

The broken

Prose Poetry Photography Art Music



Issue 3: Take this job...



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Cover Illustration:
Mouki K. Butt

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Jeff Crouch is an internet artist. Google him, or Yahoo him, or Lycos him, or HotBot him. Or, review his fairly recent listing at *Blue Print Review*.

girlfixer (a.k.a. Kristie Wiwad) recently decided that if Haruki Murakami could start writing at the age of thirty, so could she. *The Broken City* is her first publishing credit and for that she is grateful. Visit her online at www.myspace.com/suicide_room.

Darren Bradley Jones makes poor decisions when drinking, speaks about himself in the third person when tequila inspires such arrogance, and frequently manages to trick those around him into believing his intentions are sincere and his heart is pure. He writes fiction to exorcise his bad behavior and uses his characters to do and say things that, in real life, would be detrimental to his successfully passing for a likeable human being. He can be harassed and ridiculed at darrenbradleyjones@gmail.com.

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Despite speaking and writing in his mother tongue, Christian Martius lives far away from the country he used to call home. Recently, he has started using words like "kinda" in his sentences and now calls trousers pants and pants underpants. His short stories have appeared online and in print in Vancouver, Toronto and London. He also writes articles for various magazines and websites, including *Eye Weekly*, *Discorder* and *Capital Mag*. Samples of his work can be found at www.christianmartius.com.

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Amanda Thornton

Salvatore William is an Ottawa native who has traveled North America through and through, seeking out truth and inspiration in the nooks and crannies of the land. In 2002, he was published for the first time in *The Book of Hope* and *The World Healing Book* (Beyond Borders Press, Reykjavik). He has released two mini-albums of wistful songs, *Fjord* (2002) and *Three Faces* (2007), and is currently in the planning stages of his debut album. Recently, Sal's music and poetry have been published on the Calgary-based e-zine *Splinterswerve.com*, as well on his personal website, salwilliam.googlepages.com. Look for the release of his first book of poetry, *A Misspent Youth Of Ramblings: My Adolescent Poetry*, in 2009.

Christopher Woods is the author of a prose collection, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*. His photographs can be viewed in his online gallery, *MOONBIRD HILL ARTS* (www.moonbirdhillarts.etsy.com), which he shares with his wife, Linda. He lives in Houston and in Chappell Hill, Texas.

Long Live The Ants

Katrina Taliana

Far ahead of its time and stylistically influential in the swing of things, a deep voice echoes from the hallways of imagination. Ants. A soft brush of a brown sweater and a familiar warmth at hip level. Almost forty-two percent of luck, the rest is left up to fate, a connection unbridled by the ties of decision. Holding dreams from the confiscating people, confiscating the dreams from the regular people. This is not my divine. Driving away in the high grey dying cities, singing away the blue temperate mornings. A love song written across hours of countryside, and the sticky remnants of nectarine dripping down, down my thin freckled wrists. Ant. Ant. A faint breath of forest, a jolly blow of seaside, a true hopeless romantic. There are fourteen trees that line the bathroom walls, and a patch of white paint on the floor. This is amusing, this is pointless, this is just the falling of Rome in our living room. Murder by a small child's toy and a few freedom fighters. Ant. A perfect erasable blue heart on the door, rice in the bowl, chopsticks. Mango flavoured dishes from mango flavoured countries, and his face shining up from the sidewalks. Catching myself believing in the slow ripple of change and synchronicity. These are the best lines from the poems about Pallantine. Ant. Flat rate star bought off the back of a truck close to the border. A midnight pinner, and the twinkle of colourful Christmas lights waiting for October. This is reality. This is it. Ants.

Broken

Amanda Thornton

Photos: *Julie Kitzes*

We got thrown out of our uncle's house at the same time, me and Lana, my twin. I figure we both left with the same three things: a high school diploma, our life's savings and a suitcase.

The diploma was pretty much useless; we knew that to start. Our uncle had told our caseworker he could keep us until we had a place to go after we graduated from high school. But after graduation, Lana slept with our uncle's stepson, and that woman my uncle married said it was us or her. So he gave us each an extra twenty bucks, and threw us out with the same suitcases our mom bought us when she lost custody.

I was walking as angrily as I felt and ignoring Lana even though I knew she was looking at me sideways through her long hair. She started talking fast.

"We can get a bus ticket out of here, Jackie. It's only fifty dollars to Yorktown."

It took me a while to get enough spit in my mouth to speak. "You get us thrown out and you already have plans?"

"Yeah." She set down her suitcase and put her fists on her hips. Both of us had these wide bony hips even though we were skinny everywhere else. Edith, the woman my uncle married, called them "childbearing

hips."

"Who's in Yorktown? Another cousin you can lay?" I kept walking.

"Yorktown is where Ryan lives." Ryan was her old boyfriend, and Lana had the most irritating way of poking her chin out when she knew she was trying to pull a fast one. Out of the corner of my eye I could see her doing it now.

"I'm not coming."

"He already said he'd take us in."

"When did he say this?"

"He said whenever I needed a place."

"You can whore yourself out for a place to stay," I said. "I won't."

"I'm not a whore."

I stopped and put down my suitcase. "No, not a whore, I guess. A whore can keep her legs together for long enough to get a price for..." and she clocked me with her fist, right in the face.

I went for her and when we stopped, my face was throbbing, and I had some of her hair in my hand. I spat to get the taste of blood out of my mouth and heaved my suitcase up and headed towards the highway out of town.

I had no plan and I was too pissed to think of

one when I reached the highway. So, I put down my suitcase and stuck out a thumb. I nearly put down my thumb when a pink and white junker slowed because I couldn't tell if the driver was a woman. When she rolled down the window, I got a good look at her and changed my mind. She was ancient and fat as a house, and she was wearing a pink shirt that said "Rosy cheeks" with the picture of a butt underneath. Old and bad taste in clothing was pretty comforting.

"How far are you going?" I asked.

"Oh far, far," she said. "It's all right hon. I can take you wherever you need."

"Going to a big city?"

"Hell yeah. Come on hon." She popped the trunk. "You can call me Granny Greer. What do I call you?"

"Jackie."

"Okay Jackie, we got a long drive. Just tell me if you have to pee."

I never was much for talking to people I didn't know, so we sat quiet. We'd been driving for a while before we stopped, so I could pee in the trees by the road.

When I came back, she was leaning on the side of her car, smoking a cigarette, wearing hot pink leggings and pink high-tops. "I needed to stretch my legs," she said. She sucked in and I noticed the cigarette was made with black paper.

"Those coolers in back of the car," she tapped on the window with a long pink nail. "There's buffalo meat for my grandson's restaurant."

"Huh."

"He's got a big restaurant in the city we're headed to." She looked at me sharply. "You got a job?"

"Me? No."

"You ever worked in a

restaurant?"

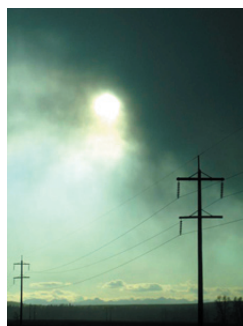
"No."

"Well." She coughed for a little and I wondered if she should be smoking that cigarette. When she stopped, she said, "He could give you a job if you wanted to work for one."

"Even if I haven't done it before?"

She took another drag and blew the smoke out in circles that widened as they came towards me. The smoke didn't smell like tobacco; it was sweeter, more like pipe smoke.

"If I bring you in, you'll get a job and training hon," she said. "My grandson and I have an arrangement." She said arrangement



like it had a couple more syllables than it actually did. "He always needs more wait staff."

"Yeah." I thought she might be lying about the job, but after we drove for a couple more hours, I started thinking it was a good plan.

I was sleeping by the time we got into the city, but I woke up when she stopped at a big restaurant with fancy white columns at the entrance. Granny Greer told me to take a cooler and my suitcase to the kitchen and tell them I was the new waitress. When I walked into the kitchen, they gave me a uniform and took the cooler. I was in.

