and other assorted snacks. He arranged them on the shelves matter-of-factly. The guy did *everything* matter-of-factly, Frankie observed. The rest of the employees regarded Derek with a kind of fascination. He was bland and polite to a fault but had an oddly detached way that made him seem mysterious. Frankie always ended up shaking his head or rolling his eyes when he tried to ponder what made Derek tick.

The night wore on without much incident until 12 a.m.—quitting time—approached. Frankie heard the familiar electronic tone that accompanied the front door opening, but in this case it wasn’t a customer in search of caffeine or nicotine, just his buddy Jay showing up to take over on third shift. His lanky figure swaggered across the store. He was the king of cool, even if he was the only one who thought so.

“How’s it going, man?” Jay asked.

“Boring as hell. I don’t know how you do it on third, man.”

“That’s the best part, not dealing with assholes all shift.” Jay laughed loudly at his own remark.

“Just the one in the mirror,” Frankie smirked, earning a playful but firm punch to the shoulder.

“Fuck you. Who’d you work with tonight?” Jay asked as he scanned the magazine rack.

“Derek.”

“Oh, shit,” Jay scoffed. His eyes lit up. “How’d that go?”

“Not bad,” Frankie said with a shrug before remembering the way he’d been startled earlier, “Except when he scared the shit outta me by ghosting behind the counter and just blurting something random without warning.” Jay cackled. Talking about Derek’s eccentricities was his favorite subject.

“He’s done that shit to me, too, dude! I came in early for some overtime last week and worked four dead hours with him. He about gave me a heart attack while I was reading *Rolling Stone* and he just blurted something about his damn cat.” The two friends shared a knowing laugh.

“He talk about his plant at all?” Jay asked in a tone fully aware of how weird the question sounded.

“What?” Frankie smirked.

“He showed me a video he’d posted on YouTube of a plant in his house.”

“A plant?”

“Yeah, not weed, either,” Jay quipped, “Like just a regular house plant that he waters every day.”

“OK?” Frankie was lost.

“There’s no point, Frankie. There’s never a point with him. The guy’s a fucking freak.”

“C’mon, Jay.”

“Oh, what, Mr. Sensitive now?”

“No,” Frankie said with a touch of insecurity, “It’s just that...I don’t know, the guy’s a vet, you know? He’s probably got PTSD or some shit.” This caused Jay to roll his eyes.

“Yeah, more like he’s some bipolar weirdo who can’t function without his meds. He’s a damn robot. If that guy graduated from West Point and was in Desert Storm like he said he was, I’m fucking worried for our country.” Jay had a habit of saying crass things for the shock value and then reveling in the attention. Frankie had heard it since high school.

“Whatever,” he decided to cut off the conversation, “Time for me to get outta here.”

It was midnight. As Frankie gathered up his hoodie from behind the counter, Derek walked out of the storeroom with his windbreaker on, ready to head for the door.

“Hey, Derek, how the hell are ya?” Jay greeted him while shooting a smart-ass look to Frankie.

“Oh, pretty good,” Derek replied in his always-steady melody. Frankie and Jayson bumped fists under the counter. He’d done it again. No matter how many times you asked him how he was, Derek was always just, *‘Oh, pretty good.’* His predictability was like a game to them.

“Any hotties come in tonight?”

“Uh,” Derek chuckled awkwardly, “Not really, I guess.”

“I’ll see ya tomorrow,” Frankie interjected before Jay could press Derek’s buttons anymore.

“See ya, man.”

With that, Frankie hit the door, crossing paths with Karen, a middle-aged divorcee arriving to work third with Jay. She was the gruff type but had a soft spot for Derek.

“Hey, guys.”

“Hey, Karen,” Derek said, breaking free of Jay’s juvenile questioning.

“How you doing, Derek,” she asked.

Frankie stopped with his arm on the door and waited for it. “Oh, pretty good,” Derek replied.

Frankie glanced back at Jay, who was bent over, shoulders heaving, silently losing his shit.

Jay wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. “Well, you should get going,” he said to Derek as Karen stomped past them into the storeroom to clock in. “Probably should get home to water your plant.” He bit down hard on his lower lip. He could hardly contain his smirk.

“Yeah, I probably should.” Derek was seemingly oblivious to the sarcasm. “Have a good one,” he said as he strode to the door, leaving Jay baffled as always. Frankie held the door open for him. He was going to say goodbye but by the time he looked up from pulling his keys out of his pocket, Derek was already in his car.

#

Same shit, different day.

Friday night only differed from Thursday night in that the store sold a few more cases of Bud Light. By ten minutes until twelve, Frankie was in the familiar position of scrolling through social media on his phone as he waited for Jay and Karen to come in. About ten feet down the long counter, Derek sat reading the newspaper, silent enough that Frankie would occasionally glance his way in order to keep up his guard against surprise bursts of conversation.

He couldn't stop from glancing at Derek tonight. The last time he had seen the guy, his short, perfectly combed hair had been streaked with gray. Today it was jet black. He had given himself a very bad dye job and had the proof of it all over the end of his fingers still. As amusing as it was, he dreaded Jay seeing it. This was going to be too much and might finally send him over the line from joking to outright cruel mockery to Derek's face.

Jay and Karen arrived within moments of each other. Jay saw it immediately. He beamed with joy and glanced over at Frankie, who just nodded and gritted his teeth. Here it comes.

"Oh my God. Dude. Derek. What did you do?"

Derek looked up from his paper. "What do you mean?"

"Your hair! What did you do to your hair?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, I dyed it." His attention went back to the news.

“Holy shit. I see that. It’s--”

“Hey, Derek, what’s happening in the world?” Karen saved the day, stopping Jay before the attack began. She flipped him off and walked up to Derek.

After a brief pause, without looking up, Derek blurted, “These ATM skimmers are getting bad, I should take all my money out of the bank.” There was no context, just an awkward, self-satisfied laugh for punctuation. The other three were used to it by now.

“Yeah, sounds like a good idea, man,” Jay said, unconvincingly, his voice full of bored defeat. His fun had been taken away from him. He turned his attention to Frankie. “You coming over tomorrow night?”

“Yup,” Frankie replied, “To ingest totally legal substances.”

Karen rolled her eyes as they smirked. “You guys better be glad they don’t piss test us here.”

“Hey, I have chronic pain,” Jay pleaded while halfheartedly grabbing his lower back. Frankie laughed. Derek looked lost.

“God, it’s gonna be a long night,” Karen observed.

#

Jay’s apartment was one of four in a slightly run-down building on a hill overlooking what passed as downtown Melville. If it was a Saturday night, he and Frankie could be found sitting among the shoddy furnishings packing bowls and getting high as music thumped through the small living room.

“You working next weekend?” Jay asked.

“Yeah, unfortunately.”

“Shit, why can’t they give us the same weekends off more often?”

Frankie smiled as he took another hit. “Because they want to make sure that at least one of us shows up sober on Monday.” Jay chuckled at this as he got up and went to the fridge for a fresh beer, snatching his copy of the work schedule from its magnet when he closed the door and returned to the living room.

“Oh damn, you’re working with Derek both nights,” Jay observed, studying as closely as he could in his impaired state. “At least you can fuck with him. You should try a twelve hour shift with Karen,” he suggested, pantomiming sticking a gun in his mouth.

“You’re the only one that messes with Derek,” Frankie observed.

Jay swigged his beer. “You should try it, I know he annoys you, too.”

“Yeah, but he’s harmless, you know? A little odd, but harmless.”

“A little odd?!” Jay echoed, incredulous. “Let me show you just how odd that retard is.”

After rummaging around the couch for a moment, Jay located his smartphone and started searching furiously on it.

