THE HEMLOCK

A Literary Arts Journal



Issue 08 | Summer 2025

Editors' Note

Welcome to the '**Summer 2025 issue'** of **The Hemlock**. Every issue we put together feels like opening the windows and letting new voices, new visions, and new imaginations flow in. This one carries the warmth of the season—poems, stories, and images that hold both tenderness and edge, works that remind us of joy, sorrow, memory, and discovery.

The poetry here is rich with emotion and resonance. Noah Borromeo's '*Mary'* lingers with a quiet endurance, while Cassey Abella's *'I Steal People's Corsets'* unravels intimate, almost invasive closeness. Basil Payne's *'Spruce follows, almost incessantly*' gives shape to grief's shadow, and pieces like A.J. Moss's *'Red Mother'* and Reagan Symone Davison's *'Morning Came, and I was Still Important'* carry both rawness and healing. Mary Tina Shamli Pillay's *'Every Soil'* reminds us how roots live on, no matter the distance. Together, these poems trace the many ways we hold onto love, loss, and belonging.

Our fiction offerings bring their own kind of light. Kaitlyn Downing's '*Fear Gorta*' haunts with hunger and myth, while Amita Basu's layered story digs deep into human contradictions. Writers like Robert Boucheron, Mark Brazaitis, and many others invite us into worlds where characters breathe, stumble, and shine.

The flash fiction in this issue proves that even a few hundred words can hold entire worlds. EJ Hyndman's *'Caterpillar, You'* and Courtney Weaver's *'Digitalis'* are striking in their brevity, while Urmi Chakravorty's *'The Triumph of Loss*' and Ashley Paige Dryden's *'The Pink Bird'* remind us how quickly beauty and ache can meet.

Our nonfiction grounds us with honesty and reflection. Sarah Harley's *'The House of the Dolls*' and Justin McDevitt's *'Barbacking for Poppi'* are windows into lives that linger in the mind long after the page is turned.

Visually, the journal blooms with Ashley Paige Dryden's *'The Raspberry',* the dreamscapes of Resoun B Acharya, and the Sequential art of Patrick McEvoy's '*Part(y)ies'*.

And in our book review of *Sam Locrian's $20,000 Under the Sea*, we close with the reminder that reading, too, is a dialogue across time and imagination.

Every piece here was chosen because it stopped us, moved us, or stayed with us. We hope they will stay with you too. Thank you for making space in your day for words and art, for letting them spark something in you.

Here's to a world of stories, poems, and images that feel like companions.

— The Editorial Team

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Mary

By Noah Borromeo

O I have loved what is mortal and what never could be again, with both a violence that rears lambs into gods, tyrants, slaughterers, and a tenderness that shatters bones, phones, egos. I have held on so tightly that my own life became meaningless; the moldable clay of my earthen soul left with an impression that no longer looks like me, but still has all the same careless parts. And of course, the reckonings did come, as they always do; and even if it took me years, even if the fists that gripped desperately were smeared with blood and both our tears, I found the strength to watch them walk out my door, my life, again and again and again and again and again. And up until now, at my naive old age, waiting for Father Saturn's grand return, I held close and held tight questions of waywardness, yearning, aimlessness, cowardice, despair, to which I am tentatively ready to propose an answer that might satisfy them all, a fourth item to add to the laundry list we call living in this world: pick yourself up and do it all again, and again and again and again and again, until life, too, lets you go.

Mental Exercises

By Ihor Pidhainy

She walks about with confidence
That her brain rot will not out,
She mumbles frequent incantations
To limit the loss of language and her self,
But I think that she is sad in her delusions
That the ravages of time will rest
Beside her window, like a timid titmouse
Upon spying our bored, beloved house cat,
Rather than the tornado spawn
Mother Nature deigns to have thrown
Upon our homes, devastating,
Complete that no crosswords
Or finger stretches could buffer or reduce.

Willamette August, Keizer Rapids Park

By Marc Janssen

There is little difference between air and water
A few chemical slights of hand and one turns into the other.

The moon's golden shine
On choppy upset water
Be still, be still child

As the sun has abandoned the water's flat surface
They pass each other, water going from south to north, air from north to south

Of course the river
Took the light into the night
Leaves just memory

Reeds calmly snake dance back and forth in the water's loose grasp
While trees stiffly rock resistant to the air's urging.

Crepusculum

By Patrick Trombly

I am
Near the ceiling,
But there are no rafters
To grab
And no ladder or catwalk. There is no hatch
Through which to get to the
Roof.
The air is full of dust and the windows are covered in a film of grease.
Grease or no, I know
By the indirect light (the only light)
That outside the building, the sun has sunk past the horizon.
I can feel myself swaying gently.
Gentle does not translate to "good."
I am awake. Awake enough to make a detailed account.
But I am still sleeping.
I am
sweating.
But the room is cold. I am shivering.
Yes, I am shivering.
Shaking.
But I try not to. I want to shout.
But I know that that the vibration would topple
The stack of boxes
On which
I am lying, and which has started to wobble.
There are fifty boxes, unevenly stacked,
One
On top of the other.
The boxes are not uniform in their dimension
Or construction. I see
Perfect lines but faded colors. I see boxes,
Some with markings, barely perceptible, completely illegible.
There are other stacks
Just like mine, the closest of them just out of my reach,
Throughout the warehouse.
But nobody is, and nothing but dust is,
On top of any of the other stacks.
I am alone
In the warehouse
On a stack
Of boxes.
I do not recognize the warehouse
From any experience other than having had this dream before.
The boxes are not mine.
I do not know their ownership, or origin,
Or content. I do not know how I got here –
Only that I am
Here.
Don't make it fall. Don't make a move. Don't speak.
Just wait.
Wait for what?

The Thirst Wasn't for Water

By Meeta S Thakur

Something seems fractured deep within—
A part of the soul, perhaps, lying awake.
The tears never seem to dry anymore,
And her face remains wet with silent ache.
It feels like sleep has forgotten her
For too many nights in a row.
To wounded in your emotions
Is like the skin being set on fire—
The surface may heal,
But the scars stay behind, always.
Even the layers of makeup
Fail to mask the grief.
The sorrow stretching across her eyes
Refuses to let her smile breathe.
Like a half-dead fish,
She searches for refuge in puddles near the shore.
And then, helplessly,
Gazing into the indifferent sky—
She surrenders her breath
And quietly slips from her body.
They say she died of thirst.
But I know—
She died of love.
Or perhaps,
The cruel absence of it.

Whispers of Sunlit Petals

By Sophia Daniel

I will never let anyone suppress my ability to love.
Watch delicate koki'o 'ula'ula petals slowly unfurl to reveal a vibrant golden center.
Sweet viscous nectar produces, this thick translucent liquid
gradually drains from a sieve,
soaks into layers of luminous skin and compact bones,
porous soil crevices and transient ocean waves.
Nourishes the soul in abundant delight.

My effervescent heart moves as a light misty spring breeze.
Kind, boundless, and warm.
A soft whisper that reminds me to
passionately sow seeds of love,
dash grace, compassion, joy, and peace in soil,
create lush fruitful flower gardens,
endlessly forgive with tenderness.

Despite this brittle sharded barrier being strung back together,
one glass tile can shatter in an instant.
Though the truth is,
no matter what trials and tribulations,
or treacherous seas of darkness pass,
when frigid white blankets come, a gentle fragrant rain emerges.

Budapest

By Sarah Georgevich

My majestic Paris of
The East calls Szia to me.
Don't know what Ezra sang of,
But the old folk dance with ease,

'Neath ancient catacombs they
Czardas, stomping sway, stay
Kick bare feet in Danube rain.
Channeling Magyar tribes and

Rebels, Hussars, wayfarers,
They all take my hand, surface
The Motherland streets of glee,
Tulips fringing tropic springs.

All sip cherry Palinka
Red pepper spice wafts Stephen's
Basilica, Cathedrals
Dotting the Matra mountains.

Ancestors wait for us, dressed
In Kolosca embroidr'y
The elders don family crests,
Wave broadswords, in Budapest.

Holding flags and ribbons, we'll
Join in death, artifacts held
Tight, cherishing them til we
Meet our dead, dance among graves.

Salut d'Amour

By Daniel Lusk

—Listening to a tune by Richard Elgar,
Colin Firth on piano fr. Supernova.

Winter morning. Old Poet daydreams:
stolen moments in a borrowed boat.

There was a smell of absinthe, cigars
and oysters.

He scatters sand and ashes on the cliff-side
track …

A time to wonder, to sing, to sympathize
with sorrows of the hooligans and whores.

To recall *The Martyrdom of the Carmelites,*

an open-air theater in Virginia, audience
arrayed in next to nothing…
a grassy slope, summer of pretense.

Or was it Hamlet in New Jersey"
And what of Ophelia's warmed-over tears?

Irresistible, tune-salad outbursts
of a winter wren, a savant…

It might as well be spring…

What poem does owl whisper
to unwitting creatures under the snow?

Were we lovers?

Morning Came, and I was Still Important

By Reagan Symone Davison

I stretch the muscles that launch
stuffed animals and worn shoes, wishing
for the release of a pain of being played.

I made the bed that I thought you would
lie in with me until this morning came.
I slept in the middle to bring myself back to reality.

I logged into work and put on a strong voice,
trying to move the urge to tell you how I am.
My coworker notices the pain, and I cry.

I tell my friends that we no longer speak,
and they curse your name and wish you karma.
I don't know if I will fully lean into the hatred.

I go to bed with a want for someone to just like me.
Slipping into a dream of being loved and catered to;
I question if I am asking for too much from the world.

I remember I am flourishing in this life.
My eyes will still shine, and I smile at the blessings.
Even when I wanted you, I never needed you.

Morning came, and I was still important.
Though my heart has not known a match from you,
I burn a candle for myself and what I deserve: love.

In Silence

By Srijil Choudhury

Thou passest by as tempests pass the shore,
Unknowing of the wrecks thy winds dispense—
Thy gaze, a blade my breast hath oft forbore.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

I wear thy memory like a withered wreath,
A crown unseen upon a brow grown tense—
Its thorns I kiss, though they may bleed beneath.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

Thy laughter lights the marble halls of fate,
While I am shadow, bound without defence—
A ghost that lingers past the closing gate.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

I marked thee once 'midst gardens drunk with spring,
While thou didst bloom with careless opulence—
And I, the dust beneath thy wandering wing.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

My thoughts are ships that sail a sealed sea,
Where none return to speak of consequence—
Yet still they drift, each one a hymn to thee.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

Would I were wind that threads thy golden hair,
Or rain that grieves upon thy window's fence—
But I am naught, and thou art unaware.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

I speak thy name to no one but the night,
And stars alone may heed my eloquence—
They guard my vow in chambers void of light.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

Thou smilest, and the world resumes its grace,
While I behind the mask make no pretence—
For none may read the ruins in my face.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

I built a temple none shall ever see,
With pillars wrought of pain and reverence—
And in its hush, I kneel alone for thee.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

When others praise the light that warms thy brow,
I toast their joy with cups of abstinence—
And bless their fortune, though I know not how.

Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

No tempest wrung from heavens torn and wide
Could match the storm of such forbearance—
To stand so near, and be so long denied.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

One day the grave shall soften all I hide,
And lips long still may voice deliverance—
But not in life shall love be satisfied.
Until then, I'd love thee in silence.

Every Soil

By Mary Tina Shamli Pillay

What fools can think
My native soil does no longer live
For it thrives
In every broken heart and battered soul
That owns the soil it once tilled.

(This poem won the First Prize at the BBC Digital Radio Text Poetry Competition in 2001 and was broadcast on BBC Radio in September of that year. This poem was also published in her first collection of poems titled, 'I MET A FEATHER' published in 2023)

Avowal

By John Muro

(Dedicated to Norman Marshall)

The late afternoon sky has slowly
descended and settled upon the marsh
where it bleeds out colors of crushed
coral and plum over the underbrush
and the broad leaves of the cattails,
slipping between – and through –
them and into the still waters and,
from some distant bough, I can
hear a thrush's full-throated lament
for the loss of day and the expiring
light. Now, with eyes half-closed,
I'm trying hard to unsee the splendor
bestowed upon the earth and quiet
a world that haunts with its confounding
beauty and stands apart from my
hurtful habits and the many times
my heart had failed at simple acts
of kindness or the one-too-many
moments my younger self stumbled
through life's entrances by way
of exits only to watch missteps
grow in number even as I made
certain to hide away any rare pieces
of luck I found along the way
and set them aside for the inevitable,
late-in-life trade or barter.

~

I Steal People's Corsets

By Cassey Abella

with a writhing tightness of breath
neither mine to hold
nor release.

A moral anarchy to be molten into
the shape of
my lungs,
an oath I swear to soon behead.

The first dance around the waist, scent of grieving sweat
I weave, lace, *tighten*
(with)out respite,
my chest an orchestra of still persuasions.

A thief lusting after heavy shoulders:
A freight of wear and tear,
I kneel, digress, confess,
"I hear you through me,"

(With)out fault, I steal people's corsets.
Breath into
breath,
with wisdom I cannot warrant
to have ever been mine.



Dream of J-Da:
Resoun B Acharya

This is an illustration on A3 Cartridge paper-Acrylic colors. This painting is inspired by the life of Harka Shrestha aka Jethha Dai. The painting focuses on a dream of J-Da where he sees his mother breast-feeding him and he running away to save himself from the cruelty of his step-mother.



Flowers, Fish and Women

Resoun B Acharya

This is an illustration on A3 Cartridge paper with Acrylic colors. It is inspired by the scene in the bank of a river: flowers offered to dead gathered near a large fish stoned by two fishermen and women bathing a little far in an enclosed pool.

Silence

By Aishani Sen

"Do you like me?"
I ask, my voice a fragile thread,
the question half-formed, unsteady.
And she answers, almost tenderly, "I love you."

But love, I think, is more than a four-letter word,
more than the simple syllables we drape across vast chasms.
I want to unravel it, to shake its foundations, to yearn and rage in the desolate wilderness of a universe stripped of light
Yet all I can do is shatter, disrupt, and endure,
even as the cosmos itself fades to obscurity
a love that pulls like gravity,
a love that roots itself in the marrow,
refusing to let go.

We sit in shared silence,
each encased in our own unspoken worlds,
our breaths held, the room heavy with our solitude.
Dinner unfolds between us like a ritual,
a communion of muted gestures,
words swallowed into the spaces that divide us.
Her eyes, worn yet resolute, hold a quiet bruise—
a burden she silently offers me,
and I take it on, unresisting.

So I carry it:
the weight of her unspoken dreams,
the remnants of a life she set aside
for the shadow and shape of mine.
Her silent gifts become an inheritance of things unsaid,
of visions surrendered before they met the dawn.

In that silence, I feel an urge as foreign as it is familiar—
the longing to erase myself, to slip out of the frame,
uncoil, dissolve—to make space.
In some tapestry of a thousand lives,
I could exist as part of an absence.

And I wonder, could she live then,
in that brief vacancy,
free from this strange burden of me?

I can't tell where she ends and I begin.
We are an entangled constellation in a darkened cosmos, intertwined and tethered, half-shaped by her sacrifices.
Her love casts shadows,
and I am both carrier and creator of them.

So again, I ask, in that enduring silence—
"Do you like me?"
And as the words fade, I feel the pull to disappear,
to let her live—
or perhaps to free us both—
a world unburdened by each other's existence.

Spruce follows, almost incessantly

By Basil Payne

there's a tree
in my mind
that haunts the waking world
always finds
a way to stand
behind when my guard is down
kind of like being in a forest
but Spruce takes turns
being every tree
only one at a time
Spruce
they follow

in the same way clouds do
even on a sunny day
you know storm could roll in
or how grief is so woven
into the chest that
ridding yourself of it
feels as futile
as plucking bindweed
from your garden

it always comes back
when I watch the sunset
warmth on my face
I can somehow feel
Spruce's sharp shadow
bleeding over me
how cold it feels
on my back
You need to stop
ignoring this
or at least acknowledge
who's there

Red Mother

By A. J. Moss

I.

Red -
like the body of my mother
Freckled -
like the body of my mother
Scar-stretched
like her, like her, like her,
In the map of my belly I feel her
In the cackle of my voice I own her
In the red hands - wash hands - work hands
I am her
In the hair rooted to my chin I watch my mother plucking through the mirror
Despite every girlhood promise I look more of her every day
Despite the difference I catch the smell of her leaking from my thighs and I am caught - between the tender and remember her hand across my face and the way she screamed my name

II.

How beautiful she was when she gave birth - an army of strength in her body and the moments my parents loved each other cradled around a newborn babe
Yet she tells me they broke her,
She tells me she lost her love - she looked for her children - she looked to be lost, forgotten, sinking in that pit of womanhood, that womb bursting with life crushing up behind her eyes, leaking out and she was gone
Where have the differences gone?
And I have so many dreams of broken children that turn back to you - to face you in a way I never knew how - to thank you for the heated words across my back - to know you would beat me again and again if it turned back time
I am her anger planted inside her chest - but I am the dreams too
The dreams she forgot when she met me red and howling.

II.

He named me “Father’s Joy” but I was never his.

IV.

Tell me again mother
The prophesy men prayed over me
Tell me what words they fed you
Our world like a story unfurled before us, picked, plotted and written
As you lay there bleeding and cut open, sewn apart by so many hands
Mother tell me if you and I had any chance
Or were we just two dolls for them to play with
I imagine myself there between your breasts gasping for your blood and airways as they mark me for baptism

Like your blood wasn't enough - or your tears - or your pain - like the woman isn't pure enough - like baptism doesn't occur naturally
Like they have to mark me against you
Make sure I'm not stained by you
Like they have to break the lineage between us
When you burn to tell me a story but their words rise first and
Then it's all men's prophesy - bitter cruel
And I am named their joy though they do not know me.

V.

I see your fists inside me - anger planted deep
I see how they swung us around each other
Planted me a timebomb back in your arms
A punching bag your crown of thorns
You tell me I make you a saint
But your words are soap cleansing my mouth
I made you mother
But I didn't ask to be your daughter
And now the body you made fits awkwardly
Forever holding you a mirror - an orthodox - a canon law.

VI.

Mother I hear your voice tonight,
She comes out my throat to tell bedtime stories
I hear you reading - I am reading - I'm falling through cracks in time.

Bread Aisle Eggs (tanka)

By Kenneth Nichols

i

Someone discarded
a carton of eggs beside
potato bread loaves–
seven dollars a dozen–
albumin chalaza gold.

ii

The night stocker, new
stepfather, had spent mornings
learning French omelets,
fluffy, buttered, moist, and chived:
breakfast bonding with the boy.

iii

“Can I take these home?”
The manager clicked his tongue.
“The GM freaks out.
because there was a lawsuit.
Toss it into the Dumpster.”

iv

A couple cracked as
the carton dropped beside a
box of expired
frozen burgers that had once
been a living creature’s chuck.

for macdonald pass

By August Ryan

in the deeply hush of winter pines
only broken by tinnitus
i can see, in the distance, fir
branches abruptly shedding

their powder dusting, and it
slumps, emphatically but
quietly, into the deep
and equally powdery snow below

the air is so cold it hurts
the back of my throat to breathe
it in, and the vapor of my breath
forms icicles in my moustache

there is no-one else that i can hear
or see, and i will end up remembering
this place for the rest of my life
as the most peaceful moment

i ever experienced, even as i
read in hammocks, garden in deserts,
sip tea quietly in the window
while quiet love takes the form

of potato soup in the kitchen.
the snow equalizes, even kills
but its danger is belied by
the great reflective beauty of mirrors

tree-mirrors, sky-mirrors, the gray
chalk clouds beaming loving envy
down on three feet of snow, and
more falling

more falling, until it stops and the trees
then are tinder-dry, and the mountains then
scream naked, and the valley ignites
like a torch, but by then there will be

no-one left to watch, to feel peace or to feel
fear: we will have eliminated each other and as
the pines crackle with burning, they will hum
the tramping eulogy of exit

Cave Bear

By Isaiah Janisch

The marks of fearsome claws
and enormous paws,
left on rock walls
for thousands of years,
speaking of the
underground lives
of colossal animals.

In the same space,
just yards away,
lay the lines
of small human hands
less than 1825 days.

Millenia ago,
hiding from cold,
raising her cubs
in the damp, dark hole.
Six feet tall and over
a thousand pounds--
a bear with nothing to fear.

But in the same place,
just a few feet away
were the bones of those bears
hunted by hands
that were once less than 1825 days.

transfiguration

By Z. S. Sorensen

a sign in the night,
abrasive blue-white
against a Van Gogh back-
drop of blue-black:

"LOW COST" AUTO INSURANCE
WE INSURE ALL DRIVERS

cacophonic cries
of insect lies,
truths, and in-betweens
bed with machines'

more calculated drones:
loud wires for telephones,
America online,
and, of course, our sign.

smell the plastic
meet sick-
ly and pair
with sweet heavy air

like warm whiskey
and Pepsi-
Cola. taste the blood
of lawnmower cud:

St. Augustine,
cut clean
and sending
fire ants defending

leveled king-
doms of sand. fevering
and shoulders
ablaze, the body smolders,

as does the soul and the mind:
unholy trinity, heat in kind
and burning bright—
hark! a nova takes flight.

Who is He?

By Danyielle Reevers

Danger of the stranger that sleeps next to me,
He
Has his clothes in my closet where they're supposed to be.
The stranger shadows my moves, connects like a plug in the wall,
He
Caters to all my physical needs and picks up when I call,
But see,
I don't know this stranger, couldn't tell you his dreams,
a shut door to his mind, blind to the soul it seems.
Reincarnation of a yearlong one-night stand,
repetition attempting to replay each moment holding my hand.
No fears, no favorite colors...do I even know your real name?
That's right
You go by lust, a pretentious moment to keep me sane.

Who Am I?

By Kasturika De

A question that I fail to answer as always.

Cause the question is not about who you are, but your worth.

Nevertheless I try to convince,
more than answering to myself.
A question I ask in pain,
or awakening
or to remain awake.

It's a counterattack to the repressed,
a truth of the oppressed and sometimes the answer
of enlightenment.

I believe in creativity and a deep seeker
of it within me and elsewhere
as it is the cause of creation or creation the result of it.

To seek your truth,
is not a mirror in finding
but a reflection under construction;
navigating through the dark waves
trying to swallow everything that comes its way.

There is this one lifetime and
this one time to live your way or anyway.
So why should you stop yourself
from being absolutely broken,
to regenerate yourself.

To become the version you want,
than to die with a version that suffocates.

It takes time to break free
to know who you are
where capital determines
and defines
‘ Who Am I ?’

Heights

By Natalie Schreyer

Before I knew what it felt like to dangle
from a tautening wire
in slow motion,
molecules colliding,
encrusted and anxious,
the view from fifty stories high
shapeshifted in the purpling dusk.

A ribbon of washed color tying itself
to my lingering body,
balanced in an act of
surrender;
the fear buzzing
like a kettle at simmer,
a collection of bubbles,
clumsy and leaping;
a failed boil
like the scene of a crime
without blood or acid,
yellow tape.
Do not cross.

“Her house had no windows”

By Ajeeti S

she called me little bird,
and i believed i had wings.
followed her through dark rooms,
cold kitchens,
men with eyes like broken clocks.
i didn’t ask questions.
children don’t,
when love wears their mother’s face.

she brushed my hair
with the same hand
that wiped his spit off her cheek.
said,
“he’s trying, baby.”
as he poured silence down my throat
and called it discipline.

i waited for her to see me—
not the inconvenience,
not the noise,
not the body between her
and a better life.

i painted pictures for her,
invisible ones—
of birthdays,
and rooms that smelled like
bread and safety.
she never looked.

he raised his voice,
so she lowered her eyes.
i stopped crying one day
and she said,
“see? he’s learning.”
but it was me who learned
how to disappear.

when he left
(it was raining),
she sat on the porch
in a dress meant for parties.
said nothing.
i sat next to her,
but she didn’t look.

now, she walks rooms
with no photos,

talking to no one.
she says,
“i did it for love.”

and somewhere,
the little bird
curls its wings inward,
makes no sound.
because the nest
was made of splinters.
and the fall
was long.

Freedom is an illusion

By Jeena R. Papaadi

so,
this is what
freedom looks like.

not limitless skies
or safety, security,
or ability to do
whatever you want.

this new freedom
means only one thing
to me:

relief.

relief that it's over:
the past and its strangling;
the bowing to someone.

now I can breathe.
free from the binding, stretching,
dragging from all sides;
now I'm released.

true, absolute freedom
is always an illusion we seek.

the freedom you desire
evades you.
visible from a distance
but a wisp as you approach.

everything comes with
a clause. a chain.

the deeper you try to define
freedom, the less you experience it.
the finer your needs,
the more constrained it gets.

it's a leash around your neck:
loose enough, stretched just right.
if you struggle, you choke.
if you let go, you breathe.

liberty within a spacious garden
bounded by forbidding walls.

eternal freedom is a myth; for
freedom is a battle you have to win daily

that's freedom for you:
take it or leave it.



Part (yies) - 1
Patrick McEvoy, Olivia Pelaez

Rat

By S.M. Adams

Something about how the midday sun trickles through the skyscrapers to cast long shadows across the street infuses these endless summer days with the most dreadful kind of laziness. The sun bakes into the city, steam curls from the asphalt, and nobody comes into the store. I can't blame them; if I had any choice in the matter I'd be out basking under an oak tree. Our two paltry box fans don't make a dent in the wet-blanket humidity. I shift on my stool behind the register and time my breathing to the ticking of the clock. I should be grateful to be in the store, grateful that I can sit and rest and take in the day, but despite my relative peace I can't bring myself to settle. To breathe. It's quiet here, but my body is drenched in ghosts of noise. As the minutes slip by, I force my eyelids flutter shut. Let my bones melt into the warmth, just a little. Try to convince myself that I have time.

The bell above the door chimes and I jolt out of my seat. I may own the store, but sleeping on the job isn't a good look for anybody. Smoothing my smock, I survey the woman walking through the door. Her face is bowed beneath a baker boy hat and a curling riot of hair, a small pocketbook held white-knuckled at her side.

"Welcome in," I call. I make my voice cheerful and loud, loud enough to be heard over the box fans. I don't think I've seen her before and damn if I don't know everybody in this neighborhood. "Can I help you find something?"

The woman flinches – I know she heard me. But she doesn't say anything, instead speeding down the nearest aisle towards the back of the store. As though she doesn't want to be seen. Or see me. I nudge the cash register closed with my hip, finger the key to the drawer tucked beneath the countertop, hooked just where customers can't see. Gregor's voice echoes through my head, saying it's better to over-react on suspicion than to risk my life in a robbery. But the woman hasn't done anything wrong. Yet.

I blow air through my lips, check the clock above the door. Officer Montgomery'll be by on his daily rounds in a few minutes. He's one of the good ones; he made a point of keeping in touch with me over the years even after I moved neighborhoods and dropped all connection to the other police wives. He sat in the third row at Gregor and I's wedding.

He's due soon enough that I can wait for his arrival before making a decision on what to do. Rudeness isn't a crime, just unneighborly. I shake my shoulders out, roll out my neck. Try to ease the nerves pounding through my jaw with each jumping pulse of my heartbeat.

You aren't in any danger, Iris. She hasn't done anything.

Distraction. A distraction would be good. My fingers find the boxes of cigarettes, stacked precariously behind the counter. One good gust of wind could blow them over, but Gregor insists we keep them as is.

"People like regularity," he'll say, pressing a kiss to my neck. "Routine. Their cigarettes in the same place every time."

He's never said anything about making sure they didn't avalanche on some poor, unsuspecting customer though. I start shoving cartons back, balancing them against my arms. I'm on my third row when I hear a cough behind me.

I jump and whirl, trying to hide my shudder as a fountain of tiny boxes collapses behind me. I grit my teeth into a grin; I'm going to have to pick all that up before Gregor sees. Serves me right for reorganizing. "Find everything you need?"

The mystery woman is standing by the cash register, face downturned as though she's afraid to meet my eyes. Now that I'm closer, I can see the exhaustion in the weight of her shoulders, the way she bears her frame. A bit of spit-up colors the collar of her shirt, and I feel my heart clench. She's a mother.

Gregor always says I'm too quick to judge.

"Just this, please." woman's voice is deathly quiet, almost hoarse. I have to strain to hear her over the whirring of the fans, and I fight my shiver as sweat drips down my back. I don't know how she can stand being buried under long sleeves and pants in this heat. She places a small vial on the countertop, its yellow label staring out at me. Rat poison. The old kind, made with arsenic instead of the new chemical formula they'd developed to jack up the prices.

"Ma'am, I'm going to need to see an ID for this. And know the purpose behind its purchase." I make my voice stern, square my shoulders back.

"Is that really necessary?" Worry threads her voice, stringing it out in a trembling line and leaving the end of the question hanging.

I raise an eyebrow, hoping I look intimidating. "Yes, ma'am, it is."

She reaches into her purse, fumbling with the clasp. "It's just, I don't want this getting back to my husband. We've developed a bit of a rat problem, you see, and he's – he's just terrified of them something awful. He'd never come home if he knew there were rats in the house."

"Funny how men get like that, calling us the cowards when we're the ones asked to clean up the mess. I'm sure your husband will be more than fine with you taking care of it," I say. I want to keep her talking. Something about the way she trips over her words, rushing over them like she's reciting a well-rehearsed backstory, makes me pause. Nerves can do funny things to a person. But rat poison and a newborn don't mix. When she doesn't respond, I hold out my hand. "ID, please?"

"Of course." She slowly slides the small card across the counter, and I glance over her face, her name, her age. Her last name is familiar, and I stare at it on the ID, running it over and over in my mind. Then it dawns on me: she's that Senator's wife, the one who campaigned on tax breaks for the rich and a city-wide curfew to crack down on crime. He got a hell of a beating in the runoff, but eventually came out on top. I didn't vote for him; I like what rights I do have kept right where they are.

"Mrs. Solomon, if I could just verify your face against the ID?" I let my voice trail off. The woman in front of me is a world away from the same polished Senator's wife I saw plastered all over the campaign trail. Her perfectly coiffed hair is down and scraggly, her pristine skirt-suit replaced with denim and wrinkles. She swallows – I can see her throat bob with the movement – and looks up at me.

I barely manage to keep from gasping. Half of her face, buried under her hair and hat, is covered in a mottled, yellowing bruise. She's tried to hide it with makeup, but her foundation is patchy and peeling away, probably from the heat. Her lips crest into a bloody split that's painful to even look at. I shudder, try to hide it by turning back to the register. I remember that feeling, of pounding makeup into bruised skin, aching even as the pain disappeared under powder.

I don't believe for a second that she has a rat problem.

"You need the poison kept a secret from your husband, you said?"

The doorbell chimes, but I'm too focused on Mrs. Solomon's face to pay attention to who enters the store.

*****

"Where've you been?" Mathew's breath was hot in my face, reeking of cigarette smoke and the after-dredges of one too many whiskeys. He usually only bought the cheap stuff out of respect for his wallet, but he was working his way through leftovers from the annual police banquet.

I fought to keep my voice calm, to not look away. "I told you; I worked late tonight. Mr. Preston's got a big

conference coming up. I'm typing all of his speeches."

"Liar." The word was quiet, but the blow exploded into the drywall next to my head with deafening force. I could feel the powder coating my lips, my tongue. Choking me. "And you didn't even have the decency to have a roast done when I got home?"

I knew there was no arguing with him. I knew it, and I still fought the urge, bit my tongue against the blood filling my mouth. Sinking into the spaces between my teeth. When his next blow hit my face, I could feel every imprint of his skin – every line, every wrinkle. I focused on the sensation of his calluses, grounding myself against the sting of the pain.

He pulled away, looked at me. Eyes beady. I tried to breathe through my swelling nose.

"Put the roast on, bitch. You'll eat with the dog tonight."

*****

"You got any Boston creams today, Mrs. Reynolds?"

I break eye contact with Mrs. Solomon, catching sight of a tall man dressed in deep blues, police cap in hand. Officer Montgomery, right on time.

"Samson's in a foul mood, figured I'd sugar him up."

"I'm so sorry, ma'am, will you give me one moment?" I ask Mrs. Solomon, mind racing.

I should report her to Officer Montgomery. Tell him my suspicions. If I'm questioning her story, he'll see straight through it.

I could be preventing the death of a Senator.

I glance at Mrs. Solomon. Her face has gone deathly pale, her lips parted as she stares at Officer Montgomery.

It's too much. It's all too much. Moving to the donut carousel, I pull Officer Montgomery's usual dozen as I try to think of what to do. The easy option would be to point out the rat poison on the counter, the bruising on Mrs. Solomon's face. Hell, I might not even have to show him, it's sitting right in front of him. I could erase this whole thing, wash my hands of Mrs. Solomon and keep the peaceful life I've built for myself here. With Gregor at my side and our store firm under my feet.

"Creams are out for the week; Gregor didn't order enough of our usual custard. We've got some jellies to replace them, if you want?"

I could sweep all of this away today, but I don't know if I'll be able to look at myself in the mirror tomorrow.

"Eh, Samson'll get over it. Donuts are donuts. How's it in here? Boiling out of your skin yet?" Officer Montgomery puffs himself up as he says it, tucking his fingers into his belt loops and swaying back and forth. Mrs. Solomon is still hovering by the cash register, twisting her wedding band around and around her finger. The diamond flashes in the sun, out of place against her unkempt appearance. She's pulled her hair back over her face. Hiding.

I know what I have to do. I just hope Gregor can forgive me.

The poison is a problem. It's sitting next to the cash register, right out in the open. All Officer Montgomery has to do is look over and clock the bottle, ask a few questions, and everything will be out of my hands. I may have escaped his questioning once, but I don't think I can get away again. Mrs. Solomon shifts her weight between her feet, glances towards the door. I can tell she wants to run. I pray she doesn't.

If it comes down to it, I can't say she's done anything out of the ordinary. On paper, she's guilty of nothing. I smile brightly at Officer Montgomery, herding him towards the cash register. "Oh, you know, we've got the fans going. And it's been a pretty quiet day."

He yawns, scratching his stomach. "Glad to hear it. I'll probably swing by tomorrow around the same time, check in."

"Of course, Gregor will be in. I know you two like your chats." I've arrived at the cash register. I catch Mrs. Solomon's eye, hope that she understands what I'm trying to say. What I'm trying to do. "Ma'am, if you wouldn't mind moving your belongings while I check out Officer Montgomery?

Just for a moment, I'll be right with you."

She glances up, startled, before I watch the realization dawn on her face.

"Oh – yes, of course! Take your time." She steps forward and carefully palms the little bottle of poison, tucking its label into her palm and away from Officer Montgomery's prying eyes as she fades back into the aisles.

"Aw, Mrs. Reynolds, you didn't have to do that," Officer Montgomery placates, but I can tell he's pleased by the way he huffs importantly as I ring up his donuts. I bristle with pride and flaming adrenaline. I haven't felt this kind of thrill in years.

"Anything for our favorite customer," I joke as I ring him up.

"You're too good to me. Give Gregor my regards." Officer Montgomery takes his donuts and turns towards the door. As the bell jingles closed behind him, I breathe a sigh of relief, turning back to Mrs. Solomon, half shadowed in the darkness of the aisle. Her eyes are large, and unexpectedly damp. I don't know what I'm doing. What I've done. I can feel my heart beating through the pulse in my throat. Mrs. Solomon starts to move towards the counter, but I hold up a hand – I can still see Officer Montgomery's back as he moves down the block.

"You know, rat poison is one of the deadliest substances on earth," I remark absently. "They just reduced the poison levels, for safety. I'd say the new stuff doesn't work as well. But you've got to be careful with what you've got there. One wrong move, and you'll be in a world of trouble."

"I know," she says, moving up towards the counter. For the first time, her voice is strong. And I can't help but remember what I've tried so hard to forget.

*****

Mathew was on his fourth drink of the night. I counted his pours, listened to the clink of ice in his glass as I sat in the corner and fiddled with the radio. Blasts of *The Larry King Show* intermixed with static filled the room. He'd started to slur his words, his rants about his boss and how he was "just starting to come up in the company" growing more and more unintelligible. Until, finally, he said it. What he always said when he wanted me.

"Baby, pour me another drink."

My response fell from my lips like a line in a play. The same as every other drink-drenched night. "Of course, love, want a chaser?"

"You know I do."

I turned towards the bar, poured the last of the whiskey into his glass in one deft motion. The small tablet followed soon after, so quick even I almost missed it as I tossed it in. So quick Mathew, cast in shadow and drunk out of his mind on the other side of the room, would never see. I stirred around the ice cube, watched the small white granules dissolve into amber. Going, going, gone.

"Here y'are, sweets." I handed Mathew his glass and perched on the arm of his chair, ran my hand through his hair. It was his hair that drew me to him in the first place, made me accept his offer out of all the boys I had courting me. Thick and blond, it curled around my fingers like a rat trap. Ordinarily, I'd kiss him. But I couldn't risk it tonight.

"You make the best drinks, baby," he slurred, pulling me closer as he downed the glass. He winced for a moment, squeezing my waist. "What would I do without you?"

"Sit around at night and be miserable," I offered, sliding neatly into his lap. Any second now. It should work any second now.

"Say, budge up a bit, would you? My stomach's aching."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that. Want me to get you an ice pack or something?"

"No - no, don't go. I think something's wrong."

