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Robert Chatham

# Noisome Beasts



# Noisome Beasts: A Compelling First Novel

By Robert Chatham

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# ***Noisome Beasts***

*A compelling first novel*

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*Prologue*

If one must live in New Mexico, Todd thought, one must have ample mouthfuls of onion rings. Fumbling in the greasy yellow carton, he pulled out five enormous, breaded onion rings, and stuffed all of them into his mouth at once. He poured more root beer into his mouth and nearly choked on the mess. Coughing heartily, he spat the masticated slop onto the sidewalk, and then reached for another handful.

Blue skies. Burning heat. Cacti and plains as far as the human eye can possibly see. Todd had lived in New Mexico for eighteen years and still marveled at the stark, barren life that he lived. Gallup was no true home for one of the world's most talented rappers, he'd told himself, his parents, his friends, coworkers, and – on at least five occasions in the past month alone – begging hobos.

He beamed proudly as he remembered Frank, the homeless gentleman that he'd now spoken to three times. Frank was everything a father should be: open, warm, receptive. "Good rapper, good rapper," he'd repeated to himself earnestly as Todd pressed three dimes and a crumpled dollar bill into his dirty hand. Todd had resisted the urge to hug the grizzled bum only because of the raunchy, eye-watering smell wafting from his dirty red coat.

Todd proudly strutted down the street, smiling broadly, tossing the used fast food carton to the sidewalk. He laughed loudly to show how unconcerned he was, tossed his hair (though, having a crew cut, he appeared to passers-by to be avoiding an angry bee that had flown near his ear), and marched on, arms held stiffly at his sides as he bobbed up and down. Now deep in thought, he worked on his latest opus: a rap song about the prodigious efforts it took to maintain a steady reputation at the Cracker Barrel, the deadly pains of not having any sort of girlfriend, the uncertainty of who his birth parents really were.

Todd choked back a cry as he thought about it. It was far too much for a man as young as he to endure. It was heart-breaking, and he shouldn't have to deal with it. A tear dripped down his cheek in a startling display of self-pity.

"All that and I still have to work the evening shift at the Cracker Barrel," he mused furiously. "Always doing time at the Cracker Barrel... What rhymes with barrel?" he thought, and then smiled. His mind was a steel trap, always looking for his next amazing rhyme. He'd been inspired to write four stanzas of a new opus, "Fronting with the Cracker Barrel Crew," and was working daily on the fifth verse.

And, in deep thought, he continued his steady pace. He ran his greasy hands through his hair, trying to simultaneously wipe them clean and give himself an impressive sheen. He stopped and dumped the last of the root beer on the street. He stood nervously before the Cracker Barrel; one of the biggest attractions in the city, it loomed over the milling citizens like a squat southern woman dolefully partitioning out handfuls of biscuits and salt pork. The hideous facility where

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd worked for slave-labor wages. Was he really set for the day? He reached into his pockets and felt around: a slim wallet with a picture of Batman, a tube of lip balm, a little baggie full of Honey Nut Cheerios, his pocket notebook, an ink pen. Yes, Todd was definitely set.

Sighing heavily, he walked in, grabbed his apron, and cinched it around his waist. He yawned. It looked to be a long, tiring day. There were already five customers in the dining area, and no doubt they would all probably want some sort of delicious meal. How would he balance their drink refills with the careful attention that his rap opus so greatly deserved? He shrugged and grabbed a pad to write down orders. He was readying himself to greet the first set of customers when a large, hairy hand clapped down on his shoulder.

“Sanders,” barked his ineffable supervisor, Mr. Jacobs. Mr. Jacobs was forty years old but still worked a job just a step above minimum wage. He also wore polo shirts at least two sizes too small. “Do you know how late you are today?”

Todd did not know. When he was in grade school, he had to repeat third grade twice because he could not tell the hour hand from the minute hand on the mimeographed worksheets given to grade schoolers to ensure that they could properly read time. It really bothered and bewildered him. He also had trouble remembering that when the minute hand pointed to the “2”, it actually meant 10 minutes. After his third go-round, they just told him to stick to digital watches and moved him forward out of pity. The only problem was that the cheap five dollar digital watches that Todd bought always managed to drown themselves in soapy water when he was forced to wash the dishes at the Cracker Barrel. After digital watch number four – his personal favorite, a pink-and-green number – had passed away, he’d cried for half an hour. Never again, he had promised himself. I can’t do it. I’m just not that strong.

Todd was paralyzed by surprise and bewilderment, but finally managed to regain his voice. “Thirty minutes?” Todd guessed.

“Eight minutes, wise-ass,” snarled Mr. Jacobs. “Sanders, let me clue you in. Four o’clock is when it all begins. People get off work early, they want to celebrate, want to take the wifey and kids out for a big family meal.”

Todd nodded furiously, his mind working: “*Big family meal / ...*” and his mind went blank. On the spot improvisation, or freestyling, was not his strong suit. He knew that each word, each line, each syllable of his raps were something to cherish and to really ponder. *But what rhymes with meal?* he thought desperately, drowning out the rest of Mr. Jacob’s words.

“So you get out there,” finished Mr. Jacobs, “and you take those orders.” He began snapping his fingers in front of Todd’s nose. “Come-on-come-on! People come here, they want drinks!” he shouted. “Drinks and bread! That’s how we get ‘em! So go take care of them and let’s get moving.” He clapped his hands loudly, while the surrounding staff members ignored him. There is a strong innate tendency to block out anyone who ever shouts the words “Let’s go, people,” which happened to be one of Mr. Jacob’s favorite things to bellow at his employees.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

He'd heard the phrase in a movie once, as a child, and the words had seared their way into his brain as symbols of power and might. He dreamed himself a general, a brilliant magnate whose lackeys and gophers sat limply, waiting for his stentorian command.

Todd cleared his throat and nodded, walking into the dining area. He was on his game at once; though there were only five seated tables and he was only responsible for two of them, he knew that the best waiters treated their customers like kings and princes. He needed his job, he reminded himself: he needed his savings. He had \$324.79 so far, and with that seed, he decided, he'd grow the vine that was his future. First, he decided, he'd buy a car – not a rusted green Ford like his best friend Edgar bought from his cousin, but a sweet red convertible. A rapper needed a car with gigantic, revolving, sparkling rims; a rapper was a poet, and his wheels were his punctuation.

“Thank you for choosing Cracker Barrel,” he announced. “My name is Todd. May I take your drink orders, please?” The customers spoke and he wrote, and every word they spoke flowed through his pen and onto the paper like the beat of some unbelievable rhyme that was just begging to be created and spoken with conviction.

And with the convertible, fame, women, and his own apartment would arrive. His parents would knock on his door, crying wistfully, “Please let us move in with you!” “GET OUT OF HERE, YOU'RE SIXTY YEARS OLD,” he'd shout at them in a victorious voice, and he'd watch them for about six seconds to see their eyes widen in recognition at their own words distorted and thrown back at them, and then he'd slam the door in their faces.

Back to the kitchen to fill the drink orders. He'd be famous in his own time, like some brilliant prince raised by peasants and serfs and placed rightly upon the throne as a grown man, recognized by the noblemen and women as someone incredibly amazing and with a really sweet set of wheels. He smiled wistfully to himself as he set down the sweet tea and the ice water with lemon in front of the two customers at table number four.

The woman at the table, a fortyish dull blonde with a wrinkled brow, stared hatefully at the ice water in front of her. “What the hell is this,” she muttered slowly and quietly to herself, and then shrieked it to the room at the top of her lungs. “WHAT the HELL is THIS?”

Todd stepped back, eyeballing the beverage. Was there an insect in her water? He hoped that was all it was. If it was a spider or a piece of green bell pepper, he'd have to run back to the kitchen, shrieking and terrified.

“LEMON,” the woman hissed, and pushed the glass off the table. The plastic tumbler hit the floor, ice and water and a lemon wedge scattering. The cup bounced once, solemnly, and then rested amidst the mess.

“If I wanted lemon, I would have said lemon,” the dull blonde told him. The brunette across from her smirked and crossed her arms. “I'M the one who asked for lemon,” she murmured scornfully, but the blonde paid her no attention.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Get me your manager. Get him out here, get him out here now,” the blonde hissed. Todd stepped back, taken aback. From dreams of convertibles to cold water pooling around his sneakers in less than thirty seconds was, for him, a personal record. Meanwhile, the entire room – customers and servers alike – was staring at the trio. The blonde snapped her fingers aggressively at him, shouting “Andele, andele!” At that very moment, Mr. Jacobs walked through the swinging doors from the kitchen, looked at Todd, scowled, and began making his way over to the table.

Fired! Todd felt a strange, burning combination of broken-heartedness and elation. It was a shame; he’d worked at the Cracker Barrel for six weeks, longer than any other job he’d ever had. He smiled wistfully to himself, nostalgia building in his heart, clogging his arteries. He felt like crying again. Todd cried, on average, three times a day, so he was very close to reaching his daily limit, and it wasn’t even 5:00 yet.

He couldn’t afford self-pity, he decided. He had to be a man. Steeling himself, he remembered how angry he was when his mother had demanded that he go down and apply to the Cracker Barrel. If only she’d had the foresight to see his heartbreak when it was discovered that he was obviously overqualified for the position! Todd pulled out his little notebook and wrote: “*Cracker Barrel: I was overqualified...*” He chewed the tip of the pen that he’d reluctantly stolen from the counter on his way out the door, Mr. Jacobs shouting the whole time. And suddenly, a brief smile lit his face as he finished the line: “*to serve to chicks some food that’s fried.*” He practically danced down the street, delighted. It was rare that he was able to complete a really amazing rhyme so quickly. This was definitely going into his opus.

Or was it? A gnawing fear crept into Todd. What if he hadn’t worked long enough to truly gain the experience necessary to write such a grim exposé? What if his rap sounded paltry, sounded too hollow and naïve? He was an exacting man; he couldn’t settle for mediocrity. What if his work was stalled, dead, worthless?

It was his parents’ fault! If they hadn’t forced him into indentured servitude, he’d still be at home, working on his album! He cursed a little and then felt bad. What good was labeling one’s self a cuss-free rapper if one was going to have that kind of attitude when the tapes weren’t rolling?

He slapped himself on the back of his hand harshly, still slowly shuffling his way down the street. He did not relish the idea of returning to his parents’ house and admitting to them that it was all a mistake. He could almost hear his father’s snort of dismissal, could practically see his mother roll her eyes. It wasn’t enough that he’d tried, that he’d really made an effort at being a model employee, that he’d become near a hero to the entire staff at the Cracker Barrel with his modesty and charm and resolve. They’d practically carried him around on their shoulders – cooks, bus boys, dish washers, and waitresses – when he’d loudly recited his latest rap song

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

(“Sources of Fiber”) at closing time one evening. He was definitely their hero, and he wouldn’t forget that, especially when he was composing the chorus to his opus.

Yet every single time he’d tried to share his creative output, his father held the newspaper close to his face as if he were trying to study the very dots that made up the typeface; his mother turned up the volume so that Dan Rather’s voice shook the windows and the next-door neighbor gave them the finger as he walked to get the evening mail.

Were they even really his parents, Todd wondered, and not for the first time. They didn’t know him, didn’t understand him. And did they even really look like him? Todd had a thick mop of brown, tangled hair (or, rather, he had before his mother had shorn it all off with a pair of electric hair clippers as a punishment for the last time he’d been fired), while Todd’s father was bald. Todd’s mother was a girl, so Todd knew he didn’t look like her at all. Probably he *was* adopted, Todd reasoned with himself for the fifth time that day.

He knew who he really wanted as his father, had known for over half his life. He still remembered the feeling he had when he first heard the stern, authoritative voice of the actor Reginald Vel Johnson saying – no, commanding – “Go home, Steve. Go home, go home, go home.”

Reginald Vel Johnson, the bright, shining star of the television show “Family Matters” was everything that his parents were not. As Carl Winslow, he was kind, wise, strict, and a man that Todd could respect. Unlike Todd’s so-called father, who merely worked as a customer service representative at a local bank, Carl was a police officer. He had a real career fighting real criminals.

And Carl knew how to listen, unlike Todd’s father. One day, in a fit of brilliance, Todd came up with the ultimate brilliant idea: it would make his father millions – maybe billions – in commissions. “Put this up on your marquee,” Todd ordered his father. ““Tu Pac is alive in the bank basement. Great interest rates on CDs.”” When his father protested, saying that he could not put a rumor about a dead rap star on a bank advertisement, Todd stomped his foot in fury. “Look! Just listen. I don’t know if Tu Pac is alive. You don’t either. No one does, not really. But listen – if just one person comes in and asks about it – that’s a customer you didn’t have before.” It was brilliant, infallible. But Todd’s father just shook his head and opened the paper again.

Carl Winslow – Reginald, really – would have listened carefully. He would have taken proper notes and thanked his son profusely and typed up a proposal to his supervisor. He would have driven Todd to the marquee and stood beside him with his arm around Todd’s shoulders, staring proudly at the brainchild of his son, as customers stormed the doors of the bank and all but threw their money into the tellers’ faces. Todd nearly wept with the unfairness of it all.

He trudged up to the front door, wiping his feet carefully on the front mat, which greeted him with a cheerful “*Welcome to our Humble Home!*” It was hideous, a mauve and tan weave



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

that his mother had purchased at the local dollar store.

Inside, he could hear the television blaring and his mother loudly yapping to herself about the various women on television who had offended her that afternoon. He rolled his eyes desperately, imagining telling his mother that he'd been fired. Her look of concern, her tears, the conversations with his father, and, later, the accusations and hair trimmer. He held his stomach with disgust. No, now was definitely not the time for his mother to discover he'd been fired. Could he sneak upstairs without notice?

The answer was yes, absolutely. He snuck up to his room and took inventory. One black-and-white television adorned with a pair of aluminum-foil covered rabbit ears. One mini shelf full of albums from his favorite bands (Van Halen, Aerosmith, and Barry Manilow were his current favorites, but he had a wide selection that also included some Sugarhill Gang records and – his crown possession – a 45 single of the song “Bad Company” by the band “Bad Company”.) A twin sized bed, his laundry basket, two trashcans (neatly emptied, he happily noticed), another shelf holding his absolute best model tanks. Six – no, wait. Five bags of cheese puff snacks.

Five.

Suddenly, Todd could not breathe, he was so furious. Bellowing in absolute madness, he stomped down the stairs to the living room.

“ALL RIGHT,” he shouted loudly. His mother, still complaining to herself, immediately froze and then unfroze long enough to turn around to look at him. The television blared advertisements for cough drops in the background, oblivious to the shrieking.

“WHEN I LEFT FOR GOING TO THE MALL AND THEN WALKING AROUND DOWNTOWN AND THEN GOING TO BURGER KING FOR A SUPER LATE LUNCH AND THEN DOWN TO WORK AT THE CRACKER BARREL, I HAD SIX BAGS OF CHEESE PUFF SNACKS IN MY ROOM. SIX BAGS, I PAID OUT OF MY ALLOWANCE AND THE MONEY I GOT FROM CRACKER BARREL, THAT WAS A DOLLAR TWENTY FIVE A BAG AND NOW THEY'RE ALL GONE. WELL, ONE OF THEM IS.”

Mrs. Sanders, his mother, wore a pink bathrobe over a bleach-stained t-shirt and a pair of faded navy sweatpants that were probably older than Todd. Her mouth opened and worked, trying to make some sort of pathetic explanation, but Todd wasn't through, not by a long shot.

“THIS IS HOW YOU TREAT ME, THIS IS HOW YOU ALL TREAT ME, LIKE I'M JUST A SNACK HOARD THAT'S READY TO BE RAIDED WHENEVER YOU TAKE OUT MY TRASH FOR ME. GOD, I HATE YOU!!! I HATE YOU ALL!!!”

Todd's mother continued to stare, her mouth agape, completely and totally flummoxed.

“HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU DO THAT!!!” Todd shouted. “THIS IS THE STUPIDEST DAY OF MY LIFE!!! GOD!!!”

Todd's mother, realizing her son was leaving an empty space between his words so that she could muster a defense, spoke up hesitantly. “I – I don't know what happened to your food,

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd,” she faltered. “The only thing that happened is I went to your room to take out your trash and - ”

“AND YOU HAPPENED TO SEE MY SNACKS AND THOUGHT YOU’D HELP YOURSELF!” Todd shouted emphatically. He stomped his foot as hard as he could. “YOU AREN’T EVEN MY REAL PARENTS, MY REAL PARENTS WOULDN’T EAT ALL MY SNACKS AND LEAVE ME HUNGRY AND TIRED RIGHT AFTER A LONG DAY AT WORK!”

“I didn’t take your snacks, Todd!” cried Mrs. Sanders. “And don’t say I’m not your real mother! That’s not true; it’s hurtful and you know it. Your father and I showed you the birth certificate. You can’t run away from us just because you’re having a hard time!”

“SHUT UP, FOSTER MOM,” Todd shouted. “I’M DONE WITH ALL OF YOU! I’M LEAVING! I’M GOING TO FIND MY REAL FAMILY, AND THEY’LL KNOW WHAT TO DO. WHEN I GET FIRED, REGINALD WILL SIT ME DOWN AND HAVE A TALK ABOUT HOW I CAN LEARN AND GROW FROM THE EXPERIENCE, AND THEN HE’LL SMILE AND SHOUT AT THE NEIGHBOR KID, AND WE’LL ALL LAUGH.”

“Who’s Reginald?” Todd’s mother asked tearfully. Todd stared at her for a minute, eyes glowing pale blue. Then he turned on his heel and walked out the front door, slamming it so hard that a wreath on the back of the door fell onto the floor.

Todd was furious, and had almost walked two blocks before he remembered he probably needed to pack if he really wanted to go find his foster parents. “What a great plan!” he thought to himself. He walked quickly back to his so-called parents’ house. He walked in, where his mother was watching television again. “GOD,” he shouted, going upstairs.

“And don’t try to stop me,” he warned her calmly as he walked upstairs. “You can’t do anything to stop me now.”

Downstairs, his mother dug a spoon into a large bowl of Neapolitan ice cream.

Upstairs, he stuffed the five bags of cheese puffs into his high school backpack, which was now two months retired. He smiled for a single moment, remembering his last day of school. It had been a wild time. He’d listened to Alice Cooper’s “School’s Out” on repeat for seven hours after classes ended, until his father came up and yelled at him to turn it off for the rest of the night.

The backpack wasn’t very big and the cheese puffs wouldn’t really fit so well. Still, he’d be damned (danged, he thought to himself, slapping his own hand again) if he’d let his parents have another bag of snacks at his expense. Pushing hard, he managed to jam in the last bag, which exploded open under the pressure. Bits of puffed corn and cheese were smashed into his backpack, rubbing bright orange stains into the ink-stained interior. Todd muttered another cuss (apologizing again for all the cussing he was doing today – he was really ashamed at his

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

language) and zipped it shut almost all the way. He reached under his mattress and grabbed the \$324 and stuffed it in his Batman wallet where it joined the remaining seventy-nine cents. Todd counted every dollar carefully first. No way would his parents profit off him ever again, he promised himself.

His notebook, his ink pen, his lip balm; he compulsively counted everything in his pockets three times before he left the room as he always did before a journey. All present and accounted for. The only thing he left behind was his baggie of Cheerios. He wouldn't need it where he was going. He sighed heavily and dramatically and took one long last look back at his room. He'd lived here for fifteen years of his life. Was he finally saying goodbye forever?

Here was the corner where he'd vomited uncontrollably as a ten year old. There was the stain on the bed where he'd wet it for eight consecutive years. "Goodbye, room!" he shouted, slamming the door behind him.

He ran down the stairs two at a time, making sure to stomp extra hard so his mother would hear him. She wasn't downstairs, and for a panicked moment Todd was worried that she was going to try to stop him or she'd killed herself in panic, but then he realized that she was just in the bathroom. "HOPE EVERYTHING COMES OUT OKAY IN THE END," he shouted. "SEE YOU LATER, FAKE MOM." Then he left the house, maybe forever.

He was two miles away before he realized that he'd eaten the sixth bag of cheese puffs furtively under the covers the night before as a late night treat, snickering wildly as he waved a flashlight around and made spooky faces to no one in particular. He decided not to ever apologize for his mistake. It would make him look weak in the rap game.

Forty-five minutes of walking later, his legs felt like shredded cooked pasta. He labored heavily, trying hard to keep going. "Findin' my real dad, my legs all like pasta," he thought to himself, and then spent another five minutes trying to figure out something that rhymed with pasta.

Where was he going? Where were his parents? Todd was a waiter (former waiter, he amended), not a detective. He didn't have his birth certificate, and didn't know where to get a copy if he wanted to. Besides, he'd seen it once before and strongly suspected his foster parents had somehow altered it irrevocably. He suspected that his real parents – judging from his own personality – had style and flavor; instead of leaving him at an adoption agency, they would have left him in a wicker basket on a porch. But where would that wicker basket be kept, and would it contain any clues as to where he should journey?

For a minute, he paused and thought to himself. "Maybe," he mused, "maybe my parents are actually really my parents. Maybe I wasn't adopted after all."

He shrugged, and then laughed heartily to himself. What was he thinking! Of course they weren't really his parents. Just imagining his dad's buttoned-up polo shirt made him laugh

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

hysterically, especially when he remembered the little alligator on the front pocket. He remembered how hard he'd ribbed his dad when he'd come home with the shirt, writing a brief, four line rap about the pocket after half an hour of contemplation. "Your pocket's got an alligator / it's awful, see you later / If you wear it to work / Your peeps will think you're a jerk." His dad had not been amused, nor had he clapped; just further proof that he wasn't Todd's biological father. Reginald Vel Johnson would have written it down on parchment paper and glued it to the refrigerator.

Who could possibly tell him who and where his parents were? A policeman? His boss? (Former boss, he amended.) The library hotline, where any question was answered? He shook his head at each one of these. They were authority figures, and remembering how his fake parents with their bourgeoisie clothing had fooled him for years, he knew that authority was never to be believed or trusted. "Liars!!" he thought to himself, nearly shaking with rage.

No, there was only one person in the world he trusted. Edgar, his best friend, a thirty- five year old self-professed genius who worked at the local Subway. Todd thought back to the first time he'd met Edgar.

"Good afternoon," Todd had said, brushing the Oreo crumbs off his jeans, peering at the glistening meats in the glass case. "I would like – a cold cut trio, please."

"What kind of bread?" replied the nervous man behind the counter. He wore thick, bottled rimmed glasses and coughed reluctantly.

"What kinds do you have?" Todd asked.

"Well," replied the man, whose nametag read "Edgar" - "I'm a double major – mathematics and history." His non sequitur reply completely baffled Todd.

"White bread?" Todd guessed. "Do you have white bread?"

Edgar wordlessly took a loaf out of a giant metal bread storage thing. "Six inch or twelve?" he asked.

"You're the mathematics and history double major," Todd said, hoping this would stir some kind of nerve in the man. "You tell me which is better."

And from then on, they were the best of friends. Edgar was a nervous man who worked at Subway while he attempted to write a book on how math and history complemented each other. "It will be an outstandingly fascinating work," he explained, "and something that I don't have time to explain right now." Todd nodded curtly. He'd managed a C in algebra and remembered little about history except the line about "In fourteen hundred and ninety two Columbus sailed the ocean blue", because it was one of the tightest raps he'd ever heard.

Still, though their professional capabilities were vastly different, the two forged a friendship with an unbreakable bond, mostly over getting each other free food at their respective restaurants and listening to Van Halen while doodling pictures of snakes fighting pentagrams on

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

wide-ruled notebook paper.

If anyone could help him find his parents, it was Edgar. But where was the Subway? Todd was a little lost.

He wandered the streets of Gallup for about fifteen minutes before he realized that he was going the wrong way.

It was just about closing time at the Subway when Todd burst in. "Edgar!" he shouted. "Edgar! Edgar!" He shouted Edgar's name repeatedly as the two customers in line stared at him balefully.

Edgar looked up, his eyes cool underneath his green visor and behind his thick glasses. "Hey, man," he said. "Let me get with these cats and I'll help you momentarily."

"I need more help than that," laughed Todd. Edgar laughed too. The misuse of the word "momentarily" was an in-joke that never grew old for the pair.

Todd waited happily as Edgar dressed the sandwiches for the last two customers of the evening, sliced the sandwiches, wrapped them in paper and then in plastic bags. "Man," Todd said, looking over the shoulder of the young woman in front of him. "That looks good. I got to say that the cold cut trio beats out the roast beef in both flavor and price, but roast beef is a pretty close second. You should get hot mustard on that," he cautioned her as she rolled her eyes. "That mayonnaise is really gross, don't ask for that. Eddie and I don't trust anyone who eats mayonnaise. It's really bad for your rap career, if you're into that," he called behind her as she paid and then stiffly and wordlessly left with her husband.

"Is it really bad for your rap career?" asked Edgar. Todd shrugged. "It's really gross," he explained sadly. "Do you think that Hammer would have ever been as cool as he did if he, say, ate canned frosting?" They both frowned.

"Edgar," Todd finally said. "I need your assistance."

"Just a minute," said Edgar. "Let me clean up the area for the night." Todd sat patiently at a table for half an hour as Edgar locked the doors and put up all the fresh produce and meats. It was so boring he almost started crying.

It was almost eleven by the time Edgar finished wiping the counters. He sat down at the table across from Todd.

"What's up, man?" he asked, the two giving the secret handshake they'd invented so long before.

"I'm adopted," Todd said. Edgar's eyes widened in shock. "So you found out for sure? They told you?"

