

An impressionistic oil painting of a bouquet of flowers. The central focus is a large, vibrant yellow sunflower with a dark brown center. To its left are several red flowers, possibly tulips, with some petals appearing to be falling or in motion. The background is a mix of soft blues and greens, suggesting a sky and foliage. The brushstrokes are thick and visible, giving the painting a textured, expressive feel.

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e. britten



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Transformation by Craig Britton

THRICE FICTION™

Issue No. 16 • APRIL 2016

RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside
the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen.

It's flagship publication, **THRICE FICTION**, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside
exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE ARTS** provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 16 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

This is our 16th issue and once again we will have never before published writers in our lineup. This has become a point of pride for us but I must say it is certainly not planned. Submissions, which come in hot and heavy when our reading periods are open, are approached the same way each time. I ignore your name, your cover letter and just read what you sent. That's all. It's important to start strong. The advice remains — get me early or lose me. Simple as that. But there are some names in this issue our regular readers will also be familiar with. We also continue the artwork that has helped make **Thrice** unique in the small press world. So all in all, I think you'll like this issue too.

Aside from this issue, we will be publishing two stand-alone titles to start the building of the Thrice Library. We're pleased to announce Joel Allegetti's **Our Dolphin** will be our first short novel. We are in the editing process as we speak and hope to get this title out soon. The second title will be a collection of material from Lorri Jackson. Thrice is excited to have been chosen by Lorri's family to produce this book. This will be out, hopefully, sometime in the late summer or fall.

Thrice Publishing, a Not For Profit registered with the state of Illinois (we're open for business even if they aren't) is also a 501(c)3.

This means that any donation made to us is tax deductible. It's too late for tax year 2015 but why not get started on your 2016 deducts early, he asked.

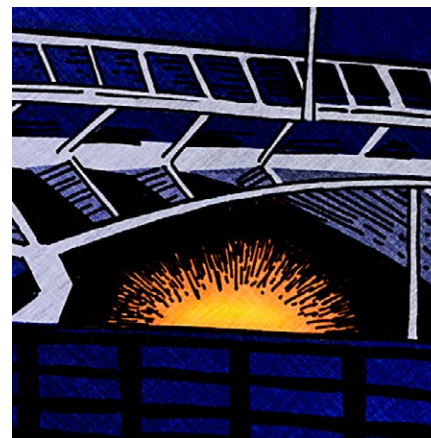
We are awaiting the results of grant applications as well, but that is a crapshoot. The bulk of our financial needs are for advertising. The stand-alone titles are paying gigs for our writers.

If you'd like to help out, send a check or money order to the address below or donate online. Then next January you'll get a tax credit letter from us and off you go.

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Thanks for your help!



Kronprinzen Bridge

David Weinberger

Blue tarp. Found that blue tarp five days ago. Before I only had the brown tarp. Now I have a blue tarp and a brown tarp.

The brown tarp is good over the bench. Can keep my things on the bench. No rain on my things. Did a good job stretching the blue tarp from the top of the bench to the railing on the bridge. The Kronprinzen Bridge. My new home. Temporary. I'll move on I'm sure. With all this Berlin rain I should move on now. But with the blue tarp I have a good dry space for my sleeping bag.

Working today picking up trash. People leave trash all over. Good for me. I get an orange vest and a bag and a few euros to pay my way. Not enough for a room though. Enough to eat and live under the Kronprinzen Bridge. Not too bad. People walk by. Stare. Probably think I'm no good. I had a good job in Budapest. Lost it. Too many people, not enough jobs. Been here two months now. Working for one month. I like the job. Hate the vest.

Work with Andrzej. He's from Warsaw. Made pizza there. Now he's in Berlin picking up trash. And making pizza. He's young enough to work two jobs. Maybe twenty-five years old. Not sure which bridge he lives under, but I know it's a bridge. Safest places for temporary homes. Bridges, underpasses. But the people stare. They have it better. Rooms. Heat. What do they know?

In Budapest, I had a room with some friends. Rent was cheap. But when you lose a job, rent's not possible. Roommates had no feelings. Pay or get out. Struggled for

a bit in Budapest then came to Berlin. The Kronprinzen Bridge. My first home in Berlin. Right by the train station. Who needs roommates?

Beyond the bridge, view of the main train station. Big black glass building. Other direction is a view of the Reichstag. Government. Glass dome on top. Tourists walking inside. Looking down. Never been there but I like looking at it at night. Lighted dome.

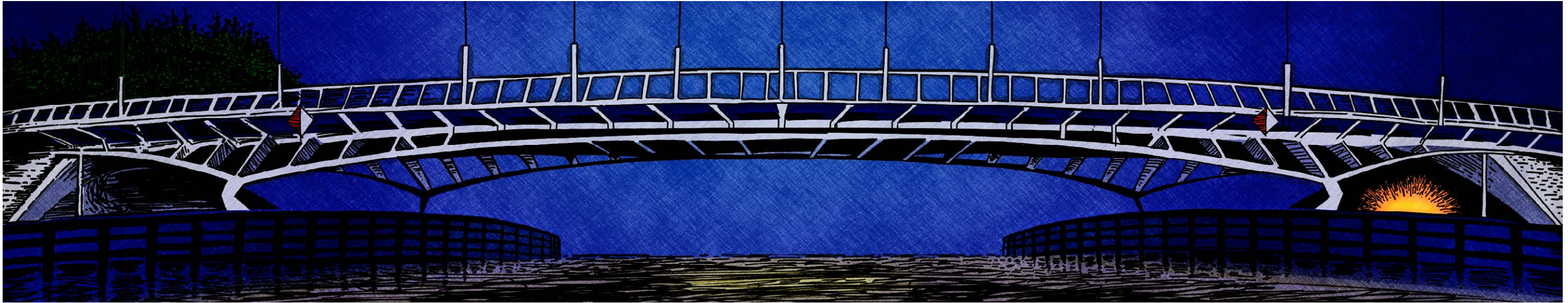
Budapest. Used to visit the Buda Castle. View over the city. Old city. It's still home but don't think I will return. Homeless? I have my tarps. My bridge. I'll move on sometime. Not yet.

Working today. I think with Andrzej. Warsaw sounds nice. Like Budapest. Andrzej couldn't make it in Warsaw. Not enough money. Moved to Berlin. Pays better but still the same as me. Means no room. Good talker. Sometimes I just listen. No talking. Just hear. Hear Andrzej speaking. Talks of travels. He's been to a lot of cities. Now he's in Berlin.

I pick up trash around the city. Around the train station. Beer bottle caps all over. People drop them everywhere. Always hear the sound of beer bottle caps rolling on the pavement. I've seen them open beer bottles. Flick the cap off; let it fall to the ground. Hard to pick up with that nifty tool we use. The grasper. Have to pick them up by hand. Sometimes sweep and then pickup.

Other garbage too.

Better get to work. Four hour shifts. With the vest. One



day a longhaired guy stopped to talk to me. Questions. Where do I come from? What jobs did I do? That kind of stuff. Nice enough guy but too busy. Just leave me alone. I listen. I don't talk. Just to me.

He hung out. Bought me a beer when I was done. He flipped his cap; I put mine in my pocket. Good beer in Germany. He talked of America, where he is from. Traveling the world. Rooms in hotels. Temporary but warm. Trying to understand me and people like me. Can't understand though. He's gone. In Berlin for a week and then home.

I'd like a home. For now, Kronprinzen Bridge is home. See Andrzej as I get to work. Nice vest I tell him. Same joke every day. He laughs. Every day at the same joke. We pick up trash. Four hours. We say goodbye at the end of our grind. He to his and me to mine.

Walking home. Short walk from the station to Kronprinzen Bridge. I see caps I missed.

Been here two months now. Good city Berlin. Easy to find cheap food. Cheap beer. Carry it to Kronprinzen Bridge. Get change back for the bottles. Too many tourists though. Streets are filled with them. They look uncomfortable when they see people like me. Like they think they should help but they won't. They make it hard to walk around. Better under my tarps. Just me. My food and beer. Just a little beer though. Always have to work.

Tomorrow I work with Patrik. Not a nice guy. Angry. From Prague. Thinks he needs it all. Thinks he should have it all. Hates everybody and tells them so. Hates me and my tarps. I told him of my tarps one day. That was a mistake. Patrik couldn't find work in Prague. Came to Berlin and is pissed about it. Wants to go home and takes it out on everybody else. Andrzej doesn't complain. Even though he liked making pizza back home. He talks nice and is good to his fellows.

I think about Budapest. My old home. My old job. Can't go back though. No work. No safety. Kronprinzen Bridge is safe. Has been anyway. And walking at night and early morning is safe too. I like it in Berlin. But four-hour shifts are not enough. Can't live under tarps forever. Where to go though?

