

LIVINA PRESS

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

Edited by Laci Felker

Masthead
Laci Felker | Founder | Editor-in-Chief

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*"If you can dream without limits, you can soar
to great heights. Let the magic of your
imagination set you free."*

— Kerri Maniscalco

Editor's Note



One of the most wonderful things about your imagination, is you can create anything. It can be a story, a piece of art, a whole new idea for what a character might look like...the possibilities are endless. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to write. It didn't matter what I wrote about, all I knew was that I wanted a pen in my hand. It wasn't until about a year and a half ago that I began submitting to literary magazines, finally taking the chance to put everything I had learned during the years of studying for my English degree to use. I was rejected 75% of the time, but there were a few acceptances that I still hold near and dear to my heart. But I found that a lot of places had themes that I didn't know how to write for. So, a few months ago came the idea for Livina Press—a way for people to tell the stories that they wanted to write

In this issue,

you will find the stories that have poured out of people's hearts and meet the characters that have taken on a life outside of the author's mind. There are poems that grip your heart and hold it, refusing to give it back, and there are stories that will follow you into your dreams. In this issue, you will find the things that every author wanted to write about. Livina Press was created around the sole purpose of letting people write what they wanted to write, and that is what you will see.

Welcome to Issue 1 of Livina Press. Remember to keep your mind open and your heart ready.

Laci Felker
Editor-in-Chief

CONTENTS

Editor's Note.....	1
Poetry.....	5
Fiction.....	72
Art.....	191
Creative Non-Fiction.....	197
Author Biographies.....	238

P
O
E
T
R
Y



Recursive

Rebecca Dempsey

I kept your letters. Folded maps of your growth
over years. In return, I was a poor letter writer.
Ungenerous as a pen pal. My life, short
catalogues of books read, and events
that didn't happen. We stopped writing.
Well, I stopped first. It seems likely.
We lost each other. But I imagine
your life, rich with meaning and value.
Full to brimming; decisions made
dreams fulfilled, recorded in
your regular handwriting, elegant,
ink pressed into thick lined paper,
firmly, no hesitation. Lines up and
down, no curls, but constant.
Different to my scrawl: half print, half cursive.
Writing permanently hurried yet
undecided, on a lean to liminal.
Unlike the certain strokes of your pen,
the steady hand of your destiny.
My hand always wavered.



I do not miss the spring

Christina Bagni



Reprint: First published in Lit. 202, Issue One

I do not miss the spring
I do not miss the gently blooming flower, nose dusted with nectar, soft petals gently pressing
on either side of my smile.

I do not miss the sweet scent of new life, the warmth of the sun, the bacchanalian revelry, the
lemonade passing my lips.

I do not miss those three months when the sun shined on me and me alone
When you brushed my face and for a moment I could believe

I was your equinox
As you were mine.

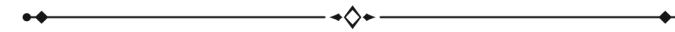
But the solstice was always stronger.
And the summer and fall seduced you.

But I do not miss the spring,
As it coils within me, still.



MOUNTAIN

Regine Ebner



this half-light of mountain
in the shade of tall leaves
a bell tower of wind and chime

the evening's lodestar
takes in the full breadth of land

shepherds us north
sure of step and night
a sanguine mother ship

mountain

we sit at your bluffs
and hear the summons
of the bells

and play the sunsets of your
homesick centuries



FEASTS

Regine Ebner



half-notes and gold dust
gild the flight of morning and
dapple the waking brush

rabbits munch on marigolds
and wink

quail rush by
with large families
catching trains

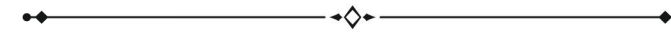
scented arrows take aim
hoping for ricochets
and ballet

weightless
while courting destiny
and

stealing thunder

GOLD

Regine Ebner



it is

it is

a heraldry of spring

birds court trees
and call us away from sad winters
mountains bury wagons and grief

we paint leaves in gold now
and ask them for light
goliath suns ponder tyranny

you bring moths
wrapped in honey velvet
with tiny blue ornaments

I sing anthems



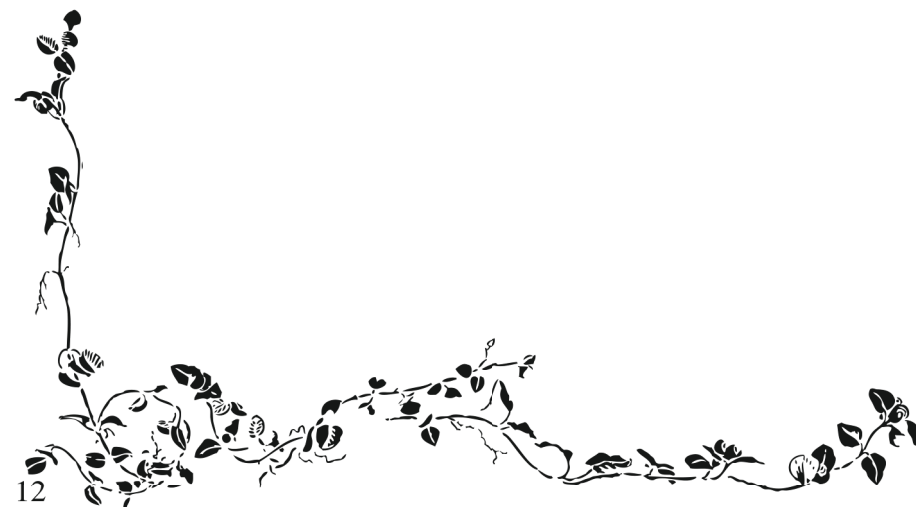
Useless Art

Phrieda Bogere

working against a deadline
the pressure moves in waves,
the sheets are never warm enough
to sleep peacefully throughout the night.

i subconsciously think about
the pieces in progress,
rearranging words,
being too honest,
still ashamed to be
in the thick of it.

reacting violently,
i lock myself inside,
humming to stay calm.
i've thought about throwing
away the papers at least
three times.
but instead, i hide them
in folders, pretending
that they don't exist.



Opacities

Olalekan Hussein

There are lots of burning words to tell my wife
but something intersects my mind every night

and fire explodes in the bottom of my tongue when I plan to pour it out like rain that forms a body
and permeates into a local room.

Believe me, it's a concord of heart obeying heart to rummage the miracles of God.

When I say I'm the light that parades in my mother's eyes, believe me, it's a litotes for a murdered
term _

in which I mean I'm her fragile mirror that must not get broken like a brittle egg.

This is a portrait of a boy at twenty learning and unlearning the geographies of life.

Anytime a sigh escapes me like smokes from the mouth of a cigarette, everything in our room sighs,
too.

Including my brother's photograph who studies in an elementary school.

Father says: home is a physician that holds the remedies for our maladies,

& at the same time, it's a symbol for things left unwanted - like my world which is a map of suffering
individuals.

What I knew in the beginning was: a man who falls from a tree & dies is killed by what he loves
most.

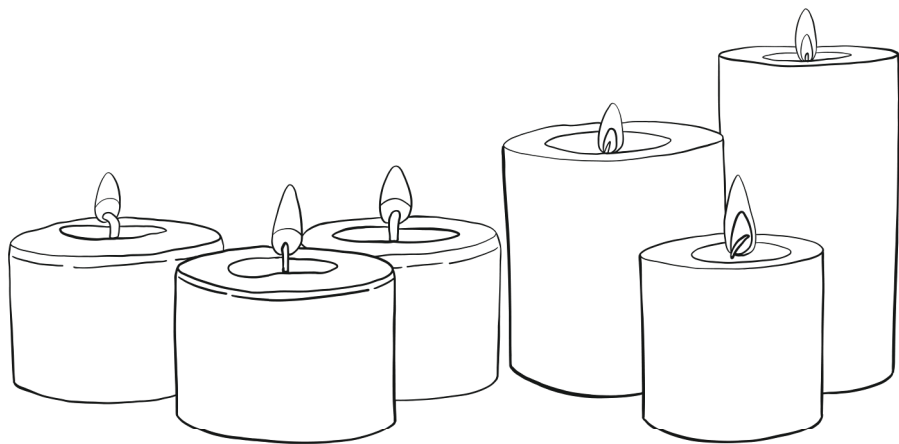
Me, too, I've been walking and walking this place like an astronaut,
and I guess I will be accompanied by what I desire most.

a blasphemous poem on holiness

Natalya Kostula



they say i am unholy. i say nothing, because i know they do not understand that what i felt for you on that day in late winter, harmony, safety, that feeling of *i may never see you again, but you know what, you are here now, and you are beautiful* is far holier than they are.



i feel the earth move under my feet

Natalya Kostula



and it does not take me with it. i try desperately to hold on to it, but it does not let me. i plead, but to no avail, it cruelly slips away, leaving me to fall deeper and deeper into the void that remains. i am alone there.

you are(n't) there

Natalya Kostula



you are there. i am leaning against you, your arm around me. we are holding hands. you tell me, in your soothing voice that can calm any storm in my brain, that i am beautiful. that you love me. i tell you that i love you too. we look into each other's eyes and our lips brush against each other so softly and it's beautiful like you like us like me then you fade. and i am just a girl crying, leaning against the wall, and clutching her own hand.



The Redstart's Plea for Dark Sky

Meg Smith



Heaven's flight pattern must mark both ways.
No song sings without true night.
A city floods its sky with day, and day again – stars never show, and sleep never comes.
Wings waver, and fall – and feathers scatter – tears for an Earth of electric, unceasing eyes.

Lime Quarry Reservation

Meg Smith



In the pressing of gray clouds,
the forest has become my friend.
Snow has interred the leaves and stones,
and moss glimmers through shifts of ice.
We've sighed in gentle arguments, and
trails have given way to shadow-houses
fading into thinning trees.
When I reach the lip of the bright brook,
a song breathes within me, and rises,
to a self-made sky.

The Song of Shadows

Meg Smith



I whisper your name to the night wind,
scouring the streets, rippling the canals –
on the brick walls, light dances around
the dark cast of everything living.
Nothing and no one sleeps.
A yellow light flashes. Cobblestones rattle.
How your name blurs the loneliest call.



The One

Lori Cramer



I’m the girl your boyfriend refuses to talk about, the girl in the photo he keeps hidden in his bottom desk drawer underneath his 2019 tax returns. I’m the reason he doesn’t wear that Red Sox hat anymore, the reason he bristles when you call him Baby. I’m the girl who got him to grow a beard, who taught him to make bruschetta, who convinced him to quit that dead-end job. I’m the one he loved first, the one he’ll never be able to forget no matter how many years pass. I’m the girl you can never be.

Backstop

Lori Cramer



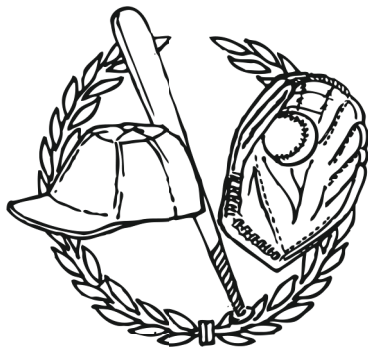
He crouches in the dirt, flashing fingers at the lanky lad standing sixty feet, six inches away. Beneath a hard-plastic helmet, his sun-soaked curls send streams of salt down his well-weathered neck, saturating his pin-striped jersey. Ready for action, he pounds his fist against his oversized mitt. Game on.

Enveloped

Lori Cramer



Like a well-worn glove cradling a brand-new baseball, you enveloped me in unconditional acceptance, providing me with the encouragement I needed to take flight.



my first baby boy

Krista Sanford



in the spring of my junior year of college, i was a mom for a week.
my parents had temporary custody of my cousin, nic,
and i came back home to help them out. at that time,
my mother was working two jobs, and my father’s pain heightened with every move he took.

so my week of spring break,
instead of heading to the beach like other college students,
i packed my bags and drove back home to the chicago suburbs.
and nic became mine.
at least for that week.

he was only sixteen months; chubby legs and crazy blond hair.
he went everywhere with me: my old high school, to drop something off to my sister.
the post office. doctor’s appointments.
i held him while i cooked us mac ‘n cheese. sat him on the couch and let him watch *friends*.
even sat him in my lap and read him *david copperfield*, which he must’ve enjoyed because he sat
through it, listening intently.

we laughed, we cried, we danced. it was the two of us, together,
while my mother worked and my father healed.
maybe that was the moment i really knew i wanted kids.
i found that connection in nic and i couldn’t imagine living without it again.
if i could’ve, i would have packed nic in my suitcase and brought him back to ball state.
he could’ve lived in the blue house i shared with three other girls.
we would’ve made room.



opening peaches

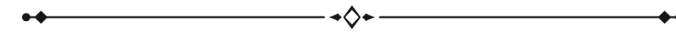
Krista Sanford



from the size of the scar on my thumb
and how the two ends almost come together
in a circle, i would say i came pretty close
to cutting the tip of my finger off.
adam and alex,
looking over from the living room,
didn't know what to do.
i stuck my thumb under the facet,
dying dirty dishes red until
the water turned clear again.
i wrapped it in a paper towel,
so tight the towel kept sticking to the cut,
making it bleed again each time i checked
to make sure it had stopped.
i thought about going to the hospital,
but with no insurance – in the middle of a
pandemic—
it wasn't worth it. but i probably should have.
instead i wrapped my thumb in three bandaids
and let it heal.

We're Not Jody

Karen Walker



Eve calls.

“Where are you?”

She worries a lot —

“Dad gave us the car?”

— for a little girl.

Took a lawyer to get the junker from him.

Can hear Jody's mom. Posh. Pissy. “Should I drive Eve home?”

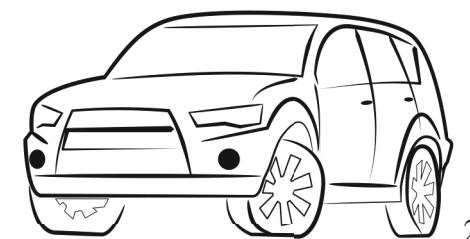
We'll get by on one tank a month —

“Or is she staying for dinner?”

— on pasta, soup.

But Eve's hoping for dessert: rich dance classes, sweet ballet shoes like Jody's.

The engine and I will sputter as she cries on the way home.



In Retrospect, Again

Jason Theriault



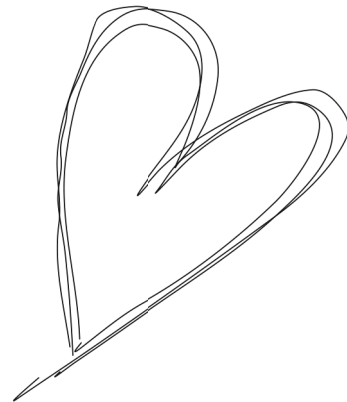
Your silhouette wore
A beacon in the brume
Pairing your sister's coat:
Enduring bloodblack
With the delicate last of your voice

Spellbound in velvet ice
Careen, beckon. Throats hot from the kettle.

Anatomical fire, your
White, innermost death
I loved and later found
You. Feathering lash
In the mouth of morning.

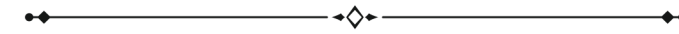
The seasons are still
So slow and earnest

Teeming dearly
Beyond an enveloping mist – how bittersweet.
You hold me: an invitation
I hold you, tethering memory
And time together in
Impermanent evanescence.



Longing

Ila Railkar



I do not know how many times
I turned my pockets inside out
In the snow white lanes of Chicago
To unlock my home in Bombay

I conversed in flawless English
And smiled at the praise they showered
Yet pressed beneath the grammar books
In Marathi lay unsent letters

I learned to love the taste of Italian beef
And raise a toast with Chardonnay
But could not hide a blissful moan
'Round a mouthful of homemade pickle

I got used to the punctual trains
Without the overwhelming crowds
And sometimes glanced at empty seats in surprise
When I wondered at the utter quiet

And when the photos weren't enough
For a moment in my cigarette smoke
I breathed in the sultry scent of my land
Before it ebbed away in the cold

Frater

Clive Uche



There were good days,
When we would drink and play together,
When we would argue about football,
About music, about women.

There were good days,
When we ate and slept together,
When we shared a zoot together,
When we shared our birthdays together.

There were bad days,
When we cursed and fought each other,
When we slapped and punched each other,
When we hated everything about each other.
But you are my Frater.

I have been sworn to protect you,
To defend you and always have your back,
To always love and support you,
Irrespective of the choices you make.

I have always believed in you,
That you will make me proud,
That you will rise above your peers,
That you will shine above all others.
You are my Frater.



Temporal Lobe on the Road to Damascus

CA Russegger



When the clouds tremble open, I know I have been here before—*temporal* as in the two electric altars weeping at opposite sides of my skull, *temporal* as in the time of our flesh, unfurling in hours, decaying over years.
Temporal as in transient, the cracking of the sky revealing sun. The light pouring in between my ribs, the dirt road ossifying beneath my feet. I make a temple out of the sunlight. There is something flickering. A voice echoes, my muscles shell-shocked: *Why do you persecute me?* Here I am, collapsing around myself. Fire scintillates over shattered Earth. Persecute from Latin *persequor*.
—I describe.
—I imitate.
—I follow, persevering. In the frenzy of flesh, my left side numb, my head clears and my vision melts into white. And still I walk farther and farther. The fire. Here is the light again, and here is the flame. A heat rolling around my head, a burned glass marble from temple to temple. How is the sky still cracking? The voice has fallen away but my chest remembers the sound of heaven’s glass crumbling, shards of the bone road crushed underneath my steps.
Sweat flashing across my forehead like a cross. How am I still walking? Here is the light again. The clouds tremble open. I have been here before and I will be here again. Two altars in my skull, firing shots in the dark. Everything all at once. *Altar*, as in Latin *adolere*: to burn. In the midst of the bright misfiring, the flesh convulses. Everything more vivid and everything invisible, my eyes fading into the scorching voice from shattered clouds. Shattered ground. Again. I hear the echo. *Why do you persecute me?* Again.

Captain Ahab

CA Russegger

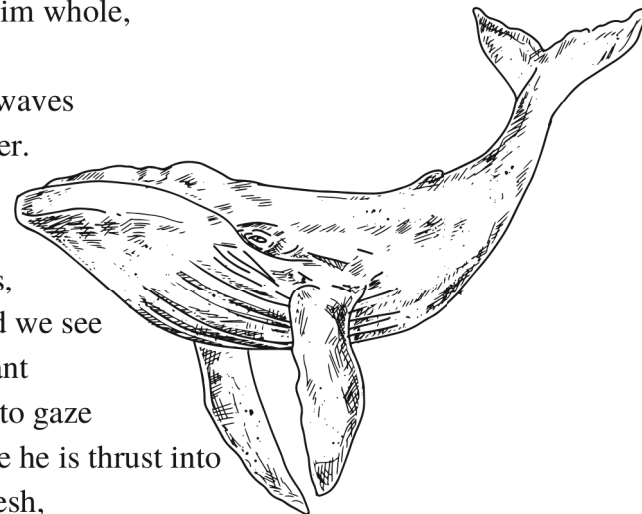


A grand, ungodly, god-like man—

Deep scars of thunder cracks etched on his face,
leaving it seething and branded. A blighted leg
lopped off, caught in the maw of a whale. Sharp
teeth marred by thick blood.

His leg is a false prosthetic, made of cold steel. Some
say this elegant device marks him as a villain.
The author of the myth mutilates his evil children. Readers
cannot know this wicked man is wicked unless they see
the pathological maiming, the gash across his face. Legend
tells us the whale has swallowed his leg but refuses
to address his scar. *Possessed by every angel fallen from heaven—*
him or the whale, slashing through a sea that takes no prisoners
and heeds no saints. Before the water can swallow him whole,
his passion burns him alive. We see him tangled
in his own harpoon's line, dragged along the brutal waves
with his own steel leg as a millstone taking him under.

We see the grand whale dive, slashing the stillness
and turn his presence into a gorge sinking into chaos,
the ship's captain drowned in the mouth of Hell: and we see
the catharsis, the echo he left behind. We aren't meant
to do more than devour his savagery. We are meant to gaze
deep into whale-chasing blood and glory. Every time he is thrust into
the bitter trench, the riptide of his own massacred flesh,
we know it is Hell on the sea. The price he paid for his sin.



Sometimes we see the shadow of Ahab, standing on his own
Pequod, Messianic ship fashioned by a distant saviour. If
this fiery dart cannot be quenched, then we will scoop
damnation as sand out of the ocean. He says: *What I've willed,*
I'll do. Sometimes we see saltwater welling up at in between
skin and metal on his leg. *I will dismember my dismemberer.*
We see monomania—ambition with unholy cause. And
sometimes we see him look out over slowly-calming waters,

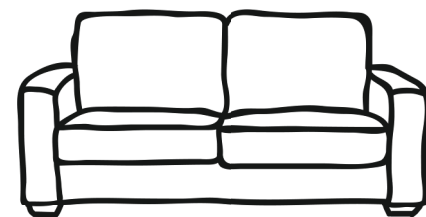
the whale blurring out of view. His scar shifting against
light, steel leg steady on the wooden deck. And for once,
we see not a monster marching on troubled seas, but
a man at home on his ship.

Criticising Freud's Interior Design Choices

CA Russegger



What a hideous couch. Okay, I'm standing here. You're sitting here, and your patient is supine on the couch, so you linger like the mind's landlord out of sight. Dangle the unconscious' debt over an unsuspecting disaster of a man, hoard a million anxieties in your maw. As if you could kill man's most primal fear—whatever bizarre thing you think it is now. Maybe everyone's afraid of your damn couch. Parts that should be compartmentalised keep bleeding into each other. Red crashing into blue at bizarre angles, like a river turning to blood. Add brown and gold and thrust them all into kaleidoscopes, thousands of swirls crammed into the fabric, broken by a stream of off-white. Barely there, cast deeper by your hypnotic light. That's not a metaphor: I'm saying your lamp needs to go, too. Get a dimmer bulb so people don't just see heaven when they lie down on this terrible couch and spill all their repressed emotions to some old guy who thinks he knows what every human's mind looks like. What, an iceberg? Theee divisions of the mind? At least the mind is cleanly divided, unlike your couch's overlapping, oversaturated embroidery. The thread is seething in black patterns like little cockroaches speckling the space. As if this couch were rotting, gathering dust in an abandoned mansion. Are you going to use a mansion as a metaphor for the human's anxiety-plagued mind, too? Please don't. You even have this tapestry hanging over the couch, literally of the same colour and pattern. The pattern is dizzying. Also—nobody needs five pillows on the same couch. Would it kill you to go for simpler shades? Less maximalist design? The couch and the carpet are the same colours. And patterns. From tapestry to carpet, I'm looking at the same terracotta-tinged fabric. Repetitive chaos—scratchy



textures. What kind of sad, sad man would be comfortable lying down on this thing for a whole hour? What is plaguing you? The fact that your couch is making me break out in a violence of hives. Your leaky white ceiling tinged with brown water stains. Liquid dripping. I have a massive headache. Attempting to navigate where whitish tassels, blunt like teeth, melt into the creaking wooden floor. The room is imploding in all this unabashed colour. It'll collapse into itself. The roof will crash down on everyone inside. The colour red will splatter you and your patient, and everyone in the room will burst into tears. Dramatic, isn't it? All because of this inhumane monstrosity of a couch? Fine. Let me know when you've redecorated.

Waiting on hold for two hours

Cat Dixon

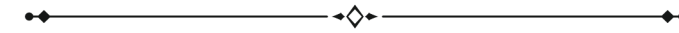


The music amps up the suspense and the hero fails at last.
Isn't that how the story goes? Anti-heroes are in vogue.
Nothing's lonelier than an isolated villain in a cave, but
all that matters is the story, the finished product, the payday
bounced on by bill collectors who put you on hold to listen to
Elton John's *Tiny Dancer* who I imagine is a ballerina with
a powder-puff tutu that's so heavy she collapses in tulip of tulle
(red and white striped like a candy cane) puddle on the dancefloor.



I wish the world were like a seminar where I could write well enough to make you love me.

Becca Frankel



This pain will not pour out of me as previous ones have done.
Perhaps I've lost my abilities as a vessel,
Can no longer spill the many multitudes that I contain.
Or it could be that I have kept you too long inside of me to let you out now.
An eidolon imprisoned in my nunnish heart.
The secret sacral "you" in every song I listened to,
that warm pre-sleep image: my bare shoulder, a forearm roped, your slender back.
I could parse a perfect participle with more ease than I could say I loved you
Love you. No past tense, not yet. I can't bear it.

When we met you were a blonde magic boy, fresh off a nervous attack
And I was nineteen, in love with the impossible, starving sick and ancient inside
Pages of datives running rampant down my spine.
Odysseus burnt out Polyphemus' eyes
Calchas interpreted bird signs.
That shrimpy half-ginger mustache did nothing for you
And I hardly noticed when it got shaved off.

We decide that Science Fiction is the new Greek Tragedy
On an April phone call in the plague-midst.
I am your disembodied vocality, shrill and soft-stomached.
I go robotic when you tell me about the new girl you took for coffee.
Synapses snap and ache and fracture.
An alien love has taken up residency in my chest
And I rupture where it ends.
Hippolytus lies broken on his chariot
And Artemis goes it alone.

I started smoking cigarettes to quell all sorts of pangs
Inhaling packs equivalent just to get near you.
Oedipus stabbed his sight out with Jocasta's pins
While I watched you read.
I used to have better Greek handwriting than you, but I kept with it longer.
Familiarity leads to mess.
I leaned into your lighter after class and you said
"This is how I pick up girls."

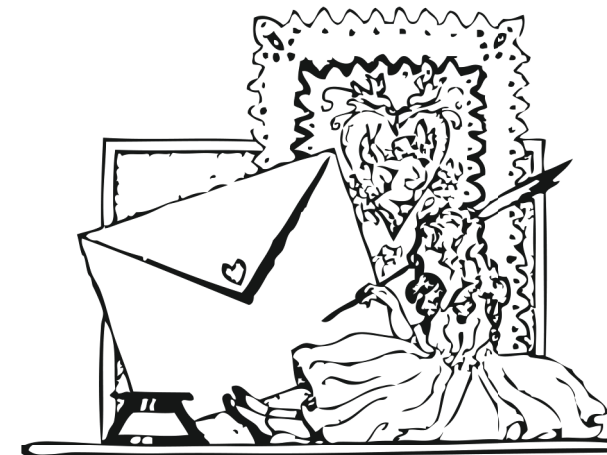
You say that elenchus is like sex and I feel the clenching hush inside
That means I'm fucked.
Akhmatova was once called "Half-nun, Half-harlot" and I wear that as my new moniker.
I stay celibate like Christ depends on it, you have sex like its a mitzvah;
I count up twenty-three on the heirloom abacus.
We swap faiths and I pray unpracticed.
Divining you takes up all my time at night.

Back then, everyone thought we were together.
Seven hour days in the library and you brought me coffee.
I was your work wife, you slammed down six-packs.
All our friends were on ketamine. We were both otherwise entangled.
We screamed Plato at each other in our cohort of four;
Ablative of struggles had over the Bacchae.
I left for England in turmoil and came back a classicist.
You moved east and said you "selfishly wished I was there."

I go out to your dive-bar and wait 'round back for thirty minutes.
It's the first warm Boston night in many months.
You hold me when you see me, I am trying to get used to your easy touches.
I still buy you books as if you'll read them. *Possession* has stayed on your shelf untouched
Despite all that I wanted it to explain.
You have so many friends, we are never alone. Your roommate spills a full pitcher of beer on my blouse.
I dressed for you tonight. I painted my nails. I curled my hair.
Matching all over, as if you ever could care.
A new fling rocks up to our booth, I share a chaste kiss with your colleague
When we all go back to yours. Nothing helps.
I drink too much but its never enough and I tell you that
I've been in love with you for years.

I crumple on the fence. I don't say half of what I ought.
Your pity cuts deeper than I'll ever let you know,
And I take the Uber back to Waltham alone.

June and you were on the moon.
Almost April once again, you're making moves on another continent.
I should call you, but I won't. I shouldn't want you, but I do.
In your *roman a clef*, I am the "classics girl with
The biblical name." In mine, you succeed golden Alexander,
Flying high atop your elephants.



Renouncement

A.R. Salandy

We mourn forgotten moments
Surrendered to youthful arrogance
Where minutes were an infinity
That could never be conquered
And years were hopeful occasions
Before aged pessimism crept in
And gave urgency to action.

But time takes hostages
Never prisoners.
For the ultimate sacrifice
All must endure
When escaping this transient world;
The relinquishment of earthly enchantment.

Dusk

A.R. Salandy

Shades of dusk
Nourish concealed embers
Burning below anointed skin
Where pulsing blood

Electrifies delicate veins
That awaken to rousing breaths;
Warm lashings that find their way
To tender ears

That hear warped drivels
But submit all the same.

For tumescent risings
Must have bitter realisations

That leave blackened eyes
Darting into an abyss of confusion;
Hurried departures into pouring rain,
Where fulfilment has replaced commitment

And vigorous rendezvous' are rendered
Nightly exercises in lacking satisfaction.



I'm rereading Wilfred Owen

Annie Cowell

News of war snipes at us
from tv, radio, social media
images whistling past like bullets
as we tune in and scroll down
so much *exposure* –
we donate, collect, protest, pray
knowing that it's not enough.
I re read Wilfred Owen
read the spaces between his words
knowing that if words cannot win wars
what is the point
imagine there are poets warring now
battling to decide which truths they should reveal
a new 'Anthem for the Doomed Youth', perhaps?
Will they speak of one small man
his finger poised in threat
or will they write of young men returning,
discarding ballet shoes and tennis rackets,
following their leading actor, unrehearsed, onto the stage.
Or of mothers making molotov cocktails,
women offering handfuls of sunflower seeds
whilst their children grow in darkness underground -
A nation forced by another's madness into believing
Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori

Halloween in June

Adele Evershed

Walking out
like Laurie Lee
one midsummer mourning
dryness breaks under my flip-flops
sounding the air with cracking—
like my breast bone
pulled apart

wanting to believe
I make a wish
and there—a whiff of magic
a shell—
a pumpkin head
carved with eyes
yet without a mouth

sepia squashed
studded
with worry warts
the face of a woman
(or maybe a witch)
who has seen too much
yet learnt nothing at all

she could be
Peter's wife
the one from that nursery rhyme
the wife he couldn't keep
and to think
I once wondered
why she didn't just keep running

I kick it over
a head
without his face
and hide
the jagged space
the one that's calling out to me
to just stay kept



The Ghosts that Made a Home

Okwy Ada

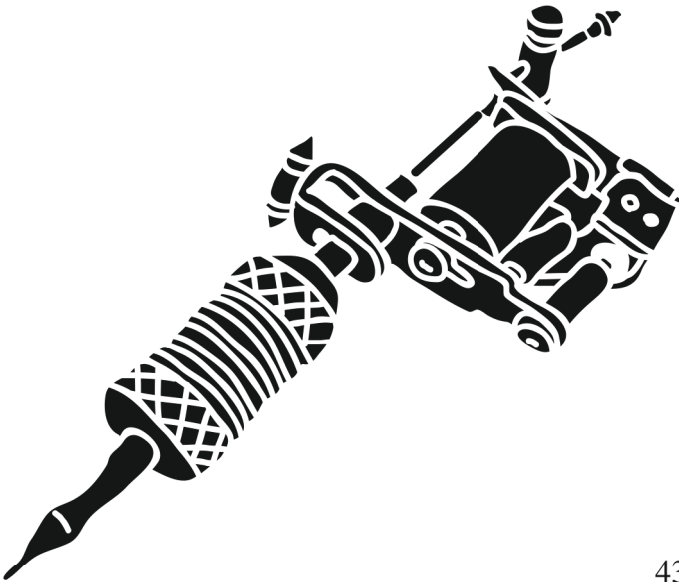
You have that look
Of a man haunted
By ghosts.
Fighting to keep
A middle ground.
But these ghosts
You try to keep under
Wraps,
Do you not think
You should exorcize?
My father kept ghosts
You see,
And often he looked away
Thinking he hid them well
In bottles,
In words aplenty
And atimes a few
In an onslaught of cruelty...
He lives alone now.
A home
Shared with ghosts
He chose.
Haunted? I know not.
Is life more beautiful

When ghosts live free?
There are shadows
Behind your eyes
Make your words heavy
Where they oughta be light
Light where they oughta be
Weighted.
Exorcize these ghosts
I couldn't live with my father
And his ghosts.
I will not live with yours

Tattoo You

Abigael Leigh

They say never put
a bumper sticker
on a Corvette, but
that's not me. I'm an
old Cadillac with
a hundred coats of
paint baking under
the West Texas sun:
the shell of what used
to run, now resigned
for Beauty itself.



Bananas

Marc Isaac Potter



... a young girl walks slowly across the dirty red sand of this forgotten beach ...

She is supposed to meet a boy here, a boy for whom she has feelings,
a boy who professes having feelings for her as well.

Minutes pass, and then more minutes pass by.
Cockatoos chatter in their tropically odd way –
there is no telling what they have to say ...

A breeze rises across the water,
coming onto the beach
to lift a few of the lighter pieces of garbage from the sand:

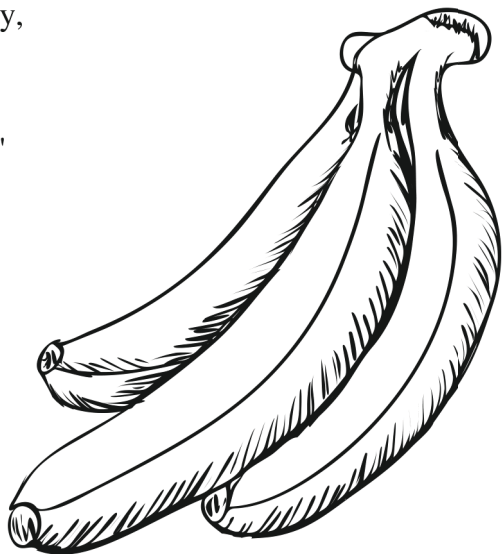
for example:tissues, and
a man's stylish handkerchief,
such as you would see in the breast pocket of an evening jacket.

This makes her think of prom night:

"Will he also stand me up on prom night?" she thinks ...
having watched her father, as many times as eternity,
look lovingly in her mother's eyes and say

"I'm sorry My Dearest, it will never happen again."

The girl glances at the bananas on the trees:
some are green,
some are greenish yellow,
some are yellow-ripe.



Centipede

Marc Isaac Potter



.... a centipede is arguing furiously about his speeding ticket, having carefully forgotten about the
"rolling stop" he committed two stop signs back ...

but no one is fooled, neither the officer: a tall blonde woman with a weathered face, nor her young
trainee, a kid so green he still remembers what they had for lunch at the Academy on Thursdays ..

Sometimes there is very little room for expansive compassion, and thus – in an act of "tough love"
she throws the book at him.

Unfortunately, this book – the California Vehicle Code,
being inordinately heavy,

slips,

squashing the centipede into a paper-thin paste, ...

a paste for which no one has yet to find a resourceful use

Snakes and Horses

Marc Isaac Potter



... sawing through the long snake of bread ... a thin small knife entirely inadequate ...

I see the tiny serrated teeth doing their very best ...
My cutting board is *Beyond Thinking* by Zen Master Dogen ...

Who knows the extent of my unspeakability? ... Stumbling as I did ...

...

Mr. Ed, the Horse, of course, is standing in his stable ...

The prop man comes in and puts peanut butter in his mouth ...

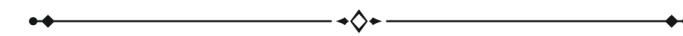
... and Mr. Ed – in a vain attempt to extricate the goo from the roof of his mouth,

does just what the manipulators want him to do,

he appears to be speaking,

Brontophobia (*fear of thunder*)

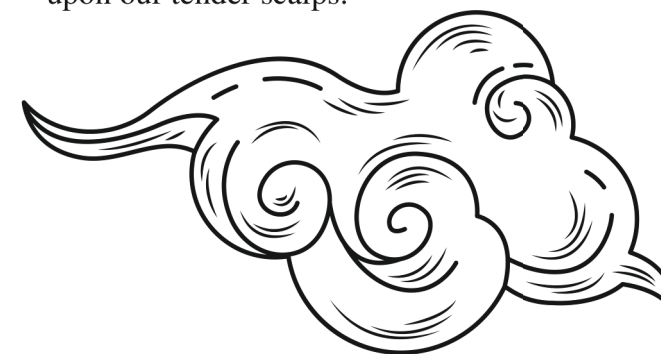
Mukund Gnanadesikan



I crave the quiet, rebuke this noise:
Sonic omens of destruction,
Please leave me in my bunker,
eyes willed shut
but ears unplugged,
open to bombastic warnings.

For now, only sabers rattle.
But one day, it may be detonation
of incendiaries,
That prefaces a frantic screaming.
Do not ask why
I fear the rumble miles away.

Though now they may mean nothing,
those hooves percussing distant dirt
will soon bring down
the wrath of Zeus,
a final blow to rabid men
upon our tender scalps.



In the ICU

Mukund Gnanadesikan



After Ezra Pound’s “Chi E Questa [Who Is She?]”

Would she have me kneel before her, bend
backward, contort myself to prove my honor?
I, paternal troubadour, sing songs, plant kisses upon her,
seeking nothing more than a nightmare’s end.

In the beginning, there is no conception of an end
for the child may just as well be proof, of divinity,
of all potential bounty that exists to be
cultivated, ripened, fed by a robust heart.

But at the last, there is nothing more than grace
No explanation for the girl’s, departure, wrought
by rogue vascular weakness without a name,
that brought us to this sterile, urgent place
where monitors beep without a thought,
unarticulated love grows weeds of shame.

It's the Little Things

Candice Kelsey

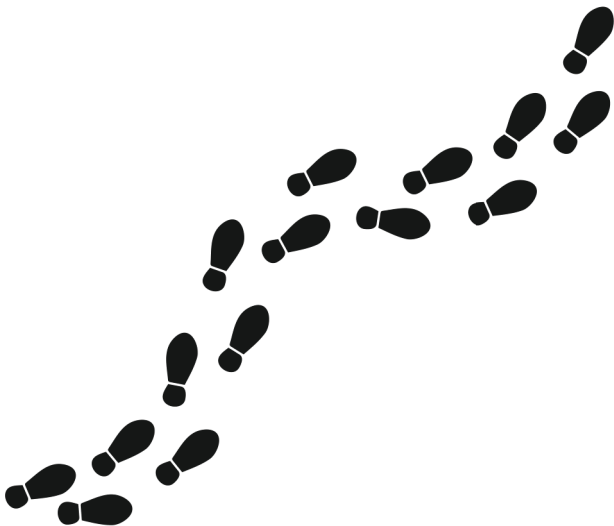


Sometimes it takes an unexpected *Walk* at a busy intersection,
or even a three-dollar pack of avocado rolls
to feel like things are going her way.

Sometimes just the manager's discount at Jiffy Lube,
or a jeweler changing her watch battery
free of charge for the second time in ten days.

Sometimes it’s what she’s walking toward,
or maybe whom she’s walking from—
in her linen skirt stained with wasabi and responsibility.

At the end of the day, when her eight-year-old says she wants a parrot, she smiles.
Things are okay. Until her daughter explains
she wants the bird because at least it will talk to her.



Aftertaste

Olowonjoyin Muhammed Sanni

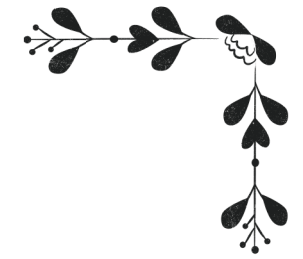
i wear an opium of emotions, and this poem,
written from neverness, holds an eclipse of me,
and missiles cascading, before boys pick shrapnel
of themselves. a lover said: *hold me like you held
the bodies of your brothers in palestine, & how
tomorrow holds silence*, so I shoved my heart into
earth's throat, before love snailed into a vacuum
/

this poem is not a catharsis of
disheveled flowers
adorning the sullen
hideaways of men, say this poem holds a lamp
across hills of cloud-cuckoos before men got
stonewalled by their dreams &, before
darkness burrowed a home in their ribcages.
/
say a drupe of time held itself to a branch &
sang hallelujah to God's face before fading from
reach, into the hungry soil, before shapeshifting
into anthills of tears sprouting like the pain time
couldn't fade, before it says: *embrace darkness
and the aftertaste of your dreams' funeral.*



Valentine's Day

Adam Chabot



Mrs. Lemay rolls an Expo between
her doughy fingers, her bespectacled
eyes watch each carnation exchange
hands. She's a veteran; she's seen
this played out before. Extroverted
seventh graders bulldoze into her room,
one of them pushes an industrial cart
on which skinny green buckets filled
with flowers slosh and flutter with
each movement. Some of the flowers
are dead, but there's no time for that.
A name is called, a delivery is made,
a carnal, vicious, torch-passing that
has obliterated Mrs. Lemay's lesson.
Today, her pupils will experience the
tongue-taste the verisimilitude of rejection,
collect their flowers like trophies and sink
into themselves under the weight of some
unmet expectation. Class ends before
the rite of passage is complete but
it's nonetheless over. "If you didn't
get one, check the front office!" someone
hollers as students scurry out like rats
in a bright light. For as much as she cares,
for the many years she's spent with students
in this exact, vulnerable moment, she
doesn't look any of her kids in the eyes,
instead, in her empty classroom, Mrs. Lemay
packs her things, the carnation she purchased
for herself dangles limply with each of
her steps, and for a moment, she thinks
of throwing it away, but chooses
otherwise: it'll be better tomorrow.

