



**CORVUS REVIEW || ISSUE 11  
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## **COVER ART**

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She was also one of the finalists for the Poetry Matters Poetry Contest and has won many prizes for her poetry. Her works were nominated for the Best of the net Anthology award by the Scarlet Leaf Review and the Spirit Fire Review.

## **STATEMENT**

Nothing is more beautiful than a small wet leaf on a rainy day. The leaf looks so fresh and young which gives hope and happiness to the beholders. I found it really very beautiful and immediately appealing.

## **EDITORS**

Janine Mercer (EIC/Poetry)

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## Little Green Bag

David Norwood

I made *sure* to rid myself of all pet responsibilities. “Do you have any pets, and do you even want any?” I asked. I wouldn’t have continued dating had she said yes. Thankfully, she said no and stressed how it wasn’t that she hated animals. I informed her how I never wanted a pet since being an owner involved too much responsibility, and I was glad she felt the same way.

*She said no. I was in the clear. No pets. Thank God.*

But, once we moved in, the first thing she wanted was a dog and to name it Nemo. I promptly reminded her how much I didn’t like pets. I even reminded her of the conversation we had when we first met. But, she wanted one anyway and said *she* would take care of it—I wouldn’t have to lift a finger. I reluctantly agreed, but only after clarifying any lingering ambiguity.

“I’m serious,” I said, “I don’t want to have to do *anything*. It’s the reason I don’t want a dog in the first place. I don’t want to take it for a walk and carry one of those little poop-bags,” my eyes squinted in disgust, “and fill it up and carry it back home.” She assured me that would never happen. But, my sternness was short lived.

She’d be running late and frantically text me, pleading me to take Nemo out—*I know how much you hate it*. I’d look down at Nemo anxiously waiting by the door, her rear-end rapidly lifting and lowering in anticipation. Her eyes would beg. Mine would roll. Out of guilt, I’d eventually grab the leash, the kind that efficiently dispenses a little green translucent bag. Nemo would whimper in excitement.

We’d walk down our street. Nemo would quickly trot from yard to yard, mailbox to mailbox, and squirt pee in quick bursts along the way. We’d then approach an open field at the end of our street. Nemo would sniff and scurry in circles, perhaps ranking the best place to squat. A few rounds would pass before she’d crook her back-legs at ninety-degree angles and pull her front legs inward. Like a gymnast learning to position themselves for the first time, she’d do her business. She’d stare. *Judging? Understanding? Embarrassed?* When it was over, I’d unroll one of those little green bags and pick up her warm morsel. Defeat would ensue as Nemo watched, pleased from relief.

I’d soon return home, embarrassed, and toss the little green bag in the outside trash can along with my pride. So much for no pets. I’d promptly text—*done*—and turn on the television. Nemo would sit next to me on the couch. The commentator on the television recapped sports highlights. I’d jerk with excitement and frustration. Each time, Nemo would lift her head and stare. *Judging? Understanding? Happiness?* Then she’d yawn and lower her head back on the sofa cushion next to me.

This became our routine for almost two years. Day after day, week after week, month after month. And, then it was over. No more walks. No more waiting by the door. And, no more little green bags.

The breakup was quick. We discussed who’d stay and who’d move, who’d get *this* and who’d get *that*. Nemo never came into question. As I packed, Nemo followed me from room to room, box to box, and then to my car. She stared. *Judging? Understanding? Sadness?* I took her on a walk one last time with the little green bag. “See you later Nemo. It’s been real.” The squat. The stare. I dropped the bag in the outside trash can, gave her some fresh water and food, patted her on the head, and drove off. It was the last time I saw her.

Until now, at the park, two years later. I sat alone on a bench reading, surrounded by autumn ash trees. Their orange leaves rustled like crumpled paper. The crisp air carried the

scent of bark. Fall helped open my lungs like no other season. I dressed in jeans and sweaters. I carried books and coffee to the park but ended up sitting and watching others instead. And today, I saw Nemo with her new owner—just the two of them. Nemo trotted down the asphalt walkway, sniffing and searching for a place to squat.

She approached me. He apologized for her behavior. I smiled to ease his worry. After a few rounds, she did her business right next to me. *Nemo!* He exclaimed while softly jerking at her leash. I laughed. I saw the little green bag in his hand. Nemo maintained her awkward posture and stared up at me. *Judging? Understanding? Remembrance?* The man leaned down, embarrassed and disgusted, and picked up her treat in the little green bag. “Good luck with that,” I said. I sipped my coffee and turned the page in my book as they walked away.

## The Newest Member

Marisa Crane

*What's love gotta do with a little ménage? - Fat Joe*

“No, no, no,” I say, even though I can feel myself getting a little hard at the suggestion. “I’m not having a three-way. Remember what happened with Tina and Aimee? Charlotte nearly ruined their marriage.”

“It’s not a three-way, babe,” Victor insists.

“Okay, whatever you wanna call it. *Polyamory*. I know we’ve been having some problems, but damn—I didn’t think this was the answer.”

“It’s not meant to be,” he scoffs. He is no good at scoffing as he almost never does it. He is a kind and gentle man, deliciously sincere.

“I don’t wanna share you,” I say.

“I think you’ll feel differently once you see our third,” he grins. I hate that grin. That grin could convince me to march off a cliff.

\*\*\*\*

That night I fall asleep on Victor’s shoulder, his arm wrapped around me. His ring feels icy against my back. I keep waking up to streams of warm air on my forehead. He’s sighing in his sleep. I wonder what he’s dreaming about, whether I’m frustrating him in that world too.

I imagine a man on the other side of him, the stranger’s arm draped over my husband’s beautiful body. When I finally find sleep I dream that my body has been flipped inside-out, my organs spilled all over the street. A little boy nudges my heart with his foot, begins to juggle it like a soccer ball.

\*\*\*\*

I spend the day furiously masturbating to my favourite porn star, Cali Creamin’, this ripped hunk from L.A. I suppose he would suffice as a third.

Victor comes in the door from work looking all hot in his skinny, navy suit.

“I wanna rip that off you,” I smile, doing a silly dance as I approach him.

“It’s Armani, you better not,” he says, taking a step back. “Have you given any more thought to what we talked about?”

“No,” I lie.

I go outside to sweep the patio. The air smells like trash, but I know that it’s the low tide bringing in all the seaweed. I thought a house by the ocean would be enough for him. I thought I would be enough for him. People warned us that men, gay men in particular, rarely remain faithful. We swore that we’d be the exception, and so far we have been. To my knowledge, anyway. With that vow, though, came insecurities in the form of *Who was that?* and *I haven’t seen him before* whenever one of us spoke to a man at the bar. I think about what our third will look like, talk like, smell like. I wonder which one of us will fall for him first, and about the trajectory of that fall.

Back inside, Victor is cooking vegetables on the stove. I hug him from behind and nuzzle my face in his back.

“Okay, I’ll try it,” I mumble. “Because that’s how much I love you.”

\*\*\*\*

Again I am at home trying to distract myself—perusing LimeWire for Akon songs. I smoke a joint but the weed is shit so I get all the paranoia and none of the high. I beg my client not to leave us even though he called to renew their contract. He asks if I’m feeling

okay and I tell him my mom is sick even though she's been dead for ten years, and he gives his condolences then hurries off the phone. My skin is itchy.

Victor arrives home. Today he's wearing a charcoal Brooks Brothers suit and he got his hair cut over lunch. He gives me a kiss on the lips and I cup his skull in my head and pull him closer.

"Ready?" he asks. He sets his briefcase down and unzips it.

"For what?"

"To meet the newest member of our relationship," he smiles maniacally.

"Um," I say, looking at the front door.

He pulls out a small white box. Inside is a black titanium screen. Kind of looks like a miniature TV.

"What is this?" I ask.

I hadn't been prepared for a remote threesome, to video our sex.

"It's called an iPhone."

"I already have a phone," I protest.

"Yeah, a shitty RAZR. This is beyond what we could ever comprehend, Pat. The world is at our fingertips. And then some."

"I don't get it."

"Shhhh," he says, holding down a button and turning it on.

The screen says *Welcome* and tingles traverse my spine—the bad tingles. Not the 'my husband just bit my earlobe' tingles.

\*\*\*\*

"Do you like him?" my husband asks, opening a bottle of red Zinfandel. I'm cradling the small smooth phone in both hands. He pours three glasses, pulls the phone from my grip, and sets it in front of its glass.

"This is ridiculous," I say.

"What's so ridiculous about it?" he asks, tilting his head like a dumb golden retriever.

"Why the fuck are you calling it a *him*?" I ask. I eye the iPhone jealously. It vibrates and crawls across the table like a lizard, like something far too alive.

"Because he's a valuable part of our relationship," says Victor. "I want him to feel welcome."

He picks it up and laughs at something on the screen that I can't see.

"Oh my god, he's so funny," he coos, and I'm already feeling like the third wheel.

\*\*\*\*

That night my husband glues a few cotton balls together and makes a pillow for the iPhone. He's named "him" Rafael. "I like Latinx men," he'd explained as I examined the white-blond hair on my forearms. We lie down in bed and Victor lays Rafael between us, his "head" resting on the cotton ball pillow.

"I want him to feel comfortable on his first night with us," he explains. It's been at least two hours since I've last spoken, my senses dulled by the red wine and shock.

Rafael's screen is icy cold against my neck. Just as my husband's ring had been a few days ago. I can't sleep. I wander the house hiding objects from myself. The remote in the freezer. My wallet in the medicine cabinet. I feel afraid.

\*\*\*\*

Sunday, the three of us go to brunch. I'm embarrassed when the hostess says "Table for two?" and Victor corrects her, "No, three." She stands on her tip toes and searches behind us for a third.

"Oh, you're meeting someone," she smiles.

“No,” Victor says. He holds up the black machine and wiggles him. I turn magenta.

The hostess clears her throat and nods, instructing us to follow her to our table. She pulls out my chair then my husband’s and then pauses, looks at the ceiling like she’ll find God swinging from the rafters, and pulls out Rafael’s chair.

Victor smiles and sets him up nicely, doesn’t bother asking if I’m okay where I’m sitting even though the sun’s shining in through the window and nearly blinding me. I try to play nice. I ask Rafael what he likes to do for fun. He glimmers beautifully and vibrates in response. I don’t know how I can ever compete.

“Isn’t he great?” my husband beams.

“Sure.”

I order a pitcher of mimosas for myself. My husband holds Rafael delicately, whispers things into his screen. I can’t hear what he’s saying, but somehow I know that they’re the kindest words he’s ever uttered. He runs his veiny finger down the screen, scrolling and smiling.

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Sex with Rafael is strange. I can’t really tell where his erogenous zones are so I lick his camera, but Victor yells at me and says, “That’s his nose!”

At one point Victor is recording himself giving me head, but he seems way more into the camera than actually sucking my dick. I go limp and Victor moves onto Rafael.

Afterward, he gives me a quick kiss and gets up to charge Rafael in the other room. When he returns, he is distant. He doesn’t hear me when I say, “I love you,” and if he does, well that’s even worse. I can tell he wishes Rafael were laying on his stomach instead.

\*\*\*\*

“I guess we should agree on some ground rules,” Victor says, looking from Rafael to me and back to Rafael. We are sitting in our courtyard drinking champagne. I nod, Rafael glimmers. From what I understand, that either means “yes” or “pick me up.” *Like a child*, I think, but I don’t dare say this to my husband.

“Communication is a must if this is going to work,” he says, writing in a notebook. He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. His pupils are really dilated.

“Communication. Yeah, okay.”

He paws at Rafael, like he wants him really badly. Rafael lights up with an alert. Victor’s childhood best friend sent him a photo of his new dachshund.

“Aww, Raf, you’re so thoughtful. Thank you,” he grabs him in his hands and responds to the message.

*Raf*, barf. I down my champagne. He scrolls through Rafael tapping the screen every few seconds.

“You want communication?” I threaten. Victor doesn’t seem fazed.

“Yes, love,” he says without looking up.

I wuss out and say “This is really good champagne,” and he laughs and says, “Good, I’m glad,” and I’m trapped in a hell I never knew existed.

\*\*\*\*

It is morning. I wake up before my alarm. My husband is sitting on the edge of the bed—our bed—scrolling through Rafael. He’s hunched over, hypnotized. I watch him touch Rafael the way I’d like to be touched, admire him the way I’d like to be admired. He raises Rafael to his lips and kisses him tenderly, the way one does to someone they wish to love forever. I close my eyes and try to will myself back to sleep but my chest is tight, like a balloon has been inflated behind my sternum.

I try to conjure up a memory of visiting Belize with him so many years ago when things were new and fresh and dying to be cracked open and slurped up. At the time it was illegal for men to be with men in Belize. We had a wonderful time drinking margaritas and eating lobsters by the sea, but we couldn't touch each other. Victor might as well have been on the moon. All day I'd ache for his body and then collapse into him the moment we got back to our room and closed the blinds.

Now every moment we are restricted like in Belize but without all the sun and island music and urgency of newness. I feel him stand up off the bed and I wait for him to kiss my forehead like he usually does, but he doesn't. He's holding Rafael in one hand and slipping on shorts with the other, almost tripping as he steps into them.

He slips Rafael into his pocket and I swear I hear him say, "No funny business while you're down there, babe."

When I get up and wander into the kitchen they're eating bacon and French toast at the table. There's room for me, but there's not.

"Rafael, can you get me a plate?" I sneer. My husband scoffs at me and this time it's a good scoff and I wonder how he learned to do that so quickly.

"Don't be obtuse," he says, grabbing his new love and taking a photo of their breakfast.

"You're such a good photographer. Where's you learn to take photos like that?" Victor flirts with Rafael. Rafael doesn't respond then vibrates a few times when my husband's mother calls. He takes the call in the other room—the first time since we got together that he's done that. I don't know what to think.

Except I do.

I can hear my husband telling his mom that he's doing better than ever. That he had no idea he could be this happy. I want to ask what Raf has that I don't. I hear Victor say goodbye, but he doesn't return to the kitchen. I eat both of their meals then go outside and smoke a joint. I think about Cali Creamin'. Hopefully he feels like he is enough.

\*\*\*\*

I tell my husband that he's gotten too much time with Rafael, that if we are going to have a successful three-way relationship then I've got to have time with Raf too. My husband seems pleased with my effort. It's the first time he smiles at me without resentment or pity since Raf moved in.

"You're going to love him once you get to know him," Victor reassures me.

I nod and raise my eyebrows as if to say, *Okay, now get out. We'd like some alone time.* Victor leaves, reading me well. He has always read me well, ever since we met and my best friend, Jacob, tried to make me dance in the cage at Moe's, and, reading the terrifying look on my face, Victor swooped in and saved me. He was so sweet and understanding. I guess he still is—just toward someone, something else.

"Guess it's just us now," I say awkwardly, swinging my arms back and forth.

Raf doesn't say anything. I don't expect him to. I'm the odd one out here.

I'm painfully aware of my every move, like I'm outside of myself. I crack open two beers and set one in front of Raf, who's sitting on the couch. He doesn't touch it so I drink it. I inch closer, eventually take him in my hand. He's cold and smooth and weirdly comforting, like I'd been waiting for him my entire life. I answer some of my husband's texts as if I'm him and I feel powerful.

Raf makes me feel like anything is possible.

Eventually I take him to bed and it is an otherworldly experience. Despite his small size, he touches me everywhere at once. Signals fire in my brain that say *This is good, this is*

*real damn good*, and I roll on top of him and touch all his buttons, stroke his screen, and make believe that attention is the same as affection.

## Skipping Stones

Tyler Womack

You hold the small, flat, kidney-shaped stone between your thumb and forefinger and fling it sideways with a snap of your wrist. You hope for five skips, for six: perfect circles spreading out in a line, each smaller than the one before. But this time the stone goes seven, then eight, nine, ten skips. Some magical conspiracy of physics, hydrology and atmospheric sends it spinning onward, faster: fifteen skips. Twenty. Then it's cleared the pond.

It hits a flagstone on the far bank and ricochets into the air, like a bullet. It snaps right through the green glass window of a small, three-story building on the other side of the pond, and you can vaguely hear it strike against objects inside.

You start to run around the pond, hoping that the damage is minimal. It was just a stone, you think. But as you're running, you hear the sound of equipment, crashing over. Then the hiss of gas spilling out, following by the FWOOMF and crackle of flames igniting. The fire alarm goes off, and it blares dully through the windows as you round the pond. You step up on the yellow gravel pathway as smoke begins to build up behind the glass. You can see it faintly as it seeps out of the hole made by your skipped stone. You hear raised voices and high-pitched screams, competing with the whooping alarm.

The back entrance is locked, so you run around the building, wondering whether you can undo whatever destruction you've caused. You get to the front and you realize it's a hospital. The building's sign is a dead giveaway, which reads Children's Cancer Clinic. Then you notice the children, who are being led outside by nurses and orderlies.

You run toward the doors to help, but firemen have arrived, and they're asking you to step aside. An elderly nurse is being assisted out of the smoky entrance by an orderly, and she collapses mere feet away from you. Up at the front door, gurneys come squealing out, each holding a small child. A young, blue-eyed girl in an oxygen mask points right at you, and you look around to see if anyone notices.

Then the firemen are asking everyone to please move backward, because the fire is still uncontained. You help the elderly nurse hobble another thirty yards and turn to see flames licking upward from the building's roof. The firemen are making a valiant effort, but they can't seem to prevail. Wailing ambulances charge toward the building's entrance, skidding around fallen debris. Somewhere, a man is weeping.

Policemen with small notebooks are talking to people nearby. A news van has arrived, and a reporter is saying that a projectile was fired into one of the building's laboratories. Some are calling it a hate crime. There's a dull ache along the back of your shoulders, and a buzzing behind your eyes. Your stomach is filled with ash, and you think it's only a matter of time until the police come your way.

This is, of course, an allegory. I'm putting you in the story only so you'll feel the stakes the way I do. The "you" here is me. Got it? Because here's the truth:

This is how I've felt since I told you I love you.

I know you're going to call me melodramatic for telling you this. You've got such an easygoing way about you. Like we simply whiled away those countless afternoons, gorging

on the warmth of these last few teenage days. Casting so many looks, oblivious of the currents. Of the wind.

There was more than one stone thrown these past few months. There were things I said to you: on the phone, at the swimming pool, at parties. “You have *exceptional* taste in music” and “I’m happy to see you,” and “You’re way cooler than her anyway.” At the pool, I said “You look like the cat that ate the canary,” and — pleased with yourself — you wore that look all the way to the snow cone stand. Your blue eyes, sparkling.

“In another life, we were probably pandas. Locked in the same enclosure, forced to eat bamboo while people stared, wondering when we’re going to *do* it.” That one was yours, cast at a boring art show on the East side. It skipped seven times, following me home. Even that was nothing like when the slow dance ended at the Shangri La Sock Hop, and you looked up at me and called me “dangerous.”

So when I told you I loved you last week, walking you to your car under that starlit pool of inky black, how was I to know it would spin out of control?

And now you won’t return my calls, and neither will Bianca. I guess sisters gotta take sides. Which is what this is: Lines have been drawn.

Lindsay said she saw you and Scott fighting at the Side Bar. I wish I could say I’m sorry about that, but I think he’s wrong for you. I think he’s always been wrong for you. I’m half-afraid that this thing will make the two of you stronger- you always wanted to prove yourself, and I can see you, at this moment, crossing your heart and swearing that you won’t hang out with me ever again. Because Scott means too much. And maybe he does, but I never saw it.

George disinvited me from his band’s show at the Parlor. He said he didn’t want drama. Were you suddenly planning to attend? And now nobody is visiting the Sunday Funday chat group we started. Did Bianca tell them to stop? Did you? Yesterday evening, I went to Thunderbird and none of our barista friends had time to talk. No comped drinks or anything. So I went for a walk.

I walked around Cherrywood and I thought about you. About how three small words could skip so many times, could summon forth so many circles, could shatter our sacred space. I watched lightning bugs signal through the overgrown yards of Lafayette Avenue, and I charted the busy paths of loosed calico house cats. Alone as the moon, stomach full of ash, I scanned the gutters for small, flat stones. I felt, keenly, the ache across my shoulders.

I guess I should be mad at you for abandoning me. But the truth is that I’d fight tooth and nail for you, if only you’d let me.

## Open Wide

Phoebe Reeves Murray

My husband thinks I wear a lionsuit. He's wrong. It's not a suit. I'm not a lion.

I'm a lioness.

Google me. Lion: a large tawny-colored cat that lives in Africa. Lioness: a female lion. We

all begin as female so why isn't a lion a male lioness?

I'm not a female lion. I'm a lioness.

A marriage needs a lioness because of the hyenas—particularly the ones that skin themselves

as doctors.

This hyena dressed as a doctor copulates a plastic spine with a gold metal spider—doggy style of course—hypnotizing my mate. Just like the first two spiders, this one will envelope my mate's spine, bite down with its fangs, poison his pain until he can no longer feel it.

Or, as I've discovered, anything else.

My husband and I have no sex now because this hyena wearing a doctor suit has cut open my mate's spine two other times, and each time, the spider gets a little bigger, wraps itself around his spine a little tighter. My mate feels nothing now. Which means no mating for the mates.

This hyena doesn't like me. I can smell his anger under his white coat.

We've—no, I've come to see the hyena about removing the spider. My mate acquiesced—he's afraid of the hyena and in thrall to the spider. I wear my human suit because even if phone booths still existed, many men don't like a woman to change her appearance unless it is for her to leap onto an inverted bucket and open her mouth, teeth covered, of course, so they can lay their head inside it and whip her. They want their happy ending and they want you wild—to know you have teeth, but keep them covered. How do

you do both? I'm still trying to figure that out.

The hyena's nurse is a winged monkey and screeches a giggle as she stage whispers to my mate that Doctor Hyena has told her, "Don't worry. I know that guy and he's easy." I growl deep in my throat. The current spider tightens its grip on my mate's spine. He frowns, blaming my growl.

The nurse asks him to describe his pain in numbers, in words, in location, in frequency, in motion—except for the important motion. She doesn't ask about that, and he doesn't volunteer that. Even though that's why we're here. She leaves to get the hyena.

