



COLD WAS THE GROUND

by Scott Stealey

DIRT WAS ALL OVER THE PATIO.

Porgo had shoveled about three feet of earth out from the condo building's backyard patch of grass and didn't seem concerned about making a mess. He wore a yellow hard hat and a white sleeveless t-shirt stuck with sweat to his back. Two bags of pre-mix concrete sat on each side of him like tiny game pieces. Gina watched him from her balcony. There was no work order for the dig and it had to be Porgo's mistake.

The backyard's square patch of grass looked like a board game, mowed in a manically patterned set of diagonal lines, like someone, probably Dale, Gina thought, had pushed the lawnmower the way you would a vacuum over a rug. The sun was just a little pink cold sore on the lip of the horizon. The dawn and the humidity gathered over all the shrubs and garbage bins and parked cars and left a thin flaky shine. "It's like glazed doughnuts out there," Gina's mother would say during weather like this.

Gina drank her tea and considered what would become of Porgo once the foreman found out about him digging in the wrong building's backyard. All over the neighborhood holes were being dug for the newer developments. The huge homes and buildings were constructed suddenly, in the span of a few weeks, bursting into the world fully formed and armored, some even with stone pillars, and they all needed to patch into the electric lines and pipes in the ground. Gina considered this. Not all electric lines are between poles and towers. The internet is below. This was discussed at her condo board meeting, when Dale suggested all 16 condo owners just stop paying for the routers and service providers and simply steal the internet out of the air. *Right out of the air!*

Gina disagreed, and thought the internet was a service and should not be free. It was a debate that went on across the world, but there in the laundry room/fitness center basement of her condo building, Gina felt that the argument became a battle of two separate wills consigned by time, and hers seemed stagnant against the progressive force of Dale's.

Dale said information was free. "Information is not free," Gina said, "and either way, what we're talking about is just a means to information. I'm not saying we pay for the information. I'm saying we pay for the means." Some of the other condo owners mumbled to one another. Gina was comfortable with how things were already being done. Bills came in the mail for services, those services worked well and there were very few complaints about the state of the utilities in the condo building. All the new construction going on around the neighborhood was shaping a strange sense of resistance in residents already there, a desire to halt all of this speeding change. The future was not to be rushed, the faces of the condo residents all seemed to say, and Gina wore this face whenever she looked out at the neighborhood from her balcony.

The new developments made the neighborhood appear lopsided in history, undecided, between time periods, a few of the old wood-and-siding duplex houses set stubbornly between monster structures with flat hanging roofs and shiny bricks and wood-latticed hottub dens above their garages.

Dale, his combed-back, dyed-black hair and sideburns gleaming under the track lights, quieted all tempers at the board meeting by putting it to a vote. The vote was close, but Gina lost. She felt small if she did nothing, so she announced, as people went back to filling out work orders for the maintenance men, "You know, many people, lots of people, pay for their internet to come through the ground. Like your water. We pay for our water."

Gina didn't know why Porgo was digging a hole in the backyard, since it couldn't have been for the internet. Her building now was stealing the internet from a nearby coffeshop's wi-fi. Maybe the newer developments needed a tube below for their internet service. They were the good ones; they were right not to take the internet for free. It is a service. Porgo, she concluded, must be digging the hole to patch into their internet tubes. But why, Gina worried, hadn't this been brought up at the condo board meeting?

Porgo was alone on this early morning dig. There was no other crew or any mechanical-jawed vehicle around him. Gina thought about the day laborers who walked around the sidewalk and back to the

razed lots. Noticeably overworked, expressionless, almost like drones. They never said hello to her. Often they littered their hamburger wrappers off in the weeds beside the curbs.

Porgo was the only one of the workers in the neighborhood she had met. He had approached her and introduced himself to her days before as an exercise for his local English as a Second Language class. His first name was Witold and his last name was a long Polish last name with many letters neither he nor Gina could accurately remember—Porgozelichemski, something like that—but the first five letters spelled "Porgo," they agreed, so that is how he referred to himself, and with a warm tone of voice expected that of others, too.

