



October Hill
MAGAZINE



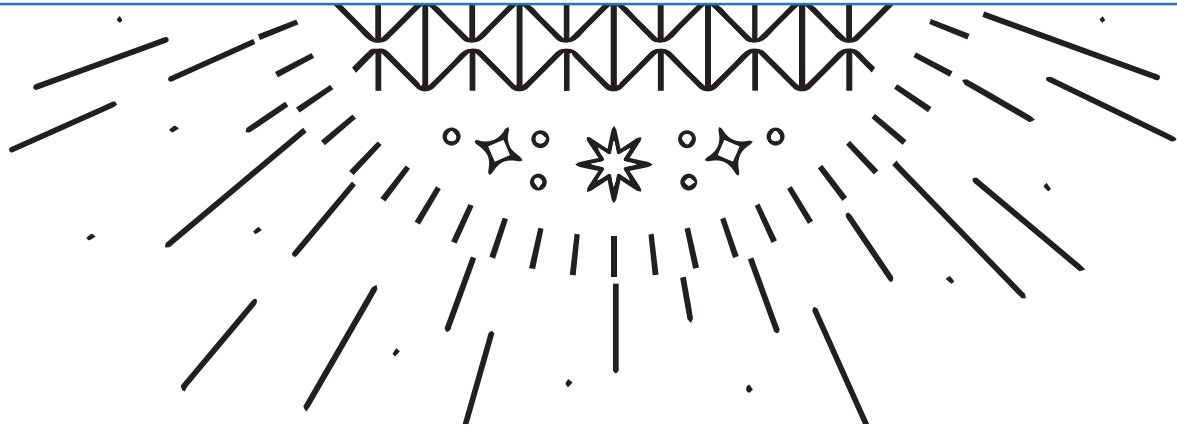
WINTER 2021 | VOLUME 5, ISSUE 4

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MAGAZINE



Volume 5, Issue 4



Remembering Lawrence Ferlinghetti

In a year of pandemic and widespread death, most people may have overlooked the death of one very remarkable man: Lawrence Ferlinghetti, nearly 102 years old, co-founder of City Lights Booksellers and Publishers in San Francisco, who was named Poet Laureate of San Francisco in 1998. Perhaps it is time someone paid tribute to the bard.

Ferlinghetti was perhaps best known for his second collection of poetry, titled “A Coney Island of the Mind,” one of the best-selling collections of all time, which sold well over one million copies.

Soon after launching City Lights Bookstore in 1951 with a partner, Peter Martin, with a total investment of \$500 each, Ferlinghetti found himself in major trouble. In 1955, he bought out Martin’s share of the business and established a publishing house, best known for launching the extremely popular Pocket Poets Series. The annual series included poets such as Kenneth Rexroth, Denise Levertov, William Carlos Williams, Yevgeni Yevtushenko, Frank O’Hara, Robert Bly, Jack Kerouac, and Vladimir Mayakovsky – a Who’s Who of accomplished and rising poets. “I had in mind to create an international, dissident, insurgent ferment,” said Ferlinghetti. He was soon arrested and charged with obscenity for publishing “Howl,” Allen Ginsberg’s landmark poem. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, Ferlinghetti was acquitted during the trial.

Ferlinghetti’s poetry was noteworthy for the visual quality of his words. It was often said that he painted with words and told his readers stories with pictures. The hardships of his early life often surfaced in his poetry. Shortly before birth, his father died suddenly of a heart attack; his mother was soon after committed to a mental hospital. He was reared at first by an aunt and uncle, and later by foster parents. Ferlinghetti somehow rose to the rank of Captain of a submarine in the U.S. Navy and participated in the invasion of Normandy.

Throughout a long career, Ferlinghetti won a National Book Critics Circle Award for his contribution to American arts and letters. In 2003, he was awarded the Poetry Society of America's Frost Medal. On his 100th birthday, the City of San Francisco decided to commemorate his birthday as "Lawrence Ferlinghetti Day."

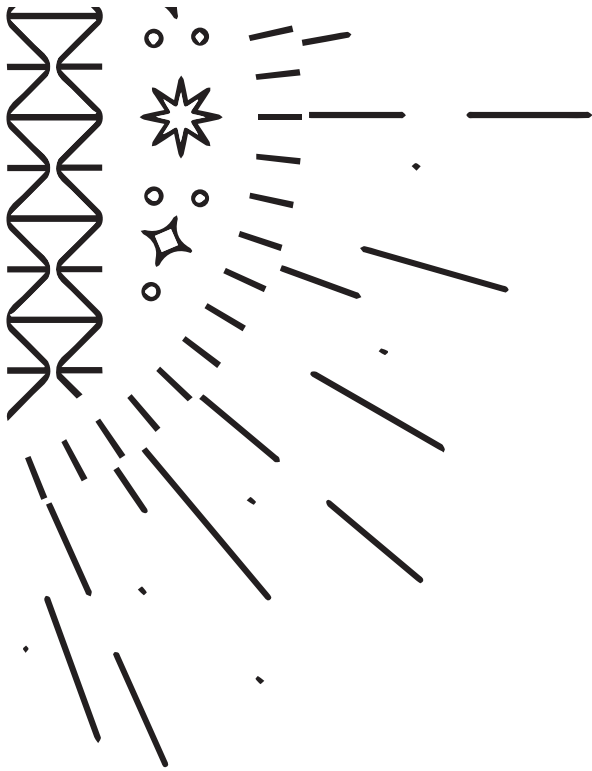
A self-styled anarchist in the post-war period, Ferlinghetti believed that "art should be accessible to all people, not just a handful of highly-educated intellectuals." His legacy bears that out. City Lights has published over 200 titles of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, and continues to introduce numerous new voices.

Ferlinghetti left behind a remarkable body of literary work but, more importantly, in his own populist, counter-cultural way, cleared a path for some of the best new talent in the world of poetry and literature. He believed in the noble ideal that publishing should be a field open to all talent. And that is something that we at October Hill Magazine – and many, many authors in the literary world – must embrace and celebrate.

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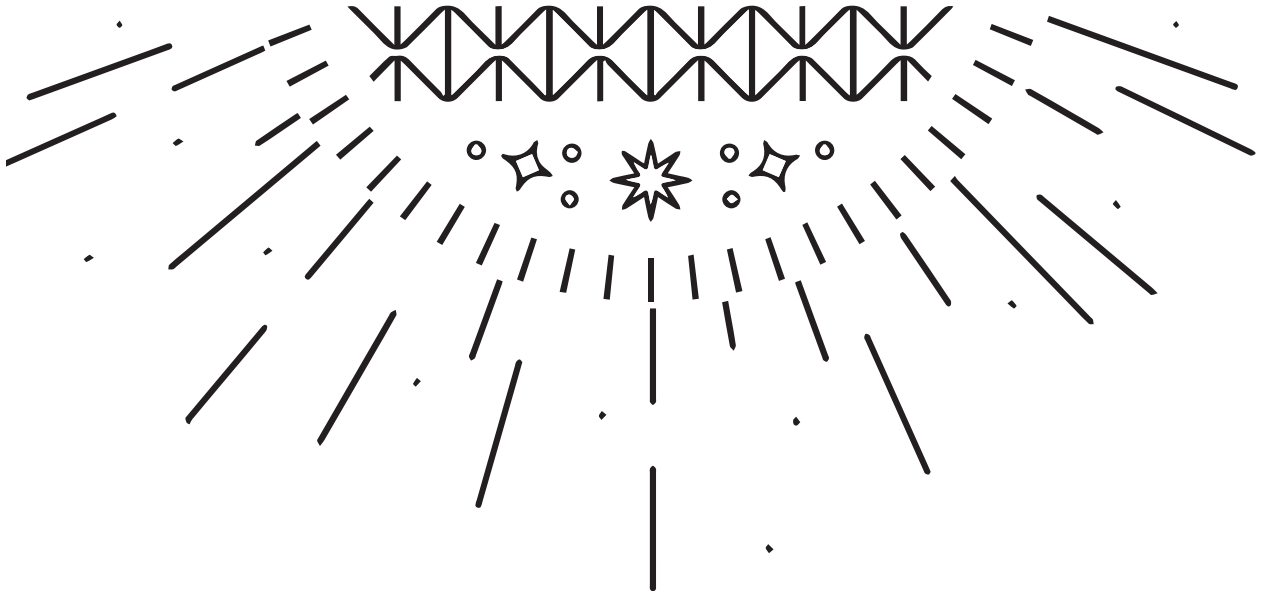
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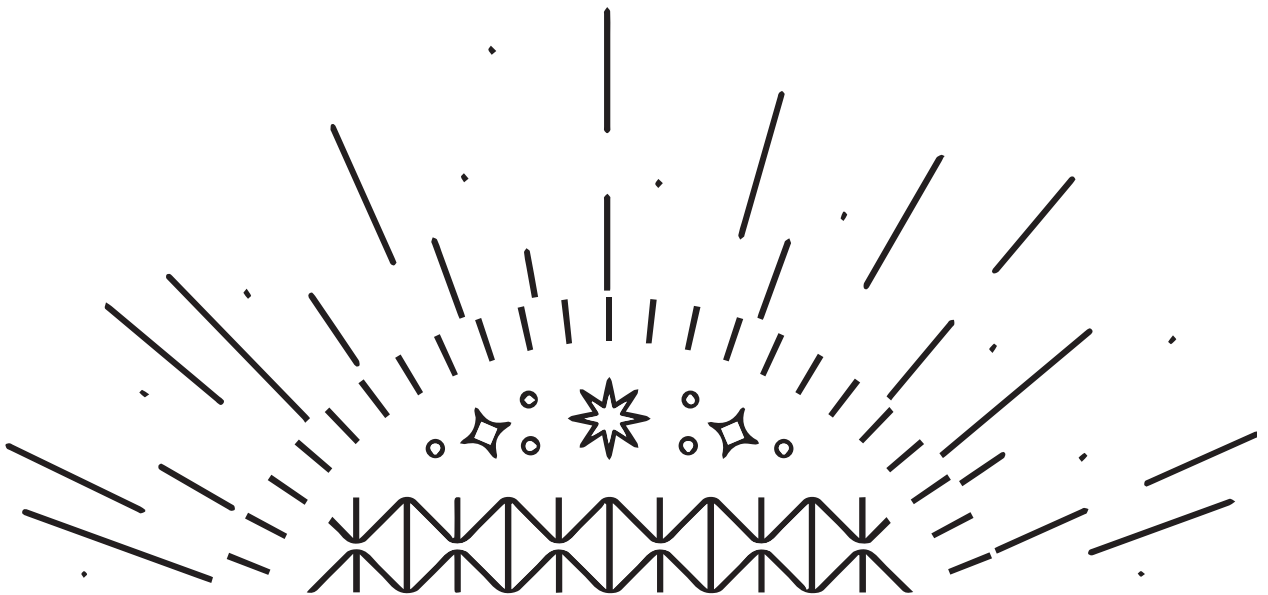
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Short Stories





Resilience - Mara Szyg is an established international Argentinean-Canadian artist. She is a double cancer survivor. Mara loves working with oils and acrylics on West Coast Seascapes & Abstracts She is a very intuitive artist and draws inspiration from nature all around her and the feelings brewing within herself and her undoubted sensitivity.

The Tourist

By: Marlon Bogart

Marlon Bogart is a Rutgers University student. He is under contract to publish his first full-length novel. He is also set to have a short story published in *The Adirondack Review* this fall.

I consider myself well traveled.

Have I told you about my amazing day? My friends and I went on a slew of journeys. I saw wild adventures and experienced exhilarating times that my grandkids will hear rehashed over and over and over again.

Through it all, I didn't say a word. I stayed silent while enjoying the world.

My first journey was with Clarissa. We travel together a lot. This time, we embarked on a hike; the summer sun was static in the Arizona sky. When our hike apexed, we found ourselves staring over the Grand Canyon, perched above a gulf of ancient rock, our feet inches from the ledge. We had a great view, Clarissa and I.

The hike was tiresome, to put it lightly. She brought a gallon of water, stopping intermittently to take swigs and wipe sweat from her face. After particularly arduous stretches—portions marred by steep inclines and uneven footing—she devolved to panting, crouching over her knees; collapsing completely, she sat on scorching rock. I stood from afar, watching her struggle, sympathetic but unable to relate. I didn't bring water. I wasn't even sweating—not one bead. I never lost my breath; I never needed a break. I'm in good shape. Regardless, I waited for Clarissa to recoup, and we continued our waltz to the top.

It was worth it. I stood behind as we gazed at the expanse. Not a soul in sight. Miles and miles of desert and steep ledges in the distance. Our only company were the occasional flocks dancing overhead. They'd fly to the distance and disappear from sight. A few times, we spotted a lone hawk—maybe a vulture—gliding across the sky.

And speaking of that sky—how amazing it was! No words can describe it. Any attempt to do so would be a disservice.

It looked like one of those generic computer wallpapers. Nothing moved. The clouds, thick and wide, were stagnant in the air. They didn't move an inch; they were glued firm to the sky. The scene's a painting, untethered to motion. An exception to dynamic, moving nature. It was a photo. It felt unjust to move—I didn't take a step; I didn't crane my neck. I stood still and paralyzed. To twitch would desecrate a long-standing portrait.

I didn't say a word to Clarissa. How could I? She didn't speak to me. She was enamored with the scene, too.

After a few minutes of gazing, during which Clarissa caught her breath, she turned around. She stared into my eyes with unregulated joy. That smile of hers—I'd seen it before, in front of the Big Ben and at the top of the Eiffel Tower—it was piercing: the way her dimples accentuated her face, and the buoyant sparkle in her eyes. Still, I didn't say a word. I couldn't.

Clarissa glared with nothing but that smile. A half minute later she turned back toward the expanse. The sweat dripped down her face. Her back was caked in it. That white shirt of hers was soaked. Despite her elation, I did feel bad—I wish she was as cool and dry as I was. There wasn't a lick of perspiration on me. I'm immune to the heat. I don't feel it at all.

Nature's wonder wore off. What remained was dull sadness. An unsatisfied craving for more. I'll never see anything like this! The beauty straight ahead did nothing to mollify my pain. But Clarissa enjoyed herself. Why can't I be happy for her? Am I selfish? I'm present; I'm here, and yet I'm disconnected. Clarissa

had a good time. Focus on that.

Without consulting me, Clarissa gathered her bag and water and began walking down the ledge. I followed, neither of us saying a word to the other. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence. No animosity in the air. To be honest, I don't think we thought anything of the silence. After all, neither of us could speak. Conversing was not an option.

I left the Canyon. Clarissa hung back. She'd be trapped there, for a brief moment in time, forever.

In an instant, I found myself lying in bed. To my left, a small fan, plugged in the wall, oscillates. It's winter; I don't need relief from the heat, but I like the fan's white noise. So I keep it on the lowest setting and let it hum, pointing the blades toward the wall so I don't get chilly. My hair's oily; I haven't showered in a couple days. That's fine. I don't get body odor or anything, so it's no tragedy if I skip bathing for a day or two.

My room's a mess. There are empty bags of chips on the floor and a bunch of barren water bottles on my desk. I've been meaning to throw them out. Next to the bottles is a stack of disheveled papers with scribbled math. Some are angrily crumpled from when I grew frustrated with trigonometry.

Dad keeps saying he'll replace my light fixture. It's flickering now as it always does. The room is dim. Maybe I should open my blinds, get some natural light. But I'm tired, too tired to leave bed. I didn't sleep until four a.m.

I'll lay right here. Nothing better to do. I've got a mild headache. Better pop an Advil, stay in bed, and enjoy this well-traveled life.

Where'd I go next on this amazing day?

Paulo's an acquaintance, not a close friend. His great-uncle, 86, died a week ago in his Northwest Brazil abode, so Paulo and I left the States for South America.

To be frank, Paulo wasn't close with his dead uncle. Not remotely. We were dragged to the funeral by his mother, but Paulo viewed it as a vacation. After the dull formality of a burial was complete, Paulo and I set off to the Amazon rainforest. Paulo's brother Joao came with us.

In perfect contrast to the Canyon, which I'd seen minutes before, the forest atmosphere is lush and wet. It's November 29th, 2019. The seasons are reversed in

the Southern Hemisphere—it's autumn in the States but spring in Brazil. As such, it was temperate out, the breeze relieving tropical humidity.

Again, I wasn't present. I didn't need relief from the humidity. I can't feel the weather.

I couldn't feel the heat at the Canyon, and I can't feel the breeze now. Something must be wrong. Am I in a vacuum? It feels like room temperature. It shouldn't.

Shake it off. Enjoy the scene.

Paulo led us down a narrow pathway. Greenery lining the sides, the path itself is trampled dirt with odd rocks strewn about. The sound of a million bugs in the distance, each individual chirp, meshed with a legion of others; they all blend together to form dull white noise in the distance.

At the end of the passage is an outlet filled with tall trees. Paulo turns to Joao and points at one of them. A rope ladder hangs from a platform midway up the tree. Extending like an umbilical cord is a zip line fitted with a harness. A man stands on the platform,

Paulo and Joao chat for a second and decide to try zip-lining. I try jumping in the conversation. I'm a pansy when it comes to heights. I definitely did not want to zip-line. Not in a million years. But I can't speak. My tongue's severed; my throat's clamped; the words won't come out. Tragic. I don't know why this is happening.

Paulo leads the way. Using a well-formed back, he climbs up the rope and struggles onto the platform. Joao is younger than Paulo, smaller and weaker. He labors up the latter, losing his footing twice, but manages it.

I acquiesce to peer pressure and climb up after Joao. I won't zip-line—I'll watch from the platform and act as moral support. The platform's cramped with all three of us and the guide.

Paulo gave the man three USD. He pocketed the money and fixed Paulo in the harness.

"Aperte o cinto. Segure firme. Polegar para cima e eu vou empurrar," he instructed Paulo.

I haven't a clue what that means. I don't speak Portuguese. Paulo's semi-fluent. He mentioned that one of the two times we spoke.

He gave the instructor a thumbs-up and flew down the line. Paulo screamed the whole way across and landed on a faraway platform; this distant platform also had a worker. He unbuckled Paulo from the harness.

My Brazilian friend was invigorated. I felt second-hand pleasure from his wonderful experience; part of me was jealous. Even if I could zip-line, I'd be too cowardly to do it. But I wish I had the option at least.

Joao got into a harness, and the guide buckled him.

“Você viu seu irmão. Faça o que ele fez,” the man instructed.

“Eu vou,” Joao replied timidly.

Off he went, just like Paulo. He screamed and laughed the way across. It's a beautiful sight. To live for a day, just a day.

The guide didn't address me. It was like I wasn't even there. In the distance, I see Paulo and Joao climb down the opposing rope ladder. I tried speaking to the guide. He can't hear me. My words fall on deaf ears.

Paulo and Joao, joyous, laughed and laughed as they walked away. Neither turned to acknowledge me. Defeated, I climbed down the rope ladder and made my way back alone.

I'm home again. Back in bed. It's four in the afternoon, and, besides my trip to the Canyon and my journey through Amazonian splendor, I haven't left my bed.

My dogs bark from below. Don't they consider my headache? Ungrateful mutts. With each yelp, my head thumps a bit harder. The air in my bedroom remains stale, and the afternoon sun is peeking through my blinds. The weak beams accelerate my worsening headache. I should get off my phone—staring at the screen is making things worse.

“Are you awake?” Mom yells from below.

“Yes, I'm awake,” I yell back.

“Just checking.”

She departs.

I forgot to brush my teeth last night, made clear by my musty breath and tender teeth. My phone's about to die—I've been on it all day, it seems. Christ, I need to get up. What am I doing? I've got nothing to show

for this day.

A fire truck's siren blares outside. The world's conspiring to worsen my migraine. Each squeal of the truck sticks a needle in my temple.

Okay. Time to start my day. I sit on the side of my bed, feet dangling, and stretch my torso. A few of my joints crack. My phone's on the bed, tempting me. I submit to it. One more journey before I start my day. One more—that's it.

I left for a Christmas party. It's 11 p.m., December 22nd, 2019. Thomas, one of the affluent seniors at Springfield High, is throwing a party for the whole grade. Most of the grade. Everyone was invited except a select few losers.

I wasn't invited—I'm sure that was a mistake—yet I saw everything.

Thomas' house is decorated with colorful Christmas lights, green reefs, and candy canes. The chandelier is off so the Christmas lights can shine superbly. It's a cozy affair.

Holiday hits play in the background. First up is Elvis' “Blue Christmas.” Then “Baby It's Cold Outside”—very mellow. Sedating music perfect for the holidays. “Let It Snow” plays next.

The song came on at a perfect time. A herd of people walk to the sliding glass door and peer outside. I tried walking over myself, but people bumped into me like I wasn't even there. I stood behind the crowd on tippy toes to catch a glimpse.

Through the glass door, we saw a gentle snow come down in wintry air. The black of night is dashed with flakes of pure white. We see the snow hit the ground, a thin layer piling under porch lights.

Thomas stood next to me.

“A Christmas miracle,” he cackles. He stares toward the crowd. I turned to him.

“Sure is. This is a great party,” I complimented. He didn't hear me. Or, he did but opted not to respond—or acknowledge.

Whatever. The crowd by the glass dissipated.

There's a folding table propped in Thomas' living room. On it is a punch bowl. It's filled with eggnog

spiked with who-knows-what. Vodka. Or gin.

I see Mandy. I've known her since elementary. We used to be close, but our relationship has severed since high school started. I want to rekindle our friendship and earn her affections.

She's holding a cup of eggnog. Alone, she leans against the wall and gazes through a window, watching the snow with a sedated grin.

I make my way through the crowd, unnoticed, and stand by her.

"Mandy—how are you? The snow's wonderful, isn't it?" I asked in succession.

She didn't bat an eye. I'm a ghost: unseen, unheard, unnoticed.

"Mandy, it's me," I pleaded. "Please talk to me."

Nothing. Her lazy grin remained. She was enamored with the snowfall, unwilling to acknowledge my existence.

Thomas walked to us. He pushed me to the side without apology and talked to Mandy. I stumbled back and watched the two interact, intrigued. I hate Thomas. He's arrogant. He's malicious, a bully. The sweet Mandy I know wouldn't entertain him.

"Why are you alone?" Thomas asked. She turned and fluttered her lashes.

"I can't enjoy the snow?"

I'm an apparition. I'm embroiled in the scene, at the center of it, but I'm nothing. Nobody knows I'm here. Nobody considers me. I might as well be a dining table. Centerfold but not sentient. Inanimate.

Mandy smiled.

"Want more eggnog?" Thomas smiled back. "Happy to fill your cup."

"Sure."

The host took her cup and passed through me en route to the punch bowl. He filled it and passed through me again to Mandy.

"There you go," he said while putting the cup in her hand. "I know the music's corny, but Rebecca

demanded it."

"I don't think it's corny."

I wanted to intercede. With quick steps, I nudge between the two.

By some act of God, they don't notice me. I'm between them, made of flesh, breathing on Thomas' chest, and I'm unnoticed.

Am I alive or a ghost?

A sudden blackness enveloped all; the floor, lights, reefs, and partygoers are devoured by a void that swallows all in existence.

My journey ended when my phone died. I was looking through Thomas Graham's social media. That post from his Christmas party was nice.

I wish I was invited.

A horsefly flew above me. I'm lying in bed in pajamas that have been unwashed for weeks. I plugged in my phone and rose to my feet. First order of business is brushing my teeth.

I wish I saw the Canyon as Clarissa did; I wish I went to the Amazon like Paulo. And if only Thomas invited me.

Things could be worse. I haven't left bed today, but I've gone on several journeys. Isn't that worth celebrating?

The dogs are barking again. I swallow an Advil and turn on the television. Until my phone charges, I'll have to watch TV. Oh well.

I wipe the crust from my eyes and flip on a cartoon. There's a bowl of chips out from yesterday. I eat one—semi-stale. I eat the rest. All is well.

What can I say? I'm well traveled.



The Pottery Teacher

By: Danis Banks

Danis Banks has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Montana and teaches Writing at New York University. She has published previously in *October Hill Magazine*.

At boarding school, I rowed crew. Second boat, bow seat. The coach often said that I helped steer the expensive, insect-like vessel, perhaps to compensate for my undistinguished position in the lesser boat, an octet of the comparatively overweight, nearsighted, and not-tall. A very hierarchical sport, crew, in spite of its reliance on teamwork. Unlike some of my friends, I was never referred to as “a natural” on the water. The raw, red blisters on my palms didn’t heal as quickly as the other girls’ did, and, early in my first season, I strained a back muscle, probably from pulling the oar incorrectly or just being physically underdeveloped, as I’d not been very athletic prior to boarding school, where it seemed that everyone had been on skis or maneuvering a ball up a field since infancy. The back injury required missing weeks of practice, and, instead of jogging to the boathouse with the rest of the team, I was told to ride a stationary bike, alone, in the spooky old gym next to the newer one that housed the locker rooms, basketball court, and pool. The rickety exercise bike sat on a platform beside the warped elevated indoor track on the second floor, and, from there, I’d look down to homoerotic wrestling practice happening on the blue mats below, the boys grunting and scrambling into and out of my field of vision as their coach’s shrill whistle punctuated my breathing and my pedals spun a whirring sound of defeat.

The crew coach was also my history teacher, and her boyfriend taught ceramics at the school. Faculty often dated each other because who else could they spend time with but students? The coach, Carrie, was around 40, and her boyfriend, Matt, seemed younger, maybe 35. I was 15. Matt had a successful pottery career beyond the school, and his name was so well known in the crafts circuit—a viable industry in New England, with its outdoor trade fairs and touristic boutiques selling blown glass and

handmade candles—that even my mother’s friends had heard of him. His and Carrie’s house had a kiln in the basement and a sign on their front yard that advertised his studio, both of which contributed to my impression that Matt saw teaching as a side project—very aside. I hadn’t received any of his instruction in throwing pots, but I could tell that he’d never view class as something so conventional as a “class.” Surely lesson-planning was beneath his heightened levels of artistry. I imagined Matt’s pottery workshop as a chance for stoned students to experiment with soft, mushy mud-like matter in their forays into bong- and ashtray-creation while Grateful Dead bootlegs (it was the late 1980s) tinkled from a clay-smear tape deck in a corner of the studio. A sensory experience, which, one could argue, is always educational.

Most of my friends rowed, and they all sort of idolized Carrie, crew being cultish and self-important. Mediocre at it, I didn’t need to fixate as much on her opinion of me: I knew where I stood, which was barely on the team. Still, we discussed Carrie and Matt as often as we did our peers, because they were interesting, we thought. They were adults. Their small house, on a dirt road that bordered the school grounds, had sloped oaken floors, crochet oval rugs, wood stoves, and an earthy vegetarian-cooking smell that lingered. Although they lived off-campus, they were considered faculty of our co-ed dorm, a beige-brick monolith abutting acres of state land that had a network of trails where students would go to smoke pot, or, less rebelliously, to run, because the pine needles made a soft landing, as did the snow that, shaded by evergreens, took longer to melt than elsewhere. Matt and Carrie often ate with us in our dorm’s high-ceilinged dining hall, beneath its walls of multi-ply-paned windows whose surreally long curtains were a shade of electric blue that brought

to mind polyester bell-bottoms and late 1970s eye shadow at the roller disco. Or they sat with us in the central lobby, on the musty overstuffed furniture near the gaping fireplace that no longer functioned but still evoked scenes of dorm life a century ago: I could easily imagine red-cheeked boys gathered by the flaming mouth of the thing, caroling, or propping their snowshoes against the wall to dry, or joking in some corny, dated way that, if I heard them now, would embarrass me. They'd have names like Jedediah or Abraham, wear knickers, knee-high wool socks, and suspenders, and study Latin, not as an elective but as a requirement.

Much had changed since then.

Allegedly, Matt sold pot to students. People also said—in knowing whispers, adjoined by the pointless and self-contradictory “don't tell anyone”—that he had slept with a few of the older girls. They happened to be very good looking, which let Matt seem more attractive but only in the abstract. For the most part, we found him reckless and ethically unsound—which further enhanced his allure, albeit perversely. The first rumor I believed due to the skunk-like strain of what I assumed was home-grown pot that pungently clung to Matt's skin, hair, and clothes. Plus, I'd often noticed him skulking the boys' and girls' halves of my dorm with the helpful yet conflicted air of having just delivered an ounce. But I dismissed the possibility of his affairs with students because of the risk involved. I also wanted the rumor to be untrue. Instead, I wanted to like him.

Fortunately, his appearance rendered the supposed conquests improbable. He seemed to cultivate extreme sloppiness, as if deliberately defying the notion that looks mattered. This thwarting of convention might've been part of his bohemianism, his politics, or his attempt to dispel the gossip about his purported seductions. Certainly the sight of the pale hairy man, so skinny and slouching as to seem scooped out, did not suggest Casanova. His dirty corduroys, duck boots, and plaid flannel shirts—inoffensive on their own—when combined with the drooping walrus mustache, unkempt graying sideburns, long scraggly ponytail, and little round eyeglasses whose thick lenses were perpetually finger-smudged and food-speckled, led to a woodsy, warlock aesthetic that, being vaguely mushroomy and troll-like, would only captivate the most dedicated hippies. He drove a rumbling, dented pickup that had filigreed rust above the tires and two pretty but obtuse-seeming Weimaraners standing in the truck bed, their floppy, tongue-like ears blown

back and their noses twitching in the wind as they shakily balanced among a spare tire, metal shovel, folded blue tarp, and uncoiled hemp rope. His clothes almost always bore dog saliva, either dried and shiny as a slug's trail, or fresh and spreading like a wet badge. As much as Matt seemed unable to prevent dishevelment, his physical disorder—from the grime under his nails to the duct tape-patched holes in his down vest—struck me as contrived, as if he were well aware of the repulsive's paradoxical appeal. Mostly, I thought of him as penile: strange-looking, bordering on the grotesque, with an erotic function.

Matt's libidinal charm, such as it was, included a repertoire of sex jokes and lewd remarks. My friends and I described him as “gross but funny” and saw his depravity-shtick as entertainment. A precedent had been set that he would shock, disgust, or at least annoy, and he may have felt perpetually obligated to offend his audience of, most frequently, a clutch of teenage girls. If he failed to meet our expectations of randy humor, he'd feel dull, or, even worse, dead. These are only my assumptions based on how consistently he played the boor, the lech, and the rake. I've since known other men who win admirers through caddish vulgarity, but if hypermasculinity is objectively unpleasant, anyone who prefers it must have a repetition compulsion.

Whatever the reasons for our acceptance of—and sometimes pleasure in—Matt's crudeness, they don't explain why an expensive boarding school that had a certain amount of prestige kept him on the faculty and even gave him a renewable contract. Admittedly, mine was not a fussy institution with a dress code and impressive rates of admission to Yale. It was, rather, more a precursor to the University of Vermont. Alligator logos and stitched poloists were not typically on display. Instead, tie-dyes were common, and a few boys wore skirts to Ultimate Frisbee or African Dance. Students often left for a month of rehab, did schoolwork while there, and managed to finish the semester on time. Even I, a studious sophomore, had hosted pot parties in my room, wedging one rolled towel at the base of the door and using another for our exhalations, which left coin-sized brown stains on the fabric. At the town's sole convenience store, I'd purchased jugs of vodka and gin with my older sister's expired driver's license, yet I barely resembled her and could've been 17 at the most. (In that bleak part of Western Massachusetts, the shop owners must've needed the business.) After smuggling the liquor into the dorm, we would sit on the floor of someone's room and drink from the bottle, not knowing better, with group

vomiting and blackouts to follow. The Grateful Dead played from speakers in dorm windows more than any other band, with people spinning on the campus' vast lawn, their sheer fabrics aflutter, or studying outside to the repetitive auditory mishmash. Some of the Dead's especially twee lyrics—"That's right, the women are smarter"; "Nothing left to do but smile, smile, smile"—had been painted on the cinderblock walls of the smoker, a foul-smelling hovel in the basement that had an inch of cigarette butts on the floor and one high window, dungeon-like. Students were permitted to visit the opposite sex's side of the building at certain hours, but we went back and forth when we wanted to, the faculty consistently blind-eyed to what was aptly known as cruising.

One night at dinner, my friends and I sat at Matt and Carrie's table, flirting at the usual level of inappropriateness: enough for him to get fired but not arrested. He asked how we felt about masturbation, and Carrie wore an impassive look, as though gazing into the middle distance might precipitate a change of subject. When that line of questioning failed to prompt much dialogue, he asked whether we'd ever seen porn. Did we know what a "money shot" was? How about a "fluffer"? He explained the terms, we blushed, and, in the silence that ensued, Carrie mentioned an upcoming race against Exeter. Matt's leg pressed mine, and I let the contact continue because it seemed harmless—or I was flattered and thought: He likes me best.

After study hall, I took the central winding staircase to my room and, on the landing of the floor below mine, glanced down the corridor to see Matt on the girls' side. Probably doing a delivery, or visiting a senior, many of whom he was friendly with. Heading to the bathroom later, I spotted him in my hall, and we waved. No one roaming in their pajamas seemed to find Matt's presence bizarre: He and Carrie had dorm duty that night, and part of the routine involved ensuring that all the students were in the building by 10:30. Typically, Carrie checked the girls' side, and Matt signed off on the boys, but maybe Carrie wanted to speak with a particular male student—she sometimes gave impromptu progress reports to people who took her history class, or a study session might spontaneously form around her.

My roommate was in the brightly lit basement lounge, doing homework on the orange modular furniture down there, and I lay in bed, reading for Carrie's class. I heard a quick knock at the same moment that Matt slipped into the room. He looked bizarre standing between the mandala tapestry that

my roommate and I had cut down the middle to hang over our doorless closets that flanked the entrance. The pink swirling design usually served as a backdrop for a teenage girl asking to borrow something: a textbook, some coveted article of clothing, one of my roommate's cigarettes.

Matt sat beside me on the bed, the mattress buckling under his weight, and I inched higher against my pillows to await whatever important news he'd come to deliver, because why else be in my room? He'd never visited me here before, and, while his sitting on my bed was confusing, even troubling, I also felt honored: The only girls I'd heard of him going to see were older ones whose names I'd learned my first day at the school but who still seemed oblivious of mine.

Matt draped himself over my bent legs, and I leaned them toward the wall, as far from him as possible. A thigh pressing mine at the dinner table was one thing, but surely he recognized the weirdness of laying his torso across my shins. He removed the Howard Zinn book from my hands, folded it shut, and set it on the desk. It seemed fitting that he prevent me from doing a task that Carrie had assigned: I'd lately found it difficult to feel loyal to both of them at the same time.

"Why are you here?" I said. As if in response, he grabbed my shoulders, and his clutch felt fervent, his palms hot. This direct show of emotion was atypical, as Matt was more inclined toward slouching innuendo and double entendre. I awaited the terrible information he would no doubt soon convey, news of a fire in the building or the death of somebody's parent—the mother of a girl on my hall had died the previous month, and several of us still discussed it with chastened awe.

Reflected in his eyeglasses, my nose appeared extra-wide, and my eyes were very far apart, like a fish's. The convex distortion would be comic if not for my mouth having formed an oval of fear. Matt brought his face so close that I could smell his mustache's unwashed saltiness. His teeth had a thick mortar of plaque or tartar or something, and vertical brown streaks, no doubt from marijuana. I dodged this wet cavern and began kicking as though he were an enormous hairy spider.

He stood and, staring down at me, made a "tsk" sound, of disgust or offense. He seemed about to spit or start crying: His mouth was working, cheeks twitching. Then he rushed out as if to erase what had

just happened. I was slightly unsure myself whether the incident had occurred until I sniffed the part of my pajamas he'd touched and detected a clayey mustiness, as well as the acrid tinge of marijuana.



At breakfast the next morning, my friends just laughed, as if the encounter should be forgotten as quickly as possible. He was like that, they said. It didn't have to mean anything—with Matt, nothing did. "I wouldn't go around talking about it," said a blonde girl (first boat, starboard) who was dominant among us. "People love Matt and Carrie. You don't want to mess things up for yourself."

