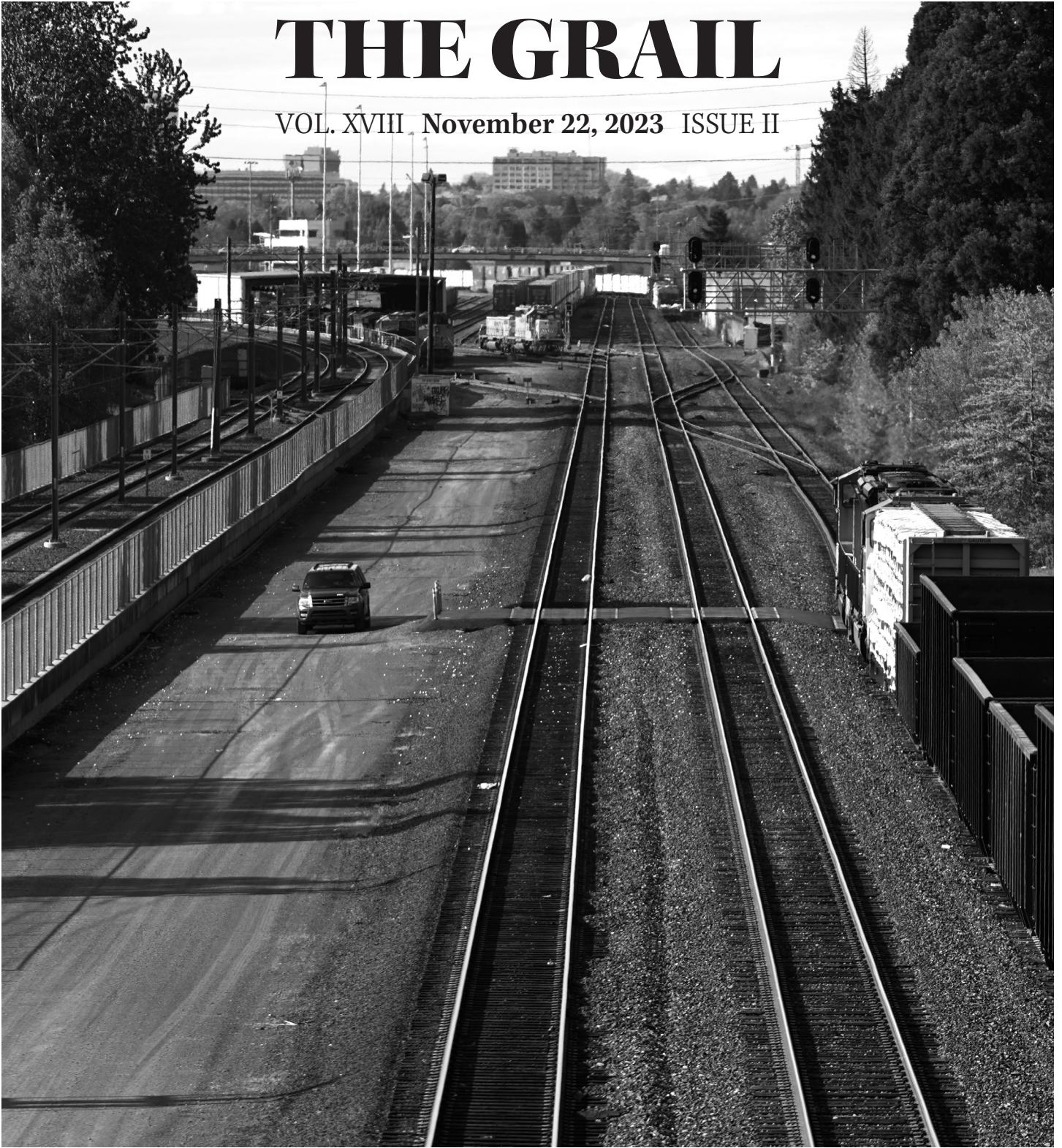


THE GRAIL

VOL. XVIII November 22, 2023 ISSUE II



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FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

We've had a lightbulb moment, so grab your screwdrivers and let's make this second Issue of The Grail Volume XVIII come to life, with the theme of invention! The semester may be winding down, but our gears keep turning to bring together content about all sorts of inventions, from the serious to the comical, the specific to the broad, the realistic to the fantastic— it's all here in this innovative Issue II.

