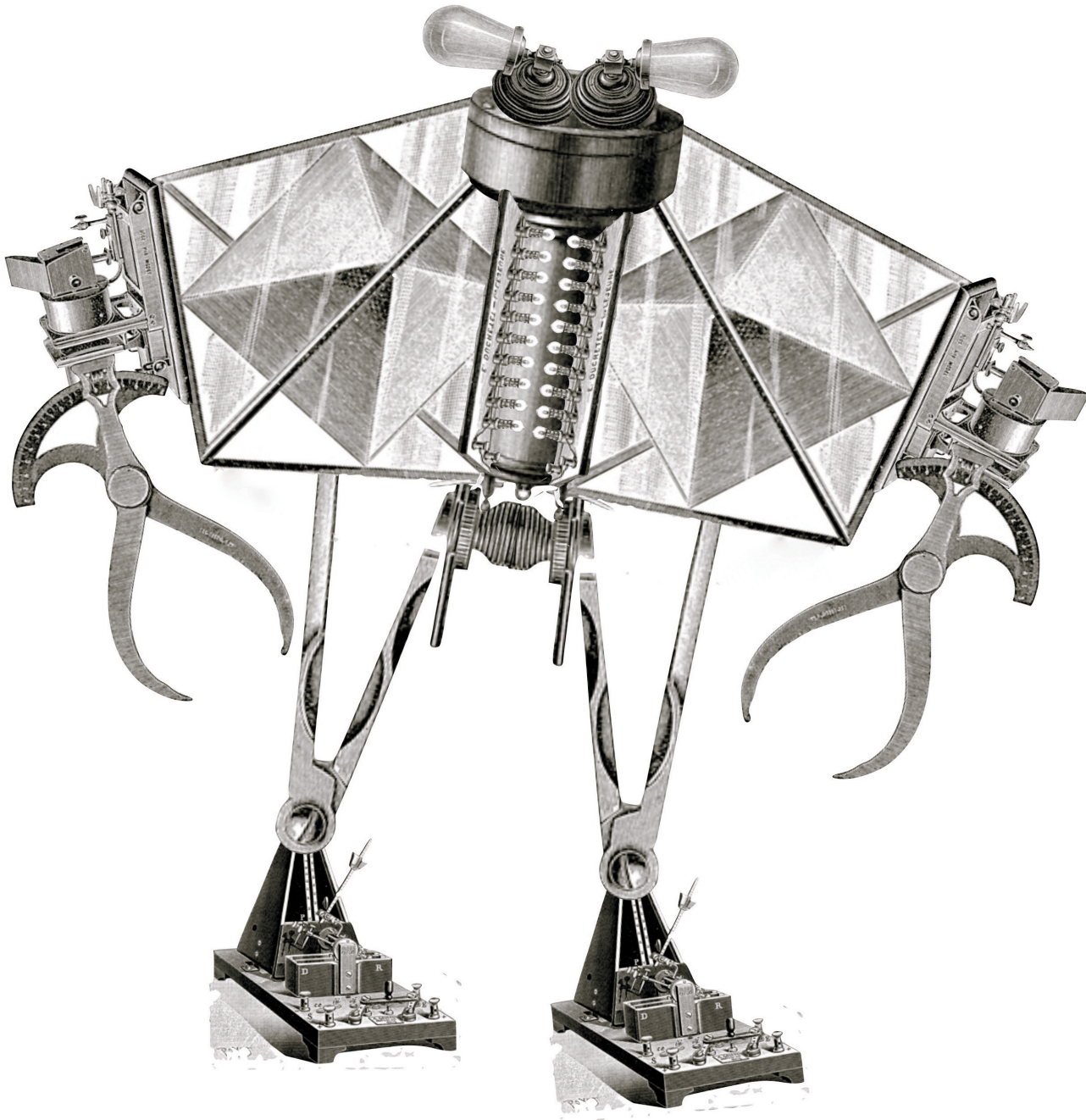


# The broken



Sidling and secretaries  
A harmless three-hour tour  
Reality TV on the Red Planet  
That faithful moose passes by  
“Darn tootin’, I love Fig Newtons”

REMOTELY CONTROLLED



# The broken



Winter 2015 Issue 17

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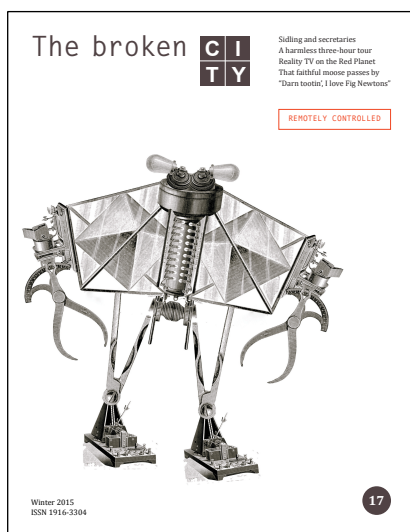
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## In this issue:



Do we control TV, or does it control us? Studies done in the '90s suggest the latter view is more accurate. It's not the content that hooks us, they discovered, it's the medium itself. At least we're addicted together; let's lean back and enjoy the ride.

Welcome to *The*

*Broken City's* tribute to television's past and present.

