

# THE HUTCHLIT REVIEW



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# THE HITCHLIT REVIEW



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“Never be a spectator of unfairness or stupidity. Seek out argument and disputation for their own sake. The grave will supply plenty of time for silence.”

-- Christopher Hitchens  
*Letters to a Young Contrarian*

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# Poetry

# Ornithology

Carey Scott Wilkerson

From this upstairs window, I can only hope  
that the White Heron stalking among the Blue sage

doesn't notice me—self-conscious and boring—  
watching him in the pewter evening light,

searching the shallows for unwary minnows  
and snails. We saw him last year, scaring

the sunning turtles off their logs, practicing  
his repertoire of stop-motion dances

and now: these pirouettes, precise, silent  
in Georgia clay. Unlike the glamorous Hollywood

Kestrels we saw swooping over the Silver Lake  
reservoir, we have not learned patience enough

to wait for a changing season: you've migrated  
too soon back to Los Angeles and I keep forgetting

to call. Still, here, Purple Martins are hunting mosquitoes,  
and our Heron is nesting in the impossible space

between us under a sky gone suddenly dark  
with rumors of September except for the last

stray filaments of the Perseid, darting ghosts  
of fireflies, barely visible in the mirror of the pond.

# Scientific Method

Carey Scott Wilkerson

NOUN: a method of procedure consisting in systematic observation, measurement, experiment, and the formulation, testing, and modification of hypotheses.

Tonight, I have slipped on a banana peel.  
In a Kroger parking lot. In the rain. For science,  
of course. I confess that I find it hard to believe  
myself, but I hear a startled shopper cry out:  
"Look at that lunatic slipping on a banana peel!"  
This is proof that I have survived the head trauma  
of experiments involving bananas, parking lots,  
and rain. And the strangeness of night.

Sure, I considered other scenarios: a series of trip wires,  
a golf ball out of nowhere, a puddle of butter custard  
spread across my path. Or, without warning, my assistant  
(unpaid) could simply throw me to the ground.  
This discussion ended when I asked if he might enjoy  
putting in a little overtime whisking the custard (see above),  
and, in a regrettable confusion over nomenclature,  
he resigned and called a lawyer. Hence, the banana.

Lovers claim that falling hard bends the world's axis  
and I only want to see if what they say is true.  
I'd hate to come this far and fail my first test  
in slapstick philosophy, but I have no theory of pain.  
And yet here I am on my back, squinting at a sky  
now spun by the torque of reappearing stars,  
thinking that clowns always make this look good  
because the body naturally knows how to swoon.

# Fairy Godmother's Lament

Carey Scott Wilkerson

I shouldn't talk about clients this way,  
but Djamila the Tunisian seamstress,  
who asked for an infinite supply of fabrics,  
was found suffocated in her garden  
of wild cinnamon trees under  
six tons of lavender charmeuse.

Meredith, an up-market estate planner  
in Pacific Palisades wanted her newborn twins  
in the best possible college, at which instant  
Kirabelle and Mathilde vanished from the nursery  
and materialized in Professor Celeste Rosen's  
Women's Studies seminar at Bryn Mawr. The mother  
was charged with endangerment and the babies dropped  
from class for failure to pay the necessary fees.

Alexander wanted only money and so, lost all his  
possessions--everything in his house, including his wife--  
having turned into stacks of unmarked, non-sequential  
hundred-dollar bills. Phyllis wanted only to be in love  
and so, lost all her friends, who could not love her  
in the same way and who could not bear her  
long life of betrayed silence. I never learned to say no.

If I had one wish, it would not be for the end  
of desire's secret madness or even for a planet  
of rational, compassionate hearts. Instead,  
I would ask for some place where magic  
is just words and the wand, a piece of pine.

# Forever Shooting Garcia Lorca

Mike Wilson

Fascists seize his curly locks  
stand him up for Franco's  
firing squad cocked to kill urges crossing boundaries  
bullets fly  
to make Garcia Lorca's body dance

Riddled corpse, shoveled in a shallow grave,  
riddle me this:  
What's dirtier than a socialist?

A poof  
one sin hides the other

I see AOC she  
wears hoop earrings  
smiles red lipstick  
talks Green New Deal  
OMG Chiquita  
have you gone bananas  
neglecting your emotional work  
bringing Wall Street down?  
What's more frivolous  
than a socialist?

A flirt in a skirt  
one sin hides the other

Malcolm, Martin made a fuss but  
no one aimed the blunderbuss  
until  
they uttered blasphemy:  
*racial unity means  
economic equality*

It was decided  
some must sleep  
that others be not woke

What's more dangerous  
than a socialist?

A rabble-rouser

one sin hides the other

so no poet dare shouts *socialism is democracy*  
lest bullets make Garcia Lorca's body dance again

Burn

Mike Wilson

he's folded against the urine-soaked wall  
like a note left in the rain, head down,  
greasy gray hair a bad luck charm

I want

to turn away  
so that I don't fall into the hole he fell in

ambiguity circles his head like a fly  
he is a bomb that could explode  
a body on a stretcher  
decorated with flashing lights  
red and blue

he is me

he is you

he is

a warning from rich men with guns:  
don't let go your ladder's rung

# CORONAVIRUS #1

Mike Wilson

Craving a plague to explain the malaise of a  
frog slowly boiling in a pot of climate change  
some punishment to pay debt piled to the moon  
a reason to march to a death we can understand  
together

holding hands

no matter how much DNA we sequence  
we can't make medicine to cure what ails us  
until we develop a microscope that

peers  
deep

we strap on masks and can't quite hear  
the muffled mumbles

like tourists who don't speak the language  
we read eyes

we swim in the stench of what unites us  
afraid to take a breath

# Parable

Toti O'Brien

The reflection of a building's  
window  
rips a window into the sky.  
Narrow slit, shard of mirror  
causing the blue expanse to turn  
inside out.

And I can't believe a plane  
could bring me so fast  
half a planet away, hemispheres  
switch under my foot  
yet my body remain  
intact.