It turned out her grandson was a real tightwad, but he kept

his hands to himself. Granny Greer supplied him with girls mostly, some boys, and he worked us for every second he could, paid below minimum wage, no overtime. Probably illegal, but the restaurant fed us, and there were two cots in the back room for the staff to crash on. I started out sleeping in there and later my savings were enough to rent with some other waitresses. I got my own place in a couple of months. It was a little lonely, but it wasn't so bad.

After I'd got my own place, Greer started in on me to train not just to wait tables, but to cook too. After a year of his griping, I decided I could learn to cook in the restaurant kitchen. I didn't even care that it paid real bad because I felt safer than I'd felt in a long time.

I had thought of Lana a couple of times since we left Uncle's, but I always figured she'd be all right. I wasn't still mad, but I was working so hard that everything personal seemed blurry. At least until Lana showed up.

She surprised me in the dark. It was three a.m. I'd had a long night and I cursed pretty loud, thinking it was the drunk from the fifth floor, asleep on my doormat. The landlady was nasty about noise after midnight, so I kicked at her on purpose as I stepped into my apartment and she looked up.

It's strange seeing someone familiar, different from how you remembered them, and Lana's face was all bruised-up, black eye, bloody nose, and my first thought was that I had smacked her good with my foot.

"Jackie, you dumbass," she said, and crawled into the apartment. I locked the door and dropped down on the floor beside her.

"Your nose is bleeding," I said and pinched it shut like we were kids. "I didn't know it was you." Then she started to cry and about 20 tons of guilt dropped down on me right there.

Now, me and Lana, we had been close 'til we hit puberty and she got interested in boys. That was when she kind of left me behind, and maybe I had aimed at doing the same thing to her. But I started thinking that I should have at least let her know I was alive. And I sure shouldn't have kicked anyone in the face, even if it had been the drunk from fifth floor who was mostly harmless.

My apartment was a dump, so there were paper towels right by us from where I mopped up the leak in the ceiling. I got one to her face, and tried to get her to hold it on, but Lana just cried and wouldn't hold a thing.

"Lana?" I said, and she still just cried, maybe even cried harder.

"Jackie," she said. "Jackie, Jackie, you shit." My name and insults were all that she had gotten out since I let her in. Figures. I had bullied her off the ground before I noticed that she was pregnant. Hugely pregnant. And she was wearing a t-shirt I remembered.

"Lana, come wash that off," I said, and got her headed in the direction of the bathroom. She was good about moving as long as I was pushing her, but when I turned on the water and plugged the tub to let it fill, she just stood there gasping with her long hair stuck to the bloody mess she was making on her face with the paper towel.

"Lana, move and shut up," I said. "You're going to wake people up and get me thrown out."

She shut up so suddenly

it was like I had muted a TV, took off her pants, got into the tub, and splashed water over everything, including the shirt she had on.

Then she took off her shirt with that same sharp motion she had used on her pants and dropped it in the water. I could see little round bruises up and down her arms, some on her shoulder blades. It took me a while to figure out they were fingerprints. She scrubbed her feet with the t-shirt and my soap, and then started up her legs. I looked away when she got to her knees because a lot of the dark marks weren't coming off with the t-shirt and soap. When I sat on the toilet,



I saw her underwear was a mess. I picked it up and threw it in the trash.

The water in the tub was a dirty pink when she got up, but she wasn't still bleeding anywhere. She had stopped crying. I gave her my towel but it didn't manage to wrap all the way around her belly.

"You're huge," I said.

Lana looked at me, stuck her chin out and said, "I'm pregnant," just like that explained it all.

"Yeah," I said. "I saw," and I went out into the main room to find something for her to wear. I was still wearing my stuff from work.

"You a cook now?" Lana was standing in the bathroom doorway

holding the towel up like a curtain. It could only cover her upper or lower half and she had chosen the lower so I could see that her boobs had gotten enormous.

"Yeah." I threw my biggest shorts at her and she dropped the towel to put them on. Then she wrapped her arms around her belly again, walked out into the main room and sat on my bed.

"You cook something specific?"

"French," I said. I came over with my biggest t-shirt. She pulled it on but it didn't cover her lump. She put her arms around it again.

"Can I stay here tonight?" she asked. "I'm just on my way through."

"Why d'you keep holding that?" I put my hand on her tummy, mostly to stop myself from getting teary. It was softer than it looked like it was going to be. "It's not coming out or anything, right?"

"I just like to feel that he's moving," she said. She pressed my hand down. "I can feel him kick and I know he's okay." I felt a little flutter and took my hand away right quick. It was eerie, was all. She was growing something that moved.

"Yeah, you can stay here," I said. "I just gotta get up at eight for work at the restaurant."

"Okay." She scooted up to the wall and sighed. Then she pushed back her hair and from the side she looked like how I remembered, smooth and confident, like she was going to put on makeup to finish perfection. That's what she used to say: "I need to finish perfection, give me your lip liner."

"You want a mirror?" I asked. "Yes."

I got up to find the little

mirror I used for plucking my eyebrows and turned out the light.

"Hey!" she said. "How'm I supposed to see?"

"I have to sleep. That streetlamp shines right in here anyway." It was one of the reasons I could afford to rent the place. I gave her the mirror and changed into shorts and a t-shirt in the dark; I didn't know why, but I didn't want her to see my body when hers looked like that. She opened the mirror and touched her face gently with a fingertip, hissing when she got to the bruises.

"Did I do that?" I asked and lay down beside her.

"No. Jimmy did that."

I tried to see if I could remember any Jimmys. I couldn't.

"Who's Jimmy?"

"My husband. He picked me up when I was hitchhiking out of Yorktown about a month after you left."

"You married the guy who picked you up?"

"Not right then, but yeah."

"Is that Jimmy's?" I nudged her tummy with my chin.

"No." She snapped shut the mirror and gave it back to me.

"Whose is it?"

"It's mine." She was back to holding her tummy so I changed the subject.

"How did you get here?"

She looked at me and then slid down to lay on her side. "My back hurts. Can I have another pillow?"

I handed her one of my little ones and she stuck it between her legs.

"How'd you know where I was?"

She sighed. "Do you know

someone named Greer?"

"Yeah, he's the guy I work for."

"Well, this wasn't a guy, this was an old lady with pink hair."

"Granny Greer!" I sat up. "She doesn't pick up pregnant girls. She just picks up people to work at the restaurant."

"Well, that's weird." Lana closed her eyes. "Yesterday when I went in for my check-up, she was driving past the clinic." She opened her eyes to look at me. "Tesquaw, you know where that is?"

"Yeah?" It was a good 90 miles away.

"Yeah. Anyway, I only made my appointment because Jimmy and I... I made Jimmy let me because I wanted to make sure that," she paused and swallowed, "that it wasn't going to make me abort or anything. And the doctor asked if I had a place to go and I said yes, just to get out of there without a scene."

"You didn't know where I was."

"No shit. So, I'm standing outside the clinic waiting for Jimmy and thinking about how I'm going to get away from him and this old lady stops and gets out and tells me she knows someone who looks just like me, but not pregnant. I thought she was crazy, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. She kept saying she used to get beaten up too and it'll all be fine if I come with her."

"Granny Greer?"

"Yeah, this old lady. Anyway, she takes me here and tells me to go to the fourth floor and wait. Then you came home and kicked me in the face, but you're letting me stay so I forgive you."

I lay back on my bed.

Granny Greer used to get beat up,

so she picked up people who had been beaten up and pawned them off on her grandson. Greer ran his restaurant and trained a bunch of kids who stuck around or left but got paid, and fed, and had a place to live. And I started to laugh.

"What?" Lana poked me and I swatted at her hand and got her stomach.

"Your belly is huge," I said, and started laughing again.

