



Q&A with the Author  
**261**

Easter Eggs: Scenes Revisited by Emily Schultz  
**269**

About the Author & Illustrator  
**282**



## Q&A WITH EMILY SCHULTZ

**BACKLIT:** To start, why write about vintage video games? Were they a jumping-off point for your story or a layer you added later on?

**EMILY:** *Joyland* the novel began when I was twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, more than a decade ago now. I believe it started with the title — Joyland was the name of an arcade in my hometown, long closed — and I felt it would make a good title for something. I began to wonder what a book titled *Joyland* would be, and somehow became determined to write that book. At the time, I had written a short story collection, and it was on its way to being published, but I'd never attempted any kind of long-form work, so it was largely about the challenge. I wanted the story to mimic the movement and imagery of those games, and I felt that any coming of age story I might write would have to feature them because, as someone born in the '70s, they were such a vital part of my childhood. I felt they should be a part of my generation's literature as well.

**BACKLIT:** Following up on the subject of gaming, its influence is present in explicit ways like the chapter titles and some of the imagery, but it's also in the narrative form, which, as Chris says of video games, has "room for upward movement." How did *Joyland's* temporal skips and formal digressions (Chris and Laurel's DNA diagrams, Genevieve's encyclopedic entry) develop?

**EMILY:** It's funny you bring up the temporal skips and digressions. I liked the idea that early technology had these blips and burps. I wanted to explore what happens when the machine gets it wrong, like a record skipping or a screen melt-down, and how that might mirror in the story. In retrospect, I see them as me being young and cheeky as a writer, trying to prove myself and trying to break all the rules even when they didn't necessarily need to be broken.

My editor at ECW, Michael Holmes, and I discussed this technique. His feeling was that readers might feel cheated if the book broke out of sequence only at the end, and that the story should either be told more traditionally throughout, or that these nonlinear skips and blips should come with some regularity. I opted for adding several scenes of this nature. The DNA diagrams of Chris's imaginings were one. The interview with Christie Brinkley was another. The encyclopedic entry had always been there, the video game Dig Dug funeral in the sky, and also the boys' futures. These scenes are "wrong" in that they are jolting in nature and pull readers outside of the created world I've asked them to believe in. Yet I have to admit, they are still some of my favourite parts, even though I know that.

I think that readers (and reviewers) were split; people really loved these elements or really disliked them and felt that I had veered away from the story's natural truth in order to do something showy or forced. Point of view is one of the hardest things for a young writer to learn, and I don't know if I learned or

understood p.o.v. really until I had to teach it for several years in a short story class. I can see now that part of me wanted to write an omniscient story, and another part a story that was in third limited (from Chris's view or Tammy's view exclusively). I had written many drafts of *Joyland* — four or five years' worth — before the book came into Michael's hands at ecw. So the book is, ultimately, a bit of a mash.

I still really resist traditional narratives, so I don't think that the straight-up coming of age book without any of these diversions would be better, just different. At the same time, I wonder what that book would look like. There are infinite ways to tell any story. I decided that for my alternate scenes for this edition I would attempt to tell it straight — without any jumping into the future — to try to give those readers who really felt I'd cheated them a glimpse of what their ending might look like.

**BACKLIT:** *Joyland* is set in 1984, a time when video games, like Chris and Tammy, are on the cusp of big changes. Why did you choose that period? Do you think the same story could have taken place today, when technology can't be contained in gaming consoles and boarded-up arcades?

**EMILY:** There's the obvious ominous feeling of the year thanks to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The video game boom was really earlier, 1980–1982; stocks fell rapidly in '83. If we think of those early '80s years as a kind of heyday, then the natural disillusionment should come around '84. I wanted the book to be about loss of innocence, so this fit for me. The style, values, and focus of the '80s changed around that time too. When you look at decades and eras, that turnover year, not everything stops being something and starts being something else. A lot of the early '80s were still like the '70s; by the time the middle of a decade comes, that's when we tend to stop and notice that things have changed.