White coated and white smiling, he enters, greeting my mate, "We'll get to the bottom of what's wrong!" Neither of them look in my direction.

My mate wears a daze as he introduces me again even I was there for both of the previous operations. Dr. Hyena limply shakes my hand. "Yes, I remember you, so good to meet you."

My mate sits. The hyena doesn't bother to examine the information the monkey nurse has collected. Instead, he asks my mate the exact same pain questions again. My mate relays that it hurts to bend over, to lift things, to lie any way except flat on his back. He doesn't mention that sex hurts worst of all.

They finish circling each other making meaningless information sounds. Silence. Dr. Hyena stares at me. My mate turns to me, asks if he's missed anything.

I sit on my haunches. "Have you found this spider to kill sex, Dr. Hyena?"

The snarl ripples across his eyes. "Never. In fact, my business partner and I had a woman open last week, and when we slid the spider inside her, we stimulated her and she orgasmed right there on the operating table." He whooped. "Opens up a whole buffet of business for us."

This hyena slices open bodies but doesn't know anatomy, its location and function.

*My orgasm has never originated from the middle of my spine.*

My mate pretends confusion. “She means can the neural stimulator be causing me to lose  
desire?”

Why does he pretend confusion? The hyena has entered his body twice.

“No.” The white coated dog turns to me. His mouth stretches open in a grimace. “The  
problem...” His eyes turn black. “...must be you.”

*Along came a spider and sat down inside him.*

A heavy silence brings down the office air. How can I get it out myself? With a steak knife?

With my bare claws? But what if I kill him by saving him?

Other white-coated doctor hyenas have slunk into the office and circle around me. They toss  
my mate a white jacket, take out his eyes, and give him black eyes like their own.

“Here, pussy, pussy,” Dr. Hyena snarls. The others shriek and throw back back their heads as  
they close in. They all line up in front of me.

Only my mate stares at me.

But I’m not a pussy.

“Here, kitty, kitty...”

I leap onto a chair and open my mouth wide. I can feel all their throats pressing against me.

And as my mate lays his head inside my mouth, I slide my lips back, baring my fangs. I’m a  
lioness.

## The Persistence of Memory

Clark Zlotchew

January but hot, hot, steamy hot. Sweltering, stifling, torrid. Clothing-stick-to-skin humid. Sultry atmosphere oppressive yet paradoxically stimulating on the deepest levels. Aromas: raw tobacco leaf, sweat, cheap perfume, disinfectant, cling to my clothes, to my skin, my nasal passages. I gaze out the taxi windows. Yellow-purple blur of stucco houses, balconies and black iron grillwork streaks past my sandpapered eyes. We careen through narrow streets, sweeping me along with the current of this tropical city, this oasis of fertility among the breakers of a sterile salt sea. My brain pickled in alcohol in thrall to the radio that bles insistent, brutally accented rhythms whose beat is the beat of my own heart, accompany beguiling, soul-snatching melodies. I writhe in my seat, beat on the dashboard in time with pulsating music. *Sacídelo, chico!* Jerking strum of guitars, hurried chic-chic of maracas, angry rasping of güiro, shallow bat-a-bat of bongos, booming thunder of frenzied conga drums in different pitches... They vibrate in my skull, shiver my spine, quiver my stomach, my guts. They hypnotize, mesmerize. But suddenly: Strident, acid trumpets, in minor key, tasting of lemons, razor sharp, slash through my alcoholic haze, the haze that helps me forget Her... up there in the frigid Northland. The cold, the ice, the stony hardness of a tombstone in sub-zero Winter. So, I am once again reminded, unwillingly brought back, rudely awakened to implacable memory.

## Pink Band-Aids and Microwave Pizza

Lucas J Burford

This is my ritual: 9am, pink band-aids and microwave pizza. It's sloppy and secure. I wrap one band-aid on my finger tightly. The slick oily bandage with that bubble in the middle looks like a short fat worm with a hundred pin pokes. I can't eat in the morning without just one pink band-aid on me. I tried it once and felt motion sick for the rest of the day. The microwave pizza must be refrigerated and never frozen. I prefer a flimsy pizza in a cardboard box creased around the edges, never home-made or ordered. It must be wrapped in plastic and cooked on high for exactly two intervals of *fifty-five* seconds each, with a short, very short, break in between. This is exactly how I prefer my pizza.

While it cools, I peel off another band-aid and place it on another finger, but a different hand. It's very important that each pink worm is not on an identical finger; it must be mismatched. The pizza has now cooled off enough and I love the way it looks in the plastic, sloppy and trapped. I pinch a hole in the center of the plastic while the band-aids keep my fingers from shaking and I peel the plastic off. This is when I eat and sometimes I scream at myself while I chew. This helps me block out the sound of my teeth and spit. If I scream loud enough I can finish eating within twenty minutes.

I gather the cardboard box and place the greasy plastic inside it, leaving it on the table. I try to be as careful as possible during all of this not to make a mess of things. I can't risk washing my hands or taking a bath this early, it might make my band-aids slip right off my fingers and my hands would just shake too much to get any work done. It's very important that I get my work done, for everyone.

Work starts early in the morning and happens every morning. I try to be early each day, but I manage to get there exactly on time. I work alone. There is a thick sheet of blank paper in front of me, one black ink pen, and an eraser. My job as an artist is to carefully draw a list of animals. I wait for my list while taking deep breaths. I tend to get nervous before work, but I never scream at myself during work; it's not professional. A lady miss brings me my work instructions and I don't feel as nervous now.

Today it's a giraffe, two pigs, and a bird of my liking. Sometimes I forget what the point of a bird is, other than to draw it. Sometimes I forget what the point of me is. I place the pen in my hand and I feel it rub against my band-aid and I know it's going to be a good drawing. I start with the bird and make it have short feathers of all different colors, I can see the colors in blue ink. I am god in this moment, but only of this fat little bird. When I say *I am god* in my head, my hands get warm to the touch, but I don't tell anyone that underneath what they feel are like blisters full of boiling water to me. Today the blisters don't feel as hot. Some days I want to kill myself; not today, though, because it's Wednesday. I finish the bird and lady miss gives me her approval with an outside break for a reward. This makes me very happy.

Outside is very cold today and the sunshine hurts my eyes, but I don't mind it today. Today is the last day for me to smoke; even if it's pretend it's a nasty habit. I blow the cold air out and suck in. My fingers make a *V* in front of my lips and I suck in. I breathe in the world and its cancer one last time and throw it on the ground while wafting my shirt to get the smell off me. I can hear a voice yell at me because I'm not supposed to smoke at work, but that's pretend as well, I think. There are many lady misses outside today. I don't mind them when they help.

I finish the giraffe and two pigs and lady miss asks me to redraw them. I just smile at her, imagining pulling out her teeth with my fingers. I hope she wouldn't bite down and chop

them off; my band-aid would protect me, I know it. I could pull out each tooth one by one and keep them in my mouth to chew and she would smile at me and say I did well. I hope I could hear her over the screaming.

I stop smiling and get back to work. I adjust my feet under my legs and I focus on one giraffe and two pigs. I wish I could draw birds all day. I finish work and at last lady miss approves and I smile, all the while imagining me putting her teeth back into her mouth, one by one. She would be happy about this, I know it. I don't think anyone would be happy with a sunken-in face, not even lady miss. On bad days, unlike this one, though I am imagining it now, I see her sunken face being pulled over her skull, down past her shoulders, around her feet like taking off a dress. She is still smiling while sweeping her loose skin and mop of hair a few feet away from her, a tripping hazard for most and it's quite nice of her to do this for me.

11am is nearly my worst hour. I try to extend this time to reflect but a tension in this place with all the hungry lady misses and others seems to change the air. I can hear their rumbling bellies throughout this place; it's the loudest part of the day. This is when nobody smiles. I smile, though, underneath my face for none to see. I don't think it's polite to smile when nobody else is.

I go back home and wait for a lady miss to walk me to lunch. They are rarely late, so I tend to get less nervous around lunch as well. I sit and look around my room, trying to make it spin by swinging my neck back and forth to pass the time. It's a task to make a room spin when it's still like this, trying to knock the picture frames off the wall. I did it once while shaking my head very hard. At two minutes before a lady miss knocks on my door and I peel off my pink band-aids and apply two fresh ones. Since it's the afternoon I don't mind putting them on the same hand; I never do, though. I did this once and I felt like everyone was looking at me, to get me, for the entire day. That day, unlike today, was a bad day, and on bad days the lady misses are stronger than me.

The lady miss knocks on my door twice, always twice, and I reach out my hands to show her my fresh pink worms wrapped around two opposing fingers. Though this is the worst hour, it has my favorite part of the day in it, the long hallway. In this hallway I never step on the white tiles, only on the black. I once stepped an inch onto a white tile and I nearly threw up. I swallowed it, though.

At lunch, the lady misses are not very happy. I hold the lady miss's hand while I pull her around, she steps on any tile black or white, which annoys me, and I try to pull her away. No luck. I stare into the passing doors' windows. Each door has a specific name on it; I've passed four doors, all whose names I don't care for, or for the girls inside. I love to look inside the windows and see the beautiful animals inside, waiting for the other lady misses to take them away. Most sit on their beds or breathe fog onto the glass, writing bad names with their noses. Sometimes I yell out the bad names in my head while my fingers tap on the glass as I pass by. Lady miss doesn't care for this and that's when she gets very strong. Sometimes I wish she was my mother. Sometimes I wish she was dead.

All the animals are now free in the cafeteria. There are exactly ten round tables with seven seats per table. The two tables at the front are closest to the long food station where three mister misses work; they are each fat and old and I rather enjoy looking at them. They are very kind and give extra scoops to the good girls. The three tables in the middle of the cafeteria are for the bad girls and each chair has a bum leg or sunken seat. No fat girls sit in the middle, not because they are bad, but because they are fat and the creaks of bum chairs might just start a panic. I am not allowed in the middle; not because I am bad, but because I am fat.

It is exactly thirty-five steps from the mister misses to my table in the back. I sit next to the other fat girls who eat like fat girls. I daydream of microwave pizza before I eat. I hope my thoughts will trick my tongue, but they never do. I am the fattest girl at the table, I used to be not fat, but now I am. I wish I could throw up like the skinny girls, but I only throw up on occasion. I punched a skinny girl in the mouth for whistling in the cafeteria and her soft teeth sort of popped out of her mouth. I kept one tooth so she will always be ugly.

For lunch today we are having none of my favorite things, but I will eat it all. Sometimes I pretend I'm a skinny girl and make sure I eat everything on my plate. I guess in a way it's good to have more skinny girls, so when they die they won't take up as much space. I bet the world is a skeleton of dead bodies. I bet if we buried the dead in glass coffins above ground not a single person would walk through a graveyard, except the weird girls. I would walk through it, but very carefully so as not to look too close. There is a good amount of privacy being dead. All the girls here are just walking dead bodies that are alive, barely eating their lunch, hoping they might choke to death instead of taking another bite more. Some days, three during the week to be specific, I am a fat girl and I pretend to eat like one.

I tend to feel nervous walking back with the lady miss after lunch. Today I feel strange, not myself. I feel fatter today without the emotional side of being happy. I think lunch is kicking in because I feel full and hazy. Mister misses put something in the food, I know it. I know this because one mister miss likes me and gave me a kiss on my forehead one night, I think. He said not to eat the food and to kill myself, I think. It might have been a dream, again, but I don't think so, because before bed I part my hair one way and when I wake up it's all different. When it's different I know someone has come into my room. It used to bother me, but not anymore.

At noon, which is just five minutes away, I usually sleep. Not because I am tired, but because the lady misses need a smoke break, a nasty habit. At exactly noon I feel wide awake and at one minute past I feel very dizzy. I am always very sore when I wake; I am sore now around my privates and I went to the bathroom this morning. I go to the bathroom once a day because I'm afraid to drown myself from drinking water. I also don't like to waste water because it's not very fair to the sea creatures. I hope this pain goes away, though I deserve it, but maybe a nap would be okay. I close my eyes and I see the sea creatures floating around, millions of them, with millions of their dead on the seafloor. I feel the bed spin and I hope I get sucked to the bottom of the ocean like a long violent whirlpool. There's no time to waste in getting to the ocean floor or to bed.

At two o'clock I wake up and a lady miss is standing over me, nearly red in the face. A mister miss is next to her with his hand on her shoulder. I look at them and he places his hand off her shoulder. I feel dizzy, but alert of how the room feels, and it's warm. I usually wake up at one o'clock, not a minute later or before, and now that it's later I can hear a voice in my head yelling again. It's not appropriate to sleep in later than on schedule. I place my feet on the ground and the voice stops yelling and lady miss directs me to the night stand where a glass of water and six vitamins are lined up.

This part of the day, though I am late, is called the drowning machine. I never tell lady miss this because it would only be worse for me. Mister miss is here to help if I don't take my vitamins, and I don't plan on it. I stand up and walk to the glass of water, holding it in one hand and making sure it doesn't touch my band aid, and pick up one pill with the palm of my hand in the other. This is the beginning of the drowning machine and I just stand still. Lady miss is getting annoyed and I can see this with her hands joined in front of her apron, squeezing tightly. I raise my eyebrow at her and remain still; mister miss walks towards me and takes the glass of water while I struggle to fight him off. He is very strong, but I can't let

my band-aid get wet, otherwise a bad thing will happen. His hands are large and hairy, and he pins me against the wall while lady miss bends my fingers to take my vitamin, I scream on the inside to not make things worse. Lady miss shoves the vitamin towards the back of my throat, her fingers taste okay and I bite down while she pulls her hand out, yelling over the yelling in my head. I can just barely hear her over me. Mister miss grabs my jaw and squeezes and the pressure of his hands that smell like cleaning detergent and vegetables makes me gag. Lady miss put the vitamin back towards my throat and mister miss pours water in my mouth while shutting my mouth and plugging my nose. I feel my body shake after ten seconds and see their lips move while I look into their eyes. I can't breathe with all the water in my mouth and I drown just a little before swallowing. I gasp for air and lady miss shoves another vitamin in my mouth and mister miss comes with the water again. By the last pill the voice has quieted his yelling, and though I am shaking and can feel tears on my cheeks, I haven't drowned today. That makes it a good day.

Mister miss walks me to my bed and places me in a sitting position. Both mister miss and lady miss leave me and I am an upright statue of stone. I sit straight but soon I feel hunched over; I fight this by remembering my dream. I imagine this while replacing items in my room in front of me. My walls become a dense forest, the light coming in is snow falling thick and soft. My bed becomes the ground and it's hard with cold dirt. I can see my feet now hunched over completely and I breathe just enough to live.

The noise of the forest is tiny pings of the snow landing on my shoulders and on the ground. I am afraid and wait for the bad animal to get me. My feet are covered in snow and I feel a tremble in the ground while I see a long snout sniff around. I can't stand or move, and I watch as it sniffs closer to me inside my legs. I hear the voices get louder, telling it to go away, but I can't yell loud enough. The dark snout buries under the snow and I feel a pain in my legs. The snout lifts from the snow and I see tiny gray hairs towards the end and blood is pasted in the hair. Its teeth open and separate from the hairy tissue, like pulling apart an overdone slab of meat. I feel the tear and the voice inside me screams while the snow is matted with the pasty blood. It takes one more bite before the pain becomes unpleasant. My arms freeze in the snow and I am awake and motionless against the animal.

I wake myself in a sweaty haze. My arms feel heavier than they look and I wipe away the wet from my forehead. I walk exactly six steps to my room's light and flick it on while holding my belly. There is no forest in my room but shiny red droplets on the ground. I look around my feet and the tiny specks of red are at my feet and I can see my privates, for lack of a better word *vagina*, and I am soaked in blood. This is when the voices came back, screaming at me *you're fucking dying*. I don't appreciate the vulgar language, some of which I've seen drawn, again, with fog, on other girl's doors. I feel my lungs expand with my silent scream, just a faint noise of air blowing snot through my nose while tears are falling into the small tiny puddles of blood. I never understood death, but I am dying. I feel sore and swollen walking back to my bed where a soggy patch of red sits on my yellowed comforter. I look to my right and see it's now dark and I run to my door and peek out the window and it's quiet. It's impolite to bother the others during rest, so I stand for a moment while the blood keeps coming.

I hold below my intestines and try to keep the blood in me. I feel a racket in my brain of voices and my own thoughts, some of which I haven't thought in quite some time. The voices are yelling *you are fucking dying*. I reach for the door handle and turn it quietly, so as not to touch my band-aid to the copper door knob, and I softly walk down the hall, away from the cafeteria and towards the staircase. I pull on the door handle, which is white with crusted over paint through however many decades, and make my way up. My legs are tired after the

first flight, exactly eight steps of seven inches high. I am careful not to think of my mother or God during any of this. I am dying and I know me better than any lady miss or mister miss. I keep going up the stairs, a total of five flights. I am proud that only a few droplets of blood fell onto few steps, which I did wipe clean with my feet. I open the door to the roof but it's locked. I pull harder and harder but I'm only getting blood everywhere, and I know lady miss wouldn't care for this, and it would only get me into trouble. I bend carefully over the railing and see a spiral of stairs and levels with an opening down to the floor. I feel the blood on my hands, cold and rubbed into my clothing. I feel my feet carefully navigate with my toes onto the railing, I close my eyes and think of pink band-aids and microwave pizza with the angles. This makes me very happy.

## The Stars Call

Alexis Ames

Even before you step on board, you can tell the ship has been abandoned for years.

You wonder why she's been cast adrift so far from home, but you don't dwell on it for long. You're not one to question good fortune.

She's been breached. There's no oxygen left inside her hulls to sustain you, so you're forced to wear the bulky EVA suit you picked up four years ago in the outer rim. You hate wearing it, but can't deny that it's handy to have around. You even sewed your name into it during a seven-day stint hiding inside a nebula, being rocked to and fro by eddies of gas while the authorities searched fruitlessly for your ship. The words came out shaky, but legible. *Zedediah Callahan*.

The ship isn't old; she's *ancient*. The tech inside tells you that much. If she predates Unification, you wouldn't be surprised. You float through the corridors. A schematic hung decoratively on one wall tells you that spaceship design is universal even across the centuries. You see the engine room is where you expected it to be, on the lowest deck. The galley is on deck three. If no one has found her before you, the ship should still have supplies you can use, well-preserved by the vacuum.

You brush your thumb over a smear in the bottom corner of the schematic, rubbing away old soot and grime. A name emerges. *GN Rampart*.

An ancient ship indeed. The name itself means nothing to you, but the registry dates back to before the Collapse, back when humans only came from one solar system. GN. Galactic Navy. Their home base was Earth, a world now as mythical, it seems, as your own.

You float into the corridor and turn a corner. A body drifts there, grotesque and distorted, and you nearly collide with it. He's human, but his features are all wrong, stretched and strained, and his mouth gapes open in a silent scream. His eyes bulge from his face. It's not apparent how he died, only that he was terrified at the end. You also have no way of knowing if he died alone, but you do know that he will spend eternity that way. His fellow sailors are all gone.

Anxiety pricks the back of your neck. It's bad luck to become entombed in a ship. Dead sailors are meant to drift among the stars, released from the confines of their metal homes as their souls are released from the flesh.

You should find the nearest airlock, and put him to rest.

You continue on.

Out of the corner of your eye, something flickers. You turn your head, and nothing is there. It happens again. You feel a twinge in the middle of your spine, and twist violently around. Nothing is there. The corridor is empty, and no one is following you.

You haven't eaten in two days, and you wonder if it's starting to get to you.

You press on. Engine room first, galley second. Though your stomach would prefer that you believed otherwise, your most pressing need is a new power cell. You can survive without food for a time, but you know that without a functioning power cell, your ship is doomed, and you along with it. No power cell means no water reclamation, no oxygen filtration, no food, no *life*.

And you don't intend to die out here.

A computer screen flickers to life. You startle, heart lodging in your throat. You watch for a handful of seconds, drawing deep breaths to calm your jack-rabbiting heart, but no one appears on the screen. It is a stationary shot of the engine room. A recording, or have you accidentally triggered a live feed?

It doesn't matter. You have only an hour of oxygen in the tank, and you need to move on.

Even sailors from centuries past knew it was the engine room, not the bridge, that was the heart of the ship. This one had been well-fortified once, protected with layers of security codes and heavy durasteel doors. Those doors stand open now, and the security program has long since gone silent. Inside, it appears as though the engineers only left for a moment, and are bound to return soon. Computer screens flicker. An ice-encased sandwich, preserved by the vacuum, is caught between two pipes. A thermos has been frozen to a console.

As you drift into the room, all the lights go out.

You tell yourself that it's only the ship's unreliable power supply as you activate the flashlight on your wrist. She has been out here for centuries, after all. It's a wonder her core works at all. You activate the mag-locks on the bottom of your boots, securing your feet to the deck. It helps you take stock of the situation, seeing it from this vantage point.

Sweeping the thin beam of light over the room, you give it a cursory examination. There - an equipment kit secured under one of the computers. It's centuries old, sure, but you haven't found a piece of equipment yet that you haven't been able to take apart and rebuild to suit your own needs.

But you don't make it that far. The vid screen on your left flares to life, and you would have jumped backwards entirely if your feet hadn't been magnetically attached to the floor.

The image isn't an image at all, but black-and-white snow fluttering across the screen. Static. The vid screen hisses. Slowly, the image begins to resolve itself. It's a sphere. A slowly-turning world, its surface a patchwork of lavender and burnt umber and cerulean. Atria.

Home.

You wonder how it knows. You think, maybe the ship isn't as old as it seems. Perhaps whatever is left of its computer system scanned your DNA and found your homeworld in its database, and thinks it's something you want to see.

Reaching out, you slap the side of the vid screen. The image flickers but doesn't vanish. You could trace the power to its source and cut it off, but that would be a waste. You check the dials on the arm of your EVA suit.

Half an hour of oxygen left.