"No," said Todd. "I just know. That's all, I just know." Todd and Edgar regarded each other. Todd sipped at the free diet cola in front of him.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“So how do I find my real parents?” Todd finally said.

“Well,” Edgar thought out loud. He rubbed his chin.

Todd waited patiently for his answer. Surely if anyone would know, it was a man who double majored in history and in mathematics.

“I guess – do you know anything about your real parents? What do you know?” asked Edgar. He scratched at a scab on his left hand.

Todd yawned. It was very late. “I guess probably just that Reginald Vel Johnson is probably my real dad,” he finally said. “You know, the dad from the television show ‘Family Matters’. Hey, does this cola have caffeine in it?” he added.

“Sure, that makes sense,” mused Edgar. “Reginald Vel Johnson. I wonder why I didn’t see it before. And yeah, it does,” he continued, rubbing his chin. He paused. “Wait, did you get diet cola or caffeine free diet cola?”

“Uh – whichever the brown one is,” Todd said.

“That’s probably the caffeine free,” Edgar said. “You should get the one with the gray button.

“So I think I know where you can meet this guy,” Edgar called as Todd refilled his soft drink.

“Yeah?” said Todd, sitting back down.

“Yeah, I think so,” Edgar continued. “I think actually it’s a pretty big coincidence. There’s this convention down in Wichita, Kansas in three days, and I think it’s called the Family Matters convention. I saw a headline about it this morning in the newspaper. He’d almost definitely be there, you know.”

“Hey, really?” cried Todd in excitement.

“Yeah!” said Edgar. “You should check it out! He’d totally flip to meet his son! I know I would!”

“Hey, awesome!” Todd said happily. “This is so awesome. I knew you’d know, Edgar!” He beamed triumphantly, and then his face fell. “Wichita – isn’t that, like, an hour away?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Edgar said. “It’d probably take you like four or five hours to walk there. It’d be a cool time.”

“That’s too far!” wailed Todd. “I already walked like seven years today.” He’d actually spent about an hour and a half walking from his parents’ house to Subway with a three hour nap on a public bench on the way. He reasoned with himself that it’d been a long, trying day, and he needed every bit of rest he could get. “DAMN it,” he shouted, wishing he could really stop this cussing habit he’d picked up. “I wish I had my car that I was saving up for!”

“I guess – I guess I could drop you off,” reasoned Edgar. “I mean, it isn’t that far.”

“Hey, and you can meet my dad,” Todd said thoughtfully, respectfully. He rubbed his chin. “Hey, wait a minute,” he said. “Won’t you be tired at work tomorrow?”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Edgar smiled. “That’s the thing,” he said proudly. “I’m off work tomorrow. In fact, I’m off work three days. Maybe we can hang out for a little while in Wichita, check out the sights.”

“Three days off work!” Todd cried triumphantly. “That’s absolutely amazing!” He belched a little, sadly. “I’m off work,” he said soberly. “For good.”

Edgar paused for a moment, reflected. “For good?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Todd said. “And I’m moving away, and I’m never coming back. I didn’t need it anyways,” he said, sniffing. A tear ran down his cheek, betraying him.

“Todd, I’m so sorry,” Edgar said. He smiled at his best friend, knew that it was his time of need and that Todd really and truly needed his help. “Do you want a hug?”

“No!” said Todd.

As Edgar unlocked the rusty green Ford in the parking lot, Todd felt a little apprehensive. Was he really prepared to meet his real father? To explore the missing life denied to him? Why had his father abandoned him in that wicker basket so many years before? Or maybe, he thought, it wasn’t a wicker basket – maybe it was a silver space bullet, like the one Superman was in. “Of course,” he thought. “It makes so much more sense. He’s a superstar; superstars don’t buy wicker baskets.” But why had his father left him, and especially to a weird, snack-stealing, polo-shirt-wearing bank customer service representative? He shuddered.

“Penny for your thoughts,” Edgar said.

“Space-bullets,” Todd said thickly.

Edgar nodded as he stepped in and unlocked the passenger door.

Todd brushed the crumbs, cassette tapes, and empty soda cans off the passenger seat as he sat down. He neatly cradled his backpack in between several half-empty quarts of motor oil in the backseat and then carefully buckled his seat belt. Edgar’s car smelled like an old man’s bathroom, he thought, wrinkling his nose.

“Okay, road trip checklist!” cried out Edgar. “My mom taught me about this one. You always have to do this checklist before you go anywhere more than ten minutes away. Okay, now: Air in the tires?”

“I guess,” said Todd. They weren’t flat, at least.

“Overnight bag?” asked Edgar.

“Check!” yelled Todd. “We got snacks!”

“Okay – and – uh – okay, I filled up yesterday. We got gas.”

“And I have some money if we need anything,” Todd added helpfully.

“Cool. Okay, pull out old McNally from under your seat and let’s get you to your destiny,” Edgar said, putting on a pair of sunglasses that were sitting under the emergency brake. They slid over his real glasses fitfully. They were sticky and old and apparently bent; the right side of the frame was lower than the left side, exposing Edgar’s eyebrow and making him look

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

like he was raising the eyebrow in a sort of leer.

“It’s pretty late,” Todd noted. “Should you take those off?”

Edgar just laughed. “Okay, where to, bro?”

Todd reached under the seat and felt around, crunching cheese snacks and old acorns under his fingers. He pulled out the road atlas and leafed to the index. “I think – we just – where’s this yellow line going?” he demanded, pointing at one thick mark across the page. Edgar peered over at the book, leaning forward until his face nearly touched the atlas.

“It’s hard to see in these things,” he admitted, “but I think we just get on this road here and drive for a while. Maybe two hours?” he asked.

And with that, the battered Ford rumbled and shook with an inward fury, lurching its way across the parking lot and towards the highway, and they were off.

New Mexico is a big state. Todd stared out the window and thought about not having to go to the bathroom. “It was Edgar’s fault,” he thought furiously. “He was the one who showed me that there was diet cola and not just caffeine free diet cola. He knows caffeine makes me have to go to the bathroom.”

“Can we just pull over?” he demanded. “I really have to go pretty bad.”

“What if there’s a cop?” asked Edgar peevishly. “I mean – maybe YOU don’t know history because you didn’t double major, but I happen to know that pretty much every movie I’ve ever seen, if someone pulls over, there’s a cop and he hits them with a club and they go to jail for years until a spunky young lawyer with a lot of courage helps them regain their freedom.”

Todd yawned. “Can I go out the window while you drive?”

“No,” Edgar said, “no, please don’t. It will get on the side of the car.”

They sat in silence as the miles passed.

“Look!” Todd shouted. “Look at that! Truck stop! There’s a big gas station truck stop thing. Can we go there?”

Edgar sighed and pulled into a parking spot. He had barely coasted to a stop when Todd jumped out of the car and dashed to the men’s room, legs peddling furiously.

Todd pushed his way through the glass doors and came to a sudden stop, terrified. Was he still in New Mexico? Had he possibly vanished into some strange monstrous dimension of hate? Men in tattered blue-jean vests snorted as they entered and exited a bathroom no more than twenty feet away. A grimy claw-machine filled with cheap jewelry, stuffed animals, and what looked like lug nuts languished in a corner next to the entrance. A pudgy, leathery, chinless woman wearing a baseball cap and a sleeveless shirt scratched her stomach behind a counter stocked with cigarettes. Her jaw lurched forward confidently as she spat a black mass.

“You need somethin’?” she asked him, leaning forward, and Todd nearly shrieked as a bell jangled behind him. Edgar grasped his arm, looking shaken. “Did you go yet?” he hissed



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

into Todd's ear. "Let's go."

"We got beef jerky on sale," the spitting woman told them. "'N' motor oil."

Todd stiffly walked to the restroom with his arms at his side, pretending he couldn't see or hear her. He saw Edgar start to look around at the aging bags of potato chips and the nasty cellophane bags of peanut brittle that happily decorated the store.

The bathroom was the most hateful place that Todd had ever experienced.

It smelled dankly and sadly of ammonia and cigarette butts. Behind the urinal was an outdated laminated weekly ad. Flashlights! Engine coolant! Screwdriver sets! The promised beef jerky! Todd grunted and attempted to think of rapping rhymes for each of the sale items. Sometimes that helped him start when he couldn't go. A fat man in a plaid shirt and overalls urinated endlessly only three feet away. Todd felt stone dry.

... what rhymed with screwdriver? Cashews... sunglasses... mosquito spray... "Got me some mosquito spray, so being outside is okay," he muttered to himself proudly, and almost screamed when the fat man next to him turned his head. "What?" asked the man in a high pitched voice, and Todd swiftly turned his head in the opposite direction. Go, just go, JUST GO.

After what felt like an hour, the man finally zipped up and moved on, and Todd went to the bathroom in peace. He did not bother washing his hands on the way out, giving the corroded sink a passing glance and nearly gagging at the stench of the neon-pink soap in the dispenser.

"Hey, man," greeted Edgar. He held up a bag of beef jerky and two bags of peanut brittle. "We set?"

"Yeah, we are," Todd smiled, giving Edgar a high five. "I really owe you one, man."

The woman waved her chin at them as she rang up their purchases, but said nothing else, only spitting on the floor when Todd handed her a hundred dollar bill. She handed back their change with one shaking, nasty hand, and Todd's heart sank. "Just put it in the bag," he protested sickly, and she shrugged, dumping the rest of the money into the sack with their jerky and candy.

It was nearly midnight.

"Man," Todd said, the rusting Ford rumbling along the road. "What kind of music do you have in this thing?"

"Well," frowned Edgar. "I'm not entirely sure. I keep all my really awesome music in my room at home. But I have a bunch of tapes around here; just look for them!"

"Cool," yawned Todd, picking up a handful of dirty cassettes from the floorboard. "Hey, is your mom going to be worried that you're gone so long?"

Edgar shrugged. "Probably not," he said. "She's being really stupid lately." He took off his glasses and wiped them against his t-shirt.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Mine too,” said Todd. He looked in the backseat and found two more battered cassette cases. He glanced over the array in his hand. Motley Crüe. Led Zeppelin. Genesis. Wilson Phillips. “Can we listen to Wilson Phillips?” he asked. “Sure, man,” said Edgar. “I don’t know where that came from. It’s probably my mom’s. Pop it in.”

Todd sat back in his seat and listened to the trio of shrieking harpies wail about lost love and missing fathers and felt himself wanting to cry. They were so good, their little voices trilled together like sea otters gibbering at each other. He sat back and felt the tears prick his eyes as he fell into a deep sleep.

When he woke up, the sun was creeping through the windshield. The aging Ford perched on the side of the road. Edgar was snoring, a string of dried spittle gluing the side of his face to the steering wheel.

“Wake up, man, hey, wake up,” whispered Todd. Edgar snorted.

“Are we here?” asked Todd. “Are we in Wichita?”

Edgar yawned and sat up. “Nah, bro. We’re right outside of Albuquerque. I figured we were probably about halfway there, seemed like a good stopping point.”

Todd nodded in agreement. Edgar was an excellent navigator. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and glanced down at the road map in his lap.

“It doesn’t really look like halfway,” he said dubiously.

Edgar shrugged a little angrily. “Sure,” he said. “I’m just the guy who double majored in history and mathematics. I don’t know a thing about halves or anything. I’m just the guy who’s taking you to meet your father.”

Todd ducked his head, his ears pink from Edgar’s sudden outburst. “I didn’t mean anything, man” he said. “I was just - ”

“Aw, Todd,” Edgar said. “I’m sorry. I’m just hungry, or something. Want to stop by the next place we see?”

Todd nodded emphatically. “Breakfast is on me,” he announced. It was a beautiful summer morning. The day was still cool and both the road and Wichita were ahead of them. Todd smiled and thought about how incredibly lucky he was and what an impossibly spectacular rap video he’d make.

Todd sat at the plastic table at the Burger King with his note pad in front of him, ink pen in hand. “Burger King, Burger King,” he wrote down, and then faltered. This should be an easy rhyme, but he felt completely wiped, washed. Maybe he wasn’t as great of a rapper as he thought. Why couldn’t the words flow out of him the way they flowed out of the Great Rappers? Had Biggie Smalls ever waited on a sausage-and-egg biscuit, worrying about his next hit single? Probably not. He crumpled up the little piece of paper as Edgar set their plastic breakfast tray

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

down and began to sniffle.

“Hey, man,” Edgar said. Todd looked up with red-rimmed eyes.

“You...” Edgar faltered; the words he wanted to express were beyond his grasp. “You really have a gift, man. Don’t you ever forget that.”

“A gift,” Todd said, and laughed hollowly. He picked up his breakfast sandwich and started to unwrap it. “It’s been two weeks since I wrote a full rap song. And it’s so hard, man, so hard.”

“And who said art is easy?” Edgar demanded. He’d taken a bite of his biscuit sandwich, but laid it down in front of him. “Listen, Todd. I’d give anything to be able to come up with raps like you do. Because you know what? You’re going to be famous one day. I’m a mathematician, and I double majored in history too, but you know – all I can do with that is come up with some math theories some day, maybe some night I can think about some. And I can tell you about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Maybe one day I’ll finish my book and a few guys will read it and nod respectfully. But you, man.” He shook his head, emotionally overcome.

“Do you know why I agreed to drive you to Wichita?” he asked.

Todd shrugged.

“Because,” Edgar said. “Because, and that should be a good enough reason. You’ve got magic running through that pen, and you’re going to discover who you really are. And after that,” he said, snapping his fingers and picking up the biscuit, “you’re going to be a mega star.

“I mean it,” he said, chewing a bite of sausage with his mouth slightly ajar. “They’re going to make, like, a Mount Rushmore of rap stars, and you’re gonna be on it.”

“Oh yeah?” Todd’s eyes lit up. He had a picture of a giant monument made entirely of obsidian, deep black and intricately carved, tall enough to rival the biggest building in Gallup. “Who else will be on it?”

“Hammer, I guess,” Edgar said. “Tu Pac. Who else? I don’t know all their names.”

“Yeah, Tu Pac, definitely,” Todd said sadly. “I wonder if he could have been my dad.”

Both sat silently, munching hash browns, contemplating.

“You know,” Todd finally said. “I think I’m definitely going to throw away my old opus.”

Edgar raised a single eyebrow, looking exactly the same way he did when he wore his sunglasses over his real glasses.

“I’m going to throw it away, because that’s not who I am. That’s who I was,” Todd explained. “Actually, it isn’t who I was at all. It’s who they made me be. But now, I’m going to be me,” he said, getting excited. “I’m going to meet my dad and find out who I really am and I’m going to write a rap opus about it!” He started yelling, he was so happy.

“YEAH!” shouted Edgar. “DO IT! LET’S MEET YOUR DAD AND THEN WRITE AN AMAZING SONG ABOUT IT – THIS IS A ONCE IN A LIFETIME CHANCE!”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“YEAH!” shouted Todd. “WICHITA AND DAD AND THEN FANCY RIMS! IT’S GOING TO BE AWESOME!” He started coughing, and the woman behind the counter asked them both to please lower their voices.

It was 10 AM and Todd and Edgar were finally on the road again. It was a warm morning and both were singing along happily to a Phil Collins cassette that Todd happened to find under the driver’s seat. Phil was singing about a girl with an uncertain identity that he still loved and Todd was wearing a spare set of sunglasses he found in the glove box (they worked fine, only they were missing one of their stems) and holding a piece of string to the Rand McNally map when he came to a realization.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Todd called out. “Stop the car. Wait.”

Edgar pulled over to the side of the road. Cars veered around the Ford and honked angrily.

“According to this, Wichita is another five hundred and fifty miles away,” Todd told him. Both sat in silence.

“And how far have we come so far?” Edgar said. “Like, halfway, right?”

“About two hundred miles,” Todd admitted.

“This is bull,” Edgar said finally. “We’ve been driving forever and we’re not even – now, that’s some math. If you have a calculator, I can figure this out.”

Todd didn’t have a calculator. They both munched sadly on the already opened bag of cheese puffs in Todd’s backpack.

“Well, dude,” Edgar finally said. “Should we get driving?”

“Come on,” Todd said. “There’s no way, man. You gotta be back at work in three days. That’s impossible.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” said Edgar. “Mathematically, it’s perfectly sound. And even if we are a little late – I mean, what’s more important? Making sandwiches? Getting a few dollars? Or meeting your dad and writing the world’s best rap song ever?”

Todd felt himself tearing up for the second time that morning. “You’re my best friend, Edgar!”

“Aww,” Edgar said, smiling. “Can it, you leaky faucet. Just give me a ‘shout out’ on your album credits. Let’s crank up these Collins jams and get going, okay?” And with that, he pulled out into traffic, just barely avoiding an accident with a dump truck aggressively attempting to pass a nearby sedan.

Two hours later, they stopped again to have lunch at a quaint little town near the border of New Mexico and Texas. They argued passively over what they were in the mood for. Todd wanted a hot bowl of soup, but Edgar wanted a sandwich. In the end, they both agreed to go to

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Limp, soggy chicken fried steak stacked under a heat lamp – that was the special of the day. One tureen held a gallon of thick gravy covered in a heavy skin that was magnified by the giant puddle of grease that coated it. Mashed potatoes, thick and glue-like, held a serving spoon aloft like a wretched, pathetic Excalibur. Heavy, cardboard-like biscuits sat next to a brownish collection of iceberg lettuce, and the soup of the day was “ham and bean.” Edgar and Todd ate like two sultans.

“What sort of spectacular place is this?” Todd asked. “Seven dollars. All you can eat! I wonder, if we stayed right in these seats – would that deal ever expire?”

“Think about it for a while,” Edgar mused, the idea appealing to him. “Room and board. Seven dollars. Even if they charged us seven bucks a DAY, it would be worth it. We could pay that if we worked here, and then finance your rap album on the extra money we make on the side!”

“That’s a brilliant idea,” said Todd. “I wonder if employees get that deal.” He waved his fork in the air excitedly. “HEY!” Todd shouted to the waitress. “DO YOU LIVE HERE?”

She popped her gum and stared vacantly at the pair, carrying a water pitcher to the table. Her nametag read TRACY in big, raised letters. “What, in town?”

“Here, in this great restaurant!”

Tracy poured their water carefully and wordlessly. “Assholes,” she muttered, walking back to the kitchen.

Edgar and Todd looked at each other, bemused.

“Do you think she thinks we’re trying to take her job?” asked Edgar.

“Probably,” Todd said, a little perturbed. He didn’t want to start out on the wrong foot with his future coworker. “HEY,” he shouted worriedly to the back of the restaurant. “WE DON’T EVEN KNOW HOW TO BE WAITRESSES. WE’D PROBABLY JUST, I DON’T KNOW – INSPIRE THE COOK WITH RAPS.”

Edgar nodded eagerly. “I CAN DO MATH,” he called out. “AND HISTORY – I HAVE A DOUBLE MAJOR.”

Tracy, if that was really her name, didn’t even reply. Edgar and Todd sat casually alone in the restaurant, picking at their limp steak and slurping at the watery soup. “This steak is so tender,” Edgar cried happily. “I can cut it with this butter knife!”

“It’s really good,” Todd agreed.

They snorted and continued eating. The bell dinged at the front door.

“Do you want more salad?”

“Yes, please.”

“What sort of dressing do you want?”

“The pink stuff. I got four different kinds on my last salad and that one was definitely the

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

best.”

“Do you want croutons?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want tomatoes?”

“No. Put extra croutons on it, though.”

Todd was about to stand up when a big hand pushed him back down into his seat.

He looked up at what appeared to be an oxymoron: a hairy, balding man. His arms were coated with a thick, grey fur. The fingernails on the hand pushing him were neatly trimmed, yet slightly green underneath. The man’s hair was thinning, yet the sides of his hair were carefully combed over the top to form the appearance of a gossamer, disgusting mop of hair. Todd could see some sort of food between the man’s teeth as he opened his mouth to breathe heavily. The dirty figure was wearing a t-shirt that advertised a national gasoline brand and paint-stained jeans. Todd could not take category of the man’s feet, because he did not want to look down.

“What’d you say to my wife,” the man hissed in a guttural New Mexican accent. *Whoodje seeh tumu waayf.*

Todd and Edgar looked at each other, and then Todd shrugged. “I’m going to get Edgar a salad now.”

“They asked if I lived here,” said a familiar, angry voice. Tracy walked out of the kitchen, arms crossed.

“Now, why would you ask my wife a thing like that,” muttered the man aggressively.

Todd panicked.

“Edgar said it would be funny,” he blurted out. Edgar stared at Todd with an unreadable expression.

“You two think you’re a couple of comedians,” breathed the man heavily. He stepped closer to Todd. He smelled like hair cream.

“No, no!” cried Todd. “I’m a rapper. I’m looking for my father.”

“I’m a mathematician and historian,” announced Edgar coolly. He shot a dirty look at Todd. “I double majored.”

The man breathed heavily and didn’t say anything. Tracy’s arms remained crossed and she leaned against the buffet. She narrowed her eyes at Edgar and Todd.

“This chicken fried steak really is great,” Edgar finally told them. “Did you know you can cut it with a butter knife?”

“I don’t need to know about all that,” said the man in the paint-splattered pants. “I just need to know which one of your asses I’m going to kick first.”

At that moment, Todd realized that he was going to get beaten up only a few hours away from his house. He’d come so far! His dreams would all die here, though. He would be smashed in the face by this imposing, hairy beast. He pictured Edgar driving home without him as Todd

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

lay with a broken, bloody nose in the middle of the restaurant. Night would fall and everyone would go home, but no one would give him a cot. In the morning, they would demand payment for his room and board, and he'd reach into his back pocket only to find the Batman wallet gone. He would ask if they maybe took credit in exchange for raps, only even if they agreed, he'd soon find himself stuck for a rhyme on "balding" and they'd send the gruesome man to beat him again nightly. In the end, he'd be a toothless old man, sucking helplessly on soup and crying endlessly, never even seeing the land beyond New Mexico. Mothers would come and point him out to their babies as an example of what might happen to you if you lost your job at the Cracker Barrel.

Todd started crying again. "I don't want to eat more soup," he explained unhappily to the balding man. "I just want to find my dad. I just want to find Reginald."

Edgar started crying too.

The man moved his dirty hand away from Todd's shoulder and compulsively wiped it on the front of his jeans as if to clean it. He coughed in disgust, drooling on himself a little as he did so.

"Faggots," he muttered under his breath, looking away uncertainly. He looked over at Tracy, who shrugged angrily and started wiping off the buffet with a dirty rag.

"I don't know. What the hell. Hell with this," the man said. The words seemed to explode out of him in nervous grunts. He turned around and walked out of the restaurant.

"Pissant," muttered Tracy. "All you."

"Can we pay now?" asked Todd, wiping his face.

"I don't want my salad any more," Edgar said to himself morosely.

The total came to thirty dollars. Todd paid the woman carefully, picking his teeth with one of the toothpicks from a dispenser. The two slouched to the car, watching nervously over their shoulder for the man again.

They sat in the car, silently reflecting. Todd turned on the radio to find some music and Edgar slapped the power button, turning it off.

"You tried to sell me out," he said. He tried to sound angrily, but his sniffing betrayed him. "You said that I told you to say that stuff. You almost got me killed. Why'd you do that, Todd?"

"I was panicking," Todd said helplessly.

"Well, you sold me out. Friends don't sell friends out. I had your back, and you sold me out."

"Sold you out! Had my back! Listen to you. You don't talk like the Edgar I used to know. You don't sound like a mathematician and a historian. You sound like a... a mobster, or something!"

Edgar seethed, furious. "Well, you sound like a – a turd."

They stared at each other for a few tense moments. Finally, Todd held up his hands.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Hey, look. I’m sorry. That was really dumb of me. I know how I would feel if someone tried to get a weird guy to punch me. Friends?”

Edgar tried not to smile, but it came out anyways. “You’re paraphrasing Macaulay Culkin, aren’t you? *The Good Son*.”

Todd smiled back. “The best movie that never won an Oscar.”

“Give me five,” Edgar said. “Still friends?”

Todd lightly slapped his hand so that Edgar would still be able to drive. “Thanks, man. I’m going to write a part in my rap about these dangerous streets, and I’m going to dedicate that part to you.”

Edgar bellowed with shock and happiness and excitement, started up the Ford, and the two were off again.

The miles stretched far, far ahead. Up through the corner of Texas. A quick stop at a gas station for a fill-up and a bag of hard candy. Another five miles, and another song from Edgar’s limited collection of musical tapes. It turned out that the Van Halen was warped and faded from too much time in the sun; the sound distorted and hissed, and right in the middle of “Panama”, the song stopped and a slithering noise gasped its way out of the tape deck. “Oh no!” cried Edgar. “Oh, dude, oh no!”

Todd moaned in horror and pressed eject, but it was too late. The cassette tape curled out with something like five feet of unwound tape uncoiled in the tape deck. He slowly pulled out the damaged tape, inspecting it coolly. “Don’t worry, man,” he said. “I can fix this. Do you have any scotch tape?”

“Tape?!” howled Edgar. “You want to tape it!? Okay, first, that’s just going to mess it up even more. The next time it goes through, it’ll catch again, and even if it doesn’t, there’s going to be a huge gap in the song!”

“It’s better than nothing,” yelled Todd. “I don’t want to listen to Genesis any more! I’m tired of it! Don’t you have any more tapes in this car?”

“No! Maybe next time you want to just pick up stakes in the middle of the night and head to Wichita I’ll be prepared and grab some at my house, but I didn’t know. This is all we have, buddy, and you better be happy that I had all these!”

