

# Ink Collective

(Two)



# Ink Collective (Two)

*“No Chrome on wheels / I’m a grown up for real.”*

*—JayZ*

# (Two)

## the adolescence issue

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# InkCollective

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## *Submissions*

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## *Cover Art*

Cover art by Saul Gray-Hildenbrand. You can see more of Saul's work at the LaFontsee Gallery in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or in the editor's apartment. A few images are online at <http://lafontsee.biz>.

from the editor



**W**hen I was eighteen years old I fell in love with the barista at the coffee shop. She studied at the local Christian college, although I never had the impression that she was religious. The school was small and expensive, tucked into the parlors of old Victorians and the basements of quaint brownstones, their walks lined with tulips. This was enough for most, and was probably why she attended. After a few years she quit school and moved in with her parents an hour away. She scooped ice cream and pretended not to know me when I came to visit.

I thought her beautiful; my friends disagreed. She was under five feet tall, her stocky body capped by too-large a head. The tips of her ears always poked through her straight, chestnut locks, giving her an elfish quality. She wore baggy, earth-toned sweaters with the sleeves cuffed. Thinking back now, with ten years between us, I can see that my friends had a point. Cute, maybe; beautiful, not.

If I am to stop dancing around it and come clean: I loved her hands. But we had other things in common. We smoked the same brand of cigarettes, although nearly every smoker I knew under twenty smoked Marlboro Lights. These are cigarettes for those who are just pretending, who are wearing the smoker's hat, trying it on for size. We were too young to be serious.

The barista and I eventually became friends and I cooked weekly dinners for her and her roommates. On her birthday I baked a cake and bought her flowers and a plant, which tipped over in my car on the way to her house. Months after she returned home I was still vacuuming up dirt specked with white, Styrofoam pellets. We never dated, but she strung me along. That is, until I met the high-schooler: who was short, with chestnut hair; who wore baggy sweaters and smoked Marlboro Lights; and those hands, those hands.

You should see the shit I wrote about this.

I met the high-school girl in the coffee shop on a cold and rainy Sunday in March. Until I was a few feet from her table, I thought she was the barista, late for work. I thought she was beautiful; my friends disagreed. But oh, those hands.

We sat together, awkward and alone. She told me about her boyfriend, who was drunk in bed, about how she had snuck out because she was sad. For a while we sat in silence. I became who she wanted. But for me she was a lie as well. Oh, those hands.

We walked the three short blocks from the coffee shop to the library of the Christian college to find a book for her boyfriend. I showed her where it was in the stacks. She was going home then, but she really enjoyed our walk and talk, and appreciated me finding the book for her boyfriend, who was drunk on his bed in the afternoon. She thought we should see each other again. I never thought about her drunk boyfriend, but I was still thinking of the barista when she hugged me. I held on as

long as I could. Who was I holding? I had waited for so long. Oh, those sweaters, those hands.

For me, there was never a clear line between childhood and adulthood. It was a liminal space, a vacuum, a place where years of progress in defining myself could be undone by a tangled, beige sweater in a single rainy afternoon. Years later, only by chance I realized that those hands were behind me, abandoned with the Marlboro Lights and the bad poetry written on napkins. It was an experience no one else could imagine; an experience that everyone else has had. For this second issue of InkCollective, we've tapped our authors to bring out their baggy-sweatered girls, their low-tar cigarettes, their youthful delusions, and those hands, those hands. •

insight

# Ryan Simonson

## *I'm Moving to Sleepy Eye*

I work in Public Education, with a group of autistic middle-school students. I go to class with them and help adapt their coursework. So, basically, I'm stuck in junior high. I'm the twenty-six-year-old kid in the back of the room that still doesn't know how to find the circumference of a circle. And like every kid who has to get out of bed each morning to go sit in an uncomfortable plastic seat and listen to dull lectures from uncharismatic grown-ups, the promise of a snowstorm brings an exciting variable to the prospect of a new, crappy day.

Well, hope is a funny thing. It's pretty much un-killable, which adds up to years of mental anguish and bitter disappointment. I know this because I'm the twenty-six-year-old kid who's been through this routine a million times. They never cancel school. They cancel it all the time in places you've never met anyone, but not where you live. Minneapolis/St. Paul? Sorry kids, you better put your boots by the radiator and keep your shovel-hands loose. Breakfast is at 7am sharp.

Every time we get snow dumped on us, however, that hope pops right up again. I wake up to the first bellowing of the alarm and turn on the radio, praying that the words “Minneapolis Public Schools” will be wedged somewhere in the list of school closings and delays. Never. Not in a million years. But as I rise from beneath my mound of blankets and feel the cold air begin to gnaw at my toes, the bearer-of-no-news informs me that Sleepy Eye public schools are closed yet again.

The lucky bastards in Sleepy Eye.



**T**heir superintendent has got to be the biggest wimp in the history of Public Education. Every goddamn time it snows, hails, sleet, or gets windy, Sleepy Eye schools are closed. It doesn't take much for that guy to pull the plug. If he sees *Doctor Zhivago* on TV, he freaks and calls off school.

Every blizzard it is the same thing. The morning news becomes non-stop coverage of automotive misfortune. "35W North is at a standstill, with a 76-car pile-up at the Lake Street Exit. Expect long delays. 35W South is stopped from Lino Lakes into the metro. It looks like a rolled

semi-truck blocking all four lanes. 94 East and West, as well as 395 East, 55 East and West, Highway 12, 65, Crosstown, and all other routes in and out of the city are stopped by either 17-foot snow drifts or massive, deadly collisions. Expect delays, and drive with caution. By the way: it's class as usual for Minneapolis Public Schools. Sleepy Eye schools are closed."

Sleepy Eye has always been up to no good. They were to Walnut Grove what Shelbyville is to Springfield. It was always the same thing. Didn't matter what tragedy struck Walnut Grove: the whole town might be buried under twenty feet of snow, on fire, or astride a malaria epidemic; Laura might get her arm ripped off in a stampede, a tornado, or a mudslide; Mary might run off and get bitten by some critter, whatever. They were dragging ass to that crappy one-room school house every day to get smacked on the wrist with a ruler and be driven mad by the sound of chalk on their second hand slates. The kids in Sleepy Eye were home making butter.

To hell with Sleepy Eye.

Bring on the snow. •

*This essay first appeared on the now-defunct web journal, Sumpin.com.*

# Jillian Schedneck

## *Indian Dancing*

**A**t ten years old, it felt as though I spent my whole summer dancing in Sonya's living room, trying to memorize the strength of her fingers and the flatness of her palms. They were different when we danced, not the tight, clenched hands on a pencil during math tests, or the careless fingertips twirling through her shiny black hair, but sharp and precise, twisting and flashing tanned wrists and slender fingers. I held my arms still, flexing tiny muscles so that my forearms might appear sleek and electric. I concentrated on the blue veins running up the underside of my forearm, waiting for the music to begin. The Indian songs were a rush, a sweeping wave, a swirl of high-pitched words in Gujarati, Sonya's other language. We shook our hips for eight counts, then stepped rapidly on the balls of our feet, criss-crossing each other, socks gripping into the shaggy brown carpet.

"I wish we had a mirror here," Sonya complained, out of breath. "It's hard to do this dance without practicing in front of one." I shook my

head at her gyrating back and watched her arms swirl in tight circles above her head. I had vowed, ever since we'd started these dancing lessons, never to watch myself dance next to Sonya. The reality of it—my awkward rhythms, her graceful steps—would ruin the picture I had created: my feeble, wobbly hands cupped as if balancing a precious pearl in each, my feet tan and bare, stepping in and out of pure white sand. When I danced with Sonya I was in India, among the gods and goddesses, smiling near beautiful children just like my friend. When I followed her lead it was as if she was taking me through her country: we stopped in cities with fantastic names, like Jaipur, Bhopal, and Lucknow. In my dreams, I wore a plain, long skirt and Sonya was wrapped in a brilliant red sari; we danced in the street, and people came out of their homes to clap and marvel at me, a white girl, dancing just like Sonya.

When the music stopped, we sat on the floor, legs sprawled under the coffee table we had pushed aside. Sonya translated some of the lyrics, but I didn't listen. Connecting words like beauty and desire and love to those in the song only made the rhythms sound ordinary and stagnant. Those English words took me nowhere. I listened to the language of an unknown land, supple and pristine. I listened to the words of Sonya's parents and grandparents, of gold elephant statues and goddesses on the mantle. I listened to the words of Gujarat, a place in India that my best friend sometimes called home. Sonya took my hand in hers and we practiced my favorite dance without music. We rose and fell like dolphins in and out of the sea. I was brought there.

**W**e started fifth grade at our Catholic school in the fall. As gold and red leaves kicked and swirled in the wind, Indian songs rolled through my head, joyous beats that matched the summer sun and hues, not this sudden stinging cold. The high-pitched voices of Gujarati singers stayed with me through religion class,

as we learned about the Holy Trinity: three Gods meshed into one. Our teacher told us this was a difficult concept, so she repeated it over and over. I pictured three heads in one body, but shook off the image, knowing, somehow, that this monster was not what Mrs. Gataroska had meant. So I tried to imagine face upon face upon face: three layers making up one belief. As I puzzled over this, folding and tracing ghoulish features over and into each other, I looked at Sonya, two rows over. Her head was in her hands, eyes wide with curiosity, listening with the luxury of believing this education was a myth, while the rest of us must absorb it as true and unbending. I imagined Sonya's religion—gods and goddesses roaming the golden land, as bright as the sari I had only seen Sonya wear once on Halloween. These powerful, playful figures made her curve and twist her hands, jiggling golden bracelets. To me, all Sonya had to do was lift her leg and clap her hands over her head, as if she were a sorceress luring a snake from a basket, to be favored and loved by her many higher beings.

That weekend I couldn't sleep over at Sonya's house because she had a dance competition in the morning. I wanted to watch her dance with the other girls, with bright costumes and big smiles, but the competition was too far away, her parents told mine. My mom drove me to the dress rehearsal the night before. In the practice room, the whirls of yellow and orange costumes stirred the air around me. The room smelled fresh and wooden, not like curry and warm spices, as it did at Sonya's house. The mirror worried me at first (would I have to look at myself, in jeans and a T-shirt, next to these girls?). But no, I sat against the mirror and watched. Sonya and her friends smiled coyly, carving circles with their wrists, inviting their reflections to come a little closer. I had assumed Sonya would be the best dancer, but each girl had her own charm, some with soft, wistful movements, others with more force, thrusting and stomping. During the break, the girls gossiped about the boys in the next room. I heard their feet stamping as if they were warriors beating drums, preparing for battle.

In church that Sunday, my family and I sat in the pews on the side of the altar with the other families and couples that felt out of place and snuck out after Communion. I tried to listen to Father Anderson's homily, but really I was wondering if Sonya would have sat in the side pews with my family, or in the front rows, close to the altar. Would she rather associate with the mothers and fathers who gave donations in the form of special checks already made out to the church when the collection baskets came around, as my mother scrambled for change? But these thoughts were fruitless. Sonya would never need to be here at all. I was worried that she would rather spend time with her Indian friends, that they somehow knew a special part of her that I could never reach.

That fall, it seemed as though I spent every afternoon at Sonya's house or listening to her voice over the phone, gossiping about the popular boys in our class, boys she was friends with and I was not. They fascinated me, though. I saw these scrawny, pale boys everyday and couldn't believe their hands had reached under the shirts of Angela Pagano and Shea Roth, that they had slipped away during an intramural basketball game and kissed. Sloppy and wet, was John's report. The phone cord tangled and twirled from the kitchen to the family room, looping around wooden chairs and a love seat to me, curled up with my shirt over my knees, cackling at the goings on of my classmates.

There were sleepovers—dramatic affairs filled with streaming tears and red, blotchy eyes. Sonya mediated between Shea and Angela, Danielle and Marlana, while I just watched, not knowing what to say to these shattered girls, their emotions mangled and exposed next to our New Kids on the Block sleeping bags. These girls trusted Sonya to solve their disagreements—words behind another's back, stealing the affection of a sixth grade boy. Perhaps we listened to Sonya because she had older friends and so had experience with this kind of drama. Perhaps she

just exuded maturity. But I think we truly saw her as removed from the concerns of the sixteen white girls in our class. She was just like us but more, with an extra layer that allowed her into our circle and caused her to stand above us, too. She learned about our religion everyday, but also had her own. She ate pizza and cookies like us, but her mom cooked tangy, spicy Indian foods with strange colors and textures every night. She was our friend, but she had Indian friends, too: older boys and girls who did more than reach under shirts and kiss. Sonya had two worlds. We just had one.