You grab the equipment kit and sling it over your shoulder. You find two more, and then you wrench some durasteel pipes from the wall. Then, finally, the power cell. It takes you some minutes to wrench it from the core, and you use up precious oxygen, but it's worth it. This will sustain you for months.

You can feel it as you leave the engine room, that presence. The shadow you catch out of the corner of your eye. The *thing* that vanishes every time you try to fix your gaze on it. It's behind you now, though nothing is there when you turn.

There might be rations in the galley. You move on.

A computer screen mounted to a wall in the corridor blinks on as you turn a corner. Atria again, serene and whole. Your first and best home, and the only one you can't return to. It turns slowly, giving you ample time to examine its continents and pristine oceans. You remember many a summer spent out on the red water, and your stomach churns.

As you pass, the image winks out, only to be replaced by another. Two women, and a swaddled, dark-haired baby nestled between them.

"Mothers." It's out before you can stop yourself, before you even consciously think about it. You brush gloved fingers against the screen.

*What is it you want, Zedediah?*

You feel the voice more than you hear it. It reverberates in your bones. Cold prickles down your spine. You turn, and of course nothing is there.

It isn't until you reach the next deck that you realize you've left the equipment kits and durasteel behind. It doesn't seem such a pressing matter anymore. You can hardly remember why you needed them in the first place. And why did you come here? This is the galley. There is nothing you need in here.

Food, you realize after a moment spent wracking your memories. You came here for food.

There are five vid screens in the galley. The moment you step in the room, they power on, and five Atrias rotate slowly above your head. Then, your mothers are smiling down at you. An ache settles behind your sternum.

What do you want, Zedediah?

"I want to go home," you whisper.

*Then come home, Zedediah*

Another image. Fire and smoke, a burning world. You turn and stumble from the room, out into the corridor, but the screens there all show the same image. Atria in her final days.

You disengage the mag-locks and propel yourself down a corridor. You have scarcely an idea of where you're going. All you know is the overwhelming *need* to put as much distance as you can between you and your dying world. You collide with a wall, ricochet off, and hit another. There's a pipe above your head, and you grab it to steady yourself. You kick off the ceiling, and shoot down the corridor once again.

When you stop, you're at an airlock. The stars slide slowly past outside the window as *Rampart* gently rotates end over end, set on this course centuries ago and unable to stop. You can't stop staring at them. How have you never noticed how beautiful they are? Diamonds glittering against the void, each one of them a sun. Each one of them giving life to countless worlds, countless homes that everyone else has but you.

"I want to go home," you whisper.

You open the airlock.

*Welcome home, Zedediah.*

## All Along the Spectrum of Gray

Warren J. Cox

He'd just finished a new round of executions and was sitting in his swivel chair in the basement. There was activity outside the window: birds chittering away, edgily hopping after one another as if also caffeinated in the far reaches of the Maple branches. They were medium-gray hue, mockingbirds or white-breasted nuthatches.

Their feathers matched the cushion coverings of his chair and he was pleased. Franco closed his eyes, remembering the slayings.

What had made him do that? Common house spiders posed no threat.

But those wispy gothic websites made him feel icky, while the droppings littering the floor corners like ash were psychologically discomfiting. Being dark gray, they clashed with the great concrete slab coated with paint calibrated to reflect a friendlier dolphin-gray wavelength.

Not that he was at home describing colors like this, he was no physicist. He'd never been programmed as one. Consequently he didn't have to worry about the complex intersecting worlds of wavelength ranges of visible light and the function of retinas, rods, and cones in human eyes or of optic nerves and occipital lobes.

Still, he did worry about them sometimes

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"Civilization pushes me to kill them. Civilization has planted a lethally uptight housekeeper in me, a shadow assassin." He spoke aloud to himself and possibly, an unseen omnipresent being.

His thoughts pivoted back. Isn't gray achromatic? Is it reflecting or absorbing light? It doesn't even have a wavelength.

"Oh well, it's easy to get mixed up in this, gray area."

Franco thought about the term 'black and white,' how it was applied to mean 'right or wrong,' and tried to diagram all the implications and assumptions involved in this.

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Fuck... was someone else listening?

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Sometimes he got caught up in vicious circles. He'd wonder about his fundamental origins and his role within larger schemes of others' making/scheming, about his fundamental wiring. Were not the tiny chains of deoxyribonucleic acid like little wires in there? If so what did they plug into, what grounded them? He had never been programmed as a geneticist, life scientist, or electrician, but he was fascinated with morphology, physiology.

He was also fascinated by the Matrix flicks, in which people were kept by machines in pods and led to believe they were living regular lives, but such lives were colorful outright lies.

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"How is it I never seem to bleed?"

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It was strange to have a huge music playlist in his brain, an unending amount of pop, rock, hip-hop, and classical pieces in store. In the vast chamber-vault of his mind he could select a song at will, as if by click-dragging its title to center through the dark background amid jagged bits of pulsing green or bluish-white electricity. The tune would begin, emanating clearly. Astonishingly he would hear the piece unfold as identical to the recording he'd been accustomed to hearing in the past.

Was he sure he didn't come from Tokyo, some Stanford lab, the future?

He could listen to Mozart's "Dies Irae" or "Set Adrift on Memory Bliss" by PM Dawn or Aphex Twin's "Stone in Focus." The latter track was good when he felt his thoughts piling/swelling too frenetically—flowing together almost like rushing/rising water or the zombies from World War Z when they go sprinting/climbing over themselves to make a hell's ladder and breach the tall walls of fortified Israel.

Often he put on "All Cats are Grey."

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Days when the white sunlight came out blasting, Franco was quietly devastated. When the shine combined with that all-swallowing clamping heat and mugginess it was worse.

Such days he prayed for rain.

Such days Franco begged humans' god for one thing – nimbostratus. Sacred blanketing moderating nimbostratus, or: Gray Savior.

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One week later the spiders are reconstituting their bases. Franco eyes them warily while readying for work, but the woman upstairs yells, "Change of plans, we go. Get MOVING."

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When they return it's drizzling. The saturated grass looks electric green, Franco's favorite. Two blue jays streak past—their black/white/blue/gray feather-bouquets so beautiful.

...Down-the-walk-up-the-porch-steps-to-the-door...

She doesn't notice but he senses something out of the corner of his eye (the human field of vision is 180 degrees; for cats, all of which are grey or gray, it's 200).

There on the smooth red boards, what?

Several diminutive white eggs—super-cute, wrecked, blue-speckled, oozing, halfway overrun by a horde of black ants.

The house wrens.

They knew exactly who/what perpetrated the savagery on the chickadees' nest, which the cuties had diligently constructed inside the hanging hen-shaped birdhouse over the previous weeks (the entrance was in the chicken's backside, and watching these black-capped birdies had been a rare pleasure for the couple).

Days before they'd witnessed an aerial confrontation between two defending chickadees and one attacking madman wren. The wreck-minded wren had gone for the birdhouse, but was repelled after either Daddy or Mommy Chickadee bulleted straight at it, latched on and pulled them both down out of sight into the butterfly bush.

The crash had left the spiky purple trusses which point in different directions like in a Paul Klee painting, shaking dramatically.

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The next day Franco watches a deer stalk through the trees.

"Appalling what happened." The girl had even cried.

But they hadn't retaliated against the tiny monsters.

What the wrens did was wrong but the matter wasn't black and white. Those wrens weren't programmed with the 'golden rule' or any moral code.

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He feels vaguely dazed, half-formed thoughts regarding violence, civilization and nature drifting and bumping off one other like days old birthday balloons—some red, some blue, some green.

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After a while, he speaks aloud:

“The chickadees themselves though, are a matter of black and white, and gray, it seems. Those chickadees were, are, matters of black and white and gray. The chickadees, themselves, are a matter of bl-aaaaaack... white... grrrr-raaayyy-Gray.”

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Franco stands, heads toward the bathroom.

He is thinking of a pack of razor blades under the vanity, and wants to check something.

## Hyacinth Girl

Eric Michael Bovim

It was a quiet line that stretched across the threshold from the airbridge into the fuselage world, business travelers, mainly, eyes fixed into screens and sipping away their liters of glacial water, an idling American engine.

Further ahead, in the first-class cabin, I glimpsed the Steve Jobs biographer, Walter Isaacson, blocking the aisle, straining to hoist an overnight bag into an overhead bin. Mid-thirties men unpacked carry-ons monastically, a whisper of directives into their earpieces, virtual meetings stretched to the brink. You got double miles for first class. Champagne fizzed in plastic flutes and the silent flight attendants stood with dim smiles. Behind the economy class partition, an old woman in the window seat, wrapped in a silk shawl, bit an irradiated white peach, chin glassy with nectar. Overhead, dirty plastic TV boxes. Scalded Arabica and microwaved sausage. Pre-departure trickle of Sunday brunch piano, faint Gershwin.

Once the plane was taxiing, the CEO of United, spray-tanned and flanked by subordinates in a hangar, waved an onscreen “Hello.” The new global fleet of today burns less fuel than the fleet of yesterday—emphasis on today. He spoke in the same suit, on different days, from major landmarks in different hubs—the Pantheon, Big Ben, sunset Buddhist temples, the Taj Mahal at dawn—narrating to a brassy version of the score to “An American in Paris” in nearly a full minute of flare-gun promotion. Then he navigated around the new website, swiped screens of the companion app. The next shot was of a Spanish celebrity chef chiffonading basil to make a vinaigrette. The menus on the transatlantic route all bore his name.

When it ended, I calculated the production costs at more than \$200,000—come to think of it, the rights to the music alone were definitely over seven figures. I tried to quantify the corn in the fuel, the tonnage of Iowa crop yields incinerating in the engines. This was Tuesday morning.

Soon the captain broke in: we would be landing thirty to forty minutes late. The only choice was patience. He was static omniscience, armed and barricaded behind a terror-proof door. Surveying all the passengers I wondered who else like me had randomly been chosen for pre-screened security check-in—I had simply slipped through the scanner like a mist. Now a safety video played. I started to contemplate my free drink. Cabin life had its preordained rhythms. The goal was not to think.

I had been woken that morning when my vibrating cell phone rattled the water glass on the nightstand with emails coming in from Tokyo. What if I had awoken in the middle of the night, glanced at the alarm, saw that the time was close, and rather than waking had pushed in the pin on the clock and fallen back to sleep? What if, instead of sitting up with night sweats and drinking the glass empty, showering, rubbing my chin and debating whether to shave, then walking downstairs into the kitchen and making Colin pancakes with chocolate chips sprinkled into the patch of batter, and cellophane-wrapping them for later, the dreaded pale headlights of the sedan waiting in the rain—what if, instead of sinking into the backseat for another trek to Dulles, I had climbed back up the stairs to wake him, hitting the dormant parkway in the Maserati by eight, glazed alpine white, off to one of his tournaments, a good two-hour morning drive? I would have taken the empty roads through the Sunday city, the decaying bridge over the bay to the tallgrass peninsula deep in autumn, to Easton, while he was swaddled in wool in the backseat.

Rising steam from the mug in the cup holder. A satellite broadcast of NHL banter and trade speculation. The only driver for many miles. I headquartered my company in a Leed-certified building where the toilets half-flushed, and my drive in was always a highlight. Weekdays I would take the scenic byway that paralleled the Potomac, blaring music—usually Oasis, especially where Noel Gallagher sings, or R.E.M. or Pearl Jam—or playing YouTube poetry readings by T.S. Eliot or less fortunate poets, or holding myself captive to trade speculation on the radio, and when I saw the spires of Georgetown University across the river, I would decide amongst the three bridges that fed Northern Virginia into the District of Columbia. I took conference calls via Bluetooth, hands at ten and two, and when I skipped the calls or killed the music and the readings, I drove in pleasant catatonic silence, marking the seasons by whether the leaves had turned lemon or garnet, had crisped then fallen, or had come again, tiny green stars on their weary limbs.

This daydream Sunday I would have slowed near the known speed traps, then blown open the engine on the straight-away, passing under wet arches of garnet leaves, their phantom smell entering the car. He would have been asleep, right there with me.

But this was Tuesday and the corn-fed engines roared and flushed the sanitized Gershwin and my plane lifted off, a streaking human lyric in the sky.

It was a steep ascent through silvery clouds, and soon we passed over the Shenandoah, the ink of the Mississippi, the heartland patchwork plains, then the anonymous canyons and camel hump mountain range and the creosote rail ties across it all, and somewhere below there is a rusted Model-T, a cactus grown into the fender, some shotgun shell ghost town, and to the north, in Council Bluffs, Iowa, deer are grazing near the electrified fence surrounding a Google server farm, all those thickets of tendril wires gripping the national privacy. Death Valley. Apache, Cherokee, Hopi, Navajo. Then some stunted green fringe, Silicon Valley. The usual approach: right over San Francisco Bay and out into the Pacific, banking eastward and over the polyglot city, the vital edge of America.

My seatmate wore a blue suit with chalky pinstripes and was completely middle-aged, like me. There were still raindrops on his jacket and he smelled like mildewy wool. I declined the champagne, ordered English tea, milk and two sugars, for no apparent reason. He turned to me and asked if I was from the east, a question that I thought was simply *déclassé*. Usually, I slip-noosed all potential airline comradery with one-word tugs—“yesses”—and if necessary I pretended to speak no English. But he kept at it.

“Politics?” he asked, pinky-stirring his Bloody Mary. He had his laptop open and was sifting through time-sensitive legal briefs, red pen hand-scribbled notes, flipping through timesheets and invoices.

“I’m agnostic,” I said.

“I meant are you on the Hill? I think we’ve met before, you look familiar. I think you’re with Senator Gonzalez, am I right? I think so, right? You were his chief of staff?”

“I’m just a consultant.”

“Consultant,” he said with his head raised, swirling the ice cubes in his now-empty glass, as if appraising some ancient scroll. He had a voice full of paver stones. “Litigator. Securities. Nice to meet you.” He held out his hand. “But then you worked for Senator Rogers, I think. What kind of consultant?”

“I, in fact, never worked on Capitol Hill. I’m an agnostic.”

“That’s very funny. Clever. How does that work in principle? I mean you need to pick a side. Where are you now?”

“A P.R. firm.”

“Democrat or Republican?”

“We do corporate work, so no.” I tried to emphasize my disinterest by rummaging in my bag for a bag of seedless grapes.

“We always need a P.R. guy for our cases. I represent a guy accused of fraud. You think you can get him an interview in the *Journal* or the *Times*? We’ve tried and it’s been a battle. We just need a piece, something to sway the jury. His trial is in three months. The jury is mostly multiracial—no offense.

I covered my hands on my lap, as if it mattered.

He watched me doing this and said, “I may try to get involved myself, maybe go on T.V. and speak in his defense. What do you think? And I am sure I have seen you somewhere.”

“I’m afraid we’re oversubscribed at the moment.” I stuffed some grapes in my mouth and tried to reclaim some savor of solitude by turning towards the window and feigning interest in the view—green earth in between the gauzy clouds, car specks marching off to nowhere. He went on speaking about his plaintiff while I initiated my breathing exercises and imagined Catskill light over the whoosh of the jet stream.

Then there was a shrill loudspeaker interruption, a pitch to apply for the airline Visa card—bonus miles for debt—and my seatmate took one of the applications that were being distributed without looking up, placed it over his invoices and started checking the tidy boxes with trance intensity. I pretended to look across at the other window and glanced at his sheet. Divorced. New dependents. New address. The “Other” income box, the one that says, “over \$750,000.” I finished my breathing exercises and thought about the unanswered emails, texts, voicemails. Gold prices. The indeterminate distance past the clouds.

“Then I must have seen you on television,” he said to me, checking the hours on his time sheet with a cell calculator.

There was a woman across the aisle in the window seat. She was smiling at me. The resemblance to Monica was uncanny.

“These drinks. It’s like flying in a convenience store now. I’m serious. Try flying to Paris or Seoul or Buenos Aires—same food, different direction. They don’t give you much of anything anywhere anymore. You’re expected to be self-sufficient. You’re probably not old enough to remember what it was like to fly to London on the Concorde. They’d set up a caviar buffet right in aisle—right there. Petrossian. It was vodka and caviar and Marlboros and zip—New York to Europe in three hours tops.”

The stewardess, Brenda, per her name tag, came back and snapped open a can of Motts and poured out the Smirnoff nip without blinking and stabbed at a lemon cube and poked it into the drink. She wore too much rouge and had parchment hands.

“Twenty years ago, they’d leave the goddamn bottle and the captain would come out and have one with us. Who knows if they flew intoxicated, back then, just like in that movie. So, what do you think?”

“I think there are rules against that.”

“You’re funny. No, I meant the case, my case, the jury.”

“Do you know what I think of the *Times* and the *Journal*?”

“I’m desperate to know,” he said, chugging the drink.

“Your case is fairly hopeless and there’s nothing the media will want to write about it because your story likely has too many nuances. There’s too many stories and too few journalists. That’s my assessment, *Lorem Ipsum Dolorem*.”

“Coffee too, dear. Thank you,” he said, not as shocked as I had hoped.

Brenda poured the coffee a little too theatrically, as if the pot were a carafe of Margaux. Would I like the chicken or the beef or we have ravioli, she asked us. I waved her off and ordered vodka-cranberry.

“Well,” he said, “I guess we should have hired you a few years ago before we loaded up on bad firms. It’s nice to get a fucking straight answer now and then.”

The woman across the aisle smiled again: she was maybe forty, most certainly private sector. She wore a peak lapel white suit. Although Monica would have worn it differently; she would have lent it some insouciance, projected some mild defiance with that way she fluffed her hair from her shoulders with the back of her hands, jettisoning that raven sheen behind her. She would have perforated the monotony by pulling on the pink gloves with the fox fur cuffs that she used to break out this time of year.

This was the month she always left for Mexico. I am like a monarch butterfly, she would say. I fly south after the first frost. Then she would migrate for a month to that red clay town with a bell-tower up in the hills, had a hunched studio right off the Calle San Miguel, near the poorly lit bodega with no labels on their tequila bottles and the bartender with the Fu Manchu. She said the town had the right light for her work, air that nursed her imagination.

*We are never where we are.*

It was something she said whenever she saw me on the phone making dinner or reading an email if we were already in a conversation, when my attention was subdivided among apps and browsers and inboxes and people. This was my fifth business trip in two months. If I was not on the phone I was in a meeting and if I was not in a meeting or on the phone I was on a business trip. Whatever was left I called home.

Last week, I’d flown to Copenhagen to meet a new client, my journey marked by the clang of saucers at the Segafredo coffee kiosk in the arrivals terminal at Tegel. A man with an Ayatollah beard was stretched out asleep on a bank of leather chairs, an empty orange Fanta bottle on the table beside his head, everywhere the punishing density of German, the sky lunar gray with morning and later the October sea already frozen as I rode out to the old Grand Bretagne, now the country’s finest hotel, where I even saw the Danish Queen sleigh-riding by, votives flickering on all the breakfast tables when I arrived and an oversized staircase spiraling up through the center of the refurbished building. They had kept the original façade but now it was called D’Angleterre.

I waited for Lars, my client, in the hotel bar, long enough for a croissant and two macchiatos. I’d been hired by the private equity firm that backed him and his lover, Fung. Lars was a Dutch hacker, something to do with bitcoin and the Mt. Gox scandal, and now he and Fung were co-founders of a startup that translated spoken Mandarin into English and vice versa. The IPO was the week after Thanksgiving.

“You look so tired,” he said when he arrived. He sat down, hand trembling. “I’m not going to have something. Are you going to have something? Maybe it’s better if we go walking. It’s better maybe.”

“We can walk if you like, Lars. Why don’t we go to Café Norden? It’s nice there—and it’s nice to finally meet you.”

He had disappointing splotches of facial hair that gave a sense of “almost” growing on his face, and his head was shaved to a near shine. We left the hotel and walked down streets with unpronounceable names, diphthongs and exotic letter pairings—like Catalan blended with German. He was nearly six foot three, all his bulk stuffed in a crimson blazer and spandex denim. The shops were just opening. People were riding bicycles to work. It was not clear to me yet if I would invite Lars to dinner; I had been instructed by Alan to try Noma,

what the lists considered the world's best restaurant. You sucked live ants served on bark through a straw or bit into a nest of veal fibers, slurped parsley jelly and razor clams—Viking primitivism. My job demanded I sometimes consume things against my will. Looking at Lars, fiddling with his phone while he walked, I did not sense he would care if we skipped Noma altogether.

When we arrived in Amagertorv Square, the pigeons and the students and the bicycles were amassed at the fountain and the water was turned off but all the heat lamps were on, glowing orange above the tables at all the cafes. We went inside and found seats near the corner by the newspapers. The waitress spoke brittle Scandinavian English and stood a little impatiently at our table. We ordered little sandwiches of smoked fish with turnips and tiny pickles and clear yellow beer to wash it down. I watched the barman sweep the foam from the glass after he poured it. He handed it to me and I licked the remaining foam from the sides of the glass and tasted the cold beer and watched life outside. It was mostly small talk until the beer kicked in.

“So, what is it that you are you thinking we should do?” His hand was still shaking and beer foam was sliding down the side of his glass.

I said, “Can you repeat your version of events again please. One last time.”

He recounted everything from the night of the hackathon, elucidated the nature of his relationship with Fung, and when he was finished I ordered us another round. I deliberately asked him to repeat the story again to see if he resisted further embellishment.

“We do not want any more sensation, Lars. The articles last week were enough. Now we need to project facts, eclipse bad news with new news. Do you understand?”

He was massaging his temples. “It's less about the criminal possibility and more than what I have built may be diminished by this scandal. This is the thing.”

I sipped the beer and waited for him to go on.

“If Morgan Stanley wants to end the IPO then I guess this was for nothing. I will never get such a shot like this again. Everything, all of it—it all would have been a waste. I don't want to change the world, I just want it to know who I am.”

He reached into his breast pocket and handed me his phone. “I have all the settings right. Do you want to try it, see for yourself?”

The surface was sticky and the home screen was a photograph of the Fibonacci sequence inside a conch shell.

“Do you know Chinese? Well, I guess it doesn't matter. Just say something into it in English, anything. It will come out in Mandarin. Hold down the zero key, just like this, and then speak a few words at a time, then listen for the Chinese to come out of the speaker. Just talk regular about anything and OneSpeak will do the rest.”

