



Issue 51 February 2014

JERSEY DEVIL PRESS



# JERSEY DEVIL PRESS

February 2014, Issue 51

ISSN 2152-2162

Online Editor: Laura Garrison  
Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown  
Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez  
Reader: Rebecca Vaccaro  
Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

All stories and other contributions are copyrighted to their respective authors  
unless otherwise noted.

[www.jerseydevilpress.com](http://www.jerseydevilpress.com)

## **Table of Contents:**

Editor's Note	3
Raritan, New Jersey. 2012, Jason Macias	4
Things That Float, Suzanne Samples	12
My Horns Hurt, Daniel Thompson	20
A Bad Case, Charlie Brown	22
Path of Stones, Robert Lowell Russell	32

## Editor's Note

The stories in this issue are by turns surreal, scary, funny, sad, puzzling, and sweet—just like love. In "Raritan, New Jersey. 2012," Jason Macias takes us galloping through equine dreams. Suzanne Samples introduces us to some mysterious (and slightly creepy) "Things That Float." Next up is a thoughtful and intriguing flash piece by Daniel Thompson, "My Horns Hurt." Charlie Brown's narrator gets "A Bad Case" of a surprisingly lively and entertaining venereal disease. Robert Lowell Russell's "Path of Stones" examines a well-known fairy tale from the perspective of a marginalized character who must weave through many stories before finishing his own. And when you think about it, isn't that what we all have to do?

Happy Valentine's Day. Hope your story has a happy ending. (Or, for all you perverts out there, a "happy ending.")

— Laura Garrison

## Raritan, New Jersey. 2012

Jason Macias

One night, about a year ago, I was up late at my computer listening to music on my headphones and goofing around on the Internet when these song lyrics caught my imagination:

*Now you are the warrior*

*Who will conquer this land*

*On a horse made of clouds*

*You will scatter the sands*

For some reason I still can't explain, the images from these lyrics, and that of the horse made of clouds especially, wouldn't leave me alone. Since I was just up killing time, waiting for a little bout of insomnia to pass, I started digging around on the Internet. I was hoping to find some random clue or association to help me understand what this fascination was all about, but all the information I was able to find on the history of the band in question, the symbols in the lyrics, possible references, etc., did nothing to shed light on the little mystery of the song's appeal. Eventually, I decided I would give up for the night and try to get some sleep after listening to the song one more time.

As soon as I put the song on, though, my computer screen started to flicker a bit and shift toward green before going completely blank when I tried to adjust it. There was nothing I could do to make it turn back on, so I decided to leave the problem for the next day and powered down the computer. After I shut off the lights and turned to go to bed I was annoyed to see that the monitor had clicked back on when I turned my back to it and was

now displaying a vivid outdoor scene that seemed like a still photo until I noticed that the clouds above were moving slightly. I thought that the computer must have been hijacked by hackers and was about to unplug it when I noticed that the clouds in the scene seemed to be taking the shape of a horse, a vague impression of one at first that soon resolved itself into the unmistakable shape of a fluffy white stallion in the sky.

As the scene unfolded on my screen I felt almost present there in that idyllic landscape. While I sat huddled in the darkened room before the image, the horse of clouds descended to the earth where it was joined by the other horses taking shape from their environs. There were horses of grass and wild flowers rising from the meadow as well as water horses splashing from the brook that bisected it. Horses of the palest sky strangely, ethereally detached themselves to join their brothers in the growing herd that now included horses formed from leafy boughs and horses of muddy earth. Horses of asphalt and horses of signposts fell in with them as they made their way toward a town where a maddening variety of horses were waiting to meet them, made up of furniture, compost heaps, sporting goods, and roofing materials. Electric horses leaped from every transformer while the townsfolk cried out for joy and huddled together in small mixed groups of all colors and creeds to happily meld into piebald horses of men.

From there the proliferation of horses increased until the equine welter growing from the physical world was joined by immaterial horses formed entirely from such abstract concepts as love, bitterness, and contempt. Finally, off in the distance, I noticed a massive brown horse against the sky that seemed to be shedding some sort of material from its surface. When I moved closer to the

gigantic figure I realized that the stuff dropping from it on all sides was manure, and that the entire cantering behemoth was formed from other, smaller, horses, and the unbearable amazement this inspired jolted me awake from the dream.

It took me a few moments to realize what was going on, but once I became aware of where I was, I took off my headphones and used my sleeve to wipe up the little puddle of drool that had built up on the desk as I slept. The sun was already up so I decided to trot down to Quick Chek for a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

While inside I nodded and said hello to a nice woman that I see there once in a while when another young lady in scant attire butted in loudly, saying, "why bother with an old nag like that when you can talk to this young filly," as she walked out the front door, giving me a significant look. When I paid and left I saw her loitering out front, so I decided to give her a little piece of my mind for being rude to the woman in the store, but when I stopped in front of her, she caught me in her gaze and all I managed to get out was, "hi."

"Um, hi," she responded in a sarcastic little tone that reminded me that I ought to chide her for her behavior in the store.

But again I was disappointed when I heard myself say, "I like your shirt."

"My shirt?" she responded incredulously.

"Yeah, it fits you really well, and I can tell it's made of good fabric," I said, having completely given up on trying to control what was coming from my mouth by that point.

"Well, it's just a t-shirt, but it is soft. Would you like to feel it?" she asked, angling one shoulder toward me.



“Yes, thank you, you're very kind,” I replied. I realized that it was, in fact, just a common t-shirt, but the fabric was as soft as she had promised, and it felt wonderful. “This feels wonderful,” I said while I smiled broadly, and probably stupidly, into her face and stroked her shoulder as if it were a little bunny rabbit.

That made her laugh, but when she raised her hand to her mouth she caught a glimpse of the tether she held in it, and her smile disappeared. I noticed that it had been cut, and she told me that she had tied her horse to the post out front with all the others to run inside, only to return a few minutes later and find that the animal had been stolen. I let her know how sorry I was and that I could only guess how difficult it must be to lose a horse like that. If it made her feel any better, I continued, I could give her a ride home. She said that she would like that, but when I turned to look for my car I remembered that I had walked there. I was about to turn back and apologize, and maybe offer to walk her home, when I felt her hop on my back. Before I could respond she prodded me in the flanks with her heels, urging me forward at a brisk walk while she gently guided me to our destination, running her fingers through my hair all the while and whispering soothing things to me.

