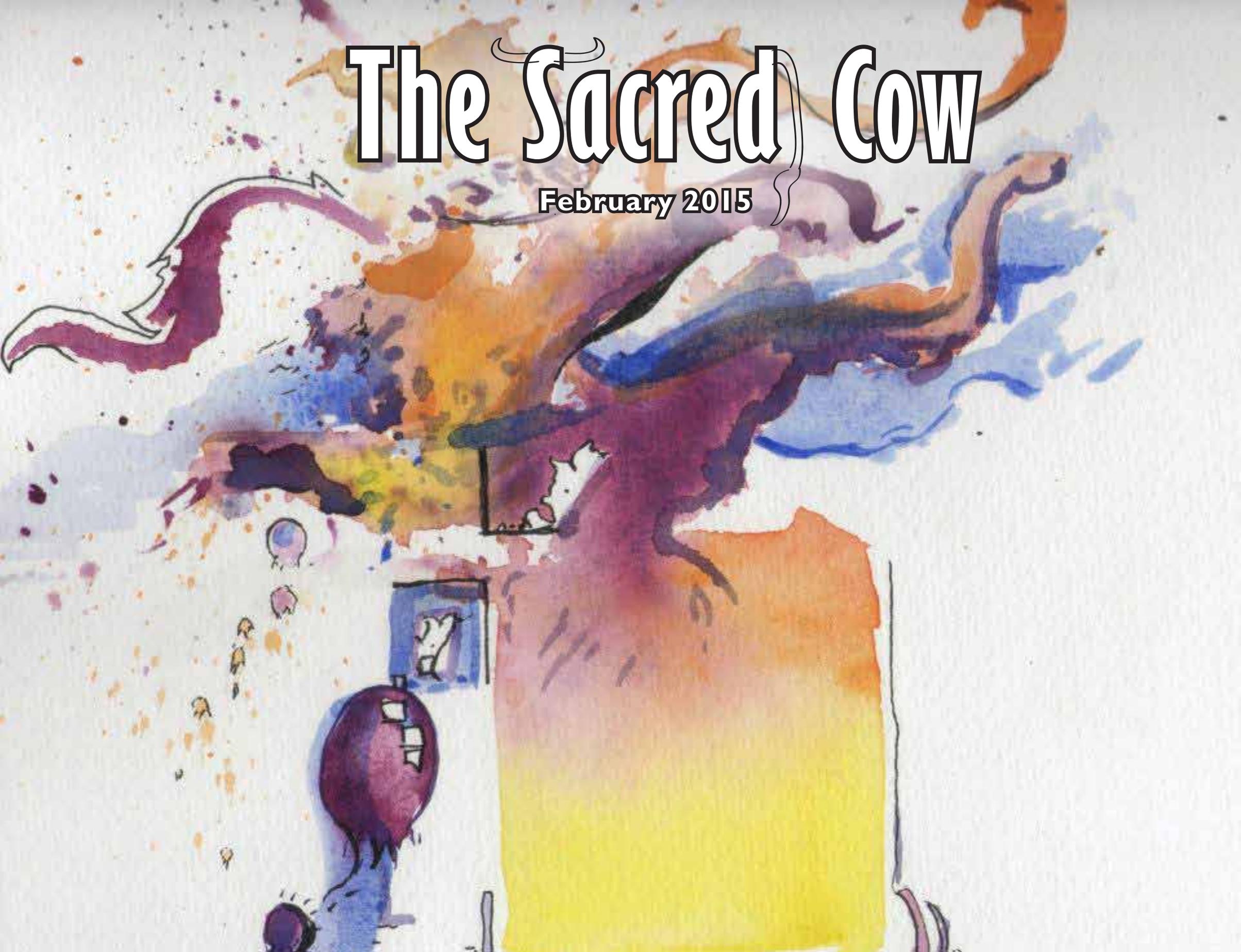


The Sacred Cow

February 2015



The Sacred Cow

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Mail

Story did not take storms seriously enough

Dear Cow,
I was very disappointed when I read the story about the tornado (“Tornado! Or, a Boy Gets His Chance” by Hans Shenk, Sept. 2014). Utterly absent was any serious discussion of safety in dangerous weather events; rather the author seemed to think it was appropriate to use a major, tragic and terrifying event like a tornado merely for entertainment value. Also, despite the protagonist’s reckless behavior and unsafe response, he got away largely unscathed and in fact was celebrated. Tornadoes tragically take the lives of many people every year, I can only hope for your sake that your reckless publication of this piece did not mislead your readers, and hope you will take the opportunity to educate your readers in this issue about the importance of following recommended procedures during a severe weather event.

Sincerely,

Thelma Collins
Topeka, Kansas

Have a little human decency

Dear sirs:
I strenuously object to your columnist’s unauthorized and careless use of the word “Xerox” in your most recent issue (Matt Swartz, “The Window That Looks Back,” Sept. 2014). This kind of reckless theft of the name dilutes the trademark and you and your columnist are thus guilty of genericide. You should, of course, use the generic verb, “photocopy” when discussing this kind of action. Xerox works very hard to maintain its brand and its efforts are damaged by thoughtless publishers such as yourselves.

John Thompson
Norwalk, Connecticut

*Mr. Thompson,
We googled the issue of brand dilution and discovered that you are correct. We will not be content with a simple band-aid fix but will take this issue very seriously in the future.*

Send us mail at tscmagazine@gmail.com, or find us on Facebook.

Editorial

Literature is not like fine wine

Literary magazines are not very popular these days.

That might seem like bad marketing in the pages of a literary magazine; it doesn’t reflect the sort of positive self-promotion a PR firm might recommend. That’s because we are a literary magazine and don’t make enough money to hire a PR firm that could stop us from talking about this.

There’s a tension, not just in literature but in other art like movies and music, between “pop” creations and highbrow art. On the one hand there are the action movies, the thriller novels, and the shallow songs with a contagious beat. On the other hand there are what are often called “indie” movies, books and films that have small, devoted and almost always insufferably snobby audiences.