I spoke a few words, and the screen froze. Then the app crashed.

We did not go to Noma. I re-booked myself on an earlier 6 A.M. flight to Berlin the next morning. There were no directs to Portugal. I had a speech later in the morning, a confab of robotics engineers who had built a hitchhiking humanoid robot—hitchBOT—that they were about to let loose. Toronto to Los Angeles. I could go home after that.

When I landed back in Tegel for my connection, I thought about calling Alan to tell him what had happened with OneSpeak. I sat down in a café beneath the enormous departures board and began to draft an email to him, but once I read over it I deleted it. The menu noted, in footnotes, the items containing quinine. There were only forty minutes until boarding for my connection. I ordered a “vital” breakfast of muesli.

I rode a people-mover to my gate, where there was a stand that sold frankfurters and steins of Schultheiss. I went into the Lufthansa business lounge and rewrote the email about the malfunction to Alan and deleted it again.

My panic attacks began the morning of her funeral and a month later full depression set in. Dr. Weller put me on a trial regimen. Stick to a routine. Hire a nanny. Take a leave of absence. Take flowers to the cemetery but don't take Colin yet. Take him to the cemetery more often. Consider selling the house. So, I hired a live-in nanny, a Filipina with grown children who bleach-washed the bathrooms mid-week, neatened his trophies, tucked paired socks into the drawers—kept Colin's room as immaculate as Monica had, always tight hospital corners on the bed.

My goal was to try not to think. When I was away, I was a good enough father through texts. I would wait to hit send once the wheels left the tarmac. By the end of the year, though, I was taking seven pills a day just to freeze the frame of my decline. Grief can bleed you into white nothing. Colin soon became symptomatic: tying and untying his shoes three times before school, looking for dirt in the house, insisting on new toothbrushes every night, drinking from the same sippy cup.

I simultaneously heeded everyone's advice—returned to work too soon, took Colin to the amusement park, brought him out for pizza twice a week, sang to him, administered his pills, watched him fall asleep.

When he was six I told him the partial truth.

She won't come home. She was so very sick. She is in a better place. I never mentioned the police.

I would wake up remembering little details, like that she quit law when she sold her first piece, oil on canvas, a long-range buffalo herd gnawing the Colorado plains, or what she thought such a sight might have looked like before they were all cold-blood slaughtered. Her exact words. By then, White & Partners was more or less a success. I was half Mexican and so my complete re-enfranchisement became her *cause célèbre*. I had found this amusing. She was a realist without the saccharine Norman Rockwell patina, her landscapes imbued with some bitter end prehistoric gloom. Her father disapproved—of me and the painting, precisely which was most offensive to him I was never sure. He had an ulcer and a membership at Augusta, owed his wealth to sugar beets and once sucker punched the bartender at the Savoy for smiling at his paramour, caught him with a martini shaker to the head, the poor Serb never stood a chance, he'd say. He told that story within the first ten minutes of meeting someone, up until his second heart attack. After that he was an invalid. He and Monica were not on speaking terms since she had become a working artist. Her mother faded away in a facility in the Berkshires for schizophrenics, where she had been remanded since the eighties. We saw her twice a year until she died months before Colin was born.

Monica had a vendetta against big commercial institutions. She purged the Virginia house of anything prefab, even flavored dental floss. She brought me to upstart salad chains with mission statements. She resented Starbucks—all the condescending flavor permutations—honey maples and winter mint mochas and spiced chai pumpkin, and so on. The year she died, for my thirty-seventh birthday, she bought a Breville burr grinder, eager that I dedicate myself to outperforming Big Coffee. I bought Rwandan beans online from a co-op. They came in vacuum-sealed silvery bags, hallmark sweetness and cocoa notes, none of the pitch-black aftertaste. Grind size 12 and 17.8 seconds to produce a double-shot. It took four months of trial and error to get the tamp down right—anywhere between twenty to thirty

pounds of pressure, all in the wrist. Any more and it's over-extracted and tar-ry, any less it's under-extracted and watery.

She had died shortly after I finally got it down, and since then every morning I used a butter knife to pry out the basket and break up the grinds with my fingers and sprinkle the grounds on random perennials, depositing the export from an impoverished nation into my yard, low-wage labor enriching the rose beds. She would have approved.

Colin and I still lived in the house, less than a mile from the CIA, where cell calls dropped at all hours without notice. We could hear the boom of jet engines echoing from the sky, flights in takeoff paths or final approaches, who knew which, just too high for contrails, and sometimes I stood at the window or the balcony and watched the red blinking wings vanish into the heights. A Baptist church stood across the street, and a bell rang on Sundays and the congregation of slacks and hats and pink dresses and little boat shoes filed in. Black crows perched on the crucifix atop the steeple every morning. I would see her painting in the backyard, the sycamores shedding their bark like English poplars do, the flaky bits nestling into the paint, and her blowing into the cobalt dollop like it was a dandelion and the bark just sinking deeper. The backyard was a total sanctuary—almost. Even with the birdsong and the vaulted trees blotting the traffic noise and the neighbors, which gave the space the feel of some distant artist's colony, I could never forget we were less than ten miles from Washington.

Last night I came in from the balcony and went to Colin's room to tuck him in.

"Hey," I said, turning on the white noise machine. "Daddy is going to California tomorrow morning."

I waited.

"It's not even two days. You'll be in school. You won't even notice it." I lifted his chin and said, "You won't."

He rolled over and turned away. I walked out and into the hallway, Atticus, our Maltese, in tow.

"Will you sit here with me?" he said.

Sit down with him, Mark, I heard Monica say, and I answered her back, sometimes, my lips moving.

Mid-flight, I felt faint and short of breath. I reached for my pills in my suit jacket, opened another button on my shirt and finished my drink and sucked the ice cubes. No one was watching. I placed the white pill beneath my tongue, chewed it down with ice. They kept their heads bowed, load-bearing fixation, sci-fi paperbacks, and Sudoku pads and rainbow scatter plots and powerpoint graphics, and I imagined their interior monologues, pieced together the unspoken commotion. There was just a collective hush and a jet-stream hum.

As the plane tilted north some of that syrupy, high-altitude light poured onto my lap.

Condensation was spreading across the window. I saw what I thought was the Mississippi below. I had no written speech, only something from memory that I would unfurl at our meeting at the Four Seasons San Francisco. I looked up, put the paper down on my lap, finished the grapes, stacked the plastic cocktail cup into the Styrofoam teacup. I pushed the call light button to order another tea and I tried not to think.

I figured I would do what I could with Lars and Fung. I contemplated how all of this might play out, which journalists to call for major interviews, and I devised a comprehensive mental list in under three seconds: which hypothetical piece would publish online, fungible content, how it would catalyze reprints and me-too pieces by other bloggers and print

reporters who did not want to let a racing story get too far down the track without them pulling up alongside it, and all of that healthy content would surface instantaneously on Google, enliven the brand and re-circulate around OneSpeak like a digital blood transfusion.

I ordered a Vodka drink and watched the ticker symbols on my seat screen march west, my shares climbing higher every forty-five seconds, and so on.

We were somewhere around Nevada, and I browsed the airline magazine, a collection of sponsored stories under three pages, all in blue-eyed prose, a Chicago steakhouse menu, poetically-named cocktails alongside an advertorial for a beige office park city in wherever North Carolina. Then I whipped up a throwaway sermon, something of a riff. We would talk to press, not avoid them. Control what was seen, a brand being just a consensus of perceptions. We would refrain from social media, for now. We would switch wardrobes. We would speak in new voices.

I knew Colin was at the kitchen table, demanding that Mae let him Facetime me and I could hear her explaining that Facetime does not work when someone was miles above Nevada. I resisted the urge to log on.

Brenda swung by with the drink cart, pouring more Margaux carafes of tepid coffee, sugar packets crammed into Styrofoam cups.

Where did the sugar come from, Colin would have asked.

A plantation outside of Sao Paulo, and maybe the baron had a small warehouse on site for the unhung art, and maybe he had someone to do his clothes and sipped Drambuie and stalked his own art collection after hours.

He would giggle through missing front baby teeth as I described those eighteen-wheelers long-hauling all that sugar from the ports into cities like Charlotte and Raleigh, the minor notes of America.

Where are those, he would say.

All around us.

At the last radiant edge of America, Lars and Fung were waiting for me, their lone counsel, retained to translate them out of the headlines. I wanted to barge into the cockpit and steer the plane backward, walk back into the house, recite all the facts of her to Colin. This is how she sketched you when you were just a week old. Or maybe I would have shut off the phone last night and missed this flight altogether. We would drive into the tallgrass peninsula. I made a note to myself to show him more pictures of her. I saw the desert below, empty and scathing. The border of Nevada looks like the border of California. We are never where we are. She loved these kinds of flowers, hyacinth. One time I called her the hyacinth girl and she made me purple cupcakes. He giggled. When you arrived, you had a full head of bloody black hair, not even crying, not a whimper. You are a good boy, don't cry. Please try not to cry. Mommy held you this way. Put your hand there. Think of her. You will hear her when you pray. Just close your eyes.

So I flew.

## The Four Walls

Arthur Davis

Dreyfus stared at the far wall, then the ceiling, poised and prepared for the time when they would move against him.

He hadn't heard the voices in days, but he knew they were there. *"Come with us. Yes. Don't fear us."*

He knew he had to be patient and nimble if he were going to catch them advancing upon him. Dreyfus wasn't a man to be easily surprised. He knew his means and his reach and the importance of being alert.

Oscar, his lifelong friend, was the opposite. He said once that Oscar could surprise himself with his own naiveté. "Nonsense. Walls don't talk," Oscar reproved, in his usual mocking voice. "Only idiots talk to walls that don't talk."

Dreyfus thought the wall to his left had shifted ever so slightly. He checked the corners and was satisfied that they had maintained their vertices. If he watched the corners, especially as they related to the mirror, the broken maple rocker, paintings, and closet door frames, he had a chance. The chair and throw rug were also trusted sentries. With their steadfast help, he would not be defeated. If he were caught off guard, all would be lost.

*"We need you ...."*

A car door slammed shut. But he was on to their tricks. That was one of the first discoveries he had made. You had to recognize the manifest evil woven into the fabric of the inanimate world or you would be overtaken by its insidious, distracting innocence. No telephone calls from concerned co-workers, no low flying planes, no friends knocking at his front door would divert him from his purpose.

If he gave in, he would be overtaken and consumed.

Little Christopher Bradley's basset hound barked on the lawn outside. Dreyfus also appreciated how animate objects might be manipulated into tempting his attention. It wasn't a simple process; comprehending connections and distractions, but the battle was all that he had left.

His wife had walked out months ago with his children. His parents were dead and what few friends had tolerated his curious eccentricities had finally turned their backs on him. Even Oscar doubted his rationale just short of offering some denigrating commentary. Oscar had walked across his lawn and rung his doorbell yesterday, and the day before.

"Hey, crazy person," he thought he heard Oscar question, laughingly. "It's me."

He understood his family's apprehension, though he always felt they could have been a little more sympathetic. There was no point in worrying about what others might say or do or the frailty of their conscience. If they could live with their own cowardice then he could live without them. He was alone, but not without purpose.

The struggle had been joined, as he had predicted, with the wall to his left. No one, especially those who deserted him, appreciated his grasp of the peril or the breadth of his courage to thwart dark, predatory forces.

Dreyfus preferred it that way. This battle was going to be fought on a deceptively simple playing field. In the end, he was convinced that if there was going to be a victory, at least a respectable stalemate, it was going to come from the courage of his conviction and grasp of the enemy's strengths and vulnerabilities.

*"It's us...."*

"You think I don't know who you are?" he returned. "I am on to you, and soon the world will know your evil because even you can't contain it."

The distance between the wall to his left and the border of Mary's Oriental throw rug had diminished. Dreyfus was capable of precise calculation and perspective, far greater than what could have been measured. Possibly less than a quarter of an inch, but palpable movement had taken place nonetheless.

He had been studying his options for some time. Long before Mary left with the children. Long before his boss at work counseled him that he had become distracted, unmotivated, and more recently, entirely uncooperative. Long before neighbors took notice of his activities without commenting on his eccentricities. Dreyfus was prepared for that too. He understood human frailty and slavish devotion to consistency.

There, it happened again. It was not so noticeable this time, but his trained eye missed nothing. He would not be fooled or lulled into a false sense of complacency.

They were testing him, as he was measuring them. They couldn't possibly know the extent of his preparation and perception.

The border of the rug was a full half-inch closer to the wall to his left. Was it the beginning of a full-scale assault, or were they probing for his defenses? It was the longest wall and most heavily decorated in the bedroom and thus they would expect him to be partial to its presence and squander most of his attention and resources on its surveillance—its essential importance in gauging the tenor of the conflict.

He was alert to everything in the room, in his home, in his life—beyond these walls and beyond the threshold of his home. He had waited for them, knowing this day was in the offing. He knew the forces would be surprised by what he was willing to sacrifice in the conflict.

A rumble outside, at the curb beneath the window. The sound was familiar though unexpected. Garbage was not collected on Wednesday. How clever and very devious and cunning. The maw roared and scooped up half-empty containers. Couldn't his neighbors, these tepid, irresponsible jackasses, see what was happening and how vulnerable they were to the madness closing in around them?

Was he the only one in town that understood the danger of apathy in the face of antipathy?

The wall to his right jumped closer. The curved back of the chair he had positioned tightly against the wall, and against Mary's objections, had been pushed forward lifting the two rear legs off the floor. The trap to detect the slightest agitation had been sprung. Another chair guarded the wall behind him and a small wooden carpenter's chest was tilted up against the fourth.

He was the lone marshal defending the ideology of a world under siege. He would have preferred it otherwise, but accepted his fate as others must accept the consequences of their own infallibility. They were lazy, self-aggrandizing dolts condemned to routine and delusion. Primitively banding together for their own safety, and in that incestuous collusion, dooming themselves.

He suspected the ceiling shifted. But even he doubted it would happen this soon. He always believed the ceiling would be the last to strike down against him. Once the walls were committed, once the plan was afoot, then the ceiling would come into play. It was simply too soon for them to exploit their reserves. Possibly the cracking sound he heard was another diversion, like the sanitation truck? They were not beyond such chicanery.

Dreyfus was comforted by their predictability. He had carefully and meticulously researched, plotted, and delved into the depravity of their tactics. He discovered there were others who had also encountered them. Others who had given battle and, while most were

vanquished or driven from the fray, several succeeded, though they would later admit that Dreyfus' battle had far graver consequences than any skirmish that preceded it.

"Do not underestimate them. Never give them reason to believe you might waiver. And, never sleep or you will surely be taken." Yuir Tambov closed his eyes and forced himself to continue. "I lost everything to them. Everything I had and believed in is gone. I am a ghost of my youth."

Dreyfus recalled these prophetic words. At first, he was suspicious and apprehensive of the crackling voice on the phone. But the Russian's words resonated with his own. This man had survived, if what remained of his spirit was worth enduring for.

Dreyfus checked the positions of the four walls again. There were no further incursions. He had no idea how long this false peace would last, only that when it ended the real battle would commence. It might come in slow, torturous interruptions that could last for many days, or convulse in one mighty assault.

Predictability was the unforeseeable variable. No matter how he had planned and calculated, there was an element of surprise that could not be measured. He considered the possibility of winding up like the old Russian, if he survived at all.

He had learned from his Bible training that evil does not need a purpose to exist. It manifests itself in weakness and sloth, in the most gifted and the greatest fool. It is everywhere so why not here and now and all around him waiting for an opportunity?

*"There, now why deny what's in your soul ...."*

Dreyfus thought he heard himself humming a child's chant. Nothing he could recapture once it had passed. He must have heard it somewhere. Possibly one of his own children had sung it to their mother long ago when he was at work. They never sung to him. They never spoke with eagerness or glee to him. They never trusted him with their frights, fun, and formulas. They never shared, compared, or pledged him to secrecy as he had learned from other fathers that children do when they loved you and believed you worthy of sharing their fantasies.

Still, that was hardly a reason to leave him, to abandon their father. Unless they had been poisoned by their mother. He knew that was a more worthy likelihood. But he could not bring himself to confront her. It just proved that treachery was all around him. A hero engulfed by an ocean of poison and perfidy.

Suddenly the floor and ceiling moved in a shattering crunch of wood, sheetrock and expectation. The floor trembled. The wall to his left and right came alive. This time, consuming over an inch.

Streaks of gasoline snaked from the five-gallon can in his grip to the four corners of the room. Two separate but parallel lines soaked the hall carpet leading down the stairs to the four corners of every room on the first floor where smaller containers of gasoline waited instruction.

If bravery was the mark of courage then just as surely, imagination was the righteous hallmark of resourcefulness. Dreyfus knew what had made the enemy victorious. It was not so much their capacity to wage war, but the degenerative lack of commitment of their adversaries, and a willingness of evil to accept unseemly losses.

Not that he was willing to throw away his life to prove his cleverness or commitment, but simply to sacrifice his home and all that was dear to him. He had tested his agility many times, outrunning a speeding fuse of flame he had set on the concrete floor in the confines of his garage. And now he was ready.

The floor jumped up. What remained of the baseboards were nearly half consumed by the floor. There was movement overhead. A splinter fell past his right shoulder. A grey plume of dust followed.

Dreyfus heard a crash coming from below. It could have been anything. He shrugged impassively. Another crash. Glass again this time. He knew it was the dining room table, his wife's treasure. In a spark of perverse satisfaction, he had never considered they would do him a favor. He never liked that cold monstrosity his wife doted over more than she did their children.

The smell of gasoline had soaked into every wall and floor. It would have been overwhelming were it not for the windows. They were open, letting in the frigid night air. Infusing Dreyfus with confidence. There was resoluteness in his glare—a man who stood his ground stood the length of his character. Dreyfus believed this, and that in his heritage were the seeds of greatness.

The floor beneath his feet heaved upward again. In an instant, the baseboards disappeared. Plaster and paint rained down, covering him in a fine white ash. The hanging ceiling light was just overhead. The wall to his left and right rushed forward. He turned. The wall behind him continued to bide its time. That gave him cause for concern. His one great fear was that when the end came, it would be in one sundering burst causing total structural collapse without affording him time to affect his defense.

Mary shut one window before she left. It was usually out of alignment, but he couldn't help but wonder. Dreyfus tested it as he was developing his plan. It was wedged tight. If that happened to the other four windows then he would have go downstairs before igniting the gasoline.

He was concerned, not necessarily questioning his courage or resolve, but the powers that he was contesting.

The floor underfoot shook. Then, as the image passed, the second of five windows dropped shut. He should have nailed them open. He was taking on an adversary that had reigned supreme, conquered legions of the wise and brave. Why was he so disposed now to stand and fight? He never before possessed such equilibrium, such unhurried composure; to take on an adversary whose spirit had shadowed mankind forever.

*"A last chance to redeem yourself, and secure your family...."*

The room shuttered violently, nearly rocking him to his knees. The third window broke free and slammed shut. In a way—in a sick deviant way—he was gaining respect for evil, as though the outcome, if he should not be victorious, would be more worthwhile because he had fallen to a more worthy adversary.

He removed the lighter from his pocket. A gift Oscar had given to him for his sixteenth birthday. The floor moved. The ceiling dropped half a foot. The wall behind him, the one that had been silent for so long, breached its boundaries. Something alive and terribly evil wanted him dead. They had chosen him to sacrifice for a reason he would never know.

Through the windows, he saw George Kaplan's home to his left and those across the street in front of his house. Life for them was moving into the late evening. Car lights slipped along the street under lamp-posts that told of a secure suburban neighborhood unaware that it was about to fall prey to the night.

He picked up the can and started for the fourth window when the floor buckled and the wall behind him plunged forward, shoving his bed and dresser and two chairs along as if they had been struck by a train. The mirror broke and glass shards flew in all directions. The rocker was hit with such force it flew past him and embedded itself into the wall.

It was then that Bishop Dreyfus realized he had underestimated his adversary or, in reflection, overestimated his own cunning.

He sat, transfixed, staring at the fourth and fifth window. To their left was his wife's favorite Miro lithograph, unaccountably left behind in her haste to leave. On the right, her closet nearly emptied of clothing except for out of date rags. Dreyfus watched as the ceiling dropped another inch. Then six. But he didn't move.

The floor underfoot wrenched up a full foot as the wall behind him lurched forward twice that distance. The fourth window slammed shut taking the fifth down with it.

Dreyfus brought his thumb down on the lighter, rolling back the little abrasive wheel against the top of the flint. Tiny sparks flew over the wick. He tried it again. Nothing happened. The one door to the room swung shut and the wooden door frame surrounding it buckled tight. The room was sealed.

"No."

*"Regrettably, yes...."*

Dreyfus ran to each window and pushed up as hard as he could. They were fused shut as though they had never been anything other than what they were now. Each wall was advancing steadily. The ceiling lamp swung down to shoulder height. The bed was upended. Terrible sounds from below warned him that the rest of his home was faring just as poorly.

Dreyfus wasn't a religious man, but the question of 'why him' flooded his reason. Why not Oscar, Marcus, or Devlin across the street? Devlin was the alcoholic who was caught for petty theft years ago. Or Connolly, down the block who everybody knew was cheating on his wife and spending money he couldn't repay. They were truly evil. He did not see himself in their ignominious league. The wall to his left burst forward.

The bedroom consumed itself until it was half its original size. The floor was littered with the impossible. If he survived, and it was becoming improbable, the evidence of their evil would be found and exposed, putting the rest of humanity on notice.

Soon, it would halve again, then again, until he would be huddled on his knees, the next convulsion pressing him up against the walls, floor, and ceiling. The last upheaval would crush him to death. There was no escape. The lighter wouldn't ignite and the can of gasoline had spilled most of the liquid on the carpet. To light anything now would only engulf the room in flames. He picked up the can and threw it against the window. It bounced back.

Outside, several cars came down the street with their headlights glaring. They turned the corner and disappeared. What good would it have done if they stopped and the drivers had gotten out and looked up in his direction?

