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The usual geniuses had red and blue first-place ribbons on their science fair boards. The usual geniuses themselves stood in front of these testimonies to their brilliance and wore the nonchalant confidence of the high achieving.

Willie—not being a usual genius—did not have a ribbon on his board. Like the rest of the rabble, he stood by his board in lonely silence. Occasionally, he pulled at the too-large tie his mother made him wear and, when he thought no one was watching, gazed at passing girls.

The mother of a boy he'd played with in elementary school came up to him. "Willie! Look how big you've grown. I wouldn't have known you but for the name on your board."

"Hello, Mrs. Kleeve."

"Don't you love the science fair? What's your project? Show me."

Willie pointed to a box standing on a table. The box was full of sand. In one corner there was a pool of water, and, in another corner, there were some plants that looked like corn. In a third corner, an earth-colored blob kept banging against the side of the box.

Mrs. Kleeve crinkled her brow in the good-natured way that mothers of usual geniuses do. "Hmm. What have we here?"

Willie fiddled with the knot of his tie and looked down at his shoes. It took all his strength not to melt away like ice cream. It was just so embarrassing. His project was so simplistic; he saw that now. It was something a kindergartner could have done. No wonder he hadn't won anything. "It's a carbon-based life form," he said.

Mrs. Kleeve bent down and took a closer look at the blob. "Really? I haven't seen one of these in ages. Very unpredictable, aren't they? Still, there's always something to be learned from them. What's your question?"

"Given self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence, what will a carbon-based life form do?"

"And your conclusion?"

"Bang constantly against the side of a box."

Mrs. Kleeve straightened up and laughed. Willie felt his face grow hot. "Like I said," she said, "very unpredictable."

"Well, it was nice seeing you, Willie. You should come visit Howard sometime. I'm sure he'd love that."

Willie watched her walk over to Howard and his red- and blue-ribboned board. God, he hated Howard. God, he hated everything to do with Howard, including his mother and his

ribbon and his stupid self-contained expandable galaxy.

He looked over at his blob and frowned. He flicked the side of the box and sent a tremor running through it. The blob froze and then fell to the ground and gnashed its little teeth. Jeez. These were the stupidest life forms ever.

Mary Ellen Dilbeck slid up beside him. He felt her long hair graze his back. Willie liked Mary Ellen. She wasn't a usual genius for one thing. She was just a normal girl—normal, not ugly, and nice to him, which was a pretty much unbeatable combination. Plus, her breath smelled like the Red Hots she always sucked on. It made him a little dizzy, but he liked it.

“You see Howard Kleeve's board,” she whispered with a roll of the eyes.

Willie shook his head.

“It's covered with equations and twelve-syllable words. He's so full of himself. And, of course, he's advancing to State. Ten bucks say Bello nominated Kleeve before he even saw his board. I say, if no one can pronounce some loser dude's title, the dude definitely shouldn't win anything.”

Willie nodded. He tried to think of something clever to say, but all he came up with was, “Totally.”

“What'd you do?” he added.

Mary Ellen pulled out the wand of her lip gloss and applied it without even looking. “Something lame,” she said. “How about you?”

He pointed to the box. “Carbon-based life form.”

She bent down and peered inside. “Ah... it's so cute. Biped. That's advanced.”

Willie bent down next to her. “Not advanced enough. Bello gave me a fricking B-.”

Mary Ellen rolled her eyes again. “Mr. Bello is such a prick. I like your biped.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She put her hand in the box and picked up the blob—then she dropped it. “Gross. It peed on me.”

“It's got issues.”

“Why?”

“It has self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence.”

Mary Ellen stood up. Her mouth was wide open and her face was turning kind of purple, and it wasn't a good purple. It was a bad purple, a judging purple, the kind of purple girls' faces turned when teachers gave them bad grades and were forevermore cursed as evil.

“That's so mean,” Mary Ellen said. “It's scared.” She ran a finger across the back of the blob. “Poor thing.”