Read poetry on the act of photography in Sasha Sasse's "The Detritivore" (3), and see what the Devil's been cooking up in Nadav Schul-Kutas's "The Hell Squeeze" (4). An Offbeat Poet ponders growing up in "Senior Photos/Adult Acne" (6), and you can take a peek at an inventor's process in Bailey Galt's "In the Workshop" (7). Tiago Beck embarks on an all-American ride

aboard the "Meat Train" (9), while a new angle on trains can be seen in photos throughout this issue, including on the cover, courtesy of Tucker R. Twomey.

We hope you enjoy the journey of transformation this issue takes you on, and stay tuned for our next issue with the theme of homecoming. With high school and college school spirit season upon us, and holidays fast approaching, let merry thoughts of your own version of home fill your head, and our next issue: HOMECOMING! Watch out for us on SB Info or on our website at reedthegrail.org for a link to add your submissions for our next issue! Until then, we hope you have a safe time, stay warm out there, and keep tinkering.

Warmly,

Care Paden, Adrian Keller Feld, Izzy Bresnan, Robert Bourbon, Inez Gallant, and Zach Mandel

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The Field Remembers

By TIAGO BECK

The craters are hardly visible now. The cracked earth of the great divots is covered by a layer of plant life. The tall yellow grass waves in the breeze, a bandage across the land. Ticks jump from stalk to stalk, frolicking in the light. Below the earth, gophers scurry back and forth in their tunnels, embarking on errands and family business. In the dips and holes, ferns create a miniature canopy over a carpet of mosses, further sheltering the scarred ground from the sky above.

The field remembers when harsh shapes of steel and flame streaked the sky, the whistle of their plummeting payloads setting the grass trembling in anticipation. Boots slammed down on the ground, squelching the ferns into the mud as they attempted to run, to escape the inevitable. Shouts filled the air. And then a boom, as the world shook, and the ground was scarred.

But that is done now. The scars are covered, healing bit by bit.

Among the covered craters stands one hill. It is not a particularly large or notable hill. A piece of rusty scrap metal has recently been pulled aside from the little door that it once hid. The door is circular, made of dullish grey metal, and buried up to its center. Behind the inwards-swinging door, old, reinforced brick walls line the inside of the hill, forming a dome beneath the earth. A set of wooden cabinets are built into the wall opposite the door, their once white paint stained to a dark brownish gray. The floor is dirt, dry and hard packed. It conceals cigarette butts once ground under boots, stained paper and wrappers, a dropped pen with ink long dried.

The field remembers when this room was filled with voices of fear. A legless corpse on a stretcher, wailing as if it were still alive. A blinded

man trying desperately to open the cabinets. A uniformed figure curled up by the wall, knocking her head slowly and repeatedly into the brick. Knock. Knock. Knock. A scream. Knock. The blind man dropped a glass. Crash. Knock. Knock. A distant explosion.

The sounds are gone now. While they are still remembered, their echoes have faded, even in the earth which holds them longer than most.

No plants grow under the hill, except for in the center of the room, where a single fern patch sprouts under a beam of light that shines through the top of the hill. This beam shines not through a window or from a conveniently placed spotlight, but through a hole, dug into the rain-and-time-weakened ceiling by a group of children trying to bury treasure.

The treasure lies near one of the walls, a cardboard box of stolen jawbreakers only half buried because the ground here is difficult to dig in and the children didn't have the patience for it. How could they, after all, when they had found such a cool new hideout? The children did not find the remains in the dirt. The children did not hear the sounds that had echoed in the hill. The children saw only what was here now, and what was here now was good. Their shovel is still planted next to the treasure, and sticks of several shapes and sizes have recently made their way into the stash by the cabinets.

It was the sticks that drew the attention of the gophers. A series of tunnels stretching under the field, connecting at three places to the dome, were home to the local gopher family. A mother, father, aunt, grandmother, uncle, and various assorted gopher children all lived together in the tunnels and were rather confused by the new

neighbors poking at their tunnels.

The gophers were timid at first, and they avoided the children. The children searched for the gophers but never managed to get close. The gophers stuck to the tunnels, and the children quickly dismissed them and ceased their attempts at stick-powered exploration. As time went on, though, curiosity got the better of both sides, and they sought to make contact. A kid left some apple slices for the gophers. The grandmother gopher brought another kid a worm. And slowly, the factions began to interact and to play.