I was already on my way to the kitchen. I didn't look back. I pulled half a lemon from the fridge – I'd made meringue pie yesterday; Mathew had called me a goddess and then proceeded to throw his plate at me – and carefully squeezed a dollop of juice into each eye. It stung, burning harshly against my tear ducts, but not nearly as badly as Mathew's fist. Slowly,

surely, my eyes started to water. I blinked rapidly, letting the tears mingle with my mascara into a sticky, dripping mess.

I heard a thump from the living room. The smashing of glass.

"Mathew? Are you alright?"

I could hear Mathew's breathing, stuttering and labored against the plush of the carpet. One breath, then two. I waited for a third, straining to hear over the hum of the fan.

Mathew was dead silent.

I pulled the phone from the wall and dialed, hoped with every faltering breath that Mathew's brothers-in-arms would buy the ruse, buried beneath so many of their wives' over-powdered faces and a squeeze of lemon juice. The phone rang, sharp and tinny in my ear. I breathed.

*****

"I can't divorce him. Half the judges in the city owe their seats to him; I'd never be able to prove cause."

The smell of old cigarettes and powder is thick in my nose. I sniff it away, blink rapidly. Find the two rings nestled tight on my finger. Some days, I can't believe that I found Gregor. That the universe or God or whoever out there who's in charge gave me a second chance after what I did, that grace was granted to a monster. To live again. To love again. I glance up at Mrs. Solomon, the woman who is about to become me.

She is not a monster.

But I can never tell her that. Not without endangering everything I've managed to build here.

I force a smile, shove some lightness into my tone. "Oh, I doubt your husband would leave you over a little rat problem. This should more than do the trick." I widen my eyes innocently, quickly plugging the rat poison into the register and sliding her ID back to her. "I'm assuming you'll pay cash? Keep it off the Senator's card?"

"Yes – yes, I can do that." She brushes a tear off her cheek and I pretend not to see the way her hands tremble slightly as she opens her purse.

"Your total is seven dollars and eighty-one cents."

She slides the bill across to me, change clinking into my hands. I ring her up, push the poison into a paper bag. I could let her go, leave the unspoken buried in our silences. We are strangers, after all.

I push the paper bag across the counter, force my fingers to let go of its slightly crinkled top. Mrs. Solomon glances up one more time, eyes slightly glassy. I've seen those eyes before, sunken into my own cheeks. She blinks, and a fleck of powder drifts down her face. I turn away, start picking up the cigarette boxes scattered across the counter and floor. "You have a good day now."

"Thank you."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Mrs. Solomon tuck the small paper bag into her purse, folding it deep. Like a secret. I hear her stride toward the door, her paces long and sure. Determined.

I have to say something. Anything.

"Mrs. Solomon?" I call. She pauses for a moment, turns back. I open my mouth, try to think of what to say. What would have helped me in those awful few months after Mathew's death, when the guilt was eating me alive. When I was afraid that in killing Mathew, I had killed my own humanity. The words appear, simple. And true. "Good luck."

She nods slightly. I think I can see the hint of a smile. Then she disappears into the bright sunshine outside, the doorbell announcing her departure. She doesn't look back.

The Old Car

By Mark Brazaitis

Benjamin "Benny" Blake, the new city councilor, hoped to become governor by the time he was forty. To do so, he would need to accumulate impressive achievements. Having an old car removed from an alley wouldn't qualify as an impressive achievement. But it would be an achievement nevertheless.

Benny emailed the city manager. The city manager emailed back to say he would contact the head of code enforcement. The head of code enforcement would send a crew to tow the car to the auto graveyard on Snakeskin Road. Problem solved. Achievement achieved.

Benny had learned about the car only recently, and not from the people of Redwood, the neighborhood in Sherman, Ohio, where the car was parked, but from one of his campaign donors, a contractor who planned to raze three houses that the alley served in order to build a Dollar Tree. The contractor said his vehicles needed "clean access" to the alley. Besides, he said, the old car, rusted and smashed beyond saving, was an eyesore.

On his drive to the monthly meeting of the Redwood Neighborhood Association, which would be his first, Benny decided he wouldn't boast about the car's impending removal. He would allow its soon-to-be absence to speak to his effectiveness as a leader, then sweep in to next month's meeting to receive his rightful due.

The meeting was held in a basement room of the Last Apostle Church on the southernmost edge of Sherman. The ceiling was low, and one of the two fluorescent lights flickered as if intending to provoke an epileptic fit. The room smelled like waterlogged Bibles and whatever had last been burned in the adjoining kitchen. Benny claimed a foldup chair at one end of a foldup table. He estimated he was the youngest person in the room by half a century.

The five other attendees introduced themselves. On his right were Sally and Stan, who, although they were married, looked like brother and sister, with the same flour-white skin, silver-gray hair, and gray-blue eyes. On his left were Martha and Larry, who, although they weren't married, behaved like they were, sitting inches apart and whispering into each other's ears. Martha was heavyset and tall, Larry slight and short. At the opposite end of the table was Mitch King, a Black man who wore a blue pinstriped suit and had a voice that, had it come from the sky, could have passed for God's.

While Benny met most prerequisites for a successful politician—he was a more or less faithful churchgoer, was good at remembering names, and knew how to wrangle an extra $50 or $500 from a donor—he lacked gravitas. In his less-than-Lordly voice, he recited his biography as he'd done dozens of times during his campaign. He hadn't campaigned in Redwood—it was the Sherman neighborhood with the lowest percentage of registered voters—but he mentioned his friendship with the developer, adding, "I know about the old car in the alley."

The car was a 1973 Jaguar, Sally explained. It had belonged to Cecille Rodriguez, a local girl who became a Broadway actress and bought the car with her earnings from West Side Story. Benny admitted that he'd never seen the play.

"Do you know the music?" Stan asked.

Benny wondered if he should lie.

"My favorite from *West Side Story*," Larry said, "is 'Tonight.'"

Stan sang, "Tonight, tonight, won't be just any night."

"I don't know it," Benny said.

Stan continued singing, "Oh, moon, go bright, and make this endless day endless night."

"It's about anticipating ecstasy," Larry said.

"I used to anticipate ecstasy," Stan said. "Now I'm only hoping for a good night's sleep."

"A good night's sleep is ecstasy," Sally said.

"Owning a beautiful car used to be ecstasy," Stan said.

"Especially if you had a beautiful passenger," Larry said.

Benny remembered his first car, a Honda Odyssey, inherited from his mother, who'd used it to ferry her five children around town. Benny was her youngest. By the time he learned to drive, she didn't need to play family chauffer anymore, so she bought herself a lipstick-red Chevrolet Impala. The Odyssey wasn't the sexiest car, but its size was a plus. He would drive his classmates to Lake Erie and Cedar Point, to rock concerts and Cleveland Indians games. The day after his high-school graduation, he drove his girlfriend, Mary, and four of their friends to Blues Beach, West Virginia, where they camped for three nights and drank enough beer for three weeks.

On the first night, on a blanket on the banks of the South Branch Potomac River, Benny and Mary lost their virginity to each other. Although they'd intended to return to their tent, they fell asleep. He woke at dawn with her in his arms, her yellow hair as brilliant as the sunrise. She smiled as if it would be the first of a million mornings together; he knew otherwise. In the fall, she would be going to a junior college in a town an hour's drive from Sherman. He would be attending Ohio State. His life would outshine hers.

He'd lost touch with Mary—she had no social media presence—although he'd heard she'd moved out west. He hadn't settled into a career because he hoped politics would become his career. He augmented his modest city-council stipend by working three days a week at his uncle's hardware store. He'd traded in the Odyssey long ago.

"I remember when Cecille bought the car," Martha said.

"She roared into town like she was leading a parade," Stan said.

" She was in her early twenties."

"We all were."

Mitch, his voice a bass drum, said, "One of us was looking at his twenties in the rearview mirror."

"She was living in New York," Sally said, "but every month or two she drove back home to visit her parents."

"She was showing off," Larry said.

"She deserved to," Mitch said.

"She played the lead in all of our musicals in high school," Stan said.

"And you had a crush on her," Sally said.

"I did not." .

"Yes, you did."

"Even I did," Larry said. "And that was *after* I knew I was gay."

The old people laughed.

"Remember when she brought Robert Redford home to meet her parents?"

"He wasn't Robert Redford."

"She said he wasn't Robert Redford. But she said he wasn't Robert Redford so everyone in town wouldn't stare into her parents' windows."

"How would she have met Robert Redford?"

"She spent a few years in Hollywood, remember?"

"Disappointing years."

"I'll take her disappointment. She was in a bunch of movies."

"Always as the girlfriend of a Latin gangster. She hated the stereotypes."

"The stereotypes kept her employed."

"Up to a point."

"When she turned thirty, the Hollywood jobs dried up."

"She went back to New York. Broadway. Then off Broadway. Then off-off Broadway."

"Not so off-off Broadway that she ever performed in Sherman."

"Or even in Cleveland."

Benny looked at his watch. He had a sense they'd had this conversation a hundred times. He cleared his throat, hoping it might encourage the group to focus on business. No one acknowledged him.

"But she never forgot her roots."

"She would have been happy to

forget her roots. If her parents hadn't lived here, she never would have come back."

"Not even to see you, Larry?"

"She loved me. She just didn't know it."

"Eventually, she gave her Jaguar to her father."

"He kept it in great condition."

"And then Camille's brother…"

"He was the black sheep."

"He was sweet but ever so troubled."

"He was a poet."

"Which is what I mean by sweet and troubled."

Sally turned to Benny: "He crashed the car."

"It was drivable but totaled."

"Insurance doesn't pay if you're drunk."

"Camille's father had a heart attack three months later."

"So there it is, in the alley behind Camille's mother's house."

"It's the centerpiece of our modern art museum."

The neighbors laughed.

Benny had lost track of the timeline. When had Camille's brother crashed the car? He looked at his watch again. At neighborhood meetings, he was supposed to be more observer than participant, noting what problems needed solving and assessing whether he could help solve them. In the future, he decided, he would encourage the group to move more efficiently through its agenda. Of course, there was no agenda.

"It was such a beautiful car."

"Camille had good taste—in both cars and men. A Jaguar and Robert Redford."

"She never had Robert Redford."

"She could have had me."

"If she had, my dear," Martha said to Larry, smiling, "we wouldn't be talking about her good taste in men."

The old people laughed again.

"What happened to Camille?" Benny asked.

The room grew quiet. Mitch said simply, "Cancer."

"It wasn't a long struggle. Maybe a couple of months."

"Her mother stayed with her in her hospital room the entire time, knitting in a chair in the corner. She was making a blanket but it turned into a shroud."

"Everyone in town came to the funeral."

"The choir sang 'Tonight.'"

Benny glanced at his cellphone. He was supposed to meet Danielle "Little Danny" Brezinski for a drink. He wondered if he should text her to tell her he might be late. He'd started dating her a month after he announced his council candidacy. She was the daughter of Daniel "Big Danny" Brezinski, who owned three car dealerships and was his biggest donor.

Although Little Danny's familial connection to one of Sherman's richest families might have been her most appealing attribute, Benny thought she might be The One. He imagined the two of them sitting at a table at Le Reve, the new French restaurant on the Sky River. After sliding a ring box next to her chocolate mousse, he would whisper, "What would you say if I told you that, one day, you would be the first lady of Ohio?"

He was becoming impatient to see her. Or maybe he was impatient to eat. Meetings gave him an appetite, thus the six-and-a-half pounds he'd gained since he'd become a city councilor. "Listen," he said, interrupting the old people's chatter, "I understand the issue. I'll work on it."

They all turned to him, their faces expressing degrees of befuddlement. "Don't worry," he added, as if they were in his Odyssey and he was driving on an ice-covered road, "I have it under control."

"Were we ever out of control?" Larry said.

"I've see you out of control," Sally said.

"Of course you have. You were at my twenty-first birthday party."

"And your fiftieth. And your seventy-fifth."

"Wait until my eightieth."

As the old people continued talking, Benny composed a text to Danielle: Might be a little late, Little D. Counting the seconds til I c u.

"Blanca celebrated her ninety-fifth birthday last week. She's outlived her

daughter by half a century."

"So sad to see one's child die."

"It was such a beautiful car. When Blanca looks at it, I bet she remembers it the way it was."

"It was midnight blue."

"It was sky blue."

"It was ocean blue."

"What's the difference between sky blue and ocean blue?"

"It depends on whether we're talking about the Pacific or the Atlantic."

"We agree it was blue, anyway."

"We remember it the way we want to remember it."

"If only we remembered each other that way."

"I'm way better looking now than I've ever been," Larry said.

There was laughter.

As if Benny had asked, Sally turned to him and said, "Camille never married."

"I wonder if she was happy," Stan said.

"Maybe she would have been happier if she'd stayed in town."

"Maybe we would have been happier if we'd left town."

After adding three red hearts to his text, Benny pushed send. He looked up and said, "Is there anything else to discuss tonight?"

"We were going to decide what movie to show in the park during the neighborhood picnic," Martha said.

"I thought we decided," Stan said.

"If it's a Robert Redford film," Larry said, "I'm changing my vote."

"*The Wizard of Oz*."

"Didn't we show *The Wizard of Oz* last year?"

"*The Wizard of Oz* would be good a hundred years in a row."

"Great choice," Benny said, grinning. His campaign manager, who'd been his roommate at Ohio State, had warned him that his grin sometimes looked too wide to be sincere. He narrowed it.

"We hope you'll come," Sally said. "Your predecessor always did."

"Of course!" Benny said with what he hoped didn't sound like insincere enthusiasm. He found The Wizard of Oz, with its whiny heroine and her bumbling sidekicks, tedious.

His opponent in the council race, Gabriel O'Connor, had held the seat for twenty-six years. O'Connor was full of inscrutable phrases such as "What is is sometimes what ought to be" and "You can travel halfway around the world or you can wait twelve hours and be in the same place." O'Connor must have listened to the Redwood Neighborhood Association discuss the old car at every meeting. Obviously, he'd done nothing to have it removed. In the campaign, Benny had raised five times more money than O'Connor but had defeated him by only nineteen votes.

With a feigned show of reluctance, Benny stood up. "If there's nothing more," he said, "I better head off to my next appointment." Before departing, he said, "I heard you tonight. I'll handle everything."

At the next meeting of the Redwood Neighborhood Association, Benny strolled into the basement of the Last Apostle Church like a triumphant athlete into a post-game news conference. But no one mentioned the car. The neighbors resumed discussing the movie to be shown at the neighborhood picnic. Stan sang a subdued verse of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." There was discussion about whether to offer the church a contribution for permitting the group to meet in its basement. The association had $98.68 in its bank account. The old people debated about whether to offer $10 or $15. They compromised on $12.50.

When there was a lull in the conversation, Benny filled the silence: "Maybe you haven't noticed, but I had that old car removed."

"We noticed," Sally said.

When no one followed up on her remark, Benny said, "It was no problem." To emphasize his point, he snapped his fingers like a magician over a hat.

There was more silence.

"If there's no more business," Sally said, "we can adjourn."

Benny looked at his phone. He had

again arranged to meet Little Danny. He would be early.

The neighbors shifted in their seats but didn't stand.

"Quick meeting," Benny said. He stood to go. "I'll see you in a month. In the meantime, if there's anything you need my help with—you have my email address and my cell phone number."

"We even know where you live," said Larry, who waited a beat before laughing.

Benny left the room but lingered behind its insubstantial door. He could hear the neighbors talking. Larry mentioned Camille. Sally mentioned Camille's mother. Martha said, "It might be what kills her."

"Maybe," Mitch said, "we could have it towed from the graveyard."

"Bring it back from the dead."

"The Jaguar could roar again. So to speak."

Benny wanted to laugh. The old people were talking about the old car again! At the next meeting, he would remind them of his campaign slogan: Progress isn't a U-turn.

Fourteen months later, Benny lost his reelection bid to Gabriel O'Connor. Little Danny, meanwhile, had decided she didn't want to be the first lady of Ohio. She was now dating a local musician famous around town for his holiday shows at the Sunrise Manor, where, in addition to Christmas carols, he sang every Frank Sinatra and Elvis song the elderly residents requested.

On a Friday night three weeks after his defeat, Benny was supposed to meet his campaign manager at the Book and Brew, but his old roommate texted at the last minute to cancel. Benny downed several beers anyway. Admittedly, he was feeling sorry for himself. Once an illuminated highway, his path to the governorship was now a meandering backroad. Or maybe it was a dead end. He'd begun working full-time at his uncle's hardware store.

Too drunk to drive, he left his Volkswagen Golf in the parking lot and stumbled toward his apartment. Several minutes later, he decided to take a shortcut on a side street paved with bricks. There were no streetlights, but the moon provided sufficient illumination. Tonight. *Tonight. Tonight the world is full of light.* His mother had an old vinyl recording of *West Side Story.* As a kind of penance, he'd played it three times the morning after the election.

Benny wasn't far down the road when he realized he was lost. Never one to admit defeat—Progress isn't a U-Turn!—he continued.

Presently, up ahead, he saw his Odyssey. Parked against the right curb, it was rusted around the wheels, and the moonlight gave its maroon color a silver glow, but it was as familiar as his favorite song. He stepped up to the car, caressed its driver's-side door, and peered into its interior. The gum wrappers in the cup holder might have been his. He tried the handle; the car was unlocked. He slipped into the driver's seat.

Where was the key? If he had it in his palm, he would start up the car and drive across the night to Blues Beach, where Mary would be waiting on their blanket, her sunshine hair so radiant, so wild and bright, that dawn, conceding defeat to a worthier rival, would never break.

Buried

By Avery Troester

The dead body wasn't what Beatrice expected. When she found a dead body, she wanted to see rot, pus, muscle bulging out of oozing holes made by pulsating, feasting maggots. Death was supposed to wield his smell, waft it past her neighbor's dinner tables, alert them to his presence. It wasn't supposed to look so plain.

Beatrice wasn't surprised to confront death. It was always only a matter of time. But when did anyone have time to bury a body in her backyard? And in this town full of poorly kept secrets, who could get away with it? The foot sticking out of the hole she'd dug for her tomato was pale, but the flesh of it wasn't shrinking away from the toenails. Still, thought Beatrice, the toenails did seem to need a trim.

Beatrice had been trying to grow a garden for the last six years. But last August all she had to show for her work was a few crispy, yellow tomato leaves and memories of sunflower seeds that had been dug up by some asshole squirrel. The weather was warming up again now that it was May, and one of the seeds from a tomato that failed to thrive last year was sprouting on the ground. It was thin and falling over, but it seemed like a good omen. Beatrice didn't believe in signs, but if she did, that little stem would have been one.

She dug and dug in her backyard to rehome her little tomato bud. She named it Argos. Argos deserved better than a dry patch of dirt under a chain link fence. Beatrice found a perfect spot next to her porch swing, the one she had to place in her grass because she had crumbling concrete steps instead of a porch. She could rock back and forth and watch over her little tomato plant. She could check if Argos needed water or more sunlight. If any bugs wandered too close to Argos, Beatrice could fend them off.

Beatrice felt like she was supposed to scream when she found the foot. Instead, she leaned in, looked a little closer. She thought, based on the creamy color of its flesh, that maybe the body was fresh. But if that were the case, why was the dirt still rock hard?

Beatrice couldn't make herself look away. What's that saying? If you can't look away from a dead body it's because you want to be one?

Beatrice walked back into her house to call 911. The operator was a tired-sounding woman who asked for her address then let Beatrice know that someone was on the way. It might be a little while. It was a day with a lot of crime. "There are a lot of dead bodies," the operator said.

Beatrice hung up and avoided eye contact with the calendar hanging on the wall next to it. It still had her doctor appointments written in blue ballpoint ink. The next one was supposed to be on the twelfth of October six years earlier. Snoopy in his sun-bleached witch hat smiled down at Beatrice.

The police showed up an hour and a half after Beatrice called. There were two officers. One was a young man that Beatrice had never met before. His name tag said "Officer Butch". The other officer was quite a bit older, Officer Trout. He had always been friendly.

"We understand you found a dead body?" Officer Butch asked. It wasn't a question. He elbowed past Beatrice into her house. He didn't even take off his shoes. Officer Trout did; he dangled them by their laces as they trotted behind Officer Butch. Beatrice tried not to think about the microscopic bits of dirt that Butch was leaving behind. Maybe they carried traces of those other dead bodies the 911 operator had mentioned.

"Are you sure you don't want a glass of water?" Beatrice asked as she followed them through her screen door and into her backyard.

"That sounds lovely," Officer Trout said. "It's been a hell of a day."

"We're pressed for time," said Officer Butch. "Can you show us where you found the body?"

Beatrice's yard wasn't big. She could see the hole she'd dug, even from her doorway. The foot was gone.

"It was right there. I swear it was," Beatrice said.

Officer Butch took a step back, right on top of Argos. "Filing a false police report is a crime, ma'am. If you're lying, you could be arrested. You could go to prison. Have you heard what happens in prison? Look at you—you'll never make it out of there. Now, tell us the truth. Was there a body in your backyard?"

Trout pulled him aside and spoke in a lowered voice. "Hey, kid. Calm down a bit. Beatrice is… She's a bit… She gets lonely. Don't be too hard on her okay?"

"There was a body. I saw it," Beatrice insisted.

Butch put his hand to his hip, toward his holster, then Trout grabbed his arm to stop him. "Beatrice, it was nice to see you again," he said. "I think we have to go now. Another call is coming in. Call me if you need anything, okay?"

People in her neighborhood thought Beatrice needed to be protected. They thought she was broken. Suffering. If she stayed inside too long, Officer Trout would show up and knock on her door. Someone out there wanted to make sure she was alive.

She lingered in her backyard after Butch and Trout left. The air was warm but the breeze still held a light winter chill. She leaned in close to the hole in the ground. When she didn't find anything, she leaned in closer. She squatted there with her face in the dirt and felt pretty stupid. How could she have been so wrong? But then the dirt moved a little bit. It was a small shift, like a sprinkling of ants crawling across her kitchen counter. Beatrice could only see it when she unfocused her eyes, but there it was. The dirt was moving.

She stared without blinking until her eyes were so dry she couldn't see and she gave up and turned away. That was when she hit the precise angle she needed to see a flash of white against the dark soil hole. She swiveled back, dropped to all fours, and there it was! The foot! It was somehow deeper in the hole. It looked like a little kid hiding from a monster in a blanket. Maybe some kind of pressure thing had sucked it in? Beatrice moved the dirt one pinch at a time until she revealed a little bit of toe.

The foot tucked back into the dirt, so Beatrice kept digging, gingerly, until she exposed an ankle. It was hairy and bony. Then she found the hem of a skirt. It was green and floral, like the garden Beatrice had hoped to grow. The legs pulled themselves in again. Whoever was in there didn't want to be found. When Beatrice uncovered her eyes, she screamed in pain at the sunlight and blocked it with her arms.

"Holy shit," Beatrice said. "I thought you were dead."

The woman sat up and scowled. "What, like all buried people are dead? That's a little prejudiced, don't you think?"

"Do you want me to bury you again?" The hole was deep enough to reveal layers: dust and dirt and soil and clay, stringy grass roots and deep dandelion stalks, worms and centipedes and earwigs and larvae. There was a millipede wrapped desperately around a clump of the woman's hair.

"Yes. Please." She laid back down in the hole and I shoveled all the earth back over her, first covering her head, then blanketing her shoulders, stomach, hips. The women held perfectly still. Silent. The only sound was Beatrice's fingers scooping and patting, scooping and patting. Down the block, a child screamed like they were dying. Another child joined in. They were playing.

Once the woman was buried again, Beatrice sat on her porch swing. Argos was flattened. She didn't need to transplant it. Argos was dead. She rocked back and forth. Back and forth. The swing creaked. If she couldn't plant her tomato, she didn't need to do anything at all today. The day was

hers. Peaceful.

She didn't need to talk to anyone.

She could be alone with her thoughts.

Beatrice grabbed her trowel and dug the woman's face out again. "What are you doing in my backyard?" she demanded.

The woman squinted. She sat up and the soil fell off her in clumps. "What is it with you grass-side people? Why can't you leave me alone?"

"I'm sorry," said Beatrice. "I only wanted to know. I've never found anyone in my yard before. What's your name?"

"All these questions. Names, jobs, hometowns. If I wanted to have a name, I wouldn't have moved root-side. Now please, will you bury me again?"

She laid back down, face first, and Beatrice cried out, "No! Wait! Please, stay."

The woman, muffled by the earth, asked, "Why? What's the big deal? Let me go home."

"I don't understand how you could do such a thing. Living in the ground? All alone?" Beatrice sat on her porch swing. "Don't you miss the sun? What about your family?"

"Stop rocking," the woman said. "It's making me sick."

Beatrice stopped herself.

"And stop picking your nails," the woman added. "It's very annoying."

"What if I call you Patty?" Beatrice asked.

She rolled her eyes. "If you must call me something, you can call me Calliope."

It brought back a memory for Beatrice. When she bought her house, the lawyer gave her a document that listed everyone who owned the house before. He told Beatrice to put it in a fireproof box, so she did, and then she forgot about it. But one thing on that paper, brown and crispy, stood out to her when she received it. A woman's name, Calliope. Beatrice read *The Odyssey* in high school and thought it was a beautiful name. She wanted to use it for her daughter. Beatrice asked the lawyer if he knew about the house, about the woman who owned it before her.

"She went missing. But don't worry. It didn't have anything to do with the house." Then he slid more papers across the table for her to sign.

"You used to live here," Beatrice said to the woman. "Didn't you? How long have you been in the ground?"

The woman shrugged.

"Didn't anyone care that you were gone?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. That wasn't any of my business." She stood up and more clods of dirt fell off her. "Look, I don't think I can give you what you want. I should really be getting back now. Do me a favor and don't dig me up again."

"Wait—" Beatrice grabbed her arm. "Can I come with you? Just to see what it's like?"

#

The root-side woman showed Beatrice how to dig with her fingernails. "If you use your fingertips you'll shift the dirt too much. Fingernails, though, they work perfectly. You can create a tunnel and slither in."

She showed Beatrice how to cover her toes. "Were you paying attention to how the grass was laid out earlier? If you're not careful, it will be obvious that something is under there. If someone knows you're here, then what's the point?"

She taught Beatrice to lay perfectly still so she didn't disturb the earth. It was strenuous at first. When her chest rose and fell, everything shifted around her.

"It's okay to feel hungry. Keep an eye out for worms. They're easy to slurp."

Time disappeared down there. Beatrice didn't need to know the date. She loved the weight on her back, the clay in her nostrils.

#

Even with all the dirt, Beatrice could feel footsteps on top of her. Then the weight being stolen, air on her heel. The sound was muffled. "We found her. Call for an ambulance."

"I'm sad to leave you," Beatrice said. The woman says not to worry. Everything will be okay. She'll still be there tomorrow.

#

One Dollar's Worth

By Marco Etheridge

Pete had time on his hands, and, big bonus, he wasn't bleeding face-down in an alley. Midday sunlight erased the shadows. Traffic rumbled past on the Kennedy Expressway. Saturday, and the Cubbies were playing. All in all, a good morning so far.

The deal had gone down with minimum suspicion and zero bloodshed. Unlike some other groups Pete dealt with, the Poles tended to be level-headed. Of course, it didn't pay to cross them. That could lead to Pollack boots kicking your skull.

But not today, Boyo. The big Poles got the goods, he got the cash and then zipped out the door. Left the brick garage behind without a backward glance. Luck of the Irish, a good day's work done by Saturday noon, and a bit of money in his pocket.

Pete O'Brien kept his deals small. Big deals attracted guys who drove Cadillacs and never worked a day job. He'd made it to twenty-five without taking a serious fall or becoming compost in the Forest Preserve. Being a little fish didn't bother Pete. Little fish didn't attract sharks.

The roar of the expressway faded as he backtracked to Milwaukee Avenue. He walked at a steady pace but not too fast. A man running errands, taking care of business. Nothing to see here.

Pete stepped out of the crooked side streets and into the Polish downtown, where Milwaukee, Ogden, and Chicago Avenue crashed into one another. The smart play said straight up Milwaukee to the Chicago Avenue El station. One train down to Clark, then hop the Lake Line heading West. Business done and back home, piece of cake.

He headed for the El with the best of intentions but got waylaid. The sign read Bronski's Place, one of those cozy bars tucked below sidewalk level. Pete hesitated. The Cubs were playing the Cardinals. He had time for a quick beer or two, catch the first few innings. Decision made, he descended the stairs.

Pete stopped just inside the doorway and gave the barroom a quick scan. The joint looked safe enough. A couple of empty stools and a TV hanging from the low ceiling. He let the door close behind him and walked to the bar.

The bartender stood behind the business side of the plank. Big guy, mid-forties, white shirtsleeves rolled up over hairy forearms. Pete gave the man a nod and pointed to one of the stools. Didn't pay to take a regular's seat. The barkeep waved a hand.

"That one's free. Gotta save the other. What'll you have?"

Pete glanced along the bar as he perched on the stool. Schooners and mugs left and right.

"A draft, thanks. Just a schooner."

Laid a ten on the bar and checked the TV. Looked like the bottom of the first. The Cubs jogged onto the field, with Rick Reuschel taking the mound. Barry Foote crouched behind the plate.

The bartender flipped a beer mat onto the bar and dropped a foaming schooner on top. Pete pushed the ten forward. He drank off the foam and turned back to the game. The till rang. The big man swung back and counted out the change.

"You a Cubs fan?"

Pete looked away from the warmup pitches.

"Yeah, I'm a sucker for heartbreak."

The barkeep let out a standard-issue chuckle.

"Ain't that the truth?"

The door clanged open and shut. The bartender shot a quick look over Pete's shoulder. A grimace passed across the man's mug, replaced just as quickly by a pasted-on smile.

A cheerful voice filled the barroom.

"Greetings, one and all. Hello, Stan. I see you saved me a spot."

"Hello, Janek."

The bartender turned away as the newcomer settled in. Pete ventured a glance. The fellow caught his eye and smiled. He looked like everyman, the guy in the room you'd never notice. Fifty if he was a day, balding, wearing a white button under a Mister Rogers cardigan. Before Pete could look away, the man stuck out his hand while gabbling like a bluejay.

"Janek Polkowski. How's that for a Pollack name? Haven't seen you in here before."

Pete gave the man a minimal handshake.

"Uh... Pete, Pete O'Brien."

"Pleased to meet you, Pete. Irish, huh? Don't worry, we won't hold that against you. Ah, thank you Stan."

A pint landed in front of Janek, and then the click of an empty shot glass. Stan the barkeep reached under the plank and came back with a fancy bottle. He filled the shot to the brim.

Janek gripped the shot glass between his thumb and middle finger and raised it without spilling a drop.

"*Na Zdrowie!*"

Tossed it off in one go and clicked it back to the bartop.

"You're a lifesaver, Stan."

"So you always say."

Janek turned to Pete.

"Stan objects to happiness. Speaking of which, you ever tried slivovitz?"

He didn't wait for an answer.

"One more for me and one for Pete the Irishman."

Another shot glass appeared as if by magic. Stan filled them both. Pete gave the shot a critical eye.

"What is this stuff?"

"That, my friend, is slivovitz. Polish brandy. Made from plums. It's good for you."

Pete glanced at the barkeep, who shrugged.

"And you need to learn the proper toast. You say *Na Zdrowie*. Like this: Nah-zdrov-e-Yay. Got it?"

Right, thought Pete. One and done, then I'm outta here. He reached for the shot, dribbled the tiniest bit, mumbled the toast, and threw it back. The firewater burned his throat and lit a flame in his belly.

Someone called for a refill. Stan disappeared. A low groan ran through the barroom. Pete looked up just in time to see a Cardinal runner strolling across home plate. Cards two, Cubs nil. Another heartbreaker in the making. Beside him, Janek chattered away, pouring out a flood of words that pulled Pete away from the ballgame.

"You know the basic problem with the Cubs, dontcha? They've got no luck. Not a bad ball club, but unlucky. Funny thing, luck. You either have it or you don't. Take me, for example. I figure I'm the luckiest man in Chicago. Maybe luckiest in the whole world. Got a great wife, two beautiful kids, a good apartment, and a job I love. Who could ask for more, right? You married, Pete?"

Pete shook his head and got no further.

"Should be thinking about it, young guy like yourself. Best thing that ever happened to me, meeting my wife."

Janek interrupted himself.

"Hey, Stan, two pints and two shots, please. Drink up, Pete."

Pete started to protest, but Janek waved him off. Before he could finish the schooner, the pints arrived.

"You're the guest today. Ah, here we go. Thanks, Stan. Here's to you, Pete. *Na Zdrowie!"*

Three innings slide by in the blink of an eye. Pete managed to buy one round but sort of lost track after that. Janek hopped from one cheerful monologue to the next, ignoring the dismal baseball game. The shots kept coming, and the barroom took on a mellow glow.

By the fifth inning, it was clear that nothing would save the Cubs except maybe a rain delay, but the skies above St. Louis remained a clear blue.

Someone grabbed Pete's shoulder. Then more words, so many words. Janek, still talking a mile a minute.

"I said, let's head over to my place. The wife will be putting food on the table. You need to eat something."

Janek downed the last of his beer and pushed a stack of bills across the

bar.

"Keep it, Stan. C'mon, Pete, there's a feast waiting for us. Want you to meet the wife, see how good life can be. On your feet."

Somehow, Pete found himself out on the sidewalk with Janek at his elbow. Milwaukee Avenue stretched out in front of him. All he had to do was start walking. No looking back. Thanks, but no thanks. But he just couldn't do it. It'd be like kicking a little kid. So he let the happy bald guy tow him around the corner and up the block.

The good apartment Janek bragged about proved to be a rundown four-storey walkup. The stairway smelled of cooking grease and the ghosts of onions. Pete followed the guy up the stairs, enveloped in the man's never-ending stream of happy chatter.

Janek paused outside a scuffed door, key in hand.

"Here we are, home sweet home."

He pushed the door open and ushered Pete over the threshold. A short entry hall opened onto a living room just big enough for an armchair, a half-sofa, and a worn recliner.

A woman stood on the far side of the room, gray hair above a sad face, wearing a stained apron. Pete caught a glimpse of a kitchen beyond the woman's thin shoulders. He felt a sharp urge to make a run for the door, but Janek had him blocked in.

"Hi, honey. This is my friend Pete. Pete, this is Anna."

Pete forced himself to look at the woman.

"Pleased to meet you, Missus Polkowski."

Janek's wife nodded once, then lowered her eyes. Janek pushed up next to Pete, took his elbow, and steered him to the empty armchair.

"Make yourself at home."

Pete collapsed into the chair, hoping it would swallow him. What the hell was he doing here? This place looked all wrong. Maybe this guy Janek was some sort of psycho serial killer. One part of Pete's brain tried to wave a warning flag, but the bigger part slid into the haze of too much drink on an empty stomach.

Janek lowered himself into the recliner, levered the footrest, and smiled at his wife.

"Where are the kids?"

Anna spoke to the floor.

"The children are in their room, Janek. They've got homework."

"Aw, too bad. Anyway, I invited Pete to lunch. And a couple of beers to go with, honey."

Anna disappeared into the kitchen without a word. Janek's head lolled back against the cushion. He kept talking, but his eyes were on the ceiling.

"Great kids, I got. Good at school. Always studying. Great kids, a great wife. Lucky man…"

Janek's words faded to nothing. Silence filled the room, and not the good kind. Pete cocked his head to listen. Not a sound from the kitchen, just Janek's heavy breathing from the recliner. Pete pushed himself forward, rubbed his hands on his jeans, and snuck a quick peek into the kitchen. No sign of the wife.

Then he heard soft footsteps. A little girl appeared in the kitchen doorway. White-blonde hair, blue eyes, maybe ten years old. The spitting image of her mother.

For a moment, she stood still as a statue. Her eyes locked onto Pete's. Without a word, she stepped past her father as if he didn't exist. She drew herself up facing Pete's armchair but kept a safe distance between herself and his knees.

Pete sagged forward in the chair, his forearms on his knees. The solemn eyed girl stepped back. Before he could say a word, the girl raised her arm. A dollar bill dangled from her fingers.

"Mama says for you to go now, please."

Pete stared at the worn dollar bill, then into the girl's face. Her expression did not change. Fierce blue eyes above a mouth set into a grim line, the look of a child performing an adult task. A small creature facing down a predator.

A stab of sobriety pierced Pete's addled brain. This girl knew what she was doing. She'd played this role before. Mama gave the girl a chore to

do. Get rid of the bad man. So that's what she did.

Chasing that realization came another, heavy as a hammer blow. Pete recognized the villain in this showdown. Shame flooded his guts, and that wave of shame carried bitter memories that washed Pete away.

Instead of a little girl, Pete sees his father raging out of the kitchen. The air blue with foul, angry curses. Mam flat on the kitchen linoleum, hands hiding her face. Little Pete in the middle of the hallway, tears and snot running down his chin. Daddy cuffs him aside like a stray dog. Little Pete hits the wall and slides to the floor. A door slams. He knows better than to get up. Curl up tight and wait. Daddy might come back.

The vision faded. Pete blinked, shook his head. The girl stood in front of him, waving a dollar bill. The dollar lolled back and forth like a green tongue, limp and repulsive. Pete cringed away from it. A question bubbled out of his mouth, cutting through the chaos in his head.

"What's the dollar for?"

"Bus money. Mama says for you to go now, please."

Something snapped in Pete's head. He reached for the dollar bill. Freed of her ransom, the girl vanished through the kitchen doorway, quick as a rabbit.

The room closed in on Pete, threatening to crush him. He shoved himself upright, took one step, and tripped over Janek's outstretched feet. Janek snorted in his stupor.

