

**BEST NEW  
AMERICAN  
VOICES**

EDITED BY  
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FRESH FICTION  
FROM THE  
TOP WRITING  
PROGRAMS

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## HORUSVILLE

Stephen went to the woods instead of math class. His algebra book was still under the backseat of the school bus, or under his bed, or maybe even somewhere in the woods, swollen and muddy from last week's rain. Losing the textbook had meant weeks of calling out answers with squared *Y*s to problems that had no *Y*s, which equaled weeks of the math teacher yanking him into the hallway and yelling at him. It had been easier when his fellow ninth graders had laughed and made fun, but now, baffled and full of pity, they avoided eye contact. The obvious solution to math class, the answer he arrived at on an average of three days per week, was to take the latest issue of *She-Hulk* from his locker and walk out of the school doors into the dim, shadowy woods, where the sponge-thick and gently bioluminescent moss felt refreshingly cool on his bare feet. He would go to his favorite tree, solemnly turn the carefully dog-eared pages of *She-Hulk*, and jerk off to her muscular green thighs, her bulging green

ass. On his way to fulfill this plan, just a short way from his favorite tree, he saw his art teacher, his big brother's fiancée, naked.

What was immediately attractive about Miss Baskin's nakedness was how She-Hulkishly green it was. The wood's thick canopy of leaves filtered light into a muted jade gloom, and the glimmering moss radiated a faintly emerald glow. It was possible that Miss Baskin's thighs were somewhat muscular, too, and her ass possibly bulging, although from a hundred or so yards away and the view partially obscured by trees, it was difficult to say. It looked like she was slow-dancing by herself. She ran her fingers through her long, deep red hair — a little too red, she'd explained to Stephen's wide-eyed art class the morning after she'd dyed it, because she'd used a five-dollar do-it-yourself kit from the clearance aisle. Stephen snuck closer, moving from trunk to trunk.

As he got nearer he could see that Miss Baskin was dancing for the tree eyes. She swayed her hips back and forth while the eyes — the whites especially bright from the recent rain that had also turned the irises blue — swung to and fro, like pendulums. The tree eyes, he knew, were why people went to the woods. Prior to Miss Baskin, Stephen had spied on other people. The former town mayor, shortly before he died, would come to deliver grandiose speeches in acceptance of high offices. The high school janitor had a velvet cape he wore while he failed over and over at sleight of hand, littering the moss with dropped coins and cards. Stephen once saw an old lady confess on her knees to acts of sadism so imaginative and outlandish that, still, on some nights, he wasn't able to sleep until he convinced himself that she'd been lying.

Why people spoke to the trees — which only had eyes, after all, not ears — Stephen couldn't figure out. He was glad they didn't have ears; it was bad enough that they were forced to see whatever anyone showed them. If it were up to him, they'd have mouths and arms so

that they could keep people away by screaming obscenities and throwing their own apples, like the tree in *The Wizard of Oz*. But these trees didn't have obscenities or apples, just creepily intense eyes that tracked every movement with the precision of high-tech security cameras. Some eyes were small as shirt buttons, others big as dinner plates. Wet and gleaming, with shining irises that varied in color by tree type and weather, the eyes dappled trunks and limbs and dangled from twig ends like blinking fruit. There was a game he played in which he sat still for a very long time until the eyes forgot him. It wasn't the most exciting game, but when the eyes forgot him they opened and closed their nutshell lids with mesmerizing out-of-sync slowness that made him imagine migratory moths, alighted in the woods to rest. Inevitably, he'd get tired and scratch his nose or balls and — *snap!* — every eye would be on him again.

To get closer to Miss Baskin, to really see in detail what he was anxious to see, Stephen had to hop over the tiny double stream that trickled such a sinuous path through the woods that it often ran right alongside itself in opposite directions. He hopped once, twice, then slipped and planted his face in the moss. The tick-tocking eyes rolled around in their sockets to stare at him. When he got back up, she was running. She had an armful of clothes. Her bare shoulder blades jutted. Her bright foot bottoms flashed. Her ass cheeks switched from dimpled to full while she ran. He saw the bumpy line of her spine. Hip bones. The small of her back.

