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Brendan and The D

Kevin Clouther

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Brendon and the D

Driving to the edge of the county at midnight is driving to the edge of civilization. Light is a memory. The trees are ancient, and the insects have always lived here. When they fly past your ear, they sound like trucks passing on the highway. They linger between the hairs on your arms. These hairs are grasses, your eyes puddles that haven't evaporated. Only the wind respects your form and only then for a moment.

You think you're the first person here, even when you're the last. In the darkness, the cars make sense. That this isn't civilization doesn't make it nature. Your eyes adjust. They find roads opening to single blades of grass. The power of something so slight is disconcerting. The roads have names like Evergreen Place, though they were never finished. The asphalt is half-laid, bulging from the heat. It will never be painted. The only cars to use the roads—to have ever used them—are cars that come at midnight.

You have to know where you're going to get here, but it isn't hard once you know. The hard part is driving without lights because lights attract attention, and who knows who's watching? Not that anyone lives at the edge of the county. Seminoles lived here for a while but only because nobody would follow them. They never signed a peace treaty with the U.S. government. This is a point of pride.

There's no music. Smell doesn't carry so much as sit. The edge of the county smells like sweat when it's not raining, and it's always about to rain. The air can never recover. It soaks your lungs. When the race is about to start, everyone is nervous about the normal things. Money and girls and cops and the way these things influence each other, which they always do. Once there was a girl who said she was going to become a cop. She said she would never tell anybody anything. She had tattoos of alligators the length of both arms.

Once there was a thunderstorm, and the cars raced anyhow. You could see everything then. The way some people painted their cars and other people didn't and how poorly it predicted the person doing the driving, which you wouldn't expect. You'd expect a madman to drive a madman's car with something like exploding heads, certainly not something clichéd like flames, but the madman's car wasn't even painted. It was blue metal. The quiet guy had the exploding heads. Seeing that made you wonder what made him so quiet. It made you hold your head, without even realizing, like everything inside would burst if you didn't.

Because normally you couldn't see that well. That's part of the appeal, normally. That the race is this dark, faraway event where nobody would follow you, and even if somebody did, what would that person really see? The belly of a palm, half of a stranger's face, the geometry of a spinning wheel. Only if the moon shakes off the clouds. Some nights the moon is a girl changing behind a curtain. Some nights even the stars are too modest to stick their pins through the curtain.

Brendan never drove and never said a word to anyone. He only came because The D wanted to come. Brendan drank from a St. Ides wrapped in an empty Doritos bag the whole time. He had the bag because he'd finished the chips on the way. It made him less nervous, not that he had anything to be nervous about here, not that watching silently ever got anyone in trouble, not that getting in trouble was even what made Brendan nervous. He was thinking about his mother's cat, which he'd loved.

Yes, running over the cat was awful. That was a bad mistake. Lying about running over the cat was also awful, though less so, certainly more understandable. Because the cat loved sleeping under the car. Brendan knew that, checked under each tire before shifting into reverse, and that was more than what a lot of people would do. He was careful about everything, not just the tires but also the mirrors and traffic, even the incline of his seat. But there was this flap of rusted metal that hung off the muffler, and maybe the car sort of nestled into that flap, maybe it was sort of maternal, which is depressing when you consider. Not that a dead cat isn't depressing enough. Brendan understood all of this; he owned it like a man should. What he couldn't understand was his mother's rage over taking the car.

No, he didn't have his license. He had a permit, and anyone would agree that he was a better driver than the old ladies who could barely see over the wheel, who stop well before the lights and touch
Kevin Cloutcher

up the ubiquitous nicks on their fenders with nail polish. It was age discrimination or maybe reverse age discrimination. It was an outrage. And his mother buying into all of it, screaming at him for doing what he was perfectly qualified to do. Were there old ladies racing here? There were not because they would all start late and stop well before the finish line. They would get lost on the way and, not being able to see, run over something endangered, something large like a panther, which is worse than running over a regular cat, of which there are millions. Brendan had considered replacing the cat and saying nothing but he thought better of it. Where was his credit for that adult decision?

