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Previously published in Quarterly West and The Man Back There

Show & Tell

The Decapitated Android

Someone has twisted off its head.

This had once been a pretty great toy, but now only a small rubber stem extends from its stump of a neck. If a head were placed there—the correct head—and turned and screwed and elbow-greased hard enough into position, the thing would be just like new. The joints at the elbows and knees are still strong, the cool-ass silver paint unscratched, and a small switch in its back, when pressed, reveals not one, not two, but a row of three machine guns hidden in a panel in its beefed-up, no-nippled chest.

That first time Heineken brings you into the walk-in closet, this is the toy you see, this is the toy you have to have, because even though it's broken, ninety percent of it is *the fucking neatest thing you've ever seen*. You reach for it, hold it in your hand, imagine that the head is around there somewhere, in one of those old boxes, and that you're going to find it and make it whole and when it's healed you're going to stuff it under your shirt and tell him you have to get going. You've never stolen anything bigger than a pack of gum in your life, but your animal instincts kick in, and you want it with a greed that surprises you. It's just that slick.

Heineken pushes shirts out of the way so he can climb to the back of the room. It's more like a room than a closet, you realize, as the shirts part and you can see the length of it. It has a small window at the far end that looks out onto their large yard. He looks out the window, then turns and slides down into a crouching position. "This is where she put all his stuff," he says.

His nickname is Heineken because he once drank one of his dad's Heineken beers out behind the school, in broad daylight, during school hours, or least this is the story he told you when you met him at the beginning of the summer, at the scrub-brush baseball diamond at the end of your block. He was wearing the same shirt then that he is today—a yellow T-Shirt with 'Star Wars' written across it in space-aged block lettering. You often lie awake at night wondering why you're the only person in North America who hasn't seen this movie. But you're not about to beg your brother to drive you. You just lie. You say you have seen it four times, one less than Heineken, who repeats the storyline enough that you sort of feel like you really *have* seen it.

"If she knew we were fucking around in here she would go ape shit," he says, as he wipes the back of his arm across his nose.

When your grabbed Kool-Aid from his fridge just an hour ago, you noticed that there were Heineken's there in the vegetable crisper, four of them placed end to end in rows of two, like batteries. "Yeah," you say, even though you have never seen his mother, know nothing about her temper or why this place is off limits. That comes later.

"It's hot in here," he says. "I'm sweating like a pig."

You make a sound like your brother sometimes makes, deep in the back of your throat, halfway between a burp and a snicker. It's a sign that you have better things to do, even though you don't. You have discovered another secret about the android. The machine guns are

hollow and fire real projectiles, little slivers of plastic with red rubber ball ends. You find one on the shelf, slide it into the barrel, cock the switch in its back, and hear the click.

It is the kind of thing little kids swallow. They fire it into their open mouths. Then you read about them in the newspaper.

Cool.

Satan's House of Horror

This is missing its cover but you know it is issue twelve because you've read the fine print. All the secrets of the comic are written in the box at the bottom of the first page in type so small it feels like a joke at your expense: the year it was printed, the address of the publisher, the subscription rate for the comic in the United States and Canada, and the words *no similarity between any of the names, characters, persons, and/or institutions in this magazine with those of any living or dead person or institution is intended, and any such similarity which may exist is purely coincidental*.

Above these words, a brightly colored splash page shows a devil peering down at hordes of people stewing in a gigantic vat of molten lava. The Satan-figure has raised its pitchfork, because maybe one of these people might try jumping out of the lava and scrambling away to safety and it needs to be ready to spear that person through the heart. The rest of the comic has nothing to do with this image—it's a compilation of three boring, badly drawn ghost stories—but this one page rocks. The devil is smiling like crazy. You've never seen anybody so happy.

And then the creepy thought occurs to you, the so-scary-it-makes-you-proud idea. There are so many people in the vat that a lot of them

probably do look like real people, despite the tiny words proclaiming that any such similarity is purely coincidental.

"He had a shit load of comics," Heineken says. He's watching you as you read. Occasionally he asks if you want to catch some TV, go to the pond and throw rocks, have some nachos, but sprawling on his bed with a stack of his brother's comic books is ten times better.