The Trouble With Water

Ace Boggess



How it seeps through baseboards of a wall
one studies the other side of
to pinpoint no new examples, leaks,
rain from the ceiling where pipes would be.

Maybe something lower, unseemly—
that is, unseen. The house
has a hole in it, somewhere near the center,
a hell-gate open as demons fly through

in ratios of hydrogen & oxygen.
The house requires an exorcism.
I'd call a priest, but the carpet's wet.
I wouldn't want to soak his dainty slippers.

I'm on my own, drowning made a slow-
paced tragi-comedy like in dreams
of falling from a ship: one never breaks
the surface of a nameless killing sea.



Letter: Re: The State of Things

Ace Boggess



1.

To those who've failed to pay on time,
or pay at all,
the work finished, worries
still an exit away from forgetting—
I resent you for your kindness
to yourself, your windfall
at my expense.
When I needed money, it was spent
before my hand caressed it.
If & when. If & not.
I threw bones as best I could.
I was never lucky, seldom good.

2.

Everyone's running a con on someone.
Dollars, drugs, power, flesh.
Some slip in & out before you know it.
Some draw a river in the maze.
Which side of the fly rod are you on?

Weather Advisory

Ace Boggess



After three winters of warmest air,
flowers blooming in February,
insects bloated to the size of birds,

we have had enough of snow this year,
& cold, the need for gloves & knitted cap,
a constant fear of roads, the roads

under foot & tire collapsing
with sounds of cookies snapped in halves.
We want no more

of the bitterness, the biting,
the blossoming breath—
white roses sans perfume.

We reject nightly serenity of painted earth
in yellow light. No more peace—
our hearts were never in it.

Resonance

Frank William Finney



Last breath of light
in a gloomy room:

a sudden glimpse of
my daughter's smile.

Small Town Witch

Frank William Finney



Mother said the place
was cursed.

The lights went out.
The pipes had burst.

We found a rat
in Chuckie’s room.

Dad chased it outdoors
with a besom broom.

I asked my mother
if the witch was pretty:

It was shortly thereafter
we moved to the city.



Camber

Tom Farr



The indigo sky darkens.
Scarred by the spine
of a plane. Every atom
of me is too heavy.
It’s too much. Facing
the sea. Slow. Heaving.
Silence
ravelling
around me;
the sun a smashedglass
tropic
being swallowed
with industrious
ease by the darkening,
star-corbelled
night.



Breaking Through

Hameedah Aruwa

My hands used to be riddled with
 holes the size of broken ego

Once, I picked the garments of my tears with these
hands & watched them
burn my palm

I wondered if the earth felt the same way, whenever it rained—
 if her skin burned, like mine did

My tongue became a warehouse of bruises, from
eons of waging battles with the syllables
of distress

What name do I call a pair of feet that
 have walked the narrowest roads
of agony? I used to harbor doubts that relished folding
my wings into a shadow
of themselves

You see, before you came I only knew
 to breed hurt

And somehow, I found fragments of warmth cradled
in the bosom of my own misery

My feet became scorned, too, from wading through thorns
littered in my path

I learned to answer the name of a weak woman;
But ever since you found me, I have only answered the name of a woman,
 reborn Because reborn was who I
became after you plucked radiance
from your heart, to resurrect mine

You rekindled the
 flames that had misplaced their vigor

You My beloved

Look at me now, I'm no longer of darkness & ash



Scarred

Hameedah Aruwa

Trigger warning: sexual abuse

I can still smell him/ His sweaty arms swathing my waist/ I remember my knees faltering as he drew me closer/ I remember his cold fingers/ trailing the length of my/ thighs and between them/ How I/ battled to evade his grip and failed/ He was our housekeeper/ He was supposed to protect me/ Please! let me go/ But his grip only tightened/ Please!/ There he had me, trapped beneath the/ weight of his lust– I still remember/ and this memory has betrayed me/ many times/ Unyielding, it refuses/ to empty itself of the filth buried/ inside it/ Holding onto these thorns/ like earth holds onto dust/ I try to forget/ I try...

Clocked In

Hameedah Aruwa



Isn't it intriguing, how I find comfort
in the frail arms of
 my clock.
Ticking; it reminds me of these
fleeting times.
 And I cannot feign happiness because
my cheeks have become stones and will avail
me not a single smiling muscle.
Truth is that I'm sad. Outside,
 the balmy breeze smothers my skin,
teasing these holes in the flesh,
 stretched beneath my melanin cloak.
Don't you see
 that I'm wasting away?
Tick! tick! tick!
 the clock doesn't stop ticking.
So for the while that I'll be here, won't you afford me a
 room in your heart?
Afford me the luxury to mirror your smile
 on my face—
before my clock stops ticking.

Note for the following poem:

Trigger warning: mentions of self-harm, suicide, blood, scars, hospitals/nurses, possibly triggering title

Split Wrists

Jade Driscoll

Trigger warning: mentions of self-harm, suicide, blood, scars, hospitals/nurses

I don't know what I said to this mediocre white boy who's probably never left our hometown to make him think he was my savior, but that line must have been a doozy, because one week after I broke up with him, he pulls me aside after class and asks what my wrists look like under my bracelets. They're clean—have been clean since I left the hospital over a year ago. I thought I'd made it clear I was doing better, but apparently not better enough to survive without our four-month high school relationship. He says he's proud of me, but he looks disappointed. Like he wishes for me to not just hurt, but to hurt so much that I bleed because of him—or lack of him.

Sometimes I still admire the white scars seared into my wrists; not because I want to give them company, but because I don't want them to ever fade completely. I need the reminder that I used to bleed to feel something, anything, nothing, so that I don't have to feel it again. The fading scars whisper *run away if your perception of us becomes longing*, not remembering, and I laugh. Never again will I let metal split my skin or let another boy think he is the vital thrum of my blue veins. My blood has earned better than that.

Transformation

Jade Driscoll

each time I dive into water, I wish for suffering that never comes. I beg to see scales twisting from flesh; thigh meat boiling before solidifying like cement; muscles rearranging, severing joints; fins like stubbed toes on steroids. childhood dreams brought to life through adulthood realities and pains. instead I scissor my legs, feel the chlorine seep into cellulite, flex my toes. my hair tangles and mats to my forehead. there are no luscious locks for me.



breath(less)

Jade Driscoll



I.

when i was eight, i learned the planet was dying.
we made crafts in school to show how we would
reduce our carbon footprints, prove we knew how
to recycle, and pledge to plant more trees.

*trees absorb carbon dioxide before reproducing
oxygen, but they can only do so much. that's why
we must plant more trees.*

i only knew so much about oxygen and the ozone
and how we were killing everything. but i knew
enough to realize what my teacher's words meant:
if i didn't help the trees, i would die.

*almost everything we do produces carbon dioxide—
even our breathing. every time we exhale,
we produce carbon dioxide.*

i started to hold my breath, as long as i could,
as often as i could. my breaths were killing
trees, and i needed those trees to live. but
i needed my breaths for me to live, too.

*if we all do our parts, we can save the earth.
think about what you can give up. think about
what you can do. think. about. the. trees.*

we bought saplings every year and planted them
in the front yard. i was torn between whether
i should breathe by them: do i feed them,
or will i overwhelm them,
killing them before they've grown?

II.

nearly two decades later, i still hold my breath
every time i read headlines about how we've reached

the point of no return. we can't combat everything in the air—
all the carbon dioxide the trees can't keep up with.

the trees must fucking hate me.

i can vote, i can donate, i can boycott, i can give up
everything i didn't let go of when i was eight.
but it would take millions of child me—who loved
the trees so much she would hurt herself to save them—
to move in the right direction. to keep the trees
from killing themselves, not for us but because of us.
i can't hold my breath much longer.

{Capitulations to the Native Land}

Kendra Mills



An eye for a navicular,
angel strict,
unreasonable.

Birthdays at the cliff's live edge,
pirate lessons,
an elegy for the Tower of Babel.

Psychosis
somewhere at the intersection of
victory and
dismemberment;

vectorless: I am grief's most twisted vulture,
equipped [only] with a lexicon of defeat
and the language of the rapture.

At the kiss of dusk, the sky bled until empty,
exquisite, mimicry. I am

begging, devoted, checkmate.

Loosing the War

Rory Frasch



I think I've won the war,
Your hands are clutching across my chest, ripping at my rib cage,
My heart is in your palms, it's dripping down your fingers,
There is a sense of triumph in the way it'll stain your nails,

I cannot explain to anyone why the bile coating my tongue tastes as sugary victory,
I cannot recall the names of my friends,
I cannot remember their faces with kindness in their features rather than scorn

I am a lonesome victor, a champion,
I hold my sword high, the blood on it is my own but it is blood nonetheless,
I've lost every battle, yet I reign high on this pile of bodies,
All of them identical to me,

I think I've won the war

Rooftopping

Sam Szanto



mask on, seagulling to the pillar, back
to glitter the city, music bombastic
promotional climbing boots in shot
foot dangling off the rooftop, snap
snap, the selfie is king, he'll go viral
like in lockdown, four million hits
his towerblocked mother saw it
might get it now, how he's teetering
on the edge of fame
overshadowing the others
doing what they proclaim to be the same
fifteen thousand followers on Instagram
the moon's pale face gazing at him
the clouds rapturous, if he falls
likes will raise him up again
although no one knows his name
throwing off his mask, he screams
Will you look at me?

Shadow

Wren Donovan



She who leans out of the darkness, peripheral
the one whom I endeavor to ignore, pretend
I do not notice do not hear the rustling
see the shimmering, feel the pulse
desire to follow. Fuck-around and find out.
What to make of her, this fever dream
this cinematic fog hallucination?

I know the stories.
Crone bends over cauldron
while the dragon sleeps on treasure.
I kiss the frog, embrace the witch
kiss all my demons, wrestle angels.
Saintly sage and Beatrice have led me here
to pause in this rock cradle. Restive
rabbit, wary hare, I twitch and tremble
while I block the light.

I'll be drawn out of this bramble
by the darkness shaped like me. She who beckons
to creation, or destruction, love or immolation
liberation, evisceration, blood or wine or tears.
I smile as if there is a difference, still pretending.
We're both so full of shit, me and my shadow.



Morning Moon

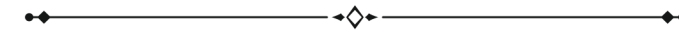
Wren Donovan



First-born child, gift of autumn born in summer
with eyes as wide and blue as 10 a.m. in mid-July
behind a round pale face, quick and quiet and gentle
so unlike the other moons the ones that shout out
loud against the darkness. You paint a softer edge
against the hazy blue of daylight. Morning moon
who slept all through the first night, awoke to peer with
one-eyed curiosity and skepticism at the world
I'd pushed you into. Venus Leo gives the warmest hugs.
Virgo Moon requires a rhythm, punctuation of emotions.
Your sun gives you the moon. Sun in Cancer manifests
those dreamy eyes that bony brow, odd humor and a stubborn streak
and tender care for bears and cats. Crabby shell protects a tender heart
tenacious. You like to hide and wait and know for sure. You travel sideways
usually, to ambush what you want and hold it tight, sometimes too long.
So serious, so reticent and full of care. And yet
no caution slows you when you spy the morning moon
when you see your fellow shy eccentric in the morning sky, a dream
a fairy-tale a figment, a surprise, so bold in sweetness
cloud-soft and courageous, you greet the Morning Mooooooooooooon
and that vowel carries off my heart for you to hold
among the tiny things you hoard in secret lairs, along the shore
where motherhood can't go
where ocean tides extend long foamy fingers, flat and silver
but cannot reach your hiding places hidden in broad daylight.

Roan Mountain

Wren Donovan

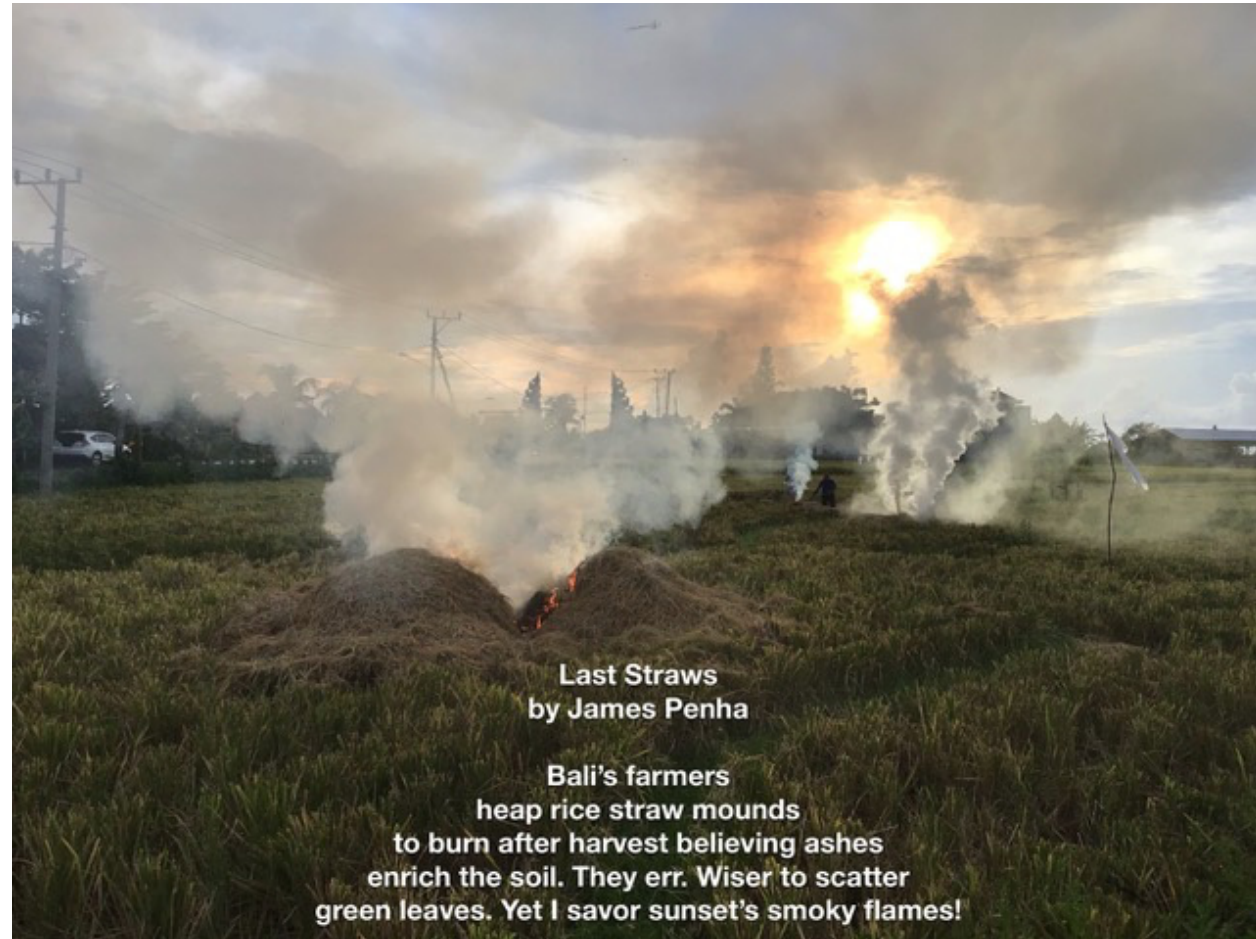


Gaia exhales in her sleep, breathes out the sky
the morning fog, the dew on fairy fingertips
on spider webs on vines over bear-trails. She sleeps
in the blue-green, the forested ocean
of old mountains worn and wise, veiled
in mist and flowers. Red and pink
rhododendrons adorn her curves, flourish
in her valleys soft with rain and moving shadow.
Sunlight feeds berries and lichen and moss
on the swell of her hips high and round to the sky
then back down to grottoes, flint-grey and green.
Her body is Home, these hills
where our walking makes pathways
where our songs create god.
When she turns in her bed
the hemlocks may shake. Birds flee
to the sky but return again, gentle.



Last Straws

James Penha



F
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Curious Case of Clairvoyance

Ms. Sam L. Story

Deming, NM – Sixteen-year-old Rosemary Roberts doesn’t consider herself abnormal, but the nation disagrees. Only two months have passed since she solved fourteen murders without even leaving her home in Santa Fe, N.M. The young lady accomplished such a feat by using the eldest of all art forms: the written word.

She published her book, *Death’s Doorstep*, on January 1, 2017, as a New Year’s Resolution. But once a detective in Mississippi got his hands on it, he was baffled.

James Deleon, a detective in Jackson, Miss., thought he was just picking up another leisure book until he started reading.

“At first,” says Deleon, “I thought, ‘Oh, its murder, most bloody crime scenes run similar.’ But as I read more and more, I realized the book not only detailed one of our open cases down to the T, but was also using the same names as the parties involved in the case.”

Using the clues provided by Roberts’ book, detective Deleon found concrete evidence against the suspect in the murder of Jaimie Lynn, a young woman discovered stabbed to death in her own home on July 13, 2013.

After the closed case went public, *Death’s Doorstep* became a New York Times bestseller and sold over 10 million copies. With its newfound popularity the thirteen other cases were picked up nationwide by other detectives noticing the shocking similarities to their own hometown homicides.

The seemingly supernatural occurrences don’t stop at one book, Roberts has been writing from a young age and has apparently predicted the future, even death before.

“She’s been writing since she was only four years old,” Says Fred Roberts, Rosemary’s father, “She wrote a poem about how a red car hit our neighbor’s dog the day before it happened, even drew a little picture at the top. We just shrugged it off before, but the thought of our daughter having a gift is truly remarkable.”

However, not everyone agrees. Skeptics such as George Larson, a defense attorney in Oklahoma, where one of the solved murders took place, feel as though the entire thing is a hoax.

“It’s truly a shame in America,” Larson says, “When a teenager can claim to have magical abilities and send innocent men and women to jail for life. The media and the young lady are using, and abusing the justice system for attention and to gain wealth. I pray that it ends soon.”

Another theory is that Roberts isn’t clairvoyant, but she is still solving crimes.

“The evidence is too strong for her to just make this stuff up,” declares forensic scientist, Eliza Chang, “I personally believe Rosemary has researched these crimes thoroughly and understands that a simple hunch from a teenager wouldn’t get the attention she needs to make an impact. Is she psychic? No. Is she a brilliant detective? Yes.”

While no one can say for sure if young Rosemary is truly clairvoyant, well researched, or making up stories, she did state that she is publishing another book in May.

Following Broken Trails

Cody Shrum

December wind rose through the shadow-strewn street of East Pine. Jon and his younger brother, Max, watched snow flurries float to the ground like glistening butterflies through their front window. Their mother was already fast asleep on the couch, shifting light from the television screen dancing across her face. Jon looked at her. His mother’s dark auburn hair was a matted mess beneath her head. Her mouth hung slightly open and released a series of gentle snores that the boys had gotten used to in the two years since the divorce. Jon shook his head and turned back to the window. He and Max held the burgundy curtains open like eyelids.

The streetlight in front of their house had never quite worked and now it looked like a strobe, flickering on and off in the cold.

“I hate seeing Mom this way,” Jon whispered to Max, staring out into the cold. He hadn’t really noticed how bad she had gotten, but now that he was on winter break he saw her like this every night, without homework or friends to distract him. It seemed like every one of his friends were traveling for break with their families, except for him. He was stuck here, in Oakaville, for his final Christmas break before graduation.

“Me too. What do you think we should do?” Max asked in the same hushed voice.

Max was four years younger than Jon, over a foot shorter, but they both had the same dark, shaggy hair. People often forgot their age difference because of how strangely mature Max was. Jon knew, though, that the freak accident three years ago during the famous ice storm had made Max grow up a little quicker. Max being alive was a miracle, and it was a wakeup call for Jon. He’d grown up quicker because of it as well.

They turned to face their mother, the week’s stress showing wear on her face. Since divorcing their dad, she’d been this way. She would come home from a hard day at the realtor’s office and, after drinking a cup of coffee and watching her less-than-reality TV shows, would fall asleep on the couch long into the early morning. Occasionally she would meet a guy, but each time she drove him away after a few weeks, and she was back to falling victim to the couch. Jon had actually liked a couple of the guys, as much as he wanted his dad to come back into the picture. So there she laid, mouth cracked, limbs sprawled, sleep dancing over her eyelids.

“There isn’t anything we *can* do. Mom’s set in her ways at this point. I mean, she hasn’t dated in almost a year. Nobody can replace Dad, but . . . I don’t know,” Jon said. He had no answers.

He could picture his dad’s face, but it had become more difficult to imagine his voice by the day. Not seeing him for nearly eight months didn’t help. He’d texted them a few times to check up, but ever since summer started he’d been busy on the few weekends during the month that were his. In the beginning, custody had been split, but then alcohol had come into the mix. If they’d been younger, Jon and Max would be able to see him every day at school—he was the grade school principal. But they weren’t grade-schoolers anymore, and so they didn’t. By that point, Jon was happy Max didn’t have to deal with the confusion of it all anymore, being in eighth grade now.

“Well,” Max started, “maybe we could get Mom and Dad back together. Maybe something’s different now.”

Jon crossed his arms and let his side of the curtains fall back into place against the window.

Jon, nearly eighteen, knew this was not at all a possibility. Max most likely thought this too, but he knew Max was just being hopeful. Their dad had lost his chance; that was all there was to it. They’d seen it happen. Even before the accident, Jon knew something was up between his parents. Their silences, body language, his mom’s disinterest, his dad’s desperate clinginess. Things had gotten worse when Max got hurt and went to the hospital. Jon shook his head and turned to gaze out into the night. Just as Max quietly turned and began to leave the room, Jon noticed a group of shadows shifting down the snow-covered street.

“Max, come here. I see something!” Jon whispered.

As far back as Jon could remember, the two of them had stared in wonder at falling snow through the oversized window each winter, their breaths growing in a pale fog on the pane of glass. Something about snowfall had always felt magical and unexplainably entertaining to them. Max spun and returned to the window. Jon pointed down the street where the flickering light began to fade. As they watched patiently, a man slowly emerged from the veil of shadow and snow. They pulled the curtains almost shut.

“Who do you think he is?” Max asked, a smile sweeping his face. Jon and Max had played this game around people they didn’t know when they were younger: guessing what these people might be like.

“Random guy blizzard-walking at midnight—he’s gotta be a robber. He’ll hit a few other houses before he rounds back to ours,” Jon replied. They had acquired a certain skill for this, having played the game so much.

“Nah, I’m thinking he’s banging Ms. Bradford three blocks down. She likes it at exactly midnight and snow gets her in the mood,” Max laughed. He surprised Jon sometimes with just how much he knew about adult life when he shouldn’t. Being around Jon and his friends, and dealing with the divorce, Max had heard quite a few things he shouldn’t have.

“Nice, that’s a good one,” Jon said with a smile. His smile faded when he recalled his mother’s dates over the past two years, the men who’d stepped foot in his house. “How ‘bout this: he’s a hit man assigned to whack Ms. Bradford. Ya know, before her husband died, he was a Navy SEAL or some shit, and she knows some deep dark secrets that she shouldn’t. NSA classified. Now the government knows and she has to be taken out? I’d say that one takes the cake, guy,” Jon said, satisfied.

“Yeah, I guess that’s the best one. I still liked the idea of Widow Bradford being happy for once; she’s always a crabby old bitch,” Max said. “I’m gonna pretend this guy’s banging her anyways.”

Jon burst into laughter until he remembered their mother was asleep. He glanced over at her, shifting on the couch, but made sure she was still fast asleep before turning back to Max.

“Hey, man, I don’t care if you talk like that but Mom might hear. But I agree with you.” His mother’s snores chimed in once more.

“I have an idea. Let’s follow this guy and find out if we’re right. It’d be fun and we haven’t done anything exciting all break,” Max said.

Max’s complete lack of a smile told Jon he was entirely serious. Normally Jon would have said no, reasoning it was dumb and a waste of time, but their mother was asleep and they were bored.

“You’re suggesting we trudge out into the full force of wild winter, just the two of us, after the ice storm debacle? After the concussion and near-death experience and hospital? *You*?” Jon was taken aback. He thought Max would be the last person to suggest such a thing.

“C’mon, this is different. We’ll be careful. Also, don’t be a pussy,” Max said.

Spending all this free time with Max brought Jon back to the games they played together when they were younger, back when the family was still together. Heading into high school, Jon found these opportunities to still be a kid coming few and far between. He figured, what the hell. Jon took one last look at the stranger half-cloaked in darkness and felt a certain familiarity with the man’s uneven footsteps. It vaguely resembled how his dad walked.

“All right, let’s suit up,” Jon said. He tiptoed to his room to bundle up for the bite of winter. He hadn’t fully thought out why his dad would be walking their street during a snow storm, but he actually hoped it was him.

Jon soon realized that the night was far more frigid than he’d imagined from the house. He and Max were underdressed to say the least; they both wore blue jeans and light coats. They had outgrown their old snow boots, now wearing tennis shoes with short socks and they wore thin, matching stocking caps. Their mom was a department store sale fiend, so he and Max had a lot of matching clothes. Now, as they jogged to catch up the mystery man, the snow seemed to dart directly into their faces.

The lack of streetlights lining the empty streets in their neighborhood made them lose sight of the man. Jon preferred the darkness and snow-covered land to all the unkempt lawns and awful landscaping disgracing many of the houses in their neighborhood. But in all this snow, their only points of reference were the man’s slowly-filling footprints. As Jon weaved in and out of the shadows cast by houses and garages, Max following close behind, he remembered playing blizzard explorers together when they were younger.

The massive cedar tree in their back yard had always been home base. The tree lacked a section of limbs on its south side, serving as a hollow for them to escape the snow and devise their plans. Jon and Max pretended the paw tracks from their neighbors’ cats were those of some exotic animal nobody had discovered yet. They had taken measurements using their fingers and noted the track depth—serious business. Jon remembered the sweet warmth of hot chocolate after playing in snow for hours, the cold melting away.

Despite the freezing air against his bare face, Jon smiled. Keeping out of sight in case the man looked back was as fun as he remembered it being when he and Max were younger. Sneaking from tree to tree, army crawling around their house, hiding behind the cars in their circle driveway: Jon remembered all of it. He and Max now crouched from lawn to lawn and jogged through snow drifts to catch up. Jon spotted the man under a streetlight two streets ahead, and he pointed him out to Max.

“This guy seem familiar to you?” Jon asked.

“You mean, have I seen him lurking the streets to bang Widow Bradford before?” Max laughed.

“No. Does he remind you of someone? The way he walks, what he’s wearing—anything?”

Max paused, held a bare hand up over his eyes to shield the snow. “Nothing comes to mind. Why, does he remind *you* of someone?” Max asked.

“Actually, I think it could be Dad,” Jon replied. The guy probably wasn’t their dad, but either way he knew Max would think he was crazy. He hoped he wasn’t crazy.

“You think this random blizzard-creeper is Dad? Why would Dad—,”

Jon cut him off. “Never mind, let’s go; he’s getting away.”

They were closer to discovering who the lurker was, to knowing if it was their dad. Max may not have agreed, but Jon knew there was a chance. Their relationship may not have been the best, or even a relationship at all, but Jon still held out hope for his dad. If anything, the nostalgia conjured up from he and Max’s current adventure made it seem even more possible that his dad was different, had changed, still loved and cared about them. His smile held strong, Jon set a faster pace and Max followed close behind.

When Jon was still in grade school, in just one day it had snowed over a foot and a half one winter. Jon and Max had been headed inside to get some hot chocolate and warm up. As they rounded the side of the house they had seen their parents throwing snowballs at each other in the front yard. They both had makeshift snow forts but their mom’s had been poorly constructed. She yelped almost constantly as their dad pummeled her with snowball after snowball and snow had begun to fall down her coat. Max had quickly run to their mother’s side and Jon followed suit, packing snow and throwing it at their dad.

“Hey, no fair!” their dad had said, triple-teamed. The memory quickly faded into the canvas of snow.

With the family ripped apart, the pieces never quite collected, Jon led his brother through shadowy ditches and back yards to locate the nameless man. Snow continued to fall hard, hushed, a monsoon of crystalline cold. Jon hoped his mother wouldn’t budge from her sleep, wake up to find them missing, panic like she had so many times before. She already had enough to deal with. She needed rest and calm.

Six blocks down, they passed through an intersection that would have normally been lit by a functioning street light but instead its light was blotted out with the thickening snow. On the other side of the road they crouched down against a group of mailboxes. Icicles clung to the mailboxes and snow still cut the air.

“Come on man, it’s freezing and we’ve only seen him once. Let’s just go back,” Max said, plumes of breath steaming from his lungs. “Fire up some Call of Duty.”

Part of Jon, most of him, agreed and desired the warmth and safety of their house. But part of him was desperate to discover if it was their dad, desperate to see and talk to him. Even if he was a homeless man heading to sleep under the park bridge, at least his mind would be at ease. Besides, he was having too much fun with Max. He knew all that fun would come to a halt if the man turned out to be his dad, though. Things would get serious, fast.

“Hey, man, this was your idea in the first place. Ten more minutes. He’s gotta be close. Don’t you want to find out who this guy is?” Jon was frustrated with him; what if they quit early and never got closure with their father? It was just like Max to be a baby and not follow through, Jon thought. But after almost dying from a fallen tree branch during an intense ice storm, barely being saved by an ambulance, Jon could see where Max’s hesitation would come from. He didn’t blame him.

The amber light cast down through the fog of snow suddenly reminded Jon of the Scotch his dad had always drunk, more so after Max’s accident and especially after the divorce. He hoped that he’d finally stopped drinking the stuff. Jon shivered.

“I guess so,” Max said.

Jon hoisted himself off the ground using Max’s shoulder and headed north through the ditch.

Despite the fun they were having, Jon began to think more deeply about his dad and his drinking, the fights he’d had with his mom. It was never his place to tell his dad what to do, but he wanted to protect his mom. His dad had started A.A. and temporarily patched things with her, but they got divorced when he started drinking again, after he began disappearing, sometimes two or three days at a time. Even to this day, neither Jon nor Max knew where their dad had gone off to. Surely he wouldn’t have jeopardized his grade school principal job. After the divorce, he essentially stopped trying to see Jon and Max. Now, thinking on it, Jon hoped this man wasn’t his dad.

Through the next gleaming streetlight he could see that the footprints were nearly full and they were almost halfway across the small, Kansas town by now; they were running out of street to catch up to the man. Jon led Max through the blanket of shadow and snow into Widow Bradford’s yard. Through the grimy pain of glass in her living room, Jon could make out that she was watching Jeopardy. The innocence of that made him briefly warm inside. Guess we were both wrong, Jon thought, his brief smile fading into the cold.

The streetlight at the following intersection shivered into existence and the man walked beneath it. The boys crouched and stopped moving forward. Jon couldn’t tell too much about him from the back: a pair of dark blue jeans and a rough brown coat with its hood up. It resembled the coat his dad had worn every winter. He found it funny that he was so excited over this; he felt like a

little kid again. This thought turned bittersweet as he recalled the scotch, the divorce, the fact that his father didn’t care to see them at all after all this time. Looking up at the streetlight, it seemed like he and his brother were inside of a giant snow globe that had just been violently shaken.

“Do you think this guy could be Dad?” Jon asked Max.

“I don’t think this so,” Max said. “I’ve been watching him—he’s nothing like Dad.”

Jon ignored him. Jon was older, more familiar with his dad, his mannerisms. Besides, Max can’t see shit in this storm—that has to be Dad, Jon thought. There wasn’t a possibility in his mind that this man could be anyone else. Still crouched, they crept in the same direction as the man.

One block later the man veered from his steady path on Washington Street and bee-lined towards the gravel parking lot next to the baseball fields, though the gravel was well-buried beneath heaps of thick snow. Only one vehicle was parked in the lot, and it was familiar to Jon. He came to a halt and turned through the blizzard to face Max.

“Do you recognize that truck up there? The one next to the baseball fields?” he pointed in the direction of the barely visible black truck.

Max put a hand across his brow to stifle the battering of snow against his eyes and squinted to see. After a few seconds he dropped his hands and nodded his head.

“I don’t know, looks kind of like Dad’s ’71 Chevy,” Max said.

“Good, isn’t just me then,” Jon said.

He stood and jogged through the barrage of snow towards the truck. Blood rushed to Jon’s head and he could barely hear the wind whistle past his ears, the snow crunching beneath his feet. The man had reached the black pickup and stood next to it as he began to unlock the door. Jon was almost to him and the snow didn’t feel cold anymore; it felt molten sharp against his skin. Jon was sure the man heard his steps because he turned around before he was even fifteen feet away.

The man was not his dad. When Jon saw the dark blond beard, he knew immediately that it wasn’t his father and he stopped dead in his tracks. Jon’s dad had a silver beard speckled with black. Girls in Jon’s class used to call him a silver fox before he had stopped coming around. This wasn’t him. Their only resemblance was in height and attire. The man’s eyes were held wide, his mouth wedged open with surprise. The cold returned and Jon found that he wore the same expression as the man.

“Sorry,” Jon started, “I thought you were . . . someone else. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Oh, that’s . . . that’s okay,” the man said. He threw open the door of his truck and hopped in, visibly rattled by the strange encounter. Jon laced his fingers behind his head and looked up into the downpour of snowflakes. He knew the odds of the man being his father were low but he was devastated. However, the moment echoed with a sense of relief as well. The truck roared up, in much the same way their dad’s truck always had, and plowed its way down Fifth Street away from them. Its bright taillight embers faded in the precipitation, the glow dimming to nothing.

“What the hell was that all about, man? Did you really think that guy was Dad?” Max walked up behind him, snow crunching loudly under his footfalls.

“Yeah. I did,” Jon started as he squatted and placed a hand through the snow for support, “I was damn sure that guy was Dad.”

Max paused for a moment before responding.

“Dude, why would Dad be out here in the —,”

“I don’t know, Max, I just wanted it to be him! We haven’t seen him in so long, and he’s a fucking asshole for that, but I still miss him. I thought maybe he’d been coming around our neighborhood randomly for a while to see us or something, but he didn’t even care enough to do that. Even the random guy I just scared half to death is better than our own goddamn father.” Jon stood up again and, though the snow felt like a thousand pinpricks against his skin, he didn’t feel a thing.

“Jon, if he wouldn’t take time out of the weekends we’re scheduled to be at his new house to see us, why would he spend time walking around our neighborhood to do it?” Max’s arms were crossed and he bounced from foot to foot.

Jon knew it wasn’t logical. He knew it was something that wouldn’t even happen in the movies, but he had hoped it was him all the same. He held on with everything he had to the glimmer of hope from seeing the man’s staggered walk, seeing the same coat and similar truck. Now that glimmer had faded like his warmth into the fury of the snow storm.

“I don’t know, I just hoped . . .” Jon trailed off. Without another word he pulled his stocking cap snug against his ears and began trudging the ten-block stretch of snow back to their house, his hands searching for what warmth they could find in the depths of his pockets. Max followed close behind.

The warmth of the house settled over Jon. His mother was still asleep on the couch, wading in her blue fuzzy blanket. She was in the same spot they had last seen her, though her arm had moved

over her head and onto the mahogany coffee table since they’d left. Jon and Max slowly took their snow-covered clothes off and fed them to the washer in the laundry room.

“Look at it this way: Dad fucked up, but at least we had fun tonight. And I miss Dad too, but we can’t change the things he does. You wanna talk about it?” Max asked, but Jon simply shook his head. “All right, well I’ll be in my room if you need me, man. Gonna murder some Nazis online ‘til daylight. Night.”

“Night,” Jon replied. He walked to his room as well to grab a fresh pair of clothes.

Back in the living room, he looked at his mother’s tranquil face and found it hard to believe she used to be with someone like his dad. He tried not to wake her as he walked over and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. She’d been taken out, just like Widow Bradford. Between the divorce and work, dating, being their mom, she’d been through so much—too much. He had no idea how to help her. He was growing up quickly, but he still had no clue what it must be like to be an adult with adult responsibilities and stresses. Not to mention the added stress of not becoming a mirror image of his absent father.

Jon walked back into his bedroom and closed the door. At his dresser, he pulled out the bottom drawer and sifted through the pile of valuables beneath it for what he was looking for. Towards the back, past Lauren Abbott’s bra he’d stolen freshman year and a small bottle of Jack Daniels he hadn’t yet touched, he pulled out the smooth piece of quartz his dad had found hiking when Jon was little, when Max was just a baby. Jon left the drawer where it was and fell onto his bed, rolling the stone around in his hand.

This particular piece was milky clear all the way through and right in the center of it was a zigzagged vein of gold. His dad had used to tell him it was what happened when lightning struck rock: it got trapped inside. He ran his index finger along the stone’s edges. Gentle ridges caved in and out of its edges like an arrowhead and it cupped perfectly in his palm, as if it were crafted especially for him.

With the stone clenched snugly in his hand, Jon got up and left his room. The hardwood in the hallway creaked with each step as he walked into the living room. He tiptoed back up to the window and drew one curtain aside. The chunk of quartz felt smooth in his hand; cool with the promise of healing. Healing should be warm, Jon thought, but everything was cold. Only cold. He looked out into the heart of the snow storm and fell into the fury of it. He wished he would find his dad standing somewhere out there, but he knew he wouldn’t be there. His father would never be

there. His gaze held upon each falling snowflake, Jon nestled the piece of lightning quartz safely in his shorts pocket.

“Jon,” his mother said.

He spun, startled. She yawned and flipped her hair out of her face.

“Hey, Mom,” he said. He sat at the end of the couch by her feet.

“It’s late—what are you doing up?”

“Max and I were just playing. He’s asleep now.”

“Okay,” she said. She rubbed her eyes. She seemed disoriented, as if waking up on some different planet.

“Why doesn’t Dad ever come around anymore?” Jon asked.

A long silence passed before she answered. In the dark, she looked stunned—by the question, by waking up mid-sleep, by her life, by the state of things.

“I don’t know. Your guess is as good as mine. He’s changed. He still loves you both, but he’s changed,” she said. “I haven’t heard from him. Probably better that way.”

“But Max and I want to hear from him. It pisses me off he’s being such a dick.” He squeezed his fists.

His mother eyes grew wide, mouth opening to speak, then closing.

“You should be pissed. I’m pissed. We can get ahold of him together soon.”

“It’s okay, forget it,” he said. He stood up and put a hand out. “Hey, you should get to bed. Real bed. This can’t be good for your back.”

“You’re right,” she said. She took his hand. “My baby boy is parenting me now. Scary times we’re living,” she said. She laughed at herself and hugged Jon goodnight.

Jon listened for his mother’s bedroom door to click closed down the hall. He slowly opened the bulky front door and snuck outside. Snow still fluttered past the golden streetlight, but it had begun to slow and the wind was gently dying. He thought of Max playing video games, his mother struggling, his father caught in his own distant storm. Deep down, somewhere warm, he knew tonight had been the end of something, the beginning of something else. He scooped the quartz from his pocket and worked it around in his hand, hoping to feel the charge of the lightning trapped inside, but he felt nothing. He pulled back and threw the stone as far as he could. He lost sight of it in the flurries. Barefooted and shirtless, Jon stepped down off the icy concrete of the front porch into a snowdrift and fell backwards into it, just to feel the cold.

Evergreen Trilogy

Robert James Cross

“Life isn’t everything. There’s a limit to humiliation.” – Appelfeld

The sentence was not long. After a few short weeks, she was let out of the hospital. A better outcome than the older crowd in her ward. Her lungs burned like sand between toes in the Sahara. Even with her weeks-long reprieve she needed sleep.

All she could think about as she lied in her own bed was the illness she had endured. She thought about the fact her grandmother had visited the week prior from the outskirts of Texas. By the grace of God, grandma dodged the airborne bullet and made it back to the Lonestar State happy and healthy.

She thought that she may have gotten it from an underground electronic dance music party she had attended but none of her friends came down with it. Maybe it was the drug dealer who supplied her with molly or the deliveries of marijuana that were now legal in California. Or perhaps it had come from her various suitors on Tinder where her profile had the tagline: *Looking for something Open/Casual, like hookups, fwb, or possibly even friends.*

Whatever the case it was clear that the world was not as safe and clean as advertised. It had become harder and harder to trust. What may not have seemed threatening in the rearview mirror was lurking right behind her. A new day and a new way of doing things had hit her like a brick against gelatin. No vegan diet or magnetized mattress pad could save her from the fate of the nation.

She tried to enjoy her few days in bed but found she could not rest. The thought of not returning to work and seeing her friends and family for so long made her feel like she had been trapped in a casket. Her friends were her family in most cases. She had an on-again-off-again relationship with her mother and stepfather who deemed their daughter too exhausting to keep up a sound appearance in the community.

The doctor told her to take an extra week off to let her body rest and recuperate. She listened to his every instruction and still found ways to not listen. She thought that it was just a cold in the beginning and that she would be feeling better in a couple of days but it got worse and worse until she needed the intensive care unit. Her life was full of acronyms. ICU, EDM, BPD, DID, FWB, LTR, BDSM, STD, HSV, THC, MDMA. The list was only bound by her imagination.

On her way into the hospital for a final check-up the next week she spotted a disheveled old man sitting outside of the emergency room doors clutching a military cap. She tried to smile at him but the mask blocked her gesture and the man slowly brought his gaze back down to the peppered concrete.

Her lungs had been put through hell. The diagnosis was a life of slow nights and no intense emotional frenzies.

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“Life is valuable, but there is a limit to disgrace.” – Appelfeld

There were flights that went directly over the Alamo. You could float in the gentle clouds above where many men had spilled their blood for land that would become pockmarked for the Earth’s black gold. It meant zero intuitive things were happening every place below unlike the fast blinking lights of the city beyond. Millions of beating hearts captivated by neon dinosaurs and one-dollar mojitos. On the last left off the freeway, if more could organize, climate permitting, instead of massive icy glaciers that had been there millions of years ago, there were living caricatures in rocking chairs lost among the gravel strewn road. Fracking meant earthquakes every few days that rocked those chairs enough to wake their occupants up for a brief moment of consciousness. The fear of God for a nanosecond made them appreciate life for a few seconds afterward.