So many immigrants now. Spain, Hungary, Poland, and

others I don't even know. Not just from Europe though. Now from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan. All over. Much more difficult to find good work. Only four-hour shifts. Not much money. So many people and more every day. I'm lucky I have my job. But I want a room. A warm room with kitchen.

Four hours picking up trash. I could do better. In what city? Maybe London, Brussels. Not as open as Germany. Might not be allowed. Too big anyway. Too many people.

Andrzej says we're stuck here. Closing borders all over. Brussels used to be an option. Not anymore. Too many people. Even Germany. Where to put everybody? So many people. I'm lucky to have my tarps, my home. Don't have to wait for help, for shelter. Many others do. I don't mind being stuck in Berlin for a bit. But everyday, more people. Tougher to find jobs. To keep jobs.

Papers say we're all low-skilled labor. Might be true. Never went to university. Mechanic back home. Fixing machines in printing press. Not much money but a good job all the same. Not enough though. And not enough skills for me here. Nobody wants my "low-skilled" abilities. But I keep looking.

Papers say everybody coming now lacks job skills. Don't know if this is true or not. Don't really run into these people. Just hear and read about them. Andrzej says they all want to go back. After the wars. No war in Hungary but I can't go back. Not yet. But I want to as much as everybody else. Doesn't make a difference where you're from. We all want to go back.

But right now, Berlin is home. Tarps, bridges, picking up trash. Enough for me for now. Patrik says it's never enough. No reason to be living under a bridge. Plenty of money going about. Trick is to find some of it. Patrik says he does but I don't think so. I don't find any of it. But more than the people coming now. I find lots more. Don't know how they'll make it go. Too few jobs. Too many people already here. Like me.

Have to get some sleep. Working with Patrik tomorrow. Start at the north side of the train station, work our way around. Then back. More trash in the places we picked up trash. And Patrik will be the bastard he always is.

Complaining. Slamming the new folks. But they have nowhere to go. He doesn't care. Anywhere but here. He's an ass. If I could, I would offer my tarps to them. A few anyway. But I won't. It's just me. Under my tarps.

Waking up is always difficult. No fresh water. No bathroom. But I get by. Crisp air. Cold coming from the Spree. Mist all around. It's beautiful. Just peeking out from my tarps. New morning coming on. Had a beer with Patrik last night outside my tarps. Got them at Rewe at the train station. Good cold beers. One is good. Patrik gave me shit about my tarps. My home. He has a room. Three roommates. Thinks it is better than a tarped home. Couldn't disagree more. I have a great place. No one bothers me. No roommates.

Glad when Patrik left. So negative. Thinks that our problems are everyone's problems. I'm here because I don't have any work skills. But I have a job. A place to sleep. What better?

Sometimes I think things will get better. I'll find a better job. Make some real money. Get a room. Live in style. But then I wake up. Things won't get better. They'll stay the same. Always the same.

Working with Andrzej. He's leaving. Heading to Brussels. Brussels is tough right now. Why go there? Might not let him in. But he is determined to try. Thinks things will be better in Brussels. They once were, so I heard. But with all the immigrants things have changed. Even Brussels. Tried to make him stay. No good. He's leaving. Next week. That leaves Patrik. Shit.

Patrik says Andrzej is a pussy. He thinks Andrzej

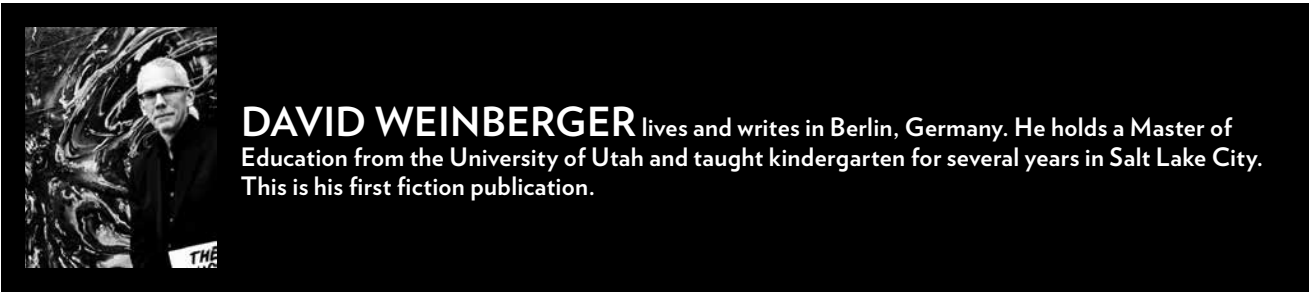
couldn't take Berlin. Ha. Berlin is easy. Jobs are hard but Berlin...its easy. Pick up trash, buy some grub and some beer. Sleep under tarps with the sound of the Spree in my head. Nothing to take. It's all good.

I liked working with Andrzej. Good talker. He could take Berlin. Just had to move. Better ideas than me. Younger. More ambition. Belief in the next thing. Something better. Maybe a pizza shop in Brussels. People love pizza. And he can make it. Good for him. Forget Patrik.

New guy is from Syria. Trying to make a few euros to send home. Don't know how he can live here and still send euros home. I can't. Maybe he will do better. Named Cesar. I can't say it the right way but he doesn't care. Nice guy. Has a family. Wife, two small kids. Four hours of work? And remittance to his parents? Can't imagine it. What am I doing wrong?

Cesar and his family came around last night. Brought some beers for us and juice for the kids. Sat at the edge of the bank. The Spree was quiet. No wake. Moonlight in the water. Told me about Syria. How he tried to stay. How the fighting got so widespread. About his need to move on. Like me, didn't want to move. Walking out without a thing except regret and sorrow. But he had to save his kids. What will they do? Share my tarps some day? They might make it home. A few years, a few changes. Who knows?

Berlin has tons of bridges. Kronprinzen Bridge is just one of many. It's where I feel the safest. Many people stay at lots of bridges. Bags, tarps, blankets. Some safe, some not so much. But we make a home where we can. People pass. People look, or don't. They don't know. 🙄



DAVID WEINBERGER lives and writes in Berlin, Germany. He holds a Master of Education from the University of Utah and taught kindergarten for several years in Salt Lake City. This is his first fiction publication.



Babe Leto

Lynn Mundell

Her old plum trees dropped fruit on his side. He lobbed them like bombs back into her yard.

She bagged them up, made a gift of plums to him. He forgot them, sunbathing on the grass, young limbs darkening.

She watched at a chink in the wall, her body flattening fruit so it looked like Cupid had shot her, repeatedly. He slapped at fruit flies.

October and still the plums rained down.

She made plum cordial, grew drunk on memories of past loves. He snapped — sawed the boughs on his side.

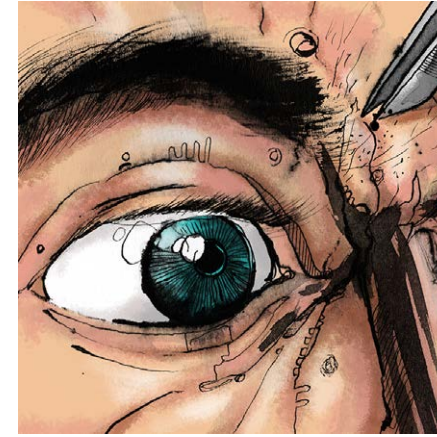
She collected plums pits and juggled. He poured poison over the wall and onto the roots.

She dozed at the wall, dreamt of pink flesh sweet in her mouth, never awoke. He woke early, haunted by gnarled branches shaking him.

Out the door, down the steps, and he was on her side, bending, finally bending, to gather her up. ↻



LYNN MUNDELL's work has appeared in *Literary Orphans*, *Number Eleven*, *First Class Lit*, *Eunoia Review*, *Blink Ink*, *Oblong*, *Counterexample Poetics*, and elsewhere. She lives in Northern California, where she co-edits *100 Word Story*.



Where Comfort Resides

James Claffey

In the mirror of our tiny bathroom you pluck the stray hairs between your eyes with a silver tweezers. To facilitate the removal of the dark matter you employ your large shaving mirror, the one that has one side that magnifies everything. In this glass your eye looms like the Cyclops, huge and bleary, the red veins like those that stick out of the beheaded turkey at Christmas before Mam cleans it up for stuffing. Your lashes are long, cow-like, and I possess the same ones. “Blood is thicker than water,” you say, wiping the tweezers on the washcloth on the sink. “When I’m dead and gone, maybe you’ll look in your own mirror and see your old man staring back at you?” You look at me fondly when you say this and I feel a dull roll in the bottom of my stomach. We stand in the doorway, your head at a slight angle, and in the silence between us a comfort resides and the weight of the silence makes me blush and come up with an excuse to get away. The truth of being a little boy watching you perform your morning ritual has me bewildered. As I walk up the three steps to my bedroom there’s a new knowledge that I possess, one that frightens me half to death—one day I too shall be old and I shall take the tweezers to my own eyebrow hair and find myself caught in a time warp as the face looking straight back at me wavers and becomes yours. ↻



JAMES CLAFFEY hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. He is fiction editor at *Literary Orphans*, and the author of the short fiction collection, *Blood a Cold Blue*. His work appears in the *W.W. Norton Anthology*, *Flash Fiction International*, and in Queensferry Press’s anthology, *Best Small Fictions of 2015*.