On the one hand, fans of pop art seem to feel that if they don’t get an adrenaline rush, a shot of pure entertainment, it’s not worth their while. And art snobs seem to feel that if bands or writers make it big, their art must not be very good. Otherwise, why would so many dumb ordinary people appreciate it? This may be one reason why, if an indie band becomes successful, it is invariably accused of “selling out,” and its fans go find another band with an exclusive group of fans who are the only ones who “get it.”

On the literature side, it sometimes seems that the most praised works of writing are those that are dense, difficult to understand, and have almost zilch entertainment value. The characters are unlikable, their adventures are uninteresting, and the genius of the piece is bound up in the “lens” through which it views the

world; the artists and their uniqueness then become the focus. This is not objectionable to the artist, of course, but it can be very boring for everyone else.

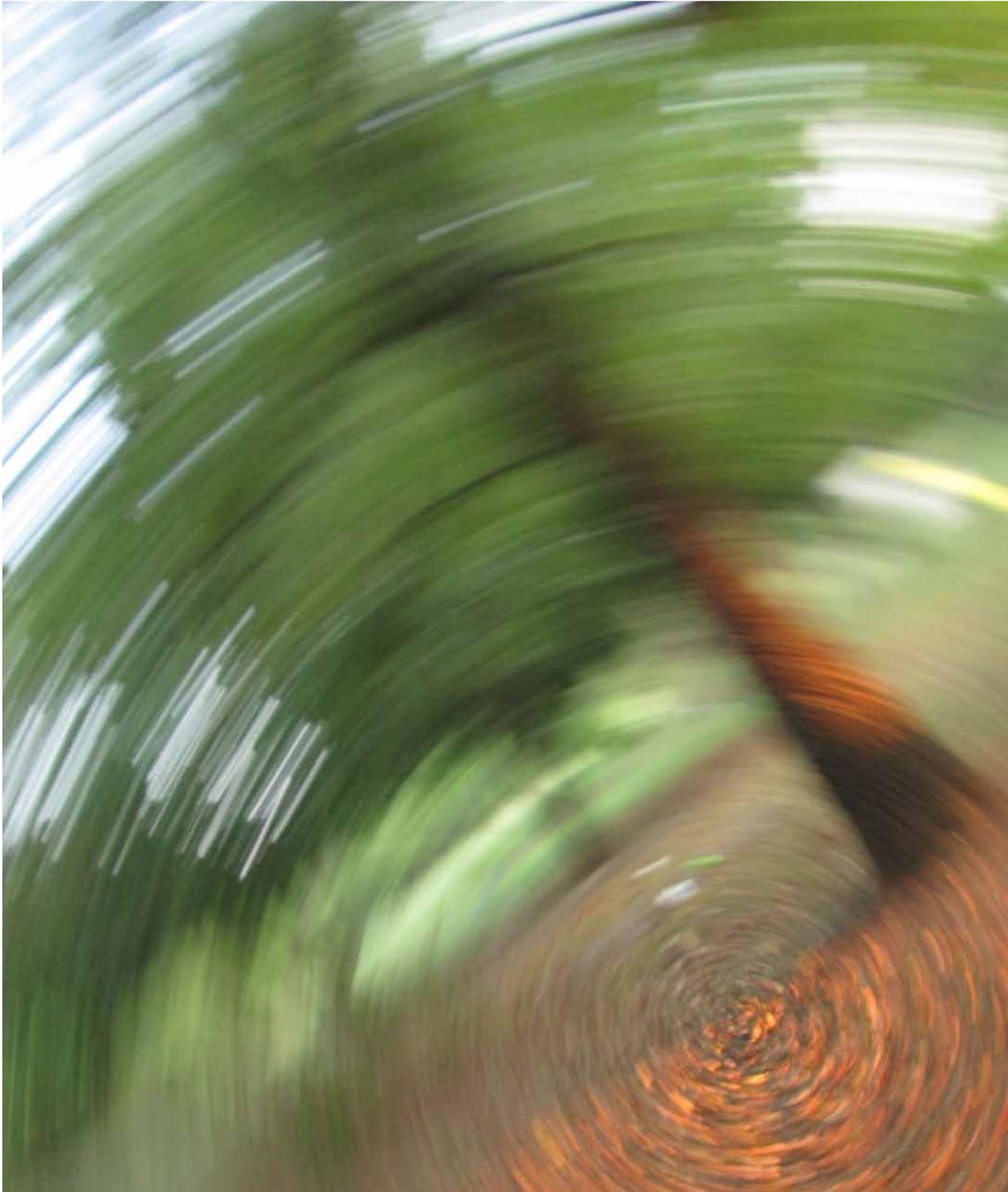
It seems that artists have lost their way. On the one hand, we have immensely talented people creating works that are technically very skillful, but not really that appealing or interesting (think John Updike). If a piece flops, it’s convenient, and less painful for the artist to blame the audience. Those poor plebes — I’m just too good for them to appreciate.

And on the other hand we have works that are thrilling and catchy, but not skillfully done (a good half of everything you’ll find in a bookstore, by a generous estimate).

We’re all used to the movie critics who slam films that don’t meet their high standards but inexplicably draw huge crowds. Maybe these critics would get more respect if they also tore apart works that are technically well done, full of artistic genius and soul, but virtually unwatchable.

Great art does not have to be popular, of course. There are many reasons for a creative work to never become famous — the editor wouldn’t publish it, the agent didn’t think any radio stations would be interested, the artist kept it in her attic and never tried to get it published, and so on. But some art deserves to be unpopular.

The artist’s goal should be a creation that is skillfully done, interesting, enjoyable, and meaningful. If the Sacred Cow and other literary magazines publish such pieces, we might be able to stop moaning about how nobody likes good literature anymore. 



