

Fiction at Work

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Issue #25

5 January 09

Loofah

by Lindsay Hunter

He woke up after having a dream of falling. Just before he fell this guy from his college trigonometry class walked toward him shirtless. Then he fell.

He opened his eyes and watched his girlfriend jump around the room on one foot. Charley horse, she yelled accusingly. Her big toe was stuck in the up position. He had a throbbing hard-on and figured it was just as painful.

His throat was dry so he got up and went into the bathroom. He popped a zit in the crease between his nose and cheek and slurped at the water coming out of the faucet. His girlfriend limped in and stood behind him until he met her eyes in the mirror. You could've helped, she said.

What could I have done? he asked her. He answered himself: Nothing. His girlfriend sighed, sat on the toilet with her shirt bunched between her legs. This had always been his dirtiest fantasy, ever since he was a child: a girl's exposed thighs and the delicate sounds of her pee stream hitting the water.

His girlfriend was in a punishing mood. Get out, she said. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, maneuvered his hard-on under the waistband of his boxer shorts.

He found a soft orange in the kitchen with very thin skin. Its insides were blood-colored and dry. He put it back in the fridge and stacked its peels in the middle of the stove.

It was raining outside. He could see a faint reflection of himself in the window. The guy in his dream was shirtless. His girlfriend had beautiful ice-cream-scoop breasts. The guy in the dream was shirtless. His girlfriend had pillowy dicksucking lips. The guy in the dream was shirtless. His girlfriend often played with his balls when she was bored. The guy in the dream was shirtless. His girlfriend got drunk almost every night and breathed Let's get nasty into his ear to the point where the smell of margarita mix got him hard. The guy in the dream was shirtless. His girlfriend let him tie her up once. The guy in the dream was shirtless. His girlfriend the guy in the dream was shirtless.

It's raining, his girlfriend said behind him. She opened the fridge and he stood behind her and tried to finger her. It made him think of the dry bloodcolored orange and he gave it up.

Jake. The guy in his trig class's name was Jake. They'd gone out once, to a frat party, and had ended up making out with two girls who'd been standing by the keg all night. He'd done too many shots of tequila and at the end of it all he'd pushed Jake up against a dumpster on campus somewhere and sucked at his neck. He remembered Jake grabbing his ass and biting his ear, and it turned him on until Jake punched him in the solar plexus and he realized he was getting his ass kicked. He threw up on Jake's shoes and fell asleep on someone's discarded bag of McDonald's. He stopped going to trig and flunked out and had to take an extra semester.

Bagels? his girlfriend asked. Butter? Cream cheese? He'd met his girlfriend at a bar and they'd ended up dry humping against a jukebox playing Freebird, had been together ever since. I'm not hungry, he said. It thundered loudly and he yelled over it, I gotta take a dump.

In the bathroom he stared at himself in the mirror. He imagined that his body was an elaborate empty coffin. Here lies Nothing. Here lies No One. He could smell the bagel burning in the toaster, heard his girlfriend hiss *Shit*. He masturbated with her mint green loofah and appletini body wash, crouching over the toilet so that when he came there'd be nothing to clean up, no trace of anything ever happening.

Issue #26

12 January 09

Scotch

by Karla Lammers

His wife's absence the evening before had permitted him to drink half the bottle of "special" malt scotch whiskey that Patrick, his brother, had purchased from a traveling salesman and kindly shared. Punishment had arrived early that morning in the guise of a splitting headache, and Liam had little patience for the mare's antics today.

"Da! Da!" he heard his daughter call as she sprinted to his side.

"What are you doing out here lass? It's cold." He gazed down at his seven-year-old as she tugged on the bottom of his coat in the early morning dimness.

"Let me go get her!"

Liam squinted toward the far end of the field where his errant mare stood with her nose lifted in a southerly direction. "Aye then, that's fine with me." He handed her the halter and lead rope and turned back towards the barn to milk their cow.

He placed the milk pail under the cow's udders and pulled up his milking stool. "Stupid horse," he said out loud as he grabbed an udder and yanked.

"She's in love."

Liam stopped milking and asked, "Who said that?" He couldn't place the feminine voice with the British accent.