I see this period as the beginning of the technology we

know today in terms of ordinary people beginning to focus on the home computer. Schools were buying computers and making it a special part of our education, and people began talking about when we would all learn on computers all day long and go to school remotely. This seemed insane at the time! But even between the writing of this book and its re-release, technology has leaped ahead again. The internet, and our use of it, has grown in ways I couldn't predict. Now, if I wanted to, I could find almost any tv clip from the '80s online at YouTube, whereas when I was writing *Joyland*, I had only my memory and the memories of those around me, and the resources of magazine archives, video stores, and libraries. There were fan sites and databases, but only a handful. Wikipedia was just being launched in 2001 — the year I wrote the first draft of *Joyland*.

I don't know if I can say what a coming of age story melded with today's technology should look like. That may have to come from someone younger than me, someone growing up now, for whom these things are natural and taken for granted, rather than someone who is absolutely agog at how we communicate and how quickly things change.

**BACKLIT:** It seems that Chris is the main agent in the action, so what inspired you to write from Tammy's perspective as well? Did you find alternating between the two perspectives a challenge in terms of voice? Was one character easier to write?

**EMILY:** At the time, I thought it was very important to have two main characters; I wanted to write for both men and women, something I worry less about these days. Chris is definitely the driving action of the novel, but Tammy is its eyes and ears. The novel needed a conscience, and that's where Tammy came in. It had more to do with the ages of the characters than with their genders, but I definitely found her easier to write. For me, the story began and ended with her. She's much more like me, although I admit that I am in parts Chris too: competitive,

introspective, yet reckless.

One of the things I wanted to get down on the page with these characters was the bigness of emotion at those ages (eleven and fourteen) before I got older and forgot what it meant to be there. Because of the complexity of those emotions I see it as an adult book about childhood. Although I wrote it between twenty-seven and thirty-two, I felt in a rush to try to preserve as much as I could remember of youth. I'm glad I did, because every year those worlds feel farther and farther from me.

**BACKLIT:** Though Chris is used to being in total control in a game environment, he discovers that the real world offers no such luxury, and his involvement in Adam's death demonstrates the unpredictability of the future, the sudden cruel shifts that can derail a life. Yet the book's final paragraph takes a different perspective on this uncertainty, speaking to possibility and "the beauty of the future." How did such sweetness and optimism come out of such a dark story?

**EMILY:** The book is about survival. All video games are about survival. You can play against a partner, but most times you are really playing against yourself. The characters see the world change, and see how their actions have consequences, but in the end, they themselves have survived and this is enough — to see and to witness the world as it continues. I didn't want an easy moral code to the book. I grew up in a small town not unlike the fictional one of South Wakefield. Although to some extent this depiction is an exaggeration in the tradition of the Gothic, truthfully there was not a lot to do there, and violence was inevitable.

**BACKLIT:** You decided to provide a couple rewritten bonus scenes with this edition. Why did you choose these scenes specifically, and what are you trying to offer with this new approach?

**EMILY:** I chose the climax of the book for rewrite. I didn't want to change what happened so much as how it was told. This

is the part of the book where the temporality shifts, everything falls out of sync, and I wanted to provide a more straightforward telling to see if the same events and emotions could be conveyed. Much of it is the same, and some readers may not see a lot of difference, but I had to try it. I also wanted to see what would happen if I made Chris slightly less passive in this scene, so that we see him taking more of a role in his own revenge.

**BACKLIT:** You've written two other novels since finishing *Joyland*: how did it feel to return to the world you'd created? Has your work since then made you see this first novel differently?

**EMILY:** I still have a depth of feeling for this novel, complex good and bad feelings, like a first love. I don't want to say I worked harder on it than *Heaven Is Small* or my new novel, *The Blondes* (which is still forthcoming), but I worked at it the way you can only work at a first novel: obsessively, in such a way that you and the novel are one and the same, and if it doesn't succeed (or you don't see it as succeeding) it will literally kill you. Now, my work comes from me, but there is much more of a distinction between how I see myself and what I produce.