"Where is Oregon?" you ask, because that's where Heineken has told you his brother moved when he was sixteen.

"It's on the other side of the country," he says. "It's practically Alaska."

Sixteen seems just old enough to make an ambitious move like that. You're eleven now and in five years you are going to be a completely different person—and not a person like your own brother, who at nineteen slides his feet across the pocked kitchen linoleum like a tired fifty year old. You hear him from your bed when he comes home from work, his feet sliding, his keys clicking on the glass tabletop in the kitchen. The door to the room you share opens and he clicks on the light, then the TV, and you push your face into the darkness of your pillow.

Inside the comic book, a ghost in a black hood is walking down a corridor, dragging chains that create a long sound effect that spirals out of the panel and into the next one, where a man cringes in his bed, listening. This is stupid stuff you are reading, but you need to find out the end. You really hope somebody gets snuffed.

The ghost is passing through the door, arms extended, his hair like smoke trailing from the back of his head. The man is screaming, and something about their common expression—two mouths agape, two sets of eyes bulging, the similar caveman slope in their foreheads—makes it look like they are relatives in an especially ugly family.

You think that anybody could do bullshit like this; you could do it right now if you had a crayon and five minutes.

Stupid Rubber Werewolf

On Tuesday you play with marbles, holding them up to the light like jewels so you can see their shiny hypnotic centers. On Thursday you uncover a box of books—sword and sorcery paperbacks, thick science textbooks, a dog-eared collection of car photographs–and discover his name written neatly on the inside cover of each one. The next day you rummage through the pockets of a dungaree jacket and produce four things: a petrified stick of gum, a quarter, a ticket stub to a Black Sabbath concert, and a small werewolf made from rubber and wire. You bend its hands above its head, its legs into painful-looking pretzel-shapes. Of the three big Hollywood monsters—Frankenstein, Dracula, and the Wolfman—the Wolfman is potentially the coolest, but this guy you're twisting around is not very cool at all, and you have no idea why someone would carry it around in a jacket as sleek and dirty-amazing as the one hanging from the wire hanger.

"Want to eat?" Heineken says.

"Sure," you say. Heineken's father works in Boston and his mother works in Lowell and they leave meals for him wrapped in cellophane when they leave for the day. He always offers half of them to you, but you never accept. Instead you open the cabinets, find something familiar—a can of tomato soup—and plop it in a pan.

Heineken watches as you click on a burner and shake the pan above the flame. Your mother waters soup to thinness, or yells at you if you overcook the eggs, so this is good, this is better than the eating itself, and at first you serve Heineken too—a bowl, a spoon, and then a

piece of bread taken from the fridge. But he says no, and looks at the soup like he's not sure where it came from. You want to tell him, *look, this is yours*, but you eat separately—him his sandwich, you your soup—and you're rushing to finish because today is Friday and you're running out of closet-time. In a few hours you will walk home and you won't see Heineken until Monday, when once again he will appear at the boring little playground where you first saw him hanging limply from the jungle gym. Then you will head to his house together, Heineken walking slightly ahead, talking loud about what he did with his parents that weekend. This is how it works.

You've thought of showing up here some rainy Sunday morning and ringing the bell, but you remember another kid in another city, last year, and the way his head appeared in the upstairs window when you knocked on his door, and then that long wait, the second knock, the stupid shamble back down the stairs and out into the street, where you picked up a rock and thought of throwing it hard at the spot where the face had been just a few seconds before.

The first taste of the soup ignites your hunger, but you rest the spoon in the bowl and let your appetite stand. "What did William do?" you ask, trying out the name from the inside cover of the books. It does not feel that unnatural on your lips, especially with one of his quarters in your pocket and the werewolf on the table.

"Who?"

"William."

"Billy," Heineken corrects you.

Then he goes back to chewing like this is some kind of answer.

Giant-Sized Super Spectacular

There's at least one lesson to be learned from every object, and then something to learn when objects are put together in combinations of two or three, like the Matchbox car you found hidden inside a plastic submarine, but for the most part these lessons are beyond words. And the simplest lessons, the ones that appear in sentence form in your head, are as unsatisfying as your mom's mottos about *people making their own luck* and *respect being earned and not given* and sometimes, when she is especially tired, *tomorrow being a new day*. For instance: Supervillains are always trying to take over the world. Superheroes are always trying to stop them. That's the lesson in the comic book you are reading.