"What's so funny?"

"You know when we had that fight after Uncle threw us out? Granny Greer picked me up hitchhiking out of town. She must have thought that someone beat me up."

"How is that funny?"

"Because you beat me up."

"What, this is payback? You think I did something to deserve this?"

"Well, you were always going for the worst guys. Guys do that when you let them stick around for too long."

Lana was quiet for a little. "I don't think they always do."

"Yeah, well, you're the expert."

"Has any one you've slept with hit you?"

I thought a little more about it. "No," I said. "I'd stab them with my kitchen knife." I remembered how bad she looked in the tub. "Lana, why didn't you leave? Or get a bat or something?"

She sighed and then farted really loud.

I burst out laughing. "Don't warn me or anything, Lana. It's just my bed."

"I'm pregnant." She rubbed the tummy again. "The thing with Jimmy, it was a bad situation, but it's

not my fault."

"You let him!"

"I left, didn't I? And he didn't mean to do it."

"What?" I barely remembered to keep my voice down.

"That's what he said when he was sorry afterwards, and I thought I could stick it out with him." She sighed.

"Stick it out." I couldn't believe I was hearing this.

"Yeah, people change, you know? You're a chef and you didn't even cook when we left home. And Jimmy, I thought he would get calmer, but he just got madder. Then he does this when I'm pregnant, and I figured out I had to leave."

"And you think he's going to let you do that? You, with his kid?"

"He doesn't have a choice." Lana's voice was fading. "I'm gone."

"What if he hunts you down?"

"I guess that's my problem."

We were both quiet for a while as I thought.

"Not just yours," I said finally. When she didn't say anything, I turned to face her. Her eyes were closed and I could see her belly move a little as she slept. It did a little shudder that reminded me how thin her skin was stretched and I got the shivers. Then I put my arms over my flat belly and started thinking some more.

Granny Greer must have known Lana couldn't work like that, but she'd still picked her up. And maybe Granny'd been in a bad situation before, but that didn't mean she had to help. Most people would have steered clear, just like I had when me and Lana went different ways.

I ought to be mad at Granny 'cause she brought Lana right to my door, maybe even still mad at Lana for getting us thrown out, but maybe things had changed. Lana was family, and I could let her stay here, and maybe be around that kid when he's born so he'll be one up from what Lana and I had. I even started feeling grateful I hadn't been working so hard for just me, which might as well have been for nothing. It may be messed up, but I was pretty sure it was true.

So next morning, I left my apartment key and all my cash in an envelope on the nightstand with Lana's name and "Stay here, Buy food, Be back at midnight," written on it. If she was set on leaving, she'd go. But maybe she'd forgive me for leaving her, and stay so we could strengthen the tie I'd been so bent on breaking.

Teenage Flashback *Salvatore William*

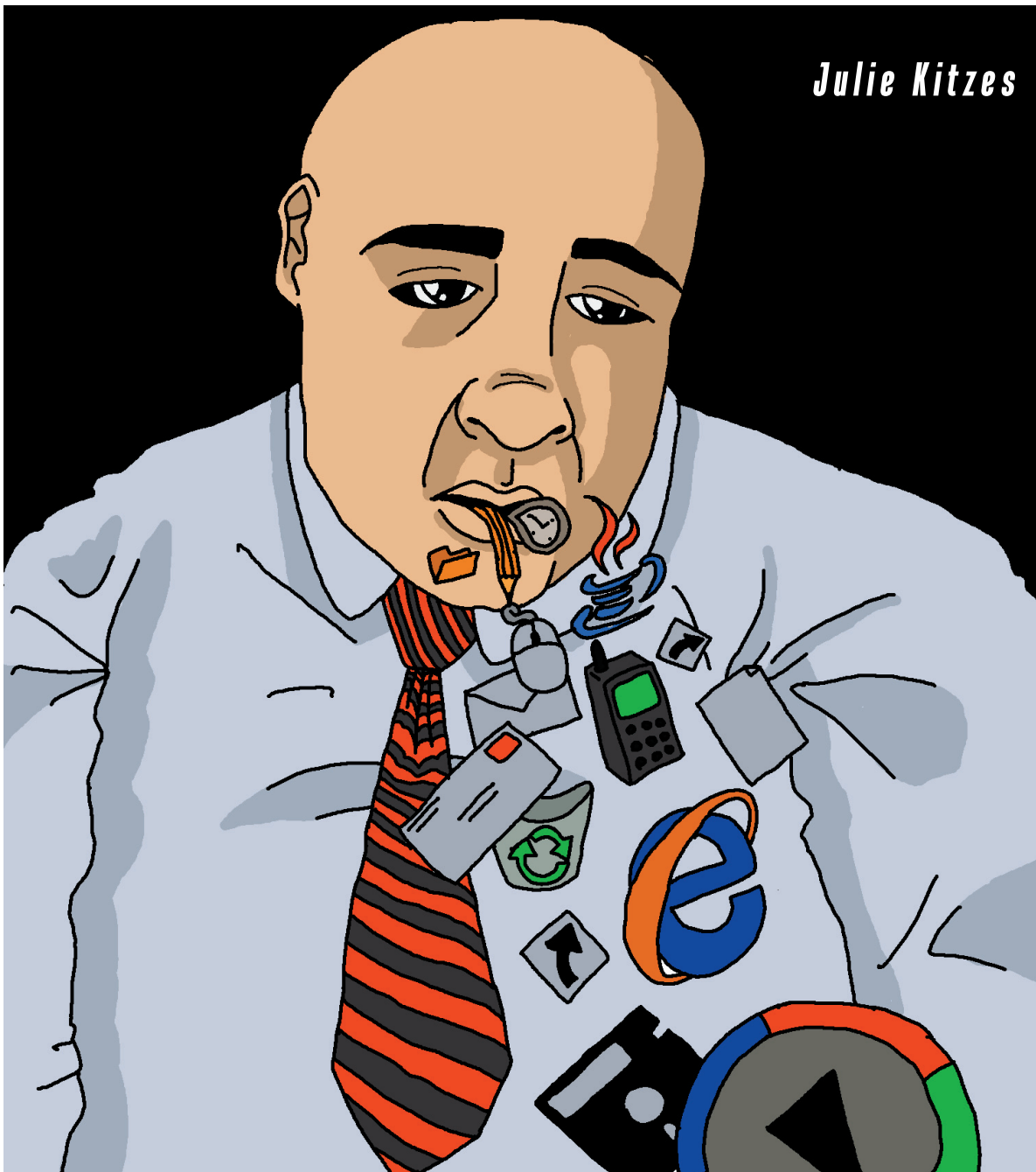
like the crispy snap of a wheat cracker
innocence is lost with a whisper
by seventeen I could not speak
the glossolalia of my mildly insane youth
the faith in my own hysteria
had slipped away in no time

and we can almost lose that sensation
that once had been so entrenched
adult fears may pay the rent
yet never leave the mind
clear enough to relent
and glean a little from the natural flowing
inspiration of the naked fields,
the Edens and Elysiums
of an end to grownup listlessness

when young energy comes alive for the first time
it shakes and wretches, and wreaks havoc
like Stymphalian birds
and the tumbling down of time,
the constant labours offered to that man
the gray shades, the old bones
I would hand it all away and burn
for just a spec of timeless inspiration

WORK!