Todd pressed his hands to his head as if in agony and moaned. “How can this even be happening to me?”

“We can fix this,” said Edgar, panicking. “Look.” He pointed to a green sign alongside the road. “The next town, Dalhart, is fifteen miles away. It’s got to have some cassette tapes in it somewhere, right?”

“I guess so,” grumbled Todd. “Can we sing until we get there?”

Instead of replying, Edgar rolled down his window and burst into a rousing chorus:



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Slide over here / and give me a moment / your moves are so raw / I’ve got to let you know / I’ve got to let you know!”

He paused and both men howled in unison: “You’re one of my kind!”

They laughed again, blood brothers howling into the desert heat. Todd had never felt so alive before. Had he really been fired from the Cracker Barrel merely a day earlier? It felt like a trillion years ago, like a fading dream. He’d shed it all like snakeskin, left it all behind him. He was going to find his father, he was going to find a bunch of new cassette tapes, and the world lay before him like a stinking drunkard sprawled in the gutter. “WATCH OUT, DALHART,” cried Todd. “HERE WE COME. WE’RE COMING FOR ALL YOUR TAPES!”

“And for your bathroom,” finished Edgar. He pressed down on the gas pedal and sped on. He sipped from a flat can of Mountain Dew that he’d found in the cup holder.

The problem with a small town, Todd decided, was that there were no enormous signs pointing to the local music store. They drove around slowly, carefully watching out for anywhere that might possibly sell music tapes. They found a couple of movie rental shops, but the town seemed quiet, nearly vacant. Music shops were ubiquitous, weren’t they? Todd’s heart began to leap and lurch in his chest. Was it possible that they’d made their way to the only town that didn’t know what music was? Would he have to teach them to rise up, to embrace the singing and stomping that defined Hard Rock like some sort of perverse version of Footloose? He started remembering the gruesome horror movies he’d seen as a child. He ducked down in his seat, rising up just enough so that he could peer carefully out the window. Were the locals slack-eyed cannibals? He shuddered to himself and ducked down even further.

“What are you doing?” Edgar wondered, peering down at Todd.

“Hush,” Todd begged. “We need to be vigilant. First, where is the music shop? And let me ask you something else: have you seen any dogs wandering the streets?”

Edgar sat for a while, thinking. “I think so, yeah, when we first got in. I don’t know. I don’t really see dogs wandering the streets too often, though.”

“Something’s almost one hundred percent definitely wrong with this town,” Todd said firmly. He pursed his lips.

“We need to stop and ask directions,” Edgar said. He pulled over and stopped the car. “Look. We’re downtown. This is where all the shops are. If there’s a music store in this city, it’s going to be here.”

“Look around you!” wailed Todd. “I see maybe two fast food places, a condemned building, and a beauty salon. I’m telling you, normal people can’t survive in this sort of environment. We need to just get out of this place or we’ll be as dead as everyone else. Murdered and left on the side of the road, and twenty years later, the police will make a report that says that it seemed like such a quaint place until the investigations began.”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“And look, there’s a bank,” pointed out Edgar. “Todd, I’m sure this will all work out. People are the same wherever you go. And nobody hates music. There is definitely a music shop in this town.”

Todd rolled his eyes nervously. The logic didn’t seem sound. He just wanted to get away from the creepy little town before anything terrible happened. “I’m going to trust you,” he said, voice quavering. “You still have my back, right?”

“Yeah, man,” Edgar said. “Come on. I bet we could find a copy of Def Leppard’s ‘Hysteria’.”

Todd and Edgar exited the vehicle and slowly trudged down the street. A fat man on a bicycle pedaled by slowly. He was nearly a block away before Edgar had the idea to shout at him: “PARDON ME SIR DO YOU KNOW IF PERHAPS - ”

But it was too late. The fat man turned down a side street and pedaled on. Edgar shrugged. Todd put his hands in his pockets and tried his best to make his body small and unseen. It was made even more difficult by the fact that he was half a foot taller than Edgar.

They walked down the street for a mile, glancing down each side street, which held horrors even less trivial than the street before. Dollar stores. Chicken wing restaurants. Antique stores. One dusty shop, locked, held a series of canvases; Edgar stopped to glance through the window and Todd nearly gagged with boredom.

They’d been walking for fifteen minutes when they saw a crowd of dismally dressed teenagers slouching outside of a public library. Edgar’s eyes lit up. “I bet they know where a music store is. Look at them! They obviously have their finger on the pulse of culture!”

“No!” said Todd, upset. “We can’t talk to them! Let’s just turn around and go back to the car!”

“Look!” Edgar shouted. The group of teenagers turned and stared at the pair. Edgar lowered his voice. “Look,” he seethed. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you, but I will be damned if we go back to the car without new music! You remember how it is to drive with those same five cassettes.”

“Four,” whispered Todd. “Please don’t cuss.”

“Sorry,” whispered Edgar. “So let’s go ask them, okay?”

“You ask them,” said Todd.

“Fine,” said Edgar, and they walked up to the crowd of teenagers, all of whom were now staring.

“Greetings, young ladies and gents,” Edgar said awkwardly greeting the children. Two of the boys stood up straight and began walking over to Edgar and Todd. The rest remained slouching against the library.

“What’s up?” asked Edgar. “You kids know where there’s a music store around here?”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

He gave them the thumbs up. “We need fresh jams!” He frowned and corrected himself. “Music jams. Not strawberry or anything.”

One of the slouching girls rolled her eyes and snorted to herself. The two boys walked straight up to Edgar and Todd.

“Who’s this?” said the one on the left. He wore a fisherman’s cap, a basketball jersey, a pair of khakis, and a pair of bright red tennis shoes. He didn’t seem to be asking the boy next to him or Edgar and Todd – he seemed to be curiously wondering to himself.

“This is ridiculous,” marveled the other boy, dressed in a tie-dyed shirt and baggy blue jeans. His wispy little moustache danced reluctantly beneath his nose.

“Beat their asses, Carlo,” said the girl who’d snorted.

“You don’t want to do that,” Edgar said quickly. “My name is Edgar Hornbeck, and I’m a mathematician and historian. I’m also a gourmet chef,” he added.

“I’m Todd Sanders,” muttered Todd. “I used to work at Cracker Barrel. I’m looking for my dad.”

“He’s also the most brilliant rapper of our day,” Edgar said nervously.

“Oh yeah?” asked Fisherman’s Cap, whose name was apparently Carlo. “You think you’re a rapper?”

“Beat his ass, Carlo,” repeated the snorting girl.

“Hush, baby,” said Carlo. He didn’t take his eyes off Todd. “He’s a brilliant rapper, right? I want to hear this man’s raps.”

“I don’t have any with me,” said Todd. “I threw away my opus when I got fired.”

“So let’s freestyle,” said Carlo quietly. “Come on, I’ll start.”

“Freestyle,” repeated Todd. “You want me to freestyle.”

Carlo smiled and stepped closer to Todd. *“A crew-cut and a fatty / They’re lookin for their daddy! / And ratty they are, from life’s jabs and japes / Wandering through the city lookin for some new tapes / But they just walked down the wrong street / Just happened to meet / the tightest crew in the D-Hart / actin all smart / picked the wrong patch / just met their match / by the most dope rapper in town!”*

“So now look at that frown,” he finished, and put his hands on his hips. The other hoodlums applauded and smiled. Edgar turned pale with shock and dismay. Carlo put his hands in the air as if to quiet their applause.

“It’s your turn, man,” he said.

Todd was horrified and offended. “First off,” he began, “I’m not a performing seal. I don’t just rap on command. That’s what I hate about freestyling. It makes rap into just a parlor illusion, something to show your grandmother when your yo-yo tricks grow stale.” His voice grew louder.

“Second,” he said boldly, “that’s not even true! Edgar isn’t fat, he’s just a little pudgy!”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Edgar nodded emphatically. “And he’s not looking for his father, I’m looking for mine! Edgar doesn’t even care to know who his dad was!”

“Todd’s definitely better at rapping than you when he writes it down,” added Edgar. “He’s really a great rapper.”

Carlo and his friends laughed hysterically. “Come on,” chuckled Carlo. The boy with the tie-dyed shirt sat back down and crossed his arms, sneering. “Let’s hear you. Just try.” The teenaged ruffians laughed loudly and clapped.

“I... uh,” tried Todd gamely. “Your rapping isn’t great...” He paused and looked at the sidewalk, thinking.

“Your rapping isn’t great,” he repeated, thinking hard, “and... your head... looks like a crate.” He was proud of himself! For the first time in his life, he was really freestyling!

The kids guffawed hysterically. Carlo nearly fell over. “Oh my god,” he spluttered, gagging in amusement, “you’re amazing.” Todd was proud, and then realized he was being patronized.

“Head looks like a crate! Head looks like a crate!” repeated the snorting girl, and the blonde girl next to her took up the chant. “Head looks like a crate!” The teenagers repeated the line. Carlo laughed hysterically and gave Todd and Edgar the finger. Todd shrieked in offense. “That’s a hand cuss!” he yelled. “You’re cussing with your hands!”

The teenagers continued to chant at them and gave them the finger, and Todd couldn’t take it. Crying, he turned around and raced down the street. He could barely see because of his blurry vision and he wasn’t even sure where Edgar was. “Take me home!” he yelled blindly. “Just take me home!!!”

Edgar caught up with Todd back at the car. Todd was leaning over the passenger window and weeping hysterically.

“Oh my god,” he repeated over and over. “Oh my god, I’m the worst rapper. Did you even hear them teasing me? They hated me.”

“They loved you,” Edgar consoled him. “They kept repeating it because it was a great line.”

Todd raised his hands from his arms and stared at him, then lowered his head and bawled again. “Just take me home,” he cried. “I just want to go home.”

“What?” asked Edgar.

“I want to go home,” wailed Todd. “I wasn’t meant for a rough life like this. New Mexico didn’t have people like this. And how far away from the goal are we? We aren’t even in Oklahoma yet! And if we can’t even stand up and be men in Texas, how can we be men in Oklahoma? And,” he continued, choking back sobs, “if we can’t be men in Oklahoma – what chance do we have in Wichita?”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“God,” he continued, wiping his nose. “What if Reginald could see me right now? He’d laugh himself hysterical. He’d say, thank sweet heaven I put that little sissy boy into a space bullet and fired him off into the snack-stealing bank-customer-service-guy’s house! He deserves parents like that! He deserves to never know my friendship and respect. Go home, Todd, Go home, go home, go home!”

Edgar was completely bewildered and attempted to put a consoling hand on Todd’s back. “Look,” he said intensely. “I don’t know much about outer space guns or snack thievery. But I do know that you deserved better than that back there.

“Look,” he continued. “Do you remember that rap you wrote about the Taco Bell?”

“Y- yeah?” asked Todd. “Y-y-yeah. I...” he sniffed, smiling, remembering. “I called it *Taco Smell*.”

“Yeah, you did,” said Edgar. He smiled, standing a little taller. “It was completely hysterical. And YOU thought of that, Todd. So what if you can’t freestyle?” he asked. “Do you think that John Wayne was ever less of a man because he didn’t shoot lasers from his eyes?”

“No,” said Todd, wiping his face.

“Hell no, you didn’t!” said Edgar. “John Wayne was all man – he was the man that we all strive to be every single day of our lives!” He hitched up his pants in a gesture half born of respect and half born from the nervous fear that somewhere, somehow, John Wayne was watching. “But even he had his limits!”

“Don’t say that,” Todd warned.

“Well, it’s true,” said Edgar. He silently thanked John Wayne for not striking him with lightning. “And even if you can’t freestyle, your talents lie elsewhere.”

“They do, don’t they?” asked Todd.

“They most definitely do,” said Edgar firmly. “Now – we have a choice. We can get back in the car like a couple of quitters. We can drive back to your foster parents’ house and ask if they’ll take you back for the evening. Or,” he said, his voice growing icy cool, “we can get back in the car, find a music store in the next town – and head to Wichita to find Reg.”

“Reg?” asked Todd.

“Sure,” laughed Edgar. “Do you honestly think he’s going to make his son’s best friend call him by his full given name?”

Todd reached his hand out firmly and gave Edgar a stellar high-five. They both got into the Ford, cranked up the engine, and headed back to the highway.

The motel was a cramped, filthy mass of concrete and moldy siding that looked like it had been designed by a fussy, agitated toddler and then tossed on the border of Texas and Oklahoma to rot.

Todd was infatuated. “It’s so – so *real*,” he gawped, waving his hands at it frantically as

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

the Ford slowly drove by. “It’s like the complete and total embodiment of the perfect rap song. Please let’s stay there!”

Edgar was not as ardent. “Inspiration takes many forms,” he said dubiously, eyeballing the broken glass, the sagging door frames, and the giant dead rat that squatted in front of the business office like a particularly unvigilant watchdog. “Can’t you be inspired by a Holiday Inn? Something a little cleaner?”

Todd rolled his eyes and made a scoffing noise. “I’m paying, remember? It’s my choice!” He pulled out the Batman wallet and waved a handful of five and ten dollar bills under Edgar’s nose.

Edgar sighed heavily and pulled into the parking lot. The car rumbled and jerked over the uneven, broken concrete as they made their way to one of the many, many empty parking spaces.

Inside the motel’s office, a chubby, grizzled man wearing a white undershirt and a pair of what appeared to be swimming trunks grunted and handed them a greasy key in exchange for sixty dollars. Todd peered into his wallet carefully, mumbling to himself and counting the remaining bills carefully. Finally, concerned but resolved, he shoved it back into his pocket.

Room 19! It was Edgar’s lucky number, and he hoped feverishly that it was a portent of spectacular things. He envisioned a British butler greeting them as they walked in with warm, fluffy towels and a cold beverage each. “Tis a jolly ol’ time seeing you two blokes here,” the butler would announce before announcing that there were plenty of cheddar Goldfish crackers and orange soda stocked in the mini-fridge next to the sauna. “I wonder if the butler will be able to play checkers in such a way so that he gives a good game, but I end up winning,” he muttered thoughtfully as they made their way to the room.

Todd pushed the key into the room door and attempted to turn it, but the key was stuck. He pushed and pulled on the doorknob with no real effect. Finally, in a burst of fury, he karate kicked the door and it opened.

A small army of roaches, agitated by the dim beams of the nasty parking lot lights, skittered under the bed. A television rendered worthless by a bullet hole tilted meekly on a cheap wooden dresser. Towels and covers lay in tattered piles all over the floor. Todd kicked one aside to find a small hole in the floor occupied by a swarming mass of termites.

Edgar sat down on the bed, mortally offended. The springs creaked heavily and sadly, sagging harshly towards the floor. Todd turned on a lamp and then wiped his hand on the bed.

“This is absolutely amazing,” he goggled, staring in wide-eyed wonder at the atrocities around them.

Edgar was peeved and offended.

“This hurts my heart,” he said coldly, clutching his chest in despair. “I just want to sleep in the car. Wake me up when it’s morning.”

Todd shook his head. “No! Listen. When you want to write a poem about a forest, what

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

do you do?”

“Eat a sandwich and watch television,” said Edgar. “That’s what I always do, no matter what.”

“That’s why you have no poetry,” Todd pronounced. “If you want to write a poem about the forest, you go to the forest for inspiration. If you want to sing a song about love, you fall in love with a woman who drives you out of your skull with lunacy and then you write a creepy song that borders on stalking. Art is a dance, man, and you follow the steps if you want to salsa. To write the world’s greatest rap song, you go to the streets and you live! You live like Americans have for centuries, from Plato to Gandhi, right in the middle of the dirty streets.”

Edgar scratched his stomach and peered through his thick glasses at the dusty bedside table, the scum-layered cake of soap lying irrationally next to the paint-chipped wall.

“Yeah,” he explained. “Uh, but – I can live in the streets in the car.” He stood up, shrugged as if bewildered by an unasked question, and then headed back to the car.

Todd fell back onto the bed, which lay limply and uncomfortably under him. “God!” he seethed to himself. “What a traitor! Traitor!” He thought the word “Traitor” to himself until he passed into an uncomfortable sleep on the lumpy bed, completely forgetting his intentions to acclimate himself to the climate of the streets enough to color and flavor his new opus.

Meanwhile, Edgar was in the backseat of his car, stuffing garbage from the backseat underneath the passenger side so that he could lean back far enough to nap. He came across Todd’s backpack, still stuffed with cheese puffs. Edgar glanced fearfully at the motel room door, noticed it was still basically shut. Stealthily, he unzipped the backpack, removing a bag of cheese puffs.

“Surely one will be fine,” he thought to himself fearfully. Edgar was not a brave man, nor was he a thief. But he was hungry, had been hungry for an entire fifteen minutes, and after all, there were four whole bags. One cheese puff – wait, one bag - would go unnoticed.

Crawling back into the front seat and locking all of the doors, he quietly opened up the cheese puffs as if he were in a movie theater, trying hard to ensure that even a bloodhound would be ignorant of his actions. Carefully munching cheese puffs, he curled up, shivering. He’d never been so far north in his entire life, and the 75 degree nights were taking their toll.

Edgar awoke early the next morning to a loud pounding on the driver’s side window. He was confused and startled and cursed a little bit to himself, his heart maniacally slapping itself against his ribcage. Todd smashed his face against the glass window, peering in at Edgar and smearing grease all over.

“GOOD MORNING!” he shouted. “It’s your 6 AM wake-up call! Let’s get headed to Wichita!”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Edgar rubbed his eyes blearily and rolled down the window. “It’s pretty early. Can’t we go back to sleep?”

“No!” said Todd happily. His hair was dripping wet. “I’m hungry! Let’s go find breakfast. Do you want to shower first? I cleaned off the bar of soap!”

Edgar suddenly remembered the cheese puffs from last night and felt nervous – and, then, ashamed. After he’d eaten the entire bag, he’d stuffed it carefully under the seat so that Todd wouldn’t find it. He also remembered the hideous cake of soap that he’d seen in the hotel room the previous evening.

“No, thank you,” said Edgar carefully. “Let’s just go and get some breakfast. Maybe it will rain or something and I can just get out of the car for a few minutes.”

Todd danced over to the passenger side and waited for Edgar to unlock the door. He sat down in the familiar, worn seat and buckled his safety belt.

The Burger King was aging and dilapidated, but the breakfast sandwiches were absolutely identical to the sandwiches sold at every other Burger King, so the pair was pleased. Two Burger King breakfasts in a row! It was definitely a portent of wonderful things. As Edgar stuffed his face with hash browns, Todd studied the characters on his placemat and wished he had a box of crayons so that he could draw moustaches on all the faces.

“I had a really weird dream last night,” he finally said. Neither Todd nor Edgar had discussed the motel, though both were feeling mildly offended at the other’s behavior and subsequent tacit ignoring of the incident.

“What about?” asked Edgar.

“Well,” Todd began. “I was a waiter at this Chinese restaurant. It wasn’t a real Chinese restaurant though – it was sort of a backyard pool party, but people were giving me orders anyways and I couldn’t remember them all. And I think it was my ex girlfriend’s house and she was, like, the manager of the restaurant.”

Edgar’s eyes began glazing over.

“Anyways, so we didn’t have any beef, but everyone wanted Mongolian Beef, and so suddenly I was in the grocery store looking for the beef, and I wasn’t wearing pants and I was trying to get to the lettuce section so that no one would find out,” Todd continued. “But here was the weird part. Suddenly, my dad was there – I mean,” he corrected himself, laughing, “my foster dad. Anyways, suddenly I started freestyling right there. It was all brilliant and hilarious, like I’d spent a decade writing and perfecting it. I wish I could remember it, man. It was just so good, and it all made sense. But I finished my rap and then my dad hugged me and said he was proud of me.”

Edgar rubbed his hash browns in a puddle of ketchup on a napkin and chewed thoughtfully.



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“What do you think that means?” asked Todd.

Edgar shrugged carelessly. “Dreams are mostly fluff doused with a little local color. It doesn’t mean anything. You just had too many cheese puffs before you went to bed.”

“What?” said Todd. “I didn’t eat any cheese puffs before I went to bed. I didn’t eat anything.”

Edgar froze, shocked at what he’d almost revealed. “That’s what I said – you just had not any cheese puffs. It probably made you feel weird and affected your – your blood chemistry or biology, or something,” he finally muttered. He felt like he’d been punched in the stomach by his own stupidity.

“Sure,” mused Todd. “That’s probably it!” He sucked on his soda until the straw made terrible sounds that caused a nearby couple to glare at him. “You should be a dream analyst, or something. You’re pretty good at it.”

Edgar smiled weakly and thought of the backpack and how angry Todd would be if he ever found out about the theft of the bag of cheese puffs.

An hour into Oklahoma, both the air conditioning - and, subsequently, the civility between Todd and Edgar - began to die.

While the heat was nothing compared to the New Mexican summer, it was enough – in the absence of working air - to make the pair feel sick and tired. Todd rolled down the window and poked his head out like a puppy dog on a long car trip. “You should try it!” he announced. “It feels spectacular!”

Edgar shrugged miserably, his Subway uniform shirt stuck to his back with sweat.

“Do you think your air conditioner needs coolant or something?” wondered Todd. “I mean, the air works fine normally, right? Should we go to the mechanic? Hey, how hot is it outside? How hot do you think it would get in this car if we rolled up all the windows?”

“I don’t know,” Edgar snapped. He immediately felt guilty. It was the first time in his life that he’d ever been rude to Todd.

“I’m sorry,” he said sadly. “I guess I’m a little tired and hot. I wish we could just go swimming or something.”

Todd stared out the passenger window, a little shocked – and then, suddenly, relieved. “Look!” he cried. “Ask and you will receive! Check it out!”

An unpainted wooden building sat in the far distance. A large sign announced: “BEER! POOL! AIR CONDITIONING! JUKE BOX!” Todd nudged Edgar in the ribs. “Sounds like a cool time, huh? Get it? Cool time?” He laughed uproariously at his own joke. Edgar frowned. Puns were hideous and disgusting.

“Are you sure?” he asked dubiously. “I mean, it doesn’t look big enough for a pool. The YMCA is way bigger.”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd shook his head. “The Y’s got weight benches and exercise bikes too. This is probably just one of those special community pools. Come on!” He punched Edgar on the arm eagerly.

Edgar pulled off onto the side road and headed towards the shack. Dust kicked up from the wheels of the Ford as they pulled up.

“Jimmy’s Bar,” Edgar read off the half-opened front door. “Do they really have swimming pools at bars? My mother always said I should never swim before I eat. And I imagine that goes double for drinking. That sounds extremely dangerous.”

“We’re men,” said Todd boldly. He opened his car door and stepped out. “That means making our own decisions, no matter if they put us in harm’s way or not. Besides, even if you get cramps and drown a terrible, watery death, don’t the juke box and free air conditioning sound great?”

It did. The two stepped into the near-empty bar. Edgar was wearing swim trunks underneath his khakis and was so eager to jump in that he’d yanked off his pants and half peeled his shirt off before realizing there was no immediate body of water to hurl himself into. Embarrassed, he pulled his shirt back down over his swelling stomach.

The bartender comfortably wore a moustache and a cowboy hat. Bewilderingly to Todd, he was not drying off a mug the way bartenders always seemed to be doing at saloons in movies. Instead, he was amiably chatting to a pair of businessmen seated at the bar. He held up a finger professionally, wordlessly requesting the men to put the conversation on hold.

“Gentlemen,” he said proudly, turning to Todd and Edgar, “Welcome to Jimmy’s Bar. Special of the day is the jalapeno burger with sweet potato chips. Happy Hour starts in fifteen, buck off all domestic brews.” He eyed Edgar’s swim trunks distastefully, then glanced back up. “What can I start you off with?”

Todd counted the money in his wallet, mouthing silent words to himself as he fumbled through the bills. Finally, he held up three fives, smiling. “I have fifteen bucks here in my hand,” he said proudly. “Bring us each a burger and as many drinks as that will get!”

Jimmy the bartender nodded. “It’ll be a few minutes, gentlemen.” He nodded to the corner of the bar. “Meantime, you two are welcome to play a game of pool.” He pointed to the back of the bar, where a trim, aging black man leaned against a green felt-covered table. Jimmy said a few brief words to the businessmen and then walked through a door behind the bar. Todd and Edgar slowly walked to the back and joined the black man by the table.

“Is there a changing room?” asked Todd. Edgar scratched his stomach. “I’m ready to get in,” he announced.

The man adjusted his hat and smiled. “There’s a bathroom over there,” he pointed with the stick. “Meantime, one of you boys want to play a game of pool?”

Edgar’s mouth dropped open in dismay as he realized their mistake. Groaning loudly, he

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

sat on the floor and cupped his stomach in disappointment.

“Me! I do!” chirped Todd. He had heard of pool, but had never played an actual game. He’d always assumed it was a dangerous rite of passage that he’d never have to experience, like poker or roller derbies. To actually be invited to participate – that was a dream. “I’m Todd. I don’t know how to play, though. That’s a great suit you’re wearing.”

The man peered at him. His fedora was cocked at a suitable angle, and he was dressed stylishly in a navy blue suit and a dapper pair of loafers. He looked like he was about to star in a Broadway musical. He tossed the stick to Todd and gave him a broad grin.

“Why, thank you, Todd,” he said. “Call me Ned. And I’ll teach you how to play. I’ll even go easy on you, it being your first time and all.”

Ned grabbed another pool stick and rubbed chalk on the tip. “First thing we do,” he announced, “is put some chalk on the end of our pool cues. Doesn’t really seem to do much, but that’s the ritual,” he told Todd. Todd solemnly rubbed chalk on his own cue.