I followed her suggestion and tried to pretend that my feelings about Matt hadn't changed, but, over the next few weeks, I found that I couldn't look at him. I was afraid he'd slowly mouth an upsetting word at me when no one else saw: *bitch*, *cunt*. Or, from across a room, form a "V" with his fingers and wiggle his tongue through the opening, as he'd done in more convivial circumstances—and at which I had smiled, knowing that was expected. In my peripheral vision, he became a dark-haired, bespectacled, plaid-flannel-wearing object to avoid rather than an actual person. He was like a semaphore crossing the green or a buoy to navigate around in the dining hall. I began sitting with the theater crowd at dinner on the opposite side of the room from Matt and Carrie's table. My friends didn't seem to mind: I was with them all the time anyway, so what were a few meals apart? Some nights, I ate with that mini-clique of a boy and two girls who had the same short asymmetrical haircut, were on the fencing team, and may've been gay. They were a strenuously humorous trio and would speak out the side of their mouth with wry disdain toward practically everything: "It's fish sticks again," smirking at whomever might care about such trivialities. "How was *crew*?" they'd ask and eye me obliquely. "*Great*," I'd answer, glad to parody the notion of boats, a coach, teammates, oars, and the river. At first, I'd thought such low-grade perpetual irony had to be exhausting, or at least burdensomely negative, but soon our smugness became a balm, the levity a relief.

School ended a few months later, and I spent part of the summer with my father in Brooklyn, where he was living at the time. Toward the end of my visit, we had dinner in a Mexican restaurant near his apartment, and I was allowed a frozen margarita. He permitted me one drink per night because he thought that people my age should learn to "demythologize"

and "demythify" alcohol: "It's got to be a normal, ordinary thing, not some hysterical bacchanal." That spring, though, I'd drunk almost every weekend at school, where alcohol use was both normal and hysterical—at the same party, for the same person, during the same binge.

Over the surrounding din of margarita-fueled adults, and with the cactus-like smell of tequila pulsing from my skin, I asked if teachers and students ever had relationships at the university where he taught. "Why?" said my father, his brow slightly combative, his wandering eye fiercely on track.

"Because at my school, that sometimes happens."

He winced and seemed braced. "What do you mean by 'relationships'?"

"Sex," I said.

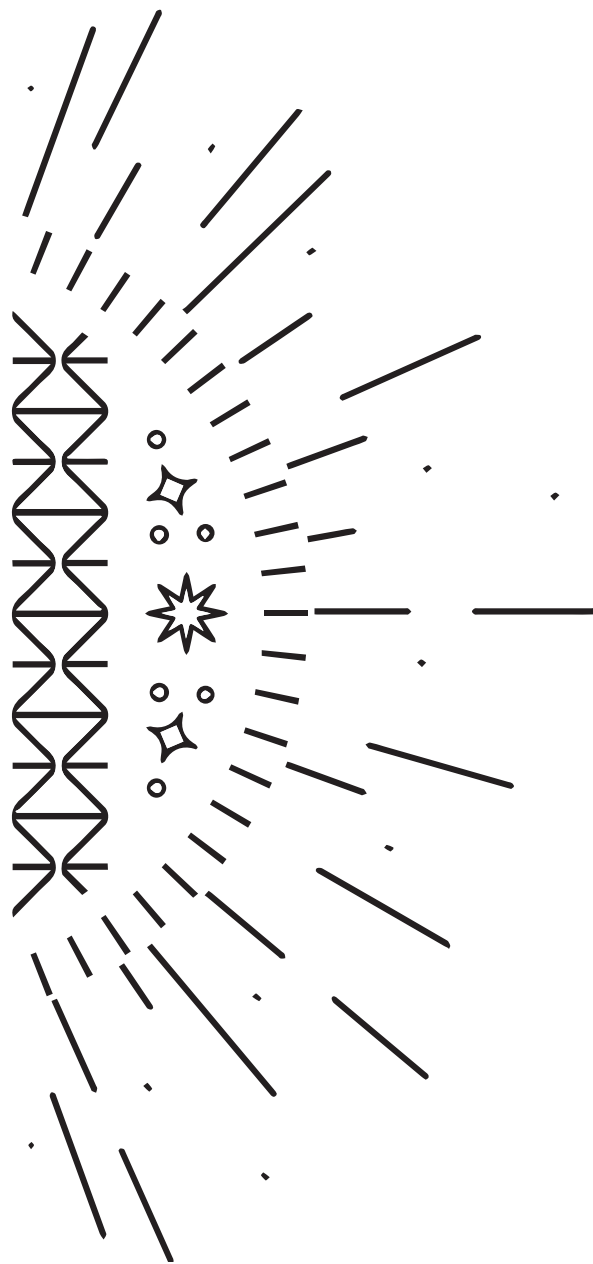
"Did a teacher try that with you?"

"I fended him off." Surely I should receive some praise for this, but the face across from me tightened, and his lips pressed into a bloodless line. The tensely displeased look made me feel young and foolish, and reminded me of something.

Years ago, when he still lived with us in rural New England, my sister and I kept pet rabbits in a cage in the barn. I'd gone out to feed them before school, which was one of our "chores" meant to foster discipline and prevent us from turning into layabouts like our mother (as my father had put it). The wire door of the cage had gaped, and the rabbits lay strewn. I'd assumed that local kids had done this as vandalism against our family, which had assimilated to small-town life not without difficulty. But the rabbit that limply sprawled on my sister's skateboard had seemed broken as if from the bites of a larger animal. My father's expression across from me now was identical to the way he'd looked when we'd told him about our pets, as if my sister and I were to blame for their deaths. That same stern bitter face returned each time he brought his rifle into the garden so he could "deal with" whatever had been eating the tomatoes and corn. Lately, he lived in an apartment building—no barn nor garden—and I sometimes wondered if he missed those country problems or was fully content to have replaced them with the urban annoyances of alternate-side parking and early-morning car alarms. "I'll call the headmaster tomorrow," he said.

I peered into the bottom of my glass and poked at the greenish frozen margarita clumps that had previously eluded my straw. Carrie would kick me off the crew team, of course. She could base her decision on my performance in races and at practice: I was one of the disposable rowers whose seat would be better used by a strong incoming freshman who'd grown up sailing in Maine. Spurned by my friends, I might get to know the Goth smokers and long-skirted Wicca girls, the pale Dungeons and Dragons-fanatics with whom I'd never had a conversation. My father must've sensed these fears because he said that he wouldn't mention my name. Skeptically, I tried to believe him.

In September, I learned that Matt had been fired over the summer. People said that he wasn't even allowed within a one-mile radius of campus. This didn't reassure me. He could use binoculars to spy from further away than a mile. He might wait in the woods when I ran. We could encounter each other at the one diner in town, which friends and I sometimes rode our bikes to for breakfast on weekends. I called my father to let him know that Matt had been fired, and he said that he wasn't surprised: The headmaster had told him that several parents had contacted the school. But my father thought he'd made a convincing case on his own.





Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, and *The Phoenix*. Edward is also a published poet.

What Do You Do?

By: Ivanka Fear

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear in numerous publications, including *The Sirens Call*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Mystery Tribune*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Close to the Bone*, and elsewhere. The debut novel of her mystery series is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in January 2023.

“So, what do you do?”

The question hangs in the air for a moment as I consider how to answer. Should I tell him what I used to do?

“I’m a poet.” I start with the truth and see where it leads. His response doesn’t surprise me. From my first impression ten minutes ago, I knew this wasn’t going to work out.

“No, really, what do you do? For a living?” The raised eyebrows above his steel-gray eyes and the upturned corners of his mouth make me regret my answer.

Nothing. I do nothing important. When did a poet ever contribute anything to society? Is that even a job?

“I used to teach. I’m retired.” *Those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach.*

“Now, there’s an honorable profession. High school?” He leans back as one of my former students, Pam, hoping to earn enough for college next year, sets mixed greens in front of me. Not that I’m fooling him with my healthy choice. Anyone can tell by looking at me that, in private, I opt for chocolate more often than vegetables.

“No, primary.” I smile at Pam as she serves his calamari. “I loved teaching.”

“Little kids? You must have a lot of patience.”

I assume that’s meant as a compliment and accept it with a smile. This is the way the conversation usually goes. To be polite, I ask what he does.

“I work for a large accounting firm, crunching numbers.”

Great. Numbers in a suit.

“That must be”—*boring, tedious, uninspiring*—“interesting work.”

He laughs, a spark in his eyes, as he leans forward. “Actually, it’s boring as hell, but it pays the bills.”

From the way he dresses, his choice of restaurant, and not to mention the car he drives, I’d say it does more than that. I guess rich people need accountants to tinker with numbers to make them look less rich at tax time. But having never earned enough to warrant needing an accountant, I can’t say that with any certainty.

I shovel salad into my mouth in an attempt to avoid further awkward conversation. I’ve already decided this first date, like the others, won’t lead to a second. Just another guy looking for a good time. Nothing will come of this.

My married friends and relatives, although well-meaning, won’t give up despite their failed attempts to partner me up. People are uncomfortable with unmatched halves of a pair. You’d think a spinster on the other side of 50 would be exempt from setups. I’ve tried to assure them that just because I’m alone doesn’t mean I’m lonely.

Who am I kidding?

“So, what do you do for fun?” he tries again, setting his fork down.

Salad dressing dribbles down my chin as I forget to

swallow before speaking. Dabbing at my mouth with a napkin, I strain to come up with an answer.

Nothing. That's what I do for fun.

"I like to read." As dazzling as my conversational skills are, he looks at me expectantly, as though I'm in the middle of a sentence. "And I like to go to the beach. How about you?"

"I love the beach. Cuba, Florida, Cancun, and Côte d'Azur, of course. And Majorca's one of my favorites. But the beaches in Crete...just gorgeous. Have you been?"

Hasn't everyone? I do an internal eye roll. Most days I'm lucky to travel around the block once.

His face is animated as he speaks about the beach: snorkeling, sailing, and windsurfing. Judging from his body, I'd say he's into "active" activities, unlike myself. Short brown hair graying at the temples, dimples when he smiles, full lips, a defined jaw, and a five o'clock shadow—he's not quite as attractive as the guys in the various TV series I binge-watch, but he's not hard on the eyes by any means. Not that it should matter what he looks like. I'm not exactly remarkable in that area myself.

He segues into the topic of trips in general. "What's your favorite destination?" His eyes lock on mine. I realize it's time for me to contribute to the discussion.

"Lake Huron."

His eyebrows fly up again. "Oh. You swim? Boat?"

"No boating. Some swimming." I'm terrified of the water. I dip my toes into the water along the shore, sit on the sand with my nose in a book.

Pam brings our main course, rescuing me from elaboration. Lobster and steak for him, chicken breast for me. I dig in, my knife slicing the tender meat and bringing it to my mouth. My eyes can't help but go to his hands: strong and confident as he squeezes and cracks the lobster to extract the edible parts. I try not to stare, pretending I'm familiar with lobster. He manages it well, an obvious connoisseur of seafood.

Gross. I'm not a fan of fish.

He drums his fingers on the table, the first sign of nervousness he's exhibited, then stops himself. "How about family? Ever been married? Any kids?"

"No. Just me."

"I was married. Divorced the last five years. Two grown kids." He regales me with anecdotes about his kids, but only for a few minutes, as I move my fork around my vegetable medley, shoving the pearl onions to the side. I would have preferred fries. "Anyone important in your life?"

Parents gone, no siblings...that leaves me. "Sure. My aunts, uncles, cousins, friends."

The way he tilts his head and leans forward tells me he's looking for a more personal answer. "What about relationships? Has there been anyone special?"

Anyone? No one.

"Not really."

The next ten minutes go by in agonizing silence as we concentrate on finishing our meal and getting out, him back to his numbers, and me back to my poems. He's given up conversing, which is just as well. We have nothing to talk about.

I excuse myself to use the ladies' room and take my time wandering through the restaurant. Hopefully he'll have paid the bill by the time I return, and we can get on with our separate lives. Or maybe he'll want to split the bill. Might be just as well—no expectations that way.

Pam winks as I make my way past the kitchen doors. "He's nice, Miss Rada." All I can do is smile and nod. He is nice. Just not my type. No one is.

Back at the table, he stands as I approach and pulls my chair out for me. "I hope you don't mind, or think I'm being presumptuous, but I took the liberty of ordering dessert."

Not just any dessert. My favorite. Chocolate cheesecake. I furrow my eyebrows together, the creases between my eyes no doubt deepening, as if I need any more wrinkles, and open my mouth.

He speaks before I can think of anything to say. "Pam. I asked her. She said she remembered you like chocolate. The cheesecake was my idea. It's my favorite."

We do have *something* in common. But is it enough? Is a relationship built on cheesecake alone sustainable?

I pick up my dessert fork and let the chocolatey

cream cheese melt onto my tongue. “Thank you. It’s delicious.”

The sheepish grin on his face touches something inside me. Perhaps he has some redeeming qualities. “I noticed you didn’t exactly relish your veggies. So I thought we should top them off with something sweet.”

The way to a woman’s heart is through her sweet tooth. The drawbridge lowers over the moat.

“So, poetry, huh?” He catches me off guard, my mouth full of chocolate, with another forkful on its way. “What kind of poetry do you write? Have you published any of your work?”

I remember to wait until my mouth is empty before opening it. “Yes, actually. I’ve had lots of my poems published. Stories, too.” And I tell him about the numerous journals and magazines my work has appeared in. Not that I’m bragging, but he did ask.

Much to my surprise, he doesn’t doze off.

“Wow, a published author. I can’t say I’m into poetry myself, but I like to read. Where can I find some of your stories?” He leans in. His hand caresses my cheek; his eyes twinkle; and one corner of his mouth turns up. “Sorry, it’s just that you’ve got a big glob of chocolate on your cheek.”

I should be embarrassed. But I like the feel of his hand on my face, the curiosity of his eyes taking me in, and the warmth of his smile. I should cut my losses and leave the rest of the cheesecake, excuse myself, and make as graceful an exit as possible under the circumstances. Instead, I laugh. And bite off some more chocolate bliss.

“I have a website. You can read my work there.” Just like that, I give him access to my most private thoughts. Not that they’re private online. It’s just that sharing them with my “date” seems like I’m making a commitment to this relationship.

Which I’m not.

“Great. I’ll look you up.”

Sure you will.

“I’ve written a novel, too. Not published yet, of course.” *Why don’t I just shut up? What the hell does he care what I’ve written?*

“So I’m having dinner with a future best-selling author?”

Yeah. Definitely.

“Not too likely. It’s really tough breaking into the publishing business.” *But I can dream.*

“Who knows, maybe someday you’ll be a rich and famous writer. And I’ll tell people that I knew you before all the glory.”

As though money and fame are the definitive measures of a great writer.

I can’t tell if he’s poking fun at me, or if he’s genuinely interested in my craft. *Hobby? Pastime? Leisure activity? Personal obsession? It’s not a job. Not a career. Not a vocation. Is it?*

It doesn’t pay. It doesn’t save lives. It doesn’t save people money. And it certainly doesn’t contribute anything to society and the world in general.

“Well, it’s just a hobby. Keeps me busy.” Maybe it’s the two glasses of white wine I consumed with my meal, but the heat rises up my neck to my face. I’ve exposed myself.

It doesn’t matter. I’ll never see him again. We have nothing in common.



Two days later, my phone rings. It’s not the usual telemarketer call.

“Hi. It’s Vance.”

Vance?

“I was wondering if you wanted to see a movie.” His voice is casual, like we’re old friends.

Vance. The accountant Vance. A second date.

“A movie?” I must sound as though I’ve never heard of such a thing. Second dates are rare, for some reason.

“Yes, at the cinema?”

“Oh.”

“So, what do you think? Do you want to see a movie with me? You can choose.”

He picks me up a few minutes early, dressed more casually this time. He looks different in jeans, less accountant-like. It puts me at ease. Or as much at ease as I can be on a date with some guy I really don't know.

I had left the choice of movie up to him, expecting some boring action-packed blockbuster or maybe some rom-com to get me romantically motivated. Instead, he takes me to see the thriller based on a novel I'd recently read.

"I read some of your stories," Vance says. "And I thought maybe this would be something you'd like."

Read my stories?

His arm around my shoulder as we share a bucket of popcorn feels right, as though it's always been there.

Don't read too much into it.

Nice. We got through date number two. Glad I gave him a second chance. We go for coffee afterwards and discuss the movie. Then we talk about some of my stories. Conversation comes easier for me, having a topic in common. He lightly brushes his lips against mine as he bids me goodnight at my door. The castle gate is raised.

But that's where it ends.



Until he calls on the weekend. "Hey, do you want to come over to my place? Pizza, Netflix? I thought we could have a night in, if that's okay with you." He hesitates, probably waiting for my answer. "Or I could come there."

Here? In my space? Why does that make me panic?

"Your place sounds good." A third date. Almost unheard of.

This time, I put on my jeans and a sweater, and tone down the makeup a bit. Vance has the radio tuned to a country station playing some sort of love song. He stops at the pizza place where he's already ordered, having asked me ahead of time what I like.

In my mind, I saw Vance living in a luxury condo, a single guy on his own. When he pulls up to the cozy little bungalow and escorts me to the door, I can't help but ask, "You live here? I expected something different."

"Such as?" He settles me onto the sofa as he opens the doors in the kitchen, gathering plates and wine glasses, a bottle of red.

I pick up a book off the pile on his coffee table. A photo book of Crete. Underneath are more photo books of places I've never been to. So that's what he meant when he said he likes to read. I start to flip through the book on Crete.

"I don't know," I respond. "A high-rise condo, a highly sought-after building, something expensive, I guess." I've put my foot in my mouth. I try to undo the damage. "Not that this isn't expensive. I mean, of course, this is very nice. It's just...kind of cozy, homey. Not really where I pictured you."

He laughs, pouring me a glass and handing me a plate with a couple slices of pizza, then joins me on the sofa. From behind the window curtain, a tabby cat pops out, sniffs the air, and jumps up next to Vance. "Here you go, Sally." He peels off some ham for Sally and shares his pizza, petting her head. "That's my sweet girl," he coos.

A cat? This guy has a cat?

"You didn't tell me you have a cat. I love cats. I have two of my own." Sally, having plopped herself onto Vance's lap, narrows her eyes at me, assessing whether or not I pose a threat to their relationship.

"It's more like the cat has me. She let me take her in when I found her meowing at my back door. I honestly tried to find her owner, but she seemed to be on her own, like me."

The shrill ring of his phone prompts Vance to excuse himself, with Sally following him to the bedroom. I set down my plate and walk over to his bookshelf, expecting more travel books. My eyes open wide at the sight of Bronte, Faulkner, and Hemingway, among other classics, adorning his shelves, along with more contemporary fiction. Over on the end table, a mystery thriller by one of my favorite authors lies bookmarked. As I open it, I see it's not a library copy but part of his collection.

So, he does read. I may have misjudged him.

Vance's voice carries down the hall. Snippets reach my ears. He's making plans for tomorrow. I inch toward the bedroom so I can hear exactly what he's saying, the heavy book in my hand in case I need to defend myself. On the wall in the hallway, I notice a familiar

print. *The Bedroom at Arles*. Not my favorite Van Gogh, *Starry Night*, but one I admire just the same.

So, we share an appreciation of art.

I can tell Vance is nearing the end of his conversation. "So, I'll come by first thing in the morning. Love you, too."

The nerve of that man! Another woman on the phone while he's on a date with me?

I slip into the bathroom, so as not to be caught eavesdropping.

Vance is back on the sofa with Sally when I come out. "I was just talking to my daughter. I'm taking the grandkids out to the zoo tomorrow, and I wondered if you'd like to come?"

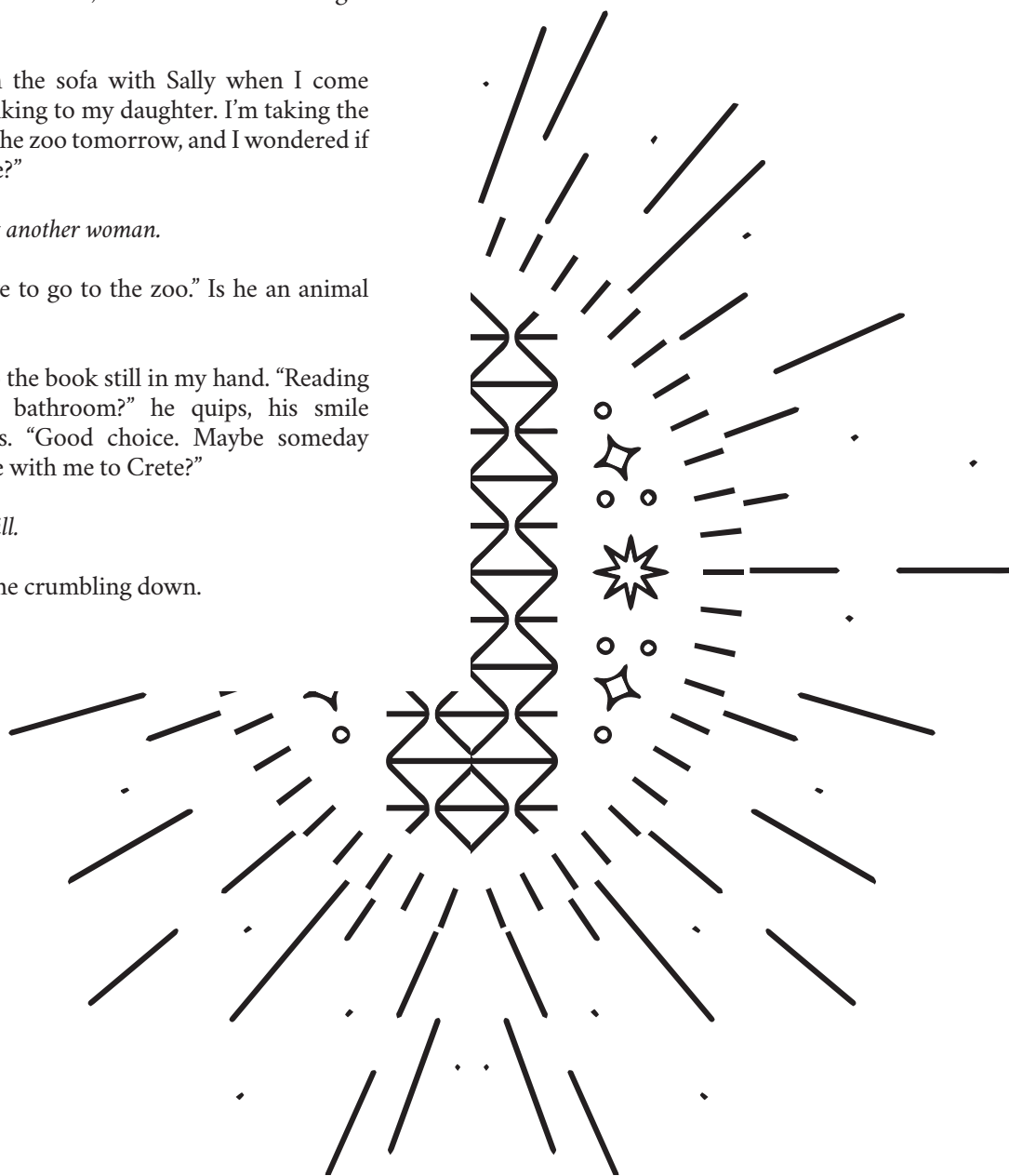
Oh, grandkids. Not another woman.

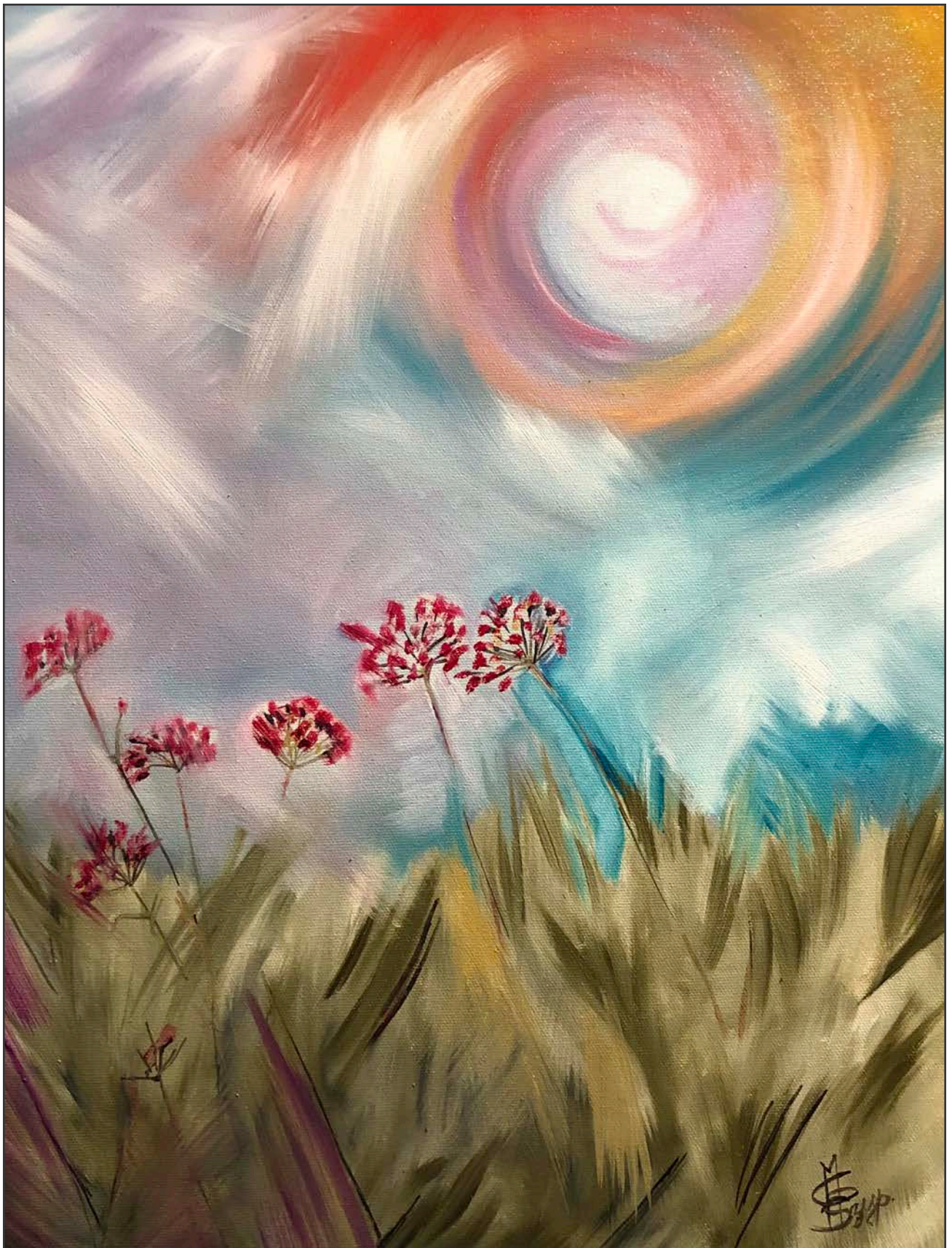
"Um, sure. I'd love to go to the zoo." Is he an animal lover, like me?

Vance's eyes go to the book still in my hand. "Reading material for the bathroom?" he quips, his smile reaching his eyes. "Good choice. Maybe someday you'd like to come with me to Crete?"

Maybe. Maybe I will.

And my walls come crumbling down.





Wildflowers by Mara Szyp

Vandellia Cirrhosa

By: Julia Laurie

Julia Laurie has been writing for two years. Publications include “My Brother and The Bulls” in *Levitate Magazine*. She is currently working on an MA in Linguistics at the University of Cape Town.

The bus was late, so Margot occupied herself by trying to decipher the nature of the poison that was inside her. Perhaps it wasn't poison at all. If it was, surely all the vomiting would have gotten rid of it by now? Instead, she felt even more full of it than before. It crept up her throat and poured bitter cement down her belly. It hardened her, like parched earth. That was what poison did.

Parasites could do that, too. Margot had learned about the various kinds of symbiotic relationships in biology class. Most people think that symbiosis denotes a perfectly harmonious relationship, but that's only mutualistic symbiosis. There is also commensalism, in which one of the organisms benefits and the other isn't affected, and then there is parasitism. Of course, everyone knows about the common parasites, like worms and lice. But the ones that fascinated Margot were the grotesque ones, the ones that made her feel both horrified and in awe of the ingenious pathways to survival in the natural world. Not a lot of time had been spent on them in class, but Margot had googled them later that night, her eyes wide in the glow of her phone as she delved deeper into nature's underbelly. Now she wondered, out of all the parasites out there, which one had been inserted into her.



Eric was the cousin on her father's side who was closest to Margot in age. On the various occasions over the years when the extended family would meet at some house, holiday cottage, or wedding hall, she would spend most of her time traipsing after him. She'd follow him across lawns and flower beds, up trees, and to the tops of fences. Sometimes, he abandoned her to join soccer matches or video games with the older boys. He would disappear into

the pungent boy funk of sweaty socks and indoor farts, and she would be left wandering on her own, dawdling among the nooks and crannies of garden or house, disappearing inside her own imaginary world. Or she would join the flock of younger cousins, become the knowledgeable older one for once, and teach them how to jump rope or impress them with the narratives she wove with their wooden blocks and stuffed animals. Even though according to them she was the big fish, she wanted to swim with the sharks.

So she'd keep looking over her shoulder, waiting for the moment when Eric would grow tired of the older boys and succumb to the temptation of being her big fish. She gobbled up his expert opinion on how best to scale walls, find whatever was hidden in the undergrowth (Were there insects? Buried treasure? Dinosaur bones?), and outsmart the adults. The two of them, smack-dab in the middle between a tribe of older cousins (all boys) and a flock of younger ones (mixed), were sometimes torn apart and stuck, not quite fitting into opposite sides of the two halves, and sometimes they formed their own group strung in between. Because they had in common that they were both only children in a large family of large families, Margot thought that it made sense that they should stick together. But she also couldn't blame him for the pull he, too, felt to run with the sharks, to be one of “the boys.”

“Where are the boys?” someone would ask while laying out forks or bringing a steaming roast out of the oven.

“They're in the den, playing video games.”

“Ah, boys and their games,” another aunt would chuckle, shaking her head as she tossed the salad.



The bus was now 40 minutes late. Despite the morning sun warming the bus station's plastic chairs, Margot couldn't stop shivering. People shaded their faces with hands or newspapers as they grumbled to each other, still sleepy in the blurriness of the early morning. Perhaps it was a type of protozoa, she considered. They were tiny parasites, single-celled organisms, that could only be seen under a microscope. They were experienced by the host in the same way as bacteria or viruses, often causing diarrhea and sluggishness. That would explain the nausea. But no, that didn't quite fit. The symptoms she had went beyond a simple stomach illness. There was a creature inside her, sucking out her existence from within, making her feel like a hologram of a girl in a bus stop.

Perhaps it was one of those parasites that affected the host's brain. The most fascinating of these was the *Cordyceps* fungus: a family of fungi that infected insects and took over their brains so they were impelled to climb up high plants, made them clamp down, and then erupted from their heads, raining down spores in a wide radius on the forest floor. Actually, a surprising number of parasites affected the host's brain chemistry. She wondered if her parasite had impelled her to take this bus, and once she alighted, it would erupt from her brain, its spores taken far and wide by the sea winds.

But she couldn't believe such a fungus would want to take root in the bright openness of the seaside town where her grandmother lived. They favored jungly biomes, places where secrets lurked and scuttled in the undergrowth. Margot's grandmother's house had its fair share of shadows, its forest of bookcases and leafy secrets nestling in chests and cupboards. But the windows were always open, and the house seemed to breathe with the salty sea air, refreshing itself as lemony sunlight danced through.

Most likely, the parasite was nothing more than a run-of-the-mill devouring kind—a wormy thing that gets inside and feasts on blood or flesh as you wither away. Perhaps it was the type that would enter the body of an insect and eat its flesh from the inside, leaving only the decaying exoskeleton that formed a sanctuary for the parasite's babies when they hatched. Or perhaps it was the *Vandellia cirrhosa*. This was the so-called vampire fish, a type of catfish that enters through your gills (or any other orifice that presents itself), lodges itself there with spines, and sucks your blood until you are nothing but a pale and dry husk.

That seemed to fit, decided Margot.



The family had fragmented over the years as the cousins grew up and their grandparents died. She and Eric became strangers, exchanging awkward teenage small talk at the few family rituals that were still preserved about their music tastes, which never seemed to match, and their lives, which no longer had anything to do with each other. But then there was that night: her parents leaving her home alone, the drunk driver on the swerving streets, her belly full of pizza when she answered the phone, the world crashing down around her. It's strange to become an orphan at age 16, and even stranger to gain an 18-year-old brother, who is really your cousin, who used to teach you about worms and making mud pies and climbing trees.

At first, she had kept herself walled in, refusing to accept that these people she didn't know well were now her closest family. But Eric had been good at coaxing her out of that shell. He had enticed her with a brotherly warmth to stick her head out, to unfurl and expose the soft pink skin underneath. As they got more familiar with each other, he began to touch her occasionally. It wasn't anything like that, just pokes in the stomach as they passed each other on the stairs, or fingers on her ankle, touching a mole while they watched TV. Or he'd clench her shoulders suddenly, surprising her while she was studying at her desk. He was always laughing. But these innocent touches reminded her of an echo stashed away, his fingers tracing invisible lines that burned in vague, terrible recognition of something hidden in the past. When he started talking about moving out, she felt a confused relief and hoped that he'd be gone sooner rather than later. But she shook it off because it didn't make sense—weren't they getting along lately?

A memory had attacked her that day as she stared at his overhead light shade, painted to look like Mars, the taste of bile rising in her mouth. In the memory, she was lying on the same bed, staring at the same light shade. She was eight, and he was ten. Double digits, which is why it seemed unbelievably babyish of him to want to play doctor-doctor. They had never played it before, preferring activities that involved scrabbling in the mud or shinning up a tree, games of dirt and grit and scraped knees. So this clinical game of care and methodical actions, the opposite of daring, seemed totally out of character. But she treasured any time that he let her play with him, so she went along with it. She was the patient, and he

was the doctor. She lay there as he brought his ear close to her chest and listened to her heart beating.

“Take off your top,” he commanded. “I can’t check your heart properly through your clothes. And your pants, too. I have to examine your whole body to find out what’s wrong.”

She was the clay, and he the hands. She let him shape her.

His fingers were warm and sweaty and not at all like a doctor’s. Margot was ticklish, and he kept telling her to stop wriggling.

“Don’t you want to get better?” he asked.

Yes, she wanted to get better. She wanted him to say, “There, now you’re all cured.” She would feel warm and golden. But he didn’t want to stop yet. He told her she had to take off her panties, too, or it wasn’t a full examination. She didn’t know how to argue, so she did as he said. He was the hands, and she the clay—hardening.

And here she was again made clay, her body freezing its memories deep into her skin, stuck forever in the shape of the space between his mattress and his body. And while clay is crackable, once cracked, what lies beneath? Once the vampire fish is done sucking her dry, what will be left beneath the shattered casing?



After what seemed like forever, the bus was in front of them, belching acrid fumes. The camaraderie of waiting was gone as people pushed to get good seats. Margot found one unnoticed window seat and curled into it. She was surprised and annoyed when a young woman with flaky skin and a too-tight T-shirt sat down next to her. She had thought her shivering would be enough to keep people away. In fact, the woman was almost as shaky as her, although not trembling like Margot, but rather jiggling, bouncing her knees, tapping her fingers, and popping her chewing gum. She glanced at Margot.

“Are you sick?” she asked.

“I think I have a parasite,” said Margot.

“Jeez. It’s not infectious, is it?”

On top of the jiggling, she was a blur of constant movement: organizing her bags, taking out a Coke

and putting it in the bottle holder, taking lip balm from her pocket and running it over her lips, hitching up her jeans.

“No. I don’t think so.” Margot felt unbelievably sluggish next to her.

The woman considered, chewing her lip.

“Good, because I have to be extra careful. I’ve got a bun in the oven!” She chuckled. “That’s also why I stopped smoking, which, as you can see, is going great.”

