

Everything Is Becoming Empty

by James Tadd Adcox

There is nothing inside my computer. It's been running slower and slower and, not knowing much about computers myself, I asked a techie friend of mine over to have a look at it. "It's amazing it still runs at all," he says, showing me the inside of the machine, completely empty save for a few specks of lint from the carpet. After he leaves I begin picking up things around the house, testing their weight. Things look solid enough, but as soon as you take them apart... The phone? Gutted. The stereo, likewise. I sit down on the couch and open a bottle of wine. I try to think but my head feels dry and brittle. From the bottle of wine, nothing but dust. And I'm out of cigarettes. On the way to the corner store, I wonder if my apartment, too, will be empty by the time I get back.

A block from the store I run into Cathy. It's awkward, of course. We haven't seen each other in a month. Someone, a friend of a friend, told me her father died. The whole time we were together, she'd never even told me he was sick. She asks how I'm doing and I say fine. She shakes her head. I'm trembling. She brushes something off of my shoulder and her touch is so light I feel like her hand might pass through me...

Oatmeal for My Boyfriend

by Tim Jones-Yelvington

Fresh from my Emmy for *Extreme Gardening*, I produced the most successful reality television series of my career. *Oatmeal for my Boyfriend* featured gay men cooking oatmeal for their partners. Each episode combined recipes and cooking tips with voyeurism. Many of the couples

were painfully attractive. Others gut-churningly grotesque. When the oatmeal wasn't to one boyfriend's liking, he smashed the bowl against his partner's face, resulting in scarring and third degree burns. This episode was a two-parter. There were trauma counselors, then lawyers. Regrettably, television has changed a lot since then. Retirement isn't what I thought it would be.

Root Mouth

by Kim Parko

My mother told me not to gnash my teeth in public. She was afraid, over time, I would grind my teeth down to their roots. She said, "Who'd marry a woman with a mouth full of roots?" I couldn't stop gnashing though and come my twentieth birthday, my smile was thick with dark, branching roots. I went to bars like any other young woman looking for creeping love. Looking for something small that a few beers might make epic. I had perfected my closed-lipped smile and my closed-lipped talk. The men found my closed-lips intriguing. What was behind them? They had to know. I married Reggie and he said on our wedding night, "C'mon, let me see those pearly whites." He tried prying my lips apart with his fingers, then a butter knife, then a crow bar. They would not be opened. Meanwhile, there was a tree with baby-green leaves burgeoning in my brain.

Pluck, Pluck

by E.K. Entrada

The day after Rachel lost her virginity, she plucked a single hair from her left eyebrow and winced. By the end of the year, she'd plucked both brows clean.

The shrink called it trichotillomania and prescribed reversal training, which meant Rachel had to keep a log of every hair-pulling incident and what triggered it. At the end of six months, most of her entries began with "Mother said."

The doctor gave her pills.

"I won't take these," Rachel said to her mother. "It means I'm a freak."

Mother said, "Aren't you?" Over the next five years, Rachel's brows grew thick and neat, and she only thought about trichotillomania when she took the pills.

On the day her mother died, she still owned a thick log of "Mother says." After the funeral, Rachel leaned over the sink and grabbed her tweezers, careful not to brush the sleeve of her black dress against the faucet.

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