The Walkers

By *BEN HERR*

I crouch between two holly bushes, breathing heavily. My hiding spot is nestled between two houses within the sprawling development I've spent this wild night in. I may not be in the best hiding place, but at least I can clearly see the only two ways to get to it. The coast is clear on both, yet I can't escape the feeling of being watched. But it's probably just paranoia. As much as the movies love the jump scares and surprises, they never capture the feeling that every bush, corner, tree, building, or garbage can hides a nemesis. At least, not to the level you actually feel it when you find yourself dead center in the first known, real life zombie outbreak.

I hear the dreaded music again, and I hit the deck, scooting as close to the wall as I can. I can picture what is coming perfectly, for I've seen it at least a dozen times tonight. Yet I feel the need to get another look, that somehow, this is also the first time. I crawl along the wall to the house's front corner and crouch behind another decorative holly, peering around the corner to get a better view.

The well-paved, marking-free road is empty, but not for long. As the tinkling music box tune becomes more audible, he rides around the corner. It's one of what I call pipers. The zombie pedals a rickety bike around the community, ever so slowly, and ever so unsteadily, an old music box playing a repetitive,

Next page

The Walkers continued

erie tune from the basket in front. The music is accompanied by a mild chorus of growling from the ever growing crowd of walkers not far behind. The music seems to draw them together; avoid the pipers and you can avoid the zombies, I've learned. But I notice a hobbling figure come out of the darkness on the far side of the street to join the crowd. My heart pounds as I twirl around, having forgotten to check behind me. There are still more out there who haven't yet joined to packs.

I think about how I got stuck in this disaster. I suppose it's no different than Little Red Riding Hood. A simple trip to Grandma's house landed me in great peril. And now I've been running around for hours, lost and disoriented in the development, unable to find a way out, and turned back by a piper whenever I get close. Perhaps this is why I can't shake the feeling of being watched.

With the pack almost even with my hiding spot, I realize it's time to get out of there. I scurry to the back of the house and scan the terrain. A joint system of back yards, with the next row of houses about 50 yards away. An old shed stands about halfway through the open space. I'll make it there first.

I take a few more breaths, then dart to the back of the shed. My head goes on a swivel, looking to see if I drew any attention, but the night remains still. I creep to the front of the shed, ready to run to the next row of houses. I take a few breaths, trying to keep my breathing quiet and under control, when the shed door flies open, slamming into my forehead, and a growling zombie stumbles out.

"Why was there a zombie hiding in a tool shed?" I wonder, losing precious moments as the creature closes the few paces separating us. I frantically backpedal to stay out of reach, creating enough space to turn and run. Yet as I turn, my feet tangle and I start to fall. My head turns forward just in time to grab onto the tire swing directly in front of me. I hold on as

I swing forward, then start to spin as gravity pulls me back. I'm heading straight for the zombie. Fortunately, the swing rotates my legs forward, and I'm able deliver a strong kick to the thing's chest, knocking it down. I let go and drop to the ground.

For the first time, my thought is not to flee, but to fight. Though I have nothing to fight with apart from the tire I regain control of as I stand up. The zombie is coming back. With no other option, I push the tire over its head and down around its arms, forming more or less of a straight jacket. Then with a strong shove, its feet leave the ground and it starts swinging back and forth. I give it a strong kick to add a spin to the zombie pendulum. Inspired by the weak growl that escapes its lips at the peak of each swing, I take mental note to patent an idea for an undead grandfather clock.

I'm not sure what to do with the zombie now. This is the first one I've encountered and dealt with, instead of simply running away. I haven't yet considered the ethics of killing a zombie. I don't even know what's making them zombies. Virus? Supernatural miscue? I think of the pipers. Hypnosis? I understand nothing of the situation, nor can I formulate any guesses that make logical sense. The whole situation reeks of an elaborate explanation that will never be made clear.

I figure the zombie won't be going anywhere soon, especially if zombies are still affected by inner ear function, so I decide to check to the shed for anything useful and leave poor creature in its swinging prison. I am surprised to find a well stocked tool shed. Rakes, hoes, shovels, sledgehammer, pickax, screw drivers, crow bars, hedge clippers, machete, rope, weedwhacker, and chain saw. My hand hovers ironically over the chain saw for a few moments of consideration, before I pass over it and choose the pickax.

After dashing away from the shed and the immobilized zombie, I find a dark corner to hide in. I spend some time trying to retrace my steps, trying to regain a sense of direction, but I am irreversibly lost and confused. The roads loop around too much and end in too many dead ends to make any sense of where I have gone. What was a large housing development

before now seems like an endless jungle of identical buildings, with legions of chiming pipers patrolling the paths. There is but one option: Keep going. I look around once again, searching for the invisible pair of eyes that I keep sensing, but see nothing.

Pickax over my shoulder, I move forward, now more deliberately, trying to track where I was going and where I had come from. For the next 10 minutes there was neither sign of life nor unlife. I follow roads, cut through properties, and double back when I suspect I'm going in circles. But I still feel no closer to finding my way out by the time I see another piper.

This time, I see them even before I hear them. A massive pack is scattered along the road in front of me, walking from my left to my right. The piper is already so far past, he disappears from view shortly after becoming visible to me. I think through my options to go back, but it is a long way. I would try to wait it out and let them pass before I keep going.

I drop to the ground and crawl the remaining 30 feet from my vantage point in a cluster of trees to the nearest house, ending behind the glass-enclosed back porch. I then follow it to the back corner where I can watch what is happening without risking much visibility. From my spot, I watch them file past like an unending row of stumbling ants. Again, I wonder, what were they? Was there anything human left? Were they animal, lower than animal, or still almost human?

A twig snaps behind me, throwing my heart into a frenzy. Involuntarily, I spring up and spin around. I am frightened by one thing, and terrified by another. I am frightened by a lone zombie hobbling toward me, no more than 20 feet away. I am terrified, however, by the sound of shattering glass. The pickax is still over my shoulder when I spin.