When we got to her house, she hopped down and brought me some water, pouring some of it over me to cool me down. I moved around the yard a little, shaking off the moisture until she came out with a little bag of sweet oats that she fed me from her hand as she looked me over and said, “You are a sweetheart. I think I'll keep you . . . would you like that?”

I thought about it for a second and decided that, yes, that would be very nice, so I looked down and gave a little nod as I finished chewing my oats.

“Okay, then, I just need to take a look at your teeth, please,” she said, so I opened up wide.

My mouth was scarcely open, though, when I thought of all the fillings I had in there and started to get self-conscious, and before she was able to get a good glance I remembered the crown I had recently got on one of my molars and snapped my mouth shut before she could see it.

“Come on now, let me see,” she said as she draped her arms around my neck, but I was adamant. When playful cajoling didn't work, she turned to tickling, and when that didn't work, she turned to force. I was pretty sure that there was no way that this small woman could get me to open my mouth if I didn't want to, so I didn't really resist as she pinned me to the ground, which turned out to be a mistake, because once she had me firmly straddled beneath her all she had to do was pinch my nostrils shut to make me open up and, quick as a snake bite, shoot her small hand between my teeth.

I didn't want to bite her, so all I could do was slap at her fingers with my tongue in protest as she pried my mouth open and jerked my head to the side to let the sun shine in and lay my dental history bare.

“Just as I thought,” she crowed, “no wisdom teeth! Probably doesn't have the sense God gave a horse!” and then I woke up.

I was lying in my bed when I awoke this time, in a lather and breathing heavily in my too-hot room. Now, I had been through the whole dream-within-a-dream-within-a-dream bit before, so I

figured that since I was probably going to be exploring my unconscious for a while longer, I might as well try to make myself comfortable. There was a nice little breeze rustling the trees outside my window, so I slipped out of my clothes and went out to enjoy the open air.

It was sunny and pleasant, and the light wind against my body felt great. I was having a wonderful time outside, waving at all the nice dream people driving down the street and doing some light stretches when a woman from up the block came walking by with her dog and raised an eyebrow.

"I think you forgot something," she said, as she nodded down at my lack of clothing.

I pretended not to know what she was talking about, but I was beginning to suspect that this might not be a dream at all, so I finished the set of toe-touches I was doing and went inside and got dressed.

By this point I was a little worried about the whole nakedness faux pas and that some of the neighbors might take it the wrong way. Since it isn't really unusual behavior that tends to unnerve people, I thought, but erratic behavior, I decided that I would probably have to start taking regular strolls outside in the nude just so people in the neighborhood wouldn't think I was some kind of weirdo. It was while I was coming to this conclusion that my phone rang. When I picked it up, I heard a low whickering on the other end and asked, "Is this a horse?" The loud neigh in response told me that it was, so I thanked it for calling and hung up. So this was a dream after all, and a good thing too because I was not looking forward to walking around naked in front of all those people every day.

I was feeling very relieved when I walked back into the front room, so I was able to take it in stride when I saw the head of the massive white charger leaning into my open window and nibbling on one of my plants. He was all saddled up and ready to go, so I said what the hell and rode off in search of something to do.

That day we rode. I let the horse roam where he pleased and wasn't disappointed, as he took us to places of such beauty that I would have never believed that they could exist in New Jersey. We made new friends everywhere we went, and that night we camped under the stars. The following day we had several scintillating adventures, which I won't get into here, and even solved a mystery or two. I wanted to continue on like this forever, but it was a Sunday and I had work in the morning, so we turned in early, battered and bruised from all of the riding and fighting we had done, but happy to have had such a fine weekend.

The next morning Bucephalus II, for that was the name I had given that unsurpassed steed, allowed me to ride him to work, but when I asked if he would wait for me in the warehouse attached to my office until the work day was through, he turned his head away awkwardly and I knew that he wouldn't. Our farewell was emotional yet dignified, but when I reached my cubicle I broke down and wept without restraint.

Oh Bucephalus II, how I have wondered where you are and what you might be doing. Are you still near, or have you wandered to some far-off place in Pennsylvania, or, perhaps, upstate New York? Are you, even now, riding off to war with some other doughty horseman? Do you ever think of me as you graze under a starry sky?

**JASON MACIAS** is a librarian from New Jersey. He is also a deadly martial arts master. Well, maybe not a master exactly, but he practices judo diligently. Or, he practices it anyway, when he isn't busy daydreaming or being lazy.

# Things That Float

Suzanne Samples

The heads float on the pond like beach balls. They float like balloons. They float like hollow globes.

Everyone wonders about the heads. How they got there. Why they stay. What purpose they serve. Why no one jumps in to see if torsos and arms and feet grow like tree roots beneath the invisible necks.

The heads appear after Sarah comes back home. She walks into the kitchen, lights a cigarette, looks out the window, and says, Well, shit. They're out there. The heads.

We all thought Sarah was dead.

We haven't seen her in three years.

She looks the same, and I look older.

Sarah's hair is still short and neon green. She is still skinny. She still has the gypsy tattoo on her shoulder. She is still wearing her Tough Shits t-shirt.

She is still Sarah.

That night, she sleeps in her bed. Even though we'd given up hope and never found a body, we kept everything in her room arranged the way she liked. Dirty clothes in the closet. Post-punk band posters on the wall. An old store mannequin propped in the corner. Ostensibly, Sarah was going to use the mannequin for an art class, but then things changed.

Things changed drastically.

Maybe that's where the heads came from, Rachel suggests. Maybe Sarah had more mannequins. Maybe she dumped them in

the water before she disappeared. Maybe they've always been there, but we're just now seeing them.

Before she dropped out of college, Rachel took a literature course that *changed her world*. Now she sees symbolism in anything and thinks everything means something.

Maybe they don't mean anything, I say. Maybe they aren't even there at all.

John laughs. He has no further suggestions.

Or maybe, Rachel says, maybe the heads represent our deceased parents and those family members who came before us. You know, like headstones. Just more literal.

John laughs again.

The heads don't have eyes, and I think this is what disturbs me most. Though I've never touched the heads, I've studied them from the safety of the bank. No hair, either. Just noses and mouths. Noses to smell the stench of the pond and mouths to ingest the flies.

Mouths to sing.

The heads.

I tell Sarah that we don't smoke in the kitchen, but she keeps puffing. She gives me that look, the *I don't fucking care what you say* look that all younger sisters give their older siblings. Or maybe it's the *our parents are dead, and you can't tell me what to do* look.