“What are you doing?” Frankie asked, puzzled.

“Here, look,” Jay offered the phone to him.

“You’re friends with the guy on Facebook?” It was Frankie’s turn to be incredulous.

Jay laughed. “Check it out, dude, it’s hilarious.”

For the next few minutes, Frankie scrolled and explored Derek’s profile: there were pictures of random household items and of his beloved cat, Goldie, shared stories about random news from West Point, and dozens of status updates that were, like his verbal declarations, gloriously free of irony. Frankie chuckled as he read a few aloud, then finally burst into laughter as he came across one that sought the answer to a simple question:

What’s that smell?

He read it aloud in his best Derek impression as Jay howled.

A few seconds later, Frankie came upon a picture of his wooden front door.

“Is that duct tape?” He tilted his head quizzically for a closer look. It was, in fact, duct tape, all the way around the door’s frame.

This is my theft deterrent system Derek flatly stated in the caption, *This is the only way I can make sure it’s secure. Also, it keeps the cold air out.*

Frankie was nearly in tears with laughter as Jay shook his head in amazement. “Scroll through the comments. There’s more,” Jay said.

In the comments were perplexed questions from what looked like Derek’s family: *Why did you tape the door? Why don’t you get a deadbolt? How do you get in the door if it’s taped shut?*

Derek answered the question. *I go in the back door. I keep it unlocked in case I forget my keys.*

“Wait, what?” Frankie scratched his head. “Did I read that right? He tapes his front door shut because he’s so worried about people breaking in, but he keeps his back door unlocked? And he lets the whole world know on Facebook?!”

Jay laughed himself into a coughing fit. He pounded his chest. “I know, right? What a dipshit!”

“Goddamn, if he did some of this stuff on purpose, he’d be a comic genius,” Frankie observed. Jay’s eyes lit up as he snatched the phone back.

“Bro, there’s more!” He searched excitedly for something else.

“The YouTube channel?” Frankie knew.

“Yes!”

A few moments later, they were exploring Derek’s wonderfully weird collection of uploads.

“Have you seen all of them?” Frankie asked.

“No, he just showed me the plant one. Look at some of this shit,” Jay laughed. There were brief videos of Derek watering his very common-looking plant and speaking about it as if it were a rare vine in the rainforest. There were even more of Goldie the cat. Derek spoke to it like it was a person, asking him how he was doing, if he liked his new food.

“What’s the point of these? It’s kinda sad,” Frankie observed. Jay scoffed.

“There you go, again. Look...”

They pulled up a longer video of Derek taking viewers through a tour of his house. It was bigger and nicer than Jay’s place, a house instead of a small apartment, but it was nothing special. The décor was predictably plain. Goldie occasionally darted through the frame as Derek catalogued his mundane household, saying it was because he was thinking of refinancing.

“What the fuck is refinancing?” Frankie said as they watched.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s something I have to worry about,” Jay responded as he threw his now-empty beer can towards the kitchen trash can where it missed and clattered to the floor.

The tour wound its way into Derek’s bedroom, a plain room with just a twin bed and a small dresser, where his arm emerged into the picture to open his closet.

“This is where I keep the bodies,” Jay quipped in a whiny impersonation.

The closet door opened to reveal nothing so dramatic. Just some hanging clothes, some shoes on the floor. Right next to a small safe.

“Good one, Derek,” Frankie rolled his eyes, “Show everyone where your safe is located...and that you don’t lock the back door.” He smirked at Jay. His friend returned the expression for a moment before it abruptly faded. Frankie looked confused.

“What is it?”

“What do you think is in that safe?”

“Hell, I don’t know. The most boring shit imaginable, probably. Why?”

“Remember what he said last night about taking all of his money out of the bank? With him, how can you tell when he’s joking? We could find out,” Jay said, too seriously for Frankie’s liking.

“You’re shitting me,” Frankie responded. Jay shook his head.

“You just connected the dots for me: we know where the safe is, we know all we’d have to do is go in the open back door and we’re in the house. It’s like he’s asking for it. It’s his own fault, really.” His wheels were turning and had Frankie worried.

“Dude, you’re not serious.”

“Why the fuck not? The guy’s the perfect mark. And look...” He picked up the work schedule off the couch. “He’s working a twelve next Saturday night. He’s with you until midnight and then Karen until 4 a.m. I’m off. We could roll his place in the wee hours and be gone before he gets off work.”

“You’re crazy. What are you going to do about the safe, genius? It’ll be locked.”

Jay shrugged. “It’s not that big, we could throw it in a bag, just take the whole thing. Once we get it back here we can figure out how to pry it open. When we’re done, I’ll take it back. He’s so dumb, living in his own little world. He’ll never know we were there.”

Frankie laughed. “Stop saying ‘we.’ *We* are not doing this.”

“C’mon, Frankie, don’t be a pussy.”

“You always do this, man. You get some dumb idea and don’t let off until you rope me into it, too.”

“You still sore about that detention?” Jay asked, caustically.

“Shut up, dude, we’re not kids anymore. You’re lucky you didn’t get popped when you were running around stealing cars with your idiot cousin. This could mean jail. I’m out.”

After a hard stare, Jay relented. Sort of.

“Fine. Whatever I take is mine, then. Fuck our shitty jobs, fuck Derek. I’m getting paid. And the least you can do is have the balls to keep an eye on him while he’s at work with you.”

Frankie could see there was no way to change his mind. “Okay, I’ll keep you posted. But if the cops start chasing you, throw your phone in the river...then yourself, while you’re at it.”

#

Frankie couldn’t sit still.

It was Saturday night, just after 10, and he and Derek had been selling cases of beer and packs of cigarettes to the townsfolk for hours. To Derek, it was the typical Saturday night at work. Frankie’s paranoia about Jay, however, had him on edge.

Around 10:30, he felt his phone vibrate in his jeans pocket, and the vibration seemed to shudder his whole body. Glancing over at Derek, who was, as usual, busily stocking shelves, Frankie turned away and glanced down at the screen as he pulled the device just over the top of his pocket. A text from Jay, a thumbs-up emoji followed by

a question mark. Frankie took a deep, fretful breath, and responded with a thumbs-up, sans question mark. Derek was where he was supposed to be.

#

Across town, Jay was hiding in the shadows.

He had parked his car halfway down the block from Derek's house and walked, backpack slung over his shoulder, as casually as he could up the sidewalk. So as not to be noticed by any suspicious neighbors, he walked around the block, into the vacant lot adjacent to Derek's fenced-in back yard. He approached from there, walking quickly to the rear of the house.

This was it. He had been planning all week, driving around the neighborhood, studying things, visualizing. He made sure to wear a black hoodie, black jeans, and gloves. Jay was confident he could pull it off once inside, but this was the one moment he feared most. He had to open the door. It was the easiest part of the job, but it was the biggest step. He played it cool with Frankie, but Jay was scared to death. Then it occurred to him, what if the door was locked? What then? He hadn't planned for that.

His heart racing, Jay cracked his knuckles and slowly reached for the knob, as if it might come to life and bite his hand off with any sudden movement. He turned it and pushed. It held for a moment, but then with a creak the door opened inward, revealing a semi-dark laundry room. There was a very old washer and dryer to his left. Straight ahead was another closed door leading to who knows where. Jay started forward and to his right, where the laundry room led into a kitchen. He tiptoed through it then came to a sudden and terrifying stop. The moonlight was passing through the kitchen window and the way it fell across the fridge made Jay think that for a moment

someone was standing there with him.

He wiped away at the sweat that had started to form on his brow with his sleeve. “Jesus Christ. Keep it together, man,” he whispered. He left the kitchen and was now in the front of the house. Ahead of him was the front door, still duct taped heavily along three sides. One long strand had come loose and hung from the frame. “Unbelievable. Nice security system, you fucking idiot.”