It seems like the millionth time these characters have fought, but there are no other issues before this one that help to explain what's happening. Why do The Lightning Dynamo and The Boomerang Kid dislike each other so much? The villain with the lizard skin keeps mentioning revenge, but revenge for what? It makes you think of September, that sick-stomach feeling that comes on you when you walk down the hall for the first time and everybody else is calling each other by name. You're this close to crumpling the stupid thing up, but you like the drawing, and one of the villains is sleek like a cat and has claws for hands.

"What does he do out there?" you ask. You are thinking that he maybe draws these things, comics like the one spread on the living room floor.

"Where?" Heineken asks. He's reading too. A boy scout manual.

"Oregon," you say. "Your brother."

"He's a boxer," Heineken says, and his eyes do this screwy thing they've never done before. They look up and off to the right, into the far corner where the ceiling meets the wall, and for a second you think

he's heard a car in the driveway. You're ready to bolt down the stairs and out the back, into the thick woods behind their house. "A professional boxer," he says, limply, and your leg muscles relax.

You imagine him, hard and shiny-wet, throwing punches at the air. It is like a scene from an old movie except there is no plot, no dialogue, just the empty ring, the one mysterious character, and the sandpaper shuffle of his feet.

"It's going to rain," you say, but you stay where you are, flipping the pages of the comic back and forth without really looking at them.

You walk home through a light drizzle that makes the blacktop of the road glisten. You take the long route past the train station, and when you finally arrive at your front door the little house is dark except for a light in your mother's bedroom. So you head in through the back door and make a peanut butter sandwich by the light of the open refrigerator. When you finish you close the door with your foot and eat the sandwich standing in the dark. Your mother calls something out and you answer with a mumbled hello as you chew. Then you wipe the crumbs off your hands above the sink and head into the bedroom. You could have sworn you put the headless android under your bed, but there it is leaning against the lamp on your nightstand, standing at attention like it’s been waiting up for you. Its head stem spears a small note, which you grab and ball up, think about throwing on the underwear-littered floor. But you open it and find your brother's scribbled handwriting. *Are you going through people's trash now? Show some self respect. Love, Gerry.*

You'll have to hide the comic books somewhere better.

Broken Water Rockets

Two long rockets with hollow ends that can be filled with water from a plastic hand pump. A drawing on the box shows a rocket flying into the air and droplets of water exploding through the sky. Two smiling cartoon kids look up from the ground, waving their hands like they're saying good-bye.

You are getting too old for this.

You love it though. Your own toys—the bag of plastic solders, a machine gun that goes clack clack clack when you pull the trigger, even your plastic bat with duct tape wrapped around one end—they've all gone unused since you moved here in May, but Heineken's brother's toys are special. You want to keep digging. And anyway, the summer is a little secret between you and Heineken. In the fall things will be different. You know that. You're pretty sure he does too.

"Damn it," you say, when the rocket spurts up half a foot in the air and falls to the driveway blacktop. You pick it up again, begin pumping the stupid pump again, and then swear again when it still doesn't work. "Damn it to hell."

You've developed a habit of swearing like a sergeant in the war movies your brother watches late at night when he comes home from his new job at the 7-11. It's his third this summer, and your mother is already talking about moving again. She says there are jobs in Florida, and the weather there is beautiful year-round. She has mentioned Washington state too, which you now know from a quick glance at a map is not that far from Oregon, but you're guessing it's a lot of baloney, like the time she wanted to go to Greece to check up on some old rich relative who probably doesn't exist.

"Your brother sure bought some stupid crap," you say, as you think about your own modest toys.

"Shut up," he says. He's not even looking at you. He's kicking at the grass near the two-car garage, trying to find June bugs. This yard is so different from the small square of dirt behind your own house. Sometimes you see a family of rabbits huddled around the back porch, or a single deer staring at you from the safety of the woods, and you watch them for as long as you can before they scramble away from you.