Either one.

I don't ask her where she's been, mostly because I'm afraid that she will leave again.

Nobody wants that to happen, not even Rachel.

Everyone wants Sarah to stay.

We've had too many people leave us in the last few years.

I look outside and see the heads. I wonder if I should count them, take an inventory. I wonder if I should spoon them out of the pond and have them tested for diseases. Pollutants. Poisons.

I know what you're thinking, Sarah says. They aren't fitted with spy cams from Russia. It's nothing like that.

John no longer laughs.

I think that he is finally starting to feel frightened by the whole ordeal.

What the hell does Russia have to do with anything? Rachel asks.

They didn't teach her that in college.

Sarah ashes in the sink.

I imagine that the cigarette ashes float in the small sink puddle like the heads in the pond. Unlike the heads, however, I know how the ashes arrived at their destination. I know who put them there.

I know where they will go.

Before she disappeared three years ago, Sarah and I had a fight. After the car accident, Sarah wanted to spread our parents' ashes in the trees behind the pond; I wanted to keep them for at least a year.

I wanted some time to think.

At the time, I didn't even know if we should spread them in the same place. Our parents really didn't like each other a whole lot, especially toward the end, and I thought that our mom probably just wanted to be alone.

Finally.



They belong here, Sarah said.

Yes, here in the house, I said.

But you're not keeping them here in the house, Sarah said.

You're carrying them around in that huge bag of yours. I've seen you. Sooner or later, you're going to drop them, and they are going to be spread at the recycling center or at the post office or at the dollar store. Is that what you want?

No, it wasn't. I just didn't want to let them go.

John said he didn't care, and Rachel was in Virginia and wouldn't answer her phone.

I feel like we should put them someplace special. Even if it's not the same area, I said.

The trees behind the pond were special to them, Sarah said. Special to us.

And then she walked out the door and was gone.

Before this, Sarah and I agreed about pretty much everything. Sure, we were different. She went to post-punk clubs in the city and smoked a pack a day. Even when our parents were still alive, I rarely left the house. I took care of things at home. The cleaning, the cooking, the domestic stuff. Sarah dyed her hair bright green, and I kept mine a normal shade of brown.

But before she disappeared, we both liked watching Johnny Depp movies, and we loved feeding the stray cats that congregated behind the back door. We both liked Siouxsie and the Banshees. She would play *Tinderbox*, and we would dance until the floors shook like broken hearts. We both thought that since she went to college, Rachel had become a pill. We both liked coffee before bed and peanut butter sandwiches for breakfast.

After the fight, Sarah left without a bag. Without her cigarettes. Without her phone. Without her pink and green Libra lighter.

Without the things that made her Sarah.

The only things she took with her were the Tough Shits t-shirt on her back and her gypsy tattoo.

I suppose that for her, the pond was so special that she wanted to be there forever.

These days, our parents' ashes rest under the sink, between some Comet and a package of dirty sponges. After Sarah disappeared, I just couldn't look at the ashes any longer.

I just couldn't wait any longer for Sarah to show up, wet and probably sick from all the storms.

On a Monday evening, John scalps one of the heads from the pond and brings it inside. He sets the head on the table, and water drips onto the surface like beads of angry sweat.

I didn't see what else we could do, he says. I had to do something. Pa would have wanted it this way.

I can't argue with John. Pa was someone who needed to know things, even when he didn't need to know them. He would have wanted someone to inspect the head and try to figure out what the hell it was.

Who the hell it was.

Why the hell the head and its friends had been floating on our backyard pond for three days now.

I pluck a piece of wet grass from the cheek. I imagine that it's hair. The skin feels soft and real.

I see no blood or flesh.

I want to wash my hands.

I ask John how he decided on this particular head.

It floated to me, he says. I was out there staring at them, and I felt like this one wanted out.

Despite my curiosity, I wonder if I should tell John that perhaps it is best for him to return the head and leave things alone. The heads aren't really bothering us, not really. They are just floating along like empty eggs or milk jugs or rubber ducks in a muddy bathtub. They are not sprouting arms and legs and walking into our house like zombies or worse. They are not irritating the neighbors. (Well, we don't really have neighbors, so I guess that's not a good excuse. But still.) They are not drinking the pond water or shredding deer, coyote, or black bears.

That we know of.

But now here it is. A head. On our kitchen table.

For reasons I still don't understand, I pour a glass of water on the head. Clean water from the sink.

A rinse.

A purification.

A baptism.

Welcome to our home, I think. Welcome to the home of no one. Welcome to the home of the crazies.

I fear that Sarah will be gone when I wake up.

It is a Tuesday.

When I roll out of bed, I feel the beat of a Siouxsie and the Banshees song pounding through the ceiling and into the floor. It's

an odd song choice for early morning, I think, but Sarah is full of odd choices.

The head is still on the table.

John brought us the head of a preacher man or the head of Christine or the head of an Arabian Knight. Something like that. Now someone needs to put it back.

No one has asked Sarah how long she will stay.

She's still eating, sleeping, and living here. She's watching the television. She's using the telephone. She's helping herself to the cookie stash that I keep on the highest shelf of the pantry.

She's still here.

Sarah comes down the stairs, and I wonder how such a lightweight can make such a heavy thud. She walks into the kitchen; she looks at the table. The water I poured onto the head the night before has pooled below the chairs like a small pond of tears.

Sarah pulls our parents' ashes from below the sink and rolls them into her cigarette paper.

I pretend I'm not watching.

When she's finished, Sarah lifts the head from the table and saunters out the back door, the screen swinging to the melody of a post-punk song not yet written.

Post-post-punk.

My sister, still in her torn Tough Shits t-shirt, places the head on the grass and lights her cigarette. No one else is awake yet, and I'm not sure I am either. She picks the head back up, the lit cigarette hanging from her mouth like a lost cause and smoke rising toward the sky like a thin bass line.

Sarah walks toward the lake.

She glances at the naked trees.

Sarah places the rogue head back amongst the others, and the pond looks perfect once again. Without removing any of her clothes, Sarah slips into the water and joins the floating heads.

I fear that she will go under and disappear forever. I fear that she might be dead, and she is nothing more than a ghost. I fear that she is leaving, and this time for good.

But instead of plunging completely under, Sarah floats on her back. She holds her cigarette just above the water, the surface reflecting the bright purples and reds of her gypsy tattoo.