The back right tire crushed the cat's head. This was the image he couldn't shake. It looked like the cat's brains pushed right through its mouth, but that couldn't be possible. That must have been something else. Why couldn't the cat's eyes have just shut? Why did the cat have to look up at him, as if to ask, Why why why? I'm a good cat, the eyes said. I leap into your lap and never knock over glasses with my tail. With great relish I eat the moths that would otherwise consume your home, which is filthy, which never bothered me because I'm an uncomplaining animal. The animal's front paws were also somehow crushed. They were as thin as CDs. The back of the cat was fine.

The D wasn't a good driver, so he had to cheat. He used turbo, which wasn't the real name but what the video game called it, on his engine. If the other drivers knew The D used turbo it would mean trouble, but nobody but Brendan knew. He only knew because he saw The D spraying it on his engine one afternoon, and The D, being a realist, admitted to everything. He begged Brendan not to say anything. They grew up together. They played street hockey in the sticky streets of their neighborhood with sticks they stole from gym and a tennis ball covered in dog saliva. Brendan's mother got drunk with The D's mother beneath fishnets and buoys at a restaurant called Guppy's. This was the reason Brendan couldn't say anything and the reason The D was the only person—besides Brendan's mother, of course—who knew about the cat.

Brendan took a hard drink from the St. Ides. It felt like a cat scraping his stomach, but it got him drunk, and it was the only alcohol you could buy from the MexiMart, which was the last store before the county receded and the only place Brendan knew that sold to minors. The MexiMart had no connection to Mexicans or Mexico. The D didn't mind bringing him there even though The D didn't drink, even though he was against drinking, being a Christian of the variety who chooses his values selectively and clings to them unflinchingly. The D bought mints and a Coke.

The first thing you do when you arrive is find the guy who collects money. (The D's values did not prohibit him from betting or, for that matter, cheating to win the bet). That you have to pay the guy before you race, twenty dollars per race, is the only rule enforced. The D got his money from working for his grandfather's landscaping business. He sweat for his money, which Brendan respected, as he'd never held a job and had no money beyond what he could lift from his mother. What was an occasional twenty and drive around the block? It was nothing, and yet from listening to his mother, you would think it was murder.

Tonight he told his mother he was going to a Young Christians meeting with The D, an easy to confirm lie, but she didn't protest during her mourning period. She'd taken to wearing black and telling anyone who would listen that her only son killed her only pet. It was very intentional in her telling, never mind that he'd loved that cat. Never mind that he fed the cat most days and named it, even if it refused to recognize its name. The D started to dig his sneakers into the dirt, meaning he needed encouraging. Brendan punched him encouragingly in the ribs. The D looked at his car hopefully. He said he was dedicating his first victory to the memory of Senior Cat. It was the first time either of them had brought up the cat's name since Brendan informed The D of the accident.

Only two cars race at a time, but The D never won. He'd been coming closer, though not that close. Not close enough for anyone to suspect he was cheating. Still, The D had made major changes to his car, such as removing the back seat entirely. He spent a lot of money replacing factory parts with specialty parts he ordered. Brendan suspected everyone made these sorts of changes but he didn't know because he didn't talk to anyone other than The D. Sometimes Brendan wanted to talk to a girl, a forgotten, sweet-looking girl who

Brendon and the D

NATURAL BRIDGE

136

NATURAL BRIDGE

137
might appreciate that he didn’t exactly want to be here either, that the whole thing was a little frightening but also exciting and would you like some St. Ides? And even if she didn’t, because who would, wouldn’t she appreciate the earnest way he asked, the respectful way he didn’t quite touch her elbow? Not that he had any interest in talking to most girls here. Most girls looked like they could knock him down in a fight. Most girls looked like they came from places a lot rougher than where Brendan and The D came from, which wasn’t that nice but at least pretty safe.

The race starts when the guy who collects money fires a gun. A real gun. This is part of the excitement, that people carry real guns. For a while, his mother dated a guy, Paul, who had real guns. Paul liked to clean his guns on the living room couch, despite Brendan’s mother having forbidden this activity. One time Paul asked Brendan if he wanted to help him clean his gun, sort of pointing the gun at him when he asked, and Brendan didn’t know what came over him. Next thing he knew he’d locked himself in his room with the stereo loud, so nobody could hear him being a child. Next thing he knew it was three in the morning, and he was bashing a street hockey stick in and out of the hood of Paul’s car. That was the last time Paul came to the house.

