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Ornery Corn

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by

William H. Wandless

Mr. McCorkindale sized up Tim with a squint. He muttered to himself, rubbing his chin in an agitated way that made his fingers look like jittery worms when they popped through the froth of his bushy white beard. At last he crouched down, his gaunt body a stack of odd angles, and delivered his verdict.

“I reckon you’re big enough for me,” he said, “but you’ll have to be big enough for Ol’ Huck.” He gestured toward the plywood guardian that stood between Tim and the corn, the cutout of a straw-hatted, freckled boy with a thin smile and lifeless eyes that held one arm straight out to the side and carried a sign in the crook of his opposite elbow. *You Must Be This Big to Enter the Crazy Maze*, it read. Tim nodded, fidgeted, and looked over his shoulder to his folks.

“Give it a try, Timbo!” his father called between sips of cider. He was perched on a bench made of hay bales, and his feet dangled inches above the ground. “You’re as tall as you need to be! You’re the biggest of the Littles!” His mother nodded and smiled, steadying

Ginger, his little sister, as she tried to get the better of a caramel apple as big as her head.

Tim swallowed hard and turned to face Ol’ Huck. Mr. McCorkindale stepped to the side of the plywood boy, leaned against the forbidding sign, and watched with undiminished skepticism. Tim squared up to the outstretched wooden arm; it seemed impossibly high. He was wearing four pairs of socks and had pulled the strap of his baseball cap so tight that it sat high on his head. Would it be enough?

Tim straightened up, crossed his fingers in the pockets of his jacket, and took three big steps forward.

Ol’ Huck knocked his cap clean off.

Tim looked to Mr. McCorkindale. The rawboned farmer grinned toothily; and when he left his post beside Ol’ Huck, the plywood dropped back into its rut with a dusty thump. “Well, young fella,” he said, rubbing his hands together like they had never been warm, “if it’s okay with your folks, you’ll be the last to brave the Crazy Maze this season.”

“Way to go, Timmy!” his mother cried, and his father shot him an emphatic thumbs-up. Tim flipped his cap back on and wheeled toward the entrance, but Mr. McCorkindale caught him by the shoulder, his fingers light and spidery. He crouched down beside Tim, his knee digging a divot in the dirt. Gray eyes sparkled from the crags of his leathery face.

“You look like a smart boy to me,” Mr. McCorkindale whispered, albeit at a volume Tim was sure his parents could hear, “so you must have heard about the satchel full of money Ma McCorkindale lost in the maze. I’ve told that woman time and again that the Crazy Maze is no shortcut to anywhere, but she don’t never listen. She says she’s sure she left it out on the deck in the middle, but no one’s been able to find the deck, much less the money. My guess is that the corn decided to keep it, but what corn could do with five thousand dollars I’ll never know.” Tim’s mother chuckled, and Ginger yelped as the caramel apple bopped her in the nose.

“Young fella,” Mr. McCorkindale said, shaking his head, “I’ve given that money up for lost; if you find it, it’s yours to keep, okay?” Tim nodded so eagerly his cap fell off again, but the farmer held up a cautioning finger. “You’ve got to hold up your end of the bargain and keep it fair and square, though. Before you head in, you’ve got to make me three promises.”

Tim nodded again anxiously. The cornstalks beckoned, and he looked with concern at the descending sun.

Mr. McCorkindale pressed a shining tin whistle into Tim’s palm. “First thing: if you get lost--when you get lost--just blow this whistle. We’ll go round up some bloodhounds and see if we can’t find you by Christmas. You promise

you’ll blow this whistle if you get yourself in a pickle?”

Tim looked to his father, but he was trying to unstick Ginger’s caramel apple from the sleeve of his blue windbreaker. Ginger clapped her hands, considered them with a frown, and wiped them clean on the front of her gingham dress. Tim turned to Mr. McCorkindale, whose lips were twitching so much that his beard shivered. “I promise,” he said.

“Second thing,” Mr. McCorkindale continued, passing Tim a penlight. “It gets gloomy in there once the sun dips down behind the rows. Won’t be long from now. You can use this flashlight if it gets too dark, and it might even scare off the groundhogs if they’re none too hungry.” He turned to Tim’s folks and winked. “If you get caught in the dark, promise me you’ll turn this light on and wave it around, okay? We’ll come fetch you if you do.”