Dreyfus knew they would have seen a home like every other home on the block. And, from such a distance, they probably wouldn't have noticed the frantic glimmer in his eyes, the tips of his fingers rasping bloody lines across the wall on either side of the window. They would not have noticed the walls to the left and right jump forward as the ceiling struck the back of his head, driving him to his knees. They might have blinked and in that second missed him being sandwiched in from all sides. A small, terrified caged beast. They might not have been able to make out the word that exploded from his lips. It might have been misinterpreted to mean heap or hump or held.

If they hung around for a day, they might have noticed the mail and milk delivery piling up, the lights from the windows never turned off, or the unanswered phone calls from his friends, business associates, and concerned wife. If they waited two full days, they would have seen the man's family return accompanied by the police.

But some unsettling questions would remain in conflict with the medical examiner's conclusion that forty-one year old Bishop Dreyfus had died of natural causes. The carpeting

in the bedroom was splattered with milk, as were the hall and carpets in all the rooms downstairs. And in the corner of each room in the Dreyfus home were opened containers of spoiled milk. Bishop Dreyfus was found at the foot of his bed with a lighter in one hand and an empty milk container clutched tightly in the other. His wife mentioned to the police that the lighter never worked, a prank gift from one of his friends.

Weeks later Oscar Devlin confessed to his wife that Dreyfus had come to him in strictest confidence describing his concern that others were out to 'get him.' Oscar was confronted with this disturbing confession twice over a month. The second time Oscar Devlin told Dreyfus he should seek medical attention. Devlin confessed he should have tried harder to help his friend.

Bishop Dreyfus was buried four days after his wife returned home. The exact time it took to air out the master bedroom from the smell of decay and rotting milk since the windows were strangely jammed shut.

No explanation was ever given as to why blood marks were traced hysterically over the frames of the five bedroom windows, or what had caused the glass dining room table to slip from its oak support and shatter on the Mexican terracotta tiles.

Months later, a distraught and bewildered Harriet Loring Dreyfus caught up with her correspondence and bills. She took exception to a call made on her telephone. Upon hearing the tragedy that had befallen the young mother, the supervisor at the phone company used her discretion to credit the woman's account for a call that had been made from her home to a small village in the Ukraine just days before her husband passed away.

## For the Seeing

Emily Harrison

Gran was talking to Sandra again, puffing on a Benson & Hedges Gold, smoking her life away. She'd been dead seven months – Sandra, not Gran, but Gran *was* talking to her. Staring intently at the empty space in the armchair opposite. Jabbering on about everything and nothing, like one of those puppets whose mouths moved continuously – *yap yap yap* – unnerving in their motion. Gran didn't unnerve me, but since the ghost-spotting had started, I was always mildly wary. Except for when she started laughing, huffing like Muttley the dog, shaking her shoulders and wheezing at something the ghost of Sandra had apparently said. Then I just found her funny. My old Gran again. An infallible woman, full of fervency. Friends with everyone, gossiping with Sandra on the regular.

I'd come to live with her five months back. Two months after Sandra's untimely death.

Before Sandra passed away, Gran was swirling in the precarious state of being 'okay' – sort of going a little blind, only mildly deaf, still with her relative wits about her. But like the Morecambe Bay tide that Gran's flat overlooked, the waters were quickly changing, and the day after she'd learnt of Sandra's death – a death which took not only a friend but a neighbour and a carer - she let the sea swallow her up. Maybe it was inevitable, mother nature at her most disparaging. Either way there was little she could do to stop it - all consuming, absorbing every fibre of the woman I once knew.

I was with her the first day she saw Sandra's ghost and I watched on in horror as the tide that had swept in marked its spot in the sand, in Gran, and refused to leave. She was in the kitchen making tea, serving cake, doing what she'd always done when I visited, telling me I was too skinny, needed some meat on my bones, when she whimpered rather than screamed, voice too meek, and smashed the mug she was holding on the kitchen counter. I lurched from my seat as she began pointing, with a bloodied hand, a gash cut along the life line in her palm, towards the fridge. Shaking and startled she began hissing, "S, s, s, s, ssssss...", then forced out a "Sandra" before looking along the bridge of her nose to her slowly seeping hand and passed out back into my arms. It was since then that it was decided, by Mum, that I should move in. She couldn't pay to put her in a home, and she wouldn't have gone anyway. So as the *favourite* grandchild, as though that title alone would make me able to aid her, I left my flat in Leeds for her sixties built prefab existence in Morecambe. She knew that the reason I was moving in was to keep an eye on her despite having no idea how I would go about it, and she gently but insistently reminded me of my own relative inexperience and insufficiency in dealing with strangely challenging situations daily, bringing me back down to Earth as though she controlled gravity itself.

"You think you can look after me? You can barely boil an egg."

"I don't need you to help dress me. You can't even dress yourself, jeans halfway down your arse."

And my personal favourite, after pitching to her that Sandra might not really be there.

"You might be my favourite Jonathon, but you aren't half daft. If she isn't here, then why is she sat on the sofa?"

Her insistence about Sandra made me chuckle. But it also made me ache somewhere deep down, sore from second-hand embarrassment. That was *my* Gran, and she could see ghosts - Sandra who used to live next door and was supposed to be buried six-feet under. She told everyone about it too.

"I heard about Sandra, love, such a sad thing."

"Well not too sad is it? She lives in my flat now."

There were sad smiles as we left shops, pity delivered with first class stamps. I never defended her and loathed myself for being so cowardly. I let people look on as though she was a batty old woman. And maybe she was, but she deserved more from me despite it.

I got her to go to the doctors after I noticed her sight was deteriorating like quick sand on the beach- pulling everything under. She couldn't see things up close, even with her reading glasses on, and whilst she could see Sandra perfectly clearly, she couldn't always see me. I wasn't sure how it worked, or how this 'ghost', although I remained sceptical at best about its existence, could be seen by my Gran when she could barely read the paper in front of her – or view me from afar. She tripped constantly, banging into tables, kitchen countertops, walking straight into me.

I caught her hands as she began twisting them in the air, too – “I'm just doing Sandra's hair” – trying to grab hold, or knot her fingers, I don't know, in Sandra's thick ghostly afro. For a moment I thought I could see Sandra in the flesh again.

\*

Miss Vaghela diagnosed Gran as soon as she left the room.

“I'm going to the toilet, you can tell Jonathon instead.”

Another deflection from the fact she was ill.

“It's most likely CBS,” was all Miss Vaghela said. She might as well have told me it was ABC or DFS.

“What?”

“CBS. Charles Bonnet Syndrome. It's not ghosts.”

I wasn't sure if she expected me to know what that was.

“Oh right.”

“Yes.”

I left with a pamphlet.

Apparently, Gran was a sufferer or a diagnosis - a case to be monitored. Charles Bonnet Syndrome a condition where those who are losing their sight begin to see things that aren't really there. Visual hallucinations – the brain creating images of fantasy and fiction to replace what has been lost, using old figures and forms that the retinas have stored, that brain has kept in its recesses, to pull out at opportune moments. Except – and Miss. Vaghela didn't fully explain it, but CBS sufferers apparently know that what they are seeing isn't real - or something like that. It's just an early symptom of sight loss and clears up eventually. Presumably when they go completely blind.

I told Gran all of this as we were getting off the bus but all she said was, “I don't know who Charles is and I don't have his syndrome” and carried on waddling home.

\*

Miss. Vaghela's diagnosis couldn't explain everything – certainly not the incidents that followed in the months after. I'd begun to accept Sandra as an entity in the house for Gran's sake, but as we ate dinner together - we being ‘the three of us’ - there were more sinister apparitions in Gran's mind, ones that would reveal themselves like arsenic. Slow, but vicious.

First came the spiders. I thought maybe Gran was resigned to ghosts – the supernatural alone, but my lack of understanding CBS extended beyond the simplicities. In the bath, in her chair, and even in Tesco, she began witnessing what she claimed were arachnids. Crawling close and creeping near.

“They're on me, Jonathon. Brushing. Don't let them curl inside me.”

She'd swing her arms about, shaking like a wet dog and cry. Gurgling and glassy eyed.

No adjective can quite describe the sensation of watching a once formidable woman, one who raised my mum, and for all intents and purposes, myself, have a panic attack, or

something akin, over imaginary spiders. There is little to say and little you can do, and no matter how many times I told her they weren't real her only response was "Well then why can I see them?" and I had no argument for that. She didn't believe in the diagnosis.

The worst though, was when she saw *the boy*. She kept on with Sandra, who was a permanent fixture now, like a light switch or Grandad's old cabinet, but *the boy* was new entirely. He only made himself known once – once being enough for a lifetime.

I can't say what happened in the interim between me waking up to hear Gran screaming and then bursting into her room, all I knew, or perhaps all she saw, was "the boy with no legs, on top of the wardrobe – taunting me, he is, taunting." I knew who she meant from what I'd been told. A tale that swirled around the area. It was another ghost, most likely. A young kid had died in the flats before I was born in a nasty accident.

Gran was on the floor, picking at the carpet. Plucking at it with her nails. I tried to separate her from the torment. Pull her from the room and out into the hallway.

There are no scripts for this. No guide books or leaflets about how to calm down your Gran after she's 'seen' a legless boy in her bedroom. My only instinct was to remove her from the ordeal and calm her elsewhere. But like the latch of a child who refuses to let go, she stayed where she was, looking back to where the boy was supposed to be perched, and then back to the carpet, knocking her head against the wall.

"Gran, he's not there, it's okay, it's just a ghost, it's..." but she wouldn't let me finish. Began digging her nails into my forearm instead. Biting at my skin like shark teeth.

"He is there, he *is*, you stupid boy," she was hissing now. Tears turned to temper. "He's there, laughing at me. And you. And Sandra. Giggling."

I tried to console her again, and again, but she wouldn't have it. My neck pulsed.

I didn't want to hurt her. I just wanted to make her stop. But I'm not sure that there was much difference in my actions. I crossed the line between the two so easily, it was as though I was putting pen to paper, slicing the ink back and forth, writing all the pain myself. I clasped her shoulders tight, fingers pressing in on purpose, and hauled her out of the room, banging her head into the frame as I went.

Gran now screaming I decided to put my hand over her mouth, but she bit me bloody, so I hit her until she became unconscious. Let her head drop dull, then called for an ambulance and waited.

I wished, in that moment, and almost all the moments since, that the ground would swallow me up and knock me unconscious too - stop the prick of guilt that was fizzing at the back of my eyes and forgive me for the things I would never forgive myself.

\*

Gran refused to acknowledge me in the hospital, hooked up to wires and machines, legs stiff under the blanket. Mum wanting to know more. Like always.

"Why won't she look at you, Jon?"

I gazed at Gran, but she was fixed on the window.

"I'm not really sure," I lied.

I could see it now, five-year-old me stealing sweets from her treat drawer, my cousin catching me red handed – *fibber, fibber, Jonny's been naughty*, Gran sweeping in - "now, don't tell lies, Jonathon, they always come back to you, don't they?"

She didn't say anything though, so I went back to the flat instead, every fibre of me bone tired, body running as slow as molasses. Since I'd woken with Gran's trauma at 03:00, ambulance and my remorse at 03:30, I didn't realise how weak I was until I checked my watch back in the flat – 13:07. I fell into bed and slept in fits and starts, getting up past five to

ring the hospital and check on Gran, before passing out fully around eight. I could tell what time it was, EastEnders was on.

When I woke later, midnight or more, Gran was turning the TV off in my bedroom. Lavender nightie on, length down to the floor. She had the bangles on that she always wore – jingling on her wrist. I couldn't comprehend it, so I watched her mutely instead. She padded over and placed her chilled hand on my forehead.

“You left the telly playing.”

I blinked her into focus and whispered, “Aren't you supposed to be in hospital?”

“I'm all better now. Go back to sleep, Jon,” was all she said.

She brushed my hair back like she would when I was a kid, then cupped the side of my face gently. I shut my eyes and couldn't remember hearing her leave.

\*

The day woke me early, my bed underneath the window, bright light spilling in. The flat felt reticent, dust swirling in the air as I got up to check on Gran. She wasn't in her room when I creaked the door open and the bed was still unmade. I shuffled back to the kitchen, but she wasn't there either. The kettle was steaming though, and two mugs had been placed on the counter. I could feel the throb of a headache just above the lids of my eyes and went to sit down in Gran's chair, the one next to the phone. I started ringing as soon as I sat as though it knew I was perched next to it. I picked it up with my right hand, the left rubbing at my temple slowly.

“Jon?”

It was Mum.

“Jon are you sitting down love?”

I told her I was.

“I've got some news.”

As she began talking, voice shaking on the verge of what sounded like tears, Gran appeared out of what seemed to be nowhere and sat in the chair next to me. Nightie still on. Mug of tea warming her hands. The mug she made for me set down on the side table next to us.

“So, she's...”

I didn't reply. I already knew. Minutes passed.

“Are you there?”

I put the phone back on the receiver and stared at Gran for what felt like eternity. I went to open my mouth, but she closed her eyes, took a sip of her drink, blowing on the beige liquid gently and said, “I'm glad you can see it now, Jon,” nodding at me knowingly. As though she was in on *it*, whatever *it* was, all along.

I had no idea what she meant so I picked up my tea and gulped it down. Burning my tongue and throat on purpose to see if it would wake me from what I was sure was a dream. I remained conscious – eyes watering with the pain. Sandra turned up not five minutes later, with a tin box of biscuits and a cup of tea in a mug all her own. They started nattering about something or other, the weather and then the news.

## **I Could Only Hear Her Silence**

By Juanita Tovar Mutis

She failed me, failed our fate, failed the memories we could have built together. She stopped. Stopped replying, looking for me, meeting me. She paused the flow of emotions that ignited our connection.

#

I was laying down late at night, watching cars' lights come and go, filling the room with moving silhouettes. I texted you. I knew from the clues you left on social media and through one of your articles published online that you were not well. I told you what I tell almost no-one. 'I really care about you.' I meant it. I was ready to be there for you, to hold you if you needed me. I was committed to give you my all- my time, my thoughts, my affection.

I pushed on the blue button, confidently, without anxiety. I did it as I remembered the last time we had been together. How your shoulders descended whenever I spoke. The way your eyes widened and your lips revealed a smile when you told me about your recent trip to Paris.

I recalled that after I told you I had recently lost someone, you put your hand over mine and opened your arms so I could meet your embrace.

Snapshots of the moments in which I enunciated my sins to you calmly, completely unafraid to reveal truths that could destroy my relationship, my stability, my life, came to mind. They reminded me how unburdening my secrets made me feel closer to you.

How it made me think that when you said, typed, rolled your tongue to the sound of the words 'I L-O-V-E Y-O-U,' you really meant them.

I saw myself falling, peacefully descending to the realm of dreams, feeling the warmth that our memories would elicit in my body, resting reassured of the connection that we shared.

#

She didn't answer. Hours, days, and weeks started to hit me, slap me on the face, hard. I kept on looking at my phone. There was nothing. She had vanished. She kept on acting as if we had never happened. As if those quiet afternoons filled with uninhibited laughter needed to be erased. As if the dinners in which we sat raw and emotionally naked in front of each other needed to be wiped from my memory.

I could only hear her silence. It was loud, deafening. Pressing. It made my throat tighten, my teeth clench.

#

I went through the motions.

First there was *bewilderment*. My hands pressing on my phone, eyebrows rising when I would wake up to find no written trace of you.

Eyes not wanting to look, sight avoiding the Instagram page that narrated your everyday life. Feelings being puzzled by the big white smile you revealed on your pictures, the colorful places you visited, and the dark, grotesque humor you expressed on your captions. I did not want to look. I didn't want to listen to the inner thoughts that pierced and damaged me. They were approaching, pulsing through, slowly filling my mind.

Time kept on flowing, on hurting me with its passing of seconds, hours, and days.

Then *sadness* rushed through.

I first felt it while sitting on the subway. I was going to meet with your boyfriend. He had a professional opportunity I wanted to take, to seize. I kept on seeing the stops passing by. The car full of faces, began to close in on me. I looked down, trying to breath slowly, catching my breath. A pressure in my chest began to build. My nails now were tightly pressing, closing in on my thighs. That didn't work. Their voices became too loud, too quickly. The pressure of their shoulders against mine intensified, it felt aggressive. Now with my feet tapping on the floor, I closed my eyes, tightening my grip on the subway pole that grounded me. I kept on thinking: you just gotta endure three...two...one more stop.

The sun came down after the meeting. I could not hold it in any more. It needed to be released, to flood and overwhelm my mind. To rush in and empty me.

I called Karl and told him "I need to not be home, I need to take the night and take it all in, I have to get drunk. I must drown my mind with anything that comes my way. I have to figure out what I'm feeling."

And so we did. We sat in a dark room. His face lightly touched by the entrance's fluorescent light. Face to face we drank. Our eyes meeting only when the woman singing in the background stopped. Glances locking on each other in between her breaths and in those moments the saxophone filled in her silence.

I kept on talking. Couldn't seem to stop. Fast, quickly. So as not to catch too much breath. Talking to understand, to grieve, to flush the stream of feelings that had been confined within me.

Emotions fell down my cheekbones. Made my throat tighten, my face press up against the inner space of his shoulders: to hide my flushed cheeks, absorb my tears, and shield me from my own sadness.

Now there's *anger*. I feel it ebbing, rubbing up against me. It comes, it goes, in cycles, at night, in the morning. I could feel it flaming up my chest after your name lit up on my inbox.

I know it will be gone. Eventually, in time. I need to accept it. I have to gather the patience, the strength so I can bare to watch it disintegrate slowly, unfold right before my eyes.

## Journey to Manhood

Ted Garvin

The glaciers were in retreat and the sea level was rising. Drowned Doggerland lay mostly beneath the waves. What would eventually be the English Channel was soggy salt marshes and small hills.

One early autumn evening, in what would eventually be Norfolk in East Anglia, a going-away party took place outdoors under a gigantic spreading oak. Reddish-yellow leaves littered the ground. A village of wattle-and-daub houses, dark, windowless and with a single door, stood under the tree. Resin-dipped pine torches lit up the darkening space. The inhabitants danced in a ring around a bonfire. Dark-haired men alternated with women, their hands joined. They held bundles of dried flowers. The annual festival—it was best not to meddle with tradition—appeased the hostile nature spirits. A matter of life and death, it wasn't solely performed to give the young man, Harren, Deccan's son, a good send-off.

I hope nothing bad happens when I leave the village, he thought. He'd recently turned fifteen and avoided adventure. He filled a tray with food: venison, the ever-present fish, and wild vegetables scavenged from the countryside, and ladled tepid water into his decorated clay beaker. He walked over to where his friend, Bade, sat. He, a year older, was finely built, with a delicate beauty. He'd gone on his man-faring last year. He'd agreed to accompany Harren on his.

The storyteller walked away from the fire with her reward, potent berry wine laced with belladonna, henbane, and other dark ingredients. She'd recited epic poetry about a heroic episode of the distant past, involving a hunt for a mastodon. Skilled artists could drink potables without ruining the complicated meter and rhyme scheme. She'd successfully skirted the twin hazards of offending both gods and men.

As Bade and Harren ate they discussed his upcoming journey.

"I don't know why I need to go on this man-faring." Harren sulked. "It'll be dangerous."

"You need to learn about the outside," Bade replied. "About strange places. Do manly deeds. How else will you be accepted into the men's group?"

Harren didn't reply, so his friend continued, "We need to scout for danger, be prepared for whatever the gods might throw our way. Always trying to make life interesting for us."

When his friend still made no response, Bade asked, "Want to play?"

The other nodded, so Bade took pebbles from a bag and arranged them in a spiral pattern on the table.

"Where do you think we should go?" Harren moved a piece, threatening one of Bade's. "I've heard reports of higher ground far to the west. Might be useful if we ever need to move the village, like our grandparents did."

The encroaching sea, a troublesome sign from the gods, threatened oblivion.

"We'll have to cut around the bay." Bade drew a crude map on the table with a wine-dipped finger. "Afterwards, we'll go more northerly, inland."

Harren was about to respond when Hu and Yar, his half-brothers, walked up.

"What do you think you're doing?" Hu's face was flushed, his speech slurred. He towered over the seated Harren, a maddened aurochs.

Harren wondered, why is he still standing? He bristled. "What do you mean?"

"You think you know things." Hu's hostile face intensified. "You don't."

He said more, but Harren stopped listening.

Yar tilted his mug up and buried his face, drinking noisily. A thin red trickle flowed down the sides of his mouth and into his bearded chin. He lowered his mug. "You're just a

child. You're not ready to go out on even a berry-picking expedition." He tossed back the last and aggressively plunked the container down on the table. "At least, not without an adult looking after you." He laughed, a crow call.

Harren moved a pebble a few inches.

Yar grabbed his shoulder. "Don't turn your back on me, boy."

"I'm not a boy." Harren flicked Yar's hand away.

Yar gave another harsh crow sound. He pushed a lock of his dark curly hair away from his eyes, where the wind had tussled it like a lover. "You think you're so tough, going out fishing at every opportunity with that geezer."

"Not even a real man," Hu said.

"Geezer? Who, Goban? Our uncle? What's that supposed to mean?" Harren struggled to keep his voice steady, but it rose to a childish squeak. He flushed, embarrassed.

"How many children have you sired?" Virile and manly, Yar had fathered several. "I'll tell you. None. Prick the size of an acorn. When erect." Yar uttered an obscenity.

Harren's face turned redder. If he'd had a weapon, he would have used it. Instead, he shouted incoherently, got up, and shoved Yar, who fell backward, knocking Hu over, who fell on top. Yar shoved his brother aside and arose, his face dark with rage. Violence, maybe even murder, seemed likely. Hu stood and rested his hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Let's go." Hu's speech was slurred. "We'll get better sport elsewhere." He whispered something in Yar's ear, who muttered something Harren couldn't quite hear. His half-brothers strutted off.

"Here, have a swig of this." Bade offered him a wine-filled beaker. "It'll calm your nerves. A little will be good for you."