You're sick of the sight of his big flat face, his shirts with the little alligator on the chest, his pale little legs. You do some quick math in your head, trying to guess at how old he was when his brother left home, but you come up with nothing. The facts don't seem coherent yet. It's still like a bedtime story, something sleepy and faraway. "What was it you said before about the boxing?" you ask, and he shrugs his shoulders. He seems to do that more and more as you get to know him, although maybe you're just noticing it now. "You're a God damn liar," you tell him.

"Yeah, well, you're a God damn thief," he says.

You pick up the rockets and hold them while Heineken fills them with the hose.

The Other Robot

This one is not nearly as good as the headless android, but it's kind of fun to smash with the hammer you find in Heineken's cellar. It's lower jaw is larger then its upper jaw and as the hammer comes down on its chest, it seems to be frowning at you like the little Buddha your mother keeps on the dashboard of her Chevy Impala. When your brother drives, he talks to it like it's a passenger, asks it where it's headed, then answers with a high, I'm-so-funny voice. "Canada!" it says back. Or, "Arkansas!"

You imagine the hammer accidentally coming down on your thumb and turning it blue. You sort of hope it does; then you would have something to be mad at Heineken for, because it is his hammer. But your swings come down hard and precise, in the same spot every time, directly on the chest, which has fractured open to reveal a little clockwork mechanism.

"What are you doing?" Heineken asks from behind you.

"Fixing something," you say, without breaking the sharp upward swing, the downward slam.

He turns and heads back into the living room, where he will probably sit in front of the TV and watch *Donahue* push a microphone into the faces of his studio audience members.

It doesn't feel like you're lying. There's something important inside, a little system of interlocking teeth and tiny rubber bands, and you want to see it as completely as you can. But as you break it open you are also smashing it flat. When you stop, Heineken comes back, but he doesn't say anything. "What?" you ask. You're breathing hard through your mouth.

"That was my brother's," he says.

"It wouldn't work," you say. "I was trying to fix it."

"He won that at the carnival," he says, "just before he left. We won it."

The word *the* before *carnival* pisses you off, like there is only one carnival in the entire world and you're supposed to know about it. "It's not like he's coming back for it," you say, but he's already walked away. You lift the hammer and bring it down a couple more times.

The landlord has been calling the house. You pick up the phone in the evening and he asks if your mother is there. You have orders to tell him she is in the shower, so this is what you tell him even though she sitting at the kitchen table scanning the newspaper. She lifts her head and smiles.

"Go tell her it's me," he says, because he's called enough that he's stopped introducing himself.

"She's in the shower," you say.

"I know that," he says, so you hang up the phone.

It begins to ring again. You walk away from it. So does your mother, in a different direction.

Rusted Scimitar

You know this word from some movie you saw just a few weeks before on Heineken's TV, so when you find one at the back of the closet behind some old clothes it's a doubly satisfying discovery.

It makes you feel strong to slide your hands around the grip and lift it, smart to know its real name. What do people call this? Luck.

You are wearing a plastic army helmet you found at the bottom of a box and although the two items do not fit together at first, with a little imagination you can picture yourself as a time traveler who has

picked up these odd items on all of his journeys through history. When you emerge from the closet, you feel so tough that you wave the scimitar around and say, "I could chop off someone's head with this."

You suddenly remember the decapitated android. Where did that thing end up, anyway? The last time you saw it was on your brother's pillow. He had pushed an orange down on its stem as a makeshift head, wrapped a napkin around its shoulders as a cape.

"Watch it," Heineken says. "That thing is sharp."

Which it is. You touch your thumb to it and draw a small droplet of blood, which you wipe on the front of your jeans.

You point it at his chest and say, "Was your brother a pirate? Is that what he was?"

"Cut the shit," he says.

You can hear the cars driving up and down the street outside. It's a little past five o'clock—the latest you've ever been here—and the chances of one of those cars being driven by Heineken's mother grows greater every second. You poke the sword forward, move it in the shape of an X. He rolls his eyes. He's bored of this, bored of you, and he wants you to be gone. All summer you've been thinking you're the one who chooses to leave before they get home, but no, you can tell now, he's been the one prodding you out the door. He's ashamed of your dirty Keds and your hungry belly.

"A pirate," you say, because somehow you know this hurts.

"Shut the fuck up about my brother," he says.