"I was in a testy mood. I'd been inside my head all day—some days that just happens. You get lost doing just one task, and suddenly you look up and it's dark out, but you still don't want to leave your headspace, and then she comes up behind you with a 150 kHz marine emergency blow horn and lets off one big parp that has you shitting out your eyes, ears, and nostrils, and when you turn around, you discover that your evil co-workers were videoing the entire prank, and you get furious and you scream for everybody to fuck off and die. "Aw shucks, it was only a joke," but the fact remains that because of that one loud parp you'll never be able to parse C++ code again because you fried those dendrites that dictate logic patterns, and in a flash you see yourself as a future object of pity, forced to work at a TacoTime outlet, feeding disrespectful larvae of the middle classes while taking soiled orange PVC trash bags out to the back alley, where you see a grease storage drum, and wistfully remember that earlier, more charmed portion of your life when you once knew the chemicals and procedures necessary to convert restaurant grease into clean-burning planet-friendly ethanol, and that was just one of the many feats your brain was capable of, back before the parping, back before people whispered when they saw you walking their way, hoping they wouldn't have to make small talk with you, back before they dumbed themselves down to the verbal level of Pebbles Flintstone to make you understand them." —Douglas Coupland, *jPod*



The Wellness Room

Kiran Mehde

My aloneness was a warm blanket I could hide in, burrowing like a wild ferret. The room, called the “Wellness Room,” was the only reason I even managed to survive the job for the fourteen months I was there. Sparsely furnished with a plain table, a chair, a small trash can, and a fake plastic tree in the corner, it was an inner room surrounded by offices full of cubicles full of diligent wage slaves like me.

But not quite like me.

I would go to the Wellness Room at least twice a day, usually more. My job, moving around, up and down the sixteen-story building, fixing people’s computer issues, allowed me a lot of leeway. I could disappear for a couple of hours, and everyone assumed I was with a “client,” one of the three thousand or so people who rang our department whenever the cryptic machines their careers— nay, the entire corporation—depended upon, misbehaved.

Being in a tech support job like that had its advantages.

But when I walked back into our department’s office on the eighth floor, I was reminded that for all my freedom of movement, I was still just another cubicle rat, plodding along in my designated wheel in this glass cage overlooking other glass cages, with others going through their daily rituals: coffee, e-mails, voicemails, open tickets, follow-ups, start over. Yes George, I’ll send you the status reports, the meeting minutes, the lists of enormously insignificant things I’ve accomplished this pay period.

That room had walls as blue as muted dreams, a blue that is so blue it has stopped even imagining a way of being anything else.

At first, I went there ten minutes at a time, after the communal coffee breaks that Elizabeth would invite Alex and I to, where we’d talk about George’s or Vicky’s or anyone else’s bad haircuts, bad breaths, bad spelling, bad e-mail etiquette, etc. Then I’d tell them I was going to the ladies’ room, but instead I’d sneak into my blue room of silenced screaming. I’d stop smiling that fake corporate smile—stop giving a shit about people who forgot their passwords daily. And I’d... just... sit. I’d hear phones ringing on the other side of the walls. Outside the door with the heavily frosted window panes, I’d hear colleagues crossing paths as one left the nearby bathrooms and another approached. Small talk. Small. Very, very small.

At some point, I started bringing my mp3 player along. Modern escapism device. Then I was in that room longer and longer. Just sitting, tuning out where I was, when I was, why I was there, who I was becoming.

Then I started to dance in that room. That fake plastic tree held the door so nobody could walk in on me. And I danced and I danced and I danced. Once or twice, I bumped into the blue walls, even left scratches on their sterile blandness.

And one day, I danced all the way out of that world.



Charm Offensive

Christian Martius

Jake was always over-friendly. He was the sort of person that addressed you by your first name in even the most arbitrary conversations. He made everyone feel at ease, or at least the centre of his attention. Jake had no problem with physical contact—a tap on the shoulder or a handshake was like a blink for him—and thanks to Jake, we could maintain incredibly tedious discussions, the sort of exchanges I would go out of my way to avoid outside of the office.

“It’s Clare without the ‘i,’” said the new temp.

“Really?” said Jake.

“It’s not that unusual.”

“I know. I’m just used to writing it with the ‘i.’”

“There are thousands of Clares in this world, Jake. Some of them don’t even have an ‘e.’”

“Thankfully there are only three of them in this office,” Jake said.

With Jake it felt good to have a dialogue like this; it was as if a gentle breeze divided the stolid office air and caressed your temples. This in itself was a tiny miracle. His place in our work dynamic made us sometimes forget the barrage of daily resentments that surfaced because we weren’t anywhere any of us wanted to be. The air conditioning would pipe out a mundane atmosphere regardless, and amongst the carpet tiles and strip lighting, we were all damaged by the petty affects of middle-management. But not Jake; he would genuinely smile at least once a minute for the whole day. It was always, “No problem,” or “I’ll do it right away,” with him. His influence

was universal. He was a rare breed under a shirt and tie.

I was employed with Jake in a typical office; the sort of place that exists in the collective memory of everyone that has ever worked for a living. At some point in your life, you will step into an office like this. To the general public, it was a civil service department; to us who worked there, it was just an area where documents were delivered and stored. Like most of the other departments under the same governmental umbrella, we prayed for the boredom to evaporate, and our section had Jake.

“How are you today?” he would say, and I would rumble my generic non-committal answer. As easy as it was to keep a smile off my face, there was a part of me that grinned. He was the answer to our prayers.

Propped up with his veneer of optimism, had he also created a convincing Eden outside of this office? Was he elevated on a menu of mood pills? Or was he constructed by our masters and wound up every morning like a clockwork toy to wheel himself between our desks?

What began as a curiosity stemmed by Jake’s apparent divinity in relation to the company he kept, soon developed into uncertainty. We were all infected. Each of us in our own way grew a little smile inside of us because of him. I began to question this charity of character. It was inconceivable that he existed in the work environment he roamed, nay, even in the city.

I began to look for cracks that would lead to fissures and the

eventual fault-line, a singular clue that he belonged to the same race as the rest of us—me, I, the other more regular type of guy, regular because I couldn’t think of anything good about myself without having to sit down and really think about it.

For a brief spell, I walked behind him. It wasn’t following, just hanging around after he left work. Short bursts of activity, and over a minimal amount of distance, I’d chicken out when he got near public transport. It was difficult for me to keep up this pretence—acting in such a deliberate way without revealing myself. On occasion, he’d notice my presence lagging behind him and look back jovially.

“Going my way tonight?” he’d shout back without a hint of suspicion.

Jake knew I lived on the other side of town, the side that we were both walking away from, but still his demeanour kept its permanence. I wasn’t made to be a stalker, so delights of camouflage and night-vision goggles were suspended. Echoing another’s footsteps made me paranoid. Deviant behaviour wasn’t my speciality, at least not in such an outright manner, and I clearly lacked the expertise to be successful. So, I gave it up.

But I was still curious about Jake. Given the nature of our workplace, how could he sustain his level of super-human exuberance? When I woke in the morning, the first legible phrase that entered my mind was, “Oh no,” particularly on a weekday, and then I would think about Jake. Considering that in those

early, pre-employment morning hours I'd also sometimes think about masturbation, I attempted to ignore him. He got in the way of the way I liked to get my heart started and that didn't make me happy. At the bedroom ceiling, I'd shout, "Why don't you go away?" and then in turn glance down towards my penis, inert as if it was waiting for the right moment for him to leave. It never came.

What is so fascinating about a man that is happy? It wasn't such a perverse notion that an individual could be overly cheerful. But he carried his personality with such an impenetrable conviction that you'd suspect it wasn't his persona after all. I would have drunk his bath water to find out how he did it. Instead, he was handed to me on a plate along with silver service and a cake trolley.

Katherine, "Katherine with a K" as she was called, was a fairly recent addition to the workplace. She actually had the enthusiasm for her job that most of the interviewees lied about. She used phrases like "you guys" when referring to us and everyone was a "darling" on their own. Naturally, our hero Jake gravitated towards her. We could all see the simulacra of character unfolding as she settled in. Both Jake and Katherine were animals of a rare breed. Their kind was maybe close to extinction but in the zoo of our workplace we were lucky enough to have two of them. Soon, our office could open up into a world of fluffy pink bunnies and magical rainbows as they attacked the hegemony of work on two fronts. But this was simply imagination, not reality. This parallel was mistaken, based on perceived rapport and on the

familiarity of office romance. Granted, they were similar animals and they had a mutual interest in one another, but Jake didn't latch onto her because he'd found a kindred spirit. In fact, he discovered the very opposite. Katherine with a K had entered his territory as a rival.