**BACKLIT:** You also published a Trillium Award–nominated collection of poetry, *Songs for the Dancing Chicken*, in 2007. Does your work as a poet inform your fiction writing, or do you try to keep the two separate?

**EMILY:** In this case, I was still very much developing as a poet and considering myself one, so I do think that *Joyland* is informed by that love of poetry. The poetic influence is there in glimpses in my other work, but I read much less poetry and aspire to it less than I used to. There was a time where you couldn't catch me without a volume of poetry in my purse. Lately, I'm more likely to be dipping into short fiction than poetry — still an abbreviated form relying on symbolism, but with stronger narrative.



**BACKLIT:** *Joyland* features gorgeous line drawings by Nate

Powell. How do you think the images shape or complement the text? How were you involved in the process of selecting or developing the illustrations?

**EMILY:** After conversations with Michael at ECW, I approached Nate Powell. My thought was that the novel was a time capsule of youth, and I liked the idea of the winking gesture of adding illustrations for each chapter, similar to young adult vintage mystery books. From my work as an editor at *Broken Pencil* magazine, I was familiar with Powell's zines, comics, and graphic novels. *Tiny Giants* and *It Disappears* had just come out from Soft Skull Press. I liked his dark, desolate style. His illustrations had a lot of emptiness in them; his focus on things like a lamp post or telephone wire really spoke to me as it was the same kind of microscoping detail I was also trying to deliver in my prose. Although he's lived in several places across the United States, he had recently moved to Indiana; terrain-wise the Midwest is similar to the flat southwestern Ontario I was trying to portray.

**BACKLIT:** Interestingly, a book that combines video games and literature gave birth to an online literary publication and a digital-only imprint. Tell us a little bit about how the digital iterations of *Joyland* came to be.

**EMILY:** I purchased the domain name Joyland for the novel and it acted as my author webpage throughout the book's initial run. But after a few years, it felt vain to continue to promote only myself. My husband (and now co-publisher at *Joyland* the magazine), Brian Joseph Davis, suggested that I use my website as a vehicle for something else and begin to publish others there. I saw a lot of my peers wanted to write short but due to industry pressure, were struggling to write long-form, so even though *Joyland* was once the name of a novel we decided to dedicate the web space exclusively to short stories. He and I were doing a lot of touring and promoting our own books and meeting others



and peering in on different literary and art communities, so the idea emerged to arrange the writing on the website by location. I feel that this part of *Joyland* the magazine is true to *Joyland* the novel in that both are very much about place. We networked with writers across Canada and the United States who would act as editors. We began with four regions and eventually expanded. We hadn't met everyone in person who would come to be involved, and there are still a couple editors we only know in the virtual world. The magazine has since spun off into an ebook series in partnership with ECW Press.

We began and grew the magazine with very few resources other than the people who agreed to be involved. For someone who wrote a novel about technology and is now a digital publisher, I'm really not a tech-savvy person . . . but the thing about the internet that excites me is that it's a folk culture. It's written by its users, it's written by everyone.



**EASTER EGGS:  
SCENES REVISITED  
BY EMILY SCHULTZ**

*[Continues from "Joust," Player 1, page 214]*

Ball-capped and snickering, the gang grabbed their BMXs. David and Kenny popped wheelies, each riding a couple of metres on back tires. Dean wove in and out, wheel wiggly. Reuben stood on the back nubs of his brother's bike. He held onto the plastic seat by his fingernails, his bovine body still for once, unquivering, laughter quelled. Chris brought up the back of the pack, eyes on his running shoes — still too white for the first day of school, no matter how he tried to scuff them.