She floats like a plank of wood. She floats like a twig. She floats like a forgotten leaf.

Every second or so, Sarah flicks our parents' ashes from her cigarette and into the pond.

I tap my foot to the beat of music that she can no longer hear.

The heads turn to her as if they are watching, almost as if they expected this kind of thing to happen.

The heads.

**SUZANNE SAMPLES** lives in Asheville, NC, where she plays roller derby with the Blue Ridge Rollergirls. Suzanne has a Ph.D. in Victorian Literature from Auburn University, and she teaches at Appalachian State University in Boone, NC. When she's not writing, teaching, or knocking over roller derby jammers, Suzanne spends a lot of time watching *Wheel of Fortune* with her cats.

## My Horns Hurt

Daniel Thompson

They straightened my teeth and now my fingernails ache. I can feel them growing. It hurts. I checked Wikipedia and they called them horns. I can feel my horns growing. That's weird to say—horns. But maybe calling them horns makes sense. Do antlers hurt when they're growing? I guess antlers are the same as horns. Is that why a buck rubs his antlers on the forest trees? Or does that have something to do with mating? I checked Wikipedia again and they said deer rubbing happens during the rutting season—mating season. But I bet those growing antlers still hurt. If my horns hurt and they're less than a fraction of a fraction of something, then I know those bony horns rising out their soft, brown heads has to hurt. And their heads—so small. I know because Mom collects deer skulls. It's weird. Dad left and it's the only thing Mom does differently. The dogs keep dragging them into the yard and she keeps hanging them on nails in the basement.

Man, my horns hurt. If only I could get to them. Work them back a little, but they pulled my working-back tooth. It was the one right out front, right out in front of the others. The others crowded in behind the working-back tooth like they were scared of something. Then they pulled my working-back tooth and the huddled teeth got put in a picture-perfect row. That's what the orthodontist said. Picture perfect. From now on, our family portraits will be picture perfect, he said. But there's nothing picture perfect about me not

working back these horns. So, I miss my working-back tooth. And the deer, they keep scraping their horns up and down the tree barks and making these deep moaning noises. Maybe they miss something too. I can hear them early in the mornings outside my window, and now that I know we both have horns—maybe I'll rub my fingers against the wood of my bed when I hear them. I'll do this and hope the pain from my horns goes away soon.

**DANIEL THOMPSON** is an urban planner in Richmond, VA, where he lives with his wife and daughter. You can read his first published story in *Bartleby Snopes*.

## A Bad Case

### Charlie Brown

Steven woke up with a bad case of the gnomes.

Rising from a dream in which he was scuba diving deeper and deeper until the pressure was too much to bear, he opened his eyes to find the weight on his chest was real. A tiny, white-bearded face wearing a gleeful smile almost touched his nose. Steven was too stunned and too tired to leap up.

“Oh, shit,” was all he could muster.

When the gnome stepped off him and started going through his medicine cabinet, Steven called his HMO. He felt it was definitely urgent, but not an emergency. The first appointment would suffice.

His primary physician had a full schedule and no openings, but, with a little cajoling, Steven arranged to see another doctor.

The ride over was uneventful, mostly because his car had a never-before-used child safety window, so the gnome couldn't ride with his face to the wind. The gnome sulked in the backseat until he found a discarded magazine and made origami mushrooms until Steven parked the car. The Portobello, with a pouty, baggy-eyed face as the stem, was best.

Steven stared at the stirrups in the examination room and knew this doctor usually saw women instead of men, but *quo vadis* American health care. As the gnome flipped in the gynecological device like an Olympic gymnast on the rings, the doctor, a thin, balding gent with a gurgly Romanian accent, explained his brand new condition.



"It is sexually transmitted, I'm afraid to say." The doctor looked over his glasses as he turned to Steven.

So, he thought, Sheila had given him the gnomes.

"I'm afraid the only cure is passing it along."

Steven thought about his night with Sheila and how odd it had been. Throughout their congress, they both were clumsy and fumbling. He felt bad that he hadn't called, but he wasn't sure if she wanted to hear from him. He was still bummed about the whole thing, because he liked her. But she wasn't exciting. He turned back to the doctor, putting on a smile.

"You mean I have to get laid again? Do you know how hard it was the last time?"

The doctor closed the thin manila that held his records.

"That is none of my business. To alleviate the symptoms, there are the old wives' remedies. They might work."

Steven nodded to the doctor who really didn't want to say them out loud.

The doctor sloughed out a sigh. "All right. Let me think." The doctor put his hand to his chin and Steven crept forward on his padded chair. "I believe you are to cleanse the genital area with lemon juice and rubbing alcohol."

Steven slid back immediately. "That won't happen."

"How do you feel about enemas?"

"Not enthusiastic."

"Well, some of the women in my country say spicy food drives them away. That one I cannot guarantee."

The doctor continued with more instructions, but Steven stopped listening. It was all so confusing and the gnome, who was break dancing on the exam bed paper, made crunching noises.

Steven grabbed him and walked out, thanking the doctor for his time.

Steven came home to find that his problem had multiplied. There were many male and female gnomes going through his CDs, reading his mail and filling his Internet browser history with porn and auction sites.

He decided to call the original one Beardy, even though all of them, including the females, had facial hair ranging from Amish to Abe Lincoln. But Beardy was the only one with a moustache that gave him a Santa Claus vibe. He couldn't decide if calling the gnome Beardy because of the moustache was irony, paradox or coincidence. He flipped quickly through his iPad, but Wikipedia was no help.

Steven stood over the growing crowd of miniscule miscreants and wondered exactly what to call them collectively if, or more likely when, he had to explain his condition to someone else. Although he couldn't hear them speaking, the gnomes all seemed to understand him. With the help of his thesaurus, he cycled through "bevy," "batch," "passel," and "suite" to a series of frowns. "Murder" brought a threatening reaction. "Village" was rewarded with smiles. He had a village of gnomes. He had to live with that.

Steven decided he liked cooking more than searing scrotum pain or a hose up his ass, so he drove to the grocery to find peppery pickings. The drive was pure chaos, because he now had multiple gnomes climbing around, bouncing on the seat cushions and blowing against the windows to puff out their cheeks. One female kept tuning the radio to the hip-hop station and jamming up the bass.