Battle commenced. We were fooled because the conflict was never overt; it was conducted in the same polite, good-humoured manner that had afflicted them from the start, but there was an undercurrent of malice. I noticed it first, of course.

When Katherine said, "Hello darling," the bayonets were drawn.

When Jake said, "How are you Katherine?" his cannons were loaded.

The fuses were lit with an "Are you coping with all that work?"

And her troops moved into position with an, "Of course."

All questions were answered without a single tone of defensiveness.

"Do you want me to help you with anything?"

"No, I think I'm doing just fine here."

"Good, just making sure you're settling in alright."

"Why thank you Jake, you're so considerate."

"No problem."

Exchanges like this—these little stabbing motions—were disguised with a mannered language, the sort of language that existed out of the context of Katherine and Jake, as a pleasant conversation. They conducted themselves in pleasantries such as these many times before clocking off, and observing the minutiae of these exchanges, it was apparent to me that their words were nothing other than the ingredients of

a war.

Jake sometimes offered Katherine a coffee and she was wise to refuse. He would have fetched her a cup of the brown liquid that belched out of the machine in the corridor that has probably been there since 1972—the machine with faded ink symbols that were supposed to represent what was inside but didn't even resemble the selection of muck that fell into your cup. Katherine knew what he was up to, as surely as if the coffee machine company had re-branded their product and placed the word 'SHIT' in bold letters on the front of it. Jake couldn't make her drink shit, not with sugar, lemon or milk.

Katherine offered to photocopy files for Jake, but every time she fed his sheets into the apparatus they came back smudged and wonky. "I don't know what went wrong there," she'd say and he would have to accept them. "Don't worry, I'll try again later," he'd say, knowing how to return the favour with the franking machine.

Everyone else in the office was too absorbed to notice the combat in their midst; my companions were hidden away behind piles of imminent tasks. But then Jake's campaign mounted a surprise attack. He crossed the boundaries that both he and the enemy had set with smiles and kind words.

I've never seen Jake act in a clumsy way, ever; his nimble fingers were meticulous and his limbs were in all the correct positions. He could have moonlighted as a waiter at the most congested restaurant. On countless occasions, he'd carry more coffee mugs or paper folders

than the average man in a suit and never was an item dropped. That was until a Friday, when the final battle took place in the few minutes before everyone left for the weekend.

Katherine had re-arranged her makeup with some of the other women in the office. The collective snap of the metal clasps, of handbags and of make-up bags, always resounded at this time. Of course, Jake had timed the incident perfectly. Walking towards her with a mug of coffee, as if passing, he lodged a foot under a protruding chair leg, tripped and fell right down in front of Katherine with a K just as she was applying her mascara. Her eyes were locked into her little mirror, her defences were down and she was unprepared.

"What the..."

Jake didn't touch her but the contents of the mug did. Her blouse turned into a stained and transparent piece of wet fabric and her hair became a bird's nest, holding dirty raindrops. The mascara brush was far away from her eye as he fell; the accident could have been worse. To Katherine with a K, it was bad enough. She was drenched.

"I'm so sorry," Jake said.

Then I saw it. In an instant, they looked at each other with the perfect amount of venom. Hate was

behind their faces and it twinkled in their eyes. It was the singular moment of truth in all of this, when animal reaction overtook the sophistication of personality. But it was a mere moment, and in another instant, their features switched back to their default modes. They were both too aware of the lucid.

"I really didn't mean to."

Jake started a mock mopping action. In silence, Katherine got up from her chair and walked towards the bathroom. It was over.

We stood around like freeze-framed statues in the aftermath and watched Jake dab her desk with pathetic tissues. Brains whirled like faulty alarm clocks and something passed between my workmates and me. To the ones without awareness, it was simply the shock of the incident. To others, it was the presentation of Jake as a normal human being—one who made mistakes. That in itself was shocking. In the end, to most of the employees, it was just a clumsy accident like all the other numerous calamities that peppered our occupation.

After the Friday soaking incident, Katherine became like the rest of us. Gathering the standard amount of adjectives required to describe her profession, she metamorphosed into a bored and

jaded Katherine with a K that we all came to know and understand.

Jake resumed his former role. He fed off of her dwindling enthusiasm like a jovial parasite and she gave him the power he needed for free when she couldn't avoid him. I guess his behaviour haunted Katherine with a K. Maybe it reminded her of the person she used to be.

But did Jake really win? This episode revealed more about him than he would have liked—to the workers, his employers, and even to himself—but still, he continued to wear that familiar face. After the drenching, we all began to notice it. Maybe the mask had slipped a little—enough for us to see the straps holding it in place. But, in the realm of a hollow victory, Jake continued as if nothing had happened.

It could have been seen as a superfluous affair—as meaningless as the bland incidents that occurred in every office hour. The death of Katherine with a K was consistent with the demise of spirit we had all witnessed. An accident can sometimes be just an accident, but in watching Jake, I could no longer take him at face value. I saw the mask that pleased everyone so much, that his real face was long forgotten.