“It’s not infectious. It’s nothing.” Margot willed her to shut up so she could continue to diagnose herself in her mind.

But the woman clearly was not aiming for a silent bus ride. They sped away from the city, and as they passed through the clanging industrial outskirts, Margot found herself grateful for the woman’s chatter. It was becoming harder to keep the flashes out of her mind—of the Mars lampshade, of Eric’s damp sheets, of his sweaty fingers.

“This is my baby daddy,” said the woman, who Margot learned was called Shereen, showing her a photo on a cracked phone screen. “Total douchebag. I found him fucking this other chick just last week. Then he refuses to admit the baby is his and won’t send me any money even though, unlike him, I have been faithful. That’s why I’m here.” She gave a shrill laugh.

“Where are you going?” asked Margot.

“It’s not where I’m going,” she said, chewing a fingernail. “It’s what I do along the way.”

Margot didn’t say anything.

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell you!” said Shereen. “If you want, you can actually help me. But I’m not forcing you, okay? Because, you know—culpability, et cetera, et cetera.”



At around 9:45, they pulled into the rest stop. She followed Shereen around the back, where the staff parking was. Margot was on lookout duty while Shereen scanned the cars. After a few moments, Shereen gave a little cry and ran to a bruised-looking white VW Golf. Margot alternated her gaze between

checking to see if anyone was walking toward the parking lot and the white Golf, where Shereen was jiggling the car's lock. She could smell the wafting odor from the overflowing trash cans nearby.

After what seemed like forever, Shereen got the door open. She rummaged for a while before finding what she was looking for and slamming the door shut. She stood in front of the car and considered for a moment before pulling a small object out of her back pocket and moving with decisiveness to the front right wheel. This, too, was no quick task, the tires being a tough match for a cheap Swiss army knife. She labored at the tire for a good while before standing up, panting. She considered the car for a moment but seemed to conclude that one wheel was enough, because she was soon back with Margot, waving a wad of cash in her face.

"What an idiot! Who the hell leaves their savings in their car, let alone a fucking Golf?" Shereen was buzzing with glee, almost jumping up and down in excitement. "I always told him to stop doing that, but he never listened. Well, now he'll have to!"

Margot stared at Shereen as she peeled a few notes from the top of the wad and thrust them toward her.

"Your cut." She winked.

Margot stared at the money. She felt as if she were watching a scene in a movie. But Shereen's movie was playing at many more frames per second than Margot's.

"No, thanks," she said. "Do you mind if I do something quickly, though?"

Instead of taking the money from Shereen's left hand, she reached for her right, where she held the knife. The handle was solid and heavy, despite the knife's small size. Margot clutched it in her palm as she walked toward the car. The warm air felt like water as she moved through it. She went for the back wheel on the same side as the one Shereen had slashed to stay hidden from view. She breathed in the sharp rubber and tar smell as she readied herself, holding the knife aloft, gathering all the strength she could muster from her hollow body.

Thuck. The knife went in but not very far. She wrenched it out, finding that this required almost as much strength as the stab itself. *Thuck.* This time, she summoned even more strength, pushing the blade with all her might. The phrase "slashing tires" evoked

imagery of a quick slice, a Zorro-like swish of the blade that revealed soft rubber underneath and caused instant deflation. But this was slow, grunting work, and the results didn't even look like much. *Take that,* she thought at the vampire fish lodged inside her, imagining it getting crushed, as she tensed her core to make the jabs. After a few more stabs, she stopped and turned her hot face to the breeze. She looked at her reddened palm, which had curled tightly around the knife, as her breathing began to slow. She flexed her hand, feeling the muscles clench and stretch.

"Margot!" It was Shereen, casting a shadow in front of the sun. "Margot, we gotta go. The bus is leaving!" Margot let herself be pulled up and dragged out of the parking lot, dodging cars, with Shereen's fingers tight around her wrist. Then they were running as fast as they could, and Margot felt the wind smarting her eyes; her legs were her own; she could see the bus—

But it was too late. The bus was turning onto the highway, the gap between them growing larger, and the only passenger who noticed them was a toddler staring out the back window. The women slowed to a stop, both panting hard.

"What are we going to do?" cried Shereen as they watched the bus becoming smaller and smaller.

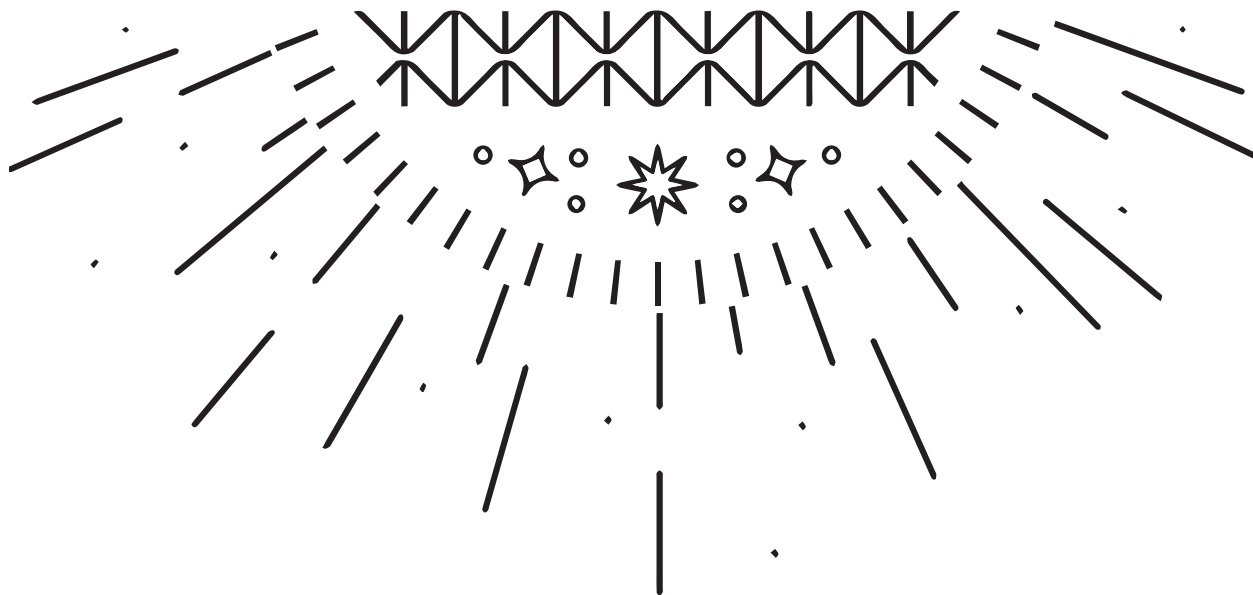
The two looked at each other. Shereen smiled and giggled, and then she was laughing and guffawing, and so was Margot. They were leaning onto each other and cracking up on the side of the highway, and then Margot was crying. She sunk to the ground, sobbing, and she couldn't stop.

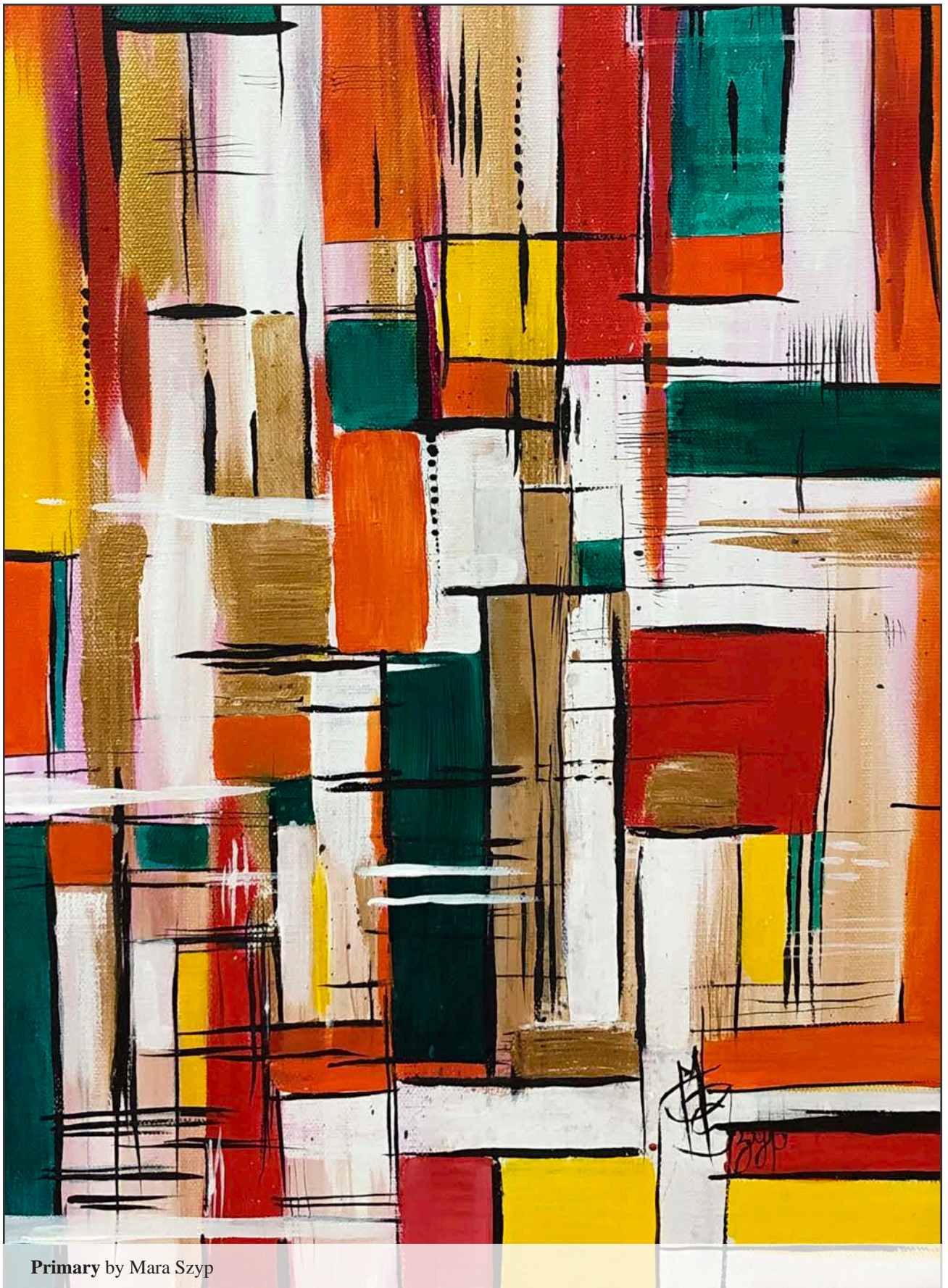
Shereen was around her. "Hey, babes, what is it? Are you okay? What's up? Is there someone else's car whose tires we need to go slash?" Her hug was strong, and she smelt of cherry chewing gum. Margot clung to Shereen as the sobs poured through her. Shereen's body was surprisingly firm and still, anchoring Margot in the storm of sobs and cars roaring past. Eventually, Margot's crying ebbed.

"We should probably get off the freeway, okay?" said Shereen as they peeled off each other. "Maybe we can phone the bus from the rest stop or find out about another one." She held her hand out to help Margot up. "You gonna tell me what's wrong?"

"My grandmother lives not too far from here. She has a car. She can fetch us." Margot couldn't bring herself

to speak the words, to put into material existence the sweaty fingers on her throat, the endlessness of his damp bed, his ice-hard and unfamiliar eyes. The *Vandellia cirrhosa* was still clamped around Margot's insides, but she found with surprise that she was no longer shivering, and that she could feel the warmth of the sun, high in the sky.





Primary by Mara Szyg

The Human Condition

By: Amela Moray

Amela Moray is a Colorado native who enjoys seeing life through an uncommon lens. She has been writing since her early teenage years and has published her work on various online platforms. This will be her second story in *October Hill Magazine*.

I once lived deep in a tropical forest. It was mostly due to work but, in part, for pleasure. I appreciated the seclusion. My work back then was to examine the creatures of the forest and document their similarities and differences.

I was provided a cabin fully stocked with all of the tools necessary for experimentation. Both the interior and exterior were crawling with creatures of all kinds, mostly insects and arachnids. I managed to cozy myself to the idea of being surrounded by creatures other than humans. Society was always exhausting and constantly required certain practices to establish friendliness and relatability. I can complete those tasks fine enough but was drained at the end of each day. The tropics held a different, more compatible society.

Here I could go up to an insect without a word and observe its behavior without asking permission. I could jot observations without worrying about copyright infringements. I could even stay with a pack of animals, as if one of their own, and not be concerned with the niceties of bringing some overly processed dish to the table. The creatures went about their ways, and I my own.

I was due to stay in this location for 16 months in order to complete extensive research involving any new or undiscovered species. For the rare specimens, I was to establish that they had somewhat of a colony intact and then separate the weakest one for examination. If there were not at least three or four members of a species, I was to leave the species alone until the population increased. However, it was also my duty to observe the behaviors of said creatures. I wasn't allowed to extract them from their environments and perform dissections until their group was better solidified and stable.

The research went well, and the first few months felt like days. I was engrossed with a wide variety of insects, spiders, butterflies, crickets, birds, snakes, beetles, fish, monkeys, and all animated life in between. My journals were brimming with in-depth notes about the behaviors and habits of every life form I had the privilege to observe.

Before I was posted, there were other scientists at the cabin. Some were instructed to gather information about plant life, others about the weather patterns, and a couple were to observe the ranking structures among various groups. Everyone was limited to 16 months. Only 16 months. We were never given a reason for the short amount of time. But we accepted the terms because of the wonderful opportunity at hand.

There is a memory I often try to recall when I lay in bed, thinking about my adventures. It's a fog now, an almost distant interaction that takes effort to bring back. But the event was so transformative that I should surely recall more than I do. I close my eyes, not to sleep, but to call attention to my mind. I conjure pieces of the story the more I delve into the memory. But there is a point where I develop a grinding headache, and I have to stop.

The most I currently remember is that a creature appeared as I was finishing my dinner. It was snacking on the discarded animal carcasses just below the window. Its teeth tore easily through the tight, bloated skins.

At first, I'd determined it to be a wolf, or some sort of rabid dog. I had almost left it to feast on the corpses discarded for that very reason. But what compelled my attention was its very familiar human stature. It rose to a stand. A frog's leg dangled out of the corner

of its mouth. Hair fell from the top of its head and ran clearly past its shoulders. Its silhouette presented finely shaped arms and legs, and its chest heaved. As it turned, the moonlight only barely illuminated its facial features. I could vaguely gather that it had two eyes, high cheeks, a nose, a mouth, and a smooth round chin. Not much to go off of but still significant data.

In a stupor of curiosity, I leaned forward, and my hand slipped on the windowsill. The creature dropped the fragmented frog and was gone in a blink. My heart sank. I wanted it back. I wanted to watch it eat more of the dead animals. There was still a variety of frogs and birds and small mammals to pick at. Most of all, I wanted to know what it actually was.

Despite my interest, I still had much work to be completed and continued with my schedule of dissections and observations. I sliced through thousands of birds and stored their data in a binder specifically dedicated to them. My walls were soon lined with butterflies of all sorts, their colors ranging from dingy brown to the brightest of blues and yellows. Their wings were pinned delicately to the walls. They were my decorations.

The pile of discarded bodies just outside the window was quickly just a fingertip below the sill. My plan had not appeared effective. The creature had not returned to harvest the delectable organs and skins of the tropical creatures. My dissatisfaction was building. There would have to be a trick.

I closed my eyes and rewound to the day of discovery. I rescanned the surroundings, noting that it was an almost completely dark night; that it was just after a strong rain shower, without any wind; and that the leg of a frog was hanging from the creature's lips. Out of all the carcasses, it had singled out the frogs. And the frogs I had experimented on were now at the bottom of the pile, no longer producing an enticing scent.

I went outside and retrieved a large bowled shovel. I normally reserved its use to surface creatures of the soil. But it seemed just as useful for this mission. It hooked into a large chunk of bodies and, grunting, I lifted the mass to the side. Flies swarmed from the opening, and spiders crawled out of their holes. I would have been disgusted if not for my interest in the adaptability of the insects and arachnids. It was a society feeding off the remains of another. It was glorious. I stilled the shovel until it seemed that the community had hushed. Then I hooked into another

hill of animals and pushed it to the opposite side. Maggots squirmed over the decaying green legs that I sought. With the corner of the shovel, I completely exposed the treats and went back inside, hoping and praying that the maneuver would prove fruitful.

That night, the moon was almost full. An untrained eye would miss the missing shard of light from the right edge, creating a distracting oblong sphere in the sky. I pulled a chair to the window and sat with a fresh notebook and pen. My hope was high and my determination strong.

I watched the trees flutter in the mild wind, the leaves tickling the branches. The moon was brighter tonight and presented me with a better view of the forest. I observed as lightning bugs blinked in and out of existence, their pack growing and fading. I had the sudden urge to capture the lights but suppressed my eagerness for the larger want of seeing the mysterious creature.

The night lingered through the hours. The forest was relatively still and quiet, which only struck me as unusual after the fact. But I persisted and kept my eyes firm on the window. It would come. Surely it would. The frog legs were exposed and deliciously presented for its pleasure. I gripped my pen and traced my fingers over the bind of the notebook. They were eager for research, for discovery. I looked downward and watched the shadows of my hand quiver over the lined paper. My attention was distracted for a few moments.

I blinked, and then suddenly my eyes flared open as something hit the side of the cabin. My breath was loud in my ears, and I was intensely excited. Taking the notebook and pen with me, I approached the window and carefully edged my eyes above the sill. The moon's light angled onto the creature. Its hands clutched the frog legs and its teeth scraped the rotting muscle, tissue, and tendon from the bone. Once shiny white, the dull, dark legs were thrown into a pile.

My mouth cracked into a half smile. I felt the surge of anticipation that I had discovered something altogether new. I took down whatever notes I could, my eyes all the while concentrated on the creature. It finished the remains within a few minutes and lowered its nose to the ground, possibly seeking out a hidden stash. It extended its finger and flicked away what it deemed unsavory. It managed to find a couple more frog toes and chewed them without hesitation, even managing to devour a few unfortunate spiders.

Gradually, it came closer to the window. I could hear its sniffing and breathing. I slid below its view and could see the condensation of air on the glass. My hand continued to work on the observations passing through my mind. Its voice was gruff, and it huffed its disdain when there were no more pieces of frog to be found. Its hand—I assume it was a hand—slammed into the side of the cabin and shook my core. My hand stilled momentarily. Then the surroundings grew quiet.

I hid my breath the best I could, even though it amplified painfully in my ears, and slowly rose up. The light of the moon hit my eyes first and offered a temporary blindness. But my vision soon focused on the subject at hand. It had foreseen my rising up, and its eyes bore deep into my own. Its breathing was smooth as I rose up further, paralleling its face and mine. One eye was green, the other brown. My two blues flickered back and forth, absorbing the splendiddness of diversity in the colors alone.

A black line distracted me from its eyes, and I was soon looking at the whole of its face and the scars of stitches woven along its features. Lines segmented each facial component. Its cheeks were bordered from its mouth, chin, nose, and eyes, and its eyes from its forehead, nose, cheeks, and each other. Even its ears had their own border. One cheek was white, the other brown. Its chin was tan; its nose was black. Its ears were pointed and clothed with a light coating of hair. My brain could not process these elements very quickly. But my hand continued to work. It would not miss any observation.

Then the creature leapt at the window and slapped at the glass. The frame rattled, and I recoiled from the surprise. The creature bore its teeth, which were various forms of sharp and smooth, small and large. Part of me appealed to hide and leave the creature be. But the inquisitor was too strong, and I remained dumbfounded at its diverse physicality. A fire burned in its eyes, and it mustered a loud, guttural roar before disappearing. I shook, and my hands released the book and pen. I crawled to the window on all fours and took a deep breath before looking outside. It had run away once more.

I gathered myself and my tools and retreated to my bed. The window and door had been secured before my retreat. Even though my curiosity compelled my explorations, it would not be the key to any deadly fate.

I slept long into the next day. The sun was high and hot, and the humidity was overbearing. It had taken hours to calm my mind enough for sleep. But it was now, with the sun strong and bright, that I could review my notes and create new means of enticement. I saw the book resting at the edge of the bed and brought it close. I flipped the cover back and looked at the first page.

My handwriting was nothing to win an award but was legible and extremely useful. My subconscious had instructed my hand very skillfully to document every observation racing through my mind. I had written everything perfectly. I smiled and cuddled the paper to my chest, giving a kiss to the binding before releasing a small chuckle of satisfaction. A dictionary of Latin words was soon rushing through my mind as I contemplated the best term to name the species. Something with my name in it maybe? But that would feel far too egotistical, I bet. But, at the same time, this was what I had worked hard for—to earn the right to name a new species after myself. But I also wanted something simple enough for students to pronounce instead of stumbling over it during an exam. My head raced with voices and suggestions until excitement overwhelmed the calmness of the room, and I had to stand up.

I went back to the window and opened it. I looked down and confirmed the activities of last night. The bits of frog were most definitely missing. A new surge of happiness flooded my stomach and chest, causing a brief flurry of giggles. With the book still in hand, I went to the desk and pushed aside the creatures to be dissected. I stacked the trays on each other with little regard for the integrity of the specimens. I would dedicate my work to the exploration of that one particular creature. I would find everything there was to know about it.

The memory of its face flickered into my mind. Again, I saw the black lines separating its eyes, nose, mouth, forehead, and ears. My fingers translated the lines to my face, and a smile crept over my lips. It was fascinating. My mind muddled over the reasons and methods with which the procedure must have been done. But I could not conclude anything definite and would therefore have to investigate the matter further. A bubble of anticipation filled my chest.

A few days passed, and I accumulated more mutilated frogs for the pile. I laid the freshest ones right on top. This time, however, I would try to lure the creature into the daylight. This would provide me with significant data about its survival traits. Like the



previous encounter, I brought a chair to the window and held my book and pen with firm determination.

The experiment began in the early morning when the sun was just beaming through the trees. Animals came to life and, soon, the surroundings were loud, even in the cabin. Songs of love, competition, and mercy rang out. The different families could hear each other's calls perfectly and responded with grace. Birds swooped into their nests to feed their young, only later to be swallowed by the vicious snares of tree snakes. I wrote a few notes on these behaviors. These papers were solely reserved for the exploration of one particular creature: my creature.

Mid-afternoon came slowly. My eyes were tired from intense focusing. My head dipped down, and I quickly jerked it upright. And I heard a crunch and a slurp. With less caution than the previous encounter, I went to the window and peered out. To my surprise, the creature was feasting on the frogs. In broad daylight, no less! I wrote in the book as fast as I could, then retrieved a frog leg from a tray next to the window. I pushed the window up ever so slightly and slipped the leg out. The creature turned, and its brows furrowed.

I flicked the leg a couple of times to make it more curious. Its hot breath was on my fingers. Its tongue reached out and lapped at the limb, gliding over the tips of my fingers along the way. I resisted the temptation to flinch and calmed my shaking nerves. I watched as it opened its mouth and came closer. I held the leg with my thumb and forefinger, presenting it as much as I could without dropping it. Saliva dripped onto my nails. And then it bit. I felt it tug on the leg and released it.

I smiled and watched it suck the leg through its lips. Its tongue worked on the limb and spit bones onto the decaying pile of corpses. I watched with the utmost fascination and pulled my hand back in. It continued to play with the food in its mouth. Then it smirked and was working something against its lips. A red and pinkish cylinder oozed out. At first, I gathered that the creature had been mashing the frog meat together to form a shape. But then I noticed a fingernail. I looked at it in confusion, then stole a glance at my hand. My index finger was missing. The blood had formed a puddle on my notebook. I clutched my wrist and screamed. The pain, which was not present before, surged through my body, as if my finger were on fire. I bit back tears and took breaths through grating teeth.

I retrieved the first aid kit and went to bandage the wound, accessing gauze, alcohol, and tape. The alcohol poured onto the wound, eliciting a new world of pain and fire. Then I grabbed the gauze and padded my nub, securing the end with almost the whole roll of surgical tape.

I worked on calming my breaths but was distracted by the loud eruption of mutilated laughter from behind. I turned to the window and met eyes with the creature before my head collided with the floor. I faintly remember my knees feeling cool and damp.



A wild gust of air blew into my face and startled me upright. I pulled myself to a stand with the edge of the table. My shoes squeaked as the soles slid through the mess of alcohol on the floor. I was dizzy, and my head throbbed. I touched the bump and winced. Then I remembered my finger and looked at my hand. The gauze was deep red, and blood seeped down my palm. I grabbed the tape and started to pull it off. It resisted, and I realized that the bandage had melded with the wound. I fought back a rush of bile and took a deep breath.

Retrieving surgical scissors, I cut through the tape and only a bit into the gauze. My hands shook as I took hold of the bandage, braced myself, and pulled it from the wound. Pus clung to the gauze, stretching the blood from my nub to the fabric. I removed it with a firm pull and buckled over, groaning into my shoulder. The air penetrated the wound and sent an electrical zing clear through my wrist. My saliva was sour, and my vision shook.

My knuckle throbbed, and I let out another groan when I returned upright. Sweat froze on my face. Rationality gradually returned, and I moved to retrieve more medical supplies. I would need to bandage the wound better so that it could heal more effectively. The back-up supplies were in the medical locker. Something caught my eye on the way to the cabinet. I turned and found my digit on the edge of the table, resting on the bloody notebook. Below it, written in red, was "stitch it." A needle and thread were below.

I am unsure of what compelled me forward. But the finger was against my nub—the needle sewing the pieces together before I comprehended the lack of feasibility that the finger would ever work again. But I finished the task. There was no thread left over. It knew the perfect length.

I fell into the chair and cradled my head with my hands. Everything felt foggy and heavy. My skull throbbed again. I clenched my eyes and teeth, which only increased the pain. Then there came a rumble from the side. A scalpel slid across the floor and collided with my shoe. A tray rattled to a still on the floor. I jumped but sensed that it was there.

I turned toward the sound of weighted breaths. It sat on its haunches in the corner and focused its eyes on my movements. The sun was long hidden below the horizon, and the moon was not to be found. Yet the creature was perfectly visible. A pulse of fear beat through me.

It was in my room. It had prime access to me. It could do anything, and I knew I couldn't stop it. It cackled, and I flinched. My hands twitched excitedly. Stunned, I looked down. My finger curled inward, although it struggled against the stitches. Inside, I was both fascinated and frightened beyond belief. And then the creature moved.

From the corner, it took careful steps in my direction. My hands clutched the chair. I was determined to stay put. It stopped a few feet away, and its smile beamed through the darkness. Its teeth were wickedly diverse. The disgust showed on my face. A laugh bubbled from its chest and produced a horribly mangled sound, similar to a mixture of pent-up gas, violent whispers, and a strangled whimper. Then we sat in silence.

It was then that I could better process the image before me. The creature's body resembled that of a man, but its skin was covered in stitched patches. One arm was a hand longer than the other and covered in a variety of colors. Its hands had complete human qualities and were free from stitches. Its fingers were long and thin and fine. Its legs were crooked and bent. It did not appear as if it could properly stand upright. Its torso resembled a quilt of culture, mixing together a rainbow of races. But I also observed random introductions of fur and scales, their sections cut in squares and hidden throughout. My lips tightened, and then I noticed the smooth area between its legs. My mind couldn't help but search for some sign of gender. But there was only a smooth patch of skin. The creature seemed to notice my confusion and looked downward. It shrugged, then spoke.

Its lips never moved as it explained that it was neither gender, that its organs had been extracted during a procedure, and that it could not reproduce via traditional methods. But I couldn't get past the

strangled voice. It screamed while talking, sighed with howls, and breathed as if its lungs were under constant compression. But gradually, reality set in, and I began to fathom the gravity of what had been done. Then I digested what events were to follow. The last I saw was a hand covering my face and blackening my vision.

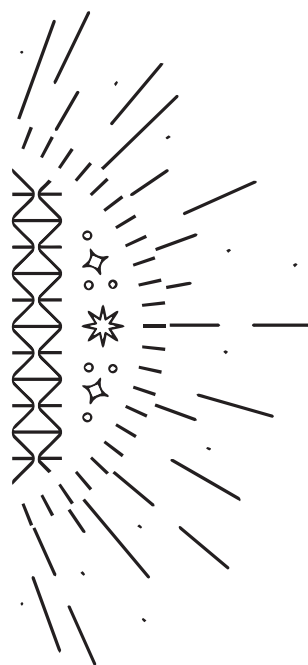


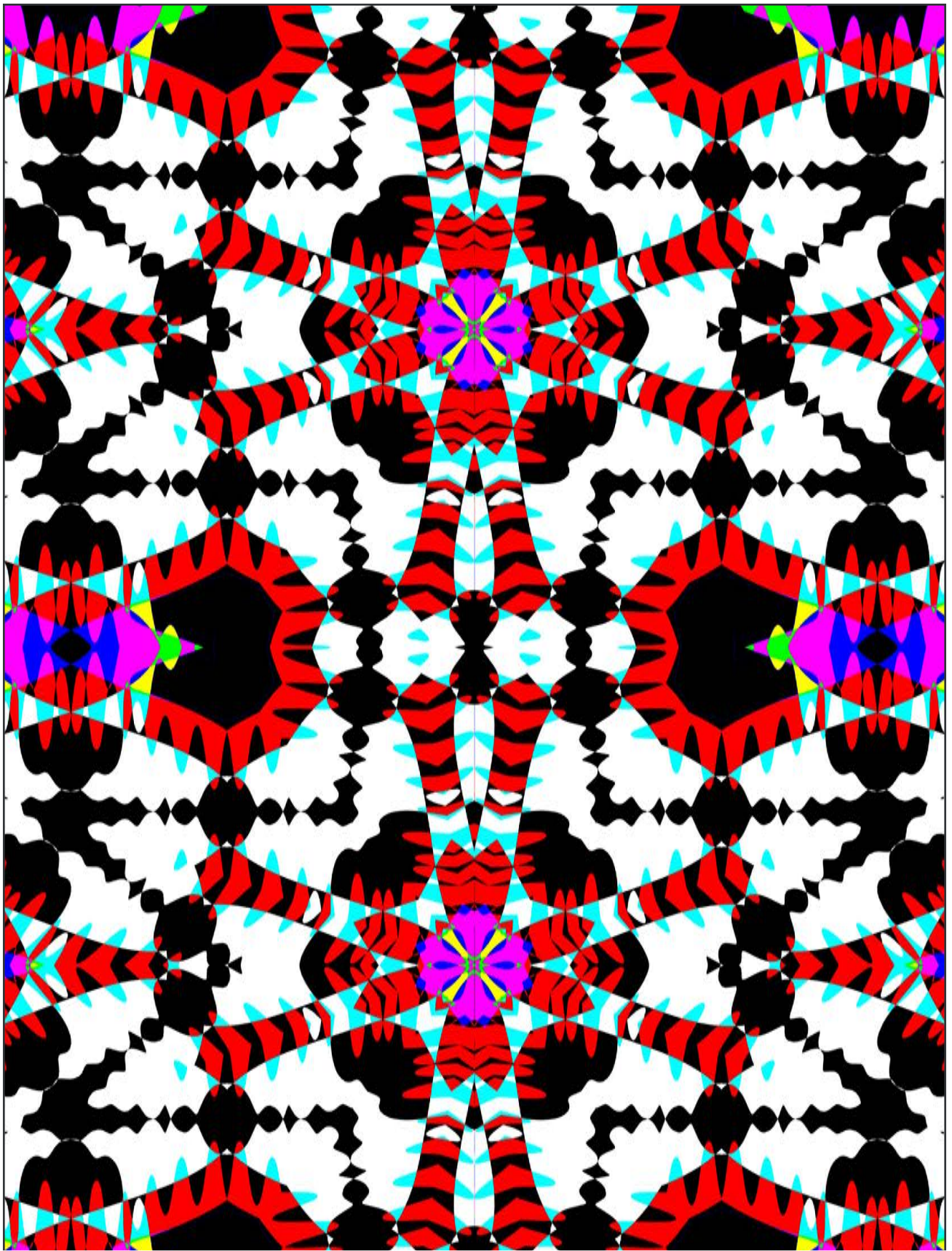
I awakened in the spot where I had been left, sitting on the chair by the window. My body shook even despite the fact that I felt incredibly warm. I turned and pushed the window open, letting in a rush of cool air. The sun peeked over the horizon. The birds sang to welcome the new day. The crickets hid in the soil. The frogs croaked. It was a symphony of animals.

I retreated from the view and looked into the room and rubbed my hands over my chest. It itched, and I rubbed harder. Then I massaged the back of my neck, working out the itches there as well. And last, I rubbed my face. Soothing the scratches felt splendid, and I moaned into my hands. The stitches were still fresh and integrating into my flesh. The tips of my fingers traced over my cheek, memorizing the bumpy pattern of frog skin. I smiled. My tongue rubbed into the opening of a missing tooth.

Creaturas plura. Many creatures.

And so it would be. And so would I.





By Edward Michael Supranowicz

The Worst Roommate

By: Jessica Mulcrone

Jessica Mulcrone works as a technician in a soil chemistry lab. She reads and writes suspense and horror stories whenever she can.

The pantry door hung wide open again, blocking my path to the coffee maker. I kicked it closed with a bang that no one was around to hear.

Only hurting myself. That was the lesson this week at our meeting. We hurt everyone around us trying to destroy ourselves. Well, now there was no one else here...for another ten hours.

The coffee maker ticked and rumbled. I wished I'd set the automatic brew, but I never remembered at night. A deep nutty smell gradually filled the kitchen and pried me awake as autumn sunlight spilled through our eastern window and over my slippers. I told myself to relax into the room—spread like light and take up space. But Olivia somehow still hogged it.

I borrowed the coffee pot from its perch before the brew had finished and filled a ceramic mug. The clock read 10:37. Olivia would return from her day of grading and writing around eight. Her schedule was irritatingly disciplined the last few weeks. Eight to eight, every day.

My day's structure was somewhat looser. The back porch looked inviting this bright, chilly morning. I set my coffee beside the vase of dying multicolored flowers on our kitchen table and walked to our living room to retrieve my jacket and book. The closet door was wide open.

I gritted my teeth, lifted my coat off its hanger, and shut the door. On the way to the back of the house, I gathered my novel and coffee, sticking the book under my armpit to twist the knob on the back door, which was, of course, unlocked. This time the agitation coursed through my blood—my pressure rising, my chest tightening—and lurched toward real

anger until I stepped outside and a gust of cold wind simply carried the weight away. Out here, I couldn't feel Olivia.

The plan for my day had been to complete job applications. But once outside, I couldn't convince myself to sacrifice the harmony I felt with the fresh air and the last of the rusty clinging leaves to sit on the couch and lie to hiring committees about my enthusiasm for teamwork and going above and beyond. I read until the early afternoon, when I finally gave in to the insistent need to take a piss.

I nearly ran to the bathroom, roughly tugging my sweatpants down, and flinched as my skin hit the chilly plastic seat. The pressure lifted and relief unfurled until I noticed the cabinet door over the sink hanging open. I waited impatiently for my bladder to empty and stood quickly to close the cabinet, barely managing to do so gently so as not to break the mirror. I caught my eyes in the reflection as it shut: out of control. It was a glint I'd locked eyes with in many a bar bathroom over the last year. I took a deep breath and walked calmly into the hallway. The air was cold enough to sting my lungs. I checked the thermostat. Olivia had set it to turn off from noon to five, as if I didn't even exist, or my warmth wasn't worth its cost in electric bills. What an absolute bitch.

I turned the thermostat up to full blast and sat on the couch. Reluctantly, I opened my computer to at least go through the motions of a job search. My hands shook. But as the house warmed, I considered that a job would mean the freedom to move out. I committed to applying to at least three that afternoon and succeeded. Afterwards, I opened the window over my head to consume more of Olivia's precious electricity and leaned back on our secondhand couch, waiting for her to return.



I heard the tell-tale sound of a bike clicking up the driveway and footsteps on the back porch. The doorknob jostled. She assumed I would have just left it unlocked all day. Olivia walked into the living room a moment later and immediately turned the 90-degree angle towards her room.