“Now,” said Ned, “I’ll lay the pool balls out.” He picked up a plastic triangle and placed it on the table. He inserted a couple of quarters into the machine and several pool balls rolled out. He carefully placed them into the triangle and moved it around the table a little. He picked up a white ball and placed it a good distance from the set he’d carefully arranged.

“I’ll break,” he announced. Todd winced and covered his ears. To his surprise, Ned merely hit the white ball with his pool stick, knocking it into the rest of the balls, which scattered around the table.

Ned frowned, surveying the table. “Your turn,” he said. “You just try to hit one of the balls into the hole, either solids or stripes, and then you keep trying to hit that kind in.”

“That’s it?” Todd asked. Edgar was watching them carefully from a seat he’d pulled up. “That sounds really – I don’t know. That’s all pool is?”

“It sure is,” Ned said. He tapped his pool stick against the table impatiently. “You go.”

“No, thanks,” said Todd. He shrugged. “I thought it was something cool and dangerous, like – I don’t know, like whatever Bridge is. This is just boring. That’s not who I am, and it isn’t what I’m about.”

Ned nodded curtly and placed his pool cue aside. “And what, may I ask, would you be about?”

Todd sighed heavily and asthmatically. “Rap music. I’m a master rapper.”

“I’m a mathematician and historian,” Edgar piped up. He nodded happily. “A double major.”

Ned nodded. “Well,” he laughed, “I don’t know too much about that, being a jazz musician, but I’ve had a little contact with the rap music from time to time. Let’s hear you freestyle.”

“I don’t freestyle,” seethed Todd. “That’s a parlor trick. It’s ridiculous to judge

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

someone's rapping skills based on how well they can perform on cue like a barking circus seal."

"True," mused Ned. "Truer than you know, friend, but let me clue you in: *to rhyme in short time is a thrilling skill that will show your glow, you know.*"

Todd stared blankly, and then suddenly laughed. Edgar gaped at them bemusedly.

"Did you just come up with that?" demanded Todd. "That was amazing!"

"*A mere parlor trick wouldn't stick,*" said Ned, "*but if your talent lent you wit, why not run with it?*" He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I'm very rusty. But you got the gist, right?"

Todd was delighted. "How did you do that!" he begged. "I've never been able to freestyle!"

"It's practice," said Ned firmly. "Practice, practice, practice, and the ability to notice your surroundings. For instance: you're here at the bar. What do you notice?"

Todd glanced around. "Chairs, I guess. A pool table. You."

"No!" said Ned. "What do you *notice*? Really look; when you freestyle, you're making a soup, and the more ingredients you have in the refrigerator of inspiration, the funkier your stew can get."

Todd took a careful look. Blue plastic chairs. Sad, round tables that needed to be wiped. Two pictures on the wall; one was a smiling dog wearing a top hat, and the other showed a vase of tulips. A used ash tray sat on the bar in front of the two businessmen. The mustached bartender was laughing at something one of the businessmen said. Smoke billowed from the door behind him.

"Just a word of advice!" shouted Todd suddenly to the bartender. He paused, and then closed his eyes.

"*It's heat for which your burgers are famed / but it would be such a shame / if you suddenly learned that they'd already burned.*" He paused and thought carefully, remembering the sign outside the bar.

"*So maybe go check on them, James,*" he finished.

The bartender looked surprised and dashed to the back.

"That was good," Ned offered. "Sort of a freestyle limerick. I'm very impressed." He laughed loudly. Edgar stared in awe at Todd.

Todd shrugged, a little embarrassed and surprised at himself. "I – I don't know where that came from," he stammered. "It just sort of..."

"It flowed through you," said Ned. He put on a pair of sunglasses and sat down. "Listen," he told them.

Just then, the bartender walked up. "Good thing you remembered, gentlemen" Jimmy said, setting down the two plates. He sat down a single beer. "There you go, fellows."

"One drink?" said Edgar doubtfully.

Jimmy shrugged and tipped the cowboy hat. "Fifteen bucks," he reminded him.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd and Edgar thanked him and began eating.

Ned cleared his throat loudly. “Oops,” Todd mumbled through a mouth of hamburger. He swallowed quickly. “You may continue.”

“A rapper,” Ned said, “has the soul of a poet.”

“That’s what I’ve always said!” shouted Todd. “A rapper is no different than a poet! Just rappers get girls and poets definitely never do. Man,” he continued with his mouth full, “you are so awesome.”

“And,” Ned continued solemnly, “at times, the poetry flows through his soul and must be expressed. To ignore the music of the spheres is to frustrate and suffocate his very essence.”

Todd thought of the many times he’d locked himself in a restroom stall at Cracker Barrel so he could add a couple of lines to his opus and nodded emphatically. “It’s like having a stuffy nose and no tissues,” he elucidated.

“Freestyling is just another way for the poetry to express itself through the rapper’s heart,” Ned finished. “That’s it. It’s a form of artistic expression that has no precedent, unless you want to count those guys at flea markets that do a funny sketch of you in ten minutes.” He beamed at the pair proudly, who nodded and continued eating their burgers. Edgar took a little sip from the beer.

“Thanks,” said Todd. “You’re pretty wise.”

Ned bowed.

“I need solid information like that. You know, one of the reasons we’re actually going on this trip is so that I can meet my dad – my real dad – and make him proud of me. That kind of knowledge will probably help,” Todd said awkwardly, wiping grease off his chin.

“Oh, yeah?” Ned asked. “So who’s this guy you’re meeting?”

“Reginald Vel Johnson,” Edgar told him, belching. He apologized.

“Good old Reg,” said Ned. “You know, I met him once before.”

Todd’s eyes blazed. “You did?! What was he like?”

Ned stared blankly from behind his sunglasses into the distance. “It was maybe fifteen years ago. I was hustling at a bar not unlike this one, just before one of my jazz shows. Then suddenly, there’s a knock at my dressing room, and there he was in the flesh: Reginald. He shook my hand and told me I was the greatest trombone player he’d ever heard and he came expressly for the purpose of hearing me play in person. Then he pressed a hundred dollar bill into my hand and left.” He wiped his eye. “Reginald was one of the most extraordinary men I’d ever met.”

Todd was emotionally charged. “That’s absolutely amazing,” he said heavily, trying not to cry. “I can’t believe you met him. He’s just like I imagined.”

Ned nodded. “He was a great guy.” He removed his hat and stood up.

“Well, gentlemen,” he told them. “It is time for me to take my leave. I’m glad I could teach you a few things and help you out on your journey. To be young again and on an adventure

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

– I envy you,” he smiled, the corners of his mouth crinkling.

“Can you lend an old family friend a couple hundred?” he asked. “I hate to ask, but my next jazz concert is in San Diego and I really need train fare.”

Todd peered in his wallet. “Gosh,” he said worriedly. “I don’t have a couple of hundred. I’d say you could come with us, but we’re heading towards Wichita.”

“A hundred, then,” Ned asked. “I can take a Greyhound.”

“I don’t have but ten dollars,” Todd said sadly.

“Thanks,” Ned said, taking it firmly from his hands. “God bless you and yours, and have a safe trip. And say hi to Roger for me,” he shouted over his shoulder as he left the bar.

“Reginald!” shouted Todd.

“Yeah, him!” yelled Ned, and then he was gone.

“That guy was my second best friend ever,” beamed Todd.

Edgar nodded happily in agreement. “He was probably the coolest guy I know, apart from Carl Sagan.”

Todd and Edgar were full and happy. The bar was a great place, even if it didn’t have a real pool. They struck up a conversation with the two businessmen and found that their money should be invested in several key companies, a fact that Todd promised he would remember “if we ever get any more cash.” Jimmy the bartender, lonely for conversation, brought the boys a complementary bowl of peanuts and set the jukebox to play the hits of Elvis Presley. Todd and Edgar had never spent such a fantastic afternoon.

It was a couple of hours later before the two hit the road. “Wichita?” the bartender had asked. “I go up there a couple of times a year, gentlemen. It’s only four hours away – you can almost see the Kansas border from my bar!” Cheered by the news, as well as his newfound freestyling abilities, Todd had asked for a soda for the two to share. Digging up a few lint-covered coins from his pocket, he’d been surprised when the bartender waved the change away. “Don’t worry on it,” he’d told them. “I remember when I was your age. I tried to find my father, too. It’s a great journey – never managed to find him, but hey, I did happen to open up this bar!”

“I hope that I’m as successful as you are,” Todd had gushed before gulping half the drink and handing it to Edgar. Unfortunately, he’d forgotten – once again – to ask for a decaffeinated beverage.

And, two hours later, he was paying the price. “Come on!” he moaned feverishly. “Just pull over, pull over!”

“Not again!” Edgar said peevishly. “We’re never going to get to Wichita if we have to stop every five minutes! Why didn’t you go in the bar?”

“I didn’t have to go at the bar!” snapped Todd. “I have to go NOW!”

“Look,” said Edgar, pointing to a sign. “REST STOP: SEVEN MILES.” Can you wait

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

seven miles?

“No!” announced Todd. But as Edgar would not pull over, he had no choice but to hold himself frantically and squirm in his seat impatiently like a cranky five year old. Seven miles later, he nearly cried with relief as they pulled up at the rest stop.

“Fantastic!” cried Todd. He dashed inside, leaving Edgar slumped at the steering wheel, bored. Edgar was feeling weary and more than a little disconcerted from their long, long journey. They were over five hundred miles away from home and he hadn’t made a fresh sandwich in two days. He hoped that he’d be able to nap in Wichita. Todd was his best friend, but this trip – how exhausting.

Suddenly, he straightened up. This was the perfect time to grab a bag of cheese puffs, to replace the pilfered snacks before Todd noticed. Looking around carefully, he grabbed a couple of dollars in spare change from the car’s floorboard and then made his way to the rest area’s snack machine.

Week-old cookies, melted chocolate bars, fifty-cent packs of twenty-five-cent chewing gum, potato chips with unnatural flavors and colors... Edgar had nearly given up when he noticed a bag of white-cheddar cheese puffs. It was a different brand, different size, and different cheese, but he was desperate. Tossing the coins in frantically, he pressed the selection repeatedly until the vending machine dispensed the snack. Rushing back to the car, he fumbled open the backpack’s zipper and stuffed in the new bag of cheese puffs. Gasping for breath, he managed to zip up the bag and refasten his seat belt just as Todd re-entered the car, chipper and smug.

“Man,” Todd said. “Now I know how the banks of the River Nile feel!”

“High five, man,” Edgar said, and slapped Todd’s hand. He grimaced mildly.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Todd said, winking. “That’s just from where I forgot to dry my hands after washing them.” He leered evilly. “OR IS IT?”

He tossed a handful of pamphlets into Edgar’s lap. “Check it out!” he boasted. “Looks like Mister Plans Ahead strikes again! I got a few pamphlets for Wichita while I was in there. I guess we’re officially close!”

Cheered by their vicinity, Edgar and Todd pulled out of the rest area and sped off. Todd buried his nose in the pamphlets, occasionally announcing snippets of information like, “Did you know there are at least four Holiday Inns in Wichita?” “Did you know that Wichita is the name of an Indian tribe?” He unfolded and refolded the pamphlets, memorizing the contents. “This sounds like the most amazing city in the entire universe,” he mused.

“I sure hope so,” said Edgar crankily.

An hour later, Todd had cranked up the Phil Collins cassette and was playing imaginary drums to the song “In the Air Tonight.” “This song is so amazing,” he shouted. Edgar nodded quietly, sweating. He wiped condensation from his thick glasses. He hadn’t said a word in the

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

last few minutes.

Todd grabbed the mangled pair of sunglasses sitting on the emergency brake and slid them on. They sat askew on his face. “Check it out,” he laughed. “I’m that Miami Vice thing!” He made a gun from the index and middle fingers of his right hand and held it in the air with his left hand. “Here we come, Wichita,” he whispered to himself, pointing his gun-hand out the window at the passing cornfields.

Green, green, green, white. Suddenly, instead of cornfields, Todd found himself pointing his imaginary gun at a police car. “Oh, no,” he whispered to himself, pulling his hand back in the window, but it was too late. The car pulled out behind Edgar’s car and began flashing its lights.

“Oh my god,” Edgar said. “What did you do?”

“I don’t know!” wailed Todd. “I was just being Miami Vice! Drive really fast!”

“The car doesn’t drive really fast,” Edgar yelled. “This is as fast as it goes!”

“Oh my god.” Todd began crying for the first time that day. “This is it. We’re going to jail. I didn’t even get to meet my real dad and I haven’t even written a rap album before I go to jail, and my parents are going to be so mad at me.” He looked back. The police officer was wearing a stern expression while tailgating their car. Todd removed the sunglasses and threw them out the window. “I’M SORRY!” he yelled back at the police car, but the officer continued flashing his lights.

Edgar cursed and pulled the car over to the side of the road. He parked the car and tried his hardest to place his hands over his head. Todd felt sick to his stomach and wished that Edgar would watch his mouth.

The police cruiser pulled over behind them and parked. Todd turned his head to watch the officer, who was writing on a piece of paper. “What is he doing?” Todd wondered. “Why is he writing all this stuff down? Do we have to fill out some kind of form?”

“Todd, be quiet,” hissed Edgar helplessly. “He’ll shoot us. You need to turn around and put your hands in the air like me. That way, if he wants to arrest us, he can do it easily and quickly without having to beat us with clubs.”

“Do you know what jail is like?” Todd asked sadly. “Mom – I mean, I guess my foster mom – she used to say that if I ever wound up in jail, to not bother ever coming home. She said that her uncle had been in jail and she never wanted for any of her kids to end up there. She said that it smelled like my grandfather’s house and you couldn’t eat ice cream, only brussels sprouts and liver all day long.”

Edgar began shaking with heavy sobs, his chubby arms quivering in the air. “I know enough,” he choked out. “One time, I went to summer camp for a month. The other kids made fun of me and kicked me in the leg when the counselors weren’t looking. This one fat kid ate my pudding every time we had dinner. When I went swimming, my trunks fell off in the water and everyone laughed and pointed. I had to do archery and I got mosquito bites all over, even on my



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

eyelids. When I told my mom, she said it sounded like I'd been to jail. She said I never had to go to camp again if I'd just do the laundry every week!" With this confession in the air, both Todd and Edgar began bawling.

The police officer knocked on the window, and Edgar laid his face on the steering wheel and held his hands even higher in the air, sobbing loudly.

"No, no," Todd cried. "We're sorry! We're so sorry!"

"Open the door, please, sir," the officer said, watching the pair carefully. Were they high?

Edgar carefully brought his arms down and unlocked the car door, sniffing. He opened the door.

"Are you boys okay?" asked the police officer. He considered putting his hand on his gun, but decided to restrain himself in the name of caution. The two young men were already behaving erratically, and he didn't want to push them to do anything ridiculous or dangerous.

"EDGAR MADE ME DO IT," Todd shouted. "I don't even like Phil Collins," he continued, "and I don't know who my real father is yet, if that's on your form."

"Todd's a liar," yelled Edgar. "I offered to take him to get a new cassette when we passed by a big mall a while back, and he said no thank you, that what we had was okay. If I knew how the Phil Collins music made him act up and lie," he said, giving Todd a dirty look, "I wouldn't have even let him listen to it."

"May I see your identification?" asked the officer.

Edgar handed his driver's license over with one quavering hand. The police officer studied it carefully, holding it against the light. He scratched his head. "Sir," he addressed Edgar, "I have to ask you: have you been drinking?"

"We had half a beer each," Edgar confessed. He started crying again. "Officer, please don't hit us with a club and then send us to jail for years until a spunky young lawyer with a lot of courage helps us regain our freedom."

"When was the beer consumed?"

"A few hours ago," Todd interrupted. His eyes glistened. "Edgar bought it for me. I'm sorry. I don't even have ID," he admitted. Edgar glared at him again.

The officer shrugged and handed Edgar's ID back to him. "I'm going to ignore that remark," he said. "Guys," he said, "you were going fifty in a seventy zone. Now, I'm not going to write you a ticket, but there's a minimum speed limit around here. I ask that you please follow it for your safety as well as the other drivers."

"Edgar gets car sick if we go too fast," Todd said chipperly. Now that he was out of danger, he felt in control of the situation. "But we'll try. A jazz musician taught me to freestyle a couple of hours ago and I'd like to get in some practice. Would you like me to give you a demonstration?" He smiled at the officer in a belated attempt to disarm him through charm.

The police officer stared icily at Todd. "Boys, I'm doing you a favor. I don't know where

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

you two are going or what you think you're trying to pull," he said to Edgar, "but you two had better move on. And don't let me catch you out here again, got it?"

Edgar nodded solemnly and sadly, hunching his shoulders. The police officer got back into his cruiser and sped off. Edgar started the Ford back up and continued on the highway.

"Wow," gloated Todd. "Did you see that? I mean, did you SEE that? We were absolutely amazing," he shouted.

"I mean," he continued, "we were cool. We were super, completely awesome. We just talked our way out of a million dollar ticket and probably a few years in the slammer. And that's an experience that will definitely go in my rap: the first time the cops tried to take me in." He raised his hand up to Edgar for a high five and was shocked when there was no returned slap.

"Todd," Edgar said coldly, "that was the second time you lied and tattled on me. I thought you were cooler than that. I thought we were friends."

"We are friends," said Todd. "Best friends! Just like in *The Good Son*! Remember?"

"Macaulay Culkin died in *The Good Son*, Todd!" shouted Edgar. "He was a manipulator! Just like you! You're going to get me jailed or clubbed or shot or even worse," he squealed in anger and terror.

Todd was quiet for a while. Then he nodded. "I didn't know you felt that way," he said. "I mean, not that *you'd* ever try to deceive me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Edgar.

"Where's my other bag of cheese puffs?"

Edgar felt himself turn cold. "What? How do I know – in your backpack, probably."

"Wrong! Absolutely and totally false," roared Todd. "There WERE four bags back there, and now there's three. Three bags and a bag of some nasty white cheddar junk that SOMEONE put in my bag," he hissed vehemently.

"I was hungry," Edgar said sullenly.

"So you admit it!" hollered Todd. "Look at Mister Hard Working Subway guy, Mister 'I never lie to anyone and betray my friends'!"

"You remember why I left my foster home," he continued in a cold whisper. "Because my faux-parents stole my snacks. And you did it to me again. You did. Chew on that for a while, Edgar." And he turned to the window, staring out into the Kansas countryside.

Edgar drove on, miserably. Both watched as the cornfields passed by in utter silence.

Unbelievable. The heat was absolutely sweltering, even with both windows rolled down. Edgar and Todd, still furious at each other, were practically melting in their seats.

Still, Todd had made up his mind not to talk to Edgar, and Edgar had decided the same thing. Unable to sit without communicating, though, they spoke in improvised Shakespearean soliloquies.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Forsooth,” said Todd to himself. “The lack of air conditioning hath brought me to a level of misery and sickness unforeseen. If only I’d had the foresight to choose a friend both faithful and true who had a real vehicle, like a convertible!”

“Todd speaks in fancy words of outlandish possibilities,” said Edgar to himself sagely, “and yet he does not remember that I, Edgar, was the only man who agreed to take him on his long and noble journey to the far-away land of Wichita. Methinks he is an unthankful lad and should be chastised properly.”

“Todd is forever grateful,” said Todd, now inexplicably speaking in third person. “But Todd feels that Edgar actually did want to visit Wichita and brought Todd along so he could use Todd’s money.”

“LIAR,” shouted Edgar. “Todd is a liar and says things that are merely ridiculous speculation! Furthermore, Edgar is thinking about turning the car around and going back home, especially since he could get back to work early and start making sandwiches again!”

“Edgar WOULD do that,” Todd roared. “He won’t even let Todd install a rotating fan in his Ford, so why wouldn’t he just bail on Todd and go home? He’s a quitter!”

“A rotating fan needs an OUTLET, Edgar TOLD that to Todd,” Edgar howled. “And Todd’s been taking Edgar for granted since they started this whole trip!”

“How?” asked Todd.

“You set me out on this long journey with barely a word of thanks, you rented the world’s most disgusting motel room, you tried to get me killed in a restaurant, you signaled the police to raid my vehicle, and then you tried to get them to arrest me!” Edgar seethed.

“And YOU ate my bag of cheese puffs,” Todd hissed. “So I guess that about makes us even.”

Just then, the car shuddered heavily and then began to slow.

“What’s going on?” Todd asked, alarmed. “What are you doing? Stop doing that.”

“I’m not doing that,” Edgar cried, panicking. “Oh my God. What is it doing?” He pounded the steering wheel with his fists, cursing loudly. “We aren’t mad at you, sweetheart,” he wailed in desperation.

“We broke it with our anger!” cried Todd as the car lurched and complained to a stop on the side of the road.

“Let’s never be angry at each other again,” Edgar yelled fiercely. He let go of the steering wheel and gave Todd a hug.

Todd hugged Edgar back. “I’m sorry,” he said to both Todd and the car. “You’re right! You’re my best friend, and I didn’t mean all that stuff I said!”

“Me neither,” yelled Edgar.

Both stared hopefully at the dashboard. The car continued to not work.

“Hey,” Todd finally said. “When’s the last time we got gas?”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Edgar rubbed his chin. "I think – well, somewhere in Texas, wasn't it?" he asked.

Todd rubbed his chin too. "Huh."

Both men sat in the car, thinking.

"Wait," said Edgar. "This is easy. Five minutes ago, we passed an exit, right? So we'll walk back there, buy a gas can and a couple of gallons, then drive until we hit the next gas station." He beamed proudly. "We're saved," he yelled. "I saved our lives!"

"Yeah!" shouted Todd. He pulled out his Batman wallet and looked into it carefully.

"How much do we have left?" Edgar asked.

Todd counted to himself, muttering out loud. He raised his eyebrows. "Seventy-four cents," he announced.

Edgar stared at him. "That doesn't seem right," he said.

Todd thought about it. "Well – food for the last two days. The motel room. The bar. The other gas place," he counted.

"That's maybe a couple of hundred," wailed Edgar. "Didn't you have over three hundred dollars when we started?"

Todd shrugged angrily. "You're the mathematician," he shouted. "You tell me how much I should have!"

"More than you have right now," Edgar said dully. He shook his head. "More than you have now. So what do we do?"

"Doesn't history teach tactics?" sneered Todd. "Come on, Mister Mathematician Historian. Figure it out for us!"

"You know," Edgar said, "somewhere along the way, I think you stopped being my friend."

"Well," said Todd, "the same thing happened to you."

"I want to go home," Edgar sniffled. "I just want to go home!"

"Go home, then," Todd said. He opened his car door. "I'm going to Wichita. I'm going to find my dad, I'm going to find my future, and I'm going to write my rap."

He stepped out, yanked his backpack from the backseat of the car, and put one hand firmly on the roof of the car. "Listen," he said to Edgar. "I learned something along the way. I learned that friendship really isn't the most important thing."

Edgar stared at him impassively.

"The most important thing," Todd continued, "is finding a passion. It's finding a hope, a dream, a vision. It's making the most out of that vision and ignoring everyone else in your way." His eyes glistened. "Edward –"

"Edgar," interrupted Edgar.

"Sure," said Todd offhandedly. "Listen. When we first left, it was sort of – a cry for attention, you know? But I have a real talent, a real ability. And I don't need you trying to stand

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

in my way. I'm going to be the world's greatest rapper," he shouted bitterly, waving his arms for emphasis, "and I'm going meet Reginald Vel Johnson and start my new life."

He took his hand off the car and stepped back, hoisting the backpack over his shoulders. "It's just too bad you couldn't be a part of it," he said bitterly, spitting on the ground. He tried to put on a smile, but his mouth just curled like he was attempting to imitate a duck. "God speed, Ron. Maybe you'll read about me one day."

Edgar's mouth quivered.

"I'm going to miss you, Todd," he whispered. "God speed to you, too."

He watched as Todd walked into the distance, kept walking. He kept his tears in check until Todd was just a little dot far along the highway's shoulder, and then he blubbered like a fifth grade camper.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

*Interlude*

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd wished he had a skateboard.

If he had a skateboard, he reasoned to himself, wishing upon the single star in the sky (he proudly remembered the day that he'd first discovered the sun was actually a star. Instead of crying, the way he would have a scant year earlier, he wrote it down carefully in a notebook and then scratched it out heavily. It was that day, he decided, that he was definitely a man), he'd grab onto the bumper of one of the passing cars and let it carry him the last thirty miles to Wichita, just like Michael J Fox did in "Back to the Future." He began whistling a song by Huey Lewis and the News, distractedly kicking a stone. For the next ten minutes, the stone traveled with him as he kicked it carefully ahead of him. Finally, an errant twist of the ankle led to the stone skipping onto the highway, and he let it go sadly, watching it out of the corner as he passed by in hopes that it might somehow jump back.

"I'm liberated," he suddenly whispered to himself, stumbling over his own feet at the same time. He was suddenly struck by the idea. No parents, no friends, no job, no home. It was like life had just this moment squeezed him out onto this Kansas highway. A *tabula rasa* beginning an entire new life, a new existence. He whooped loudly, dancing in a circle. He was a free man! He would no longer be defined by the rules and roles placed upon him by a society whose sole purpose seemed to be to categorize and store him like a Scrabble tile. Now, if he wanted, he'd stay up until midnight watching cartoons, eating ice cream, playing cards with homeless people, writing declarations to an ignorant society that he'd turned his back upon. "Is this what college is like?" he wondered to himself.