## Art Contributor:

**Bill Wolak** ("Tasting the Whispers" on the front cover and "Sand Dreaming of Dew" on page 8) has just published his twelfth book of poetry, entitled *Love Opens the Hands*, with Nirala Press. Recently, he was a featured poet at The Mihai Eminescu International Poetry Festival in Craiova, Romania. Mr. Wolak teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University in New Jersey.

## Disclaimer:

Though we arrived at this issue's title independently, we should point out that *Remotely Controlled* is also the name of an unaffiliated book by Aric Sigman.

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*The Broken City* is currently accepting submissions for its summer 2016 edition: **Breakfast Clubbed**.

No, it's not another food issue; the magazine is running a school-themed edition. We're looking for work that involves school at any level, from kindergarten to college, but we're most interested in submissions about high school.

Is your coming-of-age fiction looking for a good home? Show it to us! Still having nightmares that you're late for class and can't open your locker, twenty years later? Tell us about it! Just this once, we'll even consider heartbroken teen angst poetry.

Send your poetry, fiction, essays, comics, illustrations and photography to [thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com](mailto:thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com).

## Imperium In Imperio

### *Catherine Bull*

Because Cookie punched BooBooKitty right in the damn face  
then 40 seconds of ohhellno awyeah on a red pool table!  
And now they're business partners. Because fingernails!  
Because murder! Because unexpected children!  
Because silk sheets and sidling and secretaries  
and seriously huge self-portraits. Because while he was dying  
he was not dying! Because the box they're in  
is the box they're all in together,  
and they go all in, all the hair  
all the sex, all the effoffs, all the about-faces,  
all the facials. Because people! Because wanting!  
Because entrances! Audacity! Breakdowns! The hots!  
Because booze and butts and begging  
and wily lunching and jewels  
the size of satellite dishes! Because rhythm!  
Because rhymes! Because of course! Because who  
wouldn't act that way all day if they could!  
Because who doesn't want to be  
all their everything at all times with the dial  
all the way up, and have no one leave the box of your life  
for any reason but dying and only then  
if you kill them your damnsself?

---

*Catherine Bull's work has appeared in Bellingham Review, Field, The Human, The Literary Bohemian, The Operating System and other fine journals. Her poem "On Stage At The Bardot" appeared in the winter 2013 music-themed issue of The Broken City. She holds degrees from Oberlin College and U.C. Davis, and lives in Seattle. Catherine is also a Seattle Independent Bookstore Day Champion, and for an explanation of that and more, please visit [www.catherinebull.com](http://www.catherinebull.com).*

## **"Talk Show Addicts" by Roger Brown** ***Janet McCann***

To live in identical houses, each  
with four-pronged aerals and all  
equidistant from the street and from each other,  
one or two-formed shadows, glimpsed  
in front of screens, in blaring yellow light.

The voices that they hear are not their own  
and not each other's. The voices that they hear—

*The psychiatrist said that the killer must have been  
an abused child. The political analyst blames  
Obama. Viagra sales are slumping: why?  
Some countries in Europe have low sperm counts  
and births are dropping there. Many believe  
wallabies make good pets but they don't;  
they jump over fences and can leap  
right into neighbors' houses, and they punch!  
I love my wallaby, he's gentle as a lamb.  
Thatcher was Ronald Reagan's friend, America  
was closest to Britain then. It is true  
that the one pair of penguins is lesbian  
but they have to have sex with males to produce  
eggs, one of them will make the sacrifice. They can't  
just ring up the sperm bank, ho ho!*

in their identical houses, where the voices  
they hear are not their own and not each other's  
do the lights go out at once, or does  
one blink out at a time  
until the frame is dark?

---

*Find the Roger Brown painting here:*

[http://chicago-outdoor-sculptures.blogspot.com/2010\\_04\\_01\\_archive.html](http://chicago-outdoor-sculptures.blogspot.com/2010_04_01_archive.html)

## Listening to Emily Dickinson's Poems in a Bar While Watching Ultimate Wrestling on Mute *Janet McCann*

Shaved heads, fangs,  
a woman and a man in mortal  
erotic combat. *He kindly stopped*  
*for me.* Violent colors  
and screaming. *I dwell in possibility*  
and the tattooed brunette throws the bucket  
at the blonde, who seizes the brunette's flap of hair  
and yanks. *A fairer house*  
*than prose.* You can't turn it off,  
that huge screen over the bar. *My life*  
*closed twice.* What a resounding slap,  
mute but you see the patchy color rising  
on the white face. *If immortality unveil*  
the gleam of oiled muscles,  
costumes flashing electric  
colors. Rivers of blood flow over her face,  
between her breasts, into her eyes,  
someone is thrown into the  
pit. *I felt a funeral in my brain.*  
Whirl of heliotrope and orange, stillness.  
Medico! *Wild nights! Wild nights!*

---

*Janet McCann is a Texas poet who has been teaching creative writing at Texas A&M since 1969. Journals publishing her work include Kansas Quarterly, Parnassus, Nimrod, Sou'wester, The Christian Century, Christianity and Literature, The New York Quarterly, Tendril, Poetry Australia, and McCall's, among many others. She was a 1989 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner. Her most recent collection: The Crone at the Casino, Lamar University Press, 2013. She started teaching in 1963 and just dismissed her last class!*

# The Agony of Defeat

## *Brent Raycroft*

The things we used to see on TV,  
my brother, my sister and me.  
Vanuatu tribesmen, for example,  
diving from a wooden tower  
with vine ropes tied to their ankles.  
Each mortal tug  
made the make-shift tower sag  
and though the line  
was duly shortened  
sooner or later  
some poor sportsman  
would hit the ground head first.  
Or so we hoped.  
Or was the level ground a pit  
filled with twigs and topped with moss  
to make the tourists think the danger  
worse than it was?  
The spectacle reenacts  
(we did not know it then—  
that would take the advent of  
another medium)  
the legend of a woman  
held captive in a treetop bower  
harried by her cruel mate  
to the brink and over.  
Diving after her he died  
because he didn't use a vine.  
But he won't be fooled again, will he?  
The things we used to see on TV,  
my brother, my sister and me.