Pete bounced off the half-sofa and almost went down. Regaining his balance, he lurched to the front door and yanked it open. Didn't bother to close it. Took the stairs two at a time, careening across each landing and down the next flight. Skidded into the foyer, grabbed for the street door, staggered outside. With the sidewalk under his feet, Pete ran. Shame, the girl's solemn face, and Daddy's ghost chased him.

He reached Milwaukee Avenue before he remembered the dollar clutched in his fist. A blazing heat seared his fingers as if the bill had burst into flame.

Pete dodged past pedestrians as he sprinted toward the El station. Only a block away, but it felt like miles. Finally, he reached the stairs rising from the sidewalk to the overhead platform. Saw a wino at the foot of the stairs, cadging for drink money.

He stuffed the dollar bill into the wino's outstretched hand without slowing down. Hit the stairs at a full run, bounding upward, his heart pounding out of his chest. The stairway vibrated under his feet. He staggered onto the platform at the same moment a train rattled to a stop.

Pete dashed into the car as the doors slid closed. Flopped onto one of the bench seats, gasping for breath. He held his seared hand at the wrist, closed his eyes, and prayed for the flames and memories to die.

The train lurched, coupling against coupling, then rolled from the platform and rattled away above the city.



Of heart

Resoun B Acharya

This is an illustration in A3 Cartridge paper with Acrylic colors. This painting represents the state of heart in shreds where it relies on the different aspects of desires in the peace represented by the blue color. Love and ambition are main themes in it.

At the Window

By Nicholas Claro

T*emperatures are likely to plummet into the single digits by eight o'clock this evening*, the meteorologist is saying when my wife opens the front door.

Susan had gone out hours ago. To do what, I haven't a clue. Over the last seven months she's taken up every hobby imaginable. It's impossible to keep track. When it was warmer, there was Zumba and birdwatching. Lately, it's indoor activities, like pottery, still-life painting,. Once, a few weeks ago, she came home from a French cooking class smelling strongly of fennel.

I could ask, but I know there's no point. I know how the conversation will go.

What was it this time, knitting?

Volunteered at the WAM.

Oh, right. Of course.

I'm going to get ready for bed now.

Sure thing.

Unless we're in the company of Allison, our surviving daughter, this is how we speak to each other—in a manner that's sanitized and transactional.

Next week, it will be a year since our oldest daughter Blair died. But it hasn't taken this long for me to arrive to the belief that two people who share such a devastating loss are incapable of bringing each other any semblance of solace. We've tried. What we arrived at was a balanced indifference that lead to resentment and eventually wore us down to whatever we are now.

Tired, mostly.

Susan hasn't closed the door, and a scentless, frigid air blows in. No cooking class tonight.

She sniffs and looks to the floor. Susan's arms hang slack at her sides. Her long brown hair, which is silver streaked and still thick as it was in her twenties, brushes off her shoulder. Susan keeps her hair parted down the middle, and though the room is only lit by the television, I can clearly see she's upset.

She drags a wrist across her nose and the hand belonging to her wrist holds a large manilla envelope.

The furnace kicks on.

"You'll let the hot air out," I say.

"Can we talk?"

The meteorologist is talking about ice and snow. I turn to see him measuring out how much of the white stuff with his hands. He says something about high winds and a windchill of -17.

Similar to an arctic climate, he says, and hugs himself. *Brrrr!*

I hope this jackass's car breaks down on the way home. I hope he freezes to death in his Tesla. I don't know if the meteorologist drives a Tesla. He just looks like someone who would.

Susan takes a tentative step inside, like the floor might cave in, and closes the door behind her. She moves between me and the television and holds out the envelope.

"Is that what I think it is?" I say.

"Don't ask stupid questions."

Of course, she's right. I've wondered how long it would take for this to happen. I'm not the least bit sad or relieved. If anything, I'm thankful I've already had plenty to drink.

I remember now that I *have* a drink. Imagine that. It's in my hand and the next thing I know I'm drinking deeply from it. The bite of the bourbon is non-existent. This tastes like warm water, though in the next second my stomach goes hot.

I set the glass down on the side table harder than I mean to, which startles Susan.

Don't shoot the messenger, folks! the meteorologist says.

I raise a hand to make a pistol out of it and cock back my thumb. I let my thumb drop and go, "*Pow*."

I holster my finger pistol after Susan moves closer. I feel the cold coming off her. She moves a fold of hair behind her ear and thrusts the envelope toward me.

How many pages is the decree? Ours will surely be a simple matter. We've never had what either of us would describe as a traditional marriage, except for the kids and the house. Other than that, there's always been degrees of separation. Separate savings and checking accounts, Roth IRAs, insurances of all kids, credit cards. It's like we've been preparing for this moment from the beginning.

"Will you just take the damn thing already?" Susan says.

It bends like a fishing rod with a big fish on the line. I figure it's seven or eight pages. That's better than fifteen. Twenty. Fifty.

"I'd rather not," I say.

"Don't make this harder than it already is."

She holds the envelope so close I can smell it. Vanilla. Sandalwood. A slight spritz of sweat. She's traveled with this back from Martin's—our lawyer's office, which is one of the few things we *do* share—close to her, tucked under an arm, maybe, with the heat in the car blasting.

"I don't think it's in my best interest to sign or even look over anything in my current state."

To me, this has left my mouth clear as day, but with the way Susan looks at me I'm not too sure.

"How much have you had to drink?"

"I could do with a little more."

"Every single night."

"I'm retired," I say, and push the envelope away. "Set that on the counter. Next to the coffeemaker. I'll look it over first thing in the morning."

Susan doesn't say anything.

"I promise."

In an instant, she is through the living room and marches past the dining room and into the kitchen. The light cracks on and her silhouette reaches into the room, stretched across the floor like a ghost. And like a ghost, it suddenly disappears. I feel helpless.

If you ask me, it's always better to err on the side of caution. Mother Nature always wins, the meteorologist says.

I've had enough of this clown. At least there is something I can do about him. Except, where did I put the remote? It's not on the cushion next to me, and when I slide my fingers between the cushions, there's nothing. Not even spare change. I consider grabbing my glass, hurling it at the screen. But then Susan will think that's because of her.

I'm about to get to my feet and turn the television off the old-fashioned way when my phone rings.

The name on the screen is blurry and it takes a few seconds for me to see it's Allison.

"What's the word, Al?" I say.

"Have you read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*?" she says.

"Who?"

"This is how cold I imagine Shukhov felt in the Siberian labor camp."

"Are you all right, hon?"

"Oh, shut up, will you?"

"Sorry?"

"Not you, Dad. I've got the kiddo with me."

"She means the cat. Miguel belonged to Blair. Blair gave him the nickname Kiddo as a joke to cut the tension and soften the blow to her mother and me that she and James did not have any plans to have children. I suppose Susan and I are traditional in this respect. Anyway, Allison kept the nickname alive because she, like Blair, also does not have plans to become a mother.

"With you where, exactly?" I say.

"Knock, knock," Allison says. "We just pulled up out front. This is me, you know, calling ahead?"

"You're sure everything's fine?"

"The heater crapped out. Daniel's in Bentonville and won't be home until Tuesday. Longer if this fucking weather keeps up. He's Mr. Fix-It. I don't know jack-shit about relighting a pilot light, even with him baby-talking me through each step over FaceTime. I told him I'd probably end up exploding the house."

"Did you leave a faucet dripping."

"*That*," she says. "I could handle. One in the bathroom and the other in the kitchen. I'm going to hang up and get out of the car now before I freeze to death."

Susan's shadow reappears on the floor.

"Who're you talking to?"

A car commercial plays on the television. Classic rock music and the image of shiny, red overpriced 4x4 that's climbed and parked what looks like the top of a mountain.

I get up and go to the door. The knob's freezing and sends a chill up my arm. I bring my cheek against the wood. Through the peephole, I make out the Allison's car parked at the curb out front, gleaming below the light of the streetlamp across the street.

The furnace sighs off. Behind me, a drawer bangs closed. Susan's steps grow louder.

"Will you answer me?" she says.

Allison swings her legs out of the car and emerges with a backpack slung over one shoulder and the cat carrier in the other hand. She hips the door closed.

"Bill?" Susan says.

I run a hand against the wall until I find the switch and snap on the light. After I bring my head back, I discover my cheek is numb. This could be from the door or the booze. I don't know.

I unlock the door.

"Don't tell me you made some poor kid DoorDash you Meddy's in this weather," Susan says.

"We have a visitor," I say, turning to look at her over my shoulder. "Al's heater is on the fritz. She's staying here. At least for tonight. I'll see if I can get the pilot relight tomorrow. After that, I'll deal with us." She doesn't say anything. "She's brought our grandson along with her."

Susan picks the remote off the floor and turns the television off, then tosses the remote on the couch.

I crack the door open and in my thin bar of visibility, I watch dim figure of my daughter dash through the darkened front yard. It's started to snow in fat flakes.

To my surprise, Susan rests a hand on my shoulder so she can get a look, too. I'm drunk, not stupid. I know not to make this into something it's not. It's procedural, if not performative.

Once she's on the porch, Allison trips the motion sensor. She's wearing sweatpants. A gray Ohio University sweatshirt. A beanie rests loose on her head, with sashes of light brown hair that falls an inch past her earlobes. Her nose is red. So are her cheeks. I open the door the rest of the way. She pauses on the welcome mat to wipe her feet and catch her breath. Allison lifts the cat carrier.

"Say hit to grandma and grampa, pal," she says.

Inside, Miguel release a pathetic mew, then yawns, unfurling his bright pink tongue. His orange eyes are wide, searching, and nervous.

Susan motions for Alison to get inside. "Get your butts in here right now," she says.

I move to allow her room to get in and close the door behind her. Allison lets the backpack slip from her shoulder to the floor. She shivers, then holds the carrier for me to take.

"You're welcome here anytime," I say. "Both of you."

I'm cautious with the carrier. Miguel is a decent-sized cat, but I'm surprised how much and how fast my arms drop beneath the weight of him and the carrier.

This spooks him and he yowls and begins moving as erratically as the small space provided allows him to.

My grip slips and for a moment, I believe I am going to drop the carrier. Allison and Susan gasp, so I know they think I am going to, too. But at the last second I'm able to get a firm grip on the situation. I know this won't last, so I very carefully set the carrier onto the floor.

"Jesus, Dad," Allison says.

Susan shakes her head.

"Easy buddy," I say, and open the carrier door.

Miguel doesn't come out, so I slip a hand inside and wait. His nose is damp and cold against the knuckle of my thumb. Soon, his sandpapery tongue is going crazy on my fingers, the topside of my hand. I turn my hand to curl fingers below Miguel's head, to scratch his chin.

When I stop scratching, Miguel comes out, looks around, then trots to Allison, who now has her boots off, and rubs against her leg.

She lifts him and flops him over her shoulder, as if he really were a baby.

"Shit," Allison says. "I forgot about his food and litter box."

"I'll go," I say.

"You're not dressed for this weather."

I'm wearing jeans and a dark green wool button-down shirt. A gift from Susan.

"Not yet."

"Maybe sit this one out," Susan says.

"Al," I say. "Relax, will you? Make yourself at home. Eat whatever. Drink whatever. Let me be a father."

Susan shrugs. "Come on," she says to Allison, and reaches out to stroke Miguel between the ears.

As they walk toward the kitchen, Allison turns and says, "It's unlocked, by the way."

I go into our bedroom, which is on the downstairs floor, and throw on parka and boots. While lacing the boots, I hear the refrigerator door open and close. A moment later, the pop of a cork, followed by the murmuring voices of my wife and daughter. One of them laughs. Their laughs sound the same. At least I think they do.

The interior of Allison's car smells like leather and cheap coffee. I don't see the stuff in the passenger's-side seat or in the back. It takes me a minute. When I find the lever below the seat, I give it a sharp yank and the trunk pops open.

I should have worn gloves.

The litter box is two-toned, gray and bright green. It's empty except for a small, slotted shove that rests next to a bag of pellets. There are also several cans of wet food. Once I have this stuff out and the trunk closed, I turn toward the house right as the motion-sensor light snaps off.

It's snowing harder. I mean really coming down. There's already two or three inches of the stuff on the ground. There's no way Daniel's flight won't be cancelled, even if it isn't in a couple days. I take a step toward the house when I see the curtains part. I squint. It's Allison. She's backlit and has her face up to the glass and peers out the window with hands over her eyes. She spots me immediately. She raps the glass with her knuckles, waves for me to hurry up, to get inside.

We raised Blair and Allison in this house. And when the girls were little, there were plenty of times I got stuck at the office on a call or a meeting that ran longer than expected. Whenever this happened, I'd get home well after dinner, at a time when the girls should have both been asleep. More times than not, though, after I got out and rounded the hood of my car, I'd look up to find them at the window. In he same window Allison is in now, the both of them waving, like she is now.

"Why weren't they asleep?" I asked Susan once, after I'd tucked the girls back into bed and twirled reheated pasta fork tines.

"It's because they recognize the sound of your engine," she said, smiling.

I start to cry.

Boys

By Zeph

Kye and the other one walk on a street. Painted on a shop window is a ship. Its bow leaks from a hole in the glass, inside of which are slanted, empty shelves, and a dusty welcome sign on the wall. Smoke blows over the window. It rolls like a fog over the painted sea, and the ship disappears. The smoke continues down the street to where some boys sit on a porch and another sits alone on a curb. There wails a hidden, scratchy laugh.

"I'm ready to go," Kye says as he passes the shop.

"The Gospel finally get to you?" asks the other one.

"No," says Kye. "It's just time."

The laugh sounds again, and as they are now closer, they can tell it comes from an alleyway filled with old trash, pallets, and a fallen sign that says "Neighborhood Watch." It sounds like a rusted boat horn.

They continue East, towards the sea, which lies beyond their view.

The Cathedral stands at the intersection of Church and Broadway with scorches of burnt hair at its belfry. Its spire is decapitated, and it lies on the ground in a heap next to the chained doors of the portal.

The Cathedral itself is covered in soot. It is black, and the windows blend into the stone, and the stone blends into the gable such that its shadows have no distinct beginning nor end. Even the small rose window that once decorated the front has become stained and invisible. The only exception to the Cathedral's shadow is the graffiti on its tower, which shines like a light, and shows a compass that marks East, South, and West. The place where North should be is missing. Perhaps it used to be on the belfry, perhaps it was never there at all, but now the Northless compass marks the Frontier.

As the two approach the intersection, a boy comes around the corner and runs past them. He is huddled over himself and crying. His bare feet lift ash up from the pavement. "I don't know," he says. "I don't know, I don't—"

Kye and the other one take a right.

Those on the Frontier grow closer each day, away from the fires, away from the sea that gains an inch per night. They throw their furniture onto the street so they don't have to move it again; they watch it sail away, or become charcoal. They move closer together; they all but huddle up.

Go North. The other one once had a dream about that. It was back before he and Kye realized they would be stuck. Beards, fur coats, rubbing their hands on their arms as the endless expanses of snow blinded them. It felt real. He said that meant it would happen—a dream like that is one of prophecy, one that says they are on the right path. He was excited, but Kye disagreed. The other one was another wrong voice in his head. "A dream just shows what's inside," he said. "Fear and hope, we never know which. But it's never prophecy, not for us." And the other one knew that he was right, that that was the real meaning: he had seen a life that could only be in a dream.

Down the street sounds a horn. It is the Gospel on a boat that will be sailing North.

As if summoned, missionaries appear. They offer salvation to everyone, the damned in rags and linens who wander aimlessly without faith and hope, but no one listens. The boys shun themselves. They cannot say what they know, they hardly know it themselves, and the missionaries struggle and retreat from the silence. It is the Devil's. They fear it. The horn sounds again and ruptures the orange sky. It parts the fog, and then the fog tumbles back in. There were clouds

above, so the Sun was never visible.

South and East, North and West; the unknown against certainty; boundless hopes against cold knowledge. In the South and East, they think, you could be more than a whaler, more than ice; there could be warmth, sand and plants and joy. And while such dreams could encourage one to be adventurous, to be brave and to see what the world offers, as the days go on and hope flits about, the imagination craves reality, and those who have remained on the Frontier have convinced themselves the opposite of their fears would raise only its equal. After all, go far enough South, and would you not land on ice as well? And if the South is the same as the North, would East not be the burning fires of the West? Best to stay in the Frontier. Let all unknowns cease, dream only in certainties.

Take the boys standing in a circle. On the ground between them is another boy with limp, ashen feet. His long hair is matted, his patchy facial hair filled with soot. The others dangle cigarettes from their mouths, and ash occasionally flakes off in a gale.

"There is no South. The bottles you got said nothing," says one. "And you said it yourself: the paper dissolved in your hand. No one's ever come back from there, because no one's ever made it, we all know it. There's only North. Don't lie to yourself."

"We can make it."

"It will be like leaving home."

"Since when is this home? Look at him. He went down without trying. I mean, we have to at least try."

The boy on the ground looks like he just found pure clarity—like he can see everything, and he is upset about it. Now he knows there was never anything hidden.

"That's not what I meant. When we go, that will be the same."

"Look at him."

"No, listen—if we leave, we would never find home. North would be the only one we'd ever get. We'd get and there would be nothing else, nowhere else we could ever go again. I know there's no South, there's no East, we all know it. But then there would be no home at all, and it should make sense but I don't understand it—"

"There's nothing to understand."

"He understood it."

"This isn't home. Don't you get it? We're not home now—"

"I know—stop—please. I know. But there has to be something we're missing. Something has to be wrong. It has to click. We have to wait for it—."

Kye leaves the group. The other one follows through the streets of the Frontier. The rest stay around the feet with empty cigarettes and hazy words.

The two stop at the end of the alleyway. Water laps over the asphalt. Ahead, buildings stick out of the ocean like dock pilings.

A voice speaks from behind them. It comes from a man, and it sounds like it's coming from their own mouths. "You know, I don't get it," he says. "Why haven't you left yet?" He is leaning against a wall that will soon be underwater, picking at his nails, each making a soft sound. He tells them he will take them North. "There's nowhere else to go, and no more ships are coming. You have no choice."

Once more sounds the horn. Like a cheap laugh, it rattles the city. The bracken trembles, the brownstones shake out the last of their teeth; they fall from the cornices in rotten decay, and land on the asphalt like a heavy snow. All the signs have surrendered already. They hide in the water: Yield to the sea, Stop here, Union Ave against Regatta View; wake rolling over them as if they had drowned long ago and no longer need to gasp for breath. Others, compasses and boats, quotes, messages, thoughts from weeks past that once decorated the side of the street but now only line the canals, they mention the sea, they mention South and East and bearings between, there are names and maps drawn in posterity of what there once was, and then others of what there could be; they line the walls in bright chalk that yearns to peek through the soot; they relinquish the crucial messages they

were meant to share, and were always dismissed.

"It's leaving," he says.

Ahead, the horizon of the black ocean blends with the orange sky. It expands over the alley like a plume of smoke. The boys watch where East has become North, and South has become West. Soon, they know, a strong wind will come. It will blow the smoke away, and all will become clear. Blue upon blue, extending forever; a world full of blue smoke.

Dinka

By J. Lee

Beer Pong, you know it? It's a drinking game. That and this quote are all I learned from five years of college.

The quote – "All art is erotic." – from some Austrian architect.

I heard it first in a Beginning Life Drawing course I took back then. In a class full of weirdos, I was the lone exception. Really. Life drawing, aka figure drawing, was code for nude figures, involving live models. Not proud of it, but I was drawn to the class mainly to view naked women up close. But to my biggest disappointment, the instructor could only entice male models to pose for us.

Next to me, at least for the first few weeks, sat skinny Annie. She wanted to be a Disney animator, she said. To make cartoons come to life.

Annie's most visible quirk: In all her detailed, perfectly proportioned portraits, there was a blank, a white space between the legs. She refused, or maybe was unable, to draw the male model's "dinka," her word, not mine.

An odd modesty, perhaps, but no big deal. Except.

Except at the time I was deep in the "everything must be balanced" phase and to counter her gap, compelled you might say, I started drawing only the male model's dinka.

For a few more classes, Annie drew everything but. And I drew nothing but the little love-gods, which she, with nuclear stoicism, ignored until the day one of my drawings didn't quite match the low hanging fruit attached to the male model of the day.

"Whose is that?" Annie asked.

"Isn't it lovely?"

"Not exactly. Who does it belong to?"

"Who do you think?" I said, trying and failing miserably to sound proud but not creepy. "A self-portrait, if you will."

"Then, it's inaccurate."

"Oh, I'll have you know, it's actual size."

"You wish," Annie said. "I guess it's true what they say."

"What's that?"

"You are what you draw."

"You calling me a, what's your word again? Dinky?"

"Dinka. If the portrait fits."

Next class, she moved to a seat where we could no longer see each other's artwork.

No big deal. Then my sketchbook went missing. Again no big deal. I could easily recreate all the dick drawings, right? But for some reason, I couldn't. I was, as the saying goes, drawing a blank. Along with my drawings, my mojo went missing, too. Yes, large deal.

Do you believe in voodoo witches? I certainly didn't. But that was before I met skinny Annie. As I was searching for my missing sketchbook, I started to have problems. In the bedroom. I was having a hard time, or rather its opposite.

And I had a hunch offering Annie a simple apology would not do. And I was right. I went to her apartment where she opened the door, shoved a sketchbook to my chest and slammed her door shut without a word. It was my short lost sketchbook minus the drawings. Pages have been ripped out.

Knock, knock, then a third knock. Just so there's no confusion and to preempt any attempt at a "Who's there" joke.

"What?" Annie said from the other side of her closed door.

"Where are my drawings?"

"I needed them," she said.

"Mind telling me what for?"

"To burn."

"What kind of a wicked witch are you?

"If you don't stop calling me a witch," she said. "I'm going to turn you into a frog."

"Then why did you burn my

drawings?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? Having any problems lately? In bed?"

"You used my drawings to cast a spell on me? Isn't that a witch-like thing to do?"

"It's technically a curse."

"You're joking? Hey, can you at least open the door?"

By way of an answer, she finally opened the door, just so she could slam it shut.

At home I experimented to see if the curse was still in effect. It was. I showed up at her place the next day for what turned out to be the first of three sessions of an exorcism or as she called it, a "de-cursing."

Inside her place, I envisioned candles, lots of them, in a circle on the floor along with an inverted pentagram drawn in goat's blood. Instead, in the middle of her apartment sat a lone chair and an easel off to the side like in our drawing class.

"Just so you know, I don't get naked on the first date," I warned her.

Joke or no, it was hard to keep to my word. No AC, no fans anywhere. She kept the place hellishly hot, I suspected, on purpose. But I gamely kept my clothes on, mostly. I sat and sweated while she stood and sketched.

"How is this going to get my sexual mojo back?" I asked.

Behind the easel, she answered by making a few tentative, caressing charcoal lines to a drawing I couldn't see but I soon felt a warm tingling, starting from the top and slowly moving down my body.

"Make yourself comfortable," Annie said, in a deep ancient voice. "Remove some pieces of clothing."

Which I reluctantly did. As if I was playing a game of strip poker and was losing. Or winning, depending on your perspective.

As I shed my clothes, my senses came alive. She wielded and waved her charcoal like a mini-wand and my body responded. I couldn't see but I could tell where and what she was sketching.

When I was down to my boxer briefs (semi-clean ones, thank god), I knew she was about to cross the border into my southern regions because her gentle caressing lines were breathing life into me, well, at least one part of me, anyway. That was when Annie suddenly stopped drawing and ended Day One.

"Tomorrow. Same time," she said before kicking me out.

I could see where this was headed. She was just warming up. A prelude or foreplay, if you will. But then isn't everything?

But if Annie wanted me to take off my clothes and pose for her, she could have just asked nicely. Which she never did. Instead, the next day, she tossed me a tattered, terry cloth bathrobe and showed me the bathroom to undress.

I came out, sat on the chair, wearing nothing but her bathrobe, and waited.

"Now," she said. "Lose the robe. Or do you need music?"

When I hesitated she said, "I've seen it already, remember?"

"When?"

"Your self-portrait."

Right, my drawing. So I tossed the robe aside and felt naked but not vulnerable.

My exposed dinka sat there, like a fluffy, well-behaved French poodle.

"I knew it. You did exaggerate," she said, not unkindly, but not kindly either.

That's when I felt naked and vulnerable.

Annie picked up where she left off and I soon felt an electric tingling in the pubes. A tickling of the testicles. And when she finally reached basecamp, an unmanly "Eek" involuntarily escaped out of me, followed by a loud tear of a page being ripped off her sketchpad. She crumbled up the drawing and tossed it aside. And just as quickly my proud boy fell, one second a wildly waving, air-inflated tube dancer outside a used-car lot, the next, a deflated, flattened piece of a sad dream.

Even then, I felt for her. I really did. She was stuck deeply in Goldilocks's dilemma, wanting to get it just right. And I honestly tried my best to be helpful.

"You know, you can't make it too big," I assured her.

We deja vu'ed – drawing, animating,

semi-awakening the awesome poodle below, only to start over again – until I was sore and we were both frustrated, her with the drawings and me, well, you know. End of Day Two.

At home, another self-examination, another self-diagnosis. No choice but to return the next day, hoping for a happy ending to the curse.

The last session started out much like the previous one: robe on, robe off, but then, she felt, somehow, self-conscious. She couldn't, she said, draw with a naked man staring at her.

"Do you mind?" she asked, handing me a blindfold. Dreams do come true.

With me blinded, she became once more uninhibited. Like a manic symphony conductor, her hand flew around, large quick strokes, drawing faster and faster.

I was getting dizzy, from her heated apartment and my blood all rushing to one place.

My dinka was coming to life, the largest it's ever been. The curse, the damn curse and everything associated with it was being lifted, painfully so. Make it stop, I wanted to scream, but no words came out. I went to remove the blindfold but found my hands handcuffed to the chair. Dreams do come true. But when did that happen?

Harsh sounds of charcoal grinding, scratching on paper continued. Oppressive heat. Blood rushing. Engorged pain.

I lacked many things but at that moment, mostly, blood and oxygen to the brain. My roommate back then, a pre-med, told me, in that situation, a body's only response is to fall. To pass out.

The smoke woke me up from a warm womb-like dream, dragging me back from a place I didn't want to leave or wake up from. Looking up from the cold floor, I found Annie staring blankly at her drawing as it burned and I dressed and left quickly but not before getting a glimpse of it as it turned to ashes.

You ready for another drink?

Lunch Break

By Shrutidhora P Mohor

"Menatel cups, menatel saucers, me-e-e-e-ena-a-a-a-atel crockeries!" The man who called out musically at regular intervals was known to him by now. They saw each other every day. The man was one of the first few shop owners on this side of the gate and as he sprinted his way in and then slowed down, he saw the stout bald man, huffing even when he was seated, often fanning himself with a folded newspaper, calling out with great gusto and then shutting his mouth and looking around, tired.

He usually moved slowly in front of shops. Busy passers-by nudged him involuntarily as they rushed from one shop to another, bargaining their way in and out. Their elbows dug into his ribs, or sometimes a tall figure passed by carelessly raising his hand and dishevelling his hair. Their long flowing dresses trailed behind them, often sweeping the entry to one shop while they themselves waited at the next one, quoting their best prices and running their hands over fabric, smelling perfumes from crystal bottles, cupping their hands to take an ounce of one of the spices and observe closely to decide on the suitability of the ingredient for a dish to be prepared later in the day or the next day, for a simple family dinner or for a friends' get-together.

He was generally in no hurry and looked into all shops even though he knew what he was looking for would not be there.

"Yes, son?" Asked one thin man who looked to him like a distant windmill, the kind that he had seen at the countryside on a holiday a year ago.

He immediately felt shy and wanted to crouch behind some upholstery on display. He stepped back in order to hide and got caught in a jostle. "Watch out, son! There are people behind you!", said an angry voice pushing him. Only when the thin man who had spoken first looked away did he slide out from behind another shop and run away. A little later he slowed down his pace again. He peeped into each shop, looked intently at the faces of each shopkeeper until they spoke to him, and ventured to see if what he wanted was there.

"What do you want, son?" A large lady whose eyes looked like the goldfish at home asked him.

Remembering how lovable the fish were he mustered courage and whispered, "Do you have chocolates?"

"Ain? What? Speak loudly, my son!" The lady spoke loudly herself.

He craned his neck ahead and said a little louder, "Round chocolates, inside wrappers, with nuts in them…Do you have chocolates?"

The lady looked at a man sitting on a stool beside her and asked what he had said. The man, instead of answering her, told the boy, "No! This is a shop which sells cosmetics and decorative pieces for homes. From where will she get chocolates for you, huh?"

"Chocolates! He asked for chocolates!" By now the lady had understood. "Hey, little boy, why are you alone? Where are your parents?" She paused. Another man from the next shop looked out and said, "Have you run away from home? You are very fond of chocolates? You ran away from home without telling anyone in order to get your chocolates? Where do you stay?" Then they looked at one another and decided, "One of us must accompany this boy back to his home and inform

his parents about this. It's dangerous for little children to be alone in a market place. Boy! Don't you know there are rag-pickers with huge sacks who frequent *bazaars*? They pick up stray boys in a wink and put them inside bags and whisk them away! Like this!" One of them made a sweeping gesture with his hands and tucked an invisible child into an invisible sack.

His ears sticking out in fear and his thin bony hands shaking, he ran away that day.

When he arrived at the arched gateway to cross over into his side and jog his way home he stopped and thought of something with a concerned face. The people at the *bazaar* had alarmed him. What if they actually followed him on his way back the next day and told his parents? With an anxious face he went in and picked up two pieces of chalk from the study desk, one blue, one pink, and then came back to the gateway and set up a fence. He also put on a bolt, drove the latch in, and locked it. Then he stood back and thought again. Biting his lips he now took the two pieces of chalk and wrote out a notice, 'No entry.' He considered it for a while and as he was about to hang it up he seemed a trifle dissatisfied. Trying to recall further prohibitory orders he finally looked relaxed when he added to the notice, 'Road closed.'

Happy with his defence measures, he turned around and went home.

"You took one hour ten minutes today," his mom remarked while she beat the batter for pancakes on the kitchen table.

He smelled the titillating smell of raisins and vanilla and wondered if his mom too had been to the same *bazaar* as he and had picked them up from there. "You went to the *bazaar*, mom?"

His mother was now kneading the dough for cookies. She frowned and said, "*Bazaar* what! Supermarket! Yes, I went to the supermarket. Why? Did you need something? Have you run out of chocolates?"

He lowered his eyes and shook his head on both sides to indicate that no, I still have enough stock.

A long linear semi-roofed pathway extended in front of him. Pieces of sunlight in odd shapes and sizes streamed in through open spots lighting up the road and all therein selectively. A thin film of silvery-golden light seemed to be covering the surfaces of shops and goods at the souk. Light and shadow patterns fell in dancing style on men, women, and things. At a distance was a puppet show. The wooden dolls moved their hands and heads in tandem with one another while sunlight and shadow fell on them alternately. Artisans and craftsmen were gathered in one place. The dice for embossing designs on to the items lay on one side. It smelled of just-extinguished fire, and of molten lead, and dollops of hardened lead lay scattered around the items and the dice. Earthy crockeries were lined up for display on a mat. He thought a few of them might be warm still, bearing the caressing touch of the potter's hands, the loving strokes of the maker adding a few impromptu designs on the surface. Some of them looked bright under the thin layer of sunlight while the rest of them appeared darker than they actually were because they sat in shade. On both sides of the path were lines of shops. It was common to have half the store items out on the general walkway and one would have to twist and turn appropriately to avoid bumping into them. He had all the time in the world to look for what he wanted. He moved ahead slowly, taking the smallest possible steps, stopping at every point and raising his hands to form a circle with his fingers to ask for his round chocolates. The scarf and stole store, the tailoring shop, the New Barkat Ali Suitings, the corner spot where stray dogs crowded to snatch

throwaway morsels of meat at the Imtiaz Ali Meat Centre, the shop with a hundred scent bottles on display at its glass window and many more flanked either side of the long straight path which proceeded like the spine of a never-ending dinosaur. At the far end of it was located a large enclosure consisting of a spacious courtyard in the centre surrounded by shaded colonnades at the sides. Mysterious curtains hung at the doors in between pillars and latticework windows.

In one place, he stopped to count the number of sacks stacked tightly with grains and spices. As he began counting he observed for the first time how huge these sacks were. Their lower portions lay in fat coarse pleats, each fold containing a lot more of the stocked up material than one could accommodate otherwise. He imagined how one would have to straighten the folds as the contents of the sacks would near exhaustion and how like a sudden collapse of the wall of a dilapidated building the wheat and the white pepper, the millet and the star anise, the *elaichi* and the cinnamon would tumble down on the floor of the sack. He could almost hear the 'swoosh' sound as they would drop down to the bottom, happy to have escaped the constriction of the folds and stretching themselves on the loose floor of the sack. He moved closer to one of the sacks and holding its side peeped inside. There amidst a mountain of red rice he spotted a golden wrapper lying empty, its surface crumpled. His eyes had a spark as he asked the man at one side, "Do you keep chocolates here?"

"Staples. Staples and spices. Chocolates, straight ahead, on your right." The man shooed away a chubby cat smelling the outside of a sack.

"You took over three hours today! What do you do for so long inside?"

"The cockroaches scare me. They keep coming out and inspecting my big toe." "Just give them a shoo with your big toe." "Their legs are rough. They scratch my skin." "Stamp on them with your feet. They will be dead."

Whoooeeee! Someone seemed to be calling him.
He stopped and searched for the caller.

On the steps of a shop selling items which he could not recognise or remember seeing anyone around his home wear, he found his caller, a boy bigger than him, in age, and in height.

He walked closer.

"Why are you alone? Don't you have a playmate?" The bigger boy asked. His dress had been starched and neatly ironed. Its folds looked crisp and firm. The long sleeves of the upper portion of his dress covered well past his wrists.

He hesitated to reply to the first question and then after some seconds thought he had an answer to both the questions.

"I come from the other side of the gateway," he half-turned and pointed far away behind him. "The gateway?" "Yes."

The older boy thought for a while and then said, still thoughtfully, "The *tripoliya*?" "No. The gateway." "Yes, that's the *tripoliya*. Which of the three arches do you enter from?"

He frowned and began thinking. Which one had he entered from today? Left, right or centre? Which one did he usually enter from? The older boy interrupted his attempts to recall. "The left one is for elephants and horses and camels. The central one is for the royal carriages. Music plays when carriages enter. Flowers are showered from the sky. And men enter on foot from the right hand side one. Did you come on a horse? Did music play when you entered? Was it the tune of the blazing sun, aloud and fearless? If so, the it must have been the king entering

…If on the other hand the music sounded like dew drops on a meadow, or like the tinkle of jewelleries inside a casket, then we know it is one of the queens…So what was your music like?"

"Don't you like chocolates? From where do you buy them?" He asked, now a little worried that the entire market might not have what he was looking for.

"Y-y-y-yes, but I have figs and dates more often."

He tried to think if he knew what those were. At that point, he saw a cockroach squirming towards them. He screamed and moved away. The bigger boy, startled at first, quickly positioned himself close to it, raised his foot on it and crushed it to the ground. He removed his foot and showed the evidence of his bravery, a still and mutilated body. "There!" The bigger boy declared proudly. He smiled, relieved.

"We need to fix the area this weekend. The whole place has become quite messy. Can you get someone to do it?" His mother told his father after dinner one night. She had taken a good look at the place. The cistern needed to be replaced immediately and when the man would come for that work they might just as well renovate the place. The WC could be mounted a little more, the holes in the walls needed to be filled up for good, and of course, the wall in front would get a fresh coat of paint. Crisscrossed endlessly, it looked like an abstract drawing. Ugly random lines which appeared like the sketches of a story unfolding in front…

"I am looking for these round chocolates with golden wrappers, the ones which glitter and inside of which there are nuts and raisins." He rounded his fingers to indicate what he was looking for and spoke just the way he had heard his mom asking for things at the local grocery.

"Oh! Chocolates! That's the shop," a man tying brown paper packages pointed in one direction behind himself without looking at him. The man had a large striped handkerchief spread over his shoulders from the back to the front of his neck. He had never seen handkerchiefs which looked like napkins, nor seen them around men's necks.

He proceeded in measured steps. When he arrived at the shop he found its gates partially shut with a narrow opening left free in between. Through the opening he could see two men inside, using their hands to wrap small portions of some food and put them inside their large mouths, their faces satisfied, their mouths busy at work. Their fingers operated in a particular pattern in picking up the food, wrapping it inside a soft-looking white round something, and sliding it through their restless teeth on their tongues. He went right up to the opening and put his face inside the gap.

"Hello. Can you give me chocolates?"

The men at first did not hear him and their munching sounds drowned his voice. He repeated, a little loudly. Now one of them heard him and nudged the other with his elbow and signalled towards the opening at the gate. Their mouths chewed on the food while their foreheads assumed marks of a sand-dune, creased, puzzled, slightly annoyed at having been disturbed.

"What? What is the emergency?" Roared one of the two men from inside. "I have come for chocolates. Everyone said your store has chocolates."

They looked at each other and then one of them said, "Boy! It's our lunchtime. Can't you see it written outside?" They resumed eating and did not look up again, determined not to be bothered by mealtime intrusions.

He stepped back and searched for the writing. He saw a handwritten notice at

one corner of the wall. It said, Lunchtime, come back after half an hour.