Like the sycamore trees  
fooled by overlapping seasons  
sprouting fingers of green  
among autumn leaves  
fastened to the banks  
and yet lost.

Dots of jewel tones, manmade  
(red car and blue sweater)  
break the contained polyphony  
of the landscape.  
Uncompromising hues  
uttered amidst nature's lull.

But the water, trees, bricks  
and stones forgive them  
carrying them  
like the mighty back  
of a pachyderm  
carries birds.

And I wonder  
while hours and miles collide  
where the man with the falcon went.  
His grin more ferocious  
than the eye of the predator  
perched upon his arm.

Tense smirch, lined  
with nasty undertones, sharp  
like the screech of departing trains  
like rain sparring with tar  
or a ceaseless argument  
of bells

puncturing my heart au passage  
as we quickly, quickly  
cross path.

# Because Exodus is More Than a Book in the Bible”

John Dorroh

1.

Exodus is more than a book in the Bible, more than a parable about mass migration and being lost, wandering in some god-forsaken desert for 40 years. Why in Jehovah’s name would people wander about without a guarantee that the Promised Land would have a more direct route? Mana was nothing more than pieces of dried unleavened bread, flavored with locusts and the dung of scarab beetles.

Exodus is more than a movie about harsh climates and demands from a controlling God to do this and that and make sure that you are saving your shekels for Christmas gifts because the overhead for handling frankincense and myrrh has gone up in smoke. It’s about architecture and mystery; miracles and misdemeanors; promises and predicaments.

2.

I have felt the pyramids drilling themselves into my chest and the heat of King Tut’s breath on the back of my neck, hoping that he can top me without busting a vein in his papyrus rod, filling up my body with the spirits of Ca.

3.

I like honey but the locusts are disgusting.  
I will not allow them to enter into my robe,  
nor will I avoid kicking them with my sandals  
no matter what God says that we shall do.  
I think he had the same issues with prophets  
that I do with carob dung in my morning cereal.

And Moses died at the end of the 40 years  
with the Promised Land and Mount Nebo in sight.  
Such luck.

# Meditation on the Seven

(in Seven Words on Seven Lines in Seven Stanzas)

Kaecey McCormick

## ***One (Lust)***

I'm pretty sure this is an oversight,  
not a sin, because who doesn't lust?  
Why make sin central to our existence?  
This must be a mistake in translation,  
something taken out of context and dropped  
on the unsuspecting faithful like a stone.

## ***Two (Gluttony)***

People love to let this one slide.  
Look around if you don't believe me.  
No need for faith in my words —  
the evidence surrounds us in supersized truth.  
Bible-thumping gluttons press my buttons. How  
can you eat your cake in grace  
while thousands die of starvation every day?

## ***Three (Greed)***

Just try avoiding avarice in America today.  
It seems being boiled alive in oil  
is a fair price for your luxury —  
as long as it's the best oil  
money can buy. I do my best  
to ignore cupid's claws. Tell me, how  
many pairs of shoes are too many?

#### ***Four (Sloth)***

I sat on the blue couch today,  
as if that would make a difference.  
It didn't. The boredom, the apathy, the  
indolence. The refusal to do what needs  
doing — they remain successful partners in crime.  
I tell myself omission isn't a sin,  
but lying about sinning is another sin.

#### ***Five (Wrath)***

Yesterday, a driver on crowded Highway 101  
wouldn't let me in, forcing me to  
creep along the dirty shoulder, blinker flashing,  
until someone let my car slowly sleaze  
into the unending line of unmoving vehicles.  
I imagined 101 ways for the asshole  
to suffer and die, sealing my fate.

#### ***Six (Envy)***

Since I don't care much about money,  
I thought I was safe. And then  
I saw the women on his screen  
and it gripped me from the inside.  
I've tried confession and prayer, but nothing  
works to cool the flames of jealousy  
and my desire to take their place.

#### ***Seven (Pride)***

I tell my kids I am proud  
of them, their major accomplishments, their minor  
efforts. Is that wrong? I ask him.  
He adjusts his collar and looks up.  
I don't know if he's looking for  
help from God or if my questions  
annoy him, but he never answers me.

# Leaves no mark

Candice Velasco

i was you, once  
constricted  
bound up in swaddling;  
closed in fear

at fetid troughs  
you called your water clear  
you laid me down  
inside a house of dust

my thoughtfulness you  
called wildness. my  
questions,  
willfulness

compassion, you wrought  
into sin  
at your feet, I learned hatred  
from your tongue, self-righteous

cowardice

your sinners taught me love  
gave me strength of voice, of  
incantation.

“i don’t believe you”

# Dying on a Monday

## Holly Day

I feel her growing quieter beneath the pressure of my hands  
flops and flutters like a butterfly drenched in oil, only a few moments more  
and there will be no more cheerleader left to tell you how wonderful  
you are.

I come upstairs and tell him that I've killed the cheerleader, that she's  
all gone  
there will be no more pom pom parades every time he does something  
mildly intelligent or innovative. He stares at me blankly until I explain  
there was a cheerleader inside me this whole time, that what he's been  
seeing  
is the cheerleader, but now she's gone and there will be no more

twirling flaming batons or happy puppy antics  
every time he walks in the door on time, or actually remembers to pick up  
milk  
or offers an actual compliment instead of some snort of derision  
at my choice of clothes or shoes or makeup or hairstyle  
I have given up on organizing parades or circuses or celebrations at the  
price of dignity  
all that is left is me.

# The First Step is Nothing but Air

## Holly Day

How brave must a little bird be  
To leap from its nest into the air for the first time  
To not just take that first step out onto a branch  
But to actually try to fly?

A scientist would tell me that it's all  
Just instinct, that your average baby bird  
Has less fear where heights are concerned  
Than a baby taking its first upright, unaided steps

But I would tell that scientist  
That they must not have ever seen  
A tiny sparrow, balanced wobbly on a tree branch  
Noisily squawking in protest at its parents on the ground below  
Unwilling or unable to join them for most of an afternoon.