“Hey, Aurora,” she said politely, while rudely not making eye contact.

“Hi, Olivia. Could you wait a second? I think we should talk.”

Olivia stopped. She pulled out one headphone—just one—and started unwrapping her scarf.

“I had a really long day,” she said. “Could we save it for another time?”

Olivia’s answer to everything these days—save it for later. Nothing was as important as her work.

“No, actually, we can’t,” I said, sitting up straighter.

Olivia sighed and dumped her backpack on our armchair but didn’t sit.

“Okay, what’s up?” she asked. “And why is there a breeze in here? Is that window open?”

“Yeah, it is. Isn’t that annoying? Leaving things open? Letting the house turn cold?”

“Yes, it is,” Olivia said impatiently. “What’s your point? And can you please close the window?”

“My point is I had to close the pantry, closet, and bathroom cabinet doors today. I asked you to be more careful about closing doors.”

Olivia rolled her eyes.

“I *am* being careful,” she said emphatically. “It’s not like you’ve never left a door open in this house. And I really don’t think I left all those doors open. Your stupid open window probably blew them ajar. And if I forgot, it’s because I’m under a lot of pressure right now, and I’d think you could manage to close one door for me. I’m trying to catch up and regroup from last month, after all.”

She nearly hissed the last line. Poor baby missed one night of sleep, then sharpened my misstep into a

Swiss Army knife.

“And you left the back door unlocked,” I snapped, ignoring her whining. “That’s not safe. Anyone could have walked in.”

“I really don’t think—”

“And the thermostat? *Really?* Did you forget that I’m here in the afternoon?” I was leaning toward her now. I didn’t like her towering above me, so I stood from the chair. “Or are you trying to make a point?”

Olivia rubbed her temples with her fingers, as if I was giving her a headache. As if I was the one being ridiculous and inconsiderate.

“And what point would I be trying to make, Aurora?”

“That I shouldn’t be here in the afternoon,” I spat. “That it’s pathetic I’m here all the time, and you’re sick of it. Is that what the doors are about, too? Some kind of bullshit space claiming? You’re the one who has made it a point not to be home at all since—”

“Since I got a call from the police that you got wasted and assaulted someone at a bar? At *two in the morning* the night before my prelim?” Olivia interjected, her voice straining not to yell. “And bailed you out and held your hair back while you puked for hours? And then failed one of the most important tests of my life?”

Now I rolled my eyes. “You were going to fail anyway. Not sleeping for one night wouldn’t have been enough to make you forget things you had a solid grasp on. You’re probably grateful for the excuse. You get to be a victim instead of a failure.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. I’d never said the accusation out loud. In fact, I don’t think I’d even thought about it before now. But it seemed obvious in retrospect. She took a step towards me.

“I took care of you,” Olivia said slowly and steadily. “I stopped keeping alcohol in the house to support *you*. I am careful to remember to close doors, but I’m a little scatterbrained because you are up at all hours making all kinds of inconsiderate racket since you lost your job and have nowhere to be in the morning, laughing maniacally at videos or whatever, and I don’t say anything because I feel too bad for you.” She finally made real eye contact as she said it. “I’m running on the fumes of our old friendship, but I’m out of rope here. The hypocrisy is too much. Get

yourself together, Aurora.”

I couldn't believe she was turning this on me. Classic defensive maneuver—accuse the person confronting you of the same or worse. Making a racket? I was just *existing* in *my house* past Olivia's strict ten o'clock bedtime. I was, in fact, very careful, practically tiptoeing, and if I dared to laugh, it was under my breath, walking on eggshells in constant parole.

I didn't say anything. Olivia shouldered her backpack. “Are we done here? I have an early day tomorrow.”

“We're done,” I said.

“You know,” Olivia added as she walked away, “I think you're even worse sober than you were as a drunk.”

The split second of rage was too intense to talk myself down from. I lunged at Olivia and shoved my shoulder into her back, causing her to stumble into the living room wall.

“What did you just say?” I screamed. “Say it again, I dare you!”

Olivia righted herself and turned to face me. Though she looked scared, there was something smug in her expression, too. “You have lost your goddamn mind. I'm moving out.”

Before I could respond, Olivia stomped to her room and, thankfully, managed to slam her bedroom door shut just fine, leaving me fuming in the middle of the room. I walked over to the open window and slammed it shut as loudly as I could.

That night I went to sleep early, right after her, so there would be no chance my movements could be exaggerated and twisted into the reckless stompings of a degenerate night owl. As I lay in bed, struggling to sleep on the altered schedule, I was surprised to hear a bit of a ruckus myself: footsteps falling heavy in the walls, a strange bang from the basement. My stomach dropped. Had someone actually snuck in the unlocked door and hid in the basement, waiting for nightfall? I jumped out of bed and crept to the kitchen, pulling our sharpest knife from the silverware drawer. I stared at the basement door, then changed my mind and ran back to my room with the knife. Safe behind my locked bedroom door, I decided the sound was likely nothing—the wind and old pipes. But if it was something, it was Olivia's problem.

I almost hoped there was a monster in the basement to teach her a lesson. What would my sponsor think of that? She would say I was outsourcing my demons. Maybe I was. I glanced at the knife on my bedside table and fell asleep.



When I woke the next morning, my bedroom door was open. Fury rose and then fell just as suddenly once I worried my wish had come true. Had a murderer spotted my knife and decided Olivia was easier prey? I picked up the weapon and stuck my head into the hallway. Olivia's bedroom door was open, which was unlike her. Heart racing, I inched along the wall until I could peek in. Empty. I took a step onto her carpet and checked under the bed and in the closet. Relieved, I went to check the living room but froze as I turned out of the hallway.

The closet and front door were open, as well as the window I'd shut last night, and the wind was whipping through the house with even more fury than yesterday. I ran to the kitchen and saw that every cabinet and door was ajar. For a moment, I thought we'd been ransacked by a thief. But then the truth sank in.

This was Olivia being a petty, self-righteous jerk. She was the *worst* roommate. I scowled and walked around, closing every door in the house before I put on the coffee pot. I paused at the basement door. Something told me I should check that nothing was amiss down there.

As the coffee pot steamed and dripped, I descended the creaky staircase, a strange sense of curiosity building—there was something interesting down here. I didn't know how I knew. I flipped on the light switch, but the basement was as dank and barebones as ever. Just a washing machine, a dryer, and neat stacks of cardboard boxes. The flap was ajar on the box closest to the stairs which was sitting by itself. It was also unlike anal Olivia to allow a box out of line. I bent down and lifted the top the rest of the way off.

I stared in disbelief at the box of alcohol. Vodka, whiskey, rum. I picked up a bottle with shaking hands that untwisted the top, as if they were acting on their own. I stood quickly and dropped the bottle, shattering glass and splashing whiskey across the floor.

I turned and ran upstairs, shaking as I slammed the basement door behind me with a rattle that

reverberated through the house. I fell to my knees, breathing heavy, and sank to the kitchen floor. The whole point of being constantly home was to avoid the outside world's abundant alcohol. And this whole time, there were ten bottles right below me. The sounds from last night must have been Olivia sneaking downstairs for a drink after our fight. Perhaps she couldn't be bothered to re-hide her stash.

The smell of the spilled whiskey floated up the stairs, mingling with the brewing pot. Irish coffee, I thought, and nearly laughed. Irish coffee was my first taste of booze, offered by my father when I was teenager because "the caffeine canceled out the alcohol." He had his Irish coffee every morning, his lunchtime beer, and forever-creeping-earlier happy hour. Until he stopped. Successfully—cold turkey. Oddly enough, that was when I began to slip. I was glad he got clean. A DUI was what finally did it, and he could have died. Yet he was never the same man. He excised the alcoholism, but it seemed to take his personality, and affection for me, with it. I missed him ruffling my hair and offering me Irish coffees. Once he got sober, all he cared about was AA. So I had happy hour by myself. Eventually, he avoided me and my drinking like the plague. Once he told me he was sorry that he passed his demon off to me. Then my happy hour crept earlier and earlier, month by month, year by year. Until I ended up in my own police station, calling Olivia at two a.m.

I stayed on the kitchen floor for hours, afraid that standing up would lead me back to the basement. Eventually, I dragged myself to my feet, pulled the lock across the basement door, and collected my coat and a throw blanket from the couch to wrap around my shoulders. Leaving my coffee but bringing my book, I walked to the deck, determined not to go inside for anything—not even a piss—until Olivia got home and took all the damn alcohol out of the house.

I read on and off, taking breaks to stare at the trees. They were bare after yesterday and today's winds, reaching towards the day's gray-purple sky. I even dozed some. When I woke from my second nap, a biting hunger had compounded the irritation from my caffeine withdrawal. I heard a bike coming up the drive and then the click of a lock. Olivia walked around the house and up the porch steps.

"What the hell, Oliva?" I asked.

She stopped on the steps and pulled out one of her headphones. "Huh?"

"First, opening every door in the house was petty and childish," I said, holding up a finger. "Second," I held up another, "how dare you keep alcohol in the house? And leave it out like that? A bottle broke in the basement; you need to go clean it up."

"Aurora, what are you talking about?" She stayed on the steps and studied me. "Are you drunk?"

"No, Olivia, I'm not drunk. No thanks to you."

"Well, if by 'left out like that' you mean hid away in a box out of consideration for you and as a major inconvenience to me, then I'm so sorry. And I didn't open all the doors, but I could see right into your room this morning. The knife, Aurora? On your dresser? I'm seriously freaked out. I'm sleeping elsewhere until I can officially move out. I only need a few things from my room."

Olivia walked up the rest of the steps and tried to squeeze past me, but I put out my hand. "Doors don't just open on their own, Olivia. But leave. Be my guest. Just clean up the booze first."

Olivia swatted my hand down and continued inside. I got up and followed her. She was removing her coat, laying it over the entire goddamn kitchen table.

"Clean up the spill in the basement!" I yelled, slamming the door.

Olivia whipped around. "I'm *terribly* sorry you can't stop yourself from digging through my things for a junkie fix. But that doesn't make it my issue. You are not my problem, and I'm done being patient with you. Great job, Aurora. You've driven away one of your last friends."

"Clean it up!" I screamed, then picked up the vase of flowers from the kitchen table and threw it onto the kitchen tile between us. As the vase shattered and shards of glass flew across the kitchen, I grabbed the knife I'd left on the counter this morning. "I'm not crazy, and I am not a junkie! You're just the worst roommate ever."

Olivia took a quick step back and put her hands up. I looked at my hand and gasped. I lowered the knife.

"Just clean it up, please," I said quietly.

This time, Olivia didn't look smug, only terrified. She spun around silently and walked towards the living room.

“Don’t walk away from me,” I said softly. She broke into a run.

“Don’t walk away from me!” I lunged after her and sunk the knife into her shoulder blades with terrible ease. I pulled it out and she fell forward onto the ground, a crimson stain spreading over her blouse.

The blood pooled as I watched in shock. I dropped the knife. *What had I done? Where was my phone?* I knelt next to her. “Olivia?” I asked. She moaned. She was alive! I stood to look for my phone, and a gust of wind shoved me back across the kitchen. My head banged into the counter, and my vision swam as I crumpled onto the floor. Shaking, I pulled myself up. As I looked around for the guilty open window, I heard the rattle of the slide-lock on the basement door and turned my head in time to see the door fly open. Another gust of wind—or something—knocked me sideways and back towards the staircase. I grabbed onto a shelf leg as I was dragged but only knocked everything over, spilling the coffee pot and a fruit basket.

I tumbled down the stairs backward, rolling and picking up speed until I hit the basement floor and heard an awful crunch. An apple tumbled down after me and rolled behind the stack of cardboard boxes. The world dimmed again and, when I came to, my leg throbbed excruciatingly. I glanced down and almost vomited at the sight of the angle that my leg now stuck out at. My skin stung in places, and I realized I’d fallen on pieces of broken whiskey-bottle glass, though perhaps I’d also sustained cuts from the shattered kitchen vase. I glanced up the staircase. Maybe if I could pull myself up the stairs, I could still call an ambulance in time for Olivia.

The box of bottles was within arm’s reach. Perhaps if I drank just a few sips—to numb the pain—I could do it.

Suddenly, I heard laughter. Maniacal, like the kind Olivia had accused me of. The door at the top of the stairs slammed shut with a decisive bang, and I heard the lock sliding into place. The laughter continued, swelling. It sounded like all the demons I’d fought to get sober, laughing at me that I wasn’t strong enough. Perhaps my father really had passed a demon onto me. *Demons*. Ridiculous. But I stood by what I said—doors didn’t slam shut and blow open on their own.

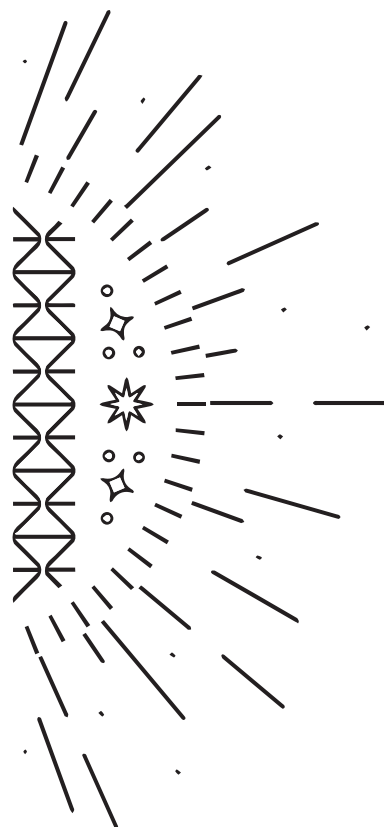
I’d rid myself of the demon, too. I’ve been sober for a month. Did the demon have nowhere to go after? It couldn’t jump to perfect, tidy Olivia. I reached

into the box, touching a bottle with my fingertips. I adjusted my body slightly to get a better grip, shooting pain through my leg. I grasped the bottle’s neck and pulled it back to me. The top twisted off easily while laughter closed in around me.

Perhaps the demon had settled into the house. Olivia hadn’t been opening the doors. He or she—*it*—poisoned everything until it got what it wanted. Well, it won. I tipped back the bottle and drank.

Vodka burned down my throat. A warmth spread through my stomach and chest before a cold rush sank in. The laughter around me stopped. The demon was home, though I was no longer sure it had ever left...and no longer sure I wasn’t losing my mind.

The smell of coffee from upstairs drifted down to me. I laughed and kept drinking, determined to finish the whole bottle. Slowly, I stopped thinking about Olivia, dead or dying, in our living room and how she was probably right all along. I could destroy myself without hurting anyone else. Hopefully, the real worst roommate ever would die with me.





Sand and Ash

By: Jonathan Ferrini

Jonathan Ferrini is a published author who resides in San Diego. He received his MFA in Motion Picture and Television Production from UCLA.

The desert wind blows through my tiny home. The wind speaks to me of the many souls it's transporting, reminding me my time will come soon when I join the windy cavalcade.

My granddaughter, Anna, retreats to where her grandmother is buried, lying on her back and staring at the stars. I was told by my Native American neighbors that the stars show Anna her destiny and that the wind will lift her away from the unhappiness she has endured in her short life. Anna will be reunited with a boy who couldn't return the love she had for him. The hearse delivering Stoney for cremation will arrive in the morning.

Anna idolized Stoney from the day they met briefly as children when the hearse delivered Stoney's beloved grandfather, a Vietnam veteran, for cremation. Anna followed Stoney's athletic career from Pop Warner football to high school quarterback, keeping scrapbooks filled with press clippings of Stoney's gridiron heroics. Stoney led his high school to a state championship. He received football scholarships from every top college but chose West Point.

We live on an Arizona ranch bordering a Native American reservation. Once a prospering cattle ranch, it's become a desert, including a tiny wood-frame home and a metal warehouse with three smokestacks. Our ranch has been in the Montez family for generations.

I own and operate a crematorium, incinerating medical waste delivered from Arizona, California, Utah, and New Mexico. When the unrefrigerated trucks arrive, I quickly unload the orange bags marked "Biohazard," placing them into my refrigerated crypt inside the crematorium. The smell is horrific, and when the wind whips up, the putrid odor is carried

for miles, making the Montez family unpopular with its neighbors. The three cremation chambers run from morning until late at night, seven days a week. The incinerated remains, often hip replacements made of stainless steel with titanium alloys, are given to my Native American neighbors, who sell the metal for scrap. In exchange, they ceremoniously remove the incinerated ashes, providing a dignified Native American ceremony by scattering them into the wind.

I keep Anna away from the crematorium. I don't want her around the sights and smells of death. She was born to my daughter, a heroin addict who succumbed to a lethal fix. My departed wife and myself relished the opportunity to raise Anna. My daughter's drug and alcohol abuse created birth defects. Anna was born with a club foot and partial paralysis on one side of her face, creating slurred speech. She also has learning difficulties. Anna is sweet and kind. Staring into her big brown eyes reveals only love, creativity, and an eagerness to explore life. I've reconciled myself to the reality that her birth defects will deprive her of finding romance.

Anna learned to cook and clean from her grandmother and keeps the house spotless. She has a green thumb, makes roses bloom in the desert, and maintains a garden, growing fresh vegetables. Anna loves her Native American neighbors. They named her "Soaring Heart."

I taught Anna to handle the office duties. A funeral home conglomerate has been after me to sell to them for years. When I die, Anna might sell. I'm confident she'd make a fine bookkeeper for somebody.

Anna was deprived of a loving female mentor to guide her into womanhood. She has no interest in buying

clothes, makeup, or fragrances. She lives in a secret world she crafted for herself, including scrapbooks. Her secret world doesn't protect her from the cruel taunts and humiliation of her classmates.

One day, I sat with the school bus driver, Pam, at the town coffee shop. She is a no-nonsense retired prison matron who revealed the cruelties Anna never mentioned to me.

"Mr. Montez, I couldn't prevent the cruelty your granddaughter endured. Little Anna was last to board the bus and struggled to make it up the stairs into the bus with her club foot. Anna always resisted my offer to assist her, knowing it would slow down our departure and create more taunting. She sat in the front seat, reserved for handicapped students, which felt like a 'Scarlet A.' The children were cruel, shouting out, 'Scuzz Montez, what's in your lunch box? Human organ sandwiches? We can smell you coming a mile away.'"

"Anna always held her head high, Mr. Montez."

My ranch is many miles from the school, and I regret I couldn't drive Anna to and from school. I remember receiving an emergency call to pick up Anna early. On the last day of junior high, Anna's classmates celebrated by running amok. Anna became their target. They dragged her into the bathroom, placed her head into a toilet, doused her hair with powdered hand soap, and repeatedly flushed the toilet, chanting, "This 'shampoo' is called a 'whirling' and will wash the smell of death out of your stinky hair!"

On another occasion, I received a call from a young man, introducing himself as "Stoney."

"Sir, I'm with Anna. She needs to go home right away. Can you pick her up? We'll be waiting for you at the flagpole out front of campus."

When I arrived to pick up Anna, her head was dripping wet and wrapped with a football jersey emblazoned with "State Champions."

Stoney approached me.

"In observance of Veterans Day, the high school played the movie *The Green Berets*. The school punks began pulling pranks when the lights dimmed and the movie began. A glass soda bottle was rolled down the concrete floor, and the clanging noise caused laughter. One of the punks brought in a fast-food chicken lunch box, and chicken bones were thrown

in Anna's direction. One of the punks loaded a spoon with mashed potatoes and gravy, creating a catapult of warm, disgusting, creamy goo, which landed in Anna's hair. Anna screamed. The auditorium lights were raised, and the students laughed as Anna left the auditorium crying. Nobody went to Anna's aid, so I chased after her and found her crying outside. I took her to the water fountain and wiped the potatoes and gravy from her hair. I used my football jersey to clean and dry her hair the best I could, sir. Anna calmed down, and I told her, 'Don't mind those jerks. They disrespected you, *The Green Berets*, and John Wayne. You're in good company.' Anna managed a smile."

I thanked Stoney for his kindness. It was ironic that the only kid to show Anna kindness was the most popular kid in high school.

When the shiny black hearse entered the dusty road leading into my ranch, it was occupied by an Army Major, in full dress uniform, and the funeral home director. I worried Anna would be traumatized. To my surprise, Anna rustled up a pretty dress; her hair was neatly combed; and she wore a beautiful yellow ribbon. She held my arm as the Major handed me the cremation orders, revealing the remains were those of: "LT. STONEY ADAMS. KIA. AFGHANISTAN."

I retrieved a gurney and joined the Major and funeral director in removing the cardboard box from the hearse, placing it onto the gurney and pushing it towards the crematorium. Anna followed. But when we reached the crematorium, I motioned for her not to follow, and she complied.

We entered the refrigerated crypt. The Major took a knee alongside the gurney, silently said a prayer, and stood facing me.

"The United States Army has entrusted you with the remains of Lieutenant Stoney Adams. His body was dismembered by an IED. The Army has confidence you'll treat his remains, and service to his nation, with reverence and honor. Goodbye, and thank you, Mr. Montez."

Stoney's cremation was set for morning. Fearing Anna might enter, I closed and locked the door to the crematorium before opening Stoney's cardboard casket and inspecting the remains. I cut the three metal bands securing the cardboard lid to the box. Plastic lined the interior, containing a rubber body bag, which was surrounded with dry ice. I unzipped the body bag, revealing vacuum-sealed plastic orange bags marked, "Partial Face," "Forearm," "Leg,"

and “Partial Upper Torso.” They were arranged as if still attached to a fully intact human body. The bags were covered by Stoney’s full dress uniform, polished dress shoes, and hat. A folded, triangular American flag was placed at the head of the box, along with Stoney’s West Point ring, buttoned to the ring finger of the white glove he’d wear on his right hand. A card was enclosed, reading, “Goodbye, fallen brother, with love.”

It was written by the Dover morticians preparing his body to be shipped home. I zipped the body bag and replaced the cardboard lid, securing it with the gold-braided ceremonial rope I keep for special occasions.

I was concerned about Anna’s emotions. It would be a sleepless night for both of us. The wind picked up in the evening, and the sand pelting our home made it difficult to fall asleep. But I managed to nod off.

I awoke early the following morning, calling for Anna, who didn’t answer. I went to her room and found her scrapbooks, containing clippings about Stoney, piled upon her bed, which hadn’t been slept in. She must have sat late into the night remembering Stoney. One scrapbook was open, revealing a photo of Stoney, the “Prom King,” with his “Prom Queen.” I feared the worst. I entered the crematorium and found a note hung to the handle of the cremation chamber door: “When wind blow through hous, me and GranMa are visitin. I luv u gran pa. Gud by.”

I opened the door to the chamber, still warm from the cremation.

Gruff, old Sheriff Jack and mild-mannered Doc Kippers, our county coroner, completed the suicide report. They were visibly shaken. Concluding from the skeletal remains and stains, Anna must have placed the plastic bags inside the chamber as they were placed in the cardboard coffin. She had set the cremation timer to commence in five minutes, as recorded by my computer, and crawled inside, closing the chamber door with the ceremonial gold braided rope still hanging from the chamber door. Judging from the bone fragments, Anna had laid close to Stoney. The singed remains of the American flag covered them like a blanket.

Doc Kippers concluded: “The 1,800-degree flames quickly consumed the oxygen inside the small chamber, and Anna fell unconscious, never experiencing any pain.”

Pam arrived after the sheriff and coroner left. She handed me a box of handmade birthday, Christmas, and Valentine’s Day cards from Anna. I broke into tears. Pam held me tight, whispering, “Anna was a gift to all of us who loved her, Mr. Montez. Losing Anna is a knife in my heart.”

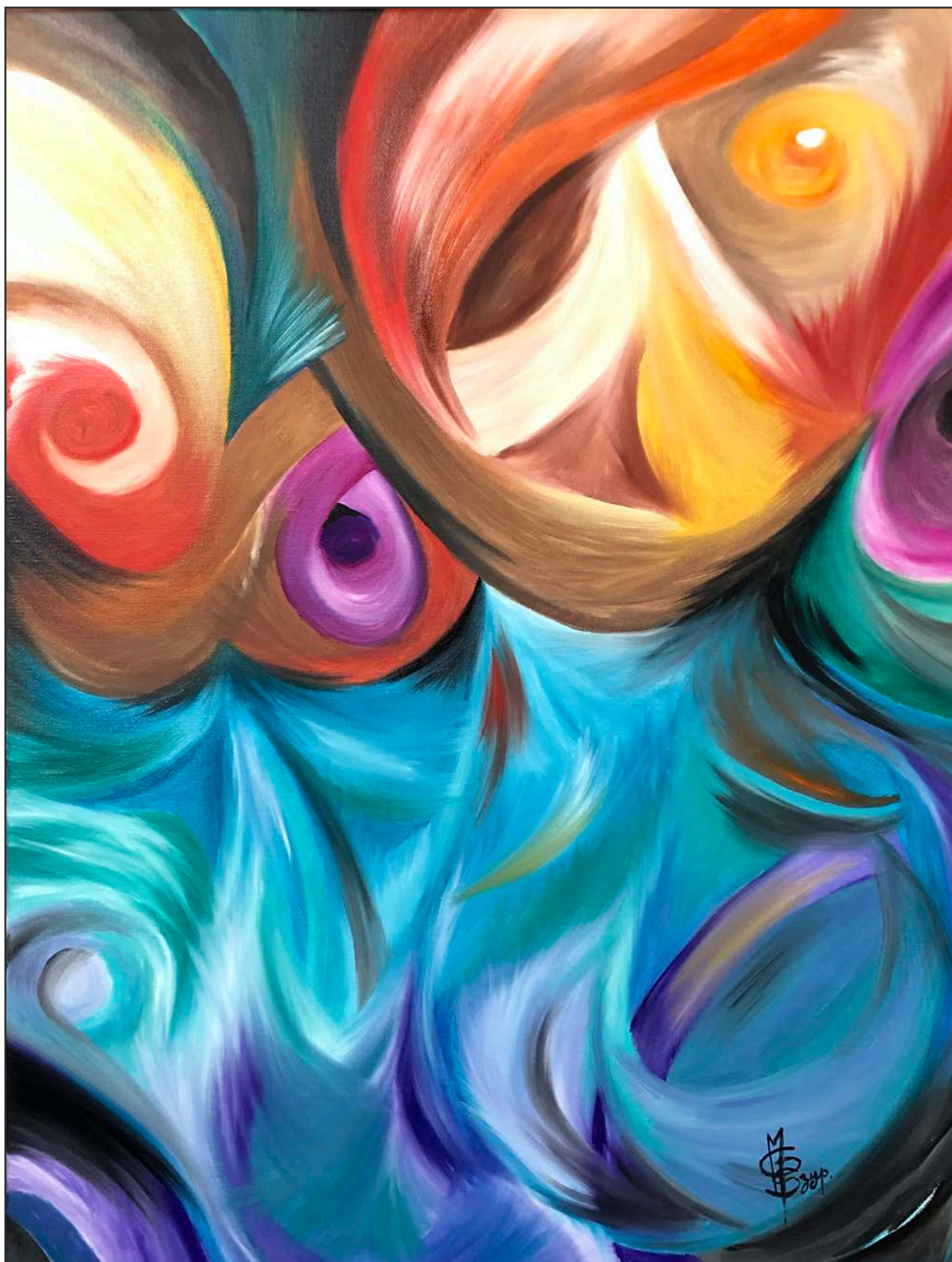


My grief was lessened knowing Anna was reunited forever with a love she sorely deserved. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I gently swept their combined remains from the chamber and carefully placed the bone fragments into the cremulator, grinding down the bones to sand, in which I placed a gold, satin purse belonging to Anna’s grandmother before sealing the remains in a plastic bag.

My neighbor and tribal chief arrived, wearing a ceremonial headdress and clothing, followed by his procession. I handed the chief the purse as he sat atop his horse. He silently prayed in his native language, held the purse to the sky—then to his heart—and motioned for the procession to proceed back to the reservation. I knew Anna and Stoney would be released into the wind and carried across the desert, and into the afterlife.

Now, whenever the wind blows through my curtains, I know Anna and Stoney have returned to say, “Hello.”





Turmoil by Mara Szyg

A Prayer Answered

By: Kerry Edwards

The pink and amber glow of a new dawn spread itself out like a geisha's fan over the eastern skies. But the golden light was not enough to take the edge off the chill.

It was already late; no one in the house would be in at this time. Work began with the return of the first night's catch in the early hours before dawn. Sam was used to waking up in an empty house, finding something to eat, and making his way to school. He had hated that life until the pandemic hit and, now, the apocalypse. He would give anything to go back to that life he once hated and quit this one. Solitary breakfasts now seemed to extend throughout the day and into the evening.

He couldn't believe this was what he had wished for back then—this working life. Where was the fanfare to celebrate the end of school? Where was the happy ending and party? It was as though he had fallen into a dystopian sci-fi film, like the ones he used to watch with his mates on Saturday nights. That life with his mates was then, not now.

He stumbled out of bed and found his jeans and sweatshirt; everything stunk. He thought he was used to that, too. But that was when there was something to compare it to, like his friends, who didn't smell of dead fish.

He cleaned his teeth and ruffled his hair. The bathroom mirror was cracked where he had smashed it in a rage last week. He had smeared toothpaste over it, hoping his dad wouldn't notice. He thought about how pointless attention to appearance was now. Today was Friday. It would be busy with customers down at The Hard, or at least there would be some customers, covert in masks and gloves, standing as far from him as they could.

Kerry Edwards worked as a textile designer in New York after leaving the MA RCA textiles/fashion in 1989. She traveled widely in her career and found great inspiration for her passion for writing. She is interested in stories that are written about people in other places and places of otherness.

Grabbing his boots and gloves, he left the house. His bike was still where he had left it, still not nicked—a bonus! He cycled fast, his blood pumping through his tense and angry muscles.

"You're late!" his uncle greeted him.

His dad ignored him.

He flinched and slunk to the staff area.

Becks was there, thank God! She was the only good thing in the place. She had a fish face. He teased her that she looked like a puffer fish, and she sort of did. Her cute smile and red hair and freckles made her his Northern Hemisphere fish cousin. She was nice—just nice! How hard was it to be nice, he often thought, as he threw rays of hatred at his dad.

"Hey," she greeted him.

"You all right?" he asked her, not waiting for an answer.

"You better go down to the water. They've got a big haul from some tropical place, somewhere I wish I was," she laughed.

He picked up some strong rubber gloves and braced himself as he walked to the water.

"Too late. Get in there and clean. We've unloaded and don't need whatever use you are now," his dad said.

It was always the same, negative stuff. But it never ceased to cut deep.

At least he was with Becks as he gutted and cleaned the day's catch, slopping the entrails into buckets

and chucking them out the back into pails for the scavenger gulls. No gloves for this job. His cold, translucent skin, pale as bone, glistened against the blue-black entrails and their deep, scarlet blood, like molten rubies against the cold, silver blade of his knife. He looked at his fingernails, stuffed with barely dead matter.

Every so often, the pair stopped to rinse their hands under the warm tap, watching life return to change their fingers from white to pink. The day passed like any other, and Becks's cheerful banter made him feel more alive.

At four o'clock, the yard closed. The men had drifted off earlier to the Fullers pub across the water. His dad had told him to unpack the boxes that came off the Indian trawler, and he hadn't finished the job yet. He should have done it first but didn't feel like it. It didn't matter what he did: His dad always treated him the same way, so he may as well do what was expected of him. Fuck it all! Becks was cashing up.

"You going home?" she asked.

"Yeah, we can't do anything else."

"It won't be long. Cheer up!" she said hopefully.

He didn't feel hopeful. She left, and he sat down and rolled a smoke. Where could he go with this lockdown? Everything had gone to hell. Half his mates were too scared to come out. Pussy cats!

Anyway, he had to finish his work. He couldn't be around his dad if he didn't. He wouldn't see the next day.

He took the silver box blade, flicked it open, and watched as the diminishing dusk light caught the blade softly before dying. He ran his thumb over the tip, feeling the pressure and working out the boundary between clean and cut. The light tinkered around the edges of the building, squeezing itself artfully through the gaps in the dilapidated, sea-battered window frames. It barged in and retreated a bit, like the damp chilly air. You could never tell, as it was always as cold as the grave in there.

The opalescent, vibrant fish were the prettiest fish they sold. Not many locals bought them; they mainly went to restaurants in London. He had to repack them before their collection in the morning.

He pulled the flaps of the last box open, and

something stopped him in his tracks. There was a queer shaft of sunlight glinting on something dark. At first, he thought it was a rogue plaice. But it was too dark for that. He looked again; there were bands of metal rings...definitely metal rings!

He felt spooked. He shivered. Time for the lights to be on. He almost ran to the wall. The lights blinked and whirred as they buzzed to life.

With some trepidation, he walked back and peered into the box: an odd, dark fish or animal mass with metal—no—gold rings and stones! He poked around its flesh to gain a better look. He was mystified. Taking his knife, he speared its tough, rubbery flesh. Was it a mollusk? Octopus? The blade finally caught the flesh, and he jerked the thing out. Nausea rippled through him like a rib on the Solent. He jumped back, and it slid off the blade and bounced onto the floor with a deep thunk.

Fear gripped him like a vice, and he pushed back against the counter. He held it steady, catching a stabilizing breath.

What am I supposed to do with that?

Thoughts collided in his brain as he considered asking the fraternity who ran this place.

Somehow, they would make it my fault.

The soft, gentle voice of his mother floated across his panic. She showed up in his thoughts when he needed her. At this moment, and many others, the pain of losing her tugged at his heart.

Focus!

He shook himself and stared hard at the floor, where the severed hand lay.

Just put it back!

No! Whoever found it next would know it and come through here.

Chuck it in the marina and get out of here!

No! Somehow, that would come back to this place.

What about those rings?

He peered closer. The flesh had swollen around the rings despite the ice.

Thank God the ice had slowed down the decay and the stink!

The rings looked rough, handmade or just battered, but they had stones in them. Big stones. He threw some water on them for a clearer view.

Were they real stones?

Emerald and ruby, something in his gut told him they were precious.

Call the police!

Are you having a laugh? Dad would really kill me.

Seriously?

Seriously!

If those stones are real, I could sell them and leave here, buy a bike, and just leave! Never have to listen to Dad's abuse again. Maybe Becks would come with me?

No, why would she?

If not, then what should I do?

He looked at the clock and realized he should go on. He still had lots to do, and the daylight was dying.

He skirted around the hand, keeping it on the periphery of his vision, as though it were a tarantula about to scuttle away. The discipline of his work focused his thoughts. If he were to take the rings off, he would need to keep it on ice, or the thing would swell even more. He threw a bucket of fresh ice over it, pleased to have hidden it temporarily.

He breathed a long, slow, comforting exhale.

Plans began to form and, as fast as they took shape, he dismissed their grotesque implications.

Nothing he could do would take away from the macabre fact that he would need to butcher this hand to get the rings off.

Unless...he buried it and let nature do the job for him. This didn't appeal to him very much, as he had visions of a dog digging it up from his garden and running off with it.

He buried his anxiety in cleaning and re-icing the fish. Never was his attention more focused than

it was now. Eventually, the boxes were packed—beautifully!—and the time had come to make a decision. There was nothing left to do. He stood and surveyed the place.

Everything was packed: check.

Everything was stowed away: check.

The debris, recycling, and food waste were in their proper bins: check.

The lights and alarms were all that was left.

Nothing for it—he scooped the hand into a carrier bag and stuffed it in his jacket. He felt the gross weight of it against his chest. He had to try hard not to vomit.

The night was bright and cold: a full moon.

He found his bike and took Beach Road. The air was cold and fresh. But the wind provided a buffer against the chilling weight on his chest. He leaned down to switch on his lights.

Damn!

Nothing happened. Great!

He pedaled faster. Just as he was sailing hard against the wind, a siren whined behind him. Panic acted like another gear he didn't have, and he pedaled like the wind.

The police car set its siren at a higher pitch, and the patrol car easily caught up to him. He tried to duck onto one of the side streets of Beach Road, narrowly missing the corner of a building. The car followed.