---

*Brent Raycroft lives north of Kingston, Ontario and has published poems in Arc, Prairie Fire, Vallum, Freefall, Grain, The Walrus, The Broken City and other magazines. He doesn't have a full-length book out yet, but there is a manuscript rising (he imagines) through various slushpiles. The Subtleties of Divine Creatures, a single-poem chapbook, was recently published by Thee Hellbox Press.*

## Fifties' Child

### Nels Hanson

Where did they go, kind companions of defeated  
childhood, their constant cheerfulness who they  
really were, happier than any parent? Bucky Beaver

no one made fun of, brushed and smiling, big teeth  
white and strong enough to fell a tree? Strange Reddy  
Kilowatt, monopoly PG&E's electric robot boy in

free comic book each Spring? Does he live or falter,  
memory fail, against his better judgment fly his kite  
into high voltage line? Was it intentional? Sharpie

the Gillette parrot, my best friend, no howling coach  
or principal, sang smartly, "Look sharp, and feel sharp  
too!" between rounds, rugged Gene Fullmer, shaved-

headed and doomed Hurricane Carter. Land of Sky  
Blue Waters where surely Hiawatha lived with his  
tender grandmother Nokomis, the drunken forest

bear dancing to tom-toms beating "*Hamms, The Beer  
Refreshing*"? Its rhythm made me want to drink or  
live with surviving Indians in deerskin. Speedy Relief

grows old, disk body and hat Alka-Seltzer tablets air  
dissolves. Eye-patched grizzled pirate intoning, "Darn  
tootin', I love Fig Newtons"? I didn't like them, only

Dad did, fruit too healthy, not enough like candy. Now  
I do but never buy, their frayed Jolly Roger full fathom  
five, with Snap, Crackle, Pop, friends or odd brothers,

different father or mother. The curved-nosed elves sailed  
sea of milk and floating rice, bergs waiting for Titanic.  
Lowing Bossie, Elsie never met, separate pastures, each

in thrall to competing dairies. Sweet Sugar Bear, casual  
stoned cartoon Bing Crosby crooning—his coated oats  
cultured cavities and made you fat that anyway future

time would do. Towering but gentle Jolly Green Giant,  
half human, half vegetable, grew peas and broccoli  
you hated and never ate though still you admired his

size and strength, vast legs spread, my Colossus of  
Rhodes above fertile valley like yours so you wished  
a friendly monster to set things right. Four decades

later a wealthy neighbor owned a cane the lame man  
used who bellowed the goliath's almost scary "Ho, Ho,  
Ho!" The raisins dancing to "Through the Grapevine"

arrived too late—we farmed yellow Thompson Seedless  
raisin grapes through autumn rains and the Sun-Maid  
co-op's default and all went broke, grandfather's farm