Porgo walked with a sort of shuffle, one stride longer than the next. He had blond hair festooned with cowlicks, turning it up like a troubled sea, and a youthful, unflappable quality to him. He reminded Gina of a boy she might have crushed on in high school for being so lost in his imagination. Porgo's English was accented and clipped, and he fumbled some basic rules, but he never mispronounced anything. He gushed about how he was getting the best grades in his ESL class, how the teacher had told him this. They were doing all sorts of fun projects in his class. They had gone out to the local bar, the Pistachio, and ordered different cocktails and appetizers, all in perfect English.

Gina was impressed by Porgo's pride, the ease that happiness came over his face. She liked him immediately, and was not offended, as she might have been with someone else's pride. Someone like Dale, who stole the internet from out of the air with pride, a vagrant smugness to his face. Porgo didn't seem interested in what he deserved, only what was most important. Every man, Gina thought, had his own peculiar way of proving things to himself, of willfully not letting himself down.

She put her moccasin slippers and terrycloth robe on and walked downstairs to investigate the dig. The screen door snapped shut behind her and Porgo stopped and turned to look at her. She was 34, single, and standing outside of her condo building. The mug for her tea was not a mug at all; it was a silver cylinder that topped a skinny missile of a thermos. She suddenly felt bad for taking Porgo's coworkers to be drones and unfriendly litterbugs. They probably just didn't speak the language. Maybe they weren't taking ESL classes like Porgo, maybe they were just getting used to the new language in their own way, total immersion, a fever of sounds quickly becoming little Post-It-size expressions until certain phrases stuck. Which was one way of doing it, albeit a way not as ambitious as Porgo's. She moved to apologize to him, to declare she didn't mean to bother him about the hole.

Porgo acknowledged the hole with a nod into the space between them.

"Why are you digging this hole?" asked Gina. "I am burying something in your ground," said Porgo.

"For a new development?"

"No, I am burying on my own. This is why so early."

"What are you burying?"

"Nothing yet. Small hole still. Gina, I don't want trouble."

"Why this patch of grass?"

"I like this patch of grass."

"I do too."

"So you won't tell on me?"

"Well what are you going to bury?"

Porgo pointed at a small round black object that was placed delicately in one of the bags of pre-mix concrete. It was oblong and looked like a oversize shiny black egg, with some strange red writing on it.

"What is that?" said Gina, now pointing herself.

"A space capsule." His eyes seemed shy as they scanned up. Gina's pointing finger trembled, like she was trying to remember how to play certain chords on the piano, which she hadn't done in years.

"Is that word?" Porgo asked.

"Oh. I see," she said. "Do you mean a *time capsule*?"

"Time capsule."

"Yes."

"Time is word." He seemed slightly embarrassed.

Gina turned her shoulders toward him. "*Time capsule*. Something to explain our world to future people. You must be thinking of the time capsules we sent off into space."

Porgo just stared, an energetic confusion set over his face. "Space" and "time" were abstract concepts that went together, but because of the difficulty in explaining them, something must have gotten mixed up in the difficulty of translation. Gina herself knew that in Spanish they used the same word for "sky" that they did for "heaven." That had to mess up a few people. Gina told Porgo more about the time capsules shot into space. NASA had shot them up. "Into outer space," Gina said.

Porgo still appeared to be baffled. She did her best to explain.

"There's a record on one of the time capsules. It's got Glenn Gould playing Bach and a blues song by Blind Willie Jefferson on it. It has 'Hello' in 50-some languages."

"Blind Willie."

"There are animal sounds on it, too, like dogs barking and crickets. And train noise."

"Train noise?"

"Yes," said Gina.

"A record?"

"Well, yeah, like an actual record, that you can play on a record player. It's a hope record. Hoping intelligent life out there will find it and play it on their space record player, light years from now." Porgo still was silent. Gina said, "But a record too, yes, of human culture."

Though clearly uncertain of the language, Gina thought, Porgo looked at her with admiration for what she knew, what she could tell him; he listened. Gina didn't get listened to that often, not at work or at her condo board meetings. Here she was a master of the English language, a native user, a teacher, an orator. There was a pleasant lull in their talking. The rising sun streaked a cloud orange and bestowed a purple underbelly on it.

Finally Porgo said, "Fried mac 'n' cheese balls."