Walking into the living room, Jay heard a jangling sound a moment before Goldie darted into his view. Startled for a second, Jay calmed himself as the cat glared at him from a perch on the couch. With this feline sentinel watching over him, Jay began to explore the living room, opening drawers and closets, looking for cash or anything valuable enough to be sold. There were books and magazines in the drawers, old jackets in the closet. In the small entertainment center beneath the TV, Jay noticed a DVD player and a few dozen DVDs. Fuck it, he thought, it’s something. He quickly threw the player and DVDs into his backpack before wandering down a hallway and finding Derek’s bedroom.

#

Back at the store, Derek had finished stocking the shelves and was now situating himself down the counter from Frankie, who was starting to feel guilty about the whole thing. He watched as Derek pulled out his phone and intently started tapping away with his thumb before smiling to himself at whatever was on the screen. The guy’s so honest, doesn’t have a mean bone in his body, Frankie thought. Do we really want to do this to him? For a moment, he considered telling him the whole thing, but thought of Jay’s fate before opening his mouth.

“Whatcha looking at, man?” Frankie decided, for once, to

make small talk with his co-worker. Derek's eyes stayed on the screen as he spoke.

"Just Goldie, my cat," he said, the smile growing wider.

"Your cat? You got pictures of him on your phone?"

"No, it's my webcam," Derek informed.

Somewhere between "web" and "cam," Frankie felt the blood rush to his face.

"Oh...really?" he said, at a loss.

"Yep, see?" Derek held the phone out toward him. Frankie leaned closer to see a high resolution picture of Derek's half-lit living room, complete with Goldie slinking along the wall.

"Cool," Frankie choked out, his heart pounding.

"Yeah, sometimes I call my house phone and talk to him on the answering machine while I watch. He's so silly." Derek was practically giddy that he could interact with his pet this way.

"Watch."

Frankie was powerless to do much else as Derek picked up the store's landline from behind the counter and punched in his number.

#

Jay poked his head into each door as he made his way down the hall, briefly stopping in the bathroom to rifle through the medicine cabinet, finding prescription pill bottles bearing names he

couldn't pronounce. He assumed they were Derek's anxiety meds and tossed them in his backpack. *I should pop a couple right now*, he thought before moving on. He had to stay focused.

As he was entering the last room on the right, Derek's bedroom, he heard a shrill tone cut through the silence from somewhere else in the house, making him flinch nervously. It was the phone. Derek still had a landline, because of course he did.

His heart still pounding, Jay waited patiently as the phone on an end table in the living room rang about ten times. Finally, Jay heard an electronic beep.

"A fucking answering machine? Really?" He rolled his eyes. He heard Derek's monotonous voice awkwardly stumble through an away message followed by another beep. And then the same voice continued talking.

"Goldie? Hey Goldie..."

It couldn't be, could it? He cautiously walked back to the hallway and looked toward the living room. Being closer, the voice now sounded louder and was unmistakable: it *was* Derek. What the hell?

"Goooooldie...." Derek cooed over the answering machine as Jay stood there, dumbfounded for a moment before returning to the bedroom. Forget the weirdo. It was time to find that safe.

#

Goldie tentatively walked into the living room from the kitchen and looked around at the sound of Derek's voice, stopping before the end table with his back arched curiously. Derek chuckled. Frankie watched the screen, a

nervous wreck, thinking Jay might waltz into the frame at any moment. The realization snapped him out of the state of shock he'd been in for the last few minutes.

"Hey, do you think you could watch the register for a minute? I need to use the restroom," Frankie was already power-walking down one of the aisles before he finished the sentence. Once he was out of Derek's sight, he pulled his phone out and called Jay as he hurried into the small restroom and locked the door behind him.

Jay answered on the third ring.

"What the fuck, Frankie?"

"Dude, where the hell are you?" Frankie asked in a panic.

"I'm in his bedroom," Jay responded, feeling his pulse skyrocket as he stared down at the safe in the closet.

"He's got a fucking camera!"

"What?!"

"I asked him what he was looking at on his phone, it's a fucking webcam so he can watch his cat!"

At hearing this, Jay felt like laughing and screaming at the same time. "Has he seen me?"

"I don't think so, he seems happy as can be, but there's no way you can go through the living room without him seeing you."

"There's no other way out, man! What do we do?"

"Goddamn it, I told you not to do this," Frankie said, exasperated.

“Don’t preach to me, OK? Where are you now?”

“In the store’s men’s room.”

“Well, get back out there and keep an eye on him!”

Frankie wanted to scream at his friend but bit his lip and hung up.

Walking back down the aisles, Frankie craned his neck over the shelves to see Derek sitting dutifully at the register, phone still in front of him on the counter.

“Slow night for a Saturday, huh?” Frankie said, trying to divert his attention from the screen any way he could. Derek’s eyes squinted in concentration then went wide as he continued to look at the screen.

“Derek?”

“I gotta go,” Derek said, something like urgency in his voice for the first time Frankie could remember. With Frankie standing there awkwardly, Derek jumped up and bolted out the door.

#

What to do?

Jay was sweating in the darkened bedroom. The small safe weighed about twenty pounds but did just fit in the backpack with the electronics and the pills. Once it was secure on his back, Jay stepped over to the bedside window and looked out. The neighborhood was still quiet, but several of the neighbors were home, as evidenced by lights and TV screens glowing through their front windows.

Jay stopped and steadied himself when he reached the

hallway, as for a few nervous seconds he blanked on what to do. There was no other way, he decided. He had to make a break for it. The lamp in the living room felt like the spotlight of a police helicopter as he passed through. He lurched through the doorway into the kitchen but heard a shriek and felt something tangle up his fast-moving feet. Before he knew it, Jay had tripped over Goldie and slammed his head into the tile floor, the weight of the backpack's loot multiplying the force of the blow.

Lying there in semi-consciousness, Jay wasn't aware that several minutes had passed. He was still groggy but shaken back to life by the phone vibrating in his pocket. With considered effort, he pulled it out and held it to his throbbing head.

"Hello?" he said, barely able to process what he was doing.

"HE KNOWS! HE'S ON HIS WAY NOW, GET THE FUCK OUTTA THERE!" Frankie screamed.

Jay's eyes went wide. This news forced him to pull it together and regain his feet, legs unsteady beneath him. It took him a few tries to jam the phone back in his pocket and he took a moment to lean against the stove and get his bearings. His head was spinning and he grabbed onto the counter, afraid that he might pass out again. As he bent over a few spots of blood dripped onto the linoleum. He felt his cheek and came back with a long streak of red.

"Shit. You really fucked yourself up, Jay," he mumbled. Stumbling through the darkness, Jay made it back to the laundry room before collapsing against the washer. He laid his head against the cool metal and tried to calm himself.

"Oh, God. Come on, man, you can do this." Jay took a deep breath and stood up. He turned right for the door

and opened it, stepping through. He was out. He made it. Except he hadn't. He looked around at his surroundings, completely bewildered. This wasn't the backyard. He was in another room. This one was long and narrow, boxes stacked around the corners, the center of the room revealing an empty concrete floor. A large metal door took up the entire other end. He was in the garage.

"The fuck?" He stumbled into the center of the garage, rocking back and forth on his heels, willing his brain to focus and get him out of there.

Suddenly, the garage door started to go up. His head still ringing, it took a few seconds for Jay to figure out what was happening. By the time his dulled reflexes kicked in, he turned around directly into a pair of headlights a moment before feeling his legs blasted from beneath him as he went flying back into the wall, the scream stuck in his throat.