He let the bike slow and fall. While catching his breath, he ran and hid in the first alleyway he could see. The patrol car slowed just feet from where he stood. A window slid open, and a loud hailer called him to attention.

He closed his eyes and prayed to the one person in the universe who he knew would have his back, in every situation, anywhere. Like a condemned man, he begged for her forgiveness and for courage.

Doors slammed, and two officers made their way toward him.

He put his hands in the air and showed himself.

He tuned out the instructions.

The sound of his heartbeat trumped anything else.

“Where are you going in this lockdown, and why are you in such a hurry, son?”

He didn’t answer.

“You are breaking the law by cycling without lights!”

He began to believe that this was all they were going to get him on, and euphoria took him over.

“Oh, yeah, I’m really sorry. I just finished work. It’s been a long day and . . .”

“I think you need to come down to the station and tell us what’s troubling you.”

With that, Sam knew he was a gutted fish.



The neon strip lights blinked and hissed as the light fell over him in the dismal gray box of a room. He sat on a gray plastic chair that had seen better days. The clock on the wall was the only distraction and reminded him he had been waiting for nearly two hours.

The future was not looking quite as rosy as Sam thought about his options. They had found the macabre bag inside his jacket as soon as they had asked him to take it off in the reception area.

Stories and alibis slid in and out of his mind as he panicked about what he would say if they brought his dad in. His life would be over. Luckily, they didn’t ask him much. Just the usual: where he lived, who he lived with, where he worked, and why he was leaving work at this time. And, of course, why was he carrying a bag with a hand in it?

The truth was, he didn’t really know.

The minute hand of the nondescript, cheap, plastic clock made an irritatingly loud sound, which bounced off the shiny walls of his prison. It reminded him of Big Ben, as it ticked away minutes of his existence with the authority of a judge and executioner, while he tried to work out what the rest of his life might look like.

Without warning, the door flung open.

The stench of rancid, oily filth flooded the room and overpowered Sam; he knew immediately who was joining him. Everyone in the city knew him: the homeless man who fished. When his fishing rods were stolen, the vendors on the street where he lived clubbed together to buy him some new ones. He was very vocal and sometimes quite erudite. But, tonight, he was obscene.

Sam tried to tune him out. After a while, Alun calmed down.

He closed his eyes and tried hard to avoid breathing through his nose.

Alun was speaking, and Sam couldn’t help but hear what he said.

“I never saw the hand. What’s it got to do with me?”

Every hair on Sam’s body stood at attention. The air around him froze. He began to understand his place in the world. Maybe, for the first time, it was all working in his favor. He had told the officers where he worked. He knew his dad was in with some of these guys. He didn’t know how, but he just knew.

Alun was becoming agitated now, and he was coming dangerously close to Sam.

Sam saw the betrayal reflected in Alun’s eyes.

Did Alun deserve this?

No, but this is a way out for me, and what difference is another night in here going to make for him?

“I’m sorry, mate,” Sam said, truthfully.

Alun looked satisfied.

Poor bastard, that was his problem—he was too trusting!

“What are you doing in here?” Alun asked him.

“Ah, drunk in charge of me bike,” he said, surprising himself with how quickly he thought of that lie.

Alun laughed, and Sam laughed, too.

“Poor bastard,” he said.

Sam joined him, “Yeah, poor bastard,” he echoed, laughing amicably.

It wasn't long before Alun had arranged himself across three chairs, snoring in his alcohol-fueled stupor.

Reassurance settled on Sam. He found himself satisfied that Alun was better off, warmer in here than he would be on the street. As for being punished for possession of that hand, the evidence probably wouldn't stick, and he had probably done time before. Very quickly, Sam absolved himself with all the confidence of a seasoned trickster. A sense of peace settled over him. He even considered nodding off himself until the door opened, and he sat up.

"You are one lucky...!" the officer observed. "Get out of here."

Never before had Sam been so eager to oblige.

The officer walked him back to reception, and before he signed him out, gave him an envelope.

Sam looked at him, puzzled.

"Just get out, son," the officer said.

Outside, in the cool night, he breathed deeply and looked around him.

Home?

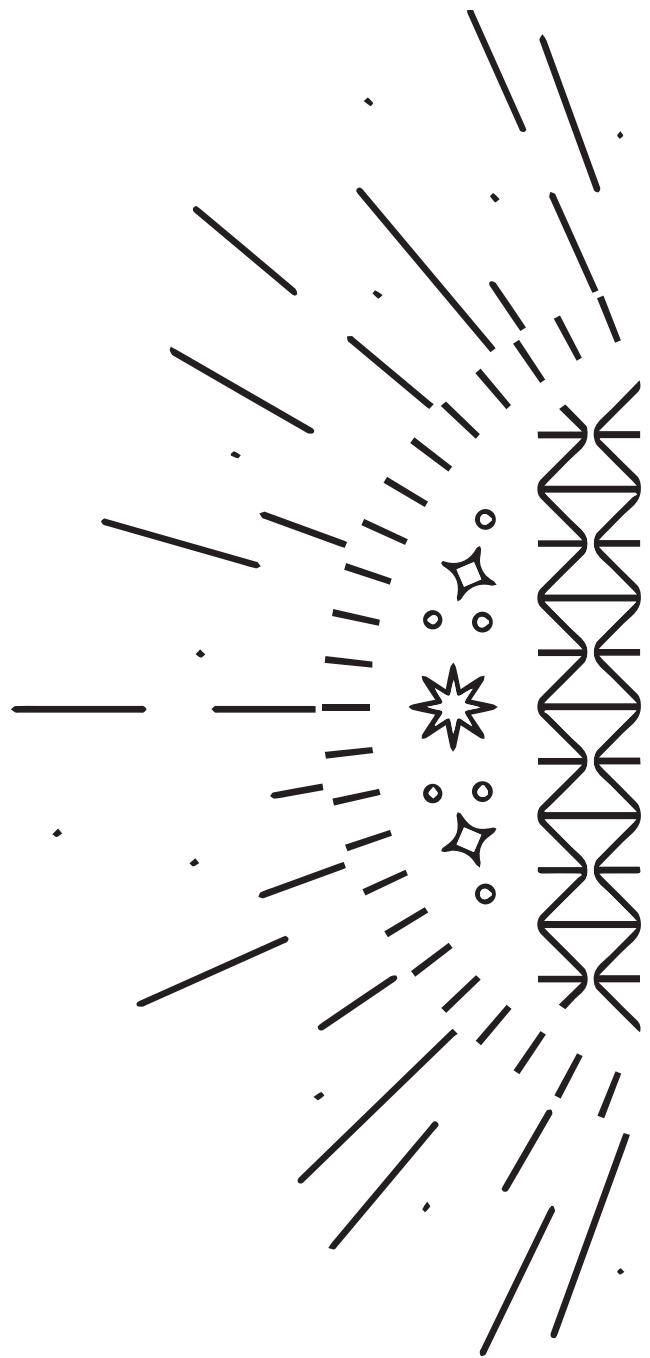
Yes.

He looked at the envelope and felt its shape as he opened it. A smile slid across his face.

Why?

Who cares?

The stars were fading as he scanned them for answers. He shrugged and, still smiling, got on his bike and headed home.





Roll the Bones

By: Robin Sinclair

Robin Sinclair is a queer, trans writer of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Their work can be found in various journals, including *Trampset*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, and *Across the Margin*.

When people who do not write find themselves talking to a writer, especially a writer they admire, they invariably ask what we call “the dreaded question”:

“Where do you get your ideas?”

The answer they receive is always a lie. It may be a pseudo-spiritual lie, a confusingly evasive lie, or (often) a lie that seems disproportionately abrasive for the circumstances.

We, the people who write, lie not because we don’t know the answer, but because we do.

All of our best ideas come from...Neil Gaiman.

True, Neil Gaiman was born in 1960, and stories existed before then. Stories didn’t *begin* with Neil Gaiman, but they do, in fact, come from him.



In 2001, I was a struggling writer. I struggled mainly because, like most writers, I couldn’t come up with any great ideas. I read books. I took classes and did workshops. I sat in chair circles with other desperate scribes, listening to the same heroes with the same faces over and over again.

I thought, perhaps if I squeezed more experience out of life, I would find my way creatively. I quit my job and traveled, hoping to find some sort of grand inspiration.

Then, after a year of wandering and only a half-filled notebook of go-nowhere ideas to show for it, I begged for a cigarette outside of a liquor store, sat at the murky intersection of the St. Croix and

Mississippi rivers, and accepted defeat.

I’d run out of money and hope in Prescott, Wisconsin.

For all my dreams of being a writer, I’d never thought to write a back-up plan in case things didn’t work out. Not only did I not know how I’d make it home—I had no idea where home was.

I figured I could flirt my way into a few drinks at a bar I’d noticed on my walk through town, and from there I might discover a warm place to sleep. The rest I’d work out in the morning.

Hob’s Tavern was Goth-club dark but inhabited mostly by middle-aged men wrapped in flannels: the weekend fishermen and after-school baseball dads. I stood conspicuously, scanning the room and waiting to find the lonely or curious eyes that would scan me back.

On my second extended glance—the nervous one, desperate to be asked what my drink is by anyone other than the bartender, who’ll want to be paid—I noticed an odd shuffling along the edges of the pool table in a seemingly forgotten corner of the room.

I caught a brief flash of the tousled hair, a glimpse of the outfit that would sit well at the bar in an *actual* Goth club. Even as I abandoned my post and crept my way toward him, I blamed the poor lighting for the improbable familiarity of his face. But I had to know.

Laid out on the unloved pool table were loose pages, covered from edge to edge in scribbled notes. Near a corner pocket was an untouched glass of what appeared to be whiskey. Beyond the pages, a cell phone with its battery sitting next to it. And curled

over it all, like the dark swirling curve of a live oak, was Neil Gaiman.

This was not the methodical Neil Gaiman from interviews, nor was this the well-paced, thoughtful Neil Gaiman who had signed my copy of *Season of Mists* years earlier at a comic shop in Pennsylvania.

This Neil Gaiman was frantic. Frenetic. Lost in some exigency I wouldn't dare interrupt. He was a spectacle.

"A moment, please." He noticed me but never removed his eyes from the pages.

I watched as he paced and bounced, getting clearer views of each page and running his eyes over the blur of ink as quickly as possible. He paused for a moment, rubbing his temple, then began flipping the pages one by one, revealing (to no surprise) more scratches and swirls. On the sixth page, he stopped.

"I knew it." He sighed in a way that made him shrink. He turned his head to look at me, making no effort to hide his exhaustion and relief. "I knew I had her in here somewhere."

He picked up the glass at the edge of the table, laughing to himself before taking a sip. As the chill of panic rolled off of his spine and finally dissipated, Neil's propriety reemerged, and he turned his entire body toward me, smiling mildly and offering his hand.

"I'm so sorry. Thank you for waiting. I'm Neil."

"You seemed panicked." This was the observation I chose to verbalize while grinning and shaking his hand.

Neil paused for a moment and took another sip of his drink. "Well, I'm leaving for some book signings tomorrow, and..." He scrunched his face uncomfortably.

"And you didn't want to leave without saying goodbye?"

"Actually, yes." He smiled, revealing a comforting shyness. Knowing he, too, was vulnerable to this shared awkwardness put me at ease. "May I buy you a drink?"

Finally.



Over three double whiskeys (plus however many he'd sipped before I arrived), Neil told me about the ways in which his novel had come to fruition—the images he returned to, how the loose concepts found their way to each other in Reykjavik, and his travels around the vast strangeness that is America.

As we slowly outlasted the locals from our quiet corner, Neil began to slump onto his hand. Starting to fatigue from single malt, our conversation became more sparse. We both smiled, and noticed each other smiling, when the bartender put on *Raoul and the Kings of Spain* by Tears For Fears.

"What do you write?" Neil mumbled.

"What?"

"Well," he adjusted clumsily in his seat, "you didn't ask me the dreaded question. That means you probably hate being asked yourself."

There is a feeling that can only be described as "shameful ridiculousness" when you know you are about to tell Neil Gaiman that you are a writer. That feeling permeated my response. "Fiction and, occasionally, poetry. Sorry."

"Why are you sorry?" He perked his head up.

"I feel so stupid telling you what I write. The truth is, I'm a shit writer. People don't even ask me the dreaded question—I don't have good ideas."

Neil picked up his glass and spoke as he tipped the last drops of whiskey toward his lips. "You're in one."

Neil Gaiman: muffled, slurred, and ominous.

Neil pulled a small notebook and a pen from his pocket and began to write. For a moment, he paused, lifting his eyes to stare at me, then dropped them back to the page.

After some vehement underlining, he ripped the page from the book, folded it in half, and held it out in front of me. "Do you know what the difference is between us?"

"You're a great writer, and I'm a drunk with an empty notebook?" I took the page, puzzled.

"The difference is in the reason we hate the dreaded

question. You hate the question because you don't have any ideas. I hate the question because I have countless ideas, and I know *exactly* where they come from."

I opened the page and started to read, not yet understanding the true gift I'd been given. Even at this point, I'd just assumed I'd gotten a very creative person very drunk in a strange little bar. I skimmed until I got to the bottom of the page, reading the words underlined with such severity.

"Is this Latin? Is this...some kind of spell?" I laughed. Neil did not.

"No, it isn't a spell. Well, it is, sort of, but not because of the Latin. The Latin is a very specific type of plant."

Neil raised his hand and smiled at the bartender. "Nora, may we have another round?"



That night, over that final drink, Neil welcomed me into what might be the last true secret society. Like all great secret societies, there are strict codes for what I can and cannot share with outsiders.

I can tell you that almost every answer Neil has ever given about the source of his ideas has been a lie. The lie about deadlines. The lie about the werewolf biting the goldfish. Lies that make people laugh or feel comforted because Neil is a kind and generous human being, but he lies nonetheless.

One answer, however, has a hint of truth.

Depending on his mood, Neil has, on occasion, answered the dreaded question with an anecdote about going to his cellar, and rolling goat bones. A flying creature comes through his door, explodes, and leaves behind a chocolate, which Neil eats to get an idea.

In the actual ritual, you don't need a cellar. You need privacy, comfortable chairs, and candlelight.

The bones are not those of a goat. I can't say more on the matter.

And while chocolate is not required, it is encouraged. What is required are the boiled petals of a rare flower of the genus *Aconitum*. The petals, and a touch of the water, are mixed into a glass of wine and, at some time near midnight, you must light the candles, sip

the wine, and sit.

Relax. Perhaps enjoy a chocolate, if you brought one.

Then, as if his voice were an integral part of the warm glow around you, you will hear him.

No explosion. No flying creature. Just Neil Gaiman.

Neil will sit with you and share ideas. He'll look tired (you won't be the first writer he's visited that night), but he will give you his undivided attention.

You'll eventually begin to drift, trying to capture the flashes of him as you fight against your eyelids. You'll give in and slip into a restful night's sleep. Neil won't mind that you've fallen asleep mid-sentence. He'll smile, then vanish.



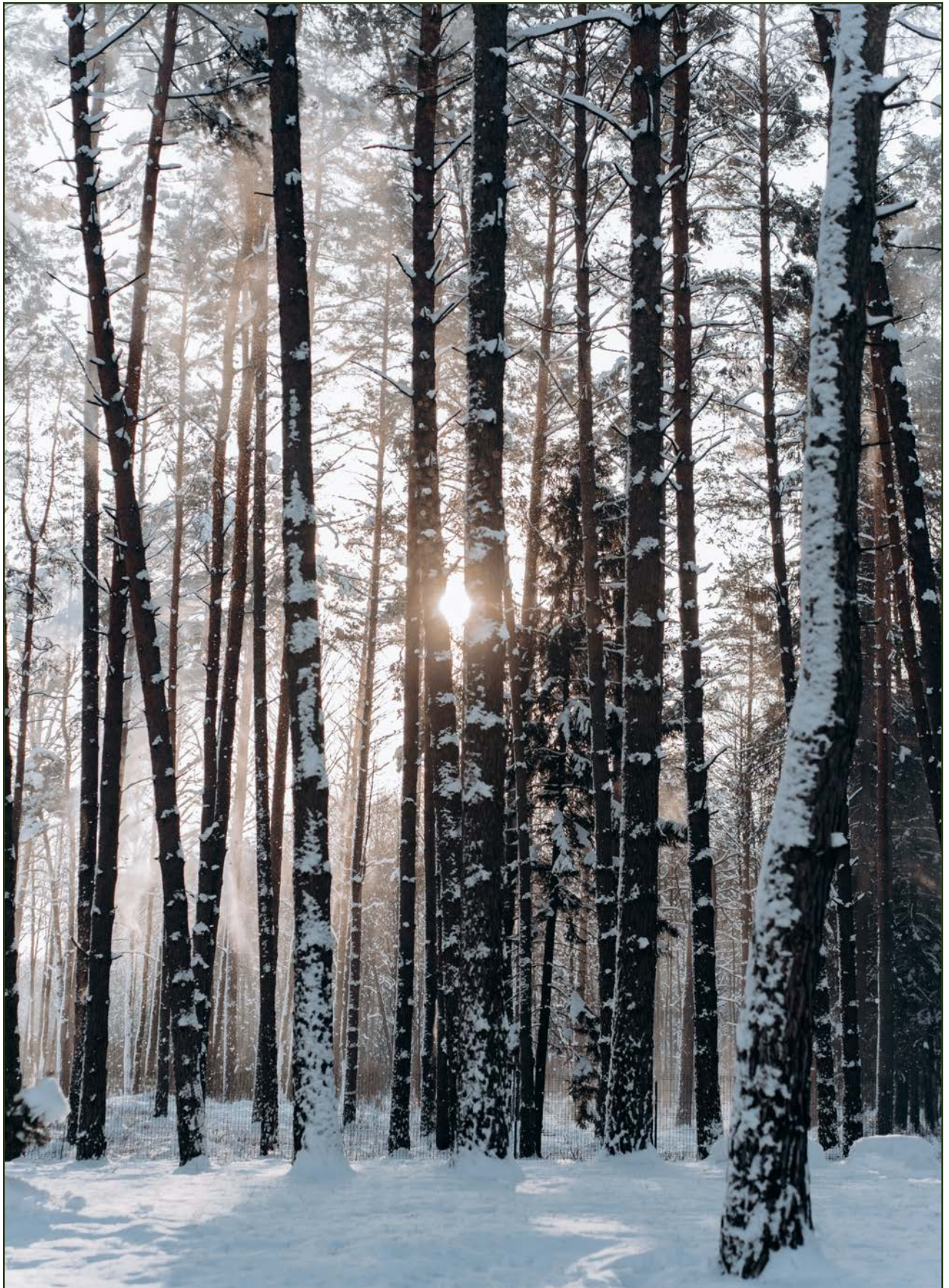
Neil couldn't (or wouldn't) tell me how he got this job, only that his predecessor was C.S. Lewis, and before Lewis was Mary Ann Evans. Even in his drunken stupor, Neil spoke with a veneration for his responsibilities as the key holder for literary ideas.

Aside from the inherent misdirection, one of the other reasons why I am able to share this with you is that, unless you know more than I tell you, attempting this ritual will almost certainly result in death.

As we stumbled out of Hob's Tavern and into the ruthlessly bitter Wisconsin night, Neil recalled the story of Rufus Bush, an American industrialist who had heard rumors of this great secret and, after the death of Mary Ann Evans, blackmailed her mourning husband into revealing the ritual. Bush died an agonizing death after ingesting lethal amounts of wolfsbane.

"Not everything has to be perfect to receive the ideas," he said, "but some things do."





Dead Dreams

By: Sandeep Kumar Mishra

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is the best selling author of *One Heart- Many Breaks*. He is a guest poetry editor at *Indian Poetry Review*. He has received the Readers' Favorite Silver Award-21, the Indian Achievers Award-21, the IPR Annual Poetry Award-2020, and the Literary Titan Book Award-2020. He was shortlisted for 2021 International Book Awards.

In his dreams, Rajan searches for the ghosts. He hunts for them, tracing their footsteps in the dirt. He is back in his hometown—he knows these roads. The moonlight shivers on his skin. The crooked streets rattle around him. His heart burns in his chest. *Baba, mama. Where are you?*

He runs, following the path laid out for him. The streets smell like smoke. Everything is hazy and deserted, shuttered up and locked away. He knows his neighbors behind each door. But no one steps out to help him. They're too scared. Rajan is terrified, too, but he keeps running.

Please, if I could just see you one more time.... I didn't know it would be the last time. I would have said so much more. Baba, mama.

When he looks up, the ghosts are further than before. They blur in the distance, like poorly developed photos, but he can still sense the sadness etched upon their faces. Their feet twist backward from their bodies. *Bhuta*. Spirits. He should have known better—he's been following their trail the wrong way the entire time. He won't ever catch up now.

Grief sweeps over Rajan like a monsoon. He drops to his knees. The ground begins to crumble. A dark pit opens underneath him—a grave—cloying and sticky with the scent of death. The spirits watch from a distance, cold in the low moonlight.

Rajan falls.

He wakes up with a jolt. It's still dark outside. Warm air filters in from the cracked window by his cot. The only sound in his cell is his own unsteady breath and what sounds like the rustle of paper. He looks at his journals. They lay still across the room, untouched.

He looks out the window. Two beady black eyes stare back at him, then rise in the dark, unfurling into an undulating brown body. The snake's tail lashes out and strikes the window. Rajan jumps back, his heart hammering in his chest. The snake hisses. It sounds more like a shriek of mocking laughter.

He doesn't sleep for the rest of the night.



Dawn spills like pale pink soup over the horizon, bringing with it a searing heat that refuses to break. The prisoners queue up to receive sloppy rations of oatmeal ladled into their bowl. The cafeteria smells like vinegar and bleach.

Rajan sits down at a table and pulls out one of his journals. He's made it a point to write every day he's been imprisoned—it's the only thing keeping him sane. A flip of the journal's pages shows his journey: raw confusion at first, legal jargon to look up later, and then feverish thoughts of revenge as he realized what had happened. After, his writing shows a dull acceptance of his fate, then a sudden jolt back to confusion as the pandemic hit and the world spun upside down.

He still feels all those things like an ache in the pit of his chest, a heartburn he can't be rid of. Rajan used to take pride in his sensitive emotions—it made him a better poet, after all, and his poetry landed him a teaching position at a prestigious university. Now, he wishes he could turn off his mind. There's too much to feel. It's overwhelming.

"Hey." One of the other prisoners—a skull-inked man, aptly nicknamed Bones—nudges Rajan's side. "Stop writing, professor. What's the point? None of us are

ever getting out of here.”

Rajan does not spare him a glance and continues writing. “The words are the point.” If he doesn’t write, the words will haunt him in the dark, and he won’t sleep.

Bones grunts, “That’s deep, man. I bet if I was that deep, my wife wouldn’t have left me.”

This is a ritual the prisoners go through daily, sitting around the table and wishing things had gone differently—a storytelling of sorts. Rajan has heard it all by now. *If I hadn’t met her...if he hadn’t pissed me off so much...if the cops hadn’t been nearby that day....* Rajan has never played their game. There’s no point in wondering about the past. He isn’t even sure of enough details about his case to wish differently.

All Rajan knows is this: One minute, he was an esteemed professor traveling internationally to attend a literary seminar. The next, airport security found a bag of white powder in his carry-on, and there was a global pandemic. The world was having a collective panic attack, and his pleas of innocence were lost in the cries of a million others.

Rajan’s mouth goes dry just thinking about the horrors of that day. He takes a sip of milk, but it’s curdled and stings going down his throat. He hacks up a cough.

Bones leans back. “Hey, get away from me, man. Is that contagious?”

“The sour milk? I hope not.” Rajan understands Bones’ anxiety. The fear of the plague is almost a second pandemic in and of itself. He sets the cup on the corner of his tray, as if it must be quarantined from the rest.

“Ugh.” Bones makes a face. “Why is everything here so rotten?”

“It’s a metaphor,” Rajan tells him dryly, and they both laugh.



Mid-morning, he gets a migraine, which makes him scream and kick his cot in frustration. He’s been plagued by headaches his whole life, but they got viciously worse when he came to Australia eight months ago: something about the climate, he suspects. He’s learned that there’s nothing to do but wait them out.



Rajan curls up in a corner of the room, his hands wrapped around his knees. White spots dance in his vision. It feels like a hammer is raining blows on the back of his skull. When things got this bad, his wife used to soothe him with a cool compress. But now, she’s a continent away. He passes out with her name on his tongue.

In his hazy, pain-filled sleep, he sees a snake. He can tell by the markings that it’s the same one from the previous night. Mottled spots of green blot the snake’s body like mold. No, not mold—it reminds Rajan of the diagrams of the COVID-19 virus he and the other prisoners were shown at the beginning of the pandemic.

The snake hisses at him. Rajan is distantly aware that this is a dream, so he does not flinch. The desert blurs around him. The prison is at his back. He’s outside. He’s free if he can just make it past the snake in his path.

Rajan picks up a stick from the ground, intending to shoo the snake away. Before he can, the snake shrieks and flails, its tail lashing on the ground. Rajan jumps back. The snake hurls itself toward him. He raises the stick and clubs it over the head. Its scales brush his wrist. He feels a pinch of pain. He pulls away and strikes it again. It keens, wild and pained. Adrenaline floods Rajan’s veins. He strikes the snake for a third time. It lies still.

Breathing hard, Rajan looks at his wrist. Two pinpoint pricks of fang bite are embedded in his skin. Poison seeps slowly through his veins. Dizziness overwhelms him, and he collapses.

He wakes up smothered in sheets from head to toe, like a funeral shroud.



The rest of the week flits by like a ghost in the mist. Time blurs, and Rajan struggles to find things to record in his journal. It’s just another day after day after day—what is there to write about when everyone is trapped, when nothing changes? He knows vaguely that this is momentous, that the world has never seen a pandemic of this magnitude. But he’s so isolated in the prison that he can’t conceptualize how the outside world would be changed.

He is starting to forget the details of his family’s faces.

He draws awkward, crooked pictures of them in his journal. Does his father wear two rings or one? Does his mother have a mole under her right eye or left? It strikes Rajan with a deep, tolling sadness that he will never again be able to look at them and remember.

With nothing else to do, Rajan starts recording his dreams. The doctor prescribed him sleeping pills to help with the migraines and insomnia, and they do help, but they make him dizzy, thick-limbed, and unable to differentiate wake and sleep. In this half twilight, he writes:

October 18, 2020. The ghosts came to visit me again. This time, they were my children. They danced around me in a circle, chanting, "Baba's dead! Baba's dead!"

I tried to tell them that I wasn't dead, that I was just away temporarily, but they couldn't hear or see me. I tried to embrace them, ruffle their hair, but I couldn't touch them. It was as if I was invisible or a ghost. Am I becoming a ghost? My feet are straight, and bhuta are restless, transient things. I never move. I am stuck. I hate being stuck.

October 19, 2020. Last night, I saw the snake—the same snake I always do. I killed the snake. But the snake returns. It bit itself—a perfect, pure ouroboros. It behaves like it also wants to die. I don't know how to feel about this. The snake returns. The snake returns.

The rest of the entry trails off into unintelligibility, marked by a spot of sleepy drool at the edge of the page.



"What's up, dude?" Bones prods Rajan's shoulder. They're in the exercise yard, Rajan crouching to pick up a dumbbell bar, Bones watching to make sure he doesn't injure himself. "You look even more depressed than usual, which is saying something."

Rajan focuses his efforts on squatting, then lifting the bar over his head. His muscles burn, but it feels good to sweat. "Nothing. I'm fine," he says.

"Really?" Bones arches an eyebrow. "You look like you're about to pass out."

"I am not—" A burst of light-headedness flows through Rajan. He sways on his feet and sets the dumbbell down with a *thunk*. "I am not going to pass out," he says, panting.

"Seriously, professor, you're worrying me." Bones

offers him a water bottle, which Rajan gratefully accepts. "Is it the nightmares? Are they getting worse?"

Rajan blinks. Water drips down his chin. "How did you know?" he asks.

"You cry in your sleep." At Rajan's expression, Bones rushes to reassure him. "We all have bad dreams, dude. We've all been through something heavy. If anyone judges you for it, I'll beat them up."

"Thanks," Rajan says, flattered by the offer. He wipes sweat off his forehead. "I think...I might be cursed. I don't know." He gestures to his chest. "My emotions are like water, filling me up, drowning me. There's only so much grief a person can take."

Bones sits next to him. "What do you see in the dreams? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"A snake," Rajan says, holding up his hands. "About this big. We fight. I kill it. The snake returns."

Bones scratches his head. "The same dream? Every night?"

Rajan shrugs. "Pretty much."

"Cool," says Bones. "In my dreams, my wife always yells at me." Rajan laughs humorlessly. "If you have the same dream every night, a spirit is haunting you. You need to do something to appease it."

"Like what?"

"Well, leave bowls of honey and milk outside for the fairies to eat. But you can't do that here. Maybe do something different to help it out? Hmm." Bones taps his hand against the barbell. "Saying that aloud, it all sounds pretty nutty."

Rajan gestures to the prison yard, to the barbed wire walls and the world at large, where panic and a pandemic consume them all. "If you ask me, anything's worth a try."

"Or ask your doctor to double your prescription."

"No, thanks. If I take any more sleeping pills, I might never wake up again." The thought had been appealing at times. But Rajan can't go through with that. He has to find his way back to India, to his wife and to his children, to his parents' ghosts and graves. He has to believe that someday, this will end. Giving up means *he* will end.



Rajan takes no sleeping pills that night. He lies on his cot, his arms folded over his chest, and he watches the moonlight seep, like spoiled milk, through the window. Part of him thinks the snake might come to find him while he is awake, but the desert outside his window remains bleak and empty. In the end, he has to go to it instead.

He closes his eyes. His breathing is soft and steady. He slips into sleep and dreams.

Here he is again: the jail behind him, the snake in front of him. Imprisonment or death. Are those his only options? Is he supposed to give up and let the snake poison him? Rajan refuses to believe it is so.

The snake bares its fangs, which curve like crescent moons in the light. Rajan picks up the stick. The wood is familiar in his hands, grooved from his grip.

“Back off,” he tells the snake. It hisses. “I mean it.”

The snake lunges. Rajan dodges, swiping the stick to protect his bare feet.

“What do you want from me? Just leave me alone!”

The snake writhes and coils. Its tail thumps in the dirt. Rajan strikes it with the stick. It howls.

This is his dilemma, the problem he’s solved over many nights of mystic battle: He can wound the snake, but, whenever he closes in for the killing blow, it finds a way to bite him. Slaughtering it only results in both of them dying.

Do something different. Break the cycle. Bones’ voice whispers in the back of Rajan’s head.

Rajan backs away. The snake follows. Blood drips from its abdomen.

“Stop,” Rajan says. “I don’t want to hurt you.” The snake ignores him. It seems compelled to attack. Its black eyes fix on the weapon in his hand.

So Rajan sets the stick down.

His heart is pounding in his chest. He raises his hands above his head.

“See?” he says, mouth dry. “I mean it.”

The snake rises and twists its head to consider him. Its eyes reflect the white light of the stars above.

“Go,” Rajan says. “You’re released. You don’t have to die to be free.”

The snake places its body back on the ground, as if it is bowing to him. Then it slithers off into the desert, leaving soft plumes of dust in its wake. Rajan drops his hands, breathing heavily. He takes a step into the night. Nothing stops him. For once, there are no ghosts, no migraines, no spirit-snakes waiting to strike. He is free.



The next morning, a guard comes to his cell, rapping loudly on the bars.

“Hey. Wake up.”

Rajan hasn’t slept. This time, it wasn’t insomnia but indecision: He is burdened by his choice to let the snake go free. What has he set loose? The nightmare has so warped his life that he can’t help but imagine that it will impact the waking world, too. For all his metaphors, for all his knowledge of spirits and curses and dreamscapes, he doesn’t know what he’s done.

“Get going,” the guard snaps. “You’re leaving.”

Rajan blinks and sits up. “Leaving?”

“In three hours.”

He almost doesn’t want to ask. It’s too much to hope for. “Where—where am I going?”

“I dunno. Back to wherever you came from, I guess,” the guard sneers.

But Rajan barely registers the jab. He’s going to get out.

He glances at the page in his journal, where he has written the first scrawling lines of a poem: *today I did not kill the snake / I set it free / it will return to the wild / I will wait for its mercy / and it will return to me.*

He asks, though he already suspects the answer, “Why?”