A similar shift was brewing in most of the other states west of the Mississippi. While it was easy blaming the magnanimous socialites, who served their dinner guests plastic cutlery, it was becoming clear that the true culprit of spendthrift oil consumption was, and always would be, the combustion industry.

When it wasn’t naturally raining frogs over the San Fernando Valley, squirrels darted and weaved in front of the peloton races that occurred yearly outside of the overachieving refineries that dotted the American southwest. A man lived in close proximity to several fire spewing pollution camps that served the fifty (soon to be fifty-one) states with its automotive refreshment. This was not an advantage in paying any less for the aptly named crude propellant. The last price that he had paid to fill his mechanical surrogate was almost triple digits. If the world outside had become hypercommiscible due to the varied and vast reliance on factory fabricated fuel there had been no indication of a piecemeal between wallet and pump.

Most others that lived beyond the flamelines tied their trust to the political cartoons come to life that occupied the halls of D.C. who would lie and make the Earth storms that destroyed their jurisdiction be the result of religious sacrilege.

These people saw the future, just like the man who lived in the middle of the desert with his son and two daughters who shared more than a love for Texas Tea. This was the man that stood in an empty living room and listened to whispers from on high while looking out the window at men that lived close by and could tell him the same story. This was the man that never changed his thirst for the cost of a gallon of gas.

When they could all agree that the moon shone better in clearer air, they moved from the desert to the California foothills and waited for the storm. He was not allowed to live in California without a permit to pollute. He didn’t get a permit. So, when he was arrested for littering, they wouldn’t let him leave.

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“Truth before all, isn’t that what they used to say?” – Appelfeld

When he looked back over his shoulder, he saw the other two were following, with their gazelle-like, easy strides, and the blue smoke of their cigarettes was rising up into the still air, white in the sunlight.

“At least I will have some shade,” he said, and thought: *I wonder if they are mad, too?*

Ahead of him, the road wound down into the forest, and the trees began to crowd in. The bushes were a mass of tangled, blackish foliage. He thought: This is the way to the hell I read about.

There were no birds. In the trees the leaves were silent, but from the undergrowth came the faint roar of the beetles and the chirping of the crickets. A little further on he saw the little road fork. One led up the hill, and the other wound between the trees. He followed the one that wound. He thought: If I get out of this, I’ll never again skip church.

The path was steep. The soil was covered with loose, sharp rocks and fallen trees. The trees were thick, and overhead were the branches of great spreading leaves like pale green flags. Between the trees the path was covered with a soft carpet of moss and ferns, and the air was heavy with the sweet smell of the plants.

He was tired. His feet were sore. He thought: If I keep on, I’ll never get out. Then he came to a place where the path broadened out into a clearing. In the center of the clearing stood a great tree. Its branches hung low over the ground, and in the tree were great golden leaves.

The sunlight lay on the tree, and through the branches the sunlight fell in a soft, bright light, and the air was heavy with the smell of sap.

He walked slowly over the carpet of moss.

He thought: *I'll never get out.*

The trees seemed to close in on him, as the light fell softly through the branches. He stopped in the shadow. He could hear his own heart beating. He thought: *If I keep on, I'll never get out.*

And then he heard a sound, the sound of running water, but it came from far away. He walked slowly through the clearing, and the trees opened out before him again, and he came to a place where the path widened into a great pool. In the pool there was a little island with a stone building on it, and on the island were flowers and a great stone bench. The water was shallow where he walked, but the water was deep in the center of the pool.

He looked into the water. It was clear and green, and the sunlight lay on it, and it was very warm.

He said: I can't do it. I'm not strong enough.

But he walked on. He could hear his own heart beating. He thought: *If I keep on, I'll never get out.*

Then the path turned, and he found himself back where he had started from.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw the other two were standing under a tree, their backs turned toward him. The man was sitting on the ground, with his back against the trunk, smoking. The woman was sitting in the shade of the tree, her legs stretched out. She was looking out over the desert. She was wearing a red dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Her legs were crossed.

He felt a sensation of peace, of relief, and he wondered if it were possible that she could be mad.

He walked further down the path.

The two of them had not followed him. He had passed them and gone on. The forest was cool, and the air smelled of pine needles. Again, he heard the sound of running water in the distance.

He walked on, and the forest opened out, and the trees ended, and he was on the edge of a great, stony plain. In the distance, he saw a wall of hills. He looked back over his shoulder. The two figures had disappeared, as though they had melted away into the shadows. He was alone.

He stood for a moment, and then he began to walk again.

He walked for hours. The sun rose in the sky. It climbed high, and he was still walking. He walked through a place of broken stones, and the sky grew darker and darker.

The sun had passed its zenith. It was falling toward the west, and it was no longer hot. He walked on.

The sun began to sink. He walked on.

The sky turned purple. He walked on.

The sun had set. He walked on.

The moon came up. It shone brightly. He walked on.

The sun was rising again, and he was still walking.

He walked until the mountains rose up in front of him.

He had reached the end of the world.

Single to Stupor

Ezioma Kalu

Do you know that last Friday was the most embarrassing day of my life, yet?

Why did I add ‘yet?’ My dear, it’s because we’re in *Naija nah*, and better days are what we might never be able to experience again, if we’re to be pragmatic and realistic.

I’d never waste my precious time swimming in the ocean of idealism, and hanging on the weakest thread that the better days would come, when reality, that murky and bleak occurrence stares at me hard and long in the face and dares me to be optimistic. *Omo*, everyone should brace up *o*, because the worse days are ahead, they’re warming up, doing bouts of push-ups and squats, readying to strike.

What happened? Chill, I’ll give you the *juicy gist*.

You know this video making round on social media; the one with a girl on black, peplum top and blue jeans with white sneakers, that two minutes video where the girl kneels and proposes to a guy who turns and leaves? My dear, that’s me *o*... I’m the miserable girl in that appalling video.

You really don’t need to make faces, I understand you’re knocked for six, and in your mind you’re thinking; “*Ahh!* This girl is piteous *o*, she has no single shame.” But come on now, don’t judge me yet, wait till you hear my story.

Why am I telling you this? First of all, I must admit this seems crazy and bizarre, but I’m not a Psycho. Yeah, I understand how weird and creepy it is, for someone to walk up to you on a hot Friday afternoon, at the bus stop and telling you tales you’d rather send to the birds because you don’t care, *but it is what it is*. I also don’t know why I’m doing this; sitting on this hot bench and spilling this *green tea* to a stranger, but I guess it’d help me feel better. Even if I don’t go telling everyone that watched the video how I really feel, at least I’d be relieved you heard my own version of the story.

You don’t need to wrinkle your nose or squint in disgust; I’m not a horrible person. Okay, I admit that maybe I exuded a nasty vibe in that video, but cut me some slack *abeg*, it’s not that deep. At least I’m not like the girls who would rather use *kanyamata* on their partners, to soften their hearts and make them propose.

Was I desperate for marriage? Yes *o*, who wouldn’t be? I’m thirty three, unmarried, devoid of a child and a voice, sinking deep in the abyss of fear; that abysmal chasm of despair and

hopelessness, of the continuous monotony of living my life in reverse order, of not enjoying what would rather come to others naturally, of floundering in that hollow of loneliness, of singleness, of frustration, being single to stupor and perpetually playing the ‘searching’ card. Put yourself in my shoes *nah*, if tables were reversed, won’t you be at the end of your tether?

I don’t know which is worse, experiencing the horrendous and life-threatening economic situation of this country and blaming the leaders for their actions and inactions, mostly their inactions, or living in my parents’ house and playing nanny to my two younger sisters’ kids, Chizitalu and Chinwe, who always visited during the holidays. At least I can blame the government for this unceasingly dwindling economy that’s steadily and rapidly plummeting to Hades, channel all my frustrations to it, while cussing it out and praying that all politicians would burn in hell. But who do I blame for my inability of meeting a great guy in my twenties, whose feelings aligned with mine and whom I’d tie the nuptial knot with? Certainly not the President, nor the bald-headed, marijuana-smoking governor of my state...

That’s not even the part I wish I could face God *man-to-man* and ask him *what’s up*, why am I a tragic heroine to a depressing movie?

The part that shreds my heart and slashes my brain with a sledgehammer, sends excruciating pain to my soul, and makes me wish the world would end and be reshuffled again, is when my mother makes reference to my singleness every now and then.

“Nkechi, if you were married now, your own kids would also be here for the holidays... Had it been you were in your husband’s house, you wouldn’t know if the soup I cooked in my own husband’s house was too spicy or bland... You want your breasts to fall to the floor before you know you’d get married and give me grandchildren... You’re the *Ada*, the first daughter of this family, but your two younger sisters are happily married and cooking in their husbands’ houses. But will you finally garner your senses and get yourself a man and move out of here? *For where... Igasikwa*. You’d rather stay in my own husband’s house, rubbing shoulders with me and complaining which soup is bland and which is tasty. *Ewu*. You’re a big goat. Don’t think about your life.”

Omo, I don suffer o. I’ve done *asoebi* in this life and I’ve lost count, and I think the next unfortunate girl to bring a ludicrous *asoebi* material to me *ehn*, will smell her ass. One of us will go home with a swollen eye and I’m affirmative it wouldn’t be me. Nonsense... They laugh at me behind my back and then bring *asoebi* materials for me to spend my hard earned money, just to be in a bridal train where there’s no possibility of meeting a potential husband.

Is it right I continue telling you this doleful and drab story of my life? My dear, I know I should stop, I'm boring you. But I need to talk *jare*, to vent, to explain myself to someone, someone who doesn't know me. I don't think I'd ever see you again, I don't even know my way around here. I came all the way from Achara Layout to New Haven. So relax and let me gist you.

I know it's kind of off the wall, sitting on the bus-stop and listening to a mind-numbing story of a pathetic thirty three year old lady, but you *sef* look like you came here to cool your head, because I was watching you for like thirty minutes, before I approached you. If you were passionate about being on a bus and going to your destination, you didn't show it. So you might as well calm down and listen to my story.

Yes, you asked why I'd fight the next person that includes me on their bridal train. My dear, these girls are a terrible bunch. They don't give a fuck about you, they just care about their weddings, and when they successfully marry their knights in shining armours, they'd toss you in the trash can, where you rightfully belong. I'd never forget what Adaobi, my best friend that year, did to me.

Adaobi and I were practically sisters. I met her during my entrance examination into J.S.S.1, but the memories of that day are far from being nebulous in my mind. We were only ten that wrote our own examination in the small hall, because the auditorium was filled to capacity. I vividly remember how she looked. Young as she was, *she was the youngest*, nine years old at the time, she was breathtakingly beautiful. She looked like a *big man's* kid, with her brilliant, soft, brown eyes, a small pointed nose that firmly perched on its position, and had an aura of a best-student-in-mathematics.

She was cultured and mild-mannered, though deftly keeping her stubborn streak disguised and under lock and key, but going to that locked chest once in a while, to pick her stubborn and madness-stricken trait and shoving it right in her contender's face. They say big things come in package *kili-kili*, and I think whoever coined that quote, did so while having her as their muse. She outwardly looked innocent and fragile, but step on her sore feet and she'll bite your ass.

That was the Adaobi Ifesineke I knew; the calm but fierce, cultured but stubborn, reserved but wild. When we sat side by side in that small space that barely contained twelve people, she told me my calculations for question one was wrong. The answer was fifteen and not five. She had the disposition of someone who knew what she was doing, and who had excelled a lot in the past, doing that which she was good at. So, I didn't argue. I cancelled five and wrote fifteen. But when I went home and asked my older brother Ugo, he laughed at me and jeered at how gullible I was.

We had solved that particular problem the previous night and got five, so why did I change my answer because of a bespectacled, scapula-wearing, nine year old girl? Adaobi and I would joke about this incident a couple times in subsequent years. Whenever we told the story in our homes, in school, in church, people guffawed at the thought I believed her merely because of her appearance, and the glasses that perched above her nose. My indecision stemmed from a place of intimidation, of awe. If she wore glasses, then it meant she'd be super-intelligent. *My school of thought was lame sha*.

I'm deviating *abi*? You don't see the connection between my gist about Adaobi, and how I shamefully proposed to a man in a mall as big as Shoprite Enugu? My dear *o*, don't mind me. I'm spontaneous. I'd tell you twenty subplots, before I actually garner my thoughts together and narrate the main story.

I just wanted to let you know how my friendship with Adaobi began. It started as that seatmate who told me the wrong answer in an examination, and graduated to an inseparable, Siamese-twin-bond.

We were in each other's lives from that day, till few years ago when she got married and erased me from her life without flinching or raising a brow. We stayed in the same dorm in High school, and when we came for holidays, we visited each other's homes daily. We even went to the same University, and studied the same course.

But I guess people's lucks differ. What comes to people naturally, without having them to swear and cry their eyes sore, would never come to me easily. I'd have to put in the extra work, be it in academics, relationship and every other aspect of my life. I can never understand the vendetta between me and the god of luck, because why do I have to suffer for things that willingly and naturally come to other people?

Okay in high school, we were admonished not to have sex till marriage, keep your virginity till your wedding night... Auntie Ifeyinwa, that ugly, middle-aged Agriculture teacher, who flogged students as if their asses produced food, and hitting them savagely in the bum would produce more food, always warned us about the dangers of premarital sex.

"It's a sin against the Holy Spirit, so don't defile your body. When the time is right, you'd know..." she had said and I believed. I'd wait. When Adaobi started dating that short boy from C.I.C., the one with regular, even features and sincere, brown eyes, we were still in S.S.2. They exchanged love letters and snuck out of their homes to meet and kiss and touch in discrete places. But I couldn't care less, Adaobi had her life to live and I had mine. I knew I had to wait till at least

when I entered the university; I would definitely meet the love of my life there. In the university there was no scarcity of boys, as they were enough guys to go round for every girl in campus.

Was I right? *Igasikwa*... I entered the university in high spirits. Studying Economics in the University of Nigeria Nsukka had always been my dream, and when I shared that dream of mine with my best friend Adaobi, she adopted it too, and we made plans and studied together.

What about that her C.I.C. boyfriend? *Omo*, Adaobi dumped him as soon as we entered the university. Of what use was a guy who couldn't even pass his J.A.M.B. exams? I had warned she was too harsh, but why would she listen to a girl that had never been in love? I remember the day I gave her my unsolicited advice. We were in my room, listening to 'I'm burning up' by Yvonne Chaka Chaka, and gisting about how we expected life in the university to look like.

We sat side by side, eating the *opiora* mangoes my mum bought from the market and gossiping about this classmate that failed J.A.M.B., and the other who didn't even make an 'A' in W.A.E.C. I would have minded my business *o*, but the *amebo* in me had to ask after my friend's relationship. Apparently, she wasn't cool I was being nosey about her relationship with Emeka, the C.I.C. boy.

"Ada, how far Emeka *nah*?" I began, sucking every bit of the mango juice and licking my hand as the juice raced down to my elbow. I didn't want a single drop of the mango's sweetness and goodness to elude me, for it was my favorite mango species.

Without looking up from her mango, she replied, "Emeka is fine."

I wasn't satisfied, so I pressed on. "You know that's not what I mean."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Will you really break up with him?"

"I already did."

"*Haba nah*... That was harsh *o*, you don't know tomorrow. Just because he failed J.A.M.B. today doesn't mean he's a failure in life."

"*Akuko*... See I've outgrown Emeka. I'm no longer interested."

"Even though..."

"Even though *gbuo gi ebe ahu*. I say. 'Even though' kill you there. See, who do you even think you are to tell me what I need to do in my relationship? Have you dated before *gbo*? Do you even know how to kiss? In fact..."

Adaobi never completed that statement; she just stood up, buttoned her green shirt, adjusted her skirt, made an irritating sound in her throat about a stupid and miserable girl, and zoomed out of

my house, leaving me dazed and replaying the scene in my mind to see where everything went wrong.

I never saw her again till a month later when we started the semester proper. We became good friends again after settling our differences and burying them in the past.

Did I later get a boyfriend like I envisioned? *Odiegwu*... It was as if I had a hideous and repulsive smear on my face. Nobody wanted to date me. And retrospectively, I think it's more like I was invisible. Nobody knew I existed, even though I was the assistant class representative and in their faces for four whole years. Nobody considered me more than a comrade.

At first, I didn't feel the need to rush things; I knew I'd get a boyfriend sometime along the line, so there was no need to bother. I had imagined what my relationship with my first boyfriend would look like. You know *nah*, the type we watch in Korean Dramas and The Philippines telenovelas, the type of undying love between the hero and heroine that stands the litmus test of time against family disapproval, envy, hate...

I'd envisaged I'd fall in love with an older guy, preferably from engineering faculty, *because Engine boys were super sexy and every girl's dream on campus*, he'd be tall and dark and handsome, with boyish looks, a warm smile and an enormous charm. I'd meet him around S.U.B. or Marlina or Chitis, and we would exchange numbers and call ourselves often. He'd ask me out on a cool evening in the U.N.N. love garden, that large expanse of land between the old Pharmacy complex and Ekpo Ref., and I'd smile bashfully, hold my face in my hands and say 'Yes, I will be your girlfriend!'

They say be careful what you wish for, because they would definitely come to you, so why haven't mine materialized? Or is that quote solely made for misfortunes? If there is a God who said we should declare a word and it shall come to pass, then why is my own declaration taking eons to manifest? In fact, *ike agwugo m*, I am fucking tired.

So did I finally meet my Engineering prince charming? Your guess is as good as mine. However, after three years and many single, lonely, painful nights later, I met a guy, only that he was neither a prince, nor charming. He wasn't even an Engineering student, but a young Political Science student, a self-acclaimed charmer, who was persuasively glib. He was decidedly unspectacular, with a mane of dark hair, candid, black eyes, a strong chin and the inclination of someone who had the whole world in his hands, and could navigate it as he liked.

For the first three years I spent in school, I was single to stupor. You don't believe me? Why is it hard for anyone to believe me when I say this? And not like I was rejecting boys up and down *o*, the problem was that they were not just coming. It was terrible it got to a point I thought I was cursed. I even went to the Shiloh program in my sophomore year. I watched in awe as some girls clasped pictures of their lovers to their bosoms, splaying their hands at intervals and praying to the high heavens, others knelt, or sat, while praying for God to melt their lovers' hearts and make them propose.

They all had something in common; a picture of a man, with his name boldly written at the back. They prayed and commanded the angels to somehow make a miracle and turn those pictures into marriage certificates. And there I was, clad in my yellow *big-aunty-vibes* kind of gown, staring at my feet in shame and ignominy. I didn't even have a boyfriend, and at 200L, hadn't had my first kiss.

And while the other girls who had their lives organized, and who were nothing like I, who lived my life in reverse order, came with pictures of their lovers and potential spouses, I came empty handed, hoping I would meet a guy who might turn out to be my prince charming in that large, overcrowded space that contained a thousand solution-seeking, marriage-hunting humans.

My life is poignant *abi*? My dear *o*, I really had to go to the extremes, to pray to God so I'll feel what comes to others effortlessly. Don't they say love comes to you naturally, especially when you aren't looking for it? *Omo*, I searched for love, it didn't come. I even pretended not to be interested in it, it still didn't come. Who did I offend? *No be juju be that?*

I should move to the main gist? My sister I will. Just *nyegodi m*, give me five minutes to buttress my point. I met Obinna on an ordinary Friday; *I'm yet to unravel the conundrum about my life and why it is tightly knotted and entangled in a yarn of mysterious Fridays*, he had the kind of face I wouldn't turn around to behold once he passes me, had it been I wasn't cursed to not have a choice. He was plain-looking, but excessively confident and knowledgeable. What he lacked facially, he augmented with his brain.

I met him on a bank's A.T.M. queue, U.B.A. to be precise. It was a sunny Friday, the most celebrated day in school, because it was almost a lecture-free day, as only a handful of lecturers scheduled their lectures on Fridays. This explains why the bank was bursting at the seams that day. Almost everyone was lecture free and all U.N.N. students were at the bank hall, shoving, spitting, cursing and arguing for a space on the queue.

It was that time of the year, many payments were to be made, textbooks bought, debts cleared, and while majority of those who argued and dragged each other for a space in that tiny cubbyhole of an A.T.M. hall, needed to withdraw money, serious money for the weekend, I, penurious at the time, endured the bouts of ear splitting shouts and saliva bath, just to withdraw a measly five hundred naira. I wasn't even sure if the hassle was worth it, if the A.T.M. dispensed amounts less than a thousand naira, but I tried my luck anyway.

When Obinna sauntered into the bank thirty minutes later, he looked as though he would collapse and die if I didn't allow him use the machine before me. I was thinking about my life, and how I'd spend the next Valentine's Day, which was barely few weeks away, alone for the third time in a row, when he nudged me and pleaded he went before me. Apparently, he had a quiz and needed money for the lecturer's handouts, and would be goddamned if he missed or went late for it. I simply nodded; he was free to go before me, and then shut out the murmurs of complaints by other A.T.M. users. At first I thought, "*he no too fine.*" But when he smiled and revealed a set of teeth so sparkling, that I thought he had never eaten chocolates with them in the past, I thought, "*He's not looking that bad sha.*"

We met again a week later, in the Faculty of the Social Sciences lecture theatre and exchanged contacts. That was the beginning of a not-so-rosy friendship, which I desperately hoped would blossom into a salubrious relationship, the kind Katarina and Daniel shared in the Philippines' telenovela; 'My Eternal.' *But would a darned beggar ride, if wishes were horses?*

We became close, extremely close that we didn't spend a day without talking to each other, and I thought God had started his work in my life. I started smiling brighter and being more cheerful. He brought a spark I never knew existed, out of my life and I fell for him, hard.

Ahh babe, this one you've been staring at your wristwatch since... I'd just make the gist snappy, I appreciate your company and don't want you to vex.

Long story short, he stood me up on Valentine's Day for reasons I never got to find out, till date. You still do not see where my fiasco of a proposal comes in right? My dear, I'm gradually getting there. So few days after I was stood up, someone told me she saw Adaobi making out with Obinna on Valentine's Day. But I didn't believe, I shook it off with a mere wave of the hand and marveled at how jealous, people could be, for them to go the extra mile of trying to break a sweet friendship, just because they couldn't enjoy it themselves.

However, Adaobi got married three years ago. I was over the moon with excitement, I was the chief bridesmaid and literally planned the wedding myself. But what did she do right after? She deleted all my numbers and blocked me on all her social media platforms. I had to call her with a friend's number, hoping she would deny or even pretend it was a mistake, but she didn't. Instead, she said I was single and a potential threat and bad influence to her new home. How could she be friends with a cursed, unmarried lady? I cried for weeks and nearly sank into depression after that incident.

Where is she now? I honestly don't know, and I, Nkechinyere, Onwuka, don't give two fucks about her existence. She could be in Limbo, hell or purgatory, I don't care. That girl played me for a fool, but *yadiba*.

So, I met Dozie, the guy I proposed to, two years ago on Facebook. Initially, our chats were irregular, but he started putting in the hard work and then we started calling and texting every day.

The day he asked me out, I nearly collapsed. That was my first time being asked out and I was glad the god of luck was smiling favorably at me. But he never spoke about marriage. I mean we were quite a perfect match, we complemented each other and were clearly in love, but anytime I brought up the topic, he always gave one flimsy excuse or the other. He wasn't prepared yet... He would propose soon; only that his 'soon' would never come after two years and three months. I already knew how pathetic my life was, and if I had continued waiting, he might never propose. So, I decided to take the bulls by its horns, and man did it work out.

On that ill-fated Friday, we planned to go grocery shopping. However, I went to the venue, Shoprite, before him and strolled nervously to the jeweler's shop to get him an engagement ring. *Omo*, jewelries are fucking expensive *o*, I bought that stupid ring for a whooping hundred and fifty thousand naira, my entire monthly salary. Though I was quite broke at the time, I withdrew my entire savings to be able to make that hopeless purchase.

The importance of 'self' and its discovery cannot be overemphasized. It is necessary people understand themselves and what works for them. Even Socrates advised man to 'know thyself.' I had already come to terms with the gruesome reality of my life, and even if I abhorred it tremendously, it was still there. I knew I was destined to never have anything easy, and what did the scripture say about the kingdom of God? The violent takes it by force.

I already knew it was likely no man would ever make the first move towards me, and I'd be goddamned if I didn't take my destiny into my hands. Hence my decision to propose to Dozie, since

he was playing dumb to my endless body languages that suggested I desperately wanted to be his wife.

For people who always cussed the government out, while endlessly decrying the poverty-stricken, dwindling economy of Nigeria, that Friday, Shoprite was astonishingly clogged with humans who swarmed every section like bees, buying this item and paying for that product.

I aimlessly ambled about, blinking rapidly and biting at my lips, while pacing from one corner of the mall to the other, in quick, jerky steps. I walked past happy people, some couples wearing matching outfits and smiling into the cameras as they took tons of pictures and videos, some singles going about their businesses with straight faces and tired eyes.

It was a regular Friday for everyone, except me. I had a mission and my heart pounded vociferously in my ears that it swallowed every other sound, when I touched my handbag and felt my little ring in it.

I suddenly felt so hot, that I thought the air-conditioner was merely stepping on my toes and engulfing me with hot air, instead of cooling me with that soothing sensation. I strolled to the 'Coldstone' section of the mall to get my favorite vanilla-flavored ice-cream with caramel toppings. My clammy hands struggled to hold onto that container, and as I shoved that supposedly yummy goodness into my mouth, I felt worse. It was as if I was drinking bile-flavored chalk water.

When Dozie sent me a text that he was already in *Kilimanjaro*, where was I? Let's have lunch, my heart nearly fled from my body and ran for dear life. I slowly took in breaths and gently released, to calm my rioting nerves. I wanted to drop the ring and abscond, *but a girl's got to do what a girl's got to do*. So, I staggered to him, my heart pleading I stop, my mind rehearsing my lines, Dozie smiling affectionately.

He started saying, "Babe I'm sorry I'm late..." when I went down on one knee, brought out the ring and popped the one million dollar question.

"Dozie, will you marry me?"

The rest became history...

After that debacle, I realized that maybe I was destined never to get married. *Because how can the odds be forever against me?* His wife *sha* threatened to kill me, if I ever pull that stunt on her husband again.

Wait...Hol' up... He was married?

My dear, I just found out of that scandalous fact, last Monday.

Visitation Rights

Aneeta Sundararaj

“You promised. Remember?”

My blood ran cold. The voice in my ear was scratchy, as though the man was speaking for the first time after being extubated.

Jolted awake, I couldn’t move. My chest felt heavy and I wondered if I would ever draw breath again.

“Yes, I remember,” I whispered into the darkness.

In seconds, I could breathe once more.

Why the hell was I still waking up in the middle of the night because of a man who’d been dead for five years?

Standing by the window of my high-rise flat, I stared out at the city bathed in ambient light. Even though the Klang Valley in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, seemed deathly quiet, I was certain that news reports from the night before were true. I strained to hear City Council officers trawling the dark alley ways to round up the homeless to prevent social ills.

What on earth did social ills mean? One drug-addled man having his way with a semi-comatose woman in her cardboard box under a bridge? Try as I might, I couldn’t hear a thing at this hour before dawn.

These were all frivolous thoughts. A desperate attempt to shut out the more serious ones: Daddy’s dementia’s becoming worse; Mummy’s alone; so far, far away from them; will I ever sleep through the night again?

I shivered and mentally ran through my checklist for when the inevitable happened: ask my cousin to drive me home; call my editor to reassign the work she’s given me; have a full petrol tank in the car.

What if I were overseas, though, when Daddy died? Must have enough money to buy a ticket home; must arrange for someone to help Mummy call the doctor, report the matter to the police and do all the paperwork; Daddy must be taken to the mortuary until I was home; I have no brothers or husband; I will have to light my father’s funeral pyre.

Such morbid thoughts.

Still, I learnt months ago that, in the dead of night, when worry and fear threatened to consume me, it was best to be practical and think of all that needed to be done. This mental activity was exhausting and shut out emotion; the body and mind eventually succumbed to sleep.

Even then I knew that I’d lost my father two years before he actually died. He had suffered a severe bout of pneumonia and was hospitalized for two weeks in November 2014.

“Ma,” he had said, calling me by the Tamil term of endearment.

I had hurried to his bedside and helped him to push away the sterile tubing of continuous infusion of antibiotics before he had said, “When it’s time, you let me go. Don’t let me suffer. I don’t want to lie in a bed all the time.”

Without hesitating, I had responded with, “When your suffering to live becomes more than my suffering to let you go, I promise you, Daddy, I will let you go. For now, let me have the pleasure of looking after you.”

He had smiled brightly, cupped his hands below his chin and closed his eyes.

Seated in the plastic chair, I’d watched my father sleep for the next hour and, thereby, heal from within. I’d also begun bargaining with God:

Let Daddy come home and I’ll write the name of Lord Shiva 108,000 times.

Let him recover and I’ll turn vegetarian.

Let him live and I’ll recite the Mahamrityunjaya mantra 108 times for 48 days.

Daddy had pulled through and was discharged on his birthday, 23rd of November. But he was never the same again.

Two things happened in the last months of Daddy’s life which made me anxious. The first was the morning after I returned to the city for work. While I was at Village Grocers in Bangsar, the maid called and pleaded, “Talk to your father. He is crying all morning.”

Back in my flat, the moment I put away the groceries, I dialed the number for the landline in the house.

“Why are you crying, Daddy?”

“S-o-r-,” he choked on his words. I didn’t need to hear the rest of his apology to understand that in a moment of incredible lucidity, it had occurred to him that for the two weeks I’d been home, he couldn’t remember who I was. He’d tortured himself all morning assuming that I was upset.

“Daddy, don’t cry anymore. Don’t worry about this. Please,” I begged, unable to bear my father’s emotional pain.

“Promise me visitation rights. Okay? When I’m gone, you let me visit.”

“No,” I cried out. “No such thing. If you keep coming back, the whole world will laugh at me. As though I didn’t do all the proper prayers for you. No visitation rights.”

Daddy hung up on me. I knew he was angry, but there was no way I was going to make a promise that he could stay around with us in spirit form.

One morning a few weeks later during my monthly visits home, Daddy called me to his room after he’d woken up.

“Say good morning, Ma.” Pointing to the end of his bed, he said, “We have visitors.” Turning to look at me, he added, “Later, when I visit, you give me coffee, ok. Promise?”

“Hmmm... Yes. Promise.” I didn’t have energy left to argue. I’d already read stories that the dying will report visions of angels, deceased loved ones, or religious figures.

I will not let this happen.

I refused to be defeated by our visitors.

I guided Daddy to his spot at our dining table. After I poured the brewed coffee into his mug and was convinced that he was happy with his breakfast of boiled oats with berries and slices of papaya, I returned to his room under the guise of tidying it up. Going to the foot of his bed, I imagined that that there was a person standing in front of me. In that moment, I decided to call him, ‘Someone’. Granted, it was an unimaginative name, but my world was falling apart and there were only so many grey cells I was willing to exercise at the time. Pretending to stare into Someone’s eyes, I said, “It’s okay. You can be here for now. Keep Daddy safe. I know why you’re here.” Wagging my finger at Someone, I implored, “But you wait, please. A few weeks also can.”

At the threshold, I turned back to Someone and said, “Actually, you can take longer. No need for you to hurry. Okay?”

I’d like to think that Someone listened to me because nothing happened for a long while, meaning that Daddy didn’t mention the presence of visitors again. Instead, he continued to heal and our little nuclear family of three was happy in each other’s company. Such was the improvement in his health that weeks later, Daddy was hale and hearty enough to make the five-hour car journey to my flat in Kuala Lumpur. I wanted medical experts in the city to assess him and made all the necessary appointments.

During the consultation, the cardiologist picked at a xanthoma peeping out of his shirt collar while he scanned Daddy’s lab reports. After tension-filled minutes, he declared, “Wah, Uncle. Your blood results are very good. Better than mine. You’re doing very well.”

Next to me, Mummy exhaled, relieved.

When he then said, “See you in six months, Uncle,” I heard a soft voice in my head say, “It ain’t going to happen. We’re never coming back here.”

Dismissing it, I helped Daddy with his wheelchair so that we could leave the medical specialist’s room. Our next stop was the institute’s pharmacy bursting at the seams with a cross section of Malaysia’s obese and diabetic citizens suffering from all manner of heart ailments. Daddy came home that day with more than the requisite medication – he came home with a bug in his lungs.

Two nights later, when I was helping him to get ready for bed, Daddy asked me, point blank: “Who are you?” I smiled and continued to rub the night cream for his dry skin.

“See Appa! See Meneka!” he said, pointing to the end of the bed. “She won’t tell me who she is. But I have to let her touch me. So shame-shame.”

I held my breath, angry.

The visitors were here? In Kuala Lumpur?

They had the audacity to sit on the bed? My bed. Next to my father.

This was too much.

Logic dictated that this rage was unfounded. Clearly, Daddy’s dementia had progressed to the extent where he no longer knew me, but he could name his childhood playmate and my grandfather who had been dead for more than forty years.

When my father was intubated and placed on life support five days later, I didn’t dare bargain with God anymore. A miracle had already taken place: I’d fulfilled Daddy’s wish and brought him back home to Alor Setar. He was so frail that I feared he would die in the airport. But, like magic, everything fell into place and his final journey home went off without a hitch.

I knew that any medical intervention at this stage such as kidney dialysis could keep him alive, but would have rendered him bedridden. It was time I kept my promise. My task was not merely to let my 86-year-old father go, but to help him let us go as well. I steeled my nerves, let go of my selfish desire to keep my father alive at any cost and silenced the voice of my sorrow.

I turned to friends and explained that for the last two years, my father had become a ‘child’. I became his ‘parent’ and cared for and loved him. Now, as the finality of what was going to happen fast approached, I was worried. Would he be safe? Would he be cared for? I asked that they pray for

me to have the strength to go through one of the hardest things ever. How kind they all were, regardless of color, creed and faith: Catholics recited the Rosary, Christians prayed and Hindus chanted the mantras with me.

I can count on one hand the number of people I informed about Daddy's worsening and terminal condition. Yet, word spread fast. Uncles, aunts and many friends dropped everything and rushed to be with us. The *makcik* who sat next to me on the plane during a quick dash to Kuala Lumpur to shut down my flat comforted me as I wept. My co-workers sent cards and comforting messages.

I held back tears when the ICU nurses told me that long after Mummy and I left the hospital to get some rest, consultants from other hospitals visited him. As a former medical superintendent in the government's health service in the 1970s, Daddy was once upon a time their boss. They wanted to stay with him on those nights when he was alone with nothing more than a beeping monitor for company.

I chose to believe that in those last five days of his life, Daddy came back to us. Although physically helpless, he knew who I was. And we learnt to communicate without words. He smiled when I promised to look after Mummy. He squeezed my hand when I asked for his forgiveness for all my wrongs. Tears flowed from his eyes when I thanked him for giving me the honor of being his daughter. When I told him it was time to rest, he gave me a firm nod.

Finally, on the morning of 17th of October, when there was no longer any cognitive function and Daddy was slipping away, we gathered by his side.

At one stage, I whispered into my father's ears. "Daddy, if you can see, look around you. I'm here. Mummy is here..." and I continued to name all the people standing around his bed. I imagined that, like in the movies, Daddy's astral being would rise up and see us all.

"Daddy, pray to Amma," I urged him. This word 'Amma' had a double meaning. For one, Amma was his *ishtadevam*. It was also what we called my grandmother and I hoped that she was a last-minute visitor to help Daddy in his hour of need.

Daddy opened his eyes and glanced at all of us. It was the validation I needed that he had heard me and knew that he wasn't alone. I looked into my father's eyes and whispered, "Visitation rights, Daddy. You have them. Promise."

When my father closed his eyes for eternity, I surrendered his body, heart and soul into Amma's hands.

As Mummy and I got used to our new reality and I told people about the perfection of my father's death, it was impossible to shed any tears. What right did I have to cry when the entire sequence of events was a testament to the fact that every one of Daddy's wishes was granted? He died peacefully, surrounded by the people who loved him body, heart and soul, and in a town where he'd earned enormous respect.

In time, my mother and I collected happier memories, such as my marriage to a Catholic man to whom I hadn't told the details of my last words to my father. It wasn't that I was keeping secrets from my husband. I didn't think Daddy would hold me to a promise I made when he took his last breath.

Our son, Johnny, was three years old when my husband and I decided to move to our new home, a corner lot in a row of suburban terraced houses. The garden was large enough that we could plant a neem tree without worrying that its secondary roots could damage the foundations of what I was determined would be my family's sanctuary.

We converted one of the four bedrooms into a playroom for Johnny. A beautifully functional room, it opened out into our kitchen. This meant that while I was busy preparing our meals, I could still hear my infant's mostly garbled sounds as he joyfully played.

"What to do?" Johnny said, one day a few weeks ago. The mid-afternoon sun was way too hot for him to be playing outside. I'd put the air conditioner on in the playroom and my son seemed happy enough.

"No, cannot," were my son's next words.

Something wasn't right. I turned the stove off and listened. After a while, it occurred to me that my son wasn't merely talking to himself. He was responding to someone talking to him. Could it be his imagination?

I walked to the bedroom and leaned against the doorframe to watch him. Johnny wasn't looking down at his toys when he spoke. Instead, his head was raised and eyes wide open, as though he were looking into the face of someone seated on the floor playing with him.

"Who are you talking to, Baby Boy?"

He turned to me, dimples denting his cherubic cheeks. Pointing to nothing in front of him, he said. "Someone."

What?

I blinked.

Someone? Dear God, help me.

My breath became labored. Should I pick up my baby and run? But where to? Was my baby going to die? Was Someone here to take him away?

I blinked again and whispered, “Who?”

My child turned back to this invisible being and, ever so politely asked, “What is name, please?”

A moment later, he turned to me and said, “Tata.”

I stood stock still.

Could it be?

Tata would have been the way Johnny addressed his Tamil grandfather had Daddy lived to meet his grandson.

Was it even possible that my son and Daddy were having a conversation?

I turned on my heel and walked away, stunned.

In the coming days, I said nothing. But every afternoon, in the kitchen, I sat with mug of coffee in hand and listened to this one-sided conversation my living, breathing child had with my seemingly dead, lifeless father.

Then, I made a huge mistake – I share what happened with my husband.

“What?” he practically shouted at me. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t believe in all these hocus pocus, mumbo jumbo, bullshit.” Although I didn’t mention ‘Tata’ again, my spooked husband called his family for a meeting and a unilateral decision was made to contact the church elders the very next day. A priest was commissioned to come to our home and help us mere mortals.

I almost blurted out, “He’s my father. Not the Devil or a demon,” when I saw Father Michael gripping his crucifix.

Who would have thought that Catholics were prone to following shamanic rituals? Here I was thinking that it was only ‘my kind’ (Father Michael’s words, not mine) that made sacrificial offerings of slaughtered goats to Hindu gods and goddesses to appease them. Three nights in a row, Father Michael came to our house, garlic in one hand and the bible in the other. With Johnny on my lap and my husband seated on the sofa next to me, we were given lessons from the Bible about our sins by a celibate priest who hadn’t let go of his Hindu roots. On the fourth, fifth and six nights, we slaughtered *kampung* chickens, mixed their blood with holy water and sprinkled it all around our house.

“So that the spirits don’t take another life,” he explained.

The dead chickens, which we had to buy daily from the wet market so they were ‘fresh’, were taken away by Father Michael. I never dared to ask what he did with them. Maybe, the nuns in a nearby convent made chicken stew. Maybe, the school-going children in the Church-sponsored orphanage had fried chicken for dinner. Who knows...

On the seventh night, a time to rest, we hosted a dinner for Father Michael, a few parishioners and my mother-in-law. “It’s all sorted,” he declared after he arranged his billowing robes and we bent down to kiss his ring. “Everything will be fine from now on,” he insisted, comforting my mother-in-law as she lay a hand on her chest and sighed.

Three days later, I vowed never to confess to my husband that all his family’s efforts had been futile. You see, within twelve hours of Father Michael’s failed sort-of exorcism, I sat with coffee mug in hand and listened as my son and father resumed their daily conversations.

“Mummy,” my son appeared at the entrance to the kitchen, a week later. “Come, come,” he said to me.

I put the mug down, took his outstretched hand and let him lead me to the playroom. He rushed to sit down on the straw mat and looked up at his playmate who was invisible to me.

“You tell her,” my son said to him.

“Tell me what?”

“Tata said he’s shame-shame to tell you.”

I smiled.

Shame-shame? Oh Daddy. Nothing’s changed.

Oblivious, my son added, “He said to say thank you.”

I swallowed. “For what? Please ask Tata?”

A few seconds later, my son looked at me and said, “For letting Tata visit.” He was about to turn back to play when he added, “And my name, Mummy. Tata said thank you.”

Turning on my heel, I left my son alone and staggered back to the kitchen. Shaking from head to toe, I quickly pulled out a stool and sat down. And then I sobbed for I was now aware that my father knew all along what I’d done.

When my child was born, I’d insisted that he be given a Hindu name in addition to the Biblical one my mother-in-law chose for her first grandson.

“Please,” I’d begged my husband. Mercifully, he’d agreed.

“His name,” I’d said to Father Michael a month later, “is John Sunder Pillay.” Watching the priest pour water from the baptismal font over my child’s head, I’d closed my eyes and silently

added, “With God as my witness, I will teach this baby to be deeply honored to carry his grandfather’s name, Dr. Sunder Menon.”