Todd hoisted the backpack of cheese snacks higher on his shoulder and marched along. He oddly felt as if he was floating high above the highway. He wiped sweat from his brow. "I really should drink some water," he thought, worried. This feeling of elation and delight was abnormal. He was probably extremely dehydrated.

A highway sign greeted him as he trudged by. "Wichita: 28 miles," it read. Twenty-eight miles! Todd groaned as he remembered the trip to the Subway shop that seemed so many months ago, though it had just been the day before yesterday. It had taken him nearly a quarter of a day to walk the two miles. "So how long will it take for me to get to Wichita?" he wondered. He scratched his stomach, wishing Edgar was around to tell him the answer. He was surprised to realize that he almost missed the back-stabbing cretin.

But Edgar had never really believed in Todd; he'd driven him this far and then cast accusations, stolen valued possessions. Todd had simply behaved as any baby bird would; he'd flown away as fast and as far as he could manage. "That's just what birds DO in the face of danger," he muttered to himself, stumbling again on the highway's shoulder. Dear God, how hot was it out here? Eighty? Eighty-five degrees?

Todd watched as the occasional pickup or family sedan roared by and wished desperately

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

that he was part of their caravan. He imagined riding happily in the backseat as an aging farmhand couple sang rustic songs about the mysteries and legends of Wichita. “You know, Lorraine,” the driver would eventually say to his wife, grinning, “I’m feelin’ a kind of a yen for a frozen yogurt banana split.”

“Henry,” the toothless old woman would grunt happily, drooling from the corner of her mouth, “you just read my mind. How about it?” she’d ask Todd, who’d recoil slightly from the halitosis spewing from her diseased gums. “Could you stand to have a frozen treat, young man?”

“Free of charge,” Henry the farmhand would say, his eyes crinkling in sheer delight at the prospect of buying frozen yogurt for the young man. “I’m happy to treat the son of the most famous man in Wichita. He’s our guest of honor, you know,” he’d nod, “and after we’re done, I’m driving you and Reginald on the Family Matters parade float myself!”

Todd would smile nonchalantly and take Henry’s hand firmly, making sure he was still able to look forward and drive the pickup without getting in a wreck. “You know,” he’d say, leaning forward, “you two are simple, humble country people. I will remember you both in my grand rap opus.”

And Henry and Lorraine would be so delighted and touched by his gesture that they’d both cry at the great honor, wiping their wrinkled, oozing eyes on their tattered blue overalls. Todd grew a little teary-eyed himself thinking about it.

Quickly, before he could change his mind, he tore a single page from his pocket notebook and pulled out his pen. His mother – foster mother, he amended silently – would vomit in fear and disgust if she ever found out what he was doing right now. “A hitchhiker is no better than a hermit or a carnival worker,” she’d told him on more than one occasion, grimacing as they passed by a young man holding a cardboard sign and waving his thumb desperately. “If I ever see you doing something like that, I’ll run you over in the family car myself.”

Run Todd down! He shuddered. Surely any real mother would never be able to threaten such a hideous fate. He cast her aside into deep, fiery pits in his mind as he carefully lettered on the tiny page:

**WICHITA, PLEASE.**

He waved the sign high in the air. A truck appeared far on the horizon; Todd waited until it was close and then gave it the thumbs up, pointing at the note in his hand. The driver leaned forward, peering intently and muttering to himself; shrugging, he gave Todd the thumbs up in return and sped off.

Todd was offended. Muttering furiously, he added to the little note page:  
**(NEED RIDE)**

He drew a little picture of himself holding a little stick with a tied up flag bundle at the end, just like a hobo. It wasn’t very good and mostly looked like the character was brandishing an inflatable golf club. This was no good, he thought to himself, panicking. Any passing cars



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

would assume that he was some sort of lunatic putter attempting to make his way to some sort of tournament without any golfing equipment. "That highly unnatural young man is definitely the last person I would pick up," he thought wildly, and threw the note to the side of the highway.

"Forget the note," he thought to himself. If only Edgar were here! Todd would have been able to write a bigger and legible message on Edgar's large, ridiculous head. Something like "HELP, I AM GOING TO WICHITA TO FIND MY FATHER, OUT OF GAS, HELP ME OUT AND WE CAN GET ICE CREAM." In letters that would have been readable from the moon.

In the end, Todd decided that no one really liked to read and that the best way to get a ride was to mime. He found himself dancing down the highway, waving his thumb madly at passing vehicles and dramatically hoisting his backpack over his shoulder like a woman displaying a bulky infant. He waved frantically to other cars, jerking his thumb towards Wichita as if directing traffic. He was relieved and delighted when a beige station wagon pulled over twenty minutes later.

He rushed over to the vehicle and peered inside. He was delighted. In the front seat were two smiling parents; the father wore a pressed blue suit and waved politely to Todd while the mother, who sat in the passenger seat, pursing her lips and raising her eyebrows. In the backseat were two children; a little boy who looked nearly two, who drooled and waved happily to Todd, and a twelve year old girl who folded her arms and stared coldly at the seat in front of her. The rest of the vehicle was packed with bins, bags, and laundry on hangers.

The passenger side window rolled down and the father leaned over from the driver's seat to call to Todd: "Need a ride, young man?"

"Wow!" called Todd happily. "You bet, guys! Thank you!" He pulled the backpack from over his shoulder and hopped into the backseat, squeezing himself in next to the two-year-old's car seat.

The man in the driver's seat cleared his throat and turned around. "Before we get going," he announced, "we need to discuss a few things. Ground rules, that kind of thing."

"We certainly do," said the woman next to him coldly. "We don't normally pick up hitchhikers."

"No, we don't," agreed the man, "but we're on our way to a convention in Wichita, and it seems in the spirit of the day to treat those in need as family."

"Hey," cried Todd, "I'm going to a convention in Wichita, too! What are the odds?" He scratched his stomach and wiggled in his seat. "The Family Matters convention. I'm going to finally meet my father," he explained.

"Why," cried the woman, finally warming, "that's wonderful! That's exactly where we're going." Her husband patted her leg warmly.

"Now, you seem like a nice boy," said the man, "but let's get a few things clear. First, no dope," he said, shaking his head. The woman next to him also shook her head.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

"I got two kids in the backseat and I don't want them around that crap. We absolutely clear on that?"

"Of course," said Todd, shocked and mildly offended.

"No drinking, no smoking, no cussing, and no talking about - " The man broke off, tilted his head back at the little boy, and then hissed "ess eee ecks."

"I would never do any of those awful things," Todd said sincerely. "In fact, I'm the world's first no cussing rapper."

"Well, it's good to meet you. I'm Jim Richards," the man said, leaning back to shake Todd's hand. Todd noticed how neatly his nails were clipped, how straight and carefully he'd combed his hair, and was extremely impressed. "This is my wife, Sandra," he announced, nodding to the woman. "And my two children, Rachel and Oliver."

"I'm Todd Sanders," Todd said properly, brushing his buzzed hair several times for maximum effect. He smiled cheerfully at the others in the car. They were the best family he'd ever met, he decided.

Jim put the car in drive and pulled back onto the highway. "To Wichita," he cried delightedly. "To Wichita, or bust!" Sandra and Oliver cheered. Rachel rolled her eyes and put her head in her hands.

"So, Todd," Jim said once he'd picked up speed and set his cruise control. "Are you from around here?"

Todd shook his head feverishly. "No," he addressed the couple. "I'm really not. I'm from New Mexico."

"Where's your mom?" asked Sandra sadly. "She's not going to be there for the reunion with your father?"

"Thankfully, no," Todd said firmly. "That nightmare of a parent is a sneak and probably a thief and definitely a liar. I left home so I could get away from all of that. I came out here to be born again."

Sandra clapped joyfully. "How wonderful for you! Jim and I were born again when we were just a little older than you." She smiled, her eyes shining brightly. "How wonderful to meet such a delightful young man."

Todd was just as happy. "You know," he announced, "you guys are definitely the coolest people I've met so far on my great adventure." He frowned, then amended himself: "Except for the jazz musician who knew my father and taught me to play pool."

Sandra pursed her lips again and glanced warily at her husband. "Hmm," she said carefully. "I don't know how we feel about jazz musicians and pool halls."

Oliver belched and waved his arms happily. Jim looked at him in the rear-view mirror. "We're more country-western people," he said, addressing Todd, who shuddered inwardly.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

"Would you like to have a sing-along with us?"

"Please, no," Rachel said sadly. Todd shook his head emphatically. "Oh, no, thank you," he announced. "I'm really thirsty and I couldn't possibly sing. Besides," he continued, "I'm more of a rapper."

"A who?" asked Sandra.

"A rapper," said Todd. "The jazz musician taught me to freestyle."

Sandra shook her head sadly. "I'm not following you, Mr. Sanders."

Todd looked out the window at the passing cornfields. He couldn't believe it, but he was sort of actually missing Edgar a little.

Five minutes later, Jim and Sandra were treating the others to a freakish medley of irritating songs; they started with "Ninety Nine Bottles of Pop on the Wall", which quickly deteriorated into a chorus of "Row, Row, Row your Boat" before melding into "The Song that Doesn't End." Todd pressed his fingertips against the bridge of his nose, wondering how much pressure it would take to both break the cartilage and drive the fragments into his brain. "I hope it's quick and painless," he thought to himself desperately, preparing to implement the gruesome plan, when suddenly Jim pointed and cried out: "Dairy Queen!"

The Dairy Queen! Todd's heart raced, imagining the promised banana splits, the delicious Blizzards. "How about it," Jim addressed him. "Feel like having a cool treat with us?" Sandra looked at him expectantly and even Rachel and Oliver seemed delighted by the prospect of leaving the car for a few minutes.

"That sounds absolutely spectacular," Todd enthused, already unbuckling his seat belt. Jim turned the wheel; the station wagon veered onto the side road and slowly stopped in front of the restaurant.

"Now, remember the Big Three Ice Cream rules," Jim said, as he turned the car off. "What's the first rule?"

"No peanuts," said Rachel, sighing.

"Right, and the second rule?"

"Don't get more than you can eat," Rachel said.

"And the third rule?"

"Share with your brother."

"Right. Now let's head in and enjoy ourselves!"

Todd cracked his back as he stepped out of the station wagon. Jim elbowed him in the side as the family entered the Dairy Queen. "Don't worry about paying, big guy," Jim whispered. "It's on me. Any small dessert you'd like."

Todd beamed.

As they stood at the counter, Todd stared at the wide variety of desserts, trying to figure

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

out what he wanted. As the rest of the family stared at him and waited for him to make a choice, he scratched his chin with bemusement. “I guess-s-s-s --,” he slowly said, choosing carefully, “I want – a fudge sundae. With extra nuts.”

“No nuts,” interrupted Jim, and Sandra shook her head nervously. “No, no nuts.”

“One small fudge sundae, no nuts,” repeated the pudgy cashier, who scratched his oily forehead and counted Jim’s change back to him.

“Sandra’s allergic to nuts,” Jim explained as they sat at the table. “If anyone even eats nuts near her, she can break out in a rash.”

“It’s really bad,” Sandra explained. “I’ve had it for years. Almost died once.” Todd slunk in his seat sadly as no fewer than three patrons around them munched spoonfuls of dessert replete with nuts happily. He hoped that she’d swell up like a balloon – at least for the entertainment value – but was sorely disappointed by her complete lack of a reaction.

“How did you make your way all the way to Wichita, Todd?” asked Sandra as she dipped her spoon into a small cup of vanilla ice cream.

Todd felt tears welling up and thought about Van Halen and how disappointed they’d be if they ever found out their biggest fan was a crybaby. “This guy I used to know drove me,” he said. “But he ended up having to take off.” He shrugged nonchalantly.

Jim and Sandra gave each other a meaningful look. “Well,” said Jim uncomfortably. “I don’t know why he left you, but – he must have been a pretty good friend to bring you this far. You two must have been really close.”

“Kind of,” Todd sniffled, shoving another bite of his sundae into his mouth. Oliver took a handful of chocolate ice cream and wiped it all over the table. Everyone stared at it glumly.

Todd wondered if Edgar was still sitting in the gasless car on the side of the road some twenty miles back. Probably, he thought remorsefully. Probably he was doing mathematical equations and trying to figure out how he’d get home. “You abandoned him,” he reminded himself. “He drove you seven hundred miles to see your dad and you just left him without a single thought. He believed in you when no one else did; he told you that you’d write the world’s greatest rap song. And you left him over a bag of cheese puffs.” He shook his head sadly.

“I’m ready to go,” he loudly announced, burying his spoon deep into his dessert and letting it stand straight up. Jim and Sandra stared at him for a moment, and then Jim nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s head out.”

As they packed into the car, Todd had an epiphany of sorts. He realized Jim and Sandra Richards seemed like exactly the parents he wanted. They talked to him; they were interested in what was happening in his life and where he was going. And at the same time, he wished very badly that something dismal would happen to them – not a robbery or a murder, of course, but perhaps Jim could trip and somehow find himself with a broken arm and Oliver’s ice cream all over his face. “Ugh,” he thought to himself, peeved. “Twenty more miles, and how many of their

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

disgusting songs will they force upon me along the way? Why did Edgar have to forget to get gas? Why didn't Reginald send me an invitation and a limousine to the convention? Why couldn't I get nuts just because Sandra can't eat them?" Irritated and upset, he crammed himself into the backseat again, where Oliver greeted him with a smile and a sticky slap.

Wichita! Todd practically ran from the vehicle as soon as he saw the city limits. "This is it right here," he begged unhappily, interrupting a "family round table discussion" on the merits of Luby's versus Chili's.

Sandra looked around in disbelief. "There's nothing out here. Where are you going to go?"

"My dad told me to meet him here," he said fervently. "I'm just going to wait on him."

"We'll wait with you!" said Jim. "We couldn't leave an honorary member of the family by himself to wait on a street corner like some urchin."

"Thank you," said Todd, "but I'll be fine. I'm in Wichita now!" He unlocked the door and, grabbing his backpack, he ran away from the car as quickly as he could.

"See you at the convention!" cried Sandra and Jim in unison, and Todd nearly vomited in disbelief.

Wichita! After two days and over seven hundred miles, Todd was in the land of dreams and hopes. He stared gape-mouthed at the various trees and sidewalks. Actually, it didn't seem very different than Gallup.

But that was only the surface! He knew that as soon as he made his way to the downtown heart of the city, he'd see the shining heart of Wichita, like a polished zirconium in the middle of a brushed aluminum band.

Where was it? Todd thought to himself harder than he'd ever thought before. No doubt that Edgar would have some sort of absolutely brilliant plan to determine their exact location, but he was merely a rapper, not a mathematician. Suddenly, he had it; a distant memory from the three weeks he'd been in Boy Scouts as a young man. He'd hated the Boy Scouts, hated wearing the uniform, hated the songs, hated the zesty pocket knives that could do fifty different things. But now, he thought carefully for the words that would save him from being completely lost.

"Moss grows on the something something side of a tree," said their troop leader. Todd ran to the first tree he could find, but there was no moss. Neither was there any on the next tree. "Huh," he thought blandly.

Then another thought came to him: the sun. It rose in the west and set in the east, right? He smiled broadly, glancing up into the sky. It was nearly 5:00, and the sun was definitely setting – that way. He felt like Daniel Boone, a self-sufficient pioneer who could conquer the world. "Me and Daniel Boone / travel by the sun," whispered Todd, freestyling. "Look out,

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Reginald / you're about to meet your son." He wondered if it was allowable to rhyme two homonyms.

Todd thought for a minute and then realized that even though he now knew what direction was East, he still had no idea where downtown was. He frowned sadly. He'd been so close. But now he'd never see his father. The convention was tomorrow and he had no idea where he was going.

He slunk towards the sunset, slunk eastwards.

It was getting chilly, and Todd wished he had a jacket. He pulled out the disgusting bag of white cheddar puffs that Edgar had tried to sneak as a replacement and began tentatively nibbling on them. They were pretty okay, he thought. A little stale, but definitely suitable. He began gnawing them hungrily.

As he continued down the street, he heard the sounds of voices chattering, the sounds of children falling down on roller blades and screaming. A public park! If anyone could direct him to the Family Matters convention, surely the wonderful homeless wandering in the public park would be able to help him. He turned down a side street and was promptly lost.

Wichita was definitely the devil's town, he thought as he made his way through a spaghetti-like maze of smaller streets and avenues. Cold and confusing and bewitching, unlike New Mexico, where everything stayed exactly where it had been for the last few years. Todd shook his head and continued to follow the sounds of human voices, hoping he wasn't being led astray by elfin pixies or something weird.

He pushed his way through a hedge and found himself in the middle of a beautiful public park. He gasped in surprise and happiness. How wonderful! A beautiful girl on a cheap bicycle pedaled by him and he nearly fell over in surprise. Wichita, he thought, you are a spectacular town.

"Hey!" he cried out to her, suddenly realizing that she might be able to help. "Where's Reginald Vel Johnson going to be tomorrow?" She waved noncommittally at him without turning to look as she pedaled onward.

Todd shrugged. Surely some other helpful citizen would know. He tossed a handful of white cheese puffs on the ground for the squirrels to eat and walked along the park's path, tossing more cheese puffs at birds and occasionally in the air so he could catch them in his mouth. He'd caught three in a row and was applauding himself when he realized he was being watched.

A young woman sat on a bench holding an infant. Both child and mother stared at Todd's antics. "That kid must think I'm incredibly awesome," thought Todd, and went over to introduce himself.

"Todd Sanders," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm the world's greatest rapper."

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

The young woman stared at him with disgust. A nose ring poked from her right nostril. She snapped her gum angrily.

“What?” she asked. She asked again, emphasizing the word, stretching it out: “*what??*” Her son’s nose dripped as he began howling loudly.

“Oh my God,” she said, hoisting the baby over her shoulder like a bag of potatoes. “Thanks a lot, asshole. I can’t get away from you people even in the middle of nature. Even the middle of nowhere. Do I not have the right to get away from this shit for five minutes? Is this not a free country now?”

Todd was disoriented. “Sorry,” he muttered to himself. “I just – sorry. Do you want a cheese puff?” he offered apologetically.

The young woman curled her lip, and the baby cried even louder. She slapped its bottom vigorously. “No, thanks,” she said sarcastically. “You’ve really helped me out enough already, fatso.”

“Am I really fat?” wondered Todd to himself. He didn’t think so, but he decided to start ordering the six inch sandwiches in addition to his diet colas whenever he went to Subway.

“Listen,” he said to the young lady. “I’m trying to get to the Family Matters convention tomorrow morning, and I just got into town and Edgar’s not here to tell me where I am and I can’t seem to find any moss. How can I get there?”

“Jesus,” exploded the woman. Her baby howled up at them both hatefully. “My eyes are up here, you know. Just get away from me, you hobo!”

Todd shrugged and backed away. “Thank you!” he called over his shoulder, and he thought he saw her give him the finger. “That’s twice in as many days,” he marveled to himself.

It was because he didn’t have any money, he decided. A hobo! That was the first time in his life he’d ever been called a hobo, and he didn’t really like it. He wondered how Frank the Hobo had felt every time that Todd had called his name from two blocks away and felt shame heat his face.

“I could beg,” thought Todd. “I could beg like a common street harlot. I’d be ashamed, but it would keep me alive.” He was suddenly astonished to realize that for the first time in his life, he really felt like a rapper. So, he thought to himself, you’re a rapper. A rapper attempting to survive on the dirty streets. So what is your plan? What do you do?

He was too proud, he finally decided. He couldn’t take donations. What was he, a cripple? What had his father (foster father, he amended silently) always said?

Todd couldn’t remember. His father had said many things and Todd mostly drowned them out. They were incredibly boring. He yawned stiffly as he sat, reminiscing, and then he had an idea. The cheese puffs! Maybe they were a rarity. After all, Edgar hadn’t been able to find a spare bag on their journey; maybe they weren’t sold in Kansas. Maybe they’d stopped selling them all together, he reasoned, his eyes widening. He’d been out of town for a while; he didn’t

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

know what might or might not have happened in his own absence.

“Excuse me!” shouted Todd. He reached in his backpack and pulled out one of the unopened bags of cheese puffs. A few pedestrians slowed down and looked in his general direction.

“I’m selling these imported cheese puffs, a real rarity, never to be seen again!” Todd yelled. He felt like a carnival barker, a salesman; he felt talented. He began shouting again.

“They’re delicious and there’s only three bags left! Ten dollars a bag!”

Two of the pedestrians murmured to each other and laughed. The remaining walkers continued strolling at a leisurely pace. Todd’s face turned red.

“Five dollars?” he suggested quietly, but was ignored. “More for me,” he muttered, and was about to stuff the bag back into his backpack when he noticed something.

There, in the bottom of his sack, was a plastic bag containing beef jerky, one bag of peanut brittle, and nearly ninety-three dollars in loose bills.

How’d he forgotten? Actually, he knew exactly how he’d forgotten. When they’d made the stop at the gas station, he’d asked the disgusting monstrosity of a cashier to place their change in the bag. And he’d stuffed the snacks into his backpack for safekeeping after they’d munched through the first bag of peanut brittle in less than three minutes. He was rich again! He’d be able to buy as many snacks as he wanted, wouldn’t have to spend the night on the streets.

“Of course,” he thought unhappily, “it also means that Edgar’s still sitting out there on the highway without any gasoline and I could have helped him. Oops,” he blushed. “I guess I’ll have to go back. After I’m done hanging out with Reginald,” he smiled to himself. “Probably Reginald will have his own limousine! Imagine how Edgar will gawp when we pull up with a gas can!” He laughed outrageously.

Stuffing the bills into his Batman wallet, he gnawed off a large piece of beef jerky and sauntered through the park. It was a beautiful afternoon.

Dusk was fast approaching and he was getting tired. As he left the park, he was delighted to notice a coffee shop across the street. “Todd, you are definitely brilliant,” he thought to himself.

Coffee was a dollar and fifty cents for a large cup and fifty cents for refills. Todd guzzled the warm beverage zestily; he’d never been so exhausted in his life. His foster mother’s voice echoed in his mind: “Don’t drink too much of that stuff,” it said, “or you’ll be up all night.”

Up all night! What a great idea! Why stay in a hotel room when he could rebel against his foster mother, be his own person – stay up all night and watch a sunrise? He was excited and giddy. He suddenly realized that he could use the public payphone on the street corner to call



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

them and let them know just how great he was doing.

Studying the instructions on the phone, he inserted a dollar in coins and then dialed his phone number (his foster phone number, he amended.) The phone rang and rang, and finally, a stern, familiar voice answered.

“Good afternoon, Sanders residence,” his father said.

Todd sat on the phone, frozen and surprised. He hadn’t planned this far ahead.

“Hello?” said Mr. Sanders. “Todd, is that you?”

“I guess,” Todd said sullenly. He was suddenly very offended by his own father.

There was a long pause on the phone. “Well,” his father said. “How’re you doing? Your mother was asking where you might be. I told her probably roughhousing it up with the rest of the guys.” There was another pause.

“I guess so,” Todd finally said, dubiously. “Edgar and I came up here to Wichita to try to find my real parents, except he ran out of gas and he’s a crybaby anyways and I just left him on the side of the road to do whatever. I’m having a great time and I’m going to stay up all night,” he added.

“Well, that sounds great,” his father said. “Do you want to talk to your mother?”

“I guess so,” Todd agreed reluctantly. He heard his father put the phone down and say a few words then his mother was chattering in his ear.

“Todd? Are you eating all right?” his mother asked. “I told you that I don’t want you to eat more than two meals at the Subway every day, you understand?”

“I’m not at the Subway,” Todd said. “I’m in Wichita, and I just drank a bunch of coffee. I’m going to be up all night, and I’m going to watch the sunset. I *hitchhiked*,” he said dangerously. It was the coffee, he thought; he was getting far too excited.

“Todd,” his mother gasped, shocked. “That’s dangerous! If you don’t get enough sleep, you’ll have hallucinations and it can lead to possible brain injury and death. What on earth has gotten into you?”

“I’m finding my parents – my real parents,” Todd announced.

“Well,” his mother said, “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. And I most certainly didn’t eat your cheese puffs. Wait, your father wants to talk to you again.”

“Todd,” his father continued, “don’t forget that Family Dinner night is the day after tomorrow. I expect you to be done with your little slumber party and home by then.”

“I don’t know,” Todd said. “The convention is some time tomorrow, and then it’s a pretty long drive from Wichita. Besides, my real dad might want to take me to some sort of special Hollywood restaurant.”

“We’re eating at Luby’s,” his dad said, “and I know how much you like their chicken. When you and Edgar are done horsing around or whatever the hell is going on, you ask him to drive you over here, okay? Did you call the Cracker Barrel and let them know you’d be off, or

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

are you still going in for your afternoon shift?"

Todd spluttered angrily. "You don't understand me at all, do you? I'm gone! I'm long gone! I'm in Wichita, and I'm never coming back. I'm having the time of my life!"

There was a long pause on the phone, and finally his father said, "I don't know what the hell kind of game you're playing, Todd, but I had a hard day at the bank today. I don't know what kind of wise ass kids want to call the bank customer service line and ask ridiculous questions, but don't you ever let me catch you doing that. I'm going to take off my shoes and relax for the night now. I'll see you in a couple of days."

Todd was taken aback. The forceful tone, the no-nonsense vibe; was it possible that his father was actually really his father? He stared off into the distant Kansas sunset blankly before deciding another coffee refill was in order. "Whatever," he said angrily, out of habit. "I'm going to go try to fix my life that you screwed up. God!"

He almost hung up, and then quickly shouted "SEYYOUDADSAYBYETOMOM BYE," before slamming the phone back in its receiver.