"Why do I let him do it?" Harren took the clay container, brushing his friend's hand. He took a reluctant swallow. "I can't avoid his jabs and barbs."

Bade said nothing, but swept the game pieces into the deerskin bag. "The game is spoiled. We should leave on your man-faring soon. Your brothers will be trouble."

"Half-brothers." Harren said. "I know. I know. I suppose we should go, even though I don't want to." Harren gave Bade an anxious glance. "I'm not sure how long I can tolerate this." He dithered, but eventually agreed.

###

His father insisted they leave the next morning. They packed their things and started walking west. Harren had heavy reluctant feet.

They'd reached the Temple when Hu ran up, puffing.

"Father sent me to go with you, to supervise. Someone needs to watch over you."

Harren said, "it doesn't need to be you."

"Who else?"

A long moment passed.

"What are you doing? Why are you just standing there, staring off into space?"

Harren came to himself and looked at Hu, who was tapping his foot in agitation.

"Come on," Bade said, "let's go." He started walking.

"Just looking at the Temple," Harren mumbled.

It was a boundary marker, set to magically prevent the sea from advancing. Rough cut, a column of unmortared stones, seaweed covered it. The trick hadn't worked. The temple, once erected on dry land, was now only visible at low tide. The gravelly sharply sloped shingle beach stretched for yards to their right.

"Come on," Hu said, grabbing Harren's arm.

###

Harren's voice rose to a plaintive whine. "Do you think we will see people any time soon?"

To their left, the land sloped sharply upward. In the shallows, dead trees, white and skeletal, stood accusing, like jagged teeth. The sea had taken even more of the land here.

"That's hard to say," Bade shivered in the chilly autumn breeze. "I'm afraid we're lost."

"Lost? How can we be lost? Don't you know the way?"

"Idiot," Hu said. "Of course we're lost. We've never been this way before."

They walked northwest, into the forest. After a while, the trees thinned, then disappeared. A salt marsh stretched far to the west. Moorhens, gray herons, and grebes called their mates and warned their rivals.

Hu displayed his civil side, away from his brother's bad influence. "I've heard there are people living there, in that." He moved his head in the general direction of the marsh.

Harren's gray eyes looked into his half-brother's blue. "Really?"

"Yes, they harpoon fish and eels. As I recall from my own man-faring, there aren't that many. People, I mean. They keep to themselves." Hu's voice trailed off. After a moment, "those harpoons are wicked-looking." He chuckled.

"I wish you'd stop talking about food," Harren said. "It's making me hungry."

They hadn't eaten for days. They'd emptied their packs.

Bade tried to change the subject. "We could make a raft out of these reeds. We'll never cross this marsh at this rate, not without getting our feet wetter. Or, rather than slog through it, we could go around, to the south."

Hu agreed, to Harren's relief. After all, there might be water demons. The possibility, unthinkable frightening, daunted him. Harren's stomach reminded him again it was empty.

###

They came to a pocket of grassland, farther inland.

"I thought we'd never get past those wetlands," Harren said. He told himself not to worry, but the thoughts persisted.

The silent fen they'd avoided had defied their efforts to describe it. They'd stopped talking, dispirited. Now, they paused to take in the spectacular vista open before them.

Harren was the first to speak. "I could do with a bite of fish, just about now."

Hu looked annoyed. "Now you tell us."

"Fish aren't all that hard to catch," Bade said.

Hu waved his finger in the air, sideways. "Just patience and time. We should go back?"

"No." Harren shuddered. "That place gave me the willies."

Hu said nothing for a while. "My patience is about exhausted. I thought this trip would be more interesting. All we've done is nothing. Seen nothing; caught nothing; eaten nothing." After a pause, he continued. "All you've done is act like a frightened girl, Harren."

"It wasn't my idea, at all, either. I didn't want to go and didn't think you would, either."

"Someone needs to keep an eye on you," Hu said.

Harren sulked.

"Do you think we should go back to the fen?"

"I'm afraid we must," Hu said. "It's a feeling I have."

Harren made a noise of objection.

"I agree," Bade said. "That means you're outvoted."

As the acceptance of ideas went, majority rule dated from earlier days, when the arrival of meals was more uncertain and the People had to roam to hunt. Now, only the chief was in charge. Memories of earlier liberties hung on, though.

Hu said, "we should find something we can kill in the marsh. Birds or something."

“Anything,” Bade said.

###

They confronted the marshes, rich with elusive wildlife. Some god thwarted their hunting efforts. Dizzy with fatigue and hunger, they tramped about in the trackless marshland. A water vole surfaced briefly, then disappeared with a plop. The marsh, peaceful and tranquil, extended as far as they could see in every direction. Harren imagined he could see a hint of water, the sea, glimmering far to the northeast and he could hear terns or gulls calling. A bit of seabird would taste good, just about now.

Their food sacks empty, their bellies noticed the lack. There was little sense in grumbling. They did anyway. It's all Hu's fault, Harren decided. I wish I could sit down in a dry place. A wet bottom's even worse.

“Why did I agree to go on this gods-forsaken man-faring?” he said. “I wish I was at home, my feet dry, with a warm place to sleep.”

Their feet squished in the waterlogged ground. Marsh birds, hidden by mist and tall reeds, sounded mournful notes. Grass patches obscured any view.

His grandmother had filled Harren's head with tales of spirits lurking behind every bush and tree. The gods were a different matter. Everyone believed in them.

“You know the rule,” Hu said. “No man-faring; no wife.”

“Stupid rule,” Harren said. “Who wants a wife, anyway?”

Bade interrupted. “I see something. Someone?”

“Where?” Harren asked. “I don't see anything. Maybe it's a spirit.” He made a gesture against evil.

A solitary boatman sculled a small raft about forty feet away. A hulk of a man, he'd gone unnoticed in the mists until the sharp-eyed Bade spotted him.

“Do you suppose he's hostile?” He asked, his brown eyes twinkling with mischief.

The boatman hadn't noticed them, intent on his own business.

Hu said, “maybe not. He's fishing or looking for something.”

“Is he looking for us?” Harren asked. “Let's go. We're saved!” He cast away all caution, relieved the boatman was no bogeyman.

At this sign of their deliverance, they splashed over to him with high hopes. He wore a plain mid-thigh length kilt made from beaten reeds. A long, flint knife hung bare at his waist. Diagonal zigzag tattoos graced his bare chest and thick dark bands encircled his upper arms. He didn't seem to notice the slight chill. Then he stabbed something with a twin-pronged spear he held in his hands. An eel, black and ugly-looking writhed on its points.

Harren shouted at the boatman, pointing at his stomach. “Do you have any food? Any other food than that, I mean?”

“Show him your empty sack.” Hu pointed at Harren's crotch and laughed, harshly.

Harren glared at his half-brother, but obediently opened his food bag. He turned it inside out, then upside down. He shook it. Empty. Nothing but crumbs fell.

“Eugh.” The boatman surprised them by speaking their language. Comprehension spread over his weather-beaten face. “Food I have. Want?”

He held out the eel, still wriggling, then stooped, his legs straight, and picked up a bag, lumpy and pulsating. From it, he took out another writhing eel. He drew his knife and struck off their heads, first one, then the other. They oozed blood from their stumps. He offered them to Harren, who looked at them dubiously. He hesitated, squeamishness riding upon his face, afraid it'd taste nothing like the fish at home.

The boatman spoke. “These eels good. Want?”

Disgusted, Harren watched Hu take the dead eel and wolf it down.

“It's good, but too many bones.” Hu wiped his mouth with his sleeve and extracted something small and white from his mouth. “More?”

The boatman obliged. He reached into his bag again and pulled out another pair. He offered one to Bade, the other to Hu. Harren overcame his distaste and reluctantly asked for one.

His companions introduced themselves. Startled into politeness, Harren tapped his chest with the flat of his hand. “Harren.”

The boatman also pointed to his chest. “Pommo. Name. Boat in. Get.”

They boarded, their shoes waterlogged.

The boatman turned his attention to navigation and propulsion. When they'd traveled some distance, he spoke. “People of mine. Living here long time. Much food.”

“How long?” Harren asked, his voice hoarse.

“Since sea, marsh created. So says holy man,” the other said. “Eels we fish. Bone harpoons we use.”

Silence prevailed. Harren thought, this strange man seems easy-going, but are his people? Easy-going, that is, except to the creatures they hunted.

Pommo asked, “Cooked you want?” He pointed. A small clay pot sat in the bottom of the raft, fire showing from its mouth. Harren finally decided the eels, much improved by roasting, tasted delectable.

Hunger is the best sauce.

At Pommo's camp, at what would later be called the Kilverstone settlement, the reed huts stuck above the high tide waterline water level on thick poles. The travelers dried themselves and soaked in the heat from a large fire pot. Harren shifted a bare foot toward the warmth.

“What in marshes doing you were?” Pommo asked.

The silence became a frightened little doe in a thicket. Then the man laughed, a raucous hawking sound, an osprey seeking its prey. Harren wasn't reassured.

Hu answered for the group. “We were lost.” They were in the boatman's power, for good or ill. “We entered the marsh driven by desperation. Starving.”

“We were just looking for some adventure.” Bade patted Harren on the arm in a reassuring gesture. “He's on his man-faring. I'm Bade and this is Hu.”

In answer to their unasked question, Pommo said, “good you me found. People to northwest there are. Yes, I take.”

The tension left Harren's body like flowing water.

###

A girl crept into Harren's bed that night.

Awake, he bolted upright. She put her hand across his mouth. He thought he recognized her. She was Pommo's daughter. He didn't want to wake anyone, especially her hulking father. He kept his protestations quiet.

Silently, she pushed him flat onto the padding that served as bed. She began committing further invasions.

“What if someone pushed aside the reed curtain and look in?” he asked, but she still said nothing.

After a few moments, he could think no longer. His world shrank to a point. He ceased to care what anyone thought, then he lost even that capacity.

He fell asleep.

###

He awoke, alone. The Moon God rode low on the horizon, shining His light in, past the open hanging. Harren lay wakeful for a long time, pondering the possible repercussions, until

the Sun Goddess made her presence known. She beamed over the watchful reeds and yellow flag iris, as though nothing had happened.

###

They left the marsh, and Pommo's daughter, for dry ground, the grasslands.

A brown beast with short horns and a tail, with thick curling fur, interrupted the travelers reverie-like discussion about what they were likely to discover. It barreled past them out of the dwarf gorse. A disheveled little man followed. He wore a felt kilt, a vest open to the chest, and a brimless pale gray cap tilted back, a precarious limpet. He whirled a rope and captured the strange animal. He struck it on the head, knocking it over. He said something incomprehensible in an angry tone.. He looked up at them. More words spewed forth.

Pommo responded in the same language. Harren wondered if the verb was at the end of the sentence this time, too. After a brief conversation, the marsh dweller reported.

"Abuidu his name is. Sheep." Pommo pointed at the horned beast. More gibberish flowed from the shepherd. "Welcome to his land you are." He peered at them from under his thick eyebrows. "Steal his sheep you not?"

"Oh no," Bade said, before Pommo could finish. "We won't steal the whatever it is. A sheep?"

###

They ate the freshly-slaughtered mutton, the sheep's reward for an escape attempt. The delicious meat, cooked on sharpened sticks over an open fire, deeply satisfied them. There was enough for Abuidu's entire camp.

Harren wiped at the grease which had gathered on his chin. He wondered, how long will I drift around here? "Pommo, ask Abuidu about this place."

Abuidu answered. The boatman relayed his words: a laconic translation of bizarre, poetic-sounding nonsense. The young people learned about his neighbors and what it was like to keep sheep instead of hunting and fishing for a living. Pommo added that Abuidu's people alternately fought and traded with a semi-nomadic people, wild and beautiful, to the north. They lived in tents, stole their sheep, and were all women.

###

Later that night, they were raided. Confused shouting and general hubbub followed. The raiders took a valuable sheep, a breeding ram kidnapped. The travelers agreed help Abuidu recover it.

Harren had no gift for languages, no ear for words. Something always got lost in the journey from the shepherd's mouth to his ears. Wish there was another way, he wondered. They remained dependent on the Pommo's translation.

After an hour or two, they were finally ready.

Abuidu appeared to curse.

Pommo tried, and failed, to translate. Finally, he said, "Grey wolf bad. Brown bear bad. Why people difficult?" Pommo reported. He struggled over the three syllable word. Abuidu needed his sheep. All of them. He wished all those predators were gone. Kill them all.

The shepherd led the way. A rabbit darted out from cover, but vanished before they could kill it. Pommo relayed more words from Abuidu. His, the boatman explained, was a strictly male world, one of sheep. The men bred with those tribe women. They only interacted when it was time for sex, wild and short. The women kept the girls and the occasional good-looking shepherd. The two sexes lived apart.

Their solitary worlds made the marriage bed a desert.

###

"Arrived," Pommo said.

They'd entered a settlement. A ramshackle affair, it was smaller than Harren's village. A muck-filled stream trickled through the middle, barely visible because of the morning haze and campfire smoke. A young woman walked up. Unintelligible conversation resulted.

"Yes," Pommo translated. "The ram they have. Your friend they want. Exchange. Breeding." He gave them a glance Harren couldn't interpret.

I suppose that's a fair trade, he thought. Would Bade enjoy living with the women? Why was he special? He wondered how they'd communicate, but soon figured it out.

More discussion followed. The one-in-charge came. Her eyes traveled up and down Bade's body, as though judging stock. She checked his teeth, then grasped him by the front of his tunic and led him away. He protested, but not very much. It didn't hurt that she had a beautiful body, a robust physicality, and wildly-curling scarlet hair that flowed down her shoulders.

A woman came, tugging the ram with a short rope.

Abuidu looked happy and a little relieved. He had his animal back and was, once again, in business.

"We should stay the night," Hu said. "It's late."

"Celebrate," Pommo related.

They had a large feast. Stolen sheep featured prominently.

###

Three months later, midsummer.

The tribe kept track of days by scratching marks on a stick. Harren assumed it was sacred, but really didn't know. In celebration of the day, one of the year's twin hinges, a woman roped off a space. Pommo explained. It was sacred to the Summer King and something big was about to happen. The woman walked in the sun's direction and trickled a white powder from her fingers, which wafted down onto the ground.

The birds sang sweetly, innocent of meaning.

When the Sun Goddess rode high, lacking a hand span or two of the zenith, the scarlet haired one-in-charge came to them. She, like Abuidu, had no words they could understand. Pommo told them Hu and Harren were to fight to the death.

"No, I can't kill my half-brother," Harren said.

"You die the death. Painful," Pommo relayed.

Harren said, "What sort?"

Pommo told him.

Harren blanched at the description. Not wanting to go into the trackless Mists of Death, he agreed. If one of them had to go, better it be Hu.

The woman handed him a wicked-looking flint knife, then she approached Hu. She talked with him. He didn't need a translation and nodded his head up and down rapidly with an unreadable expression. She handed him a spear, which Harren thought unfair.

The two men entered the combat area. Hu saluted Harren and assumed a businesslike pose, his knees bent.

"Fight well," Pommo relayed, from the safety of outside the sacred circle. "Gods favor winner."

The two, Hu and Harren, circled. Hu made the first move. He thrust at his half-brother's midsection.

Harren deflected it, flicking the spear away. He made a reluctant return jab, not really wanting to kill him.

Hu brought his weapon up. The blades made a harsh noise as they slid off each other. In one swift motion, he brought his spear down and inward. He nicked Harren's left arm. The triumph of first blood belonged to Hu.

They backed off. After a pause to regain their breath, they circled again. Hu taunted him. "I never thought you'd stoop to this, turning traitor to your own flesh and blood."

"Traitor? What about you? I had no choice."

Hu became silent. He made another savage thrust, another glancing blow.

Harren glanced at the wound and made a quiet smile. "Is that the best you can do?" He would play the martial banter game as best he could, despite his fears. He followed up with counterattacks: stab, parry, jab.

Hu walked backward at the furious assault, almost all the way back to the chalk barrier. He appeared to lose his footing, nearly tumbling backward. He knelt and tossed a handful of gritty dirt at his half-brother's face. He stabbed.

Momentarily blinded, Harren managed to wipe his eyes in time and avoid the blow. The fight was on again. Then it was his turn to retreat from Hu's attack.

Back and forth, side to side, round and round, they moved. First one, and then the other, had the momentary advantage. But neither could make good on it. They paused to catch their breath and tend their minor wounds, unavoidable nicks and cuts. More gibing speech happened.

They resumed the combat.

Hu flicked his spear and nearly knocked the knife from Harren's hand, who stepped back. This time, it was his turn to approach the barrier. He recovered, reversed his knife, point downward, arm drawn back. He stood in a professional looking posture and held out a hand in a warding gesture. "Give up?"

"No," Hu answered, also short of breath. "Still have weapons. No desire to meet the Death Goddess."

"Good luck." Then Harren said nothing more. He rushed at his half-brother and slashed at him, stabbing his right shoulder, nearly losing the blade in his fury. He wrenched it free and slashed at Hu's face.

He backed away, driven to the circle's edge again. Hu flinched backward, appearing unbalanced. He fended off the relentless attack. He surged forward and made his own series of quick jabs, underhand. "I tire of this. Let's finish it."

Harren made no reply, winded. He deflected his half-brother's latest attack, then thrust his knife into Hu's right thigh, narrowly avoiding the artery. A little blood flowed. He withdrew and stuck the blade into the middle of Hu's chest.

Blood frothed from Hu's mouth. He tried to speak, but collapsed. He continued to try to speak, but couldn't.

In a savage motion, rage filling him, Harren wrenched his knife out and stabbed him in the belly. He twisted the point.

Hu cried out, more blood flowing, a mass of bloody bubbles. He died, his eyes staring.

Harren withdrew his knife and cut off Hu's head. He straightened and lifted his arm, holding the head aloft, his face impassive. He stood, looking at it for a moment. He picked up his half-brother's spear and jammed it into the earth, then placed the head, almost tenderly, on the butt-end. He limped over, wheezing, to the chalk edge. He smudged out an exit and left without another word. Gore dripped down the spear shaft.

For better or worse, he was a man now.

## Smoke Days

Renée K. Reeves

One morning when the tips of the leaves were just turning yellow, smoke began to trickle from the mouth of the Speaker's cave.

The next day, the Matron arrived before the sun. I met her at the door, since I had slept little and risen early.

We washed in the supplicant's spring that sat by the path to the cave. The birds that watched us warbled off-kilter, their little minds dizzied by the fumes that now poured from the cave.

When we arrived at the mouth of the cave, it was midday. Before we entered, the Matron turned to me. "Dasha, you are satisfied in your preparation? Out loud, so the Speaker hears."

"I am satisfied."

The Matron took my hand and lead me into the cave. As the smoke surrounded us my mouth filled with the taste of sulfur.

We felt our way through the haze, leading each other. The Matron's crutches clattered against the rock beneath us, echos returning to us from deep within the cave.

"You come in a timely manner."

I stopped, heart pounding at the sudden, strange voice. The Matron walked deeper into the cave before handing me her crutches. She lowered herself to the ground, kneeling as best she could on her remaining leg.

She pressed her head against the ground once, twice, three times, then lifted her eyes.

"I bring a supplicant."

As the haze cleared, a figure appeared. It was draped in the same black robes we wore and sat on a long, low ledge carved from the wall of the cave. Only its hands were visible. They were long, narrow, desiccated, like the hands of bodies pulled from spring snows.

"A girl?" The Speaker's voice was flat, raspy, dulled from long months without use.

The Matron nodded.

"Let her come to me."

The haze had slipped into my head — for a moment I struggled to move. When I collected myself I knelt by the Matron, tapped my head against the ground as she had, then rose again.

"Closer."

Fingers drummed against the rocky bench. Now I could see the figure's lips, pressed thin and lined with deep creases. The rest of the face was drowned in shadow.

We sat in silence for long minutes. Finally, the Speaker's lips parted. "Yes," said the Speaker.

The hand trembled as it reached out to touch my left arm. "This one." The hand disappeared back into the cloak. "Now, go with peace."

"May you live forever." The Matron and I murmured the traditional farewell in unison.

We descended the mountain in silence, only speaking after we had again washed in the ceremonial spring.

The Matron bound my arm against my chest, talking while she worked. "We will go back in five days. That is more time than I had to prepare."

Those days are dream-like in my mind. My mother brought me bone broth and fasting tea every morning. I took nothing else, which was not difficult as I had lost my appetite to elation and anxiety. The sleep fast was harder. Every morning before the sun rose, the Matron

walked with me up to the spring. She sang prayers to the Goddess of the Sun as she unbound, washed, then rebound my arm. Every night I meditated in darkness until the sun rose again and the Matron returned.

On the fifth morning, the Matron waited outside with five men from the village. They all bowed as I emerged from the tent. Even the Matron bobbed her head.

“Maru, bless your daughter,” the Matron said.

My mother kissed me on the cheeks. “Be well, Dasha.”

I gave her a fumbling hug with my unbound arm. “I shall try.”

We walked in a line to the supplicant's spring. I walked first, to symbolize that I was walking willingly back to the cave.

At the spring, the Matron unbound my arm for the last time. When she had finished washing, she took a ladle of the spring water and held it to my lips.

“Take it.”

“But it is unholy to drink!”

“For you, for today, nothing is unholy.”

The smoke billowed out of the cave in great frothing waves. When we reached the worst of it, the men and the Matron wrapped scarves dipped in supplicant's water around their mouths. I stumbled along without protection, growing fuzzy with the fumes until I could walk no further.

After they carried me into the mouth of the cave, I remember little.

There was the Speaker's voice, then the cold, hard dirt of the cave floor under my back. The Matron's gentle fingers unwrapped my arm, stretched the stiff muscles.

Then, for a small eternity, there was agonizing pain. Then, nothing.

I do not remember the journey back to the village, but I remember waking the next morning, the sun already high in the sky. I spent most of the next week asleep, dreaming of teeth set deep into my arm.

When I was well enough, the Matron and I traveled back to the Speaker's cave. As the wind was colder now, we traveled slowly, our bodies draped with furs and what remained of my arm wrapped in scarves.