He regretted his choice of the high-end natural foods store because it was just too big to keep tabs on his tag-alongs. The gnomes overran all of the sample stations, stole grapes for a juggling routine and posed in the Garden Supplies section, only moving to scare those who would buy them. The final straw was when one of the green-aproned workers saw a gnome taking a gritty shower under the peanut butter dispenser. They allowed Steven to buy the contents of his cart, which came to \$151.32.

Getting home, Steven got to stewing, roasting and slow cooking the most diabolical recipes he could remember. For lunch, he made Johnny's curry, an infamous concoction that held three chopped-up habaneros along with the usual spice mix. Steven sat down to eat with anticipation, but, try as he might, he could only finish half the bowl. But he was encouraged, because the gnomes finished off the pot.

For dinner, he tried his best to recreate the Evil Jungle Prince from the long-closed Cafe Siam. He knew Thai bird chilies and chicken were involved and he cobbled together something close. He got a whole plate down, this being as flavorful as it was spicy. The gnomes looked like they wanted more.

He didn't sleep well, partially because of his grumbling stomach and roiling bowels, but mostly due to the calliope chorus of gnome farts. But, in the morning, the gnomes were still there.

By the end of third day, the gnomes took over his second bedroom. They hauled in garden dirt and grew crimson-striped mushrooms that smelled of dung. They commandeered his footie socks for bedrolls and Beardy turned the clothes washer into a hot tub. When Steven wanted to do a load of whites, a pruned Beardy handed him a shot glass full of mushroom wine. Reluctantly,

Steven drank it down. He didn't remember the rest of the night and, the next day, the hangover was fierce.

Through the searing headache, he tried to figure out what to do. He felt he couldn't live like this, trying to keep order with the gnomes. At work, all he could do was think about what trouble he would find when he got home.

Steven decided he had to get back into the dating pool, anything to get rid of this nuisance. It would be a horrible thing to do, but he wanted his life back. Let somebody else deal with this mess.

He knew the Internet back and forth would take too long, and bars were too random. He gave speed dating a try.

When he arrived at the bar, Steven realized that the gnomes were hip to his plans. They must have snuck into his car and quickly run in while he fretted in the parking lot, trying to psych himself up for the lies he had to tell. The female gnomes filled the slots, so, as he went from table to table, he saw only his hirsute housemates. The first one batted her eyes at him like the world's ugliest kewpie. The second blew fish-lipped kisses. The third simulated oral sex, jabbing her tongue into her cheek. He actually considered this offer, trying to figure out if it would solve or worsen his problems. In the end, the logistics just wouldn't work.

Finally, he came to the table of an actual human female. Claire was only three deviations from very attractive (he considered himself three-point-five) and she drank white wine, which had a nose of surrender and a finish of desperation. It matched the top notes of existential crisis in his single malt. She crooked her mouth to the left.

"Wow," she said. "Someone who can look me in the eye."

Steven looked down the line and Beardy and his bros waved at him. He turned back and tried to make his own smile simmer. "And maybe I'll actually answer your questions."

The rules of the night were no job talk and no personal history. Creativity was emphasized and only reacting to physical beauty of the potential date was discouraged.

Steven answered he would be an oak, like the ones that line St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans; he would be the planet Mercury because he liked hot weather; and the dinner would be with Muhammad, Jesus and Emperor Augustus because he would want to see how quickly a fist fight would break out. Claire's last question came off-handedly, as she filled out her date evaluation cards.

"What up with the gnomes?"

"They're with me." Steven shut his eyes tight.

"You have gnomes? When were you gonna tell me?"

He could only shrug his shoulders as the bell rang. He got a one out of five rating, his only point coming because Claire liked his answers. The gnome with the Van Dyke got her phone number, but the little fucker never called.

Over the next week, Steven hit bars, gallery openings and adult sock hops. He even went to a church social for one of those Protestant religions he just didn't understand. But like Mary and the lambs, the gnomes always turned up everywhere he went. He got thrown out of every function before he could connect with anyone, and he would go home without human companionship.

On the second Sunday night, Steven splayed on the couch, exhausted from heavy drinking and still going to work every morning. As he watched the football game, the gnomes joined him.

Most snuggled up in every corner of his body as others carted in bags of microwaved popcorn. While he couldn't hear them cheering, they were into the game, throwing their arms up at great catches or big hits. For the first time since they arrived, Steven felt relaxed.

Even though he had given up on the spicy food, that Monday he found he had andouille sausage for jambalaya. He put together the rice dish after coming home from work. As the cayenne smell filled his apartment, Beardy broke out a concertina and another gnome grabbed a wire-ringed notebook to use as a washboard. Soon, they were playing "My Toot Toot." Steven thought the version was pretty good, and he danced around the kitchen trying not to step on any of his housemates.

While the rice boiled in the stock, he decided to finally call Sheila. He wasn't sure what he was going to say, but she picked up midway into the second ring and he could only stammer out a weak, "Hello."

"I was wondering if I was going to hear from you again." Her voice balanced exactly at the midpoint between excited and peeved.

"Well, there was this problem."

"I should've told you. But, I . . ."

"I know. Three-date rule. I stressed that." Sex after a third date was the explicit social contract in Steven's mind. But why hadn't Sheila warned him of the aftermath?

"You know, it was really great." Her voice sharpened to a katana edge. "If you want to give it another try."

He heard something in her voice. The tone could not mask that she lied. "You want the gnomes back."

“No, you were . . .” Sheila’s voice sounded nervous, like she didn’t want to offend him.

“Stop.” Steven held up his hand, even though she couldn’t see it. “It was first-time sex. I’d give us a B-minus, mostly because of the red wine.”

“Okay, you’re right. It was only okay. But I didn’t know I was gonna lose all of them. I had plans. Like, I went to the Baby Gap that week and I downloaded all these knitting patterns.”

He put his hand over the phone receiver and turned to see the remaining gnomes two-stepping in a circle.

“Hey! Do y’all want to go back with Sheila?” The gnome *fais do-do* immediately ceased. Scowls ripped across their fist-sized faces. Beardy stepped forward and thrust his thumb downward. Steven uncovered the phone. “It looks like I’m stuck with them for a while.”

Sheila cried on the phone and then came to Steven’s home. She threw open her blouse in a desperate move to get him in bed. But she wanted the gnomes, not him. He asked her to leave. Beardy saluted her as she walked out.

Steven decided to wait the gnomes out. Had the doctor said something about a cure? He couldn’t remember. He thought maybe boredom would drive them away.