# Trade Surplus: Chinese Exported into English

Yuan Changming

Trade Surplus: Chinese Exported into English

John does not deserve that award.

*You can you up [你行你上啊], no can no BB [不行别哔哔]!*

Joe was stopped by the police near the school zone.

*No zuo no die [不作不死].*

Jill spent fifty thousand on a pair of shoes.

*Her father is a tubao [土豪]from Beijing.*

Jack's bitcoin has risen by more than 1500 % this year.

*Wow, the digital gold is so gelivable [给力]!*

Jeff feels full of *niubility* [牛逼]and brags too much.

*That only reflects his shability [傻逼].*

Jennifer enjoys playing *zhuangbility* [装逼].

*She is nobody but a sexretary [小秘].*

Jenny was lost among *people mountain people sea* [人山人海].

*I don't blame her in such a gunvernment [枪政府]celebration.*

Same Wordings: English Spelling vs.  
Chinese Syntax  
Yuan Changming

钱是没有问题

Money is having no problem

问题是没有钱

Problem is having no money

有钱是没问题

Having money is no problem

没有钱是问题

Having no money is problem

问题是钱没有

Problem is having no money

钱没有是问题

Having no money is problem

# Fiction

# Fishbowl Frenzy

Susie Porter

“You’ll never guess who I saw the other day,” my mother says.

“Oh really?” I am somewhat distracted. My mother likes to ramble. Before I left her here, I don’t think I noticed it much. But, now that I’m away at college most of the time, whenever I come back, her chatter seems incessant.

“He was holding a sign, begging for money,” she continues.

As I pull her dusty-smelling Buick into a narrow parking space, something in my gut clenches.

“Kyle?” I ask her.

She nods, painting a look of sorrow and remorse on her face. I want to smack it off of her.

She doesn’t know a thing about Kyle, about what he was to me. We weren’t true loves or anything like that, but he was a good friend, a good boyfriend, someone who rescued me from her all-encompassing, clinging need.

I don’t say anything as I help her unload her shopping bags. I’m silent still as we walk up the stairs to her apartment, the one she’d moved into after selling my childhood home, the home she’d always promised would be left to me.

I help her put away her groceries, the blouses she bought that look just like the blouses she already owns.

“Do you have to be getting back now?” she asks. There’s a look in her eyes like she expects me to say yes and like she’s already judging me for saying it.

I’m here less and less. I help her less and less. But it’s not my fault that my mom is seventy and needs help. She’s not forty or fifty like all of my friends’ parents. She’s old. She acts more feeble than she is. She still acts like she needs me. I don’t want her to need me. I never wanted her to need me the way she did.

“I don’t have to go quite yet,” I tell her.

“Oh,” she says, “good. I’ll make us some coffee.”

As she goes and bustles in her tiny kitchen, my mind wanders to Kyle.

We’d grown up together. We were best buddies in elementary school until, suddenly, all the girls had cooties.

Then, junior year of high school, I’d run into him at a kegger. He’d offered me a beer, smoked me up. We’d had a brief fling. We’d had fun, and God how I’d needed fun.

We'd lasted longer than anyone thought we would. He was too hot for me, too cool, everyone said. But we'd had a nice effect on each other. A calmness, a gentleness seemed to envelop us when we were together.

But still, a couple of months before graduation, things had petered out.

I had been kind of talking to Greg Olsen behind Kyle's back. Greg was so nice and dependable, while Kyle smoked pot all day. He'd already dropped out of school, sacrificing a degree for delivering pizzas, at least when his gas money hadn't gone to weed.

Before Kyle, Greg never would have looked at me. But dating Kyle, with his soft blonde hair and his Ryan Gosling features, had elevated me in the eyes of my peers. It had made Greg see me, and, the way I saw it then, there was nothing real ahead for Kyle and me. There were other options.

Kyle had called me one night.

"Listen" he'd said. "Are you into Greg Olsen? That's what I'm hearing."

"I don't know," I'd answered honestly. "Maybe?"

"So," he'd said, "this thing between us, is it over?"

"I don't know," I'd told him, even though part of me did. "Do you want it to be?"

"No," he'd answered, "not really."

"Okay," I'd said. Maybe we could drag this on for a few more months, at least until I left for college.

"I think it should be over," he'd said, after a pause, "even if I don't want it to."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't know." He'd sighed then, heavy. I could picture him raking his hand through his hair. "It's just done, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah." He'd paused for a moment. I'd known he was toking. "I'll always care about you."

"Me too," I'd said, realizing that I meant it.

When we'd first gotten together, there had been those teenage girl dreams. Yes, I'd scribbled Mrs. Kyle Harris on a notebook or two. But, there was something in Kyle that wouldn't let me dream too big, that wouldn't let me make up an entire future. I just knew he wasn't the one, couldn't be the one, couldn't help make me into the person I wanted to be. It didn't mean I cared about him any less.

"You know," I tell my mother, coming out of my thoughts, "Kyle is the only nice breakup I ever had. We didn't fight or throw things."

I think about my most recent ex, Dylan, who cheated on me at a frat party and then had a bonfire with his buddies to burn all the bras and panties I'd left at his house.

"Hmm," she mumbles. "Do you want cream?"

"Yes," I tell her, "a lot."

I remember Kyle making us coffee at his apartment.

"I'm going to make us a surprise," he'd said.

"Okay."

He'd come back with two cups of coffee, a scoop of vanilla ice cream floating in each. He'd looked so proud of himself.

"Delicious," I'd told him, beaming. He'd smiled and smoked his morning weed.

That was the thing with Kyle. Morning weed. Afternoon weed. Pre-date and after-date weed. It was all the time.

He'd taken me out to a restaurant once, early in our relationship.

Over chips and salsa, feeling romantically swayed by the lilting music, I'd asked him, "What are you thinking about?"