Afraid of the Dark

Lisa Laffend

There's a deafening silence that lives at three a.m. so furiously quiet that it'll scramble your brain, making sleep a lofty dream and thought near impossible; a single light burns white on the other side of the room; in its wake the hint of many things lie – a desk, a dresser, knickknacks and souvenirs, dolls, a cluttered magnet board; a gentle hum comes from the sleeping computer, muffled words from your sister in the other room, a grumbled response from your father across the hall, this conversation of the subconscious, the ticking of a clock embedded in the magnet board that hasn't fully functioned in years, the deep slurp of the fish tank pulling water up from the top-off – yet this is silence all the same; inescapable consuming silence; time doesn't move; you know that's not true; it's lying to you; you can't sleep; you lay awake.

Tomorrow you'll wake up and put on something new; something a bit more formal than everyday wear; something just nice enough that, everyday after that, they'll make you feel just slightly overdressed due to the fact they were earmarked as 'first day of school clothes'; photos will be taken as you make your way past vibrant green suburban lawns towards the stop sign marking the bus stop; you'll enter the school and participate in coloring and name games and this illusion of a 'new beginning'; you'll be amazed how quickly the leaves will turn and fall transforming those green lawns into an autumnal rainbow of crimson, orange, brown, and gold; nearly time for the warmth of cinnamon, fireplaces, cousins, and baking; sitting at the long, yellow-stained Ikea table; allowing the bland biscuit of strawberry shortcake to soak up the sweet juices; minutes after counting down yet another 'new beginning'; construction paper litter and pink candy boxes will welcome the return of tulips and daisies; you'll swear there was less than a week in between; school will be over again; returning to summer vacation; returning to tonight; returning a year later; it'll seem so fast; you were just getting comfortable; now it's gone.

This blur of time has haunted you since the days you sat in the middle of the kiddie pool outside your apartment in Syracuse, sucking on a Taco Bell taco, wondering when your Daddy would come home; it lay low during most days; growing with the sunset, wonder and fear came to play; it would set in slowly; leeching on as you reviewed the day; how it seemed to slide by in a matter of seconds; knowing that you don't know

what comes after the end; always there; these dark thoughts had their preferred days – birthdays, holidays, the-night-before's; tonight is one of those nights; the one before third grade; motion sickness from the earth's spin has prevented you from that strict bedtime of 8p.m. sharp; third grade was two away from fifth; five from eighth; nine from graduation; thirteen from graduating college; that'd bring you to about 22 or 23? Maybe? Let social norms and peer pressure take over, you'll start a family perhaps; they'll go through this same cycle; you'll grow old; they'll grow old; your grandparents will die; your parents will die; it'll be your turn; you'll die; then what? What comes next? What lay beyond life? Lay in the darkness? The shadows? The silence?

The thought paralyzes you; without warning the tears come and the off-beat sobs, the ones that will make your stomach sore in the morning; your lungs are suddenly tight, unable to hold more than a few seconds worth of air; you know you're supposed to be silent but the fear has taken over; you're bound to wake someone up; then you'll really be in trouble; but you don't care; Mommy enters, eyelids heavy, in her oversized old red t-shirt serving as a nightgown; *That's not for a long long time*, she assures you, from the side of your bed; just in case, she hands you a children's Bible; turns to "Revelations;" *The streets will be lined with gold*, it tells you; as if to spark the youthful imagination; you know it's just to hush you back to sleep before you awake your father's wrath; but this leaves you with more questions; doesn't she know? Don't they all know? Aren't they scared? Why don't they cry? Why don't they scream? Am I alone in my fear? My knowledge? My anxiety?

She won't answer me; she never will; frankly she's more concerned that my father has work in the morning; she can't comprehend why I won't just go to sleep; or at least find something else to entertain myself; I cry alone until there's no more; until I'm subdued from having nothing left in me to express how shaken I still am on the inside; no one seems to understand that it never leaves, it just becomes too tedious to indicate; the only response to my questions is the creak of stairs as my cat awakes; the concerned and curious whine of her meow as she finds the room she was looking for; the rattle as the radiator turns on; the chirping of the dryer as it finishes its cycle; the whirl of the fan built-in to cool down my computer; the shuffle of sheets as I toss and turn; a silent lullaby to hush me to sleep. 🌙



LISA LAFFEND is an undergraduate at Ithaca College majoring in Integrated Marketing Communications with a minor in Writing. When she's not at school, she resides in the suburbs of Philadelphia, raising cacti and scouring the city for exciting food and amazing concerts. She's also been published in *30 North*, *Gambling the Aisle*, and *Buzzsaw Magazine*.



My Song Was Gratitude

Blake Kilgore

I got lost and wandered into the world of the giants. Fluttering in haphazardly, I smashed into their treasures, raised a clamor, and was found out. Soon a blonde female tried to kill me, unleashing a war cry and swinging open palms at me like a rickety windmill, and I only narrowly escaped her madness. But then she went away, and brought back a tall male with dark hair and beard and eyes. He carried a menacing weapon with many black teeth, and swiping, he forced me to flee. I darted down the narrow and wide alleyways, through the myriad colors and materials of their castle, darkening with the passage of the day.

I thought of my children. Crouching atop metallic walkways above the hunter, I sprung from one to another each time he approached. For all of his size and noise, he was a poor hunter. He kept missing badly, his free hand waving for me to come down from the high ground, his voice pleading.

Dusk was falling. He pointed toward the gate, and I considered flight, but then I heard the screeching and grinding - a devouring machine with glaring bright lights. I returned to the shadows. The hunter charged me, bawling in frustration. I panicked, fled erratically, smashed into corners and ceilings and walls.

The screaming blond returned and I froze, outnumbered. *Will I get home to my children? What if I am killed?*

I waited. The sun and giants went to sleep. Concern and hunger gnawed, pushing me to escape or die. Hopping from the walkways to the lower levels, I saw the bread crumbs. Was it a trap? I hesitated. Then distant warbling, the tone charged with uncertainty and fear, jolted me. Leaping, soaring a few inches above ground, I grasped the bread in my talons and beak. Swooping into the air, I bolted toward the stars; their twinkling gave rapture proof of my escape.

I soared home and settled, grateful, beside my children. Sorrow receded from their eyes as I nuzzled them, humming a lullaby while they ate. I smiled - I had escaped.

Imagine the disappointment of the giants in the morning.



Part Texan, part Okie, **BLAKE KILGORE** fell for a Jersey girl and followed her east. A history teacher by day, he also coaches basketball and performs original folk music. Blake is a skeptic who still believes. As such, he is grateful for much that is still good, and particularly for his wife and four sons. Blake's stories have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *Forge*, *The Bookends Review*, and *ginosko*, and *The Stonecoast Review*.



Code

Susan Tepper

He picks me up in this old Corvette convertible. It's just before nine. July. A flat, dull darkness over the neighborhood. No stars. The salt air with a smell like iodine.

I'm in temporary quarters. Small flat at the rear of an old wooden row house, couple streets over from the ocean. I have to walk a narrow concrete alley-path. On my mobile I told him (Marv) to honk loudly and I'd come out.

"You can get a ticket for having a bad tail pipe," I say. Gas fumes hovering in the air. Opening the door I get in. Royal-blue metallic. Terrible color choice for a vintage car.

"You can get a ticket for what *you do*," he says.

Dammit. I hate when they try and make it funny-personal. I light up and puff. Enjoying my cigarette while it's still my time to enjoy. My hair blows freely as he picks up speed along the ocean road.

"The Oasis Bar OK." Marv asks by way of telling me.

"Sure, baby. Wherever you wish." Ha Ha. The joke is on them, always on them.

He nods. Affirmative. I don't care for his pointed beard. It makes him look like an old wizard. "I thought we were having dinner first," I say, though I'm not remotely hungry; just to throw him off his game a little.

He slows the car to maybe 10 mph. "I told you it's a convertible." He glances my way a few times. "Why didn't you wear a head scarf?"

What the hell? "A head scarf?"

"Your hair is wrecked." He sighs. "I guess we can get food at the Oasis Bar."

When I don't respond I feel him starting to worry. They have this way of conveying nervousness. A worried John is a good John. I puff the cigarette gleefully. If I'm unhappy, my performance could be, well— well under par. I stare straight ahead. The streetlights have come on, the ocean black and invisible. We both know I'm the one in control for now.

Right now I could practically have him sign this hideous car over to me. Marv. An ugly divorced bloke, with few, if any, prospects. Anyway that's my educated guess. Why pay if you can get it for free?