Surprisingly, the lone zombie stops in its tracks. Startled? Scared? Or just distracted? I am frozen, still tense, still kicking myself for blowing my cover. I sneak a glance over my shoulder. The parade has stopped following the music box and has turned off of the road and toward the houses, approaching in a wide, sweeping wall. Going forward, or even sideways, is no longer an option; I have to, once again, turn back.

But the lone zombie still stands in my way. I would do my best to make quick work of it, but we seem mutually frozen. It stands there, staring at me, looking almost uncertain, and I stand still because I don't understand why. I look into its vacant eyes and see nothing flicker, no gleam of humanity as I had hoped. A few moments later it again starts forward, coming for me with a growl. I lift the ax and give it a broadsided blow, knocking it off balance enough to run by.

It doesn't take long before I have once again put good distance between myself and the zombies. I no longer have a plan for where I am going. I no longer feel I can do anything but aimlessly wander. I can only think about what is really going on, and about that lone zombie. It looked completely unlike a human, yet did not look completely brainless and dead. It looked somewhere slightly in between, or at least, like it was battling to become so. What was it?

For that matter, what am I? How do I know I am fully human? I think of the events of the evening. They seem far from sane. I look at the pickax in my hand. I have ended up with

far from the most practical weapon from the tool shed. Had I made the selection because it seemed awesome, or was there some unknown factor in the decision? I think of how I was seemingly blocked at every turn in my attempt to escape from a place that makes a corn maze seem like Alcatraz. Either I am the unluckiest of unlucky survivors, or I am doing, thinking, or perceiving something wrong. So something, perhaps, is working to keep me in.

What did the movie characters do? When things went wrong, they always found a way or a reason to keep going. But this brings another thought to mind. In the movies, they often have the same pop culture knowledge of zombies as the real world. They reference the knowledge of zombies, but act as though they are seeing them for the first time. It seems scripted to us, the viewer, but seems real to them.

I think again to unshakable feeling that someone or something is watching me. I realize it's not just the fear that zombies are near that I just don't see. It's something bigger. The puzzle pieces fall together. Am I just a character being written, or more likely filmed, into existence? 

Contribute to The Sacred Cow

We welcome contributions. Email short stories, poems, or essays to tscmagazine@gmail.com for consideration. If you must choose between making your story interesting or artistic, go with interesting.

Artists who want to do illustration work or editorial cartoons are welcome to submit proposals. We will also consider standalone artwork and photography.

Waiting

By SARAH STOLTZFUS ALLEN

I can't help but feel sorry for the poor saps who do nothing but sit and wait. Waiting doesn't come natural to me. But waiting, it's what I do. Waiting for Mama to come back home. Waiting for her to get sick. Waiting for her to get better. Waiting for her to leave. Waiting for her to die. I finally got tired of waiting and put a little too much of her crushed up pills in her bottle of Johnny Walker (or whatever her flavor of the day happened to be that morning) and waited one last time.

"Where's your treasure, young lady?" Those were the last words I would ever hear slur out of her mouth.

"I'm not a lady, Mama. Never been one." I looked one last time at her thin body as it laid there in them dirty sheets. Once her eyes closed and her chest stopped moving, I headed for the train station.

Done waiting. 

After the Worms Destroy the Skin

By **ANDREW SHARP**

Richard Magee had sometimes wondered what it was like to die. But when he actually did, during what he had thought was going to be the middle of his life, his mind was too clouded to analyze and understand it. Does anyone know the moment he falls asleep?

They're going to be celebrating the Fourth of July, and I'll be gone, Richard thought as he lay in the hospital two days before he died. Thinking was about all he could still do. Without the ability to act on his thoughts, he felt increasingly as if he were living in an imaginary world, his bed a tether that kept him from roaming as far as he wanted to.

Yesterday, he had been worried about paying the gas bill, whether he could talk his wife out of a European vacation, whether he'd get caught for fudging his time sheets at work, and whether the Phillies' pitching was really this bad.

He'd been looking forward to watching the fireworks this weekend.

Now he was watching the ceiling in the hospital, and it seemed likely the fireworks would go off after his grand finale. This was not a morbid gut instinct. He had heard the doctor tell his family the end would be soon. That was a relief. He wouldn't want to linger on for years asking for more pain medication with eye blinks. They kept asking him if he understood, and he blinked at them, and then they still talked as if he wasn't in the room. Why don't you ask me if I feel horrible and want to die? he thought. I'll blink yes for that.

And where would he be, while everyone watched the fireworks? He used to think that life must go on in some way after death. He had been raised believ-

ing in God, and had taken comfort in the chance that, assuming he got a passing grade after his expiration date, he had more future than as a skeleton in a coffin.

But that hope had gone down with the loss of all hands years ago. He saw the random disaster that destroyed innocent children and saintly grandparents alike, while criminals enjoyed wealth and happiness. He learned how hurtling space rocks changed the futures of entire planets with chance impacts. He grew to accept the hard scientific understanding that consciousness is just a complex organic computer program. Religion, he realized against his will, was a masquerade. It was useful in that it gave color to the lives of ordinary humans, a structure to order their short lives around, but it was not a truth that provided real hope. Despite all the prayers, struggles, and faith, the pious were just nasty ordinary people underneath. There were no miracles.

He remembered the day he finally knew, against his will, deep down to his very core, that when he prayed, no heavenly being heard it. That his father was not "safe in the arms of Jesus" but very literally becoming a worm, or rather a worm's feces, his atoms redistributed to the eager benefit of the life that was still lucky enough to be squirming.

The doctor was right. Richard's last day did not procrastinate. He recognized it when it came, and knew the light streaming in through the cracks in the curtains was his last sunrise, which he had missed because he was flat on his back. He watched the light crawl up the opposite wall, and he breathed disinfectant fumes instead of the foggy morning air that was a few feet away

on the other side of the drywall and brick.

Death stripped away sentimentality like a nest of beetles. For the victim, anyway. His wife and two of his children were gathered in the room, ready to send him out with tears and ceremony.