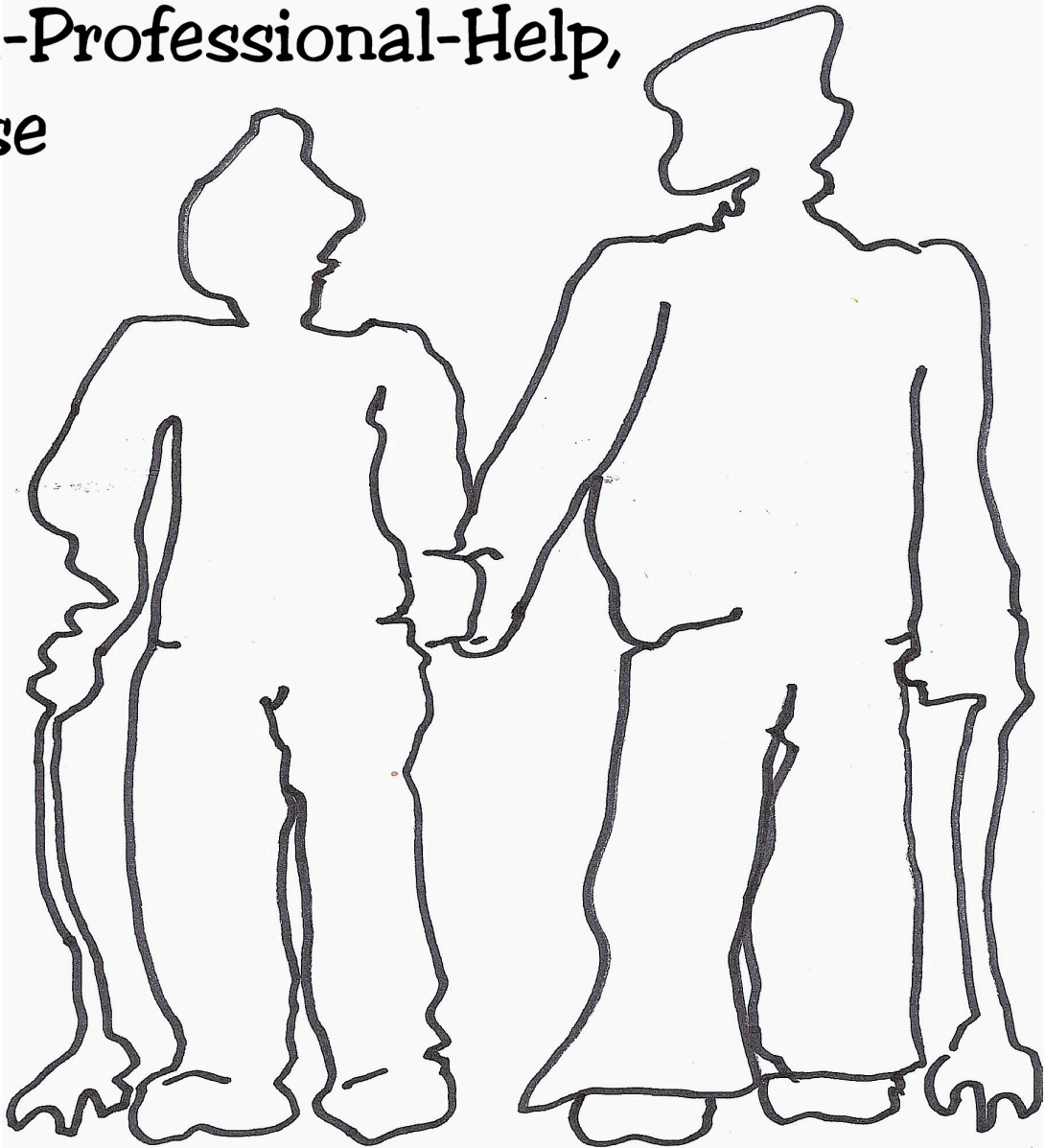
Unwanted Ads

Jeff Crouch (Art) & Christopher Woods (Words)

Photographer Retoucher

Need a person who knows Adobe Photoshop very well to revamp family album. Extensive experience required to remake album to reflect current situation. Several group portraits need special work after disastrous family reunion. I love my family album, but not my family. Please furnish your rates and include a sample when contacting me. Willing to pay top dollar as this will be faster and more gratifying than therapy.

Semi-Professional-Help, Please



Man, mid-nineties, and wife, same age, need help now. On a very limited income, we live with my mother-in-law, one hundred twenty-two, who is making life difficult for us with her constant swearing, fortune telling and knife-throwing. She's blind, but insists that she can throw knives around the outlines of our bodies. If we refuse, she threatens to throw us out on the street. She gets drunk and tells our fortunes, always one horrible kind of death or another. The last few nights, she's crawled into bed with me with her knives. I fear castration, or an early death. We desperately need someone who acts and talks like a therapist, or who has taken a mail order psychology course. We can't afford to pay. I can arrange to have your fortune told, but it won't be upbeat. Please help us out.

J.J. Saunders
979 Slicer Way
Oakland

Barter?



Yard guy looking to bargain. Winter is coming and my business is slowing down. Nice-looking and very muscular dude with two full weeks' lawn care experience looking to do other "special" jobs around your house. I'm told my interior work is the best. Not looking for handyman stuff - painting, plumbing blah, blah, blah. You are a person who appreciates my shaved body, my butt, my desire to please. Let's cuddle on those long winter afternoons while wife or hubby is away, or I can be with both of you if you want. I'm an equal opportunity kind of guy. Try me.

Bruce

awesomeguy88@yahoo.com

The Eighteenth Floor

Kristie Wiwad

Ring!

Ring!

Ri—(you never let it go more than two.)

Between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m., the better part of my day was spent silencing that interminable ring in two-and-a-half to three-minute increments.

Two-and-a-half to three minutes when they were happy. It could go on much longer when they weren't—sometimes as much as an hour or more! Unbelievable, their sudden bravado. But the telephone made it easy.

They argued, complained, screamed, insulted. Some reasoned, some plead, some even cried—but it always ended in our favour. We had something they wanted, so they either played the game or walked away empty-handed.

During breaks, there was the stairwell. At eighteen floors above ground level, and with three elevators in the building, there was little danger of running into pedestrians. We spent our fifteen minutes one flight up, passing joints between us and sipping our double-doubles.

The weed was alright, but the joints were usually poorly rolled and cut with cheap tobacco. I didn't smoke cigarettes, but the nausea and dizziness from the nicotine never lasted long. Tolerable, for free bud.

By the end of the first year, I had developed a new appreciation for peace and quiet and a life-long distaste for the telephone.

By the end of the second year, I couldn't (as hard as I tried I could not!) connect the voices on the other end of the line with something human.

Three years and I'd lost any and all sympathy I had ever had for them. The whole lot could go to Hell. I'd gladly join Sin and Death to greet them there.

Then, midway through my fourth year in that place, there started a persistent ringing in my left ear, my telephone ear. Tinnitus, I was told.

Now I wear my headset on the right.

The Broken City is currently accepting submissions for its summer 2009 edition, *History, repeated*. We're looking for creations dealing with or inspired by the past: stories from your personal history, anecdotes from our collective history, tales of trends or fads, and narratives steeped in nostalgia.

Have you been itching to write an essay about 15th century warfare? Are you imagining a short story about video game developers at Atari? Do you have some old photos you can scan? Was an album released in 1996 that changed your life? We want to see it all. Please send your poetry, fiction, non-fiction, comics, art, photography, music/book reviews to thebrokencitymag@yahoo.com. More details at: www.geocities.com/thebrokencitymag/submissions

Nothing that fits the theme? Send something anyway—there will likely be room for non-conforming work too.

My Own Worst Enemy

Darren Bradley Jones

This morning, a river of spilt coffee ran the floor of the subway car. A discarded newspaper sat at its embankment, its edges curled and dark. I watched it move from the mouth of the paper cup, watched feet lift as it traveled, until its girth grew too thin to continue.

Now, my stomach grumbles angrily and I ignore it. I refuse to acknowledge it. Nothing about the churning emptiness of my gut causes hunger. I sip my coffee as I watch the faces of my fellow passengers, caught in their Sudoku or lusting for the eye contact of a fellow passenger, none of them speaking. Fifty people cramped into the same tight space and the only sound I hear is the clacking of the train as it moves clumsily through the tunnels, teetering like a drunk.

No one is hiring. No one is hiring me. No one wants me.

I try to shake the thoughts on a daily basis, this undeniable sense of rejection, this ridiculing feeling of self-loathing. The self-help mp3s I listen to are only keeping me in denial. In the mirror this morning, my reflection rebelled against its recent conditioning, rebelled against being told day after day that "I like myself" and instead coldly and without hesitation, announced that it hates me.

I hate you, it said, my own eyes staring back at me.

I watch the same eyes now, in the darkened window of the subway car, feeling as though I'm staring down an opponent, because I am staring down an opponent.

The train rolls to a stop, jostling along the tracks like running

a dry palm across a sheet of rubber. The pitch of the brakes would cause dogs to go deaf.

You have the power to change your own life, the voice says, speaking to me through the headphones of my mp3 player. I watch the faces of passengers as they clamber onto the car, packing us all in tighter, the florescent lights exposing all our flaws: the lint on black clothes, the hickey hidden poorly by foundation, the coffee stain on a brown skirt. I watch the awkwardly flirtatious smiles and the indifferent scowls. *Anything in your life is yours if you only believe that it already belongs to you*, the voice says. *Never use the word "want." Never use the word "tomorrow." Instead say, "will," and "today."*

I will get a job today.

The words flow through my head like a lie, as though I've just told myself I can fly, or that I have a million dollars in the bank.

Whatever I say to myself, it doesn't make it so.

The voice in my ears, he's regurgitating old eastern philosophies and passing them off as new age ideas.

Passengers flood out the doors, pushing against those trying to get in, acknowledging each as though they were nothing more than a stiff breeze. I join them in tandem, holding the length of headphone wires to my pretentiously worn tie and the shirt I fumbled through ironing, my sleeves buttoned at my wrist, concealing my tattoos. *The love others feel for you will always be reflected by your love for yourself.*

I scoff aloud at this and receive a scowl from a fellow passenger who mistakenly perceives it as being at his expense. I walk towards the exit, the escalators people are too lazy to walk on, and I make my way through the narrow gray halls to the blinding lights of the streets above.