Tim looked to his mother, but she was busy tucking her hair back under a blue polka-dotted hairband, replacing the black one Ginger was chewing. His father was trying to interest Ginger in the caramel apple, but she was more fascinated by the spectacles balanced on the tip of his nose. Tim turned to Mr. McCorkindale, whose crow’s-foot wrinkles stretched all the way back to his ears. “I promise,” he said.

“Last thing,” Mr. McCorkindale said, leading Tim at last toward the maw of the maze. His voice dropped down low, so low Tim could barely hear it above the rustling of the rows. “This here is ornery corn,” he began, “a kind of corn that’s no good for nothing but mazing. My daddy’s granddaddy brought back the seed with him from Crete, an island where the first and finest maze was ever built. You see how those stalks grow real, real close together? That’s because

they're a tight-knit bunch and like to share those old Greek secrets, ear to ear. This corn knows the wickedest tricks that have ever been played, and it won't think twice about using them if you do the rows wrong."

Tim nodded, but the whooshing of gusts through the stalks had obliged him to guess at every third word. "I promise?" he ventured.

Mr. McCorkindale laughed a dry, rustling laugh, but when he looked down his expression was grave. "Here's what you've got to promise: whatever you do, promise you won't break the rows. This corn takes mazing frightful serious, and if you cheat to make it to the middle, there's no telling what it'll do. You promise to play it fair and square?"

Tim nodded, tucked the whistle and light into his pockets, and stepped over a fallen stalk that marked the threshold of the maze. "I promise," he said.

Tim waved to his parents, and they waved back. "Good luck!" they cried, and his father held the caramel apple while his mother helped Ginger to wave as well. "Apple!" she cried. Tim waved to Mr. McCorkindale, too, and the old man nodded back, his thumbs hooked in the straps of his overalls, his suntanned skin turned pumpkin orange as he gazed dreamily into the uncanny light of the late October afternoon.

"Have a care, young fella," he said, his vision fixed somewhere beyond the maze to the west. "Out here we're in the business of saying one thing and meaning another, but those rows take every word they hear real serious." He cocked an ear toward the corn and cupped a hand behind it, listening, then chewed his lip and nodded once again. He seemed so lanky that he practically swayed in the breeze. "Promises are ours to make," he said, "but they're the corn's to keep."

Tim backed into the maze; with every step Mr. McCorkindale looked scrawnier, more skeletal. The voices of his folks were softened when he was bracketed by the cornstalk walls of the opening row, but they bustled in a familiar, harried way that made him feel safe and brave. By the time he rounded the first corner and they had vanished from sight, their customary noise had become one with the rustling.

Tim darted down a straight passage that ran parallel to the hay bale benches. The stalks were close together, but he could see stragglers leaving Ma McCorkindale's Cider Shoppe between them. The path took a gradual right turn that ran along the perimeter of the maze, and Tim jogged along, his feet kicking up dust and papery husks. The wall of stalks grew denser as the path sloped inward, and before long he could not see the world beyond the rows.

At last he arrived at a right-hand turn that split into a three-way branching. Each of the paths snaked into the heart of the maze, but their curvature made it impossible to guess where they would end. A weathered wooden sign was propped against the stalks where the avenues met; it read *Welcome!* in stenciled white letters. Beneath it, in faded characters, Tim could make out an older greeting: *Kalós Orísate!* He paused to root around in his pockets and filled his lungs with crisp autumn air.

"It's Timmy Time," he breathed.

From his right pocket Tim produced a coil of blue fishing line. He turned to the wall facing the spot where the three paths branched, tied one end of the line to the stoutest stalk he could find, and looped the rest around his wrist. He was a little afraid of losing his way, and the line would help him find his way back. Better yet, it would tell him where he had

already been, so he would not waste daylight retracing errant steps.

From his left pocket he produced a photo of the Crazy Maze that had appeared in the newspaper. The image was grainy, and much of the maze was eclipsed by the McCorkindales, who waved from a platform in the foreground between the photographer and the first rows. The far side was out of focus, but the picture revealed two critical details. First, Tim knew the rightmost path at the branching where he was standing ran almost all the way back to the entrance; he had traced it with a pen, and it led to a tangle of dead ends. More importantly, he could tell that the deck where the satchel was supposed to be was decidedly not in the middle of the maze but tucked closer to the north wall. If Tim could keep the sun to his left and work his way toward the northern border, where Possum Hollow Road ought to be, he stood a fighting chance of finding that satchel.