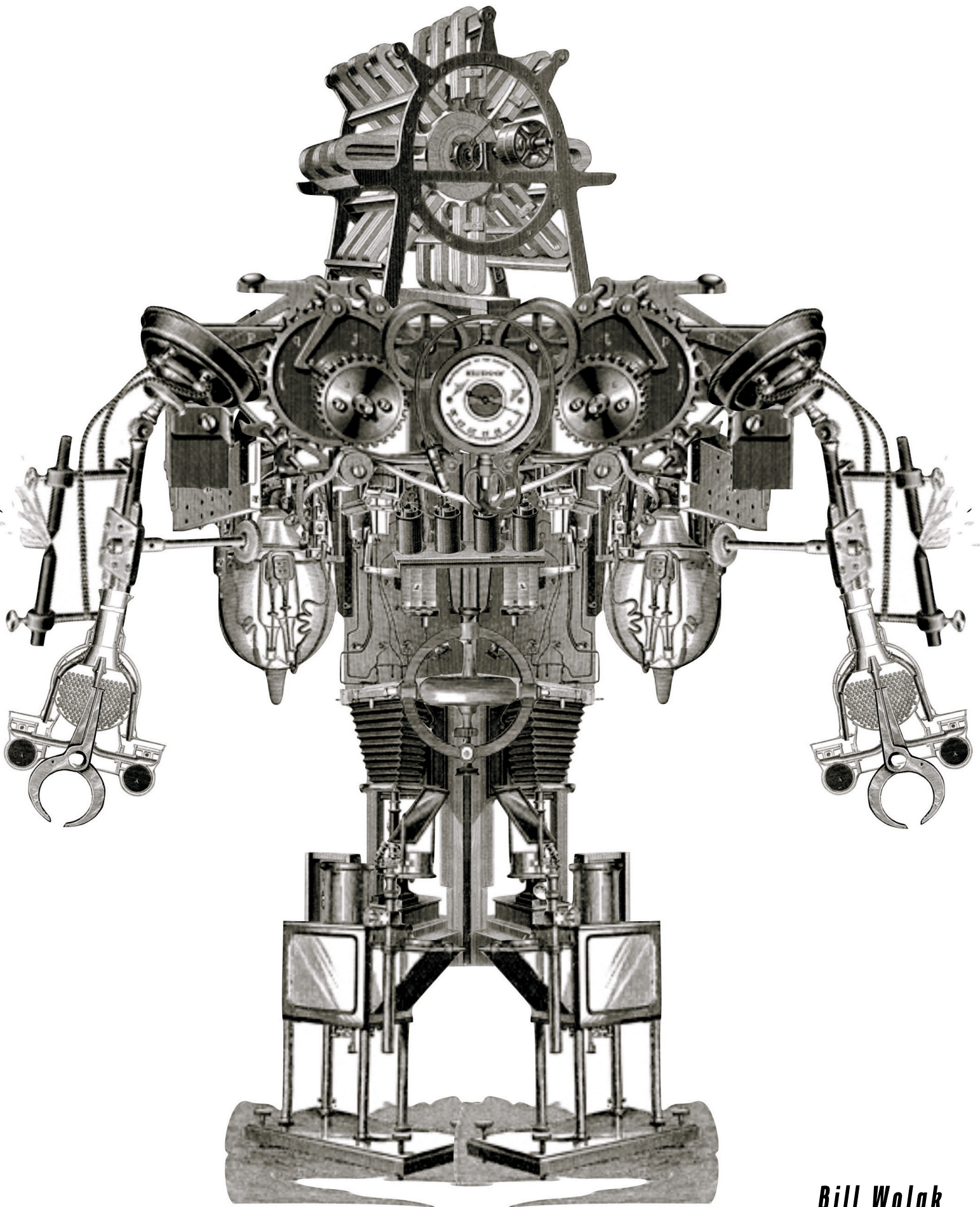
a ghost in dreams. Michelin Man and Pillsbury Dough  
Boy, both hollow, pumped with air, won no affection.  
I was jaded, too skeptical to believe they loved us for

ourselves and not adults' money to purchase new war,  
cash you'd earn or die from vanished kingdoms' make-  
believe you believed, still prefer to any grownup life.

---

*Nels Hanson grew up in California's San Joaquin Valley and has worked as a farmer, teacher and writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation's James D. Phelan Award and Pushcart nominations in 2010, 2012 and 2014. His poems have appeared in Word Riot, Oklahoma Review, The Pacific Review and other magazines, and garnered a 2014 Pushcart nomination, Sharkpack Review's 2014 Prospero Prize, and 2015 and 2016 Best of the Net nominations.*





***Bill Wolak***



# Making it real

**Matthew Harrison**

It was the end of the shift. The airlock door opened with a hiss, stirring the cabin's fine red dust, which then settled gently in the low Martian gravity. A helmeted head appeared.

"Coffee, Pete?" Steve greeted the head.

The helmet was unfastened, revealing Pete's stubbly face. He coughed and, grimacing, spat out a gobbet of saliva that traced a gentle arc before reaching the floor.

"Christ—none of that!" Steve scolded. He was neatly dressed and clean-shaven.

"We're not on air yet," Pete said, gesturing to the lenses that commanded the room. He moved slowly to where the saliva lay, and ground the floor theatrically with his heel.

Then he picked up the coffee cup and, still in his suit, sat down and took a draught. He swilled it around his mouth as if to clear his throat of dust.

Steve asked him how things were.

"The patrol?" Pete coughed again. "Same as yesterday. Pointless." He upended the cup and let the last drops fall slowly onto the table.

"We had a dust storm yesterday," Steve reminded him.

"Didn't need a patrol to spot that," Pete said morosely. "Got the sat views, haven't we?"

"It keeps you out of mischief," Steve replied. The two of them went through this routine each day, like a double act.

Then Steve's tone changed. "Me, I'd rather be out there, driving over the

mountains, looking at the stars or even looking at the dust. Rather than than stuck in this bloody portacabin wondering if Jessie's going to look at me today. The bitch!"

Surprised at his friend's vehemence, Pete half-rose, then sat down again. "I'd give you my place, just that Marty..."

"Nah, sorry, losing my grip." Steve smiled ruefully.

Pete took off his suit and since it was the end of the shift he opened a bottle of spirit that they'd distilled themselves from fermented waste. It was rough, but after a day on Mars, you needed it. Already the two men could see things in a rosier light.

Pete raised his glass. "Here's to the Aspiration of Mankind." That was how Marty had described their mission. "Two aspirations—you and me!" He downed the glass and poured himself another, watching the liquid spiral gently out of the bottle. Steve put a hand over his own glass, but allowed his friend to lift it away and pour him a generous measure.

Earth had risen—a bright blue dot through the portacabin window.

"Mars was supposed to be a big thing," Steve said. "But on Earth they don't aspire to be Martians. We're ten minutes behind right now; that's twenty minutes for the reply. Think about it—twenty minutes for each turn of the conversation. We're just nowhere."

Pete had no answer to that. "How's the terraforming?" he said at last, to break the silence.

"Ha!" Steve supervised the pro-

duction of oxygen, and they both knew what was happening to *that*.

"No point anyway," Steve said. "If we produced more, it would only blow off into space."

"There's rock," Pete suggested. "Hollow caverns, that's what they were thinking of."