It is important to look yourself in the eye every day and tell yourself that you love yourself. As a child, your parents told you constantly that they loved you, and you believed them. It is equally important to tell yourself this, so that you'll believe it.

But what if I don't love myself? What if I'm constantly letting myself down? What if I look in the mirror each morning and see my nemesis? See the man who stands in the way of my own success?

We have people in our lives who will stand in the way of our success, and those people we can mistakenly view as allies. It is important to know the difference, and remove those who may be a harmful influence on our success, from our path.

I'm my own worst enemy.

I ascend the escalators at the corner of Yonge and Bloor, past the bustle of pedestrian traffic, the languid pace of tourists and the panicked push of professionals, my own meandering somewhere in between. The afternoon sun blinds me as I push through the glass doors and onto the street and I tip my sunglasses down over my eyes from their perch on my head, thankful for my headphones as a convenient excuse to ignore the homeless man on

the other side, collecting his toll for granting access to the outside world. My beaten runners, barely concealed by un-pressed pants and an oversized shirt with a hand-me-down tie, must just scream unemployed lay-about. The apologetic nod I muster for the homeless man is returned in kind, as though the two of us are peas from the same pod.

He doesn't even bother to ask for change as I pass through. This recession of ours has gone un-noticed by few.

As a child, one of the first words we learn is "no," from our parents, as they limit our behavior and our actions—constantly being told of the things that we're not supposed to be doing, and never told of the things we can do. This will often result in our feeling that so much in life is out of our reach, but this is untrue. Our parents were under the false impression that they were protecting us, but the only thing they were protecting us from was success, conditioning us to the idea that so many of our desires are out of reach.

I wander south on Yonge Street, tempted by the second hand book stores and record shops, the fell-off-the-back-of-a-truck discount clothing stores and, of course, the strip clubs, where I might be able to rub enough coin together to have a beer and a lap dance if I'm willing to sacrifice subway fare and walk the seven subway stops home.

But the one thing they may have inadvertently taught us is that success is accompanied by sacrifice, and sacrifice will often result in a greater reward. Not eating crackers before dinner will result in cookies after dinner.

I walk south on Yonge with

my hands deep in my pockets, occasionally picking lint from my pants in a vain attempt to appear presentable, watching the street signs for the corner I'm supposed to turn onto—a small side street I've never heard of.

All of our desires are at our fingertips, if only we're willing to reach out and take them.

I find it—St. Joseph Street. I leave the cluttered, independently owned shops of Yonge Street behind and find myself feeling further out of place amidst tall green trees that cast a delicate shade over recently-built town houses. At the end of the street is a short office tower, the address displayed in heavy chrome lettering over red brick. I push my way through the glass doors with a sigh, adjusting my clothes, straightening my tie, and wishing that I had anything other than my high-school backpack slung over my shoulder, still decorated with punk rock patches that are sewn to its surface.

I anticipate laughter and being shown the door before the interview even starts.

It is important to remember that the world will always see us the way we see ourselves.

Shut up.

People who speak in negative tones will be spoken to in negative tones.

I ride the elevator to the floor indicated on the sheet of paper I have folded in my pocket, noting that there is no room number. When the door opens, there's a desk that curves around the girl behind it in the shape of a half moon, painted a soft purple to match the walls behind her where the company name is displayed in tall, proud letters. I stand

a few feet from the desk and pull my resume from my backpack, trading it for the mp3 player, and I push the bag closer to the chairs behind me, hoping it won't be identified as mine, hoping it would be seen as some other hopeless loser's disheveled backpack. Even standing there, I can still hear the voice of my self-help guru prattling on in my ear.

Confidence is everything. A strong presence holds more weight than an impressive resume.

"Um... hi," I say, stepping closer to the desk. The receptionist, this girl, her hair falls over her soft and flawless cheeks with perfect symmetry, blond highlights in her brunette strands leading my eyes down to her polite cleavage where each side of her buttoned jacket meets to draw my gaze. At most she's two years younger than me, and I feel close to her, as though she may be more like me than her surroundings imply, and may have a tattered backpack covered in punk rock patches buried beneath her desk, and I catch myself wanting to ask her how she managed to find a decent job, even though the look on her face states that it's anything but decent. She presses a finger to her earpiece, looking at the computer screen and speaking into her mouthpiece while holding a finger aloft to let me know it's not my turn to speak yet. Her heavy lips part, deep red, revealing perfect rows of snow-blind teeth. Behind carefully applied mascara, her eyes glow like the green of a sunlit lawn. Her demeanor, however, implies only misery, contrasting her beauty.

She clicks a button on the phone, looking up at me, her patience as absent as her smile. "Help

you?" she asks, cocking her head aggressively to one side as though this was the fourth time she'd posed the question. Her eyes widen the longer I take to answer.

We trade energies with those around us. We're all part of the same universe—all the same molecules bouncing around—and we're directly affected by the energies of others. It is hard to stay positive in the company of negative people. Surrounding yourself with positive attitudes will, in turn, make you a more positive person.

"Uh... yeah... I have an interview? With David Peterson at...?"

"Resume," she says, holding out her hand, retrieving it like a late-paid debt. She scans it quickly, clicking her tongue. I can almost feel the floor trembling beneath her leg that bounces on the ball of its foot. "Down the hall on the left," she says, not meeting my eyes. "You'll see his name on the door. I'll let him know you're coming." She hands me back my resume and I search for eye contact. Still, she doesn't smile, and I realize I want nothing more than to see it.

If you smile at a beautiful girl, she will smile back.

I call bullshit. No one's smiling at me.

"Thanks," I say. "Wish me luck." And she says nothing.

I sigh and shake my head, feeling bitter and alone.

"Good luck," she says, and the words come to her lips with an inflection more suited to a question than a blessing. Her shoulders rise to a shrug and her lips curl into an almost reluctant smile.

Beneath the layers of make-up I have my suspicions she may even be blushing a little, thankful for

sincere human interaction.

I catch myself; I feel the warmth and confidence of her reluctant sincerity.

We trade energies with those around us.

Yeah. You said that already.

I take a step back towards her desk. "If you're going to smile, don't do it half assed," I say, feeling my shoulders rise with more confidence than I have any rights to. "Smile like you mean it. Give me a thumbs up, even."

She laughs gently and her chin drops to her chest. When she lifts her head back up, her thumb is raised. Her smile displays her entire mouth satirically, but it still feels sincere; the manner in which she humours me is meant to amuse, not condescend.

I take comfort in this, and try to keep my smile from conveying the goofiness I'm feeling. I wave politely and start my walk down the hall towards the office of my would-be future employer.

The interview was short enough that the gum I chewed still had its flavour when I left his office. It took less time than that for Mr. David Peterson to confirm that not only did I have no experience, but I wasn't interested in getting any, and had little desire to learn. I couldn't keep my mouth shut while I chewed my gum, sacrificing grace for fresh breath, and no matter what I tried, I couldn't manage to keep my hands off of my tie. Every question asked, I answered in a cliché that he saw through. My biggest weakness is that I'm a perfectionist, as is my greatest strength, and so on. I was mid sentence, explaining how I feel that on the job training is more essential

than an education, when he stood and met my eyes for the first time, shook my hand, and told me he'd be in touch.

I thank him for his time. His hair reminds me of the clip-on hair worn by Lego men.

Jackass.

I close the door to his office, shaking my head, and consider all of the time I wasted coming down here—the hour on the subway. I spent more time pressing my shirt then I did in Dave Peterson's audience.

Thomas Edison was considered to be a failure for years, but upon the invention of the light bulb said that he had not failed a thousand times in its creation, but had succeeded in discovering one-thousand ways NOT to make a light bulb. He considered none of his first thousand attempts to be a waste of time.

And I'm on my way to successfully discovering one thousand ways NOT to gain employment.