The smoke had died down to a trickle. I could see the Speaker's golden-green eyes peering out from beneath the thick hood.

“How do you feel, young one?” the Speaker asked once we had bowed.

“I am healing.”

“Let me see.”

I unwrapped the layers of scarves that enveloped the stump, revealing bandages tinged with blood.

The figure's left hand emerged from a swirl of cloaks. It was young, with delicate skin. A shiver ran through my body when I noticed the freckle on the second finger, the one my mother had always called the kiss of a star.

“You were gifted the hands of a creator, child. Together, we shall use what you have been given.” The hand reached out and brushed against my cheek. “Go in peace.”

I bowed. “May you live forever.”

## And Coyote Answered

Arthur Lamar Mitchell

I'm on the coyote's sere, cacti range making my way  
Civilization behind

Threw off rules regulations conformity

Nothing out here to judge or bother not

the brown & green lizard watching me from his rock

When I tell him to eat a fly,

flicks his tongue.

I lay against a berm search the horizon

Earth and sky are one I'm

in between. green-hued

patchworks delicate plants, orange and white

An oriole lights on a smoke tree

a moth in her beak

a quick lunch,

cleans up

wing's away.

Daydream of years having

flown

Some good, some not so,

none all bad just like people known.

A tiny wren nestles under a sage for a dust bath then flutters off,

Where will she go? How long her lifespan?

Better not to know.

A light Autumn breeze lifts a scent to

Shame the finest perfume of a

Queen

I continue into the immutable

World in Heart of a

Silence

Finally broken by an impertinent

Raven overhead

Scolding

“What do you want? You, black pirate!” I shout and sit on a boulder.

He swoops to a rock nearby scolds

Not deigning to look at me.

With good will I slowly approach.

He lifts, and cursing, leaves the scene.

As the day grows shorter

Softer light exposes

A new palette of color

Silver-gray-mica, rosy rock and glittering golden sand

Distant mountains of mauve

Sky of turquoise streaked in yellow

An *Elephant* tree bark's striation brown and gray

Beneath it a tiny hillock, six feet high invites

The top's level layered sandy soil and dry leaves

From my pack a light blanket,

canteen of water,

figs and apple.

The sun descends

glows scarlet into distant clouds

Layering the horizon pink and pearl.

Venus soon appears

and I remember her

A fool I am for love

Wrapped like a mummy

Under a galaxy of pulsing light & time

And from my dark space

Dream and

Hear piano cello soprano sax drum

I sing spontaneous lyrics burst free clear

A crescendo resonates

The horn solos

Long and

Mournful

Awake listen to the horn's lament

From the dark Coyote calls the tune.

Sitting I sip water gazing at white moon

listen.

I sing at the moon

“Helloooo!

Coyoteeee!

Hellooo!!”

Silence!

Again, I sing greetings

Coyote answers:





## Yard Sharks

B.L. Daniels

My neighbor built a pool of sharks in his backyard.

It was quite the spectacle as it came together, like a weird jigsaw puzzle. Steel drums growled as they poured concrete. Contractors hammered fence posts and an insurance adjuster shook his head and wildly gesticulated, lecturing my neighbor. This series of interconnected events culminated in a truck depositing large carnivorous fish into a swimming pool about a hundred feet from the sidewalk.

Things eventually returned to normal and nobody really cared...until the evening barking of neighborhood dogs was replaced by the chirps of crickets and peep frogs. The telephone pole on the street corner was wallpapered with fliers- a war memorial of adorable names. Families searched the block, empty leashes in hand. Children's lips quivered and their parents' aimed judging scowls as they walked by that yard.

It went on like this, the disappearances, until Labor Day, when my neighbor invited everyone to a barbeque. My wife and I made our way across the street with a bowl of macaroni salad, driven by morbid curiosity.

If a man is measured by the beer he serves and the sharks he keeps, my neighbor was a king.

Brown glass bottles sweat in the afternoon heat, pulled from icy coolers. The lawn was an emerald mosaic; a crosshatch pattern mowed to artisan perfection. The backyard was a Norman Rockwell painting come to life, and at its center...the pool.

Calm blue water sparkled, casting brilliant reflections off the hand-tiled deck. I laid in a chaise lounge, watching two large forms glide by. Their dead, black eyes absorbed the sunshine as they swam. The tip of a fin peeked above the water's surface, slicing in wavering strands as one of them completed a lap. Smooth gray-blue skin seemed like odd camouflage for this alien environment. They twitched and rolled as children's laughter echoed across the yard and into the water.

They frightened me.

The afternoon wore on until the coolers held more water than ice. Some guy from down the street, who loved Hawaiian shirts and other people's business, finally had enough liquid courage to ask what was on everyone's mind. He sloshed to the side of the grill where my neighbor was blackening the skins of kosher all-beef franks.

"So, I gotta ask. What's with the sharks?" He coughed and wiped the sweat from his forehead, slicking down the front of his comb-over in the process.

Pointless small-talk halted; ears perked. His words afflicted us with a suburban aphasia that only a pointed question about someone's home decor choices could. My neighbor smiled, pulled his shoulders back, and squinted up toward the sun. "Got a great deal."

"Huh, really. That all?" Hawaiian Shirt furrowed his brow.

"Yup. Sometimes a man has to treat himself. Sales guy upgraded me to Mako, no extra charge. Said their color would contrast the hand-laid tiling nicely. I'd tend to agree. How about you?"

Hawaiian shirt gave a disappointed shrug at the climactic non-answer. "Yeah. I suppose the blues and grays do look pretty sharp, but don't you think..."

My neighbor's gaze suddenly shifted to the pool as something splashed into it. A small boy stood poolside, feet together, tossing Nerf balls at the sharks. Rows of teeth tested orange foam as it bobbed along.

“Excuse me, son, please get away from there,” my neighbor asked politely. “Whose child is that? Can someone please make him stop? Where are his parents?”

No one budged.

“Whose kid is this? Honey, are his parents in the house? Hey son, c’mon stop it!” a nervous laugh punctuated his demands. The child glanced back, then quietly returned to throwing balls into the water.

“Knock it off! You’re going to void the warranty! They’re not supposed to eat foam!” His temper flared, face red as the meat he had tossed on the grill.

Hawaiian Shirt delivered a hearty back pat in an attempt to defuse the situation, “Whoa, why don’t we just calm down?”

“Why don’t you just mind your damn business and finish the beer I bought for you?”

“You just lost yourself an invitation to our annual luau!” Hawaiian shirt snatched another beer from the cooler as he exited the party.

With no parental intervention, another ball landed in the pool. Snapping jaws chewed through a hail of spongy neon orbs.

“Okay, that’s it.” My neighbor marched toward the pool, shoving through stupefied onlookers “Kid, I said to stop it! Are you deaf or just dumb, you little brat?” The child’s arm was outstretched, dangling the last ball over the pool, and he looked back at the enraged man, smiling. “I swear to God, kid, if you drop that ball...”

He reached forward, trying to snatch the orange ball, but the boy pulled his arm back at the last second, and my neighbor pitched in head first. Sunlight glinted off the metal spatula as it flew through the air. A bottle opener rang off the tiles after ejecting from the pocket of his khaki shorts. There was a large splash, followed by thrashing limbs and screams. He fought and shoved against the clamping jaws, beating against gray flesh as the huge fish enveloped him in a predatory whirlwind. A crimson bloom erupted and washed through the pool once they finally ripped him under the foaming water. The smiling boy dashed away, hurdling a white picket fence and disappearing down the sidewalk.

The barbeque ended poorly.

The smell of chocolate chip cookies wafted from the kitchen counter as we stepped through the front door. The real estate agent met our curiosity at the door with a peroxide smile and a helpful print out. “Oh, so you live across the way? Just checking out the open house? That’s lovely.” Her predatory eyes scanned us as she smoothed her gray suit jacket, “There’s a plate of chocolate chip cookies over on the counter. Help yourselves!” She stepped outside and I watched her straighten the FOR SALE sign that had been posted in the front lawn for weeks.

I stared out the kitchen window towards the pool as I bit into the soft, warm cookie. Two white bellies breached the water’s surface; skin shriveled and blistering in the heat. I pictured luggage abandoned in the ocean after a plane crash. “Taking in the view of the custom decorative sharkscape?” The agent crept up beside me, grinning “It needs a little work, for sure, but with a little TLC and elbow grease it could really make this home the gem of the neighborhood.”

## The Prophet of Patmos

Steven Joyce

The prophet of Patmos appeared, beard and all, face minced with ferocity and madness all roiling in a spectered glass of coke- Coca-Cola. He appeared between transparent ice cubes beginning to dissolve in lazy swirls of brown as transparency itself slipped into another medium. Like funhouse mirrors, it stretched and taffied, bent and fattened that face etched by biblical suns and obsessive eschatological thoughts, now shattered by a Mexican afternoon sun into nothing less than thought-shards of light. A meadow of glistening shards created an iridescent effect and strangeness not unlike that of the hundreds of sea turtles beneath the sea-grazing in coral meadows like herds of hard-shelled cows.

Coca cola is served worldwide and the prophet found himself served, though he thought “trapped” was probably a better word, a hapless genie in a bottle, but worse- since the dissolving ice also seemed to dissolve him in a way that can only be called disconcerting. Or possibly discombobulating, or even more possibly- unnerving. His message of apocalypse, always already imminent, garbled as if he were talking to one of the four horses, calming it with gurgles of a kind known only to hermits of dark vision, became lost in the eliding droplets of condensation on the outside of the glass.

The glass was held by a wizened but well traveled and long-lived hand that had a huge brown scab on the inside of the wrist. Both scab and wrist belonged to a very old man who spoke flawless English, Spanish, German and Italian. Actually, his conversation in any of these languages was riddled with flaws- intonation infelicities, semantic missteps, and etymological faux pas of all kinds that, nonetheless, went unnoticed. He drove a small three wheeled disability scooter with tall carnivalesque flags of Canada and Mexico waving at an embarrassing, accusatory angle whenever he left the restaurant. The scab, needless to say, this unseen cynosure, if that makes sense, accompanied him everywhere, oftentimes sparking long animated conversations about cilantro or habanera or drug cartels.

The prophet was soon to learn that as a vision in the glass of coca-cola, he had a relatively short shelf-life. It made him nauseous- the Sartrean variety. He felt dizzy and swoonish, especially every time the old man would take a sip of cola. The prophet, upside down, dissolving, moved his eyes round and round, taking in the shimmer created by what he felt was an existential thermocline that caused the transparency and shifting colors to separate. Each time the glass returned to the table, he had a new disfigurement to deal with, to appease, to vet, to rationalize. He struggled to find the right word for what that was. This time, his beard trailed upwards, he thought “unceremoniously” for a prophet of doom and his left incisor dripping down over his chin (he checked to see if “drip” could possibly be the right word, and it was). It dripped down over his chin like Dali’s flaccid clocks, lazy and contemptuous. There was something like anguish in his eyes, but not really since anguish too was not exactly the right word. He wanted an expression or maybe a phrase. He settled for *dystopian displacement-distention*.

The scab, which could change colors like a flounder, seemed to make the old man hungry. At least that is what the old man thought and determined never ever to tell anyone. It did, however make him hungry- that bumpy brown grayish purple-at-the-edge scab made him hungry which he did not understand. It also made him grateful which he did understand. He looked at it like this: he had cells in his body that still remained interested in healing wherever his skin broke open. A very touching and real allegiance, he thought. His pale skin sagged and sank where the large tunnel veins ran a pale bluishness over his hand and up his arm, but the scab remained as promise fulfilled.

The sea shimmered as the prophet, now resembling exactly the front left hoof of the third apocalyptic horse in Durer's famous painting, struggled to say "Patmos" as if a single word prayer. What came out was this: "I look like a horse's hoof." It was the last thought he had as the old man motored silently away with the flags of Canada and Mexico drooping in his tricycled wake; it was the last sight he saw as the sun settled into the ocean and the top ice cube pushed his now hoofish face deep into the sepia colored cola.

## Ignite and Awaken

Emalee Sickles

*“Nothing is more sad than the death of an illusion” -Arthur Koestler*

Miska watches as the fire pops and sizzles. Yellow flames dance at the base and orange ones leap for the ceiling. The heat beats at his skin, intense and nearly painful. A twig snaps. The flames pop. Miska’s never seen anything more beautiful.

He shifts his position, adding more fuel to the fire. He can hear his heart beating in his chest. Quickly. Loudly. Forcefully. His breath is almost the same. His eyes sting, sting, sting. Miska gives them barely a thought.

The fire is so entrancing. So intense. Alluring. He wants to touch it. To *be* it. Living fire. Fury and passion and pain and *life*. If only. He watches it frolic, free and unconcerned.

Miska’s knees burn. A flying cinder jumps into his cheek. Another hits his arm. He blinks, tearing his eyes away from the flames in front of him. It feels like he’s wading through water. He coughs, suddenly aware of the acrid smoke in the air. The flames in places they shouldn’t be. Red hot tendrils climb the reed walls, free of their clay prison.

Suddenly his heart thuds for an entirely different reason. The house is on fire. He stands unsteadily, narrowing his eyes as the black smoke hurts them. Flames lick at his clothes and skin, threatening to catch and burn. *I have to get out of here*. Even though the smoke blocks his view, he knows where to run to get out. Where objects stand in his way.

It isn’t until he’s out of the house that he realizes he should have woken his family. Guilt courses through him, mixing with the fear. The summer’s night air is cool compared to the blaze. He stares, gasping for breath, as the reeds of his house burn and wrinkle before collapsing. Spreading.

Someone grabs his arm. Shouting reaches his ears. The voices mix with the roar of the fire, creating a symphony. Miska feels numb as he watches his neighbors run from their blazing houses. As they run for the river, only to stop in despair as they remember the low tide and summer drought. As the flames reach for the sky. Calmness falls on him again.

And yet something rips it away. Hands claw at him. Voices shout. *“Miska! Miska!”* He lets them take him. He lets them bind him and put him in the prison, far enough away from the other buildings to be safe from burning. He sits, breathing through injured lungs and resting on injured limbs.

He deserves it, anyway. He built the fire when it wasn’t needed. He let it leave the clay boundary to grow on the dry reeds. He didn’t warn anyone. He didn’t mean it, but it doesn’t change what happened. Miska coughs, shoulders shuddering. His right knee aches from where the fire claimed it. His left shoulder throbs from where angry hands grabbed. He can barely open his stinging eyes.

His salty tears of grief intensify the pain.

He doesn’t know how long he’s alone in his cell. Without a window or visitors, it could be only a few hours. Or, days. If he’s hungry he can’t feel it. If he’s thirsty it doesn’t register. He just feels numbness.

When the door to the prison finally opens, he doesn’t move to look. He continues to stare at the reed ceiling.

“Miska.” The voice, usually the familiar soft melody of Guard Aneil, is hard.

Miska doesn’t answer.

“We’ve finally sorted your mess, Miska. It only took five sunrises.” Aneil continues.

*Only. Only* five sunrises.

“Your family is dead. Vali and Asya were found in their bed. Your brother Kinnd was found near them, It seems he awoke and tried to warn them.” Aneil pauses. “Little Faina was reduced to bones and melted skin.”

At that, rage courses through Miska. “Saying she was dead would have worked fine enough.” He growls. It comes out more like a whispered squeak, hoarse from disuse and smoke inhalation.

“You think so?” Aneil growls back. “You *killed* them, Miska. And your *infatuation* destroyed half the village. We have too many people and too few homes. We cannot even begin to rebuild until the wet season, when the reeds grow back. *And it is your fault.*”

“I know that.” He says. The reed ceiling stares back at him, as unforgiving as Aneil’s voice. “And I’ll have to live with it.”

“No.”

“What?” Miska asks, finally turning to look at Aneil.

The guard’s face is stony. “You will burn as you burned us, Miska. You will not live past tonight.”

“It isn’t as if I meant it.” His throat burns from speaking and his eyes burn for an entirely different reason.

“But you will still be punished.” Miska wonders how Aneil’s soft brown eyes can hold so much cold fury. “You will be whipped with a rope of crocodile leather, once for each person you killed. Then you will burn.”

Miska swallows. “Please.” He whispers. “I don’t want to die.”

“Neither did your family. Ot Chiryn, when his house collapsed over him. Teven the elder could not take the smoke, and Hal died from her burns.” Aneil tilts his head. “It’s only fair, your life be taken for taking theirs.”

Miska protests only physically as Aneil drags him from the prison. His burns object to walking and his lungs agree with every breath. But he doesn’t speak as he’s led through the charred village, across the dry river bed. Through the angry crowd of grieving villagers. His neighbors. Friends. *Victims.*

He doesn’t speak as he’s bound to a post of wet, mud-caked hawthorn wood. The ropes that bind him are just as wet. Around him are piles of sticks- maple, beech, hawthorn, poplar, sweet chestnut. Surrounded by a ring of rocks and mud to prevent the spread of fire. Aneil makes sure to keep the ropes off Miska’s torso, instead wrapping his legs, shoulders, arms, and neck. All while jeers and shouts are thrown at him. And Miska feels desolate.

Aneil steps away, out of the circle of wood. Another person steps in, walking close enough to reach Miska with the whip he holds. “Any words?” He asks stonily.

Miska swallows, mouth dry. “Uncle...” There’s an ugly feeling in his gut forming. “Please.”

His uncle’s face doesn’t change. The feeling in Miska’s gut gets stronger. He closes his eyes. *I’m not ready to die*, he thinks.

There’s a loud *crack*, and pain erupts across his chest, completely different from the pain from his fire injuries. He cries out, lurching forward against his bonds. It’s as if the whip opened up a channel in his ears, and suddenly the shouting, jeering, howling of furious villagers are no longer background noise.

“Murderer!” Dot shouts, her voice shrill.

“Daemon!” Screams Puce.

“Monster!”

“Wretch!”

“Savage!”

The whip strikes him again. Pain, sharp and powerful and deep wells as his flesh tears. Miska keeps his eyes shut tight, but he can't keep the sobs and screams from being torn out.

"Killer!"

"Hellfire!"

"Penalty!"

This time his cheek is slashed. His body jerks, straining against his bonds.

"Die!"

"Suffer!"

The whip strikes his stomach. He tastes blood. He coughs, and his eyes open enough to watch as something small and red tumbles from his mouth to the ground. The whip drives into his chest. He shrieks, injured throat flaring with pain. Hot tears sting his face. His busted tongue oozes blood. Fury erupts, and he raises his head to glare at his audience. His 'uncle'.

"Hellspawn!"

"Abomination!"

"Incompetent!"

He's roaring back, even before the whip hits his flesh once again. Anger, like fire, courses through his body. *Ididn'tmeanitIdidn'tmeanitIdidn'tmeanit-*

"Burn!"

"Freak!"

"Maniac!"

The whip slices his chest for the last time. His unintelligible cries of anger turn into a choked gasp. Miska sags against his restraints. He glares at the crowd.

"Penitence!"

"Retribution!"

"Cutthroat!"

He wheezes.

"Miska, son of Valin," his uncle says. "You will burn." He walks out of the ring of firewood as others drop flaming torches.

The wood ignites.

*"Sometimes God will deliver you from the fire, and so other times God will make you fireproof" -Joel Osteen*

Miska watches the wood burn. It pops and fizzes and spits, and within minutes the fire reaches him and licks at his ankles. He draws in ragged breaths.

He should be terrified, but instead...

He watches the red-orange-yellow flames rage with detachment. It really is beautiful.

And dangerous.

The fire climbs his legs, fed by his clothes. And skin. At first the fire doesn't register.

And then.

It's a peculiar sensation, feeling your skin burn and melt, Miska muses. It hurts, oh, it hurts, like nothing he's ever experienced. At once his savage wrath returns. He screams back at the voices damning him still, barely audible over the roar of the fire. He screams incoherent curses and pained desperation. And he burns.

If his fireproofed bonds weren't holding him up he would have fallen ages ago.

The fire sears his skin, bakes his bones. The scent of sizzling flesh mingles with the smells of all the burning timber. An airborne ember strikes his cheek.

Pain. Agony.

Rage. Fury.

Shouting. Roaring.

Smoke. Fire.

The conflagration claws at him, stripping away everything about him. Smoke curls in his lungs, in his eyes. The inferno ravages.

Miska's bindings snap, his post crumbles. His body collapses. Ash clouds his eyes, his throat. The agony in him overtakes everything.

Beautiful, beautiful fire.

It takes.

And takes.

And destroys.

And *reveals*.

His skin and bones burn and death takes his corpse but he *awakens*. And the roar of the fire is nothing, nothing compared to the roar of his own as he breaks through his ashes.

He's new.

Free.

Angry.

The hatred in the air is bound in his bones. His blood. His skin. The fire lives in his veins. Miska roars again, his new self a far better fit than his old self.

The fire that burns around him is nothing now. The people are nothing.

He is awake.

## **Pins**

James Croal Jackson

Cigarettes and your hair I tangle myself in our scribble of night,  
bar patio, cheap beer until taxed. I'm saying the gunk in my heart  
will kill me before you, these smoke-breath evenings the steady  
rhythm of the planet. So I'm asking you to come in. The steering  
wheel on your car spins in a forever rotation, circles and circles  
spilling exhaust like a blanket over this dim, confusing street.

## **Sign Here**

Cat Dixon

The sign is a flag of surrender—  
a white-out erasure of the vows and affairs.  
If you take this banner, it'll stream behind  
you like a kite—it will pull you to the edge.

You're like the guy at the street corner  
with the "going out of business" sign—everything  
half-off, everything must go. You toss  
the sign, catch it, slink it behind your back,  
flip it, and slide it between your legs—  
always the showman. No, you're

the cataract that drifts by, a lazy  
swimmer back-floating, and with every  
blink or twitch, the dot dunks out of sight.  
I can never focus—closing one eye—  
to wait for your next appearance.  
All you offer is static.

## **My Best Friend**

Arthur Russell

Even when they're happy, it's always like they're almost not.  
They like chess, but only as a metaphor.  
They like cooking for others, frying chicken in an iron skillet.