He wished they would just go to work like usual. They would die too; why make such a fuss about his passing and waste the time they had left? This sentiment was too complicated to blink, so he let it be.

It became hard to form thoughts. He knew his wife was holding his hand. His chest hurt, even through the drugs. There was a baseball game. A bowl of oatmeal. A commotion on a highway with yellow stripes, and he was tripping on something. Wings flapping. He was falling. A weight pushed down on his chest and he tried to grab it and push it off. He worked to remember something important. Then he felt as if he were in tiny pieces, specks spread far, spread everywhere, a great horrifying gap, too much distance, too much space. Everything was a mist that was rushing inward, growing tighter and more solid. His perception was not a thought, but a restless knowing, like a dream during sickness.

Something is pushing all over my body, he thought. The weight. Then he knew what he had been trying to remember. I'm dying. I don't want to die.

He fought to breathe and tried to thrash his arms. No one came to help. Suddenly the weight gave way and he sat up, gasping in breaths of air. He was up to his waist in black, leafy dirt in a patch of ferns. A mosquito whined at his ear and bit his neck. He crushed it.

He brushed a long tendril of moss out of his face and looked around.

"Christ!" he said. 

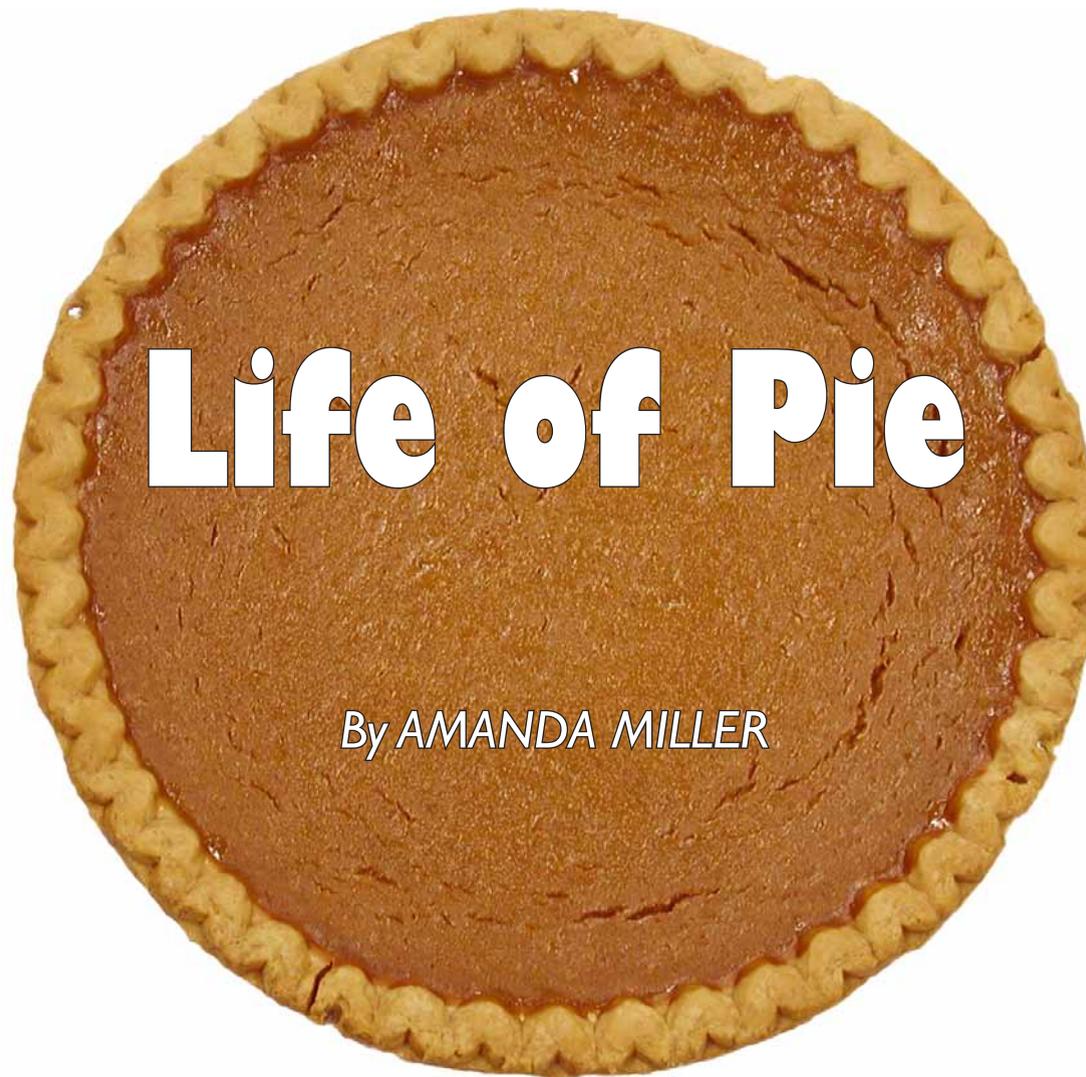
Chocolate, pecan, cherry, pumpkin. Nut, cream, fruit, custard. It can be topped with fluffy meringue, whipped cream, buttery crumble, or a dollop of ice cream, but no matter how it is served, it's pie. And everyone loves pie.

Multifaceted and many-splendored, pies come in a plethora of types and tastes. Billowy egg whites piled onto a rich lemon curd are just as much a pie as peanut butter crumbs sprinkled above and below layers of cool whip and vanilla pudding; quintessential latticed apple is in the same recipe categorization with unusual bourbon chocolate peanut.

In spite of the limitless possibilities for variation in the filling and topping of this dessert, pies do not come in all shapes and sizes. They are round, and typically within an inch or two of diameter. No one makes tiny square pies, you know.

The other common denominator comprises the actual foundation of the pie — the crust. There is only one style of true pie crust, the traditional pastry dough. It's the shell within which the rest of the pie is allowed to come into being; that flaky underlying layer is the component tying this dessert category together. Whether it is blind-baked or baked filled, single or double, the crust makes the pie. A pie is literally not a pie without it.