Eventually, Linda or Stacy would call for peace, asking that we all forgive each other and go to sleep. But I never went to sleep. Sonya and I stayed up and watched the sunrise, then looked at the dreaming faces of our once desperately wronged girlfriends. All would be well in the morning.

**I**n the spring, Mrs. Gataroska announced that there would be a carnival at our school in July to raise money for improvements to the church. In the middle of the carnival, surrounded by rides like the Tilt-A-Whirl and the Ring of Fire, by games of chance and fried dough stands, would be a stage. They needed student performers. Sonya and I and two friends signed up. That summer, we danced, practicing on the deck in my backyard or in Sonya's living room. We incorporated Sonya's Indian dancing along with the moves on MTV videos and anything else we could come up with. As a break, we played songs we had taped from the radio: Criss-Cross, Robin S., Snow. We sang along, choreographing in our heads, sprawling on the grass, our bodies lean and tan. Finally, on stage, we rolled our wrists to the rhythms of Paula Abdul and Janet Jackson and slid our legs forward then back, causing the panel floorboards to creak beneath us. We blended two worlds to perform in front of audiences holding giant teddy bears like trophies, dizzy from the Gravitron. I was

dizzy with dancing. I didn't want it to end.

Sonya spent the whole month of August in India with her parents, visiting family. I missed her large brown eyes when she was gone. I missed imagining India in the movement of my wrist, the sliding of my feet. I wouldn't dance alone, in my hot living room, without Sonya to follow and dance next to. I needed that energy, that other rhythm, to be brought there. In Church, my mind drifted during the homily, as usual. But during this month without Sonya I tried to imagine her in Gujarat, the real place and not the one of my dreams—poverty, dirt, noxious smells. But I couldn't get a clear picture. I drifted back to the fantasy, the toes resting on sand, the music of Sonya's living room playing throughout the country. It was a picture that made me smile and feel juvenile. Perhaps Sonya would return changed, matured. I would have to give up these dreams of India.

When Sonya finally came back, she was darker than I had ever seen her. The whites of her eyes bulged against her brown eyes and face, her cheekbones prominent and deeply red. She said she learned a lot in India, like not to take things for granted, simple things, like running water and the foods we loved to eat together: Domino's pizza and Entenmann's chocolate chip cookies. I took those things for granted, but looked at them differently now, as a part of something that was mine, and perhaps, did not belong to her.

**I**n September, Sonya's sister got married to a white Jewish man from Massachusetts. My family and I were invited to the reception and a dancing ceremony a week prior. I learned the dance quickly: tap sticks lightly with the person across from you, spin around and do it again. The room was filled with circles of dancers. Older women wore saris; girls and boys wore jeans and polo shirts. Young and old mixed in these circles of dancing sticks. The music was only a rhythm underneath our clanking and banging; the one initial beat from which we all began. My parents

smiled at me from the sideline, talking to Sonya's parents. I was videotaped twirling and banging, laughing and spinning. For a moment, I felt a part of Sonya's world.

At the wedding reception, Sonya told me that during the ceremony, her sister had rode in on an elephant, like she would have done in India. For the first time I doubted her. I couldn't picture an elephant walking into the Sheridan Hotel. I tried to forget about it and met more of her friends. They wore slinky black dresses and smiled at me. They smiled at everyone, especially the boys in suits. The boys didn't see me; I was invisible in my white Confirmation dress, shiny and pristine, so unlike the slender brown skin covered in tight black. Sonya and her friends danced to Indian songs. Even though I knew the moves, I didn't join in. The boys whistled, their faces rapt in attention, knees jerking to the beat. I imagined an elephant leading all of these dancing girls to the man of their choice, traveling through white sand covered in plush red carpet.

In seventh grade, I heard Sonya's tales from Indian get-togethers at recess. We walked around the perimeter of the school grounds, passing boys playing wall ball and girls practicing their cheerleading moves. Our pea coats flapped in the wind, our faces stern as Sonya relayed the stories of her weekend at this or that ceremony, dance performance, banquet dinner, with all of her friends and their families. Two boys, Tuppan and Nevish, fought over Sonya. They were older boys, fifteen. I marveled at her stories from this other world. It was like a soap opera, or a musical, since there was always dancing. There was always drama, too, but not the petty kind from our sleepovers. This drama spoke of a world to come, a world I was not yet welcome in: the world of flirtation and femininity, lust and desire. I knew nothing of this personally, could only try to feel it through the songs we listened and danced to, could only try to show it through the movement of my body. But I wasn't there yet.

I felt a flutter deep inside my chest when Sonya mentioned these parties, these boys, her pressure to choose between them. When she described Tuppan's jealousy or Nevish's charm, I tried not to express this quiet tinge. I wasn't jealous. I thought she deserved this attention; she was more mature and beautiful than the boys in our class, anyway. So it wasn't that. Sonya's outer layer, that covering that gave her people to dance with and for, was slowly breaking us apart.

Soon, when Sonya chose Tuppan, we ended our dancing. We were getting too old for it, anyway. She still told me stories about her new boyfriend at recess, along with the other girls who eventually broke away from cheerleading practice and joined our walks along the playground. We swooned at her stories, imagining this dark, beautiful couple on the brink of something grand. I would lose her to this other world, I knew. I also knew I should end my dreams of India, those childish fantasies of magic and gold, but they crept back once in a while, when I watched Sonya during religion class, or noted the way basketballs clung to her long, slender fingers like magnets. When we talked about the latest hits on the radio, I remembered our dancing days, the way I suddenly became a part of her world, and then, when the music stopped, just as suddenly returned to the brown couches and carpet of Sonya's living room. I had felt changed, satisfied, ready for the next song to begin. •

fiction

# Brett Yates

## *Weakness in Numbers*

I spent most of my senior year at the diner. We would use our lunch hour at school to do a little homework, which we only did in the cafeteria and never at home, and as a result we'd have little time to eat. So after school we'd jump in our cars and head to the diner, which was nearby and inexpensive. It was our place, our shelter.

I think most of us felt a little embarrassed to still be in high school. At eighteen, we thought we should be adults; at the diner, we were. There seemed to us something very grown-up about heading to that diner instead of to our parents' houses immediately after school. At these times—not during our clumsy attempts at sex or at our part-time jobs at the mall—we felt most like adults, natural and at ease. We'd arrive at quarter-to-three, and the lunch crowd would be gone, so we'd have the place to ourselves. It was like we ran it: we'd shout for our waitress to bring us another round of Cokes and that was OK because she knew us. She'd wink and bring

them, and we'd thank her. With our book bags left in the backs of our cars, we could've been businessmen stopping for a bite to eat after a board meeting. We'd often stay until the arrival of the dinner crowd.

On the second Thursday in April, we were at the table in the corner by the window. I had a club sandwich. This time, "we" meant Danny Conroy, Scott Shelton, and me. There were other classmates at the diner: one of the pleasures of going there was guessing who would show up and who wouldn't on any particular day—an impossible game due to the enormous amount of students the diner drew. And there were a lot on this day, but only Danny and Scott shared my table with me.

"I got a date for the prom," said Scott.

"Congratulations," I said. I made sure to lace my reply with a tone of unimpressed aloofness: I didn't like to talk about the prom because it called attention to the fact that we were still in high school and of its culture.

"Who?" said Danny.

"Kirsten Whitfield," Scott said.

"I've never heard of her," I said. "Is she a senior?"

"No," Scott said. "She's a freshman."

"I guess that makes her about eight years old," I said.

"About that—maybe seven," said Scott. "But if you saw her, you'd want to go with her, too."

"Eighteen is too young to be a pedophile," I said.

"Well, who are you going with, Paul?" said Danny.

"Angela Fleming," I said.

I finished my sandwich as Danny and Scott continued to talk about the prom, and then I left for home, claiming that I was tired and wanted a nap. Aside from disliking the idea of the prom, I, in truth, also wasn't thrilled about my date. Angela was attractive enough. I particularly liked her hair, blond and reaching nearly her waist. Unfortunately, she also

had a curled, awkward smile, as though the expression were not natural to her. Moreover, I was convinced that she liked me only a little bit. She was coming off a recent breakup, and I functioned as a serviceable, but not wholly satisfying, replacement of her ex-boyfriend, with whom she would've preferred to go. But we were friends, and logic dictated that we go to the prom together.

**W**hen the day came, I put on my rented tuxedo. I gave Angela a corsage, and her parents took pictures of us. We shared a limousine with a couple of her friends, whom I barely knew. Angela wore a red dress, and I complimented her and made small talk until we arrived at the hotel ballroom, where our school had chosen to hold the prom.

I looked around. I saw the kids who had irony painted on their faces and acted as though they were too sophisticated for the quaint, old-fashioned prom yet, still, were here. I saw the girls who enthusiastically jumped into the role of the young ingénue, for whom dressing up to go dancing was the most exciting thing in the world, even though everyone knew that they weren't as innocent as they pretended. I saw the boys who clowned furiously, turning the contrasting formality of their tuxedos into part of the gag, but whose nervous desire to impress their dates undermined the image of carefree, fun times that they wished to project. I saw the girls who struggled painfully to dance in their high-heels and the uncomfortable boys whose bow ties had apparently cut off their supplies of oxygen. I looked at all these bundles of anxiety, pimples, ungainliness, and searing, repressed sexual urges, each stuffed into the fancy packaging of a tuxedo or dress and then squeezed into this sweaty ballroom. I had no enemies. I felt bad for all of these kids.

I danced poorly to two songs with Angela, who was nice about it, and then I chatted with my friends, making sure not to stray too far from

or ignore my date. I couldn't find Danny, but I noticed Scott, greeted him, and met his date, Kirsten. She was a very pretty and cheerful brunette, but it was clear that she was three years younger than him. Scott, undoubtedly, was glad that the difference was noticeable: a freshman was a trophy. I wondered if he was a trophy for her, too: did she brag to her friends that a senior had interest in her?

I hoped it would finish soon, but I knew that the end of the dance wouldn't mean the end of the prom: it was Friday, and I had braced myself for the weekend-long after-party. This would traditionally take place at Long Beach Island or Seaside Heights, and it seemed Angela didn't like to break from tradition: She had arranged for us to stay at Gina Sanders's family's beach house at the former location. I knew Gina only vaguely; nevertheless, I considered myself her friend. She sought friends as politicians sought voters, and her smile had, minutes after I had met her, asked me whether I would support her campaign for popularity. I, admiring her social get-up-and-go, had smiled back, thus pledging my allegiance and making us comrades.

But I didn't want to see Angela strain for two days to act as though I were the one with whom she desired to be. I didn't want to watch her pretend to have the time of her life, to match the joyful facades of the others, who had built up this party for so many months that it could only disappoint. I didn't want to see her pretend to be able to handle hard liquor. It'd be a weekend of the same Herculean effort that the girls put in everyday, to wake up before dawn and put on their make-up for school, when they wanted so badly to keep sleeping. I admired them, just as I admired the guys who found it in themselves to ignore the nausea that the pretty girls affected in their stomachs and act as though winning the next basketball game were the only thing on their minds. But when would it end? When would we unsure, vulnerable creatures be able to drop our guards and let our inner selves make their way to the front? Our

inner selves surely were ugly things: squashed by repression, shriveled by malnutrition, and resentful from neglect. But we couldn't possibly endure the pain of holding them back forever. We were eighteen! We'd done it long enough! We were adults now! But it had shown no signs of stopping.

I found myself on the verge of faking an illness to excuse myself from attending the party at the shore, but I stalled, dreading the theatrics I'd have to go through and hoping something would come up—like an embolism in Gina Sanders's brain—that would get me out of the weekend without deceit. Sitting at a table with Angela, we chatted, which was pleasant because she had a nice sense of humor that made me glad she had befriended me, although I knew we'd lose this repartee upon entering a larger group.

"Did I mention how handsome you look in your tuxedo, Paul?" she said.

"No," I said.

"That's because you don't look handsome. You look OK at best."

"Well, you look downright terrible. Maybe we should switch. I could wear your dress, and you could put on my tuxedo. I'd have to shave my legs first, though."