But staying home and cutting himself off from society developed from slight sadness to a full-grown funk. He could feel himself giving up. He ate cheese dip for dinner. His face bloomed a bushy beard. Soon, soft-rolling hills were visible beneath his t-shirt.

From his CD collection, the gnomes saw Steven had a deep love of Mississippi Delta music. To cheer him up, they decided to lip synch to some 12-bar ditties. But they could only cobble together a

half-assed Blues Brothers tribute that just made Steven angry and he threatened to call Sheila. The gnomes gave up and created a video of themselves dancing to Michael Jackson's "Thriller." It got over one million views on YouTube.

Over the next month, he noticed, despite the weight gain, his pants were loose and baggy. He had to switch to military-style pull-tight belts to keep from showing ass crack. His shirts felt like circus tents.

After two months, Steven woke up to find he himself had turned into a gnome. He stood on his bed, now a lake of cotton, and looked at his stumpy legs and round belly. He thought back to that day in the doctor's office. Had the doctor said "curse" instead of "cure?"

He rappelled down the covers to the floor as the other gnomes surged toward him, Beardy in the lead.

"Beardy, what happened to me?"

"The name is Moses, brother. Welcome to our village." Moses pulled him into the world's tiniest bear hug.

"Wait. You can talk." Steven heard the growly timbre of Moses' voice and tried not to compare it to Papa Smurf.

"We could always talk. You couldn't hear us."

"Are your voices like dog whistles or something?" Moses nodded. "Okay. Now for the hard question."

"It's quite simple, Steven. If you don't get rid of us, you become one of us. I was human once myself. Just like everybody in the village."

"But what if I want to go back?"

Moses laughed at the question.



But that wasn't what Steven wanted to hear. He crumbled to the ground and all of his repressed feelings erupted in a howl. He felt the tears flood his cheeks and he smashed the carpeted floor with his minute fists.

"I don't want this. I want my life back!"

Moses crouched down and put his arm around Steven's shoulder. With a soft force, he lifted Steven to his feet and pointed to the now-huge room. "Take a moment, Steven. Look around. Things may not be as bad as you think."

It was then, as Steven beheld his house and the faces of his new family, he saw just how radical was his shift in perspective. It was like he was a toddler again, all the world huge and wondrous. But he still had his memories, his ideas and all his accumulated knowledge. The cloud of his funk dissipated as he finally understood why the gnomes just didn't care about human rules.

He turned to Moses. "What happens now?"

"We need to find a new home. But, before we set off, we want to throw you a welcome party."

He made a deal with his new leader: if Moses would learn how to play some Fats Domino on his concertina, then Steven would somehow make some seafood gumbo. They spat in their hands and shook on it.

**CHARLIE BROWN** is a writer and filmmaker originally from New Orleans. He lives in Los Angeles where he is working towards a Masters in Professional Writing from USC. His stories have been published in *The Menacing Hedge*, *Aethlon*, and others. His film *Angels Die Slowly* has been signed for distribution.

## Path of Stones

Robert Lowell Russell

The white stone hung on the tree like an ornament. It swayed on a length of twine as if blown by the wind, though the forest air was still.

"I've been waiting for you," I said to the stone.

In a nearby bed-and-breakfast, a woman slept on the bed we'd once shared in a bliss of skin and sweat. Lately, though, we'd hoped to wake to alone. Aiming at an open window, I blew a kiss. *See? Wishes do come true, my beauty. Never said I was a prince.*

The smell was faint at first, a cloying scent mixed with the stink of ash.

"Do we always have to do this?" I asked the stone.

The odor grew, invading my nose, seeping down my throat. When the witch's screams came, as they always do, I clapped my hands over my ears but couldn't keep her agony from my mind.

"Stop! I *want* to go!"

I snapped the rock from the string and rubbed it in my hands, improving a little on the polish of sand and time. I closed my eyes as a roar grew, filling the air, drowning the shrieks. Then came the laughter, a cackle like crows arguing over a meal. I ground my teeth until the laughter faded, then blinked in the morning sun. A 747 soared above, contrails streaking the sky.

I fought the compulsion to find whatever it was I'd lost. The stone would have me search for eternity. Instead, I watched the scars on my hands vanish.

Who was I this time? A thousand names whispered in my head. I nodded. *Abram. A name as good as any.*

The buildings nearby were painted in pastels. Conversations buzzed in English, Creole, and Spanish. No . . . not *proper* Spanish.

I sighed. *Cubanos*. South Beach. As the stink faded, I smelled the lightly salted air and the scent of sex, money, and *cafecito*.

A flyer plastered to a wall read: Room for Rent.

The wooden house was pink, not the pale pink of so many other homes in the suburban Miami cul-de-sac; it was the color of bubble gum and cotton candy. Chalk drawings of animals, flowers, and abstract patterns of dots and squares, swirls and stars covered its walls.

A boy, maybe ten, stood on the porch. "Are you here about the room?" he asked. He was blond with freckles.

"Is it still available?"

He stepped off the porch and came down the walk. "Yep. Come on in, I'll give you the tour."

"You're here by yourself?"

"Course not." He shook my hand and said, "Use a firm grip and always look into their eyes. My father says that shows sincerity. I'm John."

"Abram. You do the decorating?" I indicated the drawings.

"Those are Pearl's. They drive the neighbors nuts. The drawings wash away when it rains, but Pearl puts them right back up."

"I like them."

He smiled. "We buy chalk by the ton."

The boy led me inside. The room, like the house, was small but clean and smelled of potpourri. The furniture was an eclectic mix of antiques and IKEA. A portrait of a woman in an Indian headdress hung on the wall.

Tiger Lily had been little more than a girl when she'd married Peter. He didn't deserve her. I'd told her so, even as she held their son to her breast. She just smiled, that same sad smile that made me want to hold her. I played peek-a-boo with her boy as Pan bitched about something in the camp. He was always bitching. Time had scarred his mind, if not his body.

I noticed the stone in the clear water of a stream as I washed.

*Time to go.*

As I reached for the rock, Lily said behind me, "Farewell, Atticus. I hope you find her."

In the kitchen, a young girl, about eight, sat at the table. John, who'd excused himself from the room, stood behind her braiding her golden hair. The boy weaved three lengths together into a thick rope as the girl kicked her legs and sketched a castle with a purple crayon. Peanut butter toast and a half-eaten banana rested on the table.

"So you're the artist of the house?" I asked the girl.

She beamed and nodded.