“Just because it's self-aware doesn't mean it has feelings,” said Willie, sounding sulky when he meant to sound funny. He smiled at Mary Ellen to try and make her understand, but that just made her purple face shine neon.

“It may not have feelings like we do, but it still has some sort of emotions.”

Now it was Willie's turn to roll his eyes. "I doubt it," he said, which was exactly the moment he knew he had truly blown it.

Mary Ellen's mouth dropped even wider, and then she just walked away, just straight away, sending her long hair rustling in outrage.

Willie banged his head against the table. Then he banged it again and again. When he stood up his friend Martin was staring at his blob. "Dude," said Martin. "Why is your carbon-based life form humping the box?"

Willie looked over at the blob. He nodded. "Ahhhhh."

* * * *

That night, even though the science fair was over and Willie was stuck with the fricking B-, he started to make another blob. His mother said, "What are you doing? You haven't even finished your math homework."

"It won't take long," said Willie.

"It better not. Math matters, you know. Math gives you options. Universities look at math grades more than anything else. Howard Kleeve is being recruited by top-tier schools—and he's fourteen."

Willie grunted.

"And you know why?" said his mother. "Because he's good at math, and he works hard. His mother told me he spends four hours a night studying math.

Blah, blah, blah, heard Willie. Blah, blah, blah. Howard ass-kissing Kleeve. Blah, blah, blah.

Willie took his carbon polymer clay and rolled it in his hands until it became warm and the brown mixture began to stick to his hands. Then, with his fingers, he formed the clay into another biped blob, a little smaller this time, about the size of his fist. The blob yawned, as if awakened from a long dream, and it stretched out its pudgy limbs. Willie gave it self-awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence and watched as little drops of salt water leaked out of its eyes.

He deposited the new blob on the other side of the box from the old blob and let them eye each other from across the distance.

Sometime later, after Willie finished his homework and watched a little TV, he went back to the basement to check on the blobs. Right away, he could tell something was wrong.

Something red was smeared all over the sand. The pool of water was tinted pink, and the new blob lay floating on top of it, dead.

"No," sighed Willie. He picked up the new blob between his thumb and forefinger and placed it face up in the sand. Its skin had gone gray, and its eyes looked like glass, and even though it was just a blob, Willie felt his skin crawl.

Then it dawned on him: Where was the other blob? His eyes followed the smear of red back

to the old blob's corner, but the blob wasn't there. No, the blob wasn't there at all, but a little way down—toward the corn—there was more red. Willie's eyes followed the color to a barely vibrating quiver of corn stalks. He pushed aside the plants. There was the blob, trembling and leaking salt water and making strange, soft, guttural sounds.

“What did you do?” whispered Willie. “You killed it.”

The blob trembled and leaked, trembled and leaked.

Well, this is ridiculous, thought Willie. These blobs are the worst blobs ever. Clearly, they can't handle any advanced psychological variables. Clearly, advanced psychological variables make the blobs go fricking nuts. That's what he should have told Mr. Bello. That's what he should have written on the board. Jeez. What fricking messes these blobs were. No wonder no one ever experimented with them anymore.

Enough was enough. This experiment was over. Willie picked up the smooth stone used as the basement doorstep and prepared to smash the blob. He lifted the stone high above his head. With a thud it hit the sand, sending grainy particles sailing in all directions. But the blob had moved. It had eluded the stone and now the blob was on its feet, running from side to side, tripping in the sand and standing up again and running some more. Its moan morphed into a shrill scream.

Willie watched the blob, its panicked arms flailing. He put the stone back by the door and regarded the blob some more. It was over at the wall now, pounding, pressing, jumping, looking for some means of escape.

Willie stood transfixed. He had never seen anything so pathetically desperate and frantic. Frankly, it freaked him out and made him want to eat pudding or ice cream. He'd even settle for stale, store-bought cookies. Didn't he have some stale, store-bought cookies? Hadn't he seen some in the cupboard? He would check it out. He would look for the cookies, eat them all, and then come back and kill the blob. Or maybe he would just kill the blob in the morning when it had calmed down. Absolutely. That was a much better plan. He would kill the blob in the morning. Decided, he turned off the basement light and left the screaming blob in the dark.