This is where it gets tricky. Although it's hard to find someone who doesn't want to eat pie, those who make them are a bit fewer and farther between. In fact, the mention of entirely homemade pie with crust is often enough to trigger waves of admiration and/or tremors of fear in any baker, nascent or experienced. That standard pie crust is essential and



inescapable, an arch-nemesis and a bragging point of home cooks.

I sometimes wonder if the aura of holy trepidation is actually based on reality or more in the socially accepted and perpetuated reputation of elusive perfection. I'm usually too busy happily and harriedly trying to keep the dough chilled and the flour dust contained to ponder on it for long.

I'm so happy muscling my wooden rolling pin over the stiff disc of fresh pastry because I love making pies — maybe

even especially the crust. No one else I know likes to make pie crusts; most rarely if ever even attempt it (although maybe I just need to get out more). In contrast, frequently I hear a note of disdain or perhaps bitterness in reference to that one downer in pie-baking. Really, just buy frozen premade crust.

Why am I such an anomaly in the realm of pie-making? It's one thing to always make your own pie crust, but to even love it ...

The secret lies not in my achieving an

unfailingly flaky, light pie shell every time, because half the time they're uncomfortably overbaked, tough, or soggy. It's not that I can't wait to sink my teeth into fresh, all-butter pastry, because I awkwardly prefer to eat the filling by itself. It's not even in some driving hubris to be The Mennonite Domestic, because that's only part of it. It's in the source of my first learning how to make pie crust.

My grandma is the one who first walked me through elevating a few basic ingredients into the base of that dessert we all know and love. Even those years ago, her wrinkled hands were not quite dexterous enough and her aged wrists not quite strong enough to roll out the pastry dough into submission, but she pulled her chair up close to our kitchen worktable and talked me through each step.

Grandma's years of experience negated her needing a recipe to guide her dictation of ingredients I should dump into the bowl. It isn't meticulous measurements of flour and fat that makes the shell, after all; it's working with the dough and making the dough work for you. Enough flour, a clump or two of shortening, some cold water (but not too much). She watched me mix, she fingered the crumbs, she helped me adjust it to just right.

As always when I do anything in the kitchen, during this whole process, I made a mess. Flour poofed out as I mixed and patted, ice water sloshed onto the table, sticky flakes of dough sprung off my fingers. My impeccably neat grandmother, tidy to a fault, said nothing as I trashed her standard of housekeeping. Flipping the pastry disc over to continue the rolling process, releasing more white

SOUL TRAIN

By **ANDREW SHARP**

“I don’t believe in teletransport,” Marcus Byrd said, leaning forward over the table and speaking quietly. A coffee grinder cut into the silence that followed his statement, and the bell over the coffee shop’s door jangled as another customer walked in.

Randy Allan was not the kind of man who allowed himself to show undue surprise. A less controlled person might have jumped up and knocked the chair backward, or pounded the table, or let his jaw hang open. Randy just drummed his fingers on the table and frowned. But he couldn’t keep all the agitation out of his voice.

“Besides the fact that you own a giant share of Teletransport Inc., how can you not believe in teletransport? It happens. It’s foolproof. It’s how we travel. It’s how we got downtown today.”

“It’s not how I got here,” Marcus said.

“How did you get here?”

“I drove.”

“Expensive. Bad for the environment. Why?”

“Can you transport a soul?” Marcus asked.

“What are you talking about?” Randy said, frowning.

“You can transport a copy of me, but is it me?”

“Listen here,” Randy said. “You’re half owner, and I’m on the board. We’re supposed to be talking marketing strategy. We’ve already invested 500 billion dollars in this company and in the infrastructure all over the

Pie continued

breaths of flour? But no reprimand.

Her wooden rolling pin in my still-practicing hands creaked back and forth, a semi-round shape materializing beneath it. Soon it was big enough for me to carefully fold in half over itself, gingerly place into the awaiting pie plate, reopen to full size, and gently press down. We breathed a collective sigh of relief at successful transfer.

Grandma instructed me to use a butter knife to trim the edges of limp dough hanging lazily over the walls of the pie pan, and to treasure-trove the scraps for baking with cinnamon sugar later. Her fingertips knew exactly what they were doing in ridging the perimeter of the crust, so my thumb and forefingers copied hers as closely as possible as we worked our way around the shell, leaving mismatching teamworked pinches in our wake.

And then we were done. Leaning back, together we smiled our celebration at completion. Sure, flour dusted the front of my shirt, dishes cluttered the table, and dough stuck in my fingernails, but that was all peripheral.

I just learned to make pie crust. Best skill ever.

I don’t even remember what we filled that glorified specimen of a pie shell with that day, but it doesn’t even matter. I’ve modified my method and ingredients since then, always using homemade butter and a pinch of this and that, but it doesn’t matter either.

What matters is that every time I messily cut in that cold butter or capably pinch my way around those pastry edges or cautiously lay those lattice strips over the filling, I remember Grandma. It was just one morning, one baking project together, but it will stick with me for the rest of my life.

Everyone loves pie. But I love pie crust.



Bookshop

By **JASON ROPP**

As I man my post —
Espresso bar in bookshop,
An old fellow with
Matching blue windbreaker
And Gilligan hat strolls
Hands gently behind back,
Admiring books, furniture,
And ventilation system.
Wide eyed in old age
As a child.

Soul Train continued

country. It is a very, very bad time for you to suddenly be expressing doubts. What are you doing, turning into one of these fundamentalist religious people who believes that the teletransport machines are evil?”

“Maybe they have a point.”

“LISTEN,” Randy said. The baristas glanced over at them. “It’s been demonstrated over and over. You know that. You step through, you leave point A, you get to point B with all your memories, your body, exactly the same down to the atom. This is not a marketing ploy. We’re not pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The demonstration tours settled everyone’s doubts except for fringe conspiracy theorists and religious wackos.”