"I think you'd look gorgeous then," she said.

"Likewise," I said.

She laughed a little and tried unsuccessfully to smile. What a good sport she was! A wave of gloom hit me, and while I had thus far kept my head above the surface, I now began to drown in it. How unfair it was that this girl was unhappy! I didn't know her ex-boyfriend, who ostensibly carried the blame, but nobody here was fit for a romantic relationship. We all wanted someone to see and understand us and our pain, but we, ourselves, could not find a clear glimpse of it, buried as it was beneath our many layers of functional posturing. And tonight required even more pos-

turing from Angela, who had hastily dried her eyes and shown up with me at her arm, as though—oh, yes, hadn't you heard?—we were a couple. And so many other pairs, who knew each other only as friends, had to play this game, too. It was too sad to watch.

**P**arting from Angela as if to go the bathroom, I moved gradually to the exit of the ballroom. I pondered the potential consequences of leaving the prom. Certainly, I would miss the weekend at the shore, since I wouldn't have it in me to return to my peers after experiencing the lift of abandoning them. That didn't bother me, but the thought of ditching Angela tugged at my conscience. It wouldn't break her heart, since she had no strong feelings for me, but a sudden disappearance could bewilder her enough to ruin her night; without anyone to accompany her to Long Beach Island, she might, amidst the other couples, feel awkward enough to skip it, even though she had professed a desire to go. With my inability to dance, I had already proven myself a subpar date, and I'd make things infinitely worse by bailing on her suddenly. She, a nice girl, didn't deserve that.

I did it anyway. As I left the ballroom, I heard someone announce that the senior class had voted Scott Shelton and Gina Sanders prom king and queen, respectively. Sociable Gina's campaign had worked, after all. This spurred me towards the door. I didn't want to look at either of them. I hated to think of Angela, but the relief of declining to be for another two days the person my peers expected me to be, instead of the person I was, overtook me, and I allowed a grin to creep up my lips. Since I had taken the limousine to the hotel, I had no car to drive home, but luckily the hotel's location allowed me to walk to a place where I felt wholly myself: the diner.

The walk refreshed me, and in five minutes I arrived at the diner. As I stepped inside, I, for the first time, found it entirely bereft of my

schoolmates. I saw that my table in the corner by the window was vacant, so I sat down there. It was long past dinnertime, and the sparse crowd seemed curiously old, as though a small gang of ancient insomniacs had invaded my territory. My youth, in contrast, made me self-conscious. I felt like the only child at the grown-ups' table.

It was a warm night, and the diner's air conditioner buzzed behind me. It had an irritating sound, which I'd never heard before. I considered that perhaps conversation with my friends had previously drowned it out.

I thought about my desertion of Angela and our friends. I wondered if they would ostracize me. Since our graduation was near anyway, the thought didn't really disturb me, but it felt a little odd.

When the waitress came, I ordered a club sandwich. It seemed to take longer than usual for her to serve it. When it appeared, the bread was stale, the turkey dry, and the lettuce wilted. I wondered if the diner was not, in fact, lousy. I dropped my sandwich back onto its plate. I tossed a few dollars—enough to cover my food and a tip—onto the table without pausing to ask the waitress for the check.

A moment later, I found myself outside, alone and without a ride home. I was afraid, but unsurprised. I had been heading for this. This was what I wanted. •

interview

# Phil Tanis

## *Mayor Boy*

I knew of Phil Tanis long before I knew him. His kin were legendary in my hometown of Holland, Michigan, the way the Rockefellers wow Manhattanites. Phil's brother Joel was the star local painter, and Phil himself stood at the helm of the city; to my biased eyes, he was the lone voice of reason amidst a sea of blue hair and J.C. Penney sport coats. After the peaceful reign of Phil had receded to the history books, he married one of my high school friends (and Joel married her sister). Phil was kind enough to sling his electronic answers through the ether about growing up with civic power.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

How old were you when you were elected to the city council?

TANIS:

I had just turned nineteen when first elected, and was a freshman at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

What drew you to seek local political office as a teenager?

TANIS:

I decided to run just after graduating from Holland High School. It was the weekend before petitions were due, and no one had yet filed for an open seat—the one representing the neighborhood I grew up in. So my dad and I walked around for an afternoon and collected the twenty-five or so signatures that were required. (I noted later it was easier to get on the ballot for city council than for Hope’s student congress.) I had been interested in politics for quite some time, prior to suddenly jumping in. I was on the student councils in middle and high school, had participated in Hope’s Model United Nations, done the Close-Up program, etc. The motivation was thus more of a general interest in politics than any specific issue.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

How did serving in local government affect your experience as a college student?

TANIS:

The impact was varied. On the one hand, it kept me on campus more than I otherwise would’ve been. It also made me popular at off-campus parties. When the noise level got too high, the police would invariably swing around. I’d be summoned to have a chat with them, and we’d ultimately settle things down with no additional complications.

Academically, I was able to complete a political science minor fairly easily, taking an independent study focusing on my role as a “city father.” It also afforded me some “protection” when I got involved in on-campus antics, such as sit-ins, writing and editing the school newspaper, and overzealously publicizing an anti-apartheid movement. Instead of someone calling me into their office, it was my fellow students who took the brunt of the discipline.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

Was there a large age difference between you and your fellow councilmembers? Did you ever feel like you weren’t taken seriously because of your age?

TANIS:

The next youngest councilmember was ten years older than me, and he had set a record as being the youngest ever in Holland when he got on a few years earlier. My former middle and high school history teacher was a member, as was a Hope professor. Half of them could’ve been my grandfather (there were no women when I served).

I think initially I was pretty intimidated, though it was nothing to do with anything they actually did or said (in fact, my former teacher was very proactive in letting me know that he was no longer “Mr. McGeehan” to me, but rather “Al” (he’s currently Holland’s mayor)). I tend not to speak much unless I feel comfortable, and I didn’t utter much more than a “yea” or “nay” for several months. But once I settled in—and focused on a few specific issues—I was raring to go.

The issues that got me rolling were 1) the downtown’s revitalization (which was sparked by the threat of a mall proposal for the south side of Holland—something which my vocalness helped kill, eventually bumping it to the north side, and giving us a few years to get our act together

downtown) and 2) Centennial Park's renovation. This ultimately saw me suit up in a cardboard box painted like a red paving brick for a "Buy a Brick" fundraising campaign to pave the gravel pathways in the park. We also got a new gazebo with proper restrooms constructed, and reshaped the park to enough of an extent to keep it vibrant and useful 100 years after it was first dedicated.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

When you graduated from Hope, you ran for mayor and were elected by a narrow margin, making you the youngest mayor in the U.S. How did your experience as a young council member influence your decision to run?

TANIS:

I beat the incumbent mayor by sixteen votes ("fifteen more than I needed"). I had settled well into my council position, enjoying it greatly, though I wasn't ready to run for another four-year term. The plan was to head to graduate school, but I didn't feel quite ready for that either.

The mayor and I had disagreed on a number of issues over the four years, the most pointed one being his support of a municipally-owned marina to be placed in the midst of a core lakeside city park. I disliked this for a number of reasons, from its hijacking of a public park to the city's getting involved in yet another private business concern. The marina's never been built, by the way.

So, with my vast experience and absolutely nothing to lose, I postponed graduate school and ran against him. Those sixteen votes undoubtedly came from Hope students, as the margin of victory in the area I had been representing (which include large parts of the college) more than made up for the areas in which I lost.

I ran an active, door-to-door campaign, hitting hundreds of houses

in the areas that were electing new city councilors. And, if memory serves, those are the areas I won—and which also had the larger turn-out since they had more than just a mayoral race to vote in. I wouldn't credit this campaign strategy to my experience on the city council, though it did help to have an excellent campaign manager (who had previously worked on state campaigns and had given me my first real job...at a downtown toy store, which I left shortly before being elected mayor).

INKCOLLECTIVE:

Your biography on the City of Holland website claims that “Although he was Dutch and a member of the Reformed Church in America, his blue jeans, taste for rock and roll, and unorthodox style often met criticism.” As mayor, did you meet with a lot of opposition because of your age and style?

TANIS:

The first and worst criticism came from a letter to the editor immediately after I was elected. I had made some statements to the press along the lines of how I wouldn't be changing my dressing habits, usually jeans and t-shirts, for the office. A citizen, and father of a fellow councilmember, decided that jeans, t-shirts, and rock and roll led invariably to drugs, which wasn't a good thing! Ironically, I've never taken drugs; a fine ale has long been my preference for a relaxing evening.

Thankfully, the letter was so over the top that it resulted in a cascade of letters along the lines of “give the kid a chance” and many more defending rock and roll. The critic's son was also duly elected my mayor pro tem (a post he holds to this day).

On the council and with city staff, everyone was pretty well used to me by the time I was elected mayor. So, while there were some adjustments, it was pretty quickly back to business as normal there. And

in the community, most folks appreciated having a mayor who wasn't intimidating in the least; I was highly approachable, both because of my age and style.

And I could dress up when needed; I had a suit coat and tie on when addressing the Rotary Club (though I began my speech with a quotation from a Kate Bush song) and when former President Ford visited. But there were some times when I should've dressed a bit better (I have a rather embarrassing picture of me with the governor—and I'm in white shorts, topsiders, and no socks, though I think my shirt was tucked in, at least).

INKCOLLECTIVE:

Your list of accomplishments as mayor is impressive: affordable housing for low income families, the recycling center, and the snow melt system. How did you manage to get so much done in just one two-year term?

TANIS:

I did a lot in two years—the entire downtown streetscape project, of which snow melt was the best bit; getting recycling going; doing a long range plan (which undoubtedly languishes under a pile of dust somewhere to this day); and the start of the Macatawa Area Coordinating Committee (the MACC), which brought together officials from the city and surrounding townships to actually talk about cooperative efforts for the community. The MACC's since become a federally recognized (and funded) level of bureaucracy (how proud I must be).

I think I was able to get so much done in so short an amount of time for three reasons: 1) I didn't have a real job so had ample amounts of time to spend on city business, 2) I had way too much energy back then (breakfast consisted of a Coke and a donut), and 3) I didn't realize there

were things I shouldn't be doing.

Ultimately, I inadvertently set a precedent for future Holland mayors by taking a part time, mostly ceremonial office and turning it into a nearly full time office with the power/ability to accomplish stuff outside of the usual structures (for instance, I don't think the MACC was ever voted on by anyone—I just got folks together to talk).

INKCOLLECTIVE:

If you could relive your youth, would you run for city council and mayor again?

TANIS:

Heck yes. Though I don't plan on running for elective office again in this lifetime, or until I'm old enough to become Holland's oldest ever mayor.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

You entered politics in the Reagan era, when even I remember getting into fights with my fellow elementary-schoolers during the Mondale/Reagan debates. Do you think that the decade had a lot to do with the political decisions you made?

TANIS:

No, not really. My favorite part of the elected positions in Holland is that they're non-partisan (i.e. we're all assumed to be Republican, or at least we were). But what that does is cut out the bluff and blunder of partisan politics. While we'd have our own viewpoints, we were able to discuss, debate, etc., in a civil and respectful manner (and often go out after a meeting for beers). We were all dedicated to one thing: to make Holland a better place to live. I don't think the national politicians at the time (nor

the ones now) really have as their top priority making this country a better place for everyone.

INKCOLLECTIVE:

This seems like another politically-charged decade. Any advice to our readers, young and old, about their political responsibilities as citizens?

TANIS:

All I can say is this: prepare yourselves for the coming oligarchy. Capitalism has just about beaten the life out of our Democracy, and I really don't know how we're going to get ourselves out of the mess we're sliding into (not to end on a downer, as I find this very fascinating, though in a sad sort of way).

INKCOLLECTIVE:

My grandmother wants me to tell you that you were the best mayor Holland has had since she was born in 1922. Thanks for taking the time, Phil. •

flashback

# Sasha Wang

## *Why is This Puppet Touching Me?*

I was eleven—old enough that I felt sophisticated and adult. It was at this age that my older sister and I began snooping. Our snooping was fruitful. In basement dressers we found buttons, homeless dentures, and dead mice. We found wedding pictures with our father and a strange woman; my parents were forced to reveal that our dad was on his second marriage. We found the will outlining how each of us would end up with a different relative if our parents died. We found the gun cabinet, then the key to the gun cabinet, then the ammo, then the key to get the ammo. Yet we continued snooping.