* * * *

Willie did not kill the blob in the morning. He slept in and his mom woke him yelling, “Hurry up! You'll be late! Blah, blah, blah.” After school he had marching band and homework. Plus, he had a couple of big tests to study for. So it was three days before he had time to deal with the blob. Even then, it was sort of an afterthought. He was looking for his gym shoes and went down to the basement to see if they were there.

They weren't. It almost seemed like the blob had been waiting for him. It fell down on its knees and started rocking back and forth. Willie bent his face toward the blob. The blob fell

prostrate onto the sand.

“At least you’ve calmed down,” said Willie.

Willie almost had to laugh. These carbon-based life forms. Too funny.

“Ok, little guy,” said Willie. “If it’s that important to you. But you can’t be this pathetic. That’s just sad.”

Willie looked at the blob and thought. “How about this?” he said. He put his hand on the blob and pinched off a bit of clay. He rolled it in his hand, spit on it, added some more clay, and worked with it until he had another blob. This time, when the new blob began to leak salt water, Willie put the new blob down right next to the first blob and stroked its head, gently.

When the first blob lifted its stubby arms to attack the new blob, Willie made a barrier with his hand. Then he stroked both blobs on the top of their heads. The old blob made another move to attack. Willie made another barrier with his hand and then stroked both heads.

The new blob toddled over to the old blob. It put its hand on the old blob’s head and stroked it. The old blob froze. Little bumps popped up from its skin. It stepped back, confused. Then, tentatively, it took small, crouching steps toward the new blob. It ran a stubby hand on the new blob’s waist. It brought its stubby nose close to the new blob and smelled. It ran its nose over the surface of the blob and something seemed to click in the old blob, something seemed to happen, and the blob ran faster and faster in circles around the new blob, touching and smelling it, until, suddenly, the old blob fell to its knees and wrapped its arms around the new blob, contented.

“All right,” said Willie with satisfaction. “There you go.” And he turned off the light and went in search of his shoes.

* * * *

A week later, Willie checked in on the blobs. A third blob was now in the box.

“Cool,” whispered Willie.

“No way,” said Martin when Willie told him. “You made a reproducible carbon-based life form? That’s, like, really hard. You should have done that for your science fair project.”

“I know,” said Willie. “Even Bello would have to give me an A for that.”

“Bello’s head would explode for that.”

By lunch, Willie was a god. Everybody knew about his reproducing blobs. Everybody knew what an amazing thing he had done and what a usual genius he actually was. Everybody wanted to come see the reproducing blobs, but Willie’s mother would have none of it.

“I don’t want a bunch of kids, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah...” she said.

Still, Martin came, and then a few other kids came, so at least people knew that Willie wasn’t making things up. He really had done something cool. He really did deserve everyone’s praise.

Well, everyone's praise but Mary Ellen Dilbeck's. Mary Ellen did not praise Willie. Mary Ellen wouldn't even talk to Willie.

"She still thinks you're mean," said Martin. "She's telling everyone that it's bad enough to give one blob self awareness and knowledge of its own impermanence, but to give it to a whole species is just evil."

"Species? It's three blobs."

Within weeks, however, it wasn't three blobs. It was seventy-five blobs. Then ninety-two blobs. Then one hundred and twenty blobs. With each passing day there were more and more blobs. Blobs filled the box. More than that, they wrecked havoc on the box—on each other. They fought over water. They fought over corn. They fought over blobs, over even the fricking sand, which was everywhere, which was worthless.

Willie would enter the room. He'd turn on the light. His shadow would pass over them. Only then would they stop their reproducing, their fighting, their weeping of salty tears and gnashing of tiny teeth. Only then would they still themselves and begin to tremble and bow, tremble and bow. Only then would there be peace. But then Willie would turn around, his shadow would lift, and—and wham!—and blobs would go fricking nuts all over again.