"Lookie." He jerks to the right, braking hard at the curb. "A spot right in front of the Oasis! Lucky us."

Yeah, right, whatever. I flick my cigarette onto the road. "Anything you say." He is so fucking unlucky it's pathetic. I shrug reaching for the door handle.

"What about your hair?"

What about your mug? Smiling, I give my hair a toss. "All fixed now."

He's looking dubious. "Umm..." Patting the top of his own hair like that will somehow correct mine. "I can probably talk Louie into grilling us some big burgers. With fries," he adds.

"Uh huh."

He's sweating across his top lip. It's a warm night. I take my time stepping from the car, closing the door.

Inside is the usual. Three hippie leftovers with acoustical guitars. Small low platform stage. Active dart board. Noisy. The Oasis regulars hunkered down around the horseshoe-shaped bar. I recognize the two muscled bartenders in their tight wife-beaters. The one with close-cropped yellow hair turned nasty on a date. In my business you come to expect peculiarities. Sometime after, I saw him nearly punch a woman in the face. She complained he used a mix instead of fresh lemon and sugar in her whisky sour. He'd called her nose *a beak* and made a fist, saying *how'd you like it flattened*. She cried out loudly, drunkenly, calling him cruel, and could she help how god had made her. Could she?

Her mercy appeal didn't affect this guy. He kept wiping the top of the bar in a circular motion, over and over. "Sister you're preaching to an empty drum," he finally said.

I could've told her as much in half the time. When they

flick the cash at you afterward is never good. I waited till he shut the room door before getting off the bed to pick it up.

Marv is gravitating toward the bar. I tap his arm. “Let’s grab a table in the rear.”

He follows me back. I want to stay clear of that yellow haired bartender. Not that I would expect him to remember me. But all the same...

You never know who will remember you. In the spring I carried a half crushed dog to the vet and it died anyway. The vet still remembers me. Sometimes I see him at Dunkin Donuts in the morning buying himself a powdered twist. He always asks if I’m over my dog yet. I never bother to explain that it wasn’t mine, but a dog some car hit then kept going. What’s the point? The dog is dead. He wants to remember me as the woman who carried her dog in her arms to his veterinary clinic. Who am I to take away that memory?

Marv is signaling a waiter. “Louie on tonight?” He asks the gangly young guy.

“Back there cooking.”

“Good, good.” Marv grinning like he won the lottery.

“Listen, do me a favor, will you kid?”

“My name is Travis.”

“Travis will you tell Louie to fry us up two big burgers, two! Tell him press them into the grill so they get the black lines. The hot grill lines. But not overcooked! The lines, but we want them medium-rare.”

The kid seems bored. He scratches one arm. “You want the meat seared but you don’t want it overcooked. That’s kind of tricky.”

“No! No! Louie can do it, he always does it like that for me. Tell him his Uncle Marv is making this request. He’ll know.”

Travis is sucking his bottom lip. “You’re his uncle?”

“No! Not technically! It’s like code. Look, kid, would you do this?” Marv turns to me palms up, looking exasperated. “I don’t understand. How can this be a problem? Do you see a problem?”

“I don’t see a problem.”

“You talk low, it’s that accent, I can’t hear you.”

“I said I don’t see a problem.”

Travis walks away shaking his head.

“The kid is a fucking freak.” Marv is looking around.

“What kind of waiters do they hire in this place?”

I lean back in the chair digging cigarettes out of my purse. “It’s not the Waldorf Astoria. It’s the Oasis Bar. You have to make concessions.”

“What concessions? Maybe in your country, all hoity-toity. I want my burger how I want it! I hate my meat cooked wrongly.”

Wrongly? Is that correct?

He’s agitated, pulling on his beard, making it more pointy, looking this way and that over his shoulder.

“If I had to guess, I’d say he’s talking to your Louie about the food.”

“My Louie?” He’s squinting. “You think so?”

“Yeah I do.”

“OK, you’re probably right.”

“Hang on, it shouldn’t be long.”

“You know I’m starved.”

Starved? Is that correct? The dog looked half-starved when I carried him to the vet. So light. Just a short way but he bled all over me. Even my rings were encrusted.

“That fucking waiter didn’t take our drink order,” Marv is saying. He pounds the table, but limply.

“Can’t you go up to the bar and

tell *them*?”

“We have table service. It’s his job to take the drink and food order. That’s the whole point of table service.”

I’m thinking about what will come after. After the food and drink. After—

when it’s my turn to be his wait-person. To wait on him, on my hands and knees if necessary.

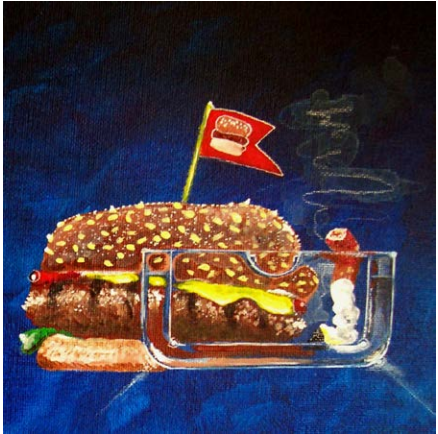
I crush my cigarette in the ashtray and stand up. “I have to dash, catch you another time.”

He looks floored, starting to rise from the chair too. “We made a date. You made a date with me.” His eyes are bugging.

“Yeah.” I let some air out of my lungs. “Well now I’m un-making it.”

“Don’t expect a ride home, bitch!”

“You see, that’s the problem. I don’t expect anything.”



Alleyways

Susan Abram

She has brought me chocolates but I wish she were giving me a box of snakes. I want mean, blood spitting lizards with eyes as still as stone, roses with blackened dead petals. I want her to tell me I’m no good, that I ruined her life, that I should go away and never darken her door again.

Instead, Gina places the box of chocolates on the nightstand, where I can see it.

“I’m back baby,” she whispers as she takes off her clothes, then slides into bed next to me.

They’re chocolates from Hawaii, with the smooth white nuts inside that she knows I like so much, because they’re so hard to find.

“I left spaghetti and those little potatoes you like in the fridge,” I say, trying not to sound disappointed by her love.

“Me and the guys went out for tacos,” she whispers, before she kisses me good night.

She is afraid of my ways.

She has said she would kill herself if I ever left her. She says she’ll swallow liquid Drano until the lining of her stomach bleeds through.

Maybe she’s right to be afraid.

After she falls asleep, I get up slowly to sit by the window and smoke and drink instant coffee until I feel light headed. There’s a warm, early morning wind that blows down the mouth of the alley, scraping leaves and secrets and longings on cement. I’m always looking for movement, for hints of change. Outside, the smell of exhaust from a truck running

on diesel drifts through the window screen and the sun begins to rise behind the row of palm trees along Glenwood Road. We live on the second floor of a fourplex and one of our windows faces a long alley that then splits at the end, like the letter T. I keep my eyes at that intersection, looking for anyone to determine my fate.

If someone walks or drives down the alley then takes a right turn, I’ll stay home and let another Saturday dissolve away as I do most times. Left, and I’ll slip out of the black tank top and red plaid pajama bottoms and dress myself carefully in clean jeans and a T-shirt. But only a woman everyone in the neighborhood calls Mama Sarkis has awoken early to pace up and down the alley near the apartment heading neither left nor right. She passes ivory rosary beads through her fingers and I watch her until my eyes blur.

Her chocolates make me cry.

When I’m thinking of suitcases, when I’m imagining a wide road, Gina finds a way to nail me to the ground. This time it’s chocolates. Sometimes, it’s baklava from Paradise Café down the street, or a Gerbera daisy from the mini mart.

Gina thinks I’m still in love with someone else, but she’s only caught in an old illusion. What do I tell her? That faraway, somewhere, there was a woman with long brown hair who tempted me with stories of the road and told me that to live was to experience love in many forms. How do I tell Gina that for a few weeks, there was someone whose



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eyes seemed to only want me, that her hands and lips on me and the words she whispered in my ear were all so powerful that I left what I knew to follow her.

Sometimes, my longing of moving on infects Gina, who knows nothing of why I was led here, but feels something else between us.

“Shit Rita,” Gina sometimes says to me, when she sees me staring out the window for hours, when she knows she has been frozen out of my mind. “Sometimes you make me feel like I’ve been nothing more than your tour guide.”

On those days when Gina is out painting houses in the San Fernando Valley and I’m alone, I think again about roads and a ghost on a highway named Layla, who has left me only clues of where she is as if she were Hansel leaving breadcrumbs, in cities and towns across chunks of land for me to follow.

“Survival can be a dull and tiresome chore sometimes,” Layla had said one winter day as she piled pears into a pyramid at the grocery store where we once worked. “No one should have to keep living for that alone.”