I'd hoped he'd say something like "being with you" or "holding in you in my arms later."

Instead, he'd said, "I'm thinking about going to get some weed after this. I wish I had it now. This would taste even better."

I'd just shook my head, laughed it off.

Once I left for college, he quickly faded from a boyfriend-turned friend to a guy from my past, a harmless but sweet pothead. He'd be okay. There were plenty of guys like him, mucking their way through life at minimum wage jobs, smoking pot, partying. They'd stop at forty and get real lives, usually after finding the right girl. Or, they wouldn't and they'd be slightly-sad, later-creepy dudes who partied with high schoolers *à la* Matthew McConaughey in *Dazed and Confused*.

"Mom," I say, as she brings in our coffees. Mine doesn't have enough cream. Definitely no ice cream. "Did it seem like he was on drugs? When you saw him, I mean."

"Oh, Hannah," she says. "You know I don't know anything about that stuff."

"I know," I tell her, "but he always had a thing for pot. It can't be that. I mean, it's just pot."

My mother pauses for a moment, giving her coffee a blow-sip. "I've heard," she says finally, a trace of a sensationalist thrill in her voice, "that we have a major meth epidemic in this town."

I sigh. I hate the thrill in her voice as much as the smug look on her face.

“How did he look?” I ask finally, as if the answer can tell me something concrete.

“He looked like Kyle,” she says, “only his hair was all long, and he looked kind of dirty.”

I nod. I remember the time he didn’t have any toilet paper, any soap, any of the essentials in his house. He’d had weed and Ramen, but nothing else. So, I’d taken a few items from my mom’s couponing hoard.

She’d noticed. It was just a tiny dent in her stash that she housed in the shower, a shower we didn’t use, couldn’t use anymore because of her “bargains,” but she’d noticed.

“Why would you give that boy my stuff?” she’d raged, irrational tears streaking her eyes.

“It was just a few-”

“Hannah, you had no right,” she’d cut me off, angry that I’d taken from her. More angry that I’d wanted to give something to someone other than her.

“You never liked him, did you?” I say now, sipping my coffee.

“He was okay,” she says.

Without meaning to, I make a noise with my throat, a noise that sounds like scoffing.

“Where did you see him?”

“By the mall,” she says. “I think he’s staying in the woods behind it.”

I put my coffee down. I feign a look at my phone.

“Mom,” I tell her, “I do have to get back. I forgot about this project, and...”

“I see how it is,” she says, “you’ve got more important things to do than hang out with me.”

I don’t answer her as I gather my bag, rush out the door, because, for once, she’s right.

I don’t really have a plan as I settle into my car, crank the engine. I just want to see if I can catch a glimpse of him.

I drive the few blocks from her place to the decrepit mall. Not many people go there anymore, haven’t for awhile. The small town is changing, dying even, but people like my mom don’t seem to realize it. And there are lots of people like her here.

I circle the parking lot, scanning for people, scanning for him.

After two times around, he’s nowhere to be found. I sigh. Why am I doing this anyway? I have a life now, a life that’s only two hours from here, but that seems like a world away. I wouldn’t even come back here if it wasn’t for her, and sometimes I think about abandoning this place and her as well. He doesn’t matter to me anymore. He shouldn’t matter to me anymore.

I'm telling myself all these things as I leave the mall lot, getting in the line to turn onto the highway. And then, I see him.

At first, I don't register that it's him. It's just a guy, and like my mom says, he does look dirty. Dirty and hard and old, much older than he is, which isn't that much older than me.

He's holding a sign that says "Homeless Veteran. Anything Helps."

It's a lie.

He walks up to the car in front of me, collects a dollar.

I will him not to look my way.

I wanted to see him, but suddenly, I don't want him to see me. I can't.

I look down, fiddle with my phone, the radio buttons, anything to keep him from seeing me.

The car in front of me goes, and I speed after it, too fast.

My hands are shaking. I shouldn't care this much. It shouldn't bother me so much to see him like this, but it does.

I pull into the McDonald's, the one just before you leave town. I need a minute to collect myself, to get my hands and my brain to stop rattling.

Instead, I'm assaulted by a memory. Kyle and I went to this McDonald's many times, but one particular time is jabbing at my brain, begging me to really see it.

It was a Friday night.

I was playing a free trial of this game I'd downloaded during my boring high school English class. It was called *Fishbowl Frenzy*, and it was awesome. You managed this fishbowl. You fed the little goldfish. They pooped gold coins that you collected. As the levels progressed, you had to buy a carnivore to eat the goldfish. The carnivore pooped diamonds.

I don't know what happened next in the game because that was as far as I'd gotten. I'd only signed up for a one-hour free trial. And, while I loved the game, it hadn't been worth spending money on, not when I had college to save up for.

I didn't think Kyle had been paying much attention. He was high, watching television, zoned out. This was how our Fridays went. I was getting tired of coming over just to sit and do my own thing while he got high, ignored me. What was the point? I hadn't yet said any of this to him.

But, when I'd closed the computer, he'd reached out a hand to stop me.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was waiting for my turn," he said.

"Oh," I told him, "you can't. I mean, it was just a one hour free trial."

"Oh man," he said. "I really wanted to play."

“Well,” I told him. “You could do it on your laptop. I think they track it by device.”

“Oh yeah.” He smacked his head. He ran into his messy kitchen, retrieved his laptop from the table, plunked it on his lap as he sunk into the couch.

I helped him download the trial and, for the next hour, he didn’t stop playing. He couldn’t take his eyes from the screen. He clicked. He made it way further in the game than I had, but I was bored, watching television. All I know was there was something about a “Queen Fish” who saved all your money so you wouldn’t go bankrupt. Going bankrupt meant your whole tank died.

I knew when his trial ended because he let out a loud, “God damnit.”

“What?” I asked him anyway.

“I can’t play anymore,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, “too bad.”

“Maybe they track it by email,” he said. “I had to put my email in to play.”