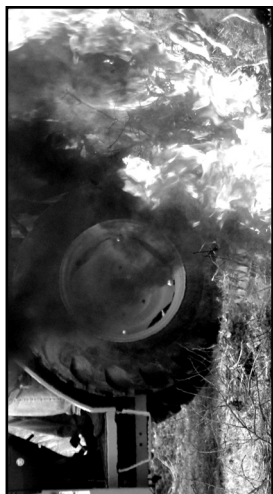
"What's that?"

"In time capsule. I put in fried mac 'n' cheese balls."

Gina laughed. Porgo understood. Fried mac 'n'

Scott Stealey's "Cold Was the Ground" has us more excited about story than we've been in quite a while. Gina, protagonist, a rather lonely condo dweller/office manager, strikes up a fleeting friendship with one Porgo, an Eastern European construction worker who is burying on her property what Gina takes for a *time capsule*. But the metaphorical fix is in—Porgo, an ESL student, may be leading Gina in directions she can't exactly get her head all the way around. Enjoy. Chicago writer Stealey is editor of the *Please Don't* online mag (plzdnt.com) and has been published in several venues. In other news, THE2NDHAND launched the *Brick* reading series in Nashville in March to join the Chicago-based *So You Think You Have Nerves of Steel?* monthly event. Keep tuned to BrickReadingSeries.com for news of the next installment, likely in late June, of the THE2NDHAND/Keyhole Press coproduction. Brick takes place at the East Nashville location of Portland Brew coffeehouse. Tune to THE2NDHAND.com for Nerves of Steel info (every third Sunday of the month at Whistler in Logan Square). June 20, catch Stealey, along with Matt Bell (Wolf Parts) and Michael Czyniejewski (Elephants in Our Bedroom).

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cheese balls could be the highest mark of the human culture. They could end up in a time capsule. Gina felt pride, pleased to have crossed the language barrier. She felt helpful, she feels the layers of her tired, workaholic self loosen like sheets of ice falling from a hanging gutter. Porgo laughed, too, but it was clear something still weighed on his mind. He pointed at the hole he had dug for a moment. “Gina,” Porgo said.

“Yes?” Gina beamed beneath the purple cloud underbelly that was her heart.

“Why don’t you come help me finish with burying tomorrow? I will have hole big enough by then.”

“This time tomorrow?”

“Yes, early.”

“OK, Porgo.”

He kissed the top of her hand. Gina felt his dry bottom lip drag against her skin for an instant. Porgo took his bags of dusty pre-mix concrete in one hand and the oblong black time capsule in the other, cradling it in the crick of his arm, and walked out from the backyard.

Men were strange creatures, Gina thought, but none had ever kissed her hand. She went inside, taking the stairs two by two. Her old photos or cards wouldn’t be special enough for a time capsule. She considered the remote control for her TV but didn’t want to get a new one, and electronics and batteries were a bad idea anyhow. Most of her CDs all felt like fads that the future people wouldn’t be able to make sense of. And a book might be too heavy, take up too much space. She wished she had held on to the little horse figurines she used to collect when she was a child. Those seemed more direct and, most importantly, small. She went to the office that morning with a calm confidence that something for the time capsule would turn up there.

GINA’S JOB WAS TO ORDER office supplies for the other workers. Her colleagues were very picky and about their paper clips and steno pads and telephone receiver cradles. They often ran out of things. Gina was paid well for this important responsibility.

As Gina was hunting around in her drawers for possible time capsule items, her boss Dixie approached her, holding a ballpoint pen in her fist. Gina took a deep breath and a fetched a sip of tea from her mug.

“I’m assuming you know I hate these pens,” said Dixie. “I chew on them, and they fall apart. All ballpoints do. Even their caps fall apart, if you put those on the ends as a chew-guard. Sometimes my spit even ends up in them, gets on a memo.”

“I can order you some tougher pens,” said Gina. Dixie’s face didn’t seem satisfied. “Or you could stop chewing your pens.”

Dixie wore a tight white blouse and a brown half-sweater cut oddly to only cover her rib cage. It was hardly a sweater at all but on Dixie it gave off a sort of added authority, a sense of self-awareness of her whole body. The sweater made Gina tense.