To Judge a Country

Enit’ayanfe Ayosojumi Akinsanya

A Prologue, Kinda

The year is 2023. The country: Nigeria. The new president is smiling. Two years ago, Nigerians had thought him dastardly. “Shameless man”, they said. “How could he publicly lie about his age like that? His eyes like *opolo* eyes. He does not know how to leave the race for young blood. A very shameless human being.” They went on and on about how he’d spoiled the country more than enough. Nigeria Twitter was on fire. The Nigerian government had to ban it from users in the country at some point. Then they lifted the ban the previous year to kickstart the campaigns. Nigerians insulted everyone over that, too. Called him, in particular, “ridiculous and despicable”. He had borne it all with magnanimity. Today, their children are waving small green-white flags at the stadium, echoing his manifestos like a tired school anthem. Talk about the real ridiculousness: the fickleness of a people. He cackles into the sultry May air and slides the window closed so that the A/C can hit differently.

Behind him, the Secretary of State and Special Adviser chortle on cue. They don’t have to know the joke. It is the president’s laughter after all; it *has* to be infectious. But their laughter is strained, particularly the Secretary’s. He wonders with irritation how the President-Elect can be so serene, holding a glass of white wine and staring out the window as though at some cartoon film. Doesn’t he know that the country is burning now, too close to the Rock? The terrorists used to be insurgents flushing out hamlets, sacking trains, raiding homesteads and pillaging whole farms. Now, the wind has changed direction. The terrorists are now the youths. The active, educated, young people on whose shoulder the nation is meant to rest. They shook Nigeria three years ago, the unforgettable 2020, spilling out into the streets, talking back at their elders, shouting “End SARS!” on all media. They could have toppled the fulcrum of the government, but for the timely wisdom of the —

Another burst from the president tears through the room.

Secretary of State Amaku clears his throat. “Sir, laughter is good, so good, but we can’t allow this peril to cont—”

“What peril?”

Amaku mentally grits his teeth.

“Do you remember the Black Mamba?”

The silence falls like a hand glider, whistling through the air-conditioned sphere and landing on the table, side-crashing, tilting the Nigerian flag away, freezing Mr. President mid-smirk.

“Black Mamba?” Special Adviser Balarabe Dauda peers at the State Secretary as if to give him a chance to repeat his phrase.

“Yes, the very one.”

The president snorts. “You can’t be serious.”

Amaku shifts in his padded chair. Why do people use that expression during situations that are actually serious? It’s silly.

“I do not joke with security concerns like this, sir.”

“You mean the same pack of northern ninnies who peddle high-class death and call themselves ‘government reformers’ but are actually wretched, hungry, bigoted terrorists who don’t even have the guts to operate in the open? Mere bloody terrorists?” The president is pointing outside, as if the bloody terrorists were standing just below his window.

Special Adviser has pulled a face at *northern ninnies*. He holds the slight in his nose like something died up there. It’s more regional an affront than tribal, but it is close enough. Tribe is the line, always the line. A man’s greatest reminder of conscience in any national upheaval is his tribe, his own. And the Black Mamba are *not* wretched and hungry. They are anti-government underground ops who kidnap federal operatives, military men and even dubious civilians, and—more often than not—exterminate them. They are heavily organized, secretly funded. They ride in cars bigger and more mysterious than all of the president’s fleet.

“Yes, peddlers of high-class death,” Amaku says, deliberately slowly, like a mother patting a feverish child to calm. “The same Black Mamba. Not all of them are from the north; it’s only headed by a northern man. A retired colonel. He has recruited from all parts of Nigeria, even from countries outside Nigeria. They are Special Operations. ‘Mercenaries for the masses’ ” He wags his forefingers in the air. “The ones responsible for the Mende blow-up and the assassination of the prime minister in 1958. They were also behind the abduction of that CBN governor during Abacha regime who—”

“Enough, enough! You are not reading from a bloody history book!” The president’s hand is shaking. He grabs a scented towel and mops his ugly face.

“Are you suggesting an assassination?” Balarabe mutters. “Are you saying someone is currently plotting to kill the Nigerian president?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your source? *Who’s* your source?” the man corrects himself, his Hausa accent thickening.

Amaku’s voice is quite solemn as the words roll out. “Secret Service.” He steeples his fingers. “I had a chat with the press secretary last night. He says he still can’t process the anonymous call he got yesterday evening, which we now know came from that underground op. He doesn’t know how to face the president directly with such news.” He turns to the Adviser. “A killer is out there. They have been assigned to take down the presidency, and it will definitely splash on those closest to him.”

The emphasis on *those closest to him* is not missed by anyone else in the room.

The president drops into a seat.

“Mr. President—”

Chief Biola Tinuosa, Lagos underworld kingpin, godfather for many presidents, governors and commissioners gone and coming, commander of committed ruthless thugs, ageless cabal lord, bloodsucker, bespectacled and bellicose, now President of Nigeria, hollers,

“Shut up and let me think! And get Doyin on the phone. Fast! He’s my Vice and strongest point. I have a feeling they will hit him first!”

Now, The Story

Suddenly, my heart becomes glass. The only way to be sure you’re not dead is to step closer and tap you on the shoulder, the right one. Like I used to do in the slum of Ijagba, when you were nine-inches buried in me and I needed you to slow down. Before you met Chetachi my best friend and your body was no longer mine. I should check your mental state, as I have been trained to, but I can’t seem to move.

Red flames are flickering in the pit of my belly. They said they found you in a hotel, naked in bed with a girl. The agents from Black Mamba, where I work now as a neurologist, said so. You like women, too? Does Chetachi know?

I will later realize that the flames were more from confusion than rage. Everyone who saw us together back in those days could have sworn we would become another Terrell and Jarius. They called us “The Miracle Couple”. We wore matching outfits, kissed at crowded bus stops and left corny photo dumps on Facebook and Instagram, where commenters trailed them with “Pepper us” and “God when”. The day we broke up, we were tangled in bed when you paused and I paused and I looked at your face, dappled with sweat, and the words tumbled out.

“You love someone else.”

“What?” It sounded like a sneeze. Sweat had trickled into your nostril and you needed to blow it out. Some had got into your eyes, too, so you were blinking fast and looking away from me.

I stared at your heaving chest and quaking arms and corrected myself.

“You are seeing someone else.”

You snickered. “Stop talking nonsense, Inyangette.”

“You are seeing someone else, Mustapha. You have started shagging someone else.” I leaned up on one hand and flung the pillow from under my back. Your smell was on me. I wanted to tear the windows open so air would rush in.

“Are you accusing me of cheating on you?” You looked wounded. It was interesting, how you always managed to convincingly express feelings that you were not feeling. “Despite everything we've been through together? How can you?”

“You called me 'Inyangette',” I said, resting now on the head of the bed, still stretched out, still naked.

“What?”

“You called me 'Inyangette'. You'd never called me 'Inyangette'. It's what my colleagues at State House call me. Dr. Inyangette.”

“So? Is that not your name?” You started to get up, to unroll the condom from between your legs, to walk towards the bathroom. Your butt muscles clenched; the hairs glistened.

“You'd never called me 'Inyangette',” I repeated, weakly, finally.

You turned on the shower so loud I could almost feel the drops hit me where I lay in the room. Your phone beeped on the dresser. A message. I knew your password, knew everything about you, but I didn't know you even had Chetachi's WhatsApp number. That you had typed “*I wish I hd met u before I met yo friend*” to him and he had typed back: “*Let's stop this o, I don't want Inyang's wahala biko*” — with laughter emojis. I didn't know that both of you had talked about plans for your appendectomy. My hand trembled. I didn't even know you had an inflamed appendix.

The phone trilled again. More jarringly.

“*U there???? Musty?*”

“What?” The word tumbled out of my mouth.

You stormed out of the bathroom, the towel firm on your V-shaped waist. “Why are you reading my messages? Do I read yours?”

I started stammering.

You yanked the phone from my hand. “Speak up!”

Water from your bearded jaw darted toward me, chilling me, waking me up. I saw my own erection rearing up again, and was repulsed. I wrapped the duvet around me and mumbled to the gold patterns.

“You left your data on, I guess. I didn't mean to. I thought it was Chief, or your mum, or maybe your sister. I thought the message was urgent. Sorry.”

But you were not listening. You had flipped the key panel open and read the message and typed back rapidly and were now throwing a shirt around your damp body.

“I am sorry.” I met your eyes.

“See, I can't be with someone who monitors me like this and questions every movement I make.” You found your jeans, the ones that accentuated your bulge when you walked, and slipped your legs through. “Let's break up.”

The moment was brittle. The air too frangible. You used plain words, flippant words, but I didn't understand what you said. I raised my hand, but you were already stalking out. I looked at the walls and asked them:

“What did he say?”

They advanced towards me in response. I was full of loose pieces. Was it because I corrected your typing grammar all the time? From what I read in the chats, Chetachi had not seemed to mind your abbreviations. Or could it be because I called you 'Mustapha' instead of what your friends called you: 'Musty'? Was it because I spoke less fluent Hausa than Chetachi did?

“It's fine, Mustapha,” I was saying two weeks after that day, via a voicenote on WhatsApp, after a long block of silence. “I know all about you and Cheta. He's my best friend. *Is*. How cruel and how funny.” I paused. I felt unmoored. “Just promise me to be good. He's my best friend and I will come for your head if you hurt him. He should no longer be my best friend and I should be yelling at you and staying put and telling you we are stuck forever in this. But I'm done with this dating business. I'm done.” To leave you puzzled, I added, with a harsh burst of laughter, “It was right on time anyway. Chetachi saved you from something.” Then I sent it and, after it ticked twice and went blue, I blocked you. Chetachi did not save you from anything. I dissolved against a wall and let all my past come out of me. My guardians probed me for an answer; my cousins had peeked in and gone to report me. When the

questions became a lead around my throat, I packed a small bag, resigned from State House, and returned to Grandma in Otukpo.

Now, I feel like I'm standing in a spy movie. The room they're holding you in is one with those small square black concrete walls, metal chair bolted to the center, like the one in which they trained you, these same people, back in Chibok. I know this hole. I've been here before, when they held the infamous drug baron from Shanghai hostage. It's the place reserved for the highest offenders of the force.

Gosh, my hunch was right. Even before I browsed through your stats on their database, I knew it was you. Every description fit your profile. *Tall. Muscular. Stubborn. Has a tendency to be humane.* I knew then that I had to be the one to come.

Mustapha. You were commanded to kill the vice president and disorientate the presidency. Weaken their defense so we can penetrate. But you went MIA, like a deserter pretending not to be a deserter. That's gross insubordination. You are a trained Special-Ops agent. You are an efficient sniper and this will not be your first killing. Here, they are going to torture you into doing what is good for the country. *Our* country. They hold you bound to that chair, like a common death-row loser. I imagine you, not as a Special Forces recruit now, but as a POW. The images are so clear. They are torturing you. You are strapped to that chair, buckled leather straps on the arm and leg rests, and someone is cranking up the kilowatts. Phase-3 memory wipes. I know all about it. Extreme bouts of psychological vitiation. It's not exactly electrocution, but it's enough voltage to annihilate the man I know, the man I love, and in his place leave an empty shell.

A zombie that will carry out this operation.

Are you a fool? Do you have to go through all of that before you do what you have to do? Don't you know that this is a double win for us? Doyin must die! He was the one who passed the law that criminalized us in this country! The SSMPA bill. He said we were not fit to live and to be. We can get back at him right now for that alone! They are many on it but we can start with him.

You have to get up and kill the vice president.

"Mustapha," I call.

You raise your head.

"Who is that?"

"It's me."

A heavy silence. "In... Inyang?"

" 'Inyangette' to you, actually." I want to wring your neck.

You sigh.

"I'm...perplexed," you mutter.

"You should be." I grin in the half-dark.

"But... But..." You cough and spit something dark out. You give the impression of someone who ran into barbed wires. You look so frail, strapped to that chair. It will be so easy to turn you around, unzip you, suck you to an upright stiffness, climb you and ride you until we climax — never mind the odor oozing from the black clothes they threw on you. I wonder incongruously whether you are still long, still slightly curved to the left.

"Speak up!" I say. Karma is a sweet throbbing at the back of my tongue.

You obey quickly. "But how come you are with them! You are a good doctor. How come you're working for the Black Mamba!"

I smile. The Black Mamba was the only organization that could shield my pain without having to name it. When I feel, I am whimsical. But with them, I could tranquilize. I could melt in there and no one would ask. I could numb my sentimentality with clinical action. I could feel less, or not at all. They have trainers and specialists who had served under Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi. They have inflexible protocols and vicious mercenaries.

"The DSO has taken a liking to me," I tell him. "I think you know what that means. That's why it was easy to persuade him that I could talk to you first without them having to use their fatal methods." I pause to let that sink in. "The youths agree that the VP must go first." I gnash my teeth. "And you will pull the trigger, Mustapha."

You shake your head. "You have always been unreasonable."

Red flames, once in my belly, now in my hands, zipping through my fingers.

"Oh really?" I step closer. The slap is swift, but it leaves ringing echoes in the hellhole. I think of dealing you another 'thwack' but I stop myself. Or else I won't be able to stop for hours. I have remembered your cold eyes inside your room, the coldness of your fingers when you snatched the phone from me, the water from your jaw hitting me in a wicked spray.

"Are you and Cheta still together?" I holler. I wish I had a pistol. I know how to crack off a few. I've got a surgery-sharp knife in my jacket, but I can't use it; I can't afford such close, direct contact. But a gun is remote—it requires no body parts meeting. I can pin your shoulders to that chair and watch you bleed out.

You spit out what looks like blood; it's too dark to see. You hold your face; the lone light catches your glare. I'm sure you wish, in that instant, that you could close your callused hands around my neck.

“Answer me!” My voice quavers; I hate the tremor so much. “Are you and my best friend still shagging?”

“Well, yes. Yes, we are!”

The tears are quick. I blink them back and pull out my special, multi-track phone. I still have Chetachi's registered number. I didn't block him online; I only muted him. He had been indecent enough to splash his status with pictures and videos of you and him. It had been horror itself. But I didn't want to erase him totally. So I muted him and blacklisted his number. I scroll down to that number and thrust the screen at your face.

“Is that still his number?”

“Yes.” You hang your head. Then snap it back up like lightning. “Hey! What are you trying to do?”

I press the phone to my temple and wait for it to ring.

“Inyang! What are you doing!”

“I'm calling your darling boyfriend to tell him you're not dead. You're very much alive and only distracted with going round hotels and sleeping with women behind his back!”

You lunge at me, Mustapha, *you* lunge at me. I step back in alarm. I had never seen you so splenetic. Your eyes are aflame with a terror I do not remember of you. You can barely get out the words — “Please, Inyang, I beg you, don't tell him!” The service bot starts speaking. Just before her voice drones to a stop and the first dial goes, I let the phone slide down my temple.

“He – he doesn't know?” I ask quietly.

“He does. But I gave him my word; I said I would never disrespect him like that again. I gave him *my* word. Oh, I'm so silly. If he hears about this now, he *will* leave me. I can't let that happen. I can't lose him. What have I done?”

“He knows?”

My hand drops limply to my side, and I feel the walls closing in on me as they did many years ago.

“You... You love him this much?” I croak.

“What?” You glance up at me as if you don't understand. Or as if *I* don't. “You don't get? Chetachi is my world. I don't want to cheat on him, that's why I go for these street girls that won't take my emotions. It's just sex. But he won't understand it that way. He's the only one I've given my heart. He doesn't believe that and it hurts like hell.” You stare into space. “I wish... I wish I had at least called him. But I wanted to get these Black Mamba guys off my back first. Going home would jeopardize Chetachi. They would track me there as they tracked me to the hotel and I didn't want him to get hurt on my account. He doesn't deserve that. If you call him now—”

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” I am tearing the black air in the hellhole to shreds. The flames have rushed back up to my throat. I am burning. I am unraveling. Everything I have rolled up like cigarettes and pushed into tiny cracks inside me are now popping out and fanning out to lash me in the face. I duck as if from visible blows. The phone clatters to the floor and I sense, rather than see, you kick it aside, far away from both our reaches. I sink against the wall and press my hands to my face. I quiver. I choke on my own wetness. Snot meets salt between my lips and, as I lick, I think of a whole country. Mine. I live in a country that robs me. I live in a country that tears every tendon from me. I live in a place where my rage is useless. I live where my past will never heal.

But you are different. You have the choice not to wallow in that space. You have a chance to love someone. A chance at life. You and Chetachi belong together, in a way I will never be. You have chosen him from the start. You will, of course, think only of the need to find each other again. But that would not be on the selfish account of murdering a prejudiced vice president. You will think of *that* as getting blood on your hands.

In my country, human lives are currency to the government and to the people fighting that government. If we drive you to kill the VP, how many more politicians must die? How many more civilians will die? If all the politicians in Nigeria die, will people like me be free? Will we have been avenged?

What is a prime government bigwig's life worth when, even if the president legalizes my existence tomorrow, I will never be free from your words, Mustapha? I will always carry you into my new relationships. Perhaps to judge a country, I have to be fair and judge myself first. Am *I* free? I am not. I will never be. As long as I remember these moments with you, Mustapha, my spirit is in chains.

I touch a hole behind me. It's wide enough for a baby to slip through. I leap up, my muscles stiff with purpose. I'm ending this. I dash for my phone. You try to trip me up but your leg can't move that far. I snarl and sweep the gadget off the floor. I hear your “No!” like a dead shriek. I am newly alive with a deathly determination. Headquarters is just a click away. The beep goes three times, an unbreakable secret service code, and soon the gruff voice of the second-in-command comes on.

“Agent XX! What is this? Word got leaked. They will move first. We got no time. Is he ready?”

I take a deep breath and smile at you. I want you to remember that smile because it's the last you'll see of me. I speak into the phone.

“Bravo. The prisoner has escaped. An armed SOS helicopter landed and broke a back entrance. This happened under my watch. I am guilty and I am willing to suffer the consequences of my ineptitude.”

I have learnt from experience that they will stuff me in a gas chamber. It's what they do to traitors, particularly traitors that shouldn't have been traitors. But you must go back home. To Chetachi. I whirl around, startling you, and drop the gadget through the hole I found. I yank out the knife. I work quickly on you, I unstrap you. I depress a button in the wall and a door breaks open. The wind fills my orifices and mangles my command:

“Tell Chetachi I miss and love him.”

“What?”

“RUN!”

I don't wait to see or hear you. I jerk the door closed and, just then, the man standing guard outside darts in, assault rifle trained on me, yelling.

“Are you all right? Are you all right?”

“Take me to them.”

He hesitates, gobsmacked, unsure what is happening.

“Do it!” I scream at him. “It's an order from above.”

Irish Men

Melissa Flores Anderson

I thought I was in love with someone else until the night Cillian stumbled into the bar. He sang along to “Fields of Athenry” at the top of his out of tune, out of breath lungs. He had his arm around the neck of a mate, whiskey five shots deep on his breath. His jacket hung open despite the rain.

I watched Cillian push the chairs and a table aside to form a makeshift dance floor at the university pub, where I spent most of my weeknights with the girls who shared campus housing with me. His eyes darted around the room, like he was looking for someone, and then he settled on me. He trounced toward me, grabbed my hand and swung me around to a song I’d never heard before.

“My team won tonight,” he said over the music as he dipped me toward the ground. He pulled me back up into his arms. I thought he was going to kiss me without even knowing my name. He looked at me and only then did his eyes seem to come into focus on my face. He paused with one hand holding mine and one on the curve of my lower back. His dark eyes swept from my lips up to my sepia irises. He backed away toward the door he’d just come in minutes before.

“I need a smoke,” he said and left.

I didn’t catch his name that night before he disappeared into the rain and I didn’t think I would see him again. All the accents and faces of the strangers I met melded into a collage of Irishness, reminding me of my outsider status. Not Irish, not European. An American abroad on a time-bound student visa.

Up to that point, I had met two types of Irish men. The ones who were all swagger and confidence, full of native pride and pints of Guinness. And the ones who were quiet and humble, full of repressed emotions and pints of Guinness. One could be forgiven for mistaking the second type for the first on a night when perhaps said man had too much to drink.

The second time I saw Cillian all the bluster was gone. He sat in a corner booth at the uni pub with a friend, a half-filled pint glass in each of their hands. His dark hair curled around his forehead in wet ringlets, like he’d recently been in the shower or in a downpour. Given the constant rain in Northern Ireland, the latter seemed more likely. I sat next to him and the smell of eucalyptus wafted toward me, from his shampoo or aftershave. The scent reminded me of home, of a grove of trees along Highway 1 that I drove through on my way to the coast.

He gave me a shy smile across the table as though he hadn't touched me a few days before when he cheered a Gaelic football victory. I thought of his pale hands against my California tan.

"You're American, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes. My name is Maggie. I'm only here a couple months."

"Name's Cillian. It's my third year here in Coleraine for uni, but I'm originally from Donegal," he said, and the cadence of his words sounded musical to me.

We talked that night, his dark eyes focused on my mouth with every word I said, as though he were trying to memorize my accent. Then he slipped away again out of the pub without a goodbye.

My housemate found me, another American student abroad, pint in her hand.

"Who is that cute guy and where did he go?"

"Cillian," I said. "I don't know. He's a man of mystery."

Big pearls of water cascaded down my hair and onto the shoulders of my wool coat as I walked home alone in the rain, no longer interested in the sweaty scent and sounds of the other boys I'd met, not even the boy back home who hadn't called, hadn't emailed, hadn't written since I left the country. Cillian took up all the space.

I dreamt that night of slipping on a slick patch of cement, and Cillian's warm, pale hands on my bare shoulders, catching me. And when I woke, I continued to fall, even after my housemate offered up news that should have stopped it.

"That guy Cillian you met at the uni bar? He has a girlfriend back home, just so you know," she said. "Irish lads all think they can have a girl at home and a girl away, and never the twain shall meet."

"I didn't know he was with someone," I said, a sudden rush of red on my cheeks that might have been from my embarrassment over developing such quick feelings for a stranger, or anger at him for letting me think he was single. "I thought he might like me."

"Do you like him?"

"No, not really. I have someone back home," I said, even though I didn't think it was true. Not anymore.

"Well, Cillian does like you," she said. "I heard him telling his friends if he didn't have a girlfriend, he'd be with you."

"He's quite sure of himself, to assume I'd want to be with him."

I played it off like his hubris offended me. But I liked the assertiveness of his statement, the boldness. Cillian was the first type of Irishman.

The rest of the semester, he and I never made plans together. He just showed up wherever I happened to be. Whether it was on purpose or on accident, I never asked. I like to get to the pubs and night clubs we frequented before him and train my gaze on the entrance. When he walked through the heavy door into the uni bar, his eyes scanned the room. His face broke into a wide grin with his cheekbones reaching up toward his eyes when he caught sight of me. He sat with me and drowned out all the voices around us, his dark eyes giving me an undivided attention I'd never felt before.

I drank a pint with him and the thought buzzed in my head that he wanted me. I drank a pint with him and he reached across the table to fold his large hand over mine, and my nerves fired off too many signals to my brain. Cillian maintained a two-drink maximum with me, and then he would disappear for a smoke. I walked home alone, the chill wind reminding me I had no one to keep me warm.

One night I stayed at the table, and Cillian came back with the lingering smell of tobacco on his breath.

"Do you fancy another drink?" he asked, his hand light on my shoulder.

I nodded my head and we exceeded the two-drink cap. I drank a pint with him and let him walk me home. We moved through the dark campus, my arms folded across my middle and his hands shoved deep into his coat pockets, a carefully maintained distance between us.

As we approached the door of my flat, a drizzle started up and I watched the lines fall under the porchlight.

"Can I come in to get out of the rain?" Cillian asked.

The real question lay underneath, swirling in the wind on the Antrim Coast.

"Yes, you can come in out of the rain."

He followed me and shrugged off his wet jacket. He shook his dark hair like a shaggy dog and it sprayed across the linoleum floor.

Cillian touched his broad hands to my cold cheeks. He looked deep into my eyes as if searching for permission, and then he stopped waiting and kissed me. It was a soft kiss at first and then frantic as he peeled away my damp coat and pressed me into the lip of the kitchen counter.

He pulled away for a second. "I told your friend I fancied you."

"I know. I want you, too."

I took his hand and led him up the stairs to my temporary bedroom. We kissed and rubbed against each other like teenagers without removing our clothes, frantic and clumsy in our desire.

When his fingers crept under the bottom of my shirt, I froze with guilt because I knew he had someone else waiting for him.

“Can we take it slow? Just kiss me tonight,” I said, as though that were somehow okay. Cillian nodded into my neck. We fell asleep with his arm wrapped around my waist, his hip bone pressed into my back.

Perhaps things might have turned out different if I hadn’t stopped him from moving his hand where he wanted, where I wanted.

In the morning Cillian left me drowsy and hungover in bed, the echo of his touch on my skin. In his absence, I didn’t want to take it slow. My time was finite as my visa ran out in a month. I made up my mind that the next time he asked to come in, I would let him all the way in. I could picture it all as if it had already happened and wasn’t still to come. His lifting my shirt up over my head, placing his pale hands on my bare breasts, the rise of my hips as he peeled down a damp pair of jeans.

But Cillian never asked to come in again and I could not find the words to say I wanted him. I drank a pint with him and pretended I’d only ever wanted to be friends.

I went back to my own life, thousands of miles away and eight hours behind his world.

I didn’t think about him often until I found a photograph of Cillian during one of my moves after college. It had been taken one of those weeks before he stayed in my room, before I knew he fancied me.

In it, he is immortally 23, sprawled on the floor in the living room of one of the old flats we lived in with his arms out wide. On one shoulder, my housemate rests her head, and on the other side, a mate of his laughs uncontrollably. The picture was printed with a glossy finish from a cheap one-hour photo place and the slick back had a faded date scrawled on it. The photo is bad. Too centered, too overexposed with Cillian’s pale features washed out.

I looked at the photo and saw something in Cillian’s gaze I had missed all the times he had looked at me. In it, he was not looking at my housemate or his friend. He stared straight ahead, with an unnerving intensity, his dark eyes coiled together in desire and denial at something behind the camera. And I wondered who else was in the room until I realized it was me only me, out of scene, immortally 21.

For many years, we were just that. Frozen in time, two people who almost were something to each other. But we destroyed it by connecting on social media and becoming friends in the half-

hearted way people are friends online. We sent happy birthday messages, congratulations on promotions, and liked each other’s posts from time to time.

I wanted to get back to where we had once been, on the verge of something meaningful. I shared some of the old photos and pushed him to reminisce with me.

Remember when you danced to ‘Fields of Athenry’ with me?

I don’t. Sure, I was drunk a lot in those days. But those were fun times.

Did you ever date an American girl?

Not really. I liked one, though.

But you had a girlfriend.

I broke up with her, like. After what happened with you.

Guess it’s a good thing I didn’t stay another semester or we might have ended up together and I’d have been broken-hearted when I had to leave.

Aye, me, too.

We danced around the edges of how we felt back then, a step closer, a step back. Like the first night I met him when I didn’t know he had a girlfriend and I was waiting for a boy back home to properly break up with me. Except now he had a wife and I had a fiancé. Even if we didn’t have other attachments, our lives in different time zones would have kept us apart. So I gave my undivided attention to my fiancé, to wedding planning, to building a life with a man close enough to hold my hand.

A few years after I was married, when the honeymoon phase had ended and life had become routine, I went to London for a work trip. I landed at Heathrow Airport and took the Underground to a hotel in Islington, and fell into a wide bed covered in white bedding, with space to stretch out for the first time in years without someone else’s hot breath on my neck. But instead of enjoying the peace, Cillian found his way out of the corner where I had sequestered him in my mind. I dreamt of the way he looked when we were young and the way it felt to be young with him.

I woke up with my hair tousled and my skin hot, as though Cillian had really been there. My body made the leap before my brain—we were in the same time zone for the first time in more than a decade. He lived in Dublin, an hour away by flight. I could blow off the last day of the conference and fly into Dublin for a night. I could rent a hotel room and send him a message online.

I’m in town for work for one day only, if you are free to grab lunch.

If I did send the message, I thought he would show up alone, his dark hair tamer, shorter than it had been when we were young, gray beginning to streak the patches above his ears. He’d be a little

rounder in the middle, but he'd stand up tall and I would reach my hands up around his broad shoulders to greet him for a hug. His long fingers and rosy lips would be the same as I remembered.

I fantasized about dressing up in an outfit I hadn't even packed. Leather boots with a green wrap dress that showed off a few inches of my tan legs and hugged the curves Cillian had once touched through a pair of tight jeans and a t-shirt. I wanted to see that cloud of denial and desire in his eyes again.

If we had lunch, after the meal, I would ask him to walk me back to the hotel and the weather would turn stormy. I would ask him if he wanted to come in out of the rain. He would understand the real question underneath, turn it around thoughtfully in his head.

I liked to believe there was a 50-50 chance he'd say yes, presented with the opportunity. And this time I wouldn't hesitate to tell him what I wanted. I would make the first move as soon as I shut the door in an anonymous room in a city foreign to me, with a familiar stranger.

Of course, I didn't message Cillian. I spent my days surrounded by dull men in wrinkled suits at a conference center and my nights alone in a cold room overlooking the city.

In truth, I understood by then that Cillian was the second type of Irishman, quiet and repressed. Whatever feelings he had for me once had long been suppressed and filed away in a part of his heart he could no longer access.

I stayed faithful to my husband who waited at home for me and faithful to my memory of Cillian as a boy who almost loved me once.

Funding the Apocalypse

Shane Wilson

I found Jesus in the restroom at my community college. He was selling pot. In fact, it was widely accepted around campus as the most premium shit that was available to people limited to making illegal purchases with excess financial aid funds. He had already run that slacker, Judah, out of business. Judah—who was called LightSwitch by everyone at the CC, even the teachers—was the official CC plug. That is, he *was* the plug—before the second coming. After JC pulled up on his red Razor scooter, everybody was buying from him—Russell Hall, third floor, men's restroom, stall three.

I approached the stall during class time. He always dealt during class due to the decreased foot traffic. The one downside to this philosophy of bathroom use was that this was when most people liked to shit for essentially the same reason. I tapped on the door the way Pete from Principles of Microeconomics told me to. I heard the latch slide and I was greeted by a dark, black face. I stopped, and I'm sure my face wrinkled up in confusion. You see, I grew up in middle class white America, where our Santa was white, our Easter Bunny was white, and our Jesus was *definitely* white. That was a different Jesus, maybe. Or maybe not. Who can say for certain?

“Is it true?” I asked him. “Are you really who they say you are?”

“Who is it that they say I am, man?”

“They say you're Jesus—” I trailed off suddenly unsure of myself.

“Yeah, bro,” said the son of God as nonchalantly as a savior could. “That's me. You buyin'?”

“Yeah, of course.” I fished my hands into my pockets for the roll of cash I had stashed there—a wad of tips from waiting tables at the steakhouse across town. “I hear it's top shelf shit, man.”

“You be the judge of that, my brother.” And Jesus Christ passed me the tightest-rolled joint I had ever seen. He produced a lighter and clicked the flame awake at the end of the joint. I inhaled deep and coughed the little cough that comes from inhaling something potent for the first time, and I thought back to that big picture my parents had of Jesus hanging over the dinner table at home. It was the same one my first girlfriend's parents had hanging over their bed—the one that freaked me out the time the two of us were fooling around when they were out of town. It's the same picture that every white Christian family has hanging somewhere in their house—white Jesus with dirty-blond hair and a white robe looking up and to his left—our right—at something we will never

discover. And he's *like totally glowing*. Why hadn't I ever thought about his ethnicity? Jesus wasn't from Europe. Jesus wasn't from Boston. "Holy shit" I said out loud and was silenced by a giggle from someone sitting in stall two. "You're Jesus."

"Hell yeah, I am," he said, and we laughed.

"Hey—I could go for some food," I said. "You hungry?" And moments later, we were stacking our trays high with food in the student center on the other side of campus.

"What's your name, bro?"

"I'm Matt."

"Good to know you, Matt. You can call me JC."

"How did you end up here? Can I ask that?"

"You can ask whatever you want. What good are questions if they never get asked?" JC took a huge bite out of a slice of floppy, greasy cafeteria pizza and chased it with soda. "I don't know, man. How do we end up anywhere? Dad gave me the boot—this is where I landed. That's about all it is to the story." He took another big swig of soda. "What about you? Why are you here?"

"It's a pretty typical story, I think. Parents made me go to college, I didn't know what I wanted to study, dad suggested something in economics because it means 'money' to him, I signed up, I'm taking classes, and I still don't really know if I want to do it."

"Where do you want to end up? Like, what do you want to *do*, man?"

"I don't know. I guess I could be a CPA or something."

"You gotta find something you can be passionate about, Matt."

"I know. I just look around at this shit hole school and I can't help but wonder how I got here."

"Me too, bro. Just remember what they say: *wherever you are—there you will be*."

"Did *you* say that? Is that, like, in the Bible or something?"

"Nah, man—I think they say that shit in Alcoholics Anonymous or something." And we laughed and drank and ate until I had to go to class.

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The days were all fuzzy back then, so I'm not sure how I started hanging with Jesus and his crew, but there I was—a first-year economics major—a consistent fixture in the JC posse. There were several of us guys—ten or so, maybe twelve. JC sold to the whole school—even some of the professors—but the inner circle was small. Sometime after midterms in that spring semester, he started dating this girl—Maggie, I think. She was a liberal arts major—something like English or

some other program of study my father would consider "bullshit that will never pay your bills." Jesus didn't seem to mind, as long as she wasn't talking about her books. The rest of us thought she was hot—dark hair, thick-rimmed glasses, bright red lipstick, spaghetti straps and shorts with high waists just clinging to her hip bones.

The addition of the girlfriend didn't shock us. What *did* shock us—at least those of us conscious enough to be shocked—was that LightSwitch started hanging with us soon after. The word was that he had been crazy bitter over Jesus stealing all of his business and running him off campus to look for other clientele. When he started rolling through, though, he never seemed upset. He was always kicked back in the shadows near the edge of the group. He never said anything and just seemed happy to have access to some pot that was obviously much better than anything he ever pushed in the library during his reign.

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Some nights, JC was really quiet, and we would just sit around watching old reruns of *That 70s Show*. JC laughed the most at Ashton Kutcher's character. Sometimes he would say things like, "I can't believe all you white people thought I looked like *that* asshole," and he would throw his head back and laugh with his entire body.

On other nights, he would be way talkative. It was on one of these nights, while we were all passing around a Colt 45 and sharing cheap gas station pizza, that JC told us about the second coming.

"It was never supposed to be like this, man," he started. "It was supposed to be a big deal, ya know? The streets were going to run red with blood, and the sky was going to be blacked out. There was going to be a dragon and angels and four horsemen—"

"Like the wrestlers?" asked LightSwitch.

"Shut up, LightSwitch." JC regularly disrespected LightSwitch in front of the rest of us. "Hell no, not like the wrestlers. This ain't no wrinkly Ric Flair shit. These were going to be the real deal—flying down out of the heavens pouring judgment out on everybody. You didn't ride with me and my pops? You were gonna be done, man." We all nodded, but I'm still not sure we understood. When I was a kid going to church with my folks, I was too busy hitting on the pastor's daughter to care about *Revelations*.

"That's what I like about you, babe," the English major girlfriend, Maggie, chimed in. This was her typical line all passion and emotion. "I *love* that you're a dreamer."

“Baby, I’m not a dreamer. That shit is *written down*. It’s in one of those books you read all the time.”

“JC,” I interjected. “They don’t teach that shit too much anymore. Church and state or whatever.”

He sat in silence, staring back at me.

“He’s right, babe,” Maggie said. “We don’t read the Bible. We only read *literature*.”

Jesus sighed a sigh so deep it felt like every sigh that had ever been sighed since the beginning of time.

“Ah. Shit’s boring, anyway,” he said. “Anyway—an apocalypse is expensive shit, man. Did you know that? And the paperwork! I ain’t got time for that at all. Not with finals and research papers and shit. Used to be we could just burn it down or drown it or whatever the flavor of the week for destruction happened to be—turn somebody into salt or whatever. That was before Heaven unionized, though. All these damn liberals flying around in heaven demanding special treatment. Now I have to put a deposit down for the dragon and the flying horses, I have to hire the jockeys and the angels, and there is this business of the Apocalyptic Angel Guild minimum fee. They all have to get paid a certain amount which I *definitely* can’t afford up front. I guess I should have been saving, but I always thought there would be more time, you know? We always think there will be more time.” We nodded again. Jesus seemed really upset that the apocalypse wasn’t going how he had envisioned. I guess prophecy only gets you so far. “So now I’m slinging pot at the community college, or I was. I’m out after finals.”

We all looked around. Pete from Principles of Microeconomics was the first to speak up. “What do you mean you’re ‘out?’”

There was all at once a tangible tension in the dorm room. The only light was from a muted episode of *That 70s Show* playing on the TV and a lava lamp on the nightstand. JC stood up slowly from where he had been lounging in a red beanbag chair. “Today was my last day, Pete.” He took a big swig from the glass bottle of malt liquor he was still holding. “I have to quit because one of you is planning to leave here tonight and betray me—rat me out to the administration.”

All of our eyes immediately shifted to LightSwitch whose hand was in the pizza box, reaching for another slice.

We knew he was the Judas of the group—the one with the most to lose by JC sticking around and the one with the most to gain by JC getting the boot.

Pete stood and glared at LightSwitch. “It’s you, isn’t it.” He wasn’t asking. “You son of a bitch.”

“No, dude. It’s not me, I swear.”

We all started to stand around the room—the gentle and peaceful vibe of the night effectively harshed. “You’re right,” someone growled, “it’s not you. We’re going to make sure it’s not.” And we all crept in toward LightSwitch. Pete was there first and snatched him up off the futon, sending pizza crusts flying. LightSwitch found himself pushed up against the wall with eleven angry faces looking in at him.

And that’s when we heard the laughter. Pete’s grip on LightSwitch loosened and we all turned toward the laughter to find Jesus Christ bent over literally slapping his knee through his cargo shorts.

“You guys,” he said through gasps of breath. “You guys thought this was like that? Dammit, dude. That shit already happened! That’s not what this is.” Everyone looked around at each other. Maggie was sitting in the red bean bag chair painting her toenails.

“What is it then, JC?” I asked. “Are you really quitting?”

“Nah man, I’m just transferring. This school is real shitty and I gotta get that degree. Plus, the state college across town is *way bigger*. This apocalypse ain’t gonna finance itself. I need to move more product.” And we all started to laugh, except for LightSwitch who crept back out into the night, presumably to start his own business back up in the library.

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That was the last night I ever saw Jesus, and I have never been as high as I was in that spring semester of freshmen year. I’ll always remember the last thing he said to me, though, as he passed me one last joint on my way out of his dorm room that night.

“Hey, Matt,” he said with a wink. “Do this in remembrance of me, alright?”

“You are so cheesy, dude,” I said as I kissed him on the cheek, and we laughed until the door closed between us—ending one of the strangest college experiences I would ever have.

# A (Multiple Choice) Test

Alice Wilson

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This is a multiple-choice test. For the best results, please answer intuitively without thinking too much about each question. Circle the answer that you think is correct. You have the rest of your life to complete the test. Once you have completed the test, nobody will know that you have completed it. Thank you for your participation.

## Section 1: Emotional Intelligence

1.1 You are speaking with your ex who you still have feelings for. She explains how she has noticed that your current partner's drinking has caused you to feel:

- a) Unpleasant
- b) Unwanted
- c) Unappreciated
- d) Unsafe

1.2 Your ex can see that you are still in this relationship but continue to seek closeness with her. She thinks this is because:

- a) You see closeness with her as a reducing pain in your other relationship so that you can ultimately keep pushing through that relationship.
- b) You need to feel in control of a relationship and that is more easily achieved with her.
- c) You are used to uncertainty in relationships and that is what she provides you with.
- d) You are gay and you need her to confirm it by being your girlfriend. Again.

1.3 Her aim in initiating this conversation is to remind you that:

- a) She doesn't think you are dealing with the situation well enough
- b) She would not tolerate the treatment you are enduring
- c) She is growing up and you are not
- d) She has done a psychology degree

## Section 2: Self-awareness

2.1 The conversation you have had with your ex makes you feel terrible. This is because:

- a) She is right
- b) She is wrong
- c) You do not actually enjoy the honesty you claim to crave
- d) You are sad that something which seems like it should be easy is so much hard work

2.2 You try to handle this experience by:

- a) Demonstrating empathy with how complicated this must feel for her
- b) Thanking her for being honest
- c) Ghosting her
- d) Eating a loaf of bread

2.3 Reflecting on this conversation allows you to realise that:

- a) You try to control conversations by asking questions and avoiding answering them
- b) You are unhappy
- c) Relating to someone with high emotional intelligence is challenging
- d) You don't like bread



Section 3: Future Actions

3.1 Speaking with your ex in the future is likely to:

- a) Be easier
- b) Be harder
- c) Haunt you
- d) Happen

3.2 You can deal with difficult feelings in the future by:

- a) Talking about it with a trusted friend
- b) Avoiding difficult feelings
- c) Writing
- d) Eating a loaf of bread

3.3 Your capacity for change is:

- a) Small
- b) Fragile
- c) Comical
- d) All of the above

You have now reached the end of the test. Thank you for your participation.

# Queen Blake of the Borders

## Mark Baillie

The East Lothian town of Prestonpans holds many reminders of the past. Along the high street, faded murals speak of its coal mining roots. A plaque outside the town hall marks the site of the first battle of the Jacobite uprising. And on the edge of the local park there is the National Trust-owned mansion that Maggie Blake sees each morning when she opens her curtains, with its vivid, mustard-coloured walls and elegant windows. But Maggie has lived there for so long she no longer notices these - and she doesn't think much about her own past either.