But wouldn’t Paul approve of this scene? He might even develop a begrudging respect for Brendan for being part of it. Brendan was sure that the guy who collected money wasn’t the only guy carrying a gun. Some of the rougher girls might even carry guns. He wouldn’t put it past some of them. The D liked these girls, though he didn’t talk to them either. As The D got into his car, Brendan thought about how another loss was inevitable, how it doesn’t make sense to work if you just waste your money on races you aren’t good enough to win. Brendan thought Paul would appreciate this dose of common sense, which he valued above all else.

The real gun fired. The cars leapt. It was amazing how quickly one car could take the lead. All you saw were headlights grabbing two hands at a time for the finish. The air smelled like rubber and tasted poisonous. The race was over in five seconds.

The D argued halfheartedly, as he always did after the race. He moved his arms emphatically, more threateningly than he might have had he seen the other headlights coming. They were brighter. The sweat on The D’s upper lip beaded then slipped off his face. The winner of the race stared reverently into the light, as if witnessing his own ascension into heaven. A girl ran, and the ferns swallowed her whole.

Brendan looked up, not toward heaven but for a helicopter, which he believed to be landing on the strip of pavement that, in the wash of too-white light, looked almost glamorous. He felt a little glamorous awaiting his fate in this scene, the sight of a major bust of some kind—gambling, trespassing, illegal firearms and probably worse—with him at the center, playing the part Paul might have played in his more dangerous days before he needed to bully people twenty years younger to feel superior. Brendan welcomed this light; he stepped into it.

Still, the cops ignored him. They stepped out of their patrol cars looking tired and a little surprised to see so many young people milling about their cars in the dark. The cops looked like they’d followed an anonymous complaint hoping to find nothing. They didn’t look eager to scan IDs or apply handcuffs. Mostly, they looked like they wanted to get back into their cars and talk about relationship problems. One cop halfheartedly asked what was going on here. His partner stared down the rough girls. He seemed like he would have been content with an apology.

The D twitched. Already he was breaking. His left leg shook, so he hid it behind his right, which began to shake. Brendan walked toward him. It surprised Brendan that he could walk over to The D without being acknowledged by the cops. They clicked on the red and blue lights but left off the sound. When Brendan reached The D’s face, Brendan whispered that everything would be fine, that this wasn’t actually a big deal, which disappointed him, though he enjoyed the courage he appeared to be displaying to the crowd that he could easily observe for the first time. The D nodded with naked terror.

It wasn’t such a big crowd, maybe twenty in all, half to race and half to watch. With the exception of The D, the guys who raced looked bigger. They stared at the hood of the patrol car with familiarity, and resignation. The girls who came with them shuffled anxiously, waiting to be saved. The other guys searched their pockets for excuses.
They looked for inconspicuous places to drop their weapons and drugs, listening periodically for dogs.

There were no dogs. One of the cops got into the car and pretended to begin paperwork, leaving the other to say something. He sighed dramatically. He widened his legs and motioned for one of the bigger guys to approach. The guy dragged one leg before the other. It occurred to Brendan that maybe the guy started racing because he had difficulty walking. That maybe the guy was distracting the cop with this labored walking, that something dangerous was about to be executed by one of the bigger guys, and Brendan felt thrillingly complicit. He faithfully avoided their eyes. He was still awaiting the gush of air from the lowering chopper.

The D stilled his legs. He swallowed bravely. He leaned into Brendan’s face and whispered that he was leaving now and kept leaning until his still-trembling legs pushed forward. Nobody noticed. He staggered to his car, thrust the key into the keyhole, tried to open the door without turning the key, turned the key, dropped into the car, and waited. The patrol car’s headlights lay across his dashboard like a white sheet. Brendan was conflicted. On the one hand was his friend, the reason he was here; on the other hand was opportunity, unprecedented in the history of Brendan’s life, to be acknowledged as part of something worth being part of. He emptied his remaining St. Ides, another unacknowledged misdemeanor, into the dirt. It sizzled. He challenged the officer with his eyes, but the officer was busy with the bigger guy, who delivered his excuses with the unbelieving precision of an automaton. What a waste.

The D started the car, and like that they were driving. The cop pretended to be listening to the bigger guy so intently he didn’t notice the car leave. It was impossible not to notice. The other cop might have waved.