“I’m assuming you know I have an oral fixation habit,” said Dixie. “That’s not something you just stop, Gina.”

Dixie also had a habit of starting most of her sentences by assuming that someone already knew something about her or something to do with her. Her tone was strange and expectant, like Marie Antoinette dumped into a cubicle. She picked up a highlighter from Gina’s desk and said, “These highlighters come in yellow, too. I just can’t read a section of a report that’s highlighted in hot pink. I’m assuming you know other associates have had this same problem.”

“I will only order yellow ones from here on out,” Gina said. Gina had ordered the pink highlighters. She had been practical, chosen a variety of colors from the large catalogue, but not practical enough.

“Excellent,” said Dixie. She shifted her posture and leaned on Gina’s desk. Dixie was only slightly older than Gina, but her face was hardened by a maximum amount of pressure in that small time. Dixie also had a cold sore smeared with concealer so it looked like a little dried worm just above her top lip.

“I’ve had a really rough afternoon,” Dixie said. “It’s not just that I don’t like pink. Not liking pink didn’t make it a rough day.”

“Something besides pink.”

“I’m assuming you know about the Carrington account,” Dixie said. Gina didn’t, but she turned a warm face toward Dixie. She thought of Porgo, and how he had listened to her. Dixie continued, “Well. It’s a mess.” Gina asked if she could help, and Dixie’s face softened. “I was thinking of going out nearby after work, maybe grabbing a cocktail at the Pistachio.”

Gina nodded, unsure if this was an invitation.

“Come on out for a drink tonight. This place has

good drinks and live music for Happy Hour.”

“Sure, yes,” said Gina.

Before they left at five o’clock sharp, Gina slipped a pink highlighter into her pocket. It wasn’t the best time capsule piece, but it would work. Not everything is a sign, Gina thought. And while some signs are there, they might not always be for you.

THE PISTACHIO WAS APTLY named. Every large varnished table was adorned with a bowl of nuts. The amber light from the wall sconces was intimate. On the walls below the sconces small receptacles were fastened for discarded pistachio shells. Against the back wall sat a small stage, a heavy wooden riser maybe six inches high. Gina craned around the bar and saw Dale from her condo building setting up some musical equipment, hunched over and running cables through his hands in a frustrated manner, like a magician with a long set of tied scarves. Dale just kept pulling cables, the ends never seeming to come. Gina turned her back to the stage and drank gimlets and chatted with Dixie about her upcoming meeting with Porgo and the time capsule.

“I’m assuming you know I think there’s nothing distinctive about this time in history,” said Dixie, her cold sore pressing up against her gimlet glass and leaving a brown smear. “There’s no one object that could tell anyone from the future about what a pain in the ass everything is these days.”

Gina was more optimistic. She pulled the shell of a pistachio back with her fingernail. She thought about the shell’s shape resembling Porgo’s time capsule. Dixie was busy listing off objects that to her had no business being in a time capsule. She had finished off several gimlets before Gina even got through her first.

“Dental floss. Legos. Anything from the Disney Store. Plastic silverware,” she said. “Ooh, real innovations. There’s no sign of the times. Look what we’ve accomplished. Ipods and Blackberries.”

“No electronics,” interrupted Gina. “The batteries will decay. It won’t work when they dig it up.”

“OK,” said Dixie. “OK then—see? There’s nothing to demonstrate human progress. See? We are in the height of our evolution, and all we have are these little dinky things that run on batteries.” She fished out her Blackberry from her yellow purse and then immediately dropped it. It fell to the floor but it was OK because it had a rubber case around it. Dixie sat back up in her seat and said, “They don’t even invent these things with a rubber casing. That’s another thing altogether.”

Dale’s band began to play on the stage. Dale was the singer and guitar player. The only other member of the band was a drummer, who looked about sixteen and wore a tank top with huge armholes. Dale looked at Dixie and Gina sitting at their table against the wall. Except for a few old drunks at the bar who had their backs to him and a couple of busboys standing around the door to the kitchen, the ladies were his band’s only audience. Gina could see the humiliation in his face. Dale strummed his strings harder and faster. The young drummer tried to keep up with Dale, but it didn’t sound like they had practiced much together.