Our attic snooping led us to a mysterious jackpot. A large mailing package, addressed to my father's father, filled with bubble wrap. We destroyed all the bubbles, then turned to the contents. It was a large film reel like we had seen at the movie theater. We tried to spin it around in the light, thinking it would play. It did not. We brought it to the den where we held each frame up to the light. PORN. It was 8mm porn. At first we wondered what stupid woman just kept licking and biting her lips, but the

next frames revealed that she was naked. Suddenly, a puppet appeared on the hand of the woman. It was a puppet of the Punch & Judy style, with a large nose and a maniacal grin. Disjointedly, with interruptions to push away our impatient brothers, we watched the woman put the hand puppet between her legs; zoom shots of lip biting ensued.



**W**e were caught by our parents. We did not get in trouble (although my dad may have), but we never saw that reel again. And so, I am left only with my first impression of porn—a black and white frame of a woman touching herself with a hand puppet. •

*This essay first appeared on the now-defunct web journal, Sumpin.com.*

fiction

# Daniel Peretti

## *The Mailbox of Death*

**O**n a dark, lonely road sat the Mailbox of Death. It lurked on the edge of a small town that was out of the way of everything, half an hour's drive from the nearest highway. The town had all the necessities of modern life, but none of the interesting aspects. There were grocery stores, video rental stores, pizza places, a bowling alley, bars, but not much else. This had a profound effect on the youth.

The youth of this town resembled the youth of most towns today: they spent the majority of their time looking for something to do. Unfortunately, as stated, possible activities in and around the town were limited. Since it cost money to travel to distant lands where they might find fun and excitement, even those with cars left town only sporadically at best.

Many drowned themselves in alcohol, forgetting their boredom at parties where they could talk about excitement in the hopes of conjuring it, usually without luck. As two of these small-town youths made their way

to one of these parties, they happened to notice the Mailbox of Death. Here our story begins.

But stories never really begin where we say they begin, just as they never end with the conclusion. There is always more to tell. There is always prologue, prelude, and precursor. In this case the story began at some indeterminable point in the past with the genesis of the Mailbox of Death. Perhaps it's best that we don't know of its true origins. Perhaps it's best that we think of mundane possible geneses and forget about other, less rational ones. Perhaps it's best that we conclude that in the past, other youths, whose identities must remain obscure, took it upon themselves to strike terror into the hearts of the United States Postal Service by destroying a mailbox—an average, entirely normal mailbox—on the side of a dark, lonely road. But this enraged its owner, and so he constructed a new mailbox to strike terror into the hearts of would-be mailbox assassins. So was born the Mailbox of Death and this story. Yes, it's best just to believe that version, for others we might postulate would not be nearly so pleasant.

**B**ack to the party and the two youths—Steve and Johnny—who were on their way to it. Most people didn't call these two by their first names. High school was boring, and so the students entertained themselves and built up a level of camaraderie by giving each other nicknames. Johnny was referred to by his last name, Willis. This sometimes caused confusion because people would think Willis was his first name. Under mysterious circumstances, Steve's friends had named him Stogie.

The sky was graying into night as the seventeen-year-olds drove down a lonely road on their way to a Saturday night of revelry. Instinctively, Stogie slowed the van as they neared the Mailbox of Death, and their eyes became fixed on it.

There it sat, stark against the evening sky, clearly visible in the fading light. Their eyes widened and their jaws slackened as they realized exactly what they saw against the wooded backdrop.

"My god!" said Stogie in disbelief.

"Are those spikes?"

"It's made of metal! Even the newspaper boxes on the sides!"

"That's steel."

Neither of the youths could believe what they witnessed. There, on their left, was a thing of pure defiance, clearly an embittered man's reaction to society. There sat something that must be dealt with, and they knew how. They looked back to their right and examined the house that corresponded to such a thing of evil. It sat back about fifty yards from the road, partially obscured by trees. No car sat in the driveway, no children played in the yard, no light shined in the windows.

Willis turned and looked at his friend. He smiled with his lips open, but showed no teeth. "It's going *down!*"

They arrived at the party a few minutes later. They could smell the smoke from the road. The party was thrown by Denny Gamberetti, whose father played baseball. Stogie and Willis entered the house and wasted no time in finding Denny himself.

"Denny," Stogie said in greeting.

"What's up?" Denny was already quite drunk, but he acted normal. After spending so many nights that way, it was normal. At first he did not recognize the two men who stood before him with devilish gleams in their eyes.

Willis said, "We need a baseball bat."

"What?" Denny was already having trouble following the conversation.

"We know your dad plays baseball," Stogie said. "He has to have a bat somewhere."

“Oh, yeah. I’ll be right back.”

Ten minutes later Denny returned. In his left hand he carried a plastic cup filled with a foul-smelling beer, in his right was a brand new thirty-four inch black aluminum TPX baseball bat. He handed it to Willis.

“Here it is. What do you want it for, anyway?”

“We gotta go bust a mailbox,” Stogie said, and Willis smiled his toothless smile.

“Don’t dent the bat. My dad paid two hundred bucks for it.”

And off they went, Stogie driving his van and Willis holding the bat.

Minutes later Stogie slowed to attack speed as Willis rolled down the window. He leaned out, brandishing the TPX as if it were an ancient battle-axe. Then the Mailbox was within range. A mighty swing did Willis make, and the sound of metal on metal was heard far and wide. Stogie saw something fly off into the trees.

“Ah! What? What was that?”

Willis drew his reverberating body back in, with the remnants of the two hundred dollar aluminum TPX baseball bat. Only nineteen inches of it.

“Fuck,” said Willis.

“Oh my god!” screamed Stogie, his words short and choppy.

Stogie turned the van around and crept back to the Mailbox of Death. The house was dark, undisturbed. The Mailbox still stood, undented.

A short while later, Stogie and Willis left the party again without the bat remnants and without having confronted Denny. They had chosen to set the nineteen inches of broken aluminum in the closet by the front door.

The two youths vowed to destroy the Mailbox of Death.

“It’s a testament to the repression of youth,” one of their friends

would say later, after becoming inextricably involved in the situation. Oh, yes, reinforcements would come, but later. First, Stogie and Willis had to attempt redemption on their own.

From a garage they got a hacksaw. Once again in the van, nights later, they drove down that same lonely road. The hour was much later this time, assuring no interference during the duration of the mission.

A first drive-by revealed a dark house and no nearby lights. A short way down the road, Stogie slowed the van and out Willis leapt, hacksaw in hand. Stogie drove away, but Willis went on foot to the mailbox.

After driving for a few minutes, Stogie pulled over. He thought, "What are we doing? This is crazy. It's just a mailbox." He sped back to it.

Willis had sawed intensely at the pole holding up the Mailbox. The headlights illuminating his work from behind did not cause him to slow or hide. He knew Stogie approached.

Willis's efforts were futile, at best. As Stogie slowed the van to wait for him, he ceased his worthless sawing and leapt back into it.

"What's wrong? Why isn't it down?" Stogie was immediately confused.

"Didn't work."

"What? Why?"

"It's steel."

"Even the pole?"

"Yup."

"So did you even dent it?" Willis shook his head. "Cut into it?" More shaking. "Scratch it?"

"Little bit."

"All you did was scratch it a little bit? You were there five minutes!"

"Bent up the saw, too." Willis ran his thumb across its blunted

teeth.

“Je-sus.”

“This isn’t over, Stogie. Not ‘til it’s gone, or we are.”

Time passed. Stogie nearly forgot Willis’s declaration, which might not have been a bad thing. The memory of Willis, however, could span months. One day, Stogie arrived at his friend’s house. Darkness had come hours ago, and Willis would delay his vow no longer.

Stogie had come to expect to wait when picking up Willis. But Willis was less prepared than usual, lacking shoes and jacket, even socks.

“What’re you doing?” Slight agitation.

“Gettin’ ready.” Willis said as he walked into the living room from the kitchen.

“Well, it doesn’t look like it,” Stogie said, which was, in fact, incorrect. Willis had begun to put on his footwear. He walked back into the kitchen and put a few items into a backpack. Then he picked up his coat and walked out the door, explaining his plan.

On the road. A bit of this, a bit of that, a bit of the other: pipe bomb.

“Go!”

The pipe bomb nestled within the spiked walls of the Mailbox of Death, Willis slammed the door to the van. Away they drove, Stogie’s van putting distance between the youths and the impending blast quickly, but not too quickly. It was a shame that no one saw the explosion, that no one *could* see the explosion. But that was just another testament to the power of the Mailbox of Death.

A few minutes later Stogie and Willis passed by the Mailbox of Death again, headlights flaring on high. Jaws dropped in horror, the two friends stared at the thin trail of smoke rising to the heavens from the

opened door to the otherwise intact Mailbox of Death.

“It’s indestructible,” Willis said, with far too much stress on the third syllable. They went home for the night.

Later, Stogie said, “if we can’t beat the Mailbox of Death, we’ll have to beat the man behind it.”

Willis responded with, “We’ll need help.”

**A**nd so months passed; months filled with the end of high school, vacation, and the beginning of college. But if there could be an underlying theme, a purpose and direction of thought to the lives of these youths, it would have been the destruction of the Mailbox of Death. They pondered possible courses of action.

They did not go about this by themselves; they had friends. They even revealed their vow to some, only to find that these others had seen this mailbox and shared their sentiment. To them, the Mailbox of Death was a blight on the roadside. Rumors and stories flew. Some said that the man was a cop, busy tracking down the people who had destroyed his first mailbox. Some said it was cemented into the ground ten feet, some said six. Some said it was the devil himself, come to earth to passively observe from the roadside. None of the youths cared. They wanted it gone.

So one night while home for vacation the next spring, Stogie and Willis took their friends Ben and Angry Jimmy Rickles to buy an item of singular importance to their plan.

“I want to paint it,” Stogie said. So paint it they would.

The youths actually waited until they were all home again, weeks later, to implement this plan. They felt it necessary to put some time between the purchase of this paint and its actual usage. It was a calm, dark night in late spring when they struck.

Stogie drove his van, but in it Willis did not sit. He patrolled the area around the strike zone in his father’s truck, alone. In the van were

Ben and Angry Jimmy Rickles. As Stogie drove past the mailbox, they all saw that the house was dark and praised their good fortune. A short ways away the van slowed and the two passengers exited. They walked the way back, while Stogie drove off to let them work.

The Mailbox of Death loomed before them, a hole in the pitch of night. They had no trouble finding it.

Once, an unfamiliar car passed by as they worked, casting the glare of its headlights upon their backs as they rocketed into the trees. Ben's shoes got wet from water in a ditch. After that little incident, Angry Jimmy Rickles got scared.

"Ben, we're going to jail," he said, over and over.

"Shut up, we're almost done."

"We're going to jail, and I'm gonna have to watch while you get it on with a bald guy named Bubba."

Ben continued to paint, making sure that every part of the steel was covered. Poor Bubba would have to go unsatisfied, for Stogie pulled up in the van as Ben emptied the last of the can.

The next day, neighbors a mile down the road could see the gleam of the new and improved neon pink Mailbox of Death. Acquaintances of the youths (unaware of their activities) mentioned it as a funny sight on the way to work.

By nightfall, the Mailbox of Death was black once more. The youths were saddened. They felt cheated, as if not enough people had witnessed their "art."

What they didn't realize was that their attack had drawn blood. The Mailbox of Death, once an ominous and uniform black, a piece of darkness sitting a few feet from the road, had become a poorly cast shadow of its former self. The black metal, once imposing, had become pock-marked and grew blemishes. Though it still had spikes, they were somehow duller, blunted. The Mailbox of Death was, indeed, vulnerable.

More vacations came and went, and Stogie constructed another plan.

“We’ll make it so he can’t get his mail. We’ll epoxy the door shut. There’s no getting by that stuff.” And he smiled his own version of Willis’s toothless grin.

And so one night, during summer vacation, Stogie, Willis, and Ben renewed their attack. They chose an epoxy based on drying time, cost, and tested strength. With Ben driving the van this time (Stogie wanted more action), they mixed it on the way. They followed their usual procedure: Ben dropped the other two off a short distance from the mailbox and drove around for a bit. He met them as they began their walk away from it, their work complete.

“We slathered that thing,” Willis said.