Tim stuffed the picture back into his pocket, chose the leftmost path, and headed west. He held his right arm out behind him, letting the fishing line unspool through the loop of his thumb and index finger. Too much time had been wasted at the petting zoo and in the pumpkin patch. If he was going to find that satchel before dark, he would have to hurry.

"Five thousand dollars," he whispered, shaking his head in wonder at the sum. He reached a fork in the corn, chose the left path, reached a dead end, and doubled back. Tim had only a hazy awareness of what so much money might buy, but he knew it was more than he could earn by mowing Mrs. Brewster's enormous lawn two hundred times. All the things he wanted--a new bike, a tree fort, a pet iguana--would be within reach;

maybe he could buy a car for his folks or a swingset for Ginger. He would work out the details when he had the satchel, but he knew one thing for sure: five thousand dollars would change everything.

The right corridor dead-ended as well, concluding in a hay bale bench flanked by inflatable owls. Tim frowned, glanced at his picture of the maze, and raced back to the welcome sign. He picked the middle path, chose another wrong fork, and was turned back by a scarecrow that had lost a lot of straw. The other fork brought him to the intersection of four paths that whorled out of sight, and Tim picked one that looked like it might curl northward. Instead it returned him to the crossing, and Tim winced when he saw his blue line drawn taut between two stalks. He picked a new path, one that tended eastward, and found himself balked by another bench ringed with the browning meat of smashed pumpkins. "Darn it!" he spat.

Tim kicked a chunk of pumpkin rind, jogged back to the junction, and rushed down the last path. The sun had dipped lower, leaving half the avenue in shadow; worse still, it was directly to his right. He was heading south. "Please turn," he murmured, rushing down a corridor of corn that seemed impossibly long. The stalks to either side swayed lazily, beckoning in the direction Tim was taking, but the path concluded in a solid wall of corn, an angled shadow spilling across yet another hay bale bench.

Tim grimaced and slackened his pace. He had lost a lot of time, and he was sure he had traveled every path he had come across. He studied his picture and scuffled forward, hoping he had overlooked some avenue. Two dozen listless steps brought him to the end of the corridor, and when he raised his gaze

from his makeshift map his heartbeat fluttered. The path concluded not in a wall but in a curious crinkle, a set of tightly-packed turns like a squashed W. At the end of the zigzag a new row opened, one that headed north, and a cutout crow waved to him with a black wing. A sign was slung over its shoulder: *Fair and Square, Halfway There!*

Tim approached the crow, jumped up, and slapped its wing a resounding high-five. "Tiny" Tim Little would not be beaten by the Crazy Maze after all! A single step down the new corridor, however, brought him to a skidding stop. The fact that he could deliver a high-five to a plywood crow meant he had exhausted his supply of fishing line.

Although the exertion had warmed him, Tim shivered. He knew his parents were nearby, maybe even in earshot, but the thought of walking the maze in the dark made him feel a little sick. He turned back to the crinkle, considered the crow, then glanced down the long corridor. He imagined returning empty-handed or, worse yet, blowing his whistle and waiting for grown-ups to come to his rescue. "Don't be a baby," he spat, his face flushed. He screwed his cap back on, turned away from the crow, and strode down the lane with renewed determination.

At the end he came to an intersection, and he identified one dead end after another, marching purposefully down every new turning. With his heel he carved occasional exes and arrows in the dirt, hoping they would guide him in the absence of his fishing line. Tim felt like he had covered miles of maze, but he would cover every last inch if that satchel was at the end.

Another north-south corridor ended in a bench, one flanked by twin stands of unlit grinning jack-o'-lanterns. That

these pumpkins were intact struck Tim as a promising sign, but the length of the shadows was worrisome. He climbed atop the bench and squinted to the west, where it looked like the sun was impaled on a tall stalk like an orange lollipop. He turned north to see if he could spot the edge of the maze, or maybe even hear cars leaving McCorkindale Farm down Possum Hollow Road. He stood tiptoe and cupped his ear; he heard nothing. When he turned north again to jump down, however, what he saw surprised him so much that he toppled face-first into a bed of scattered straw. Dusty and dazed, he climbed back on the bale to be sure.

