

Killing Time

by Joshua Siegal

So once when I was scoochin down the sidewalk, kickin at the loose gravel with the frayed lace stuck to the bottom of my sole, a bird flew in my face, and lost in the fearful confusion of feathers and claws, I turned away and smacked the bird full in the rib cage. I could feel its thin curved ribs against my knuckles. The bird wheeled back through the air and crashed into the trunk of a tree. It was messed up pretty bad. At first I thought it was just some entrails hanging out of its gut, but I realized, inching closer to inspect what I'd unwittingly wrought, that not entrails but worms were crawling from a hole in the bird's body.

One of the worms tipped his cap to me. You saved us! You saved us! they were singing.

I don't know what I did, I said. That bird just flew in my face and I didn't want to get scratched, so I guess I punched him.

Well, said the polite worm with the cap, you surely saved all our lives, except for bob there, he's pretty well digested by now; he'll prob'ly have to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He was the early worm that was got by the early bird, and anyway well the rest of us, we were up partying pretty late last night and didn't actually get out till very late this afternoon ourselves and I guess that's why we're still alive. That plus your generous intervention.

Yeah, I said, scratching my head, I was up pretty late last night too.

We were playing poker, said the worm.

How on earth do you hold your cards, I said.

Under the earth, the worm corrected me. We just stick them in the dirt in front of us like dominoes. And we wager nuggets of dirt.

But you live in dirt, I said.

The worm looked around suspiciously. This is the good stuff, he said.

We wager for money or plastic chips, I said.

Ha ha ha ha, said the worm, well what's the value of that?

Well, I said, you can trade them both for stuff.

But, said the worm, don't you live surrounded by stuff to trade for?

I stared at him. Then I stepped on him.

All the other worms fled into the grass.

Enjoy your dirt, worms! I called.

Screw you, they called back in tiny voices, we'll eat you when you're dead!