“Oh yeah,” said Stogie. “We got it good.”

Since, this time, the attack had been more subtle, its effects were not seen right away. Then, weeks later, Stogie drove by the Mailbox of Death during the day. Slowing down, he realized that there were scorch marks around the closed door. The man had tried to open it with a blowtorch.

There was much rejoicing as the sight was confirmed. They had won.

**T**heir victory was official a month later, when a temporary mailbox appeared next to the useless, spiked monstrosity. It’s wooden and plastic parts were a far cry from spiked, black steel. After another month, the Mailbox of Death disappeared completely, destined for the scrap heap.

No longer seventeen, Stogie, Willis, and friends spoke of the Mailbox of Death in hushed tones. They had fought a mighty opponent, yet their victory felt hollow. When they drove by the former site of their

opponent, they were forced to see the situation with a new perspective. Stogie, Willis, and their friends had filled their youth with a cause, but now new duties beckoned them. Suddenly the Mailbox of Death didn't seem so menacing or insulting to them. It was just a mailbox, one man's extreme reaction to a world where people destroy the property of others for fun and diversion. Sure, the youths had had good times, but all that remained were doubts as to whether or not their cause had been just. •

review

# Brooke Schedneck

## *The Buddha's Apprentices*

When many teens are worrying about dates to the prom and the latest fashion trends, the young Buddhists that Sumi Loundon has collected in her latest book, *The Buddha's Apprentices*, are desperately seeking spiritual sustenance. Loundon, Assistant Director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, is making a name for herself by compiling the writings of young Buddhists. Her first book, *Blue Jean Buddha*, collects short, personal essays by Buddhists in their twenties and thirties. For *The Buddha's Apprentices*, however, Loundon changes the formula, adding sections by both young and old, and the book benefits from it. The essays by teenagers are well-written and mature, among the most impressive and striking in this collection.

In "That Sighing Feeling," seventeen-year-old Andrew B. Howk describes his suffering with depression, which led him on a search for meaning. He found this meaning in Buddhist books, especially Thich Nhat

Hanh's *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*. Through reading and practice, Howk eventually learned to deal with his depression, and founded an on-line community for Buddhist teens.

At an early age, Anne Skuza knew that she was looking for something different than her Polish Catholic background. "I, a searching eleven year old, set out to break that mold by finding a religion I could truly believe in." She has genuine spiritual concerns for someone so young. Now thirteen and practicing Buddhism, she is happier, less stressed, and better able to deal with her emotions.

Unlike Anne, Hillary Miller has her father's support for her practice—whether she wants it or not. When the fourteen-year-old finds herself bored at an art museum, her father tries to give her advice. "You should just walk and breathe," he says. Meditating in places like the museum "is true meditation." Hillary resents the instruction and snaps back at him, "And do you practice mindfulness all the time?" Her father admits that he can only "try."

Fifteen-year-old Maya Putra attributes her maturity to meditation practice, especially the two ten-day silent retreats she has attended. Many adult Buddhists struggle to sustain their practice enough to do this intense meditation. When we are surrounded by images of teens talking on their cell phones about nothing for hours, it is hard to imagine a fifteen-year old silent for ten days in a row. These essays give the world a more mature view of teenagers in America today.

I have to admit that I am a little jealous of these young writers. Although I have been interested in religions academically since my freshmen year of college, I never felt such spiritual yearnings until recently, in my mid-twenties. I identify with Hillary's dad, who reads about Buddhism and thinks it's a great path, but can only try to practice. Whereas Hillary, at age fourteen, started her own daily meditation practice with no hesitation.

Loundon has gathered other writers who are in their twenties and thirties, as well as older Buddhists reflecting on their younger years. But the essays by teenagers are the most striking and surprising. I think many people tend to devalue the seriousness of adolescent spirituality. We think they are too young to understand the suffering in the world, having not been exposed to enough situations in life in order to need a spiritual path. But for these extraordinary teen authors, and probably many others like them, spirituality is serious.

This book is engaging reading for anyone interested in Buddhism, contemporary religious issues, and young adult spirituality. In a country where Buddhism is not the mainstream, it is exciting to read how these adolescents sought out spirituality, discovered Buddhism, and began a practice. These mini-memoirs reflect the state of religion in America today: many Americans seek some kind of religious experience, and although Buddhism isn't the answer for everyone, it is great to read about how some have found what they are looking for. These teenagers emphasize that the path isn't easy, but it is worth traveling. •

# Matthew Reidsma

*Polo Shirts*

HELPFUL INSTRUCTIONS FOR  
TODAY'S TEENS THAT WANT  
TO WEAR POLO SHIRTS:

## RULES

1. NO PINK.
2. BUTTON UP.
3. WHOA! PUT  
THAT COLLAR  
DOWN!



essay

# Jessica Belt

## *Sacrifice Bunt*

I hate baseball. A mere mention of the word can give me chills—the haunting kind you get when you know you’re being followed. Seems I’ve had that feeling most of my life.

I never actually played the sport, at least not in any organized way, although baseball became something of a family pastime during much of my childhood. My younger brother, Evan, first joined a Little League team when I was nine; each weekend, I tagged along with him and our parents to our community sports complex. The grown-ups ogled over the pinstriped little boys practicing their hand-eye coordination, and everyone tried to suppress their giggles when the bat would make contact with the pancake-flat brim of the batter’s hat. Some batters could actually hit the ball and knock off their cap in the same swing. The batter would search frantically for his hat, turning in spasmodic circles, oblivious to the crowd’s desperate pleas to run. This was one of the few, nearly guaranteed methods for the defense to make an out.

The games were amusing for the first few minutes, but by the start of the second inning, I would escape to the playground or the creek, hoping to meet other youngsters who were equally as disinterested in a sport where most of the so-called playing time was spent waiting.

About halfway through his first season, Evan was permanently assigned to the outfield. This new position gave him the freedom to practice cartwheels and pick dandelions to give to Mom after the game. Though our parents encouraged him to apply himself so he could move back into the action, I was proud of how Evan handled his outfield position. I even offered a few pointers on his tumbling.

At the close of T-ball season, Evan was still in the outfield and had learned some very important lessons:

1. Real baseball players bend their brims;
2. Dandelions make Mom sneeze; and
3. Everyone wants to play for the Yankees.

I would have been satisfied if that were the end of his baseball career, but the next year Evan signed up for machine-pitch.

**W**ith the start of each season, I renewed my determination that this would be the year I would begin to like baseball. When he started collecting baseball cards, I joined my brother's efforts. We gathered cards from cereal boxes, from quarter-slot vending machines, from friends, and occasionally from Mom as a reward for behaving in the grocery store. After his stack of cards reached a few inches high, Mom and I took him shopping for a coveted baseball card folder with plastic storage pages.

When we organized the folder, I looked at the front side of the cards with the pictures. Evan studied the backs. In fact, he spent more time memorizing stats than he did practicing the game; his skills improved accordingly. Many a family dinner was spent listening to my skin-and-

bones brother spout off RBIs and strikeouts for little-known players. The conversation would grind to a halt when Dad would remind Evan, "If you want to play like the pros, you've got to practice like the pros."

The next year I vowed to watch my home team, the Texas Rangers, with my family instead of reading alone in my room. I hadn't realized that professionals sometimes play three or more games during a week, but I did enjoy watching Nolan Ryan during the closing years of his career. I had given up trying to understand the complicated web of baseball statistics, but Ryan's career was fairly straightforward: before the Rangers he played for the Astros, and he was the best pitcher in the world. Case closed.

I also volunteered to keep the official score for Evan's team, to force myself to pay attention to every game. Scorekeeping was simple—all I had to do was mark slashes for balls and strikes and trace around a diamond to show how many bases each batter advanced. If someone scored, I blacked in the diamond. But I found more pleasure in studying pattern and contrast in a completed game (the best pages began to look Escheresque) than I did in the game itself.

My family encouraged my efforts, suggesting new angles on the sport with which I might be able to identify. "It's the thinking man's game," Dad explained in an appeal to my analytical nature. Baseball seemed pretty primal to me: hit-ball-and-run. Analytical perhaps for a Neanderthal.

"Sit with me," Mom suggested, "and we can talk between innings." I appreciated the relational possibilities until I discovered that conversations with baseball moms generally digress into endless calls of "Let the pitch come to you," and "Good eye," and "Follow through, Son." Was volume some sort of passive-aggressive parental competition? I couldn't believe these loudmouths didn't notice the players in the dugout, shaking their heads and shooting glances, begging their mothers to pipe down.

Call me anti-intellectual, unsupportive, un-American, but I struggled to find pleasure in the game.

The year rookie catcher Ivan “Pudge” Rodriguez joined the Rangers marked a turning point in Evan’s baseball fanaticism. Pudge was young, dark-skinned, and the best catcher in the league. To most, he was the archetypal underdog. To Evan he was the catching-god incarnate. With Pudge as his inspiration, Evan got serious about playing ball. He took running and batting lessons. He squatted and stretched. But technical expertise wasn’t enough for Evan. A good catcher held his team together; and a good catcher intimidated the snot out of the batter.

Only a few days shy from playing in a lower age bracket, Evan was often the youngest and smallest player on either team. His size and stance didn’t sway a single batter, and he knew enough not to talk trash. But the little catcher came up with a secret weapon: he sang his heart out. Evan belted out songs from his childhood: everything from *Mary Had a Little Lamb* to *London Bridge is Falling Down*. He found that preteen boys had difficulty maintaining their macho image when serenaded by a nursery-rhyming catcher.

The success of Evan’s strategy hinged on two things: the element of surprise and a good-humored umpire. He sang softly enough so that only the batter and the ump could hear. Thus, the first few batters were caught off guard until someone scored or got an out and clued in his teammates to the minstrel catcher. By the time of their third or fourth at-bat, some batters became so annoyed that they would complain to the umpire. Fortunately, there are no official rules against singing on the field.

The sacrifice bunt is my favorite play in baseball. The batter taps the ball so it falls just outside of the batter’s box, forcing the defense to scramble to tag him out while the other runners advance around

the bases. The strategy tests a catcher's speed and dexterity—whether he can take possession of the ball and fire it down to first base quickly enough to make a double play. Evan was quick, and frequently he could thwart the offense's sacrifice attempt. It is my favorite play, not because of my brother's skill, but because of the bunter's stance: body turned directly toward the pitcher, legs spread and squat, fists gripping each end of the bat. It was a fighter's final pose—strong, determined, doomed.

I wonder what goes through a batter's mind when he is told to sacrifice his at-bat. Is he confident that the coach knows he is capable of hitting a home run, but wants to play it safe? Is he disappointed? I suspect that he feels some of both. What of players who are called on repeatedly to sacrifice bunt—do they feel devalued? I never thought to ask Evan about it; he wasn't often asked to sacrifice.

My brother is one of those students who makes easy A's in the subjects he likes and fails those he dislikes—a reckless kind of self-motivation. Mom and Dad wanted him to learn to work hard and not rely solely on natural ability. Since he liked baseball and worked hard at it, our parents did whatever it took to encourage him, hoping that the values would transfer to other areas of his life. Evan hated that sort of attention.

"They're pressuring me," he confided after Dad suggested that he attend another summer camp to improve his running.

"At least you know they care."

"They let you do whatever you want." It was an argument I had heard many times. Mom and Dad believed that I already knew the value of hard work—I was one of those students who got straight A's because I couldn't bear to disappoint anyone—so they let me do my own thing. I could go out with friends when and where I wanted. I was rarely told no, and usually I appreciated the freedom.

"We all have to make our sacrifices," I told him.

When Evan convinced Mom and Dad to install a batting cage and pitching machine in our backyard, I had had enough. My high school friends teased me that the net peeking above our fence actually caged a rabid dog. I wished they were right and that the animal would devour every red-stripped white ball in sight. But we didn't have a caged canine and I couldn't convince my father that we needed one. So I simply refused to participate in any activity revolving around baseball. This included:

- Little League games
- Pony League games
- Live professional games
- Professional games on TV
- Bats (unless they were used as defense against my brothers or other baseball fans)
- Baseballs
- Dinner, if it included Ballpark Beef Franks or conversations about any of the above topics.

As my attitude toward baseball shifted from boredom to disgust, I developed a tug-of-war strategy to pull my family's loyalties in any other direction. I decided to dance with my high school team, in hopes that my own athletic endeavor would prove at least as interesting as baseball.