As there are no children here at the moment, there are no gophers either, except for the uncle scrabbling at the sides of the treasure. But when the children return, there will be a vast sea of curious nibbling faces to greet them.

Throughout these events, the cabinet under the hill has remained locked, both the children and the gophers failing their attempts to open it. Its stained doors remain a mystery to them.

The field remembers when this cabinet was one of instruments of life and death. A syringe rested next to a pistol. Knives and scalpels lined the shelves. Blood shone on the stainless steel and colored the glass trays that held it.

The tools are buried now. Rainwater, moving drip by drip with the force of a flood, seeped into the back of the cabinet and collapsed it. Where once the shelves were, now a new harmonious kingdom has formed. Moss makes its home, forming little cottages and towns for itself within the dirt. Earthworms stay the night at the moss towns, a pitstop on their lifelong journey. Delving down from above to explore this new land, roots take hold, providing a new stability for the earth below and the plants above. If the children and gophers were to ever open the cabinet, they would not be impressed by the new contents, but for the field there is nothing that could make it happier.

The field rests easy below the occasional chattering of the animals and plants, great and small, above and beneath.

The Detritovore

By SASHA SASSE

“Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events... The omnipresence of cameras persuasively suggests that time consists of interesting events, events worth photographing.”

—Susan Sontag, *In Plato’s Cave*

silently it slithers
 serpentine
 —satanic

leaves
 alliteratively a-rustle
 it carves a wake- (funerary?)
 hence-lifetime
 of snapped twigs
 & naturally
 dreams

a faint gleam
 lunar
 (thus portentous)

light on its flesh
 or through it:
 translucent

its latest meals laid bare
 it swallows
 moon
 leaves
 trail

translucency
 verily, it is an ouroboros:
 sisyphian self-digestion:
 an act of mythic
 collaboration

it shits
 them all out
 corroded

in consumptive vitriol
 essences extracted
 for your viewing pleasure



Photograph: Steadfast Supports by Tucker R. Twomey

The Hell Squeeze

By NADAV SCHUL-KATAS

CONTENT WARNING: MILD BODY HORROR

Hell was complicated. Being entirely underground meant that there was a finite amount of space. As more and more people went to Hell, overcrowding was inevitable. The Devil's solution was straightforward: every time a new person went to Hell, it expanded. It's elegant and humans balk at the concept (always a nice bonus). Sometimes, a bored demon would torture a physicist by showing them how Hell expansion works and not allowing them to tell anyone.

Angels and mortals won't tell you this, but demons like rewarding good behavior. Torturing your fellow hellmates is fair game, but demons will find ways to make your torture crueller if you waste their eternal time. The Fallen Angel himself built a handful of infinitely-stocked cigar lounges for when the humans got breaks (breaks help prevent them from becoming numb to the torture). Smoke any of the cigars and you'll have maggot eggs lining your mouth and throat. It's pretty basic, but the real kicker came when he told the humans that he made a dozen cigars that can bring people back to life. Angels can't lie. A few hours later, some woman from Heresy was floating up all the circles on a beam of light. To this day, you can't go half an hour without seeing people hacking up maggots.

The other 11 cigars are in the Devil's desk drawer.

Torture devices like that are excellent, but developing personalized torture devices for an ever-increasing number of people is a bit of a logistical problem. For a long time, demons would just dip people into the Pit of Eternal Fire, but that meant that they pretty much had to ignore small infractions (which are their favorite to punish) and don't have any way of rewarding good behavior.

While the Devil's cigar trick was clever, his real stroke of genius was the Dynamic Evil Valuation In Length (DEVIL) system, which took human behavior and translated it into a length. That length was added or subtracted from that person's Hell expansion radius. Good behavior made your corner of Hell roomier, while bad behavior would have you screaming into your hellmate's mouth. And it was *collective*. Regardless of how much space they had, the humans spent their eternity wondering if they were getting screwed over by some crappy person they'd never met. Needless to say, the Greed and Wrath people hated it. Before the DEVIL system, all the demons had left the nationalism branch of Wrath to let the humans torture each other forever. The demons came back for a little bit, but only to watch what would happen as their little thunderdome started to shrink. It was bad (by which I mean good (by which I mean highly entertaining)).