There is something tense and dangerous here but you want to keep prodding it to see if it bites back. You raise the sword to his face. It's close enough that you could lean forward and tap his nose with the point, but all he needs to do is step back two steps. You kind of wish he would.

"If he was here right now he would kick your ass," he says.

"A knight," you say. "Your knight in shining armor."

You are putting on your brother's I'm-too-funny Buddha voice and you hate yourself for it. You're almost relieved when Heineken slaps the sword to one side with the flat of his hand and throws a punch at your face. You duck your head and his hand hits the top of your head and then you are in there, grabbing him and pushing him back against the flower-print wallpaper. He grabs you too, in a grotesque little wrestling hold. You can hear him breathing hard. You can hear yourself too.

"Let me the fuck go," you say through gritted teeth.

"You first."

Where is the scimitar? For a scary-fantastic second, you think you have accidentally impaled yourself, that blood is pouring down your back. You are not scared of dying or the hospital, but the idea of staining the wall-to-wall is almost too horrible to imagine, and if Heineken were not gripping you tightly, you would clutch your shirt and try to stop the warm flow.

But the wetness on your back is just your own humiliating sweat. You fumble for a better position, slide your hands down his body. You can feel his ribs, the muscles in his thigh. You could stay like this for a long time, you decide, but he says, “On the count of three.”

"One, two, three," you say. "One, two, three," and you both let go at the same time, step backward, stare each other down. Your shirt is torn down the front in two places. The scimitar is on the floor. It’s not nearly as sharp as you thought it was, although it’s probably heavy enough that the flat of the blade could cause some real damage. Heineken is trying to say something, but he’s breathing too hard, and the words catch in his throat.

You hear the front door opening, or think you hear it, so you run downstairs and out the back, where Heineken's mother is standing, her car keys still in her hand. "Hello there," she says, like she had expected you.

You don't say a word.

"Where did you get that hat?" she says.

"It's a helmet," you say, like a moron.

She reaches out and plucks it off your head and for a second, you think she's going to put it on her own head, but she holds it with two hands against her belly. You remember a funeral in one of the war movies, with a flag draped casket and a captain, the star of the movie, holding his cap that way. She says, "Are you a friend of Bobby's?"

It's like you're trying very, very hard not to exist.

"You were playing in the closet," she says.

"Why do you keep all those things?" you ask.

The moment hiccups as you wait for her to push her face into the correct expression—flat and stern and unemotional. "You're not supposed to be in there," she says, and although she isn't moving, you duck and scamper to your right, running past her and into the woods. When you are far enough away you stop and cup both hands to your mouth. You struggle to think of something to say, anything, and finally you yell out, "He's dead! He's dead!" but not loud enough for anyone to hear but you.

It’s like the game you used to play sometimes. A half dozen kids wandering through the woods holding plastic water pistols and machine guns that made clicking sounds when you pulled the trigger. You’d shoot someone and then yell, “You’re dead,” when he didn’t fall down. He would shoot back and yell too, a mocking echo, and pretty soon you’d be arguing about who had been hit, who had missed. Remembering this, you

yell out a little louder, the words part command and part question, but your voice sounds strange—distant, as if someone else is yelling those words at you, from off somewhere in the forest. You lower your hands, spin around and give the trees a once over, expecting to find Heineken there, holding the scimitar. Maybe smiling in a way you've never seen before—sinister and confident—or maybe wearing a face like his mother's when you asked the question about the closet. But of course he is not. Not even a squirrel or rabbit to act as an excuse for that scaredy cat feeling that's attacking the nape of your neck.

You pick up a good, straight stick and point it at an invisible enemy, mumble the words again like a little curse.

Home-Made Android Head

It's not really. It's just a ball of black duct tape pushed down on the stem. You slip an old action hero helmet over it and it looks pretty good, good enough that you think of giving it to Heineken as a gift. But your brother finds it first and he tells you that you're pretty resourceful for a retard and that he's going to donate it to the retard museum. He holds it above his head, tempting you to make a grab for it, but you just chew on your lip until he takes it away.

You guess that this is the last time you'll see it, and you guess right. Years later, when talking to him on the phone, you'll sometimes wonder what he did with it, if he dropped it in the trash or gave it away or left it someplace you really should have looked if you had just been smarter by two I.Q. points.