Derek got out of his car and considered the young man in a black hoodie lying in a heap of agony on his garage floor.

"Jay?" he said, more with curiosity than surprise. Jay couldn't move and was on the verge of passing out from the pain.

"Is Goldie okay?" Not getting a response, Derek rushed into the house. A few moments later, Jay could hear sirens in the distance, growing louder.

#

Red and blue lights bathed every surface of the neighborhood as people rubbernecked to try getting a look at the house. Jay had been arrested and loaded into an ambulance. A patrolman had just finished taking a statement from Derek and headed out to his car, leaving Derek hold-

ing and stroking Goldie in the living room.

“We’re okay, aren’t we?” he said, reassuringly, as Goldie nuzzled his chest. “Yeah, nobody messes with us, do they, buddy?”

Dreams

Ananya Guha

I have many ways to pound at truths
such as questioning the rain
or putting a gloss of the sun on my
head, only when weird calls at night
disturb dreams do I begin incantations
of regret, hurling abuses at the world;
when I wake moments loosen into
incognito of being, remembrances are
glassy, roof tops seem to rattle bones
I become a skeleton, viper of helplessness
theories fall out of place and summers disturb
It is only winters that start telling tales
of old mangy dogs
And, believe me the dreams surface.

But dreams become wild as waterfalls
and hills intercede in momentary mists
I dream of faraway tales and the niggling
doubts of life step in. I step aside
I am me. The others are a raiment in dark.

I Hold Hope

Doug Van Hooser

like a torch, expect it light my way.
 Illuminate all the potholes.
 Let me know take the curve.
But of course it fails at the intersection.
 I don't mean the light extinguishes,
 I mean I still have to decide:
right, left, or continue on.
 The road winds through the woods.
 I touch the brake before the bend.
Fear what I might meet, swerve to avoid
 and greet a tree, or come to a halt in a ditch
 overgrown with unfriendly weeds.
Like a dog, hope is a treat I fail to chew.
 I gulp it down and beg for more.
 Most results distinguished by tepid applause,
I head in another direction
 and listen to the fading caterwauling
 of incompleteness.

Life in the Dream

Factory

Alan Swyer

In a town where there's rarely a man, woman, boy, or girl without a screenplay in the works – not just people who write professionally, or even those with no visible means of support filling countless coffee houses with their laptops– Lorber was no longer surprised when approached with a “surefire blockbuster” or the next “Citizen Kane.” Since receiving his first screen credit (on a rock & roll biopic), and even more thanks to acclaim for a basketball-based film for HBO, Lorber had been slipped scripts by film students, waiters and waitresses, barmen, personal injury attorneys, and even a dentist who handed him a so-called thriller before administering a shot of Novocaine.

Nothing handed to him proved to be even moderately interesting or, in the parlance of Hollywood, commercial.

So it was all Lorber could do to keep from cringing when a friend named Francesca, whose face had adorned billboards, which led to appearances in several forgettable teen flicks, asked if she could buy him lunch so as to bounce an idea off him.

Having nixed a vegan spot she suggested, Lorber arrived at a Thai place the following Monday with a vague sense of dread.

After a few minutes spent catching up, he tried to delay the inevitable by telling Francesca about foreign “must sees”

on Netflix, Amazon Prime, plus a cable entity called MhZ Choice. From Scandinavia he mentioned “Borgen” and “The Bridge.” From France, “Spiral.” From Italy, a mini-series called “The Best Of Youth.” From England, a series called “The Hour.” From Spain a powerhouse called “Money Heist.” And from Israel a knockout called “Fauda.”

Francesca listened dutifully while nibbling on a vegetarian noodle dish, then tapped Lorber’s hand. “I know this is the day of superheroes on the big screen,” she said. “So maybe I’m crazy in thinking that my idea could be a movie. But how much do you know about my childhood?”

“Zero.”

“What if I tell you I grew up in a prison?”

“How? And why?”

“My father was a warden,” Francesca explained. “Nutty as it sounds, we lived on the prison grounds.”

“Makes it tough for friends to pop by after school.”

“No kidding.”

Putting aside his misgivings, Lorber listened attentively as Francesca told a tale of years spent in two totally distinct worlds: one filled with freedom; the other defined by walls, barbed wire and watchtowers, plus strict rules and regulations.

Only when Francesca paused to take a sip of tea did Lorber again speak. “Once you were high school age, was there any flirting?”

“Beyond flirting,” Francesca acknowledged shyly, detailing a budding romance that was squelched when it drew her

father's attention.

"So?" Francesca asked once she was finished talking.
"Think there's a chance it could get made?"

"Who knows what can get made these days. But it's fascinating."

"Really?"

"You bet."

"Then will you help me?"

"How?"

"By showing me the ropes."

Two days later, the two of them reconvened at a funky coffee house in Santa Monica rumored to be owned by Bob Dylan.

"So how do I go about structuring the script?" Francesca asked.

"You don't," replied Lorber.

"B-but every screenwriting book I've read says first you start with a structure."

"Think Billy Wilder read those books? Or Bob Towne? Or Jorge Semprun?"

"Who's he?"

"The guy who wrote "La Guerre Est Finie" for Alain Resnais, and "Z" for Costa-Gavras. Okay if I get a little hifalutin?"

“What do you mean?”

“Form should follow content. Film is storytelling, right? That means that if you start with a structure, it may not prove to be the right one for the story you’re telling. It’s a lot like architecture. Think Frank Lloyd Wright or Frank Gehry would design a house in the abstract, without seeing where it’ll be built?”

“I-I guess not.”

“If it’s overlooking an ocean or a lake, shouldn’t the views be factored in? Or up on a mountaintop? Or adjacent to a golf course? What I’m saying is that “Citizen Kane,” “Breathless,” “Annie Hall,” and a little film “Better Off Dead,” if you’ve ever seen it, have structures that emerge from the stories being told.”

“But when I look at my computer screen I freeze.”

“Then try a trick. When I want to let a story flow on its own, I do one of two things. Either I daydream the tale I want to tell—”

“Or?”

“I write a letter.”

“What kind of letter?”

“In the voice of my main character, telling a friend or relative about events that took place, and how he or she felt about them. That way, the appropriate structure emerges on its own.”

Before Francesca could respond, a guy entering the coffee house spotted them, then approached.

“Whatcha doing?” Don Paulson asked, kissing Francesca on the cheek, then giving Lorber a fist bump.

“Conspiring,” answered Lorber.

“To rob a bank? Print counterfeit money? Hack into an FBI data bank?”

“All of the above,” said Francesca.

“Mind if I sit?”

“Actually we do,” stated Lorber. “But don’t take it personally.”

#

Between hands at their weekly Thursday evening poker game, Steve Weiner, wearing his customary Clippers sweat-shirt, nudged Lorber. “Paulson says you’re making a move on Francesca with the great you-know-whats.”

“Give me a break.”

“Why else would you make time to talk screenwriting with her?”

“Being a friend’s not enough?”

“Yeah, right,” interjected Paulson.

“Besides,” said Lorber, “her story is interesting.”

“Then maybe,” said Weiner, “I ought to direct it.”

“Thanks to your legendary sensitivity.”

“Look who’s talking.”

“For Chrissake, guys,” objected Pete Guthrie. “We’re here to play poker.”

“Yeah,” added Tim Leahy. “Shut up and deal.”

#

The next time Lorber hooked up with Francesca for coffee, tips on writing quickly gave way to a pep talk. “A novelist named Bill Eastlake, who taught a creative writing class at USC, was being pestered week after week by a sorority girl asking how she could get a novel published, until he finally exploded. ‘Sweetheart,’ he snarled, ‘before you can get something published, you’ve got to sit down and write the fucking thing!’”