I’m not sure why she chose to tell me so much. Maybe she saw the restlessness in me and my own ache of feeling stuck in one place. But night after night, I would see Layla out in the parking lot, shivering and smoking long cigarettes. I also didn’t know why she came to our part of Connecticut. Our town was small and most of us could trace our roots to an Italian village called Settefrati. We held festivals once a year where our grandmothers woke early and made pizza frit, or fried pizza dough that dripped with tomato sauce to celebrate the feast of la Madonna di Canneto. Aside from that and the Clairol factory where my parents worked, our town had little else to offer.

Layla told me she was from Belgium. And even though she was in her 30s, she favored jeans and black high top sneakers, pink and light blue sweatshirts with cartoon character decals, like Betty Boop.

She liked to talk about all the places she had visited, her lovers in the south of Spain and in the bars of New Orleans. She had a man in Texas who played guitar and another in Miami who taught her the Tango. After Layla spoke, she’d stand still and silent and look out into the darkened parking lot as if the asphalt could move and she could move with it.

“You’re so brave,” I told her.

“Brave? No, sweetie,” she said. “I just can’t sit still.”

One night, while we were on a break and the parking lot gleamed under ice, Layla shivered and tossed her cigarette butt. She asked if I was ready to go with her.

“I can’t,” I said, thinking of my graduation coming up, an invitation to the prom from a boy who liked me since the sixth grade. “I guess I’m waiting around for an excuse.”

“You don’t need an excuse,” she said. “Let’s just go.”

But I wasn’t ready. Not just like that. I told her that my family was hoping I’d go to college. I couldn’t disappoint them, I told her.

“People who are envious of others need for freedom always strike back,” Layla said.

I was confused by that and told her that I had to stay for a while longer. I had to wait. Her anger was like a slap.

“You’re such a little girl Rita,” she hissed. “I bet you still drink milk with your dinner.”

And just like that, she ignored me for days. Then one afternoon when I went to work early, there was a note left for me, taped to my locker. She had written an address in Savannah, Georgia, but there was no phone number, no other way to reach her.

“Remember that change rarely comes without pain,” she wrote. *“You might have to endure a few harsh moments for now but it will be better later.”*

For the rest of winter and through spring, it was as if I had been suffering from a fever. Even my feet were immune to the cold and ice that crept into my boots. I asked for more hours at work to make enough money to buy bus tickets. In between, I spent every free hour from school and work at the library, looking over maps on the Internet and books of Savannah, imagining the moment I too could walk passed Victorian style homes and over cobblestone streets, until I could reach her. I recited little travel tips to my parents in the morning at breakfast, and lied about how “my friend Layla” said there was a statue I had to see, a photo gallery I would like.

My parents felt Layla’s hold and my mom kept asking why a woman in her 30s was so interested in me. I told her we were friends, but I stopped short of telling her that Layla and I had held each other while we took our breaks outside the store, that she had placed a soft kiss at the corner of my lips.

At night, when I came home from work, there were brochures left on the dinner table for the community college in Bridgeport, the nursing school in Stamford, a computer degree at UCONN. But I threw them away before I went to bed. I couldn’t imagine sitting still in hard classroom seats for lectures and numbers and words and charts scrawled on whiteboards. Layla had made the roads in front of me move, and I wanted to move on them with her.

By May, I knew the streets of Savannah by heart. I could imagine the highways and boulevards I needed to take to get to her. I could feel her embrace when I saw her.

My mom had been tired of my day dreaming, of the long hard stares out the window, the smell of gardenia lotions on my skin that reminded me of Layla. She had seen the pile of college pamphlets in the trash and had listened to my constant rambling of trains and buses and tourist sites in places she had no interest in. And then one day, not long after graduation, when they had seen me throw out my diploma, my parents gave me the excuse I had been waiting for.

“Leave then,” my mom said shrugging. “Go.”

I ignored the bumps of the bus rides through Pennsylvania. I wasn’t interested in the passengers talking of vacations in Virginia or the Carolinas. I refused to soak up the Southern culture or remember the color of the booths inside each diner I stopped in to eat. I was in a hurry. I wanted to prove to a woman I had known for only a few weeks, that I too was brave. I held on to an image of her that had hardened in my mind into a perfect shape and texture. When the bus pulled into a station on Seaboard Coastline Drive, I bought a pack of Layla’s favorite brand of cigarettes, and walked for blocks until I reached the courtyard of City Market. The tables and plastic white chairs outside restaurants that I’d seen in photographs in travel guides were empty because of rain.

I had wondered if she was waiting for me somewhere in that city of old homes and iron balconies.

The address she had left for me was that of a pub near River Street. Solomon, a tanned man with green eyes and scattered white strands through his black hair dismissed me when I told him I was there to see Layla.

“Don’t know her,” he said.

“You have to,” I said, surprised that he could not remember a woman like Layla. I described her long hair, her hazel eyes, the lips that broke my heart whenever she was sad.

“That sounds like most of the whores who come in here,” he said, trying to be funny. When he saw no reaction, he stopped wiping the bar.

“Oh shit,” he said. “You mean Sela. She’s worked here on and off for a few years then she splits. My boss and her had something going.”

Solomon told me that an Algerian man who said was her husband had come looking for her not long ago. The man sat on the bar stool and cried when he learned that Layla had taken off again, that he’d been after her for a while. He told Solomon that they had a young daughter.

Solomon turned to a bulletin board and untacked a few bills and receipts. After sifting through them, he found an envelope and turned it over a few times.

“This for you?” he said. I grabbed and opened it and found a note from Layla with another address. San Antonio.

Maybe by now you are repulsed. But I couldn’t go back. Not to that life of obligations and love I cannot give. So I decided to drive straight ahead... My favorite! Away from real life, away from nasty people, forever dreaming of the next landscape to discover, the next adventure on the road.

I sat on one of the stools and felt as if I had been chasing a stranger. I envisioned her on highways cutting through chunks of countryside and cities I hadn’t studied in those books at the library. I had no map going that far or idea of what roads heading west looked like. I thought of the childhood prayer my mother taught me when a sock, or an earring or the keys were misplaced: Dear St. Anthony, come around, something’s lost and can’t be found. Standing there in the bar, Layla seemed lost to me and I had felt just as lost to myself.

My heart ached. I walked outside and cried. I felt foolish for leaving my mom who cared enough for me to let me go. Then I felt sad for a little girl whose mom couldn’t love her at all.

I didn’t know what to do. It was too hard to leave home the first time and the shame of going back scared me more than San Antonio. Layla was right. I was repulsed by her. Yet for some reason, I still wanted to go after her. Not to make her love me, but to tell her, if I found her, that I didn’t want to be like her, that she wasn’t so brave after all. So I followed her notes to other towns, to small bars, where reluctant servers gave me yet another address to another place, again and again until I reached Los Angeles.

The last address I carried was that of a crumb of a bar called the Big Tuna on San Fernando Road. It sat wedged between a vacant lot and a junkyard called U-Pick-A-Part. All I had to do was ask the bartender for a name and a note. But I hesitated and ordered a ginger ale. I was too young to drink beer and too tired to care where I was.

When I had rested enough, I told the bartender my name and asked if there were any messages left for me. That’s when I heard a voice from behind.

“Slow roads make better memories,” a woman whispered in my ear.

She placed some cash on the bar, and raised her glass of beer at a bumper sticker stuck onto a mirror behind the bottles of liquor that had the same saying. I nodded my thanks, but turned my back on her again. In the mirror I saw Gina return to a velvet maroon couch where another woman who sat with her called her a dork.

The smell of the \$2 draft beer made me queasy and I had come too far to answer her stare. I wanted to go home, but by then a landslide had come between me and the numbers and the name of a street and a town on my driver’s license, a mom and a dad living in the smallest, clapboard house on that street, and a photograph of me and my prom date in a gold oval frame. I’d been thinking of maps and decisions when Gina had found me again, sitting on my back pack against the wall of the ladies bathroom, where puddles of urine and vomit and green liquid soap had gathered between cracked tiles, and wads of soaked toilet paper formed clumps around the edges of the sink. I had closed my eyes to stop the spinning in my head.

Gina squatted in front of me and pointed gently to my eye, then dropped her finger down my cheek, to simulate a tear. I nodded and she pulled a paper towel from the dispenser, soaked it under the tap and placed it on my forehead. I leaned against her shoulder, and cried. She left me alone until I pulled my face away.

“I feel better,” I said.

“You live close by honey?”

I shook my head and blew my nose into the wet paper towel then tossed it in the overflowing wastebasket. She led me toward the bar again, where I pulled out a cigarette and she lit the end while I studied her high cheekbones and eyes. I remember thinking that I liked her dimples when she smiled and the Chinese characters tattooed on her arms.

“I want to go home,” I told her.

“I’ll take you,” she said.

“Your home?”