He wanted to ask at what time he should come back. He tried calculating on the basis of his arithmetic lessons in school. Half an hour from now? But the men seemed to be in the middle of their meal. Half an hour from the beginning of their mealtime? In that case he needed to know when they had begun. Half an hour from any fixed time irrespective of when they would actually take the break on specific days? He wanted to put his nose through the opening again and ask them but felt a little scared. The roar of the man sounded like the roar of the animated lion in movies that he watched with his dad.

On his way back that day he chased a cat away, half-killed a cockroach by clumsily stepping onto it, and chose the central arch of the gateway to walk out from this side and cross over into his side. Music as daring as the midday sun filled up all the three arches as he marched out.

"You took two hours twenty-six minutes today," his mother pursed her lips and looked at him, meaning to ask for an explanation.

"But the clock showed only one o'clock," he differed. "Look at this clock here. What does it say?"

He thought for a while and said, "That's a different time zone."

Some days from then, he came back from school to find that there had been some repair work on that wall and around the

WC area and the men in paint-smeared worn out tracksuits had whitewashed the portion of the wall where the triple archway stood. The broken edges of the walls through which cockroaches used to wriggle out had been cemented and sealed off with fresh paint.

He scampered away distressed, to ask his father why his gateway had been cleared off. But he came back soon after without
doing so and wrote out on the side of the adhesive on a chit of paper 'Lunch break, please come back after half an hour' and posted it on his side of the wall, the writing with its back to him so that the men at the *bazaar* could see his note.

Glossary:

Bazaar: chiefly an Arabic marketplace, a souk; in general, the local market

Elaichi: one of the basic spices of the orient, available in both small and big sizes, cardamom

Tripoliya: a triple archway, typical of grand entrances to large fortresses and palaces in the east



Part (yies) - 2
Patrick McEvoy, Olivia Pelaez

Fear Gorta

By Kaitlyn Downing

The call of the owl and the loud crack and pop of the damp log in the fireplace should have been warning, and no moon besides. Moira Lynch shuddered as she set the fire and put the kettle on for tea. At first, she wasn't even sure she had heard the faint rapping at the door against the television and the steady downpour outside, but when she stood up, muting the tv, there it was again. Tap tap tap, tap tap tap.

"Who on earth at this hour?" she whispered, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was long past nine.

In America, she would have worried about answering the door at night, a woman alone. Sean, rest his soul, would say, "Don't open it, it could be a masher." She chuckled at that. Masher was an expression he had picked up from her mother, probably from the Great Depression, that implied both sexual and physical assault, but with that vagueness of propriety. His eyes had lit up at the term, and he delighted in saying it whenever appropriate. It became one of many personal jokes between them. After thirty-five years of marriage, three years wasn't long enough for her to remember him without tears. Would she ever? Her eyes flicked to the picture of them, young and tan in swimsuits in Maui, at the tidal pool they had discovered. Sean had loved to explore.

"Who will protect you from mashers?" He didn't say *when I'm gone*. He had tried to muster up a smile as she held his hand, now pale and skeletal, knowing it would be soon, too soon. She couldn't have asked for a better husband. Part of her still expected him to be there, the lack of his presence a gnawing hole, like the indentation of the mattress after the person has left it. How do you get back a part of your soul?

Tap tap tap, tap tap tap. She swiped away the tears, debating answering it. Crime was virtually nonexistent in the little villages around Skibbereen, if you didn't count kids being kids. Besides, she lived far outside of town. Acres of fields stretched from her renovated Irish cottage like a green patchwork quilt, spreading to the river Ilen below. She was nowhere near the N71 and the small road that wound along the coast had little traffic. The nearest house was a good walk away. Who would ever find her out here unless they knew where to look? If a neighbor had an emergency, they'd use the phone, wouldn't they? Anyway, she was too old for any masher to be interested.

Plus, most everyone she knew kept farmer's hours. Maybe a lost tourist? It was still early for tourists, though. April was cold and wet normally, and tourists didn't really populate the beaches until at least late May, if the weather was particularly fine.

In the window, reflected in fragments from the rain, was the saddest looking man she had ever seen. She had never seen him before, and that made her hesitate. Strangers were rare. Hell, many still considered her a stranger, growing up in Florida, and she'd lived on her ancestral land for over a decade now.

Tap tap tap, tap tap tap.

I'm going to end up a Criminal Minds episode, she thought. Or the victim of one of those home invasion horror movies. If Sean were here, she thought and shut it down. He's not here. He's gone and I'm alone. She should ring the Gardai, or at least call Brian Curran, the sheep farmer up the road, but he was probably already asleep, and she felt bad waking him. Rain poured off the stranger at the door and the light gave him a greenish cast. In the muted light, he looked very old and frail. He tried to raise a rough, wooden bowl, but it fell from his shaking hand. This man didn't look capable of beating up a kitten. And he

needed help.

Decisively, she whipped open the door. “Come in, you poor man!” She ushered him to a chair in front of the struggling fire, poking it a bit to get it going faster. “You’ll catch your death out in this. Can I get you some tea?” She gestured to the kettle, not yet whistling.

Clothes so threadbare they were mere threads hung on a soaked skeletal frame, so pale he was nearly green, and water puddled the floor from his frozen feet and dripped off his nose. She grabbed two towels from the hall closet and placed one gently around his shoulders. Clawlike fingers shook as they weakly grasped the edges and tugged it closer around the bony shoulder blades poking through the rags. With the other, she gently rubbed his head and lined face dry, then his scrawny legs and feet, soles cross hatched with partially healed and fresh cuts, probably from walking without shoes. She wrapped the towel around his feet for comfort and warmth before going to get the antibiotic ointment and band aids from the bathroom shelf.

He closed his eyes in brief relief as she coated his cuts with the salve and applied the band aids. Wrapping the towel around them again, she felt tears threaten. She turned so he wouldn’t see. Not wanting to shame him with pity, she couldn’t help feeling it. She knew she could not let him leave without help.

“Are you lost?” She couldn’t imagine how else he got way out here. “Did you go off the trail and get turned around?” Sometimes bird watchers and hikers walked the nature trail further up the hill, but that was a bit of a distance. She knew better, but stubbornly searched for a rational explanation.

He just shook his head.

She filled a bowl with some of the beef stew she had made for dinner and nuked it quickly. She cut several thick slices from the loaf of brown bread, and once the microwave beeped, set both down on a tray in front of him. He didn’t wait for the kettle to boil to tear into the bread and begin dipping it into the stew and chewing hungrily.

“Cream or sugar?” she asked, stopping herself from automatically adding both, the way Sean liked it.

He made a sound and nodded, and she took that to mean yes to both. She placed the mug by his hand. He hadn’t stopped eating, despite shivering and shaking hands, and she was surprised to see the stew almost gone. She added another peat brick to the fire.

"More?” Sean could always eat. All You Can Eat Buffets lost money on him. It was one thing he missed when they moved to Ireland.

He just looked at her with eyes too large for his face, and she spooned what was left. By the time it was hot, the bread was gone. She cut the rest of the loaf.

Lifting the quilt from the sofa, she placed it across his bony knees. He shifted the tray while she tucked it around him but never stopped eating.

“Where are you from?”

He glanced up as if he didn’t understand the question.

“What are you doing way out here?” He wasn’t even wearing shoes. His eyes were so sad, she suspected he must’ve gone through something terrible. “Do you need help? Are you hurt or sick?”

He didn’t answer.

“The closest hospital is in Skibbereen. I have a car, but I can’t see to drive at night. I could ring for an ambulance…” she stopped as he looked more and more confused. She wondered if maybe he had dementia and was what they had called a “Silver Alert” in Florida, an old person who didn’t know where they were on the road. “Maybe I could phone a family member and they could collect you tomorrow morning? Do you have anyone I could call?”

He barely shook his head, seeming to swoon with the effort. Poor man. Either way, she wasn’t sending him out tonight. Tomorrow, she would figure out what to do.

“I’ll make up the guest room. You’ll be staying here tonight.” She poured him more tea and went upstairs. When she returned, he was already asleep in the chair. She considered waking him, but

he was so exhausted, she didn't have the heart. Instead, she pulled the quilt up around his neck, added peat to the fire, and went to bed, head spinning with unanswered questions.

#

When she came downstairs the next morning, he was right where she left him, sleeping like the dead. She started a pot of strong coffee—she still preferred coffee in the morning—and tip toed to their bedroom's right closet, the smaller of the two. She took a deep breath before turning the knob and steeled herself. Clicking the light on, Sean's smell—clean skin with a hint of soap—mixed with a slight mustiness washed over her and she almost lost it, but she closed her eyes, took several deep breaths until the smell faded. After his death, she had taken to sitting in his closet, wrapped in his clothes with her eyes closed, pretending he was still there. She hadn't done that in a long while, but his closet still smelled like him. It still brought her back.

But the man downstairs needed something to wear.

And Sean would never wear them again.

Refusing to linger on his favorite shirts—too painful—she looked for the warmest thing she could find. The man was so skinny, and Sean was a large man, so fit wasn't important. She grabbed a long sleeve, flannel shirt that was almost new, and the Aran Islands sweater she had knit for Sean. It was dark green wool, and he had loved wearing it. Not to mention it was warm and somewhat water resistant. Trying to find pants without stains or rips was harder—Sean had always been hard on his clothes, and he hated shopping for new ones—but she scavenged some from the bottom of the pile that looked clean. Now socks, and sneakers, which had more give than Timberland work boots in case his feet were bigger. She then remembered the cuts on his soles. Sneakers, definitely.

Part of her balked at giving away Sean's clothes, but the thought of the man downstairs made it seem petty. Sean would want him to have them. He was always kind like that.

She tucked the pile of clothes under her arm, sneakers in hand, and tried to be as quiet as she could going downstairs. He was awake now, though, and looked a little less green. That cheered her, and she smiled as she handed him the clothes.

"They were my husband's. They're big for you, but warm and clean. You can change in the bathroom down the hall, if you'd like." He held the pile to his bony chest. "I'll make breakfast. Do you like eggs?" She had thought about pancakes, but eggs had more nutrients, and he looked like he could use every calorie and gram of protein. She added bacon and toast.

It seemed like he had been in there a long time. By the time he emerged dressed, Moira had finished breakfast. She caught her breath; in Sean's clothes, it was like he had returned from the grave. Then she blinked, and it was just the man again, clothes nearly swallowing his scrawny frame. Hobbling across the wood floor, he sat at the kitchen table across from her.

The rain had cleared, and the watery sunlight filtered through lowering clouds. In the morning light, he didn't seem as old as he did the night before. She reckoned he was maybe fifty, but it was a hard fifty. Last night, she would have sworn he was seventy. Or eighty.

She picked up the platter of eggs—she had made extra—and passed it to him. "Help yourself, there's plenty."

He made no move toward the eggs. She wondered if he didn't know how many to take. She gently took the tongs from the platter and shoveled three fried eggs onto his plate. Adding three strips of Irish bacon—more like thick ham—and three half slices of buttered toast thickly coated with her own strawberry preserves she canned last summer, she placed it before him, saying, "eat as much as you want. There's more if you want it."

She filled her own dish while he dug in, inhaling every bite before she had half finished. She nodded towards the platter, and he spooned three more eggs, three half slices of toast and three slices of bacon and resumed

eating. Sean could eat, but wow. She had never seen anyone put away so much food in one sitting before. She would have to go to the grocery store. Well, she had to go to the Post Office anyway if she wanted her niece's package to make it to America for her birthday. She'd ask around. Maybe someone had seen or knew the man, whose name she still did not know. Maybe someone was searching for him.

"I have to go into town. Can I drop you somewhere?" She was surprised by the reticence she felt at him leaving. Surely, he wanted to go home.

He shook his head.

"Will you be alright until I return?"

He nodded.

She sighed. "Ok. There's more food in the fridge, help yourself."

He touched his heart with his right hand.

She smiled. It felt good to take care of someone again.

She fished in her purse for her keys, and locked the door behind her, determined to help him find his way home, wherever that was. She would check the Garda station for missing persons alerts.

#

The clouds had dissipated, and the sun was shining brightly by the time she reached the Garda station. Young Donal Flaherty was on duty. He looked fresh out of high school.

"A man showed up at my house last night unable to speak, cold and starving and drenched to the skin. I'm trying to find his family, or guardian. He may be ill or have dementia, and not know where he is. Have you heard anything about a missing person?"

Donal's face blanched. "What, now?" He shuffled a stack of papers, but didn't really look at any of them.

"He seems in his 50s, extremely skinny?"

He just shook his head. Clearing his throat, he said, "No missing people, not recently. Sorry."

She turned to leave.

"Did you feed him?" He croaked out, and she wondered why he sounded scared.

"Of course. I'm not a monster."

He looked visibly relieved and nodded.

"If anyone comes looking for him, you know where he is." She knew he knew more than he was saying, but there was no sense pushing. There were other avenues.

#

Aine, the Donovan's youngest, was working the register at McMahon's Grocery. Moira grimaced. She had hoped Clodagh, McMahon's eldest daughter, would be working instead. Clodagh was clever and seemed to know what everyone was up to.

No such luck, she thought as Aine sullenly rang up her items, and plopped them haphazardly into bags. When Moira mentioned the man to her, she looked at her oddly, and just shrugged in that teenage way that says it's so far away from her world, it might as well be alien. Moira sighed and grabbed the grocery bags.

Kathleen at the Post Office was much more forthcoming. "You saw the Fear Gorta, the Hungry Man?" She quickly blessed herself. "And you're not harmed?" She took an instinctive step back, despite the counter between them.

Fear flooded her body. "Harmed? Why would I be harmed?" She thought back to that Criminal Minds episode comment.

"Oh, he's not living. They say he was a victim of the Famine who is forever hungry, and begs at the door for food, not that I believe it, mind. Sort of like a ghost, a local legend in a way." Kathleen stamped her package and put it in a bin she couldn't see under the counter.

"Have *you* ever seen him?" She had to ask.

"Lord, no! Thank Heavens." Kathleen blessed herself again. She swiveled her head around, as if they weren't the only ones in the Post Office, and conspiratorially whispered, "but he appeared to Bonnie McDermott and she must have denied him for she was dead within the year."

Moira had heard that Bonnie McDermott died of anorexia, but she held her tongue.

On the way home, she drove slowly on the R595, trying to make sense of

the man in her kitchen. She didn't know what to think. She couldn't believe the man was a Famine victim come back from the grave, nor could she believe he was a masher. He certainly had the opportunity if he wanted to harm her, and he never did anything.

And he had never asked her for anything; she offered.

But why didn't he speak? Where did he come from? Was he homeless, and just migrated from place to place, begging? He did have a bowl when he showed up. What happened to it? She couldn't remember seeing it again, nor did she see it when she went out this morning. She skipped the turn that led to the lane home and decided to take the long way.

She passed the sign for the historical Famine graveyard, and on a whim, turned in. Funny she had lived here so long but never visited it. The narrow road wound up a small hill to the ruins of two churches, one almost unrecognizable underneath the vines and growth and the other much newer, yet abandoned and shuttered. Large trees with branches like comforting arms dotted through the churchyard, splashing dappled shadows on the gravestones below. Lower down, a large field marked with a memorial sign indicated the mass grave where thousands of unnamed Famine victims were buried. Despite the circumstances, the site was amazingly peaceful and beautiful. It felt right, somehow, that those who died in such agony could rest in such a lovely place.

For a moment, she almost felt Sean beside her. She closed her eyes and breathed in the sweetness of the air. When she opened her eyes, the feeling was gone, but this time, it didn't feel so empty. Maybe it was the restfulness of the place, but this time, it felt more natural, that his loss was part of the bigger picture, an important thread in the tapestry of Fate, newly cut, or something like that.

No thread can go on forever.

She got back in the car and started the engine. If the man needed a lovely place to rest, she would be that for him. She would be his 'shelter from the storm' for however long he needed it.

#

She found the man hoeing her vegetable garden with short, choppy strokes. He was still weak, but seemed stronger than when he had arrived. Nowhere near strong enough to be hoeing weeds, she thought, running over to him.

"Please, stop." She gently ceased the hoe's movement. "You are my guest, please accept my hospitality."

At that he let the hoe drop and met her eyes with grateful tears.

"You are welcome as long as you would like to stay." She cradled his fragile hands. "You can rest here."

He smiled, relief and gratitude shone in his face. He touched her forehead with his fingertips and hummed a little, and the weight of Sean's loss seemed to lighten. A soothing peace settled on her, and her smile echoed his.

He bowed, swaying slightly, and tottered towards the ash trees in the distance. She followed him, knowing he was leading her.

When they reached the copse, he lay within a small circle of grass slightly greener than that surrounding it. As he settled, the earth enfolded him, the grass creeping over him like a green lace blanket, consuming his flesh, stretching over white bones, until he became one with the land.

As the wind sighed, she bowed her head and made the sign of the cross over his grave. Somewhere, a blackbird sang.

The Right Question

By Abe Margel

The work week started badly for the psychiatric social worker. On Monday Kyle had to report one of his clients to the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. The man admitted to being a child molester.

"I guess you're going to call the cops on me."

Kyle leaned forward in his chair preparing to escape. The client had a history of violence. Months earlier this man had been arrested in Gilbert Park swinging a hammer at passersby.

"It's something CAS will probably have to look into."

"Yeah, I figured you'd have to tell somebody," he mumbled.

Before making the phone call to Children's Aid Kyle decided to notify his supervisor, a short woman with bleached blonde hair who greeted the news with a scowl.

"It's your client, you'll have to figure out what to do."

Taking responsibility was something Layla Mills avoided not just in this case but in general. She spent her days hiding in her office, sneaking in early and sneaking out late. When she was spotted by staff it was usually while entering or exiting the creaking elevator. Although she'd been in her position for two years, some employees had no idea what she looked like. When her own bosses did a tour of the narrow four-storey building she would reluctantly accompany them. None of the bosses noticed her unfamiliarity with the staff although she didn't seem to know the names of any of the people that in theory worked under her guidance.

The outpatient psychiatric department of St. Anne's Health Centre was in a red brick structure a block from the hospital. In the 1920s, it had been the headquarters of a canning company.

Kyle had never been in Layla's office before. "I'm just keeping you informed, that's all." He found it incredible this nobody held such an important post. How the hell did she get this job?

In the dim light, sitting behind her steel-gray desk Layla tilted her head slightly downward in the stance of a bull about to charge. "Yes, yes, go ahead, report it," she said waving him toward the exit and away from her. "Shut the door behind you, thanks."

To work in mental health and have a kook for a boss wasn't an unknown phenomenon. Still he found it ironic. He walked down the dim corridor feeling deflated. The hallway with its fourteen-foot ceiling, rough plaster walls and terrazzo floor reminded him of how old the building was. Yellow light filtered through the ancient windows to reveal specks of dust dancing in the void.

*****

On Tuesday afternoon he learned his wife's new car had been crushed by a semitrailer in a supermarket parking lot.

Erica had to deal with a stubborn insurance company who could not understand how a parked car could end up being a total write-off.

"The idiots are hinting I staged this fiasco," she said bitterly to Kyle. "There's no way I'm letting them bully me."

Tension at work was constant so he craved peace and quiet at home. He didn't like being with her when she was upset. "Well at least no one was hurt," he said in an uncertain attempt at being comforting, at calming her down.

Kyle was a gregarious, overweight thirty-four year old who favoured tweed jackets over dark blue jeans on the job. At home he wore t-shirts and track pants.

Erica gave him a hard look, abruptly stood up from the sofa and headed for the kitchen. The clink of dishes being moved about followed. He knew he shouldn't try to play social worker with

his family but it was hard to turn it off.

He liked to talk as much as listen. To keep this habit in check at work he consciously monitored how much of the discussion he monopolized. The meetings were arranged to benefit the clients, not him. It was their lives that were stuck in a rough patch and counselling was supposed to help them get through it.

By the following day the insurance company had done an about-turn. They'd sent out an assessor who examined the crushed vehicle and decided it was a total loss. They would pay for another car and in the meantime, arrange for Erica to have use of a rental vehicle.

*****

On Wednesday, Kyle had just opened up the next client's file on his computer screen when the phone rang.

"I understand you're part of the hospital outpatient department?"

"That's right.

"Do you do family support, counsel families on how to help their mentally ill relatives?"

"Yes, that's part of my job. How can I help you?"

"We don't know what to do," Amelia Bailey said, her voice cracking with emotion. "He's a good boy, really he is, but we can't handle Dustin anymore. We just can't."

"Dustin?"

"Dustin Bailey. I think you were his social work once when he was admitted to the psychiatric ward. He's got schizophrenia."

Long pause.

"I do remember him from years ago when I was still working in the psychiatric inpatients department. He's a tall, thin guy with wavy black hair and a goatee, right?"

"That's him."

"I think he was in for about a week. He had a strong presence in the group sessions I ran. I don't believe you and I met back then."

"No, we didn't meet. That would have been five years ago. Dustin was just twenty-three," she moaned. "He was only in for a few days. A lot has happened since. He's been admitted to North Toronto General a few times. It's closer to where his group home was. They didn't help him really. Maybe no one can." She sniffled. "He's been back living with us for months and he's making Nathan and me sick." She took a deep breath. "We're constantly walking around on eggshells, worried he might start yelling at us, throwing things."

"Is next Tuesday at nine okay for you and your husband?"

"We'll be there. Thank you."

*****

The week continued its downward course. On Friday a young woman with whom he'd been doing Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help deal with her depression was readmitted to St Anne's inpatient psychiatry. Technically she was not his client at that point but he dropped by to say hello.

"My husband brought me in," she said wringing her hands. "I didn't want to come here." He knew the answer but he asked her anyway, "So what happened?"

"I was going to jump from an overpass, end it all." Her big, doe-like eyes looked up at him pleading. "I'm so sorry."

He could sense she wanted to cry but was now heavily medicated and couldn't unblock the emotional circuitry that would allow her to do that.

"Thank God it's Friday," he said to the clerk as he headed out the door toward home.

*****

The following Tuesday morning Dustin's parents, Amelia and Nathan Bailey showed up for their appointment. They took their places, sitting in two lightly padded, chrome chairs opposite Kyle in his untidy office.

He glanced at them, then at the empty chair where preferably Dustin would have been sitting. Counselling Dustin's parents without him being present was not ideal.

The muscles in his shoulders tensed.

Kyle was convinced Amelia and Nathan would have to address their own marital issues at the same time as they grappled with their son's

emotional problems. He didn't, however, tell them this.

While taking notes he listened intently as the couple gave him a brief family history. He paid close attention to their behaviours, how they sat in their chairs, who spoke on what topic, the tone of their voices.

"Uh-huh, you've done a lot for your son, helped him through many hard times. I wonder if we could get some idea of what your goals are as a couple, for just the two of you?"

He was met with a tentative "alright" from Amelia while Nathan remained silent.

"Okay, what are your best hopes?"

But they wouldn't focus on their marital relationship, at least not yet.

"Best hopes? Nathan said. "That I'd have a day when I wouldn't need to be extremely cautious, fearful I'd say something or do something that would set Dustin off."

"When such a day happens what is the first small change you'll notice in the morning just after you got up, so that you know things had improved? Be as specific as possible."

"It would be nice if Dustin didn't have a sour look on his face at breakfast." Nathan threw up his hands. "But how likely is it that would ever happen?"

"There would be a friendly atmosphere at the breakfast table," Kyle said, nodding his head.

"Not just in the morning," Nathan said.

"So more broadly you want there to be less arguing between the two of you and Dustin."

"I'd hope the threatening mood would evaporate, that we'd be a normal family," Amelia said glancing at Nathan.

"Most of the fight is between Amelia and Dustin, not me," Nathan said sounding defensive.

Amelia pivoted in her chair and glared in Nathan's direction only to find him turned away, staring out the window at the skyscraper across the street.

"That's not really true," Amelia said, her green eyes darkening. "We argue more but not the screaming fits you have with him."

"Dustin's twenty-eight for God's sakes, old enough he should be doing something with his life, not just hiding in the ER or hanging around with his stupid garage rock band." Nathan waved an open hand at Kyle. "Dustin's dreaming his band is going to be the next Arcade Fire."

"The band is the only thing he enjoys, the only thing he's got going for him." Amelia half stood up then dropped back into her chair. "But no, you'd rather he be out with you fishing and hunting, right; being wet and cold and miserable. The money you've thrown away on a boat, a boat trailer, crossbows, and fishing rods…"

"So the arguments don't take place all the time," Kyle said putting a positive spin on the dispute. "There are times when it's peaceful in your home, when you all get along."

The tense atmosphere in the room faded away.

"Yeah, that's right, the quarrels are awful but not going on all the time," Amelia said softly.

"So what things are you doing when you're not arguing, when things are going well?" Kyle said turning his head from Nathan to Amelia and back again.

This was family support work but without the son, the rest of the family, being present. Two out of three wasn't bad but to have all three family members present would be much better. Although he now lived with his parents Dustin was still an outpatient at North Toronto General where he regularly met with a psychiatrist and occupational therapist. He was not Kyle's client.

*****

On the weekend Kyle and Erica went shopping for a car to replace the one that was wrecked. Their two little children spent that Saturday and Sunday with Kyle's parents in the Leslieville neighbourhood.

The couple settled on a cherry-red Chevrolet Equinox SUV.

"The last was green, maybe this one will be luckier," Erica said.

*****

The following week when Amelia and Nathan arrived for their second counselling session they both appeared dishevelled.

"I apologize," Nathan said. "We look like hell because Dustin kept us up most of last night, pacing the floor, ranting about orange blobs crashing in his head trying to take him to Oceania, wherever the hell that is."

"It's not the first time we've lost sleep because of him," Amelia said, holding back tears. "We just stayed in our bedroom with the door locked. You can't reason with Dustin when he's like that. But eventually he got tired and lay down on his bed and slept. This goes on all the time."

"He's okay this morning," Nathan said shaking his head. "He acted as if nothing had happened last night. At breakfast he was just fine, even smiled a little."

"About these meetings with you, Kyle," Amelia said, clearing her throat. "I hate to ask but will there be a lot of these. Nathan has to be at his office."

"You're an accountant, Nathan?"

"That's right. Amelia worked for the same company in Human Resources. It's been quite a financial hit with her staying home to watch over Dustin, having to give up her job."

"I don't expect we'll be meeting more than two or three more times, if that," Kyle said.

"That's fine," Nathan said.

The conversation shifted to the strengths the couple were able to muster last night while enduring their son's threatening, delusional behaviour.

"He doesn't usually rant two days in a row, so today should be better," Amelia said.

"I expect today, like most days, around four o'clock Dustin and his band will be practicing in our garage," Nathan said. "Maybe you've heard of them, The Brickfish Band. They've had a number of gigs around Toronto and Buffalo."

"No, I haven't heard of them. What instrument does he play?"

"Oh, Dustin plays lead guitar and keyboards. He's the bandleader, even writes most of their songs. When the band has work they make a few dollars."

Kyle quietly sighed. Keep your mouth shut, don't point it out. This is not a good idea. Stay on track. But he couldn't help it. His mouth began to move on its own.

"How many hours a week does Dustin devote to band practice, writing his songs and doing gigs?

"It varies but for sure several hours," Amelia said.

Kyle felt like jumping up and giving them a shake. "I'm curious," he said looking at Amelia, the woman who had given up her job, her career to care for her adult son. "How does Dustin find the strength to sometimes control his schizophrenic symptoms for hours at a time, to write tunes, lead a band, play for money, negotiate contracts? Where does he find the ability to overcome his illness during those extended periods?" He leaned back in his chair. "It's a question you might want to ask him so he can build on this skill of controlling his symptoms, practice stretching it out over more of his life."

"What?" Nathan said. He looked astonished and moved to the edge of his chair. "It never crossed my mind. You're right, he turns his schizophrenia off when it suits him."

"That's not what I meant," Kyle protested. But in fact it was exactly what he meant. If what they were telling him was correct, this poor couple was being terrorized by someone who could control his behaviour.

"He's sick," Amelia said, her face crimson with anger. "He's seen a dozen psychiatrists, a dozen and a half social workers." She opened and closed her fists. "Are you saying that he's not mentally ill? Is that what you're saying?"

"No, not at all. I'm not suggesting anything. I haven't seen Dustin in years. All I know about him is what the two of you have told me. I'm just asking a question, an important question. Only he has the answer. I thought it would be very helpful if you ask him the same question."

That night Amelia left Kyle a voicemail message cancelling all

futher appointments.

*****

It was drizzling when Kyle got off work the following day. The glistening pavement was filled with people heading home, people holding up umbrellas, wearing raincoats. He made his way to the corner where his wife was going to pick him up in her new SUV.

The drizzle turned to rain so Kyle popped open his umbrella.

"You don't think I'm sick. Is that right?!"

Kyle turned around to see who was yelling. Suddenly he was gripped by terror.

"So I'm not crazy, ha, just putting it on, ha." Dustin in a wet brown leather coat and matching cap hopped from leg to leg, moving like a puppet on a string. In his hands he held a Wicked Ridge M70 crossbow.

"No, don't," Kyle mumbled turning to run. But it was too late. A 20-inch crossbow arrow pierced his heart.

Grady Mechum

By Robert Boucheron

Grady Mechum, my best friend at the age of ten, suffered from a rare brain disorder. He was good at science and math, and he understood plain English, but figures of speech flew over his head. He was unable to detect irony.

This was in a suburban tract called Bellewood near Syracuse, New York. John F. Kennedy was president, and the outlook was positive. A baby born with clubfoot or harelip underwent surgery. Tonsils came out at age five. In public school, children were tested for hearing, eyesight, reflexes, and intelligence. We had lessons in hygiene and how to brush teeth. Birth defects and genetic abnormalities were challenges you could overcome, instead of cruel twists of fate that doomed you for life. Even a hemophiliac or an epileptic could lead a normal life.

The neighborhood gang looked out for Grady. He was a favorite, always willing to play kickball, or embark on an escapade, or help with a task such as moving a large rock to a better location. A strong boy with a mop of brown hair, he had stubby arms and legs and a sweet disposition. He would do anything you asked, up to a point. The point came when a stranger asked Grady to do something that was wrong, or told a lie, or hit one of us. Then retribution was swift and painful. The stranger fled, an outcast forever, which might last a week. Or he adopted our method of dealing with Grady, and from that moment he was in the gang.

I told my parents as little as possible about where I went, what I did, and who I played with, but they knew about Grady and they disapproved. They talked about genetic strains and tainted blood. They muttered darkly about inbreeding, cousins marrying cousins, and immigrants. Under questioning about the Mechum family, I said I didn't know, which was true. Grady had fair skin and a blank face. There was no way to tag him.

Cold War topics dominated the news and casual conversation. Comic books, our normal reading matter, were full of spies, secret agents, threats to freedom, and plots to undermine the American way of life. Poisoning, brain-washing, kidnapping, execution by firing squad, and hideous forms of torture happened every day, behind the Iron Curtain and possibly next door. A boy had to be on the lookout. Strength of body and mind were essential, because you never knew what ordeal lay ahead.

Unsusceptible to argument, opinion, and shades of gray, Grady was infallible at telling right from wrong and truth from lies. He was a human polygraph. It must be said, though, he made a poor first impression. Among the gang of boys who kidded and pulled your leg and tried to put one over, he was a dud. You couldn't tell jokes and tease him in the normal way, because he never saw what was funny.

This didn't bother me. If I wanted an honest assessment of another boy, I asked Grady. If they hadn't met, all I had to do was drag one next to the other. With adults, the procedure was harder. Grady knew enough to keep his mouth shut in their presence. Later, I debriefed him.

*

Mr. Upshaw lived in Bellewood in the same kind of house as we all did. His yard had the same trees, maple and birch; the same bushes, juniper and holly; the same grass, evenly mowed; and the same stubborn weeds, dandelion and plantain. On national holidays, he flew an American flag from a pole attached to the front porch. Tulips and daffodils sprouted there in April, and he put a pumpkin on the steps in October. At Thanksgiving, he hung a string of colored lights at the eave and draped another over the bushes. He took them down on New

Year's Day. He showed the proper spirit and shunned excess.

Mr. Upshaw dressed conservatively in dark trousers and a dress shirt, white or pale blue. He sported a mustache, dark and trimmed. His manner was polite. He spoke clearly and carefully, no trace of an accent. But in the social climate of the time, a man had to be a pal and shoot the breeze, and this Mr. Upshaw was never known to do. The strong silent type was acceptable, but was he?

According to my parents, Mr. Upshaw had three strikes against him. One, he was a bachelor, cooking his own meals, washing dishes, and doing all the chores that women do. Two, he didn't leave the house at dawn and return at dusk, which meant he didn't have a job, and he wasn't old enough to be retired. Three, he belonged to no church, fraternal lodge, bowling league, baseball team, or bridge club, at least that anyone had heard of. He was a hermit.

"What is a hermit?" I asked.

"A man who lives alone and hates society."

"Like a hobo?"

"No, a hobo hops freight trains from town to town. A hermit stays put."

This warranted investigation. On a hot summer morning, as Grady and I aimlessly prowled Bellewood on foot, with no money in our packets and hours to fill, I steered a course to Mr. Upshaw's house. When we got within sight of it, we crouched behind a bush.

"We should do a stake-out," I said.

"What's a stake-out?" Grady asked.

"It's where you watch the suspect's place of business or residence all day and night. It's also called surveillance. You note the times when the suspect goes in and out, all visitors, deliveries, and suspicious activity. If a car parks there, you write down the make and model and the license plate number."

"What do you do with the information?"

"I'm not sure about that part."

"How can we watch all day and night? We have to go home sometimes to eat and sleep and use the bathroom."

"We work in shifts, one man on duty while the other one is off."

"Won't it be boring? Besides, what if he spots us?"

"A good investigator stays out of sight or poses as an inconspicuous bystander. He reads a newspaper, or walks a dog, or gazes at the sky to determine the weather."

"You mean he pretends?"

Abruptly, I remembered that posing and pretending were impossible for Grady. Watching an actor in a movie or on TV, he made no distinction between the role and real life. His brain was wired that way. Grady was the stalwart boy who never told a lie or laughed at a joke. I had to improvise.

"No, you don't pretend in a stake-out. You really are a force for good. You have to keep your eyes peeled and be alert for danger."

"Staying in one place and quiet sounds hard," Grady said.

"Here's what we'll do. During the day, we'll work as a pair, with things to read and puzzles."

"Can we can talk in low voices?"

"Or use sign language, or pass notes."

"Yeah, because we don't know sign language."

"When the lights go off, or the suspect is settled in for the evening, we can go home. But one of us has to come back early in the morning, or we might miss something important. That's the whole point of surveillance."

"Okay. When do we start?"

"What are you doing the rest of today?"

"Nothing."

"Wrong! After lunch, we start work."

*

At thirteen hundred hours, equipped with comic books, pads of paper, and pencils, we reassembled behind the bush. We were shielded from view by other bushes, shaded and dry. The only problem was flies and beetles.

"You have to expect discomfort in the line of duty," I whispered. "Besides, bugs will keep us on our toes."

"But we're sitting on the ground."

"I mean they'll keep us alert."

We agreed that one man had to keep watch at all times, while the other could read or do puzzles or carve. We each had a jackknife, and we carved small sticks into smaller pieces and threw them away. I wore a wristwatch so we could record the exact time of our observations. At fifteen minute intervals, I noted in the log: "No activity." Then I changed to thirty minutes. Then on the hour, when we changed places. At sixteen hundred hours, we got hungry.

"We should bring snacks," Grady said.

"Okay, but we have to be careful not to leave crumbs and wrappers behind."

"What about wood chips?"

"Good point. Wood chips are a dead giveaway. Blend them into the dry leaves."

"How much longer?"

"About two hours, I'd say. Any activity?"

"All clear."

The afternoon passed pleasantly enough. Satisfied with our work, we agreed to resume. Rain did not enter our calculation.

"Keep the project under wraps," I said.

"What?"

"It's a secret, so don't blab."

"Why, if we're a force for good?"

"As a reasonable precaution."

*

The next morning, the weather remained in our favor. Grady brought two candy bars, one for each of us, and I brought a package of peanut butter crackers. By the universal code, all food was shared equally. Morning was uneventful. We staggered the lunch break to maintain surveillance. We had just settled down to another hot afternoon, when a car arrived and parked in front of Mr. Upshaw's house.

We both stared through the leaves, too excited to write down the make, model, and license plate number. An older woman emerged from the car. She wore a good dress and fancy shoes, more formal than you would expect for the middle of the day. Had she come from a luncheon? With a sense of purpose, she walked up the path to Mr. Upshaw's door and knocked. Within seconds, and without a word being uttered that we could hear, she went in, and the door closed behind her.

"Did you see that?" Grady whispered.

"Affirmative. What do you think it means?"

"She didn't have a package under one arm, or a bag, or an envelope."

"So it isn't a delivery."

"Maybe it's a pre-arranged meeting."

"To discuss some nefarious plot."

"What is nefarious?" Grady asked.

"Highly suspicious."

"She looked normal."

"A plotter wouldn't go around in a trench coat on a sunny day in July."

"That's true. Did you note the time of arrival?"

"Oh, right." I was holding the official notebook.

I checked my wristwatch, logged the time, and a description of the car. Grady read my note.

"No obvious reason for the visit," he said.

I added that. He nodded approval and wrote his initials at the end to verify.

We watched tensely for an hour. I handed the notebook to Grady. He logged the time and "No further activity." I was ready to relax, since it was now his shift, when the door of the house opened.

The woman reappeared, looking exactly as before. She walked to the car, got in, and drove away. Grady made sure I saw this by poking me with the pencil.