Todd stared thoughtfully at the phone for a few minutes. Taped next to it was a flyer: "FAMILY MATTERS: A CONVENTION FOR THE COMMUNITY AND ITS CONCERNED PARENTS." The flyer announced that the event would be held at the Best Western Airport Inn and Conference Center the following afternoon. Todd ripped it from the brick wall and stuffed it in his pocket for reference before going back into the coffee shop and ordering his fifth refill.

The coffee bar, the Nomad Café, specialized in what appeared to be little donuts covered in powdered sugar. Todd ordered three with his eighth refill and stuffed them into his mouth impulsively. The squelched, chewed, soggy wad was exquisite.

The pastries were spectacular, but the atmosphere was hateful and nihilistic. Thin young men with tight shirts and spectacles which reminded Todd of his great-aunt clicked fervently on shining white laptops. Girls with hideous blood-red and grape-purple bangs yelped about thin musicians with acoustic guitars that no one really liked. Todd felt nauseous, and he wasn't sure if it was from the company or the donuts. *If Edgar was here, he thought, he'd help me put this in perspective. Edgar had a way of taking the words that set half-developed in my mind and forming them out of clay and spitting them out. Edgar would say something like –*

"Imagine Eddie Van Halen beating this crowd in their faces with an electrical guitar," spat an enthusiastic voice. Startled, Todd looked over his shoulder and saw a young woman with disheveled hair sporting a torn grey t-shirt that said "WICHITA HIGH SCHOOL MONKEYS RULE." Underneath this slogan, in italics, were the words "We are the CHIMP-ions." She dug in her left ear with one long, purple fingernail. Todd was appalled.

"Eddie Van Halen is an artist," he replied to the girl, offended. "He'd no more beat someone's face with an electrical guitar than Michelangelo would stab them in the eye with his

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

paintbrush.” He turned back around in his seat, crossing his arms furiously, gulping his coffee.

The girl stood up and moved to the seat next to him. She stuck out her hand firmly. “My name is Eleanor,” she said.

She smelled like something rolled under the couch and died, Todd thought to himself. But still, he needed to make new friends now that he’d cast Edgar aside. Todd tried not to look at her fingernails.

“Hello,” he muttered to himself. “Todd.”

“So,” Eleanor continued. “What’s your favorite Van Halen album?” She glared at the surrounding patrons hatefully.

“Van Halen, the self titled debut, of course,” Todd said. He squinted at Eleanor. “They’re really awesome, you know.”

“I know!” Eleanor told him. She stared intensely at Todd. “Where do you live?”

“I’m homeless,” Todd admitted. “For now, at least. Later, my father, Reginald Vel Johnson, may set me up in a penthouse or condominium, I guess.” His voice quavered and rose uncertainly as he spoke.

Eleanor shook her head. “Reginald Vel Johnson? He’s not your father,” she said, shaking her head.

Todd stared at her in disbelief.

Eleanor yawned exaggeratedly and glanced down at the last remaining powdered sugar donut in front of Todd. “Are you eating that?”

“Not yet,” Todd said, and she picked it up and ate it. He was furious.

“You stole that,” he howled at her. “That was my last powdered sugar donut and you just picked it up and ate it! Why does this happen everywhere I go?” he lamented loudly.

“I’m sor-r-r-y,” Eleanor said to him in a facetious voice. Todd wanted to slap her. He was definitely enraged that she’d sat next to him.

“I’m the world’s greatest rapper,” he told her, “and you’ve disrespected me. By all rights, you should be profusely apologizing and offering to buy me more donuts.”

Eleanor rolled her eyes. “More donuts!” she howled in amusement. “Rap is probably the lowest form of musical expression in the entire universe. It’s absolutely ridiculous and requires as much talent as vomiting on the pavement. You better be glad I ate your donut! Maybe you won’t get fat and sad, like most rappers do!”

“If my friend Edgar was here,” Todd told her, “he’d definitely be just as disappointed in you as I am. Edgar’s probably the most amazing person I’ve ever met in my life, and he’s always believed in me and my rapping when no one else did.” As he spoke, he was surprised by the warmth and honesty that seemed to well up in his chest. He was being absolutely honest. Edgar WAS the only person who’d ever supported him in his endeavors and was absolutely amazing.

“You know what?” asked Todd, standing up and knocking Eleanor’s coffee over. “You

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

aren't my friend. Edgar is my friend, my best and only friend. I don't know who you think you are, but you haven't known me nearly long enough to steal my favorite snacks and behave in a ridiculous fashion around me. I'm going to leave now, and I'm going to go to the movies, and then maybe tomorrow I'll go and reunite with my father and my best friend. And as for you," he said, narrowing his eyes, "I hope that one of these ludicrous boys with the white computers talks to you all night."

Eleanor stared blankly at him with dull, bewildered eyes as he stormed out of the Nomad Café.

It was a beautiful evening. Todd stared with wide, bloodshot eyes at the sunset and worried that he'd possibly overdone it with the coffee. He felt like he could run a mile. He jittered and hummed nervously to himself as he stretched his legs as if to begin jogging. "Oh, boy," he muttered. He had to go to the bathroom again.

Dancing fitfully, he hurried behind a nearby building and began to relieve himself. He was just beginning to relax when a nearby voice began to slur at him.

"Whoooo're you?" asked the voice. Todd whirled around, quickly zipping up.

"If you're the police," he announced, and then paused. A mere few hours earlier, he would have blamed his urination on Edgar and then quickly fled. But now, he thought, maybe he'd been wrong all of those times. Maybe he needed to take responsibility for his own actions.

"If you're the police," he began again, "I want you to know that I really had to go, and I'm sorry, and you can arrest me if you need to." He hung his head in dismay and turned around. A thin, old hobo wearing a checkered hat, a tattered suit, and a cape made from a giant plastic trash bag stood behind him solemnly.

"Whoo're you?" the hobo slurred again. He saluted Todd repeatedly in some bewildering, disgusting mock-display of fealty.

"I'm Todd," Todd told him. "I'm possibly the world's greatest rapper." He peered down at the short man and remembered his manners. "Who might I be addressing?"

"King Pete," said the hobo, and tipped the checkered hat. The winds of Wichita blew his cape, but the effect was quite the opposite of dramatic.

"King Pete," Todd said, and bowed. Todd's knees shook and his hands quivered from the effects of the caffeine. "It's spectacular to meet you. I think I had too much coffee. Would you like to race?"

"Race, race," mused the hobo, who now seemed sad and slightly confused. "We could race all over the place."

Todd stared at the man. Had he just rapped? He shook his head to himself. Surely he'd just misheard. He laughed to himself a little and turned around to leave. Maybe he could run in circles for a while. After all, the night was young; anything was possible!

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“The best rapper in the world,” scoffed a suddenly lucid voice from behind him. Todd, astonished, turned around to see the little man standing straight and tall. He stared at Todd with a steely eye.

“Boy, you ain’t the best rapper in the world. Ain’t the best rapper in the state. Boy, you ain’t even the best rapper in the neighborhood,” laughed King Pete, slapping himself on the knee. He cackled through missing teeth, upsetting and unnerving Todd.

“Boy,” continued King Pete, *“my name is King Pete. I’m the ruler of the street. To everyone that I meet, I’m the man with the beat.”*

Todd’s mouth dropped open. He’d never heard such astonishing rhymes. But – and then he laughed to himself. The old man must have been nearly seventy. He’d had years to compose the fresh beats that he’d just spat out.

*“Young man, you think I’m odd,”* said Pete, *“but believe I’m the Rap God. And to me, you’re merely sod. Run away, poor, young Todd.”*

Todd’s mouth dropped open. There was no way. Just no way. To freestyle like that at the drop of a hat – his knees grew weak.

*“There’s nowhere that you can run,”* cackled Pete, *“so listen to me, son. You say that you’re the best, but you seem to be depressed. Want to get it off your chest?”*

Todd clenched his fists. He’d finally made it to Wichita, but at what cost? No friends, no family, and, he was now finding, no talent. Todd now knew the true devastating power of words, knew that all of his practice and skill came to nothing. Todd would never be the world’s greatest rapper. This aging hobo would leave him beaten down and broken in this back alley. “Thank God I got to go to the bathroom before I was utterly humiliated,” he thought to himself.

King Pete leered and laughed hysterically. Todd stepped back, horrified. “Get away, King Pete,” he shouted. “You smell like – like old feet.”

Pete gasped and took a step back, astounded at the challenge. Todd was equally astonished; he hadn’t planned the rhyme, but it had escaped anyways.

*“You’re young and naïve, I truly believe,”* King Pete said. *“But an old man forgives, and young Todd still lives. So put on your shoes, dance, while I’m offering the chance. Don’t offer to duel till you’ve graduated school, young fool.”* He folded his arms across his chest deftly.

*“Your crown is relinquished,”* Todd said, *“and your fire’s extinguished. This charming young prince now fills your footprints, and the evidence is this: while you wish that your rhymes kept up with the times, your raps are stale; they pale in contrast with the verbage I blast.”* He listened to himself in disbelief. He was really doing it. He was freestyling. Edgar was right, had always been right; the power lay within him.

King Pete was affronted and his voice was now reedy and thin. *“You brave little worm, step aside; it’s my turn. I’ve burned many a vermin with a yen to ascend to Pete’s crown. But the town is too small for them all; they fall, tumble, and sink. They stink, rank, their words become*

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

*blank.*” He leaned close to Todd and smiled. *“And then they give up and go work at the bank.”*

Todd sweated feverishly. How had King Pete touched the very fear in his heart, how had he known exactly what to say to flummox and unnerve him? He was right. Everyone was right. Pete’s ability was far, far beyond Todd. He should go home, should follow in his father’s footsteps. Maybe beg for his job at the Cracker Barrel.

And then he heard Edgar’s words in his mind. *“You’ve got magic running through that pen,”* he’d said, *“and you’re going to discover who you really are. And after that, you’re going to be a mega star.”*

Todd stood up straight and tall. A light shone in his eyes. Pete took a step back, suddenly fearful.

*“What you say may be true. Give me time to reflect,”* he said. *“I’m a burgeoning rapper. Let me earn your respect. I’ve only been rapping for two or three years; but I can see through you. You’re filled with fears; once you’ve lost your throne, you’ll be twice as alone. You hone your words like swords to wield against the hoards. But your crown is a fetter,”* he said sadly, putting his hand on Pete’s shoulder. *“There will always be someone better.”*

King Pete bit his lip sadly and seemed confused and lost again. He looked up at Todd helplessly. “I can’t think of a rhyme for ragamuffin,” he admitted, “or I’d tell you off.”

He respectfully bowed to Todd and removed the checkered hat from his head. “Young man,” he said, “you’re good. You aren’t the best. But you could be.” He wiped a single tear from his eye. “You could be.”

Todd was overwhelmed with honor and joy. “You know,” he said, “Edgar’s told me that all along. I guess I just needed to hear it from a true legend.”

He took a ten dollar bill and a bag of cheese puffs from his backpack. “Here,” he said, turning around. “Take thi - ”

But it was too late. In the few seconds it had taken him to perform the operation, King Pete, the greatest rapper in the world, had disappeared.

Todd trudged out of the alley a new man. To those who’d known him, he would have looked the same, but somehow taller. There may have been a new glow around him. He definitely seemed ten times more awesome. “Man,” Todd thought to himself. “If some of those waitresses from the Cracker Barrel could see me now, I bet I could totally go out on a date with at least two or three.” He scratched his head.

Twisting and mystifying were the streets of Wichita at dusk. Todd meandered down one-way streets, down busy boulevards and near-empty avenues. When he later tried to remember the landscape of the city, he could only see a giant, boring Waffle House looming over a series of nation-wide pharmacies.

Scratching his head, perplexed, Todd was startled to find himself near a Cracker Barrel.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Finding home, or the closest thing to it, he neared the faux-wood walls and peered into the restaurant.

How wonderful it seemed! There were the families stuffing their faces with ham, with country fried steak, with chicken and dumplings. They smiled and wiped their greasy faces with cloth napkins. They listened half-heartedly to each others' concerns and worries and hopes. They caroused, drinking near-buckets of sodas and stuffing their faces with a variety of thick cakes and pies. Todd salivated.

And there – there was a young man with a thick mop of hair balancing a tray of ice waters on one trembling hand. Todd gaped – it wasn't quite his spitting image, but near enough. He watched as the young man handed each drink to a delighted customer and then went back to the kitchen for their orders. Had the young man ever been scolded for not knowing the time? For bringing the wrong order? Had he been abused as Todd had been?

Todd sighed and wandered on, whispering “*goodbye*” tenderly to the Cracker Barrel as he left. It was his old life. His old dreams, his old memories. Never again would he nurse a grudge against a customer who demanded he bring a different kind of drink or an extra straw. No longer would he be forced to reheat a customer's lukewarm order of mashed potatoes. “At least, not at that particular restaurant,” he thought happily.

He wished that he had a model tank to assemble. It actually sounded like a really exciting time. He remembered the four he'd assembled over the past decade of his life – mostly, he picked them up on clearance from toy stores when his mother offered to buy him a present for keeping his room clean, which happened exceedingly rarely. But Todd, a man for which it was nearly impossible to thread a needle, had extraordinary focus and peace within himself when he picked up a tube of model glue and slathered it in capacious amounts on two tiny pieces of plastic.

“Ninety bucks!” he thought to himself, excited. “I bet that would buy a pretty dope model tank!” But where was there a toy store in this town? He groaned, remembering the last time he'd attempted to search for a specialty store. What if the local prepubescent hoodlums were slouching at the doors of the toy store, ready to challenge him to a duel of words for the rights to purchase a plastic model? His heart sank – but then again, he was a new man. He'd defeated King Pete; surely he could handle an eight year old ruffian.

Chortling, he stumbled down the block – and, delightfully enough, found himself in front of an enormous shopping mall. “It's perfect!” he thought to himself wildly. “I bet there's all sort of fabulous things in here! In fact, I bet I could spend the night here, if I sneak around and hide.” Todd was thinking of a scene in a book he'd read when he was ten years old. In the novel, the main character fell asleep in a mall and was locked in for the evening. Terror ensued when he awoke to discover that the mall was actually the breeding ground for a band of satanic midgets that secretly stalked patrons during the daylight hours. “Maybe I could tame one of them and use

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

it like a pony when my legs are tired,” Todd imagined excitedly.

The air inside was beautiful and icy. He breathed deeply as he entered, and then wheeled around in terror as a passing automobile outside played a hideous, ear-bursting round of some sort of strange European techno music. Holding his hand to his chest, Todd hesitantly continued through the mall entrance.

Crowds of ill-dressed patrons walked by at alarming speeds. There was a portly man wearing a bright Hawaiian shirt; a balding, staggering invalid who walked too slowly behind two teenaged girls until they disappeared, still yapping, into a clothing store; a foreign exchange student exulting rapidly in broken English on the availability of various nut butters in the local grocery store. The shopping mall was everything he'd dreamed.

“This is the greatest place I've ever been in my entire life,” he marveled to himself. He wanted to sit down and just watched the people pass by. They were absolutely ridiculous. A little boy ran back and forth between two stores, laughing hysterically and slapping his own behind. His mother ignored him as she studied a rack of clearanced dresses.

Todd wandered through the mall. There was the toy store! He wandered inside, where a solemn faced preschooler aimed a plastic ray gun at him and pulled the trigger. An obnoxious whirring noise emitted from the barrel of the gun.

“Hey,” Todd said, staring at the toy gun. “That's awesome. I want to try it.”

The little boy stared at him wordlessly.

Todd reached his hand out. “Let me! Give it here, let me!”

The boy turned and ran to an older woman who was perusing a stack of board games and puzzles, burying his face in her skirt. The woman looked up and scowled at Todd. “Asshole,” she muttered.

Todd shrugged and began browsing the toy store. There weren't very many models, and the ones that they had weren't very good. He thought about getting a model airplane, but it looked really boring. There were a couple of race cars, but they didn't have the aura of destruction and doom that a good tank or plane had. Plus, model race cars were strictly for fruitcakes. He finally decided on a fluorescent model of Frankenstein's Monster. It was a hideous neon green; the box picture showed a rough, plastic model of something that appeared to be Bob Saget staggering with arms akimbo and mouth agape. Todd was in love with it. The best part was that he wouldn't have to paint it; he had no problem smearing glue like a madman, but paintbrushes were mainly for sissies. Only one of his model tanks was actually painted, and it looked like a four year old had gotten after it with a set of crayons. The rest of the tanks were covered with carefully scissored sections from bumper stickers.

Todd took the model to the counter and paid for it out of his Batman wallet. The four year old watched jealousy from his clawlike grasp on his mother's leg. Todd winked at the



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

young man, who began crying. His mother glared at Todd again and muttered another cuss word.

Todd wanted to tell her that cussing was unnecessary. He wanted to tell her that it was absolutely possible to live in a world where cussing was banished to comedy specials and the occasional stubbed toe. But watching them, he realized that it would do no good, and that he missed his own mother, and, tucking the model into his backpack sadly, he left the store.

Three stores down was a music store. Todd gasped. Here it was! He'd surprise Edgar with a few new cassettes for his ride home. Stumbling into the store, he was amazed and astonished at how enormous it was. The music store in Gallup was about the size of a classroom. This place was fantastic; gleaming like a hospital room, it seemingly stretched as far as a grocery store. Whole aisles of albums! Similar young men in great-aunt glasses listening to headphones mounted to listening stations! An entire back wall covered with music-related hats, headbands, and bracelets! Todd salivated.

"Excuse me," he cried out to a passing employee, who stared at Todd with dull eyes. "I need to get some awesome cassette tapes for my best friend. Where can I find your Van Halen section?"

The employee continued to stare at Todd, his eyelids drooping. A wispy moustache peeked out underneath his large nose. His uncombed, greasy hair drooped over his shoulders like a living mink. His shirt announced that a new album by a band with a ridiculous name that Todd had never heard of was being released in three weeks. "Hi," his nametag announced in tiny letters. "I'm **STEVE**. Ask me how you can save up to 10% on your order today." "Cassettes?" Steve repeated.

Todd nodded emphatically. "I need a bunch." He rifled through his pockets, pulling out the wallet. "As many as – I guess seventy five bucks will buy me."

Steve pointed to a small rack across the store. "All our cassettes are over there. If we got any Halen, it'd be over there." He yawned to show Todd that their conversation was finished and meandered away to sort the country music section.

Todd scratched his head and made his way to the cassette rack. He stared down, his face burning red, feeling a fury well up within him. There were maybe thirty or forty cassettes in front of him, all of which were extremely awful. Most of them were Greatest Hits collections: Boston, Rod Stewart, the Beach Boys. He felt a cold calm grow over him. None of these would do for Edgar. What had happened?

"Excuse me," he called angrily to Steve, waving his arms wildly. Steve looked over from his country music CDs and then continued to sort them. Todd barely held his tongue, using all of his self control. "Excuse me," he repeated loudly as he quickly strode across the store to Steve. A woman in a completely unacceptable tube-top glanced at him from the gospel aisle and then pretended she hadn't.

"Steve, I don't see any Van Halen or Aerosmith or Phil Collins over there at all," Todd

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

explained, breathing hard. He couldn't believe how out of breath he was. Maybe he should take up jogging.

Steve shrugged. "We aren't really stocking cassettes any more. What you see over there is all we have."

Todd's mouth dropped open. "Seriously?" he asked. "That's absolutely ridiculous. How is anyone going to listen to music in a car if you don't have cassette tapes?"

Steve shrugged. "Most people are using CDs, sir. You are welcome to take it up with management." He turned away so that he could continue alphabetizing Garth Brooks's discography.

Todd nearly cried out in hurt shock. How completely asinine! How infuriating! His first impulse was to reach out his hand and knock an entire row of CDs off their shelves, to scatter them onto the floor and then to run out of the store as quickly as possible. He took a deep breath and tried to regain his self-control.

"Thank you, Steve," he said stiffly. "I will go back and see if there are any other cassettes I wish to purchase."

As he stood near the cassettes and read slowly through their titles, he congratulated himself for holding his tongue. And really, their selection really wasn't that bad. Here was an older comedy album by Ray Stevens – his father found Ray hilarious, so Todd picked it up on the off-chance that it might amuse Edgar on the way home. Here was Quiet Riot's second album, which he still hadn't heard. And there – the crown gem. He held it up with trembling hands, gasping. Aerosmith's album "Pump", which was probably the greatest album ever conceived and recorded. "This is absolutely awesome," he muttered to himself.

He proudly stacked the three cassettes on the counter where an ugly girl with dyed black hair and a particularly disgusting stud in her nose studied them as if decoding the Rosetta stone. "These three," she said, as if he were playing a particularly hateful practical joke.

"Absolutely," crowed Todd, delighted with his findings.

She shrugged to herself, rung the three up. "Six dollars," she said distastefully, picking each up as if covered in vomit and dropping them into a plastic sack. Todd was delighted by the frugality. "What a deal," he said to himself as he paid for his purchases and shoved the cassettes into his backpack next to the model.

As he left the music store, he noticed a DVD set of the show Family Matters. He picked it up and glanced at it fondly. At \$50, he wasn't quite sure he could afford the purchase – not if he was going to help Edgar buy gas for his way home – but he gazed at the happy family on the cover, at beaming Eddie Winslow, at the aloof, charming Laura, at the gawking, posturing Steve Urkel, and – finally – at the fatherly, confident Carl Winslow.

Todd sighed and felt a tear run down his cheek. In less than twenty-four hours, he'd be meeting Reginald Vel Johnson, he'd be meeting his real father. But somehow, it didn't seem so

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

very important any more. He dropped the DVD case on the floor and skulked out of the store. “Oh my god,” he heard the goth cashier splutter to Steve, “was he crying?” They both snickered uncontrollably as Todd held in deep, shuddering sobs.

A movie. He needed to see a good movie. But what was playing? At the mall’s multiplex, he had a wide array of films to choose from. An animated film featuring a parade of ponies singing cheerful songs encouraging ecology. An action film where a poor working class man with enormous muscles apparently destroys an entire corporation using a single handgun. A romance movie; the twist being that a male played the female role and vice versa, a stunning gimmick that had reviewers describing the film as “forced” and “absolutely retarded.” A crass documentary about a band of midgets forced to work in German coal mines during World War II. “Maybe I should see that one,” he thought to himself. “It might give me a few ideas on controlling them when I finally get my hands on one tonight.”

“One, please,” said Todd, hoping that he’d figure out exactly which one he’d want to see once his nostrils were filled with the smell of stale popcorn that he’d never possibly be able to afford.

The grizzled old woman in the ticket booth smiled up at him. “What movie and what time, sir?”

Todd peered up at the clock in the booth and froze, desperate. It was an analog clock. An analog clock!

He began sweating. It didn’t make any sense; if he was remembering his school lessons correctly, the time was nearly V past IX. What in God’s name did that mean? It sounded like some sort of disgusting prescription.

He shrugged, confused. “What time is the midget movie?”

The old woman beamed. “I didn’t hear you, young man. What was that?” There was a grumbling in the line forming behind Todd. His heart began racing.

“The midget movie,” he said loudly. “What time is the midget movie?”

The old woman stared at him, puzzled. She was obviously half deaf. “Eight dollars after 9:00,” she informed him. Todd felt sick to his stomach and cold.

What should he do? “Hurry it up,” called an angry voice from behind him. “My movie is about to start!” Todd felt tears welling up in his eyes yet again. Would he never be able to go to a movie? Never taste the sweet fruits of creativity because of his ignorance of their ridiculous time system? How did a circle with arrows indicate time, anyways? It was like using bears with different sized ears to tell temperature. “Good lord,” the doctor would cry, staring at the thermometer. “You’ve got Mickey-Mouse-eared panda! We need to give you some aspirin, quickly!” And he’d be able to lie in bed drinking juice and being taken care of until he was back to a Elfin-eared koala.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Err,” said the old woman at the counter, peering carefully at Todd, and then a familiar voice confidently stirred to Todd’s right.

“We would like two tickets to the 9:45 showing of ‘Der Leprechauns of Munich’” said a calm, strong voice. Todd turned around, gape mouthed, and there was Edgar. He shouted with excitement. Both friends gave each other high-fives that left their hands stinging, shouting excitedly in unison, and someone behind them cursed and told them to get out of line.

*Epilogue*

They did get out of line. Edgar and Todd both had a thousand things to tell each other, and they sat in the food court to share their adventures over the past few hours.

“How in the world did you make it here?” asked Todd. “I thought you were out of gas. Did you hitchhike, too?”

“Hitchhike?” asked Edgar with wild eyes. “You know how many times your mother has told you how dangerous it is to hitchhike! Why did you do that?”

Todd stared back at Edgar. “I had to do what I had to do. I guess I’ve grown up a lot since we saw each other last.” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “I guess I’m a man now.”

Edgar stared at Todd, amazed, and then – at last – gave him a high five. “Todd,” he said, “you are truly an outstanding individual.”

“And you are, too,” Todd said happily. “Continue! How did you make it here?”

Edgar paused and looked sheepish. “You know how my mom looks out for me, right?” he asked.

Todd nodded. Since Edgar’s father had left thirty years before, Edgar and his mother had been nearly inseparable.

“She always gives me an emergency fifty to hide in my shoe,” Edgar said. “It’s taped right in the top of the toe of the shoe so that strangers don’t see it if I ever have to take them off to try on something in a shoe store.

Todd nodded. “That’s right! She always asks if you have your emergency money whenever we go anywhere! I completely forgot!”