Today, though, there is no escaping it. Maggie's nieces are visiting and Emma - the eldest of the two sisters - has with her a dictaphone and notepad. Maggie eyes these suspiciously as she comes out of the kitchen with her customary tray of tea and biscuits. She is small and whippet-thin in a wolf print fleece with the sleeves rolled up. Her forearms are sinewy and her fingers gnarled from her forty years as a cleaner. She wears thick eyeliner around deep-set, alert eyes.

'I've got a uni assignment,' announces Emma, flipping open her ring binder and clearing her throat. 'Discuss kinship and its wider influence on concepts of cultural identity. Interview a relative as primary research.'

Emma's younger sister Kate sits next to her, reading a copy of the *National Enquirer*. She looks up from the latest Hollywood scandal and rolls her eyes at Emma. She is not impressed at the prospect of listening to her sister interview Maggie and puts a hand to her throat and pulls a face like she is being throttled.

The Blakes are of gypsy-traveller stock but have been settled since long before Emma and Kate were born. Maggie is the only one left with direct experience of the travelling lifestyle.

'Why not speak to your mum?' says Maggie. She scratches at the knees of her polyester trousers and the soft prickle soothes her agitation.

'Mum was never a proper traveller like you,' says Emma. 'You're closer to that life.'  
'But I only travelled when I was a girl. My recollections aren't reliable.' She fidgets with her cigarettes and waves her hand as if wafting away a bad smell.

'Come on,' says Emma. 'There must be something that stands out - a person or a place.'

As Maggie lights up, the smoke curls up around her head and she stares into it and conjures up an old, familiar face. 'Well, there was my granny. She helped raise us after dad died, so my mum could work.'

'Girl power,' says Emma. 'I like her already.'

'She was a well-known horse dealer, actually. It was her who taught me about horses - how to ride them, harness them, look after them. You know what else; she could touch a horse and knew if it was sick or healthy.'

The sisters share a sceptical look and Kate hums an eerie tune while wiggling her fingers like a magician.

'You mean like a horse whisperer?' asks Emma.

'No, hen. There was no whispering involved.'

'No, it just means...'

'Look,' Maggie snaps, 'I told you I didn't want to talk but here I am talking. Now, are you wanting me to carry on or not?'

'Sorry, carry on.'

The armchair creaks and puffs as Maggie settles back into it and resumes the story. 'See, if you were buying a horse back then, you couldn't always tell if there might be a problem - like buying a car, I suppose - it might look all right on the outside but have a bad engine. A horse might have a bad temperament or ring bone. But my granny swore she could tell if a horse was fit or not. Travellers would ask her advice before buying a horse - and if she said this isn't the horse for you, they always followed her word on it.'

'Amazing,' says Emma. 'It must have been hard for her, though, working in such a male dominated environment.'

There's a low, rueful chuckle from Maggie and she slaps her knees - 'Oh, she'd be spinning if she could hear you saying that - absolutely spinning. There was this one time, some big shot was wanting to buy one of her horses. He was offering good money for it, too. But whatever he offered she just said no. So he said, right, here's what I'll do. I'll offer you twenty pounds. That was a lot of money in those days. There they were - him with his hand stretched out and her smoking her pipe with a face on her like old milk. The crowd were loving it. You know what she did? She untethered the horse and walked away with it. She just didn't like the cut of his jib.'

'What a woman!' says Emma.

'How did she get away with it?' asks Kate, who has laid down the *National Enquirer* and is sitting forward.

'She was from a line,' says Maggie, 'a well known gypsy line. In fact, they used to call her the queen.'

'Seriously? We're like gypsy royalty?' gushes Emma, pressing her fingertips to her temples as if to compose herself. 'This is incredible. I might get a tattoo - something tasteful; a horse shoe or maybe one of those old gypsy wagons.'

At this, Maggie runs a hand down her forearm where she has a tattoo of her own - a homemade job. It's small and faded and she has always told the girls that it says luck, but it actually says Lucy.

Kate gets to her feet, tilts her head coyly, and does a royal wave. 'You may call me your majesty from now on.'

'I wish I could have met your granny,' says Emma. 'Have you got any photos?'

With a bitter suck of air, Maggie checks her watch. 'My programme's on. Photos will keep for another time. The past isn't going anywhere.' She picks up the remote control and *Flog it!* flickers onto the TV screen. The interview is over.

On Monday Emma is in the library with a stack of textbooks on ethnographic research. The afternoon ticks by slowly and she lets out a long, exhausted puff and flips her book shut. She taps her pen against her teeth as the interview with Maggie plays on her mind. There is a certain inevitability about it that a few minutes later she is up at the desk.

'You don't have anything on gypsies, do you?' she asks.

The librarian searches the database and confirms that they do.

'It's an old one,' he says. 'Eighteen forty-five. It's in rare collections. Through the doors on the other side of the main reading room.'

The rare collections room is as dim and fusty as the name suggests. A handful of people sit with disconcerting stillness, hunched over books and notepads. Emma takes a desk and waits. A few minutes later, the librarian returns carrying a wooden box. Emma peers inside and sees a small book with ornate, gold leaf lettering: *A History of Scottish Gypsies*. Also in the box are white gloves and a cushion. She finds herself leaning closer and breathing in the strong, sweet smell of the leather-bound jacket. It has a pleasant, cloying thickness that settles in her throat.

The yellowed pages lament a golden age long since gone, when gypsies moved in and out of royal courts as messengers for the kings and queens of Europe. Emma tuts and shakes her head at the language as she reads of the outlawing and persecution of what the book calls the swarthy and exotic race. An ugly feeling rises in her stomach as chapters tell of hangings, enslavement, deportations, and forced adoptions. Then a heading makes her stop. In thick black print are the words: Queen Blake of the Borders.

For the rest of the afternoon Emma is in the grip of tales of the gypsy leader - her ancestor - who emerged in the early nineteenth century and restored something of her people's past glory:

*'Queen Blake travelled on well-bred horses, dressed in silk-embroidered cloaks, jangling with gold and silver. She could quote readily from the Bible and Shakespeare and was a composer of fine poetical verses that held all listeners in her thrall. As well as Gypsy Cant and Saxon English, she was said to be fluent in Spanish and Latin and could hold her own in discussions on any matter among people of high breeding. But her gift with horses was singularly remarkable, with many stories of her healing sick horses and bringing the wildest into harness.'*

When the librarian returns to tell Emma they are closing she looks glazed and doesn't seem to hear him. She has filled her notebook and has cramp in her hand from all the writing.

The following Saturday, the sisters find Maggie in the garden, painting her front door. A cup of tea rests on the stoop, steaming into the April sunshine. Gulls squawk from rusty satellite dishes and there is a coastal sheen to the neat rows of pebble-dash houses.

'You won't believe this,' beams Emma. 'I found an old book at the library. It's got a whole chapter about one of our ancestors; Queen Blake. And you know what? She had special powers with horses, too.'

'Oh, I knew all that,' says Maggie, with a wave of the paintbrush. 'I grew up with stories about her. I think she was my great-great-great granny - something like that.'

'But you never told us,' says Emma.

'I did. I told you we were from a line.'

'But what if... What if I've got this gift with horses and I've just not tapped into it yet?' asks Emma, a little breathless.

At this, Maggie pauses the paint brush mid stroke and smirks. 'You had a meltdown the first time you fed an apple to a horse.' She turns to Kate and winks. 'I said to her - keep your hand flat or it'll nip your fingers. Would she listen?'

'Look,' says Emma. 'I want to know more about your granny. I mean it. She's a link to Queen Blake from the library book.'

'Have I not given you enough for your assignment?'

Emma isn't to be deterred. 'Never mind my assignment. This is my heritage. I've got a right to know this. And if you've got any photos, I want to see them.'

Perhaps it is the mellow warmth of the afternoon sun that softens her, but Maggie relents. She sighs, puts down the paintbrush, and wipes her hands on a rag. She goes inside and comes back a few minutes later with an old photo.

'Here she is,' she says, handing it over.

It is creased and grainy, but there is no getting around the fact the girls are staring at a formidable face. Their great grandmother's eyes glint sternly from below the faded print. Her skin is creased and puckered under a heavy brow with unruly eyebrows. Her chin is raised and her lips are crookedly parted, as if she was reprimanding the photographer as the picture was taken.

'Jesus, I wouldn't mess,' blurts Kate.

'She looks very... strong,' Emma says after a judicious pause.

There is a nod of grim concurrence from Maggie. 'That's why I left Selkirk when I was twenty-one and never spoke to her again.'

'What happened?' asks Kate.

A quiver flits across Maggie's brow and a vulnerability softens her cigarette-scratched voice. 'There was a terrible scandal. I loved someone but it wasn't the big, plain, dour, lump of a laddie who she wanted me to marry. Her name was Lucy. She was a girl from a traveller family in Carlisle and we used to go about the fairs together during the summer. It was when she told me that getting married wasn't for her that I realised it wasn't for me either. But, the thing was, there was no getting away from it at that age. There were young girls being married off left, right, and centre. There was such a fuss made about it; big gowns and parties with gifts - all of that carry on. So by the time I was twenty, people were asking and wondering, why am I not married yet? I don't know if it was serious what Lucy said about us running away together, but my engagement party was coming up that weekend and I was desperate to avoid it. So there I was, at the agreed place, on the agreed night. Going back was out of the question. Later, I heard that her family caught her and stopped her from leaving.' Her eyes drift away and once again she runs a hand over her tattoo.

Standing in the afternoon sun, Maggie smiles at the girls and this comes with a tangle of emotions. Amongst it all, she feels pride for her two young women with all before them. She can't imagine them without each other.

# The Back Seat of My Mom’s Car

Jessica Boody

In 1991, my mom drove a two-door black Pontiac Firebird. It was very cool, or at least that’s what I was told. We also lived in a trailer park. I was told this was also very cool at the time, but now that I understand sarcasm, it wasn’t cool. But, the Firebird was cool, no matter what anyone says. There was a gold racing stripe down the center and a sunroof, but you know what I really loved about the Firebird? It was a two-seater.

“Mom, can I roll my window down?”

“Of course, you can sweetheart.”

I rolled the window down with the hand crank—no small feat for a 6-year-old. I liked to put my arm out the window, make my hand ride the waves of the warm air, and pretend to ignore passersby behind my pink framed sunglasses. No one else could ride with us. It could be just my mom and me, and I knew every time we set out in the Firebird, I could have all of her attention.

We drove to my favorite beach. My mom had brought me here many times before, but something was different about this trip. It was busy, and she seemed more excited than she usually is about the beach. The packed gravel parking lot had almost no spaces, and the dry dirt flew all around, making it look cloudy. The Firebird was small and could fit just about anywhere, though, so we were in luck. She pulled it into a little spot next to a shiny blue motorcycle. The owner leaning against the fence nearby smiled and waved at us when we pulled in. My mom waved back excitedly, but I sat confused and didn’t wave. Although he looked pretty cool with his shoulder-length hair, leather vest, and black square-toed boots with chrome buckles on the side, we didn’t know this guy. I wondered how he was going to swim and play in the sand in that outfit.

My mom hopped out of the car and walked me over to this man she introduced as Neil. I tried to be friendly because my mom was so excited, but I really just wanted to go to the beach. We walked along, and they talked. We didn’t walk toward the beach, but rather the little boardwalk area where a boat festival was happening. The Stonington Lobster Boat Races. It was loud and crowded.

“How about an ice cream, Amy?”

“I guess so, but only if they have rainbow sprinkles.”

He sauntered off toward the ice cream stand while my mom and I sat and waited at a gray, saltwater-worn picnic table. He tried to talk to me a couple of times while I scooped the quickly

melting soft serve out of the Styrofoam dish, but I didn't have a lot to say and didn't appreciate his intrusion on my beach day.

I hoped this was the last time I'd encounter Neil, but he started to spend a lot of time at our house, unfortunately. My mom cooked him strange dinners with ingredients I had never heard of before. She laughed at every dumb joke he told. She seemed to like him for some reason. Maybe because he was cool, or because he had a cool motorcycle. He also said he had a lot of money and that someday soon, he was going to build us a big house and move us out of the trailer park. A year later, he did.

I'm not sure if Neil had any previous experience with children, but he didn't seem to know how to talk to me, so he just teased me instead. We had watched a movie together, "as a family," my mom would say.

"Mom, this movie is too scary for me."

"Amy don't talk during the movie. That's very rude," my mom whispered.

I went to bed that night, restless and on edge, thinking about the scary trolls in the movie. I heard a tap outside my window. When I sat up to look outside, there was the outline of a face staring back at me from outside. I ran to my mom to find her laughing and Neil coming back in the front door. I cried. It was just a practical joke. She said I was overreacting. Neil was just trying to have a little fun with you. I slept with the lights on for years.

Neil asked my mom to marry him in the White Mountains in front of their biker friends. I got to be a junior bridesmaid, which made me feel pretty important, but after the wedding, my mom and Neil went away on a honeymoon. I stayed with my grandparents, which most kids would love, but my grandmother was cruel and impatient, so this seemed like an unfair situation. After the honeymoon, a lot of other vacations would happen, but none involved me. Vacations meant time with my grandmother, and that never sounded like the paradise and fun my mom and Neil had described on their vacations.

The new house was fine, but so was the trailer. There were two big bedrooms upstairs and one even bigger bedroom on the first floor with a fancy closet and a bathroom with a huge bathtub. That was my mom and Neil's room. I wasn't allowed in there. My mom had always been right across the hall, but now she was down the stairs, through the living room, and down a hallway in a room that I had been forbidden to enter. The changes weren't welcome, but my mom seemed happy, so I tried to be happy for her.

My mom said she had a surprise for me. She said it would cheer me up and to hop in the Firebird. I was excited because I knew it was a trip for just me and her. Just two seats for the two of us. She drove me into the city, and we went to the mall, a huge treat for a kid that lives almost two hours away from shopping centers. I thought we would head home after we ate a late lunch of salad and breadsticks at the Olive Garden, but we had to make one more stop. A car dealership. Neil was standing there beside his motorcycle, just like the first day I met him.

"How did the shopping trip go ladies?" Neil asked.

"We shopped 'til we dropped, right Amy?" my mom said, handing Neil a silver credit card.

I watched the Firebird drive away with the car salesman and be replaced with a baby blue station wagon. "Brand new and super low miles," I heard the salesman say to Neil, and my mom commented on all the room we have in the back now for all the purchases we had made at the mall. It was just a car, but it felt like it was much more than that.

Neil drove the blue wagon to a small farm town about an hour away from our house. I sat in the back seat with my book and looked out the closed window.

"Neil, can I roll the window down?"

"No. It makes my hair fly all around my face. We have this ice-cold a/c, we don't need the window down."

We all bounced around as we drove down a long dirt driveway. An older man walked out of a dilapidated barn when he heard the car approach. He was carrying a box that he abruptly dropped on the ground near a rusty barbed wire fence that didn't seem to enclose anything anymore.

"Take one or take 'em all. Can't have 'em running around here," the man snapped as he walked back into the barn.

We picked out one sweet puppy that we named Oscar, although I tried to convince my mom to take the whole box. He was shaggy like Oscar, the Grouch; only he wasn't green. He was brown and white, and the fur on his floppy ears was curly at the ends. I loved him and played with him a lot, but he wasn't allowed in the house once he was no longer a puppy.

"He's an outdoor dog and was bred to be a hunting dog, so that's what he needs to learn to be," Neil declared.

Oscar sat outside in the yard on a strung wire run between two trees, and a pitiful doghouse sat under one of the trees. He had worn a path in the grass from pacing back and forth on the run. *Zip, clink. Zip, clink.* I didn't spend time with him anymore because I felt guilty about not letting



him in the house. Sometimes I considered just setting him free, but I didn't want Neil to find out. Oscar never went on a hunting trip, and neither did Neil.

At some point, things started to change and feel different. If I didn't have school, I'd have to go to my grandparents' house. I wasn't left alone in the house or alone with Neil. My mom just told me she didn't want to have to worry about me getting into trouble, but I'd never been in trouble a day in my life. I wanted to be home in my free time. I had my tv, my movies, and my books at home. It was quiet, and I had a big room with a big bed covered with fluffy pink pillows and a poster on the wall of Jonathan Taylor Thomas. My grandparents' house smelled like stale coffee and cigar smoke, and they were always watching game shows way too loud. The only thing to do was play cards or mull around outside, which was usually what I did. No one really wanted me poking around in the house, but no one really seemed to be paying attention to what I was doing outside either. I wasn't doing anything bad, but I frequently traveled really far from my grandparents' yard. If my mother was trying to keep me out of some sort of danger, I'm not sure that this was what she had in mind.

My mom seemed sad, and Neil was mean. He was always a bit mean to me, but he was mean to my mom now and to waitresses in restaurants, even my friends. I would hear them fight. The sound carried from their bedroom through the heating vent in the upstairs hallway. My mom cried a lot and was so upset about things that I didn't understand, and Neil was defensive and angry. Sometimes I heard banging on the doors and walls, and the arguing was quiet at those times. Many nights I listened, and I wanted to check on my mom, but the room was off-limits, and I didn't want Neil to be angrier. Now I wish I had.

In the fall of 1994, we packed up the baby blue wagon that my mom had since dubbed her "grocery-getter" and moved into a seasonal rental about ten minutes away. It was a strange old house with entire rooms that were closed off and heavy sheets that covered antique furniture. Even though there were many things in the house I couldn't touch, there was a secret room connected by a tiny stairwell to the first-floor laundry and kitchen area.

"Amy, where did you go now?" my mom yelled from the kitchen.

"I'm in the secret room," I said.

"It's not a secret room. It was a room specifically for maids. And it's very dusty and drafty so I wish you'd stay out of there."

It was my secret room. I hid in there and wrote lists in my journal. Lists about things I liked, things I wanted, and things I didn't like. Neil always topped that last list. I wanted my mom to be happy but putting these things on a list didn't seem to make them come true.

We lived in the old house for several months. I got off the bus there every day, and my mom came home from work a couple of hours later. We had a pretty boring routine, but it was fine with me, and I was pretty content with life, although my mom likely wasn't. In the spring, our routine was interrupted when my mom didn't come home from work on time, and my grandfather came to pick me up from the old house.

"Where is mom? Is something wrong with her?" I asked my grandfather.

"She's fine. Just needed to take of something real important tonight," he said.

I could tell he was hiding something. His normally creased brow seemed a little more furrowed than usual, and I knew something much bigger was happening than I couldn't understand.

I didn't go to school the next day, and my mom picked me up from my grandparents' house later in the afternoon. She had been crying, and I'm assuming she didn't sleep the night before. She wouldn't tell me what was wrong, but that was mostly because she couldn't start talking without crying. The phone in the old house rang off the hook with calls of sympathy, and my mom took them gracefully. Just before I fell asleep that night, I felt my mom sit down at the foot of my bed.

"Neil died."

I wasn't sure how I was supposed to react to this news, but I knew that I was more upset that my mom was so sad than I was about Neil's death.

The next few weeks were a flurry of family, friends, and, oddly, police. Whispers of words like traffic, firearms, and methadone were passed through our front door. I had no idea what it all meant, but I knew it was bad.

We moved back into the new house that Neil had built. There was a big dumpster on the overgrown front lawn full of mattresses and the furniture that had once been in the living room and bedrooms. The mailbox hung by a singular screw from the post, and the "1" in "126" was now on the ground and buried in dirt. Some of my mom's friends came to help unload the U-Haul. Everyone was quiet and just diligently put things in their places. The house looked a little sparse and under decorated, but it was better than the old house. We didn't put any furniture in the downstairs bedroom.

My mom took the second upstairs bedroom next to mine. The door stayed open most of the time, so I assumed that I wasn't forbidden anymore, and she was just across the hall from me again.

At this point, I was relieved and feeling like things might finally go back to normal. The only things that would make this situation even better were the Firebird and the trailer park, but I knew that couldn't happen.

My mom was withdrawn and started working two jobs. We didn't need the money. She just needed things to keep her occupied. She worked her day job at the bank, then worked as a bartender at night. I spent most weekends with my grandparents, and she'd come to pick me up after her last shift wearing skimpy leather outfits and smelling like cigarettes and liquor. She always seemed angry that she had to take time to deal with me at all. I became a burden at some point, and I didn't know what I had done to make her feel that way.

Eventually, I didn't need to stay with my grandparents anymore, and I could just stay home alone when my mom was at work. By this time, she had picked up a third job, cleaning an office building, so I spent most of my time by myself. A few new men came and went. A Pete, a Norman, a Tim, and a guy named Kelly.

"Who are you?" I asked the man in the kitchen as I poured milk on my Cheerios.

"Uhhhh, I'm Kelly. Tell your mom I had to take off, ok?" he said as he walked backward and turned the door handle.

"Bye, Kelly."

They were all nice enough, but none of them stuck around. I wasn't sure if my mom or the men had commitment issues until I overheard one of them tell her that he couldn't date someone who was in love with a dead man. It was my mom.

I started getting off the bus at a friend's house after school during the week. Carrie's parents were married, and her mom was a sweet loving woman that was always welcoming and usually had good snacks. Carrie was always kind. She also had two older sisters that were pretty fun. They were a happy household. A standard, picture book American family. Her mom drove me home most nights. Sometimes I could stay for dinner, but other nights she would drop me off before they ate. She seemed regretful when she dropped me at the front door of my dark, empty house, and she knew that most nights, I didn't want to go home. She never asked why, but because she knew I didn't have a comfortable life at home, she just did the best she could to welcome me into her home.

My mom became a regular drinker. It wasn't just the nights that she worked at the bar anymore. She sat in the kitchen and drank most nights quietly, but some nights were a little rowdier. She'd stagger in around 2 or 3 in the morning. Sometimes she was alone. Other times she'd bring a guy. The nights she was alone, she yelled a lot. Sometimes at me, but sometimes at no one. The night

before my 14th birthday, she flung open my bedroom door and flipped on the lights. She had been drinking but wasn't as drunk as she usually was. I covered my head and pretended to go back to sleep in hopes she would leave. She ripped the blankets off my bed. I looked at her like she was insane, but that night I saw her in a way that I never had before. She looked old, gaunt, and haggard. Her once beautiful long red hair was now shorter and thinning. The green eyes that used to be so full of life were now dull and bloodshot. Wrinkles framed the corners of her mouth and forehead. She had lived her whole life in the last few years. She stared at me expectantly, but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to say. When she finally spoke to me, her words were unexpectedly clear and not slurred.

"I know you're happy that he died."

It took me a long minute to even process who *he* was and why I would be happy about his death. Neil. I needed to choose my response carefully. The best thing to say would probably have been nothing, but it was clear that this had been sitting with her for a long time. I stood up, walked toward her, and grabbed my blankets out of her hands.

"I was never happy that he was alive."

I grew older, and my mom and I coexisted more like roommates than as mother and daughter. I moved in with my boyfriend before I graduated high school, and I don't think that I was ever missed at home. The house that Neil built was sold, and my mom moved herself to a little cabin in the woods a few towns away where she could drink herself to death in peace. I moved on throughout life, feeling relieved that I was free from a relationship with a mother that grew so much animosity for the child that her husband never really wanted.

Neil could have been the kind of man that loved a child, although it wasn't his. A man that didn't present himself as a carpenter but actually make his money illegally. Maybe my mother should have noticed the signs and red flags before the house was built and the marriage was signed and sealed. Or maybe she did notice, but she didn't care. My children will never have to wonder what their life would be like if they had a better childhood because their childhood won't be one they have to recover from. I want them to know that my car doesn't have a back seat. They can always ride shotgun with me in our Firebird.

# The Mapmaker

Emily J. Martin

The map appeared to me in the strangest of places. It slipped from the pages of one of my literature textbooks as I was gathering my things to leave the university library, having been kicked out by the security guard so that they could close for the night. I had been curled up in the corner for hours by that point, hidden amongst the shelves of the Ancient History section, where the books rarely saw the light of day and I could be undisturbed. Pen between my teeth, nose buried so far inside a book that I barely noticed I was being approached.

The security guard knew me well by then, the student card swinging from my neck betraying my identity: OLIVER PENBROOK, THIRD YEAR printed in bold beside the picture of my sleepy face; wireframe glasses perched haphazardly upon my nose, dark curls untamed. This wasn't the first time I had been forcibly removed simply because I was too caught up in another world to notice that it was already dark beyond the library doors. Even as a child I had always preferred escaping to the stories of fictional characters instead of playing with the others at the children's home, and it was a trait that had carried unflinching into adulthood. He had ushered me up out of my seat, and as I had hurried to pack up my bag the map had fallen from the pages, drifting on a phantom wind to land at my feet.

And now the map has led me here, to Abbotsbury, where, with heaving lungs, I finally make it up the steep incline. St. Catherine's Chapel greets me from its silent perch atop the hill, appearing through the fog like an apparition, its grey gothic arches bleeding into the grisly clouds. The air sticks to my skin, dense with humidity and anticipation. I couldn't have picked a drearier day to make the trek up this hill, but I'm here now and I won't turn back.

It would be futile anyway; I can't see the path I came from through the shroud of white, and the wind is picking up. The sooner I get inside, the better.

The doors of the chapel groan in reluctance as I heave them open, and inside I am met with more cold, a different cold, the dry, fresh cold of stone walls and packed earth beneath my feet. I pull my coat tighter and let the door slam shut in my wake; the walls echo the sound, bouncing it between them. Clutched in my shaking, icy hands is the map, corners wilting, crumpled from where I have stuffed it hurriedly into my bag over and over in my rush across the country. The now-worn sheet of paper shows a vague representation of a journey, almost like a children's treasure map; a

single line curls across the paper, marked at the end with the inky likeness of a bird in flight, in place of an 'X'. Along this line are written three sets of coordinates, one after the other.

The ground where I stand now is the last of them.

I start forward into the chapel, breathing into my hands to warm them, and survey the scene that greets me. The walls here are filled with wishes. It's an old tradition, dating back to a time when women would hike up this hill to pray for a husband. A quick glance around the room and I can see them, words scrawled on scraps of paper, crammed between the gaps in the stonework. Amongst all of these wishes, there is a secret, just like there was a secret hidden at both coordinates before this one.

At Hengistbury Head, with the tang of saltwater stinging my nose, I saw a quarry rendered useless by a spill of water, nature taking back what is rightfully hers, and found a series of numbers etched beside a crumbling clifftop. Longitude.

On Brownsea Island, where red squirrels scurry along the branches of a thriving woodland, I found more numbers carved into the base of an oak tree, the rain-damp bark soft and wearing away but the numbers still impossibly clear. Latitude.

Here, at the third, I don't know what to expect.

The wind outside is starting to pick up; I can hear it howling on the other side of the wooden doors, bashing against the stone. Not wanting to spend any longer in the cold than I need to, I begin my search between the cracks in the stonework, chill-bitten fingers stumbling over slips of paper, pulling them free one by one to read the secrets within. It feels invasive to read these wishes written in confidence, to run my eyes over the intimate longings of all these strangers, but I know that somewhere amongst them I will find my clue, and so I must. I cannot help my smile as I find a wish for a new puppy written in a child's scrawl, or the pitiful twist in my chest as I read a stranger's longing for their mother to be cured of sickness. So many secrets, but none of them the one meant for my eyes.

Until my shivering hand collides with something solid, and my guilt recedes, chest falling in relief. I pull it free, letting the light streaming in from the grand windows illuminate my findings.

A key. Worn, black iron shaped into a pair of wings at one end, the other moulded to fit whichever lock it belonged to. Wrapped around the long, rough stem is a slip of paper; I unravel it, heart pounding.

There is a single word written there.

Albatross.

\* \* \*

The house that stands before me is unlike any I have ever seen. It sits at the end of an overgrown driveway, bordered on all sides by mighty trees casting shadow upon the rooftops. With arched windows and intricate stonework woven throughout the bricks, it is more like a castle, complete with a winding tower clinging to the main house, its spire reaching heavenward. It is the sort of house that demands gargoyles to fully execute the appearance of vampiric beauty, yet this house has none, merely a mass of ivy slithering up the walls, binding the tower with its disorderly growth. The house must be abandoned, for surely such a great residence would be well maintained if it still boasted inhabitants.

It is this thought alone that propels me toward the entrance, map clutched in one hand, iron key in the other. I halt in my steps as I reach the door, a grand old thing of solid wood, embellished with black iron vines that match the key in my hand. To the right, there is a plaque nailed to the brickwork. It reads Albatross, and I think of the slip of paper I found back at the chapel, relieved to know I am in the right place.

Gulping down a lungful of air in the hopes of steadying my pulse, I raise the key, fitting it inside the lock. It turns, with a resounding click, and I heave the old door open.

Inside, it is far from my expectations. I had imagined empty rooms and dusty floorboards, shadows crossing the walls and painting the ceilings. Instead, the hallway that greets me is lit by warm candlelight, packed with the evidence of *life*. Books tower in small stacks, some of them balanced so precariously it's as if they are being held upright by invisible hands. A worn Persian rug stretches along the floorboards, disappearing into the belly of the house at the end of the hallway, and paintings hang either side of me, various landscapes in mismatched frames that seem to come alive in my peripheral, only stilling when I look directly at them. And then, as I step further into the hallway on wary feet, I see the maps. So many of them, scattered across the floorboards, trapped between the stacks of books, even spilling from the doorway at the end of the hall. Some of them are rough drawings of journeys resembling my own, some much more detailed, all of them varying in age and state of repair.

Before I can step any further, I hear the distinct shuffling of papers that tells me there is someone moving about in one of these rooms, and my heart stutters in my chest. A coil of fear unfurls itself in my throat, but it is quickly replaced by anticipation, the desire for answers.

"Hello?" I call out, the word echoing off of peeling wallpaper.

I am not sure exactly who I expect to find, but it certainly is not the small, slow figure of an old woman shuffling out into the hallway. At first glance she seems like any other old woman, grey haired and wrinkled, until I notice the way the candlelight blooms brighter as she comes towards me, maps fluttering either side of her as if roused by her presence.

"Ah, Oliver," she says with a smile. "I'm glad you made it."

I feel my brow furrow. "How do you know my name?"

"I know rather a lot of things," the old woman says, hardly an explanation. "Come in, come in. Apologies for the mess." She gestures to the papers lining the hallways, squeezing through the stacks to usher me deeper into the house. Too baffled to protest, I let her lead me into an equally cluttered living room and sit obediently on the worn leather sofa. "Would you like tea?"

I blink up at the old woman, still silenced by bewilderment. "Um..." I manage, my voice a little hoarse. "Yes?"

"I'll be right back," she says, and leaves me alone again, to the silence of the living room. Distantly, I hear her bustling about in a kitchen further back in the house. I survey the room. Strange trinkets line every shelf, little porcelain figures and empty glass bottles coated with dust. There are more maps in here, strewn across the sofa beside me, the lone armchair opposite, and the low table in the middle of the room.

The old woman returns before I can look any more, carrying a delicate teacup. I can smell it the second she passes it to me, lemon tea, my favourite. I wonder if it is just a coincidence, but something tells me that she knows, somehow, that this is my favourite.

She moves over to the armchair, shifting some of the maps before lowering into the seat, and looks expectantly at me. Still lost for words, I glance around the room once more, and find my gaze landing on a figure of a bird in the centre of the mantelpiece, its great wings spread wide.

"Is that an albatross?" I ask, thinking back to the same bird that decorated my map.

"It is."

"You must like them very much," I say, "to name your house after one."

The strange woman seems to survey me for a moment, silent, and I take the opportunity to observe her as well. It is hard to tell just how old she is; her worn, wrinkled skin suggests a long life already lived, but her eyes are bright and warm, no sign of a decaying mind. I can see lines around her mouth carved there by a lifetime of smiling.



“Did you know that the Wandering Albatross can cover ten thousand kilometres before ever touching ground?” she finally says, and I shake my head softly as she continues. “They spend so long in flight that they must forget how to walk on land, don’t you think?”

“I suppose,” I say unsurely. “Who are you?”

She smiles, the expression settling naturally on her face. “Drink your tea,” she says, and I obey, unable to refuse the gentle command. The first sip is sweet and bitter and warming; it settles me somewhat. “I am the Mapmaker,” says the woman.

I pause, lowering my cup. “What does that mean?”

“Well,” she says, leaning towards me. “Sometimes, people get lost in life. Like the albatross, they lose their footing, and I am the one that helps them find it again. Whether or not they know it.”

I reach for the map I had stuffed in my pocket, tea balanced in one hand. “Did you make this map?” I ask, holding it out to her.

“I think you already know the answer to that.”

I nod, and place it down, letting the clutter of the house swallow it. “Why did you give this to me? Why bring me here?”

“Tell me, Oliver, why did you follow the map? It appeared to you out of nowhere, and yet you followed it blindly. Why?”

I frown, irritated that she has answered my question with one of her own, but her words make me think. The map *had* appeared to me out of nowhere, with no explanation. Most people would have simply cast it aside, or at least wondered about its origin.

But not me. I hadn’t questioned it, just followed.

“I wanted to see where it would lead me,” I answer honestly. There had been little more to motivate me than curiosity, and the desire to venture somewhere other than the university library.

The Mapmaker seems pleased by my answer. She smiles that knowing smile again and relaxes back into her chair. “And that is why you were chosen. You are an adventurer, Oliver. You are looking for something, always have been. An orphan such as yourself, you’ve been wandering all your life. I thought you might need a little direction.”

I dwell for a moment on her words, wondering again how she could possibly know such a thing about me. I have never had parents. I grew up in foster care and was shifted straight to a university dorm the moment I was old enough. I suppose it was a lot like wandering. Never quite rooted in one place.

“But why here?” I ask again, determined now to see my questions answered. “Why show me all of this?” I gesture around at the house, at the maps, at the woman before me and her strange, impossible knowledge.

“How would you like to learn to make maps?”

“Make maps?” I ask, glancing around. “You mean, do what you do?”

She nods. “I have been looking for an apprentice, Oliver, and I have chosen you.”

I sit there on the worn sofa, cradling my cup of lemon tea, and think about what she is offering. Rationally, I am aware that I have only known this woman for a few minutes, despite how well she seems to know me, and that I still do not actually know who, or what, she is. The Mapmaker. Her ambiguous moniker suggests something beyond my simple human understanding, as does the subtle magic that surrounds her. Curiosity grips a hold of me, the desire to know, to learn, to explore. I think of all that I have to go back to, all that I left behind in an instant to pursue an unknown treasure; graduation, the looming threat of a life trapped behind a desk, of never having a place in the world. I realise then, that here in this house filled with maps, I haven’t once felt out of place. Confused, inquisitive, but not at all like I don’t belong here.

I consider the Mapmaker’s offer and survey the room. I could imagine a life here, a life learning how to lead the lives of others as astray as I am.

Placing my tea on the table before me, I reach into my pocket and my fingers find the key hidden there. It feels warm, like I was always meant to hold it. With a steeling breath, I lean forward in my seat to look directly into the Mapmaker’s eyes and say firmly, “When can I start?”



# Nemy

## Adedoyin Ajayi

Nemy saw me coming long before I saw her. I always liked to think she was expecting me, like that tiny bit of serendipity we all craved, rarely found, and mostly misunderstood. But then again, maybe she wasn't. I remember walking past the brook that day and skirting past the little muddy puddles that surrounded it. I wasn't searching for her; I was searching for peace, for solitude, for respite. I was looking for a place to shed my tears alone, in that quiet place where aching hearts sought meaning in hurt, comfort amidst joylessness, and desperately grasping at whatever wisps of relief that blew their way.

Nemy took a look at me and decided I was worth it. I don't know why she did, or what she saw in me. To this day, it remains a source of mystery between us. According to her, I wasn't cut from the same cloth as she was. I only understood what she meant later, much later. I was supposed to be the older, wiser head, the one with wrinkled eyes, with a wider, deeper perspective on life, on pain, on love and on joys. She was the more reckless one, less grounded with boundless energy. I believe our paths were intertwined by that unseen hand that reigned supreme in our lives. She was searching for a home, I was searching for comfort. I came to the Okavango searching for some measure of solitude; instead, I met her with the solitude in her. Nemy had grown alone, cast away from her home at a young age, and was forced to find her way much earlier than she would have liked. She was forced to do things she didn't have to do, things she didn't necessarily want to. She might not have admitted it, but they played a deeper role in her damaged psyche, scarred with loneliness and fraught with misery. Her eyes seldom told these sad stories. I, on the other hand, had lived a less dramatic life, experiencing joys and pains in a near-equal degree. She was the devil cast down from the heavens, a plague to her kin. My heart bled for her when she told me this. No one should have to go through life estranged from their family, alienated, cut off from their kind through no faults of their own. She often told me how I made her feel comforted. It was the sweetest thing anyone had said to me in a long, long time.

In her quest for survival, she had to do some truly terrible things, lots she wasn't proud of, some she wouldn't whisper, not even in the dark nights that she liked so much. I tried my hardest not to judge her, I tried to see it from her point of view, and ask what I would have done had I been in her shoes. I had always believed choices were before us, but I don't think I would have made better

decisions than the ones presented before Nemy. We couldn't make choices beyond what was presented to us. That platter was a closed dish, swiftly served before us, and made known in the hardest of moments. I liked the fact that she considered me someone she could talk to about delicate matters, since she practically had no one. In her dangerous world, treachery was woven in the very air she breathed, sewn deep into the fabric of life. She encountered crooked charlatans and smooth swindlers daily, those as capable of smiling at you while ripping out your heart, as adept as serving your guts on a dish and cajoling you to eat it. In her world, trust was as ephemeral and transient as the air that blew. However, what marveled me was that she tried to keep her heart intact, and she believed one day, she would find a family, find a home, and one day be accepted by her kin. She was a vagrant, cruelly cast aside; roaming the harsh world without a thought of loved one ringing in her heart.

"It hurts me, Doyin, you know? I'm out here daily, and it's not the thought that I could die that hurts me. It's the thought that if I died, I would be nameless, without a face, like I never even existed," she said, her countenance as Cimmerian as the thick, black mud of the Okavango. That cut into her deeply. Unheard, unseen, like a fallen tree in a park. She was like a leaf that fell to the ground, trampled upon, without so much as a second glance or thought. Nemy made me understand why men chased infamy, why they damned their souls for a momentary pleasure or spend a lifetime to enshrine their names in history. Well-behaved never made history after all. I asked her if she would rather be remembered for something negative than not being remembered at all. I think it was probably the hardest question she had ever had to answer. The thought of making evil, truly atrocious choices for the thrill of it was something she never considered. "Just to make a name?" She was quiet for a while. She didn't like that dark path, I'm sure. I didn't blame her for considering it though.

"Would you do it, if you had to?" she asked me.

I considered it for a moment. Such a shame evil deeds are remembered longer than noble ones. My world, though different from hers, had lots in common with hers. She loved hearing my perspective, relating her world to mine. I think she was fascinated with just how much likeness was found in our diversities. My world was no less cruel than hers. I replied her, "I just need my family and loved ones to remember me." *Same here.* She didn't need to voice it out. It hung heavy between us, our thoughts meshing together, her unspoken words as loud as the silence that lingered.

Nemy often called me "gramps." I laughed whenever she called me that. Although she was younger than me, she didn't know her age. She had been living alone for as long as she could remember. That fierce, all-consuming, protective love of a mother was something she couldn't ever

remember experiencing. She was a loner, something I was too. She had a wisdom that belied her years. Her heart had grown guarded, rough around the edges. She was a riddle, forged from a youngster's dreamy sentiment, a warrior's deadly fierceness, a survivor's creative adroitness and a lover's tender longing. She was younger than me, yet had seen more than I would ever see in a lifetime. She carried a weighty grief, her hands sullied by spilt blood, her mind burdened by loneliness and deep-seated pain she could never fully tell the extent of. She roamed her world an outcast, desolate. I imagined how I would have lost my mind were I in her shoes. Each time I was with her, I always questioned if I was really older than her. Nemy made me see experiences as a more telling way of determining age rather than years.

"It's not the years we've lived, but the years we've seen without aging," she once told me. It was something we often joked about, how she asked me about growing older, what she was to look forward to, when she probably had more to say than I did. Her heart never stopped believing she would one day find what she earnestly searched for. That dreamy look lit up her beautiful face each time she mentioned it. I think that's what kept her going. She was a weary traveller, a hopeful sojourner, who had nothing but a well-worn, creased map as a beacon of hope, a lighthouse from the choppy seas, in the face of the pitiless, unrelenting wind that buffeted her ship. While we make our fates, sometimes, they are made for us. Nemy's unforgiving fate had set her on a path she would rather not have treaded. It wasn't fair that her youth was spent looking for acceptance, seeking penance for uncommitted sins. It was for the older ones to sit, haunted from a life's worth of decisions to reflect and seek forgiveness from the lengthening shadows of the African dusk while crickets chirped around them. She had little room for mistakes, to take chances, to explore what the world had to offer, and someday tell it to younger ones surrounded by a fire at night, with either a memorable smile on her face, or a regretful look in her eyes on missed chances and routes not taken. I wished I could bear some of her weight, soothe her burdened soul. Ordinarily, Nemy wouldn't have made the list on my Christmas shopping list, yet here she was. She was like a precious gem you couldn't separate from the hard crust of the earth. You couldn't get angry at a boot for crushing an ant. It was the balance of the universe.

