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Late by Joel Kotanko

You can live a lifetime in the time it takes to piss on a stick. I sat on the edge of the bed trying not to listen to the sounds coming from the other side of the bathroom door. My foot tapped the floor without rhythm. I had to be at work in half an hour.

She'd told me she was late in a text message. We'd been drinking, then fighting and I'd left, driving nowhere too fast. My phone buzzed and I pulled it out of my pocket. I didn't open it, just put it in the cup holder, expecting it to light up again. After it didn't, I flipped it open. *I'm late*. I pulled off onto the shoulder to breathe.

We meant to get her tested, but then we thought she wouldn't be late anymore- anyday now.

A week later she was really late. We talked around it.

We didn't talk about the future or what we wanted or what we thought or how we felt. We'd forget, or almost, but she didn't have a beer with dinner anymore and I found her cigarettes in the trash. Then one morning she woke me up before the alarm and we went to the 24-hour pharmacy to buy a "results in two minutes" pregnancy test.

The toilet flushed and I stopped tapping. I sat up straighter, poised and ready for flight with nowhere to go. Lying in bed at night not sleeping and watching the ceiling fan, I would

sometimes wonder what sort of father I'd make and if I could be happy enough to make someone else happy.

The lock on the bathroom door clicked, the lock she never locked before, and she came out holding the little plastic stick in front of her like a candle with one hand sheltering it from sight, as though I might blow it out by breathing. Her eyes were on me but they looked through me. Tears had left tiny wet tracks on her cheeks.

Blue-Eyed Blind by **Alexandra Isacson**

On a Sunday afternoon, a man randomly shoots strutting roosters in a yard full of chickens. The roosters lie dead in the dust, and the chickens peck the iridescent feathers. The weathered farmhouse porch's rusty- screened eye keeps watch. Horses whinny and their nostrils flare with death stench. A hammock swings empty in orange trees, and an old Border Collie howls from the porch.

In mysterious wonder, the dead roosters rise up and follow the blue-eyed blind collie. The entranced roosters limp along the horse path. They pass a lone bull in a fenced pasture, nose-ringed with Mythic visions. A pomegranate tree splatters its fruit, the sun bleeds, pigmenting into powdered pink dusk. With a flutter of electric ghost feathers, the roosters sleep in an ash tree in the pasture.

While it is still dark, the dead roosters wake the dawn. They preen their feathers and sharpen their beaks on the concrete porch. With the slam of the screen door, the collie and roosters rouse the man curled in his down comforted bed. The spirit procession tromp upstairs to his bedroom.

Alexandra Isacson is a graduate of Arizona State University who lives and works in the Phoenix area. She has work forthcoming or in Grey Sparrow Journal, decomP, >kill author, PANK, Dogzplot, and other places. Visit her at alexandraisacson.com

Welcome To Orange County by Jesse Bradley

Standing on the crooked tongue of the courthouse steps, your thumb cleared away the morning wreckage below my right eye. "You should look in the mirror before you leave the house.

You'll never get laid looking like this," the good wife in your wrist scolded. I used to look at you like a mirror; I've forgotten how to see myself with you.

Jesse Bradley is a writer based out of Orlando, Florida.

Freakuccino by Mark Reep

The bus was almost empty, just me and an Asian girl who'd cleaned up some since I'd seen her. She was wearing a too-big T-shirt that said Freakuccino and writing in a notebook. If she remembered me she didn't say so I didn't either. Everybody sheds some skin. At the Green Street stop two cops were waiting. One said something to the driver and pointed down the aisle but not at me. She looked up and said, Me? What'd I do? The older cop beckoned. She got up and got off with them. Before the bus pulled away they'd handcuffed her. I wondered who she'd pissed off, who'd made the call.

Mark Reep is an artist and writer whose work has appeared or is forthcoming in online and print publications including American Art Collector, Endicott Journal, Gloom Cupboard, Ink Sweat & Tears, Prick of the Spindle, Art Graphica, Word Riot, Full of Crow, Moon Milk Review, Girls with Insurance, Amphibi.us, Smash Cake, A-Minor, Blink/Ink. He lives and works in New York's Fingerlakes region.

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An Empty Feeling by Kellan McCall

The night came too early, and the sun rose sooner than expected. I watched it bring itself up over the horizon, and I knew that what I held in my hand the night before wasn't there anymore. I clenched my fist as I had done when I was holding it. Now that it was gone, though, I had nothing to grasp. Just the feeling that it had left imprinted in my palm.

The sun continued its way across the sky, as I continued my life throughout the day. From the suburbs, I took the train to the city. The feeling in my hand never ceased, and its aching drove my mind into a spiral of what-ifs and how-comes. The room's air hung heavily, and the smell of cherry tobacco flooded my nose. In the corner of the room sat the old man, his cigar burning red with every puff that entered his body. I walked up behind him and placed my hand on his shoulder, feeling his frailty through the denim jacket that he wore. He looked up and smiled at me, the most beautiful smile I had ever seen, and patted the hand that I had rested on him. I moved to the window and opened the shutters, letting in an orange glowing warmth.