“Me, too!” exclaimed Edgar. “I mean, I haven’t ever had to use it except once when I was at McDonalds and I didn’t have enough money for a combo meal. She got so mad when she found out what I’d used it for, she spanked me, and I haven’t touched it since.”

Todd laughed heartily. “Edgar, you are one in a million.”

Edgar nodded. “Well, I walked back to the gas station, just like I planned. Then I drove here and realized I had no idea where you were. I asked around about the convention and found

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

out that it was tomorrow, so I figured I'd meet you there. I was just hanging out here tonight trying to pick up some hot babes. I didn't expect to see you!"

Todd was delighted. "You know, I was going to come and pick you up later with Reginald's limo."

Edgar smiled, looked down at the table. "I know that, Todd," he said quietly. "I never doubted you would! But I haven't been the best of friends during this road trip and I wanted to surprise you and help you out."

"Me too!" Todd exclaimed. He opened his backpack and pulled out his penultimate bags of cheese puffs. "Here," he said, opening the two bags and laying each in front of them. "A peace offering." He laid the three cassette tapes next to the bag.

Edgar gasped. "Oh my God! Quiet Riot AND Aerosmith? This is probably the best day of my life!" He pushed aside the Ray Stevens album distastefully.

"Todd," he said, reaching into a bag of cheese puffs and taking out a large handful, "let's never argue again."

"Of course not," Todd agreed. "We're too stellar for that. Besides," he laughed, "it wouldn't do for the crowned prince of the rap throne to stoop to petty arguments over delicious snack foods."

Edgar peered at him carefully. He really did now seem like an honest, more thoughtful man. "What exactly happened to you today?" asked Edgar, and Todd leaned back in his seat with his hands folded behind his head and began to speak.

Todd talked for at least three solid hours. The Richards family and the frozen treats. The park and the freakish mutants slowly oozing their way through the soil. The eyeless assassins buried within deep caves of the Himalayas. Todd waved his hands frantically as he attempted to explain how he defeated an entire legion of walking zombies before they took over the United States. From there, he kept Edgar up to date on a defeated conspiracy between several key members of the British Parliament "on an attempt to sabotage any sort of Van Halen reunion tour through the use of radio transmissions that are scrambling David Lee Roth's brainwaves." Edgar nodded solemnly.

From these fabricated stories, it was only a quick hop, skip, and a jump to the laborious tale of the coffee shop, the diseased hippies inside that attempted to infect him with terrifying diseases, a twenty-four hour quarantine by the United States government, the rap battle with the hobo, and the startling way a passing flying saucer landed and the alien inside simply handed Todd the three cassette tapes, explaining that "he was finished with them."

"That's incredible," Edgar said with wide eyes. "But the cassettes aren't even opened."

"They have really advanced technology," Todd explained. He'd had a really boring time at the mall and had decided on the spur of the moment that a rap legend needed to have a truly

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

mythical life whether or not it was all true.

“Edgar,” Todd said, “we can do whatever we want now. We have the whole world ahead of us. We can go break things or we can drink heavily. As long as we get to that convention tomorrow, anything’s up for grabs. What do you want to do?”

“That’s a really great album,” said a passing girl, pointing at the Aerosmith cassette sitting in front of Edgar. Todd stared at her, his heart sinking. “Oh my God,” he muttered. “It’s you.”

Edgar stood up and extended his hand. “Pump is indeed one of the finest albums of our generation,” he announced, “and it’s pleasing to meet anyone who appreciates this work of art. My name is Edgar, and I’m a mathematician and historian. I double majored.” He nodded curtly to the young woman.

“I’m Eleanor,” said Eleanor. She was still wearing the same CHIMP-ions shirt, to Todd’s dismay. He gagged heavily.

“It’s wonderful to meet you, Eleanor,” Edgar said politely.

“Don’t talk to her,” ordered Todd. “This is one of the monstrous hippies infected with venereal disease of which I so recently warned you. She also ate my last powdered donut,” he said sadly.

Eleanor tossed her dirty brown hair. “He was getting fat. And I certainly do not have venereal disease.”

“Todd,” Edgar said, “certainly someone who admires the album Pump could not possibly have any sort of social diseases whatsoever.” He smiled at Eleanor and Todd wanted to hit them both right in the face.

But he closed his eyes, stopped himself. He was above that now. He’d just promised to never fight with Edgar again. And so he opened his eyes and smiled pleasantly to Edgar.

“Shall we all three go to see the midget movie momentarily?” he asked.

“No,” said Edgar. “I’d like to see the entire thing!” He and Todd laughed heartily.

Eleanor shook her head in shame. “Grammatical jokes are ridiculous,” she told them. “Do you know that midgets live in malls after hours? If you ever stayed late enough, you might be able to see one of them.”

“I know!” Todd exclaimed. “We could catch one and then use it as a pony, or something! Do you guys want to?”

Edgar glanced up at the clock on the wall. “It’s close to one in the morning,” he said, surprised. “When does this mall close?”

“It doesn’t,” Eleanor told him. “It’s an all night mall.”

“That’s outlandish,” Todd jeered. All three sat at the food court and stared at the single remaining bag of cheese puffs opened in the center of their table.

“Look,” said Edgar. “We could sit here at the mall twiddling our thumbs and thinking of

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

the exciting movies we could see – or rather, we could have seen if we went before midnight. Or we could have some sort of extravagant adventure.”

“Adventure! Adventure!” cried Todd. “It’s my last night as a free man! Let’s do something wild and fabulous.”

“Is he getting married?” Eleanor asked Edgar.

“No,” said Edgar. “He’s meeting his father.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Eleanor said. “But that guy’s not really his father, you know.” She nodded smugly.

“Shut up,” shouted Todd. “I won’t have you talking about my father that way! I’ll have him execute you!” He spat on the floor to show that he was serious.

“I’ll do what I want,” Eleanor said haughtily. She flipped her hair again. “It’s a free country.”

“And yet you have not explored that freedom enough, because there’s a thing called a shower that you are free to use at any time,” Todd said. “Zing!” Edgar wrinkled his nose. He hated when Todd said “Zing!”

“Gentlemen,” said Eleanor, “How would you like to escort a young lady to a rock and roll show?”

“A rock and roll show?” asked Edgar. He scratched between his shoulder blades and his stomach bulged from under his t-shirt. “At this time of night?”

Todd laughed loudly to show how ridiculous he thought the idea was. “There’s no way any real musician would play music after midnight,” he said. “I’d barely try it myself and I’m the world’s greatest rapper.” Edgar nodded wisely.

Eleanor shook her head. “Look,” she said. “I know this amazing Def Leppard cover band that plays occasionally in this abandoned factory on the skirts of town. They even have a one legged drummer.”

Todd gaped. “Def Leppard doesn’t have a one legged drummer!”

Eleanor shook her head. “It’s supposed to be ironic.”

“That’s not irony,” Edgar said sadly.

“Look,” said Todd reasonably. “Here’s what I think. I think that Eleanor is probably a psychopath and she’s trying to lure us into an abandoned place so that she can slaughter us to appease some dark Wiccan overlord, or something. And I know. I know that following her is probably the most ridiculous, asinine thing we could possibly do. But Edgar. Consider the alternative.” He waved his arms around at the cheap shopping mall, pointing out a whining, exhausted toddler being pushed around by whining, exhausted parents; pointed at the closed restaurants and bored, gun-wielding security guards.

“You’re right,” Edgar mused. “I guess we can totally kick it.”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Eleanor smiled.

Edgar was the only one with a car, and Todd thought it would be funny to make Eleanor sit in the back. “She’ll be in her element,” he chortled. “The trash with the trash!”

“Todd, we can’t be impolite to a guest,” insisted Edgar. “Besides, I cleaned out my backseat after I filled up at the gas station.” By this, he meant that he threw away one of the empty motor oil containers and had scooted the remainder of the trash to the passenger side of the car. Todd had to sit directly behind Edgar with his legs scrunched up during the ten minute trip, and he complained almost constantly. “Imagine how offended the artist Prince would be if you made him sit in the backseat,” he griped. “Well, it’s ten times worse for a King.”

Eleanor and Edgar ignored him. Eleanor told them the bizarre, terrifying history of the factory. “Five hundred years ago,” she recounted in a spooky voice, “a Pilgrim by the name of Henry Adams started this factory on the bones of an ancient Indian burial ground.”

“Boring! Bo-o-o-o-ring!” trilled Todd, waving his hands behind his ears.

“Henry Adams died not more than two days after the factory opened,” Eleanor said. “THEY NEVER FOUND HIS HEAD.”

“What kind of factory was it?” asked Todd.

“It doesn’t matter,” Eleanor said. “I think a chair factory.”

“That’s a lie!” shouted Todd. “Chair factories weren’t even invented until a few years ago! Before that, they were carved by poor people and hippies!”

“I don’t think that’s entirely true,” Edgar warned. “I’m a historian as well as a mathematician, and your version of history seems a little skewed.”

Todd shrugged and scooted further in the backseat, hunching over ridiculously. “Does anyone want any beef jerky?” he muttered.

“The factory was closed three years later,” continued Eleanor, “after a series of horrifying mysteries and diseases. One hundred people died!” she said. Thunder echoed in the distance, punctuating her story.

“What an obviously manufactured lie,” Todd smirked, rolling his eyes. Edgar shivered, a little unnerved.

“Well,” Eleanor said, “I just wanted to warn you. This isn’t an ordinary concert at an ordinary factory. You might see a ghost. You never know.” She waved her hands spookily at the two men.

“Who are you?” asked Todd. “Where’s your mother? Isn’t she worried about you? Why are you following us around?”

“Todd!” cried Edgar. “Stop being rude!”

The thunder led to a mild spat of rain. Instead of lending itself to a spooky atmosphere, it



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

soaked the ground and made it extra muddy. Todd flailed his arms wildly and nearly fell over.

Inside the factory, a team of raggedly dressed teenagers with stinking, long hair were plugging in amplifiers and tuning their instruments. All five of them were wearing gold-plated crosses around their necks. There were maybe fifteen other people standing around. Four of them were at least fifty years old.

“Rodney!” squealed Eleanor. She tossed her arms around the neck of one of the stinking young men with the crosses.

“This is my brother, Rodney,” she said, introducing him to Todd and Edgar. “He’s the lead singer of Rock of Ages.”

“We’re a Christian cover band,” explained Rodney. “We do mostly Def Leppard, but sometimes we let our hair down and play some other hard rock. Including the one on which the Church was built.” He laughed loudly at his own joke.

“This is the worst day of my entire life,” Todd said in disbelief. He ran his hands through his nonexistent hair. “Absolutely the worst day of my entire life.”

Edgar looked desperate.

“I told you,” hissed Todd. He glanced over at the other people in the audience. Yes, he guessed, these were mostly the parents and family members of the rest of the band members.

“Okay!” shouted Rodney, walking over to the microphone. He cleared his throat and piercing feedback ripped through the abandoned factory. “We’re Rock of Ages, and this is our first song – Armageddon It!”

As the band began playing, Todd realized that even though he was highly offended by the music, it really wasn’t all that bad simply because of the sheer fact that it had been written by Def Leppard. Still, he and Edgar did not dance. They stood stiffly with their arms to their sides the way they always did at rock concerts.

In fact, the only member of the audience who actually danced was a middle aged mother. There were a few folding chairs set up and most people just sat down. Eleanor did, promptly falling asleep.

Todd felt no qualms about heckling the band. “PLAY SOME AEROSMITH,” he shouted. Yet he was surprised when they obliged, bursting into a rousing rendition of “Shut up and Dance.” He didn’t have the faintest idea of how that song might relate in any way to hard rock, to his request, or to religion in general, but he guessed it didn’t really matter anyways.

As the show ended, one of the parents poured Dixie cups of Hawaiian punch for all of the guests and thanked them for coming. Todd cornered Eleanor, who crossed her arms and looked bored.

“That was awful!” hissed Todd. “Well – not completely awful, but intensely uncomfortable. What is wrong with you?”

“My parents always make me come,” Eleanor told him. “I figured, why not bring some

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

people with me who'd be as miserable as I was?"

Edgar shook her hand. "Well, I had a spectacular time."

"Nobody likes a liar or a sycophant," Todd told him.

"That's untrue," snorted Eleanor. "Look, does anyone want to get breakfast? The sun comes up in three hours and I know a great place we can go. And first, we can play Monopoly!"

At this, even the normally polite Edgar balked. "There's not any real strategy," he said as they exited the abandoned factory. "It's like trying to do oral surgery using a mirror and a pair of kitchen shears." Instead, they simply stood outside of the Burger King like homeless people until it opened, slouching aimlessly like the kids in Dalhart. "This is pretty much every morning in Wichita," muttered Eleanor, fidgeting. "The alcoholism rate among teenagers is through the roof."

At last, a few exhausted employees showed up to open the doors and microwave the breakfasts. Todd likened the experience to "the first time I ever saw a sunrise," an event which he still hadn't truly witnessed – he'd briefly fallen asleep while they'd waited for the building to open, but just so that he could say he'd stayed up all night, he had promised Edgar and Eleanor he was simply meditating. It hadn't fooled his teachers in high school, and it didn't fool his friends now. The food was just as delicious as Todd remembered it being every other day. This time, Edgar got mini cinnamon rolls "just to break up the monotony," he told them, but he still got hash browns.

Todd would judge every breakfast for the rest of his life on the basis of that one meal, which he called "The Feast of Feasts." He recklessly spent fifteen dollars of his rapidly dwindling funds to sample 'just a little bit of everything.' The bored cashier shook her head tediously as she pressed every button on the breakfast menu. Todd hoarded the food as jealously as a dragon, grunting and drooling as he shoved it desperately into his mouth. "It's my last meal as an orphan!" he cried, slapping Eleanor's hand away whenever it approached his platter. "God, can't I at least eat in peace?" He belched loudly and angrily.

At last, the three were sated. Todd played with a little racecar he'd bartered from Eleanor's Kid's Meal for one of his hash browns. "Man," he grunted, air whistling from his nostrils. "I'll never eat again. Never. I promise." He leaned back and sat with his hands on his stomach.

"What fun!" howled Eleanor. "You know," she said, smirking, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm sort of glad you two came to Wichita. So what happens now?"

"What happens now?" repeated Todd, confused. He glanced at Edgar.

"Yeah," said Eleanor. "The convention isn't for a few more hours, right? So what will we do? I know a great karaoke bar."

Edgar leaned over and took Eleanor's hands. "Please," he stammered, "I think you're one

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

of the most incredible people I've ever met. But – I think it's best if Todd and I go this part alone.”

“Yeah, really,” Todd cried.

“Stop being rude, Todd!” cried Edgar. “Now, listen. We've driven over seven hundred miles. We've seen things that no one would ever believe. And now we've made it. Now, Todd needs to get into the right frame of mind; he hasn't seen his father for eighteen years. And...”

His voice softened into a whisper. “And I'm going to help him. Because he's my best friend, and because I promised that I'd get him here.”

Todd's eyes welled up with tears. “Edgar, you're my best friend, too.”

Eleanor nodded curtly. “Todd is disgusting, but I guess you're right.” She pulled out a pen and scribbled a quick note on her Burger King receipt. She pressed it into Edgar's hand. “Call me when you two are done with your little mission. I'd like to throw you a going away party before you head back to Gallup.”

Edgar smiled, delighted. “Thank you, Eleanor,” he said happily.

He followed her with his eyes as she stood up, stretched lazily, and left the Burger King. Todd sat at the table, vrooming his race car.

“God!” he finally cried as the door closed. “Finally!”

“I know!” Edgar said, ripping up the phone number. “Have you ever met a more obnoxious person in your life?”

“Not me,” shouted Todd, running the race car across the table and making it leap over a crumpled sandwich wrapper. “I thought I was going to lose my mind if she didn't shut up for five minutes!”

“Let's never talk to any other stranger as long as we're here,” said Edgar happily. “We don't want to babysit another ridiculous stranger all night.”

“Wasn't that band terrible?” Todd asked.

Edgar yawned, popping his jaw. “Actually, they were okay,” he admitted.

“Yeah,” said Todd. “They were okay. But the real Def Leppard is a little better.”

“I know,” Edgar said, standing up. His knees clicked.

“You're going to meet your father in a few scant hours,” he announced. “We both are, and look at us! We haven't showered or changed clothes in three days.”

“Six,” amended Todd.

“Let's doll you up and get you reading for your meeting with destiny!” said Edgar, tapping his mouth with an open fist to emulate an echoing, fateful voice.

“Awesome!” said Todd, tapping his mouth in imitation.

Fifteen minutes later, they were trying on fancy suits at J.C. Penny's, an activity which Todd deemed “entirely unacceptable to my lifestyle.” He held up a pair of pants to his waist,

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

groaning miserably. “These look just fine,” Todd told Edgar. “Let’s go now.”

“You haven’t even tried them on!” Edgar cried sadly. “Todd, listen to me. You’re meeting your father. Let me tell you a parable so that perhaps you’ll understand.”

Todd put the pants back on the rack and sat down Indian-style on the carpet. He yawned dramatically to show his lack of interest in the story.

“Once,” began Edgar, waving his hands around wildly and startling a nearby cashier, “many, many years ago, there lived a man who wanted to coexist with the gazelles.”

“Is that a slang rap term?” asked Todd, puzzled. “I’m not following this story.”

“A gazelle is sort of like a fast deer, I guess,” Edgar said. “Anyways, so that he could live with the gazelles, he fashioned himself a coat out of gazelle skins. In this way, he could live with the gazelles peacefully and run with them wherever they went.”

“Ridiculous!” cried Todd. “Have you ever tried to chase a deer? Big mistake. Was this guy an alcoholic? And where did he get the gazelle skins, anyways?”

“One day,” Edgar continued, “the man decided that he tired of living with the gazelles. He was tired of foraging on leaves and nuts. And so he decided to live with the tigers.”

At this twist in the story, Todd’s mouth dropped open.

“However,” Edgar said, holding up a finger, “he forgot the most important thing. To live with tigers, one must not wear a gazelle suit. He must wear a tiger suit.”

“Also,” Todd said, perturbed, “he probably has to smell like the animal, too. This story doesn’t make a lot of sense,” he complained.

“The moral is,” Edgar said, “the suit must fit the situation, or one will be eaten.” He smiled and crossed his arms to indicate the story was completed.

“And I guess I need cologne now,” complained Todd. “I hate your story, Edgar.”

Edgar shrugged and began picking through the racks again. “Well,” he said, “all I’m saying is – what you’re wearing right now is Todd Sanders.”

He held up a tie and winked. “And this,” he said, “is Todd Vel Johnson.”

Can you see them? Todd stumbling into the dressing room with two sports jackets and a pair of loafers, grumbling. Edgar holding up a dress shirt, glancing in a mirror, shaking his head. Socks, underpants, even the promised cologne; Todd and Edgar took special care to find clothing that made them look impressive, like the sons and friends of movie stars they were. Todd even found himself a waterproof digital watch and set the timer so that they’d be sure to be on time for the convention. As the two gentlemen stepped up to the cashier, they smiled at each other; their new outfits were absolutely stunning.

One hundred and fifty dollars! “They’d better be stunning for that amount of money,” hissed Edgar.

“How will you be paying today?” asked the man at the counter.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Todd's mouth dropped open. "Can't you – can't you put it on Reginald's account?" he asked.

The cashier gazed blandly at him. "I don't know what that means," he said.

"We – we don't have any cash," said Edgar desperately. "What can we do?"

"We can't leave without these spectacular clothes," cried Todd."

"Do you happen to have our charge card?" asked the cashier.

A charge card! It was absolutely brilliant. Edgar handed over his driver's license and, in return, they received the clothing and a promise of a new, physical card in five to eight business days. "This is incredible," goggled Todd as they exited the department store. "This changes everything. Free clothes whenever we want!"

"Free ANYTHING," amended Edgar. "When that charge card finally makes its way to my place – we're going to party, buddy."

They gave each other a high five.

And then, it was off to the local YMCA, where they quickly showered with a pilfered bar of soap left unattended by one of the other patrons. "I can't believe someone just left their soap here," Todd whispered loudly to Edgar afterwards as he sprayed cologne on his face, hands, arms, legs, and hair.

"Finders, keepers," Edgar whispered back. The two ripped the tags off their new clothes and got dressed.

They looked amazing. Todd wore a cheap green suit. A blue dress shirt brought a little more color, and his bright red necktie clashed with both so hideously that it looked like a kindergartener had just gone crazy with a box of crayons. A simple straw hat finished the outfit nicely.

Edgar's refined outfit included a professor's coat with patches on the elbows along with a pair of blue jeans. "I want to look relaxed and impressive," he explained, "but not super-formal. Just enough to amaze everyone at the convention." He buffed his glasses on the sleeve of his coat.

"We look so amazing," Todd spluttered, glancing in the mirror, mouth agape. "We look like real gentlemen."

"We ARE real gentlemen," Edgar told him. He adjusted Todd's tie carefully. "We just never dressed the part before."

The two stared at themselves in the mirror for a solid ten minutes until an employee of the YMCA chased them out.

"Are you ready?" Edgar asked Todd, putting his hand on his shoulder. He wished he'd brought some hair grease for the trip; it would have done both a world of good. "This is your big

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

moment; you've been waiting three whole days for this."

"Of course I am!" said Todd, but his trembling voice gave away the statement as sheer bravado.

"Need a drink?" asked Edgar.

Todd shook his head. "It's better this way," he muttered, walking away. Edgar followed him to the car.

Both were silent on the way to the Best Western Airport Inn and Conference Center. Todd stared out the window. The new Aerosmith cassette blasted noisily out of the Ford's tinny speakers. "I can't believe we're finally here," he said to himself.

"WHAT?" shouted Edgar.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE FINALLY HERE," Todd shouted.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU," yelled Edgar.

"YOUR MOTHER IS A GREAT KISSER," Todd yelled back.

"WHAT?" said Edgar, but Todd was laughing nervously and hysterically.

As the car pulled up to the Best Western Inn, Todd felt butterflies grow and dance in his stomach as he looked up at the marquee: "FAMELY MATTERS CONVENT ON: WELC ME ALL." Beneath this greeting, the marquee also read "CONGRADULATIONS WICHITA MONKYS BASEBAL TEAM."

"How do I look?" asked Todd. Edgar peered at him carefully.

"You look kind of fruity," he admitted. "Muss up your hair a little; you want to look good, not like your mother dressed you."

"Foster mother," Todd amended automatically, and then smiled nervously. "Hey," he said. "Wish me luck."

Edgar saluted him. "We'll do fine," he said. "Come on. Let's go check it out."

The parking lot was already full, and weaving around the parked cars wasn't something that Todd felt he should be doing in the hour before he met his father. "Can't these Americans even park?" he wailed to himself helplessly, pushing his way past a very familiar station wagon. He paused, staring at it.

"They're going to be here," he panicked.

Edgar nodded. He was used to Todd's paranoid outbursts during times of severe stress.

"If anyone talks to us," Todd said, "we need to run as quickly as we can. This is important."

Edgar nodded again. "Of course we will," he said. The two approached the dented doors of the Best Western Inn. Edgar held the door open for Todd and waved him through impressively. Todd walked through, his head held high, his hands nonchalantly in his pockets.

After so many hours of waiting, it felt strange to be in the magical, far-away place where

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

he'd finally meet his father. A well dressed man approached the duo with his hands folded. "Can I help you, gentlemen?" he asked them.

"We're here for the Family Matters convention," Todd announced carefully. He leaned in. "Is Reginald here yet? I was hoping to have a chance to talk to him alone before this began," he said.

The well dressed man looked perturbed. "I'm – I'm not entirely certain, sir," he said. "I'm only the hotel clerk. I don't really know everyone at the convention; I'm sure that there will be someone to direct you in the convention hall." He peered up at Todd's straw hat. "May I take your headgear for you?"

"Oh, no," Todd said, worried. "It's doing just fine up here. Thank you, though." He held the hat to his head carefully as if he were worried the well-dressed man would snatch it away.

"Of course, sir," said the clerk. "If you'll follow me?" The three sauntered across the lobby to a large, closed set of double doors. Edgar and Todd nodded once and, as the man held the door for them, stepped inside.

"I don't think Reginald is here yet," groused Todd, looking around expectantly, standing on his toes. The room was filled with at least a couple of hundred convention goers. "Everyone here is pretty white." He glanced around, and then settled back onto the balls of his feet. "Man, everyone here is well dressed," he said worriedly. "I'm really glad we dolled ourselves up for this thing."

"Reginald is one of the guests of honor!" said Edgar firmly. "They'll bring him out later. Who's that?" he asked, pointing at an elderly man in a tuxedo who was approaching them with a clipboard.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said the elderly man, pointing an ink pen at Edgar and Todd. "I'm Theodore Prescott, the event coordinator. So good for you to show up. Which party are you with?"

"Vel Johnson," said Todd.

"Johnson, Johnson – here you are," said the man, checking them off the list. "And... here are your name tags," he offered. "Please fill them out and feel free to mingle. Snacks and punch are over at the bar, and you're more than welcome to them, and have a lovely time. The speaker begins in half an hour."

"Great," said Todd. "We were hoping to get a chance to meet with him before he spoke, you know, get to know him a little better, but there's plenty of time for that later."

Theodore Prescott nodded. "Well, enjoy the event, and if you need anything, look for me. I'll be the man with the clipboard," he laughed.

Todd and Edgar laughed politely and uneasily.

Theodore wandered off to greet another set of new arrivals, and Todd and Edgar made

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

their way to the punch bowl. “This is pretty gruesome,” Edgar noted sadly. “What is this – Chex mix? Warm cans of sprite and cola?”