"Unpredictable." That's what Mrs. Kleeve had called them, and that's what they were. That's exactly what they were. But that was just the beginning. The blobs were dangerous. They were greedy and selfish. Yes, true, sometimes Willie witnessed intimate gestures of love and kindness. Mothers cradled babies. Strangers shared food, but that was nothing, that was incomparable to the constant grief they bestowed on one another. They beat each other for corn. They murdered for sand—fricking sand! They were obsessed with their own survival. It was as if they thought they were some valuable commodity, some precious gift, when they were a fricking science project. And not even a good science project: a B- science project.

It was enough to make Willie want to destroy the lot of them. "I mean, I don't even like them anymore," Willie told Martin. "They're totally annoying, and they take so much time. Every day I'm in there building onto the box, throwing them loaves of bread that they just fight over."

"Then get rid of them. There just blobs."

Willie sighed. He knew. He knew they were just blobs. He knew they were just ephemeral short-lived whispers. But they depended on him. "If I adopt a dog," said Willie. "I can't just take it back to the pound if it pees on my carpet."

"Sure you can," said Martin. "People do it all the time."

"I made the blobs," said Willie. "I'm responsible for the blobs."

Martin shrugged. "Whatever."

Willie's mother was less easygoing. "Those blobs have to go," she told him. "They are stinking up the basement. I'm telling you, they smell. It's disgusting down there."

"Carbon-based life forms have simple excretory systems. It's their physiology," explained

Willie.

“There are excretory systems and there is putrescence. Those blobs are putrescent. I want them out of the basement.”

“They’ve got to live somewhere.”

“Why? Why do they have to live somewhere? This was a science fair project. The science fair is over. And—since we are on the subject—let me say this. They take too much time. Do you think Howard Kleeve is spending all his hours babysitting carbon-based life forms? No. Howard Kleeve is studying math. Blobs are not going to get you into a good college, Willie.”

Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Just fricking shut up already, thought Willie.

“Out of the basement, Willie. Out of the house.”

“Ok. Ok.” Jeez. Like he needed this too.

He went down to the basement. He stared down at the blobs. He watched as they stopped what they were doing. He watched as they trembled and bowed.

“What am I going to do with you?” he said. “You’re a lot a trouble, you know that?” Then he picked up some screaming baby blob covered in sand and shit and handed it to its screaming mother looking for it in the cornfield.

At school now, Willie did nothing but worry about the blobs. He couldn’t kill them, but he couldn’t just let them spread their nasty pink blood everywhere either. And now he had to get them out of the basement too. Where the hell was he going to put these stupid blobs? What the hell was he going to do? It was too much. It was too much for one boy to deal with. At lunch, he dropped his head onto his lunch bag and kept it there even when his neck began to hurt.

The smell of Red Hots made him look up. There sat Mary Ellen. Right next to him. She didn’t look at him. Instead, she stared across the lunchroom. With a placid face that belied her biting voice, she said, “I hear you’ve got over three hundred of those blobs now. It’s not right, you know.”

He dropped his head back onto his lunch bag and felt his stomach sink down to his knees. “I know.”

“You should do something.”

He looked up to find her green eyes locked on his. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You’ve got to destroy them. That’s all you can do. With the knowledge you’ve given them, they must be constantly suffering. They must be constantly miserable. No primitive life form can live like that. They’ll go mad. They’ll kill each other.”

Willie gave her a shifty-eyed glance and looked back down.

“Oh. So they’ve gone mad already. Well, you really messed up, didn’t you?”

Willie nodded. “I can’t destroy them,” he said. “They want to live. They’re so scared. They’re so afraid. All the time they’re afraid.”

“That’s why you have to destroy them.”

“No,” said Willie. “There has to be another way.”

Mary Ellen stared out across the lunchroom again. “I used to like you.”

The stomach in Willie’s knees dropped down to his toes, leaving an enormous black void in his entire body. “I’ll fix it,” he muttered.