They have a passion for moving large, solid objects with their mind.  
but they are suspicious of ideas --  
the moon is a steamer trunk filled with white moths.  
They care about voter registration, the minimum wage.

The art on the walls of their townhouse  
are souvenirs of longings  
they once felt the possibility of fulfilling  
when a gallery opening made them sense that their life  
had been wasted on social missions.

They are always prepared for the end that often never comes.  
I am one of the three people whom they keep away  
from their other friends and from one another.

They never underestimate their enemies  
or mistake passion for loyalty.  
They fly first class all the time.  
The speed at which the Earth moves as it circles the sun --  
67,000 miles per hour -- is never far from their mind.

Their daughter just got married. Their mother is 96.

Many years ago, they would go to a club  
in the basement of an office building  
in midtown and nurse one beer while the drag queens  
performed. People would sit down next to them,  
start a conversation, then move on  
when they didn't respond.

They saw, early on, the limits of what intelligence could accomplish,  
but never escaped its addictive gleam completely.  
They believe in God un-introspectively, as a board member  
believes in the Attorney General. The word they use is *lumpishly*.

Not much for nature, generally, the sight of bees  
and brown moths in early autumn swarming  
over the thick, pink heads of sedum stopped them  
on the way up my front walk. *Look at that*, they told me,  
so I looked. There were several types of bees,  
one of which was shaped like a house fly,

another with a heavier, leathery abdomen;  
and the brown moths' wings were rimmed in orange,  
while the sedum's pink buds were dusty and plump.  
Their eyes were brimming.

They told me how, on the Staten Island Ferry  
one New Year's Eve at midnight, in the harbor,  
out on the deck, in the rainy wind, with the woman  
whose idea it had been to come, their cheeks were pelted  
with harbor spume and droplets of rain,  
but he couldn't remember where they'd met  
or how the night ended.

Their maid once quit based on futility.  
The hallway that goes from their front door  
to their kitchen has African masks lining the wall.  
Even when they're happy, it's always like they're almost not.

## **Old Men Walk Funny (V2)**

Michael Lee Johnson

Old men walk funny with shadows and time eating at their heels.  
Pediatric walkers, prostate exams, bend over, then most die.  
They grow poor, leave their grocery list at home,  
and forget their social security checks bank account numbers,  
dwell on whether they wear dentures, uppers or lowers;  
did they put their underwear on?  
They can't remember where they put down their glasses,  
did they drop them on memory lane U.S. Route 66?  
Was it watermelon wine or drive-in movies they forgot their virginity in?  
Hammered late evenings alone bottle up Mogen David wine madness  
mixed with diet 7-Up, all moving parts squeak and crack in unison.  
At night, they scream in silent dreams no one else hears,  
they are flapping jaws sexual exchange with monarch butterfly wings.  
Old men walk funny to the barbershop with gray hair, no hair;  
sagging pants to physical therapy.  
They pray for sunflowers above their graves,  
a plot that bears their name with a poem.  
They purchase their burial plots, pennies in a jar for years,  
beggar's price for a deceased wife.  
Proverb: in this end, everything that was long at one time is now passive,  
or cut short. Ignore us old moonshiners or poets that walk funny,  
"they aren't hurting anyone anymore."

## **The Charmer**

Mark Tulin

The charmer with a long snake  
holds it around his neck  
luring Sunday strollers like you  
to his street corner in Venice Beach.

He tells you that the snake won't bite.  
It's tame and loving, like him.  
If you gently hold the snake, he'll softly hiss,  
wrap its scaly leather around your waist.

At first, you'll feel the coolness of his skin.  
Gradually coiling its passion around you.  
Not too tight, but close enough  
to let you know of his desire.

What the charmer doesn't say  
is that when the serpent gets hungry,  
and if you refuse to feed him,  
he won't see you as a friend any longer.

He will slowly tighten his grip,  
squeezing his predatory anger,  
until the beating of your heart  
and the sound of your breath  
becomes a distant memory.

## **Gossips**

Linda Imbler

Both inside and outside a haunted house  
the dead fear you more.

So, avoid them in dark alleys  
on account that you do not startle them.

For, I guarantee that they are there.

They like to wander because  
they are as curious as cats.

They do enjoy a good look inside windows,  
especially of places where they once lived.

Would you deny them the pleasure of remembering their past?

They only want to live up to their eulogies  
of having connected  
and the questions of life never cease,  
even for them.

They watch closely  
to see and hear what goes on around them  
for there are very few spirits without a face  
and none without ears.

They share news of what they have seen and heard.  
I have been told they are some of the most  
consummate gossips on the planet.

For this reason, beware of seances,  
where the dearly departed might tell all your secrets.  
It might make for a most embarrassing day!

## **A Different Day**

Edward Lee

As one, the birds rise  
from the washing line,  
taking the line with them,  
which in turn  
takes the wall, the kitchen,  
the sitting room and hallway,  
followed by the downstairs bathroom,  
the stairs,  
then the upstairs bathroom,  
the first bedroom,  
the second,  
until only mine is left,  
the room in which I lie  
on an unmade bed,  
my eyes on the birds  
as they fly higher  
and higher,  
tailing my home  
behind them,  
and before I can blink,  
taking me too.

## **The Embalmer**

Gaynor Kane

Closed caskets  
provide my models,  
disfigured, roadkill,  
diseased, too damaged  
to wake. Screwed shut.

Stainless steel sterilised,  
laid out like neat rows  
of soldiers. Bone chisels,  
snares & scissors,  
clamps & cartilage crushers,  
knives & needles,  
rasps & retractors,  
drills & distractors.

Lab coat donned,  
headlamp, gloves;  
begin my deadly art.  
Shark-sharp saw slices,  
suck out cellulite, erase scars,  
remove ribs, chisel cheekbones.  
Add sponge and balloons  
creating curves, breasts and buttocks.

Ladle liquid gold  
over glorious goddess.  
Another immortal beauty  
for sale under dark webs.  
Transfer your bitcoin *[here](#)*.

## **The Bad News**

Jeffrey Zable

The bad news is that there is no viable detour.

You can always try to jump over the snake pits,  
or try to outrun the hungry hyenas.

You can even try to tiptoe past the dozing lions,  
the only problem being that there's hundreds of them,  
and they too haven't eaten for awhile.

You could also call your mother  
and see if she'll pick you up in the SUV,  
or touch in with your best friend who says,  
"Anytime you need anything, just call me!"  
but whenever you do, he always seems to be  
working a deal or trying to put the make  
on some floozy in a bar or at the racetrack.

The bad news is that the streets are so wet and slick  
that no matter how hard you try, you keep falling down,  
and by the time you arrive home you're old enough  
to collect a pension if you worked at least 60 years  
for the same company, or maybe you can collect  
social security that will allow you to live somewhere  
in which rival gangs have killed each other off for the time being,  
except that their children, who are budding psychopaths,  
are combing the neighborhood, looking for someone  
who matches your description:  
same eye color, same build, same inflection in the voice  
that never had much to say in the first place. . .

**Avihs || Vishnu**

Changming Yuan

Mornings || they disperse || beyond || the corn  
Fields, || separately. || Sunday  
She || throws

Her partner's computer || (midnight)  
Into the garage. || George || who  
In many || a city || upgraded || his software

Upgraded || hers.  
They will || stop over || an island  
Separately. || Your son

Hated || all || mushrooms  
George mentions – do you recall || yourself?  
To a single mind, || their spirits || evaporate

## Drafting the Dragon

- According to a recent survey conducted in ten English speaking countries,  
the top 10 most familiar Chinese words are ...

In the *Shaolin* (少林) Temple  
Rebuilt between *yin* and *yang* (阴阳)  
With billions of *yuan* (元)  
Collected from *gugong* (故宫 the Imperial Palace)  
After each greeting *nihao* (你好)  
The *wushu* (武术 Chinese martial arts) is  
Gaining more and more momentum from *qi* (气)  
Or the energy of *qigong* (气功)  
Bloated with tons of *renminbi* (人民币)  
While every Chinese is playing *mahjong* (麻将)

## **Shedding Skin**

Lorraine Whelan

The translucent scales are flecked with brown.  
They are perfect in their thin, honey-combed-ness.

They are raw.

These fragile flakes subtly illustrate

the carnage of growth.  
Small bits are stuck to the terrarium glass  
while larger pieces of skin,  
dry and curling,  
are scattered about the floor.

No blood.  
But the effect makes the cause seem full of pain.

### **More luxuriant now, the snake rests:**

fatter, larger, comfortably squeezed  
in the cardboard tube, suspended  
From the mesh roof of its false home.

Satisfied for the moment, the snake sleeps  
soundly after this intense physical activity.

Someone will come to clean the cage.  
Remove the mess of the old skin.

Sanitise.

Then the snake will slide from its paper sheath

ready to be fed –

to begin the process again.

## **Dying Thought**

Giles Selig

If you had asked me  
How it was to die  
I couldn't say  
But if I could  
I would not have  
Known myself

## **Run through Grass**

Will Reger

When you run through the grass the sun is chasing you,  
hardly able to keep up. I can almost see you take off into the air,  
kicking and waving like a long jumper who never lands.  
Is what I see in my mind not miraculous?

That you are made of a new sort of gold woven into flesh,  
a species of brightness unceasing. I smile because we  
stood once by the sea on a beach  
and swore to love more reliably than birds and bees,

and now the time is upon us—you have crossed  
into the west, declaring “we are old.” You wish me  
a silent night, like a last star before the fall.  
I came alive once before. I can do it again.

## Scholastic Poetry Award

John L. Stanizzi

-1966

-a triptych

those days	when football
seemed important	and the confusion
the pressure to fit it	to be cool
was a hard road	was hard won
when I won a poetry award	overwhelming
to prove I was a <i>faggot</i>	I got jumped
my legs were shaved	by the guys on the team

**i tried thinking of how to breed telepathy from a taxonomy of adverbs but it never got  
me close enough to you**

Michael Prihoda

be a dime-store anti-hero.  
i need you at least that much,

the way the EI needs  
a tunnel. if you gape

like a sunflower  
& shed your vertebrae

i promise you can bend  
faster than borders

beneath self-conflicted  
armaments.

when you feel the rattle  
in your elbows

of recent oblivion  
returning your call,

wait for the answering  
machine, the beep,

the disclosure  
of not quite enough bliss—

erase the monument  
of pre recorded human verbiage—

know that to speak  
of downtown

is to be more phallic  
than fallacy and

when you get the message,  
know it is a lava flow

encrusting with voice  
of history & erosion

## **Husk and Bone**

Ken Allan Dronsfield

That which gives often;  
often receives nothing in return.  
Do not be deceived  
by the writing in stone.  
Corn often grows taller than words  
words often grow taller than deeds.  
In what field strides the Earth  
with stalks as thick as dictionaries.  
We take a cache and fill silos  
forty moons per one field.  
Geese feed in flocks as the night  
haze dissolves with the daylight.  
Wrung ones neck for our bellies  
now we give it spit and hot coals.  
At dusk, we watch wise men  
gather petrified husk and stubble  
to craft tablets and rope whilst the  
crows and ravens pick clean  
discarded husk and bone.  
Within one's breath, the sun is gone;  
a slower time within life's circle.

## **First Day of September**

John Grey

First day of September,  
still summer,  
but the month's name on my tongue  
has that feel of fall.

The heaviness has gone  
out of the air.  
No Juno.  
No more Caesars,  
Julius and Augustus.  
Just the seven  
which is really a nine,  
that can turn the winds around,  
sketch flight plans for the robins.

Red buds of holly  
accompany me on my walk down  
to the river.  
They're not going anywhere.  
The current is  
but slowly.  
Like time,  
its forward motion  
is more circumspect than gushing.  
And those cooling waters  
are no longer as necessary.  
But I dip my hands and toes  
for old time's sake.  
(Old times that are  
barely a week old.)

It's not really Summer's last gasp.  
That suggests a dying.  
This is a gradual handing over.  
Just as the day hasn't a quibble with nightfall,  
no season takes it personally.

Like the cicadas that fill the air  
with their staccato cry.  
Knowing what they cannot possibly know,  
they're still more inspirited than fated.

## Bio's

David lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has created many worlds in his head over the years, and he enjoys bringing them to life. He looks forward to his free time so he can read, write, and stare at the trees in his backyard. He can be found at <https://norwoodpages.wordpress.com/>

Marisa Crane is a lesbian fiction writer. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in X R-A-Y Magazine, Okay Donkey, Jellyfish Review, Pithead Chapel, Maudlin House, Cotton Xenomorph, and elsewhere. She currently lives in San Diego with her partner. You can find her on Twitter @marisabcrane.

Tyler Womack writes about hipsters growing up and the tragedy of creative employment. A native Texan, he played indie rock in Austin before moving to Brooklyn to work in advertising. Tyler works as a content strategist in San Jose, California.

Phoebe Reeves writes about the consequences of trashing the environment and how trauma, whether childhood or adult, becomes part of our DNA. Her fiction has been published in Corvus Review, The Aironaut, Capricious SF, and a number of other literary magazines, online and in print.

Lucas Burford is haunted by the dormant animal living inside him. He writes fiction, essays, and children's books. He is abrasive, longing for ideas or items of imagination needed to be brought to life. No topics are off limit to him, if they are explained without hesitation.

Alexis Ames first picked up a pen when she was eleven years old and hasn't put it down since. When not writing about worlds that may someday exist--or might never come to pass--she spends her time running, hiking, reading, and dreaming up ways to make characters sad. She can be found on Twitter at @alexis\_writes1.

Warren J. Cox writes and paints in southern Virginia, where he also works as an academic editor. Beyond creating, he is passionate about human rights and tennis. Warren's work has appeared in Eunoia Review, Ducts, Defenestration, Empty Mirror, Fluland, The Creative Truth, and other journals. He's on Twitter @WarrenJCox

Eric Michael Bovim is a former foreign correspondent in Madrid. He just completed his first novel. Bovim studied under poet and essayist Christopher Merrill at Holy Cross, majoring in English Literature, and his work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Fast Company, and Salon.

Arthur Davis is a management consultant who has had over eighty tales of original fiction, and several dozen as reprints, published. He was featured in a single author anthology, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, the Write Well Award and, twice nominated, received Honorable Mention in The Best American Mystery Stories 2017.

A young writer from North Yorkshire, Emily Harrison has recently discovered that she actually likes creative writing, despite everything she may have previously said. She can be found on Twitter @emily\_\_harrison.

Juanita Tovar is an emerging creative nonfiction writer with only a small scattering of published pieces. She currently writes for Spoiled NYC and acts as the creative director of their art department. Juanita is a bisexual woman from Colombia and has lived in New York City since 2014.

A native Oklahoman, Ted Garvin lives in the Tulsa (Oklahoma) area. He has a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science from the College of Engineering, with minors History and Literature. He has a self-published novelette on Amazon.

Renée K. Reeves enjoys morbid history and bluegrass, ideally combined. She recently graduated from the University of New Mexico, where she studied museums, rocks, and Mars. Renée currently lives in Taipei, Taiwan, where she's learning Mandarin.

Arthur Mitchell has a recently completed novel – ‘A Grotto in the Sea.’ Poems set to music by various composers- Lyrics to third movement for voice -chamber symphony: Under a Winter Sky, music by the late Michael Moore; Nature Writing; Winterwolf Press; Lagan Online; Classical Poets Society. Remembered Arts Journal: Pushcart Nomination.

B.L. Daniels is a writer of horror and weird fiction. His short stories have been featured in Corner Bar Magazine, Helix Magazine, and various anthologies. He lives in New England with his wife, kids, and a couple of devious cats. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @bldauthor

Steven Joyce is an Associate Professor of German and comparative studies at the Ohio State University, Mansfield campus. He has published a book on G. B. Shaw entitled Transformations and Texts, poems in literary journals including Kimera and Red River Review and Minimus, an award-winning book of essays entitled The Winds of Ilion, a book of poetry, The Apostate Djinn, which was an Indie Book Award finalist.

Emalee Sickles is a soon-to-be high school graduate. She plans to go straight into the workforce. When not writing, she spends her time reading and watching television. She is currently editing her story Come Alive and working on smaller projects.

James Croal Jackson is the author of The Frayed Edge of Memory (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in Columbia Journal, Rattle, Hobart, Reservoir, and elsewhere. He edits The Mantle, a poetry journal, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. [Jimjakk.com](http://Jimjakk.com)

Cat Dixon is the author of EVA and TOO HEAVY TO CARRY (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2016, 2014) and her chapbook, THE BOOK OF LEVINSON, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2017. She has poems (co-written with Trent Walters) in They Said: A Multi-Genre Anthology of Contemporary Collaborative Writing (Black Lawrence Press, 2018).

Arthur Russell lives in Nutley New Jersey. His first chapbook, Unbent Trumpet, was published in 2017. You can buy a copy for \$5.00 (order via [arthur@attorneyrussell.com](mailto:arthur@attorneyrussell.com)). His poem “Burning Garbage” appeared in the October 2018 issue of Copper Nickel. That was a big deal.

Michael Lee Johnson lived 10 years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. Mr. Johnson published in more than 1042 new publications, his poems have appeared in 38 countries, he edits, publishes 10 poetry sites. He has been nominated for 2 Pushcart Prize awards poetry 2015/1 Best of the Net 2016/2 Best of the Net 2017/1 Best of the Net 2018.

Mark Tulin is a poet and short story writer from Santa Barbara, California. He's published in Friday Flash Fiction, Vita Brevis, [smokebox.net](http://smokebox.net), Page and Spine, Fiction on the Web, and others. His poetry chapbook is called, Magical Yogis, and his website is [Crow On The Wire](http://Crow On The Wire).

Linda Imbler is an internationally published poet. She has three published poetry collections. Her newest e-book "Pairings" is due out soon. She is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize nominee and is twice nominated for Best of the Net. Linda's poetry and a listing of publications can be found at [lindaspotryblog.blogspot.com](http://lindaspotryblog.blogspot.com).

Edward Lee's poetry, short stories, non-fiction and photography have been published in magazines in Ireland, England and America, including The Stinging Fly, Skylight 47, Acumen and Smiths Knoll. His debut poetry collection "Playing Poohsticks On Ha'Penny Bridge" was published in 2010. He is currently working towards a second collection.

He also makes musical noise under the names Ayahuasca Collective, Lewis Milne, Orson Carroll, Blinded Architect, Lego Figures Fighting, and Pale Blond Boy.

His Facebook page can be found at <https://m.facebook.com/edwardleewriter/?ref=bookmarks>

Gaynor Kane is a graduate of the Open University, with a BA (Hons) Humanities with Literature. She has had poetry published in the Community Arts Partnership's 'Poetry in Motion' anthologies Resonance and Matter and in various journals in the UK, Ireland and America. In 2016, Gaynor was a finalist in the annual Funeral Services NI poetry competition. In June 2017, she was appointed as a member of the Non-Executive Board of Women Aloud NI. She is working towards a first collection.

Jeffrey Zable's poetry, short fiction, and non-fiction has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies-- more recently in MockingHeart Review, Remington Review, Ink In Thirds, Third Wednesday, Awkward Mermaid, Soft Cartel, The Bitchin' Kitsch, Rosette Maleficarum and many others. In 2017 he was nominated for The Best of the Net and The Pushcart Prize.

Yuan Changming currently edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan in Vancouver; credits include ten Pushcart nominations, the Naji Naaman's Literary Prize 2018, Best of the Best Canadian Poetry, BestNewPoemsOnline, Threepenny Review and 1,469 others worldwide.

Lorraine Whelan is a Canadian writer and visual artist based in Ireland.

Giles Selig (a pseudonym) writes anonymously in Rhinebeck, NY. His short fiction and poetry have been chosen for various print and online outlets, including Chronogram, Foliate Oak, Light and Dark, Broke Bohemian, Penny Shorts, Flash Fiction Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review, Pilcrow & Dagger, Medium, Made-Up Words, Laughing Earth Lit, Henry, Edna, and more. He used to be an ad/communications guy.

Will Reger is a founding member of the CU (Champaign-Urbana) Poetry Group ([cupoetry.com](http://cupoetry.com)), has a Ph.D. from UIUC, teaches at Illinois State University in Normal, and has published most recently with Front Porch Review, Chiron Review, and the Paterson Literary Review. His first chapbook is *Cruel with Eagles*. He is found at <https://twitter.com/wmreger> -- or wandering in the woods playing his flute.

John L. Stanizzi's full length titles are *Ecstasy Among Ghosts*, *Sleepwalking*, *Dance Against the Wall*, *After the Bell*, *Hallelujah Time!*, *High Tide-Ebb Tide*. He's had poems in *Prairie Schooner*, *New York Quarterly*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Cortland Review*, *Rattle*, *Tar River*, and many others. Teaches at MCC, CT.

Michael Prihoda lives in central Indiana. He is the editor of *After the Pause*, an experimental literary magazine and small press. His work has received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Anthology and he is the author of eight poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Years Without Room* (Weasel Press, 2018).

Ken Allan Dronsfield is a disabled veteran, poet and fabulist originally from New Hampshire, now residing on the plains of Oklahoma. His work can be found in magazines, journals, reviews and anthologies. He has two poetry books, "The Cellaring" a collection of 80 poems of light horror, paranormal, weird and wonderful work. His newest book, "A Taint of Pity", *Life Poems Written with a Cracked Inflection*, was just released on Amazon.com. Ken's third poetry collection, "Zephyr's Whisper" should be released soon. He is a three time Pushcart Prize and twice Best of the Net Nominee for 2016-2017. Ken loves writing, thunderstorms, walking in the woods at night and spending time with his cats Willa and Yumpy.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in the *Homestead Review*, *Poetry East* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *Harpur Palate*, the *Hawaii Review* and *Visions International*.

Clark Zlotchew has had his poetry published in *Baily's Beads*, print & online literary magazine of U. of Pittsburgh, in *The Fictional Café*, in *Irisi Magazine* (U.K./Australia), in *Sick Lit Magazine*, in *Harbinger Asylum*, and in *Crossways Magazine: An Online Literary Magazine* (Ireland) from 2016 through 2018.