Before him, between the fluttering tassels of two yellowing stalks, he could see a wooden railing. The deck was less than fifty feet away.

Tim whooped and ran back down the path, fixing the location in his memory. Five turns and a second check told him he was closer, and a third check from a bench between scarecrows with overstuffed burlap heads convinced him was closer still. At the next dead end, a climb atop a cylindrical bale the McCorkindales had turned into a giant spider with long, bendy legs told him only twenty feet of corn stood between him and his prize.

He looped inward along new avenues, turning and reversing as pumpkins and scarecrows and cutouts taunted him from dead ends, guarding their stacked bale benches. Tim imagined himself as the tetherball at the playground, spinning in smaller and smaller circles as the rope coiled around the pole. Despite his giddy sense of progress, recalling the playground awakened new anxieties. What if Randy Lennox was right, and the satchel was a story the McCorkindales cooked up to get people to visit their

farm? What if Bobby Perkins was right, and a girl from Appleton found the satchel the first day the maze was open? Tim grimaced as he imagined an empty bag and a long walk back in the dark.

He orbited around the location of the deck, nervous circuit after circuit. His eyes were itchy, and he groaned a dozen times as each new bend led him to a dead end well short of his goal. He had begun to entertain the terrible idea that he had somehow spiraled away from the deck when he spied a sight that dismayed him. Up ahead he discerned a design in the dust--his own scattered footprints. Another turn confirmed his fear: the giant bendy-legged spider loomed before him, its pie-pan eyes downcast.

Tim struggled to maintain his composure. Was there another way to the center? Had he missed a turn? As he stood before the spider, drawing in ragged breaths, an appalling thought occurred to him. What if there was no way to the deck? What if Mr. McCorkindale warned him about breaking the rows because that was the only way to get to the middle?

The notion made Tim queasy, but he consoled himself with a practical, unhappy thought. "Anyone who made it this far," he muttered, "would have cut through the corn." If searchers had cheated, of course, the satchel was gone. Tears welled in Tim's eyes and carved trails down his dusty cheeks.

He had come so far; he had to know. He trudged toward the spider, wiping his nose with his sleeve as he ducked under its legs. He examined the corn, searching for signs of passage, certain he would see broken stalks. What he spotted instead caused him to blink, rub his eyes with his clean sleeve, and blink again. He reached in and parted two stalks to be sure: the corn in the rows was tightly knit not

because it was Greek, secretive, or ornery, but because Mr. McCorkindale, at least here near the center, had drawn stalks together with chicken wire. The prize of the maze was enclosed in a cage.

"You *sneak!*" Tim cried. "'Fair and square' my butt!"

Tim pressed the chicken wire and found it rigid. No wonder no one had claimed the money! Even searchers who discovered the deck and decided to cheat would be turned back by the reinforced cornstalks. Tim dropped down and tried the bottom of the fence; it curved upward when he pressed it, and the neighboring stalks shook. He lowered himself to his belly and smiled. For once he was glad to be the littlest Little.

Inch by inch he edged his way through the corn, and the stalks rustled and snapped as he pushed his way past them. He clambered to his feet as soon as his knees cleared the fence, toppling a half dozen stalks that fell across the pristine path before him. Tim dusted himself off, darted first to the right, peered down the row, and reeled back to his left. Two tight turns brought him to the foot of a flight of stairs that rose steeply up to a wooden deck.

Tim scaled the steps two at a time and lurched to a stop. On the floor of the deck, spruced with a blue ribbon, was a battered satchel with a rusted clasp. Tim wiped his palms on his knees; he could hear his pulse in his ears. The ribbon came free with a tug, and Tim unfastened the clasp with shaking hands.

Inside, bundled with rubber bands, was a pile of five-dollar bills.

Tim jumped up and raised his fists overhead. "I did it!" he hollered, "I did it!" Beaming, he looked to the east, where he imagined his parents and Mr. McCorkindale must be, but all he could see was an ocean of swaying stalks. With

sudden concern Tim wheeled to the west, where a crimson sliver of the setting sun was scarcely visible above the rows.