I knew the question would make her smile, and it did. I slid the unopened note from Layla into my back pocket and let Gina slip her arm around my waist. When we got to her place, Gina didn’t turn on the lights, but instead took my bags and carefully placed them on a chair. She put some music on; a song about how one person missed another “like the deserts miss the rain.” Then she wrapped her arms around me.

“I don’t want a girlfriend,” I had said that night. She laughed a little, then held me closer. She kissed me carefully on my neck, then on my lips. She pulled my shirt up over my head, and slipped her hand down the front of my jeans to feel my cheap satin panties.

“I can’t,” I said to Gina. “I don’t want to yet.”

Gina pulled away, but still held me until I relaxed and I lay my head on her shoulder. Later, under the covers of her small bed, I listened to car engines vibrate as she held me. I watched as headlights cast shadowy waves through the window blinds and on the wall, as I felt her mouth on me.

I was angry at my body for giving in to the mattress that

night and for each night after, when it seems her bed has become my patch of quicksand.

I’ve tried not to love Gina. I tried to put a road between us. But she blocks that road with kindness. She gives me money she earns so that I can buy clothes. She lights my dark thoughts with flowers, lipstick, or a box of chocolates. She lets me stay on in her place as if it was my own to do whatever I want, and the bills are always paid on time.

On those days when Gina isn’t painting houses for money, we go to flea markets and she takes me out to breakfast and the movies. On weekends, the smell of kabobs and buttery basmati rice drifts out of our Armenian neighbors’ windows and backyards and hangs over the alley.

The only times when she can care less if I’m there is when she rolls joints and bags weed for the guy who owns the Big Tuna, the bar where we met. He then sells it around the neighborhood. When she scatters sticky buds across the kitchen table where I rest my elbow, that’s when I make a list of reasons to leave.

When they should be in their rooms playing video games with their brothers, when they should be pushing pencils in notebooks to solve math problems, the boys gather at the end of the alley at night, under the lamppost where I can see them, their still growing hands clutching baggies of pot and their eyes turning to stone each time they exchange cash.

Gina pretends she’s not part of it, and I know it’s so she won’t feel guilty.

“If they don’t get it from my friend, they’ll get it from someone else,” Gina says as she counts money, as I watch her.

I know she’s right in a way, but her part-time pot job is all I have against her and I try to turn it into a wall of cement and stone between us.

“If you don’t like it, then go back to wherever you came from,” Gina snapped one day after we argued. “But if you do, I’ll kill myself. I’ll swallow paint thinner until I die.”

Now, as I look at Gina still asleep and realize no one else besides Mama Sarkis has come down the alley all morning, I decide against drinking any more coffee. Gina’s cat, Xena, has sat on my lap. I like the warmth of her body, but I nudge her off. Gina once told me she found her as a kitten, lost and wedged between the walls of the fourplex and the house next door. She called firefighters who climbed to the roof of the house, and they used a long pole to coax the tiny animal

toward an opening that led back into the alley. I tiptoe toward the bed and slip back in, fighting against its comfort, but then I let my body sink into the mattress.

“Gina,” I say, patting her on the shoulder.

She turns and wraps her arm around me and I let her. I close my eyes as I imagine reaching for my backpack from underneath the bed. There is the dust of neglect inside the teeth of the zipper, but I don’t bother to clean it. I can see myself pull open the drawers of the white bureau. The postcards I collected and my last, unopened envelope with Layla’s note are still there.

I imagine slipping on jeans and packing the rest of my clothes into the backpack. Then I take the box of chocolates.

I open my eyes and see that Gina is looking at me.

“You gonna go and do what?” Gina says into her pillow.

I run my fingers through her short hair. It’s softer than I expect even though I’ve felt it many times before.

“I saw there was an opening for a server down at the Paradise Cafe,”

I whisper. “We could use the money for a bigger bed. You could stop selling pot.”

Gina smiles and pulls me closer.

“My baby,” she whispers. “My little Rita.”

I shut my eyes again and I can see myself doing what I thought I’d be doing months ago. I imagine I’d pet Xena one last time before I open the door. Outside in the alley, a warm breeze tickles my bare arms. I slip on a pair of sunglasses Gina bought for me on the Venice boardwalk and blow a kiss at Mama Sarkis. The intersection of the alley looks bigger than from the window, and I slow down before I turn left. Gina doesn’t look for me as I pass and I try to forget about the cleaning products under the sink. I imagine placing my hands on my ears to block the sound of her cries. I’ll try to forget Gina’s hands on me on our first night together and the days and nights since.

Then I’ll remember the box of chocolates in my backpack and I’ll hope they don’t melt. And I’ll think about what Layla would say if she thought I’d made it all the way to Hawaii.

She would say I was brave. 🕒



The Thing I Am

Toti O’Brien

Before is a shadow.

Before: is a Basque-beret inclined on the side, and plain features. Plain equals neutral. An upper lip where hair is expected to appear, then thicken.

Expected by whom? By the shadow - lingering for a while, then vanished. Not entirely.

We have asked about breasts getting rounded and larger. It will happen over time we were answered. We have waited a day or two then we have gaged the thickness above and below the nipple. It felt slightly increased – without a doubt. Happily we have reported the news and someone has laughed. We have not been offended.

We have visited the large bedroom mirror and been surprised: our hair was getting longer. Things were changing, not sure in which direction. Hair was black and curled. Pulling the curl we discovered a remarkable stretch. Things were progressing, expanding no matter how.

But there is before. Short hair, a round face

– undetermined, nondescript. Sitting in a bed surrounded by bars, like a cage. A cage can be lovely: it prevents you from falling out. That’s a body’s natural tendency: rolling out of beds, magnetized by those small carpets appositely laid on the floor. Carpets are soft, thanks god – yet not enough.

In the cage another round-headed thing has been delivered. The thing bobs. The head bobs... well, the entire thing bobs. It’s a little brother, whatever it means. An intrusion – not yet clear if an addition or a subtraction.

We are waiting for stains on underwear. They do not appear. We are imagining it then we are hallucinating it. We are imagining infinitesimal spills of rusty brown. Then we are hallucinating a pink dot, the side of a quarter. We agonize for the vision to materialize, as if waiting for a miracle. Miracles are out of control. Agony is consuming.

There’s before, and it becomes remote. We are soaked in the bath tube with some little brother. Little brothers have multiplied. Brothers have things that mother calls peas,



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birds, fishes. They look neither vegetal nor animal, unless... maybe fat slugs. Unobtrusive, cute, certainly not worrisome. They get vigorously washed like the rest of brothers' bodies, and our own.

We have a cut under the belly. Red, inside, more intensely than anywhere else in the body. Occasionally the cut hurts (that is kind of logical), but not always, and that's pretty much out of the way so we don't really care about it. Still: the useful data is brothers don't have it.

This is the main point. A clear definition. We are not brothers. We are sister. We haven't yet appraised it as an advantage or disadvantage. Advantage, probably. Advantage would be preferable. We'll go with advantage.

Until when, after a good sparring, we prevail and put our knee on the chest or back of a defeated brother (who's in the meantime irresistibly giggling, also trying to escape, to prevail in his turn). But we cannot bang our fists on our chest, orangutan style. It is sudden: knuckles bump against acorn-like formations that weren't there yesterday. They are painful. This is very strange, most unfair, sadly handicapping. This is maiming our bravery, heroism, righteous pride.

Then embarrassment comes. Brothers taken away from her room. A room for her alone. Her room. She has a room for her, alone. One bed. Very small. A very small room. She cannot watch football on TV with her brothers. She is sent away.

Then comes more embarrassment. Father slaps her when she wears those knitted items grandma made - with such love. For her: sweaters, dresses, hoses. Father slaps her, for those clothes don't befit her. She doesn't know why, and she can't figure. She is terrified when she picks her clothes. She doesn't want to be slapped for things incomprehensible. She's more and more embarrassed. She is definitely she.

She has a boyfriend, the first one she will make love to. There has already been love and boyfriends, but without any making. She has imagining making it, with many. Then she has hallucinated it. This one is the one and it's happening, unavoidably.

Now the boyfriend - he has a beard. A black, thick, dense, impenetrable beard. Now the boyfriend is about to declare himself. Declare? She already knows what she is supposed to know. He is about to confess his feelings.

Intentions. But that happens slowly.

As slowly as you can tolerate. It happens on a very long road, surrounded by rows of very tall trees. It's a large road as well, paved, but on both sides there's a slope - muddy, kind of dangerous.

They are walking, the two of them, not sure where directed. He is talking and his talking is getting to the point - very slowly. While he talks, irrepressibly but unconsciously, he veers to the left. She is left of him. He bents left, pushing her towards the slope, closer and closer. She tries to redirect him without pushing, without telling. Gently, she tries to straighten up, re-center, proceed parallel. Straight and parallel: the road neatly shared by two moving bodies. Two. Moving. Bodies. But there is no way. She gets anguished - she's afraid she'd fall down the slope. Anguish is consuming.