He picked up a sock, a bra, a boot. The sock was brightly striped in yellow, blue, and white, but the bottom was threadbare, just shy of a big hole. Her bra was white but dingy on the straps and edges. He stuck his nose and mouth in each cup and inhaled. When he saw her bloodred boot shining on the moss, he was afraid to touch it. Miss Baskin's daily stumble through the streets to the high school halls was

a favorite local spectacle — Stephen had seen the old people shuffle onto their porches before dawn to wait, watch, and whisper. Each tottering step in those boots threatened to send her tumbling into a front yard, where (hopefully) she'd fall onto the grass, her long limbs splayed. Stephen could see it in people's eyes (he imagined his own eyes must look the same): All of Horusville was ready for the chance to rush forward and help her to her feet, or (even better) to just lie down on the grass beside her. It was obvious from the way no one could look at each other after she passed: There was something embarrassing about the bloodred boots; they made the whole town painfully aware of one another, a community of watchers, so many hearts so alike and so easily stirred. You couldn't blame Miss Baskin for pretending not to notice; it was too much longing for any one person to care about. Her boots were like a talisman that accepted looks on her behalf and reflected them back for what they were: the acute red pang of loneliness, a whole town's worth. Stephen knew he had to give the boot back.

In the graveyard between the woods and town, Stephen watched Miss Baskin button her blouse. He crouched behind the monument of Anne Lynne Brown, memorialized in the act of presenting her famous green-bean casserole. Miss Baskin almost fell down while trying to put on her panties. She caught herself by placing a hand on the big stone belly of a butcher who had a great steak of black marble in one hand, a giant knife in the other. The grave markers were all life-size statues of dead people posing at occupations or hobbies. Stephen noticed that Anne Lynne Brown's statue had a bronze plaque detailing the casserole recipe. The story of the statues, as Stephen had heard it in his fourth-grade local history unit, was that Horusville's founders, anxious about what sort of attention the tree eyes might bring, created the elaborate graveyard as a barrier to waylay wanderers. This solution

was, however, too successful, since each year ever greater numbers of visitors came in search of the eccentric monuments.

Miss Baskin hopped a few times to zip up her jeans. She must have sensed someone watching, because she darted up and down the rows of statues. Stephen had to dive, roll, and crawl. The sun was setting, and he hid himself in the long shadow cast by a disheveled mechanic with wild hair. Stephen could see the chipped polish on Miss Baskin's toenails; he could hear each breath.

"Ass wipe!" she screamed in anger, which sounded so ridiculous that Stephen had to bite hard on the heel of his hand to keep from laughing.

The statues of dead men looked a little too tall and muscular. They posed with oversize objects. A nearly seven-foot farmer stood, like Atlas, with what would have been the world's biggest pumpkin on his shoulders. Almost all of the dead women offered food. There was a waitress who poured coffee from a pot that was also a working fountain. She smiled and smiled in an endless attempt to fill a bottomless cup. The liquid poured straight through the mug into a pool at her feet.

"Masturbator!" Miss Baskin screamed again before walking off braless, with only one boot, one sock. This time the insult hurt, the accuracy of it. Either she was a good guesser or she'd seen him in the woods before, doing what he did at his favorite tree. It had almond-shaped eyes, his tree. They were hazel. They aided his imagination. They made the job less lonely by looking on with what he was sure must have been interest and sympathy. The almond-eyed tree was so consoling that he now loathed masturbating anywhere else, which was partly why he skipped school so often, even before he'd lost his math book.

When Miss Baskin left the graveyard, Stephen visited his parents. In the afterlife, Mr. Blue squinted at a test tube and wore a lab coat.

He had frizzled hair, as if electrified. He had been the school's best and dorkiest science teacher. Stephen's mother presented a meat loaf. For weeks after his parents were buried, visitors came to Mrs. Blue's monument, placed tracing paper over the engraved recipe, and copied it down by rubbing over it with pencil. It still startled him to walk down a street in the evening and smell his mother's cooking. For reasons Stephen didn't understand, his parents' monuments were embarrassing to Ed, his much older brother. He suspected Ed's reasons for disapproval were the same reasons he, Stephen, loved them so well.