"*Caverns!*" Steve snorted. "We can't even fill a portacabin with oxygen. This," he gestured at the small volume of air around them, "this is from Earth, plus a little from the algae. If it wasn't for the relief ships... And how long are they going to keep sending them?"

"We've got plants," Pete said. "Had some asparagus this morning." He raised his glass again. "To Martian asparagus, grown on Martian soil!"

Steve nodded, also raising his glass. "But seriously," he said, "what have we achieved here? Two years in, and what have we got—apart from asparagus? Even that was grown in your shit with Martian gravel for aeration. Martian soil? Martian *nightsoil*, more like it."

Pete put down his glass. "There's other vegetables coming." He held down a finger, counting. "There's exploration; we've got a good map now." Another finger. "There's medical science, the effects of low gravity—"

"Yes," Steve broke in, "a lot of opportunity for medical science—the radiation sickness, the cancers, the infertility..."

"And?" Pete looked at him. "Yes, but we didn't have to come here to fry ourselves with radiation. Could have done it more cheaply on the

Moon—and had a chance to get back home.”

Pete tried again. “There’s the search for life. If we hit the jackpot there, it’d pay for everything. We could patent the DNA, or whatever it uses for DNA.”

Steve made a face. “That’s Jessie’s thing, grinding up rocks, microanalysis. But two years and she hasn’t found any. If it’s there, it’s pretty well hidden.”

“And anyway,” he went on, “we didn’t have to bring people here to do it. Jessie could’ve been on Earth, analysing probe samples.”

“You’d have been on Earth too then,” Pete reminded him: “ease up.” Then he went on, “The biggest thing’s been reality video. That’s where we’re making the money.” He gestured at the cameras that ringed the cabin. “They’ll be watching us grousing now.”

Steve shook his head. “We’re still off air. But the ratings...”

Pete shrugged. “They’ll be back, soon as something happens. Like someone falling off a mountain.”

Steve agreed. “Bloody mountains! They’re so big. I wasn’t prepared for that.” He put his glass aside; they had almost gotten it out of their systems.

At that moment, another helmeted head appeared in the airlock. There was the usual swirl and slow settling of the dust, then the visitor took off his helmet. “You’re on in five

minutes, boys,” he said. “Try to cut the grumbles; it’s not good for the brand.”

“Yes, Marty,” they said.

Marty’s eyes fell on the bottle. “Hey, you’ve been drinking, right?” He sized up the two men. “Let’s have some action. Steve, you argue with him; Pete, you snatch the bottle away. Then, Steve, you grab the bottle, smash it over his head. How’s about that?”

“Over my head?” Pete said slowly.

“Not really, head, you know how to do it, like with the soy carton the other time. The ratings were up for a *week*!” He looked at the two men pleadingly. “Come on, boys, you’re the best we’ve got. Steve, imagine he’s Jessie!”

They nodded. Marty left via the port to the adjacent cabin. “God, what I wouldn’t give for a decent murder,” they heard him say as he disappeared.

Steve looked at Pete. “Now there’s an idea...”

Then, steadying himself, he took a slow swing at his friend. Pete parried, and did a pretend jab into Steve’s ribs. Steve staggered back, then reached for the bottle.

The cameras on the walls began to blink, signalling that they would soon be on air. The two men sat down.

“Come to Mars, and learn to act,” Steve said softly, relishing it. The camera lights stopped blinking and turned red.

---

*Matthew Harrison lives in Hong Kong, and whether because of that or some other reason entirely, his writing has veered from non-fiction to literary, and he is currently reliving a boyhood passion for science fiction. He has published numerous SF short stories and is building up to longer pieces as he learns more about the universe. Matthew is married with two children, but no pets, as there is no space for these in Hong Kong. [www.matthewharrison.hk](http://www.matthewharrison.hk)*



# Outer and Inner Truths

**Terry Barr**

I've been a TV junkie all my life, from the days of *Lassie* to *The Big Valley* to *The Mod Squad* and *Then Came Bronson*. I've argued with buddies and colleagues about the use and utility of TV, the joys and aesthetics of this bastard medium. If TV shaped me into the monster I am, exactly whom or what do I menace? I'm a Ph.D. in English specializing in Joyce, Faulkner, Southern Film, Creative Writing, and Food and Literature. I have been married for 30 years to the same woman and have never strayed. I have two lovely daughters who are competent and well-adjusted, but who, like me, often find themselves binge-watching TV. My younger is currently obsessing over *The Blacklist* (she just finished *House of Cards* while continuing to major in psychology and minor in art at a rigorous liberal arts college), while my older considers *Gilmore Girls* her *Catcher in the Rye*—as sustaining and nurturing as all those times when one of us stood in front of the rocker holding her and swaying to some unheard rhythm because sitting in the rocker caused her to scream bloody murder. She owns the complete series, paid full price, and is constantly outraged when she finds whole seasons on sale for \$5.99. And when she's away from home, she rents them on Netflix. Kind of similar to my owning whole seasons of *Andy Griffith* or *Seinfeld*.

So I raised two TV junkies, and when I think about it clearly, I understand how it happened.