“Maybe I’m a fringe conspiracy theorist then,” Marcus said. “There are all kinds of serious implications that people like you, people who should be thinking about them, are ignoring.”

“Like what, exactly?”

“In the micro-moment between deconstruction and reconstruction of your atomic configuration, are you dead?” Terrance asked.

Randy shrugged. “I’m practical. If I get from point A to B, what does it matter? If I can come back from death, who cares? I feel like me.”

“Maybe you can’t come back from death. Maybe you’re just gone.”

“Listen, it’s just like they say — like we say,” Randy corrected himself. “Your ‘soul’ is all your memories and thought patterns. Your desires, your fears, that’s you. It doesn’t matter which atoms you’re using. That’s the whole point. I’ll switch atoms all day long, I don’t care. You’re doing it even if you never go near the machine. Your body is always replacing those cells. Are you the same you 10 years from now when your body has replaced half your cells?”

“Listen,” Marcus said, “I have a very good reason to doubt. Only a couple of people know this, but I was the first one through.”

“So?” Randy said. “I thought it was Walter Franklin,

but OK, he got scared and made you go first. Inventor can make the assistant go first if he wants. So what?”

“We started the testing with rats.”

“I know that.”

“A bunch of them just disappeared. Early on.”

“Maybe in some other dimension somewhere huh?”

Randy said.

“That’s not how it works, you know that. Their atoms shredded apart and never reassembled. They’re dead.”

“But you fixed it.”

“Did we? It still shreds atoms the same. You’re just as dead as those rats when you walk through.”

“But unlike them, Marcus, I come back. I don’t care, I’m back.”

“The one time, it malfunctioned with a human.”

Randy was quiet for a few moments. “I didn’t know about that. Killed?”

“Copied.”

“What?” Randy clutched the table edge with both hands. “Are you kidding me? And you never told anyone?”

Marcus was breathing faster now. “That machine was flawless, and I knew it,” he said. “I stepped into that machine in a New York lab, and I stepped out in Tokyo microseconds later. But — when I stepped into the booth in New York, nothing happened. Or so they tell me.”

Randy didn’t say anything, so Marcus went on. “It was only fair that as the inventor, I take the terrible risk of being the first person. When I stepped into the machine in New York, I must have thought that it hadn’t worked. But I don’t know. Because that’s when ‘I’ became ‘we.’ In Tokyo, I was celebrating like crazy, handshakes all around with the lab assistants. But then we got a call from New York asking what went wrong. Imagine arguing with yourself on the phone.”

Randy didn’t say anything.

“So which one of us is the real Walter Franklin?” Marcus asked.

“If I believe you — not saying I do, but just for the sake of argument,” Randy finally said, “logically, he’s the real guy, right? He kept all his atoms. Nothing shredded. I mean, that would make you, you’re a ...” He couldn’t finish.

“A copy? But his — our company is claiming there’s no question it’s the real you when you step out. Won’t even acknowledge any alternative. You were very eloquent about it a few minutes ago. ‘Your soul is all your memories’ and all that.”

Randy was silent again, drumming his fingers on the table.

“He’s sleeping with my wife!” Marcus said, violently. “I courted that woman. I remember our first kiss. I told her my wedding vows. I remember. I miss her and the kids so badly!” He started to cry.

Randy stopped drumming his fingers and stuck his hand awkwardly in his pocket, and looked around the coffee shop. A man reading the Seattle Times a couple tables over was watching them. Randy flushed.

After Marcus got control of himself, he went on. “She doesn’t want anything to do with me. He convinced her he’s the real deal. She was really upset but she agreed with you and said I was just a copy —” Randy flinched “— and she never wanted anything to do with me. And of course the kids couldn’t see me. I understand that of course, that they couldn’t see both of us.”

“You have leverage,” Randy said. “Hell, you probably had his passport and driver’s license. And you look just like him. You could have ruined him.”

“Why do you think I own half the company?” Marcus asked. “In exchange, of course, for plastic surgery, assuming a new identity, and keeping my conscience pangs to myself.”

“Well ...” Randy said slowly. “I mean, why not embrace it? You’ve got a good life. Say you’re a copy, is that so ...” he trailed off. Marcus looked like he had been eating bad fish. “Yes, I see what you mean,” Randy finished lamely.

They sat staring at the table.

“Marcus ... or Walter ...”

“Marcus is fine,” Marcus said.

“Marcus, what exactly do you expect me to do about this? Besides the investment, we’ve got millions of people who have gone through this thing. If you shatter their confidence and they all get some kind of identity crisis, we are finished. Ruined. You, me, and Walter in Europe. And your ... kids.”

The Man I Wanted to See Hung

By MARK TWAIN

“I guess I just wanted to tell someone,” Marcus said. “I’m sorry. But ... I couldn’t go on like this, watching people incinerate themselves. I don’t know what we can do. I guess, if you’re OK with it, if it doesn’t bother you, go on ahead. Maybe you’re really Randy. Maybe you don’t care if you are or not. But it bothers me.”

“So what are you going to do?” Randy asked.

“Nobody would miss me.”

“I would,” Randy said. “God, I mean, we’ve been working together for years.”

They walked down Pike Street to the teletransport machine and stopped beside it. A young couple with a corgi walked up, and the man swiped a credit card and punched some buttons. All three disappeared.

“Are you going to get in?” Marcus asked.

“I think I’ll take the light rail,” Randy said. 

Excerpt from a dispatch to the Chicago Republican

Virginia, Nevada, May 2 (1868)

I saw a man hanged the other day, John Melanie, of France. He was the first man ever hanged in this city (or county either), where the first twenty-six graves in the cemetery were those of men who died by shots and stabs. I never had witnessed an execution before, and did not believe I could be present at this one without turning away my head at the last moment. But I did not know what fascination there was about the thing, then. I only went because I thought I ought to have a lesson, and because I believed that if ever it would be possible to see a man hanged, and derive satisfaction from the spectacle, this was the time. For John Melanie was no common murderer — else he would have gone free. He was a heartless assassin. A year ago, he secreted himself under the house of a woman of the town who lived alone, and in the dead watches of the night, he entered her room, knocked her senseless with a billet of wood as she slept, and then strangled her with his fingers. He carried off all her money, her watches, and every article of her wearing apparel, and the next day, with quiet effrontery, put some crepe on his arm and walked in her funeral procession.