“But what if my script’s not good?”

“As opposed to the recent remake of ‘Death Wish’? Or Eastwood’s ‘Hereafter’ or ‘Midnight In the Garden Of Evil’? Or Scorsese’s awful pilot for ‘Vinyl’? And that’s not even mentioning Brett Ratner’s unwatchable dreck.”

“Still—”

“Still nothing.”

“So what should I do?”

“Either block out a chunk of time six days a week, every week, with no Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, or calls until you’ve finished your day’s work—”

“Or?”

“Take up golf, tennis, or group sex.”

Francesca grimaced. “Will you read pages once in a while?”

Lorber nodded.

“And promise to tell me the truth?”

“No,” teased Lorber. “I’ll post the pages – and my feelings – on social media.”

Close to two Francesca-free weeks ensued, during which Lorber struggled with a new script of his own. After three-and-a-half years of nearly back-to-back writing assignments, trying to focus on something original that he hoped eventually to direct – an autobiographical piece about growing up in a New Jersey industrial town where the arts were viewed as left-wing and sissified – seemed forced and awkward.

Frustrated, Lorber finally used his own tricks of the trade. First he spent an afternoon lying on his living room sofa, allowing his memory to drift back to anecdotes, sights, and sounds from his teenage years. Then, after taking a break to shoot baskets at a nearby playground, he forced himself to compose the kind of letter he described to Francesca, having his central character – whom he dubbed Artie – write to a childhood friend while reflecting on events from their past.

Having substituted inspiration for perspiration, Lorber finished a day in which he had resisted the urge to check social media by at last peeking at emails. To his surprise, he found a thank-you note from Francesca, together with the first twenty-five pages of her script.

Despite his curiosity, Lorber turned on the NBA Network while peddling his stationary bike for a half-hour, then hopped into the shower.

Nervously, he then finally began to read what Francesca had sent.

#

“I’m proud of you,” Lorber told Francesca by phone.

“You mean I don’t have to go to a gun shop or jump off a bridge?”

“What you’ve got to do is keep writing.”

“Not fiddling? Or fixing?”

“That comes later. A feature-length script is more marathon than sprint. If you pick and poke before you have a draft, the draft will never get done.”

“Really think it’s worth it?”

“Unless you’ve got the means to erase poverty, eliminate racism, and make the world a better place, I can’t think of anything more important to do.”

#

While Lorber’s new opus grew in fits and spurts, so too did Francesca’s. New pages arrived via email every so often, followed by a text if Lorber failed to respond immediately. “Am I on the right track?” Francesca would sometimes ask when they spoke. Or “Are they okay?” Or “Are you sure I’m not nuts?”

Worse were her midnight calls fraught with panic. “What if it’s the world’s first 65-page script?” Francesca asked Lorber on a Wednesday night. “What if it winds up 300 pages long?” she worried on a Sunday.

“Forward progress,” Lorber urged each and every time, until that phrase became a running joke between them. “Forward progress,” Francesca would say. “Forward progress,”

Lorber would repeat.

As luck would have it, both scripts – Francesca’s and Lorber’s – were finished the very same week.

In the hope that time away from his own work would afford him a measure of objectivity when he went back to it, Lorber stifled his inclination to start rewriting by focusing instead on Francesca’s screenplay.

Rather than preparing what are known as “line notes,” he ignored the typos, awkward passages of dialogue, and repetitions so as to key on more important issues.

“I’m proud of you,” he told Francesca over the phone.

“But –”

“Forget, *but*. It’s a terrific first effort.”

“Should we meet at that same coffee house?”

“Let’s do it where we’re less likely to run into Paulson or Weiner.”

“But aren’t they your friends?”

“Are there real friends in Hollywood?”

“Is somebody being cynical?”

“No,” said Lorber. “Truthful.”

#

It was at a Vietnamese restaurant on Pico where they met. Small talk prevailed while Lorber downed a dish called Turmeric Fish Noodles and Francesca chomped on tofu with

vegetables. Then the work began.

“Before we get to the content itself,” Lorber stated, “a few ground rules. First and foremost, eliminate all the camera angles. No director worth his or her salt wants to be told when to use a close up, a tilt, or a pan.”

“But I thought –”

“Forget what you thought. And by the way, since the script runs long, doing that alone will save you maybe ten pages. With me?”

Francesca nodded.

“Next, start slashing the exposition. You want to use it to create a sense of place and mood. But when you start telling us what a character is thinking or feeling, it gets long, purple, and redundant. It’s the characters’ words and actions that define them, not your descriptions.”

Francesca bit her lower lip.

“Am I killing you?” Lorber asked.

“I’ll live. And?”

“Things happen to your central character, Julie.”

“As opposed to?”

“It’ll come more to life if we see her making choices and decisions. Sure, she’s a kid. But what are her hopes? Her dreams? The key is emphasizing the pro in protagonist. But tell me, is this too much?”

“No,” murmured Francesca.

“What you’ve got is good. But it’s got the promise of being even better. If, that is, you’re willing to push, push, and push some more.”

“A friend and mentor who gives pep talks,” said Francesca with a smile. “I like it.”

Three drafts later, Francesca’s script was a lean and significantly improved 100 pages.

“What now?” Francesca asked Lorber over glasses of wine.

“I guess it’s time for it to face the world.”

“What’s the best way to make it happen?”

“The right way?” asked Lorber, drawing a nod from Francesca. “Find someone who’ll give you a million or three in a brown paper bag.”

“And other than that, an agent or manager?”

Lorber shrugged.

“I take it you’re not big on them,” said Francesca.

“My definition of an agent or manager?”

Francesca nodded.

“A heat-seeking missile. Want me to make some calls?”

“That’d be great.”

While reaching out to several people on behalf of Francesca, Lorber finally re-read his own script. Despite his inclination to be overly hard on himself, he was surprisingly pleased. Nevertheless, a week of fiddling and tweaking ensued. Then,

instead of sending it to a couple of friends as he often did, he emailed it to his agent.

Then came the waiting game on both for both him and his acolyte.

As it turned out, the first reactions came from Francesca's screenplay, which Lorber attributed to the fact that she was, in show biz terms, the new kid on the block, not to mention extremely cute.

One agent's email was terse: "Thanks, but no thanks." Another said, "Well written, but not commercial." But then came three requests to meet her.

Meanwhile the silence from Lorber's own agent, Jon Schechter, continued.

#

Ten days later, a happy but confused Francesca called. "So who do I sign with?" she asked Lorber.

"What does your gut say?"

"Honestly? That Sue Clark either read coverage or thumbed through the script, and Schechter only seems to want to get into my pants. You're with him, right?"

"Yup," mumbled Lorber.

"Not crazy about him?" Francesca asked.

"He's not the worst."

"Talk about damning with faint praise."

"And Jack Kornblau?"

“He seems to get it and like it.”

“So what’s the hesitation?”

“Does it matter he’s not with a big agency?”

“Where you’d be constantly vying for attention against big names who make fortunes? You want somebody in whose eyes you – and above all, your script – are special.”

#

The sound of the phone not ringing was beginning to get to Lorber when three days later a call finally came in from Schechter. “Let’s put our heads together and get you a big assignment,” the agent said after a quick bit of banter.

“And my new script?”

“It’s interesting.”

“Some choice of words.”

“And well written.”

“But?”

“Really think anyone’s interested in a kid growing up in blue collar New Jersey?”

“As opposed to Northern California in ‘American Graffiti’?
Or Little Italy in ‘Mean Streets’?”

“That might as well be a hundred years ago.”

“Right, in black & white and silent.”

“Tell you what,” said Schechter after a moment of silence.

“How about I slip it to three guys and see how they respond?”