That was the first sign of the problem.

Hell was getting smaller. *Way* smaller. No one noticed at first. Then, it seemed like a fluke — or maybe an error with either the Hell expansion or DEVIL system. Things got checked and double-checked and everything was in order. The problem was the humans.

They were up to something.

Remember how bad behavior could shrink your expansion radius? Apparently they'd coordinated to all get their radii as low as possible. They'd agreed to be bad. The Devil didn't understand *why* they would want to do that, but he knew one thing for certain: whenever humans got together like this, someone ended up in a lot of trouble. Maybe it would be him, maybe it would be them, maybe it would be the folks in Heaven. The Devil's weap-

on is temptation, and even he couldn't resist letting this play out just to see who would take the fall.

Soon enough, none of the demons had to work anymore. Not like there was anything they could do within the compressed throngs of people. Pushing and kicking and gasping sweaty air, the crowds were squeezed tighter. Words were lost amongst the noise. The air between bodies disappeared. The edges of people pressed against one another, becoming wrinkles in a single, screaming disc. People cannot die again in Hell. Instead they compress beyond mortal limits, bodies stretching vertically, blood swelling into any limbs lifted above the sinful masses.

And then

THWUP

Like a great cavernous cannon, the only part of Hell left was a shrinking tunnel pointed straight towards the entrance. The humans, the demons, the cigar lounges, everything jettisoned out into the mortal world and scattered across the lands. By the time the Devil had dusted himself off, the High Seraph was already waiting, shading itself with its six feathered wings.

"What the Heaven is this?" the angel asked.

"I... um... uh... Hell peace?"

"Hell peace?"

"Hell peace. It's like world peace, but... in Hell."

The High Seraph glanced around. "Doesn't look very 'in Hell' to me."

"Well, it was in Hell. Initially. My point is they all put aside their differences. They worked together! No one on Earth can do that!"

"That's great, and I'll appreciate that later. Right now, I have to kill all these people again and you have to make sure that they can't get out of Hell *again*."

The Devil stopped to do some mental math. "I like the idea, but I think most of the people aren't going back to Hell."

The High Seraph narrowed its eyes.

"I mean, think about it: everyone's back to life, so they get a second chance at judgment. And Hell peace. Hell. Peace. Most sins are small potatoes compared to that. Plus, you can fight with your spouse every day and still get purgatory. I'd be surprised if a lot of people *did* go back."

They both said nothing for quite a while. The High Seraph's wings twitched.

The Devil traced a glowing red circle with his heel. "So... I think I'm going to head out. I've got a lot of cleaning up to do. Back home, I mean. I'll be sure to take the demons with me. And the cigar lounges. But, um... good luck with everything! It was nice seeing you again. It's certainly... been a while."

The High Seraph said nothing.

It was a good day to be the Devil.

Senior Photos/Adult Acne

By AN OFFBEAT POET

I think maybe I want to keep them,
 These weepy red constellations of chin and cheek.
 But my grandfather has already retouched them out,
 Airbrushed the skin flat and smooth.

 He says I will want to remember my face the way it will be,
 That in a year my constellations will smooth to stratus cloud,

But my older brother still gets the facewash that bleaches towels
 And my mother talks about the bump she found in her ear,

Red, greasy, ugly,
 Real, alive

And

By AN OFFBEAT POET

+ I am a dangerous trend
 A sign of adolescent miscalculation
 Or else, a dark clawed thing

+ I am a shadow on the wall—
 They have never seen my face
 (I don't think they want to)

+ I am a talking point
 An illustrative picture
 A "what's wrong with"

+ I am a *mistake* is what they say
 They are telling each other that I am a mistake

+ I am silent in their stories
 When they talk to you about me, notice this—
 In their stories, I never open my mouth

+ I have learned to be sweet + good at this dance.
 They would love me if they met me,
 Smile at my elegant mask
 + call me the wrong thing when I turned my back—

But I am a dangerous trend
 + I am a shadow on the wall
 + I am still going to be here in the morning



Passage by Tucker R. Twomey



In the Workshop by Bailey Galt

Network

By SOFIA POMEROY

if we can be described
 as a network of nodes
 inked pairwise
 and graphed in black

then I fear,
 that when the threads are tied
 and factors drawn
 I will be left without
 hanging
 factors clustered
 loops of friends made
 the ocean web coalesced
 in knots of knowing
 of smaller circles
 bound together
 without
 me

I

alone.