My daughters were born in 1990 and '94 respectively. But, I wonder, do they know that they were born

into the greatest, the most artistically inspired period of network TV? The period where ABC, NBC and CBS decided to take chances, perhaps pushed into this decision by FOX? Consider: in the late '80s and early '90s, NBC gave us *Seinfeld*, ABC gave us *Twin Peaks*, CBS gave us *Northern Exposure*, and FOX gave us *The X-Files*. I don't think network TV had ever been or will ever be that good, with shows about nothing and alien abduction and Jewish doctors in nowhere Alaska. And of course, Agent Cooper and the invader within, Bob. I know there were precedents: *The Bob Newhart Show*, *The Wild Wild West*, *The Outer Limits*, *Here Come the Brides* (just kidding). But let's face it: there was a concentration of strangeness in the early '90s, to the extent that when CBS introduced *Picket Fences* in the mid '90s, critics hailed it as "*Twin Peaks Lite*."

Pop-culturally speaking, the '90s were a decade of strangeness for me—my transition from irresponsibility to fatherhood. I think I completely checked out musically in the '90s, only barely aware of Nirvana and Pearl Jam. Because my daughters were so small, it seems the only music we listened to regularly was lullabies from *The World Sings Goodnight*.

That is, except for Julee Cruise and Angelo Badalamenti, the musical geniuses behind the soundtrack to *Twin Peaks*, along with David Lynch, of course. It was Cruise's voice and Badalamenti's orchestration that—despite the images they were underscoring—put my older daughter to sleep at night, on long car rides, or basically any

time. And we met Al and Lisa through *Twin Peaks*. Technically, we met them through Lamaze class, but we'd all agree that Lynch's collection of oddities and grotesqueries bonded us. Each Sunday night after the show, we'd check with each other about what we'd experienced, just as we did during the rest of the week when our babies wouldn't eat right or kept us up as they wailed and pulled on their infected ears.

I'll never forget seeing Al and Lisa for the first time in Lamaze. Lisa introduced herself by suggesting that her "back hurt like hell; so bad that I want to scratch the eyes out of everyone who talks to me." Al just stood behind her, kind of smiling.

"I want to get to know these people," I said to my wife as she was considering how to "Kegel."

And so we did. They came to our place for dinner one night and were greeted by a burned-out toaster oven on the front steps. "We almost turned around," Al said, but they didn't. And after our babies, their Nick and our Pari, were born, we found *Twin Peaks* and staged a theme party. Al was Sheriff Harry and Lisa was his great love Josie. The party was at our place, so while they left baby Nick with a sitter, we had no choice but to incorporate Pari into the theme. So I was wife beater Leo, mainly due to my long ponytail. My wife was The Log Lady, and our precious Pari was the log. My wife tied a log sign around one of Pari's baby legs. We have pictures to prove it.

Is it comforting or disturbing to discover friends who share with you a

fascination for movies like *Eraserhead* or *Blue Velvet*? Is there a friendship barometer based on movie thrill-seeking? Or is it that we were all just too comfortable in our small town when the outré became popular, when *Twin Peaks* hit the air?

*Twin Peaks* ended as abruptly as it started, and though Al and Lisa have remained friends of ours ever since, even to this day I don't believe Pari has seen a single episode. Maybe that's for the best.

*Seinfeld*, of course, was another matter.

\* \* \*

I remember my first *Seinfeld* episode. Elaine and Jerry are visiting Jerry's parents in lower Florida, and Elaine can't sleep because the Seinfelds refuse to put on the air conditioner. Funny, I hadn't known that my Jewish family of origin had made a sitcom.

I got so happy about the show, because who doesn't like watching dysfunctional Jews meander through Manhattan? It wasn't irreverent humor like the groundbreaking *All in the Family* back in the '70s. Actually, I'm not exactly sure what kind of humor Jerry and the gang produced. All I knew then was that no matter what the week held otherwise, in the decade of the '90s, my wife and I planned our Thursday nights around *Seinfeld*.

Kids know when their parents are excited or, let's face it, obsessed. Our daughter Pari was only three years old when our *Seinfeld* addiction began. At breakfast on those Thursday mornings as I got her cereal and otherwise readied her for her Montessori day, I'd say, "I'm making spaghetti for supper, and then we have *Seinfeld*!"

"Pisghetti," she'd say, "and *SEINFELD*!"

Now what she knew about the Costanzas, Uncle Leo, Newman, or Mr. Pitt, I can't say. Of course, she knew nothing, really, other than that her daddy particularly loved these characters. How could I explain that, in the face of the rise and fall of fundamentalist theme parks (Heritage USA), incursions in Kuwait to save autocracy, and Bill and Monica, I thought this show, this *Seinfeld*, perfectly reflected the absurdity of our culture? How do you explain absurdity to a little girl?

A more formidable problem was that her bedtime was 8:00—8:30 tops—and *Seinfeld* didn't come on until 9:00.

Ugh. You can try to hold lines and be disciplined. You can struggle, and beg, and bribe. Or you can make a "special night"—the option we chose.

"Okay, you can stay up late just this night sweetie," which of course she took to mean every Thursday night. We'd have our pisghetti, give Pari her bath, and then make a big batch of popcorn and settle into our added-on den to watch.