The streets topped, wobbled, spun, the details of them seeming to slow. Chris felt it — anticipation of a thing before it happened. It was like the holding down of a spinning record. The needle sunk to silence, then — letting it go again — bobbed back up, all noise. Chris observed the activity in the streets as if he had never travelled them before. He drifted across four lanes of St. Lawrence Street without looking. Cars throbbed in

blue-veined lanes, but delayed for the boys. Chris's gaze lingered on the back of Kenny's grey T-shirt, its shifting set of wrinkles. The bells in the chicken take-out place tinkled under Lego-red roofing as a girl of ten or eleven raced out to an idling car where someone sat waiting, the paper bag not yet acquired, bills sticking up from the girl's fist like some unrequired bit of punctuation — a physical question mark. The girl's hand split into symbol — V-ed — numbers. A nod. She turned to the car for answer and back again quickly to her quest.

Chris cruised on. Sometimes he saw himself as if from a distance, and particularly this morning. He could feel the sweat sinking into his clothes. He imagined someone in another town, far away, also riding his bike on the last day before high school — someone who had no idea where Chris's town even was, just as Chris had no idea where this imaginary one might be — riding with all the earnestness of feeling these final moments of summer. He would be in one of those places named on the packages Chris turned over in the grocery store to see where the thing had been made: Battle Creek, Tilbury, Strathroy, Grimsby, Oshawa, Belleville, or Boucherville, Quebec. If Chris could find this invisible doppelganger, he wondered, would the kid tell him it was a good plan? This thing he intended to do? Would he say, "Yeah, man, go for it"?

The sidewalk cracks ushered a soft *thwack* into the motion of Chris's vehicle. *Thwack, thwack, thwack* . . . His mouth filled with warmth, the dry salt of fear. Thoughts arrived without words, a series of fast-play pictures, visual *perhaps's* and *possibly's*. Chris yanked on his handlebars, leaned back, and left his wheel to lift. When the gang passed his corner, he ducked his head, as if his mother or father could see him from the living room window. Then, so as not to look like a mama's boy, he gathered the cracks from his tongue, leaned to one side and spat.

Kenny dropped back.

“Are you really —”

Chris looked at him.

“Are you really —” Kenny stammered again beneath Chris’s appraising gaze. “What are you gonna do?” Kenny managed finally. His eyes blinked repeatedly behind the lenses of his glasses. He was offering Chris an out.

Chris shook his head like it didn’t matter, pumped the pedals hard, and soared ahead, leaving Kenny behind. “Pussy,” he said not entirely beneath his breath.

The cardboard in the windows of Joyland had begun to peel. One day soon they would fall inward. The masking tape would let go, its tongue suitably numbed with the grit of old paint and sill dust. It would decide it had had enough, lean back, allow itself to crumble to the empty floor. When the boys pulled their bikes up alongside the old squat, though they had been there just the day before, Chris noticed for the first time that the outside sign had been removed. He wished for a second he had thought to steal it — then the thought was as lost as the sign; they turned the corner of the building and saw Adam Granger. They pressed hand brakes and foot brakes, skidded softly to a stop.

He lounged against the back wall of the arcade, his nose in consultation with his knees. He straightened when he heard them, his face pinched and red.

“Gonna lose your lunch, Granger?” David called.

Adam pulled up his T-shirt and used it to wipe the sweat from his forehead. His belly was thick and pale, a brown-hair spiral in the centre around his bellybutton. Against the tongue of the Rolling Stones’ mural, even Adam was small. Chris watched as he pulled back his elbows, forming fists, and shook his head. His whole throat jostled with muscle, the cord along one side of his neck taking the opportunity to introduce itself to

the gang of onlookers. A preparatory cracking was issued. His hair flicked back with reinstated confidence. He shrugged his shoulders. He swung his arms in circles as if he were warming up. His blotchiness faded.

“I been waiting to pound this fucker for a long time,” he said.