In spite of her hard life, she had a tenderness that made her cry sometimes. No one had ever seen her tears, those silent moments of inner battles with herself, in which her insides were torn between who she really was - a heartless wonderer, who brought misery to others, or a bone-weary, tenderhearted individual searching for love. Sadly, she could find no joy in the present. Only a thought of a make-believe future provided her with a little solace. She was like a slave being guided

by a vague shadow of freedom in front of her. I saw a part of Nemy that no one else saw, a part I doubted anyone would ever see. Being with her taught me about acceptance. Loving someone meant accepting them for all their dizzying loveliness and dark spots that marred it. I saw the free-spirited Nemy, the amazingly shy Nemy, the one who hid her stunningly beguiling, yet, infrequent smile from everyone. In those moments, it was a mystery reconciling the grimy parts of her with the one that purred over love stories. In those times, she would strut in her full, magnetic grace, drawing my eyes to her form. She would walk freely, with danger and dark thoughts far from her mind.

Nemy was incredibly shy. I was also a shy person, and I realized beauty sometimes, though strikingly shining to the outside world, could mask a deeper, placid interior. I believed Nemy saw her beauty as a curse. She was derided over being different. Long-believed norms had never favoured outcasts and hybrids in Africa. On the other hand, I was fascinated by her dazzling appearance. Nemy had never settled in a region, her nomadic lifestyle taking her from place to place. The Okavango had been the place she stayed longest thus far. I once asked her why she chose to stay here.

"This place reminds me of myself," she told me. Amidst the Okavango, that wonder, that great mystery, full of weird characters with outlandish desires; commoners, strangers, sojourners, friendly foes and deadly adversaries who skirted round one another to find tranquility, Nemy seemed right at home. However, peace was something denied her. The Okavango Delta, that river that never finds the sea, was fitting for Nemy on her search for acceptance and a place in the world. She was several shades of different, which she saw reflected around her every day. She loved the fact that there was that diversity around her, that extremity of variety which she was despised for. It would be no surprise if she chose to stay here, find some self-worth and choose to detest her kin for hating her. Hurt softly morphed into hate, a bitter cattiness borne from a deep-rooted, irradicable hurt. It was the way of the world, wasn't it? Who liked those who hated them with no just cause? Or any cause? It was uncanny how many things that existed in Nemy's world dwelt in mine too. Duplicity, betrayals, identity crisis, in addition to what she had combated her whole life – prejudice.

"You see Doyin, we're not so different after all," she said tiredly. I had to agree with her. If she wielded the winds of fate in her hands, would she have chosen a different life? It would be easy for me to say so. In the naivety of youth, she might have done so, in less than a heartbeat. No one would blame her. Thinking deeper, I don't think she would have done it. Like a vessel, she believed she wouldn't be hated by her potter for how she was crafted.

Her life gave her little room to dream. "I have to say though, in a perfect world, I just want a boy. Just a boy, nothing more," she smiled. She told me she only had these thoughts when I was with her. Listening to her, being around her, in her pain, I found resoluteness that I hadn't found elsewhere, like a sharp beam that cut through a midnight gloom.

I ended up staying with Nemy for a few years, dwelling together, like a long-lost family member you never wanted to let go of. I stayed with her long enough to see more of her graceful strut, more of those sorrowful, tearful rubies that glided down her cheeks, and listen to her secrets she seldom whispered in the dark. I loved her, she definitely knew that. But time, that great enemy of friendship, had to separate us. Our playground, the Okavango, had witnessed enough of our play, and we had to go our separate ways. Before I left though, I stayed long enough to see her have a girl. She never had that boy she wanted, yet, she was not disappointed about her girl. She named her after me. It brought tears to my eyes when she told me. Like she knew I would object, she told me long after I had gone. I could almost see her smirking with mischief at having played one of her subtle tricks on me. Her girl had her eyes, those large, soulful ones that latched on a part of your soul once she looked deeply at you. At last, I'm glad Nemy found some measure of peace. Not the acceptance with her family she craved more than anything in the world, but at least, she found some inner tranquility. And I hope she can someday sit beneath the setting sun of the Okavango, beneath those beautiful rays of pink and red that streaked across the skies and lengthening shadows of the African dusk, and play with her daughter, while crickets chirped around them, without those secrets of the dark haunting her dreams.

I can only hope.

# Five Masquerade Days

Daniel Paul

*We gods-translators cannot change our own fate.*

It was the first thing Baba taught Emeka. How he wished that was a lie now. But Baba never lied nor was he ever wrong. Baba taught him everything he knew about the kola nut and bones readings. So, he was positive, what he saw that night wasn't a lie either nor had he made any mistakes. Except of course disobeying explicit orders from Baba, but he was still a child and one could not blame a child for acting as one.

Emeka was only a seven when Baba began teaching him about the kola nut and bones. "It's a secret communication with the gods," Baba had said. "Only those who have been touched by the gods can see or hear from him when he speaks and you, Emeka, are just as special."

Emeka did not understand how he could possibly be special. His mother did not want him and if not for Baba he would still be under the huge tree at the village center, probably dead and part of the smelling things that came from there, but that was exactly what Baba meant. "Those whom humans do not want, are the ones specially made for the gods. How can humans then claim them? Ihe bụ nke chi mmadụ enweghị ike ịnara ya." *What belongs to the gods cannot be taken by man.* Baba had responded noticing the curiosity in Emeka's gaze.

Baba then told Emeka the tree god was that whom they served and Emeka, being an offering offered up by his mother was to serve the tree god till death.

At fifteen, he'd learnt everything there was to know about speaking with the gods.

However, it never really made any sense to Emeka. If it were left to him alone, there were no gods. But he could not deny what he knew and what he'd seen Baba do. Moreover, Baba never lied and Baba was wise and old and spoke with insights more ancient than he was.

The tree showed Baba the fate of the villagers and how to cleanse them in return for minor sacrifices of fowls and goats. One time, Baba had let him perform the sacrifice for a young woman.

*The kola nut and bones were not to be trifled with.* That was the second thing Baba taught Emeka.

Occasionally, Emeka had stare into the soundless night, bored and unable to sleep. He would sneak out house to the hut on the other end of the compound to try some readings on some of the many things that troubled his young mind, his mother being the ring leader. The first night Baba

caught him Emeka had the stars to thank for his rescue. Awakened by his night duties, Baba had noticed the golden flame dancing inside the hut. He'd hurriedly made his way to it curious as to why the lantern had been left on when Emeka stepped out of the hut.

Emeka had confessed to trying to find his mother after several lashes of koboko. When he tried to explain, breaking into choked sobs mid sentences and furiously wiping off catarrh from his nose, Baba had had a look on him. Something that looked acutely close to sympathy. Baba had never had that look on him before. He was a stern man, despite the tales of age on him. The look disappeared as quickly as it came.

Baba ordered him to his room, then made out into night, returning only later with the lantern and a bowl of grinded leaves he squeezed onto Emeka's back.

"Emeka, the kola nut and bones might show the future and tell us things we wish to know but it's not something we should joke with. It's as much a curse as it's a blessing," Baba had said.

A silence fell between them for a long minute, then Baba exhaled, rose from the small stole on which he sat, and sauntered back to his room.

That night, Emeka did not sleep. He stared at the floor all night, letting the flame keep him company, and was grateful for the burning in his back keeping him from thinking about his mother.

On the day Emeka saw the secret, it was the same as those nights. He had not been able to sleep, no matter how hard he tried. Every time he closed his eyes, he heard someone call his name in a sweet, beguiling voice; both soothing and terrifying. But there was no one there. He lived with Baba alone.

Outside, the wind crooned sweet, delightful melodies to which his window mat danced, the lantern flame in his room swelled and shrunk, swaying against the round glass at the beckoning of the wind. Once again, he tried to sleep. But once his eye lids shut, he heard the voice one more time. Firm and sharp. "*Emeka, rise.*"

Emeka's heart pounded, goosebumps crawled all over him as he rose from the mat. He picked the lantern, snuck outside, halting only to spy on Baba. Baba still snored blissfully unaware.

Emeka heard the voice again, this time coming from outside, hushed but firm, urging him to make haste. Every part of him screamed for him to ignore the voice, but like a hand in the dark, it reached for him, pulling him onward—never mind his own fear tugging him in the opposite direction.

Outside, he could see the hut crouched on the other end of the compound, dried leaves blistered the red soil fighting against the mad wind to stay rooted to the ground.

Emeka reached the front of the hut. He paused. Baba's warnings flashed through his mind, *The kola nut and bones are not to be trifled with.* The voice urged him on.

He stepped in.

Emeka sat on baba's small stool, pulled the clay pot with the kola nuts and bones inside. He picked them up, recalling how Baba had thought him, both hands closed, "nne madu nile gwam okwu," he chanted with rapt attention, sweat oozing down his forehead, shivers prickling his skin. He shook hard, the air around him cooed in near-silent tone, the voice urged him on. If he'd not been so focused on the kola nut and bones, he could have noticed the trees go silent, the wind stilling and even the insects and birds had stopped to watch.

He let the items loose.

The two bones formed an 'X', and the five red kola nuts formed a circle around it.

*Chineke!*

He blinked. *This cannot be happening.* But it was happening. *No. No. No. How?*

The voice seemed to chuckle just before fading away. Everything around him must have gasped.

He stared into the pot, silent, imploring it to change—there were rare occasions when it did. It didn't.

He could barely bring his feet to move. Every part of him stood still. The crooning voice disappeared leaving him all alone in the still night. Even the moon had crawled into a cloud and shielded itself from what was now known.

*Baba can't die. No.*

He hurried back to the house, pushing the mat that covered the front door open but as he reached where Baba lay, he halted, Baba words replaying again. *We gods-translators cannot change our fate. To know is to have the burden of what is to come ruin our present with no means to avert it.*

Emeka's shoulders slackened as he sauntered back to his room, the truth something only he would live with.

In less than five masquerade days, baba would die.



# Excerpt: Rays of the Setting Sun

Mahbubat Kanyinsola Salahudeen

I was ordered to leave the vehicle and go into the prison, as I walked towards the entrance of the prison, I was confused when I saw two emaciated men in torn, bloodied clothing seated on the floor, their hand bounded behind, faces covered in bruise and crimson red. It took me a confused moment to realize that they were dead. I gasped. Weakness swept through my entire body, and I felt beads of sweat gather on my face, I trembled in disbelief and my eyes began to prickle, I stopped walking hoping to regain my grip, "Move!" and I was pushed forth by an invisible hand, I was propelled to move forward with a fierceness that loosened my sandals. I barely managed to my footing without sprawling on the floor. While passing a double door, I found myself in a long corridor lined with cell doors, I stood silently without moving while the non-smiling soldier unlocked the heavy padlock, I was certain my arrest was as good as a prison sentence. The soldier gave me a violent shove. I flew sprawling into the cell.

I groped at the cell wall with my finders to keep from falling. I heard the slamming of the door behind me. I was trapped. With my palms pressed hard on the wall to regain my balance. I stood in a middle of a small rectangular cell

A voice filled with kindness asked me, "Why are you here".

I stood silently as she moved towards me, I made an effort to respond but I found no wits to do so, I simply crotched on the floor beside the wall. I blinked several times in an attempt to brace myself for some reason, the presence of those women gave me a feeling of consolation.

"I am Sultana, why are you here?"

I looked at her face, then into her eyes, her skin was extremely fair and her eyes shone hazel. Two other women stepped forth to listen, in their expression was compassion, I looked into their faces and shared the explanation for my arrest, my own words broke me, I could no longer restrain the sorrow eating away at me.

"What's your name?" The hazel eyed woman asked cupping my face in her hands.

"Khulood" I muttered

She looked into my eyes smiling, "Are you hungry?"

"No, no".

Kaleedah, please bring Khulood a cup of water"

A lady with long red hair held a cup against my lips, I took a little sip and passed it on to Sultana who drank from the cup before counting on her fingers

"It's been six months since I was brought here" she continued. "Yesterday was scheduled to be my wedding, but how could there be a wedding when I am here. I remember the trip like yesterday even though so much has happened after then. I admit that my fiance and I were feeling particularly happy on that day. We made plans to treat his family and mine with some special rice and fish. The minute we approached the KHAD checkpoint those dreams fell apart, we were asked to step aside. I grew startled and frightened, we tried explaining that were innocent and soon to get married despite our cries of innocence, we were detained and led here. We shared a cell at Al Ramadi and for 8 weeks I wasn't tortured or interrogated but Kareem was beaten daily. There were times they took him away and threw him into our cell unconscious"

I looked at Sultana and for the first time I noticed that the women's faces were deprived off hope except hers.

"There was nothing I could do to stop his torture, I had thought he was going to die from the beatings, just when I thought it was over for him, we were separated, never again have I seen him since. I don't know if he's dead or alive and as far as I know, not a single member of his family or mine knows where we are. They probably believe we are dead. Kaleedah and Lamia have been here for two months". She sighed and patted her raven-like hair, "You should get some sleep" she said.

Few hours in Pulecharki felt like days, my imaginations were tormenting, Kaleedah came over to me, "Get some sleep" she said and began to rock me. I was woken up from my brief but surprisingly peaceful sleep by the most exquisite voice, a male was reciting the Ahdan, I leaned against the wall and listened to the soothing verses.

"They're going to kill him" Lamia said almost in a whisper.

Sultana looked at the blue-eyed teenage girl and said,"Pray for him Lamia, for they will do something greater that death itself".

My curiosity was aroused by the soothing voice, "Tell me Sultana, who is he?"

"Asad". She replied. "He was brought here just days after my arrest, he recites the Quran, every day he is beaten and tortured but he never stops".

Through the wall, we listened to Asad, the pious Wahabi convert begin his nightly prayers. Suddenly it turned into screams. "They're going to kill him", I said nervously.

Sultana looked at me with sullen eyes before replying, "No, they are going to do something much worse, particularly to a devout Muslim."

I had no idea what she was talking about until the soldiers dragged Asad into the hallway, they stopped in front of our cell door before they took turns raping him. The horrifying rape when on for more than an hour until I heard the soldiers laugh and one of them said to him, "Calm down. You're our wife and you need to please us all".

I should have looked away, but there was no way I could, I needed to see it all, to absorb it so maybe a time will come that I will tell. Even though my head throbbed with pain as Asad's screams reverberated in my head, I knew I had to see it all.

Only a day after I arrived at Pulecharki, the cell door was opened in full force, I felt appalled believing that the soldiers were going to take me away for questioning and torture, but instead an unconscious woman who had been tortured almost till death was thrown into the cell, her face was raw with deep cuts, blood oozed out from a hole in her head apparently from a drill, her fingers were ripped out and some parts of her scalp were bloody, I was sure hair had been ripped off her head, almost immediately the soldier motioned for Lamia to come forth, it was her turn to be questioned. With fearful pupils, she stood up and walked towards the soldiers looking back at Sultana, Kaleedah and me.

"Go on Lamia, be strong. You'll see through it" Sultana urged on as Lamia was led on for questioning and torture.

Sultana and Kaleedah tended to the unconscious woman in an attempt to save her, it will take hours of nursing skills before she was slightly coherent because just moments after Lamia was led away and the cell door slammed shut, Lamia's screeching voice reverberated through the walls crying and pleading for help, the screaming went on for over an hour.

"Oh Allah ! Poor Lamia." Sultana sighed.

And then without a warning, it went abruptly silent. I looked at Sultana, then Kaleedah then the unconscious woman, Sultana looked somber and khaleedah perplexed just like I was.

After several hours of waiting, I grew agitated. I prayed. I wrung my hands. I prayed some more. My heart began to throb violently. I looked to Sultana for answers. And finally Sultana spoke, answering my unasked question.

"They've killed her, they finally succeeded in killing her". Sultana's voice cracked when she murmured after a long pause. Just then, a guard opened our cell door and asked, "Did prisoner Lamia leave any belongings behind?"

Kaleedah moved around the cell to gather Lamia's meager belonging which she later handed to him, he left saying nothing else. Later as we all mourned Lamia, the cell door burst open once

again and four men appeared, a bald portly framed man who had a whip in his hand called out, "Khulood At- Tamimi".

When I heard my name, my heart was gripped with fear, the man repeated my name, "I'm Khulood" I finally replied with a trembling voice. He snorted callously, "Come with us".

Almost immediately another guard called out to Sultana, "Sultana! You're wanted". Sultana was being called to torture, the last moment I would spend with Kaleedah and Sultana slipped away. Sultana's beautiful eyes met mine, we clung to each other, "I'll miss you Khulood"

"Sultana". The guard bellowed as he marched in to the cell to snatch her from me, I followed touching Kaleedah on my way out, tears of grief stung my eyes. The last thing I heard was Khaleedah's voice calling you, "Khulood, don't forget this place". I never saw her again.

I was led through the long corridor, I looked at the two guards, I noticed how they both stared at me with their lips pursed, I knew I wasn't going to be released. I thought I was going to be executed. When I cleared the steps, with my hands cuffed behind me, I was pushed into the back of the military van. I wasn't blindfolded, for some reason I was relieved but that relief suddenly became non-existent. What if I was going to be taken to the garrisons?, Was I going to be raped and thrown naked from a flying plane? My mind was moving fast, soon the soldiers turned to a much more unfamiliar area just then the vehicle pull up to a stop. Quickly, I heard gunshots, fear creep all over me, "Get down" an unsmiling soldier ordered.

# Behind the Cellar Door

Miriam H. Harrison

The cellar door was open, but as far as Daniel knew it had always been that way: perhaps not quite open, but certainly never closed. Maybe it had shut properly at one time, but since then the door and the frame had had a parting of ways and had yet to reconcile.

Some of his earliest memories were of that door. Memories of sitting in the kitchen, wondering what monsters were peering at him from the darkness between door and frame. Memories of marbles lost to that abyss, from which no mortal dared retrieve them. Memories of journeying—older and braver now—into the dreaded darkness and finding nothing more than pickled roots and disenchantment. With the monsters gone, the door was a door and the cellar was a cellar. Daniel left the cellar that day as something grown. Something sensible. Something dull.

So now the cellar was open and Daniel hardly noticed. There was nothing in it to lock away. Indeed, there was nothing in it at all. It was just one less room to pack into a box.

“Was that the last of it?” his husband asked. Sean seemed somewhat breathless—a common side-effect of moving day.

“Seems to be.” Daniel glanced around him at the empty shell of the kitchen. Stripped of all decorations, it seemed only vaguely familiar—a skeleton of memories. “I guess I was just saying goodbye to the old place.”

“Well, take your time,” Sean said. “The movers are still loading up the bedroom furniture, and I can finish up a bit of cleaning. I’ll come get you when they’re finished.” With that, he left.

Standing alone in the kitchen, Daniel found himself the loneliest he had ever been. To be alone is one thing. To be alone in a place where even the furniture has abandoned you is something else entirely. Even so, he was acutely aware of the years that had passed in that kitchen, the lives it had held. He remembered the countless old photographs that had cluttered the refrigerator through the years: old photos of a baby clad in blue, who grew into a bright-eyed school boy, who grew into a pimply teenager, who grew into him. He had hoped that the same fridge would one day hold pictures of his own children, but the world of work was now bringing him to a new town, a new home, and a new fridge.

The distant purr of the vacuum stirred Daniel from his thoughts, and as he turned from the refrigerator, he once more stood facing the cellar door. He wasn’t sure why, but Daniel found himself

stepping through the open doorway and down the small flight of wooden stairs. The light from above didn’t dare follow. At the bottom he groped about for a thin string hanging in the darkness. Pulling it, he found himself splashed in the light of a single bare bulb, bobbing about just above his head.

The cellar itself was nothing impressive. Then again, few cellars are impressive—this one just less so than usual. It was a damp and dusty place. Homemade shelves of mismatched boards covered the walls. They had once held his parents’ collection of pickled vegetables, but had more recently housed various items that he and Sean had been unable—or unwilling—to find space for elsewhere. Sean had been the one to empty the cellar the previous week, most likely directing most of the accumulated clutter to the garbage bin.

In spite of the cellar’s lack of enticements, Daniel sat on the lowest step, surveying the small space around him. It was strange to think that this had been the source of all his thrills as a young child. He tried to revive the feelings it had brought him to just imagine what lurked down here, but now he found that it was quite impossible. The door was a door and the cellar was a cellar. His monsters had only been in his mind, and even that had been short-lived once reality came.

Sighing, Daniel rose to leave when his foot hit something small beneath the stairs. He peeked between the steps just in time to see a marble roll into view. Picking it up, Daniel recognised it at once. It was small and clear, with a twist of red and yellow colour in the centre. A cat’s eye—that was what he had called it. In spite of the decades spent nestled among dust bunnies, it was just as he remembered it.

As he rolled the marble between his fingers, he vividly remembered his much-younger self lying stretched out on the kitchen floor. He had emptied his small pouch of marbles, the little glass orbs rolling in every direction. It had all been perfect: the feel of the cold, smooth spheres; the clink as they collided, ricocheting across the tile floor; the childish euphoria in playful chaos. But then it happened. He saw the one—his favourite—slip into the crack. As quickly as that, it was gone. Already he could hear the cellar monsters fighting over their prize.

“Daniel?”

He jumped at the sound of Sean’s voice. Looking up, Daniel saw him standing at the top of the stairs.

“Are you alright?” Sean asked, half-laughing. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Daniel glanced down at the marble still clutched in his hand and couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m fine,” he said with a smile, dropping the marble into his pocket. “This cellar has always gotten my imagination going.”

“Well, the movers are ready if you are,” he said, leading the way.

Daniel followed him from the cellar, but he paused once more before leaving the kitchen. He glanced back. The cellar door stood open, just as it always had, but it was no longer just a door. The cellar was no longer just a cellar. As he watched, he sensed something—or several somethings—wave to him in sad farewell.

With a final smile, he waved goodbye to the monsters behind the cellar door.

# The Sigh

Kate Torrey

For some reason, I thought I would be fast enough this time. It was probably hubris created when the adorably frustrating mutt finally let me in the room without singing his favorite song.

As I inclined the first bucket of kibble over the first galvanized feed tub, an oversized tongue sprang out of the darkness and knocked my elbow with a boisterous greeting. The bucket hit the linoleum hard with a hollow echo, then rolled across the floor at my feet, kibble scattering like marbles. My eyes widened as I remembered what usually accompanied the sound of falling food, and I leapt out of the way just as two furry heads the size of Mini Coopers came together with a soft thud that would have left me unconscious. Again. They easily shook off the impact and continued the search for wayward food with noses to the ground.

Three heads and one seemingly bottomless stomach was a puzzle I still struggled to solve. One bowl and they all think it’s theirs alone. Three bowls and they all want to be first. I reconsidered the idea of having three galvanized raised garden beds instead. All the vegetables I could have instead of bruises. I thought about it often, but would never actually do it.

I threw the too small tennis ball in a vain attempt at distraction, although it had never worked. Head three briefly considered it. Out of ideas, I pursed my lips and shoved my hands in my sweatshirt pocket with a frustrated sigh, but something sticky startled me and I retracted as if bitten. Head two cocked his head to the side, concerned for my well-being. Head one sniffed the air and recognition danced across his eyes. He sat, and ignored confused glances from the other two. He was focused on me entirely, ears forward and brow knitted. I reached into my pocket to retrieve the forgotten sticky offender, hastily stowed when loudly reminded that dinner was late. Honey cake – a recipe from my friend Sybil. She was always wise beyond her years, with the exception of giving me this infernal dog.

I looked at the cake, then looked at the first head – full of hopeful optimism and waiting expectantly. He looked at the cake, then at me. The tail as thick as a tree trunk thumped the ground hopefully.

The other two heads recognized the scent as well and the rear legs did a seated squirm of delight before going still. Rapt attention. Barely contained glee strained behind three pairs of eyes shining in the dim light.



For the first time, I was able to fill the first food tub unmarred. A smile stretched across my face briefly, and I was able to reach for the second food bucket before being knocked to the ground in a display of exuberant affection. I was nearly consumed by three honey twinged tongues coming from every direction.

“I’ve never seen him do that before. Sybil was right about you.”

I leapt to my feet, startled by the strange male voice from the shadows. I looked to my monster of a dog for help with this intruder, but he laid down and daintily crossed his massive paws at the knee. Head one followed the stranger’s movement intently as he stepped out of the shadow and into the feeble light of the room. Head two licked their toes absentmindedly while head three sniffed around for more honey cakes, briefly distracted by the stranger’s fluttering helmet.

“How did you get in here? Why are you here? Y-you need to leave.” My attempt at bravado fell flat when my voice cracked on the last word and betrayed my fear. The stranger ignored my rapid string of questions as if bored by them. I tried one more when he casually strolled up to my dog and pet head one in that spot behind his ear that he liked. “Who are you?”

The stranger shot me a crooked grin, amused at my confusion and alarm, as he greeted head two with an affectionate pat on the muzzle. “Sybil thought you might have a hard time with this, you know. She likes you more than most. Loaning you Cerberus was actually her idea.” He reached up to scratch under head three’s chin, which started the tail thumping wildly against the floor. The stranger’s sandals fluttered faintly in response to the vibration.

“Cerberus...” The question that was forming in my mind dried into dust and blew away as a different thought took hold. My heart hammered. “H-Hermes?”

A test.

The stranger’s head turned towards me and his eyebrows raised in response. There was empathy in his eyes as he saw the realization occur in mine.

“You’re here to escort me...below?” I swallowed hard when he nodded confirmation.

“I take you to Charon’s boat.”

“How did it happen?” I braced against the wall for support.

“I don’t actually know.” He shrugged one shoulder, then grimaced and looked at his foot when his sandal crunched on the spilled kibble. “It’s nearly time.”

“Nearly? Is there anything I ca—” The subtle shake of his head stopped me and I swallowed the rest of the sentence back down along with my *somedays* and *what ifs*. It was done, he wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t. I deeply inhaled a steadying breath to help me accept the next adventure, and

when I exhaled, I felt the air empty from my lungs more forcefully than I had intended. A final sigh that I hadn’t directed.

Hermes, seeming to sense a change in the air around us, stood up as if the train he’d been waiting on had pulled into the station. “There we are.”

“When do we leave?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Let me just finish feeding the dog.”

# Aurela

## Erica Marasco

“It wasn’t always like this ya know?” Aurela said as she threw a rock into the dry, cracked dirt that was once a pond. The rock landed with a thud, echoing into the vast openness. Vultures that had been circling in the sky dove down, hoping the noise would lead to a quick meal. There were four of them. They were thin and sickly looking. They walked in a circle, nosing at the rock, searching for what may be hiding.

Aurela raised her sharpened spear, shut her right eye, and threw it as hard as she could at one of the vultures. It pierced through the gray skin as the vulture squawked in pain. The other vultures flew into the sky quickly, leaving the wounded one behind. Aurela walked down into the dried-up pond, towards the vulture flapping erratically to get away but unable to fly. She grabbed it by the neck and twisted. The snap of bone made my stomach turn. I squeezed my eyes shut as she began pulling the feathers off. I hated that part. She threw it into her bag and we trudged on in silence.

We made it back to our shelter as the sun was setting. Aurela stayed outside and cut the vulture into pieces. I stoked the coals in the fire pit we dug in the center of our hut. The hut was made of old pieces of metal we had scavenged and hammered together with our fists and feet- signs from the highway, awnings from stores and cafes, and a beat-up garage door.

Aurela came in, pieces of meat in her hand, and carefully placed them on the grate above the amber flames. The fire hissed as I stoked it again with a stick.

“It wasn’t always like this.” She said again, removing her mismatched boots.

I shook my head in agreement. She was right of course; it wasn’t always like this. She reminded me often.

It started slowly. The winters became milder. The hurricanes and tornadoes were more frequent. The Earth was warming, and no one cared. At least not until it was too late.

The sound of scratching metal jolted us both up to standing.

“Hello?” a raspy voice called. The garage door shook as someone banged against it. “Are you alive or dead?”

The person continued kicking at the hut awaiting an answer.

They were part of the last men. A self-appointed group of thugs who went around every night searching for metal and other useful or valuable things to scavenge.

“We are alive. Go away.” Aurela replied confidently while pointing her sharpened spear at the door.

The voice muttered under their breath as they shuffled away. We could hear them banging on another shelter near us.

“Woo-hoo boys, jackpot!” someone yelled. “These ones are dead. Hurry, help me pull them out.”

I peeked through the cracks of the hut towards the sounds. Some of the last men were dragging the presumably dead bodies of whoever lived in that hut out as the others started disassembling the hut and throwing the pieces onto their wagon.

I watched the men pull their wagon into the distance as Aurela put her boots back on. We grabbed our makeshift shovels and walked down to the bodies. The thin, bony bodies of a man and a woman laid on the ground, faces down. Aurela sighed deeply, cursing under her breath. She pulled her bandana over her nose and mouth and started digging. I followed suit.

We dug until the hole was deep enough to contain two bodies. We carefully laid them side by side and I said a silent prayer for them.

I tended to the fire in our hut to cook the vulture pieces as Aurela paced, running her hands through her thin grey hair. When the meat was done, she took a small piece, ripped it in two, and handed me half. There were several more pieces on the grate but as I looked into her eyes, I knew what she wanted to do. She gathered the meat into a bowl and we went out into the night, offering food to our neighboring survivors.

When the bowl was empty, we sat outside of our hut, backs against the metal, eyes up to the sky, watching the stars.

“It wasn’t always like this ya know,” she said, squeezing my hand. “And all we can do is our best.”

She closed her eyes that night for the final time.

I awoke to her silent, lifeless body. I carried her down to her favorite place, where she said there had been a park she frequented as a child, and buried her in the spot she said she would sit at with her parents. From that spot, she said, you could see the whole world. She would describe it to me often. Luscious green plants and vibrant flowers in hues of pinks and blues lined the winding stream. The wind would blow through the trees, making the leaves dance happily. At night, the

benches would be full of families, eager to make wishes upon the stars. I wept as I covered her with the loose dirt.

It's been years now that she has been gone and now I am the grey haired one who tells everyone that it wasn't always like this. But I tell them to remind them how much better it has gotten. How much hope there is now compared to before. That all we can do is our best. And to make sure, it doesn't happen again.

# Strata

E.J. Nash

The car smells like French fries. That's the first thing I notice when I open the door. Then I'm hit with air freshener, the citrusy kind. Sweat. Leather. Pizza, but then I realize that's just the place next door. My mitts are discarded nearby, dark spots against the snowbank.

We have a time limit. Twenty minutes to get everything out of the car before it's taken away by a tow truck. I want to imagine car heaven with unlimited gas, experienced mechanics, daily car washes. I know this is not what will happen – I've seen *The Brave Little Toaster*. Mechanical fangs will descend from an unnamable machine, tearing the car in two, the pieces swallowed into nothingness. Perhaps this won't happen either; I'm not sure. I've always been too sentimental with objects. When I was a kid, I cried when we replaced our fridge.

First, we jettison the garbage. It's embarrassing to sort through the endless fast food wrappers and plastic cups, our culinary walk of shame. This is the easiest for us to remove, although we quickly realize we're wasting our time. The car will be destroyed anyways. We have to save what we can.

Mike opens the trunk and takes out a year's worth of sports equipment: tennis rackets, a basketball, bike helmets, skates. Most of this we only used once. At least the skates were memorable – slipping down the Rideau Canal, neither one of us admitting we were too cold. Wanting to be real Canadians. Eating BeaverTails, the cinnamon sticky against our lips. Mike was sad it wasn't actually a tail from a beaver. “False advertising,” he said. I remember seeing cracks in the ice and wondering if we would fall in.

Now people start to honk at us. Not surprising. I would be tempted, too. The mechanic's lot is tiny and sits just against a major road. If I took four steps to the right, I would be hit by a very angry motorist.

Mike keeps working on the trunk while I start on the backseat. We always joke about car sex, but we've never actually done it. Way too much clean-up, even though it's not as if the car could get much dirtier.

I dive into the strata of debris. I've become a geologist of my own life, digging through the layers of our relationship. The top layer is one of clothes - not surprising, since Mike's washing

machine is broken and he's been lugging his stuff to my place. I whip out sweaters, t-shirts, jeans, all the reds and whites and blacks and greens and blues all jumbled together. He's never understood the importance of separating by colour and remains shocked at his slightly-pink underwear. Next is one of Ottawa's hidden landmarks: a mountain of CDs. The car is a relic from pre-aux days. Whenever we go to our usual secondhand bookstore, I look through endless Agatha Christie novels while Mike browses the stacks of CDs. They're only a dollar each. The whole lot of them are thrown onto the snowbank, jazz mixing with pop, R&B on top of rock.

Our first Christmas together, I made Mike an old-fashioned mixtape of our favorite songs so that we wouldn't have to keep switching the CDs. I realize I haven't come across it yet. "Have you seen our CD?" I ask. Our CD. No need to mention which one.

"No. Don't worry about it." He's stripped to a sweater, his jacket discarded on the ground. "We'll find it."

Mike's ability to stay warm has always baffled and enraged me. It's not fair that he's been gifted this superpower, while I need to maintain a minimum of four layers in the winter. Long underwear. A long-sleeved t-shirt. A sweater, followed by a puffy coat. A walking marshmallow, as Mike put it. At first it bothered me, even if I didn't know why. I thought he was mocking me. It got to the point where I wanted to break up with him, which was perhaps the worst break-up reason I've ever imagined.

I talked to my sister about it. "Not everything has to suck," she said, then amended, "Not *everyone*."

Mike had been preceded by a series of boyfriends who didn't understand boundaries; he was the first to last past six months. Some self-sabotaging part of me had instinctively looked for a reason to end it. That same part of me was cold-blooded and still jealous of how warm he was. A self-heating battery of a man. I didn't end it, and I'm still a marshmallow.

By now I've made it to the very bottom of the pile. Next to the spider cracks of the leather are a layer of textbooks with words I haven't seen in forever – organic chemistry, organismal physiology, advanced cell biology. Mike is an environmental contractor, so he lugs around his old student textbooks in case he needs them. Not that he would. Google is a thing, I tell him, but he's a believer "in the old ways." I'm not sure what he means by that. The ways are old for a reason. They've been replaced by newer, better things.

Although now I'm not sure about it. Mike will get a new car, one with an aux cord and seat warmers. It won't have stains from when I dropped a hot dog – fully dressed – under the passenger

seat. Once, months later, I dropped a quarter and went searching underneath the seat. Instead of a quarter I found a glob of relish. Mike still laughs about it.

The tow truck pulls into the lot, and the man in the cab gives a friendly wave. "Did you find our CD yet?" I ask.

"Oh, God," Mike says. He rushes to the front seat, and I realize that we both blanked on the same thing. The CD was still in the player. Mike hits every button, tries every knob and dial. It just won't spit out the CD.

"We know all the songs," I offer as a consolation. We can recreate it. It won't be the same, but it's something.



# Tiger of the Highlands

Cindy Hossain

Elizabeth folds the map back onto its memorised creases and places it into the glove compartment. Every last inch of her car boot is full of things – things she will need for the expedition and random things the store clerk thought he could palm off on the naive camping virgin.

‘Now, I know you said you are taking enough drinking water, but I really do advise this water purifier,’ he said, adding it to the growing pile of “essentials” in her trolley.

Elizabeth is about to embark on a three-hour hike into the wilderness of the Caledonian Forest, in an attempt to obtain an image of the endangered Tiger of the Highlands in its natural habitat. This was her first paying photography job and she was determined to prove her worth to the magazine’s editors. Although Mother Nature is in her artistic prime this time of year, and the natural lightings is ideal; autumn in the Highlands wasn’t a desired time to be outdoors for prolonged time periods - this was echoed by the empty car park. With difficulty she manages to load the contents of her car onto her back and proceeds down the footpath. After walking for some time she strayed from the path, wandering deeper into the forest towards a flatting between the trees. On the bed of pine needles she sets up camp. Within minutes she secures the tent to the forest floor, feeling satisfied that her practice runs in her living room were showing their worth. She sits next to her pre-packaged tinfoil barbeque as the daylight is slowly suffocated by the dark. Using her fork to pick at the bubbling fat, coming from the tin of spam on the glowing coals she smiles at her Annie Oakley resemblance.

Her phone alarm wakes her while the sun is still in deep slumber. Although her body is tired, her mind is fuelled by the excitement of the opportunity to immortalise these beasts on film. The lack of civilization and complete silence lubricates her senses and she manages to hear the beasts before she sees their outlines in the now dim sunrise. She follows them for some time; with her camera lens she can keep an ample distance, remaining undetected. The sun is rising fast and she will have only moments to get the shot before they return from their nightly frolicking to their lairs.

She lies on her back, with her head angled against a rock, squinting at the sunrays. There is an orchestra of African drums pounding her skull. Her face feels flushed and her hair wet. She reaches for the top of her head where the pain is emanating from. Her fingers touch the sticky warm

crimson liquid. She winches in pain and jolts her hand away from the wound. Her red stained fingers fumble at her phone, she needs help.

“Fuck!” she utters when she realises there is no signal. She manages to get onto her feet before vomiting, covering her new walking boots in what is left of the previous night’s spam. Her legs offer her mediocre support and she has to rely on the crowd of trees as she moves from one wood pillar to the next towards higher ground. She forgot the first rule of photography, “when following a moving object on uneven terrain, one must look away from one’s camera occasionally to be aware of one’s surroundings”. She tries to memorise some landmarks as she moves forwards through the sea of evergreen. She anthropomorphizes the trees, but frustratingly the wonky eyed pirates and pointy nosed witches soon blend into one gargoyle image. She stops to wipe some blood trickling into her eyes before checking her mobile phone again.

“Please!” she begs as she looks at the screen, before realising there is still no signal. “Fuck!” As she proceeds again in the sea of evergreen she spots sunrays reflecting on something in the distance between the trees. Following the light, which glistens like diamonds encapsulated in a rhombus prison on a new love’s engagement ring, she discovers a stream of water. Elizabeth now too weak to walk crawls towards the edge of the water. She scoops the cold liquid into her hands and showers her face with it. It brings only momentarily relief. Lying down next to the stream she checks her phone one last time, before closing her eyes to try and calm her spinning surroundings.

“Lily!” a voice interrupts her respite. Someone is looking for me! They have come to save me! “Lily!” the voice shouts again.

“I’m here,” she manages to whisper back, as her tongue is too heavy to achieve anything greater.

“Lily, it’s ok now, I have come for you,” the voice reassures her. She turns her head in the direction of the voice, and through her blurry bloodstained eyes she can see a male figure approaching her. “Daddy?” she says to the figure now standing next to her.

‘It’s ok now darling,’ he reassures her again, smiling as he towers over her.

“But, Daddy, you are dead!” she whispers, alarmed.

“So are you my dear,” he says.

# Crosswalk Stares and Streetlight Kisses

Mariya Kika

You notice him: walking beside you on the streets of this city, your city. The city you had escaped to, that you had made your own. 18 and hopeful, tired of the suburbs and struggling to bend stop signs; here was a future unknown and streets unexplored. That is, until you met him. He had shown you the way. These streets are yours as they are his, a gift. He’d gifted you his childhood, his secrets, this city’s secrets. Lit streetlights with a wink, stopped traffic with a wave, cut down shortcuts you swore never existed. You’ve known him for years, have more to discover still, but tonight you notice him in his mundane beauty.

You notice the way the setting sun sets his eyes alight—the glowing amber of a yellow light—burns the tips of his locks—sunlight through glass—kisses upon his freckles—the populace from skyscraper views. He is a good man and, in this moment, you decide he is the best man you know. Realize he is everything you’ve ever wanted. He’d been the dream you were chasing when you first moved here. You hadn’t known it, not at first, but he had guided you, hand outstretched, mischief in his eyes, a finger pressed against his lips. Your own little secret. He was that first friend, the one that took you to all the sights, that introduced you to coffee spots and hole-in-the-walls, that helped you create a home. He is a reflection of this city. And this is your one shot. Right here, in the streets of this city. Always a moment away from an undiscovered path.

Your feet slow, his as well. You stop short of the doubts hurtling towards you, a pedestrian at the street corner. *What if he runs? Ignores me? What if his phone goes off? What if my phone goes off?*

It’s been three seconds but, to him, a second is an eternity. Your voice is a rumbling subway, “Will you marry me?”

He grabs your hand, smiles, a blinding store display, “Yes.”

And here you are, a ring on your finger, its counterpart on his. A decadent cake, an urban backdrop, only your closest friends in satin and silk. The dinner is delicious, the view perfect. The city lights glow that much brighter, the skyline that much clearer. Everyone dances, laughs, celebrates. They disperse, wisps of clouds behind buildings, you smile into the kiss your husband brushes against your lips.

You move into a bigger apartment, still in this city. You have a fancy stroller and a daughter who is two, with rosy cheeks and his hair. The city traffic always quiets when she’s put to sleep. Another child is a possibility and the man with the blinding smile is still here, pressing sparking streetlight kisses to your cheeks. You spend half a lifetime waiting for him to leave, to slip down a secret path and lose himself to the city. He doesn’t. He is still here.

You are old, your children’s children draw pictures for you. They are on your refrigerator. The man with the elevator laugh—rising, rising, rising—is next to you on your oak porch. Just outside the limits of the city that had been yours, that you had relinquished to your children. He now makes the floorboards creak, shuts windows with a smile. He is content, even away from his city. This is enough. He is holding your crumpled hand the way he did all those years ago when he welcomed you into a strange embrace and promised his place at your side. His eyes crinkle, cracks in the sidewalk, when he thanks you.

You ask, “For what, my love?”

He answers, voice crosswalk slow, “For that night, all those years ago. When you were brave. I was a coward, but you were brave.”

You are blushing now, harder than ever before, stop sign red. You squeeze his hand, there is only air. You turn your head, you find no one.

You are standing still on the sidewalk, pedestrians shoving into you, throwing dirty glances. He is still walking. Your phone rings, a horn upon a green light. You crane your neck, his phone is against his ear, you look down, it is not him. You look up, he is gone, swallowed by the city.

Months later, you try to remember that phone call as you congratulate him on his engagement. You can't, its contents the buzz of the city.

You cannot begrudge him his happiness, not when he seems to spark ever brighter.