“Maybe.” I was thinking about leaving. Kyle didn’t know it, but I was texting Greg.

“Nope,” Kyle said, after a moment

“Sorry.” I was completely distracted now.

“Did you download the game here?” he asked

“No,” I said, “at school.”

Greg had texted a funny picture of himself at a bar, holding up his fake ID with a wry grin.

“I googled it,” Kyle said, after a minute.

“Googled what?” I was busy telling Greg that maybe I’d come out, if he thought he could get me in without a fake.

“How the free trials work,” Kyle said exasperatedly.

What I wanted to say was, really, you care that much about this, but I bit my tongue.

“They work based on connection, not device,” Kyle explained. “So, if I get on a new connection, I can download another free trial. I can get further. I can win.”

“That’s cool,” I said, “but I was thinking about heading home.”

“No,” he said. “You can’t. Please. I have to play.”

I sighed. He had that look in his eyes, that desperate want that you could never say no to.

“Drive me to the McDonald’s,” he said. “They have free Wi-Fi.”

“Kyle,” I told him. “I don’t feel like it. I had a beer...”

“Just one,” he said. “You can drive. Please.”

I sighed.

“Okay, but after that, I’m dropping you off and heading home.” Greg had already promised he could get me in, no problem. He’d done it before, he’d said.

So, I drove Kyle to the stupid McDonald’s. It was closed, at least the inside part was. So, we’d parked, getting as close to the building as we could for maximum WiFi exposure.

He’d started the download and then, a few minutes later, before it could complete, his computer had died.

“Shit,” he’d screamed, suddenly irrationally angry.

“I just need to charge it,” he mumbled. “Let me see if they’ll let me in.”

“Kyle,” I put a restraining hand on his arm, “you can’t. They’re closed.”

“They might let me in,” he said, and there was a fierceness in his eyes, a determination like I’d never seen before.

I hunkered down in my car, as low as possible, not wanting anyone to see me. Kyle had marched right up to that door, knocked. When no one came, he’d yelled out a loud, “Hey.”

Finally, a bored looking girl came to the door, didn’t open it. She just mouthed, “We’re closed.”

I could hear Kyle, loud, trying desperately to explain what he needed, but she was already walking away, shaking her head, ponytail swishing.

He came back to the car.

“Fuck,” he said, slamming my door.

“It’s no big deal,” I told him. “It’s just a game.”

“Not to me,” he’d said, “not to me.”

I’d driven him home, and that night had marked the decline of us. Our connection, once so real and vibrant, had faded away, bit by bit, after that night.

And now...he was this guy I didn’t really know, who I heard about from my mom. This guy begging on street corners in our hometown.

I look at the phone in my hand. I think how, now, just a couple of years later, you can download a game in an instant...if you have the cash. You don’t even need WiFi. You have data...if you have the cash. The world, I think, is different, but Kyle is not.

I think for a minute about what I could do for him. Brief thoughts of bringing blankets, food, all the things he might need, out there, swimming alone in the world, not eating enough to poop gold.

I decide against it. I hate to admit it, but a part of me is scared, doesn’t trust him. Sure, he’s Kyle to me now, but he’s also a homeless guy, and homeless people steal. They hurt you.

I hate myself for thinking it, but I think it nonetheless.

Ultimately, I just pull out of the McDonald's, head back toward the safety of my college campus, the friends who laugh and who only smoke pot recreationally.

When I get there, collapsing in the warm safety of my room, my soft bedspread, the familiar pictures tacked up on college-chic corkboard, I feel weirdly panicked for a moment, like I'm gasping for breath, flopping around and confused. I don't know where the feeling comes from, but it's terrifying, like a weight pressing down on me, telling me I'm going to die. And, then, just like that, it passes. I take in a deep breath. I take in the non-threatening room. I'm not dying. I'm fine.

It's then that I decide, firmly and immediately, that I won't be going home again for awhile, maybe not ever.

# Your Dog Isn't Happy

Vikram Ramakrishnan

“They won’t like this.” Dr. Sudhakar twirled a mechanical pencil in his hand and tapped it twice on the brain scans in front of him. Putting the pencil down, he leaned back in his Aeron. “You’re going to have to lead the press conference.”

“Me?”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll be there for support.”

“So should I talk to the President too?”

“No, I’ll speak to her.” His shoulders slumped. “She’s definitely not going to like this. It was to show people what science can bring us. What —”

“But it is. The evidence is incontrovertible. The encephalization quotient —” I stopped myself, scrunching my eyes, realizing I interrupted him again. What did he say in my last review? Smart, but jumps the gun.

He ignored my outburst. “It was supposed to be something we could all agree on. Something to bring us all together.”

###

“You’re telling me when my little Osiris smiles, he’s really about to piss his pants?” a reporter asked. He scratched the back of his bald head with the spirals of his notebook pad.

A blonde-haired reporter in a blue pantsuit looked over at him. “Your dog wears pants?”

“I’m speaking hyphenetically.”

Hypothetically, I corrected him mentally. Jesus, these people are idiots. I cleared my throat. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

The audience of reporters began to clamor.

“Speak into the mic,” Dr. Sudhakar said as he rubbed his temples with his thumbs.

“Oh, sorry.” I leaned in. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

The reporters quieted down.

“As you can see here, though it may look like smiling, the physical action coincides with the portion of the brain that indicates the canine is in a state of extreme fear.”

I clicked my remote, and a slide of a canine brain filled the projection screen. I pointed the laser pointer at the frontal lobe, which lit up bright pink.

“This shows activity during a canine’s facial features. What you commonly call a smile, we should drop in favor of what’s referred to in the research paper as Lateral Mouth Reflex.”

The audience began to digest what I said. A few reporters took their phones out, scrolling through pictures of dogs. One man at the front started to sob.

I continued. “This is the same part of the brain that lights up in humans when we —“

“We want a second opinion!”

“Yeah! A second opinion!”

“How do you get a second opinion in something like this?”