There was a piece of limestone paper taped to his dad's back, reading KICK ME in an adolescent scrawl. No one would call Mr. Blue a funny man, but students had found his efforts endearing. He'd only had an inch or two added in death, making him one of the shorter men in the cemetery. Next to Stephen's dad was Uncle McCarty, decked out in thespian tights, neck ruffle, floppy hat, and pointed beard. He had been amusing, as far as English teachers go, but for some reason Stephen's dad was the only teacher who liked him, maybe out of a brother-in-law's obligation. A car crash had killed all three of them the night Ed beat Stephen seven times in a row at Monopoly.

Stephen stretched out on the grass between his parents, as he often did, and looked up at the sky. He tried to clear his mind and forget that his favorite teacher had apparently seen him jerk off to a comic book and a tree. Slowly, the afterglow faded and the first stars appeared. He remembered how his father and Uncle McCarty would get drunk and reenact Monty Python skits on the front porch. For a moment he thought he heard their voices, their fake accents. But it was only the squawk of geese flying in a V overhead.

That evening, Stephen sat right across from Miss Baskin at the round dinner table. Miss Baskin had accepted Ed's marriage proposal, at-

tempt number two, a week earlier. The family had never said grace when Mr. and Mrs. Blue were alive, but Ed insisted grace was just good manners, like elbows off the table. During prayers, especially long prayers like Ed's, which always included his big plans for constructing housing developments, Stephen liked to examine people's faces. Lately he'd been looking at Miss Baskin's face. Miss Baskin never noticed, because she was always examining Ed's face while he prayed about development. Miss Baskin watched closely, with such pained, focused intensity that you'd think Ed's praying face held some crucial clue to Miss Baskin's own life, which Stephen supposed it probably did. For Miss Baskin, he could tell, seeing was important work.

But this evening, when Stephen looked up to examine Miss Baskin's face, Miss Baskin locked eyes with him. Her eyes were hazel and unhappy. For the first time ever he bowed his head and tried to follow his big brother's prayer. Ed, who was also the town's unusually young mayor — not a real mayor, but the kind of mayor who officiated the monthly town meeting in the high school cafeteria — prayed that he would get the contract to expand the Horusville Library, which served both the town and the school. He was courting the favor of Miss Mahogany, the shriveled librarian, whose expertise had great sway in the matter, even though everyone knew she had an entire wall full of rare dirty books. Patrons had been known to attempt to steal the rare dirty books. Miss Mahogany, small as she was — and old, too, with wrinkled skin the same burnished red brown of her name — would beat such would-be book thieves so mercilessly with her yardstick that the pyrotechnic scarves holding her braids together would fly off, and then her hair would whip about so fiercely, all snakelike and crazy, that you could imagine the poor recipient of her wrath mistaking her yardstick's crack for the snap of poisoned fangs. Those days, Stephen always felt, were the

best days in the library — the only good thing about a research project. However, whenever anyone came from afar to examine one of the few existing copies of some dirty book, Miss Mahogany was attentive and kind and didn't give a damn about whether or not the guest had a library card.

"... and I'm sorry, Lord, that I purchased those rare issues of *The Pearl* and other Victorian erotica and donated them to the library," Ed prayed, and his voice indicated that his prayer was winding down. "Accept my apology also for purchasing and donating the rare set of *My Secret Life*. I didn't read either donation. Not in their entirety. Only a few pages, which I am trying to forget. But some of it rhymes, Lord, and this makes forgetting difficult. I hope they do not end up in the hands of the children, although they probably will, but this concern would really be Miss Mahogany's responsibility. For she is the librarian. Amen."

Rather than raise his head, Ed took advantage of his mouth's proximity to his plate and stuffed it with chicken. "Where are your boots?" he asked his fiancée, his mouth still full of chicken.

Miss Baskin was wearing flip-flops. She paused long enough that Stephen could tell she didn't have an answer.

"I'm painting them," Stephen decided out loud. "I'm doing a painting *of* them."

"Why would you do that?" asked Ed in the slightly annoyed, businesslike tone he used for all questions.

"For your engagement present."

He was sure he could feel Miss Baskin's hazel eyes boring into him, but when he looked she was just watching her fork move through her bowl of greens.

"Let's see it."

"The boot or the drawing?"

"Both."

"I only just started. It's a sketch."

Ed shrugged. "Go get it."

Stephen went upstairs to his room, drew on his pad, and brought it down to the table with the boot.