Chris stared at Adam’s face. Everything in the universe slipped a little bit, that feeling again of things being out of sequence. Chris wouldn’t call it fear. He glanced at David, then Dean. Kenny’s gaze met his for a second. The boys all paused, perhaps to consider what they did or did not know of Adam. Even Reuben, who had one foot down as if he intended to step off the wheel of his brother’s bike, stopped, a leg on the ground, the other still positioned for travel.

“H-how come?” The question came from Kenny.

Adam put his arms out, his hands hooked together. His knuckles popped. “Genevieve Cartier,” Adam said, as if they surely had to have heard of her.

Apparently, in the bungled cosmos of Grade Nine — yes, even Marc Breton’s was bungled, Adam assured them — there existed a girl named Genevieve Cartier. “He had this crush on her, and she was, like, his science partner” was how Adam put it.

“Just like your beanpole buddy, J.P., Marc was — at that time — this hundred-and-twenty-pound dork who sweated acne.”

Adam said that Marc’s behaviour toward Genevieve was that of a psychopath. Marc had shown some guy in his first period English class a story he had written about a girl, cleverly named “Genevieve,” highly derogatory. Because it had sex in it, the assignment got passed around secretly underneath desks. Marc seemed to have been smart enough not to hand it in for class assignment in the end. “But then, at the same time,” Adam said, squinting off into the distance, “Marc’s trying to impress

this girl. He devotes half his lunch hour to pumping iron to bulk up, and the other half to cold showers.

“By afternoon science class he’s so exhausted all he can do is lie across the desk and watch her as she does all their work. He don’t say nothing to her, not a word. I dunno if it’s because he’s petrified she’ll think he’s stupid, or if he’s freaked she’ll see how much he wants her.”

According to Adam, Marc watched Genevieve shooting light through a prism, recording results of yellow, blue, magenta. He watched her marking down point-form observations on their assignment sheet. He watched her decorate her binder with word balloons and smiley faces and song lyrics and green felt-tip exclamations. He watched her face in the glow of the tremulous blue of the Bunsen burner, and her hands shaking when she sliced open the mouse they were given for dissection, unfurling the red pendant of its stomach on the long grey chain of its entrails. All of second semester freshman year passed without incident. Marc laid with his head on his arm across the desk and watched through half-closed lids.

“I don’t know, maybe this guy’s never jerked his dick over a real live girl before. We *were* only fifteen.” Adam balled his fist and wiped something out of his eye.

The boys stood silently, waiting for him to go on. David set his bike down on its side and sat on a parking block. Chris dropped his head, stared down his jeaned legs at the pavement beneath his bike and remembered Laurel Richards’ hair against his cheek.

“I’m at this bush party —” Adam said. “I forget whose, Somebody VanderSomething. I’m hanging out with Danielle Desrosiers from my French class. She’s good friends with Genevieve. ‘Will you do it for a beer?’ Genevieve goes to me, so I go, ‘What? Sure.’ I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do. I just want another. So I go up to Marc and I say, ‘Genevieve

Cartier wants to know if you'll go out with her.' I don't know, maybe I elaborated a bit at that point. I might have, I can't say —" Adam held his hands up at chest height as if to push something away. "But come on, it's too good. I think she might have been serious — maybe all that time he spent at the gym paid off — but sometimes that question is a joke. I guess that's how this fucker took it cuz the next thing I know I'm buzzed at a party and then I'm fucken flat on my ass on the hard ground and this guy's hauling off . . ."

"What happened with the girl?" Kenny demanded, shifting from foot to foot.

"Hell if I know. Anytime I see him since then, we've always got some words. I wasn't exactly a runt myself, but shhh-i-i-i-i-t, I couldn't see out of this eye for a week." Adam raised a hand at it. "I can tell you one thing, he and Genny weren't science partners again."

Kenny checked his digital watch. Chris could feel his sweat turn cold.

"I'll tell you another thing," Adam said, clearing his throat and pointing his finger at the imaginary chest of an imaginary person in front of him, "I see that guy, it's war."