Tim grabbed the satchel and bolted from the deck, moving so fast that he skittered halfway through a gap in the corn at the foot of the stairs. Surprised, he backpedaled out and sat down hard on the bottom step. With the satchel clutched to his stomach, he peered down a tapering path that curled between the fallow stalks.

Curious, Tim ventured down the path, step after hesitant step. No chicken wire impeded his progress, although the row was narrow, half the width of all the others he had walked. It snaked through the corn, and the tassels above him seemed so close together that he felt he was walking down a tunnel.

The path concluded in a double-cutback, and Tim stepped sideways into a clearing, coming in from a diagonal alley tucked away in a corner. He turned to survey his surroundings, afraid he would have to go all the way back and squirm under the fence behind the giant spider. What he faced, however, was a hay bale bench, one flanked by twin stands of unlit grinning jack-o'-lanterns.

Tim's cheeks flushed with uncomfortable heat. Setting the satchel down, he climbed on the bench and peered north. The railing of the deck was visible in the deepening dusk; below him, he could see sneakerprints where he had kicked up the straw following his earlier fall. "Mr. McCorkindale did play it fair and square," he whispered. "I'm the sneak; *I'm* the cheat." A gust of wind roared across the rows, and it sounded to Tim like a long, disappointed sigh.

Tim hopped down and retrieved the satchel. The weight of the bag soothed him, but he felt woozy. Spots swam at the fringes of his vision, and the shadows

around him sputtered and squirmed. With fumbling fingers he withdrew the penlight, yet a dozen rapid clicks yielded no illumination. The moment he gave up, however, the clearing flared into brightness, forcing him to shield his eyes. Dazzled, Tim saw all the jack-o'-lanterns burn with eerie orange fire, their round faces scowling and turned toward him.

Tim ran. The cornstalks hissed and undulated all around him, and he stumbled down the rows as his eyes readjusted to the unwelcoming dusk. He scanned the path for the exes and arrows he had dug with his heel, but he could read nothing in the dust.

He arrived at a dead end and whirled, feeling as though eyes were watching him from all sides. He pulled the whistle from his pocket and blew a long, piercing note; his signal was answered by a far-off howl. As Tim stood at the end of the corridor, knock-kneed and trembling, he heard something coming toward him, crashing through the corn.

Tim sprinted headlong down the rows, making turn after turn with no sense of distance or direction. Twice he tried to burst through the stalk walls; twice he caromed off the hidden chicken wire. His ribs ached from the exertion, and he could not catch his breath. The satchel slowed him, but he could not let it go.

The Crazy Maze came alive. At the ends of some rows huge crows flapped and snapped at him, their beaks gleaming; at the ends of others, scarecrows tottered toward him, stick fingers grasping. In adjacent rows he heard whining and whomping, growling and groaning. Inky little shadows spilled from spaces between the stalks and scurried across his path, chittering and snickering.

Tim tripped and tumbled to the ground. In the sky above him something

shrieked, and he instinctively covered his head. He staggered to his feet and fell again--something had his ankle! Only as he crab-walked backward, kicking and flailing, did he realize he was tangled in his own fishing line.

Tim followed the line, crouching and shuffling as quietly as he could. He could scarcely see the blue filament but it was reassuringly taut, which convinced him he was heading out of the maze rather than toward the slack end somewhere in the middle. The thought that he might be blundering in the wrong direction made his stomach turn somersaults.

Tim was so intent on following the line, trying hard to keep low and ignore the wailing and baying behind him, that he bounced off the chicken wire once again when he reached the stalk to which the line was anchored. He regained his feet, whirled around, and held the satchel up to ward off any pursuer ready to pounce. When nothing did, he peeped through the loop of the satchel's handle. Before him, in white letters bright enough to see, a sign propped against the stalks said *Begone!*

If there was more writing underneath, Tim did not stay long enough to read it. He bolted down the row, gulping air and pumping his arms. A painfully gradual turn brought him back in sight of the entrance to the maze, and he expended the last of his energy bursting from the corn, barreling headfirst into the back of Ol' Huck, knocking the cutout flat.

Tim's mother gasped, Ginger clapped, and Mr. McCorkindale and Tim's father rose up startled from their seats. They rushed over to him, and Tim considered them dreamily.