“Isn’t he a doctor? You can get another doctor’s opinion.”

“He’s not even a real doctor. Just got a Ph.D. It’s not like he went to Medical School.”

“Yeah, how can we even trust this from someone who isn’t even a real doctor?”

After the heckling subsided, I clicked my remote again. “And, as you can see here, this is the part of the brain associated with sadness.” I took a deep breath. “This part lights up when a dog wags its tail.”

The audience lost it, and I was forgotten in a sea of outbursts. I looked back for Dr. Sudhakar, but he was gone.

###

“Brain imaging is a tricky business.” Dr. Sudhakar poured a glass of single-malt and held it out for me. “No one would be remiss to you retracting your findings due to a technical mishap.”

Blood rushed to my face as words tumbled from my mouth. “But there were no mishaps. This is really groundbreaking research. It may change the way we treat animals altogether.”

Dr. Sudhakar looked at me over his circular spectacles. “I know how hard you’ve worked on this. Undergraduate honors work. Graduate thesis. Your fellowship. Postdoc.” He waved his hand at the stack of papers in front of him. “You’ve been focused on canine brains obsessively, and I love that about any researcher.”

“But the truth is, this is not what the world needs right now. There’s already so much distrust of science. The President signed an executive order granting us a small budget to show the world that science can unite us together. Promoting the Health and Well-being of Our Furry Friends.” He took a sip from his glass. “You know what it’s done?”

He didn’t wait for me to answer. “We now have people who believe your research to the nth degree. We have fanatics storming dog breeding facilities, killing breeders. Blowing themselves up in pet stores. We have cults

forming around the idea that dogs should own humans. Church of Dog, they call themselves. We have Silicon Valley companies raising money to ‘fix’ canine brains. We are in an epistemic crisis. It’s a mess.”

I looked down into my glass. I already knew what Dr. Sudhakar was going to ask of me.

He sighed. “You can fix this. Say that you found an error in your research.”

“What about my career? The research is already out there for anyone to duplicate.”

“Just retract it.”

####

I was lucky that Dr. Sudhakar helped me find an assistant job at a veterinary clinic outside of town. All the attention didn’t do anything for my student loans, and after decrying my own work, it was impossible to find any research jobs. “Mostly untouchable,” one science journalist called me.

“Bubbles!” A woman in a bright yellow summer dress yelled while being pulled into the office by her chocolate labradoodle.

Bubbles sat on his haunches and lifted a paw up to me. A classic sign of existential discomfort.

“Don’t worry about him. He always does that when he wants food,” the woman said.

# Nonfiction

# Gullible and Naïve

John C. Krieg

I wish I wasn't, but I know I am. This is not a very flattering admission, I must admit, but I value truth above all else. Being both gullible and naïve is a curse of the highest order, and something that has plagued me for my entire life. How I arrived at this unenviable position is a mystery to me, perhaps revealing that although I revere honesty, that I simply can't bring myself to utilize it when dealing with my personal shortcomings.

Voltaire is credited with saying, "Religion began when the first scoundrel met the first fool." Benjamin Franklin is famous for having written that, "A fool and his money are soon parted." And I can be credited with oftentimes saying, "I won't get taken again," but the odds are that I will be, and following are the reasons why.

The biggest come-on to watch out for is: "I'm a good person." If that's actually true, why do they feel the need to tell you? This is presumptuous in the extreme because they assume the position of making your decision for you. The average conman tries to convince you. Accomplished con artists are proficient at getting you to convince yourself. Similar to the old saying of, "If you've got it – flaunt it," the reality is that if you've got it, it will shine through bright and clear without any bragging necessary. Always watch out for any uncalled for brazenness or any dubious pressure tactics such as, "It's going to sit," or "This offer is good for a limited time only," or "Hurry while supplies last."

Con artists are master story tellers. Plausibility and the creditability gap go by the wayside once a good story takes hold of anyone's attention span. The short story writer taps into this phenomenon by utilizing the concept of "suspended disbelief." Once a story takes us in we don't want to slow the delivery of the next line by questioning the last one. Believing in the story's arch is entertaining, and even if just for a short while, gives us something to believe in.

People need something to believe in because there are so many unbelievable things happening in plain sight in their everyday lives. Tell a lie often enough, and not only the liar, but the hearer of the lie, come to believe it. A perfect example of this principal is the performance of the king of conmen who now resides in our nation's White House. The Mad King is an accomplished liar, and you can rest assured that if his lips are moving that he is lying again; yet 40 percent of the country takes what he says as dogma on any given day.

It goes without saying that conmen are psychotics. They most certainly lack empathy. They are simply incapable of feeling bad about the pain that they inflict upon their marks, in fact they are convinced that their marks had it coming for their sin of gullibility, which the con despises as much as stupidity. This is the epitome of the heartless saying: “Never give a sucker an even break.” Their marks simply deserved it, after all.

It’s not very self-flattering that I know that conmen are exceptional judges of character and that I have frequently fallen prey to them. They can spot the desperate, those who are under intense pressure, and the emotionally vulnerable as deftly as a Red-tail Hawk spots a Field Mouse far from cover in an open field. It’s not a question of if they will swoop, but when. Desperation is a stench that revolts all noses. Conmen, know this, of course and are adept at being aloof, disinterested and nonchalant when the situation calls for it. Misery loves company, however, and the desperate are the most miserable of all and in much need of friendship which the conman delivers at that exact moment in time when it appears almost miraculous, and more than anyone else the gullible and naïve believe in the power of miracles. From newfound friendship springs gratitude, and shortly thereafter, trust

Trust given too easily is second cousin to laziness. In the world of Google, how difficult is it to actually check out a story or verify a few basic facts? Lest you doubt, consider that many jobs are given on the basis of trumped up resumes, for no other reason than the interviewer liked the interviewee. There is so much of “fake news” these days, especially on the internet, that we simply throw up our hands and decide to go on instinct alone, and the instincts of someone as gullible and naïve as I am can well lead to their undoing.