The plan was far simpler than any of them wanted to admit. When they'd originally come up with it, Chris and Kenny had done away with all unknowns — reduced it to something fool-proof and easy: lay in wait for Marc, knock him off his bike, and take a swing at him. It wasn't noble, but the element of surprise had excited them.

Mounting their bikes, they whirled over gravel again, around the corner, loop-the-loop past the park. Only this time, the sidewalk cracks that vibrated up through Chris's wheels made his stomach uneasy. The cul-de-sac where the Bretons

lived was a pale loose mouth; Running Creek Road straight as a ruler, just there, around the bend, on the other side. Dean and Reuben took up posts on the corner, where they could see all the way down St. Lawrence Street. The other boys fanned out quickly. David and Kenny hid behind the hedges on the left. Adam took shelter to the right. A rusty, chancrous van was parked conveniently just beyond the lip of the crescent.

Chris threw his bike on the lawn. His only job was to tell J.P. he was heading over to the school for registration. He shouldn't do it — he knew he shouldn't — it would only cause more trouble later. It was too late. The door opened.

“Hey man.”

Chris swallowed. “Ready to go?”

“Good a time as any.”

“Your brother coming with us?” Chris had got it out. His first line. *It sounded good*, he thought. *It did, didn't it?* He congratulated himself — an inaudible flurry of self-doubt and backslaps.

“Yeah, right.” J.P. scoffed.

“I thought he could drive us. . . .” Chris fumbled from the porch. The words hummed on his lips, burned into an invisible swelling, as if a fist had tried to force them back in.

“He doesn't get his car 'til tomorrow. Besides, you got your bike right there.” J.P. took off his ball cap and swatted it against his leg. “Hold on.”

J.P. disappeared down the hallway to Marc's room.

Too late, Chris realized that on any other day he would have followed him in. He stood just inside the doorframe under the flat-line smiles of Mr. and Mrs. Breton. Suspended at eye level, the 16x20 print shone with Windex: against the dark wood panel of the foyer a dark wooden frame. In it, younger versions of J.P. and Marc stared at Chris with adolescent penny-candy grins. Marc's hair was as unruly as J.P.'s, his scalp not yet sheered

mean. It had only been six months since he shaved it, and now Chris couldn't picture him any other way. Even J.P. seemed alien here. The excitement of having a family photo taken had snuck into J.P.'s face, his sweatshirt hood crimped along the seam where it had been pulled tight by a nervous hand. His neck burst from it, taut and beaming. Down the hall, Chris could hear them, their voices through the wall.

It was taking too long. He glanced back over his shoulder, Adam's bike tires obvious beneath the van. He wondered if Marc had the same angle, could see them from the bedroom window.

Chris heard J.P.'s voice lift through the wall, his pitch heightened. "Yeah, but —" The words stopped short. The bedroom door opened.

"Get out of my way, limp dick." Marc brushed past Chris, left a trace of elbow under his ribs. Marc made his way out of the house, the loose screen door swinging back, banging the frame.

J.P. stuck his hand out, stopped it before it could hit again, pushed it open. Without saying anything, J.P. gestured for Chris to pass him, his Adam's apple bobbing like an egg.

Chris's footsteps jolted through his legs as he bounced down the porch steps. The world felt unnaturally flat. Chris moved out into the yard. From where Chris stood, already Marc looked smaller.

Marc threw a hairy thigh over the crossbar of his bike in a smooth, easy motion. Coasting down the driveway, every gesture entrenched with strange arrogance, Marc's shoulders broke out of the long black muscle shirt. He leaned back. Chris grabbed his own bike and launched onto it. Marc's hand fumbled assward, perhaps to grip the back of the seat as he rode. Shirt hem flapped above relaxed-fits. He instantly tucked it back in place over a hard lump of hairbrush. He neared the mouth of the crescent. The bike tire tick-tick-ticked over the cement.