He has declared himself and that's all for now. Consequences are for later. But he's given her a token, a talisman. Not a ring, no: a rabbit paw. A dead rabbit paw. Elongated. Soft. Furry. Once an animal thing, but now what? She is holding the paw when he sees her to the bus. He is sending her home with their pact defined, and consequences to come.

Their pact sealed by the rabbit paw she is holding - while she smiles as she feels she should.

She is afraid and slightly disgusted: she would like to drop the paw but she knows she can't. She has to hold it: this thing once alive, this amalgam of fat, hair, flesh, bone. Blood stained? Not any more. Not yet.



The Meeting

Chris Fradkin

Bills was two years on the job and his teeth were falling out. For weeks—no, actually months—he'd followed their instructions. He phoned the dental plan, he faxed the CEO, he'd spoken to those weasels on the quad. And everyone agreed: Bills' dentist should be paid; however, no one to date had done a thing. As last resort, he'd laid himself at H. L. Vasquez' feet. "Mr. Vasquez," Bills began—they were sitting in Secure Suites, the complex filled with stop-gaps, whose mission in this life was to squelch the likes of Bills and other losers. "Dr. Jaston needs his payment. Or else," he said. "He says that he won't treat me." Bills dabbed his swollen cheek; his eyes slammed shut in pain—a bolt shot from his tooth up to his brain. "I understand," the voice wrote—post-trach in its timbre, heavy in harmonics, and seemingly transposed a perfect fifth. "I'll speak with Mr. Paul in the morning." Having tendered his response, Vasquez waited.

Bills opened up his eyes; he inched forward in his chair. "Mr. V., I need the payment now—" Vasquez noted that Bills' hands were shaking ever so slightly; Bills noted that his head was feeling full. "Bills," the voice began, "the payment must be made by our insurance. *They're* the ones we pay to pay the dentist." "But they *haven't* paid the dentist—they're five months in arrears. And Paul and James—the two of them, I swear they don't do squat!" In response to Bills' outburst, a hand reached in and shut the door. "If you want to change the system," the voice spoke evenly, "there's a committee that could benefit from input. Especially," it said, "from a man like you." "Like me?" Bills curled his lip. "So they want input from the token cripple?" "It meets three times a year—" "Three times a year?" Bills interrupted. He leaned forward in his chair—the metal on the armrest creaked.



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“Mr. Vasquez, I need payment for my tooth.” Vasquez’ eyes looked back at Bills’. A second pain shot upward—Bills’ head flew through the air. Dear God, he thought, my tooth is coming loose. “I need help,” he said. His arms flailed through the air. “Why me?” he said. “Why me?” Then with upper body straining, Bills dragged himself upright and faced his maker.

Vasquez—as he appeared from Bills’ compromised perspective—was framed between two big-screen monitors. Upon them there were images of nebulae exploding: first in yellow; then in orange—writhing in slow-motion, as Bills fell victim to their heathen spell. Meanwhile Vasquez prattled on: mouthing bylaws of the firm, feathered with collectivist clichés.

The yellow nebula let loose a crab-like paisley portion. It worked its way across the left-side screen, with shards of bursting color in its wake. Clips of Vasquez’ speech cut through the movement of the creatures as they wrapped their tendrils slowly round Bills’ brain: “...employees’ health—” Bills watched the creatures as they mingled. “... Our number-one priority—” Bills swore he felt a drill-bit in his skull. The phone rang—Vasquez ignored it, or Bills perceived he did—as the yellow nebula cell-divided.

Bills followed the display of colors on the screens—they flowed like sex from one form to another. As their mantra pulled him deeper, Bills sensed a jagged pulsing—one-hundred-twenty cycles down his spine. Then Vasquez’ face

appeared submerged inside the screens—his voice projected from the nearby speakers: “... insurance of the finest—” Vasquez offered in duet. As the soundtrack grew in volume, files of laughter filled the room. “...of the kind we would provide for all our families—”

Your families, Bills considered, in between the pounding—your families are the effing corporation! His eyes locked on the screens—the volume rose in pitch—The clock on Vasquez’ mantle skipped a beat. Then a relay circuit snapped: like rows of Dominos—Bills shot up from his chair and then crashed down.... ‘THUD, THUD,’ proclaimed the pulsing in his head... ‘Thud, thud,’ the message growing fainter... then the soundtrack in Bills’ head wound to a stop.

A pregnant pause rang through the waiting room.... “Bills?” The cripple’s eyes fixed on the ceiling. “Mr. Bills?” Vasquez asked a second time.

Bills’ body was a ragdoll lying in the chair; his hands were frozen in the air.

Then a single drop of crimson wound its way across Bills’ cheek, as Vasquez turned away and placed the call. In a voice devoid of artifice, he spoke into the phone: “Place that call to Paul about the payment....”

The nebulae moved slowly—they inched across the screens: one yellow and one orange. Forming patterns filled with paisleys, weaving in and out of sight—multiplying when the viewer least expects it. 🌀



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Author photo by Joey Alkes.



With These Three Hearts

Sarah David

Northern Michigan is a gateway, a dessert, a hovel, a refuge. Like most abstractions, it depends on perspective. Moving here from Southern California, one would guess my parents had a fresh perspective, yet they chose to see the grime under my boyfriend’s fingernail and his lack of fancy degree when he came to their door with an engagement ring. After bitter screams (mine and my mother’s) and embarrassed grunts (Dan’s and my father’s), we took off down the gravel road, two eighteen year olds without a destination, one finger wearing Walmart-bought cubic zirconia, all fingers pointed west on Highway 28.

Tucked safely in their northern refuge, my parents had convinced themselves of the error of my ways. Our ways. Everyone else’s ways. And time passed.

•

There’s a time of the day just after the sun dips below the tree line that the world appears both darker and more clear, as if with the lowering of God’s dimmer switch, He clicks

the phoropter at the optometrist’s office in the sky.

Dan and I choose this time to drive west.

I suspect it isn’t so much a decision as a necessity. We were supposed to be at my parent’s by nightfall, but worked later than expected. We have to leave now or wait until tomorrow. I keep my tidy work clothing on. My curly hair remains thoroughly secured atop my head. Knowing that it will only lead to further upset if we arrive after the nightly news, I urge my husband into the car and tuck myself into the passenger seat, one arm wrapped around my melon-sized belly. I settled in uncomfortably. I’m not used to the contours of my growing body.

I haven’t spoken with my parents since before the wedding. Since the engagement, really. Now we are headed down the deserted rural highway to see if we can change their minds. I’m not exactly eager. My father loathes confrontation. I’ve inherited that trait from him.

•

Three miles east of who-the-hell-knows, we pass a

sagging, steel blue building. It's long and narrow, with four or five doors open to the evening shadows and the crisp wind. A stained mattress and a pile of limbless wicker furniture lie across one open doorway, a dented tin garbage can in front of another. It's one of those places that make me imagine its history, its present. I wonder who lives there, picture a broken-hearted middle-aged woman, her passion snatched from her after years of bad luck and hardship; a rabid alcoholic her husband, disdain his other favorite drug. I see their fights, their struggles, their poverty; I see expired spam on cheap white bread, mice and spiders sneaking into corners, rooms with dust-coated boxes overflowing with every little possession that might be worth something, maybe worth something. Every thing is worth hanging onto when you have nothing.

If I really thought about it, I'd realize that my parents never truly had faith in me. I first learned to ride my bike without training wheels when I was eleven years old. The other kids laughed at the extra wheels when we took our bikes into town. We lived on the edge of a cliff over a river. My mother hissed threats of broken bones and broken futures if I so much as mentioned riding on two wheels. I kept the trainers on. She always knew I couldn't do anything myself. I suppose I'd surprised her when I finally tried.

In the car, a stranger kicks my left kidney. I've heard you really only need one. I rub my belly. "It's like a peace offering," I say.

My husband laughs once, brisk, his eyes on the road. One hand combs the thick, dark hair out of his face.

"Don't be nervous," I say. I am nervous. I talk when I'm nervous. "I'm glad I married you, you know. I wouldn't want to be with anyone else. Not with some poet type or a philosopher."

"Why not? Wouldn't you have more in common?"

"If I'd married another writer, we'd probably have killed each other by now. And I don't mean that metaphorically." Outside the window, a crow stalks the gravel side of the road, shifting the leg of a dead animal with its beak. "I need a man who knows physical labor. I'll do the thinking."

He tips his chin. "I feel there's an insult in there somewhere..."

"No, no." The road looms in front of us like the final stretch of a marathon, though we have miles to go. "It's definitely a compliment." I squirm and think about looking for a bathroom. There's nothing but trees and deer for miles. And birds picking at decaying things.