The old saying of: “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer,” does not apply to conmen because many cons are run from inside the family unit and the sphere of what can be viewed as friends. They have inside information, after all, and know when you are most vulnerable or going through a life change that could cloud your judgment. And since aging accelerates as it progresses, it most certainly equates to a life change. Conmen look for elderly marks, in particular, and sometimes exclusively. They are most likely to show up in the wake of human and natural disasters. Again, they seem to almost miraculously appear as saviors. The savior come lately is the master of the setup.

Conmen want you to feel exceptional and are proficient at pumping up your sense of specialness. Everyone is susceptible to flattery. We favor those that flatter us because not only does it make us feel good about ourselves from the outside, it reinforces positive feelings we harbor about

ourselves from the insides— our egos, in other words. This is known as the play.

There are telltale signs that the conman is setting the hook. They will barrage you with facts, choices, and information that they say will support their story, but in actuality is simply meant to confuse you. Conmen like to speed you up which can make you feel stupid that you can't keep up, in other words, and then they use your embarrassment against you as a tool to repress your sense of inquiry. If you're afraid to ask questions for fear of appearing naïve, that is the exact definition of being naïve.

The setup is similar to priming the pump; a little amount of water used at exactly the right time can cause a flood to spew forth. Nowhere in the dark world of marijuana sales can the taste known as “the front” be used to the conman's greatest advantage. Front a little and get a little back. Everyone knows that to win big you must bet big, so when you get that money on time you are more inclined to front a little more to get a little more; and so on, and so on, until the fronted has built up his credit to the point that it's worth his while to cut and run leaving you to hold the bag. Always remember that just because someone proved trustworthy in the past is no guarantee that they will be trustworthy in the future. How can you actually win if you don't believe that you can win? The conman manipulates belief the way a stripper does – everything appears to be within reach. You know logically that you can't touch it, but your base desire tells you that you're *so close*.

Here are the three mistakes I most commonly make. First, I believe that all people think like I think, and therefore that I have an instant insight into the inner workings of their minds. Nothing could be further from the truth. Secondly, I feel that I've had it rough and therefore deserve a break. I seem to forget that nobody owes me anything in this world. And thirdly, I truly believe in the goodness of mankind having frequently written about the family of man. Somehow, I fail to observe that in all families large and small that there are always black sheep's; it's just the way things are.

I remember contracting jobs that I wanted and that I didn't get. I could visualize how I'd complete them, how it would all go, and then nothing happened. In reality, some of the jobs that I didn't get were the best ones. This is because, although I didn't make any money, I certainly didn't lose any. When I acquired my virtually worthless online Masters of Business degree, the most useful lesson that was offered up was the concept of “sunk costs” which basically advises that dwelling upon and lamenting past money spent on dry holes and lost causes is a patent waste of time because that money can never be recouped. So, why let these losses affect the future? Conmen can string a mark along into successively worse and larger investments by spinning the yarn that all funds previously extended can be recouped, and

then some, simply by staying the course. Nobody wants to believe that their money has been lost. The ability to cut their losses is not the forte of the gullible. Just like a murderer who is compelled to return to the scene of the crime, the conman has no compunction against using the same mark, sometimes over and over again. The way they look at it is once a fool, always a fool.

I hold on to slights and insults that occurred years ago, and all that does is eat away at my self-respect because I'm mad at myself that I didn't call out those who levied them upon me, sometimes out of fear of physical harm, but more usually because I didn't grasp their true meaning at the time they occurred. Almost everyone thinks of comebacks that would have been perfect, but unfortunately, those comebacks occur in their heads well after the incident is over. The ability to let go, or failing that, to simply forget adds years to one's life, Resentments and grudges most often only hurt those who harbor them. This is the conman's stock in trade. Nobody truly wants to feel like a rube, even if they most assuredly were, so they put the whole sordid ordeal out of their mind, and the conman doesn't get exposed, after all. Believe me, they bank on it. The main reason that most conmen don't become exposed to society at large is because their marks are too embarrassed to admit that they have been duped.

The most useful advice that I've ever received considering my affliction is *The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It...Every Time* (2016) By Maria Konnikova. If you're as gullible and as naïve as I am, I strongly suggest you buy several copies and keep them on your bed stand, atop your toilet tank, in your car, and on your person at all times.

Whenever I go back and run a mental post mortem I can usually isolate that point in time where my con tipped his/her hand. I was just too blind to their compelling and/or hard luck story to notice. All the red flags were flying in full view yet I ignored them. That's when I really beat myself up. The emotional always rule out over the logical and the con knows how to pierce any emotional veil and push their mark's buttons.

Con artists expertly draw me in and are adept at the fine art of subliminal persuasion, the process whereby I convince myself, even against my own better judgment. Like the mouse in the open field, my only options are to miraculously shape-shift into a much larger species, or to never leave the safety of cover. The former is impossibility, while the later leads to a dull, boring, and unfulfilling life. Better to accept that I will occasionally fall victim to a con, cut my losses as quickly as possible, and move on, than not to live at all.

# The *Spiral Jetty* as a Woolen Cap

Rebecca Pyle

Would many art historians have been happier knitting? Then came Smithson, to remind them, to make them all want to go back to the caps of their mothers, their hats that begin as one wool nugget of spiral working outward, or begun as the broad cuff and working industriously inward: your crown and halo of warmed centered radiance, making you the magic one, your halo superior to the strange haloed repertory theater of puppets God sent around to Italian Renaissance artists painting those flat gold orbs around heads, halos mass issue, gold pious Frisbees which said the wearer was both trapped and protected by God's brand, of doom, protection, destiny, and disaster, God-ruled determinations and luck. God owned the coins, the casino.

The true creation is the cap the mother who knit you in her womb now knitting you a cap. Smithson replicated that, made it big and generous as a powerful ogre or challenged prince or an important woman seeking real answers would need.