I took the seat across from him. He placed his cigar down in the ash tray, snuffing out the embers with a quick, practiced twitch of his fingers.

"I tried to call my son again, today," he said, staring down at his palms.

"How was that?" I asked him, knowing fully what the answer was.

"Can I hold your hand while we talk?" He asked in response. I opened my hand and held it out to him, and he took it in his own. His fingers shook, as his eyes began to well up. Tonight will be another night spent sleepless and thought-filled, and in the morning, I will have the same empty feeling in my hand.

Lucid Dreaming by Ashley Vemuri

She is lying on her bed, with nothing between her and the muggy night air but mussed bedsheets and a satin duvet. She is restless but listless, because sleep doesn't come easy these days, because she is afraid that she will never want to wake up again. In her dreams, she is beautiful again, free-spirited and lithe of limb. She is walking, running maybe, but all anyone can see are her legs kicking the sheets back while she gets nowhere, fast.

There was a time when she still dreamt about him, about the sparse freckles that dotted his arms and his chest, about his brusque manner, and the way he didn't give a damn about anyone. Those days, she thinks to herself, are gone, leaving with the cool breezes of the spring. Instead, the thick summer air chokes her like the rough hand of someone who loves her too much to let her live. And so, the dreams wilt away without sweet words of nonsense to feed them, and she is alone, lying on her bed, with nothing between her and the muggy night air but a handful of bad memories and threads of wishful thoughts.

Ashley Vemuri is a college student in Washington, DC. She dreams of traveling the world and permanently kicking her bad habits. On any given day, you can find her sleeping, writing, or daydreaming about the impossible.

The First Camping Trip by Bryan Jones

The father bought his son an expensive pair of sneakers on the other side of the mall. But as they were leaving, the boy spotted a new sporting goods store, and he started talking about camping again. His father said he didn't have time to go camping. He was too busy at work. The boy dragged him inside the sporting goods store anyway. There on a back aisle in the camping section, the boy found a blue tent that came disassembled in a box. The boy wanted his father to buy the tent. Then they could go camping when the father had time. The father was in a hurry. He knew if he didn't buy the tent, his son would cause a scene. So the father gave in. He charged the tent on his credit card.

When they got it home, the boy said he wanted to set it up inside the house. He wanted to camp out in the den that night. The father said it was a bad idea. It was a work night. The boy begged his father to help him set it up. The father told him no way. The father told his son that if the boy wanted to put that thing together and sleep inside it, then he'd have to do it by himself. The father was going to join the boy's mother in their big, comfortable bed.

In the middle of the night, the boy came into his parents' bedroom. The parents were sound asleep. The boy woke his father.

"I didn't set it up right," the boy said. "It's not strong enough to keep out the bear."

"Joey, it's two o'clock in the morning," the father grumbled. "Your imagination is running wild. Leave me alone and let me get some rest."

The father went back to sleep.

An hour later, the boy entered his parents' room again. He shook his father's shoulder. His father sat up this time and turned on the nightstand lamp. The boy looked sick with fear. He trembled inside his pajamas.

"Joey, did you have another nightmare?"

"The bear almost got me," the boy whimpered.

"I've had enough of this crazy talk," the father said. "I never should have bought you that stupid tent. We're never going to use it. With all my work piling up, when am I going to have enough time to take you camping? Stop imagining things and go back to sleep."

The father turned off the lamp, rolled onto his side, and yanked up the covers. The boy left the room.

For the rest of the night the father dreamed about the time before the boy was born. The dreams had mummified surprises from his past. A woman from his wilder days wearing only a white towel told him to drop a condom wrapped in toilet paper into her bathroom wastebasket. Outside her window he could see the beach from his honeymoon. The white sand looked like powdered sugar.

When the alarm clock buzzed, the father groaned and switched off the annoying sound. Then he crawled out of the bed without turning on the light. His wife mumbled something about sleeping for a few more minutes. He resented the fact that his wife didn't have to get up early like he did. The father put on his robe, opened the bedroom door, and went out into the den.

When he got there he saw the utter destruction. The fabric of the sofa was ripped to pieces. Huge chunks of cushion foam were scattered about the room. The collapsed blue tent lay there empty. Its poles were broken.

"Joey?" he called out.

No reply came. The father frantically searched the rest of the house. He didn't find any trace of his son. The father went back into the den and reached down to pick up what was left of the tent. In his trembling hands, he held what seemed like a clue to the unsolvable mystery of his son's disappearance: a blue canvas shredded by unmistakable claw marks.

Short fiction by Bryan Jones has appeared recently in Acreage Journal, Black Words on White Paper, Dogzplot, and Diddledog. He lives and works in Texas.

Pretzel Logic **by Robert Vaughan**

Laundry flutters against the slack breeze. Bumblebees bombard gooseberry bushes.