In the spirit of the music, Dixie scooped up some of the empty pistachio shells and flung them at Dale during his second song. The shells landed near his feet and his four guitar pedals. Dixie had an arm.

Dale had a good job making websites, but this was what he really wanted to do, be a rock man. Something inside Gina made her feel soft for Dale, something warm and coagulated and misunderstood, like a slug. She smiled as Dale tore into this two- and three-chord rage. Dixie flung more pistachio shells at him. He strummed his chords faster and faster, and the teenage drummer played a simple beat and looked off to his side at nothing. Dale shouted some lyrics that might have been understood if he wasn’t pressing his lips firmly against the microphone. The song went rapidly along in its structured chaos until out of nowhere the guitar roared in volume and pitch, a wail of feedback noise shrieking like a small dog stepped on in the dark. Dale grabbed his hand and Gina saw something small fly through the air and land near their table on the floor. Onstage, Dale writhed in pain, the white body of his guitar now spattered with blood. Dale must have ripped off one of his fingernails, Gina thought. The teenage drummer continued for another measure, then stopped. He scratched his head and walked over to the bar.

Dixie drunkenly giggled and Gina went to the bar to ask if they had band-aids. They didn’t. She took some cocktail napkins and moved to bring them to Dale, lying on his side, rolling meekly on the stage.

As she crossed the floor she saw a guitar pick. That’s what must have flown from Dale’s strumming

hand, not his fingernail. Gina pocketed the tortoise shell-colored pick, then gave Dale the napkins to help stop the bleeding. She pressed them against his cut fingertips.

“Good set, Dale,” Gina said.

Dale hardly looked Gina in the eye. One of the pistachio shells that Dixie had thrown at him was stuck to his cheek, just below one of his sideburns.

GINA WAITED BY THE HOLE.

It was almost dawn. She may have been a little early. She barely had slept, thinking about Porgo’s dry bottom lip, how it barely had touched the back of her hand but she still sensed its warmth there. That is how you begin to understand the moment, Gina thought. She sat down with her tea and set the pink highlighter and Dale’s guitar pick in her lap. There may have been some truth to what Dixie said about no one object being able to say something meaningful about all of humanity—the present could only ever be this, a moment beside a hole in the ground—but Gina had objects ready nonetheless. She ran her hands on the grass and the dew. She heard Porgo approaching.

“Hello, Gina,” Porgo said.

“Hi Porgo,” she said. She stood up, careful not to spill her tea.

Porgo lifted the black capsule out from the bag of concrete and carefully placed it in the hole, leaning forward from his knees. Small bits of dirt cascaded from the sides of the hole. Porgo looked at the dirt, then at Gina.

She gestured awkwardly at what she held. “I thought I might bring some things for your time capsule,” she said, holding out the pink highlighter and the guitar pick.

Porgo took Gina’s objects in his hand. A confused look wavered across his eyebrows for a long, silent moment as he inspected the guitar pick and pink highlighter.

“They’re for the time capsule,” said Gina again.

Porgo raised up the highlighter and smiled. She wanted to kiss him then, he looked so goofy and pleased and hopeful holding it like that.

“Thank you,” he said. “These will comfort him.”

“Him?” asked Gina.

Porgo didn’t reply and stared hard at the capsule in the ground. The strange red writing on it seemed to move. A sound like several beer cans being popped hissed up from the hole. Gina moved over to look inside. The capsule’s top part had lifted.

Inside was the body of little gray alien creature.

“Oh,” said Gina, nearly slipping into the hole. “I did not expect this.” The little gray alien was lifeless.

“He was to be my son,” Porgo said, that strange pride returning to his voice. “The storm the other night,” he continued. “It was too much for him. Ship does not always make it through thick rain. Messes up controls.”

“A space capsule,” said Gina.

“Is right word?” said Porgo.

“Yeah,” said Gina. She felt like someone had wrapped one of those rubber Blackberry cases around her and then dropped her over and over again on the floor.

Porgo placed the pink highlighter next to the desiccated creature’s body, like a little pink staff it was holding. The alien’s eyes were closed and its mouth was curled.

“He’s just a little baby,” Gina managed to say.

“Yes,” said Porgo. “Baby.”