"We have a dress rehearsal Thursday night," I announced at dinner one evening. My competitions were on Saturdays, which conflicted with Evan's games. Transportation was the key issue: I could catch a ride with a friend who had a license and Evan couldn't. Out of practicality, baseball took precedence.

Mom scanned her calendar, color-coded for each of her children. Her finger stopped on aqua. "Evan has practice Thursday. We'll try to make your rehearsal afterwards." She marked it in green.

"Whatever. Come if you can," I said and shoved some casserole in

my mouth. I knew they wouldn't make it.

**E**van spent the summer between his sophomore and junior years of high school playing for a prestigious select team that promised him a catching position and the chance to travel. By then I was away at college, but Mom always gave me a baseball update when I called. Sometimes I would catch Evan at home and ask him how the season was going. He didn't reveal much—like most sixteen-year-olds, he had more important concerns.

I learned that a local textile business owner named Ronald funded the team and their frequent tournaments across Texas and the Midwest. Most team members came from Texas, but Ronald also provided food and lodging for talented players from as far away as Canada. In return for his generosity, the players simply had to win. When they did, they were rewarded with celebratory dinners, usually including steak and multiple courses. When they lost, they were, at best, sternly reprimanded, and at worst, kicked off the team.

Ronald also hired former minor league players to coach the team. A coach's longevity depended on the team's number of wins, although Ronald replaced coaches more frequently than he did the players. Coaches were responsible for motivating the team to win, both on and off the field. The barely twenty-year-old coaches' interpretations of this task varied: some gave pep talks; some worked with team-members on specific skills; some helped the team relax by introducing them to tobacco, alcohol, or marijuana.

A few times, Evan would divulge stories if I promised not to tell Mom and Dad. He told me that Jimmy, one of the better coaches, loathed Ronald's everyone-for-himself approach, and offered his opinion one evening after a tournament game. The team had lost again, and Evan and his teammates pressed their ears against the thin hotel walls to hear

exactly how Ronald would dismiss Jimmy. The conflict escalated until Jimmy pulled a gun and Ronald reconsidered. The team was treated to dinner that night despite their loss.

The boys agreed it was best not to embarrass Ronald by letting on that they knew of the spat. In fact, most team members found playing dumb to be a useful survival strategy. Evan played well enough not to be kicked off the team and kept mostly to himself. He also befriended the shortstop, a tall east-Texan with a molasses drawl, who everyone called “the Beast.” Evan and the Beast stuck by each other, and together they made it through the summer.

When the season ended, Evan had only a few weeks before high school practice began. He had played on the junior varsity team both of his previous two years, and this year his goal was to be named starting catcher. He was sure that the caliber of his summer team—the reigning Pony League World Champions—would give him the edge he needed. After tryouts, the coaches told Evan that he could be the starting varsity pitcher or he could catch on JV. Evan had a killer arm; he frequently picked off second-base stealers and he could have easily transitioned to pitching. But he only wanted to catch.

To say I was surprised when I learned that Evan had quit the team is an understatement. He might as well have said that he amputated his legs. Without baseball, Evan grew passionless. His grades dropped, even in the subjects he liked, and he stopped hanging around with his baseball friends.

When I went home during a college break, I noticed that Evan had begun to mumble. He mumbled and didn’t look me in the eye. Mom and Dad were worried.

“He’s smoking cigarettes,” Mom whispered one night, not wanting Evan to hear in the next room. He was grounded again—I didn’t

know what for—and Mom knew I thought she was over-reacting.

“It’s just a phase,” I assured her. “I’m sure it will pass.” At least I was pretty sure.

**E**ven after Evan quit, baseball still seemed to nudge its way into my life. My college roommate, Jessica, dated a baseball coach. As a dutiful girlfriend, she went to most of Ryan’s games. As a dutiful friend, I often joined her. One summer evening, when the Massachusetts air was thick and heavy, we found ourselves leaning against the chain link fence along the third-base line.

“Do you believe in ghosts?” I wondered aloud. There was a building on our campus called Frost Hall that was rumored to be haunted. I spent my days working in this building and had just been given a key for after-hours access.

“Absolutely,” she answered and put a cigarette to her lips, “but I’ve never actually seen one.” Jessica looked toward home plate; Ryan was up to bat.

“I haven’t either.” I took a drag and considered whether spirits might actually look smoky. I smoked infrequently and only in the summer, and the methodical puffing tended to make me contemplative. “What do you think they look like?”

“Come on,” she yelled when Ryan got a second strike. “I think it depends on what kind of ghost it is, what its reason is for haunting.”

“You mean it might appear in the same way it died?”

“Sure. Or it might only appear to certain people, perhaps to send a message.”

“When I die, I’d want to haunt a person, not a place.” I thought about the people I could haunt—my parents, some close friends. I wasn’t sure any of them would appreciate that sort of intrusion. Someone rounded third base and I realized I wasn’t paying attention. “Did Ryan get a hit?”

“Yep, but they got him out at first. Brandon scored, though.”

Someone else crossed home plate, and I squinted to see the score.

“Are we winning now?”

“By two runs.”

To me, a two-run lead meant that we had the game in the bag. The remaining innings had to be finished for the win to become official. “I got a key to Frost Hall.”

“You did?” Jessica was curious. We made plans to spend a night searching for spirits and secret tunnels. She told me about a janitor who had once spotted a woman wearing a nightgown and carrying a lantern.

“We have to do it soon,” I made her promise. “And we have to stay the whole night.”

We never followed through, although we often talked about what we would do if we came face to face with the otherworldly. Someone advised me that if I approached the supernatural peacefully, it would reciprocate. When I worked late and had to walk two flights down the back staircase of Frost, I sang aloud, reasoning that my melody would warn any ghosts that I was coming and trick them into thinking that I was peaceful. On the wall at the bottom of the staircase was an eight-foot square mirror. I stopped singing and stared at the floor as I passed by it, remembering the rumors I had heard at my childhood summer camp about seeing ghosts in a reflection. As much as I wanted to face the supernatural peacefully, silence seemed always to be the most appropriate response.

**I**t was that same summer when I first understood that the living are haunted as well as the dead. I don’t remember how I first learned that Evan was a habitual drug user. I’m sure Mom told me. I recreate a conversation, hoping to jog my memory.

“Hi Mom,” I say. I had phoned her.

“How are you?” I ignore her flat tone.

"I'm great," I say too exuberantly. I babble, trying to make the mundane sound enthralling, hoping that my enthusiasm will catch on. "How is everyone at home?" I finally ask.

What words does she use? "Methamphetamines. Cocaine." She had to say both—the home kit tests for both. Is she crying? I am crying. I am sitting on the edge of my bed, holding my breath, fat tears slipping down my face. I exhale and keep my voice level.

"What will we do?" I ask, but I can't hear her answer. We hang up, and I'm still crying, and my memory returns.

I lay facedown on the berber in my dorm room, and my tears mix with dust in the carpet. I don't want to sniff because I might sneeze. But I have to or my nose will drip. So I sniff, and the carpet smells funny, and I wish I had vacuumed. Why didn't I vacuum? Mom wouldn't leave her floor unvacuumed. Why can I only think about dust bunnies when my brother will spend the next six weeks in inpatient treatment?

I claw at the carpet. Something sharp sticks under my fingernail, and I leave it there because it kind of feels good. Maybe I should go back to Texas for a few days. I could help out, give Mom a break. I quickly realize that my unexpected presence at home will only reinforce what I'd like to deny. There will be questions. So much to explain. Since I have no answers, I decide to stay here, on my unvacuumed carpet, with the sharp thing under my nail, for as long as I can.

**S**ilence pervaded the weeks after Evan began treatment. No reaction seemed appropriate. If I was angry, I immediately felt guilty. When I admitted to being scared, I realized I was afraid mostly for myself. Expressing anything other than the few facts I knew seemed selfish. And the facts—he's still in treatment, I still don't know how he is—weren't changing.

I said little, and when there was nothing left to say, I began

clenching my teeth. I went through my days tight-jawed, and at night I repeatedly dreamed of my teeth falling out. A dream encyclopedia said that losing teeth symbolized spiritual unrest. I couldn't find a way to rest in peace.

I found comfort in talking with Mom and Dad, when they squeezed in a call between hospital visits and family therapy sessions. They told me that Evan had finally begun to explain when...

"That summer I played Pony League." He still mumbled and had lost nearly all of the muscle definition in his arms.

and where...

"On the road."

and with whom...

"Just about everyone."

and why?

"I don't want to talk about it."

He never wanted to talk about baseball anymore.

**W**hen I graduated the following year, I moved with several college acquaintances just across the Charles River from Boston. I had come to the city because I couldn't return to Texas—home as I knew it no longer existed—and life in small town Massachusetts was far too quaint for my taste. Most of my friends had moved near Boston for similar reasons and we frequently found ourselves discussing immigration policy or Derrida or post-graduation angst at the Thirsty Scholar, a local English pub.

The pub advertised itself as a sports bar, and as fall approached, lanky grad students wearing plastic rectangular glasses and Red Sox jerseys appeared more and more frequently. The Sox were as all-American as they come: one of the oldest teams in baseball, underdogs since 1918, and comprised of no-nonsense players. They admitted openly to being

cursed, since they had traded Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1918, the last time Boston had won the World Series. Fans loved them for their down-home values and charm, and for the hope that one day they would win the pennant.

Even I could hope the best for a team that represented what baseball was supposed to be, what I had wanted for so long to be part of. In the early October evenings I bravely joined my friends to watch the Sox. Games One, Two, and Three against New York were disappointing manifestations of the eighty-six year long Curse of the Bambino. I entered Game Four expecting the trend to continue. I was proud of myself for watching a game I was sure we would lose, and at times, actually enjoying it. But I shocked and disgusted other fans when I revealed my defeatist attitude early in the game.

Much to my surprise, the Sox did win Game Four, and talk immediately began of Boston being the first team in sports history to come back to win after losing the first three playoff games. Bleary-eyed and gleeful commuters recounted plays from the evening before. Fans encouraged each other to "Believe." I even heard a sermon that compared Bostonians' current faith in the Red Sox to the kind of faith one should have in God.

I remained a skeptic. I believe in ghosts; I believe in God. I even claim to believe in goodness and human potential. But to believe in baseball?

I decided to fake belief, secretly hoping the next game would be the last. If the season was again going to end in loss, I didn't want to prolong the disappointment. But the Sox won Games Five and Six; with each win fans became more convinced that this was the year Boston would "Reverse the Curse." An hour before Game Seven began, the Thirsty Scholar was packed: most people were standing and a crowd had gathered outside to peer at the screen through the windows.

During the fourth inning, Evan called me from his east Texas apartment, where he had recently moved to work in a small baseball bat factory—the same factory that crafted bats for Red Sox left-fielder Manny Ramirez. One of Evan’s former coaches had offered him the job, hoping that the two-hour separation from his friends would give him space to rebuild his life.

Evan was surprised to learn that I had watched the game from the beginning. We phoned each other after big plays and at the end of every inning. I fed off of his enthusiasm, perhaps the first time in our lives when we participated equally in excitement over baseball. I held the phone up for him to hear the buzz of the crowd. He stayed on the line during the final history-making pitches of the ninth inning, although the din was too loud for us to talk. People outside the bar cheered and cried and danced in the street. Horns blared. A Cambridge townie had a full page of phone numbers for bars in the Bronx. He thrust the list at my group of friends, demanding that someone call New York.

I’m not sure when Evan finally hung up. I wished he could have been with me, celebrating and living the American dream. Instead he sat alone in his one-bedroom apartment, and I wondered if he would make it to the next morning clean and sober. At that moment, I loved and hated baseball more than ever before: I loved it for its heritage and promise that anyone really can succeed, and I hated that it had sold my brother short.

Believing in ghosts was no longer enough; it was time to face mine. If I had dared to look in the mirror of Frost Hall, I might have glimpsed the ghost of the lantern-bearing woman. Most likely, I would have seen only a shadowy reflection of myself. Perhaps this is the more frightening image: eyes deep, yet vacant. I’ve seen this look in Evan’s eyes and it leaves me sad, sometimes speechless. But my silence has not induced peace; it only prolongs the haunting. So I yelled, long and loud—for the Sox, for Evan, and for hope to again reverse this curse. •

confession

# Dreemz

## *Night Dreemz*

Popeye got his license before I did. It was a cool autumn evening, and we were rolling in his parents' cherry red Honda Civic SI. We turned into the subdivision behind the elementary school playground. It was a new development, with fresh pavement and a cul-de-sac. Or maybe a "turn-around." Like my Dad always said, it depends on how much the houses cost. No matter. It was a weekday night, and the street was quiet and dark.