"That must've been some scary maze," his father said, plucking Tim's cap from the ground. "I've never seen

you move so fast."

"Hey there, young fella, are you okay? You're white as a sheet." Mr. McCorkindale peered at him, his head cocked. "But would you look at that!" he said, pointing to the satchel. "It looks like your boy will be none the worse for wear for that little scare."

Tim at last recovered his senses enough to drop the satchel, duck under the farmer's offered handshake, and put the grown-ups between him and the Crazy Maze. He clutched his father's legs and listened, but there was no howling or crashing or shrieking. The corn rustled drily in the breeze. All he could hear were his father's exclamations as he opened up the bag and Mr. McCorkindale's wheezing laughter.

Tim's father tousled his hair, and his mother cheered him from the bench as she gathered up Ginger's things. Tim opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish, sorting through all the words he needed to say, his gaze fixed on the maw of the maze. Before he could speak, however, he felt Mr. McCorkindale's spidery fingers on his shoulder and caught a snatch of the farmer's conversation: "--and he went in there and bested the Crazy Maze, fair and square. Didn't you, young fella?"

Tim peeped around his father's legs and saw Mr. McCorkindale grinning, but he could not bring himself to meet the old man's gaze. He managed only a sheepish "Yessir" in reply.

"Want to know how I know?" Mr. McCorkindale asked, giving Tim a significant wink. "If you had cheated, that ornery corn would never let you off so easy." He shook hands with Tim's father and sauntered toward the rows. "Don't spend it all in one place, young fella," he called over his shoulder. "A heap of money like that changes just

about everything.”

Tim held his father’s hand and walked toward the hay bale bench, feeling queasy. Only when he was swept up in the bustle of departure did he begin to feel safe from the maze. His mother shook out his jacket and attacked him with wet- nap, and his father bounced Ginger on his knee and sang her an impromptu tune about sticky children. Although he felt an urgent need to talk about something, anything, the experience of the maze began to feel hazy, like it had happened to somebody else long ago.

Tim’s father scooped up Ginger, and she nestled her head on his shoulder, chewing on the collar of his brown jacket. His sleeve and her plaid dress

were stained with the vivid red of a candy apple. When his mother knelt down to wrestle Tim back into his coat, Ginger snatched her red hairband and tried putting it on.

Tim’s mother straightened his jacket, patted his pockets, and withdrew the tarnished copper whistle. “What’s this, Timothy?” she asked. Tim considered the whistle and turned toward the spot where Mr. McCorkindale was waiting.

Smiling slyly, the old farmer rubbed his beardless chin with one hand and waved with the other. “Y’all come back next year!” he called, and vanished into the corn. The wind kicked up again, rousing the rows of willowy stalks, and the sun beat down on Tim Little, high in the noonday autumn sky.

Editorial: This Issue

In this issue, we welcome some new writers with a variety of tastes and techniques. In fiction, C. F. Cooper and Kevan Bowkett debut with excerpts from their respective invented mythologies. In poetry, Chelsi Robichaud and Adam Massimiano offer new interpretations of the traditional “Leda” and “Undine” myths, while Kevan Bowkett gives us a different view of Saturn, monarch of the Golden Age. Joseph Murphy also provides three poems exploring the life and vision of a shaman. Among illustrators Raquel Finol offers a striking illustration of Boyer’s poem, “I am a Witch.”

In all categories, we also welcome back some previous authors. In fiction, William Wandless, who published “The Third Mercy” in *MC31* (2009), is back with magic (or is it?) in a contemporary setting. October Williams, whose previous contributions were three poems published *MC32* (2010), is now back with a short story, not without poetic adornment. Ryder Miller, who explored the relationship between modern life and virtual adventures in *MC36* (2014), has moved on to “Laser Cell Phones” and the exploration of Mars. In poetry, Nicolo Santilli, author of “On a Sea Wind,” *MC36* (2014), presents more poetic vignettes of the life of Saliessen, the bard of that series, and David Sparenberg, whose poems evoking the mythic qualities of nature, have appeared in the last five issues, offers us “The Wild God” for this one.

L. C. Atencio once more provides a cover and three illustrations. He also offers his invaluable help as associate editor, without which, very likely, this issue would not be appearing.