"It's preliminary."

Ed held the drawing at arm's length and rotated it this way and that. While Ed examined it, Stephen realized that it looked a lot like a paramecium. Ed continued to flip and rotate, comparing it to the boot Stephen had placed in the middle of the table. It still looked like a paramecium. He could see it on Ed's face: fear for his little brother and his dim prospects in life. Drawing was Stephen's only known talent, and here he couldn't make a boot look like a boot. Ed's eyes watered.

"It's really good," Ed lied.

For Stephen, this was a perfect moment: his brother's love and pity, out in the open. Ed, with his good business sense, couldn't help but place himself in the role of villain. Whenever Ed acted like an asshole, Stephen thought back to when he was eight and Ed had caught him experimenting with their mother's lipstick. Instead of mocking him, Ed had carefully instructed Stephen in the intricacies of heavy metal makeup. With a red lightning bolt across his face and Ed painted up into a kind of Rabid Cat Man, they played shirtless air guitar to metal anthems and practiced their scowls in the mirror.

"He's actually quite good," said Miss Baskin. Ed was still looking in pain at the paramecium.

"I can tell," he lied again.

"No — I mean, he's much better than this sketch would indicate."

"It shows great promise."

She looked at Stephen now. "I know it will be good after you put more time into it."

When they made eye contact, Stephen didn't see any anger or shame — just his art teacher.

"Keep the boot as long as you need it," she said.

"Really?" said Ed. "Stephen, how long will that take?"

"Twenty-four hours of hard work," Stephen replied, making the number up on the spot.

Ed nodded thoughtfully; he only accepted firm answers, preferably numerical ones.

During lunch, the cafeteria lady with the beehive and biceps let Stephen smoke cigarettes out back by the Dumpsters near the loading dock. He didn't like cigarettes very much, but he liked the lunchroom less. The humiliation of algebra class had whittled down his seating options. Today, he was sure, he would remember to look for his math book. He spotted Miss Baskin on the far side of the parking lot, walking away from the school. She glanced his way, took a few more steps, then stopped and squinted, shielding her eyes from the sun. He waved, forgetting he had a cigarette dangling from his mouth. She waved back and walked away.

During third period, he redrew the sinking of the *Lusitania* by U-boat in pencil on his desk — an intricate drawing that someone, probably the janitor, was always erasing, and so it had to be redone every day. All those little people floating in the water. When the drawing was finished, he filled in the first bubble of his history exam, which glared bright white beneath the fluorescent lights overhead. Then he closed his eyes and dreamed of the wood's jade gloom. Next period, in the crumbling cement cave of the boys' locker room, he dressed in the required red shorts and white shirt. On the wooden basketball court, he performed a series of squat thrusts, push-ups, and sit-ups. He ran the bases during the chaos of indoor kickball and

did not stop, bursting out of the metal door and into the school parking lot, past the courthouse square, through the neighborhood of front porches, and into the graveyard, where he took off his shoes and socks to step barefoot onto the glowing moss, into shadow.

The tree eyes, even while they tracked him, blinked out thick, salty tears that made transparent dots on his thin white shirt. It was the weeping time of year, when the trees cry before the leaves crinkle and fall. The chimelike tinkle of drips dropping, leaf to leaf, and plopping onto the moss or the tops of his bare feet was like rain, except slower and possessed of a pleasant sadness that made the crying almost contagious. Miss Baskin saw Stephen first. She sat naked on the moss in a small clearing, legs pulled tight to her chest. The clearing was all but dry, just a few eyes blinking and dripping from overhanging branches.

"Here's a quick lesson," she said. Her voice was shocking, less sweet than the voice she used in class. "The next time you stand and stare at a naked woman, you might think about saying something. Or doing something. Or at least look her in the eyes. If you just stand there, you come across as a creepy weirdo."

"Sorry." He could feel his face flush. He couldn't think of anything to say. He felt like a creepy weirdo.

"You stole my bra."

"I know."

"It was my only comfortable bra."

He nodded. He tried to keep eye contact, but he wanted to look at her skin — any part of it. It was very fair, and he imagined that if he touched it, it would go flush and then quickly fade to white again. He could almost see her cleavage, but not her nipples — her knees hid them. He could see, just a little, the hair between her legs. Then she pulled her feet and legs in closer, so that he couldn't see between them anymore.