A year later, he is gone. No longer of this city.

# The Count

Holly Eva Allen

“Oh my God, Josh is in rehab,” Charlotte gasped histrionically with a wave, spilling a few drops of her French 75 onto her laptop below.

Marcie glanced over her shoulder from the kitchen where she stood emptying a bag of half-burned popcorn into a big plastic bowl. *I can hear her laptop fan from here*, Marcie thought. *That thing is on its last leg.*

“Well, it’s about time,” Marcie said.

“You remember that time he took apart the shed in our backyard and used the wood to build that horrible bridge? He dug that little riverbed or whatever he called it all around the back of the house and filled it with hose water,” Charlotte scoffed.

“I guess he needed a bridge then,” Marcie laughed.

“He didn’t even lay gravel or rocks in the creek or moat or whatever. The whole thing was just a giant channel of mud and the bridge collapsed right into it. Luckily, I wasn’t the one walking on that damn thing.”

Marcie offered up a meager chuckle under her breath and brought the bowl of popcorn and a small dish of baby carrots with hummus over to the coffee table. Charlotte set down her cocktail glass for the first time to snatch up a handful of popcorn.

“What about Alfonse?” Charlotte asked with an eager grin.

Marcie shrugged.

“What about him?”

Charlotte scoffed and a small fleck of popcorn escaped her lips.

“Don’t you wanna see what he’s up to? It’s no fun stalking people online if we only do my exes.” Charlotte said with a small, bark-like laugh.

Marcie blinked. She hadn’t thought about Alfonse in a long time.

“I mean, I guess,” she said finally.

Charlotte took a sudden gulp of her drink, finishing it off, and began typing.

“What was his last name again? Singer?”

“Springer,” Marcie corrected.

A few moments later and Alfonse's deep-set eyes and pallid face were staring back at them. Marcie let her eyes follow the hawk-like line of his nose up to the golden point of his widow's peak. She waited a beat, expecting to feel nostalgic, perhaps. Or maybe bitter. She grabbed a baby carrot and dipped it in hummus. The crunch was loud. *Nothing.*

"Look at this," Charlotte whispered, though the two sat alone in Marcie's apartment with the windows shuttered and locked. "It says he's in a relationship with some girl from the office. I didn't know they let employees date each other at his company! I guess tech-heads have to date other tech-heads, huh? It's better to have office drama than to sentence them all to die alone."

Charlotte laughed boisterously, dropping a hummus-covered baby carrot onto the drab, beige carpet. Marcie looked down at the lone carrot. *Hummus doesn't stain. Does it?* When Marcie didn't join in the laughter, Charlotte gave her a small elbow to the side.

"Hey, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Marcie said.

*Is something the matter with me? Should I care?* Marcie nibbled her lower lip thoughtfully.

"Most people have some kinda reaction to their exes, you know? You need another drink, that's your problem."

"I don't want to get a headache tomorrow; I have a meeting with our PR manager."

Charlotte gave a hearty sigh, complete with exaggerated eyeroll.

"So responsible," she teased. "Listen, let's check this new girlfriend of his."

Marcie retrieved a paper towel from the kitchen counter. She was just beginning to pick the carrot up off of the floor when Charlotte spoke again.

"Whoa. Her timeline is full of posts about old anime. She's obsessed. Public photos of her in some get-up at a comic-con? Cringe."

Charlotte looked towards the left-hand side of the couch, clearly expecting Marcie to be there, wanting to gauge her reaction. When Charlotte found the rest of the couch empty, she looked around slowly until she found Marcie kneeling to her right with a wad of paper towel.

"Oh my God, don't scare me like that," she huffed.

"Sorry," Marcie mumbled on her way to the trash can.

Charlotte chomped down on another carrot. *Please don't drop this one.*

"You won't believe this! Remember Judy?"

Marcie had just stepped on the foot of the touchless trashcan when Charlotte spoke. As soon as Marcie processed the words, her muscles stiffened. She stared at the contents of the trashcan without really seeing them.

"Judy?" she parroted; her voice softer than she'd expected.

"Yeah, Judy Haggard! You used to be attached at the hip. If you two hadn't gotten into that tiff, I probably never would've made the position of best friend," Charlotte snickered playfully.

*Judy.* Marcie stood before the open trashcan, unbothered by the heavy, malodorous fumes of week-old chicken leftovers and bitter coffee grounds. She didn't see any of it. Instead, she pictured herself and Judy sitting on the old green wagon beside the railroad crossing where they would drink cheap wine and count the cars of passing trains.

"Wow, she moved to Toronto for a publishing job. Guess she's moved up in the world. What a bitch."

Some part of Marceline wanted desperately to tell Charlotte to shut up, to stop talking, to stop everything. Her stomach twisted itself into a stubborn knot. Marcie focused instead on the passing trains. *Who counted more?* Her throat ached. *How many?*

"Hello, Marcie? Miss Marceline? You there?" Charlotte called to her.

Marcie tossed the carrot-filled paper towel into the bin, her hand shaking slightly. She mumbled some vague words of acknowledgement.

*It was you, wasn't it?* Marceline turned and walked back to the couch. By then, Charlotte had already moved on to someone else entirely. *You counted thirty-four.* A hole seemed to be growing steadily in Marcie's gut. Somewhere deep down, a hungry hollow started. *You did.* Marceline heard Charlotte laugh with abandon. Marcie gave a weak smile and sat down, happy to have Charlotte move on to another name.



# Mirrored Youth

## Atlas Booth

A young boy of sixteen was standing in front of a mirror, his hands shaking just a bit. His shirt was done up, but not completely to the top and his formal jacket made him look a bit awkward. It was the first time he had to wear one.

It was the first time he had to tie a tie too. His guardian offered to help him, but Peter was insistent that he could get it right. He had been watching his guardian tie one for years now, how hard could it be?

Outside, the birds were chirping and one could almost hear nature's humming as one so often does in spring. The river running past in the distance was also humming along, but the youth in the mirror paid none of this heed.

He had to be dressed as well as he possibly could for the function. It was his first one and Katherine would be attending too. She was the daughter of Peter's ward, Mr Foy. Peter didn't even bother to pay attention to which function they were going to after he heard that Kat would be there.

Katherine was a year older than Peter, with fiery red hair and a temper that could match her father's. Peter, in his limited knowledge, was sure he was in love.

Peter was startled from his musings by Katherine who came in to check on what was taking him so long. She took one look at him and couldn't suppress a giggle. He looked like a puppy drowning in his own collar.

She quickly fixed his tie and collar for him before she forced him out the door. They were running late and couldn't wait for any more adjustments to either's clothes. It was Katherine's third change already, according to her father.

Needless to say, Peter couldn't even remember half of the function he had gone to, but he could clearly remember the faint traces of vanilla perfume that his nose picked up, the same perfume he had given Kat for her birthday. He had saved up all year to be able to afford it, but it was worth it seeing her face that day.

It would only be six months later that his heart would be shattered by the very girl who didn't even know she held it.

# The Man Who Would

by Allison Renner

The cowboy hat was his father’s, though he’d never seen the man wear it. But he happened to be awake in the middle of the night, caught his father fumbling with the lock on the back door. The older man wore an expression too complex for a seven-year-old to understand. He tossed the hat towards his son like he was playing horseshoes.

He missed.

The man who would become known as Pork Chop picked the hat off the faded kitchen linoleum and put it on his head before going back to bed, but not back to sleep.

His mother’s first boyfriend teased him about the hat, called him a redneck and a hick. Though the hat came from his father, the man who would become known as Pork Chop credits that boyfriend for making him into who he was meant to be: a man who could take a beating.

The man who would become known as Pork Chop majored in accounting so he could support his mother. He wanted to show her she didn’t need a man in the picture though he was, arguably, a man in the picture.

He was still living out of boxes in his new apartment when he saw the cowboy hat crammed in with pots and pans. Since it was casual Friday, he wore it to the office. He can still hear their snickers whispering around him all these years later.

He walked out, not giving formal notice. He drove home, resealed the boxes, loaded the back of his SUV and left the rest. He wrote a letter to his mother and stuck it in the outgoing mail basket in the apartment lobby. He needed to be far away before she read it.

He drove south for countless hours before weaving his way off the interstate, slowing down to abide by the speed limit of a two-lane road. He passed a man wearing a cowboy hat entering a gas station and started searching for the town square. This was his place, he could feel it.

The man who would become known as Pork Chop found work where no one laughed at his cowboy hat. No one even noticed it, unless he lost it when the bull was chasing him. The crowd would hoot and holler, the joy of those sounds so different than the mocking he’d endured from others.

He often thinks back to that dark night in the kitchen. What if he had stayed in the shadows? If only he’d left the cowboy hat on the kitchen floor for his mother to find the next morning.

# ART





# Grasstrá

Theresa Kohlbeck Jakobsen



Pinkudreyma.welt is an art project I created 2021. In the centre:  
Faroese motives like the Vardi (stone landmark) or the  
Tjaldursbørkubóndi (spotted heath orchid). Positioned on wood, canvas or  
paper these symbols of interconnection with nature carry the spectator  
off into an utopian dreamworld. The artworks compositions are a  
modern-day interpretation of a Nebra sky disc.



# Stuck

Allison Renner





CREATIVE



NON-FICTION

# Hondo

Adrienne Pilon

Abandoned by her husband and with two kids to support, my grandmother, Ina, spent the war years working days as an activity coordinator in the city recreation department and nights playing piano in bars and dance halls. She was famous in Long Beach, California, in the 1940s, in her own small way, beloved by the schoolchildren who frequented MacArthur Park, where she ran after-school and summer programs and by the soldiers who spent their shore leave dancing and drinking. One of her claims to fame were the puppet shows at MacArthur Park. She crafted a stage out of old wood, sewed a red satin curtain from used clothes, and rehearsed the children in the art of puppeteering. She all made the puppets herself. Dozens of puppets, papier-mâché puppets, with intricately painted heads and complicated costumes that flowed down to cover the hands of the puppet-players.

After Ina retired from the city, she sent the puppets home with my brother and me and from a perch in the garage, I played with those puppets for hours, alone, reenacting fairy tales from the characters she created—Goldilocks’ bears, Little Red Riding Hood and her Big Bad Wolf, the Three Billy Goats Gruff.

Time passed and I grew up and out and my parents moved to another house and somehow, the puppets were lost. Except for Hondo. Hondo is a donkey—one of the characters from “The Bremen Town Musicians.” That was never my favorite story—it’s just plain weird—and Hondo (I’ve no idea how he got the name) was never my favorite puppet, but he’s the last of his kind, and I am careful with him. Dressed in a brown tunic of felt, with buttons up the front, he wears a cloak made from what looks to be upholstery material. After all these years, his mane is shaggy, and his intricately painted head faded, all his colors muted to a dull, pale brown and dun sameness. Though Hondo’s best days are behind him, and his performances are over, he is still around, sitting high on a shelf in the living room, looking down on all the goings-on like some shriveled sage of old: a tiny testament to a woman whose strength and creativity carried her family through the Depression, a World War and everything that followed.



# The Beach Rental

Daniel Wartham

The air conditioning was broken, but that didn't matter because it had the stale air of a beach house rental: salt, booze, and people coming in and out. We opened all the windows and the roar of the ocean began to pound our ears. The soft white linen curtains danced in the kitchen as we did a twist to whatever was coming out of that little speaker we'd hauled around for months. Everything is always softer at the beach: the sand, the ice cream cones from the local stand, the music, Your skin, the hardwood floors, even the wind.

The waves stayed close when you inched towards me in that bed we had never slept in. It never truly gets dark here. I don't remember the grand gestures or the outpouring of love. I remember our fingers playing off of and mimicking each other. I remember the countless strands of hair I saw you push behind your ear. I remember the shy smile you made when you looked at me. It might have been the eerie light of dawn, but my heart radiated like a summer sun.

Even when we held each other and I drew those little invisible circles on your arm, the waves were still there. Even when we talked about the future and living in a house just like this one, the waves remained. Maybe even this one, we joked. If we could pull off our scheme against the world. We needed to get into a Ph.D. together, then two jobs in academia that are close together, and then we needed to save enough money, then we needed to buy this house. And then, and only then, would the waves fade out of our ears.

The anchors on the walls were tacky and the seagulls were annoying, yes. But, you loved it all and I loved you. Sunburns, sand in my shorts, overpriced everything, tourists who "didn't know", and everything else on that list of reasons I hate the beach faded away. I loved you too much to say a word. Besides, you floating in the ocean crushed all of my doubts. I loved seeing the confidence in you. I loved seeing you with a determination to fight against the tide like you fought against every other obstacle. Your dad, your mom, the school, the job market. I was always in tow.

But, I didn't mind being sucked up in an undertow when I knew you were swimming next to me. The bright orange fabric that you chose so delicately the week before at a box retail store, a buoy for me. The winds were still, the gulls quiet, and the kids on the shore no longer screaming. We

came in for a kiss as a wave came crashing down. We were pulled under and I wasn't able to say those words to you. I would say them later at dinner, but it wasn't the same.

I love you.



# What it’s Like Having a Diabetic Dog

Jenny Cook

It’s asking the question, “Wait, dogs can be diabetic?”

It’s marveling at the fact you named her Sugar thirteen years before her official diagnosis.

It’s needing a prescription from the vet for needles but not for insulin.

It’s getting weird looks from pharmacists when they realize the box of needles is for “Sugar Dog Cook.”

It’s realizing how insulin is fucking expensive.

It’s loathing Big Pharma even more than before.

It’s feeding her on a precise schedule.

It’s drawing a shot after each meal.

It’s pinching the skin between her shoulders.

It’s hating yourself when she whimpers.

It’s petting her to ease the guilt.

It’s throwing used needles away in an empty detergent bottle.

It’s refilling her water bowl more frequently.

It’s slipping on a puddle of dog urine.

It’s bringing her to the vet again.

It’s learning diabetic dogs are prone to UTIs.

It’s adding antibiotics to her list of medications.

It’s losing your patience over the course of four years.

It’s cooking bacon because she doesn’t want to eat dog food anymore.

It’s cooking hot dogs because she doesn’t want to eat bacon anymore.

It’s cooking steak because she doesn’t want to eat hot dogs anymore.

It’s giving up because she doesn’t want steak anymore, and what dog in their right mind doesn’t want steak?

It’s refusing to give up because she’s your best friend and this is for her own good.

It’s feeding her oatmeal because your pantry is out of alternatives.

It’s slipping on another puddle of dog urine.

It’s landing awkwardly on your arm.

It’s visiting the chiropractor.

It’s paying an exorbitant amount of money to the chiropractor.

It’s dropping the bottle of insulin.

It’s uttering every curse word known to man when it shatters.

It’s taking a deep breath.

It’s driving to the pharmacy for more.

It’s seeing her collapse against a wall.

It’s pouring maple syrup onto your fingers.

It’s rubbing the syrup into her gums.

It’s wagging tails and happy pants.

It’s breathing a sigh of relief.

It’s kissing the top of her head.

It’s watching her chest rise and fall late at night.

It’s wondering how she’s still alive.

It’s knowing you don’t have much time left with her.

It’s missing her before she’s even gone.

It’s loving her with all your heart.

It’s looking down for potential puddles of dog urine.

# Rooms With Two Beds

Ingrid Ren

We sit in her red Toyota, waiting for the train to approach. I’m holding a paper bag, softened by three hours of road trip wrinkles, filled with donuts from Portland, Maine.

“I think I have to move back to Cincinnati,” she says. I inhale, slow and audible. On the cusp of graduating with her Master’s in Social Work, she hasn’t been able to find a job that will keep her in Boston. “I know,” she says. “I know,” as I begin crying.

When the train’s scheduled arrival is too close to ignore, we reach our arms around each other while our bodies point forward, toward the open road.

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He and I meet for the first time under the stars. We find each other through a mutual friend who, like many college students, stayed home because of the pandemic. Knowing the two of us were on campus, our friend encouraged us to meet. So we have dinner, and I delight in his laugh, pitched high and surprised. I tell him he has excellent eyebrow structure.

“I have never noticed people’s eyebrows,” he says.

I am on the cusp of a breakup and rejecting monogamy. He is on the cusp of desiring it.

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Two and a half years before the train takes me away from her, she and I meet for the first time in Sacramento. We are about to begin a ten-month program with AmeriCorps. One month of training on a former Air Force base followed by nine months working with nonprofits across the Western states, living and traveling as a team.

A couple of days into the program, during a break between trainings, our team stands around in the shade of a dorm building, chatting or looking at our phones. I receive a text that makes me look up abruptly, heart beating from disappointment.

“What is it?” she asks, understanding something in my expression.

I tell her. A woman I thought I could fall for is dating someone else.

A couple of weeks later, our team takes a nighttime walk, and I talk to her under the stars.

“Would you want to room together next month?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says.

Later, when I tell I was worried she would refuse, she says, “Are you kidding? Who else would I have lived with?”

Throughout the ten months of AmeriCorps, we share a room with metal beds in a retired Air Force dorm, we share a room with pastel-colored bed sheets in a massively old brick building, and we share a cabin room among redwoods with occasional mosquito roommates.

On pastel bed sheets, we sit and talk. I rant about our teammate who can’t conceive why I think of him as selfish and who walks through the hallways in briefs, too comfortable with himself. She listens, thoughtful questions ready in her palms.

Later, among the redwoods, when we’re both in bed, I confide in her a hurt within me. I hadn’t shared it with anyone yet, and she sits up a little. “We haven’t talked about this,” she says.

Across states, across rooms, she makes me crave intimate friendship.

\*\*\*

Ten days after we meet, still nighttime, I walk to his dorm with my backpack. Because of the pandemic, he lives alone in a double. Two desks, two chairs, two beds in opposite corners. One bed is made, with two pillows, a sheet, and a blanket. The other only has a guitar, in its case, laying on the bare turquoise mattress.

We sit at the two desks, placed side by side against the windows. My notebook is open in front of me, his laptop open in front of him. We talk, we listen to Mac Miller and Daniel Caesar, he plays and sings Bright Eyes’ “First Day of My Life” on the guitar. He tells me his home city, St. Louis, is the perfect place to raise a family. I tell him about my recent breakup. I tell him about not wanting monogamy right now. As we exchange stories throughout the night, we find ourselves sitting in opposite corners of the room, him on his comfortable bed, me on the plastic turquoise.

“Is it okay if I stay the night?” I ask.

“Yes, of course.”

He gives me one of his pillows and a blanket, keeping the thin sheet for himself. We lay down and talk until we lose focus of each other.

The next time I walk to his dorm, the night finds us in one corner of the room, sharing one narrow college dorm bed.

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During the ninth month of AmeriCorps, she navigates the team’s gray van out of the redwoods while I plug the sticky aux cord into my phone. “Love on the Brain” by Rihanna booms through the van speakers, and we sing-shout together into the nighttime, looking forward down the road. I grin and glance at her in my periphery.

A month after AmeriCorps ends, we live an hour away from each other. Her in Boston for grad school, me in Providence for college. My first weekend in college, she picks me up from my dorm, and we navigate through four hours of traffic to New York City. We bought concert tickets when we still lived in the cabin among redwoods, and, several months later, we spend another night in each others’ familiar safety.

At Madison Square Garden, our seats are high up and behind the stage. We arrive after the opener has left the stage, and we fall comfortably into our seats. We let ourselves relax and sit for most of it, something I’ve never done at a live music show before.

\*\*\*

I’m stretched across his two beds, which we recently pushed together, side by side in one corner of the room. The windows keep out the evening air, chilling as autumn comes to a close. The navy blue bedsheet has been washed and dried many times and feels like a feather beneath my shoulder blades. My hips are squared at the edge of the bed, and my legs drape over his shoulders. He kneels at the bedside, almost as if in prayer but his arms stretch out towards me. His mouth finds the dip of my belly button; his hands find the width of my hips. His tongue finds—

“Will you go on a date with me?”

I look up incredulous and craving. “What?” I ask, “What?”

“Will you go on a date with me?” he says again. He smiles, childlike and mischievous.

I smile back.

\*\*\*

A year and a half after we move to Boston and Providence, she spends the night in my sophomore year dorm. Because of the pandemic, I also live alone in a double. Two desks, two chairs, two beds pushed together in the middle of the room. Both beds are made, one covered with a plain beige fitted sheet, the other with a mallard-decorated flat sheet. I sleep on the beige, and she sleeps on the mallards.

The next morning, we wake up earlier than I have in weeks and drive north through Massachusetts, briefly through New Hampshire, and into Maine. We visit the breweries that brought

her to Portland in the first place. We try sweet beers that I tolerate and dry beers that leave my tongue sticky. I wrinkle my nose, and she laughs. At night, we stay in an Airbnb she picked out that is filled with potted plants, instruments swelling through speakers, the sizzle of cooked garlic and onions, and a whisper of weed. I pick out a record, and the electronic record player in our room sings us classical music.

The next morning, we compare donuts from local rivals, The Holy Donut and HiFi. In the afternoon, she orders a lobster roll grilled cheese sandwich that we share.

When the day is over, we drive to a train station in Boston.

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After Thanksgiving dinner, we walk back to his dorm from my friend’s apartment off-campus. I hold his hand. We have just begun to feel justified wearing our winter coats. As we approach campus, I let go.

“Do you wanna climb a fire escape?” he says.

He brings me to it. A perfectly vertical, iron black ladder cuts through two iron balconies, one jutting from the second floor and another from the third floor of a brick building. The lowest rung of the ladder is about nine feet high. He interlocks his fingers and holds them at my knee level. I place one damp shoe sole in his bare hands, and he lifts me. I grab the sides of the ladder at the second-lowest rung, surprised at how thin and cold the bars are. I get my free shoe up onto the lowest rung and push.

When he joins me three stories above ground, we sit side by side on a windowsill. Deterred by the vertigo of looking down, we look up at the stars. We look at each other, holding hands. My chest tightens as if constricted by a belt being pulled a loop smaller.

“I need to tell you something, but I don’t want you to distance yourself from me.” “

What is it?”

“I’ve told you I can’t be monogamous right now, and I feel like I should tell you that I kissed someone else.”

\*\*\*

She leaves Boston the summer after she graduates, the summer after I meet him, the summer after we drive back from Maine. That morning, she stuffs her red Toyota with thrifted clothes, potted and repotted plants, and Ikea furniture. When she pulls away from the curb for the last time, a full-size mattress abandoned on the sidewalk is her last mark on the city.

“Can I visit you in Cincinnati?” I text her.

“Of course.”

At the end of the summer, I fly to Cincinnati to see her. She is about to begin her first job as a licensed social worker, and she quits her job at Trader Joe’s so that her last day there is my first day in Cincinnati. Monstera plants decorate her apartment as well as her left knee, her newest tattoo. Three decorative rugs made by a local artist appear as fuzzy, brightly colored flowers on one wall. Space has been cleared for a couch arriving in a couple days.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what it’ll be like when we live together,” she says.

“I like that you say ‘when’ and not ‘if.’”

“I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

\*\*\*

He and I are lying on separate beds in his room, not touching.

“I don’t want to be monogamous,” I say.

“I can’t do something that’s not monogamous,” he says. We’ve gone back and forth on this for weeks.

His lanky body and curly hair soften in the night’s lighting. I soften. I turn onto my side, away from him. I look at the empty wall in front of me, so thick with concrete that punching it makes you realize you’re unimportant. He turns on his side, towards me. His fingertips brush my shoulder. They feel like a whisper. They seem to love me already.

This is one of those moments, not the first time, when the words suddenly come to me, like champagne bubbles rushing to the surface, I think I love this boy.

# Plunge Head First Into Your Dreams

Isabella Hawkins

As a creative thinker, my photography and creative writing has been used as an outlet to help calm me, and let me have a break from my academic mind. I have never set it free from my own personal viewing. When my work has always been shielded, I naturally become protective of it. Artists, writers, and creative-thinkers alike can agree we put our hearts and souls into our work. Each work has been inspired from a hidden section of ourselves we don't showcase to the world all the time. This maternal nature towards our work also means we wish for it to be seen and admired as much as it is by ourselves. The vulnerability shown from these pieces of art is the reason why it has the capability to resonate with its audience. I see this perspective of my protection toward my work similar to being at the top of a cliff, looking out towards a view of the ocean, reflecting my dream to share my photography and writing.

The view from the top of the cliff is breathtaking; the blue palette of the ocean stretches out and appears to be never-ending along the horizon. I stand facing the cool sea breeze, with the surrounding jagged cliff faces lining my peripheral vision. My feet are grounded in the soil and grass on the cliff edge. Alone on the highest point on the cliff, I clutch my work tightly in my grasp, keeping it hidden under the umbrella of my own private viewing. The immense height, drop, and the crashing waves, next to the cliff keep me frozen at the top. The fear of scrutiny, judgement, and dislike of my creative compositions all act like the dangers mentioned previously surrounding the rock face, cementing me in my place. The cliff feels secure and safe, but still. Nothing is happening, the grass beneath my feet is still, the air is motionless. Nothing is captivating except the view. The view of possibilities along the horizon following the water.

The most reckless but persuasive idea creeps into my mind. I could jump. I could jump into the ocean full of opportunities. Staring off the cliff the jump seems impossible; how do I gather the will to take action? How do I start committing to the first step? That is all it is, just a step away: a massive step, a leap of absolute faith. Sharing my passions to the world feels like jumping off a perfectly safe cliff. I would be open and exposed to the judgement of readers and viewers. I could be swallowed



up by waves of indifference. However every creative longs to be seen, to have their words and work mean something to others. If my photography or literary works impacted one person, I would fulfil my dream and potential for my compositions, as cheesy and cliché as it sounds. The idea slowly calms my nerves. Plans form in my mind and give me avenues to take action; I could set up an Instagram account for my photography, or submit my writing to literary magazines. I slowly convince myself, letting my grip loosen on my work, and my posture relaxes at the top of the cliff.

My mind musters up a seed of courage, and plants it deep in my gut. I motivate myself. I can do this, my work can leave the comfort and familiarity of my own viewing. My work can survive and even thrive in criticism. I can take the valiant step into the unknown. My feet leave the solid ground, making the decision, leaving the protection of the cliff. My legs are committing to the jump, propelling my body upward and outward off the cliff face. My hands and arms arch forward pointing toward the water, and my legs are straightened above my head, launching further into the dive.

The free fall is dragging me down, further from the cliff, opening a pit in my stomach. It's not just from the gravity pulling me faster towards the waves, it is from uncertainty and doubts. Have I done the right thing? But it's too late. There is no solid ground below my feet now. Wind is rushing through my fingertips and my loose waving hair. Have I jumped far enough? Am I too close to the rocks and shallows? My photography is being viewed like an art gallery on Instagram, and my writing has been submitted to literary magazines. I have taken the steps to make my dreams a reality, all I can do now is wait. Wait for my steps to take into effect.

My fingers break the surface of the water, and the rest of my body follows through. I plunge straight in, surrounded by the salt water. I am suddenly enveloped by the incoming waves, pushing me deeper beneath the surface, spinning me around like a lost baby turtle. I frantically look around trying to find my bearings. Getting used to presenting my work to open viewing is an acquired habit that leaves me momentarily disoriented. This unfamiliar sensation of waiting; to be heard, for my words to resonate, for my images to be seen and enjoyed, leaves me scrambling for breath. My arms are sweeping through the water, pushing me to the surface once again.

My body resurfaces and the white ocean foam of choppy waves surrounds me in the dark blue shallows of the sea. I persevere through the churn of the waves that crash close to the bottom of the

cliff. I reach water that has become more tranquil and still. I take a deep breath in, filled with relief and pride that I took the courageous step off that cliff. I have reached a level of peace only possible by floating in the buoyancy of my dreams. I look up at the starting point of my journey, marvelled at the height I was at and how far I have come. My writing is accepted into my university's magazine and printed in a collection of work. Reading the printed and online copies of my personal essays pumps excitement into my bloodstream. Seeing the comments of people enjoying my photography on Instagram fills my heart with elation and pride.

Floating effortlessly in the calm of the sea, I settle in this new environment, embracing this new attitude toward sharing my work, and allowing myself to be driven by bigger ambitions. An undercurrent takes me out further, the possibilities are endless; I could start a publishing house, a magazine, a photography studio, anything that helps me share my passion with like minded people. The horizon is within arms reach now, just like my vision for my dreams.

I realise behind me on the cliff there are actually other people standing in my previous position, watching my efforts. They saw the courage I conjured for myself to dive off the cliff. They are inspired by my journey, and what I have accomplished to pursue my dreams. It sparks new found courage in them, to start their journey off the private cliff. This chain reaction can be encouraged by many people in the creative community, sharing each other's stories and lifting each other up. I see it reflected in one person's eyes, the idea piercing through their self doubts and worry. A smirk is perking up on their formerly cautious face, and a foot is being lifted off the ground. A new dive has started, ready to plunge someone into the ocean of their dreams.

# Golden

## Bobbi Solano

I feel like you can tell a lot about people by how they feel about dogs. Those that don’t like them are either cat people or just have no heart. *Kidding*. On the fence? Proceed with caution. *Not kidding*. Those who are all in and “aww” at every dog video they see? The best kind of people. *100% true*. It takes a certain type of person to love dogs genuinely and whole-heartedly. You have to be ready for the mess and the fur! So. Much. Fur. You are raising this tiny creature whose life is all about you. They want to make you happy, laugh, and, at the same time, they want to challenge you. The more you love them, care for them, and teach them what’s what and who’s who, the more joy they emulate in their barks and wiggly butts.

### 11

Sasha was the most beautiful red golden retriever. I was actually the first of her people to make her a big sister. She loved to swim, join in on our yearly trips to Pismo Beach, and play fetch.

My mom and dad had been married for about a year when they got her. I always loved to have her tell me the story of how she joined our family.

“Tell it again, Mommy,” I’d ask, snuggling into my mom and getting ready for storytime.

“Well, your dad and I had been talking about getting a dog for a while,” she’d say and I’d look over at Daddy. He’d smile at me, patting down the wild curls on the top of my head. “It was just the two of us at home, and you weren’t here yet, so I figured it was just as good a time as any.”

“It wasn’t,” he’d grumble.

To this day, he still swears he’s not a dog person. *He is*.

My mom would roll her eyes before continuing on. “So, I had started talking to this family and stayed in touch with them. They had a mommy dog that was almost ready to have puppies, so I made sure to tell them I’d love to bring one home. And one day, while your Daddy was at work, I did. She greeted him as soon as he came through the door,” she’d beam.

Being the oldest, I have a lot of photo albums to my name. Looking through the pages that spanned her life, it was easy to see how happy of a dog she was. There are pictures of my two brothers and I hugging her, and her smiling at the camera, as if she understood the value the photo would hold for us later on. There were the lazy days in bed with Mom, cuddled together, me sometimes using her as a pillow. I even have pictures of her dressed up, patiently rocking the sunglasses and feather boas my siblings and styled her in.

Things were always good, even when she lost one of her legs.

Golden retrievers are my family’s breed of choice, even though we are more than familiar with the downside of them. Years and years after she had died, I learned in a college classroom that Goldens are the most susceptible to cancer.

Looking back, I didn’t need that confirmation. I had first hand experience in the matter.

So yeah, she was a tripod. But, like the good girl she was, she didn’t let that slow her down. She’d still play and swim and have a blast in the warm summer sun, but one year, just a month shy of her 12th birthday, it all became too much.

While it’s been a while since she’s passed, I still remember that day. We had told our whole family, and they came and paid their respects. They got down on the floor, nuzzling their faces in her deep red mane, held her, and cried.

“You’re such a good girl,” they’d say in between sobs and she was just there, panting, knowing that, for now, this is what her family needed. They needed to grieve and love on her one last time, and she let them. We loved on her until my parents took her, and she never came back.

Josie came into our lives later on in hers. A family we knew from rec league sports was moving and they had a golden that they couldn't take with them. So, we decided that she'd be ours.

She was a pretty copper color, not quite as red Sasha, but as shiny as a new penny. She was a little chunky and had such a sweet face. We had another dog at the time and he welcomed his new playmate with open arms. At this point, two dogs was the most we'd ever had. *If only we knew that we'd get up to four later on.*

She was more mellow than Sasha, which I think had to do with the fact that she was older. But, she fit right in at home and we loved her instantly.

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One day, while my family and I were at my dress rehearsal for dance, we got a call from my grandmother.

"What?!" my mom exclaims. She gets up and steps away from the area where we were sitting. I watch as she starts crying, pacing back and forth.

She comes back and my dad instantly asks, "What's wrong? What happened?"

My mom took a breath before saying, "That was Vavau. Josie just had a seizure."

My dad and I instantly started asking questions. My mom tells us that Vavau said Josie just fell and started convulsing. My grandmother didn't know what to do, but she stayed by her to make sure everything was ok.

"Did they tell us she had seizures?" my dad asked, just as confused and hurt as my mom. She shook her head and tried not to cry again.

From that day on, my family tried to make sure that Josie got to live the life she deserved, one in which she was cared for and loved unconditionally. For about three years she had friends to play with, a family who loved her, and the proper medical care to cope with her seizures. She was the first dog that really solidified my desire to be a veterinarian. I'd actually wanted to be a vet since kindergarten.

I knew that if I had anything to say about it, pets would always be cared for. Whatever they'd need.

### (almost) 2

At one point my siblings and I started asking for a puppy. My parents would say no, that we had two dogs and that that was more than enough. However, after a while, I could tell my mom was starting to break down. We'd look on adoption sites and she'd always show me posts on Facebook. They were always expensive and I started to lose hope. My siblings did, too.

Then, one Christmas Eve we came home exhausted after a night of opening gifts with my mom's family. My siblings and I noticed the gate covering our fireplace was knocked down. There were little pieces of white fuzz and the milk and cookies had been taken care of.

We walked into the living room and we heard little whines.

"What is it?" My mom asked.

I knelt down in front of the little cage, opened the door, and out waddled the most perfect puppy I had ever seen. I swooped her up in my arms immediately and started crying. My siblings were excited and shocked. We had no idea that Santa would actually grant our wish. I think we actually wrote alternate letters asking for something else in case a puppy wasn't possible. We were all excited! Our first puppy!

From there on, I had Rosie with me constantly. I held her as often as I could, until she had grown enough to where she decided she was too big. She was gorgeous and strong, but oh-so-hyper. Our third dog, her older siblings had to get used to her and her energy level. But, after some time, they got over their resentments and became the best of friends. She also loved to swim and would constantly zoom around the house.

*But then cancer crept in.*

At first it was a leg, just like Sasha. I remember the day we brought her home like it was yesterday. I was nervous to see how she was, hoping and praying that she was ok and not in too much pain. As soon as my parents brought her to the backyard, she zoomed around on the grass, running in circles and even stumbling at one point. She wasn't used to the limited limbs she now owned, but that didn't stop her.

She swam laps in the pool, bounded through the house, just as goofy as before. She played with her siblings and always welcomed a good game of fetch.

But then, the morning we were set to go on our yearly vacation, something was wrong.

Rosie laid on the tile and didn't move. Her breathing was shaky, each exhale coming out in uneven spurts. I sat by her and pet her and my mom knew it was time. Deep down, so did I, but she was so young. She was just a baby. She had so much more life left to live. She was supposed to be there for that year's vacation and all the years after, but with each breath in, what was left of her light would come out.

I sat with her, telling her she was a good girl, making sure she knew she was loved, until she was taken away. The car ride down to Pismo was quiet that year.

Our golden boy Max was the dog we had the longest and I think that's fitting considering he had lived with six of our seven dogs we've had. He dealt with Josie's seizures, Rosie's antics, Daisy's clinginess, Tucker's neuroses, and Jax's inquiring mind.

He was a few months old when we got him and already grown out of his puppyhood.

He, like the other girls, loved to swim and the beach was his happy place. He took his role of big brother pretty seriously and showed each new dog that came into our home how things were going to be, especially the puppies. He was the man of the house, and he humped the girls enough to prove it. *Don't worry, he was fixed.*

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Looking back, it's kind of wild that cancer never claimed one of his legs. He had dealt with arthritis and was bow-legged, so he dealt with more pain than the others for a longer period of time, but that never slowed him down, even up until the end.

Still, as the years passed, we could see that he was getting tired. Time stripped away his gold mane, leaving white hairs speckled in his coat and sprinkled on his face, This was something that was kind of new to us as dog owners. It seemed like our red girls never had that, like their hue had too much of a hold.

He was there to see both me and my eldest brother off to college. I will always remember my mom FaceTiming me and putting him on.

"Max, come here, baby," I'd hear my mom call. Soon after I'd hear the tippy-tapping of his nails on the tile floor, and there he was, smiling into the screen. At least it looked like he was.

"Hi, Maxy!" I'd coo.

"Who is that, Max? Is that Sissy?" He huffed in response, looking up at her as he started his little tap dance.



“Maxy, hi! I miss you so much!” *What I would give to hear him tap down the halls again.*

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His departure seemed to be the one we dreaded the most. It would seem like it was time and then things would be back to normal. He’d run around the house, wiggle and scratch his back on the carpet. He’d get these spurts of energy and zoom through the living room before playing with Daisy. They’d play and play before he’d fall to the floor, huffing and puffing, trying to catch his breath.

Cancer toyed with him more than the others. Over the last two years we started to feel these bumps on his body under all of his hair. One even started to grow on his face. It got to a point where it would bleed, scab over, before splitting and bleeding twice as much.

On his last day, it opened and seemed like it was starting to fall off. That was when we knew it was time. We kept him outside and tried to keep him on the grass. *Try not to get blood everywhere, baby.* It was a weird goodbye, rushed. I hugged him and squeezed him extra tight for my brother who was away at school. He loved him so much and I wanted to make sure he could feel his love from 180 miles away.

My mom said he was gone three seconds after they euthanized him. His head just dropped. *After 13 long years, he finally got the chance to rest.*

# The Rip Van Winkle Bridge

by N. West Moss

I never heard the brand name of an automobile spoken in our house growing up. We sang Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, we played Scrabble, we read Dickens out loud to one another, but we did not talk about cars. Not once. Not ever. When I was nineteen, I had a boyfriend who went on and on and ON about cars. The summer before he left me, we drove across the Rip Van Winkle Bridge in his maroon SAAB turbo 900. I remember the make and model because he made sure I’d remember it. I’d never heard of SAAB before. I didn’t know what “turbo” meant, but god help me he did, and he was pumped to share the good news. When our relationship disintegrated, one bright spot was I’d never have to talk about cars again.

I used to tell my college writing students that being interesting was our responsibility. “It’s a crime to be boring,” I’d tell them. “Take the stage you’ve been given and do something with it.”

When I was a little kid, my uncle came to visit and spent an entire thirty minutes telling us about the route he took, via 9A to the Saw Mill, to get to our house in Croton-on-Hudson. He mentioned detours, talked about the map, and which exit he should have taken. A full half hour none of us could ever get back. I’ve now remembered my uncle’s “story” about traffic for close to 50 years, which seems like a terrible bit of usefull information to take up real estate amongst my memories

There was interesting stuff we could have talked about, too. For instance, my uncle who had always been bald as a bowling ball, arrived at our house that morning, going on and on about side roads and detours, while wearing an enormous Shirley Temple wig. That slightly askew, never-mentioned wig ... now *that* was a detail worth remembering.

As for the boyfriend with the SAAB turbo, in addition to cars, he also talked a lot about working-out. How I survived it I can hardly imagine now, having to hear day in and day out about reps and crunches and trapezeus muscles, and being asked to poke his abs and assess his muscles and agree at every meal that yes (*nod nod*) you really are astonishingly fit (*yawn*).

In addition to cars and working out, he talked a lot about honor too and I remember being surprised to learn that he was *living* with someone else while we were still going out. He was supposedly such an honorable guy, right? That’s how young I was. I still thought that people who

went on and on about honor must *be* honorable. When I look at photographs of what a beauty I was then (as all 19-year olds are), it makes me sad to remember thinking that if only I'd been prettier, maybe he could have loved me more. *Sigh*. And even though that whole mess was thirty-plus years ago, I'm sorry to say that Mr. SAAB Turbo still crosses my mind from time to time.

It turns out that even boring people can break your heart. I don't know how you keep yourself from getting hurt. Loving people, even the wrong ones, well what's the point of life without loving even the boring heart breakers?

Earlier today I was driving upstate to visit a friend and WHAM, I drove past this sign for the Rip Van Winkle Bridge and was reminded of *that* guy. Back when I was dating him some aunt of his said, "He's going to be a good catch, my nephew," and I knew she meant that he'd make a lot of money, which he has, but money never did much for me. Making big bank can be a whole other kind or boring. Not that I want to be broke, but being wealthy is not the same as being fun to be around.

Later in my 20s when I was living in New York City, I was at a party and some guy came over to where I was sitting and leaned over me, his hand pinned against the wall behind me, and said, "Guess how much I make." I demurred, but he insisted and finally blurted out some number like, "A hundred thousand a year," smirking down at me. He could have said endless things. He could've told me he'd been a clarinet prodigy, or that his mother was a welder, or that he'd found a nest of finches cheeping away in a planter somewhere. Anything would have been better. But I'm glad he said what he said. If he'd told me about birds in a planter I could've wasted years on him. By the time Mr. One Hundred Thousand was leaning over me, I'd already survived the Rip Van Winkle Bridge guy, so I knew better. I smiled, ducked under his arm, made some excuse about finding the bathroom, and slipped away.

My uncle and that boyfriend with his low BMI, and the guy at the party with all the money, I think those 3 are lucky that anything as poetic as the Rip Van Winkle Bridge ever makes any of them rise up from deep memory to the surface of my brain. I sometimes wonder if *me* remembering *them* might be one of the best things that's ever happened to them.