What if,
 I am but a loose tie,
 to call when I am needed,
 an inoffensive hand
 in exchange for a kind word,
 a convenience
 but not a dear friend

What if,
 It wouldn't mean much to you
 that was the problem, in fact
 if when you all were listing
 each person you adore
 and I was there
 I was right there
 you didn't see me
 you didn't know me
 until I had to ask
 to say "Hey"
 "don't forget me"

I fear I am a whisper in the whirlwind
 and that I have to yell to be seen
 and how?
 if I am seen at all
 who am I
 what am I
 Am I—to you?
 am I?

Poem #1

By ZEDWARD SMITH

Good bye rayon, yeggs, coach-lamps, milkmen, icemen, horse-cars, moontowers, light-buttons, plug hats, lamplighters, laundry vans, carriage-blocks, argand lamps, fly netting, Hearth Spaniels, Holland shades, mint juleps, castor oil, Latrobe stoves, Dundrearies, haircloth chairs, electroliers, Isinglass, Vitrolite, Bombazine, Mattei cures, uncut books, carpet rakes, Teletype, parquet floors, cycloramas, Bayard Taylor, square pianos, carpet-beaters, Pullman Porters, Gladstone collars, Alger novels, smoking jackets, pulling doorbells, phosphate soda, knicker-bockers, lina-crusta, army bugles, police whistles, magic lanterns, chromo-lithos, boxcar handbrakes, 'Guffey readers, Brussels carpets, Rogers sculptures, Tableaux Vivant!

Just kidding, I'm taking you all with me forever.

Meat Train

By TIAGO BECK

Jenkins had always said that baloney wasn't a good foundation for a railway system. The sausages couldn't stand up to the pressure of the tracks, it didn't burn hot enough to be good fuel, and obviously they couldn't serve that kind of thing to the passengers. Vince ignored him, and signed the deal anyway, confirming the transfer of five hundred tons of baloney into the Jiang-Costa Rail Company's storehouses, and the transfer of five million dollars out of their coffers.

When the ungodly monstrosity known as JCR 53, quickly dubbed "The Meat Train," was put on the tracks, Jenkins still maintained that this was a terrible idea. Passengers lined up on the platform as usual, checking watches, balancing screaming babies and dragging around luggage. The Chicago to New York train was late, as each of the watch-checkers noted with judgement. They turned as one to check the station clock, winding their watches in unison. The clock confirmed their suspicions of tardiness.

The finely tuned ears of the baby-balancers, conditioned to note even the beginnings of a scream or tummy rumble from a mile away, heard

a sound from around the bend. Something was moving down the tracks, but it did not seem to make the familiar sound of metal on metal that a train would normally produce as it braked before a station. It was a similarly familiar sound, though not one that they had ever expected to hear here. It was the sound of meat grilling.

When it came around the corner, most of the passengers did not see it immediately. Conditioned train riders, they faced directly towards the tracks as they waited for the train to pull up in front of them. The children had yet to adopt this tradition, so they were the first to witness it, though what exactly they witnessed was a bit difficult for them to understand. A tube of baloney, severed into connected parts like a chain of sausages, was mounted on a set of hardened sausage skin wheels. To the sides of the wheels, flaps of meat had been lowered against the wheels and the tracks as brakes. The sound of the flaps grilling from the friction grew louder as the Meat Train approached, as did the smell. At the front of the train, steam puffed from the top of the sausage engine. The first car appeared to be half gone, the upper half of the sausage simply missing. This

open view revealed the inside to be mostly hollow, a thick wall of meat surrounding an open interior. Clambering around on top of the car, a group of workers dug into the remaining meat with shovels, scooping it up and carrying it into the engine car in chunks.

The train pulled up to the platform with a long, drawn-out squelch. The sizzling of the brake pads maintained a steady timbre as ropes of intestine pulled them upwards and off the wheels. The meaty car doors opened. Vince stepped out of the engine car, holding a bullhorn to his mouth. He was a small wiry man with short thick black hair sticking straight up. A limp mustache was plastered across his upper lip and his eyes shone brightly in a mildly unsettling manner. He wore a three-piece suit with long coattails.