Gina delicately wedged the guitar pick between the pink highlighter staff in its little four-fingered hand. Its fingers were icy. They both stepped back and looked at the little dead creature. Then Porgo mumbled something incoherent and the top of the space capsule closed. He picked up the bags of pre-mix concrete and poured them into the hole. Gina stood motionless. Porgo reached for the garden hose that was left on the grass and sprayed it into the hole. He stepped in the hole and moved his hands through the mixture, surrounding the space capsule with wet concrete. He stepped out, sprayed the concrete off his boots and hands, then grabbed the shovel nearby and began scooping piles of dirt back into the hole. The sun sent no colors through the clouds but gray.

Porgo patted the dirt down with the back of his shovel. It was just a section of dirt in a patch of grass now.

“I have special place for you, Gina,” said Porgo.

“Thank you. Now I have to head back. No son, no...what is word...task? Exercise? You know, what President says.”

“No mission,” said Gina, arms wrapped around herself.

“Yes, *mission*. Word is good.” He nodded at Gina, then picked up his empty bags of pre-mix concrete.

“Now is not time, looks like,” he said, more to himself than Gina. He walked toward the alley between the condo buildings and with another quiet shuffling sound he was gone.

THERE WERE GARDENING tools in her building’s garage. There were envelopes of tomato seeds. One of the condo residents had brought up growing tomatoes for the building a few meetings back, and while no one had a problem with that, no one had planted anything yet, either. No time like the present. Gina put on the garden gloves and took the hand rake, trowel and seeds with her into the backyard.

She swept all the leftover dirt on the patio together and scooped the small pile onto the torn-up spot in the patch of grass. She knelt and raked the dirt around until it was all level. Gina’s mind gently became aware of her fingers in the dirt. She thought about piano chords. She softly pressed a G chord into the dirt with three gloved fingers spread apart. She picked little bits of wet concrete out of the soil and shaped fingerholes for the tomato seeds. The sun came up and through the clouds; she felt it on the back of her neck like a balmy, encouraging hand. Gina wondered if tomatoes planted above the grave of a baby alien would grow particularly well. When the plants grew, Gina thought, smiling, she would offer the tomatoes first to Dale to check if something was wrong with them. She thought about plucking the pistachio shell from Dale’s sideburn the night before, then his face of wounded pride slightly smiling. It might have been saying *fuck the whole wide world* at the same time it was saying *I need you*. The same look saying *don’t you know that?*

She turned her eyes up to his window. Dale lived a floor up and three lofts west. He worked from home. He thought he had a mission to be in a rock band even though he didn’t play guitar that well. Did he practice his music here at the condo building? Gina wondered. Maybe she could find herself a keyboard, take it up again, practice piano here; maybe they could practice together. Gina felt a connection with Dale that she sensed had already been there, lying dormant with life. She knew if you paid close attention to misunderstandings, no matter how cold or troubling they were, they could blossom unexpectedly. She aimed the tomato seed envelope into the fingerholes and used the trowel to smooth the dirt over.

The she looked at Dale’s window again.

She had been resistant to his disagreeable ways, thinking he was someone who disagreed only for the sheer delight it brought him to have a contrary opinion. But to be agreeable was, in Dale’s mind, a form of being passive, maybe, of not really being there, and Dale was someone who wished to express himself at all costs, even if he failed in those expressions, even if he was laughed at and had pistachio shells thrown at him. We all have missions, Gina thought. She patted the dirt down. We don’t just bury them if some part crashes. Gina liked Dale. Was that how you began to understand the moment? She took a deep breath. The air tasted like wet grass. Admiring her new tomato garden, she sat and sipped her tea. In an hour and a half she’d have to be at work. She put the gloves and tools back in the garage then made her way to the condo building’s lobby. Inside, a woman standing near the elevator was moving some local advertisements aside on the corkboard in order to tack something up in their place. It was Dixie.

She still wore the white blouse and brown half-sweater from the night before tight against her ribs. Gina didn’t feel tense when she saw it this time.

Dixie’s cold sore sparkled as a track light glinted off the salve she had applied to it. Gina paused while she processed what had happened last night after she left the wounded Dale with the drunken Dixie at the Pistachio.