When they couldn’t see any light in the rearview, and there was nothing but darkness in front of them, The D started to cry. Messy, shuddering sobs. Brendan looked to the ceiling of the car where there would be no lowering chopper. Their escape wasn’t heroic. There was something cowardly about being the only ones to drive away, even if everyone was after his own skin, even if the girl had run into the swamp first. Imagine if something awful happened to her, if she was thrashing between the heavy clamps of an alligator as they drove away in the losing car, if the only thing the police found was a lock of muddy hair or shred of slutty clothes. Both cops would be out of the car then.

Brendan judged The D severely for crying. Brendan wondered if it would damage their friendship, though he knew, even as he wondered, that they needed each other too much for anything like that. The D didn’t even attempt to hide his crying, which was the worst thing about it. He hadn’t learned anything from racing, not about cars or being a man. Paul would have no patience for The D. Paul would think more of Brendan if he knew there were people like The D out there.

For example, he was crying so hard he hit a tree. He didn’t hit it so much as drive through it. The whole trunk snapped the way a twig does. A tree the size of a basketball pole plus backboard lay across the roof. Brendan couldn’t open his door, so he climbed out the window. The D glared through the windshield, as if the palm were a homeless man who’d stumbled across the hood and needed to be startled off with the horn.

“We can get this off,” Brendan said doubtfully. The D tried to open the door, but there were too many branches in the way.

“My mother is going to kill me.”

“At least we didn’t get arrested.”

The D looked embarrassed, which Brendan appreciated.

“What are we doing?” The D un buckled then re-buckled his seat belt. “Let’s talk about that.”

“Put it in reverse. Give it gas slowly. If you feel the tree moving, give it more gas.”

The wheels spun, and smoke billowed from the hood. The tree was covered in smoke and not moving.

“My mother bought this car. It’s the only nice thing she’s ever done for me.”

“Your mother is always doing nice things,” Brendan said.

“This is the one nice thing.”

“I ruin lots of things.”

“I can’t blame you for this.”
Brendan tried to think of a way he could be blamed for The D crashing his car into a tree while crying but he couldn’t. Brendan waved the smoke from his eyes and rested both hands on the hood, which was hot. It occurred to him that the engine was so hot because of the turbo, a sort of karmic payback, though the effect of the tree couldn’t be diminished. If the engine caught fire, they would have to throw dirt on it, and that would be that. They would remove the plates, scratch out the VIN, and abandon the car forever. Brendan thought about the long walk to Route 441 before them.

Parrots were laughing. The trees are full of parrots, especially at night, some wild, others domesticated, that escaped homes or sanctuaries to hide among the tall branches. Their laughs are piercing and knowing. Occasionally, a burst of air tickles your scalp. This is the parrots reminding you they are there, even if invisible.

Brendan began to worry that the cops would find them and help them. He could think of nothing more humiliating than running from the cops, only to have them find you half a mile away, standing around a smoking car. The D was still sitting. Leaving in the car still seemed a reasonable possibility to him. He attempted once more to remove the tree through reverse, and the car smoked more emphatically. The tree rolled closer to the center of the hood. He turned off the engine and climbed out his window.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, let’s just walk.”
“Are you sure?” Brendan was walking.
“I’ll come back with an axe.”
“I think Paul might have left one.”
“But I might not stop with that tree. I might not be able to control my anger.”
“No.”
“Chop down this whole swamp.” Now The D was swinging an imaginary axe.

Brendan stopped. Before him was some kind of presence. He couldn’t make out its shape or size in the darkness, but he recognized immediately that something of significant mass occupied the space before him. He blocked The D’s chops with his outstretched arm. He listened for movement and, detecting none, took two steps forward.
For a while, they walked in silence, observing what they could make out in the darkness, which was almost nothing. Occasionally, a branch would fall from the sky, and one of them would jump, making the other jump. The parrots sounded like they were warming up for a performance. They were in tune and getting louder. Occasionally, The D would snuffle like he was crying, but Brendan figured there were things to be allergic to here.

The parrots were anticipating the rain. It shook them out of the trees and made them wait mid-air until the rain decided what to do next. The air held its breath the way it always does right before. A few fat drops got tangled in Brendan's eyelashes before he could see what was happening. The D was grateful to extend his self-pity. He widened his arms and when he returned them to his chest, his entire shirt was soaked. He took off his shirt then his undershirt, and his entire torso was soaked. He waved his shirts dangerously, as if they were the gun he claimed to possess.