“Greetings, passengers!” Vince’s voice reverberated down the platform. The passengers in question paid him no mind, transfixed by the food fiend before them.

“Please refrain from sitting in the forward car, as it is currently being harvested for fuel,” Vince continued. “Those of you going to Indianapolis, if you could sit in the second car so that we can begin burning it once you get off that would be wonderful. Those of you going to Columbus, third car, Pittsburgh, fourth. You can figure it out.”

The passengers didn’t move.

“Let’s move people, come on, we’ve got a schedule to keep.”

The gawking passengers were shoved out of the way by the luggage-draggers, eager to acquire spacious seats for their precious belongings. The others followed soon after, logic and gag reflex overcome by the commuter instinct to get on first.

As the passengers boarded, Jenkins leaned out of the engine car, sweat soaking through the

bandana he had tied around his face. Jenkins was a tall heavysset man. He wore a brown cap over his curly black hair. A pair of work pants held up with suspenders and an oil-stained white shirt with the sleeves rolled up almost to the shoulders completed his outfit. His eyebrows were a bit high, giving him a constant look of worry or surprise.

“Vnse, ve bn lking at duh ful lies—” Jenkins mumbled.

“Jenkins,” Vince said, “I told you, I can’t hear anything you say through that thing. Get over it and take it off already.”

Jenkins groaned and pulled down the bandana. He gagged as the smell of the train hit his nostrils again.

“Vince, I’ve been looking at the fuel supplies,” he said. “If my math is right, we’re going to run out of train before we hit Philly, much less New York.”

Vince raised an eyebrow. “That’s not what you said this morning.”

“I know what I said this morning, but while I may be a ferroequinologist, I am by no means a carnologist. I didn’t expect the meat to burn well, but the efficiency is below my lowest estimates.”

“Can we sell the meat we’ve already burned along the way for extra funds?”

Jenkins shook his head. “It’s burnt to a crisp by the time we’ve used it. You asked me to design an engine, not an oven. What would you use the money for anyway?”

“To buy more meat,” Vince said. “I don’t think that more meat is the solution to our problem. Besides, we wouldn’t even be able to get our hands on it. Meat and supplies are hard to find

this far west. I still don't even know how you managed to get this much meat in the first place, much less why you're wasting it on something like this."

Vince looked off towards the horizon.
"Jenkins, I have a dream."

Jenkins ducked back into the engine cab.

"My dream may seem odd to some," Vince continued, paying no mind to his lack of audience. "But if I wish to cross this country in a large baloney-based horror, a horrible melding of flesh and machine based on an ill-advised purchase I may or may not have made while I was drunk, is that not the most perfect example of the American dream?"

"Hey meathead," Jenkins called from the engine car. "Get in here, the engine's heating up and we need to get moving."

Vince entered the car and the train began moving once again, pulling out from the station as it truly began its journey.



Cold Crossing by Tucker R. Twomey

Balloon & Its Child

By SASHA SASSE

she pours excess life
into its limp rubber body
breath, not helium;
she has not learned ambition
so she cannot ward against it
she transmutes air to waxen wings
— how grounded, to make a toy
of her spent vitality

it shudders with each breath
terrified of vacuous substance
of implanted purpose
she is only finished
when its skin strains to burst
a puff or a poke away
from violent oblivion
she ties it shut, admitting
no further contribution

the balloon is grateful,
after a bit of play;
it would collect dust
without her
better to be made
waste than not at all
it delights at every smack:
the pure joy of physics,
the relief of masochism

the balloon cannot distinguish
abandonment and negligence
a matter of words
the result is the same:
she throws it to the wind
up and away it goes,
safe from her,
and lonely

will it deflate
before it pops
will it be too high up
for her to notice
or to care

Poem #2
By ZEDWARD SMITH

A slimy web, compacted
in a little stick of flesh
eager, springing out
childhood school
laughter and then crying
on the streets and the apartments
connecting, reaching out
until, stretched across the universe
knotted with the rest
the sun of life sinks into dark velvet
and it falls limp.

What is the shape of it all?
The web of webs,
a net? or a twine ball?
A blight ever spreading its rash
across the skin of the cosmos?
or perhaps a hothouse garden
the tentacle curling in on itself
like the frond of a fern?

All I know is
across the vast expanse
by fortune or luck
our webs have become entangled