Afterward he secreted himself under the bed of another woman of the town, and in the middle of the night was crawling out with a sling-shot in one hand and a butcher knife in the other, when the woman discovered him, alarmed the neighborhood with her screams, and he retreated from the house. Melanie sold dresses and jewelry here and there until some of the articles were identified as belonging to the murdered courtesan. He was arrested and condemned to death, he used to curse and swear at all who approached him; and he once grossly insulted some young Sisters of Charity who came to minister kindly to his wants. The morning of the execution, he joked with the barber, and told him not to cut his throat — he wanted the distinction of being hanged.

This is the man I wanted to see hung. I joined the appointed physicians, so that I might be admitted within the charmed circle and be close to Melanie. Now I never more shall be surprised

at anything. That assassin got out of the closed carriage, and the first thing his eye fell upon was that awful gallows towering above a great sea of human heads, out yonder on the hill side and his cheek never blanched, and never a muscle quivered! He strode firmly away, and skipped gaily up the steps of the gallows like a happy girl. He looked around upon the people, calmly; he examined the gallows with a critical eye, and with the pleased curiosity of a man who sees for the first time a wonder he has often heard of. He swallowed frequently, but there was no evidence of trepidation about him — and not the slightest air of braggadocio whatever. He prayed with the priest, and then drew out an abusive manuscript and read from it in a clear, strong voice, without a quaver in it. It was a broad, thin sheet of paper, and he held it apart in front of him as he stood. If ever his hand trembled in even the slightest degree, it never quivered that paper. I watched him at that sickening moment when the sheriff was fitting the noose about his neck, and pushing the knot this way and that to get it nicely adjusted to the hollow under his ear — and if they had been measuring Melanie for a shirt, he could not have been more perfectly serene. I never saw anything like that before. My own suspense was almost unbearable — my blood was leaping through my veins, and my thoughts were crowding and trampling upon each other. Twenty moments to live — fifteen to live — ten to live — five — three — heaven and earth, how the time galloped! And yet that man stood there unmoved though he knew that the sheriff was reaching deliberately for the drop while the black cap descended over his quiet face! Then down through the hole in the scaffold the strap-bound figure shot like a dart! A dreadful shiver started at the shoulders, violently convulsed the whole body all the way down, and died away with a tense drawing of the toes downward, like a doubled fist — and all was over!

I saw it all. I took exact note of every detail, even to Melanie’s considerately helping to fix the leather strap that bound his legs together and his quiet removal of his slippers and I never wish to see it again. I can see that stiff, straight corpse hanging there yet, with its black pillow-cased head turned rigidly to one side, and the purple streaks creeping through the hands and driving the fleshy hue of life before them. Ugh! 

The Back Page

By TAMARA SHOEMAKER

Fallen Reader

Apparently, I've been ruined as a reader for all time.

Grrrrr!

Back in the day, I used to sit down with a nice, fresh book from the library. I'd rifle through the pages, inhaling the scent (you fellow book lovers know the scent to which I'm referring — you Kindle lovers who never crack a book will not understand), and I would crawl onto the couch or the bed or the floor or the park bench and settle in for an unparalleled flight of fancy.

The authors never made mistakes. The tone, structure, narrative style never even hit my radar. I simply immersed myself in the story and digested every word with absolute satisfaction.

Fast-forward a few years. I wrote a book, then two, then three, then four, five and six. Every word was studied, every adjective used, then discarded, then used again. Sentence patterns were read, and reread, flipped around, reversed, turned upside-down, then right-side-up. Books were read aloud until my throat ached and my voice rasped. The overuse of adverbs galloped through my nightmares.

Plot lines! Oh, dear goodness, the torture of a hole in my plot line!

A college professor once told me (and perhaps it wasn't an original quote, but the first time I heard it, it came from him) that to be a good writer, I had to be an avid reader. I took that to heart. Every night for years, after the kids were in bed and I'd closed up shop for the day, I crawled in my bed and cracked open a book. The

hour didn't matter; it might have been midnight or one or two in the morning. I would still read.

Sometimes, I would only make it through two paragraphs. Most often, a chapter. A particularly engrossing book might have kept me awake till four in the morning as I'd tell myself, "Just one more chapter. That's it." Until the next cliffhanger, and then I'd burn some more of that midnight oil and keep going.

But the simple, relaxing enjoyment had flown.

Now, I study every adverb, every adjective. "Why did they put 'slightly' in there? It would have made a stronger sentence without that word!"

The occasional typo presents itself, and I smirk. "See, I'm not the only one."

I grow green with envy when a particularly interesting adjective or simile pops up. "Now why couldn't I have thought of that first?"

I went with my husband to see *Catching Fire*, the second story in *The Hunger Games* trilogy. My enjoyment of the movie was tinged with the fact that jealousy ate

away at my innards.

Fie on thee, Suzanne Collins! Why must you come up with such an interesting story?

All joking aside, if I had a choice whether or not I would begin this journey again, this relationship with my keyboard, I wouldn't refuse it.

Yes, it does affect my view of other literature, and yes, it is often frustrating that I can't simply sit and enjoy.

But on the flip-side, I've known few activities more enjoyable than the pleasure of allowing my fantasy unparalleled freedom, of constructing a world in which other keen readers, like myself, can wander freely. Perhaps I will never be another Suzanne Collins, author extraordinaire, but I am Tamara Shoemaker, weaver of ideas.

And I'm fine with that. 

Tamara Shoemaker's books include "Broken Crowns," "Pretty Little Maids" and "Ashes, Ashes." She lives in Virginia with her husband, Tim, and their three children.