Brendan thought of his cat every time it rained like this. Was he inside, hiding in the bushes, hiding beneath a car? Brendan felt a desperate need to love someone or something other than himself. He made somber promises never to take anyone for granted, promises he was eager to break. He only needed the opportunity.

“This is the end of my racing career,” The D announced.
“Maybe the rain will cool your engine.”
“I finish with a record of zero wins and twenty-nine losses.”
“You were getting closer.”
“God punished me for my pride.”

Brendan liked the idea of a God who punishes people and also rewards them. He didn't see the point in believing in a God who doesn't make reckless personal decisions.

Why wasn't Brendan drunk? He usually required only one St. Ives but not this time. This time there was too much drama. The best thing that could happen now was the rain stopping and the road appearing. No, the best thing that could happen was the girl appearing, the rain and road be dammed. The D be dammed. His mother be dammed. Brendan felt ashamed of his mind and incredibly lonely.

The D moved down the road quickly. He'd reorganized the night's events as an unbroken chain of personal injustices, and this gave him a singular focus. When he tripped over a root or stumbled into a bush, it was expected, almost appreciated. Breaking a spider web with his face was motivational. He broke two. Brendan trailed behind, looking diligently for the girl. Sometimes between sheets of rain he thought he saw her, but she was revealed as a tree stump or shadow. He considered letting The D rush ahead of him completely so he might look for the girl in earnest, but what was The D capable of? Few things would surprise Brendan. It was the best thing about the night. He enjoyed these surprises as much as The D enjoyed his indignation.

“We'll show them!” The D was making contact with the axe now, felling actual leaves.

“I'm losing you a little bit.”
“This rain is invigorating!”

The rain was in sync with The D. The faster he ran, the harder it came down. When he paused to find the road, the clouds tightened their fists. Brendan resigned himself to lose The D. It would allow things to go more smoothly with the girl. What if she was following them? Brendan turned around, realizing The D would be lost as soon as he did, but she wasn't there. Brendan started to walk in the opposite direction. He called for her, not knowing her name. He called, I know you're here. He called, I can walk you back to the road. Idiatically he called, I'm wet too.

He sat on a wet log, looking wet to the world that wasn't there to see him, the world that had abandoned him or never existed. He stared into the unforgiving eyes of the paratroopers jumping from the helicopter. He inserted a sagging daisy into the barrel of Paul's rifle. For the cat, he had no explanations. What did they all want from him? Couldn't they want a little more?

The girl joined him on the log. She spread her arms so wide she was three people on the log. She turned to him slowly but not expectantly. Somehow, she was practically dry.

“I know what you think of me,” she said.
“That's not true.”
“Maybe.”
“My name is Brendan.”
Kevin Cloutner

"That's fine."
The parrots were silent.  
"Who are you here with?" he asked.  
"Nobody." She narrowed her arms an inch on each side. "Isn't that obvious?"

"But I meant before."
"Didn't you run, too?"
"My friend is still running."
"My name is Ilena."

Brendan couldn't get a clear look at her face. It was dark enough where it didn't take much to hide your face, if that's what you wanted to do. He couldn't imagine what she, or any girl, wanted. He preferred it be unknowable. He considered moving closer, but this wasn't a romantic situation. This was an opportunity to prove he knew what he was doing. He stood confidently. He pushed the rain from his eyes and looked at her directly—more directly than he intended, he realized, when she looked at him directly. She was younger than he'd thought, no older than he was. Her face was featureless. Everything on her face came from the shadows the moon sliced out of the branches. Her eyes were as wide as quarters. He couldn't remember if this was a normal size for an eye. The humidity had launched her hair in several directions. Her hair was a halo for her hair.

"Let's go," Brendan said.
"We were going," she said petulantly. She kept getting younger.

"Then you stopped."

"But now we're going again because I know exactly where."

She stood. She was so short! She was like a child. He fought the temptation to take her hand and lead her through the swamp like a child because she couldn't be one. He hadn't pressed a child's hand, and what would a child be doing at a drag race? She charged ahead of him. From the behind, she didn't look quite so young. When he grabbed her elbow, she dismissed him with a cold assurance that was decidedly adult. Brendan's heart leapt. What in the world was wrong with him?