The *Spiral Jetty*, made of poured rocks and gravel, is where an ogre, longing to be sensitive, could go to repent his inefficiencies, or overt greed: he would stand and talk to the sky, waving his big arms, hands. Why are ogres always wearing sleeveless tunics that look cut out by machete blades? Or a place a prince could go, Port au Prince, to stand lonely. Introspection: that's what the *Spiral Jetty*'s for. Figure out, without advisors with their own agendas, why your most recent princely military campaign failed, or how to win your woman back. Perhaps a new cloak?

Or be a place where a modern woman can go: to consult the oracle of Nothing.

The Oracle of Nothing as you stand at the farthest inward-spiraled point of the spiral jetty will always tell you to come up with the answer yourself, and strongly cautions you, a woman, about taking other womens' advice (as Chanel said: never go shopping for clothes with other women; they will advise you poorly, their conscious or subconscious jealousies always in play).

Smithson flew in airplanes above his project territories, wanting to see them from above (just as a mother would see a hat atop a small son's head). That was how he died, in a plane, overlooking a blank unknit space, looking down somewhere in Texas. They say the dent is still apparent in the ground in Texas where his plane fell; his plane the dropped knitting needle,

no magic hat to catch him, cushion him. Poor Smithson came unraveled from way above, while another hat was still being knit in the air.

But Smithson left his halo here. *Spiral Jetty* tells you sometimes you must back out of something now, unravel it before it goes too far; sometimes you must venture forward even if the yarn is strange, yarn no one else wants. Venture, Smithson tells us, with all your yearny yarny hearts; make the hat warming but make it like no one else's hat, or it is not worth making. Create the simple yearning pattern of your life, a place where an ogre can go or a prince or any woman properly wary of other women's advice. Go forth in the knitted hat, your brain warm and centered and secure and sure, in a halo, of your mother's knitting, as princely and humble as the greatest gamble, one lone egg travelling from the ovary out the wild unfurling narrow canyon of the fallopian tube, toward the womb-harbor and life.



## Contributors

**Yuan Changming** published monographs on translation before leaving his native country. Currently, Yuan edits *Poetry Pacific* with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver. Credits include ten Pushcart nominations, eight chapbooks & publications in *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17)* & *Best New Poems Online*, among others.

**Holly Day's** poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *Harvard Review*. Her newest poetry collections are *Where We Went Wrong* (Clare Songbirds Publishing), *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), and *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press).

**John Dorroh** may have taught high school science for a few decades. No one knows for sure. His poetry has appeared in about 50 journals, including North Dakota Quarterly, Feral, Dime Show Review, Ospressan, and Selcouth Station.

**John Krieg** is a retired landscape architect and land planner who formerly practiced in Arizona, California, and Nevada. He has written a college textbook entitled *Desert Landscape Architecture* (1999, CRC Press.) John has had pieces published in *A Gathering of the Tribes*, *Alternating Current*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *Clark Street Review*, *Conceit*, *Homestead Review*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Palm Springs Life*, *Pegasus*, *Saint Ann's Review*, *The Courtship of Winds*, *The Mindful Word*, *The Writing Disorder*, and *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

**Kaecey McCormick** is a writer and artist in the San Francisco Bay Area. Named the 2018-2020 Poet Laureate for the City of Cupertino, her work appears in the book *Pixelated Tears* (Prolific Press) and numerous journals and anthologies. When not creating, Kaecey enjoys time with her husband and four daughters.

**Toti O'Brien** is the Italian Accordionist with the Irish Last Name. She was born in Rome and then moved to Los Angeles, where she makes a living as a self-employed artist, performing musician and professional dancer. She is the author of *Other Maidens* (BlazeVOX, 2020), *An Alphabet of Birds* (Moonrise, 2020) and *Pages of a Broken Diary* (Pski's Porch 2021).

**Susie Potter** was the first person in her family to graduate college. Now, she's a college English professor who loves spending time with her family and pets, engaging in competitive figure skating, taking ballet lessons, and doing everything else people think she's too old for. She wrote this story for her friend, Kyle.

**Rebecca Pyle's** work is of many kinds. See *Guesthouse* or *Gargoyle Magazine* (both forthcoming) for stories; *Muse/A Journal* or *Common Ground Review* (forthcoming) for essays; *The Penn Review* or *Cobalt Review* for poems; *The Moving Force Journal* or *Dream Noir* for photographs; *Raven Chronicles Journal* or *JuxtaProse* or *Oxford Magazine* for oil paintings which became journal covers. Rebecca lives in Utah, in the old brick house which was new when a telegraph operator for *The Salt Lake Tribune* moved into it with his family over a hundred years ago. She was named after the Brit novel and film *Rebecca*. Website: [rebeccapyleartist.com](http://rebeccapyleartist.com).

**Vikram Ramakrishnan** is a Tamil-American writer who was born in Bangalore, India and grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He writes fiction, and is a computer programmer in New York City now. Vikram's writing can be found in forthcoming issues of *Newfound*, *SAND Journal*, and *AE – The Canadian Science Fiction Review*.

**Candice Velasco** is the "three spiritual crises in a trenchcoat" type of queer ex-Christian. She lives in Chicago with two cats, too many video game consoles, and a single pair of sensible shoes. At this point she's been writing stuff for well over half her life.

**Scott Wilkerson** is a dramatist, poet, and opera librettist. His recent poetry has appeared in *Muse/A* and *The James Dickey Review*. He is Assistant Professor of English/Creative Writing at Columbus State University.

**Mike Wilson's** work has appeared in magazines including *Cagibi Literary Journal*, *Stoneboat*, *The Aureorean*, and *The Ocotillo Review*, and in Mike's book, "Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic," (Rabbit House Press, 2020), political poetry for a post-truth world. He received Kentucky State Poetry Society's Chaffin/Kash Prize in 2019. Mike resides in Central Kentucky, summers in Ecstasy, winters in Despair, and can be found at [mikewilsonwriter.com](http://mikewilsonwriter.com)



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