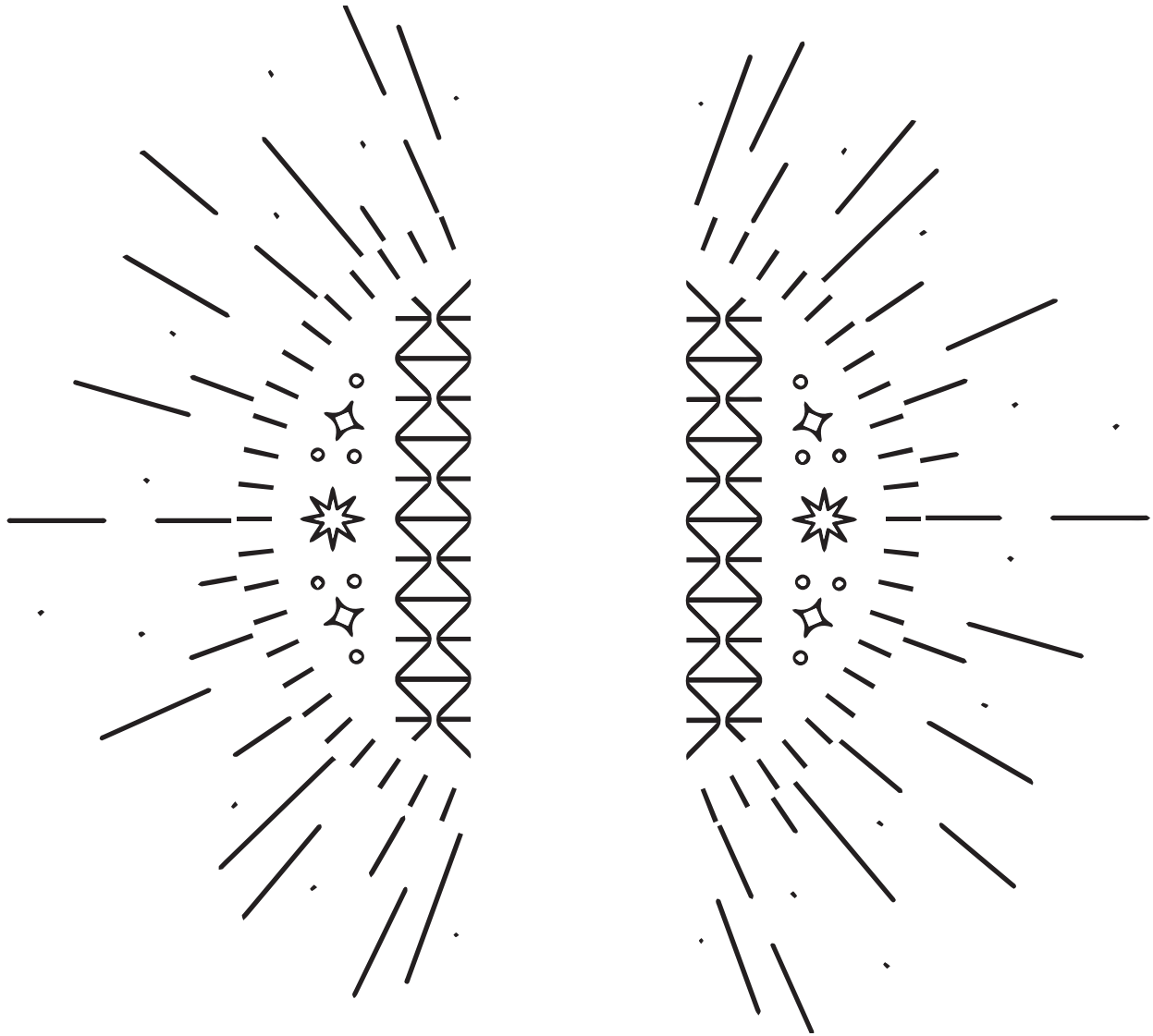
“Prison’s full—we need more space than usual because of the pandemic. You’re a minor offender. Your sentence was shortened. Congratulations.” The guard

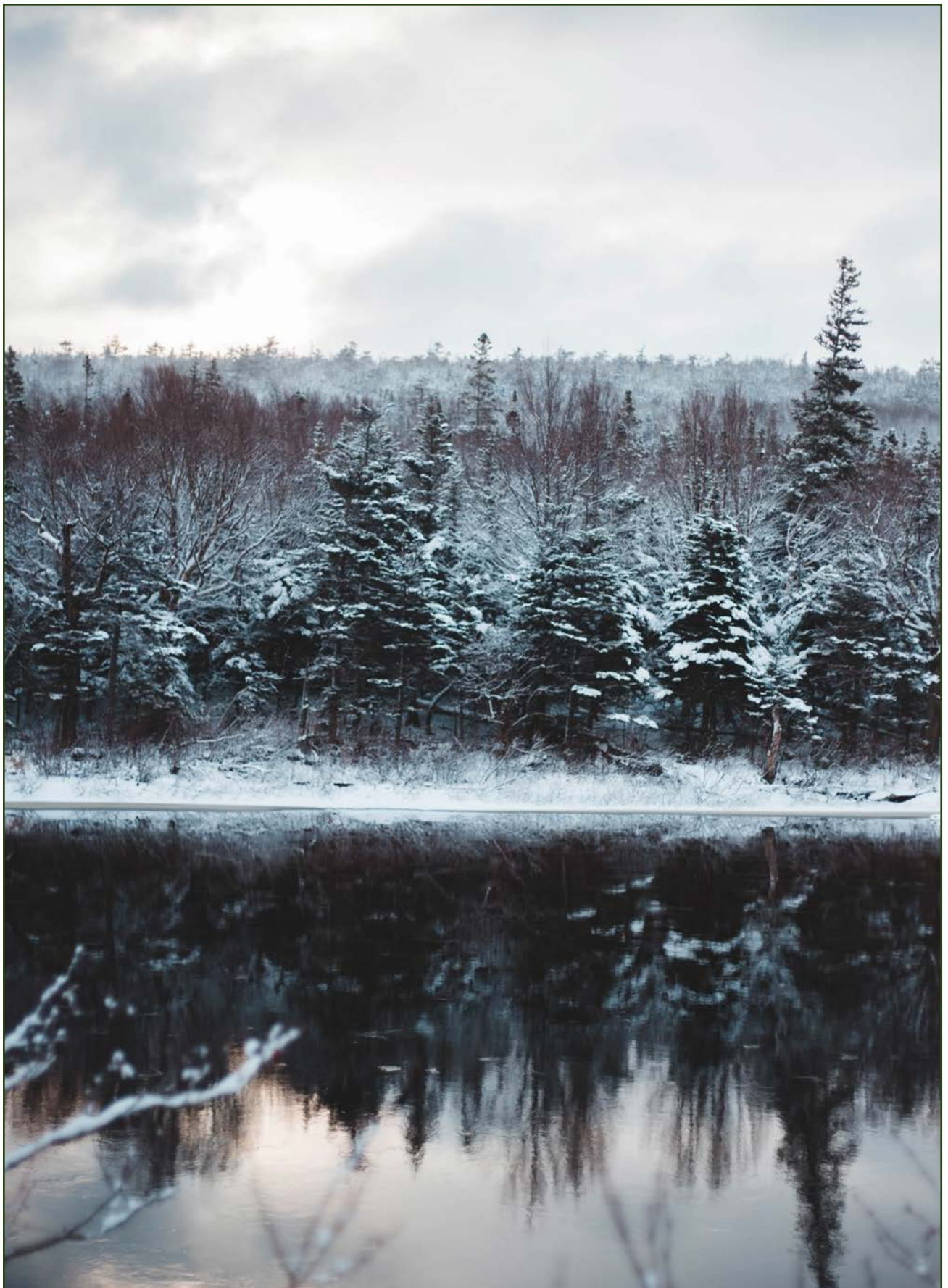
tosses a piece of paper at him, presumably some sort of court document. "Pack your stuff."

Three hours later, Rajan is out the door.

Two guards accompany him on either side, their nightsticks swinging. A car idles a few yards away. Rajan breathes the sweet desert air. The heat doesn't bother him, and his migraine has faded. Clouds of dust bloom like flowers. The world is still. Even the tumbleweed has stopped its travels to watch him. It would make a good setting for a poem, Rajan thinks.

As he takes his first steps as a free man, a snakeskin snaps beneath his shoe.





Her Favorite Place

By: T.L. Beeding

T.L. Beeding is a single mother from Kansas City, Missouri. She is co-editor of *Crow's Feet Journal* and *Paramour Ink* and is a featured author for Black Ink Fiction.

Lake George was beautiful during the winter. It always reminded me of a shimmering jewel, the centerpiece of a precious necklace, wrapped about the décolletage of the Adirondacks and draped in a blanket of snow. It was a jewel on which people could pause and take in nature's majesty; the place where dreams had been realized across generations as old as the mountains themselves. It was where my love for Marcie grew quicker than the shimmering water could freeze.

Marcie and I built a lot of memories out there, lakeside among the snowbanks. We'd sit at the shoreline, cradling steaming cups of hot cocoa and stretching our legs across the ice. We'd watch the children play and skate, the four-wheelers racing along the frozen thick of the water. Marcie squealed every time they zoomed past, giggling with delight. Her button nose wrinkled, her pink lips parted in a happy smile. Her chestnut hair was whipped by the chilled wind. And when the chill bit too hard, we would retreat back to our hotel, relaxing in each other's company—and arms—as night drew its blanket over us.

Since the first year we decided to go for Valentine's Day, Lake George had enchanted us. Nothing in Texas compared to the wintry majesty of upstate New York, and Marcie begged me to go annually. So every year, on the second weekend of February, I would pack our things and book our hotel room: the same room we stayed in the first time we visited, the same room where we first confessed our love. This year, my mother happened to be visiting as I began to pack. As I pulled Marcie's burgundy suitcase out from beneath the bed and lined it with her neatly folded clothes, my mother's eyes darkened.

"Joshua...what are you doing?"

"I'm packing for Lake George."

Her sigh was heavy, laden with disappointment and sadness.

"Again?"

"It's Marcie's favorite vacation spot. I can't disappoint her."

"Oh, Joshua..." was all she said, leaving me to my task without offering any help. Not that I would have accepted it anyway—Marcie was very particular about how her suitcase was packed. The clothes had to be rolled, military style. It made more room for souvenirs, she told me once. I smiled; she'd loved souvenirs from the lake. But instead of buying them for her this year, I'd be bringing her one. I folded the last thing to pack—a newspaper clipping from her nightstand—and placed it atop her clothes before snapping her suitcase shut.



The staff at the Fort William Henry Hotel knew me by name at this point. As I pulled into the lot and checked in, their smiles were genuine and melancholy, their eyes soft. Some avoided eye contact altogether, which I grew to understand. But all relived the memories when they saw me, just as I did when I saw them.

"Welcome back, Mr. Bratten," the woman at the front desk said gently. She handed me a packet with a single room key and an empathetic smile. "Room 142 as usual, prepared with chocolates and champagne this time, compliments of the house."

"You didn't have to do that..."

“You’ve been staying with us for years, Mr. Bratten.” Her eyes glossed over. “It’s the least we could do for you. Enjoy your stay.”

I took our bags down the hall, pressing the key into the lock and opening the room. Room 142 offered the best view of the lake; the large bay window overlooked the hill leading down from the fort to the shopfronts and docks lining the water’s edge. The sun still sat above the mountains, shedding weak light on the people peppered across the frozen lake. I placed our suitcases beside the bed, pulling the heavy curtains shut and turning down the lights. I sank into the mattress, letting the heaviness pull me down. The first look after returning was always hard, even though I knew Marcie loved it out there.

She was waiting for me out there.

“Tomorrow,” I whispered to the darkness, to myself, as the sunlight slowly dwindled. I turned my back on the chilled champagne and box of chocolates—artfully arranged on Marcie’s side of the bed—and let my eyelids fall closed. “I’ll meet you tomorrow.”



The next morning, tucking the newspaper from Marcie’s suitcase beneath my arm, I took the champagne and chocolates down to the lake with me. I left the hotel from the back entrance and slowly picked my way across the ice-slicked grass and down the hill to the street below. The route to Marcie’s favorite spot wound around the docks toward Shepherd Park, along a path thankfully clear of people at this time of day. Four-wheelers growled and spat as they raced across the lake, echoing back from the Adirondacks in a cold breeze that nipped at the scarf and jackets I’d wrapped myself in.

A small beach extended into the thick sheet of ice across the water, the beach Marcie and I liked to watch the four-wheelers from. But she wasn’t waiting there. I tightened my grip on the champagne and chocolate, carefully placing my feet on the ice until the snow thickened enough for me to take strides. I slipped between people taking pictures, ice fishing, and even camping, heading for the place I saw Marcie last: a secluded spot toward the center of the lake, some distance from the activities taking place. My knees sank into the snow, cushioned against the ice beneath. Brushing clear a spot, I gazed down into the clouded surface.

At least it was solid this time.

“Hey, Marcie.” I held the champagne and chocolates above the clearing, smiling weakly. “Look what the hotel gave us. Champagne and chocolate. For free, can you believe it?”

Only the breeze answered, tearing at my scarf as I popped the cork on the champagne bottle. I clinked the bottom with the ice before drinking long and deep, with half the bottle gone in one go. It took the edge off the pain rising in my heart. I licked my lips and stuck the bottle in the snow, unfolding the newspaper and reading the headline one last time before setting it on the bare ice. Hands trembling, I pulled my knees to my chest.

“I...think this’ll be my last time out, honey. I know you love it here...but I don’t think I can keep doing this. It’s too much. Too many memories.” Tears stung the backs of my eyes, my fingertips brushing the newspaper as it began to grow wet from the ice. “Let’s keep those memories here, on the lake. In the ice...where they belong now.”

“Hey, buddy—you okay?”

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been sitting in the snow, staring at the blotting newspaper, before I heard that voice. Obviously, it was long enough to raise someone’s concern. I considered the man standing behind me—a four-wheeler rider—before nodding.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I’m sorry. Am I in the way? I’ll move.”

“Nah, take your time. The race ain’t started yet. Just checkin’ to make sure you were all right.”

When he left, I turned back to the clearing in the ice and to the newspaper, which had absorbed so much condensation that it was nearly impossible to read now. Or perhaps it was blurry from the tears pooling in my eyes. It was hard to tell which. Corking the champagne, I pushed myself to my knees and touched my gloved fingers to my lips. Then I touched them to the newspaper clipping before brushing snow over the top of it. Covering the only words visible on the page now, covering the memories, right where they belonged:

Texas Woman Falls Through Thin Ice on Lake George.



One of Many ... One of One

By: T.R. Healy

T.R. Healy was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. His stories have appeared in such publications as *Scrutiny* and *Welter*.

Through his office window, Hagler watched swarms of students pour into the school this Monday morning. Often, they made him think of some peculiar army returning to their barracks after completing another grueling mission, even though their day was just beginning. It was a spectacle he observed every day since he came to work at Alexander Hamilton High School three years ago, and he didn't know why he continued to watch, but he did until the last student entered the building. Maybe he still hoped to see Dawson among the students. Maybe that was why he watched so intently.

It was possible, he supposed, but not likely.



Hagler was one of three vice principals at the high school, and, because he was in charge of boys, much of his time was spent dealing with disciplinary problems. Most days were pretty much the same, with boys sent to his office for acting up in class or driving their cars too fast in front of the school or smoking cigarettes in the park across the street from the main entrance. Sometimes, when a student was absent without an excuse or was late to class too often, his parents were summoned to his office. All in all, he pretty much knew what he would be doing each day before the day even got underway.

One morning, midway through his third year at Hamilton, he was surprised when Mr. Nadler, the longtime principal, came into his office, which he seldom did, and said, "We've got a problem."

"What's that?"

"Yesterday, I received some letters in the mail complaining about a certain student."

"Is that so?"

He nodded. "I'd like you to look into the matter, Steven," he said, handing him a clasped envelope, containing the letters sent by the concerned parents.

There were three letters, all purportedly from parents of current students at the school, but only one had a name attached to it. The focus of their concern was a sophomore, Dawson Arnold, whom they regarded as a potential threat to other students. Hagler didn't recognize the name, which wasn't unusual since nearly 2,000 students were enrolled at Hamilton. The parents admitted they had never met Dawson. But, on the basis of what their children told them, they considered him threatening because he often carried a knife with him; he wore a trench coat even on warm dry, days; and he had no friends.

Hagler, sighing, leaned back from his desk after he finished reading the letters and clasped his hands behind his head. He was not particularly troubled by a student carrying a knife in his pocket. Maybe he should be, but he wasn't because when he was a high school student, he often carried a pocket knife his grandfather gave him on his 14th birthday. And he also was someone who kept to himself and still did for the most part. The trench coat, however, was unsettling because it brought to mind the two students at Columbine High School, many years ago, who wore black dusters during their murderous rampage.

Due to the rash of school attacks that had occurred across the country the past few years, the school district devised a threat assessment program to determine if a particular student posed a threat to harm other students or faculty members. Though not entirely convinced, Hagler decided that the

complaints expressed in the letters were credible enough for him to recommend to Nadler to initiate a threat assessment of Dawson Arnold. He figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

Nadler accepted his recommendation and, as he knew he would, put him in charge of the inquiry. At first, he spoke with the current teachers of the youngster, as well as secretaries and custodians and gym teachers and librarians, but not any of his classmates, because he hoped to keep the investigation confidential. None of these people expressed any particular concern about Dawson but all admitted they scarcely knew him.

“He is like so many students who pass through Hamilton,” one teacher remarked. “They never make enough of an impression for you to remember them while they’re here, let alone after they leave.”

Her comment made him cringe a little because he was sure that not one of his high school teachers could remember him after he graduated. He was one of many, no doubt, but the realization still stung. He was just another occupant of a desk who preferred to sit in the back of the classroom so he wouldn’t be noticed. Seldom did he utter a word, unless called upon by a teacher. So he was as surprised as anyone that he went into teaching and figured it might have been because he wanted to be the one in charge in the classroom.



Determined that the assessment be as thorough as possible, Hagler next spoke with Dawson’s father, who had sole custody of his son after he and his wife divorced six years ago. The father worked evenings as a short-order cook at a truck stop near the interstate, so Hagler interviewed him at his apartment one afternoon before Dawson got out of school.

“So what’s this all about?” he demanded as soon as Hagler entered the apartment. “Is Dawson in some kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Arnold. That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

“What’s he done? He must’ve done something to bring you here.”

“He hasn’t done anything, so far. What I am concerned about is what he might do.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand,” he grumbled, after motioning for the vice principal to sit down at the small walnut table in the kitchen.

Then he told him about the complaints Nadler had recently received from some parents about Dawson.

“What, exactly, are they complaining about?”

“They are worried he might pose a threat to the safety of other students, and, as a result, we are trying to find out if their concern is warranted.”

“Well, it isn’t,” he barked, clearly baffled by the disclosure. “I can assure you of that. Believe me, Dawson would never hurt a soul. It’s not in his nature.”

Hagler didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes as he reviewed the notes he had scribbled down in a small spiral notebook.

“Two of the parents were disturbed that your son was known to carry a knife with him,” he said, reading from his notes. “And one of them understood he had the nickname, ‘Carver.’”

“I don’t know anything about any nickname some kids may have given him, but it makes sense because he likes to carve things.”

“What sort of things?”

“Just a moment,” he said, rising from the table. “I’ll go into his room and get some of his carvings to show you.”

He nodded and glanced around the small kitchen, which was spotless. Not a single dirty dish or utensil sat on the counter; not a towel appeared out of place. It hardly looked as if anyone ever used the room.

“Here we are,” Arnold said, setting a shoebox full of his son’s carvings on the table. “As you can see, he likes to carve animals.”

“Especially horses,” Hagler remarked, picking up a bucking white stallion.

“For years, when my brother was still around, I used to take Dawson to this rodeo held every year near my brother’s place. That’s probably why he became so interested in horses.”

“His craftsmanship is impressive,” Hagler said,

tracing a finger along the flank of the stallion.

Arnold smiled. "He puts a lot of effort into his carvings."

"It definitely shows," Hagler said, setting the horse back in the shoebox.

"Believe me, he takes a lot of pride in his work, as do I."

Hagler, nodding again, leaned forward on his elbows. "I have one more thing to ask you about, Mr. Arnold, then I'll be on my way."

"What's that?"

"Dawson's trench coat."

"What about it?"

"Why does he wear it all the time?"

Arnold squinted in exasperation. "What's the problem with that?"

Hagler then reminded him of the Columbine shooters who wore similar coats during their attack.

"You can't be serious," he snapped, barely able to suppress his anger.

"It's one of the concerns that one of the parents mentioned in her letter to our principal."

"For Christ's sake," he fumed. "I can't believe my son is considered a threat because of a coat he wears. This is absolutely ridiculous!"

Hagler was silent for a moment, then repeated the question.

"If you must know, he wears it because it belonged to my brother, who died in a boating accident a year-and-a-half ago. Dawson was very fond of him. He regarded my brother as his second father, and this is his way of keeping him in his thoughts."

"I see."

"Do you, mister? Do you really?"

He started to reply, but then thought better of it and put away his notebook.

"Well, sir, I appreciate your cooperation. You have been most helpful."

"So now what's going to happen?"

"Probably nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I don't believe your son poses a threat to anyone, and I'll make that clear in my report to our principal, and that should be the end of the matter."

"God, I hope so."



Nadler was a cautious person who was inclined to explore all conceivable avenues of inquiry before he made a decision. Hagler wasn't entirely surprised, then, when he didn't accept his assessment that Dawson wasn't a potential threat, but he was disappointed.

"These complaints are really not worthy of further investigation," he argued.

"Maybe not, Steven. But it can't hurt to find out all that we can about this matter."

"It can hurt the boy. It can make him feel even more isolated."

"This assessment concerns more than one student; it concerns thousands of students."

The vice principal was not invited to participate in the next phase of the investigation, which involved a school police officer and a mental health expert. Their inquiry included an interview with Dawson, which did not alleviate all their concerns, so they were unwilling to exonerate him as Hagler recommended. Instead, in order for him to remain at Hamilton, he was required to submit to random searches of himself and his wall locker, and each day had to check in and out with the secretary in the principal's office. And he was not allowed to bring a knife of any kind on school premises. Reluctantly, he agreed to these demands, hoping that the inquiry would end shortly. But it didn't. And it didn't take long before other students became aware that he was suspected of being a potential threat. Then the harassment began, not from all his classmates, but from enough of them to make him dread going to school.

Not quite two months after the second assessment was concluded, Hagler was informed by Nadler that his initial recommendation was accepted. Dawson was not deemed a potential threat to anyone at Hamilton. Relieved, he immediately called Dawson's father to let him know of the decision. To his surprise, Arnold did not share his relief but remained very angry that an assessment of his son had ever occurred.

"You know what you've accomplished, don't you?"

"What's that, sir?"

"You've turned a nice, quiet kid into someone scared of his own shadow. I don't know if you know it. But, for all intents and purposes, he's dropped out of your damn school. He spends most days hiding out in the park or just walking the streets."

"No, I wasn't aware of that, and I'm very sorry."

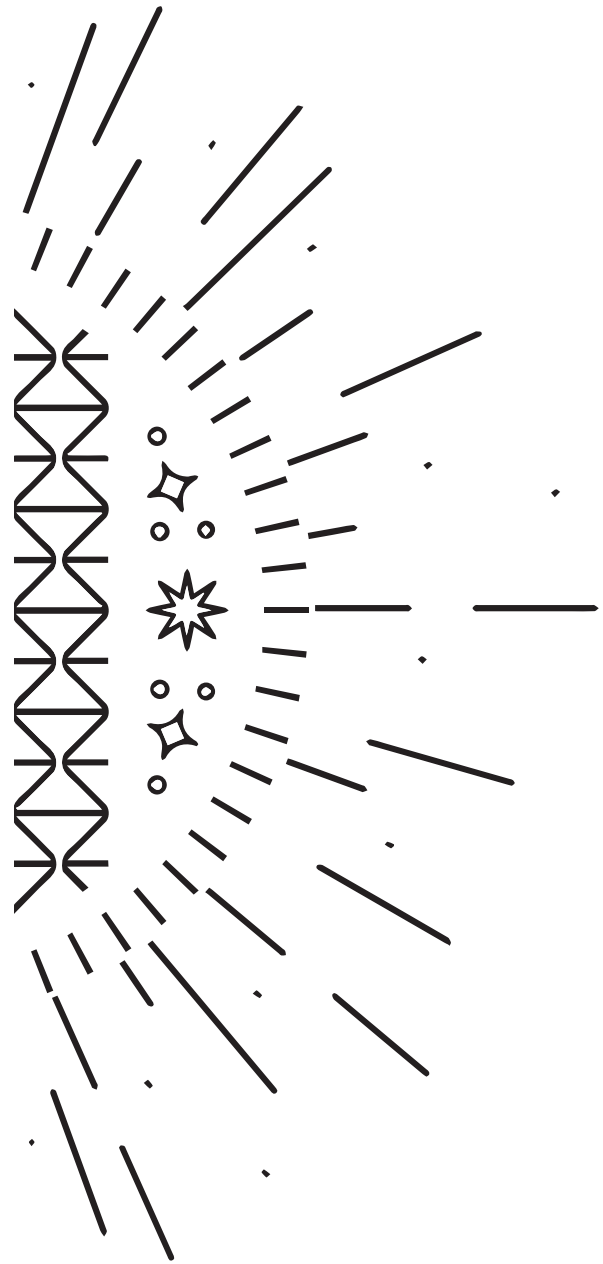
"Save your sorrys, please."

There was then a brief silence.

"You know who's the real threat, Mr. Hagler? You and all the others who thought my son was likely to hurt someone. I knew it was ridiculous, and so should you have known. So should all of you. Damn your souls!"

Arnold then slammed down the receiver so hard that Hagler heard a sharp ringing in his ears. What happened was what he was afraid might happen: The person thought to be harmful became the one who was harmed. He plugged his fingers into his ears, hoping the ringing would stop. But it seemed to get louder.

"Damn it all."



Too Proud

By: Nanci Woody

Bess, forced by poverty to quit school when she was 13, worked pulling tassels off corn, picking tomatoes, cleaning houses, and caring for a neighbor's baby. What she earned went to her father to help "put food on the table." When Bess was offered a job waitressing at a truck stop, she said good riddance to dirty diapers and muddy cornfields. She enjoyed mixing with the diners, and it was there that she met Johnny, the good-looking high school student who, when he wasn't pumping gas, endeared himself to her by clearing tables.

"I want real bad to impress you," he told her.

His good nature and kindness did impress Bess. Before he graduated in 1917, he asked Bess to marry him. She was both delighted and scared.

"But you'll be leaving for the Army," she cried. "What if...?"

"I'll be doing my duty, just like everybody else." He put his arms around her, pulling her close. "There's nothing I want more than to be your husband, Bessie. Don't you worry."

As soon as Johnny finished boot camp, he and Bess stood before a Justice of the Peace and exchanged vows. Their honeymoon was two nights in a dingy motel room. Bess was almost 16.

Johnny saw the worst of the war during the attack on the German forces in the Belleau Woods of France. Bess watched the newsreels, saw *Colliers* and the *Saturday Evening Post* cover art depicting war scenes, and heard the talk about the gory battles in the trenches of Europe. She prayed daily for his life to be spared and was terrified that her husband's name would appear in a list of the fallen in the local

Nanci Woody has just completed the pilot for a miniseries, converting her prize-winning novel, *Tears and Trombones*, into eight episodes for TV. She has also published many short stories and poems in print anthologies and online. She is currently working on a chapbook and a memoir.

newspaper.

When "Johnny came marching home again," as they later joked, they felt like the luckiest people in the world.

In the ensuing years, Bess was pregnant more than either of them wanted. With their fourth child on the way, Johnny reluctantly left his small-town job to take a better-paying factory job in Chicago. He boarded a Greyhound every Sunday to travel 100 miles north, worked 12-hour days, slept on a cot at the YMCA, and heated soup on a kerosene stove. On Friday nights, when he took the bus home, Bess was waiting for him. Her heart beat faster when he stepped off the bus, tossed his duffel bag aside, picked her up, and swung her around.

"I hate being away from you," he said. "But it's temporary. We'll be growing old together."

Johnny scraped together enough cash to buy a tiny house, dwarfed by cornfields in every direction. Though she didn't say the word, *shack* is what Bess thought. The house had no inside plumbing, ugly brown shingles, broken windows, a grungy clothesline sagging between two branches of a maple tree, and garbage buried in the backyard. She envisioned herself forever scrubbing black soot off the walls and ceiling from that smoke-belching, coal-burning stove in the middle of the living room.

When she noticed the broken windows they wouldn't be able to afford to fix, she couldn't hold back.

"I can already see us stuffing those holes with rags come winter."

Johnny's reply was, "Now, Bessie. Don't you get too

proud on me. This here's our dream house. We'll fix it up. And remember, the bastards can't kick us out."

Johnny had been working at the factory two years when a piece of steel flew off a grinder and into his eye. An infection set in, and, the next day, he boarded the Greyhound for the last time.

Bess put cold cloths on his fevered head and held a thermometer under his tongue for days until the doctor told her there was nothing more to be done.

She crawled into Johnny's bed, placed her hand over his heart, and willed it to keep on beating. But this was not to be, for within minutes, she felt his last breath hot on her cheek as he gasped, "Bessie, my Bessie."

In a makeshift cradle on the floor, their three-month-old baby began to whimper. Within minutes, he was sobbing and gasping, as if he knew he had just been robbed of a thing so important he couldn't bear it. The other three rushed to their dead father's bedside, huddled around Bess, and circled their arms around her. The children couldn't bear to see their mother so distraught when they themselves needed comforting.

At the funeral, they all sat in the front pew, with Bess holding the baby while the oldest boy, who had just turned nine, huddled close to his younger brother and sister. The preacher droned on about how ironic and sad it was that Johnny escaped injury in the Belleau Woods of France only to come home from the war and die of blood poisoning. Finally, he invited Bess and her family to come forward and lead the procession to view the body. But Bess held tightly to her children and didn't budge from her seat to participate in what she considered to be an experience too painful for her family. It was an awkward moment for the preacher, but, when he saw her tears, he motioned the others in the congregation to the open casket.

Bess tuned him out and turned her mind from grief to worry. How would she, an uneducated, impoverished young widow with four kids, survive? She assumed she was about to become an object of pity and hated that thought. Later, as she put her kids to bed in the shack that was now hers, she was thankful she had a place for her family. She wouldn't have to pay rent. As Johnny had said many times, "The bastards can't kick us out."

Bess had little time to grieve. Her small pension wasn't nearly enough, so, as distasteful as it was, Bess visited the welfare office. She rummaged sales for school clothes, cooked navy beans and macaroni and

cheese, made bread and pancakes, and churned butter. Every night during the winter, she "borrowed" coal from the railroad's stockpile. Pulling a small wagon, she trudged through the snow in her heavy coat and gloves, showing up at the coal sheds by the tracks right before the 12:45 a.m. came thundering through. *Make do.*

Sadness clung to her like the hot, humid Midwest air.

When the older kids were able to take care of the younger ones, Bess returned to waitressing. An unexpected benefit was the respite it provided from the unending loneliness.

She had been a widow for eight long years when Frank, charismatic and bold, ambled into the diner, straddled a stool, placed his elbows on the counter, and leaned forward. He narrowed his gaze, caught her eyes, and wouldn't let go.

"Got something good to eat, hon?"

Bess was flustered. "Haven't seen you around here before."

He ran his hand through his thick, curly hair.

"I live a couple of towns down the road. But, if I'd known someone as pretty as you was working here, I'd of been in a lot sooner."

Bess was unaccustomed to such flattery. Her face turned red.

Frank didn't fail to notice.

"Damn. I've embarrassed you. But I don't see a ring on your finger, so I assume I'm not out of line. Tell me I'm right."

Bess, dizzy with delight at being courted again, was thrilled when Frank picked her up in his sleek, new Cadillac. She had never owned a car of her own and felt fortunate for the first time in many years.

Frank took her out to supper and to Saturday night dances in the town hall. They parked by a small lake, listened to FDR's *Fireside Chats*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and *The Shadow*.

Bess, smitten, refused to think about the implications of the fact that Frank never invited her to his house. And though she kept it to herself, she was terrified of becoming pregnant when they made love in the back

seat of his Cadillac. Inevitably, after they'd courted seven months, she was about four months along. She had no doubt Frank would do the right thing. Hadn't he told her many times in that back seat that he was crazy about her? She dreaded giving him the news. But, when they were parked in their favorite spot by the lake, she tearfully told him she was pregnant. It was then that he told her about his wife and kids in that "town down the road." It was then he told her of his plan to divorce this wife and move out West with yet another woman. It was then that Bess's heart was ripped apart for the second time.

Alone and depressed, Bess could barely summon the strength to show up for work at the diner. She tried to hide her swelling belly with oversized rummage sale shirts, even though the small-town inhabitants knew all there was to know about everybody else. Overwhelmed with shame, she had to endure their furtive glances and hands-over-their-mouths whispers. She put her head down and kept on walking when a long-time acquaintance crossed the street to avoid her, like her condition was contagious.

When her pregnancy became obvious to her boss, he called her into his dingy office.

"You're not gonna like hearing this, but you know it's not right for a widow, pregnant like I know you are, to be strutting around in front of these high school kids coming in here to have themselves a Coke."

Bess fought panic, tears, and the urge to scream. "I need this job!"

"I know you do. And believe me, Bessie, me and this whole town pities you. But the people around here won't go for no pregnant waitress, especially an unmarried..."

"Don't say it again," she cried.

"You're a proud woman, Bess. Some might say too proud." He urged her toward the door. "There's always welfare. You know that routine, and you can qualify again, since you still got kids at home and all."

A month before their baby was due, Frank knocked on Bess's front door. When she saw him standing there, her hand shot to her mouth, and that now-familiar pain filled her chest.

"Come on now, Bess." Frank held out his hand. "Take this. You'll be needing some money."

His bright blue Cadillac was parked in the street, the engine running, the familiar back seat piled high with suitcases. His about-to-be new wife was sitting in the passenger seat. The whole neighborhood heard the cry that erupted from Bess's gut before she slapped the money from Frank's hand.

"You're too proud, woman. I'm trying to help you out here."

Bess fell to her knees, gasping, her arms hugging her huge belly. Frank reached out to her, tried to help her up.

Bess slapped his hand away, screamed, "Don't touch me! Go on to California!" She went inside and slammed the door, not wanting him to see her swollen and ashamed. Tears leapt from her eyes as her mind flashed on the kind of life her bastard child would be forced to endure.

Frank, eager to head out on the road, picked up the money, tucked the bills behind the doorknob, and drove away, never again to be seen by Bess, never to be seen at all by his unborn child.

A few weeks later, tears streaming unceasingly from her eyes, Bess delivered her daughter at home. As the doctor hastily filled out the necessary forms, he asked, "You want to give me the father's name, Bess?"

Exhausted, she turned her head away.

He held up the birth certificate, tapped on it. "Come now. I'm sure you know I have to put something on this blank line."

She rose up on one elbow and motioned for the doctor to lay the papers on the bed and hand her the pen. Bess knew very well how what she was about to do would be interpreted by her small-town neighbors. But having vowed to never again utter his name or attach herself to him, her pride left her with no other option.

Where the father's name should have appeared on the birth certificate, she scribbled the word "Unknown."





By Marina Burana

Chance

By: Marina Burana

The sound of the waves found its way into the house, and it felt like a big hug. It was the music that held Maria's days together, one after the other, a compendium of moments of her life on that island. She would sometimes sleep outside without Mrs. Chen knowing. She felt better when she was closer to the sea. Outside of the house, she always had the feeling that the sea was right there, under her toes.

Maia, Maria's friend, had told her to be careful; sleeping inside was a better choice since there were many little snakes outside at night. Maria knew it was true. She had often found the remains of snakeskin, but she just didn't care about them. She closed her eyes, snuggled into the armchair, and fell asleep with the rocking sound of the waves. She thought every time the sea *inhaled*, there was a profound silence that engulfed the whole Earth. Then it would *exhale*, and something of this world would be restored; something would be given back.

That sea was all she had, truthfully. It was the only thing she could count on. Of course, there were her friends and family back home with whom she had video conferences every day, mostly at work, since she only had one day off per month, and sometimes her days off got canceled, and two or three months would pass without one day to herself. So she had no choice but to chat with everyone while taking care of Mrs. Chen. Of course, this was frowned upon by Mrs. Chen's family members, who were always suspicious of her and treated her with utter disdain.

"You don't understand how things work," Mrs. Chen's daughter would say to her, "but here in Taiwan, when we take care of the elderly, we can't be talking on the phone all the time."

That was on a good day. On a bad day, she would

Marina Burana focuses on writing fiction in English and in Spanish. She has published three books of short stories, and her poems and her works of fiction and nonfiction appear in various anthologies, journals, and magazines. Her plays have had stage readings and full productions in the United States, United Kingdom, Argentina, Canada, and Taiwan.

receive threats regarding the termination of her contract and even deportation! This last one sent shivers down her spine. She couldn't go back to the Philippines. Her and her family's lives depended on that job, so she would not talk with them while attending to Mrs. Chen. She would do it at night when the old woman was asleep (although Maria was technically still working). As she talked to her family and friends, she would hear the waves in the background, telling her in that gentle whisper that she was not alone, that she mattered.

Mrs. Chen was, all in all, a nice lady. If Maria had to describe her, she found that the best word would be "silent." She barely said anything, and whatever she wanted to express came as small gestures and quick glances. When they first met, Maria thought her choice not to speak revealed a sanctimonious disdain deliberately directed to her. Then she realized it was Mrs. Chen's intimate way of dealing with old age: Her existential angst transformed into an atlas of silence, where the many circumstances of life bifurcated and converged into a landscape of hopelessness and regret. Still, there were times when Maria would say something nice to her, and Mrs. Chen would try a little smile or even say something nice back. But those were the vagaries of an odd day, nothing more. So their relationship was distant, almost non-existent. But, on some level, Maria thought there was a hidden conversation between them; a shared outcry that was only visible and invisible at the same time in that profound silence that enveloped them day after day. She couldn't think of Mrs. Chen as a friend, of course. But she sometimes wondered what a friend really was. She had once heard someone say, "Friendship is no less mysterious than love or any of the other faces of this confusion that is life." So would it have been wrong, for at least a moment of mild delusion, to regard Mrs. Chen as a friend?



One Wednesday morning, on her free day, Maria decided to go to Taipei and visit some friends from Indonesia who were having a party. Maia had invited her, and Maia's friends were all right, she thought, so she went. She made sure to carry her ARC (alien resident certificate) because she would be asked to show it every now and then. The police would do that. She was usually asked to show it two or three times a day if she was out in the street. Men had it worse.

She put on a black T-shirt, a skirt with a flower pattern (a gift from Maia), and some makeup she had bought herself. She didn't like wearing makeup; it felt unnatural. But she had realized that some wrinkles in the corners of her eyes were starting to show, and whenever she used makeup, poof! It was like magic—everything looked smooth and young again. When she was wearing makeup and looked at herself in the mirror, she felt she could do anything; she could be anyone she chose to be.

She smiled. With that skirt and that makeup, she felt beautiful.

She took the 9:45 train to Shu Lin. It would arrive in Taipei at 11:30. Many of her friends hated the train because it took so long. They would look at their phones all the way to Taipei. She did that, too, but not after passing the sea. She would devote the first 30 minutes on the train to looking out the window at that huge expanse of water. She liked to think of her friends and family somewhere on the other side. The horizon meant possibility. It meant millions of lives like hers, struggling, dreaming, and wanting to be someone else.