Bessie turned and looked him straight in the eyes. "I did."

He stood up, backed away from the cow and tumbled into the wheelbarrow flipping it on its side. Liam's head throbbed as it banged against the cold, hard floor, and his legs, held in place by the contraption, stuck straight up in the air.

"Are you alright?" Bessie asked.

Liam moaned. If it weren't for the pounding inside his head, he'd think he was dreaming. He struggled to sit up and stared at the heifer. "Cows don't talk," he said.

"Of course, we do. Though I admit, you usually don't listen." Bessie stared at him with luminous, brown eyes. "Do you want to hear about Brownie's boyfriend or not?"

Liam didn't answer as Fiona walked into the barn leading the mare and settled her into her stall. "There now, Brownie. Please don't run out again and get Da angry." With a gentle pat to the velvety nose, Fiona closed and bolted the stall door.

Liam stood before Fiona could notice him on the ground. "Thanks. Get your breakfast now."

"But Da! I can stay and help you!"

"You're ma would be mad. Go on...get."

"Okay," Fiona said—dragging her feet as she left the barn.

"Well...ask her," Bessie prompted.

"What's this I hear about you having a boyfriend?" Liam questioned the mare. Then, he rolled his eyes at his own words. Horses didn't talk any more than cows.

"Oh, Mr. Liam, he's the most stunning stallion I've ever seen!" Brownie replied as Liam's mouth dropped open. "I'm sorry I gave you trouble this morning. But I've been trapped in this barn three days because of the rain, and I wanted to see him!"

Liam slapped his hand against his brow and shook his head violently back and forth. "Ach — that hurt," he mumbled. "Now, ladies, this nonsense needs to stop. I've got chores and livestock don't talk!"

"Hey! Instead of worrying over silly females, how about taking care of me slop?" the pig whined.

"Aaah! Not you, too!" Liam cried. He fled the barn and dashed to the house.

Inside the kitchen, Fiona was finishing a bowl of cinnamon oatmeal. She looked up as her father blew through the door, closed it quickly and leaned forward against the table, gripping the edge so that his knuckles turned white. Sweatbeads danced on his forehead.

"Fiona, I changed me mind. Please take care of the animals. I need to lie down a wee bit."

"Aye, Da!" She pulled on her coat and left.

Liam walked to the sofa and collapsed. Sleep soon eased his aching head and troubled mind.

Later that evening when Fiona was asleep, Patrick showed up with another bottle of the "special" whiskey.

"No, thanks," said Liam and shoved the proffered bottle away.

"Catherine's not back until tomorrow. Just a nip?"

"No!" Liam repeated. "But, Patrick, did anything peculiar happen to you today?"

Patrick rubbed his hands over his face stubble. "Hmmm—can't say it did. Why do you ask?"

"Pay no mind. Just...pay no mind!"

Issue #27

19 January 09

The Triumph of Science

by John Bruce

F. Todd Weatherbee was the head of the first-year writing program at one of our great universities. His favorite saying, which he muttered with some frequency, was "If you think literature makes good men, just look at the people in the English Department." Todd was in the English Department too. His colleagues must certainly have known about his attitude toward them, yet somehow this never stood in the way of his advancement there. His world-view was sufficiently circumscribed that it never really occurred to him that anyone outside of an English department could be interested enough in literature to read it, nor that the lifetime guarantee of bourgeois respectability implicit in academic tenure might insulate someone from whatever good effects literature might have.

In fact, whether his colleagues understood it or not, Weatherbee had decided there'd been a great battle between Science and Literature, and Literature had lost in a rout. No matter if the field general had been Darwin, Einstein, or Lord Russell, the issue was decided. Literature was nothing but meaningless scribbles. Weatherbee's colleagues, as a matter of fact, pretty much didn't care what he thought; they had tenure and a live-and-let-live attitude to boot. As part of his concessions to Science, Weatherbee followed what might be called the corporate-technocratic paradigm. This consisted mostly of using scientific, especially computer-related, jargon in fields where you wouldn't expect to find it. Students no longer "wrote" papers, they "generated" them. Weatherbee called the graduate assistants into long meetings to learn how to teach first-year comp in the new, scientific way.