“No way.”

“Because?”

“Submitting it with a shrug that says ‘I don’t think much of this, but tell me if I’m wrong’ guarantees only one thing.”

“Namely?”

“Rejection.”

“Then what do you want me to do with it?”

“Truthfully? Absolutely nothing.”

“B-but –”

Without another word, Lorber hung up. After flinging a Nerf ball across the room, he found himself facing the supreme irony that, in large part because of his efforts, his protegee had an agent who was excited about her new script, whereas he was suddenly tasked with finding a new representative for himself.

For Lorber, interviewing prospective agents and managers ranked somewhere between talking to used car salesmen and having elective root canal work. Nevertheless, while ducking calls from Schechter, he dutifully scheduled get-togethers with a handful of people who had made overtures over the previous year or two.

All the while, he did everything possible to resist twinges of jealousy each time Francesca called with updates about the excitement her script was generating. First it was a series of meetings. Next, talk of options. Then a deal with a pro-

duction company, which wanted to attach a director to the project.

Lorber made a yeoman's effort to express only positivity, as well to pitch in, when asked, with suggestions about possible directors.

Still, seconds seemed like hours, and hours like days, as he waited for reactions to his recently finished script.

Then into Lorber's life came a much-needed distraction: a request to look at a script in search of a rewrite. Told by the producer that it was a psychological thriller, Lorber had just finished reading the last page when the phone rang.

"So what do you think?" asked Tom Avakian.

"That you've either got a high-powered telescope or a new form of Google Earth. For openers, it's neither psychological nor a thriller."

"So what do we do?"

Off the top of his head, Lorber suggested changing the focus so that instead of the central character being the serial killer, the protagonist should be a father whose daughter was murdered several years before, and who suspects that the same madman is at it again. When that notion pleased Avakian, Lorber proposed making the FBI agent who's brought in a woman rather than a man, adding the potential for a romantic element.

Thrilled, Avakian cut Lorber off. "When can you start?" he asked.

"Whoa!" said Lorber. "What's your budget?"

"Roughly a million."

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Why in hell not?”

“First, though things may change in a few weeks or months, I don’t need the bucks. More importantly, I’ve got a project of my own.”

“But your ideas are great.”

“Take ‘em. They’re yours.”

“Hold it! What’ll it take to get you to say yes?”

“I’ll be the first one ever to say this,” responded Lorber. “Let me direct.”

Avakian emitted a sigh loud enough to be heard from Burbank to Malibu. “I’ll get back to you,” he muttered.

#

The next morning, Avakian called again. “Why you?” he asked.

“At your budget, if you hire someone who does that kind of thing, he’ll spend half his time hustling his next gig.”

“Whereas you?”

“Will kill to make the best film possible.”

Several seconds passed, then Avakian sighed again. “Okay,” he said with a minimum of joy.

#

Instead of using the new gig as a dowry in his quest for a

new agent, Lorber instead had his lawyer negotiate the deal. Then, operating under the assumption that a successful directorial debut would add firepower to his own project, Lorber plunged into the rewrite, while also making time for certain areas of pre-production.

Once the script had advanced to the point where it could be budgeted, the fledgling director moved on to crewing, casting, scouting locations, and the other areas requiring his attention.

Only in rare off moments did he take the time to peek at emails from Francesca detailing the runaround both she and her script were getting from director after director.

Lorber was surprised therefore, just two days before the start of principal photography, when a desperate call came at midnight.

“Sorry to bug you when you’re so busy,” Francesca whimpered, “but I’m at wit’s end. Can I ask one question?”

“Fire away.”

“What are your feelings about Steve Weiner?”

“As a guy? Friend? Poker player?”

“As a director?”

“In general?”

“For my movie.”

“You’re putting me on the spot.”

“You bet.”

“Does he strike you as the most sensitive person on the planet?” Lorber asked. “Or the one most suited to deal with the life and troubles of a teenage girl?”

There was a moment of silence before Francesca again spoke. “Will you be upset with me if I say yes to him?”

“Who am I to be upset?” answered Lorber, hiding his true feelings.

#

Three weeks later, after a long day filming, Lorber found himself craving tacos. Instead of heading home, he made a detour to Culver City, where he was about to join the ever-present line at Tito’s when he heard someone call his name.

“Heard what Weiner did?” Don Paulson said, waving for Lorber to join him.

“Tell me,” replied Lorber.

“You honestly don’t know?”

“I barely know what day it is.”

“He got Francesca fired.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“And he’s rewriting her script.”

#

For days Lorber thought of calling Francesca to commiserate. But ultimately he felt that doing so could be construed as a form of *I told you so*. So he bit his tongue, which

wasn't hard to do as filming segued into countless hours of post-production. Then, after an extensive stretch without communication, breaking the silence seemed all the more awkward.

Ultimately, though Lorber's thriller made a fair amount of money for its investors, it did not catapult him to the top of any list of bankable directors. Nor did it make the original script he wrote a hot commodity. But happily it did lead to other directing opportunities. Thanks to a friend whose songs he used as what's known as *needle-drop*, i.e. providing background music, in two different scenes, Lorber got to make a music video, then several more. Through a circuitous route, those led to his making a documentary about the Latinization of baseball, which paved the way for documentaries about Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, and breakthroughs in the treatment of diabetes.

Francesca's script, drastically rewritten and directed by Steve Weiner, barely saw the light of day, appearing briefly, with no fanfare whatsoever on Hulu.

It was only a couple of years later that Lorber happened to bump into Francesca at a Vietnamese restaurant. There he learned that, disgusted with the movie business, she had reinvented herself as an interior designer.

Eirene

Christopher Moore

Note from the editor: Trigger warning, suicide

It started in the back of his taxi.

Overweight, swarthy, late fifties, greasy hair and belly fat hanging down under the limits of his over-tight t-shirt. Brilliant red, the colour he says he could never get out of his head, the colour that, now I think back properly, he always seemed to subconsciously avoid. Never wanted to buy any clothes in red, moved away from anything with a red cover in a bookstore, flinched at the sight of tomato ketchup being poured out at dinner. He could never seem to tolerate being around anything red, and it's just one of many, many signs I feel ashamed for never having noticed.

It was meant to be a peaceful place. The resort. "Hotel Eirene." The name literally meant "peace." It was supposed to be somewhere you could relax, be a child, get away from the cares and stresses of everyday life back home. But, instead, it was the place that took away his inner peace forever. Cruelly, casually, and without hesitation. An evil lurking barely under the surface lured him into the back of a private taxi, his skin, all of ten years old, sticking to the cheap leather of the seats while the sun burned in through the glass, and stole away his innocence. Fat, oily hands reaching, groping everywhere. Cigarette-damaged voice telling him it was good, it was fun, that it was something special for them to do together. Touching him in ways no child should ever be touched. Grabbing at him like he was a toy, something to enjoy for his pleasure, then throw aside.

He still remembered, years later, the afternoon ending with just that. Literally thrown out of the cab, the backs of his legs scraping against the gravel of the dirt road where he left him, shaking fingers barely managing to pull up his shorts as the departing car sent clouds of dust and stones flying into his face as it sped off. Out of his sight, and into the depths of his psyche, for the rest of his life.

That day, the first couple of hours after it happened, there was some room left in the corner of his brain to be able to feel gratitude that he was still alive. That his throwing up a little on the leather, the consequence of sour breath and smoke, and the hot, stale air of the resort, the stench of body odour all pressing on a frightened ten-year-old until saliva rushed to his mouth and he was forced to retch, hadn't driven the man to kill him for the inconvenience. But, it was only for that one day that the relief lasted.