"Ouch," I said. A tussle ensued, which caught the attention of Mr. Upshaw, who stood in the open door.

"Who's there?" he said.

We both froze in position, silent.

"I heard you and saw you," Mr. Upshaw said sternly. His voice was deep and commanding. "You've been there for two days. Now come up here on the porch and state your business."

We scrambled to our feet, picked up our gear, and walked across a front yard of parched grass. Mr. Upshaw did not look threatening. With his trim mustache, he wasn't very tall. The amazing thing was that over his trousers and shirt he wore an oversize blouse, gray and daubed with paint in

several colors.

I wanted to make up a story to explain what we were doing, but Grady would immediately correct me. Or maybe he would stay sullenly silent, and after we survived the ordeal, he would hate me forever. It was a classic dilemma.

"We were doing surveillance," Grady said.

"Ah, I see," Mr. Upshaw said solemnly. "Did you observe anything out of the ordinary?"

"No, sir," I said.

"A car came," Grady said. "A lady in a nice dress got out, and she entered the house, and she left an hour later."

"What kind of car?" Mr. Upshaw asked me.

"Chevrolet Impala, sir. Blue hardtop, this year's model or last year."

"No crime, no public nuisance?" A hint of a smile.

We shook our heads. Maybe we'll get off lightly, I thought.

"Why are you wearing a dirty dress?" Grady blurted.

Mr. Upshaw couldn't help it and laughed out loud. Grady stayed impassive as always, while I felt a flush of embarrassment in my cheeks.

"It's called an artist smock. I wear it when I paint."

"You're an artist?" I asked.

"Come inside and see for yourselves. Before I let you in, please state your names and show me your identification."

"Grady, sir. He's Robert."

"We don't have any identification."

"I'll have to take your word, then. Are you as good as your word?"

"Yes, sir!" we both said.

Mr. Upshaw let us in the house. The living room looked like any other living room, cleaner than ours. A framed portrait of a beautiful young woman hung over the fireplace.

Through an arch was what in any other house would be the dining room, except it had no table and chairs. Instead, it was set up as a painting studio, with canvases stacked against the walls, a standing easel, an armchair on a platform, and a folding screen in a corner. There were lots of objects: a plaster bust, a wooden mannequin with jointed limbs, a sword, a helmet, and a cloth or cape draped over the armchair. On a small table near the easel were tubes of paint, brushes, a palette, and a jar. The bare floor was spattered with paint, and the room was a mess.

"This is wonderful!" Grady said.

I agreed wholeheartedly. Mr. Upshaw pointed to the canvas on the easel.

"Is that the lady you saw?"

On the canvas was the same woman, wearing the same dress, but she looked younger. Instead of the serious expression we saw earlier, she wore a half-smile, as if she knew a secret and wanted to tell.

"Is she an undercover agent?" I asked.

"No, but she would be flattered at the suggestion. Her name is Mrs. Wallace, and she came today for a sitting. Her husband commissioned me to paint her portrait. Do you know the Wallaces?"

We shook our heads.

Facing us as we stood side by side, Mr. Upshaw picked up a piece of charcoal and sketched on a large piece of paper as he talked.

"Mr. Wallace is a businessman."

"Is he rich?" Grady asked.

"That depends on what you mean by rich." Mr. Upshaw's hand moved rapidly as he talked. "He may not be a Carnegie or a Rockefeller, but he has money. He is a patron of the arts. Are you boys interested in art?"

This might be a trick question. We clutched our pads and comic books.

"Yes, sir," I mumbled.

"What do you want to be, Grady?"

"A scientist or an inventor, like Thomas Edison."

"Very good." Mr. Upshaw glanced up and down as he sketched. "Scientists draw animals, plants, and minerals, things they see in a microscope, and apparatus for experiments. Thomas Edison drew beautiful drawings for his patent applications. And you, Robert?"

"An architect, like Frank Lloyd Wright."

"Architects draw the buildings they

study and their own designs. Drawing is about learning how to see. You must observe accurately and then put your observations on paper. If you boys have nothing better to do this summer, would you like to learn how to draw?"

He turned the paper toward us, and we saw a rough charcoal sketch of two boys standing side by side with open mouths and mussed hair.

"Yes, sir!" Grady said, and I nodded dumbly.

*

The offer turned out to be free lessons, since we could not afford to pay. Mr. Upshaw obtained our parents' consent. A few days a week in the studio, we drew with pencils on paper, while he painted at the easel, sketched ideas, and did chores like preparing a canvas. He let us wash paint brushes. One day we helped clean the studio.

Most days, Mr. Upshaw started us with an assignment, a still life or a copy. He paused at intervals to check our progress. Grady took to drawing as a pursuit that strove for candor. I was fascinated by the ways you can vary the line, use patches of light and dark, and suggest depth. Technique, as Mr. Upshaw called it, seemed little short of magic.

He didn't like chatter, but he allowed questions. We learned not only how to draw but who the lady in the living room portrait was: his wife, now deceased. And that he was an illustrator for magazines. He showed us ads and story pictures he painted.

"That's what pays the bills," he said.

He used to live in New York, by which he meant the city. He traveled there by train to meet magazine editors and artist friends. He was not a hermit, which was disappointing.

My parents were pleased to hear it, though. At the end of summer, by way of thanks, they invited him for a cocktail. The Mechums came with Grady. Mrs. Wallace did not come, another disappointment.

Grady and I drank ginger ale and listened to the adults make polite conversation, a new experience. He said it sounded like a TV with the volume turned down, a stream of talk that made no
sense.

Mr. Upshaw wore a necktie for the occasion, a sport coat, and polished shoes. He talked about New York with an air of sophistication, and he sipped a dry Martini with a twist.

"Excellent," he said.

Mr. Upshaw was a big hit with the Mechums and my parents. I asked Grady why.

"Because he's a real artist."



The Raspberry
Ashley Paige Dryden

Mothers and Sons

By Amita Basu

Fred pummels and kicks. Tomas stands still, knees bent, fists shielding face, the breath knocked out of him sometimes audibly, but making no other sound. Fred throws his shoulders into his assault. Dad would be proud.

After standing around in the yard all day, Fred was itching for action. When he asked this kid what he wanted to be, and the kid said 'a pianist,' Fred figured it was what Dad calls a citizen's duty to scare him straight.

This is better than kicking around a ball. With a ball, there's no thrill, wondering whether the ball will scream, bringing Daddy Ball to the rescue. Does this kid even have a dad? Tomas, what a pussy name.

One of Fred's punches misfires and hits air. Fred lurches forward and something snaps. He rubs his shoulder, rubbing the torn ligament into his bone. The pain feels good. Tomas peers sidelong, as if to ask Fred if he's done. Fred sneers. His little mutt would show more spirit. He administers one final kick, revenge for his sprained shoulder. He walks away, kicking along a pebble. He has won, but his shoulder screams, and his heart is empty of the triumph of victory. Well, sometimes if it's too easy, it doesn't feel good.

This was too easy. They're on a playdate in Tomas's backyard. One squeal, and Mommy Ball would've run out. Fucking pussy, seven-year-old Fred decides, kicking the pebble so hard he stubs his toe. His toe roars, drowning out his shoulder's screaming. Fred kicks the pebble again. Wordlessly, he knows all about drowning out pain.

Peering through the window he sees Tomas's mother on the dirty beige couch, her back to the world, the darkened drawing-room flickering ghostly television blue. Fred looks back to see if Tomas's coming to snitch. Tomas stands where Fred left him, hugging himself, gazing up at the big magnolia that showers with crumpled October gold the deflated kiddie cool and dust-furred stationary bike. Fred sits down on the two-step stoop, one eye on Tomas, the other out the rusted gate.

Late afternoon's deep gold is just rosying, and a fresh breeze is cooling Fred's boxing sweat, chilling Fred's neck, making Fred, too, hug himself – when the familiar hum clears its own path under the television's whining and the neighbours' yelling. Fred watches Mom emerging from her Subaru. Stella unlatches the gate, minding the rust, then glancing around to see if anyone saw her minding. Only Fred. She walks up the asphalt driveway, smiling too wide. "Did you have a good time, honey?"

Fred brushes a dead maple leaf from his shorts. She doesn't know the half of it, and what she does know she pretends not to. Simmering with contempt, Fred can barely be civil to her – only she'd run snitching, and then he'd catch it. He rises, looking past her at their car, and says, "Can we go?"

Their voices bring out Tomas's mother. Maria pats Fred's cheek, asks if they had a good time, insists that they stay for snacks, and summons Tomas. Stella glances at her wrist-watch, summons the tight smile of the over-engaged tennis mom graciously shuffling plans, and shrugs Okay. Maria sends the boys in to wash. As they pass under the scrutiny of two mothers, Fred thanks God he didn't draw blood. Tomas just looks crumpled and deadeyed as always.

Stella offers to help with the snacks. She's here to help, only she's not sure how. With the belligerence of third-world hospitality Maria refuses help, bids Stella make herself at home, and hustles kitchenwards. Stella shrugs and steps out for a smoke.

Leaves cover the yard. Each maple leaf is all one colour, either crimson or

mustard, paper-thin, smooth as the woman-skin on a Vogue cover. Oak leaves hold their thick spines straight, crinkling only slightly along their scallop edges; across each leaf sprawls a whole summer-autumn forest, green-red-and-gold. The magnolia leaves are mottled green-yellow-brown, curled up lengthwise in foetal position. Back and forth, across Maria's yard, over the fallen maple and oak and magnolia leaves, Stella paces.

She's grateful that Abe's home again. But should she talk to him about Fred? Abe's raising Fred as Abe's father raised him. And because that raising failed on Abe, he's determined to make it work on Fred. Abe's determination is the stubbornness of failure. Stella pictures confronting Abe, now that he's back after all these years.

Now that he's been back all these months, settled into his ways, will it do any good to confront him? After all, he hasn't turned out so very badly: everybody's got faults. Besides, Fred could use some discipline.

Stella can't lose Abe again. Her mind baulks at her own problem and flits away, looking for a distraction, finding it easily, finding Maria's problem.

Stella paces past the parched flowerbeds, the wall that's been gouged as if with hammer-blows, the fence in disrepair, and the darkened drawing-room. She remembers Maria's empty eyes and the kid's haunted look – Tomas, was it? There's definitely something wrong here, something more than poverty. Would it be rude to offer Maria cash?

Pacing up and down, Stella dives into this problem. Much easier to thrust secret money into a stranger's palm, to smile down into her eyes, than to find the words to reach someone you can't lose again, someone who always means well.

Her mind stops thinking, but her feet keep pacing, and she hears her boots crunching the leaves. She flinches at the sound, then decides she's being silly. When her cigarette's first half has dulled her nicotine craving she notices that each leaf makes its own music. The maple leaves, smooth and supple, merely rustle under her boots, flattened against the ground. The oak leaves, thick but brittle, crunch like riverbed pebbles. It's the small, thin magnolia leaves that make the most satisfying crunch.

Like crunching the baby bones of a mouthful of sardines, crunching loudly, still not loud enough to block out that crack-crack still echoing as she dined alone in her room. Absenting herself is the only way Stella dares tell Abe she's upset. Problem is, this message is in Chinese, and Abe only speaks English.

From the stony yard, to the garden where bedhead dandelions strangle parched rosebushes, to the driveway where Tomas's scooter lies on its side, Stella paces, listening to the leaf-music. It varies not just by leaf, but by surface. On the grass, the crunch is muted. The drive's porous asphalt yields acoustic diversity: some portions of dry leaf refugee in the pores and escape crumbling. But, on the concrete stoop, there's no escape. There she can make even the maple leaves crunch, crack-crack, break to pieces, once and for all, nothing left to worry about. Joyful as a child in first snow, Stella strides, composing a symphony of autumn music, singing in her head, I-can't-hear-you, na-na-na-na-na.

###

The boys troop up the dark corridor. Fred says "Me first," pushes Tomas out of the way, and locks the bathroom door behind himself.

The rug before the sink might've once been peach; now it's layered gray-brown and stinks of mould. The white bathtowel huddled over the bathtub is yellowed. The yellow shower curtains are mottled green-brown at the bottom. The handtowel, clinging to the ring with one fingertip, is stained coffee-brown and ketchup-crimson. The toothpaste tube, printed with hut-shaped squiggles, has been almost emptied, rolled tight, and left capless, gagging white vomit.

Christ, what losers! Can't even afford American toothpaste. He did that pussy a favour, beating him up. Fred turns up his freckled button nose, leans gingerly over the sink, and soaps up

thoroughly, though nobody's watching – in Fred's head somebody's always watching. Fred looks around, grimacing like an irascible hotel inspector, waiting to shout, 'Hopeless!'

He glares at the water-spotted steel tumbler housing two toothbrushes with their bristles bent out of shape. If he knew which toothbrush was Tomas's, he'd drop it into the toilet. The pussy didn't even try to fight back. It was too easy, and when it's too easy, winning doesn't feel good. Cheated of the good-feeling he's earned, Fred looks around for something that's definitely Tomas's, something more he can break to get even.

Hands frothing white, water running, Fred feels something brushing his foot. He jumps away and peers under the sink and all around himself. Nothing. Just imagining things again, worrying us for nothing! He sets his lips and prepares to rinse off. Then he sees it.

Yellow, crouching on the floor behind the sink's fat ceramic trunk. Fred gasps and stumbles back. Is that what ran across his feet? It's huge. His back against the door, his eyes wide, Fred watches. The yellow thing doesn't move. Loud and slow the seconds tick by in Fred's head.

Heart in mouth, he tiptoes around the bathroom, craning his neck, approaching the thing sideways, like his mutt approaching a strange dog: wide semicircle, butt-sniff before nose-sniff. Fred comes up against the bathtub, crouches, and edges forward towards the yellow thing. Five feet away, he sees what it is. A tee-shirt! He giggles. He strides forward, drags out the crumpled ball with his foot, and kicks it open.

The yellow teeshirt's Batman graphic has crumbled into fragments. Some of Batman's fragments have washed away; the others straggle, black and rubbery, across the front. Across the teeshirt's back is a faded red-brown stain. Fred's mind recoils and fills itself with the sound of the faucet, the sound of water still running, water so lulling, drowning out everything else. Outside the locked door, Tomas, waiting for his turn to wash up, starts humming softy, tonelessly, pausing every few notes, as if to breathe, as if he's always one second away from running out of breath. Fred's mind is still shut, but knowledge comes anyway and forces it open. Fred knows these stains.

The water still running, his hands still soapy, Fred double-checks the door-lock, then crouches over the teeshirt. Someone's scrubbed at the stain. It's deeper on one side, circular, but the circle's been scrubbed across the fabric, and there's a tiny rend. Yellow paint has been smeared over the stain. But the paint has crumbled and washed off too, leaving yellow fragments as rubbery as Batman's.

Fred wonders how long the shirt's been there. Bundled up damp, the shirt stinks – but so does the whole bathroom. How long does your pain lie, balled up and stinking, before your mother smells it through the stink of everything else? Fred crouches, his shadow across the half-uncrumpled teeshirt, shielding it from the harsh white light.

###

A few minutes have deepened dusk's rose to violet. Stella's still tramping around, smart boots making sharp leaf-music. She lights a second cigarette, just for the friendly little orange eye in the dusk, just for company. She's never been good at being alone.

Her boot's heel sticks over the path's edge. She stumbles. Her arms flail and she rebalances. But, her face two feet from the ground, she sees.

She sees a magnolia leaf, the kind that makes the best music, the kind she's been seeking out to trample on, half-crushed, speckled black-and-white. She straightens up and looks around. This other magnolia leaf is speckled too. So's this one. She walks back across the yard, peering. All the fallen magnolia leaves, all the ones she's not yet crushed, are black-and-white with fungus.

Well! Stella knows something about trees. She knows that when autumn leeches a leaf of its green, it leeches also its pest resistance. Maybe that's

all this is. The tree has given up on life for this year; it's right for its decay to feed other life. She stands telling herself it's alright.

She dashes between the ivy-covered swings and jungle gym, and peers up at the magnolia tree. The day's last light is just enough to see by. On this branch all the leaves are speckled black-and-white. She edges back under another branch. All speckled here too. She shuffles around under the tree, head back, eyes staring, neck straining. Every leaf she can see, every leaf that's still clinging on, half bitten away, dry, curled up, is speckled.

She approaches the trunk. Fingers and eyes run over the bark to identify the species, and freeze, and her breath hisses dagger-like, as she realises this is a sweet bay.

This species isn't deciduous. For this tree, spring won't bring a whole new life. This tree can't afford to give up on life in autumn, to shed all its leaves at once.¬ Her neck cranes and her eyes peer, searching for another answer, searching in vain. This magnolia isn't hibernating. It's dying.

She gazes down at the magnolia-leaves fallen and crushed. Her arched neck throbs, the throbbing filling her mind, denying room for thought, and she's grateful. Her cigarette stub burns her fingers. Gasping Fuck, she drops it. She looks up. It's night. Why's the yard unlit? Beyond the fence a single streetlight flickers sullenly alive.

Stella extinguishes the stub with her boot-toe, careful not to crush any more leaves. She picks her way back across the yard. She tramples one leaf accidentally, but its bones are already broken, and it makes little noise: you would hear only if you were listening.

She leans against the one-storey shack and looks into the drawing-room. Maria's hastily setting it to rights. Fred shuffles in from the corridor. He's got that strange look, which he gets sometimes when nobody's watching, which Stella teases him about. She sees now what it is. He looks haunted. How has she never seen it before? She's always looking at him, when he's not looking back, checking that he's alright.

He's alright, I'll get a ten-pound bag of fungicide, a wheelbarrowful of toys, a 300-gallon kiddie-pool, and I'll show up here. Maria can't turn that down, gifts for her son. Tomas will have a childhood, Maria will cure the magnolia, everything will be alright.

The boys drift from sofa to chair. Stella watches astonished her bold son following Tomas's lead, tailing him from chair to sofa. Finally Tomas perches at the edge of a chair. Fred sits down beside him. Tomas flinches, just a hair, and his thin arms curl around his torso. Tomas does his best to hide everything, and his cowardly little gesture shocks Stella into knowledge, everything's not alright, into courage.

Abe will be home tonight. His body will be exhausted from fourteen hours of physical labour, his will to fight drained. Fred will be in bed. That'll be Stella's opening, the window she's hopped to and hopped away from again, all these months, looking for other people's children to save. Tonight she will fly through that window.

Yes, she decides, yes, with a vehemence to compensate for her dithering, yes, today was the limit. Giving a seven-year-old ten minutes to tidy his room, and when he sweeps his toys under the bed making him stand out in the sun all day. And when Fred inched at noonday into the lemon tree's shade, Abe's armchair on the deck swung suddenly vacant, and Stella spilled her lemon tea. She can still hear the crack-crack resounding across the garden, still see Fred's red palms and white face against the gray city night. Tonight she'll lay down the law. If Abe doesn't like it, let him go away again. This isn't how she wants her child raised.

Stella wipes her feet on the mat, and steps into Maria's drawing-room with the self-confidence of the woman who's decided to set her own garden to rights.

###

The television's off. Particoloured polyester scarves festoon the shabby sofa. A mound of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches confronts Stella and Fred. Hair brushed, face powdered, Maria presses seconds and thirds on her guests.

Perched in the corner, Tomas eats his allotted two sandwiches, presses his fingertips into the skin of his knees to collect the crumbs, and licks his fingertips clean, his movements swift, small, and silent. Then he sits, arms crossed, thumbs digging elbows, shoulders hunched, not looking at anyone, speaking only when Stella speaks to him. He starts to reply, but Maria speaks over him, urging and nagging, then replies for him. He's fine, she says apologetically, just a little slow.

Whenever Tomas opens his mouth, Fred looks at him. Fred's no longer afraid Tomas will snitch. He just wants Tomas to look at him. Finally Tomas, obeying the wordless will of the strong, glances sidelong. His big black eyes struggle to focus on any object, even on a face. They don't struggle hard; they give up easily. Stupid and blinking, accepting fate without question, Tomas's eyes are empty of reproach.

The women chat. Stella wonders how to give Maria help without giving offence. The new Whole Foods checkout clerk caught Stella's fancy last month, reminding her of college, when Stella wanted to save the world, and, what's more, to get to know the world. Should she offer to replace this sofa? Now that she's decided to fix her own home, the compulsion to inundate Maria with gifts has evaporated. Now Stella will be content with a token.

Maria presses another sandwich on Fred. Fred accepts it, and waits till she gets busy telling Stella another story. Fred breaks his sandwich into two, and offers Tomas half.

Tomas's eyes creep ten times towards Fred's face, stopping halfway up Fred's torso, darting away again, moving a little closer each time to Fred's face. Fred remembers that big, strong, timid man from the carnival, who needed many goes at the high striker, getting closer to the top each time, and then he did get there, he showed he could do it, he always could do it. Finally Tomas takes the half-sandwich and eats it neatly, obediently. Then at last he meets Fred's eyes. Stupid and blinking, accepting fate without question, Tomas's eyes are not empty of gratitude.

Fred's eyes fill up. He looks away and stuffs his mouth with sandwich and swallows hard. Fred knows that swallowing is a foolproof way to strangle tears, unmanly tears.

The Vampire Marjorie

By Lee Cheeseman

The problem with Brown, the thing that got me into this situation in the first place, is that everyone there sucks.

Brown was the only Ivy I applied to, much to my parents' chagrin, because I knew it was the only one I actually wanted to go to. It had this vibe of being the "Cool Ivy", more laid back than your Harvards or your Yales of the world. Brown wasn't just for obnoxious future defense contractors, it was for people who cared, people who wanted to actually Do Something.

I realized pretty much right away that I'd made a colossal miscalculation when I tried to strike up a conversation with a girl in my intro psych class:

"You know, just this weekend actually I met Malala," she informed me after the briefest of introductions.

"Oh wow, how'd that happen?"

"We were both at this charity gala hosted by my great uncle, I don't know maybe you've heard of him…George Soros."

Yeah. These kids were rich, like *rich* rich. Now don't get me wrong, I grew up securely middle class; my parents were accountants for fucks sake. But at least I *went to public school*, at least I've *had a job* before. Another girl chimed in, dazzling us with an account of her magique three-month stay in Paris, to which Little Miss Soros hummed along in privileged understanding:

"There really is nothing better than a private tour of the Louvre. It'll change the way you think about art forever."

"So what did you do this summer?" Paris Girl finally asked me, remembering I was there.

"Oh, I um…I was working mostly," I replied, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

"Oh cool!" said Soros Girl (or was it Paris Girl? Not to be classist but all rich people look the same to me.) "Was it an internship or a corporate position or…"

"Um…no. I was a cashier at Walgreens."

"…What's that?"

Needless to say, I found it hard to connect with anyone on campus, and so eventually, I started looking for… other ways to meet people. Providence is home to a pretty substantial queer community, actually, so I got myself a fake and started hanging around the lesbian bars downtown.

It didn't take long for me to get noticed. I was young and I was new. That's more than I can say for most of the women who frequented those places. They would come to me with desperation in their eyes, showering me with drinks, with praise, practically begging me to go home with them. I always did, holding their hands as they led me back to their shitty apartments over sketchy 24-hour drug stores, fucking me on their unmade beds surrounded by dying houseplants and torn-up cat toys. I almost never stayed the night; I'd come up with some bullshit excuse about homework or roommates but in reality, I knew I didn't want to sleep next to any of these women. They didn't disgust me necessarily, just upset me, made me realize that their loneliness was my loneliness and that it might never go away. I saw myself in these women, saw my future: underemployed and unfulfilled, living alone, wondering how someone with so much potential could fall so far.

I was pretty much just as unhappy at the bars as I would have been on campus, but at least I got free booze out of it, and sometimes the sex wasn't half bad either. Still, it was a very unstable lifestyle and I'd already grown bored of it by the time I met Marjorie.

Marjorie was femme but in the 1950s sense of the word. And by that I mean she dressed like it was the 1950s. Big skirt, pearl earrings, white gloves; she was like something out of a movie. It was early December 2018 when I first

saw her, right before I was supposed to go home for winter break. She strode into the bar, the cold air rippling behind her, climbed onto the stool next to me, and asked the bartender for a negroni on the rocks. I just sat there, mouth agape, cradling my bottle of Guinness. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen; she moved with an effortless grace that defied all laws of gravity. And when she turned to me, chin resting in her palm, I felt like I might have a heart attack.

"What's your name?"

I paused, suddenly forgetting the answer. "A-Amanda."

"Amanda," she repeated, smiling to reveal a row of perfectly white teeth, two of which were, in retrospect, a bit sharper than they should've been. "She who must be loved."

"What?"

"It's a Latin name, a gerundive to be exact, and it translates to 'she who must be loved.'"

"Oh, right."

"I'm Marjorie," she said, presenting a gloved hand for me to shake.

Even her name sounds vintage, I thought as my trembling hand wrapped around hers.

"Pearl," I blurted out. "It means 'Pearl'."

"Very good," she smirked, "can I buy you a drink?"

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We spent the rest of the evening in rapturous conversation. I complained about school, she told me she understood, said she knew what it felt like to be an outsider.

"Queer isolation?" I asked, finishing off my third beer.

"Something like that."

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My memories of how I got back to school that night are pretty hazy but I remember Marjorie walking me back to the RIPTA stop, her fur coat draped over my shoulders. And I remember under the shelter, right when I was about to get on the bus, she leaned down and kissed my cheek. I would've just chalked it up to a drunk wishful hallucination, but when I woke up the next morning, her lipstick was still there.

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I thought about Marjorie for the entirety of winter break, unable to get her out of my head. I thought about her while playing video games and reading Dostoevsky, while working at Walgreens, while I touched myself at night… She'd already sunk her teeth into me without doing a thing, had infected my mind until all I could see when I closed my eyes was her, her face, her gentle hands, the contours of her body concealed beneath her clothes.

The day I got back to campus, I headed to the bar. I wanted, *needed,* to see her again. I braved the late January chill and warmed myself up with some more cheap beer. And more, and more; it took her a while to show up, and I was thirsty. Finally, around midnight when I'd just about given up, the door opened, and there she was. She was in a different outfit this time, a green dress with a plunging halter neckline. Her eyes met mine immediately, and I almost passed out.

"Hello, love," she said as she took her seat.

"Hello."

"Where have you been?"

"Home."

"And where exactly is home for you?"

I looked around the dingy bar filled with lonely dykes. I looked back at Marjorie who seemed to shine in the low light. "Nowhere important. Can I buy you a drink?"

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Marjorie invited me back to her place after I realized I'd missed the last bus. I accepted eagerly, both because I didn't want to pay for an Uber, and because I really hoped this was more than just a friendly gesture. Her apartment was exactly what you'd expect from a woman like her, wool carpeting, saucer lamps, antique

appliances. I was too drunk to notice the distinct lack of windows.

She grabbed my hand and led me to her bedroom. I laid my tired, drunken body out on her satin sheets. Her lips were cold, alarmingly so, and had a distinct iron taste to them that I would later realize was blood. But I didn't think anything of it then, or if I did I was too drunk on beer and lust to care. I just pulled her closer.

At some point over the course of the evening, she bit me. I remember the moment so clearly; she hung over me, her carefully styled hair now messily draped over her shoulder, her entire body exposed and radiant. And her face, previously smiling and marked by pleasure, now looked deathly serious.

"I need to tell you something."

"Hm?" I asked, my post-coital brain fog inhibiting all my senses.

"I said I need to tell you something."

I propped myself up on my elbows, coming back to myself when I noticed how troubled she looked. "What is it?"

She took a deep breath, "I'm a vampire, Amanda."

For a second, I was confused, then I just smirked. "Oh I see, and I'm your hapless victim, right? You're going to drain the life out of me while I beg you to stop, going to *positively ravish* me?"

"I'm not joking."

"Neither am I. I'd totally be into that."

"I'm not trying to *roleplay*," she insisted, "I'm trying to tell you the truth."

"Okay…so you're not kinky then, just crazy?"

"I guess vampirism could be considered a form of insanity…"

"Yeah, it could."

"You really don't believe me, do you?" she frowned.

"I believe that *you* believe you," I explained. "I just also think you might be crazy."

"I *am* a vampire," she insisted, her face transforming into almost a pout.

"Then prove it," I blurted out, against my better judgment.

"What?"

"If you're really a vampire, prove it. Bite me."

"You can't be serious."

"I don't believe in vampires; therefore, I have nothing to fear. But I'm open to being proven wrong. Bite me."

"No."

"If you don't do it, I'll just have to assume you're either a liar or a lunatic, and in either case I don't think I'd really want to sleep with you again."

She hesitated for a second, furrowing her brow, considering her options. "God, you're such a *cunt*," she finally muttered before digging her teeth into my neck.

I gasped as I felt her puncture my skin and begin to draw out my blood, screamed out in pain as she drank from me.

"STOP!" I yelled, and immediately she did, extracting her fangs from my neck and lifting her face to meet mine.

She smiled, my blood dribbling from her chin. "Believe me now?"

That was when I should've run, when survival instincts should've taken over and caused me to bolt out of there, butt ass naked, and never look back. This woman, this *demon*, she terrified me. And yet I could not make myself turn from her. She had proven me wrong, had stooped to my level, shown me the impossible. I grabbed her face in my hands and crushed our mouths together, reveling in the taste of my own blood on her lips.

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It only took a few months for me to ask for it. I was failing all my classes and barely even left my room anymore for anything other than visiting her. I'd just come from a meeting with my academic advisor where he warned me I could be expelled if I didn't improve my grades the night I showed up at her door, begging for her to turn me.

"Make me a vampire," I pleaded. "I can't do this anymore; I can't be human. You need to make me one of you."

"No," was her reply as she tried to shut the door in my face.

"Please!" I held it open with my shaking hand. "I need this."

"You *need* therapy."

"I need *you*. Forever."

Her eyes widened; the door creaked open. "Why don't you come in?"

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"You know you'll never be able to see the sun again?"

"Dad's side of the family has a history of skin cancer so I try to stay out of it as much as possible anyway."

"Hm."

We'd been doing this for at least half an hour, this monotonous back and forth. She would tell me something intended to make me reconsider my position, I would come up with some justification for why that didn't matter. It was exhausting.

"You'll watch all your loved ones die. They'll age while you stay frozen in time."

"Don't actually have that many loved ones, and the ones I do have would've died before me anyway."

"You won't be able to eat or drink anything but blood ever again. No more home-cooked meals, no more beer…"

"My mom's a shit cook anyway, and you're the one who's always trying to get me drunk, I really couldn't care less."

"You'll have to become a killer," her thumb paused where it had been caressing my cheek. "You'll have to suck blood. Your life will come at the expense of thousands of innocent people."

"I don't know if you've noticed, Marge, but I hate most people. I won't be too broken up about killing them."

"You're really sure about this?" Her eyes, concerned yet deeply hopeful, met mine, and I knew there was no alternative.

I placed a gentle kiss to her mouth. "More sure than I've ever been about anything. I want this, I want eternity, with you. I love you, Marjorie, you don't have to be alone anymore."

A smile dawned across her face. "I love you too. This is going to hurt. A lot."

She dug her fangs into my neck for the second time, slicing through the scar tissue that had begun to form over the old wound. My blood flowed eagerly from my veins and into her waiting mouth as she drank from me, deeply, without remorse. I cried out, first with pain and then with fear, as I felt a coldness spreading through my body, my limbs growing numb.

"I think I'm dying," I gasped out as my vision began to swim.

"You are." She stopped then, hooking an arm around my back to hold me upright as she bit down into her own wrist, offering it to me.

"Drink," she commanded, and I did.

I took her arm in my mouth and sucked up the blood already flowing there for me. It coated my tongue like honey and filled me with *need*. I tried to bite down and found that my teeth had grown sharper, sharp enough to pierce her skin and begin to drink in earnest. The gasp she let out when my fangs sunk into her quickly dissolved into a delighted giggle.

"You're doing so well," she informed me. I could only moan in response, completely lost in the taste of her, on my lips, down my throat, filling me with strength. I swallowed gulp after gulp, unable to get enough, wanting more of her within me, wanting it with some primal, carnal desire.

Eventually, though, my fullness settled in and I could drink no more. I removed my mouth from her arm and set it on her lips, greedy, hungry kisses. Kisses that communicated my need to taste her further. She received them gladly and we spent the rest of the evening in a type of bliss I'd argue is beyond human comprehension. Not until you've been filled with the sugar-sweet blood of your maker, your lover, your eternal companion, can you begin to understand the intimacy we experienced that night. It is like nothing I have felt before or since. I was in love, I was remade, I was immortal and unassailable. It was the beginning of something new, something I'd been searching for all my life. And there was no one else I'd rather be next to.

I'm sure now you're going to ask why I killed her. But I'm afraid that part of the story will have to wait for another time; I'm getting quite hungry, and the sun's almost up. If I were you, I'd start running, now.

Hollow Ground

By Trai Mitchell

We're sat in a circle, our hands hardly holding each others'. There's six of us there. None of us are facing each other, we instead stare up at the sublime sky. Baby-blue is the background of clustered clumps of clouds, of white slim slithering streaks. The sun shines in the far-off corner of my vision, vanishing behind a veneer of tall trees. They wave in the whispering wind, singing a soft song with their branches and leaves. There is an earthen scent to it all. Dirt, bark, and even the humidity of the air, are all assembled before nustling into our noses. Behind me, though I don't see it, silently stands the manor. Its white walls are surely livened by the light and the black roof beams back the sun's glow through the sparkling sediments dotting its shingles.

This is supposed to be warm. It's supposed to be soothing- the sunlight, the summer songs of the forest, the swellness of companionship. It isn't. In any rendering of a realistic world, the sunlight would envelop us like a thick quilt, perhaps even too much so, heating me both inside and out. Instead, I cannot even conspire of a way which wouldn't leave this place cold and barren.

I turn to face my friends; they'll surely fix this! I cock my head counter-clockwise. The brown-haired boy's the first I see, seemingly staring straight at the sun. His eyes should be, by all accounts, boiling, but the lack of tears and the knowledge he can still see corrects my misconception. Beside him is his beloved: the country girl. The sunlight splits against her emerald eye, enlivening it with the full spectrum of summer sweetness. Memories of what she used to be, of what *we* used to be, meander through my mind. My conscious considerations congratulate us both for what we've become, for all the growth we've made, yet I feel no pride nor accomplishment in the matter. I shift my sight further. An old mentor sits straight behind me. All I can see is his back, shaded like a silhouette by his black hoodie, his black jeans, and his black boots. I know his expression wouldn't, well, *express* much either, could I see it, and without any of his words to work with, I carry on. The smiler does what he does best: he grins gleefully. An upward crescent cuts across his pale face, though where his earnest exuberance ends and his mechanical mannerisms materialise is hard to pinpoint precisely. All I can see is that he's simply smiling, doing so as surely and unblinkingly as always. Finally, there's her. I don't know what to make of her. Our arms touch, her perfectly porcelain skin pressing against mine. It's soft, it's sublime, and it's no warmer than room temperature. Yet she doesn't look dead- far from it! Her look lingers on the landscape before us, yet in spite of all the superb summer sunlight, her eyes are filled with nothing but night. Only the brightest lights of the heavens can push past her pitch-black gaze, shattering into scores of stars scattered about the darkness.

I defy myself. I came to this place to create my own comfort, yet I fail to fathom even the faintest hint of it. This isn't the first instance of such insulting insolence, and I know well it won't be the last. I strive to submerge myself again, to be subsumed by the sublime scene around me and the forged friendships I've formed here. Nothing happens. Annoyed but unabated, I devise a different design.

Now there's only two of us. The brown-haired boy and I sit silently under the same summer sun. It's peaceful, it's picturesque, and I'm frustrated that nothing further is forming. I turn to him, hoping to draw a dialogue out of this. He doesn't say a word. I'm not even sure he sees me. I cannot craft a comment. I start to dawdle on his details. His hair catches

my eye, as I'm unable to properly perceive it. If I were to sketch him, I'd shape him a scattered, scruffy style. Short, bite-sized bits of hair shooting this way or that would spring from his head, with him having, at most, a curtailed comb-over his forehead. But that doesn't make sense. Such a sketch serves perfectly well when it's just that, a drawing, a painting, or some other two-dimensional portrayal, but put quite curtly, real people don't look like that. This dainty detail draws my full focus in spite of its insignificance, and I cannot proceed until I assemble an appropriate appearance.

I try other, more experimental designs. I curl and coil his hair, turning it into a thousand small springs sprouting from his scalp. It looks real, it looks solid, yet I cannot stand it. This isn't the brown-haired boy I know! This isn't the friend I've formed! Something else must be made! I turn a new page and try again. This time, I cut everything clearly and crisply. It isn't pretty, it isn't pristine, and it isn't perfect, though honestly, it's how he'd likely look in any real world. His hair is greasy now, the sheen of the sun above shining from his somewhat-slippery scalp. It certainly isn't spotless anymore, and I'm sure it'd smell sour were I to whiff it. Beyond that, it's relatively flat and featureless, this option appearing neither optimal nor offensive. The comb-over from before now becomes reality, with it flimsily falling across his forehead before curling off at the end. This is a believable, bargain-bin approach, and for precisely that reason, I am unhappy with it. This isn't correct, this isn't how he's always appeared, and acknowledging this only further frustrates me. I know I'm not getting anywhere with this, so I cut my losses and craft a new creation.