Whatever the pedagogy, the students responded as they always had: they neither wrote papers nor generated them. They plagiarized them. The graduate assistants quickly learned that bringing students up on charges for even the most obvious cases was a bad strategy: it got the deans involved, and the deans hated controversy. Whatever the deans hated, Weatherbee hated so much the more. As long as people saw that about Weatherbee, they got along just fine.

One afternoon he called the graduate assistants in to another, special meeting. "I was doodling ideas the other night," he said, "and I suddenly realized there was a way that everyone can teach one extra class a semester, but spend fewer hours in teaching." He started jotting equations on the board at the front of the classroom, just as though he were a physics prof.

"Bear with me while I explain," he went on, almost trembling with excitement. "This is something that could mean a real breakthrough for all of us." He was beaming as if he were Newton about to publish his Laws. If Science didn't rise in a body to salute him, at least the deans would. As he went through his equations, the secret of his breakthrough became clear. He'd decided three times nine was 24. If three times nine was the same as four times six, obviously if we taught four courses a semester we could spend less time in class than if we taught three and still have the same number of units. Or something like that. The graduate assistants just sat and scratched their heads.

Ed McLaughlin was already at the top of Todd's blacklist, and figured he had nothing to lose, so he finally raised his hand and pointed out that three times nine was actually 27, and if you did the math that way, you'd spend exactly as many more hours in class teaching four courses a semester as you'd expect, and it would be more, not less, than if you taught three. This was a hard sell, because Todd basically didn't trust

people who disagreed with him. Finally several other people tentatively raised their hands and agreed that, as far as they could remember from the multiplication tables, three times nine was indeed 27. One or two even pulled out pocket calculators, and at that point, Todd had to back down. The meeting was over, and the graduate assistants weren't going to get a whole new schedule with an extra class next semester, for the same money. At least, not right then.

They still loved Todd in the English Department. A few years later, they gave him an endowed chair, University Distinguished Professor of Science in the Humanities. Ed was gone by then.

Issue #28

26 January 09

Jackson

by Thom Atterton

The alarm clock began to ring softly softly at first. It seemed to grow louder as its tones grew louder and began to make punctuated sense to Jackson. Jackson's sleep could no longer absorb the acute rings of a clock. Digital, it had no breath, only a staccato scream. He didn't want to wake up, but he didn't mind getting up. Who was he to stand up to the strength of such organic synonyms? He couldn't lie there, because he didn't want to sleep—not this way. He didn't want to smack the alarm clock, because it was just doing its job. Jackson just wished that the clock would doubt itself for once. He hoped that in that dubious instant it wouldn't be able to bring itself to ring. If it was unsure about the correct time, or the correct alarm setting, or perhaps divided on whether or not it had already rung, it would remain silent in a state of striking angst. Jackson Jackson if he resented the clock, he wouldn't have said it, but he would have meant to say, "a little bit."

And the word, 'resent,' wouldn't stick or separate properly in Jackson's prostrate posture. He understood resent, or at least he felt as if he did, but it shifted so naturally to resent with a consistently repetitive Sierra. With Sierra, one acted again in sending and with Zulu one felt disdain, possibly for the first time. He massaged the word in his mind and tried to find its natural fault line. He had always placed it at the re, because he always assigned the longest Echo he could recall. But what if it was after Sierra? What if it was Latin instead of the repetitive English? Res ent – a thing insect. It didn't fit well, but it fit better than re-sent, and there was no logical third way.

Jackson thought on resign. He shifted the fault in the same way. With a long Echo it was a contradictory action in etymology from the aggregate. Resign is not to re-sign. Otherwise, Jackson thought, it was resign—a thing on fire or a thing fired. One who resigns is not a thing fired, but that was contradictory in intention; it was just different. That was merely a matter of pride on the whole.

Jackson thought of the etymology of etymology, and wondered if he could parse it cold under a sheet. The end felt familiar, but that was not enough.

Jackson turned to the clock, "You're so cocksure." He collected his overflowing body and gathered himself out of bed. His limbs always seemed to want more than his timid section could offer. Jackson's elbows always ached.