“Well hey there Gina,” she said. “So you and Dale both live in this building? Huh. Small world.”

She reached for a thumbtack and pinned up a new poster for Dale’s band on the corkboard.

Gina nodded. It was a small world, especially in the present. There was less and less to distinguish it. She looked down at the floor to see Dixie’s yellow purse against the wall. More rolled-up rock posters were sticking out of the top, making the purse resemble the tail of a very small comet.

END

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from **BUILDING WITH BRICK** a round-robin Pitchfork Battalion (the2ndhand.com/archive/archivpitchfork.html) collaboration between Todd Dills, Jason Jordan, Lydia Ship and Eric Durchholz performed at the inaugural Brick reading series event in Nashville, happening bimonthly, a coproduction of *THE2NDHAND* and Keyhole Press (keyholepress.com). See brickreadingseries.com.

by Todd Dills

Her father was a writer. He was lousy with jokes. What might be called his favorite was a story of a young child, typically a boy as he told it, which she never questioned—she was too young to question, really, other than to automatically assume the identity of the boy, a kind of questioning, becoming the other gender. Had she been older, were she capable of the kind of language this story uses, she might have wondered at her father’s careless telling, his automatic assumption of the male identity for the story’s protagonist. But she was not, and typically only ran her fingers along the bricks that made up their little bungalow’s façade and listened as her father drew out the tale.

The boy was playing with bricks, building a miniature house with a pile of leftovers from an addition to the much larger house in which the family lived. The pile had long ago been left neglected by his parents at the far west corner of the rear of their backyard.

The boy’s mother out of town, his father wanton with attention to the boy—holed up in his study with a laptop, a pen and a large stack of paper—the boy spent the better part of an afternoon unpling the bricks one by one

by one, an activity he knew might otherwise have drawn an avalanche of criticism, or at the least supervision, which he was, of course, happy to be without.

Though the bricks were indeed heavy, they weren’t so heavy, and he wasn’t so young as the girl was, that he couldn’t toss them up into the air above his head, which he did, carefully, as he was old enough to understand they held the power to come back down and crack his skull. He could well imagine what that might feel like, the girl’s father told, the joke more cautionary tale at this juncture, what he saw as creative, pedagogical juice for his young daughter, that she might well carry on to impart, some day, to his grandchildren just as his father, a salesman, gave them to him. The salesman was much better with jokes.

The girl would understand the story long into adulthood to be about mystery, wonder and fear; there was nothing funny about it, particularly. In the course of the young boy’s brick-throwing exercises, during which he began to fashion a mini-house in the back corner of his backyard, he uncovered near the center of the pile a painted yellow brick that positively glowed among the dingy red mass of the others. This magic brick he held in one hand, in his other a more ordinary red brick, and marveled at its color. Delighted at the unlikely, entirely unexpected nature of the occurrence, the girl’s father told, the boy’s bones and muscles unleashed an uncommonly powerful energy, and he tossed the old ordinary red brick high into the air. It rose, buoyed by an updraft of wind that blew into and away from the boy’s little backyard just at that moment, until he could no longer

see it. But the ordinary red brick came back down, eventually, as ordinary things tend to do, 20 feet behind him, just as he had almost forgotten about it, the delightful spectre of the yellow brick taking his full attention. He giggled, examining the foot-deep hole where the red brick buried itself, and the father, telling the story, took the moment to explain in brief the laws of gravity to his daughter, how the higher the red brick got into the sky, the faster it would be traveling when it hit the ground. The boy was the absolute apotheosis of luck, he said, luck that it hadn’t fallen on his head.

And here came the punch line, or the father’s long-winded version of such. The boy still had the yellow brick, and, imbued by his uncommon power on this day, he flung it high with every bit of strength he could muster. He watched it rise and rise until, just like the red brick, it rose out of sight.

The girl imagined it carried away by the wind to become support for a golden house by the sea, or in an alternate version in her mind, another in which her father never uttered the words “and the yellow brick never came down,” it descended as a sort of hammer with its driving head crashing hard into the highest point on the top of her own head, drilling her down away from the places she’d known into an underworld of kindly gnomes whose cities she helped build with walls and ceilings of bright yellow, so as to keep them illuminated, her dreams clear in view.

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