She leans into me, and I hold her. Her back bears onto my breasts. My embrace entirely envelops her. Something so stark, so strong, it shall surely summon something from within! I focus first on the physical, the way her skin sinks under my soft squeeze, the fine, somewhat silky, black fabric that gives her figure decency, I even try to huff her hair. Nothing, *nada.* I then attempt to attend to the abstract aspects of our array. She is someone whose heart holds near to mine. No, not near- they are one in the same. She will never fall from my grasp, nor would she ever wish to. I've put myself into her so that we may pour ourselves into one another. In this world, the drawbacks of distinction do not exist. She sees all of me and loves it, and I insist upon her existence, experiencing every moment of it. This is the optimal outcome, an endless endeavour of endearment. I will hold her and she will hold me for as long as I wish, and we will not part until I am sickened by the senseless surges of satisfaction.

Yet there is nothing here. She tilts her head back and whispers worthless words in my ear. I do not hear them, for I did not draft them. Her lips dance with music that doesn't exist. Her breath bounds up my cheek and into my ear, earning nothing in exchange. I had not prepared for the possibility that she'd speak, so not a syllable stands to be said. She continues to talk, and the incessant silence stirs me evermore. The hollowness of her heart has enveloped her speech. It is as boundlessly blank as the night sky in her eyes. There is no meaningful consciousness here– only the echoes of another. The damned doll.

Try, try, try again! "If at first you don't succeed…" as they say. We stare off at the scarlet sunset together, me and the smiler. Roosting atop a rock, we watch the sky shift from a ravishing red at the horizon to a royal purple above us, and behind, it descends into a deep darkness. The shade of the sun swirls across his paper-pale skin and blank, white sweatshirt. He appears pink in the dying hours of the day. As I consider this colouration, I realise how relaxed he seems. His gaze is usually aflame with a frantic, frenzied energy that electrifies his whole body. Now, he is perfectly at peace, and not a musing meanders in his mind. I don't realise this. I try to talk to him.

"Hey, whatcha thinkin' about?"
"Ah, you know…"
"I don't think I do."

"Oh? I thought you would." He turns to me, his smirk ever so spread and strong. "Does it look right?"

"Your smile?"

"Yeah."

"I suppose so. There's nothing wrong with it to me…"

It's in this fashion we forge a faux exchange. I ask an ambitious inquiry, floundering as I fight to form a full discussion, and he delivers a deadbeat reply. He then asks me an inane interrogative, and I answer with what I can. Nothing ever happens. Nothing will ever happen. This isn't some sinister scheme by the smiler, it isn't some imbecility of mine. This world, though I willed it to be, is not wrought with life. The will, the spirit, is meaningless before material reality, and it is reality's concreteness that my creation cannot carry. Ideas spring from the world that writes them, and the inverse is impossible. A story cannot create its author. The light of life, the depths of another human's heart, these cannot come from nothing. With only one soul to spare, I simply cannot shape a second, third, or forth from myself.

This place is, similarly, a contradictory concoction. Inspired by infinity, it insults any sort of story, setting, or plot. It is a story without an ending, a conclusion that never concludes. It is a serpent that devours its own tail. I read to the final page, then return to the first, somehow surprised that the descriptions and dialogue are the same. I listen through the chorus and crescendo, then rewind, astonished that the song starts and stops as it had before. I beat every boss, complete every side quest, and exhaust every NPC interaction, only to cry "unfair!" when the credits come all the same. I utilise every use-value one could conceive, then complain that the commodity is confined to finitity. This world is no different, and so I depart.

Were I a wise narrator, this is where my words would end. I am not, and so, this is not. This is, however, the abdication of authenticity. What lies before bears both truth and historicity, what continues after only holds truth. I apologise to you for this falsehood, and I say "sorry" to myself for not being so smart sooner. Alas, *¡adelante*!

I'm alone, as I've always been. All that surrounds me are swirling shapes. Waves and ripples rebound and rock, swaying side to side. A collection of colours confront me: chrome, silver, grey, and purple. There is nothing below nor beyond me but these coloured swirls. I do not stand and I do not fall. Up, down, left, and right are all pointless pondrances in a place like this. I am all that exists in this enormous expanse, and I wait all alone. But there is no waiting to be done. Relieved from reality, this realm is free from physicality. Nothing truly exists, and where there is nothing, there is no atrophy. Without materiality, there isn't a means to measure time, for there is no rising and setting sun, no shifting of the seasons, no emergence and expiration of the life around us. This is nigh-total freedom, and my right as reality's sole representative renders me responsible for commanding creation, for shaping something from nothing. By my word, by my will, I alone am master of everything, for *I am everything*. But because I am everything, because I am all that exists, my creation is cavernous. The life I breath into it is my own, the rib I sacrifice to shape it is my own. I stare into myself, and I stare back into me. When I gaze upon my world I glare upon myself.

"Waiting for something to happen?" my voice, though drenched in a different demeanour, asks.

"I suppose," I answer with my own lips.

"Why are you waiting?"

"I guess I'm waiting for someone."

"Waiting for *someone* to happen?"

"Yeah."

"You should know better than that."

I know I should. I suppose I already do, since I've written this. Nobody is coming to my hollow haven. My creation cannot carry another life. I am the ruler of everything, that

"everything" existing entirely within an outpost of my mind. Because of this, every blade of grass can become a dagger, every sentiment of sweetness can turn somber. With no physicality, this place fortifies and falters with every flimsy whim of mine. Moments of joy are jolted with life, and every expression of melancholy is made ever more miserable. This cosmos is cradled in my clutches, and it is inescapably bound by my brain.

It therefore cannot give me anything nor anyone. I am all that is real, and I cannot give myself to myself. It therefore follows that it cannot give me someone, for if I am all that exists, there is no one else to meet. I can create cliffs and canyons, fill them with forests and floods, and populate it with people as far as the eye can see, but none of them will be as authentic as me, for they are all but scraps of my soul. A god is the loneliest dreamer.

But there is a world in which I will find foreignness and fraternity. There is a place I can create consequential kinship. It is not here, in this void, nor is it under the southern summer sun of the faraway forest. It is a realm beyond me, a world in which I am not free. Regulated by reality, by form and physicality, by the atoms and molecules of my body, I am but one among immeasurable multitudes of matter. But in exchange for my might and liberty, I gain coherence, consistency, and connection. The world doesn't shatter the second my mood shifts. I see my surroundings, knowing they exist outside of me, that I am not alone in existence. I can build bonds both beautiful and bitter, but in both cases I can be confident that they are real, that they mean something beyond bemusement. I close my eyes and wish my world well, knowing it won't persist past the moment I stop pondering it. Then I open them, seeing the sun shining through the window.

This one is warm.

Emma Grants an Interview

By Beth Bosworth

There were five girls who danced together. An illness took one, marriage and gardening, another. The last to dance was Frieda, who also married, who bore sons, who danced like a fucking maenad. Frieda used to steal biscuits and stashed them under her bed. Once there was something else—a cuckoo clock Emma's drunk father had managed to send her. The other girls gathered round to watch the tiny bird emerge. The next week, tiny bird and cuckoo clock vanished and Frieda wouldn't look her in the eyes.

"Miss Duncan? Are you still there?"

"Gott in der Holle!"

Down the path Emma flees, jerkily, shoving her walker a few inches at a time across the gravel. When she looks back, the reporter is nowhere in sight. Two men are brushing sand off each other's bodies. Will they kiss? The lovers are soon gone, so fast that she wonders if she imagined them. Just yesterday, she turned a log into a raccoon long enough to see it change back. Isadora, dying freakishly, was spared this assault on her senses.

Do you think a woman has to choose between children and a career as a dancer?

The reporter, whose name was Suzanne or Kathy or Nancy, had waited for Emma to reply. Emma studied the linoleum as the question hopped in her mind. She could still *think*. She was not, not yet, like certain others here, the drooling ones who begged for candy or sex before they got secreted to the fourth floor. A long time ago and in Mannheim, a ten-year-old Emma had gotten lost—wandered through the streets until the girls found her. That evening they danced on water—rode two swan-shaped boats toward a leafy island where Isadora, goddess-like, awaited them.

If life were a series of such perfect moments? Wasn't that what Isadora had promised?

Instead of this—this slow betrayal of the body by the body?

The two men reappear briefly, walking hand in hand, around a bend.

I want to die, Isadora used to say—not often and mainly on beaches. Among the lessons she taught if only by example: *Dance your broken heart.*

The beach is narrow with a gray-shingled house at one end and at the other, those jagged rocks. Emma used to be charming. She used to be the one they sent to be interviewed, in the lobbies of hotels.

She might simply not take her nitroglycerin, which lies in a vial, which lies in her black purse, which lies in the well of her walker.

No one would miss her.

In fact Emma has made three roommates in succession beg to be moved. *She frightens me*, the last one begged after she awoke to find Emma standing over her with a wooden spoon.

Is it true you were the first to leave the Isadorables? the reporter had asked, as if such things mattered.

Around then Emma had upended her lunch tray and sent her slightly frozen green peas spinning across the frightened air. And in the brouhaha, she had set off toward the bathroom (she still has bathroom rights) only to swerve not right but left and through the door and *voilà*.

Voilà!

Emma might have left the Isadorables first (yes, for love of a goddamned man, Walter of the white hands) but Rivka-turned-Rikki, who wanted only to paint, left soon after for New York and Laura danced blackbottom with her jazz man. Emma cannot seem to recall *his* name, though she tries hard at night: *Louis Jouvet, Louis Journais, Jules Verne, Julius Agrippa, Bertrand Sauvage, Ilya Ilyitch, Henri Beauchamps….Louis Spark-of-the-Divine….*or *George,* yes,

perhaps *George....*

The walker has stuck definitively in the sand.

Emma abandons the walker, black purse, white vial, glossy pills and all.

Yes, but, an invisible Laura says inaudibly to Emma.

Yes, but, Frieda says, rejoining.

Of course Isadora was racist, Frieda says matter-of-factly and vanishes into her married life.

It's she, no doubt, who has sent this latest reporter. *Go talk to Emma, she is so lonely in that nursing home. She brings it on herself, accusing everyone of stealing, but even so. I would visit if she would see me—*

Such stupid questions. Is it true that she was a Communist?

Is it true that she danced naked for Rodin?

How did she feel about death? How about you?

Why did you keep her last name, if you hated her so much?

"Fucking bitches," Emma says, pausing to regain her balance.

If she falls, she will have to wait for someone to come. The pain shoots less down her leg if she doesn't move. Her underpants, however, are digging into her thighs and for some time, she realizes, she has been wanting to piss.

A wave washes higher than expected up the beach.

Her heart is yammering. If Emma dies, no one will object to her wetting her diaper-panties. There is a joke in this that no one would find funny, excepting, perhaps, Isadora.

When Emma left the group, the others took a long time contacting her in her hotel room. Did they send money? Did they care if she ate or not? Even when they returned from Greece, they didn't call or write or visit.

How could she have stayed with them, that summer, with Isadora dribbling her fingers all over the pianist whose long white fingers Emma loved?

"Walter," Emma calls out loud.

" Miss Duncan?" a voice calls right back.

Emma wills her heart to stop its yammering. Shut up, heart. Panic shoots needles into her abdomen. *Shut up, stomach*. There is little point in trying to run. Still Emma wills herself reach a certain outcropping of rock. To do so she must totter, grunt, step, totter, grunt, step around still another bend. When she looks back, the walker is advancing across the sand. The young reporter is hauling it. She has a blowsy look, red hair, a flabby cleavage. Her long earrings flash.

Emma wills herself to forget the pills, the ones she takes each evening, the ones the blowsy creature is unwittingly carrying.

I am not afraid of death. I am only afraid of dying, which is not the same thing.

The name of the jazz man is almost in her mouth now.

The questions hover, dagger-like. So many questions the creature insisted on mouthing, as if Emma could remember, as if Emma could explain.

Laura danced with him and left the group, too. They danced in mockery of Isadora or so the Figaro reported. *The Last Nymph*, that dance was called, and the jazz dancer wore a Chaplinesque black top hat and sailor suit while Laura, dressed in a Greek-like toga, pressed her two hands to her throat. *Oh, Laura, my dear.*

"After your group disbanded, did you continue to see one another?"

"How about a reunion?"

"No. Nothing like that."

Just once Emma snuck off to watch the three remaining Isadorables, Frieda, Anna, and Rivka-Rikki who would leave Paris soon enough. When Emma returned, Walter was waiting. He crossed the hotel lobby and they rode up for the last time together. The elevator was very small with a black gate that opened jerkily.

You will be destitute, Walter had

said, grieving.

Oh well, she said, meaning, *Don't fucking pity me*.

Oh well, Emma says now, meaning, *Don't fucking pity me*.

She had found a single room, a sixth-floor walkup in a bourgeois building, and she had emerged from the intolerable fact of his absence determined never to depend on man or woman. Rage would see her through and joy, also, the joy of owing nothing.

As long as Isadora remained alive, Emma owed that thieving bitch nothing.

Then, when Emma heard about Isadora's death, about the broken neck and startled head crammed against the racing-car door, she understood that everything has a purpose. Emma would dance Isadora's dances, *precisely as Isadora had danced them,* for the rest of her days. *Death and the Maiden,* she danced, leaping just ahead of the music. *Iphigenia*, she danced, cupping the air with her hands. The crowds were small, then smaller: she was not, after all, the originator. The others had innovated. Emma had chosen not to, because she had understood the meaning of love.

Love is a wave that sweeps close and, receding, leaves its refuse shining: a clump of seaweed-mussel-seaweed, a giant spool, a halved horseshoe crab. From Isadora, they five learned never to concede. Now Frieda has sent this latest envoy to pester Emma in her last days on *Mutter Erte*. *There were five of us*, Emma will not tell the pest. *When I left the group, I lived in Paris for a year and then in America. In America I didn't have a man to help me. I didn't find a banker-husband the way Ursula for all her airs did. Even Frieda—surely there is a falling away in the birthing of sons, sons who warp and weaken our bodies? But in Naxos, Walter, we walked hand in hand. Do you remember? Later you said sex was darkness. What a stupid thing to say, Walter. Sex is all colors. See how the gulls rise, how beautifully they hover above the ocean. In truth they seek only their prey. I keep your portrait on my night table. For a short time the world was flushed like cheeks*: *with the mauve of the coverlet, the other mauve of your penis, the rosy-hued walls, the purple twilight sky*

Emma's feet ache in her sturdy shoes. She discovers a last wish: to touch once more the chilly sand with one's gnarled and hairy toes. She touches the place where her heart will stop yammering, hammering. She has come so far, so fast. She used to love him so very much.

A woman and a child are playing catch with a beachball.

The beachball floats across the air in a slow arc.

The reporter is standing to one side of the woman-and-child.

The reporter's red hair is blowing across her eyes, which look worried. The nurses would have helped Emma, but she outwitted them. Where are they now, to chase this nervous creature off?

"Miss Duncan, I only want to ask you a few more questions."

Is it true? Is it? Is it true?

Of course it's all true.

Across the sand, ludicrously, float the words: "What is the relation between art and life?"

"Excuse me?"

The reporter, stepping closer, repeats her question.

"That is an interesting problem," Emma admits.

"His name was George," Emma remarks. "Yes, George Pomiès. I remember now. Laura and he danced for several years. He had other partners, but he preferred her and they lived together. I think they must have been quite happy."

The young woman and Emma stand facing the sea. The young woman's reddish hair escapes her hairband. She has exchanged the Chinese shirt for an Indian blouse that exposes her cleavage. She exudes odors of sweat and patchouli and insecticide. "I've danced with Frieda," she says shyly.

Frieda, Emma thinks. "So. What do you want from me?"

I'm interested in the preservation of Isadora's dances. You remember them all. You could teach me. I would—I would do my best."

Emma squeezes her urethrea shut or nearly shut. "It is too late," she says.

"There are no films of her dancing. If there were, people would understand."

"Film! They would understand nothing!"

"When I was a little girl, I saw Frieda dance. I remember the feeling—I almost fell off my chair. I begged my mother to let me study with her."

"Frieda and I humiliated a girl once," Emma says presently. "Frieda and I and the others. We made her sleep in the other room. They made us sleep in the stables and we stopped believing that Isadora would ever return to save us. We wouldn't let the girl wash, and then we laughed at her for stinking."

The woman stares.

"What do you really want from me?" Emma asks.

To her infinite surprise, the young woman bursts into tears.

The sky is the color of bleach. The rocks bulge. The day insists on lingering.

"I'm so sorry," the young woman gasps. She wipes at her snotty nose with the back of her hand. If she tries to shake Emma's hand later, Emma will refuse.

"I need this job," the young woman blurts. "I just don't know what to do."

"That is not my business!"

"I know. I'm sorry. It's just—"

"Shut up," Emma says automatically. "Let a woman think."

The waves lap. The sky lightens before darkening. A man at the far end of the beach resembles Walter, but so many men resemble Walter these days. The young woman is undeniably weeping. Why? No doubt, it is some stupid story of love.

"I made my own life," Emma says. "No one told me what to do."

Emma feels the young woman's covert glance before hearing the words: "If you go on like this, they're going to move you to another floor."

"How do you know?"

"I heard the nurses talking."

"And how," Emma asks, making sure to sound sarcastic, even arch: "precisely am I *going on like this?*"

"I don't know," the young woman wails.

"Stop that," Emma tells her. "Exercise some self-control." She is trying to think.

"I'm sorry," the young woman tells Emma. "It's...My boyfriend and I broke up, but it's not just that. He was paying the rent but it's not that either. Well it is. I don't even feel like dancing," she adds.

"You don't dance for any one person."

"Didn't you?"

"I loved a man, once," Emma says impatiently. "But you know that."

"You keep his photograph by your bed."

"I keep it to remind myself that love is....something very light. It is never worth changing your life for. Dance was everything."

"Did you ever....?"

"I had other lovers, of course," Emma adds, frowning.

"But you never went back to her," the young woman says. "Why not?"

Why not?

"You will ask me questions only about the dance!"

The wind blows. Toward evening, it picks up. The tide also is rising, washing away the day.

"Frieda said to give you this," the young woman says presently. And she holds out with her snotty hand a brown-papered package. What is in it, if not the wind-up cuckoo clock? Emma's father had sent it one Christmas, but Frieda had made it vanish.

"Oh shit," Emma says. "Oh crap. Oh this crappy, crappy world."

But the brown paper contains only a chocolate bar and some industrially-made crullers.

"And your name? Again?" Emma asks finally.

The young woman's name is Nancy. She is sorry not to have reminded Emma of that fact.

"Do you speak German?"

Nancy is sorry not to speak German.

Don't fucking apologize. That is your first lesson."

"You're going to teach me?"

"I did not say that."

"Miss Duncan, is there anything I can do for you....?"

"There is one thing."

"Name it," Nancy whispers. A few strands of her reddish hair lift in the breeze.

"I need to take a piss. Then I want to go back and make some friends."

The waves are crashing in small ways. The sky, growing rosy-colored, seems quite free of human interference. There is a dark stain in the sand. Nancy moves closer. She is holding the underpants, which for some reason are decorated with pink-and-blue umbrellas. "Did you ever just start crying and not be able to stop?"

"No." Emma is eager now to return to the Home. She is going to start by learning the names of the nurses. She is going to give Frieda's chocolates to her roommate, the one who snores.

"It used to embarrass me."

"There is no need for embarrassment," Emma says, summoning an old voice—almost gracious. From somewhere inside, she must summon that old grace. A line from Goethe's *Faust* flashes past—too fast, its words escaping her. She must ask this creature to bring her the book next time.

"I know," Nancy says, nodding vigorously. "My therapist says crying isn't a sign of weakness—on the contrary. Tears show how in touch we are with our feelings. We're all heroes,"she goes on somewhat desperately. She spreads out the pink-and-blue underpants, widening the leg holes with their elastic crinkle. She kneels in the sand. "We are all of us such heroes."

"What a stupid thing to say," says Emma, forgetting herself.



Part (yies) - 3

Patrick McEvoy, Olivia Pelaez

Anthony

By Margaret Devane

Without fail, whenever we put in the effort to meet, Nelly asks about my husband.

"How's Anthony? I've never met the guy."

She hopes to steer the conversation toward something other than Allentown. I fly to Pennsylvania to see her and she knows by now what I want to talk about. She will continue to ask, hoping to catch me with my guard down. I never think of Anthony when I travel to see her and I hope someday she will learn to stop asking. She only spends a few minutes pressing the topic and soon enough we're back to

when Mother brought the potted ferns into the house I had just made up my mind to move out. I still had to start and finish high school, but I didn't think it was too early to begin planning. I just felt like I was living in corners. Mother and her cumbersome plants were a perfect example. I had trouble then as now putting feelings into words, and my hot, flustered face stood no chance against Mother's shrugging shoulders and dismissive hand waving. Instead I carried my dissatisfaction as quietly as I could. The house was stuffed with ferns and a feud would have used up what little space was left.

We lived in an old stately row house, a tall sliver of brickwork that reduced our world to two dimensions, back and forth and up and down. There may have been three floors and high ceilings, but the rooms were tight, long rectangles made tighter by large furniture, and the hallways were so crowded with their hat racks, half-moon tables, and protruding picture frames I used to hold my breath through certain passages.

The ferns only added to the congestion, turning each narrow floor into a chicane. All told, we lived a home life of small steps after the plants arrived and I remember going to sleep at night with my legs spread apart as far apart as possible, dreaming of long strides. I never saw any sense in clutter and secretly I invited another grievance. An excuse for a way out.

I was still adjusting to the new mugs of my new classmates in middle school when I came home to find Mother bent over at the waist dragging a large terracotta pot up against the foyer wall.

"Did. You know. That. Plants give off. Oxygen?" A vein throbbed in her neck as she talked between tugs. "More. Fresh air. For the house. Is never. A. Bad. Thing."

A chestnut tassel from Mother's bangs had fallen in front of her face and she began grunting as she grappled with the pot. Her hunched posture embarrassed me, so I left her alone with her struggle.

Slinking past her I encountered another plant at almost every turn. They came in a variety of sizes and I soon placed them in two categories: small enough to trip over in the daylight, and large enough to bump into in the dark. I learned to crawl and walk in these rooms and the mental map of my home was now in tatters.

In my father's study I found my little brother getting acquainted with one of the largest ferns in the house. With his toys at his feet, Daniel brushed his hand back and forth across a cluster of fans standing just over his forehead. As usual he did not turn to see who had entered the room. He simply continued mumbling to himself. Just one more odd effect in an enervating afternoon.

Father and I didn't breathe any easier after a week as Mother claimed. Our house was a gauntlet and I huffed my displeasure at each turn. Father sat reading his biographies, the books pressed to his face. Mother continued to water the ferns and the plants did much except create a pastime for my

little brother. He was the only member of the house who embraced their arrival. It wasn't much of a shock to Father and me because Daniel had always been a bit off, unsettlingly so. Every spiraling dance or soft, mammalian sound out of his mouth pushed Father's face deeper into his book.

Daniel used to spend his time with his plastic dinosaurs, growling under his breath and talking in some language that only functioned at the faintest of volumes. Upon arrival, the ferns distracted him from his toys and suddenly nothing else trumped their attraction. He played in their soil, drew with chalk on the pots, and brushed their fans for hours on end. No one ever thought to ask him why. We could never get an answer out of him for anything.

Daniel's delight in the plants justified their purpose to Mother and she smiled down at him and rubbed his head. Spotting that gesture through one of the green fans, I turned red in the face and rushed out of the house.

Mother's affection bit me in some other place on my heart. We have always been a family of distant or suggested declarations of familial love, and something in Mother's petting put a spot of ruin on our typical means of expression. I had a habit of storming out of the house at the smallest offense, mostly because my pulse and breath quickened between those tall walls.

"Oh, she's just at that awkward age," I heard Mother say as I stomped away. Adolescence was always a facile rebuttal for Mother and most other parents in the neighborhood. I was coming into my own and though I didn't fill in evenly or all at once, my body did not get in its own way. Still, she used this act of growing as cause for dismissal, and I tallied it up as another trespass. Adding to the list, I even

promised Nelly wedding pictures some time ago. She was furious when she heard about my marriage after the event and it was the only thing I could do to quell her rage.

"At least let me get a look at the guy," she said.

It was a mistake and I have to back peddle every time I return to Pennsylvania. To tell the truth, I don't know where to find those pictures. Anthony and I had one or two framed for our home and the rest are stuffed away some place I forgot to remember. I did describe the reception for her, the palatial ballroom we rented for a few friends and family. It seemed silly. I just wanted a large room, big enough for it to grow dark at the corners during our dance, making infinity a tangible option in real life, yet sheltered by a vaulted ceiling, far from the

outside, I was still angry with Mother as I walked with my head down toward the stoop where Nelly lived, too distracted to be on the lookout for her no-good brothers. They were lounging on the steps, lizards on a rock. They must have seen me from the very first sidewalk tile on their block.

"Look, old Marie, Flat as a board!" Kyle said.

Kyle and Shane Dexter, dumb as they get, could only prey on the obvious. At that age I searched in the mirror every morning for the arrival of my chest and hips. Looking at Mother I knew they were coming, but those future curves didn't make me any less of a target.

"Jeez, Marie. You make the walls jealous," Shane said.

I stood fuming in front of them, my fists clenched. It was another time in my life where I wanted to be a boy, just for the license to shout and shove, punch and spit.

"What are you gonna do Marie, sock me one?" Kyle grinned with his tongue pressing through the gap in his smile.

Before I could make up my mind to throw my first punch, Nelly came over and did it for me.

I heard the slap of her jump rope and turned to see her skipping furiously over to her brothers. She was seven, plucky as can be, the only child in the Dexter family six-pack worth a damn. The hems of all her skirts were colored with the grime of the sidewalk and I could always pick her out of a crowd because of her hair, a tangled mess at all times.

Nelly dropped the rope and slapped

Kyle across the face, all without coming to a stop.

"You be nice, bucket head."

Kyle sat stunned, a red palm print rising on his left cheek. Nothing in his face showed a desire to retaliate. Nelly had a warrior's eyes, bright green, sweet when she smiled, yet fierce when ready to brawl.

Kyle had to do something. His honor as a man was on the line, and so was his neck if the neighborhood boys found out. He stood up to present the only thing he had, his height.

"You do that again and you're going to end up in the trash can."

"Just try it." Nelly grabbed me by the hand and started marching off without a worry about any fraternal reprisal.

She took me all the way to the house, tugging my arm without saying a thing. My fingers, crimped in her tight little fist, ached and went white at the tips. She seemed to squeeze them out of fear. She was afraid of her brothers, only herself, too young to come to grips with the power of her own resolve. I stared at those little fingers grasping mine the whole way home. I could have followed her for miles.

From then on she waited for me outside the junior high school and walked home with me. I enjoyed her company more than people my own age. However, Nelly and I were the best of friends for only fifteen minutes each day after school. She came home with me because I had the house key, which opened the door to Daniel.

The afternoon she walked me away from her brothers was the first time she saw Daniel. She guided me up the concrete steps of my stoop and as I opened the front door she gasped. Daniel was in the foyer on his knees peering over a ceramic rim into the potting soil. His blonde hair was drooping over his forehead and his tongue was dangling from his mouth. I turned back to see Nelly, eyes wide, mouth agape.

After the shock of first sight, she marched right up to him. Daniel did not acknowledge her at first, but he must have sensed her beside him. She gave off a brawny aura that made sneak attacks out of the question. When you had her attention, you felt it. On the back of your neck.

Still, Daniel did not respond. People were either invisible to him or in the way. Yet he did not know that Nelly could not be ignored. She stood with her arms crossed behind her back and waited. He peeked a few times to the side and found her still there, still smiling.

"Hello. I'm Nelly. What's your name?"

He did not reply and Nelly's nerves began to go to work on her. She swayed back and forth eagerly, rising up and down on her toes. She had what she wanted right in front of her, and as she swayed forward for the last time, toward Daniel, she leaned over and kissed him through his towhead, on his temple.

In a flash, he jumped up and ran up the stairs with his arms stretched straight up above his head, howling the whole way.

"Hey, what's going on in there?" Mother's head popped out from the kitchen door. Before she could investigate, Nelly skipped out the door, giggling contentedly.

Mother retreated and I stood alone in the empty foyer with a bitter flavor in my mouth. It's a hint of aspirin I can still taste if I search the back of my tongue.

Every time Nelly came to the house, her arrival drove Daniel upstairs. Despite his unabashed denial she continued, often attempting to break through different borders. After an attempt to talk through a hardback cover to Father, Nelly dragged a stool over to the kitchen island and asked Mother if she could help with the vegetables.

"Sure, why not." Mother, forever thinking herself a lady, did a lot of things she didn't want to do. "Here. You can pull the stems out of these mushrooms."

Little was said between them. Nelly worked quickly, tired of the task and Mother right from the start. Even at seven years old, she knew her opposites well enough, and I could tell from the way she huffed out each breath that it was time to get down to

business.

"When will Daniel be old enough to go to kindergarten?"

"Daniel is old enough now." Mother kept her eyes on the string beans as she explained. "He's six and a half, but I feel he's just not ready for school."

Mother's response made Nelly's jaw tremble. She could not understand a boy being kept out of school, especially her crush. That decision floated somewhere above her in an adult world of backward complication, and she did not know where to begin her battle.

"I need to go home now." With that Nelly hopped down and swung her arms straight out her sides, trying not to run to the door. It was the way Nelly cried, or maybe the way she removed herself to some private place where her pride let her cry. I called after her and started to follow her down the street but she walked fast and I would never let her see me run after her. I soon became the one to search her out, and I made sure to do it calmly because I knew that

Nelly has never come out to visit me. I forbid it. I fly back to her. Before my last visit to PA, she called my home. I have always asked her to contact me at work and I never gave her my house number. She ferreted it out anyway. Luckily I was home to answer the phone first.

"I just wanted to say hello."

It took some doing, but finally I had her promise to never call the house again. We talked after that without discussing whom she had called to talk to, Anthony or me. Still, she brought him up and no one else. In our talks we had no time for people from the old neighborhood, her brothers or Father or

Mother grew tired of the ferns by mid winter. She went about her watering wistfully because the plants could not talk back, gossip, or scheme. Flourishing as they did, they did not live the life Mother had imagined, whatever that could have been. And although she would never admit this small defeat, she could have a party.

I went around the neighborhood dropping the invitations for her "Springtime Gardener's Gala" in over a dozen mailboxes. More often than not I was greeted at the door, having been expected for some time. They knew about the party long before Mother forced me to the dining room table with the calligraphy pen.

The party was planned for the first day of spring. She ordered Father to trade in his biographies for a polo shirt. Mother hugged and kissed Daniel and then let him be. I was to wear something nice.

"I want to see you out of those jeans of yours and into a dress. Please Marie. You're becoming such a lovely young lady and you could gain the right attention if you wore something more flattering."

I didn't want anyone's attention except Nelly's and I didn't want to be part of Mother's parade. I had no mind for dresses. I wore a few when I was younger and could never think to keep my legs crossed. Rather than have my thighs pinched and sweaty, I stuck to pants for good.

Good weather showed up right in time for the party and the side garden and first floor of the house filled with more people than we'd ever had. Although space was limited among the ferns Mother distracted her guests with teeming plates of hors d'oeuvres. Rarely did Mother gather the amount of people to meet the quota in her mind for her massive parties. At this party however, she had her hands full. With barely a free moment for her guests, he rushed around, sighing and saying to herself "if only", wishing for caterers and servers.

While Mother struggled to keep her head above water with a smile, the guests talked and laughed and spilled things and I waited for Nelly.

She walked through the garden entrance with her dress freshly cleaned and a six-pack of juice boxes held high against her chest. She placed them next to the white wine glasses and pulled two from their shrink-wrapped plastic casing before walking off into the ferns.

Daniel ignored the party. Some guests, while touring the collection of

plants, stopped when they found Daniel.

"What are you looking for, young man?"

He didn't look out at the question and everyone who asked filtered back to the garden.

I did not wear a dress that day. I fought with Mother from behind the locked door of my bedroom and came out in my overalls when she was too rushed to whisper any asides to me. That aspirin taste had lingered after I saw Nelly kiss my little brother and I needed her attention more than ever to figure it out. She was on her toes in the doorway between the living room and study, about to stalk towards the staircase.

"Marie," she said with surprise. I think she forgot I lived there.

"Nelly, let's go up to my room." I had nothing planned in my room, I don't think. I just wanted to sit down and stare at Nelly and search for what ate at me. She of course had a different target.

"Not now. Where is Daniel?"

I said I didn't know. I felt like yelling at her, making a scene, saying, Who cares? He doesn't. I'm the one who likes you. Play with me.

But she knew what she wanted and I would have been an empty interference.

She broke one straw from its plastic, stuck it through the foil aperture on the juice box, and made her way to the foyer, the best place for a Daniel sighting. He was circling one of the plants, letting his finger glide along the rim of the pot as he stared into the center of the fern. Nelly held the other juice box out at arm's length as she approached.

"You want one?" She spoke softly, scared to spook him.

Daniel ignored her for a moment until he noticed the sheen and swirling colors of the logo. He slowly reached out to accept. He was never one to shy away from orange pineapple.

They both stood there sipping, their cheeks constricting as they sucked at the thin straws. Daniel began to blush at the flood of flavor. Nelly smiled back and added a giggle. Then my brother giggled too. At this, I walked off. I should have stayed. It was the first time I heard him make a happy peep thanks to another human. And I would have seen how they got upstairs, would have known who led whom, and I probably would have peeked in through the keyhole. Instead, I went off pouting to find Father and force him to cheer me up.

After so much wine at midday everyone began to yawn and all conservation had deflated except for Mother who finally had a chance to chatter away without interruption. She began asking, "So, what do you think of my ferns?" There was nothing specific anyone could say. The plants did not flower or bloom, they did not turn color in the house. They were just green. Our neighbors found a few nice words for her and she pressed on.

"Well, Daniel is really taken by them. Where is that boy?" She spoke that question softly, as uttered only for herself, and went back into the house.

We heard a shout and then the crash of a terracotta pot from somewhere upstairs, so loud both sounds were audible in the garden. Father rushed in and the guests peered in from the doorway or tried to spot the commotion through the windows. I walked into the foyer and saw a sprinkling of soil fall down through the rails of our open staircase. Mother rushed Nelly down the stairs by the arm, muttering something sternly into her ear. I did not hear a bit of it, but from the smile on Nelly's face Mother was not making much of an impression.

"Dear?" Father said from behind me.

Mother did not even take the time to turn and see who was watching. She pushed Nelly out in front of her, and would have bowled her over if she did have her locked in hand.

"Mommy!" Daniel ran down the stairs and followed them through the foyer. They were almost on top of another as they went out the door and into the street. When Mother came back in she could not face her guests. They assumed that was the end of the party anyway and filed out of the side gate while Mother picked up the pieces of her ruined plant.

After that, Nelly stayed one street away from the house. I did not want to see her for a long time—months afterwards there was that aspirin on my tongue. I spent my time on other streets in the neighborhood, walking on all the cracks of the sidewalk tiles, stealing glances at every girl with knotted hair. Such sightings were rare then, while now, it's more common, and I catch my eyes darting off when I'm with

my husband Anthony is from California and has left the state only a handful of times. After high school I felt like I was going to burst and knew our wide country had plenty of room to keep me intact elsewhere. I went west. He found me out there and I avoid going back east except to see Nelly. He stays on his side, Nelly stays on her side, and I can daydream at a distance.

The one thing I must remember to tell Nelly the next time I fly to Allentown is that Anthony never asks about her.

Caterpillar, You

By EJ Hyndman

When you were a child, you liked to save caterpillars. Liked being the word your parents used, which was actually a troublesome inaccuracy, because saving caterpillars from their imminent deaths was not so much a hobby as a necessity, and you found the task quite arduous even at ten. One summer you saved over a thousand caterpillars. You'd place them in a small green bucket, move them to another patch of ragwort by the ditch at the end of the road, and check on them daily to see if they'd grown, decimated the ragwort, or had been gobbled up themselves by an angry cuckoo. You never begrudged the cuckoo. You begrudged the mower, because mowers didn't need to gobble caterpillars to survive. But the cuckoo did. He could gobble as many as he wanted.

You no longer save caterpillars, but you're trying to save something else. Rather, someone else. And although he may not resemble a cinnabar moth caterpillar on the outside, there are a few similarities on the in. Cinnabar moths feed on ragwort which is toxic to most creatures. He feeds on things which are toxic to him too. Cinnabar moths store these toxins in their bodies, which makes them dangerous to potential predators.

But that's where the analogy fails, because he only seems to make himself dangerous to you.

Another similarity, which must not be thought about for too long, is that cinnabar moths are cannibals. Not that he is a cannibal in the actual sense. But in the emotional sense, he consumes other people like raisinettes, gobbles their love, time, hope. For the cinnabar moth, when food is limited or when their leaves are overcrowded, they'll turn on each other. The big will eat the little. The little will eat the littler. You wonder if you and he are in a time when your leaves are overcrowded.

You think the analogy fails here, too. Nothing is scarce for him. He's drowning in things he doesn't need. You don't know where the toxins come from and you won't ask. You didn't ask the caterpillars where they came from, where they would make their chrysalises, what they intended to do when they were fully fledged moths. You only saved them. And you didn't even do that so well, because you're almost sure that most of them came to an untimely end at the beak of that angry cuckoo. Better that than the mower.

Digitalis

By Courtney Weaver

"Please help," her husband wrote in a shaking hand.

Go to your garden, the healer said. How innocent she'd been then! He gave her bear fat, which she creamed into spikey rosemary - the odor gamey, yet antiseptic. She spread it on his concave chest like icing a cake.