Chris rose up on the bike, his butt hovering above the seat as he careened forward. He couldn't say whether J.P. followed or not, whether David or Kenny were appropriately stationed, whether Dean and Reuben had abandoned the mission entirely or were currently parked on some distant piece of curb, watching. When Chris looked back he imagined the moment would rubber wheel its way home without incident, would press the handbrakes before follow-up. But it didn't. Chris's throat and head infused with heat. Marc groped at his back pocket again and this time Chris could see something there, oblong and silver.

Chris opened his mouth to yell — to stop it. Marc's hand wrapped around the thing in his back pocket, which Chris saw very clearly now. It was not a brush because, in spite of the Bretons' foyer photograph, Marc had a quarter-inch buzz cut. Before Chris could make a sound beyond an inhalation, Marc's front wheel shot past the snout of the van.

Adam was standing there, his own bike already resting on the pavement. He reached out. There was a swerving of bodies and bike as Adam descended. On the other side of the circle — what seemed a long way away — David and Kenny rolled out to watch. Silence battered Chris's ears. He braked instinctually.

Swiping an arm around Marc's neck, Adam pulled to topple him from the ten-speed, managed a good jab. His fist cracked against Marc's face in a splinter of knuckle and skin. Marc's bike seemed to float. Marc reached backward again — even as he began to waver, even as his head snapped. His fingers ratcheted the thing from his back pocket.

It was a handle. Even before it came completely into sight, Chris knew that it was longer than a girl's hand and as heavy as cast iron. Marc's back pocket slowly unsheathed the thing — the intricate *Star Wars* light sabre replica, suddenly a basic piece

of lead pipe. Chris opened his mouth again to warn them. He opened his mouth. There was no sound.



Chris realized he hadn't moved, wasn't moving, was in fact the only one who had stopped dead. A thick fire reached a thick hand through Chris's throat. With one leg raised on the pedal, the other flat on the ground, Chris watched it all bloom, the colour of blood on concrete.

Marc's bike clattered to the ground and he pitched with it straight into Adam, his hand thrusting forward suddenly. The glinting nub of metal smashed into Adam's open mouth. A loud crack shook the air — the shock of teeth and bone exhumed from skin and gum. Before the red bled downward, Marc had brought his fist back for a second blow.

The hilt of the sabre landed with a dull thud against Adam's temple. Adam toppled into a swatch of red. His forehead palpitated with fleshy matter, burst like an overstuffed cushion. There was a warm, soft gush — a rush of things Chris would later claim he had not seen.

Chris yelled, but he didn't know it. He heard the sound, but it had no words and he didn't recognize it as his own. He reached out and caught Marc's arm. He did it without even knowing he was close enough to do so; one minute he was standing, straddling his BMX, watching, and the next he had edged forward and intervened. Marc jerked back hard, the metal flying out of his grip. It rang across the concrete. Then he flailed out. His knuckles grazed hard off Chris's jaw. Chris reeled backward, his bike toppling.

"What are you *doing*?" Marc spat on the road, glared at Chris, as if he was responsible for the punch he had just been dealt. Marc's face was like a hammer, one small, bright freckle of blood clinging to his cheek. Marc picked up his ten-speed,



swerved the front tire around one of Adam's bent legs. Shakily, he swung himself over the crossbar and rode away without taking his hands off the handlebars.

Chris stepped over his bicycle tire, stood over the body. Blood rang in his ears and he tasted it along his gums.

"Are you okay?" he shouted more than once, although he knew no one could answer.

His knees gave out and he touched Adam's shoulder to steady himself. Chris crouched over the boy that lay in the road.

[Continue from "Berzerk," Player 1, page 229]

Chris had never known that being stuck in a room could be so excruciating. He had always been sent to his bedroom as punishment, but in his room he had all his stuff. This was something else entirely. The boys sat on a bench, partitioned off from the main room by brick and thick glass. None of them spoke. In the end, Marc broke the silence, far away, down the hall.