The train advanced fast. But the sea was imperturbable. It was out there, in all its magnificence, like a rock, deceptively unaltered, as if it were watching over the land. She thought the sea was wise. It had all the answers. This idea made her feel protected. She had a very private dialogue with that sea she knew so well, and in that special relationship they had, in that silent exchange of breathing in and out together, the world made sense. Maria loved looking at it from the train because she was certain the sea was looking back, only focused on her. Nobody else understood that secret logic they shared, the abyss of their minds, their way of saying so much by not saying anything at all. In those ways, the sea made her remember things. One memory, in particular, came up often on the train.

She must have been around ten years old. It was the most beautiful Saturday morning, and her grandmother had just come to Manila from the little town where she lived to spend a few days with them. Maria and her five sisters adored the old woman and saw her as a definite source of wisdom. Her name was Esther, and she was stern and decisive. She had raised Maria's father and his brother under the belief that one should only cry as a last resort and, even then, to try anything in their power to avoid it. That mandate had been passed on to Maria and her sisters through their dad in what she considered ruthless choices.

That Saturday morning, her grandma brought an imported chocolate that one of her neighbors had given her and put it in the fridge. Maria's mother said they would all share it the next day. It was a treasure to have something imported, and Maria and the girls were crazy about it. They would open the door of the fridge just to look at it. On Sunday, when the time to share it finally came, the chocolate was gone. Somebody had eaten it the night before and had left the paper sleeve, with the aluminum foil in it, in the fridge, giving the impression the chocolate was still there. Since nobody confessed, and the chances of finding the thief were slim, all the girls were grounded and locked in the bedroom they shared amidst an uproar of yelling and confusion.

Two weeks passed, and Grandma had gone back to her town. To everybody's surprise, another chocolate of the same brand as the one that had caused so much turmoil appeared in the fridge. It was surprising, since they didn't have the money to afford such a luxury. The girls, a little troubled, didn't say anything to their parents. They didn't even discuss its sudden appearance with one another. It was as if the new chocolate didn't exist.

That night, the whole house was suddenly disturbed by a wailing sound and a flurry of activity in the kitchen. Everyone quickly gathered there to see what was going on, but the lights were off so they could barely see each other. When their mother turned the lights on, they found Maria's youngest sister, Christina, shouting, crying in pain as she touched her left cheek, trying to explain how much her tooth hurt. Their father was right next to her, looking a little amused and holding the paper sleeve of the famous chocolate, with its gold aluminum foil and a piece of rectangular wood that fit perfectly in it. The hoax, the guilty, and the tears were all out in the open. It was peculiar, Maria thought, that their father seemed to be vectoring towards this strange moment

of weakness, giving ground to the crying. But then it hit her. That night, he had established something in their household that was completely his own, something to pass on to generations to come: tactical shrewdness as a newly founded mandate.

He died a year later, accidentally being shot by the police. But Maria had always kept that teaching fresh in her mind, and she gave way to that memory every time the sea spoke to her in their own secret dialogue.



She was feeling drowsy and, when the train stopped at Gui Shan, she realized she had fallen asleep. She had missed 15 minutes of the first part of the journey (her favorite part!), and this was very frustrating. They stayed in that station for ten minutes. It was a shabby station. The walls were cement-gray with big patches of mold. Some men who spoke in Malaysian got on the train. She didn't speak Malaysian but was used to hearing it in the streets and could rapidly recognize it. Right when the train was about to leave the station, a woman with a three-year-old boy hopped on. She was Taiwanese. She looked at Maria and smiled, and this disconcerted her deeply. Nobody ever smiled at her like that for free, least of all a Taiwanese woman. She would sometimes get pity smiles from white folks, the so-called "expats." Of course, Maria was an "immigrant," not an "expat," although she didn't understand the difference since she and the expats were all working there and had adopted the country as their own.

The woman and the little boy started playing hide-and-seek. He would put both hands on his face and he was automatically hidden; sometimes he would close his eyes, which meant that he was gone, that nothing existed but himself. His mother would do the same, and she would kiss him almost non-stop. He would kiss her, too, with the same fruition. They would hug and kiss as if there was no tomorrow. The mother would also whisper things in his ear, and he would release a loud and hearty laugh that she would suppress. But she did it with no real commitment, laughing with him as she tried to make him stop. This whole scene was confusing to Maria, who was sitting some inches away from them. She had never seen a Taiwanese mother so devoted to her child in public. The show of affection was mystifying and unexpected. She thought about this for a moment and looked at them and felt happy. She didn't know why; she reckoned it had to do with the profound beauty

in that outburst of emotion she was witnessing. She smiled at them, and they smiled back. The little boy said “你好!”¹ and waved his hand. She did the same, and the mother was amused by him. But the sun was reaching Maria's head, and she started to doze off. She tried making herself comfortable, but the gap between the window and the seat was too big. After a little bit of twisting and turning, she felt something soft being placed on the gap. It was a beautiful flowery little coat. But upon closer inspection, what she thought were flowers revealed themselves to be tiny little dinosaurs of different colors. She looked at the woman with the boy and told her it was not necessary. She had a terrible habit of drooling when sleeping.

The woman said, “Take it, really, no problem at all.”

The boy, trying to solemnly reinforce his mother's statement, said, “My dinosaurs help me sleep. They are not scary; they want to play. I dream of them. You dream of them now.”

Maria and the woman laughed. The only option was to accept such a beautiful gesture, so she did.

It was a pity she felt so tired in the first 30 minutes of her journey. She never missed that part, but she couldn't manage to keep her eyes open this time. The funny thing was she *did* dream of dinosaurs: two big dinosaurs who roamed a deserted island and ate coconuts until they turned on each other and one of them killed the other. That's when Maria suddenly woke up and found out the train was already in Xi Zhi. She looked at where the woman and the boy had been sitting and saw that the spot was empty. They had already left.

As Maria held the little coat with the dinosaurs and looked out the window at the buildings that populated her view, she started crying. She cried as demurely as she could because she didn't want to attract attention to herself and also because every time she cried, she remembered her father and her grandmother, and their ways of dealing with grief. She covered her face with the coat until she realized her makeup was smudged, running down her face and leaving big stains on the little piece of cloth. She must have looked hideous—like a monster—and felt bad about ruining the coat, although she knew how to clean it.

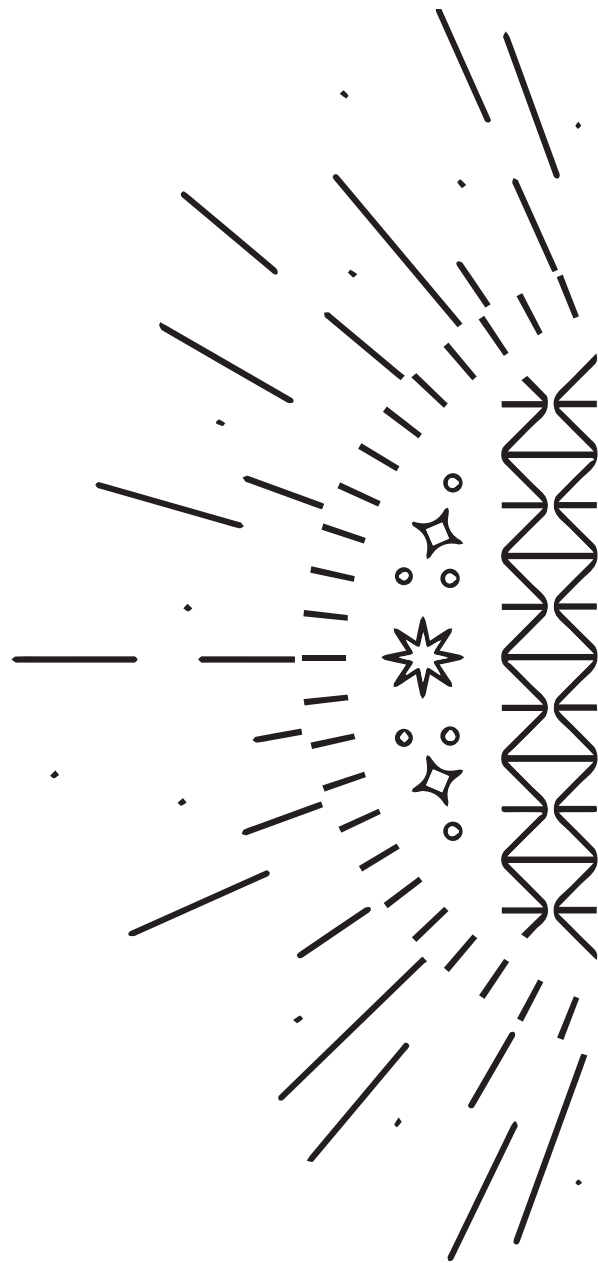
She couldn't stop crying. She had slept so well with

1 Hello!

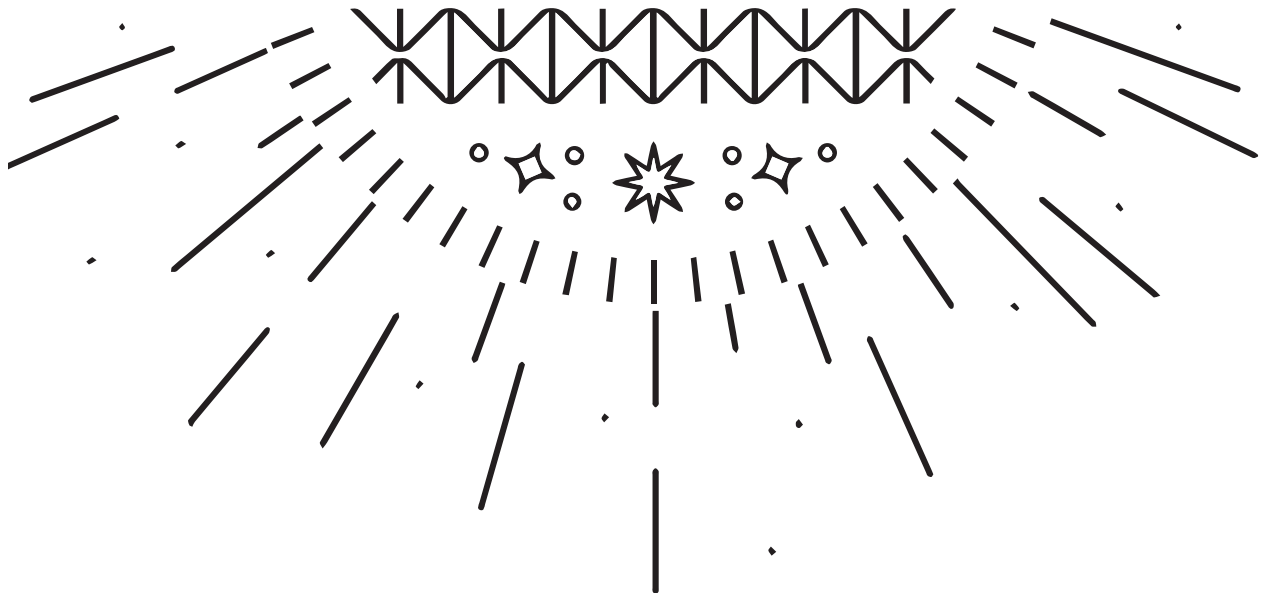
that coat as her pillow that she felt guilty. Not only had she not been able to give it back, but she had also missed her chance to say thank you one more time. Now she felt she hadn't thanked them enough. She had been so shocked since the very first moment the woman had smiled at her that it had all happened too quickly without giving her time to process the profundity of the interaction—ambushed in that strange configuration of a reality that had never been *her* reality—and the only way she could cope with it was by crying, by letting out all that melancholy that was unrelentingly welling up in her mind.

For some reason, she kept hearing the sound of the waves, as vivid as if she were at the beach, and this made her cry more. The train was nearing Taipei, and Maria thought she had to step into another world. She had to go to this party and smile and try not to be herself. Even at those little reunions, she had to change her skin, like those snakes that probably slept near her at night when she decided to sleep outside in the armchair and be lulled by the rhythm of the waves.

She put the coat with the dinosaurs in her little purse, got off the train, and slowly stepped on the platform. The day was just beginning, but Maria felt so tired already. Of course, she was tired because of her work, but now she felt her energy was drained by what had happened on the train. That small, tiny gesture of human solidarity had not only helped her sleep and made her feel grateful and hopeful about the future, but it had also done something else for her. The woman and the child, for those few minutes in which they had been part of her life, had given her something as abstract and concrete as what the waves had always offered her: the certainty of a hug. She felt good. She felt precious.







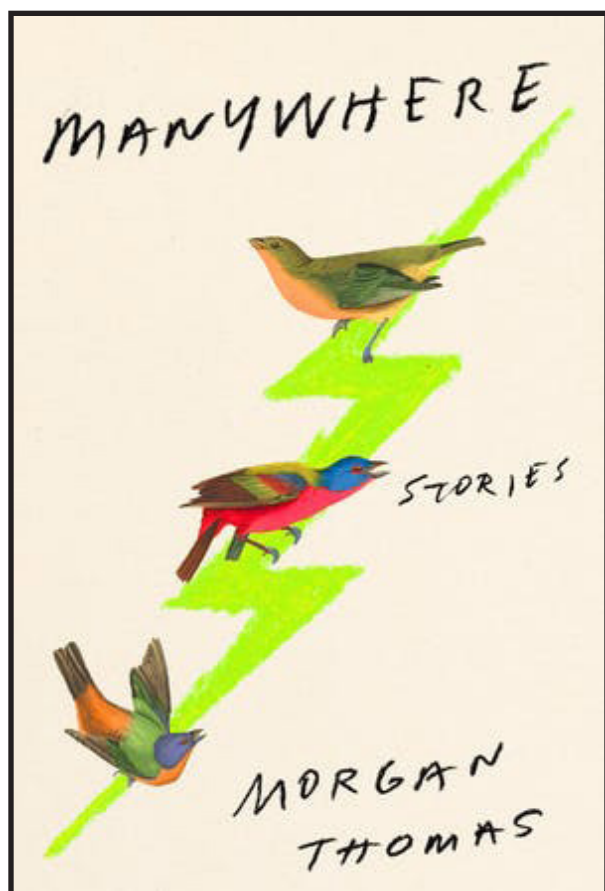
Short Story Book Reviews



Morgan Thomas Evokes Rebellion in Their Debut Collection

Title: *Manywhere*
Author: Morgan Thomas
Print Length: 224 pages
Publisher: MCD Books

Pub Date: January 25, 2022
Rating: 4/5 stars
Review by:
Julia Romero



Morgan Thomas’s debut collection uncovers the untold histories of genderqueer folk in the American South and repositions them through a lens of belonging and desperation revealed through Thomas’s expert prose and powerful imagery. Sometimes ruthless and raw, Thomas’s characters are delightfully succinct and complicated, beautifully crafted and daring. *Manywhere* is about the lengths we must go to see ourselves reflected in the ghosts of the past.

In “Bump,” a trans woman, Louie, reckons with her

desire and grief when she starts wearing a pregnancy bump. In the title story, a trans person makes it their mission to find a replacement daughter for their confused, elderly father. In “The Expectation of Cooper Hill,” a young writer pieces together the history of her ancestor, a midwife who supposedly disappeared. On her way home from an eating disorder treatment center, a young woman is mistaken for a vampire in “Transit.”

Manywhere deals in the complicated realm of in-betweenness, in the undefinable, in the minutia of motherhood and longing and gender.

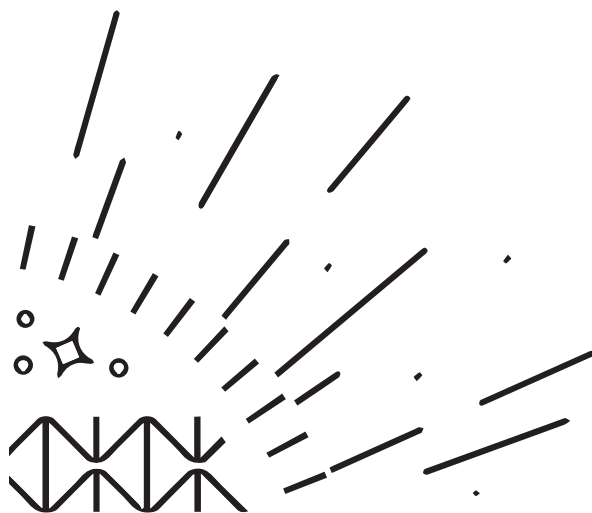
Through evocative imagery and didactic one-liners, Thomas pays homage to queer storytelling and shapes stories rich with heartbreaking honesty and nuanced metaphors. *Manywhere* deals in the complicated realm of in-betweenness, in the undefinable, in the minutia of motherhood and longing and gender. And when Thomas’s characters are forced within the cage of labels, they rebel, and within a world defined by binaries, Thomas has carved a space for readers to see themselves reflected.

This rebellion is most keenly felt in “Bump,” the knock-out story of the collection. Originally published in the May 2021 issue of *The Atlantic*, “Bump” subtly comments on normative depictions of pregnancy and acknowledges the shared grief caused by merging motherhood with womanhood.

As Louie’s emotional connection to the bump grows, the reader grows alongside her. Distressed by the thought of exposure, Louie imagines the various

outcomes that may occur if her coworker, Julie, were to discover her deception. In one imagined scenario, Louie's belly hangs open, bloody and gushing, where the bump was ripped from her skin. Louie begs Julie to bring her a needle and thread so she can sew the bump back to her aching stomach. Moved by this harrowing and heart-wrenching image, the reader keenly feels the "lack" as a ghostly presence, haunting Louie as she clings to the impossible. When the people closest to Louie begin to mock her bump, even trying it on themselves, the visceral and violent reaction from the reader mirrors that of Louie. By the end of the story, the reader is left with the sense that something monumental has occurred on the page—a testament to Thomas's talent and deep-seated care.

Stories such as "Bump," "The Surrogate," "Manywhere," and "Transit" are masterworks in suspense and ingenious narration, perfectly suited to the short-story form. While other stories, such as "The Daring Life of Philippa Cook the Rogue" and "Atla's Place," felt too grand in historical scope for the format and didn't pack as much emotional punch as the more streamlined stories. Nevertheless, Thomas has crafted a collection that is an exceptionally worthy read and unparalleled in its empathy, sure to inspire and move.



Morgan Thomas's work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *the Kenyon Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Yale Review*, *Electric Literature*, and *StoryQuarterly*, where their story won the 2019 Fiction Prize. They are the recipient of a Bread Loaf Work-Study Grant, a Fullbright grant, the Penny Wilkes Scholarship in Writing and the Environment, and the inaugural Southern Studies Fellowship in Arts and Letters. They have also received fellowships from the Sewanee Writers' Conference and the Arctic Circle. A graduate of the University of Oregon MFA program, they live in Portland.

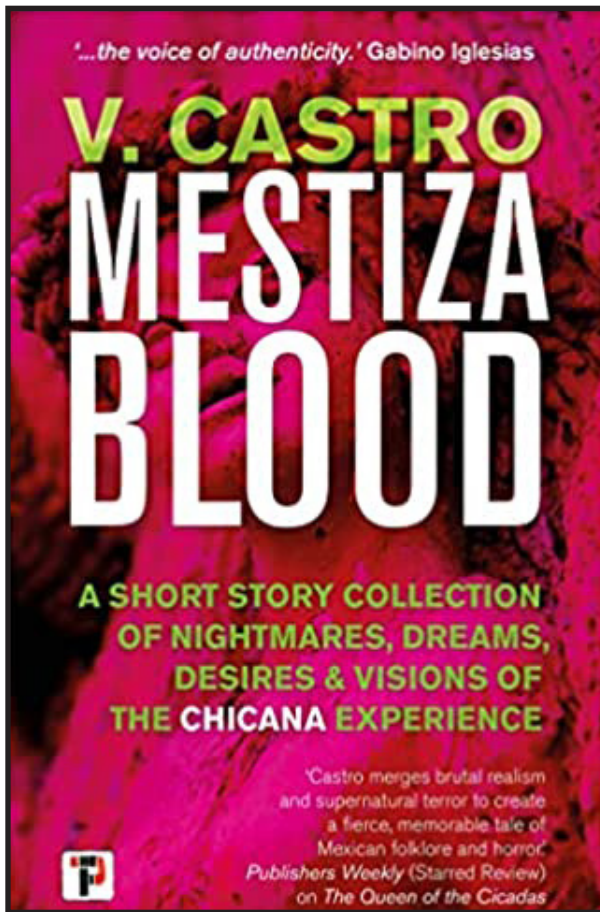


Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a Bachelors in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and currently works as a publicity assistant at Wunderkind PR.

V. Castro Blends Realism and Terror in *Mestiza Blood*

Title: *Mestiza Blood*
Author: V. Castro
Print Length: 208 pages
Publisher: Flame Tree Press

Pub Date: January 18, 2021
Rating: 3/5 stars
Review by: Julia Romero



Interweaving elements of Mexican folklore, urban legend, and gothic horror, *Mestiza Blood* is a collection of revenge, desire, and horror, both modern and mythical. Distinctly relating to the Chicana experience in the American South, V. Castro's heroic and complex characters are a motif for survival, for strength and perseverance. Exploring themes of sexuality, abuse, and shame, *Mestiza Blood* does not shy away from the truth: that the horrifying does not just reside in the pages of fairy tales, but walks amongst us.

Castro has managed to artfully convey the duality of the Mexican-American and female experience through her clever use of the supernatural.

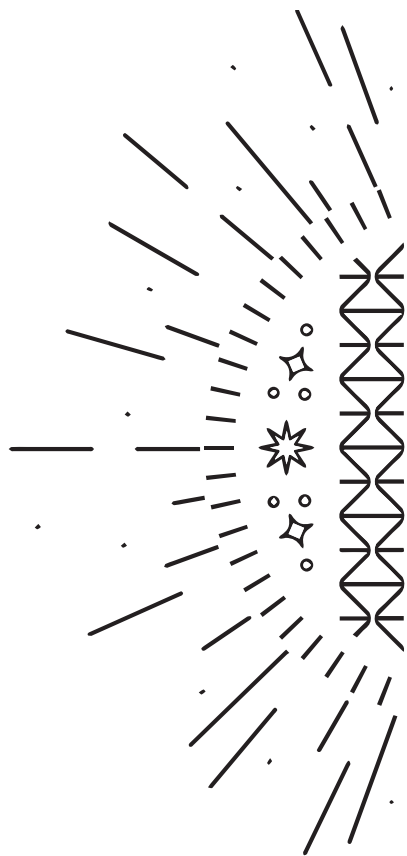
Complete with 14 short stories, Castro begins the collection with flash-fiction style tales, ranging from 2-10 pages long, finishing with two longer stories, "The Final Porn Star" and "Truck Stop." In each story, we meet women on the precipice. Fueled by pain and anger, they reclaim their bodies and their minds—sometimes literally.

A woman is raised from the dead by Mictecacihuatl, the goddess of the underworld, to enact vengeance on her murderer. A cam girl realizes that her newest client is her state's senator, whose pro-gun voting record allowed the man who shot her to get a gun in the first place. A desperate mother accidentally summons a demon when she's unable to find the doll her daughter wants for Christmas. And in the final two stories of the collection, Castro evokes the "final girl trope" with a fairy tale twist in "The Final Porn Star" and merges the erotic and grotesque in "Truck Stop."

Castro has managed to artfully convey the duality of the Mexican-American and female experience through her clever use of the supernatural. By blending two worlds—the realistic and the mythical—Castro creates an universe in which monsters can be slain and the abused avenged. Coupled with staggeringly evocative imagery and smart concepts, *Mestiza Blood* can be a cathartic read, if you don't mind a heaping dose of old-school gothic horror to go along with it.

While there is much to admire about *Mestiza Blood*, a few of the shorter stories, such as “The Demon in my Eye” and “Donkey Lady Bridge” left much to be desired, ending just as the stories kicked off—a common pitfall for flash-fiction style storytelling. And the longer stories, such as “Truck Stop” and “The Cold Season” started off strong but tried to incorporate too many social issues and ambitious plot points that it ended up feeling cluttered.

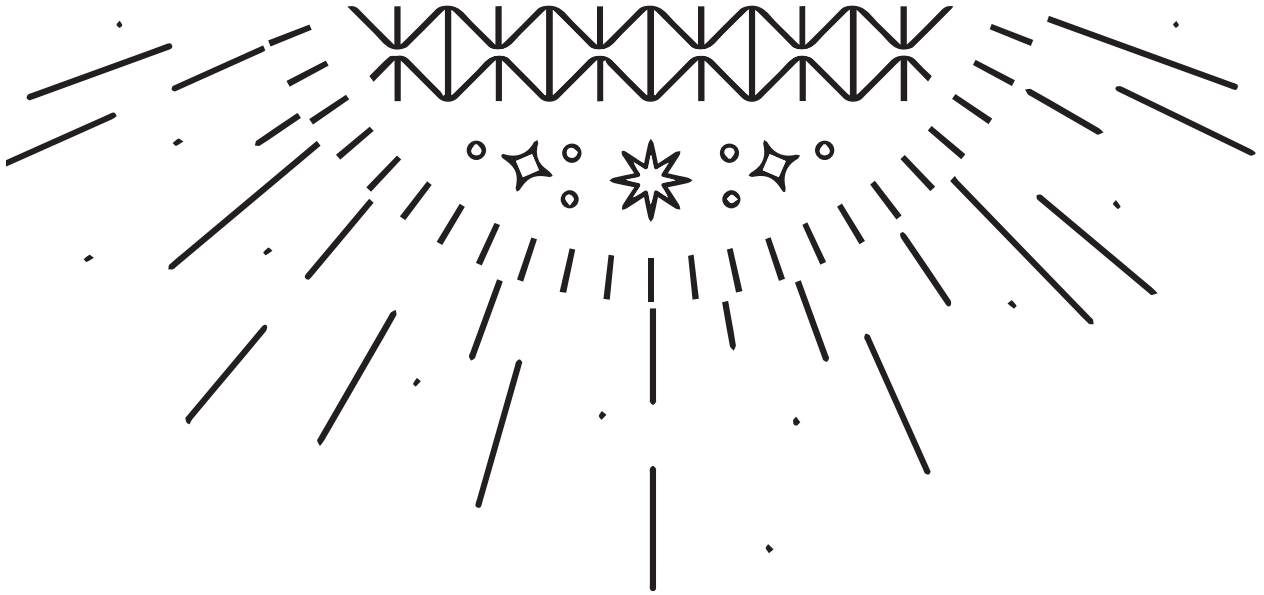
Overall, *Mestiza Blood* is an honest and unflinching collection that brings something unique to the table but might leave readers wanting more.



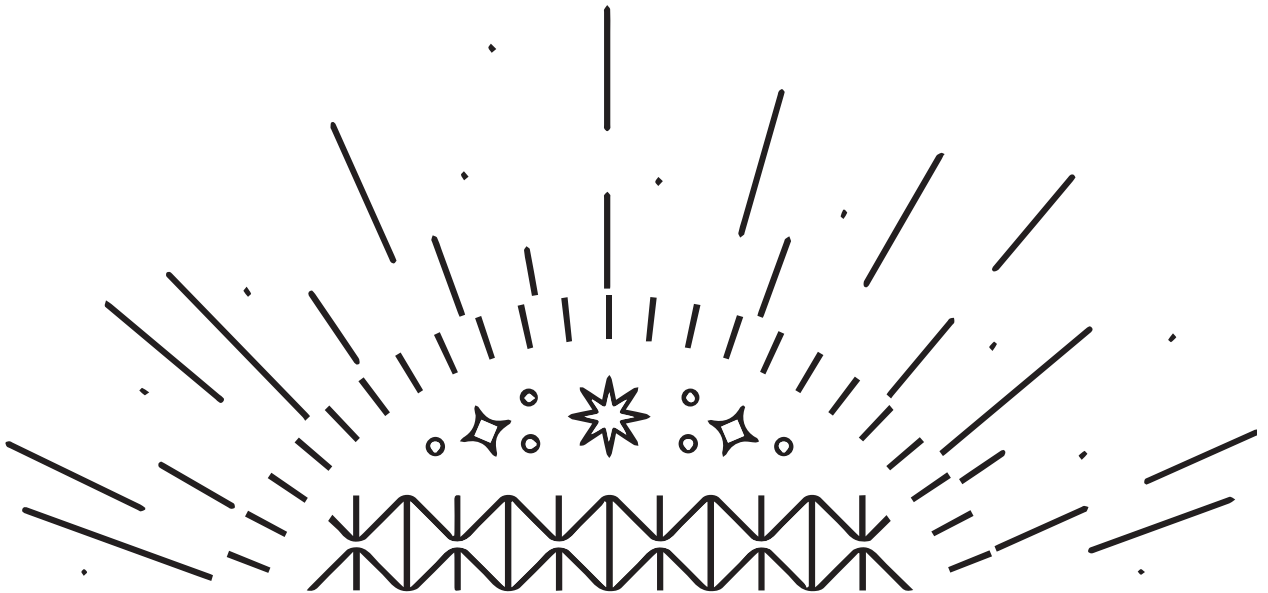
Violet Castro is a Mexican-American writer originally from Texas now residing in the UK with her family. She is the author of *Goddess of Filth* and *The Queen of the Cicadas*. When not caring for her three children, she dedicates her time to writing. You can find her horror film reviews on www.scifiandscary.com.



Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a Bachelors in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program’s undergraduate literary journal. She’s written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and currently works as a publicity assistant at Wunderkind PR.



Poetry



You Couldn't

By: Dan Pettee

A native New Englander, Dan Pettee operates his own freelance writing business in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has had poems published in a wide range of publications including *Chicago Review*, *Poem*, *The Lyric*, *Puerto del Sol*, the *Old Red Kimono*, and the *Evansville Review*.

You couldn't hear the voices speak
beyond a faint and fading echo, like a whisper
borne upon a morning breeze, or like
an FM station primed to disappear
in static or the ether, departing

like an evening easing into night.
You couldn't hear the choral voices starting,
a distant drummer measuring the beat,

the trailing coda of the madrigal.
The twisted branches of the leafy trees
appear like dancing skirts aswirl,
speed becoming truth expressed in images

you couldn't quite decipher yet,
if ever. Fact: Time will never tell
the underlying truth you can't forget:
Double lives, like yours, unspool in parallel...



when my grandfather no longer remembers my name

By: Sarah Neve

Sarah Neve graduated with a BA in Creative Writing and has been writing for 17 years. She has participated in National Novel Writing Month for the past eight years. Publications include *Studio One* and *The Live Poets Society*. She also won the Center for Mission Essay Writing Contest.

inquisitive eyes glaze over the shore,
a stuttering step followed by unsure words,
sounds that sound like words,
supposed to be words. are words internally
but the muscles have forgotten how to make
words sound in anything other than guttural.

adjacent someone confirms that you've been here before,
been here many times, so many this sand should
feel something other than any other sand, these waves
should crash familiar but it is just water and what used
to be stone, rock, gravel. this body should feel
familiar but it is too old, too stagnant, and what used
to be movement, blood, bones.

adjacent someone
moves closer, a hand outreached, eyebrows drawn
so they must be concerned but about what? it's a nice
day—there's sun, sand, water. a beach.

adjacent someone
asks you a question. muffled. you smile. waves crash.

"it's a nice beach," you say, though your tongue
fumbles over the words. "have you been here before?"

adjacent someone slowly nods.

"What beach is this?"

adjacent someone sighs.



Breakfast in the Village

By: Antje Stehn

Translated by Betty Gilmore

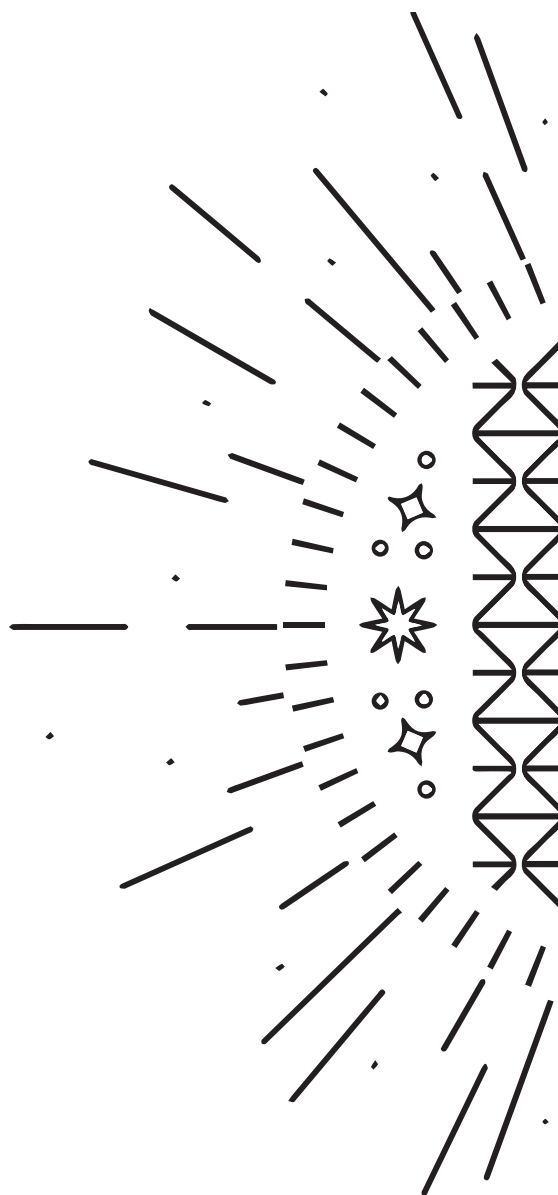
Antje Stehn is a German poet and visual artist. She is a member of German PEN and is part of the international collective "Poetry Is My Passion." Antje is co-editor of *BumBum TamTam*, *Los Ablucionistas*. She is a promoter of the Rucksack, a Global Poetry Patchwork project.

Head to head
they slurp the liquid egg yolk
from the shell
conversing about significant events:
newcomers to the village
they buy the houses
of the deceased
eviscerate the rooms
straighten the walls
erase the traces of the past

in the morning dew
a velvet mole
on the grass
his shovel hands stretched
far from his body
while golden green flies
bore their way
into the folds of his thighs

On the other side of the lake
the mountain
becomes a polyphonic
tooth shaped symphony
in seven shades of gray
and there
high above the jagged line
in deep blue ink
the morning star
in these times guests
leave without gravity
with no goodbyes
at the foot of the day

Through the cypress grove
in the black water
you see the flickering lights
of their cemeteries
as fireflies light up
in the damp grass



Walk to My Father's House

By: Cathryn Mellor

Cathryn Mellor works in publishing. She enjoys open-air swimming in the local lido and creative writing workshops.

Pot-bellied legging-ed nanas
resting remotes on bumps
staring at giant screens
agog and gormless
waiting for the lollipop-sucking
tiddlers to bobby-knock from school

Industrial men in striped baggy trousers
stretching out of cars
rippling flesh-like mounds
over waist bands
jostling in the crates of beer
cussing and coughing up
black-tarred spittle
from their twenty-a-day

The godless of Dinas Street
squatting in hallways
vaping, nodding, eyeballing
peering through clouds so thick
ghoul-like and gaunt

I catch the young mother's gaze
cradling her new infant
wistful and woeful
wondering about the man she would have wanted
watching buses roll by
juddering over potholes
trying to catch a summer breeze

Toyota flags are shimmering
along Neath Road
like lifeguard flags on a beach
seeking out a sun-sea view
as hazy light shafts
bounce off car bonnets

I hear the tattooed shop worker with dyed hair
in Morriston library
telling the man at the photocopier
"I used to loves reading when I was pregnant, I did.
Fucking 'ell, I bloody did 'an all."