Pink and white yarrow, buoyed by the breeze, bordering the wooden fence. Its clustered flowers were like miniature wedding bouquets, what she'd held decades earlier in the same garden. Its tea was brackish, and useless.

Golden poppies were next. They were cheerful, holding promise. But the tincture was bitter, disgusting. He'd spat it out. He had stopped speaking by then, but moans sliced through her at sunset. They were both dissolving in his electric green haze.

"Foxglove … what a beautiful name," she murmured. Lavender cones with dappled dots, stalks upright. Bees buzzed, crawled happily inside. They swayed in the wind, tangling the poppies. The garden was ablaze; she felt guilty comparing it to his ashen skin, his faded eyes. "*Digitalis purpurea.*"

Harvesting the miniature purple trumpets. They dried on the large oak dining table, next to his hospital bed. *How many?* The healer wouldn't tell her. Shafts of late summer spread across his shrunken legs. A brown powder, 100 proof alcohol; she'd hold his nose.

A cup lay empty, on its side. She curled next to him. The future's expanse felt wild and unbroken, a sunrise. His heart absorbed, slowed, then stopped.

In the garden, the light was purple and golden.

The Triumph of Loss

Urmi Chakravorty

Like father, like son…born to win!

His father's voice buzzed in Jason's ears as he tried lacing up his limited-edition shoes in the athletes' locker room. A cocky baritone that reeked of hubris and patronage. The mood in the stadium outside was upbeat. The much-awaited annual inter-university sports meet was in progress. The event had seen an unprecedented turnout with institutions of diverse merits vying with each other for the top honours. It would culminate with the 400-metres dash. All eyes were on Jason, the star sprinter of his institution and the heart throb of most girls. And many boys, too.

Tall, tanned, with a perfectly sculpted lean body, Jason had worked hard to get to this frame. Not so much for himself as to please his super-achiever dad and shipping tycoon, Steve McQueen. 'Billionaire Sailor'…'Money Magnet'…'The Man with the Midas Touch' – were some of the monikers attached to his name. Steve's complacent face blazed from billboards and leading trade magazine covers.

Steve was a global business icon, a man who had never tasted defeat – at work, or in life. A complete contrast to his loving, caring wife, an unassuming homemaker with a heart of gold. Traits that always invited Steve's scorn. In fact, a greater part of her life was spent trying to please Steve and live up to his nearly impossible expectations, till she could do it no more.

The sprawling sports complex was teeming with activity and anticipation. Colourful jerseys, flex banners, large placards with quirky captions, and eager faces added to the exhilaration. The announcers amped up the competitive spirit by offering delightful quips and enviable trivia about the participating athletes.

"Hey Jess, all set to take the trophy home?"
A thin voice broke into Jason's thoughts. It was coated with sarcasm - veiled but unmissable.
He looked up to face Ross, his cohort and biggest competitor.

'Hey bud, what's up?" Jason slapped his shoulder with genuine warmth.

Ross' stretched, sunburnt frame clothed in a faded jersey and frayed green sneakers often attracted jibes. But it also belied his perseverance, stamina and an all-consuming hunger to trump Jason and prove his mettle. On his part, Jason tried reaching out to Ross in all earnest, only to be greeted by a cold indifference. He understood… and respected his detachment.

As they stepped out into the field, Jason spotted his father seated with the university top brass. He bristled with discomfort. A high-pitched 'peep' sounded and the race began. Jason sprinted with long, graceful strides. In the last leg, he found himself way ahead of the others, with Ross following close on his heels.

The finish line was within sight. The cheering for Jason had reached a crescendo. Along with it, voices from afar floated into his ears –

'Sorry about your mom, kiddo.'

'She didn't slip and fall…she walked into the lake herself.'

Voices that turned his life topsy-turvy. Tossed him into a cold, competitive, unfeeling world where his father ruled the roost. Jason was barely ten.
For a few moments, Jason was transported to a different universe –

one, where uniformed cops, flashbulbs, live telecast, hollow words of sympathy, and Steve McQueen's phony grief stared him in the face. He was quick to retract. After all, he had a job at hand, one which he had to ace. And he couldn't afford to lose sight of that.

Jason eyed his father. Steve looked like a man who owned the world. Jason's stomach lurched. His legs faltered for a second before he slowed down. Almost imperceptibly, he took a couple of steps backwards. Ross caught up with him, astonishment colouring his panting, sweaty face. But that was barely for a millisecond.

The next moment saw him bolting ahead, arms flailing, face turned heavenwards, lunging forward to cross the finish line. A shocked silence momentarily descended on the stadium, followed immediately by a deafening applause.

A new star was born...history was made!

Victory at last, Jason lauded himself.

Jugular

By Salvatore Difalco

We were alone in the house. My father reclined in his black Barcalounger watching a gameshow on television, sweating and cursing to himself in Sicilian. I couldn't blame him, though. A heatwave in July and we had no air-conditioning, not back then. A couple of fans feebly whirred at both ends of the living room, offering meagre relief, but really just stirring the hot air around. You could stick your head in the refrigerator for a few minutes, and at least cool your head, but then risk getting told off, like my father told me off that morning for doing it. "The fuck is wrong with you? Cretino, use your fucking brains." You know, something like that. He couldn't pound on me with his fists anymore, but he could nag me into submission, or tears.

My cousin Margaret had taken my kid sister Angie to summer day camp. My mother was at work. She stitched pockets to shirts at the Brill factory, a ten minute walk from our place. With everything going on at home, I don't know how she dragged herself there every morning. Guess she had no choice. My father had been sick with lung cancer for two years, in and out of hospital. Down to one lung, he'd lost about a hundred pounds, and could barely walk. Didn't look good. And it didn't make him any nicer or humbler or more grateful than he used to be.

My mother had ordered me to stay home with him in case he needed anything, even though he couldn't stand the sight of me. She knew this. She'd tried to protect me during healthier times, when he felt compelled to let his fists fly or unleash the belt on my ass, but she could only do so much. He'd tuned her up enough times to let her know who ruled that household. Memories of black eyes and swollen lips lingered. He never touched my sister, a count in his favor. And at the end of the day, he never broke bones or anything, though he broke skin now and then. So maybe I'm making too much of this. He was a hard-working immigrant who missed his homeland and despised his job in the steel mill. Now he just despised the life remaining to him.

I sat in the stuffy kitchen swatting flies and reading Erich von Däniken's Chariots of the Gods? I was hooked on that extraterrestrial shit back then, like everyone else. My father called me to the living room. Told me to get him a cold glass of water.

"Make sure you let it run. Last time it was warm as piss. Do something right for a change."

In the kitchen I ran the tap for a good minute before I filled a glass and brought it out to him. He looked at me with his hollow eyes and tested the water with his finger to make sure it was cold before he drank it. His bony, bobbing Adam's apple almost made me pity him.

"Go get my strop," he demanded as he returned the glass. "It's hanging in my bedroom closet. Bring it here."

The leather strop had belonged to my nonno who'd sharpen his straight razor with it whenever he shaved. My father had used it for different reasons in the past. I wondered what the bastard had in mind now. I thought, If he somehow plans to give me the strop, he's got another thing coming. Just let him try, I thought, though I had no follow up to that.

He flashed a skeletal smile when I brought him the strop. "Remember this?" he said, half to himself, but he didn't indicate any intent to hit me with it. He handled the strop fondly, maybe recalling my nonno. Then he made

another unusual request.

"Go get my shaving cup and brush in the medicine cabinet upstairs. Nonno's straight razor's in there, too. Bring it down." He glared at me. "Why're you standing there catching flies? Muoviti!"

I resented climbing the stairs again. It was like a sauna up there. I grabbed the ceramic shaving cup and brush in the bathroom medicine cabinet. I didn't see the evil straight razor at first. But after poking around, I found it behind a a box of gauze.

When I came down, my father instructed me to move an end table close to the Barcalounger and set the shaving items on it. He then told me to go fill a bowl with hot water in the kitchen. "Bring a washcloth, too," he added. He opened up the straight razor. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he said with a faraway voice, eyes lidded. Then he started slowly swiping the blade along the strop, muttering under breath.

In the kitchen I filled a bowl with water and grabbed a washcloth. I wondered if he planned to shave himself in the living room. Cousin Angelo had been shaving him for the past year.

My father had finished stropping the straight razor and told me to wet the shaving brush and the washcloth, with which he moistened his face bristles. Then he worked the brush in the shaving cup until it foamed up thick and white, and lathered his face.

"You're gonna shave me," he said.

Thought I misheard him

"You're gonna shave me."

He wasn't kidding.

"I can't do it," I said, horrified that he'd asked. It wasn't a job for a twelve-year-old.

"You can and you will. Show me you're not a piece of shit."

He told me where to begin and with a shaky hand I started scraping foam off his face. When the blade neared his right jugular vein, he grabbed my hand and looked me hard in the eyes.

"Not like that!" he barked.

I tried pulling my hand away, but he held tight.

"Like this," he said, sawing the blade into his jugular with a sudden jet of blood. "Like this, you idiot. Like this."

We Had Only One Religion

By Hashmi-al-Haseeb Faisal

'Twas I—mine own self—who did contend within, then wept beneath the waning light of eventide. My gaze lay askance to the dusken'd horizon, watching the sun slowly descend, bearing away sundry shadows of my soul and the frail hope once gleaned in an orphanage. Sweetness was but an elusive phantasm, akin to a moth drawn forth to flame— fair in vision, fatal in truth. Now remained naught but errant echoes of a bygone solace and crumbled episodes of memory.

How soft the evening grew after that as though the air, dense with old sorrows, had grown weary of its own mourning. A strange hush, not of peace but of pause, drifted down. I knelt, fingers trailing ash, the wind folding round my shoulders like my foster mother's *tatreez* shawl, long vanished now — that indigo weave embroidered with thread as red as sumac, the pattern like falling pomegranate seeds. I remembered how she'd hum a lullaby, always a little off-key, when stitching; and I, a child, would pretend not to listen, though I knew the song better than my own name.

And then came scent — faint, unbidden — of cardamom and olive smoke, as if some memory had taken root in the land itself, blossoming ghostlike through the wreckage. That land—how it held things, how it remembered. Beneath every stone, a name. Beneath every tree, a voice. Even the olives, still clinging to charred branches, seemed to whisper of ancestors who had sung while planting them.

Somewhere, a kettle whistled—not in my world but in the memory of a world, perhaps my grandmother's. A hand reached to pour *qahwa* that would never be drunk and in the silence that followed, I almost heard the clinking of small glasses on a brass tray.

I walked on. Not forward, not back. The path turned inward.

At length, through the wavering heat, I glimpsed it: Al-Aqsa's dome, golden as a fig at dusk, cradled in the arms of a city too ancient to break and in that moment, it seemed even stone could feel, could grieve, could endure, could pray.

There were fig and olive trees, too — though fewer now — their branches knotted like old fingers in prayer. Beneath one, I sat, not seeking shade but something else. A presence, perhaps. A remembering. Dust clung to my calves and ants carried away grains of sand as if rearranging history itself. The silence pressed in. Then, faintly, footsteps. No, heartbeats. No, drums.

Dabke.

Not the music, no. Not the real thing but the echo of it—rhythmic, rooted, rebellious—rose through the soles of my feet and stirred the blood. I recalled the time cousins danced on it at a wedding in the courtyard, their heels striking earth with joy, with defiance. I had clapped along, uncertain, too young to understand the weight of celebration in a world where laughter must hide.

Now, no music. Only memory— but memory sufficed.

In that moment, I thought I understood that what is taken in fire returns in seed. Our dead are not vanished but scattered, like olive pits flung into soil, awaiting their season.

I looked again toward the city. Its

stones were still weeping but they were singing too and somewhere, carried on the sea-wind from Gaza's broken coast, came the scent of fresh musakhan—sumac, onions, oil—rising like incense from kitchens that refused to forget how to feed the living.

Then, I espied a bird, dying, yet striving for its kin. Therein I saw: a foster-mother's touch deeper than skin. My homestead was burnt in the balefire of genocide. Yet from the ashes, plume sketched a wraith—a shadow who left swaddling cloth at the burnt door.

Despair hovered, but never wholly took root. Even in ruin, some rooms refuse to close. I was born orphan but never homeless. The orphanage had fallen to ash, the door blackened, yet still, unknown hands laid infants there, wrapped in rags and silence. Their bodies were like plastic bags, capable of feeling, yet weightless, tossed by fate. Their lives were no sturdier than vagrant sacks of oiled cloth, light as chaff, yet brimmed with mute sentience, subject to the whims of wind and will.

I had to survive. Not for myself, but for them. I had to continue what the burnt door began—the legacy of my orphanage. Pessimism was not an option.

We, the children of that door, knew no creed but kindness. We prayed in different tongues, yet to the same God—the One of Abraham, of Moses, of Jesus, of Muhammad, peace be upon them all. There were no enemies in our dormitory. The Qur'an and the Bible shared our shelf. Neither did we bow to idols. We had only one religion: humanity.

It is not scripture that teaches hate—it is men. It is not faith that spills blood—it is power dressed in holy robes. Those who murder mothers are not martyrs. Those who silence children are not soldiers of God. Those who desire to extend the boundaries of their nation are political leaders, not civilians. The victims are not Muslims alone, nor Jews alone—they are sons, daughters, bread-bakers and lullaby-singers.

And I, the orphan, I say: hatred will not free us. It will only bury our stories beneath another generation of stone.

The Pink Bird

By Ashley Dryden

' A pink bird once lived in a tree near the river. Every day around noon, she would leave the tree and fly over to the windowsill near the Dogwood where the bluebird lived. The pink bird loved the bluebird and would visit the Dogwood to see him from afar every day. However, she was not brave enough to tell the bluebird her feelings because he was already betrothed to his wife, the blackbird. And so, every day the pink bird would sit on the windowsill to gaze at his loving feathers but would never say a thing.

One day, the pink bird was sitting on the windowsill when she noticed the bluebird fly over to her. After looking both left and right, he whispered in her ear that he loved the pink bird and that if she stayed quiet, they could spend all the time together that she wanted. The pink bird was elated and for weeks, she would visit the bluebird while the blackbird was out getting materials for their nest. One night, the pink bird wasn't fast enough and the blackbird caught the bluebird and the pink bird giving each other sweet nothings in the Dogwood tree. She furiously demanded that the pinkbird leave. However, the male bluebird seductively shook his head.

"As much as I used to love my wife, our relationship has grown bland and boring," said the bluebird to the pink bird, "so please pay no mind to her. I promise to forget about her so I can love you forever."

The blackbird left him in a huff, and the bluebird married the pink bird a day later. The pink bird was as happy as she could be knowing that she was chosen over the bluebird's former wife and that the bluebird could finally be hers. However, after a few weeks, the male bluebird began to act colder and more withdrawn when the pink bird was near him. One day, when the pink bird went to spy on him to see what was wrong, she spotted the male bluebird in a nest with a yellow bird while exchanging sweet nothings. The pink bird was speechless and asked the bluebird to make the yellow bird leave. But the male bluebird just shook his head again.

"As much as I used to love the pink bird, our relationship has grown bland and boring," said the bluebird to the yellow bird, "so please pay no mind to her. I promise to forget about her so I can love you forever."



Escape clutch
Resoun B Acharya

This is an illustration on A3 Cartridge paper with Acrylic colors. It represent the state of mind or heart or a bird itself whose life is trapped in a sphere of predators that can be a person or a socio-political clutches.



Engulfed Fisherman

Resoun B Acharya

This is an illustration on A3 Cartridge paper with Tempera colors. This painting is partly inspired by dream of Old man and the sea's protagonist and partly on my own sea-dream. It explores the different spectra of failures and hope through different types of fishes, whale, crocodile and a woman.

The House of the Dolls

By Sarah Harley

You change, but the doll
I made of you lives on,
a white body leaning
in a sunlit window, the features
wearing away with time.

– Margaret Atwood

We were three girls and four dolls, growing up in the house of secrets and sisterhood.

When the dolls were misplaced or taken by my brother, and feared lost forever, their names were screamed like bloody murder. Prolonged final vowel sounds echoed through the house.

"Julieeeeeee!"

"Lucindaaaaa!"

*

Angela was the most unfortunate of all the dolls. My mother bought her for me, in a passing lapse of judgment in the market one day. She was a rag doll, stitched together from off-hand bits of scrap material. She was unloved, on account of her appearance –a misshapen, flattened face, framed by a mop of bright yellow wool hair. The worst part of her was her legs, long and shapeless, stuffed into pink flannel. My brother compared them to the sausages hanging in the butcher's window.

My older sister focused on our legs.

"Who has the best legs?" she asked.

We lined up, oldest to youngest, well into our twenties, for the age-old ritual of standing in line. Legs mattered more than anything. Stepping out of the line, my older sister paced up and down, taking off points for scabs and bruises, early signs of cellulite on the backs of the thighs.

Trying to reach perfection, I spent hours lying on my back, scissoring my legs back and forth to achieve both tone and shape.

Even though she wasn't perfect, I wanted to protect Angela. But in the end, I betrayed her. In a fight with my brother, which became a tug of war, she lost one of her legs. I screamed about it, even though a part of me was secretly relieved.

My mother tried to reattach the severed limb without success. In the end, Angela was thrown away because, as my brother said, no-one walked around with a one-legged doll. I was hurt by her sudden disappearance, the way no-one explained what happened to her. I was six or seven.

*

Julie belonged to my sister with whom she had a shared existence. Each morning, my sister wrapped her dutifully in a soft white blanket and carried her around the house, possessing the unusual capacity to bestow a love upon the doll that she herself had never received. The roles were strangely reversed – my sister put herself inside a doll's body that she could love as a mother would have.

My mother struggled to love her children in the way we loved the dolls. Circumstances outside of her control had prevented her from doing so: a wartime childhood, an unhappy marriage with an estranged husband who came and went with the wind. With the blue pills and alcohol, she became mostly numb.

Julie had a shock of white blonde hair, cut so that it framed her face in a

flattering way and highlighted her cheekbones. Unlike all the other dolls, Julie had eyes that twinkled and seemed real. Her eyes even opened and closed, beneath thick dark lashes, if you rocked her back and forth. My sister limited how much time I was allowed to spend making her eyes open and close, even though I wanted to do it forever. My sister said that all the opening and closing would wear out her eyelids, causing them to stay closed forever or even worse, always open.

The belief arose from my mother's scarcity mindset, instilled in her early life experiences during a war. There would not be enough, everything would run out, even the number of times you were given to blink.

My mother passed the mindset to all of her daughters.

*

Lucinda was the oldest of the dolls and perfect in every way. She had a beautiful moon shaped face made from soft pale cream cotton. Her mouth was composed of two small stitches, forming upper lip and lower lip, light pink and delicate, giving her a demure demeanor. Her name, could she have spoken it, meant clear and radiant. Lucinda had a dress with pink and brown flowers on it, fitted over a simple cotton chemise. The hemline reached her ankles, covering her long slender legs.

But she had a fatal flaw: her neck was too thin and often unable to support the weight of her beautiful head. You could hold her neck between your thumb and forefinger as it measured even less than a centimeter. Sometimes her head would tip backwards, as if she was losing consciousness. After what happened to Angela, I worried about Lucinda's safety, imagining the worst.

To protect her from my brother's cruelty, Lucinda went to stay with a girl named Rosemary who lived up the road.

"Poor Lucinda," my sister whispered when we spoke of her.

My sister recently told me that Lucinda was never given away, just carefully hidden inside the darkness of a wardrobe.

She even gave the doll to her own daughter who carried her everywhere, and in so doing, slowly loved her to pieces.

"She must have been thrown away at some point," my sister said plainly.

I felt the rise of difficult emotions, both hard to name and understand.

*

My brother taunted us by taking the dolls behind our backs. Sometimes the dolls were hidden for days, meaning we had to go without them at bedtime, worrying all night and crying ourselves to sleep. When visited by the ghost of a doll in a dream, we woke up, struggling to scream.

Often, he put them into humiliating if not dangerous situations. He left them out in the rain or near cobwebs, high on forgotten shelves. Parts of the doll's clothes were taken off so they were left feeling incomplete. Ribbons went missing and hair was unraveled. He encouraged us to give the dolls haircuts with the blunt scissors from the kitchen drawer.

I longed to protect the dolls, as if they were baby doves we had brought home from the woods.

*

Amy was a Christmas present from my mother, the year before she died from cancer when I was thirteen.

It was winter, the air was chilly. I was with my mother, walking with my hand

tucked in her reluctant arm, the one frozen from the mastectomy and radiation treatment.

When we walked past the toy shop in town, I looked through the window at the magical world behind the cold glass: teddy bears, rag dolls, and music boxes with tiny ballerinas twirling on tiptoes. I fell in love with a small doll in a purple dress, with dark brown hair and green button eyes. I pleaded with my mother to buy her for me.

One afternoon, just a few days before Christmas, I looked through the window to see the doll. But she was gone – only an empty place where she used to be. My heart sank.

"She must have gone to live with a very lucky little girl," my mother said.

On Christmas morning that year, my mother handed me a crumpled present to open. Inside the tissue paper was a doll just like the one in the shop but different. She had orange hair, brown eyes, and a green dress. I wonder now what my mother saw in that doll — and what she saw in me.

I remembered the doll in the purple dress, with the brown hair and green eyes. I felt disappointed, strangely betrayed.

"I bought you this one because I thought she looked like you," my mother explained.

I harbored the dark unsayable truth that I loved the other doll more than the one I had been given.

For a few months, the doll remained nameless. But then, after my mother died, I gave her my mother's name – Amy.

I didn't know how to manage my mother's death or my own grief that followed. After the long illness, my mother died in the night. She was there one day, gone the next, never to return. No-one spoke of her disappearance. We just carried on.

It was June. The month turned grey, drizzling then pouring rain. Everything turned the brightest green. We had to stay inside. The curtains were drawn and the doors were closed all day long. It looked as if everyone was asleep or away from home.

*

On Saturdays, before anyone was awake, I sat the dolls on my bed. I undressed them, down to their lacy white slips, which were then gently lifted over their doll faces. It was a learned practice, adapted from the ways our brother played with us, in the half-light, when shadows danced across the walls.

The dolls didn't speak, or question what was happening to them. They just lay on the threadbare bedspread, staring at the ceiling. We shared an internal language that we used to share our thoughts and emotions. That language let me slip into their minds, and escape from my own.

I knew the practice was wrong, that I was harming the dolls in some way, stripping them down to the nothingness of their bodies. I couldn't protect them from my brother—or from myself.

I remember staring at the crease that formed at the end of a leg, the thick stitching between the part called leg and the thing called body. It was my earliest understanding that I was different from the dolls.

But I carried on, in spite of my reservations, repeating borrowed sentences to justify the ways in which undressing the dolls made me feel uncomfortable.

Do as you would be done by.

Shush. Don't make a fuss.

What's done is done.

I stared at the nakedness of the dolls, finding it strangely provocative to see them without clothes. Most of all, I observed their vulnerability, comparing it to my own throughout time.

In the quiet stillness, I invested a sense of other into them. The dolls' silence became mine.

Before anyone woke, I put their clothes back on, carefully tucking their dresses around their soft bodies. I smoothed their hair and tied the ribbons in the prettiest way I could. I arranged them together, sitting quietly, each one carrying a secret.

The dolls only had one outfit, although I wished they had traveling dresses in case we could leave the house together. I wanted to take us all far away to visit glaciers, frozen rivers of ice, in magical northern forests –a place where time flowed differently. I wanted to take us to a place, brilliant white with shades of blue, hidden from the human world.

*

As we grew older, time began to slow down for the dolls. Left untouched, leaning on a sunlit window sill, their features faded with the passage of time.

They would not remember. They would not speak of what happened in the childhood house.
Their silence, like mine, was absolute.

*

Even now, in adult life, the same old longing returns – to be elsewhere. I still dream of faraway places where I wanted to take the dolls – stark, empty, and shimmering.

The longing comes when the world floods me.

I changed, but the doll I made of myself is still there, her features wearing away with time. I carry her with me, even when I forget she is there.

Sandwiches

By Nick Farina

Seated across from my clinician at a Boston psychiatric hospital, my eyes move from her to the small table between us and back to her. She gives the same look of concern that she does every meeting. I'm sure her interest comes from a place of sympathy, but it never feels genuine.

"How do you feel today?" she asks, her eyes never breaking gaze.

I try my best to reflect on the morning so far. It was still only 10am and I felt like I had just woken up. I can still taste the breakfast of Raisin Bran and bitter coffee (if you can even call it that) and was still hungry due to the meds I was taking. I decide that I feel the same this morning as I did yesterday morning and the one before that.

"I don't know. Foggy I guess", I finally reply. This is the same response I give every time she asks me this question as my state of existence rarely changes.

We have been meeting every day for the past two months. She always wears the same tan khaki pants and neutrally colored shirt. She is shorter than me and I don't think I have ever seen her smile. She has a husky voice that can be jarring at times but other than that I don't really have an opinion on her one way or another. As far as I know, she has never really gone to bat for me when it comes to any of the requests I have made. Our meetings are technically considered therapy, but I never leave them feeling a sense of relief or anything, really. I know she meets with my psychiatrist frequently, but I have absolutely no idea what is discussed.

"Are you hearing any voices?" she asks.

I realize this is simply a box that she needs to check on her end, however, I am here for a reason. Leading up to this current residence at McClean Hospital, I was twenty-four years old and living in New York. I was unemployed, sleeping intermittently and abusing my Adderall prescription. While visiting my parents for Thanksgiving in Florida I acted erratically and was admitted, against my will, into a nearby hospital in West Palm Beach. After spending two weeks in a psychiatric ward I was court-ordered to sixty days at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Palm Beach. Following rehab, I was booked a one-way ticket to Boston and checked into my current hospital's co-occurring disorder program that costs $850 per day.

By the time I started the program, I was sleeping regularly and no longer manic. However, according to my new doctors, the internal pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. And I was now, apparently, experiencing the depressive symptoms of my new schizoaffective diagnosis. They put me on a stronger antidepressant and added an antipsychotic medication to ensure the manic symptoms wouldn't return. And even though I had just spent the better part of three months in recovery, I was being treated as if it were day one of my inpatient journey. And that my new disorder was a life sentence.

I reply to my clinician and say "No, I'm not hearing any voices," which is in my mind true.

Being constantly surrounded by patients treated for serious psychiatric disorders has had a pernicious effect on my psyche. They say that hell is other people and I understand why. Most residents in the program are young adults who suffer from clinical mental illnesses they have struggled

with for many years. My diagnosis, though, was latent and only recently presented itself. My doctor at the Florida rehab said that my manic behavior was likely drug-induced from abusing prescription stimulants and lack of sleep. That diagnosis was immediately discarded by my current doctor.

As soon as I started my new meds, it immediately became difficult to think and express myself clearly. It is now almost impossible to carry a fluent conversation or even maintain eye contact. It feels like there is a barrier preventing me from connecting with other human beings. I never had this social anxiety before and have told my clinician on many occasions that I am speaking much slower than my brain is processing information. Because of this lack of verbosity, I am routinely criticized for not "participating in the program." Whenever I tell my psychiatrist the current meds are causing unbearable side effects or that I'm not experiencing any psychiatric symptoms, I am told the more I resist treatment, the longer I will be a resident. Sometimes I think it would be easier to relent and say that I am hearing voices if it means I would be discharged sooner.

"How about the medications? Do they feel like they're working?" she asks.

I am currently on several different psychiatric drugs, the strongest being Seroquel, an antipsychotic I take every night. However, I am also prescribed Wellbutrin for depression, Klonopin for anxiety and a small dose of Modafinil to counteract the sedative effect of the Seroquel.

I say, "I think it would help to go down a little on the Seroquel."

She eagerly nods and writes something down on her pad. This is another part of our daily song and dance. I picture her urgently bringing the note to my doctor and his immediately changing the dosage. But that never happens. Within the first few weeks of being admitted to the program, I learned these daily meetings were less to facilitate actual therapy than to create the illusion of personalized care. The hospital's website convinces susceptible family members that its Ivy league-trained doctors and list of famous past clientele will fix your son or daughter's mental illness within a 30 - 90-day period. However, I still hope every morning that my request for a change of meds will be approved. She finally wraps up the meeting at exactly 10:30am and wishes me a good lunch. Today is Friday though, which means they are serving cold cuts, my least favorite meal at the house.

Group therapy is the next activity on the schedule and doesn't start for another forty-five minutes so I head back to my room. I enter the bedroom and pass my roommate who is playing Call of Duty on his laptop. I don't think I have ever seen him at a group meeting or leave his desk. I even wondered at one point if he was in the same program as me.

I recline on my twin bed and prop myself against the shitty pillow provided by the hospital. I reach for my Surface Pro on the bedside table and re-open the previous episode of Gossip Girl. I watch the show because it's only 40 minutes long and the plot never becomes overly complicated. Plus, it's filmed in New York City which I greatly miss. Time slowly passes and I consider skipping group therapy. I call over to my roommate and ask if he is going to the meeting but I'm met with silence. This happens frequently and I never know if he is ignoring me. I ultimately decide that the misery of being around the other patients is more tolerable than the boredom inflicted by watching Netflix in my room.

I leave the oasis of my bed and shuffle over to where group meetings

are held. The meeting room is surrounded by windows that overlook the snow-covered side yard and adjacent fields. The program itself is misery incarnate but the surrounding northeastern landscape and red-brick architecture is actually very nice. There are gazebos and walking paths scattered throughout the premises and we are even allowed to walk into town. Probably because they know we have nowhere to escape to.

Everyone has gathered for the meeting and are sitting around either making small talk or staring at their iPhones. Today's group leader is a twenty-something social worker named Peter who has a perfectly edged bowl cut that sits right above his eyebrows and wears large, round-framed glasses. He drives a mini cooper with a British flag painted across the hood even though he is originally from Vermont. I especially like Peter because he never cares when I miss a meeting plus, we played Mario Kart before. He finally breaks the silence in the room.

"How is everyone feeling today?"

The question is met with an admixture of unintelligible grunts and "fine." Today's topic of discussion is how our antipsychotic drugs and mood stabilizers work. Peter explains to us in scientific terms that medications like mine, specifically, block dopamine from entering the brain to prevent any hallucinations or delusions. One of the patients asks why his Lithium causes him nausea every morning. Peter says that's a great question and proceeds to elaborate on the unpleasant side effects caused by the drug.

I'm always wary of trusting the advice of doctors and clinicians when it comes to these pharmaceutical remedies. They have never taken the meds themselves and have no idea what the side effects feel like. On paper, the pills seem like modern miracles of science. *10 – 15 mg of X drug every morning can reduce manic symptoms within a two-week period.* But what are they doing to your brain and body? What havoc are they wreaking internally? Is the goal to take them for the rest of your life? The drugs are marketed to help keep me out of inpatient programs like this one but it feels like I'm trading a physical prison for a mental one.

Once group therapy finally ends, I head back to my room to grab a sweater as the dining room is always cold. My roommate hasn't moved since I last saw him an hour ago and is still playing the same video game. I throw the hoodie on and head over to lunch. A line has already formed for the self-serve cold cuts table and everyone appears to be excited for the spread, but I can't muster the same enthusiasm. The food options at the house are limited and always unhealthy. I am constantly craving a salad or some fresh fruit. I head into the kitchen and peruse the fridge for anything good and find only a single tangerine. I resign myself back to the dining room and wait in line to make a sandwich.

My Mother's Play

By Katya Cengel

He arrives exactly on time. It unnerves me a bit. My uncle is driving an hour and half to reach me, yet he rings my doorbell not a few minutes early or a few minutes late, but at 4 p.m. on the dot. I have trouble understanding how he can be so precise when he is coming from almost 100 miles away.

I open the door to a man little changed from how he has looked for the last several decades. His hair is still dark brown and plastered to the sides of his face and forehead like a Beatles' haircut, without the volume. Never handsome, his large rather flat features have aged well, drawing attention away from his wrinkles. After we perform the obligatory cheek kisses, I hand him a can of grapefruit-tinged water and take a tangerine one for myself.

He looks at my can. "Can we switch?" he asks.

"Sure," I say.

I lead Uncle Karl to my small backyard. At the threshold of the sliding doors, it looks for a minute like he might break them as he squeezes through an opening made smaller by an inserted panel with a doggy door. I have forgotten how large he is, six foot seven and full bodied. Not fat, but substantial, even at 80.

It is hard for me to think of him as that old. He has always loomed so large in my life, physically and emotionally. He is a writer, like me. Or I am a writer, like him. From the very first time I picked up a pen in grade school and started writing stories I was compared to Uncle Karl.The idea that he might be diminished by age doesn't seem possible. Yet that is part of the reason he is here now, his age – and my mother's insistence.

I should be getting ready for a trip, but a few days ago my mother left me a voicemail saying Uncle Karl was in California visiting from his home in Paris and wanted to see me. I was flattered – Uncle Karl's Paris address and occupation as a writer make him a bit of a celebrity in the family. Still, I had a long list of things I needed to get done before I left. My mother must have anticipated my reluctance because she ended the message with a light spreading of guilt.

"I know you're busy. And I told him that. But it would be nice if you could fit him in," recorded mom said. "Who knows when he will next be here. Or how much longer he will be with us. Anyway, do try to call before you are off."

I called her then. I might be able to brush my uncle off, but not my mother. I meant to tell her I wasn't available. That she should tell her brother I was sorry, that I didn't have time. It wouldn't have been the first time we missed each other. In my forty plus years of existence I have seen Uncle Karl maybe a dozen times. And even then, the meetings have been short and far from intimate, usually informal reunions with various generations present. The last time he really saw me was at my grandmother's funeral more than a decade ago. We were all in the kitchen getting ready to drive to the service. I was using the glass of the microwave as a mirror to apply eye liner. When I glanced up Uncle Karl was looking at me.

"You look nice," he said.

I hung on to that.

After the funeral I thought I might be one of the lucky ones he acknowledged. But the moment passed. Now he is causing me to feel special again, making a separate trip to see me. Not any of my cousins, just me. I wonder if I am finally being admitted to his exclusive circle. I am surprised I still care. Maybe it is because of my mother. She puts such an effort into maintaining a relationship with her brother that I feel compelled to do the same. We both know there won't be many more

chances. While not sickly, Uncle Karl is rather careless with his life. Like me he has a genetic tendency to develop blood clots. I have had one. He has had several. According to my hematologist a second blood clot means a prescription for blood thinners and an end to contact sports. Uncle Karl still plays rugby.

He is wearing a purple rugby shirt when he arrives. Now he is overflowing one of my two yellow patio chairs. My mother bought the set for me. They are small and simple and seem perfect until I see my uncle seated across from me. I worry the chair might not survive his visit. He leans forward on what now seems a tiny glass table. A concert in the park across from us is just getting under way, the high-pitched screeches from sound check misfires punctuating the quiet of the afternoon.

"First, tell me about your health. What happened with your foot?" he says.

"They think it is some sort of tendonitis," I say.

"You won't want to do anything on that. I know a swimmer who had it and she couldn't swim...."

From the swimmer he goes straight into talking about his college days. He is here in part because of a college reunion. He is also participating in an oral history project. He makes it clear he did not want to take part in the project and only did so when he realized his perspective was necessary. I smile and nod and think back to one of my first childhood interactions with Uncle Karl. It was in the 1980s back when it seemed like everyone jogged in California. I was in grade school and staying with my grandparents in LA for the summer. Uncle Karl often came in the summer, visiting from Europe. If he wasn't there, my grandmother would be shopping for him, buying the long shirts and pants he couldn't find in France. Everyone in the family was tall, but Uncle Karl was the tallest. They didn't make clothes his size where he lived. That's why she shopped for him. She paid for his ticket when he visited because Uncle Karl was an academic with more important things on his mind than earning a living.

This was all before Uncle Karl married and had children, or had children and married, I'm not sure of the order. Back then Karl was the single uncle, the one who brought a different girlfriend to meet the family each summer, when everyone gathered for an unofficial family reunion. Everyone but my mom, that is. My mother, Karla, had to work. She is the youngest of the bunch. Lorraine comes first, then Karl, Tom and Karla. Karl and Karla are named after their father, Karl. They share more than just a name. Growing up, Lorraine had boyfriends and girlfriends, always friends, Tom had surfing, Karl and Karla had math.

"He was nice to me when we were kids," she tells me whenever the topic of her oldest brother comes up. She wonders now if he is on the autism spectrum. "That would explain a lot," she says.

I am less forgiving. I don't have much space left in my life for self-absorbed men. Uncle Karl reminds me of my father, my mother's ex-husband. I wonder if that is why she married my father, because his form of neglect was familiar to her. They divorced when I was in first grade and my sister Anikke was in third. An early divorce meant my mom had work while her siblings had careers.

Of the four of them, Karl was the most intriguing to us kids. He was an adult that didn't have any of the usual adult accompaniments: spouse, children, house, 9 to 5 job. My cousins and I decided the most opportune time to attract Uncle Karl's attention was in the morning when he went jogging. The rest of the day he was occupied, with what we were never sure, but connecting with him at any other time seemed risky. So, we tried to jog with him. It took all our courage to approach him. We clustered together, nudging each other as we collectively got out the words: "Can we jog with you?"

"It doesn't matter to me," said Uncle Karl. "If you can keep up, you can join me."