It's hard to say what my favorite *Seinfeld* moment is,

## 3 Hour Tour Karen Robiscoe

I stowed away  
with castaways,  
got lost for days  
just floatin'...  
drifted to  
a green lagoon,  
on pontoon  
saved from boatin'...  
built some huts  
with bamboo struts,  
with coconuts  
for shingles...  
caught a sow  
for dinner chow,  
and held luau  
to mingle...  
of ladies three  
the pedigree,  
the richest she  
was older...  
while hourglass  
defined the lass

(the tits and ass)  
that smoldered...  
the girl next door  
in shorty-shorts  
she wore  
her tresses plaited...  
baked some pies  
to please the guys  
—a partner shy  
of dating...  
(a walking check)  
(an intellect)  
(the boss of wreck)  
(and matey)  
since hull was toast  
we lived on coast,  
composing SOS's...  
—the theme of show  
for year or mo'—  
but which show,  
can you guess it?

---

*Karen Robiscoe's short stories, essays, creative non-fiction and poems have appeared in: Spectrum (at UCSB), Postscripts to Darkness, KY Story, Bohemia, Steam Ticket, Peach Fuzz, Peachfish, Dark Light 3, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, The Main Street Rag, Meat for Tea, The Sand Canyon Review, Midnight Circus, Fowlpox Press, Blue Crow Magazine, Lunch Ticket (at Antioch), and 300 Days of Sun. Online, find her work at Handful of Dust, The Whistling Fire, Art4theHomeless, Silver Birch Press, and her popular blog: Charron's Chatter.*

but I'm going to give it to George when he's confronted by his boss, Mr. Lippman, for having sex with the cleaning woman on his desk.

"Was that wrong?" George asks. "I gotta plead ignorance on this thing." George pleading ignorance is like Jeb Bush looking a little confused when he dropped a 20 into a



collection box for victims of a deadly Florida hurricane and was met with a moment of stunned and awkward silence by the reporter covering this “moment.” You know, he was just doing his fair share like most wealthy American aristocrats. That kind of ignorance, George, I mean, Jeb.

In any case, I know TV characters had had sex and even talked about it. But this?

In case you’re wondering what a three-year-old thought of such a scene, don’t worry. Pari usually made it to the seven-minute mark of the show and then fell onto one of our laps. We let her stay with us until show’s end and then carried her to bed.

Though she was sweet and precocious and very persuasive, I couldn’t let Pari stay up on Friday nights for *The X-Files*. And even though I taped it and watched it later, protecting my child from those darker human impulses, my wife was always convinced that the sounds of crying men invaded her sleep.

\* \* \*

Of course, there has always been a tradition of creepy horror in TV—a stalking of the unknown. Though I’m a pacifist who generally shrinks from conflict, I have been a brave adventurer in TV unknown, from *The Twilight Zone* to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* to *The Outer Limits* and to *X-Files* creator Chris Carter’s beloved *The Night Stalker*, with Darren McGavin.

As in these other shows, *The X-Files* was best watched late at night, especially if that night sky, which I could always see clearly through the windows bordering our den on three sides, was blanketed white with clouds. In that setting, Donnie the serial killer who bathed his victims first, or the Jersey Devil, or the chicken farm where the birds were fed the processed remains of their own kind, came through with even greater darkness and chill.

The one stand-alone, non-mythos episode that always got me—even after seven or eight repeated viewings—was Peter Boyle’s visionary character in “Clyde Bruckman’s Final Repose.” When confronted by a deranged killer who asked him why he, the killer, did such horrible things, Bruckman/Boyle’s reply was: “Don’t you understand, son?... You do the things you do because you’re a homicidal maniac.”

Life is often just that frank—just that terribly simple. That post-modern.

Moments like this should have terrified me more, me with my therapist wife turning the sound down on our set while our child lay sleeping two rooms away, through our kitchen.

If I ever accused myself of pursuing my guilty plea-

## Changing Channels

**James B. Nicola**

Two evenings ago, neither you nor I got up to answer the door—the laughter was awfully loud and, thinking on it after, I came to the conclusion that was why you didn’t hear the doorbell. Last night, though, the smoke alarm. What was it you were heating, a cup of milk, for a cup of cocoa? You didn’t ask if I would like a cup. Did you think I was going to get up and fix it? Then I thought, you’re always eating or drinking, or both. And it dawned on me that all I had to do to save a life one day was to remove the battery from the stick. So now, to change the program, you’ll have to get up. After all, I am not anything if not a loving wife.

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sure to narcissistic ends, it was these times. As I’d watch the successive episodes of this beautifully unnerving series, I’d sink into our sofa, peer through the windows at the night sky, be thankful for my own comfort, and lose myself in the truth of a world “out there.” A world that stayed out there only so long.

One night, as we returned from a Christmas party and were putting our daughter to bed, I walked into the den, flipped on the episode of *The X-Files* that I had taped, and then punched the phone message button that was redly-flashing. And this voice emerged as if crawling through the wires like that centipedish, wormlike parasite with the extended teeth did, back in season one:



"Terry... we're watching you and we know where you live. Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil."

Donnie? The Smoking-Man? The neo-Nazi from the "Kaddish" episode?

I erased the tape in a misperceived attempt at protecting my family. The next day, I called a police detective, and through much research and other strange phone calls, we found our man, the one lurking outside: he was an adult man living with his parents, a man who had twice been arrested for indecent exposure. He was warned by the police, but he never really stopped his watching until we moved and changed our number.

*The X-Files* had ended by then. I never discovered how this guy found me or why he watched.

Or what he, in fact, ever saw.