Now when I see the sign for that bridge, as I do every year or two, my heart floods for a moment with the sorrow, followed by relief that I never again have to hear about the cost of a replacement seat knob for a SAAB 900 turbo. I've been happily married for many years to a man who makes every day silly and sweet, a man who never once asked me to assess his muscle tone, a man who has never ever told me the horse power of any car's engine, and a man who just *is* honorable, so he doesn't need to bring it up all the time. He and I read Grimm's fairy tales to one

another in bed at night, and stand close enough that we can feel one another's body heat when tragedies unfold. When it snows, he shovels and I make big pots of soup, and weirdly, cars never come up.

I imagine most people would find my life boring. It is a small and delicate world I inhabit, after all. I am excited every morning for my mug of strong coffee speckled with heavy cream, and there is moment for me in the lavender bags under my eyes from crying over people I wish had loved me better. Spring after spring I rush outside to squat down and peer into the dirt to see when the rhubarb plants will finally push their ugly, crumpled leaf-tips up out of the cold ground toward the sun. The other day a friend taught me to place my feet on the ground in just such a way that I can walk through the woods without startling deer. This, the coffee and the lavender bags, and the people who notice things, this is where I dwell, with friends who are not greedy or showing off, but who sit next to me and listen to the sound of the baby birds in the nest nearby calling out to their mother, *feed me*.

# Diagnostic Criteria for Post-Modern Prophet Disorder<sup>1</sup>

## A. Gaskamp

Time is a constant that's always changing. It ticks away (even when the clock is broken), always at the same pace (even when the brain feels otherwise).

I swim through it.

#

One constant in my life could be music. I play it, I write it, I listen to it. I create it and destroy it, deconstructing it to the barest minimum, building it up to its former glory. Yet it changes every time. The change might be in how I play it, some edit I make to it, or how I interpret it (what it means to me, how I feel), but it changes every time. It is an unconstant constant.

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I am Joe’s confidence.

I am Joe’s anxiety.

I am Joe’s faith.

I am Joe’s doubt.

I am Joe’s strength.

I am Joe’s weakness.<sup>2</sup>

#

Another constant could be books. They are my friends, my enemies; my lovers and partners and crime; the companion that could attack me at any moment. They're there for me, except for when they aren't. Meanings change, and something comes out about the author that means I can't read the books again. They're still the same books, but they aren't the books I loved anymore. Not really.

<sup>1</sup> See *Marienbad My Love* (Mark Leach) for clarification.  
<sup>2</sup> See *Fight Club* (Chuck Palahniuk) for clarification. "I am Joe’s \_\_\_\_" is repeated throughout the novel.

Fanfiction makes those books mine again. It tells the same story, but different; I see the same characters, but they're different, and the author is different, and it becomes the comfort that the source material used to be.

#

Finite (adj): having a limited nature or existence.<sup>3</sup>

#

Sometimes I think I know who I am. I have a name, a face, an age, a grade, a gender, and am another person applying to colleges (let me rattle off the list). I have a set list of interests, a set list of classes, a set style, a set life.

Then everything mixes into one melting pot, and I introduce new ingredients, and it all falls apart. I am not who I was, even though we remain the same. My interests have come and gone, but they never really change. I look in the mirror and don't recognize the person I see, even though it and I are the same being.

#

Time says, "I'm running out."

Time says, "Don't keep me waiting."

Time says, "Follow your dreams be who you say you are go for it there isn't time to change don't procrastinate the future is coming you should get ready for it don't waste a minute you only live once but you're running out of time *and you are not prepared.*"

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Definite (adj): free of all ambiguity, uncertainty, or obscurity.<sup>4</sup>

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There's a movie called *Primer*. It's an indie film released in 2004 that explores the realistic implications of time travel within a fictional narrative.

This essay is not about time. Not exactly.

#

Family has been a constant, even though it isn't. People are born, people die, but it feels like they don't. I had three siblings; I have four siblings. I don't have cousins; I can't count my cousins. My great-grandparents are alive; the family shrunk.

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<sup>3</sup> "Finite." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/finite>. Accessed 23 September 2021.  
<sup>4</sup> "Definite." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/definite>. Accessed 23 September 2021.

So it goes.<sup>5</sup>

#

There was a fandom I was obsessed with in middle school. I lived, breathed, and wrote for it in every second of my free time. I talked to people about it, made friends over it, and lost friends over it. I created countless pieces of music and wrote more fanfiction than I'll ever write again. There were people with the same set of interests as me, and we bonded over our shared niche. That fandom was a safe haven. Until it wasn't.

You know the pattern.

I'm back in the fandom, four years after I left it, and it hasn't changed at all. My fellow writers have welcomed me with open arms. There are old faces, and there are new faces, and our shared obsessions from years back are still the same. We have matured, but we're still the children we used to be.

#

Now playing: *Haunted*, by Poe.<sup>6</sup>

#

There is a book titled *Marienbad My Love*. This is the abbreviated title.

The earliest edition was 2.5 million words.

The most recent edition was 17.8 million words.

In the spirit of the author's work,<sup>7</sup> I'll leave you with these words ~~of mine~~:

When I released the first edition in March, the original length of 2.5 million words seemed about right for a 21st century Apocalypse. But the ideas kept coming, and the story kept growing. Now I feel like I'm just getting warmed up.

As of Feb. 1, 2013, "Marienbad My Love" consisted of 17 volumes totaling 17.8 million words and 10,710 pages. While I have not added to the book in recent years, I still consider it to be a work in progress.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See *Slaughterhouse Five* (Kurt Vonnegut) for clarification.

<sup>6</sup>“I’m lost / and the shadows keep on changing.”

<sup>7</sup> *Marienbad My Love* (by Mark Leach) is made up of plagiarized work, either written by the author or written by other people. The exact sources of the text are unclear. The author also considers the book to be an "open-source book," allowing others to remix *Marienbad My Love* for both commercial and personal purposes.

<sup>8</sup> I can't bring myself to plagiarize all of this. So: Leach, Mark. *Marienbad My Love*. <http://www.marienbadmylove.com>. Accessed 21 September 2021.

What seems definite,

is?

#

Indefinite (adj): not precise; having no limits.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> "Indefinite." *Merriam Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/indefinite>. Accessed 23 September 2021.



# Preserved Remains at Immaculate Heart

Michael Riordan

Just look at their transfixed faces, I thought. My finely-crafted discourse on *Moby Dick* has stunned the class: “Not just a fish story, my young friends.” Oh yeah, I still have it. Age has not withered this guy. Wait—was that the bell? So soon? I should have reserved time for autographs. Ha-ha.

As I backed out and closed the door to my classroom, I was startled by Old Switzer’s unmistakable wheezy voice behind me. I turned--Switzer, all right. He wore a baggy, chalk-dusted suit and was known simply as “Old Switzer.” He wasn’t a bad guy—just an aging math teacher with a hip replacement limp and emphysema. I guess he still had enough goods left as a teacher. I had a warm spot for him because he was even older than I was. Maybe they’ll keep me around too when I’m a fossil. Ha-ha.

“Michael, don’t forget you’re on yard duty today. Tuesdays and every other Wednesday, you know.”

“I know that, Ol—uh, *Mr.* Switzer. I was just on my way.”

Old Switzer was right--I had forgotten. Had Switzer been waiting outside my classroom? Creepy, even for a guy who wears a plastic badge that says: “Yard Duty Supervisor.”

This wasn’t the first time my brain had tried to expel the thought of yard duty. Any teacher knows that the function I was about to perform was the ultimate insult to the profession-- and it definitely shouldn’t involve someone like me, an experienced head of department—a scholar for crying out loud. Known as “playground duty” at many schools, somebody here figured yard duty sounded more dignified. This requirement of my tenure continued to be humiliating and soul-destroying—especially after a lesson as good as the one just delivered: “A noble craft, but somehow a most melancholy!” You can say that again, Mr. Melville!

No. I didn’t belong roaming the school grounds looking for smokers, illicit make-up wearers, or illegally-colored hair wrapped in non-regulation ribbons. That’s right. I was teaching English at

an all-girls private school. My “dignified” assignment: to patrol the schoolyard and scout for hardened Catholic girls.

I had completed a couple of circuits of the school when an old lady approached me in obvious distress. I didn’t recognize her, and she was too old to be a parent of one of my students. The lady was holding something, and her brows churned the panic in her face.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” she said.

She opened a little sparkling sequined clutch. You’re a little late for the prom, I thought. Ha-ha. She reached in with her spidery old fingers and handed me what at first looked like a small yellow rock.

“You’re a teacher, aren’t you--so you might know what to do about this. Please help me, sir.” She called me *sir*. I thought: She’s mistaken me for *Mr. Chips*?

I recognized the thing in my hand as a piece of amber, honey-colored, smooth, and about the size of a marshmallow. I had seen amber before back in school science class. Big deal. Just petrified stuff from trees--which was the extent of my knowledge about amber.

I tilted my head, looked silently at the old woman, and tried to make sure my eyes conveyed one thing: *So what?*

“Look closely, young man.” she said.

I lifted the object to the sky to see what she was talking about. I saw cloudy wisps and tiny dark bubbles. That was all.

“Sorry,” I said, “I don’t see anything.” I turned my head, and in the distance noticed Mary O’ Flynn and Tina Cappelletti near the chapel. I watched them scoot behind a statue of the Virgin Mary. I warned you, girls, I thought. Now, I’m going to have to write you up and report you to old Mr. Switzer.

I was about to hand the piece of amber back, and perhaps enlist a nearby student to escort this strange lady away from the school grounds, but then she grabbed my arm.

“But you must look again.”

The old lady locked her eyes on mine and wouldn’t let go. I raised the thing in my hand to my eyes again, but this time I pivoted towards the sun and brought full light and clarity to what I was holding. Then I noticed. Something was moving. Something was crawling or swimming around deep inside. Bugs. This was all I had in my entomological vocabulary to identify them. Whatever

they were, there were about a dozen of them, no bigger than fleas. Yes, they were moving. They were alive.

My God! I thought. I quickly handed the piece back to the old lady and curled her fingers around it. Was it possible that these tiny creatures, entombed for centuries, had come alive? Or maybe they never ever died! I understood why the woman was frantic. I've seen *Jurassic Park* for god's sake. I turned back to the anguished old woman, and her eyes were imploring. I had to say something.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. The bugs are very small. And, uh, people are big."

Who was I kidding? Sure, I thought: the bugs are tiny now—but what about when they eat through the outer layer, the only barrier keeping us safe? I mean, who could predict what might happen if the creatures are unleashed from the Paleozoic Era to our own? (Paleolithic? One of the Paleos, anyway.)

"Please. Will you take it--and keep it?" the old lady begged.

I took a step back.

"Well," I said.

I looked around to see if anyone had noticed my patent cowardice. Seeing no one, I then looked towards the school gate. I knew my car was parked just around the corner, and I could easily outrun the wizened person who stood before me. This was all becoming too much for me. I needed to get home and batten down the house. Do we have any battens? I wondered.

"But you must take it. I can't get it to the authorities by myself," she pleaded.

The authorities? I thought.

She continued: "Maybe there are people at your school who will know something about what we have."

*We?* I thought: Sure. We have a special investigative unit at Immaculate Heart High School for Girls. They handle all these matters—amber analysis and such.

I stood there awkwardly with the woman and was about to serve up some more feeble words: "The bugs are very small. People are big." Good one, Winston Churchill.

Then Lidia showed up. Lidia was head of the science department and was on yard duty, too. She was a lot younger than I was, but she let her hair go gray for some reason. Science teachers, I thought.

"What's up?" she asked. "Old Switzer sent me over here to tell you that you're not roaming enough. Who's this?"

I excitedly related the whole thing to Lidia, who looked at the lady a couple of times but focused more on me and the portent of doom I was describing:

"...I mean, have you seen *Jurassic Park*, Lidia?"

With that, Lidia took one look at the object in question and immediately identified it as some sort of sap. Lidia rattled off some Latin.

"This is definitely *not* amber," she said. "I don't know where you got that idea. Those insects are caught in an air pocket. They're probably about three days old,"

Lidia then looked at me as if I had forgotten to turn off one of her Bunsen burners or something. She then turned to the old lady and in an unnecessarily loud voice commanded, "You go home now. Everything is all right."

I heard the bell ring in the distance, ending lunch period. Lidia and I broke away and headed off in separate directions.

"Thanks for that, Lidia," I said, trying to pretend that none of this had happened, while wondering who Lidia was going to tell first.

"No problem, Michael." she said as she walked away.

But what I *heard* was: *No problem, old moron Michael.*

# Kidnapped by the 505

Candice Kelsey

Actual participation requires  
total surrender, a concentration  
so intense as to seem a kind of  
narcosis, a rapture-of-the-  
freeway. The mind goes clean.  
The rhythm takes over. ~Joan  
Didion

Nothing can be done about it. My husband and children are stuck in Albuquerque and cannot get home to Augusta. It's been three months.

They flew Southwest out of Atlanta, and because of a few delays, they arrived relatively late. Not a major inconvenience except for missing the meeting with Father Gunselmann to discuss the funeral. My father-in-law was a devout part-time Catholic, the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Norfolk, Nebraska, type of Irish immigrant Catholic who couldn't conceive of disappointing his mother even after she passed decades earlier. Catholicism wasn't a religion to him; it was one of two ways he could justify his existence to his dead mother. The other way failed. He was only a successful family law attorney who never became a judge.

This priest didn't know my any of this, nor did he know my father-in-law. Craig had been in an assisted living home for years with a bad case of dementia. The Father had only heard of him by way of parishioners who on occasion witnessed an elderly man exit an unmarked car driven by a shadowy figure and pulled up to the front door of St. Bartholomew's. Apparently, my father-in-law convinced an old lawyer friend of his to perform a drive-thru version of mass where he would meander into the narthex, scoop his holy water to go, make the sign of the cross with wet fingers, and abscond into the aubergine dawn of the Sandia Mountains with no one the wiser.

Many years ago, when Craig was lucid, I would be his early morning mass accomplice, only we'd have to pick up an elderly, incapacitated nun or two Craig had committed to bring to St. Bartholomew's. There we would sit — the retired attorney, me, and two nuns — in his extra-wide bench seat Buick with enough corgi hair on the seats to keep us warm should the heater tap out on those cold desert mornings. Before we could head toward the church, however, Craig took it upon himself to make a show of grand hospitality. He would take us to the local Courtyard Marriott, where

paying customers were enjoying their complimentary breakfast buffet, and where he would make me run in, pretend I was a guest, and load up on four coffees to go. I reminded him again and again that this drive thru coffee heist was not ethical. He reminded *me* we were on our way to church where we could ask forgiveness. And that we had an extra measure of grace by way of two old ladies wearing habits in the back of the car.

My husband thought it was vital that this priest — officiating at Craig's funeral the next day — not fuck it all up.

But Southwest airlines took care of that.

The funeral was uneventful and even a bit enjoyable for my husband. He heard stories from many people who worked with Craig, mostly stories about how he had believed in them early in their careers. Craig was a self-proclaimed asshole, but his heart was huge for anyone just starting out in law. He had learned the hard way what that struggle can do to a man, a marriage, and a family.

My husband was five, the youngest of three boys, living in the Palm Springs neighborhood near the mesas of Albuquerque when his father decided working eighty hours per week wasn't enough and decided to run for lieutenant governor of New Mexico. He kept himself going with coffee, cigarettes, and an increasing amount of alcohol. Not unlike Southwest airlines, he couldn't keep it all together and lost the connection to his wife.

Soon my husband and his brothers had a stepdad. Soon they were coerced into legally changing their last names. Soon they moved to Georgia. Soon they were required to pretend their dad, Craig, was dead.

He lost the bid for lieutenant governor and his family. The irony that the most successful family law attorney was embroiled in the bitterest divorce north of the Rio Grande was not lost on anyone nor did it make anything easier.

It wasn't until my husband and his brothers were older that things became healthier — they changed their names back, they disabused people of the lies, they reconnected with Craig. My husband's oldest brother, Patrick, however, was dying at age 24; his brain was being kidnapped by a nasty, tentacled tumor that refused to let go. They transported him back to Albuquerque to die in Craig's house surrounded by his family. My husband has yet to recover, and that was over three decades ago.

As Craig has become less and less lucid, my husband has become more and more unable to cope with the trauma of his childhood. It began taking on a physical manifestation as well, in the

form of an angry rash consuming the flesh of his limbs. The news of Craig’s death compounded it all but having to spend a few days in the 505 seemed masochistic to me.

When my husband decided to take our kids with him to Craig’s funeral in Albuquerque three months ago, I thought it was a terrible idea. Of course, my husband should be there, but the depths of trauma associated with the place were too much for our kids to enter into, I told him. To no avail. A magnetic pull of Herculean strength was no match for my gentle words of caution.

At first, he texted *Not getting home tonight / can’t make connections*. Then, *Can’t fly out until tomorrow / until Tuesday / until the weekend / we are fucked*. It’s been three months of this. Like some bad horror movie, my husband and three kids cannot get out of Albuquerque. There are no rental cars available. There are no flights. It’s as if the entire department of transportation has conspired to destroy my husband, forcing him to stay in Albuquerque, to stay mired in terrible memories, for as long as possible. I told him to hire a hot air balloon. No response. The last text I received, late last night, read *I can’t get out of this city!!!* He can’t get out of his childhood.

I imagine some Shakespearean nightmare of his father’s ghost pacing the roof of my husband’s Airbnb at midnight, imploring him to find healing, forgiveness, some semblance of a salvaged childhood. Perhaps Southwest Airlines is a supernatural force for evil, a 21<sup>st</sup> Century villain that rivals any earth-shattering meteor speeding toward earth. Its CEO, CFO, and air traffic controllers meet on some American version of a Scottish heath to toil and bubble schemes of Byzantine emotional tortures. And my husband is their latest victim.

Perhaps his situation is imagined, a self-deluding trauma response incapacitating him. A rash of the mind. The tentacles of pain dangling some locket in his face, hypnotizing him into a subconscious state of emotional paralysis. Has he become the unsettled midnight ghost? Will he forever pace the streets of Albuquerque, ride in the back seats of the cars on Interstate 40 sipping Courtyard Marriott coffee?

# Concert Hangover

Jamison O’Sullivan

I leave Brighton Music Hall on an exhale. It doesn’t matter who I’m with, what show I’ve just seen, my breathing is always the same, heart rate elevated. But tonight I saw Colony House, a band I don’t know very well but impulsively bought the ticket for anyway, because I really liked one song and it was only twenty dollars. I got there ten minutes before the opener started her set. Rare for me—usually I’m one of the people in line outside the venue for a good hour or so before they even open the doors. If we weren’t all wearing masks, I think the bouncers would start to recognize me. The guy giving out wristbands to over-21s definitely does, or maybe the look he gave me was because he had to push up my sleeve to put this wristband on, since I’m still wearing one from last night when I was here to see Real Friends. And the one from State Champs the night before that.

My friends call it an addiction. I might be starting to agree with them.

The past two nights, I met Liz outside the venue an hour before doors opened, and then walked to the T together afterwards. But tonight I’m all by myself—not for lack of trying, but it’s a Tuesday night, and people have their own lives—so I start the walk home alone.

It’s a trip I know like the back of my hand now: take a right out of the venue, right onto Harvard Ave, and then straight up the hill until I’m back at my apartment in Coolidge Corner.

As I start up the hill, the aftermath of the show starts to hit me. I call it a concert hangover, the way it feels like all the life’s been sucked out of me after the lights come up, but usually it doesn’t hit me until late at night, once I’m home and back to the place where everything normal lives. It doesn’t usually start this early, but tonight I’m exhausted, hovering at the edge of burnout. I haven’t even made it to the spot where the road flattens out when I start crying.

After over thirty concerts in five years, I’ve figured out a lot of things regarding shows. I know if you want barricade, you should be there at least an hour before doors open; Big Night Live security sucks, and does not know how to handle pop punk kids; there’s no cell service in Paradise Rock Club, and also, fuck the pole; the best thing to wear to a show is light layers, no jacket if you can help it, and absolutely no heels—my concert Vans have seen things, but they’ve never let me



down. The one thing I still haven't figured out is how to describe the feeling I get anytime I see an artist perform live.

There's a physical aspect, the way I feel out of breath and buzzing, how I can feel the bassline in my chest and the drums all the way down to my toes. But mostly it's a way out of my day to day life. I could stand on the floor of House of Blues until my feet hurt, jacket over the barricade and VIP lanyard around my neck, and I could forget about my friend's girlfriend a few rows back shooting daggers between my shoulder blades, my unfinished homework, the work group chat with sixty unread messages. Coming down from that and going back to a calendar so full I've run out of colors to label things is difficult when my only worry has been writing down the setlist so I can update my playlist.

So the crying isn't out of the ordinary after a show, though I suppose it's vaguely worrying that it's happening this early. It's not really because I'm sad. Realizing the moment that's still so fresh in my mind isn't a constant and I don't get to experience that high all the time sucks, but mainly it's just all of the sensations coming to such an abrupt end. It's so quiet in my head, Harvard Ave in the dark, and compared to the lights and sounds projected by speakers larger than my head, it's weirdly isolating. I'm so far from the venue floor with the overzealous smoke machine. The sidewalk I'm on is empty, a harsh contrast to the crowds of only a little while ago, the really tall guy in the Ramones shirt who screamed when Colony House covered "Blitzkrieg Bop."

Since this is night three for me, concerts back to back to back, ten artists in the span of seventy-two hours, I guess it's no surprise I'm so drained so quickly. I have some bruises from Sunday night, consequences of crowd surfing and ending up in the mosh pit during Four Year Strong's set, as well as a set of scratches on my forearm from catching a girl stage diving in the middle of the Bearings show last night. The marks are just as visible as the wristbands up my right arm, but they seem inconsequential when compared to how it's all affected my head. Maybe it's a good thing the streets are deserted tonight, because here I am crossing the road without a walk sign, tears still coming down my cheeks.

I've started to consider Brighton Music Hall my home venue, if only because of the frequency of my trips. It's about the same distance from home as House of Blues, but I like this walk better, and there's something about the smaller room that makes these shows more personal. I'd only been once before quarantine, but each time I've been back has attempted to answer what people always ask: *which show was the best?*

I think back to the beginning of October. A rainy Monday where I skipped my afternoon class and left my apartment around four to walk down the hill towards Brighton Ave. I was the first person outside the venue, three hours until doors opened for Christian French's first headline tour since the covid shutdown.

After the show, I felt like I was walking on air. I had Gabby with me, my go-to concert buddy for anything you could dance to, and the majority of our conversation was saying "oh my God," back and forth in an attempt to convey just how good it had been. It had been two years—twenty-five months almost to the day—since the last time we had seen Chris live. I didn't know how to comprehend it was already over. The sleeves of the sweatshirt I fell asleep in that night still have mascara stains from crying off the makeup I'd worn to the show; no matter how many times I washed it, they never came out.

I'd thought that was the best show I'd ever been to, until the next one, and the next. Like when I dragged Hannah with me to see lovelytheband at the Paradise, and on the walk home she said, "okay, I get it now." Or when I bought a sketchy resale ticket on Twitter to see Hot Mulligan the day before their show even though I already had a ticket to a different concert that night, and Liz and I got there before the sun went down so we could be up front to scream the words to "We're Gonna Make It To Kilby!" right back at the singer two feet in front of us, larger than life.

The best shows are usually the ones I go to with someone else. Sad Summer Fest with Rachel, when I showed up hungover and left with no voice; Macseal in a parking lot with Alaynna even though she didn't know a single song; dancing in the back of Royale with Alyssa during Jeremy Zucker's set and flirting with the opening act. Partly it's an anxiety thing, but mostly it's that I need someone to validate that I was there and it actually happened. I need someone to pinch me.

When I'm alone, the high slips away faster. By the time I make it to the center of Coolidge Corner, so close to home, it's gone almost completely.

I think about leaving the venue, stepping onto the sidewalk and letting out that breath, how my first thought had been "I have never felt so alive," and yet here I am, running out of tears because the feeling is gone, and the space it leaves is somehow already collecting dust.

The first time I took a left out of Brighton instead of following my usual route home, I spent an hour squeezed into a cracked vinyl booth next to Gab, drinking cheap vodka sodas with the boys after they gave us tickets to see Free Throw with them. The walk home was much more fun that time, tipsy and laughing, but there was no concert hangover Friday morning, when I woke up to their alarm. A stark contrast to the show before that, when I spent the entire drive home from seeing

Grayscale in Worcester with my head pressed up against the window, spaced out and listening to “Forever Yours” on loop.

I turn the corner onto Longwood and my footsteps slow. This is always the part of the walk where I stop, because I don’t want to go back to my blank walls and creaky front door, the homework I need to finish and the roommates who will ask “How was it?” from the recliner we got for free off Facebook. But I’m cold to the bone in my thin t-shirt and hating the ten days until the next show, so I speed back up again, one last block and three flights of stairs to the door that’s already unlocked.

My roommates are on the couch. Gab sees the look on my face and asks, “So, which one’s next?”

# AUTHORS

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Rebecca Dempsey.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>7</b>          |
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| <b>Christina Bagni.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <b>8</b>          |
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| <b>Phrieda Bogere.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>12</b>         |
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|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
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| <b>Jason Theriault</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>26</b>               |
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| <b>Ila Railkar</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>27</b>               |
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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
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| <b>Candice Kelsey</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>49, 230-232</b>   |
| Candice Kelsey is an educator and poet living in Georgia. She serves as a creative writing mentor with PEN America's Prison & Justice Writing Program; her poetry appears in myriad journals including Poets Reading the News and Poet Lore. She is the author of Still I am Pushing (2020) and won the Two Sisters Writing Contest (2021). Recently, she was chosen as a finalist in Cutthroat's Joy Harjo Prize. Find her @candicekelsey1 and candicemkelseypoet.com. |                      |
| <b>Olowonjoyin Muhammed Sanni</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>50</b>            |
| Olowonjoyin Muhammed Sanni is a penultimate of Biochemistry in University of Ilorin. He's a lover of art, math, and chemistry. His works have been published in Woven Poetry anthologies. When he's not tracing biochemical pathways, he's either writing or binge-watching good contents. He tweets at @aperse_                                                                                                                                                        |                      |
| <b>Adam Chabot</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>51</b>            |
| Adam Chabot is the English Department Chair at Kents Hill School, a private, independent high school located in central Maine. His other poetry is forthcoming or has been recently featured in Magpie Lit, rough diamond poetry, The Red Lemon Review, and FEED, among others. He can be found on Twitter @adam_chabot.                                                                                                                                                |                      |
| <b>Ace Boggess</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <b>52, 53, 54</b>    |
| Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, including Escape Envy (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021) and The Prisoners. His writing has appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, Notre Dame Review, Harvard Review, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.                                                                                                                                |                      |
| <b>Frank William Finney</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>55, 56</b>        |
| Frank William Finney is a poet and former lecturer from Massachusetts. He lived in Thailand from 1995 until 2020, where he taught literature at Thammasat University. His work has recently appeared in The Raven's Perch, The Thieving Magpie, Tofu Ink Arts Press, and other places. His chapbook The Folding of the Wings is forthcoming from Finishing Line Press.                                                                                                  |                      |
| <b>Tom Farr</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>57</b>            |
| Thomas Farr is a British writer of fiction and poetry. He enjoys travelling, running, reading, and writing, although he doesn't enjoy writing author bios. His work has appeared in The Folkestone Anthology, Eunoia Review, Amphora, and elsewhere. He tweets @TFarrHorror                                                                                                                                                                                             |                      |
| <b>Hameedah Aruwa</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>58, 59, 60</b>    |
| Hameedah Aruwa (she/her) is a young writer from Nigeria. Her works have featured in Praxis Magazine, Sledgehammer lit, Eboquills, Afro lit mag, All ears, Warning lines & elsewhere. She can be reached on twitter @Ugbede_Aruwa & on IG @_aruwa_hameedah                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                      |
| <b>Jade Driscoll</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <b>62, 63, 64-65</b> |
| Jade Driscoll (she/her) is a recent graduate of Central Michigan University with a master's in creative writing. When she's not writing, Jade enjoys reading, listening to music, learning Korean, and walking in local parks. Her work has previously appeared in Atlas and Alice, Plainsongs, Remington Review, and more. You can find her online @thepoetjade.                                                                                                       |                      |

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| <b>Kendra Mills</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>66</b>         |
| Kendra Mills lives in Paris and Massachusetts. She is a recipient of the Elisa Brickner Poetry Prize, and her poems can also be found in Moria Literary Magazine, Delicate Friend, Version 9, Oyster River Pages, and the Flagler Review.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                   |
| <b>Rory Frasch</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>67</b>         |
| Rory Frasch is an aspiring author who enjoys character focused writing and superheroes. They aim to create poetry and prose that connects with other people. When not writing, they spend their time reading tarot cards, studying, and doodling quite poorly. You can find them @roryphobic on Twitter.                                                                                                                                                                          |                   |
| <b>Sam Szanto</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>68</b>         |
| Sam Szanto lives in Durham, England. She won the 2020 Charroux Poetry Prize and the First Writers Poetry Prize. Her story collection 'Courage' was a finalist in the 2021 St Lawrence/Blackwater Press Awards. She was a winner in the April 2022 Shooter Flash Contest, the 2022 Writer's Mastermind Contest, the 2021 Erewash Open Competition and the 2020 Literary Taxidermy awards.                                                                                          |                   |
| <b>Wren Donovan</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>69, 70, 71</b> |
| Wren Donovan's poetry appears or is upcoming in Emerge Literary Journal, The Dillydoun Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Harpy Hybrid Review, Green Ink Poetry, Hecate Anthology, and elsewhere. She studied folklore and literature at UNC-Chapel Hill and University of Southern Mississippi. Wren also reads Tarot, practices dance meditation, and talks to cats. She lives in Tennessee and lurks on twitter @WrenDonovan.                                                           |                   |
| <b>James Penha</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <b>72</b>         |
| Born and reared in New York, James Penha (he/him🌈) has lived for the past three decades in Indonesia. Nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and poetry, his work is widely published in journals and anthologies. His newest chapbook of poems, American Daguerreotypes, is available for Kindle. His essays have appeared in The New York Daily News and The New York Times. Penha edits The New Verse News, an online journal of current-events poetry. Twitter: @JamesPenha |                   |
| <b>Ms. Sam L. Story</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>75-76</b>      |
| Ms. Sam L. Story would like to stay known as Ms. Sam L. Story. This anonymous writer is always seeking to tell stories. She will write in any genre and about anything. She has no idea what she's doing in life. She can only write stories and drink tea.                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                   |
| <b>Cody Shrum</b> .....                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>77-86</b>      |
| Cody Shrum is a teacher, writer, and gym manager based in Kansas City. He has earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Cody's fiction and poetry have appeared in such journals as Prime Number Magazine, Rust + Moth, and Harbor Review, as well as the anthology, Kansas Time + Place: An Anthology of Heartland Poetry. Twitter: @cshrumly                                                                                                        |                   |



**Robert James Cross.....87-91**

Robert James Cross was born and raised in Hollywood, CA. His work has been published in Fiction International and The Lit Quarterly. He has been nominated for the prestigious Pushcart Prize for his fiction and was a finalist in The Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival for his playwriting. He is under the influence of the unconventional.

**Ezioma Kalu.....92-101**

Ezioma Kalu is a fast-rising Nigerian writer, whose works have appeared on some online literary platforms like Kalahari Review, Writers Space Africa-Nigeria and Terror House Magazine. Twitter: Ezioma\_Nwanyimma | Instagram : ezioma\_kalu | Facebook : Ezioma Kalu.

**Aneeta Sundararaj.....102-110**

Once upon a time, Aneeta Sundararaj created a website and called it ‘How to Tell a Great Story’. She has contributed feature articles to a national newspaper and also various journals, magazines and ezines. Aneeta’s bestselling novel, ‘The Age of Smiling Secrets’ was shortlisted for the Book Award 2020 organised by the National Library of Malaysia. Throughout, Aneeta continued to pursue her academic interests and, in 2021, successfully completed a doctoral thesis entitled ‘Management of Prosperity Among Artistes in Malaysia’.

**Enit’ayanfe Ayosojumi Akinsanya.....111-120**

Enit'ayanfe Ayosojumi Akinsanya was born and raised in Nigeria. While he was an undergraduate of Obafemi Awolowo University, he bagged a "The Ready Writers" Fellowship and his fiction was a finalist for the National GTB Dusty Manuscript Prize for Fiction. He is the author of a short-story collection, "How to Catch a Story That Doesn't Exist", published in 2021.

**Melissa Flores Anderson.....121-126**

Melissa Flores Anderson is a Latinx Californian and an award-winning journalist. Her fiction has been featured by Vois Stories, Rigorous Magazine, Moss Puppy Magazine, Discretionary Love and Typeslash Review. She has read pieces with Flash Fiction Forum and Quiet Lightning.

**Shane Wilson.....127-131**

Shane Wilson is the award-winning author of A Year Since the Rain and The Smoke in His Eyes. He tends to chase the day with a whiskey and a re-run of The Office. His third novel, The Woman with a Thousand Faces, is forthcoming from GenZ Publishing (2022). Website: shanewilsonauthor.com | Twitter: @ThatShaneWilson

**Alice Wilson.....132-134**

Alice Wilson is a PhD researcher at the University of York looking at women who build their own tiny houses. Her work has appeared in Ruminare Magazine and the Apple Valley Review.

**Mark Baillie.....135-140**

Mark Baillie is an Edinburgh-based writer, surfer, and climber whose interests are in Gypsy and Roma history and his own Scottish Traveller roots. He is currently working on his first novel and has previously published with Analogies and Allegories Literary Journal, the National Library of Scotland magazine, and Journal of Media Ethics.

**Jessica Boody.....141-147**

Aspiring novelist Jessica Boody is an MFA candidate in the Creative Writing program at Southern New Hampshire University. An avid reader, television enthusiast, and New England sports fanatic, Jessica makes her home in Maine with her husband and four children.

**Emily J. Martin.....148-153**

Emily J Martin is an up-and-coming author who writes about magic, love, and perilous adventures. When she isn't writing she can be found baking, curled up with a book, or occasionally working towards her BA in Creative Writing. Emily is based in Bournemouth, UK, where she loves to spend time walking along the beach in search of inspiration. @emilyjmauthor on both Twitter and Instagram.

**Adedoyin Ajayi.....154-158**

Doyin Ajayi studied Economics from Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. To him, writing equates creation. He loves the feeling of taking hold of a reader's mind and taking them to a world of his making. His work has appeared in Brittle Paper, The Kalahari Review and Afrocritik. He tweets @AjayiAdedoyin14.

**Daniel Paul.....159-161**

Daniel Paul is a young Nigerian writer who is absolutely in love with Afro-centric fiction, preferably afro fantasy and mystery stories. His genre of choice is Afro fantasy. He's from Delta State, Nigeria and hopes to tell the story of Africa to the world someday.

**Mahbub Kanyinsola Salahudeen.....162-165**

She is a writer, poet and spoken words artist. Her works have featured or forthcoming at several places including Spillwords magazine, Brittle Paper, Ice Flow press, Ninshar Arts, Ice Lolly, Arts Lounge, SprinNG journal, Litround journal, Down in the Dirt, Aayo Magazine, Nanty Greens, Cathartic Review, Northern Otter Press, Konya Shamsrumi, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Terror House Press, Confetti, Beatnik Cowboy Literary Magazine, Fterota Logia and elsewhere. When she's not writing, she's either reading short stories or simply hanging out with friends.

**Miriam H. Harrison.....166-168**

Miriam H. Harrison (she/her) writes among the boreal forests and abandoned mines of Northern Ontario, Canada. Her writings vary between the eerie, the dreary, and the cheery, and she is a member of the Horror Writers Association, SF Canada, and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association. Her website is miriamhharrison.wordpress.com.

**Kate Torrey.....169-171**

Kate Torrey became a stay-at-home mom in 2020 due to the pandemic, and rediscovered creative writing as a way to keep herself sane. She has a bachelor’s degree from Seattle University, and lives in Snohomish, WA, with her wife, 3 kids, and a host of small livestock.

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| <b>Erica Marasco.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>172-174</b>      |
| Erica Marasco is a fiction writer originally from Pennsylvania who currently lives in Texas with her family. She loves to read, write, bake bread, and believes anytime is a good time for coffee. Find her and her stories on Twitter @EricaMarasco.                                                                                                                                             |                     |
| <b>E.J. Nash.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>175-177</b>      |
| E.J. Nash is an Ottawa-based writer. Her work has been published in The First Line, Idle Ink, PACE Magazine, the Wondrous Real Magazine, Bywords, and is forthcoming in Nature Futures. You can follow her on Twitter @Nash_EJ.                                                                                                                                                                   |                     |
| <b>Cindy Hossain.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>178-179</b>      |
| Cindy Hossain was raised in the Free State Province, South Africa. She emigrated to Manchester, United Kingdom in 2006 where she now spends time with her young family whilst doing a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. She is an enthusiastic reader and writer of short fiction, and believes little stories often deliver the biggest punch.                                  |                     |
| <b>Mariya Kika.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>180-182</b>      |
| Mariya is a young second-gen Canadian creative and student. Her writing centers around healing, rage, and family. When not writing or attending class, she enjoys bothering her cat and painting. Twitter: @mariyakeeka                                                                                                                                                                           |                     |
| <b>Holly Eva Allen.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>183-185</b>      |
| Holly Eva Allen is a writer currently living in California. Her work has been previously published in magazines and sites such as Funicular, Peculiar, Sand Hills, and Farside Review. She is the co-EIC for Foothill Journal and EIC for Horned Things. She is currently working on a degree at Claremont Graduate University. You can follow her on Twitter @hollyevaallen.                     |                     |
| <b>Atlas Booth.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>186-187</b>      |
| Atlas Booth is a writer who lives in Cape Town, South Africa. He enjoys all kinds of different teas and cold brew coffee. For more information on his work, follow him on twitter: atlasbooth or visit his website: <a href="https://atlaslb.carrd.co/">https://atlaslb.carrd.co/</a>                                                                                                             |                     |
| <b>Allison Renner.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>188-189, 195</b> |
| Allison Renner is an editor for Flash Fiction Magazine and the Publicity & Reviews Manager for Split/Lip Press. Her fiction and photography has appeared in or is forthcoming from The Daily Drunk, Six Sentences, Rejection Letters, Versification, Thimble Literary Magazine, FERAL, and vulnerary magazine. She can be found online at allisonrennerwrites.com and on Twitter @AllisonRWrites. |                     |
| <b>Theresa Kohlbeck Jakobsen.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>193</b>          |
| Theresa is a German creative, identifying as non-binary. Art she produces under the title of Pinkudreyma.welt are, for her, a tool of recovery as well as for coping with anxiety. Right now, Theresa is working and studying in Berlin.                                                                                                                                                          |                     |
| <b>Adrienne Pilon.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <b>199</b>          |
| Adrienne Pilon is a writer, teacher, and editor. Recent work can be found at Uppagus, Eclectica, Mobius: A Journal of Social Change, and elsewhere. She lives in North Carolina.                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                     |

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| <b>Daniel Wartham.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>200-201</b> |
| Daniel Wartham is a current grad student who can be found out and about on 2am walks and on Twitter @DanielWartham                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                |
| <b>Jenny Cook.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>202-203</b> |
| Jenny Cook is a writer who tells stories to make sense of the world around her. She enjoys reading when it isn't for a school assignment and will talk your ear off about her current hyper fixations if given the chance. Don't ask her what her plans for the future are – she hasn't thought that far in advance.                                                                                                           |                |
| <b>Ingrid Ren.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>204-208</b> |
| Ingrid Ren grew up attending French immersion schools in San Francisco and wants to move to Philly. She is currently studying English (creative nonfiction writing track) at Brown University. Her work has been published by Columbia College Chicago, post– magazine, and For Women Who Roar.                                                                                                                                |                |
| <b>Isabella Hawkins.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>209-211</b> |
| Isabella Hawkins is a Melbourne based writer and photographer. She is in her second year of her Bachelor of Media and Communications (Journalism) at RMIT University. Her writing has been published in the university magazine and publisher RMIT Catalyst and Bowen Street Press respectively. In her free time she loves reading and nature photography. Her nature photography is found on her Instagram @thoughtsofahawk. |                |
| <b>Bobbi Solano.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>212-218</b> |
| Bobbi Solano graduated from California State University, Stanislaus with her B.A in English in 2021. She is currently attending St. Mary's College of California where she is a part of their MFA's fiction cohort.                                                                                                                                                                                                            |                |
| <b>N. West Moss.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>219-221</b> |
| N. West Moss has a short story collection out from Leapfrog Press (2017), a memoir out from Algonquin (2021), and a middle-grade novel forthcoming from Little, Brown. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, Salon, McSweeney's, and elsewhere.                                                                                                                                                                         |                |
| <b>A. Gaskamp.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | <b>222-225</b> |
| A. Gaskamp is a part-time human who wrote A History of Rowana. Twitter @aquiententity42.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                |
| <b>Michael Riordan.....</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>226-229</b> |
| Michael Riordan has taught in the U.S., Australia, Singapore, and China, where he was a professor of writing and film studies. His short stories, nonfiction, and poetry can be found in Short Edition, Consequence, Months to Years, Spirituality & Health, Tether's End, and elsewhere. In 2020, he won first prize for nonfiction in Ageless Authors. He and his wife Mary live in Arlington, Texas.                        |                |

**Jamison O’Sullivan.....233-236**

Jamison O'Sullivan is a recent graduate of Emmanuel College with a degree in Writing, Editing, and Publishing. Her work has been chosen for publication in Schuylkill Valley Journal, Rejection Letters, and Moss Puppy Magazine. She lives in Boston, where she enjoys getitng lost on purpose and curating her many Spotify playlists. You can follow her on Twitter @pajamisonn, and on Instagram @jkosullivann.

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