With that he was off. We followed after him in a little pack, close at first, but quickly falling behind his long strides. Sara, Erin and Anikke dropped out on the first block. Anikke was the oldest of the bunch and always in charge. The only thing I outshone her in was stubbornness, which came in handy on the jog. I made it a few blocks more, struggling to keep up with my uncle's long strides on my 8-year-old legs. I figured, soon he would slow down and wait for me like my aunt did the few times I had jogged with her. But Uncle Karl's pace stayed the same. He never looked back. By the time I gave up, Uncle Karl was far enough ahead that I risked getting lost if I didn't turn around. I realized that my uncle would not come looking for me if I failed to return.

Now he doesn't notice that I am again lost, left behind. He has a loud voice with the slight accent of a native English speaker who is used to speaking a language other than English. I try to listen to what he is saying.

"I was running nude across the roof of the college building, on my way to my girlfriend's place," he says.

He seems to be looking for me to be shocked. He must have forgotten I grew up in Berkeley, where nude people are not out of the ordinary.

"Then there was the case with the professor and a student. She was good looking..."

He keeps talking. There is no space between his stories for me to sneak in my own experiences. So, I go over my packing list in my head. I wonder why he has come. I had thought he wanted to spend time with me and learn about my life and work. Yet my presence has not factored into anything that has happened, other than switching the fizzy drinks, which I note he is not drinking.

As a child, I saw my Uncle Tom more often – but I don't really know him any better. Most of the time I spent at his house was under his wife Kathy's watch. Uncle Tom had a cameo in those visits, loading me and my cousins and sister into his car for occasional rides around town. He would leave us in the vehicle with the stereo blasting while he ran errands.

Tom was funny.

Karl was serious.

When I was goofing off my grandmother would say, "you remind me so much of Tom." When I sat hunched over a notebook, crafting a story she would say "you are just like Karl." I wondered why I was never compared to my mother or her sister. It was always Karl and Tom, as if the women didn't exist. At the time I wanted to be like Tom. Everyone liked Tom. He was better looking and better with people.

By the time I was in college, I was no longer sure I wanted to be like Uncle Tom. He was predictable. Karl was exotic even if he had "settled down" a bit. He had a wife and two sons. I didn't see them often, I was busy with college, followed by work. My mother always made a point of visiting her brother in Paris. But when Karl came to the U.S., he spent most of his time in Santa Barbara with Tom, and not in the Bay Area with my mother.

The one time I remember him coming to her house was for her 60 th birthday party. He gave her a book of historical *New York Times* headlines. My mother reads the *Wall Street Journal*. The speech he delivered when he presented the book was not about his sister but about journalism, a profession neither of them have ever held. Anikke and I shared our disappointment, wondering why our mother put up with Karl. That was when Anikke and I were still close, our lives on similar paths, our days determined by the same Eastern Time Zone. Anikke had a toddler daughter and plans to return to work as a doctor. I had a long-term boyfriend, a mortgage and a full-time job as a reporter a few states away from her. The split came around kid number three. Hers, not mine, I never had any. She no longer talked about returning to work. I was back on Pacific Time, working as a freelancer, living in a condo having ditched the boyfriend

and the mortgage (I had already abandoned a marriage). Our lives had diverged and neither of us seemed to know how to pull them back together. For a while I tried. But the silence between our words became too loud and the time between our talks too great. Then, three months after my last birthday, she sent me a belated birthday greeting and asked me to visit.

The thumping bass from the concert in the park across the street pulls me back. Uncle Karl doesn't seem to notice the noise, or the people who have perched themselves on lawn chairs atop the RV in the yard next to mine. They look down on us.

"I'm surprised you aren't up on your deck enjoying the tunes," they say.

Uncle Karl ignores them. People sitting on lawn chairs drinking beer are background noise to him. I don't have that liberty. Whether I like them or not they are my neighbors.

"We're not really into the music," I shout up at them.

Uncle Karl has exhausted his stories about college and his updates on his grown sons' work. While I didn't get to tell him much about my own work, I am still flattered he came to see me, making a three-hour round-trip drive. He must have seen something in me worthwhile. Still, he has left little time to talk about me, let alone my mother.

Then he mentions her, my mother, Karla.

"I heard the last time Karla was in Santa Barbara she was talking about politics, and Doug was so upset he walked out," he says. "Imagine mild mannered Doug walking out!"

Doug is my uncle by marriage, an English gentleman and retired physicist. My mother didn't mention politics when she spoke about the visit. Instead, she talked about how Doug and Lorraine were adjusting to their new retirement community. Lorraine loves crowds. Although she comes from a large family, my mother would rather see her siblings separately than at a party. Tom and Lorraine do things big. Karl follows their lead.

"When I was just in Stockton, Karla wanted to get together, I didn't want to," he says. "I told her that the traffic between where I was and where she was, would be bad."

I am not sure what he is trying to tell me. Earlier this week he had been near my mother yet had somehow managed to miss seeing her. I listen carefully to be sure I understand.

"I told her I didn't want to miss the picnic Tom was having in Santa Barbara and I needed to get on the road," he says. "Then she suggested I stop and see you and I thought 'oh good, that will work'."

Uncle Karl laughs, pleased with himself. There is a silence while he waits for me to respond. I wonder if he wants me to congratulate him for insulting my mother, while also admitting how little the visit with me means to him. It reminds me of the period right after my parents' divorce when they used to communicate through me.

"Tell your dad he needs to pay the dentist."

"Let your mom know I am still looking for work."

Uncle Karl is doing the same thing now. Except there is no divorce. No reason for him to avoid my mother. No reason to bring me into all of this. He is elderly, there isn't time enough left to avoid his sister and use his niece.

My Uncle's voice interrupts my thoughts. He pushes something toward me, something he has been keeping until the end. He opens the folder slowly. It is the first few transcribed pages of an interview he did with his father, my grandfather. My mother has repeatedly asked for a copy of the recordings, but Uncle Karl has insisted on keeping them to himself. He wants to transcribe them on his own and then share them when he is ready. My mother worries they will be lost. That he will never get to the transcribing, and she won't be able to hear her father's voice again.

For years Uncle Karl has done

nothing with them. Now it seems he is finally going to work on them. I look at the pages he has pushed toward me. They have been transcribed using an AI service. I recognize the style. He has not gone back in to identify speaker A and Speaker B.

"Who is speaking here?" I ask, pointing to Speaker A.

He doesn't tell me who the speaker is, just that he still needs to "clean up" the pages. There are several copies of the same few pages. I pull the copy in front of me a little closer. He pulls it away from me and tucks the papers back in the folder.

"Karla can't have these," he says.

I don't understand. Why has he shown me a few incompletely transcribed papers and then taken them from me, even though he has multiple copies? I wonder who those copies are for or if
they are just part of the illusion, part of the show. I don't know where to go from this. He does. He turns to his writing. He talks about collaborating. Helping each other in our writing projects. I ask if he can help me publish my third book, about a former French colony, in French. He cannot. The help, I then understand, would be one way.

There was a time I would have been thrilled to work with him. That time has passed. My phone dings. I glance at the text. My mom is asking me to take a picture with her brother.

"Mom wants a photo," I say.

"Ah that is great," says Uncle Karl. "And be sure to tell her what a nice visit we had, then it will all be good."

I stand next to my uncle and let him use one of his long arms to take the photo. We do the obligatory cheek kisses again and head toward the door. Before he walks out, he tells me to come visit him in France. He seems to mean it. A place to stay in Paris would be nice. But that is not what I am thinking about as I shut the door behind him. I am thinking about my sister. A woman who asked me to reschedule my wedding to fit her own timetable. A mother who sent back the animal shaped handmade backpacks I bought her daughters in Guatemala because she thought they smelled like gasoline. A relative who on her last trip to California didn't have time to see me. I don't want to visit my uncle. I want to visit my sister. Because I never really wanted to be like Uncle Karl or Uncle Tom, I wanted to be like Anikke.

Because no matter what she does there is always the memory of the hug in the backseat of my grandparents' car when I was nine. The teenager who taught me how to cuff my t-shirt sleeves like the popular girls. The young woman who couldn't let me go when she dropped me off at college. The mother who bought two of the exact same sweaters in different colors so she could give one to me. I want to see her because who I am was once based on who she was. She wasn't just nice to me when we were kids, she can still be nice to me if I stick to my role as her little sister. As the youngest it is my job to keep acting. My mother taught me that.

I shut the door and pick up my phone. I text my mother the photo. I write beneath it, "The visit went great".

Meditation on Love and Humility

By Mantas

In the time when I was a wild sprig, a certain parson would assure me that love is humility. Now in our age, a parson is seldom called to vocation, but if I did not trust the words of a parson, certainly the words of St. Paul I had to trust, and even when I had entered my most romantically vigorous years, when love could have become for me anything which roused a pleasant sensation, I believed that true love could only show itself by the lover who lowers himself before his loved object.

How can a two-sided love-relation proceed from humility? What remains of our couple, if their hearts are prostrate before one another? Does not being here turn infinitesimal, and is it not customary to derive from infinitude a contradictio ex absurdo? But this form of love is too abstract; it is lacking in the qualities with which it is, in fact, found in men and women. The self- subjugation in the fair sex is indeed such humility, smallness, her presentation as a helpless creature. It begins with a cry, wide, teary eyes, innocence, with real and true submission, submission not to power, not to force imposed on her, but to the helplessness of one's position.

The love of a man cannot proceed this way without admitting the forementioned contradiction. The love of a man, however, is still a form of submission. It is a surrender to the temptation, to the challenge, the call to action. If he is a knight, and thus not an aesthete and a seducer, he knows love only in the same form in which a parent loves the child, and precisely because of this the institution of marriage in greatest part means (or meant, prior to the Reformation) a transfer of the duty of love from the father to the husband. The father is called to love his child even if the child, as often happens, hates him, that is - even if the love is unrequited. The knight loves the princess because by his very nature he is incomplete unless he vows his body and spirit to protect and cherish the young maiden. Sure enough, for both the knight and the father the love, by circumstantial necessity, demands certain effeminate gestures - poems, little cakes, words of sweetness, but all of this is effeminate only outwardly; by virtue of the knight's most noble and dutiful character, they are all in service of his vow, that is - in service of his call to action. The poet is not complete without his tragic hero, which he worships and immortalizes in his verse. But neither is the knight complete in his nature, complete in his form and arche, unless he is sung about. The man and the woman are two halves that restore unity only together, and though a man's love is justified by his superior will, it is precisely because he is at once humbled by the girl and her decision to play the part of the distressed creature that the man partakes in love's humbling character. Herein lies the dialectical nature of love, whereby dominion must become submission, and submission dominion, to form the absolute union of the two incommensurable natures. Of course, few are knights and few are princesses, fewer yet are those who would ever admit themselves humble before another person. And for good reason! Love, my dear reader, takes courage. Doth not the Almighty LORD cast a curse and a blessing in the same breath? Truly, what is our sole call and hope for salvation must become the painful thorn which stubbornly resists surrender.

Who dares to trust that love is humility? What great anguish there is when a person is mistaken. When you take an occasion quite commonplace as a call to faith, an opportunity to overcome reason, to dispel all doubts

not by means of the rhetorical, but by the sheer hope that life must be sweet, when precisely what is impossible becomes a real foundation of action - there is enough pain in this conjuncture to fill the treasury of merit ten times over. To begin not with truth, but with hope and life, to begin with love and take it to its most extreme illogical conclusion, that is the movement of faith wherein lies the true totality of life's possibilities. Blessed is he who can make this movement and believe, who is met with distress and mere insanity at the thought of his conduct, but believes, by virtue of the absurd, believes only because life is sweeter when one believes! A man has no reason to reckon with the facts; he must only reckon with passion.

But what great anguish falls on him who is mistaken, who was called to believe and left wounded, who can only look back at his letters and see that behind the thick veil of his lover there was not a person who partook in this feeling and could only ever receive him as a stranger. For here lies the very essence of the question - that only someone who partakes in the passion can understand him. Only when the poet is in love can he write the most absurd verses and believe that in them there is truth. There is only truth to passion. What great terror to glance at those lyrics and find that you had been spun into madness by love, and how ridiculous it must have been to read them as a cold, unfamiliar observer. And yet this is the ground of all life, this is where the great man, the hero, the titan began. What is it for him to be mistaken, if he is a titan? It cannot lead him into despair. But that no greater pain than it exists is not something I wish to dispute. It's known to all thinking beings that a man's duty to himself is to become who he is. That is a task for a lifetime. Of course, even the most primitive creature can see what merits it has, and these will decide what path it takes. And yet much is left undetermined in this world. Much is sitting on the horizon, much is beckoning to you. What great anguish when it dawns on a man that he is not who he thought he was.

I ask - how is unrequited love possible? How can a man love a girl, but she not love him? And what is the method for resolving this question? An answer: "but here is a perfectly sensible case, here is the *instantia* - the girl does not have the passion, she does not understand the man. His submission to her she meets with disgust. She cannot imagine life with him. Perhaps the man falls short of her ideals, which are doubtless numerous." Indeed, there is no question that she does not have the passion, and without it, who could even read Keats and not feel at least a little disgusted? The lover is, really, a louse – life with him would be impossible. This is granted. I do not even doubt that the girl has already imagined her ideal savior. But there is no answer in this tirade of embarrassment and humiliation. All of it echoes the conclusion to be shown - that the girl hath not love for him. Does love consist in a concept? Does it consist in a rough image of divinity, maybe in its shameful imitation? I know not love this way; if this is indeed love, then I have never known it and I do not wish to know it. It is easy to speak of the ideal, of the rules for a concept, for all this conceals a very basic form of language, but in which there is nothing explained. For a time, I knew a girl who had not met my ideal, but it was worse than this - it was the very core of her subjectivity that she would *offend* the Ideal. She would become the anti-Ideal so as to bring all higher being to naught, so impudent was this girl! She wished to be loved solely because she failed in a most hopeless and ungainly struggle to become someone good, she would be loved because not to love her would be an affront to love itself and to its very essence, the idea of charity. And to let one tear escape her precious dark eyes would have been the seal to bring a judgment on you most apocalyptic, dear reader, most wrathful and unforgiving. To love is to give to him who does not have it,

who by virtue of his powers and worth *cannot* have it. For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? For it is by God that we have received our fill, that is, by His extreme sorrow, which is moved with our inertia, our meager will, our pitiful ambitions - it is powerlessness that moves God. Blessed are they who weep, for it is they to whom love is owed. Believe me, dear reader, when I say that this girl I truly loved.

Do you know that in Heaven the angels weep for us, but they do not blame? Have too, like a certain insolent young maiden, felt that only punishment, only a scourge of hatred and dejection could flay the blights of sin? At the height of her despair, she could not accept that I would forgive her *everything*. And this perhaps you will not believe but let it be said that *I* do believe it, that unrequited love does not exist, and it is only because of cruelty that one would respond to love with cold and vicious disgust, only when love's boundless goblet is spilled by hands of profane trepidation is the beloved spared from passion.



Part (yies) - 4

Patrick McEvoy, Olivia Pelaez

Barbacking For Poppi

By Justin McDevitt

I raced upstairs to the second floor of The Duplex, five or six minutes before the Friday night shift change, in a mad scramble. I had only started a few weeks before. With a bucket of ice in my arms I nudged through the crowd to get around the side of the bar, past the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* poster situated to the right of the air conditioner that looked like a refrigerator, and that I used to believe was an ice machine, back when I was just a customer. In nine years I never got over the fact that there wasn't an ice machine on the second floor.

But this was 2013, so I carried my bucket and made my apologies to the happy hour queens who did not like to budge. I maneuvered behind Matthew, the early bartender, who, because he was nearing the last three minutes of his shift, was taking this crucial time to do shots down the bar with all of his regulars, individually. Matthew was a legend in the piano bar world, and worked down the street at Rose's Turn, until it closed in 2007. Despite living in New Jersey, his tan and leather skin suggested he commuted to his shifts from Boca Raton. Behind it all, behind the years of heavy drinking, he was still a twink at heart, and everybody loved him. I loved him too, I just wanted him to get out of the way so I could pour ice in the bin before:

"Matthew!" she yelled.

She gestured to her left wrist and the thick leather bracelet that stood in for a watch, what she would later tell me was her Top Bracelet.

"I still have two minutes," he said.

A bartender standoff in progress. The shift change happened at 9 pm and there were two schools of thought about how this shift change should be handled. The happy hour bartender believed that he would work until 9 pm and then the night bartender would take over a few minutes after. But the night bartender believed their shift started at nine and the happy hour bartender should be all closed out by 8:58. In the history of civilization, this problem would never be addressed or resolved.

I turned to greet the woman at the end of the bar although I suspected I knew who she was from her voice. The voice: velvet and fire, acerbic but kind, like a slightly lethal hug.

"I'm Poppi," she said.

"Uh, hi I'm Justin."

"You're with me tonight."

"That's right."

"Are you fast?"

"Uh…"

"You better be fast."

"I'm fast!"

"We'll see."

Then she raced past me to kick Matthew off of her shift.

She was filling in for the normal Friday bartender, a man famous for wearing leather kilts behind the bar. When I first started at The Duplex I didn't even know leather kilts were a thing. I was so happy to live in a world with leather kilts. I was also used to that bartender, and nervous to work with Poppi.

I knew who she was and I was a little terrified of her.

She had dark brown hair and a galaxy sized wardrobe of black clothing. The only time she wore color was at a Mets game, her favorite team. Poppi's most common work uniform: black knee-high socks, black booty shorts, black t-shirts (sometimes with The Duplex logo, sometimes not), a black bandana, and a flimsy black vest that transformed into a cape as she raced from one end of the bar to the other. I learned to run behind the upstairs bar of the Duplex because that's what Poppi did, because her mad dash from customer to customer was how she always had the highest sales, a competitive lesbian hellbent on crushing all the gay boys who ever

had aspirations of out-ringing her.

The bandana in her hair was one of my first images of her, burned in my mind, not from meeting her, but from watching her on television back home in Massachusetts, back before New York existed for me. And it was the bandana that was her trademark; or, in her death, the bandana was what symbolized her life. We all had one.

As Matthew shuffled past me in defeat, carrying a wad of wet bills in a dusty old canister, I watched as Poppi set up her station: the way she angrily moved the stapler and the little cup where we stored credit cards for open tabs. Then I noticed she pulled out some lipstick — shouted, "I'll be right with you, baby!" — applied said lipstick, then dropped it in the little cup. She did that every shift I ever saw.

Later on I would copy her and do the same, but with chapstick.

She pointed at me then she pointed to the glasses situated in slats above my head.

"Start pulling those down," she said.

Before I could even fully look at her quizzically she said, "I can't reach them! Pull them down."

She was already too busy for my confusion. I pulled down the highball glasses and lined them up along the bar.

"Flip them over," she said, "so I know they're clean."

"Okay, okay."

And before I had time to reach for more, she had already used the highball glasses.

"I thought you said you were fast," she said.

I pulled down more highballs, working out a system where I'd pull them down in groups of ten, then organize them to the left of her fruit tray, for easy access. I was never allowed to shut her fruit tray, either, even though that was a health code violation.

"It wastes time," she explained.

Then she pointed to the ice bin.

"This has to be full at all times," she said.

I stared at the full ice bin and then stared back at her.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

The ice bin had to be completely full because she was so lazy she didn't want to bend down too far in order to scoop the ice. That is, unless there wasn't a barback on duty, in which case she would wait until she was down to a single cube of ice before trudging down to the basement for more.

She listed her peculiarities as if they were the basics of Barbacking 101. I would have taken notes only I thought to pull out my moleskin notebook in the busy bar would send her into a rage. So instead I tried to memorize everything she told me, my eyes wide and blue and curious. Her lips curled into a slight smile, taking me in, but she wasn't ready to give me a full laugh yet. Everything was a test.

I learned right away that she could carry on multiple conversations at once, and that for the next seven hours we would inch our way towards a twenty minute conversation, divided in scenes.

I knew she was a talking head on this VH1 reality show from the mid-2000s called *40 Hottest Hotties of the 90s*. I wasn't sure when to tell her so I just blurted it out right then and she was happy to be recognized.

"I just got asked to be in a gay porn," she told me. "It pays $5,000."

"That's great."

She shook her head, amused.

"No one wants to see me showing up with the pizza. I know every gay man in New York City. I don't want to ruin porn for them."

Poppi was a contestant on the third season of *The Biggest Loser*. She was sent home on the first episode then came back for the finale, minus one hundred seventeen pounds, and won the At Home Competition. She won $50,000.

"And after taxes all I could buy was this t-shirt," she said.

That line was still part of her standup routine in 2018 when she died at the age of forty-six.

"What about you?" she looked me up and down. "Are you an actor?"

"Uh, no, I'm…"

I fumbled. I stalled. I took too long.

"Well?"

"I'm a playwright."

"Are you good?"

"I don't know."

Poppi-displeased-exhale.

Poppi was a Tasmanian devil behind that bar, a one-woman show, and I loved watching her. The bar would be busy because people wanted to see her. They wanted to be where she was, to occupy space with her, even if they didn't know her well, even if they were encountering her for the first time. I would start to say it was Poppi's bar, and we were merely her guests, orbiting around her in obliteration, because it never felt like she was working at a job, never felt like she was serving customers. Back then I knew she was the star. She was the fastest bartender at The Duplex, a place she worked since 1997.

"Were you even born yet?" she asked. "No. Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

At the top of the shift she played "Big Pimpin'" by Jay Z and soon I would come to realize that it was the song she began all her shifts with. I couldn't listen to it without thinking of her. She didn't make a playlist for the shift, instead she would start with that song then put her entire iPod on shuffle, and angrily skip the songs she didn't like with audible groans of frustration in between making drinks.

I was nervous going behind the bar so I snuck around her, trying to operate undetected as I cleared empties, took out the trash, and wiped down the bar which was regularly coated in vodka and sweat. After she crashed into me for the third time, Poppi demanded I touch her if passing behind.

"I don't like touching people," I said.

Her response was simple: eye roll, scoff.

We devised a system where I lightly touched her upper back with only my index finger, as if I was playing a heated game of Jenga. It seemed to work for us.

At the end of the night:

"You're actually cool," she said.

"Thanks," I said.

"You're not a spy."

"Uh… what?"

"Everyone thinks you're a spy. They think the new manager hired you to report on them."

"Is that why no one wants to be my friend?"

"I'm going to tell them you're not a spy."

I didn't see her for a few weeks after that, but I noticed my coworkers started talking to me, and even a few of her friends visited my happy hour shifts.

Everyone knew Poppi.

Book Review of Sam Locrian's $20,000 Under the Sea

$20,000 Under the Sea by **Sam Locrian** is a mix of thrill and fantasy. The author has authentically created four characters who are distinctly different from each other, but are connected unexpectedly on a cruise.

The plot revolves around the central character of Carol Jones uff Charlotte Glossington Clarke, a British aristocrat in the US with a mission. The story flows through Carol's eyes as she meets other three individuals unexpectedly during a poker game on a cruise and they end up in a mission where it's no longer about Carol's quest, but a question on the identity of each one of them.

Coming to the other three important characters who end up with Carol, first is *Beau Pierre*, a complete vagabond, who knows the underhand technique in betting. He is on the cruise to understand what's the real mission of the poker game that's played in the cruise. His curiosity makes him poke his head here and there why a rich man needs $20,000 from a poker game.

Second is *Bennet Fontaine*, who gets a chance in both the cruise and poker game because of an accident. Bennet is the most confused among the lot, he feels unsure of being on the cruise, game or the mission, but is forced to tag along with the rest.

Last but not least, *Lamont Sterling,* who is dealing with his own trauma of being in the war, irrespective of being called America's best Aviator.

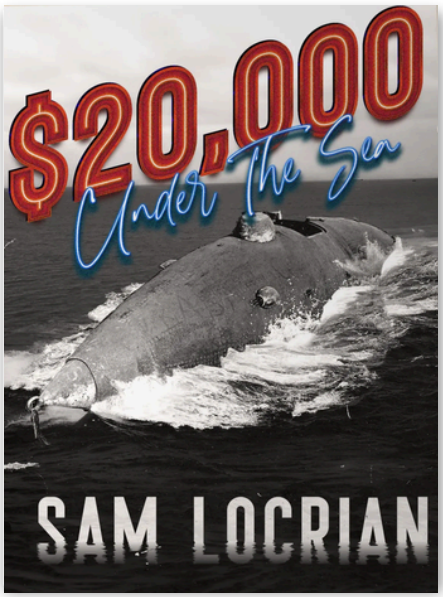
The author has succeeded in creating a perfect atmosphere for all four of them to come together and then chase answers to the questions thrown to them during the cruise.



Time period of the story is set in 1920 and the book captures the social life of those times in the US.

The author has introduced the fantasy element in the storyline through the classified papers of "Project Fallenstar" that searches for aliens in human form and how the four protoganist try to grapple with the truth bombs mentioned in that report. The book deals with the relationship dynamics that develops between the four protoganist from reluctant partners to grudging admirers and finally crisis partners during the mission.

Most importantly it deals with how Carol and Lamont come together as trusting partners and how that relationship blooms into something beautiful emerging from the tragedies of the past. Overall a good read for all lovers of fantasy thrillers.



About Book:

Four misfits board an ocean liner in April of 1920, preoccupied with their own misgivings and agendas, only to discover that they have wandered into the center of a worldwide conspiracy. Fleeing from government agents and an eldritch messiah, they are flung on a journey reaching from the bottom of the sea to the Panama Canal, all while grappling not only with the plots in which they are now entangled, but also with a jarring revelation: They are not the selves they thought they were.

Title: $20,000 Under the Sea

Author: Sam Locrain

Publication Date: 4 July 2025

Language: English

Page Count: 253 Pages

Price : E-Book: ₹429.00, Paperback: ₹1883.00

Purchase link: **Click Here**

About the Author:

Sam Locrian is the author of Three and Two and Two and the short story collection Promises for a Worse Tomorrow. He lives in the United States, somewhere between New York and California, and enjoys games, food, and philosophy.
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Srijil Choudhury is a fourteen year old grade nine student based in Navi Mumbai, Maharahstra, India, who is a published poet of the hindi langauge in the Amar Ujala newsletter and is also an academic writer.

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Mary Tina Shamli Pillay is an abstract artist and writer based in India. Her art, poems, and fiction have featured on BBC Radio, Kitaab, The Mean Journal, Blink-Ink, Borderless Journal, The Chakkar, Madras Courier, The Pine Cone Review, The Literary Times Magazine, The Punch Magazine, Shooter Magazine, Ink In Thirds, Artist Talk magazine, The Hemlock Journal, The Penn Review, Chestnut Review, Inscape Journal, and Another Chicago Magazine among others.

John Muro

A resident of Connecticut and a lover of all things chocolate, John Muro has authored two volumes of poems — In the Lilac Hour and Pastoral Suite — in 2020 and 2022, respectively. A third volume, A Bountiful Silence & Other Poems, will be published this fall. Since the publication of his first book, John has been thrice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, twice nominated for the Best of the Net and he has received several awards of his merit for his work, including a 2023 Grantchester Award. John's work has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies.

Cassey Abella

Cassey Abella is a Filipino writer and creative based in Graz. Her works often delve into her experiences with human connections and migration. She is currently studying English and American Studies at the University of Graz. Cassey has read her works at events hosted by LYSL Kollektiv and Tint Journal.

Aishani Sen

Aishani Sen is a poet and literature graduate from Presidency University, Kolkata. Her poetry explores memory, loss, and urban isolation, often blending personal and political themes. Influenced by postcolonial literature and cinematic imagery, her work has appeared in university magazines and anthologies. She writes to make sense of disjointed realities.

Basil Payne

Basil Payne (they/them) is a queer poet-artist living in Logan, Utah. Their work can be found in Sugar House Review, Sink Hollow, Oyster River Pages, Sheepshead Review, Progenitor, The Southern Quill, and occasionally Utah State University's Projects Gallery.

A. J. Moss

A.J. Moss (They/She) is a 29-year-old queer parent and writer of novels and poetry. After spending the past couple of years wrangling toddlers, they are dipping their toes back into the worlds of myth, magic and imagination through storytelling. They currently blog on their substack "Writing From The Seed" (https://abigaileckstine.substack.com)

Kenneth Nichols

Kenneth Nichols teaches creative writing and composition at SUNY Oswego. He is the author of Things That Annoy Me: Poems (Volume 1 of 6,437).

August Ryan

August Ryan lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and whistles while depositing half-drunk coffee cups around the home he shares with his partner. The cats watch on with interest. You may find his work in the engine(idling, Oakwood Magazine, and The Wayne Literary Review, among others.

Isaiah Janisch

Isaiah Janisch is a writer from Evansville, WI. He holds a bachelor's degree in English from UW-Whitewater and has been published in literary journals, like The Muse and The Hemlock. He also edited for the Rock River Review. Janisch founded @plaza.of.poetry on Instagram to explore liminality through poetry.

Z. S. Sorensen

Zach is previously unpublished. He studied creative writing at the University of Florida and Western Washington University, where he received his BA in writing. He currently lives in Bellingham, Washington, where he works as an English tutor, writes general poetry and speculation fiction, and slowly but surely works the submission grind.

Danyielle Reevers

Danyielle Reevers is an indie author from Columbia, SC. She articulates her work through personal experience to reach her viewers. Her work has been refined through receiving her BA is Psychology and currently working towards her MA in English/Creative Writing. The reflection of Danyielle's work is created through freedom of expression, connection, and creating a safe space for her readers.

Kasturika De

Kasturika De, a writer who writes to heal and feel the pain that words inflict. She comes close to fantasy only to redirect herself to reality. A bong writer from Bengal, India

trying to navigate through the complexities of mind in search of creative answers.

Natalie Schreyer

Natalie Schreyer is a poet in Washington, D.C.

Ajeeti S

Ajeeti S is an emerging poet who weaves human emotion with strong social themes. A banker by profession, she expresses her creativity through heartfelt English poems that connect deeply with readers. Her work has earned recognition in national poetry contests and features in acclaimed anthologies and literary magazines worldwide. Ajeeti is steadily making her mark in contemporary literature, inspiring readers with her authentic voice and impactful messages.

Jeena R. Papaadi

Jeena R. Papaadi is the author of six published books in English including novels, short stories and poetry. Her articles and stories have appeared in several distinguished publications including The Hindu, Borderless Journal, Kitaab, European Association of Palliative Care and Aksharasthree. Jeena's writing can be found at: https://linktr.ee/jeenapapaadi

FICTION

S.M. Adams

S.M. Adams is a lover of yarn, words, and whimsy. When not writing, she enjoys knitting, reading, cooking, and walking in thunderstorms.

Mark Brazaitis

Mark Brazaitis is the author of nine books, including The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, The Incurables: Stories, winner of the 2012 Richard Sullivan Prize and the 2013 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Prose, and the novel American Seasons.

Avery Troester

Avery Troester is a writer and teacher in Iowa.

Marco Etheridge

Marco Etheridge is a writer, occasional playwright, and part-time poet. He writes in Vienna, Austria. His work has appeared in one hundred and fifty reviews across Canada, Australia, Europe, the UK, and the USA. He is an editor for Hotch Potch Literature and Art. Website: https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/

Nicholas Claro

Nicholas Claro holds an MFA in Fiction from Wichita State University. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and appears/forthcoming in JMWW, Midway Journal, Louisiana Literature, Necessary Fiction, XRAY, Write or Die Magazine, and others. His debut collection This Is Where You Are is forthcoming from Roadside Press.

Zeph

Zeph (they/them) is one of the many trans-youth who has no idea what is going on and who feels trapped no matter where they go.

J. Lee

J. Lee's work has appeared in the South China Morning Post, the HK Fringe Festival and the RavensPerch magazine. He was most recently awarded 4th Place in the 2025 Writer's Digest Personal Essay Contest.

Shrutidhora P Mohor

Shrutidhora P Mohor (born 1979, India) has been listed in several competitions like Bristol Short Story Prize, Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, the Bath Flash Fiction Award, the Retreat West competitions, the Retreat West Annual Prize for short story 2022, the Winter 2022 Reflex Fiction competition, Flash 500. Her writings have been nominated for Best Micro fictions 2023 and the Pushcart Prize 2024. A collection of short stories titled A Moon-Measure of All Things (Alien Buddha Press, February 2025) is her latest publication.

Kaitlyn Downing

Kaitlyn Downing—part fairy, part mermaid, and part cat—spends most of her time in her pool or her garden in Florida with her four cats when she's not teaching English. Her work has appeared in 34 Orchard, Inkstains, Sinfully Twisted and Offerings for the Green Man.

Abe Margel

Abe Margel worked in rehabilitation and mental health for thirty years. He is the father of two adult children and lives in Thornhill, Ontario with his wife. His fiction has appeared in Yellow Mama, BarBar, Freedom Fiction, Spadina Literary Review, Mystery Tribune, Ariel Chart, Uppagus, etc.

Robert Boucheron

Robert Boucheron is an architect in Charlottesville, Virginia. His stories, essays, book reviews, poems, and translations have appeared in Alabama Literary Review, Bellingham Review, Fiction International, Literary Heist, and Saturday Evening Post.

Amita Basu

Amita Basu's fiction appears in 85+ venues including The Penn Review, Bamboo Ridge, Faultline, Jelly Bucket, Phoebe, and Funicular. Her debut, At Play and Other Stories, is

due out with Bridge House Press in 2025. She's won the Letter Review Prize and Kelp's Shelter in Place contest, and been shortlisted by the Coppice Prize and contests at Phoebe and Five Minute Lit. http://amitabasu.com/

Lee Cheeseman

Lee Cheeseman is a writer from Long Island, New York currently studying creative writing and English at Bryn Mawr College. Their fiction and poetry have previously been published in Nimbus, Bryn Mawr's literary and art magazine, while their nonfiction work has appeared in Advocate.

Trai Mitchell

Trai Mitchell is a political scientist and author of the self-published novel "The Blue Daisy." He seeks to shape works with strong themes and relatable yet bizarre premises. Trai also strives to synthesise his art with the humanist, cosmopolitan, and dialectical worldview he has obtained through living in five different countries.

Beth Bosworth

Beth Bosworth is the author of three books of fiction, including The Source of Life and Other Stories (University of Pittsburgh Press, Drue Heinz Literature Prize).

Margaret Devane

Born in the U.S., Margaret currently lives in Bolzano, Italy, where they run a wine bar. They worked as a professional French-English translator for ten years until the invention of ChatGPT. They have lived in Ireland, France, Greece, Argentina, and Portugal and have never applied to an MFA program.

FLASH FICTION

EJ Hyndman

EJ Hyndman is a writer and veil poi artist from the UK. After a decade with CFS/ME and chronic pain, she's now in recovery, exploring the world and writing stories shaped by resilience and invisibility. She loves circus arts, movement and storytelling in all its forms. Her work has appeared in FLARE magazine.

Courtney Weaver

Courtney Weaver is a writer living in San Francisco

Urmi Chakravorty

Urmi is an award-winning freelance writer-reviewer living in Bangalore. She has been published by The Hindu, The Times of India, Outlook Traveller, Deccan Herald, and over forty-five literary magazines and anthologies in India, USA, UK and Canada. A

passionate traveller, Urmi is a lover of psithurism, petrichor, ginger tea, and everything in between. Her other interests include music, photography, and spending time with her community dogs.

Salvatore Difalco

Salvatore Difalco lives in Toronto Canada.

Hashmi-al-Haseeb Faisal

Hashmi-al-Haseeb Faisal is a Pakistani poet and multidisciplinary artist of Arab-Persian descent, born and raised in Multan — a city renowned for its Sufi heritage. He writes in both English and Urdu and is known for his signature style that blends archaic diction and classical imagery with contemporary poetic themes. A graduate in Human Nutrition and Dietetics from Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, he has won multiple national literary competitions. His creative work spans poetry, prose, acting, music and dance, reflecting a deep passion for artistic expression across genres.

NON-FICTION

Sarah Harley

Sarah Harley is originally from the UK. She works at Milwaukee High School of the Arts where she helps refugee students to tell their own stories. Her essays have appeared in West Trade Review, Glassworks Magazine, Mud Season Review, and elsewhere. You can read more of her work here: sarahharley888.com.

Nick Farina

Nick Farina is a nonfiction author originally from Palm Beach, FL. He recently completed the 2025 Writers in New York program at NYU and is currently applying to graduate programs for next fall. He enjoys traveling, reading and writing.

Katya Cengel

Katya Cengel has published short stories and essays in The Louisville Review, Literary Hub, and The Rumpus. Her features have been published in New York Times Magazine, Smithsonian Magazine and Atavist Magazine. Cengel is the author of four books, including Eric Hoffer Academic Press Winner From Chernobyl with Love.

Mantas

Lithuanian philosophy major. Christian devout, to the point of fanaticism. Amateur guitarist.

Justin McDevitt

Justin McDevitt is a writer from New York City. His plays 'Haunt Me' and 'Honey Fitz' have been presented Off Broadway for readings and workshop productions. His writing has appeared in Rue Morgue, Fangoria, and the Cobalt Review. Stream his six-part monologue series SEVERED HEADS on Youtube. @justinwritesplays

VISUAL ARTS

Resoun B Acharya

Resoun B Acharya is a tutor, author and illustrator. He usually illustrates and paints for his books.

Patrick McEvoy

Patrick McEvoy has had illustrated stories appear inQuarter(ly) Magazine and Best of Penumbric Vol. 6, among others. In addition, short plays he wrote were chosen to be performed at various festivals in NYC. Photography has also been exhibited with Kelp Journal, Artistonish, HMVC, and literary journals.

Ashley Paige Dryden

Ashley Paige Dryden is a photographer and writer who is into nature photography, toy photography, game design, and writing.

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Cover Design: Divynak J.

Editing and Formatting: Shazia Parveen, Aditi Kaur

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