The car headlights soon fell on a red metal flag that reached skyward. I pointed it out to Popeye, and we both glanced around. Sensing the coast was clear, Popeye eased the Honda up to the box. As I rolled down my window, the cool night air invaded the car. It smelled of one part freedom and one part danger – just the right ratio. I popped open the mailbox door, quickly reached in, and grabbed an envelope. As I closed the flap, the car crept forward and we started scanning for our next target. I added the envelope to a growing cache, stashed beneath my seat. On a good night, we spotted lots of flags and nabbed shitloads of envelopes. If

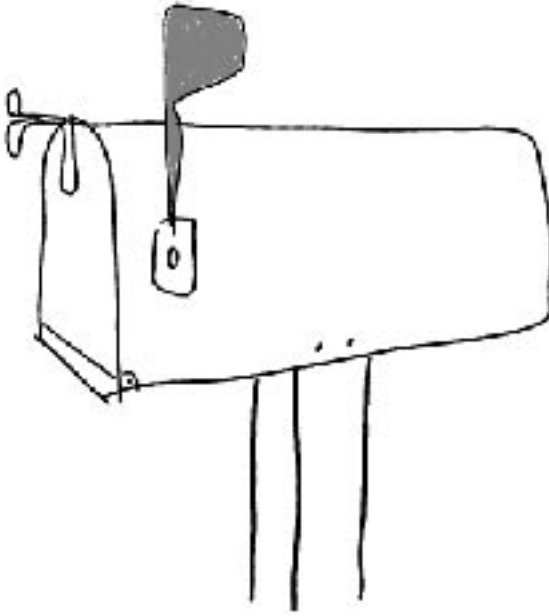
we felt especially bold or traveled by foot, we would hit all the boxes, even those without the telltale raised flag.

Our little habit—“mailboxing” as we called it—started even before we could drive. It was just one of the questionable activities that Popeye and I pursued at one time or another, in those teenage years of ennui. “Green boxing,” for example, involved cracking open those tall, slender telephone boxes on the side of the road, and tapping into random lines using a telephone with alligator clip leads. “Carring” (pronounced “car-in”), on the other hand, was a rather simple exploit that involved seeking out and rummaging through unlocked cars in parking lots. In a fitting turn of events, about all we ended up with was a cheap radar detector and lots of speeding tickets. But I digress.

Sometimes the incoming mail we found was just as interesting as the outbound material. There was always the hope that you’d nab a *Playboy* or *Penthouse*, or maybe even cash, sent to a child from a doting grandparent or distant uncle. I’d heard from other kids at school that the holidays were an especially good time for this sort of thing, although we weren’t really into it for the actual greenbacks. I’ll also never forget the time we opened a letter from a child to an estranged parent. I’d like to think that we were working for Fate that night, running the Muse’s errands, intervening in some karmic way. Probably not, but it eases my conscience.

Of course, Popeye and I weren’t the only players in the mailboxing game. Sometimes we rolled with a local rich kid, AKA Willy Wonka, in his Nissan 300ZX. It was a two-seater, with plenty of room in the hatchback for a small third rider, like me. He liked to make his mailbox rounds on the same day that the free weekly local paper was delivered. With one of us riding shotgun, he’d stop at most every mailbox and grab the contents. If there was newspaper in the box, he’d toss it behind the seat, into the hatchback. If ever stopped by a cop, all he had to say was that he was

delivering papers. He had mounds of them in the back to prove his case.



**Y**ou might be surprised to know that our actions were not motivated by teenage angst or revenge, at least not in the main. Rather, mailboxing was a means to a virtual end. Back in those days, we quickly tired of dialing into the mundane local computer bulletin board systems (BBSes). For those not in the know, a BBS is a computer system specially set up for allowing other users to connect to it, typically via a modem. Once logged in, one might participate in discussion boards, download files, and play online games. Back in the day, BBSes tended to be run out of basements by either nerdy, older, fat guys or nerdy, pimply, younger guys. These guys were called Sysops (system operators), and they had blocked us out of all the porn that was stashed away in their systems. We also quickly tired of pedantic and puerile conversations, short user time limits, and lack of real-time interaction. We longed to tap into other networks, other systems.

To satisfy our craving for digital discovery and exploration, we eventually took up the hobby of “war-dialing.” Popeye and I each had our own phone line, before star-69. One of us would set up a computer to sequentially dial phone numbers all night long. There were programs created just for this purpose—all we had to do was enter a few simple configuration parameters, and off this thing went, dialing number after number. By the morning, we had a tidy little report on all of the phone numbers that had registered some sort of modem connection. I’m sure we woke up hundreds of people in the middle of the night. We didn’t give a shit. We spent hours dialing our resulting hit lists, trying to figure out all of those mysterious systems that were scattered about our town. We hated fax machines, because they spoofed our modems into thinking they were connecting to another modem. Stupid fax machines.

Since we were still in high-school, financial considerations limited our ability to call bulletin boards or other online systems outside of our town. There were ways around this—such as using special “codes” on WATS lines that allowed you to call all over creation, billed to some corporation. (Think of a calling card system, where you dial into a 1-800 number, enter a code, and can then connect anywhere.) Unfortunately, these tricks tended to be inconsistent and risky. We could also use a local access number to dial into GENIE, or the “General Electric Network for Information Exchange.” A sort of primitive precursor to AOL, this large, multi-user service had lots of bells and whistles. But it was a pay service, and we were uninterested in paying. One day, in desperation, we started working through the GENIE payment options, to see what it really took to create an account. After spending some time exploring, the proverbial wheels started to turn. Popeye and I traded knowing looks. After anxiously waiting for night to fall, we made our first mailbox runs.

Later that night, we returned to Popeye's place and cordoned ourselves in his room. Popeye withdrew a check from the stash and fired up his computer. We anxiously waited for the modem music, that sweet synthetic symphony of blips and bleeps that promised unfettered access to what we perceived to be a vast and unexplored online universe. We entered the account information from one of the pilfered checks, and we waited. Within moments, our account was activated. We were in.