"Pearl," said John, "I'd like to you to meet Mr. Abram."

"It's just Abram."

"He'll be staying with us a while," said John.

"But, your parents—"

Pearl held out her hand. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Abram."

I smiled and took her small hand in mine. "It's just Abram. John, where are your parents?"

He shrugged. "No idea."

"How is that possible? How are you staying here?"

"A house fell on the lady who used to live here, so we moved in."

"A house?"

"Yep. It was all over the news."

"Pearl," continued John, "you need to finish your breakfast before the bus—"

A rumble and screech were followed by a loud honk outside. John sighed and handed Pearl a paper bag marked with her name. She hopped off her chair and gave a little wave before scampering out the door.

"Pearl likes school," said the boy. "I don't care for it myself. It's just the same thing over and over." John pulled up a chair and motioned for me to join him. "So, Abram, what do you do?"

Bewildered, I sat. "A little bit of everything. I like to work with my hands."

"You ever do any carpentry?"

There's nothing quite like the whine and clang of a circular saw and the smell of fresh-cut lumber. John ripped worn planks from the fence separating the backyard from the canal beyond, then

hammered new planks in place as I cut a stack of 2x4s for the frame. We sweated together in the morning air, telling jokes.

During a break, I sipped sweat-salted water.

Eurus had spat sea spray from his mouth as we pulled the heavy oar together, our backs screaming at the relentless pace, like all the other men around us.

"Pater, my brother," he said, "We've crossed the world for one man's wife. We cross it again so Odysseus can return to his." Eurus grinned, the smile that made me cold, the one he wore in battle. "My wife is no great beauty, and she's a bit plump, but by the gods, the things she does to me in bed. Come with me to my home. My wife has a sister who'd be a woman now. We can build houses instead of horses and fuck our fat, ugly wives and play with our fat, ugly children!"

Eurus roared with laughter.

"I think I'd like that," I said.

His smile faded. "Aye. But it's not to be, is it, brother?" Eurus grimaced. "I cannot abide the thought of dying as food. Why must everything seek to eat us? The one-eyed giant. The witch and her pigs. Now these monsters beneath the waves."

"We should shit ourselves as they swallow us," I said. "Maybe they'll spit us out."

We howled.

Weeks later, as Eurus and the others floundered around me and salt water filled my mouth, I found the stone in the mud of the sea floor.

In the afternoon, Pearl bounced through the front door as the school bus lurched away.

"Look, Abram!"

Pearl's bag thudded to the floor, and she rummaged through it, presenting a spelling test with two gold stars.

I whistled. "*Two* stars? Congratulations!"

Pearl led me by the hand to the kitchen, explaining she was inviting me to dinner.

John and I sat at the table while she dumped packs of orange powder into a massive pot of mac 'n cheese, refusing every offer of assistance. Pearl shoveled dinner onto our plates, and we ate together, laughing at Pearl's diagnosis of Jeffy Fitzer, long absent from school: cooties, had to be.

After we finished, Pearl excused herself to do her homework. John said there was some old beer in the fridge and I could help myself. We talked as I downed a beer, then a second, then two more. Later, head throbbing, I swayed to the bathroom, images flashing in my mind.

"You OK, Abe?"

"Sure, Troll."

I vomited over the side of the bridge, then the troll handed me the bottle of single malt scotch. I took a drag and handed it back.

"Do you remember if you're married, Abe?" she asked. "With your *condition*?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

The troll took a swig. "When I'm finished here, I'm going to go home and have babies." She swayed in place, wagging her hips. She winked. "You know how much I love *kids*."

I rolled my eyes.

I remember she looked so old waiting on that bridge, waiting for the goats, waiting to die.

"Are you OK, Abram?"

I wiped the tears from my eyes. "Sure, John. I'm fine."

When I went to bed that night, the stone was there on the nightstand. I ignored it, gagging at the growing stench as I crammed a pillow over my head, trying to drown the screams. Eventually, I slept. The rock was gone by the morning.

In the glorious Saturday sun, Pearl searched for fairies around the flowers and trees. She pushed the plants apart, held still, then pounced, scrambling to catch whatever it was she'd seen.

"John, we should paint the fence now that it's finished," she called over her shoulder. "Maybe red and white stripes? Like candy canes."

"The neighbors will hate it," he said. "Sounds perfect."

The boy and I sat together, watching the hunt.

"John, I need to tell you something," I said. "And it's going to sound a little strange."

John held up his hand as Pearl approached us, her hands hidden behind her.

"Whatcha got there, little sister?"



"Open your mouth and close your eyes, and I'll give you a big surprise," she said.

"No way! I'm not falling for that again. Last time it was a snake!"

"I'll do it," I said. "I've tasted all kinds of awful things: bugs, worms, the gingerbread man. How bad could it be?"

Pain lanced through my head and my teeth ached. I felt like I'd swallowed cement.

"Think he'll be OK?" asked Pearl.

John nodded. "I think so . . . I can't believe we finished the whole thing."

Walls' "Great Wall of Ice Cream" was now a thin film of vanilla with traces of fudge. We sat at umbrella-covered tables outside the ice cream shop watching cartoons projected against the building. A crescent moon rose in the darkening sky. I closed my eyes, breathing the warm night air.

When I opened my eyes, the stone sat on an empty table.

"I like it here," I whispered. "Leave me alone . . . *please*."

I screamed as my skin burned and crows cackled.

I jolted from bed. The Indian woman in the portrait gazed at me with pity. *The pink house again? How?* A film of dried ice cream flaked from my face. The stone waited on the nightstand.

"You win," I said. "I'll go."

I took the rock and closed my eyes, waiting. Nothing. I rubbed its surface. Still nothing.

The kids were in the kitchen when I rushed in. "I won! I beat—"

"Just a little longer," Pearl said to John.

"She won't stop laughing," he said. Sweat glistened on the boy's face.

I set the stone on the table.

When Pearl saw the rock, she said, "Oh, thank God. Now we have them all." She pointed to the stone. "That's not yours, Abram, it's mine." She dug in a pocket then placed a second rock next to John. He produced a third, pushing it my way.

"Now we weave ourselves together faster than the stones can pull us apart again," said Pearl. "Abram . . . I'm sorry I made you eat that bug."

The children stood, clasped their rocks, and pressed their hands against mine.

"Wait!—" I screamed.

The world melted with the sweet stink, then the screams, then the cackle.