They could see him as he was brought in. J.P. stood up and went to the window that looked out on the hall. The rest of them remained seated.

David jabbed Kenny in the ribs. Kenny didn't respond. He gaped at Chris, as if unaware he was being prodded. From his left side, Dean glared at David, pushed over on the bench away from him, into the space J.P. had just vacated. On the other side of Chris, Reuben stared straight ahead, bouncing his knees anxiously so that the whole bench jiggled.

Kenny had been the only one to keep his cool after the blow. The rest of them had stood staring down at Adam. Wretched David, ever cool, even tried to help him up, saying, "He's fine. It's nothing." Although after David reached out to touch Adam's hand, he turned and walked away, swearing, shaking his fingers as if trying to get something off himself.

Kenny had run straight into the Bretons' house for the phone, hadn't thought twice about throwing open their front door and dashing through their hall. Now, the shock reversed its effects: David scoffed behind J.P.'s back; Kenny zoned out; and Chris — all Chris could think was *How had he known?*

Chris shuddered. It didn't seem to matter that he hadn't particularly liked Adam, or that he had only known him for the span of one summer. Chris rubbed his jaw, tentatively. Where Marc had socked him, a small thistle of pain beneath the bone. With the bench jiggling from Reuben's bouncing, the wall behind Chris's head statically clutched at hairs.

Escorted by two officers, Marc walked past them. He yielded like a wax figure. Where Adam had struck him, a white fist-shaped mark had begun to puff into four distinct spots, the knuckles imprinted in a clean manifestation of their now-deceased owner. It took Chris a minute to process the sound that came out of Marc. He was choking on it, an octave too high, as if he had sucked helium from a valve. The dreadful squalling seized the station. Teeth that refused to open, refused to let the poor noise go, stopped it short.

J.P. put a hand up to the glass, as if to knock on it when Marc went by, but as he came closer, J.P. stiffened. He stopped short, his hand a half-inch away from the partition. His brother passed.

Chris put his head down and lay an arm across his torso. Beneath him the bench thrummed. A spike of bile jolted in Chris's throat. He willed it back down. Already he knew — in his brain, he knew — that they would be sent home soon enough. A few questions. A stern talking-to. They were accessories, J.P. even more than Chris, but J.P. would be fine. Even Marc would be fine. At most, they'd send him to a counsellor. It was a clear-cut case of self-defence. Adam had attacked him; Marc had fought back.

But that didn't matter.

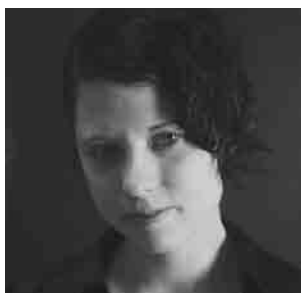
Unwilled, it came to mind, set to repeat. A terrible theme composed of heat. Hand scrabbling backward. Handle unsheathed. Muscles plunging into red. How did it happen so quickly? His idea, however backward it had gone. *His*. He heard Adam say to no one in particular, "I see that guy, it's war." He heard Marc say specifically to him, "What are you *doing*?"

Sweat fled Chris's forehead and fell to floorboards between his white runners. A faint pink residue still clung to the brand new rounds of rubber. From shoe to floorboard, imprint of dead boy blood.

A series of breathy hard-kicked hiccups began inside Chris. He struggled to swallow them, one by one, back down. *Don't make me go to the funeral*, he thought like a litany. *Don't make me. Go.* He swallowed, gulped again.

Outside the holding room, the hallway clock continued its parade of hesitant steps.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR



EMILY SCHULTZ is a writer living in Toronto and New York. She is also the author of the novels *Heaven Is Small* and *The Blondes*, the short story collection *Black Coffee Night*, and the Trillium award–nominated collection of poems *Songs for the Dancing Chicken*.

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