“There’s a cake,” pointed Edgar, “but it hasn’t been cut yet.” They peered down at the delicately frosted cake. In cursive, it read “Third Annual Family Matters Convention – Brothers and Sisters In Unity.”

“Can we get a piece?” asked Todd. “Everyone else is apparently too shy to help themselves.”

“I don’t see why not,” said Edgar. “It’s ridiculous to wait for everyone to get ready to eat a piece of cake.” The two grabbed a pair of small paper plates and a plastic butter knife, slicing cake for themselves and grabbing large glasses of punch.

“This cake is awful,” groused Todd as he mashed the frosting and punch together in his mouth.

“Tell me about it,” drooled Edgar. “Vanilla? Chocolate’s where it’s at. And what’s that, almond flavoring? And I think this drink is basically red Kool-Aid.”

“Gross,” mouthed Todd, a thin line of punch spilling from the corner of his mouth onto the carpet.

Edgar began laughing hysterically, spraying masticated cake all over Todd’s new jacket and hat. “DOUBLE gross,” shouted Todd once he’d managed to swallow his mouthful of cake, laughing with him. The nearby convention goers frowned at Edgar and Todd, shaking their heads.

“Todd!” cried a voice from behind him, and Todd whirled around in panic and confusion. Sandra Richards, carrying a disgruntled Oliver. “No!” shouted Oliver, waving his hands in fury.

Todd knew exactly how the infant felt. “Oh no,” he gasped to Edgar. “They found me. I told you that they’d be here. We have to run. RUN.”

Edgar shook his head as Sandra grew closer. “Too late now,” he murmured. “Let’s just say a few sly words and then make our escape.”

“Who’s this?” asked Sandra, peering at the bespectacled Edgar.

“Hi,” said Edgar, reaching out his hand. “I’m Edgar, Todd’s friend.”

“The guy who took off,” Todd reminded her. “But he’s back!”

“Well, how nice,” Sandra said, bemused. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Edgar. Are you born again like Todd here?”

“Oh, no,” said Edgar, shaking his head emphatically, a trifle confused. “I mean, I definitely know why Todd feels born again - I mean, not being sure who his parents really were, and all. But my mom is great. I’m just ready to get back to Gallup and see her again.”

Sandra pursed her lips. “Well, you don’t need an unpleasant childhood to be born again.”

“I guess not,” reflected Edgar. “I don’t know – I’m just here to support Todd,” he finally said, shrugging, putting his hand on Todd’s shoulder.



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Who’s your favorite character, Mrs. Richards?” Todd asked, eager to redirect attention to the convention at hand. He hoped that she’d say Carl Winslow so he could share his news.

Sandra stared at him. “Let me get Jim and Rachel,” she said. “I’m sure they’ll want to say hi to you, too.” She walked away from the pair.

“What a weird chick,” Todd said, sipping at his punch. He laid his half-eaten cake down on a nearby empty chair. “I’m still hungry. Why don’t they have bacon sandwiches here?”

“I don’t know,” Edgar complained. From across the room, he could see Mrs. Richards talking emphatically to a well dressed man. She looked over her shoulder and pointed at him.

“This convention isn’t nearly as exciting as it should be,” Todd complained. “It’s because they haven’t let my father speak yet.”

Jim and Sandra Richards approached the pair, smiling hesitantly. “Todd,” Jim said in a false, hearty voice full of forced cheer. “So good to see you again! What have you been up to?”

“I don’t even know,” Todd told him. “It’s been a long, long day. Are you as hungry as I am?”

“Not so much,” Jim told him. “So this is your friend?”

Todd looked at Edgar and smiled. “Not just my friend. My best friend!”

“Todd got me an awesome Aerosmith tape,” Edgar told Jim. “Have you listened to Pump? It’s great.”

“Have you tried that cake?” Todd asked. “Why do they always have vanilla at these places? It’s disgusting.” He pointed to the chair where he’d laid his cake, except someone else was sitting there now. “Ha ha!” he laughed loudly. “I bet she sat on it!!!”

“It was great seeing you,” said Jim mildly, and he and Sandra vanished to the far side of the convention hall where they peered back at Todd and Edgar like two mice frightened of an immense squirrel.

“Can you believe I had to ride to Wichita with them?” asked Todd, yawning fiercely. “They were even more boring in a moving vehicle.”

“I read you loud and clear,” Edgar replied. He took another long swig of his punch.

“Excuse me! Excuse me,” said Theodore Prescott, who had relinquished his clipboard and was now standing at a podium near the front of the room. Todd and Edgar automatically turned to him and listened carefully.

“It’s so nice to see so many people here,” he said to all of them, smiling. “Welcome, each and every one of you, to the third annual Family Matters convention. It’s our hope that with the help of brothers and sisters like you, we’ll be able to raise the standards of family back to where they were a hundred years ago.”

The crowd politely applauded. Todd’s hair stood on end. This was it. He’d been waiting for what seemed like a whole week, and now he was going to finally meet his father.

He pictured Reginald’s happy face as he stepped out and waved – and then, as if a single

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

spotlight had switched on to illuminate a single figure in the crowd, he'd see his son. "Space bullet," Reginald would mouth to himself, and then hurl himself through the crowd happily. "*MY SON*," he'd cry, and Todd would laugh and laugh happily.

"Go home, everyone!" Reginald would cry to the remainder of the crowd, so intent would he be on reconnecting with his son. "Go home, go home, go home!" And everyone would applaud and then slowly leave so that Reginald and Todd could catch up on the last eighteen years of their lives. Todd wiped a tear from his eye.

"Family is so terribly important," Theodore Prescott told them. "It's all we have. They're the only ones you can count on to be there for you no matter what happens. And in that sense, we are one big family. I like think of you all as my family."

Todd nodded, already bored at the rambling speech.

"And so," Theodore continued, "I'm excited to bring to you tonight's speaker, a man who knows as much about family as any man I've ever met."

Here it comes, thought Todd.

"A man that I personally admire as one of the most faithful fathers and husbands in America today."

Todd nodded happily.

"The Reverend Wayne Crumlick!"

Todd's mouth dropped open. Who? Who was this? The pale little man in the dark blue tuxedo who hopped to the microphone laughed delightedly, waving to the audience, shaking Theodore's hand. "Thank you, thank you," he said, both to the applauding audience and to Theodore Prescott. "So great to be here in Wichita. It's such an beautiful, wonderful place. A bunch of beautiful, wonderful families. Every time I come to this town, I feel so much at home.

"And it's family, is what it is. Theodore is exactly right, it's family. I feel that you're my family and I'm yours." He beamed proudly at the audience, who cheered and applauded. One middle-aged man in a nice suit hoisted his three year old over his shoulders. Edgar cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"And it's rare, it really is. It's rare in a country where the divorce rate is rising almost astronomically to absolutely record levels. It's rare in a country where homosexuals demand – DEMAND the right to get married! I want to read to you," demanded Reverend Wayne Crumlick, who pulled out a leather bound Bible and waved it at the crowd. Todd stared, wide-eyed.

"For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body'," read Crumlick. "Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.' *Every thing!*" he repeated emphatically, slamming his hand onto the podium. "Not *some* things, not *most* things, *every thing!* I promise

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

you that if every family would remember this; if every family would just make a hard, steady rule that the woman *always* obeyed her man – the *woman* obeyed the *man*, not the man obeying the man or the woman obeying the woman; none of today’s perversions!” He breathed heavily, unable to believe the shocking, appalling affront handed to him by the world.

“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself,” continued the Reverend. “For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.”

“What does that mean?” he asked. “It means that men, you do good by the little lady, she’ll do you good right back. It’s the least you can offer her in exchange for absolute submission. You can do that, can’t you? If she needs a new vacuum, don’t cheap out and get a broom, get a vacuum.” He laughed loudly and the rest of the audience chuckled, too. Todd saw Mrs. Richards smile broadly and put an arm around her husband.

“And now we get into the meat and bones of it,” said the Reverend. “Here we are: ‘For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church.’

“One man. One wife. One flesh. Very simple, very easy to understand,” said Wayne Crumlick. “Doesn’t family matter to anyone anymore? It matters in the Book! It should matter to each and every person here, and each and every person in the entirety of this great, beautiful world,” he shouted, waving the Bible in the air.

“GAY!” shouted Todd.

“Todd,” whispered Edgar, grabbing his shoulder. “That is incredibly rude and tacky!” The Reverend paused and looked in their direction, as did most of the other people in the room.

“GAY AND BORING,” continued Todd. “WHERE’S REGINALD?” He began stomping his feet loudly. “WE-WANT-REGINALD! WE-WANT-REGINALD!”

“Homosexuals!!!” cried the Reverend, infuriated. “Infiltrating homosexuals trying to destroy the family right here! Right in front of the most reverent and humble family in America!” The crowd murmured, furious at the intrusion. Theodore Prescott stepped forward and took Todd and Edgar by the arm and began leading them towards the double door, his lips pursed as if he were handling an outrageously warm cockroach.

“Fiery pits!” cried the Reverend as the two were hauled away. “Everlasting torment! Shameful debauchery!”

“Mr. Johnson, that was completely uncalled for, and we have every right to call the police,” said Mr. Prescott in a firm, yet police voice after the double doors closed. Todd and Edgar stood in the lobby, uncomfortable. “We’ll consider the matter closed, but you both need to

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

leave.”

“What about Reginald!” cried Todd. “When’s he going to speak? Don’t make us leave before he arrives!” He looked close to tears.

Mr. Prescott paused. “I’m not entirely sure what you’re talking about,” he said, pushing the two men towards the front door. “The Reverend Wayne Crumlick is the only speaker at this convention. Perhaps you two gentlemen are in the wrong place.” And with that, he turned on his feet and marched back into the convention hall.

Todd and Edgar stared at each other, speechless. Todd tried to form words, but merely stuttered.

“He didn’t come,” Edgar said finally.

“Of course he didn’t!” Todd spewed angrily. “He never meant to come! He didn’t want to meet me! He left me in a space bullet! Why would he want to get to know someone he left in a space bullet?”

He stared at the ground furiously, refusing to cry. At last, the hotel clerk in the suit came forward to help them; to lead them to their car and to ask them never, ever to return.

Todd and Edgar were silent as they walked to the rusting Ford. As they stepped up to the vehicle, Edgar put his hand on Todd’s shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. Todd looked up sharply, his face etched with absolute fury.

“Listen, Todd. We’ll meet him someday. I can look on the computer sometime, when my mom lets me. They have everything on the Internet now. We can find his place, go by there some time, maybe take a deck of cards...”

“Forget it!” shouted Todd. The dismissal echoed in the parking lot, echoed around the Wichitan plains that surrounded them. The wind blew dramatically, gently rustling Todd’s straw hat.

“He isn’t my father,” Todd muttered quietly. “He isn’t my family.” He kicked a pebble in the parking lot. It skittered and bounced, hitting someone’s fender. “He’s just some famous guy who must think he’s really hot stuff.”

“Of course Reginald Vel Johnson thinks he’s hot stuff,” said Edgar. “He’s a Hollywood star. And he’s got you for a son: the world’s greatest rapper.”

“Not any more, he doesn’t,” said Todd grimly. He waved his hand dramatically in the air as if orating to a large crowd.

“They don’t understand marketing, they don’t understand rap. They ate all my cheese puffs,” Todd said. “But the people we left in Gallup – the people whose names are on my birth certificate – they’re my real parents.” He nodded solemnly. “They’re the ones whose house I live in. And it’s my home. If it wasn’t, I’d be a hobo.

“Come on,” said Todd, putting his hand around Edgar’s shoulder. “We learned a lot.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

About friendship, and the true meaning of family, and about getting rid of someone who's annoying, and where to go and not to go to the bathroom on our trip. We learned about how to dress for a fancy event, and we learned about agony in fiery pits. We learned about the power of Van Halen," he said, looking right into Edgar's face, and Edgar could have sworn that Todd's eyes burned with a fury that had not been in his young eyes when he'd worked so long ago at Cracker Barrel. He leaned back, unable to stare Todd in the face. He had halitosis from their many days of Burger King's breakfast.

"Let's pack up," Todd said. "Let's get on the road and head back to our real families."

"All right," shrugged Edgar. He unlocked the passenger's door for Todd, then stepped into the driver's seat. Putting on the broken sunglasses over his regular frames, he started the car and they drove off.

How does one say goodbye to a dream? To a failed journey? Todd and Edgar did it the best way they knew how: loud music and the last of the cheese puffs. They did put in the Ray Stevens tape and listened to about two minutes of it. The zany, ridiculous lyrics and awful country twang infuriated them, and Edgar made a special point of stopping the car immediately, putting the tape under the back tire, backing over it, driving over it, backing over it again, and finally peeling off, leaving a demolished pile of black ribbon on the highway. They laughed hysterically at the destruction they left in their midst, two gentlemen in lovely new clothes enjoying their work.

"Thanks for driving me to Wichita," Todd told Edgar a few miles outside of the city. He was drinking a root beer that they'd picked up along the way.

"It's no problem at all, man," Edgar said. He shrugged. "You know," he said, "if you want, I can probably get you a job at Subway when we get back home."

*Home.* Had any word ever sounded more beautiful?

"I don't know," Todd said. "I want to finish my rap song. An epic rap song about this entire trip."

"Okay," Edgar said. "But let me know if you end up changing your mind."

"Thanks, man," said Todd. "That's a really awesome idea." They drove in silence for a while, thinking things over. Pondering the future the way old friends sometimes will.

Near the bottom of Oklahoma's panhandle, Todd and Edgar coasted to a stop. It had been a long, exhausting day for the pair.

Edgar eyed a Ramada Inn as their car coasted through the town. "I suppose you want to stay in a cheap motel again," he muttered sadly.

Todd laughed. "We have a credit card, silly. We're practically King Midas himself! Let's find the most awesome Holiday Inn in the town and order room service!"

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

There was no Holiday Inn in the town. They found a local Marriott, but the clerk informed them the promise of a J.C. Penny's card that was being sent through the mail was worthless. "No physical card," he told them in a thickly accented voice, chopping his hand on the desk as if he were attempting to break it using karate, "no room."

They slept in the parking lot. Todd used his backpack as a pillow and smiled as he felt the model Frankenstein's Monster crunching under his head. "Awesome," he muttered to himself as he fell into a deep sleep. "I'll get to put him together just that much more."

In the morning, Edgar was feeling remarkably hungry. "Wake up!" he cried to the dozing Todd, raising his seat from the reclining position. "It's breakfast time! Want to do Burger King again?"

Todd pondered it. "Let's do our own thing," he finally said. "Let's go through McDonalds. But let's do the drive through and eat in the car."

"You're crazy!" shouted Edgar, delighted. "We'll get crumbs everywhere! But I feel like living dangerously." The creaking Ford crashed painfully out of the parking lot and across the street to McDonalds. Four breakfast sandwiches and a large soda later, the two were ready for the very final leg of their long, painful journey.

"Slow down!" cried Todd. His face was pressed to the passenger side window like a puppy staring at a pile of steaks. "Wait a minute!"

The sign ahead of them read Dalhart: 5 miles.

Edgar scratched his head. "Do you want to look for a music store again?" he asked dubiously. "They didn't have one the last time we looked."

"No," said Todd, staring out the window, a thousand miles away. He shook his head. "No. What I want is more nebulous than music." He slammed a fist on the dashboard.

"I want revenge," he hissed. "I was a caterpillar, mocked and scorned on the sidewalk by a gang of hooligans who thought they knew what clever meant. But now, I'm a butterfly, and if you look in the dictionary under the word 'rap king', you'll see me."

He pointed to himself, secretly wondering who'd drawn his picture and if it would look cooler if he scribbled a moustache on the face. "You'll see me."

Todd made Edgar drive up and down the main street three times, but they didn't see the gang of teenagers at all. Todd was furious. "How am I going to show them that I'm a master rapper if they're too scared to show their faces?" he yelled angrily.

Edgar shrugged. "Maybe it's a school day," he said. "It's not even lunchtime yet. If we hang around for a while, maybe they'll end up showing up and you can totally throw a killer rap at them to make them feel ashamed and amazed." His eyes lit up with the possibilities.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

“Forget it,” Todd said sullenly. He wiped his upper lip. “They’re chickens. My first act as a king will be to give them clemency.”

“You’re a wise, merciful king,” placated Edgar. “Remember when Hammer was the ruler of all rap and he released an entire album called ‘Please Hammer Don’t Hurt Em’?”

“I guess,” grumbled Todd. Edgar let him toss one of the empty plastic motor oil bottles in the back seat at the library that the ruffians had slouched against so long ago. Todd wanted to write “Your heads are all crates” on the bottle, except the only pen in Edgar’s floorboard was a dried up Bic pen that would not write. Todd flung that at the library, too.

They drove through lunch, through Texas, and on through New Mexico. Todd and Edgar didn’t speak much on the way home, preferring to let Quiet Riot and Aerosmith do the talking for them. Both men were exhausted and felt a little changed, yet – at the same time – precisely the same.

As they pulled into Gallup, Todd checked his backpack three times to ensure that everything was properly packed. “Awesome,” he whispered to himself as he pictured working the model later that evening in his own bedroom. “I hope it glows in the dark somehow.”

Edgar grunted to himself as he realized he had to work the morning shift the next day at Subway. “Dang,” he whispered. “Dang.”

He pulled up to Todd’s house and let the engine idle. “Todd,” he said. “I want you to know that I had a really great time with you.”

“Me too,” said Todd casually as he stepped out of the car. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, probably. Keep some diet soda in the machine for me!” he laughed, and then slammed the Ford’s door.

It was late, but he’d made it home, made it home to Family Dinner night. To be with the people who’d taken care of him since his youth, to live with his mother and father – that sounded kind of okay for the immediate moment. He opened the front door. His upper lip curled as he thought about the disgusting congealed grease that was generously called dinner at Luby’s, and he gagged a little as he thought about their limp and greasy salad bar. “Well,” he thought glumly, sighing heavily as his parents looked up from their latest television shows and waved mildly to him, “I’m home.”

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

*Post-Script*



Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

After much persuasion, Todd began working at Subway with Edgar as he concurrently began his latest opus: a triumphant rap song about their journey to Wichita, their trials and tribulations, the lessons learned by the pair, and the hot chicks they'd scored with. Originally conceived as a four minute long rap song with a chorus predominantly featuring the word "magnificent" that Todd announced would take "at least a week to write", Todd continued to work on the song long after he was fired from Subway a scant two weeks later. Management did not appreciate his creative promotional tool called "Big Free Freestyling with Twelve Inches", especially after many customers switched to only buying the six inch subs so that they would not be inundated by Todd's improvised rap verses after they'd ordered.

In fact, not at all discouraged by the failure of his entrepreneurism, Todd continued to work on his rap opus for a solid forty-nine years. Even after heavily editing, including the removal of a 15,000 line digression about the speculative rise and fall of King Pete, the entire rap took an impressive seven and a half hours to perform.

Life went on. Todd married a waitress that he met during a stint as a Team Leader at Luby's. Their union lasted an entire ten months until she finally grew weary of his antics and left him in disgust. "I'm not your life," she hissed at him, her pregnant stomach swelling like a gerbil's cheeks. "That disgusting rap about Wichita is your life, and anything else is just some kind of weird delusion floating just outside your consciousness. You're obsessive, Todd; it's unhealthy and sick and wrong." Todd's son, Reginald Sanders, was born out of wedlock two months later, and was Todd's sole contribution to society for nearly forty more years.

Edgar finished the book that he'd promised the world for so long, which was simply titled "Mathematics and History: An Examination of Both." It was a minor success and sold primarily to college campuses, where combined mathematics and history classes took off as a way for incoming liberal arts freshmen to save money while fulfilling certain degree requirements. Edgar was married at the ripe age of forty to a cashier named Hilda who he'd met while browsing through Van Halen albums at the local music store. Their relationship lasted, though it was often tested through the years by Edgar's unflinching friendship and loyalty to Todd, as well as the number of times that Todd actually slept on the Hornbecks' couch.

On his sixty-eighth birthday, Todd announced that he'd finished editing the rap and was ready to recite it. An aging Edgar and Hilda were the only people who showed up to Todd's apartment porch to listen to the rap song, though Todd's son and ex-wife and also a young woman that Todd had seen at the grocery store were also invited. Edgar was nearly eighty-five, and though he could barely hear Todd's wheezing, rattling voice, he closed his eyes and remembered Todd's excited hand gesturing when he announced he was off to find his real father, remembered the terror at the buffet, the derision of the Dalhart gang, the filthy motel room, the

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

spectacular pool hall in the middle of nowhere, and the famous jazz musician who'd known Reginald Vel Johnson. He remembered the police cruiser and the argument that had led to the one and only time in Todd and Edgar's lives when they'd stopped being friends for an entire day. He remembered their triumphant reuniting and the obnoxious girl named Eleanor that probably had some sort of disgusting venereal disease. He remembered their awkward shock and sadness when they'd learned that the Family Matters convention wasn't a venue that was actually going to have Steve Urkel as a guest speaker. He listened carefully as Todd continued his ridiculous recital, and somewhere around the second hour of world's only performance of the seven-and-a-half-hour long "The Time We Saw Wichita", Edgar died peacefully.

Todd lived another thirty years. He was the kind of old man who bothered cashiers with long lines at grocery stores by telling them interminable stories that went nowhere. He continued to work at various minimum wage jobs for the rest of his life, usually being fired after a period of no more than a month. "I don't know what the heck," he'd tell Hilda – and, after her death, his ex-wife during their biannual phone chats. "I did my part for the human race. I wrote the best dang rap song that was ever written. I can die peacefully." As if dying peacefully was ever an option for a King.

Still, death eventually comes for all of us, sneaking through the front door like a drunken husband arriving home at midnight, either sliding silently into the bed with his wife or shrieking maniacally and waking all the neighbors. At ninety-eight, Todd lay palely and unnaturally in his bed, his chest rattling, feverishly demanding to see his son.

Reginald, now a wildly successful banker, paid his dying father one final visit. Todd looked up at Reginald and smiled wistfully.

"You look... just... like your real grandfather," gasped Todd.

Reginald nodded and took Todd's hand. "Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked gently. "To make it easier?"

Todd nodded. "Just... one... thing." And, whispering a two-line rap couplet that he'd made up off the top of his head, he simultaneously gave his last wish to his son and said goodbye.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

*Eighteen thousand years later*

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

Drone Regional Squad #7EA4CD21 – in particular, units 31F and C1C - were the unlucky robots assigned to the surface scouting mission to sector 89 of the initial homeworld planet. Though it had long ago been strip-mined for all possible resources, new breakthroughs in the cold fusion developmental software cycle meant that certain elements once deemed useless would now bring in up to several millennia worth of power per kilogram. The downside, of course, being that some poor robot bastards would need to spend several hundred years sampling soil deposits to determine where the resources actually lay.

31F had been digging in the same hundred mile square region for fifty-eight years when his probe encountered sudden resistance. A quick scan of the soil density showed that whatever it was that 31F had found, it was definitely solid metal. Robots cannot actually grow excited, but 31F sent several erratic electronic signals to C1C and received signals in reply. If we were to translate them into the English language, their conversation might have gone something like this.

“I found something metal.”

“What kind of metal?”

“I don’t know. How should we proceed?”

“Let us combine our intellects to determine the best course of action.”

**Computing.**

“Very well. We shall dig it up and see what it is.”

Robots cannot be disappointed, but there was a definite reduction in the number of signals between C1C and 31F when they finally hauled up the ovular metal object to the surface and used electrical pulses to determine composition. Only steel, then. And yet 31F showed a certain brash initiative uncalled for by the container’s obviously valueless contents when it cut the seal on the steel container and opened it up. Air quickly filled the vacuum within the ovular form. The two robots looked within.

Both were bewildered by the contents, though the plain text within – remarkably preserved for its age – was still readable. Though almost all traces of the human culture were gone, the robotic hive-mind still, somewhere, retained the ability to parse and extract information from English words. And after images of the texts were scanned and parsed, the mind studied the two works within carefully.

At last, it understood and was satisfied. Commands were issued. Units were redirected. And, in less than five hundred years, the Robot society that had built its way up for thousands upon thousands of years changed course entirely. In time, the Robot overlords lived solely in the present, content in the utopia they’d created, completely and totally forgetting that there ever was

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

a period when the existence inspired by “Mathematics and History” and “The Time We Saw Wichita” had never existed.

Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

*Afterword*

I began *Noisome Beasts* on June 20, 2008 and completed it on June 27, 2008. It's my first novel, though it quite marvelously cannibalized a few of my earlier short stories. It's sort of a culmination of all of the stories I've created so far.

I owe a big round of thanks to Rebecca Chatham, my wife, and Justin Chatham, my brother, for reading through this, finding mistakes, giving feedback, and generally giving me intense amounts of support that I absolutely needed. Thanks, both of you.

I like this book – it was fun to write. If you liked it too, I'd like to know about it! Or if you didn't like it, or if you're indifferent, or if you just want to give feedback, typos, notes, ANYTHING at all: I'd love to hear from you. I can be contacted via email at [rchatham@gmail.com](mailto:rchatham@gmail.com) and through my website at [www.robertchatham.com](http://www.robertchatham.com).

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Thanks for reading this far, and I hope you had as much fun reading this final sentence as I did writing it. Which is *so much that I feel like I ate an earthworm*.

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Noisome Beasts  
By Robert P Chatham

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By Robert P Chatham

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By Robert P Chatham

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By Robert P Chatham

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