Reaching Mam's Chapel
on the hill
near to Dad's house
I see the lopsided
"For Sale" board

Heavy oak doors
of green, brown-bricked masonry
stand silent
inwardly still and screaming
while banners for "Slimmer's World"
slash across the Chapel windows

Locked up in rusty chains
overfilled recycling bins
tumbling, littering
sticking, mildewing
out of date food
to the heels of my shoes
whiffing and nauseating
sickly smells to
the back of my throat

Once I used to walk past this Chapel
to Mam's house
winding home from school
holding a warm Welsh cake in the one hand
sugared and buttery
hot from the iron plate
and Mam's soft hand in the other
skipping, smiling, beaming up at
her round loving face

"... I sing there most Sundays"
she used to say
"... in my Sunday best"
she used to say
"... See you next week"
I used to say
kissing her goodbye
"... God willing"
came the reply
"... God willing"

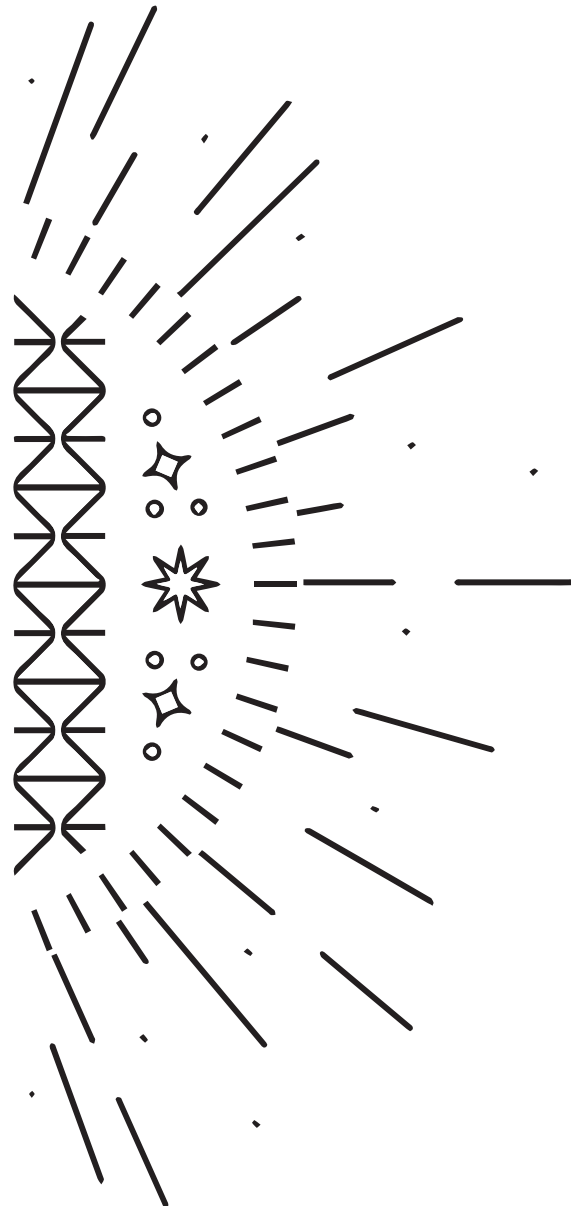


Chivalry of Snow

By: Diane Webster

Diane Webster has been writing since she learned the alphabet and has been publishing for almost 50 years. Publications include *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Blue Unicorn*, *El Portal*, and other literary magazines.

Snowflakes waltz
from clouds and land
with benevolent style
cloaking the ground
like a gentleman of old
flaring his cape
across a mud puddle
for his lady to step
on without a smudge
upon her footwear.



Prometheus

By: Elliott Orchard-Blowen

Elliott Orchard-Blowen is an artist, writer, and aspiring local hermit/ghost story. He currently lives in New England, though his mind is probably somewhere beyond our atmosphere. You can find him at your local second-hand store, kitschy bookshop, or in the dumpsters behind a strip mall.

my back
is grounded
by watchful
waiting
granite
stabbed
with shackles
trapping
the both of us.
I do
not know
what the rock fears
more;
the rain
or
the wind?
i know
what i
fear.
This is what I know;

Death
is not
a cloaked
reaper
grinning
through his scythe.
death
is a friend
of mine
or perhaps
not a friend
but surely
not an enemy.
a tool
a cog
a gear
spinning
in the same
machine
as i

doing
the bidding
of the
Mechanist
who looks down
on us both
and laughs
at the thought
of mortality.

Death
returns to me
at sunrise
gliding
descending
floating in
on
cloudy wings
of crushed amber
chocolate
and early spring mud.
he sits
on my shoulder
and
picks at
my liver;
his breakfast.
and he tells me
of the souls
he has
gifted
to Hades.
I listen
for words
cost far too much
to let them
be wasted
on unwanted
ears.

this is what i know.

his beak shines
in the morning
spotted with little
freckles
of mica
on a
stone.
he plucks
at my organs
devouring
my gift
to him.
a waterfall
of grateful
blood.
i bleed
happily,
for even
death
deserves
a meal.
this
i sacrifice
to him
for
i am
consumed
with love.

This is what I know.

the gaping /hole/pit/wrapping paper/
of my chest
grins up
at death
as he
preens
under
the afternoon
sun.

Prometheus (cont.)

By: Elliott Orchard-Blowen

we sit
in silence
a tension
wrought
ribbon
of passive
heartache.
I will concede
my insatiable
mouth
to this creature
because i never
learned
to stop.

this is what i know.

do you fear yourself?
perhaps
you should.

This, i know.

do you know
the feeling
of clay
against
your palms;
softly shaped
greedily
sticking
crawling into
the worn edges?
it drains
sucks
drinks
the very water
from your body.
i was happy
to give it.
this;
such a

small
surrender.
do you know
how to give
and give
and give
give
give
until
there is nothing left
anymore?
do you know
what it feels like
to
love through
your very
blood?

neither
do
i.

this, i know.

my hands
are scorched
by deeds
justified
by cancerous
love.
i am
a testament
of ash
to a world
of embers
clawing
at the sun
because they
envy
that something
should burn brighter
than they do.

this, i know.

i fear
the rain
and
the fire.
i do not
know which
should scare
me more.
i fear
the emptiness
of stone
and the drumbeat
of a heart.
i fear
the overflowing riverbanks
and the
gluttonous
clouds.
i fear
that one day
i will have
nothing
left to give.
that
is what i fear
the most.
for
if i
have nothing
left
to give you,
why would
you
give me
your love?

this is what i know.



4/10 2:40 pm 52° Gray Light Rain

By: Gerald Wagoner

When New York City initiated shelter in place, mid-March of 2020, Gerald Wagoner continued his long walks. The poems are presented like diary entries but are sequenced, using Gerald's private poetic logic. Publications include *Right Hand Pointing*, *Ocotillo Review*, *Passager Journal*, *BigCityLit*, and several others.

Now is the time. The roots are restive, and I have an abrupt itch to erect small brick walls. I bought one hundred used bricks, and two eighty-pound bags of dry mortar. I squat. Ponder where the first course will lie. The clay block, mildly abrasive, fits neatly in my crane claw hand. Mortar and water are mixed. My trowel is at ready. Solzhenitsyn's account of the prisoner laying bricks to erect the walls of his own prison, ennobling the task before me now.



The Other Room

By: Michael Cooney

Michael Cooney has been writing for over 30 years. The novella *The Witch Girl and the Wobbly* and the novel *Roxy Druse & The Murders of Herkimer County* are among his works. Publications of poetry and fiction include *Bitter Oleander*, *Farside Review*, *Second Chance Lit*, *Sundial Magazine*, and *101 Words*.

What I hear coming from the other room
is the sound of both our voices,
sometimes music, too,
or the news, very low.
I won't turn around.
I am in the kitchen.
I am finally trying out that cast-iron pan.
You like tuna steaks, right?
I can't look away for a second.
Just two minutes on one side and one on the other.
Now I am washing the dishes,
the Spring ones with the flowers.
Yes, I brought them up early
Why not? Fall is past, Christmas too
I know it's winter and of course,
there is snow here. We are in the woods.
The coyotes have not shown up.
Do you remember what you said about the little dog?
No, I have not forgotten.



A Farewell Note

By: John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident who was recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Hollins Critic*. His latest books include *Leaves on Pages*, *Memory Outside the Head*, and *Guest Of Myself*, all of which are available through Amazon. John's work is upcoming in *Ellipsis*, *Blueline*, and *International Poetry Review*.

I wish I did not have to write this.
But what else can I do?
And, as is usual,
I rest elbows on desk,
lean my head over,
begin to dream.
Nightmares go on from there.
I'm at the mercy of a fat slave-trader with a whip.
I'm being corkscrewed by a tornado.
Slight elaborations on my dog-eared years.
And now it all goes public.
Swapping old poet's tales.
A messenger from the book of cruel,
thinking himself mighty,
no matter how poor his intentions.

You had images of being perfectly frocked for the occasion.
A day with as much church as loved ones can bear.
Then honeymoon where I fail to notice any other pretty
young thing.
A house must not be lost sight of.
Nor kids of our own.
Then the rest whatever that is.
Yes, there's something for everyone in your plans...
just not me.
In person, I can only mumble.
With pen in hand,
I feel the mad rebellion in the air.
But I'm tired.
My eyes are weary of the couple in the photograph.
That's why I doze off
before a damn thing gets written.
That's why nightmares make such threats.

Maybe, for both our sakes, I should not write this.
Just mingle among my doubts for a while
then snap my pen, squash up the paper.
Marriage does seem quite popular at the moment.
Maybe there's something in it.
But how can I welcome my loss of freedom?
Succumb to open-hearted hospitality?
Climb the steps of the tower hand-in-hand?
Go to market, buy fruit, swat flies, together?
Yes, I'm in love with you.
And I've written it down. So there!

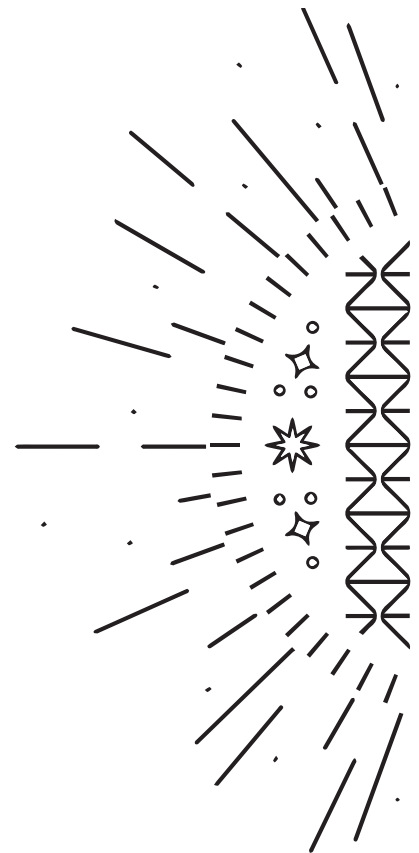


Light of the Morning

By: Wil Michael Wrenn

Wil Michael Wrenn is a poet, songwriter, and musician. He has published three books of poems: *Songs of Solitude*, *Seasons of a Sojourner*, and *Enid Lake Mosaic*, the latter two published by Silver Bow Publishing in British Columbia, Canada.

I'm so very sorry for your pain,
but I pray
it will be washed away,
washed away in the rain,
and when the storm has ceased,
and the wind is calm again,
I pray that you'll find peace
in the light of a new day,
after the dark night has faded away
into the light of the morning.



The Old Rocker

By: Brandon Bennett

Brandon Bennett is an emerging author who has been carving a literary path somewhere at the intersection of nature, spirituality, and spiritual sci-fi. A native Angeleno, he makes frequent pilgrimages to the deserts of southern California and, like the nomad in his writings, finds solace in the infinitely varied species of cacti.

He sat in a chair
idling, waiting
for nothing and no one
just a blank stare

His demons defeated
a lifetime ago
now he just writes
into the fountain he goes

35 and 5
that's him and his daughter
He knew bits of magic
and that's what he taught her

That sadness
Just a stained glint

Of his youth
with monsters and madness
He carries the baggage
of an old man, of magic

He's not quite living
and he's not quite dead
He's a little of both

If you were to guess
(you're probably right)
The one whom we speak of
is free of his plight

And the chair keeps on rocking

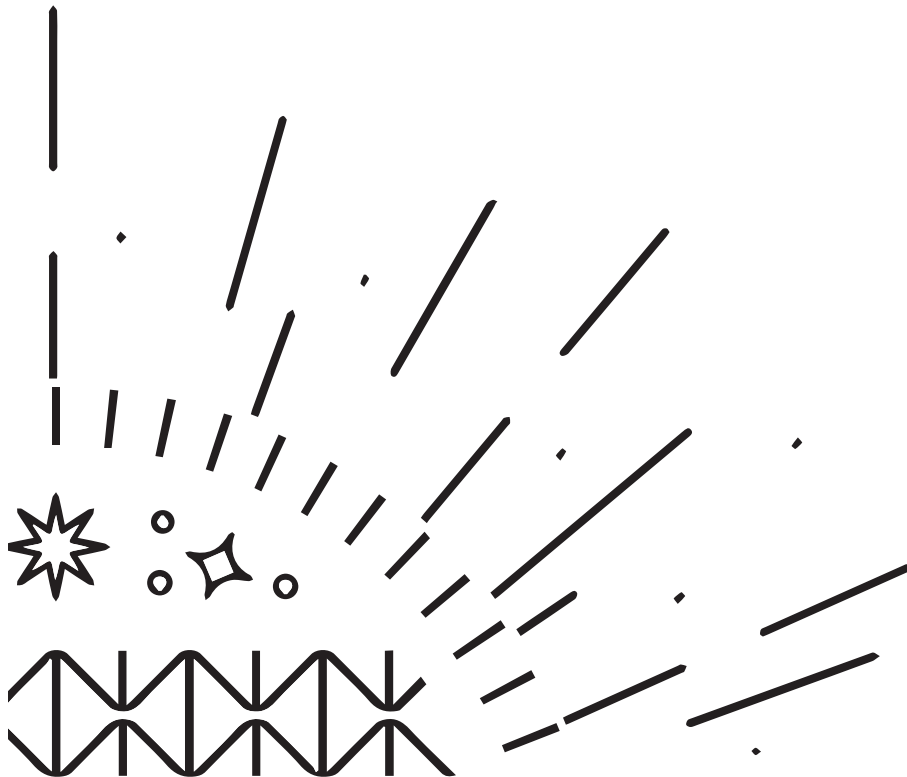


Which I Am

By: Ed Ahern

Ed Ahern resumed writing after 40 odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over 250 stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at *Bewildering Stories*, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

I am the shore-bound wind
blowing sand back into the sea,
the faltering light that dries
standing water between rain storms,
the weeds that sprawl so obnoxiously
that they are cut down and burnt,
the possums that sneak out at night
and are savaged by feral dogs.
I am all of this, and am somehow
content with the process.



Ever Get the Feeling?

By: Jim Richardson

Jim Richardson lives and writes in Florida. He has work forthcoming in *The Atticus Review*.

Ever feel like your prayers are seances?
Rearrange the words in the newspaper
and presto! you have the secrets of the illuminate.

Ever feel like words stand on street corners in
long trench coats filled with illicitly gained items
with the warranty nulled?

Probably cause they're always standing on top of their shadows
hands behind their back asking you to guess like a child
with a mischievous grin stretching her face.

thumb unveils the scroll of our texts,
those Dead Sea scrolls... fragments... ambers with memories
frozen mid-scream. Did any of these words give us the butterfly
in the left hand, or

the scorpion in the right?

ever feel like dropping a leech down your throat?
finally proving your body is good for something,
pretending that something is finally, slowly
loving you.



The Woman, who was once instead the girl

By: Lex Roland

Lex Roland is a non-binary individual from Washington D.C. They are currently enrolled in the Creative Writing MFA program at Chatham University in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. They are also an assistant editor at the *Fourth River Literary Journal*.

absorbed what her mother said like a Magic Washcloth.
Once she was soaked with whispers
of 'truths' and *don't tell your fathers*, she clung
to the reality that was constructed on her behalf.
Soon, she found it hard to wring herself out
when it came time to sop up the narrative
she finally managed to pry from unwilling hands.
The girl will never be quite as bound as she was
when she was still wrapped in her original Dollar Store
plastic cover.



Rescue

By: Robert L. Dean, Jr.

Robert L. Dean, Jr. is the author of *The Aerialist Will Not Be Performing* (Turning Plow Press, 2020) and *At the Lake with Heisenberg* (Spartan Press, 2018). A multiple Best of the Net nominee and Pushcart nominee, his work has appeared in many literary journals.

When I see you there, floundering in the same
uncertain sea as me, do I throw you
the one life jacket floating in the flotsam of the wreck
we have become,

or do I hang on for dear life, hoping for the best as I watch
you go under, hoping you will go
quick, or do I grasp our one best hope, swim for you, lift your tired
arm to one half of the S.S. US in orange,

pray for the impossible, that one prayer can preserve two,
do I
share my fate with you, your fate with me, after all, I have known you
for only this one voyage,

and what if this one voyage is all there is, do you want to share your fate,
my fate,
however many fates we have between us, surely we will voyage again,
or one of us will, and shouldn't one of us, at least,

go on, live for another cruise, don't we owe it to each other, but
which one to whom,
do you know,
do you know I love you,
do you know, whichever of us goes under,
I have always loved you,

and, in this moment, we have never been strangers, O, no, how can we
be strangers, drinking
the same salt, blistering
under the same sun,
yes, I've chosen
the third option,

and, briefly, we are supported, hands touch, eyes meet, I am you
and you are me,
and down, down, down we go, certain now, the sea
swallows us,

and, just for a moment, just as a glimmer before our lungs burst, we remember
how we got here,
and what we once thought possible.

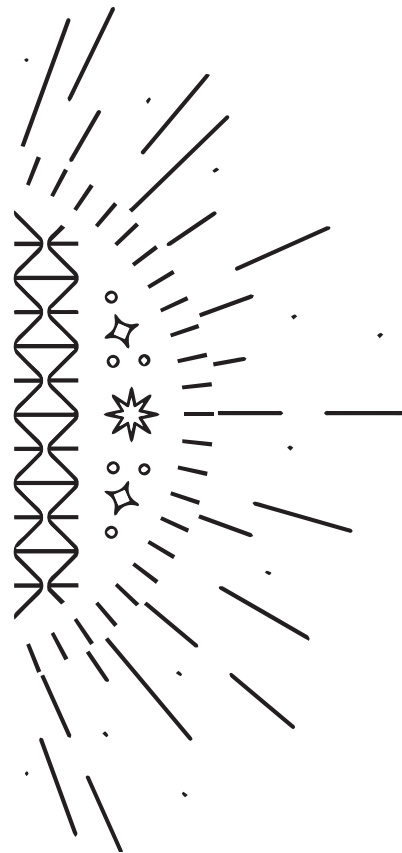


Spirit & Soul

By: Roger Singer

Dr. Roger Singer is a Poet Laureate Emeritus of Connecticut, and past president of the Connecticut Shoreline Poetry Chapter, in association with the Connecticut Poetry Society. He has had over 1,300 poems published on the internet, magazines, and in books, and is a 2017 Pushcart Prize Award nominee.

come back
from the journey
where scarecrows
watch your steps
while crossing into the
dreams of strangers
while your words
scatter
to the corner
of winds
where
blended confessions
stir
spirit and soul,
releasing
half-pressed
prayers,
as we step over
the smoke
from fires
resembling our
likeness



Silence, Where Once There Was None

By: Oisín Breen

Irish poet, academic, and financial journalist, Oisín Breen released the debut, *Flowers, all sorts in blossom...* in March 2020. Breen has been published widely, including in *About Place*, *the Blue Nib*, *Books Ireland*, *the Seattle Star*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, and elsewhere.

The call came,
But you did not reach out,
Not as you often do,

Your love arching
Through the aortic worm,
Pulsating in hot flashes
Along the carotid stem—
A barren meshwork
Of blood pumped,
A lacquer composed
Of the soothing edicts
Of emptiness.

You did not reach out,
Not as you often do,
To a mind and spirit
Convulsing
Under the minatory
Of careful biography,

Where an abeyed yet juvenescent admonition
Holds fast against the accelerating pains of love,

When, sundered into shared patterns
Of dominance and fear—
That familial leitmotif of huddling,
Deliberately barricaded on all sides
By hard shapes, my eye transfixed
On an unlocked door,
Pleading that it stay closed—
For a minute, for a minute more—
For I am drained—

When I spared myself from your love,
Only to ward off the instant
When everything must change.

You did not reach out,
Not as you often do,

To a serial abjurer,
Who seeks your likeness in themselves,
Wedded to the fallacy of his own apotheosis,
Who distills time through a soft homily of action,
But does not act, yet venerates your love
Through stayed hands, and capricious tongues.

You did not reach out.



Deli Lady

By: R. Gerry Fabian

R. Gerry Fabian is a poet and novelist. He has published four books of his published poems: *Parallels*, *Coming Out of the Atlantic*, *Electronic Forecasts*, and *Ball on the Mound*.

The lunch bag contains
a ham and cheese
on rye,
Ritz crackers with Muenster slices,
a Granola Bar
and a yellow paper napkin
upon which
she has simply printed,
“I love you.”

As you finish,
three things about this lady
are certain:
the day is Tuesday,
she never learned the Palmer method
and most of all
a good woman
can quench your every hunger
from inside
a brown paper sack.

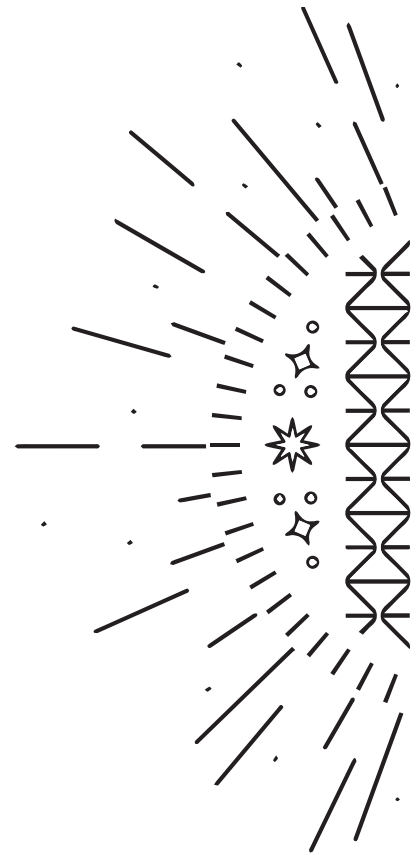


November Light

By: Judy Lorenzen

Judy Lorenzen is a writer, poet, and high school English teacher. Widely published, her inspiration comes from the beauty of the trees, flowers, fields, and farm life around her. Judy lives in Central City, Nebraska.

The shortening days
cast thin cold light through my window,
reminding me how fleeting life is.
On the farm, just yesterday,
the tree leaves in their golden browns and reds
hung gorgeously on their branches,
capturing the focal point of this acreage.
Now the trees stand skeletonized,
emphasizing the dilapidating barn's exhaustion,
its boards falling off, an angled pole holding the door shut.
Snows are coming—white will lace this place—
covering the needed repairs once again,
yet underneath, boards will rot; hinges will rust and break.
But for now, for today, I ask—
God of the seasons,
how do I see the beauty in life again, its joys—
the beauty in November,
with its ambered, dying light?
God of the resting fields,
Whose harvest lies in bins and freezers,
Your earth has given her luscious fruits,
will joy come?
God of the vast pale sky,
sending this dimming sunlight
through my window,
You remind me of the passing burnt October
in the presence of this gray November, an afterglow,
and I think of all my work left undone,
reminding me to not waste this light I have
on things that do not matter
and to take care of the things that do.



The Seashell

By: John Tustin

John Tustin's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009.

I still have the seashell you gave me
Even though I don't remember why you gave it to me.
Last week I found it—it had fallen behind my desk
And it suddenly seemed important for me to have it at hand
Next to the computer where I write.
We never went to the beach—I did that with someone else a year before.
It's really gnawing at me that I can't remember why you gave it to me.
I seem to remember very little. One day becomes another
And all of my experiences seem so distant,
Even if they just happened.
When I found out you were seeing someone
I tried to remember why we stopped seeing each other
And I honestly have no idea. I remember the first time
But not the second time.
A few days later I found the seashell while cleaning
And it's right beside me while I type this
But you'll never know that
And I'll never remember why you gave it to me.
Denouements are for writers of fiction.



About Dripping into the Earth

By: Meryl Phair

Meryl Phair is currently pursuing her master's degree in Magazine and Digital Storytelling at New York University's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. Her forthcoming collections of poetry, *Figures of Speech* and *beings*, was published with Tell Tell Poetry in January 2021.

in the real world of living
of wrinkled pages and the little holes in the screen wiring
where sight is porous
we are all made of sun-warmed clay
we are all walled gardens
waiting to spill out.



Thoughts Among the Ruins

By: Matthew Henningsen

Matthew Henningsen's poems have appeared in many journals, including *Footbills* and *Caesura*, as well as Diversion Press anthologies. He is the author of a chapbook called *Hopperesque* and teaches writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

By all accounts, the day was sad and still,
The wind came calm and tired
As it blew through pale pinyon trees,
When the ancients left, never to come again.

They all walked out of sunburst villages.
They crept up crystal canyon walls.

The accounts say, they cannot be wrong,
That stone axes lovingly used for years
Were left in quiet corners,
With old jugs, and ladders that go nowhere.

The walls are filled with mud and bits of straw.
Stones litter courtyards where no one walks.

We can see the rooms, where babies once cried,
The red canyon walls glimmering in the sun
On days when snow blows through gaps,
Piling up in corners, melting in the morning.

Carefully cut footholds wear down.
Ladders rot down to just sticks of wood.

While old signs and symbols, words lost,
Enter into dark kivas carved into floors
Where elders sat once in subterranean gloom,
Billowing up smoke, mumbling in the dark.

They all left once and never come back.
They crept up crystal canyon walls, and are gone.



Alone: *Portrait of a Woman**

By: Martina Reisz Newberry

Martina Reisz Newberry has been writing for over 60 years. *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* and *Where It Goes* are two of her five books. She has been published in numerous journals and literary magazines in the United States and abroad. Some publications include *Apricity Press*, *Gyroscope Review*, *The Pomegranate*, *London*, and many others.

The woman stares out at us. She knows what we think. Priests and misfits know what many do not: God enters a life through a dark door marked "alone." There is, I think, no exit.

What are her options?

Not to be.

Not to be here.

Not to know where "here" is...

Heavy lidded, heavy lipped, were it not for the man in front of her with a paintbrush and canvas, would she live her life on her knees in some convent?

She may have, regardless of his efforts to represent her for the rest of us.

The light hints at dusk and she, being beauty's casualty, blurs her own landscape like rain.

**Johannes Vermeer, 1672 (Dutch)*



Fragments

By: Nolo Segundo

Nolo Segundo, pen name of L.J. Carber, 74, has had poems published in 52 literary journals in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Romania, Italy, and India. In 2020, a trade publisher released his book-length collection titled *The Enormity of Existence* and, in 2021, a second book, *Of Ether and Earth*.

A bit here, a piece there,
that's all we really have—
be it the tail end of a dream
as you awaken to a more
mundane world and feel it
slip away from you, and
knowing you will never see
that wondrous universe
again—or the books you've
read over a lifetime, the
millions of words that
went through your brain
like cars speeding away into
the encroaching night...

You know you can keep
nothing really, nothing
whole, but still you want
to—you want life and yes,
love too, to be solid, sure,
unfading-- but sentience is
a melange and your mind
a bubble on a wave that
rolls in and out, in and out,
as time's undercurrent pulls
you relentlessly towards
the ocean of Eternity...



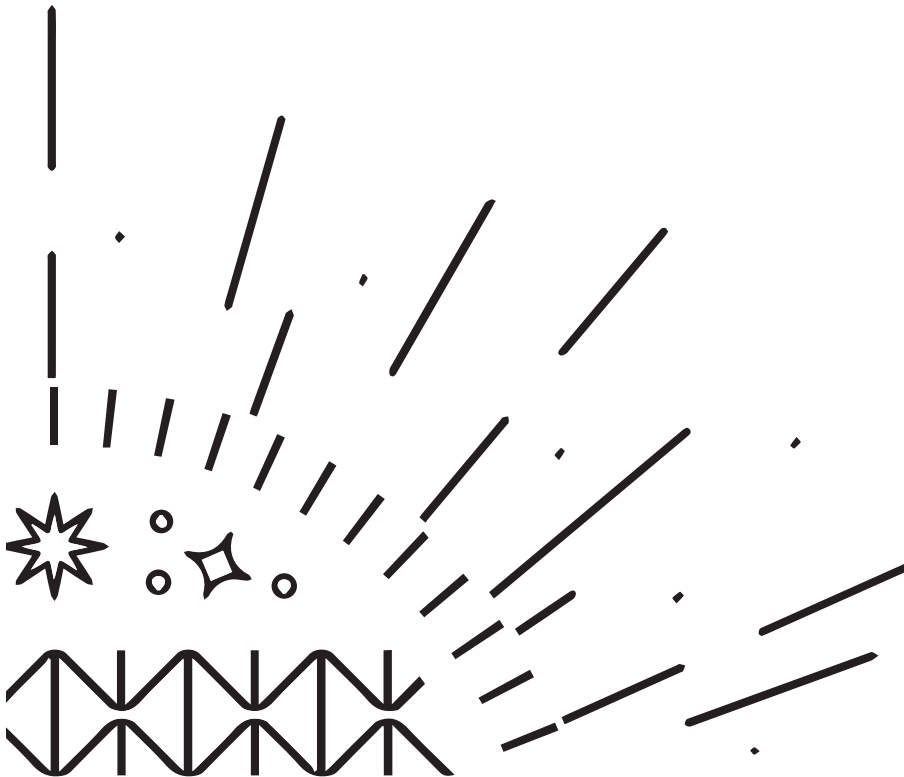
Open Sounds

By: Megan Cartwright

Megan Cartwright is an Australian writer and teacher. Her poetry has been published in *October Hill Magazine*, *Authora Australis*, *Blue Bottle Journal*, and *Oddball Magazine*. Recently, Megan was awarded a highly commended accolade by the Independent Writers Group of New South Wales for her entry in the Pop-Up Art Space competition “Haiku—Capturing a Moment.”

It was drawn in the sand.
It had all the vowels—
a song that I recalled
like the edge of sleep.

Tiny moments, undeveloped negatives
steeped in sepia nostalgia.
Washed away on
the tide, and memory.



Three Poems

By: Dominic Windram

Dominic Windram is a poet/personal tutor from Hartlepool in the northeast of England. He is a regular contributor to the poetry section of the *Northern Cross*: a Catholic newspaper that serves the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. He is also a resident poet on P.N.N (Progressive News Network).

WINTER'S LAST ROSE

Winter's last rose; rose of neglect:
O how once your radiant beauty
Shimmered in summer's potent hour!
Now your faded petals offer,
Only a glimpse of that power.

Now diamond points of ice cruelly
Surround your flesh pink, Christ-like presence.
The whine of winter's bitter song;
The cold claws of grief; the gray silence:
The landscape scorns its chosen one.
Neglected rose; rose of regret.

WINTER BEAUTY

Intense, cold silence;
Wild gulls dripping with sea foam
Suddenly emerge,
From pale blue waters. They shake
Their wings abruptly.
Like warriors. They're Nature's
Hardened survivors.
There are glimmers of beauty:
Fragments of sunlight
Punctuate the winter white:
Small hopes to cling to
In this starkest of seasons.

WINTER EQUINOX (DECEMBER 21ST: 2021)

O may my prayers awaken long-lost feelings,
May they melt my heart which has become frozen.
May they bring about a gentle inner healing.
O may they bless all those who have been chosen.
May they add firm substance to nebulous dreams.
O may they merge together what is and what seems.
May they create fresh thoughts; that sing like the
wild birds.
May they contain the sweet mystery of moonlight.
May they continually beautify the common word.
May they reach out to those lost in bleakest night.



Two Poems

By: Andrew Armstrong

Andrew Armstrong won a regional poetry contest two years ago. His poems have gotten better since then. Andrew is also a cartoonist with over 100 sales.

RECIPE

A man stopped me outside a bar and said,
“The universe is nothing but a big bowl of pudding.”
Drunk or crazy, I thought, and he smiled, reading my doubts,
Then jabbed a finger in my chest and said, “Prove that it isn’t!”
He went his way and I went mine,
But that night I lay awake a long time
Wondering where in the pudding I fit,
And how long I would be one of the ingredients.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

Waves of wildflowers have washed you to me,
Bearing sweet summer upon your wings.
I am the intruder here, and I sense a reprimand
In your unflinching bird’s eye,
Alarm as you rock upon a fencepost
Worn thin by wind and rain.
Your every motion promises flight,
Yet you linger, and I linger too.

No nest for you to guard this August day,
No place for me to go but home.
In different tongues we voice
The common complaints of living.
When winter blows its bitter notes
In a silent symphony of snow
Someone else will hear your cries
Cries once heard that evermore
Echo in the labyrinth of memory.



Ghosts

By: Michael Estabrook

Michael Estabrook has been publishing his poetry in the small press since the 1980s. He has published over 20 collections, a recent one being *The Poet's Curse, A Miscellany* (The Poetry Box, 2019). He lives in Acton, Massachusetts.

Just like that—time flew
dragging us from high school
to retirement in a flash!

I wonder about the people
who have passed
through my life who
I haven't seen in years, in decades
wonder how they
are doing now
all of us being older
old high school friends
college friends and favorite professors
church people I knew
coworkers, teammates, and neighbors
my first girlfriend, I hear her life was rough.
So many people I wonder
how many if I added
them all up.
They are all here with me
part of my life whether I like it or not
helping make me who I am
but no longer accessible
there but not there
like ghosts.



The Crow

By: Shannon Sweeting

Shannon Sweeting has been writing for over 10 years. “Stories From the New World” is where she writes short stories and shares interesting historical research. She is currently working on her first science fiction novella.

Drunk in love in the absence of hate,
Whose fate do I so desire.
Whose lust, do I partake in?

Fate, whose children I will seek,
To do unto thou, the most atrocious things.

Thieves amongst men, minds incomplete,
To whom do you rule? So sallow and jagged.

Ridged lies, worthless composition.
To whom do you trust, in your bellows so loud?
So soft to speak, yet your throat beckons so sallowy.

Sallowy, distressed, frayed, the end.
To whom do I owe my allegiance to?

Whom my proverbial martial bed?

He who rules my heart? Or he who rules my mind?
What makes this switch, so soundly in the mind?

Who is the crow at the edge of the street?
And why does it beckon to me so?

Why can it not take its gains, ache in its loses, and move on so?
Why does it taunt me? To the point of sheer insanity?
Squawking, squandering, lying there and below.

Shining, squealing, and incriminating the vibrations to a frequency allow.

It is a position. That sickens me.
To cast off itself, and make a mockery of me.

But hast, alas haste black cloaked fellow.
For ye shall not pass, ye shall not falter lo.

For aye is the time to falter, aye is the time to stammer.
Aye is the time to falter, aye is the time to stammer.

The Crow (cont.)

By: Shannon Sweeting

For lo and behold, greater things await.

Your mirage disappears,
An oasis awaits.
So sleep dear crow, sleep ever so sound now.

Sleep deep in the ground, mud and maggots your bound.

Sleep, sleep, gently.

For never again, will your kind, the black cloaked fellows,
Torment me.

Sleep, sleep, and do not dream.
Because your existence never meant a thing.

Sleep, sleep, now, now.

Fall high from the sky,
And fly into the ground.

May cars hit you,
Lightning strike you down.

May that eternal frown never reach me now.

Sleep, sleep, and never dream of good things.
For you have taken enough, it's time to free me.



It Reeked of Christmas

By: Zebulon Huset

Zebulon Huset is a San Diego–based teacher, writer, and photographer. He won the Gulf Stream 2020 Summer Poetry Contest, and his writing has appeared in *Meridian*, *Southern Review*, *Fence*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Texas Review*, among others. He publishes *Notebooking Daily*, edits *Coastal Shelf*, and recommends literary journals at TheSubmissionWizard.com.

All across the yard and in the windowsills,
the weather, the cool gloominess or the incoming warmth,
the concept of happiness, the walls, the coming of heat,
the climbing snow, the coffee percolating,
the crisp kiss of wintertime when clamoring over
the half-submerged fence, the soft tickle of breath,
the whisper of something unnamed, unsaid, the furnace,
the room as the sun was arriving on the western horizon,
the snow-gowned pines, the silhouetted back of a snowglobe,
the cold blue of winter mint, the moon greeting the departing sun.





October Hill 
MAGAZINE

Winter 2021
Volume 5, Issue 4