"Well, Stephen, you should give my bra back."

"I tossed it. I didn't want Ed to find it."

"Goddamn," she said, shaking her head. "Well, it's going to be kind of embarrassing for you to buy me a new one, isn't it? Or do you like shopping?"

Stephen thought for a moment.

"Maybe I could just pay you the money and you could order one out of a catalog."

"I guess so. But that wouldn't teach you a lesson, would it? Take off your shirt," she said.

"My shirt?"

"You're the only one who's wearing one."

"Why do you want me to take off my shirt?"

"Because I'm sitting here naked and you're not. And your shirt is already soaked through. I can see your nipples. And why are you dressed like that — are those your pajamas?"

"I ran away from gym class."

She laughed.

"Take off your shirt and sit down," she said, patting the moss beside her. "You came to spy on me. Might as well get a close look and make things even at the same time."

He lifted the wet shirt over his head, but he didn't sit down.

"Take off your shorts, too," she said.

She sounded mean. He couldn't tell if she was serious or mocking him. The thing was, he halfway did want to take off his shorts. Right then, a cold breeze caused a shower of tears to shimmer from the leaves overhead. He imagined himself a grown man in a movie, taking off his pants (they would be pants, of course, and not too-tight gym shorts). He felt cold and numb. His dick felt small. He felt like a child.

"I'm not going to do that," he said.

"Then go away and stop looking at me."

"It's not the same."

She stood and came close to him. She balanced one hand on his shoulder and lifted her leg to show him her thigh. He shivered.

"Describe it," she said.

He couldn't stop shivering. "It's great," he said.

"What do you see?"

There were veins on her leg that looked erupted, spilled over, and painful.

"Just say what you're thinking."

He had a weird impulse to put his mouth on her thigh.

"Say something, goddamnit."

"Purple fireworks," he blurted.

She laughed. "Okay. Like a little celebration happening down there? That's lovely. Before long I'll be a walking bruise. Are you going to come spy on me then?"

Next, she made him describe the white striations on her hips and across her lower back, above her ass. They looked like healed cuts from an X-Acto blade. Like rivers on a map.

"They started in my midtwenties. Soon I'll be one big scar: a walking scar and bruise. Beautiful?"

"Yes," he said, and then felt sorry for saying it. He was often late detecting sarcasm. But as far as he knew, he'd meant it: If he were in a movie, and if he were a man wearing pants, he would trace her scars with his tongue.

"Show me something," she said.

"I have a pimple starting on my neck, right here," he said, cocking his head to one side.

"You don't have anything permanent, do you?"

A cold drop struck the crown of his head. It seemed to fall through his body and exit from the soles of his feet. He began to feel so cold he couldn't think about anything but his own skin. The

woods were quiet. He couldn't put his wet shirt back on, so he crossed his arms and continued to shiver.

"I like your goose bumps," she said.

"Okay." He shivered.

"You don't have anywhere to go, do you?"

He shook his head.

"You can't stay here. You owe me a painting of a boot."

Her teapot whistled on the stove. She poured steaming water over a bag and the kitchen filled with the scent of spiced apple. Her rented cottage had a bench swing on the front porch and a garden plot in the backyard. Potted herbs grew in the windows of her art studio, a converted second bedroom. She set him up with an easel and supplies. She put her left bloodred boot on a sheet-covered stool.

"Have at it," she said.

Stephen heard the shower turn on. He started to sketch. It took him over two hours to accomplish a shitty underdrawing. He hadn't heard the shower turn off, but now he noticed that it was no longer on. From the hallway, he could see Miss Baskin sleeping on her bed. He made some more tea. He removed the pot before it whistled. He added four spoons of sugar to his mug. It was so good. He was surprised; he'd never had tea before.

Sitting on a chair in Miss Baskin's room, he sipped his tea and watched her sleep. He brought in the easel and did a few quick paintings. He wasn't meticulous, like he'd been with the boot. He made thirteen. Miss Baskin tossed and turned, tangled up in the sheets. He painted her scars and veins, and then he left them there and got home too late for dinner. Ed was asleep with the TV on. Stephen fixed himself a plate and went up to his room to paint the other bloodred boot, the right one, late into the night.