He followed her because she happened to be going the right way. By chance or maybe close observation, she was headed toward 441, or where Brendan also believed 441 to be. He hoped The D would be

waiting there for him. What would The D think when he saw Brendan arrive with Ilena? By the time they arrived together—wet, mature, triumphant—they would practically be a couple. Brendan would flash The D the smile he'd practiced flashing Paul. Brendan smiled to the girl's back, into the rain.

The D hadn't made it far. He marched alone for ten minutes before dropping into a crippling self-pity. There was no sight of the highway at this point and no sound of Brendan. The D would be alone no matter which way he went, so he went no way. He waited for Brendan or the police or exposure. Could a person die of wetness? The D thought he could. He thought being consumed whole by an alligator would be a good way to die. He imagined that article in the Sun-Sentinel. There was a reason he was such a bad racer, and it wasn't fear. He raced as fearlessly as he knew how. The reason was confidence. He didn't know where the other racers found theirs; possibly, they were born with it, rendering his lack another weight in the already hopelessly sinking scale of personal injustice.

The confidence not to accelerate as hard as possible the entire time, trusting each part to do what it's designed to do, the wheels to turn and pistons to push. What he designed the car to do through his careful reading and intelligent buying. Did the barbarians read what he read? He doubted they did. He doubted they knew the Ando 2650 was superior in every way to the Mitsui 111, to say nothing of why. They didn't use factory parts, obviously, but what was available locally was a joke. Only none of it mattered when the gun went off and he was accelerating as hard as possible, his wheels spinning dirt, asphalt, coral, whatever these roads were made of, and the car to his right was taking the infinitesimally small lead that guaranteed victory. Sometimes he saw the driver's expression, or part of it, and the expression said, I'm better. Not I'm smarter or I work harder or I care more. Just I'm better. Of course, it was right.

The D stared into the rain. The wind tried to blow it to one side or the other, but the rain wanted to reach the earth as fast and hard as it could and wouldn't be budged. Staring into the rain was like staring into a curtain. Only occasionally did the curtain ripple to reveal what moved behind. In this instance, two slow-approaching figures. The
taller trailing the smaller, faces indistinguishable. The D straightened his posture. He considered putting his shirts back on, but they were so heavy. He swallowed two mints; surely, he could do something as simple as hello with confidence.

Brendan caught up to Ilona. He put a hand on her shoulder, and when she spun around, he positioned his other hand on her torso, so it almost looked like she was leaning in to kiss him. That is, if you were staring into the dark, into the rain, it might look like a man and woman had arrived to this spot of swampland together. You might even think they were happy to be there with the unflinching smile the one wore and the welcoming bewilderment with which the other received that smile. The shuffling of parrots could fairly be taken as an exotic chorus. You couldn’t deny the rain had pried apart the flowers and scattered their perfume at your feet.

**Contributor’s Notes**

**Joy Arbor**'s poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Many Mountains Moving*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Also a scholar in Rhetoric and Composition, she lives with her boyfriend and son in southeastern Michigan.

**Alice M. Azure**'s writing has appeared in a variety of anthologies and journals. A Mi'kmaq Métis, her roots are in the Kespukwitk District of Nova Scotia. Recently, two books have been released—*Along Came a Spider* (memoir) and *Games of Transformation*—poems inspired by the ancient city at Cahokia Mounds in Collinsville, Illinois.

**Alex Balogh** has planted trees in Oregon, baked pizzas in New Jersey, sold timeshare in California, and pawned a guitar in Oklahoma. He currently teaches at Lindenwood University.

**Denise Banker** took her Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska. She has been a florist, a college professor, a book publicist, and is now a bookseller. Empty Bowl Press will publish her first book, *Swimming the Colorado*, in October 2011.

**Enid Baron**, psychologist, poet, fiction writer, and teacher has had work published in numerous literary journals and a collection of poetry, *Baking Days*, published by Riverrun Press. She is planning to bring out a collection of short stories next fall and is working on a novel with the working title of *Perestroika*.

**Tim Bascom**'s memoir *Chameleon Days* won the Bakeless Literary Prize. His essays have been selected for *Best American Travel Writing* and *Best Creative Nonfiction*. Currently, he teaches at Drake University, where he is developing a collection of short stories about fathers and sons.