Because, every day afterwards, growing stronger and stronger as the years went on, he wished it had made him put him out of his misery. He wished he'd gone further, had spewed it all up, every bit of the contents of that day's breakfast, so that the monster might have finished him off when it was over, and not left him to live with the memory, the flashbacks, the all-encompassing shame.

He managed for a long time. Managed to hide it so well, managed to convince Mum and I that his quietness, his introverted nature, was just a personality choice. That he was being rude when we pressed him to open up to us, that he was shutting us out because of adolescent moodiness, that we just weren't a close enough family to enjoy the open, warm, honest group dynamics of some. He retreated into college, into study, into his books, while I ran with the extrovert inside me and pursued acting, playing to hundreds on local stages, and soaking up the crowd approval my brother recoiled from. Chalk and cheese.

And yet, that didn't stop us from being close in our own subtle, quiet way. For all the bickering, all the irritable back-and-forth, all the mutual insults, there was a bond there, underneath, below all the layers of mutual dislike. Something fundamental, at the core of us both, that still shone through often enough for us to have, if not quite heart to hearts, then at least meaningful conversations that could have been heart to hearts if we'd both trusted each other enough to truly open up. Tantalising hints of a real brother/sister bond that, if nurtured properly, *could* have changed both our pathways, could have saved him from so much internal, lonely pain, and all the consequences it finally led to. But, that's the tragedy of life. The amount of opportunities, there for the taking, that could lead us to better, richer, fuller lives, lives of greater happiness, that so often go unnoticed or unrecognised. And our chances of rescue disappear, without us ever even realising they were there.

And so, in the end, like the inevitable conclusion of a slow-filling hourglass, his pain could no longer be masked by academic success, or literary discoveries, or the relief of losing himself in fictional worlds. In the end, reality, the stark, unchanging truth of what happened across two hours on one afternoon of his life, overcame everything else, and staying in that reality, with those memories, was simply no longer possible.

He told me how it felt. The build-up of the depression that finally defeated him. How it grew and grew in strength until its insidious progress spilled over into open, visible, irreversible damage. Recognised too late to be stopped. He always took issue with people talking about it like it was a form of sadness. Like it was just a "feeling," just an emotion to be ridden out, and before long he'd be back to feeling happy again. He said they never understood that what depression did was alter the very world around you, making it seem completely alien and strange. Like you couldn't recognise it anymore, or the way things in it worked, even

though nothing about it had technically changed. He told me it was like it began to shut out everything that used to be good in your life, that made it fun, or exciting, or varied. That they somehow morphed into horrible caricatures of themselves, and mocked you for ever thinking they were good. Used the comforts you used to take from life against you, and turned them into points of attack. Turning everything gray, and leeching all the colour out of your whole existence.

And, when you put it all like that...It really was no wonder he eventually hadn't the strength left to fight it.

He remembered the moment he gave up. The moment the whole world finally felt like it was against him and wanted him gone. The moment the very crows in the trees felt like vultures waiting for his dead body to feast on, rather than just the creatures of nature going about their business they'd always been. The moment he couldn't look at tall buildings anymore, without imagining whether the fall from one could successfully kill him. The moment he couldn't think about times in the past he'd been happy without wanting to scream for the loss of his ability to feel that way. The moment he decided to wade out to sea one night on a family holiday to the coast, and let himself be swept out. Out where no-one would ever find him. Out where he'd never contaminate the world again. Not even with his body.

He's just finished telling me that now, the final, heartbreakingly matter-of-fact words hanging in the air between us, deafening in the subsequent silence. He looks at me almost as though in guilt that I'm having to hear any of it, that he's burdening me with that knowledge. And all I want to do is run to him and put my arms around him and tell him how he never has to feel that way again. But, I can't. I can't make myself move closer to him, no matter how much I might want to. My body won't obey what my heart is crying out

for. So, I just stand. And watch. And prepare myself to listen to what I know he's about to say next.

As I expect, he starts to speculate about how what he's just described is what drove me to do what I did, too. Drove me to respond to the isolation of my brother ending his life, and my mother losing hers soon afterwards in a car crash brought on by a brain addled to distraction by grief, by channelling all the energy I had. All the fortitude I needed to keep fending for myself, going to rehearsals, getting on with the show, channelling it into a slow, creeping madness. My mind disintegrating in its own way, bit by bit, just like his did. Their absence creeping up on me like a poison, finally reaching the stage where I just couldn't handle it anymore. Couldn't cope with being on my own, no parents, no brother, no family left to care about me. And so I finally snapped, got myself some pills, and gave myself one tiny, final, triumphant moment of drama. The ultimate death scene. Raised a handful of them to my mouth, and with one last thought about him...swallowed them down. A fitting end for an actress.

He's staring at me with sympathetic eyes now. A sad sort of smile that suggests he knows I wasn't fully ready when it happened, no matter how much I thought I'd prepared, how much I 'd steeled myself. And sure enough, he starts to tell me that he wasn't, either. That no one ever really is. That if I think there were moments when his lungs were filling with water that he didn't become terrified by what he was doing, I'm wrong.

I want more than ever to go to him. To hold him, to cradle him, tell him I love him and that I'm sorry I wasn't able to pick up on the truth, to realise what had happened to him, before it was too late for either of us. That I couldn't save us from lonely, terrifying ends that still felt better than the pain of keeping ourselves alive. But, instead, all I seem to be able to do is stay where I am, and tell him how my own

end felt like being torn apart from the inside for a horrible few minutes, until my body just gave in, and broke down completely. In its own way, pulling me under, just like the water did to him. I tell him I can still, in some ways, feel it. Feel the churning in my stomach, the echo of that last onslaught of destruction as the pills did their work, the hollowing out from within that I'd made the conscious decision to experience. What I don't expect is the little bit of dark humour this seems to inspire in him, the upturn of the lips, the crooked smile, the supposition that the sensation, the after effect, the lingering memory, is all just in my head. Something my gut is just conjuring up. And then, the black wit, the final zinger. "Or what's left of it."

Maybe it's the clarity of it. The fact that I feel I can actually hear him speaking that sentence, rather than just somehow being aware of the general direction of our conversation. But, something about it, about the joke, triggers a memory of something I once read in a medical book, something I was researching for one of my roles. And even as I start to remember it, it begins to make a startling sort of sense, as though illuminating my thoughts in a way they weren't a moment ago. Like the penny has at last dropped, and this whole experience, this whole encounter, seeing my brother again, being unable to physically touch him...hearing his confession about what happened to him as a boy, how his life was stolen from him, how he decided to end the remnants of it, how that led to me doing the same to mine. It all suddenly seems to come together as I remember the words in that book, and how, even at the time, I took a strange sort of comfort from them, even while understanding that, if it ever proved to be true, it would be a very bittersweet thing to experience.

Because, I read that the brain has approximately seven minutes of activity after death. A final sort of dream state accompanied by one last rush of endorphins as it dies. An experience that's supposed to make the actual moment of

passing strangely pleasurable, and something that, if true, would make a lot of our primal fears about dying completely unnecessary. Like slipping in and out of consciousness, between different levels of a dream. Thoughts and images rushing through your head at random. A final little sensory experience, just before you go. After, in a sense, you've already gone. I remember thinking then, as I do now, as I look my brother in the eye and see him give me the smile I thought I'd never see again, that who knows what faces you might see in those moments, what interactions you might have. What understandings you might come to, how things that never made sense before might at last start to. Who knows how those final sets of images in your mind might swirl and mix, what wonderful clarity they might give you, right at the end? During that final, beautiful mess of dying brain chemistry.