I finally concluded that he saw my movie reviews in the "Readers Reviews" section of the newspaper. I had had the audacity to like Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*. "Trust no one," *The X-Files* warned. Close your drapes, check the children. Delist your number. Think of *Home* and *Andy Griffith* and be glad that you have a healthy family and a secure place. Quit creeping yourself out. Find another series, another town, a good doctor.

Find Joel Fleischman. And Cicely.

\*\*\*

Jewish characters have populated TV ever since *The Goldbergs* back in the '50s. Frankly, I was always suspicious of Fred and Ethel Mertz, too. *Barney Miller*, *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Sidney Freedman, the unit's psychiatrist on *M\*A\*S\*H*. Paul in *The Wonder Years*, and the short-lived *Brooklyn Bridge*, writer/producer Gary David Goldberg's more honest, autobiographical version of *Family Ties*.

But the '90s brought us the Jewish hits—not secondary, assumed characters, but the JEWS. And was anyone more Jewish than *Northern Exposure*'s Joel Fleischman?

Fleischman whined about having to serve time (as a doctor) in Cicely, Alaska, and initially, who could blame him? The series had plots, but more than anything, it seemed to exist to nourish a point of view: that the greatest outsider (Joel the Jew) was our insider in a town that was composed of even greater outsiders, misfits, has-been's, and malcontents.

My wife and I loved these CBS Monday nights. A peaceful show with quaint Americana music, native-American rituals and philosophies, and a moon-for-the-misbegotten love story. We all knew that Joel and Maggie would never work. But then, I was in a marriage with an Iranian woman, and there were people from my Alabama home who argued we would never work either. So fuck 'em, I pulled for Maggie and Joel, and when the lure of NYC became too strong for Fleischman? Well, I love New York too. The lox was fresher in Cicely, but the bagels?

\*\*\*

We're travelling cross-country, my wife, two-year-old Pari, and I. We're in Washington state now, and up ahead on the interstate I see an exit for Roslyn. My wife and baby are asleep, Julee Cruise dreaming through our speakers. I have no one to consult. We're supposed to hit Seattle by four, and I'm not sure we can make it if I take this detour.

But could I live with myself if I don't?

So I do.

The state highway two-lanes itself through the winding foothills of the Cascades. How far will I go to find what I hope to find? I have no prior knowledge, only the intuition of a devotee. I can

sense civilization up ahead as houses appear and traffic—or at least three cars—pass me by. And then I see some buildings, a town.

Roslyn.

I look to the left and there is a small blue building. On the window I read "Dr. Joel Fleischman." Just ahead, the side of another building greets me with its mural of a desert scene: "Welcome to Roslyn: An Oasis." I wake my wife.

"Look over there, honey."

She does.

"Oh my goodness!"

Pari is awake, too, by now, so we park and enter the Roslyn Café, ordering burgers and coffee. We keep searching the streets outside for Fleischman or Chris or even Ruth-Anne. We see signs proclaiming "Hot Set, Do Not Touch," but neither Ed nor Shelly ever greets us. Still, we're here, in mythical Cicely, and I feel as if I'm no longer who I am.

It's the closest I ever get to my dreams of meeting my favorite characters.

I buy a Roslyn Café t-shirt, the best any of us can do, and when I return to my home in Greenville, SC, I tell the story of Roslyn. And when *Northern Exposure* comes on, the following Monday, I see myself, my wife and daughter, standing on the corner where that faithful moose passes by.

It's still the '90s, and for a few more months and even some years, my four shows remain on the networks. But by decade's end, they're all gone to the syndicated wasteland, to be replaced by what? I can't really say, for soon we have a second daughter, Layla, and TV turns into Nickelodeon and ABC Family.

And of course, Barney.

I don't mind, though, for I lived in and through the '90s where "nothing" happened on TV but a murder of

a homecoming queen, an alien abduction of an FBI agent's sister, and an Alaskan town becoming everyone's My Town.

Except that we all know what happened then and in the next decade, as the terror and happiness of small TV towns turned into a national nightmare of real or imagined government and corporate conspiracies that helped us negotiate or perhaps persuade ourselves through Desert Storm and into Desert Swarm ("Swarm, swarm" the security guard cried at Brentano's as Jerry's Uncle Leo attempted to swipe a book), and through other Middle East conflicts we didn't fully understand. No wonder many of us wanted to hide in Cicely, behind a guise of nothing, or in a nondescript apartment in suburban DC with only an X on our window to signal to the

outside world that we were ready to communicate. That we might be willing to trust someone, or anyone, except those we shouldn't, like the small town beauty queen and the beings that raised her.

Everything happened back then, in those '90s, and 52 channels couldn't contain all the action. But later, in the fearful 2000s, when I could afford to, I bought the entire DVD collection of those suspiciously true series. I still watch when I want to, though it isn't the same. My kids are grown, so I don't have to turn the volume down or wait until they're asleep to watch. I'd miss what we had even more, if I didn't remember it all so well.

For that "truth" isn't "out there." It's all in here.

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*Terry Barr's essays have appeared in a variety of publications including Hippocampus Magazine, The Bitter Southerner, Deep South Magazine, Blue Bonnet Review, Full Grown People, and Red Truck Review. His essay collection, Don't Date Baptists and Other Warnings From My Alabama Mother, will be published in 2016 by Red Dirt Press. He lives in Greenville, SC, with his family, and teaches Creative Nonfiction and Southern Film at Presbyterian College. He may be reached at [gtbarr@presby.edu](mailto:gtbarr@presby.edu).*



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