Mary Ellen walked away.

If only there were a way to fix it, he thought.

* * * *

When Willie got home the blobs were in full-scale revolt. The ones by the pool of water were throwing stones at a group wearing corn-silk necklaces. They didn’t even stop when Willie looked down at them. They didn’t even stop when he bent so close that he could see the blush on their cheeks and the gleam of their gnashing teeth. “Stop,” he said. But they didn’t stop. “Stop,” he said again, this time shaking the box with his hands so that the blobs all fell over. And they did stop. They stopped and looked up at Willie. They stopped and started to tremble and bow, but then one of the blobs stabbed a sharp stick into another. Blood squirted like water from a toy gun. It splattered the blob with the stick, and the blobs raged and screamed and attacked one another once more.

Willie fell back. He shook his head. He squinted and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand. “I don’t know what to do,” he whimpered. “Someone tell me what to do.”

* * * *

Willie’s mother found him in the basement, slouched in a corner staring up at the box, his fingers pulling hard on his hair.

“What’s this about?” she asked in a voice she didn’t use much anymore, a voice she’d used more when Willie was small, when everything she said didn’t sound like blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

He nodded at the blobs. “I don’t know what to do with them. I created them. I owe them, but they’re so...unpredictable.”

“It’s not like they have real feelings,” she said gently.

He twisted his neck back and forth and his face contorted in pain. “They have feelings,” he said. “They suffer. They want to live.”

She went and peered into the box. Her nose twitched and the corners of her mouth pulled down in revulsion. She looked at Willie. “Do you want me to take care of this for you?”

He looked closely at his mother. He remembered when she did things for him. He remembered when he trusted her for everything. “Don’t kill them,” he whispered.

She straightened her back and crossed her arms. “Leave it to me.”

He tilted his head. Not sure he wanted an answer, he stuttered, “Wh-what will you do?”
“Remember the farm we took Blackie to when we couldn’t take care of him anymore? They take mistakes like this too. It’s a nice place. They’ll be happy there. Like Blackie.”
Willie felt his soul shrink inside him, and he nodded.

* * * *

He was watching television and eating his second bowl of ice cream when she came home. She had a sort of sweaty, windblown look about her, and her shoes were covered in mud. He watched her pull them off one by one and drop them by the front door. Then he looked back at the TV, which was showing people in a house. The people, he couldn’t place them, but they were talking and their words seemed hollow, far away, like in a fever.

She came and sat next to him, and when she did, she reached over, gave his thigh two quick pats, and then started laughing and nodding at the TV. He heard her, but he didn’t. It was like the TV. So far away. He felt tears collect around his eyes, and he was so afraid they would leak out, so he blinked them back and stared hard at the people. Yes. He recognized them now. They were the funny people. The people he liked. The people who made him laugh. He took a bite of ice cream. Of course. He could tell now. He could tell what the funny people were saying. They were saying funny things. Very funny things. He would think about the funny things. He would laugh at the funny things. Like her. He would laugh, and she would laugh, and he would eat another bowl of ice cream. And that’s how he would do this. For as long as it took. And he would never go into the basement again.

About the authors

Gale Acuff has had poetry published in many literary magazines and had authored three books of poetry, available from Brick House Press. He has taught university English in the US, China, and the Palestinian West Bank.

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Margaret Finnegan teaches writing at California State University, Los Angeles. Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *LA Times*, *FamilyFun* and other publications. She blogs at <http://margaretfinnegan.blogspot.net> and is very grateful that she has never had to participate in a science fair, although she has been forced to endure them.

Originally from New Mexico, **Kim Henderson** lives with her husband and dog on a mountain in Southern California. There, she writes fiction and teaches creative writing at the Idyllwild Arts Academy. She received her MFA from the University of Montana. She has work forthcoming in the *Newport Review*, where she was a winner in their Bananagrams contest, and *The Southeast Review*, where she was a finalist in the World's Best Short-Short Story Contest. She has published work in