We maneuver the broken fence. Lay naked in their kiddie pool, bodies pretzel-like,
jagged. Listen to VanHalen. Waterlogged. Clueless when they'll return from Mexico.
My mom fucks your dad and it sings like hot asphalt.

True North **by Robert Vaughan**

When the sky spits on my crown, this guy laughs and says who ever briefed life is given.
This racetrack we watch launches killer ants and I cannot ignore violence.
If you sleep through one more turn, I will pause to scream against the broken window.
Help is on its way in the form of one giant cock who, as a weathervane, points true north.

Robert's plays have been produced in N.Y.C., L.A., S.F. and Milwaukee, where he lives. He leads two writing roundtables for Redbird- Redoak Studios. His fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in: Short, Fast & Deadly, 50 to 1, Heavy Bear, Girls with Insurance, Lesser Flamingo, Clutching at Straws, Thunderclap Press, Blink/Ink, The Camel Saloon, and Tryst. He is a fiction editor at jmww magazine, a flash fiction editor at Thunderclap! Press. A member of Fictionaut and The Nervous Breakdown. His blog, One Writer's Life, is at <http://rgv7735.wordpress.com>.

The Man In The Moat by David Massengill

The prince had come to be perpetually late to bed. “It was the man in the moat,” he would excuse himself to the irritable, puffy-eyed princess each morning.

Every night, while staring out the narrow window in the castle tower, he’d see someone swimming clumsily in the moonlit water. “He looks like he’s near drowning and trying to reach the grassy bank,” the prince told the princess. The body of the man in the moat was never able to break the surface, as if the water were an impenetrable membrane of muck.

“Fantasy,” the princess finally said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “And it’s this creation of yours that’s keeping us from producing a child. Do be a practical man and let the drowning fellow die already.”

The prince offered a submissive nod, though he decided he’d try to rescue the man in the moat that night.

As he descended the tower’s spiraling stairwell, the prince glimpsed through windows all that he’d inherit: the village with its men who could rapidly fashion weapons for him and ladies who would gladly dance for him; the farmlands with their patches of corn, bulls, and barley; the forest with its weird creatures to be tamed or speared. Yet tonight the prince cared more about the mysterious man in the moat than his future as king.

He crept to the lever that would lower the castle’s smallest drawbridge, and he walked out onto the creaking planks to listen for the man in the moat. He heard a splashing below, and he saw the man some feet beneath him, calmly wading in the water. The man looked up at the prince through a layer of brown goo.

“But who are you?” the prince asked. “And why have you pretended to drown if you can maneuver water as you do now?”

The man reached toward the prince, and the muck slid away from his hand to show pink fingers without any rings. The man’s face cleared in a similar fashion, revealing a visage almost identical to the prince’s.

“We’re nearly twins,” the prince said in delight. He stretched his arm toward the man’s and then paused in his motion. “I must warn you that we can’t be close. My wife expects the world of me and my time, and I’m busy with the duties of an heir to the kingdom.”

The man wiggled his outstretched fingers, and the prince moved to take his hand. The prince grinned when they touched, and frowned when he felt the man pulling him toward the murky water.

The prince sank to the bottom as if someone had sewn rocks into his robe. The man in the moat emerged onto a green bank, where he inhaled as if he were taking the first breath of humanity.

The princess witnessed all through the same slit of a window by which her husband had so often paced. Despite her tears, she saw the man from the moat easily climb the castle's outer wall and stride down the dirt road leading to the village. He suddenly cut through the pasture with the blackberry vines and stopped outside the hut of the handsome stable hand with the lame leg. While he knocked, the princess recalled with annoyance how the stable hand had always smiled too easily at her prince.

The men embraced longer than the prince and princess ever had, and the stable hand took mere minutes to assemble a sack of essentials. Just as the sun was peeking over the mountains, the stable hand and the man from the moat rode horseback into the woods.

The princess stopped her self-pitying and sat on a stair when she saw that her belly was expanding at an amazing rate. She called excitedly for her ladies-in-waiting and chided herself for her previous disbelief in magic. At the start of her labor pains, a mouse scurried onto the mound of her stomach.

“Your prince will come into your life a second time,” the creature said, “but now as your child. Let him be himself or he will sink to his death again.”

The princess considered swatting the animal, yet its earnest tone stayed her hand.

“You thought being a barren woman would be the worst of fates,” the mouse continued. “But far more painful is to live with a barren heart.”

Over thirty short stories and works of flash fiction by David Massengill have appeared in literary journals, including The Raven Chronicles, Word Riot, 3 A.M. Magazine, Eclectica Magazine, StringTown, Tainted Tea, Tonopah Review, and Swell, among others. He has received grants for his fiction from both Seattle's Artist Trust organization and Seattle's Office of Arts & Cultural Affairs. He has also written nonfiction for American Book Review and Seattle Weekly, where he serves as Books Editor. His website is www.davidmassengillfiction.com.

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