Doc blew his whistle. "Over the top, boys!" he yelled. "Give 'em Hell!"

Bergmanns rattled in the distance, slapping rounds into the mud. Dwarves barreled over the trench wall. One fell back, then another, and another. The air reeked of gas and gunpowder, piss and fear. I shook my head. White always got what she wanted: apples, a charming prince, genocide.

Something tugged my arm. Children?!!

John and Pearl shouted, "Abram, where's the stone?"

*The stone!* I'd held Happy's hand as he died, promising I'd mail the letter he had in his pocket, the pocket where I'd found the stone. The children and I scrambled through the muddy trench. When we

ducked around a corner, I found the little man's body, just where I'd left it. Three stones fell from his pocket.

Pearl pointed at the rocks one by one. "Mine. John's. Abram's. Are we ready?"

"How do you know about the stones?" I asked.

"I just do."

The children clung to me as we took the rocks.

When the laughter faded, a small house appeared around us. A girl in red hugged a gray-haired woman. A wolf lay split jaw to tail on the floor. A bloodied man held an axe as he steadied himself against a wall. Pearl swayed where she stood.

John touched her arm. "Pearl?"

She blinked and shook her head.

"Greta! You came back!" said the red girl.

Pearl smiled. "Hi, Red. May I see the basket you brought?"

In the basket three rocks waited for us.

Pearl pointed. "Mine, John's, Abram's."

We took the stones and the world twisted.

Soot coated a jumble of buildings. A gray haze colored the sky. I wondered aloud, "London?"

Pearl nodded. "A Dickensian interpretation of London, anyway. Can you feel the misery?"

I gaped.

"I'm not eight, Abram," she said. "Not really." She put her hand to her face and blushed. "I've kissed boys."

John swayed in the cobblestone street. A filthy, bearded man stalked toward him. "There you are, Johan," said the man. He tipped a tattered hat my way. "Beggin' your pardon, guv'nor. He's a wicked boy."

John jolted. "Under the hat," he said, pointing. "They're under his hat!"

The man's eyes grew wide as I rushed him and hurled him to the ground. I pressed my foot against his neck as Pearl removed the hat. Three rocks clattered to the street. Pearl pointed. "Mine, John's, Abram's."

When we took the stones, there was still the smell and the screams but now no laughter. "Stop! Stop! Stop it!" the witch raged.

In the swamps near Tanganyika, I helped the children through the waist-deep water. Near a house built of brick, a mud-slicked mountain of tusks and pink flesh waited on a patch of dry land. The pig had bought my silence with a stone the night he'd betrayed his brothers to the Big Bad.

Now he held out a trotter, hefting me from the waters. "You're younger, Ibrahim," he said. He took three white rocks from a pocket, then touched his jowl with a sigh. "A pity they can't turn time for *me*."

The children and I jumped again, and again, weaving our way through our journeys. Where once there'd been the one stone, we found three: three under a sleeping dormouse, three more in a pirate's treasure. We pried rocks from the mouth of a desiccated god in Cairo and argued with a grumpy elf for another three.

In time, we found ourselves splashing across a shallow stream toward a fence striped like candy canes. The gate stood open, and beyond sat the back of a pink house, its walls decorated with images of flowers and animals and pictures of candy and swirling lollipops. The tang of ginger filled the air.

I remembered the day Pearl and John—but those weren't their names—had come sprinting from the candy house. I'd run toward

my children as the witch screamed inside. Just before I reached them, the witch's voice had knifed into my mind. "Curse you. Curse you ALL!" And the world had blurred.

Now, we ran into the kitchen, our stomachs roiling at the stench of burned flesh. A golden cage dangled from the ceiling. A blackened, skeletal arm jutted from a roaring oven. The arm cracked, broke off, and then smashed to embers on the floor. A white stone skittered from the charred fingers then turned to ash.

"Is it over?" asked Hansel.

"No, we have to find her!" called Gretel as she ran through the house. Crows boiled aloft outside, arguing over crumbs strewn along a path disappearing into a wall of trees.

"Hurry," Gretel beckoned us. "Before we lose the trail!"

We bolted after her, hurdling lichen-covered logs, slipping and scrambling on the mossy path, shooing crows as we followed the meager trail. The forest smelled of decay, but the air rushing past my face was exhilarating in the dappled light. The trees were ancient, familiar.

In little time the crumbs were gone, but *now* we remembered the way. We charged past a pile of rotting logs and a worn stump, a rusted axe head still stuck in its rings. We came to a clearing with a small stone cottage at its center, the thatched roof in ruins. And through a crumbling doorway lay bones.

We'd found her at last.

Gretel rested wild flowers on a grave we'd piled high with white stones. The marker I'd carved read: Beloved Mother and Wife.

"I'm so sorry, children," I said. "Your mother wasn't well. I should have never let her send you away." I held them to me. "Why didn't you just *tell* me who you were?"

"The stones would have forced us away again," said Gretel.

"My father told me about witches, once," Hansel said, smiling. "When you're in a witch's house, take care what you touch."

"And you don't break a witch's curse," I said, nodding. "You unravel it."

**ROBERT LOWELL RUSSELL**, a native Texan, lives with his family in southeastern Ohio. He is a former librarian and current nursing student. He once aspired to be a history professor, but found writing about the real world too constraining. Rob likes to write about all sorts of things but frequently includes action and humor in his work. Not satisfied with writing stories of questionable content for adults, he's also started work on series of middle-grade books incorporating his love of not-so-super-heroes and toilet-humor. For links to more of Rob's stories (or to see him dressed like a ninja) visit: [robertlowellrussell.blogspot.com](http://robertlowellrussell.blogspot.com).



## On the cover:

### "CARNECUPULUS; DISMISSED MESSENGER OF CUPID" Daniel Langhans

**DANIEL LANGHANS** is originally from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and currently lives in Tempe, Arizona. He has a BFA from The School of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and Tufts University. With the involved nature of his profession as a full time Art Teacher, Daniel is

constantly working in a wide spectrum of mediums and concepts, but his favorites remain drawing and painting. A far cry from the lighthouse and beach scenes he grew up around in Cape galleries, his current work combines cute and cuddly characters with just a dash of creepy. Cartoons and pop culture icons with his natural twist are taking up residence in galleries and private collections widespread across the U.S., Germany, and Italy. Shop for art or browse his gallery at [www.tilreearthstudios.com](http://www.tilreearthstudios.com).