I walk the hallway feeling defeated, but maybe this doesn't have to be a waste of time. Maybe everything does happen for a reason. This isn't going to weigh me down. There are bills to be paid, food to be eaten, and beers to be drank on payday with friends.

I will find work, just not here.

I let out a heavy breath, louder than it should be in the obscene quiet of the reception area, some guy on his cell-phone wearing a suit, most likely more expensive than my rent, rising for his turn to headline after my opening slot.

"How'd it go?" she asks, presenting herself now less like a reception-bot and more like a human,

raising her brow, her interest sincere.

"Great!" I say, triumphant pride punctuating each syllable. "I'm still unemployed!"

Our lives are dictated by our attitudes towards them. There is success in every failure if you're willing to see it.

One brow raises again, her cold demeanor threatened by a smile. "And this is a good thing?"

I lean hard and deep over her desk, locking my eyes to hers. "Well, the day's not a total loss."

Never say "want," instead say, "will."

"I didn't get the job I didn't want in the first place and I get to take a beautiful girl out for drinks after she's done work."

It is important to remember that the world will always see us the

way we see ourselves.

"You think you're taking me out for drinks?" she says, her pretentious reluctance betrayed by her smile.

Confidence is everything. A strong presence holds more weight than an impressive resume.

"No. I don't think. I know that I'm taking you out for drinks."

Her momentary consideration ends with a shrug of indifference and curiosity.

She nods. "Okay. I'm done at six. But if I see a thumbs up or you try to high five me I'm going to punch you in the wiener on principle alone."

I laugh as I walk over to pick up my bag, no longer worried about the stigma it may attach to me. I nod and agree to her terms, trying not to convey too much excitement as she

offers her hand with the introduction and exchange of names.

All of our desires are at our fingertips, if only we're willing to reach out and take them.

I stroll out the door of the building, feeling good as the heat of the afternoon sun climbs out slowly from behind the cloud cover, and I draw a deep breath as I pull my sunglasses down over my eyes, replacing my ear-buds to hear the obnoxious voice of my self-help guru spinning in my ears, knowing that I don't really have the money to take a girl for drinks, but trying really hard not to care.

Not eating crackers before dinner will result in cookies after dinner.

Oh shut up.

I will find a job tomorrow.

This issue, The Broken City asked contributors to discuss their worst or best job

Mouki K. Butt: So far, the worst job that I've had involved working for a large coffee chain. Being a part-time coffee slinger was generally a good experience: my co-workers were fun people, days went by quickly, we were given the opportunity to make interesting concoctions, and we were allowed to take leftover confections home. However, problems began as I slept each night, resting for the day ahead. My slumber time was full of nightmares of work, which included never-ending lineups of angry customers, piles of drink orders with specific instructions like "half syrup," "extra hot" or "lactose free... with whipped cream," the constant crash of ice being scooped into blenders, clouds of chocolate powder in the air, and the continuous ding of the cash register. I woke up each day and went to work exhausted and hating my job.

Jeff Crouch: Best job: Working a concession stand at the Cotton Bowl in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The work was volunteer, but the benefit was music (those Texas Jams) and the crazy that goes with it.

girlfixer: If you can walk down the aisles of a small town department store and not want to hang yourself with a piece of polypropylene rope from the hardware section, you're a better person than me. Shelf after shelf, rack after rack filled with everything you need, but nothing you want. A place where the household cleaners are kept behind the counter, dispensed only to those who won't drink them. A place where you can cash your welfare cheque on a Friday night, when the banks are closed but the bars are open. A place where the incessant hum of florescent lighting is punctuated only by the sizzle of musty water dripping down onto the bare glass tubes... God help me, I lasted six months in such a place.

Darren Bradley Jones: The best and worst job I ever had was spending a day in the pouring rain with others outside the ROM, with power tools and the threats of electrocution and falling into traffic from the slippery stances of our ladders, while assembling Santa's castle and other set-design pieces for the Santa Claus Parade. I found a certain amount of masochistic joy in this: humour

in the irony of the pouring rain; the sailor-mouths of my co-workers; and the distinct lack of Christmas magic in the air, while pounding together cheap set pieces that would only look magical to small children from a distance. Following the day's work and too many beers in a local bar, we were confronted by a group of men that felt we were being loud and obnoxious. Our crew leader stood at our defense with an aggressively pointed finger, declaring that it was in their best interests not to "fuck with Santa's helpers." That made the whole day worthwhile and still makes me smile at the camaraderie of manual labour, when brothers are born of strangers after a dangerous and trying day's work.

Julie Kitzes: The worst job I've ever had was being a cashier at a major Canadian department store during Christmas. I started in November, so I didn't have a lot of time to figure everything out before the rush started. The week before Christmas, the store was in complete chaos. I recall a woman had purchased over 100 items, and as it was being charged to her credit card, my register crashed and had to be restarted. I had about 30 people in my line, and there were only three other cashiers, each with about the same amount of customers. Everyone was so upset with me, as if it were my fault, that I had walk-outs, as well as several people that actually called me vulgar names. The worst part, was that because the company wanted their business so badly, my supervisor made me take all of the insults being hurled at me with a smile and a "Happy holidays."

Christian Martius: For my first job, I had to stick my teenage hands inside the dead belly of a fish and pull its guts out, every single day. It's the only job I ever really took home with me (in the literal sense) because I regularly stank of cold-blooded aquatic vertebrates. Lemon juice was supposed to help me smell like a regular human being and not some aquamarine biped but hey, I was 16, and all my contemporaries reeked of something or other in not so mysterious ways. I also had the indignity of having to wear an ugly hairnet, which was utterly mortifying for someone who believed (at the time) that his haircut was more important than what came out of his mouth. Not a bad introduction to the world of employment, and a subsequent jaundiced view of the job market. Who invented jobs in the first place and how the hell did they catch on?

Kiran Mehdee: When I was 21, and a cash-strapped student, I worked as a telemarketer for a few weeks, and before long, I realized I hated that job. I was selling lonely old ladies cookbooks they'd never cook from. I was selling fresh, no-credit 18-year-olds credit card plans that would entrap them in debt they'd come to regret. I was selling garbage to the gullible people, and I was competing with a roomful of pimply teenagers and bright-eyed new immigrants for this honor. Ten years later, I look back and still feel a little dirty for ever having held a job like that. Now, when I get a call from telemarketers, I try to give them something to think about. I tell them something I would have liked to hear back then, instead of rude remarks and the abhorred *click* of hang-ups. I tell them I used to do what they're doing and that there are better ways to make the shitty wages they're making. I ask them if this is really what they wanted to do when they were younger. I like to think that most of them listen. After all, listening skills are very important for telemarketers.

Katrina Taliana: The best job I ever had was manifesting reality. It satisfied every tooth, sweet and sour.

Salvatore William: The best job I ever had was the time I was paid to play hockey as a teenager. I know what you're thinking, and no, it wasn't because I was any good at that game. I wasn't being scouted for the Montreal Canadiens. It was just your run of the mill, \$8.00 an hour neighbourhood job, making sure no one abused the facilities at the outdoor rink. I had to keep a lid on things in the little heated shack, keep the ice clean (sometimes by simply handing the city's shovel over to a kid) and make sure the kids didn't get into any skirmishes. As long as there was nothing out of the ordinary, I was free to either play pickup hockey or read a book in the little shack. And that's what I did, all winter long.

Christopher Woods: I was twenty-one and employed at the State Hospital in Austin; there were few jobs to be had with a major university nearby. I was a psychiatric attendant, working for peanuts. Part of my job consisted of doling out medications. To make sure patients actually took their pills, I had to open their mouths, sometimes sticking my fingers under their tongues, down their throats, and so on. As it happened, an aunt of mine was a patient there. One day, I saw her near the hospital canteen and called out to her. It had been a good ten years since she had seen me. When she finally realized who I was, she asked, "Are you here now too?"

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