But it's not all bad luck that day, is it? Because your mother comes home red-faced and smiling. She hugs you before she even closes the door and says that she just won the lottery. For a split-second you

imagine one million, two million, three million dollars—your mind spins you out of the house and across town and into some brand new life—but it’s five hundred bucks, which is still a lot of money, and you hug her back.

She has lobsters in the car, she says, and you help her bring them inside. Their claws, you notice, are held shut by thick rubber bands. There are three of them, one for each of you in the family, and corn on the cob, and bottles of wine and beer, and strange little multi-colored cookies wrapped in green cellophane. There are more groceries in the trunk of the car than you’ve seen in your life, and you have to take five trips to get them all inside. When you’re finished your mother pulls you into her arms again and tells you to close your eyes. But before you can she hands it over. It’s a baseball glove—somehow she managed to smuggle it inside without you seeing—and she hands it over with a flourish and a small kiss.

She drinks a glass of wine and watches you flex your hand, pound your fist into the base of the glove, and hold your arm out like you're ready to receive a hard pitch. The glove's too big for you, but you make a show of loving it, and she even brings up little league, although by this time she's rambling about all sorts of ambitions and regrets and stupid men and signing you up for little league suddenly becomes one of a million things she should have done with her life.

"Christ," she says, with a little laugh, when she catches herself crying.

That night when she's asleep you lift the lid from the garbage can. You slide your fingers in, push aside coffee grounds and vegetable muck and sharp lobster shells, but it's not there.

You think of walking to Heineken's house in the dark, but even a retard like you is smart enough to know that it would be pointless.

When your brother comes in—he was supposed to be home hours ago—you are still awake, lying in the dark. "Where is it?" you say, with as much venom as you can bring up from your gut.

"Where is what?" he says. You can hear him pulling off his heavy shoes, dropping them to the floor. You'd push it a little more, but you know he'll push back, and you had your revenge anyway, because after waiting for him for an hour at dinner, you and your mother split his lobster between you.

"Forget it," you say.

"Forget what?" he says, with a snicker.

You are thinking of Heineken's stiff puppet face, the point of the scimitar. His features had been as much a mystery as the objects in the closet, and you wanted to nudge it to see if it would grimace the way you grimaced when you raised that single drop of blood on your thumb. Not even a nudge. A jab at the air and a flinch would have been enough. It would have been like a gift to you if he had just twisted his face to show a little pain. But he didn't do it, so why should you give him the repaired android with its ridiculous duct tape head? You'll have to be satisfied with this odd balance, this double withholding.

You don't know what he feels, though, or what he thinks.

You've never even been in his room.

You tell yourself you won't go back there.

Little Green Soldiers

"Where is he then?" you ask.

"Shut-up," Heineken says

You're standing in his yard throwing tennis balls up onto the roof of his garage. They slide down and you catch them and throw them up again. Sometimes one gets stuck in the gutter, and you poke at it with a broom handle until it pops free.

This is what passes for fun now. You haven't been inside in a week, ever since you held the scimitar in your hands and wore his brother's helmet on your head.

"You don't know, do you?" you say.

"Shut-up," he says. "Shut-up."

The summer is ending and when school starts in two weeks you know you're going to switch allegiances and attach yourself to a group of bruisers, like you did at the last school in Pittsburgh. Spitting, kicking, knotty-muscled kids who live in houses like your house. You are becoming one of these kids. Becoming isn't even the right word. You are one. And after that? In twenty years you will become *me*, and I will look for you over my shoulder as you scramble along the confused landscape of my history. In a way, you are as mysterious as that small space at the end of the hall, the missing brother. I am trying to rebuild you from scraps—smudged memories, damaged imagination. I guess I am trying to talk to you.

So when you get home you take your own pitiful little army men—the man with the binoculars, the sharpshooter, the captain, and all the rest—and burn them with your brother's naked lady lighter. They move in slow motion as they melt. Their arms curl inward. Their knees buckle. Their heads bow in prayer, and then you bury them in unmarked graves along the wire fence at the back of the yard, stand up and brush the dirt from your jeans.

"It's too late in the year to do that," your mother says, when she comes up behind you and puts her hands on your shoulders. She thinks you're planting seeds.