Shoelace

Doug Van Hooser

When I learned to tie my shoes
the knot would awake and stretch
its shoestring arms.
I would run, chance a trip, crush
the laces' aglet ends into a spider web.
As a scout learn
clove hitch, bowline, sheep bend,
and square: knots fingers have to scrub
to unravel. Now
in the mind's stomach pit, knots
are dull knives that pry on the past, unable
to puncture now.
The gallows future an empty noose.

Surplus, 1981

Marcie McCauley

The ritual of drawing up a month requires the entire kitchen table, two pens (one red and one blue), a wooden ruler, a bottle of Wite-Out, and a cup of tea. The soggy tea bag rests on the metal corner of the sink until it's needed for the second cup. (Getting two cups from a single tea bag is frugal, stretching it to three cups is a waste of the milk and sugar.) And, of course, the notebook.

My mother uses the same notebooks we have in school: Hilroys – in soft green, blue, yellow or pink – three-hole punched, although we never put them into binders. It's as though they have some other purpose, unknown to school-girls and single-mothers. She lets me have the pink ones, a perfect match for my Pink Pearl eraser, and I hoard those blank books because, in school, you have to take the pastel colour that you are dealt, and I'll need them someday.

But for now, my job is watching and listening, occasionally passing implements like a surgeon's assistant, while my mother manages the Budget. The red pen is only required for underlines, exact and succinct, and for deficits. The Wite-Out is delivered in response to a guttural sound of disappointment.

We have cousins sprinkled across three townships and my grandmother lives in Simcoe, just a little deeper into tobacco country than the small town we've moved to, and even though my father still has the same telephone number and still lives where we used to live, still sleeps down the hall from the room which I'd believed was mine, my mother doesn't want them knowing about every

dollar and cent.

And I am with her, with my own room: with the same books, the same toys, and the same stuffed animals, but with a new desk pulled from my grandmother's basement. It's really a dresser though, so the middle drawer is perfect, but the other four are meant for sweaters not homework, and the empty Tang tins and Rose Red boxes I use as organizers don't change how quickly things get lost deep down.

There are no title-pages in my mother's notebooks: no drawings, no colouring, and no maps. On the top line she writes the month and the year and then she makes each double-spread a grid, the lines drawn with the metal side of the ruler. The headers are underlined with red, but the string of dates down the left-hand side is always blue. Everything in ink. Every label, every value: my mother reads aloud.

Certain values are dependable, like the rent paid to the retired couple who live above us, and the only line for income appears above that. She copies the other values from receipts which are tucked inside the cover of the notebook until they are recorded on the corresponding dates.

Mothers' Allowance covers few extras – pop and chips on Friday nights when we watch *Dallas* and *Falconcrest* (when the antenna can pull in the signal) and an occasional jar of pickles – but there are always enough figures to require a calculator. Hers is pocket-sized and solar-powered, with buttons in '70s colours – cream and tan and orange – so small that they disappear under the pads of her fingertips.

Before the new month is drawn up, the previous month is finalized. Each element is itemized and each column totalled. Except for the surplus, which only appears on the screen. When she nears the final calculation, I hold my breath and hope for a plus-result. Once, there was nearly ten dollars.

But often there is a minus-result, which will be recorded in red ink. There must be a relationship between those pluses and minuses, but the Budget isn't about making sense of things. Once a month is totalled, it's finished.

Another way of accomplishing the same thing would be to reach the end of the month and empty her wallet, turn it upside down to release the coins from their pouch and fan any remaining bills alongside to tally the remnants. That never happens.

When there's a plus-result, we discuss our options, often visiting the newsagent's store in town when we go to my grandmother's for dinner. Having a few dollars is not just about buying a couple of magazines; it buys you time to breathe and browse, because when you are buying, the old man will not grouch at you the way he does when you are only looking.

He sits on his stool behind the counter, with his back to the window, and stares across the store. His grumbling and throat-clearing are soft warnings, issued around his sticky puffing on cigarettes. At intervals, he reaches into crinkly bags of candy, the jumbo-size that my grandmother buys only on holidays.

My mother's technique is solid. First, she asks to place two items we have decided to purchase on his counter, as a demonstration of commitment. You still can't actually read a magazine, you have to make it look like you are just leafing through the pages, assessing whether or not you will add it to the stack. The trick is to memorize page numbers when scanning the list of articles, so you can flip through until you land there accidentally-on-purpose.

I am learning how to look like I might buy. How to make gridlines and how to fill in the blanks. How to pass beneath that shopkeeper's judgement. How to underline someone

else's expectations of survival. How month after month adds up to a lifetime. I also learn that it is better to sleep on the floor in my mother's bedroom, rather than at the other end of the apartment in my own bed. And I am learning complex rituals of counting and placement. Which have nothing to do with dollars and cents. Nothing to do with money I can touch. Everything to do with budgeting my breath.

Contributors

Adam Gibbs is a writer and poet originally from Sidney, Ohio. His poetry has appeared in *Fourth and Sycamore* and been honored by the Hayner Cultural Center and Tipp City Arts Council. His novella *Dumb Luck* is forthcoming from Unsolicited Press. He currently lives in Grove City, Ohio, with his wife Lindsay and their daughter Clara.

Ananya Guha lives in Shillong in Northeast India. He has retired from service as an academic. He has eight collections of poetry and his poems have been published worldwide, as well as in several anthologies. He holds a doctoral degree on the novels of William Golding.

Megan Madramootoo majored in creative writing and English with a concentration in nonfiction at Southern New Hampshire University. Her works usually include pieces of her past that she uses to help others who have experienced the same. On a normal evening, you can find her typing furiously away by candlelight, a glass of Merlot close by her side. She resides in Maryland with her husband and four of their five children.

Marcie McCauley has had prose published in *Room* (Canada) and *Other Voices* (Canada), *Tears in the Fence* (UK) and *Orbis* (UK), and online at *The Empty Mirror* and *The Temz Review*. She writes and reads in Toronto, Canada and you can find her online at buriedinprint.com and on Twitter @buriedinprint.

Christopher Moore is a Northern Ireland-based writer, and a graduate of English from Queen's University Belfast, as well as the MA in TV Fiction Writing at Glasgow Caledonian University. He is also an alumnus of the Curtis

Brown Creative novel-writing course, and the Fireworks programme for young writers with Tinderbox Theatre Company. He has had short fiction accepted for the Octagon Theatre's "Best of Bolton" day (2017 and 2018), *Pendora Literary Magazine* (2018), *Flash Fiction Armagh* (2018), including a published anthology of that event's stories, "The Bramely" (2019), and *Nightingale & Sparrow Literary Magazine* (2019).

Robin Ray is the author of *Wetland and Other Stories* (All Things That Matter Press, 2013), *Obey the Darkness: Horror Stories*, the novels *Murder in Rock & Roll Heaven* and *Commoner the Vagabond*, and one book of non-fiction, *You Can't Sleep Here: A Clown's Guide to Surviving Homelessness*. His works have appeared, or are appearing, in *Red Fez*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *Underwood Press*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Neologism Poetry Journal*, *Spark*, *Aphelion*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Picaron Poetry*, *The Bangalore Review*, *The Magnolia Review*, *Vita Brevis*, and elsewhere.

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *The Beard* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions.

Doug Van Hooser has had poetry appear in *Chariton Review*, *Split Rock Review*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, and *Poetry Quarterly* among other publications. His fiction can be found in *Red Earth Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Bending Genres Journal*. Doug's play, "Here Ye, Hear Ye", will be performed this summer at McKaw Theatre in Chicago.

Shawn Van Horn is from Sidney, Ohio. He is the author of several short stories and poems and is currently writing his second novel. He has been published in *Our Time is Now*, *Wilmington Blues*, *Fourth and Sycamore*, *The Oddville Press*, *Adelaide*, and *Everyday Fiction*.