Popeye made a bee-line for the CB channels, which were really just glorified text-based chatrooms. Always the perv, he selected a singles channel and feverishly started tapping away:

```
#JOHNJACOB ENTERS CHANNEL CBSINGLES
```

```
#type /? for full command list or /who to see who  
is on this channel]
```

```
JOHNJACOB: /who
```

```
In CBSINGLES: ESMERELDA, MILDRED9, BART454
```

```
JOHNJACOB: hey esmrlda and mldred whats going on
```

```
ESMERELDA: not much, what are you up to?
```

```
JOHNJACOB: looking for some hot chat, I bet you r  
hot
```

```
ESMERELDA: whoa boy
```

```
MILDRED9: creep alert
```

```
ESMERELDA: okay, where are you from jj?
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JOHNJACOB: canada
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BART454: whatever
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JOHNJACOB: HEY Im just looking for a good time
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BART454: Eh, but aren't we all.
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JOHNJACOB: anybody want to talk dirty, private  
chat now? how bout you smrela
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ESMERELDA: good grief, scram loser

JOHNJACOB: screw you all

BART454: Watch it, or I will report you.

JOHNJACOB: whatever man you all suck

BART454: That's it.

JOHNJACOB: stupid gay dogs

#JOHNJACOB HAS BEEN PERMANENTLY BLOCKED FROM CHANNEL CBSINGLES BY MODERATOR CBOPS040

It seems we lacked the required finesse and patience to initiate hot cyberchat sessions with Mildred in Topeka and Esmeralda in Poughkeepsie.

No matter, there were plenty of other channels. And once we managed to get permanently banned from CB, there were always the online games. The only game that I remember playing was an online, multi-player flight simulator. It literally took all night to download the required software, but it was worth it. This was a fucking outrageous concept at the time. Flying! With other people! In four striking colors! Did I mention FLYING? Rat-a-tat-tat! Damn, shot down again! Probably Mildred in Topeka—she was a real ace. We really sucked at that game.

After a week or so, the GENIE account got shut down. We got nervous and backed away from it for a month, and then returned for another try. The thrill gradually faded, and pretty soon GENIE started to look like just another lame BBS. We moved on to bigger and better things, of varying degrees of legality. But I did take a lesson away from our experiences. To this day, I know better than to leave my outgoing mail outside overnight. •

fiction

# Tim Franklyn

## *Half In*

**B**ig Joey was, as his name suggests, enormous. Often when I visited little Joe, his dad would be clad in only a black t-shirt and tight-whities, lying on the couch with bolts of pale flesh seeping out the cracks and sticking with the taut grip of perspiration to leather upholstery. The homely sight was all the more reason for Joe and me to spend our time in their apartment tucked away in Joe's room listening to Morrissey, Green Jellö, Tool, or whatever he had recently deemed 'the next big thing.'

"Hey kid," big Joey shouted from the living room one sultry summer afternoon. "Come get me a Coke and pour it my frosty mug, will you?"

"Why don't you get it yourself, you lazy douche?"

"C'mon, kid, get off your duff and get me a drink."

Joe turned off the stereo, then nodded to me. "Let's go. I'll get him his damn drink, and then we can go cruise and smoke a bowl or something."

After fetching the mug from the freezer, Joe popped open a can of

Coke, spraying it all over himself. "Damn it! Why they all shook up?"

"Mama dropped them on the floor when she put away the groceries this morning."

"Well, why didn't you tell me, you fat piece of shit?"

"C'mon, quit your bellyaching and get me my drink." Big Joey snickered at the stain on Joe's shorts when he delivered the mug. "Hey retard, don't you think it's time you stopped pissing yourself? I'm tired of having to change you like a baby."

"Leave me alone, you fat bastard," Joe volleyed back. "I'll stop pissing, when you stop shitting yourself. You're too lazy to get off the couch, so you just shit in your sumo-diaper and roll around in it all day until Mama comes home and cleans it up."

"Come here, retard," big Joey laughed, snaring his son into a headlock. "Let's use those pretty locks of yours to wipe my ass."

A familiar wrestling match ensued, with little Joe twice crying mercy, only to dive back into the mudslinging and fat-slapping once he'd been unhanded. Cued by both self-preservation and disgust, I stayed well off to the side, betraying my mounting boredom by yawning and blowing my nose whenever they would chance to look my way. Sometimes this brouhaha would continue with sporadic bouts over an entire afternoon, and so I was fortunate that after just a few minutes, Joe got the better of his dad and pushed him off the sofa onto the coffee table, breaking some trinket of Mrs. Kelly's.

Upon catching his breath and noting the damage, big Joey shed his childish cackle and boomed with a voice befitting his size, "You fucking idiot! Horsing around like a retard and breaking Mama's shit. That's coming out of your next paycheck."

"You started it. All day long, you just lay around in your undies on the couch, starting shit with me." This earned Joe a slap across the face, and he checked his lip for blood.

“Clean it up, retard! You’re paying for that out of your next paycheck. And you’d better apologize to Mama when she gets home. There better be a great big meal on the table when she walks in the door.”

Little Joe scurried past me to fetch a wastebasket, and as big Joey tracked him, eyes ablaze, he locked onto me and demanded, “What are you looking at, retard? Some kind of fucking friend you are. When you aren’t mooching off my kid, you’re making him sick with that filthy snot rag of yours,” he ranted, referring to my ubiquitous handkerchief. “Terry, keep that fucking hankie out of my house, you hear me?”

Exasperated, I tucked my handkerchief back in a pocket and took my leave, slinking out the front door. I waited for Joe in his car, where, even with the all the windows down, I was soon boiling in my own skin under the late-afternoon sun. Letting my eyes fall closed and my head sink into the seat, I fantasized accosting big Joey with an onslaught of apt and cutting remarks, punctuated by shoving my oh-so-noxious handkerchief down his throat.

“Dude, let’s roll,” Joe said, sliding into the driver’s seat and startling me from my reverie. “You got that bowl packed?”

“What happened, man? You all right?”

“I’m cool, man. Let’s just get the hell out of here.”

Joe peeled out of the parking lot, while I packed some bud in my pipe. Before the first puff, however, Joe pulled off to the curb and slowed to a stop, fidgeting with his rearview mirror and peeping over his shoulder.

“What is it?” I asked, sparking up and taking a hefty drag that sent me into a coughing fit.

“I don’t know. This guy’s flashing his lights at me—hey, put the shit away. What if it’s a cop or something?” Still coughing, I turned and saw that a yellow ’75 Skylark had pulled over behind us, but the figure who emerged from the driver’s side a moment later was far more fearsome than a police officer: he was Sal Rebraccio. “Put the shit away! Put

the shit away!" Joe ordered.

In my rush to comply, I dumped the smoldering contents of the pipe onto my arm and with my subsequent reflexive jerk, managed to spill half of our cache onto the seat. Long before I had cleaned it up, Sal's imposing shadow passed over me, and I straightened up, looking as innocent as possible.

"Joe Kelly, you little shit!" the short, bulldog of a man began. "What the hell do you think you're doing, tearing out of there like that?"

"What? I couldn't have been going more than—"

"Let me ask you something, punk! Who paid for this car? You or your pop?"

"I did—"

"—Right, with your pop's money," Sal retorted. "And what do you think big Joey'd say if he knew you were out driving his car like an asshole?"

"Sal, leave him alone," I interrupted foolishly. "He wasn't even going that fast."

Sal turned to me with a look of repugnance and spouted, "And who asked you, dickhead? Listen, if you think that because you're hanging out with this punk we're going to cut you the same slack we do this kid, then you got it all wrong. You understand?"

"Yeah, I understand."

There was a quiet moment before Joe spoke up. "Sal, we're sorry, man. You're right, I was driving too fast. You were right to call me on it. I won't do it again, I swear. Can we just leave now?"

This gracious contrition obviously pleased Sal and settled him down. After basking in his power a moment, he squatted down, rested his arms on the car door and spoke reflectively. "I've spent ten years working with your pop, kid. My ass would be homeless, living in the goddamned park eating—I don't know—fucking pigeons if it weren't for him. He gave

me a job, a place to stay, and hooked me up with the right fellas to make a career for myself. And I was a disrespectful, ungrateful bastard in spite of it, and he had to bust my ass sometimes to get me to straighten up and learn my place. And I love him for it. And someday you pudwackers are going to learn respect and you'll thank me for this."

Relieved, I exhaled for the first time in about a minute, but perhaps a second too soon. Rather than return to his car, Sal sniffed the air, then turned his glance to the seat cushion, where I had laid my hand in a hopeless effort to conceal the marijuana.

"Oh what the hell is this?" he demanded, voice ripe to rise in anger again. "You little punk, you're smoking grass, aren't you?"

"No, Sal, it's not what you think. I'm just holding it for a friend—" I stammered.

"—Don't lie to me. I can smell it on you. Joe, is he pushing this shit on you?"

"Uhh...no."

"You are, aren't you, you little cocksucker," Sal yelled, lunging halfway into the car to get into my face. "Blowing your nose all day like you got hay fever or something, but it's really from all the coke you been doing, isn't it?"

"No, man, I swear."

"I'm on to you. Joe, you watch out for this fucker. It'll be weed today, coke tomorrow, smack the next, until you're lying on a gurney in the fucking morgue. Well, big Joey's gonna hear about this. And Terry, you little shit, if I find out you're trying to push this shit on him, then we'll dance, you get it? Your life might not mean shit, but his does, and if he gets hurt, you get hurt. You understand?" Petrified, I didn't respond. "I said, do you fucking understand?" Sal reiterated, raising his windbreaker to reveal the butt of a magnum tucked into his jeans.

"Yeah, I understand. I'm sorry, Sal. I'm sorry."

“Now get out of the car. We’ll all of us go back and have a nice chat with big Joey. See what he has to say about it.” Here Sal reached across the wheel to pull the keys from the ignition, but couldn’t get the angle. “Joe, give me the keys.”

Joe toggled his Led Zeppelin key chain in his fingers, then shot me a sideways glance. I looked straight back at him and said, “Gun it.” With Sal still half in the car, Joe turned the ignition and floored the accelerator, leaving our unwelcome visitor rolling on the macadam. Ignoring the stop sign, we pulled onto the main road. It wasn’t until we were a mile away that either of us spoke.

“That was fucked up, huh?” Joe laughed.

“Tell me about it,” I replied, again exhaling for the first time in a while. “What the hell is his problem, pulling a gun on me? He’s insane.”

“He’s a tough guy. Thinks he’s all that and a bag of chips.”

“Why does your dad hang out with that loser?”

“He’s a gumba with the Santangelos, man. How you think my dad and his little shit construction company won the bid on the new highway? Charm and good looks?”

“Long johns and bear claws more like,” I muttered. “Maybe some noogies, Indian burns, and a bitch slap to seal the deal, huh?”

Joe shot me a sour look telling me I’d crossed a line. Even though I’d heard him defame his father with far more derogatory remarks, I should have known that this is a privilege of the oppressed and they alone. I opened my mouth to attempt an apology, but was rescued by Joe’s beeper. He checked the number, but showed no intention of responding to the call. Though he didn’t mention who it was, I knew it was his dad calling to summon him home.

We were both quiet for a while, and I, for one, spent the time rehearsing shrewd comebacks and mentally flailing Sal Rebraccio like a rag doll. Joe appeared distracted, gnawing on his lip, and forgetting to yield at

stop signs as we wove our way through town. I didn't bother to ask where we were going; the water tower had been growing in the windshield ever since we left. Since Joe had started working fifty hours per week with his dad, we had returned there with increasing frequency.

**I**t was a steep hike from our parking spot to the perimeter fence of the water station, and we were panting by the top. After recovering, we snatched two cinderblocks from behind the shed and spaced them a few feet apart alongside the barrier. We heaved together on the base of the fence, hoisting it upward and propping it on the blocks so that we could slither beneath and into the enclosure. Once reaching the base of the tower, Joe boosted me high enough to grasp the ladder, at which point I did a bit of an acrobatic routine until in a position to unfasten and lower the extension to my partner. From there, our only obstacle was the fear of heights as we ascended the sixty feet to the summit.

"It doesn't get any damn easier with time, does it?" I noted, collapsing atop the 500,000 gallon drum.

Joe didn't reply at first, looking out over the hills where on a clear day you could see mid-town Manhattan. At length, he turned and mumbled, "No, it doesn't."

Not sure what to say or do, I pulled our stash from my pocket and packed another bowl. I gestured to Joe, who joined me until the bowl was cashed. After a while the silence become uncomfortable. "So, your dad gonna freak when Sal tells him?"

Still gazing out over the valley, Joe just snorted in reply.

"Goddamn," I laughed, "I still can't believe we did that. Driving away with Sal hanging out the window like that. That's action-hero shit."

Joe stood and began to pace around the edge of the cylindrical tower. "Dude, we ran away. It wasn't heroic."

"Still, that was pretty wild shit. That's the kind of thing we always

say that we should have done, like, ten minutes after the time when we could have done it. Right now we could be sitting in your living room getting our asses grilled about doing drugs, and instead we're sitting out on top of a water tower, talking about something that we did do. That's something, isn't it?"

Joe stopped and was staring straight down over the edge to the pumping station below. "You got a point there," he responded. Turning abruptly from the edge, Joe strode across the platform and lifted open an access hatch which led into the holding tank below us. "Feel like taking a dip?"

"No, man. That freaks me out, going in there. I mean, what if it starts draining or something? We would drown in a second."

"Pussy."

"No, I'm just not stupid."

After a minute or so of squatting over the aperture, hocking loogies into the water below, Joe turned to me and asked, "Can I stay at your place?"

"Sure, but Dad'll make us go to church in the morning."

"No, no. Not just tonight. Like for a year or so. Until we graduate."

"Oh. Uhh...maybe," I replied with feigned hope. "I'll have to ask my dad."

"Forget it. I've got a shit-load of money saved up. I'll just rent a place. How cool will that be? We can come home after school and spark up on the living room couch...throw parties and shit. It'll be classic."

"Seriously?"

"Sure, why not? I'll quit my job, move out, and be done with that son of a bitch forever. I can do it. Seriously. I've got a shit-load of money in the bank—" His beeper sounded again, and after checking the number, he stretched out an arm and dangled the device over the hatch. "Dare me?"

“Go for it,” I prodded. “Don’t need him to page you to work anymore, right?”

He left it out there a long moment until his hand was trembling, but ultimately the impish smile fell from his face, and he replaced the beeper to his belt. “Better not. You guys might still need to page me for rides and whatnot.”

I picked a stone out of the sole of my boot and tossed it at him. “Pussy.”

“I’m a pussy? You’re the one who shit your pants when you saw Sal’s gun.”

“Screw you, man,” I snapped back, chucking another rock at him. “You were scared, too.”

“Not like you. You turned white, man. White as your mama’s panties,” Joe chuckled, “aside from all the skid marks, I mean.”

“You jackass.” I tackled him and, after a brief tussle, produced my secret weapon—my snot-ridden handkerchief—and brandished it in his face. Before I could make contact, Joe snatched it away and tossed it down into the tank. “Fuck! What did you do that for? You know, that’s not like your toilet or something. People drink that.”

“Well, you shouldn’t of come at me with that filthy thing. My dad’s got a point about that shit. It’s dirty.”

I backed off and left Joe staring sourly over the hills. After a long while, I asked, “You think I gotta worry about Sal, man? I mean, we really pissed him off. You think he’s gonna try to whack me or something?”

“No,” Joe replied, spitting a final time into the tank before closing the hatch. “He’s all bark. Just don’t come around for a few weeks. I’ll work on chilling him out.”

“What you talking about? I thought you were moving out, getting your own place.”

Joe looked away off into the valley and shook his head. His pager

beeped a third time, and upon checking it, he stood and returned to the ladder. "C'mon, man. It's getting late. I'll drop you off."

"Sure you don't want to at least spend the night at my place?" I offered. "Let things cool off a little?"

"No, I've got to get ready for work. It's time to go home." •

contributors

JESSICA BELT lives near Boston, where she copyedits brochures that mostly end up in landfills. To reduce environmental destruction, she bikes wherever she goes and studies creative writing and electronic media.

The artist formerly known as DREEMZ grew up playing on the sand dunes of Lake Michigan, once worked for an iron foundry, and now aspires to be some sort of academic. Currently a resident of southwest Virginia, he is a self-described jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none. He was going to draw a comic for this issue, but this story came out instead. So deal with it.

Ever wander uninvited into a stranger's yard to pick every last dandelion from their lawn? How about lodging a finger into your belly button for days on end, for fear it would otherwise grow and consume your entire body? TIM FRANKLYN has. And frighteningly enough, when he's not milking his warped mind to corrupt current generations with his writing, he's responsible for raising the next—his son, Joel—with the help of his wife, Noelle, at their Whitehall, Michigan home.

SAUL GRAY-HILDENBRAND is an artist living in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He will be moving to Santa Barbara in the fall.

DANIEL PERETTI once lived in a small town that was out of the way of everything, but he and his wife have since taken up residence in Bloomington, Indiana, a small city that is out of the way of everything. If cornered, he will swear that none of the events described in his story are true.

BROOKE SCHEDNECK graduated from Harvard Divinity School last year with a Master of Theological Studies. She focused on Buddhist Studies, especially Theravada Buddhism in America. Currently she writes about contemporary Buddhist issues.

JILLIAN SCHEDNECK recently graduated with an MFA in creative writing. In the fall, she's moving to the United Arab Emirates to teach for Abu Dhabi University. Her other essays have appeared in *The Common Review*, *Brevity* and *Alligator Juniper*.

You can bet that if RYAN SIMONSON doesn't start responding to our email requests for a short bio, we're not going to publish any more of his work.

PHIL TANIS has an interview in this issue.

SASHA WANG likes to drop her glasses and shake her asses, all with her face screwed up like she's having hot flashes. She lives in Chicago, is wookin' pa nub in all the wrong places, and is only interesting when she's drunk.

Eighteen years old, BRETT YATES lives in New Jersey, where he spends his time reading, writing, watching movies, and striving to remain generally unfadeable. Self-educated since the age of fourteen, he hopes to become a famous novelist and/or gunslinger. He can be reached at [brettayates@gmail.com](mailto:brettayates@gmail.com) or, often, at the Spotswood Diner.

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