•

The first time I went deer-hunting, I got lucky. In the

rising mango orange of a brilliant cold November sunrise, a 12-point buck stepped in front of the fallen logs that made up my stand. I breathed in and out slowly, watching my breath in the crisp morning air. I aimed the rifle and squeezed the trigger, squinting my eyes and ears against the sharp noise and sharper recoil. My father thudded his hand on my back as we looked down at the fallen creature. "See, we belong up North," he said, but his eyes looked misty.

His hand felt like a mallet pounding my body into the ground.

•

The light is nearly gone now, just a whisper or a dream of twilight lingering in the rearview mirror. We stopped at a rest stop near a river a few miles back. Now we pass a gaudy bar, its Christmas lights shimmering in the autumn darkness like a bad omen. Two bright streetlights add to the sudden mirage of daylight. An old man hunkers over a cane near the bar's doorway, offering his free arm to a woman with coifed white hair. She cuddles close to him, a red sweater covering her shoulders. I can see their love story in a happily ever after; an end-of-life move to a calm northern wilderness, their dessert.

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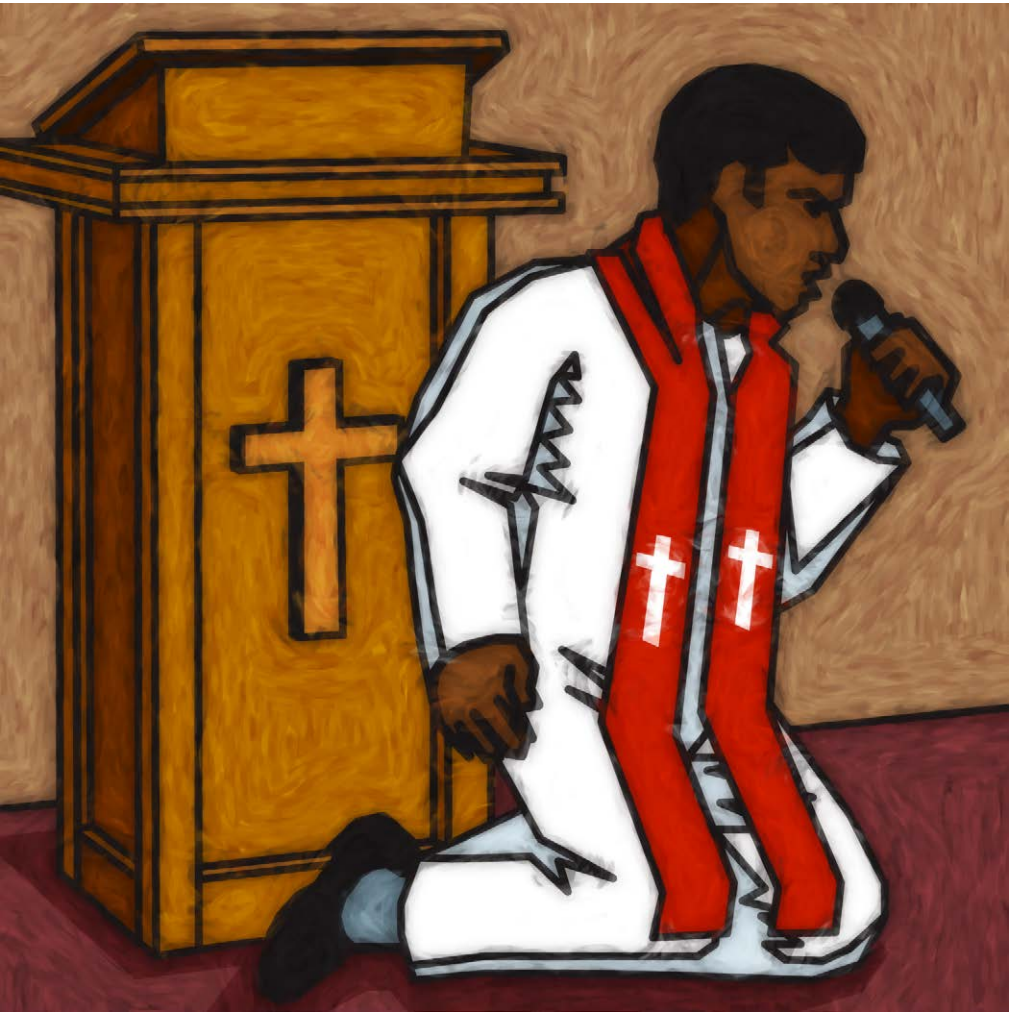
The car's mileage continues to tick upward as I cross and uncross my ankles, uncertain of how to become comfortable. I feel ungainly. Life is ungainly. I reach out to take his hand in the darkness of the car, feel its warmth. Little red and orange dashboard lights light our entwined knuckles.

"Almost there."

I rub my eyes, my head, the bridge of my nose. We'll be crossing a concrete-and-steel bridge soon, a passage over troubled water that won't calm my soul. The porch light will be on. The curtains will be drawn. All cars will be tucked away for the night, all shoes lined up before the entry way mat, the television quietly playing the news.

I remember the last conversation I had with them, wet eyes, slammed doors, sore hearts.

We cross the bridge and pull into the driveway. My husband's hand traces my belly. I lace my fingers through with his and imagine the little heart beating beneath the pulse of our wrists. 🕒



Church Folk Postscripts

Cynthia A. Roby

1.

Coworker knows I'm new to Fort Lauderdale. Beneath her Asian weave and immovable I'm-not-really-botoxed forehead, I am eyed like a fresh soul; cordially invited into her fold of the saved. Coworker tells me, *Come as you are. We love everybody. I'd love to see you there.*

2.


Ten Sundays pass. I come as I am: showered, vintage, Bohemian, dread locks. No press powder. No red lipstick. No Sunday hat. No Sunday shoes. No wig. No hairweave. Searching the rear of the sanctuary for solitude, I find a hip-room seat near a young mother with two under two in tow. Her face: charcoal blotted eye sockets confess sleepless nights, hard times, being swallowed by life. I sit, note indentations of ragged tree branches on her wrists: evidence of life gone bad. She shifts, smiles, nods in my direction. Newborn reeking of baby oil and spit-up squirms in her lap. Tired young mother uncages the nipple of left water-balloon

3.

Heavy oak doors in back groan. Humid air ushers in musk of a man from who-knows-whose-party-last-night. He creeps in, spies the front pews through hard-blinking eyes of avoidance. Lifts his wrists. Eyes the time on expensive watch. *Breitling?* Drops his head. Sits quietly on the other side of tired mom. I lean forward. He turns, nods in acknowledgement of my presence, and shrugs shoulders beneath jacket that confesses a deficiency in order or neatness. Baby of tired mom continues suckling. His left eye massages water balloon.

4.

Preacher man says, *We're all sinners.* Tired mom weeps at hearing the words, burps suckling baby, shoves Disney-decorated bottle into mouth of the second pickaninny.




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Musty party man again shrugs. I nod in silent confession. Second pickaninny slings juice-filled bottle to the floor; grabs at water balloon and demands to suckle. Heads turn. Eyes roll. Hisses of *Shhh* roam, but not aimlessly, throughout the sanctuary. Tired mom's face is shoved into a mold of embarrassment. I extend my arms and take suckling baby. Tired mom exhales hard, applies comforting salve of rocking until pickaninny sleeps. She continues to weep.

5. Preacher man unleashes fire and brimstone. Points out sinners. Calls out liars, fornicators, homosexuals. *How does he know who's done what to whom?* Uneasiness makes a beeline for our rear pew and snatches musty party man into good posture. I shift in my seat, shake my head, ease out a *Lawd have mercy on this man ...* the preacher man, that is. Party man's eyes freeze hooker-thighs wide. Tired mom raises her testifying hand and falls to her knees. Preacher man's words of unjustified and unqualified opinion force my fellows to bleed in shame. *Ain't this a regular Sunday.*

6. Preacher man zigzags across the pulpit on Tinker-Bell toes. I whisper *show time* through lips squeezed into a period. My eyebrows struggle to touch. He grunts, sweats like a woman over fifty, resuscitates a James Brown move, and then falls to his knees. The choir stands. Preacher man's Maceo-Parker posse helps him to his feet. The choir moans lyrics from a collage of soul-twisting-and-pulling gospel hymns. They rock side-to-side, wave their hands for effect. Preacher man lets out a sixty-second *Whooooah!* He takes a breath. White-dress woman in a loose wig runs to the pulpit, wipes preacher man's brow in slow sexy motion. She winks, smiles, then exits. My mouth tumbles into a gaping 'O'. Tired mom gets up and reaches for suckling baby. A cell phone rings. Heads of those nearby turn; their faces twist in disgust as if the pickaninny disturbance was enough distraction for one service. Ringtone is old school: Wilson Pickett's *Funky Broadway*. It's a shout-out from party man's disheveled yet expensive jacket. Releasing my 'O'-painted lips, I comment: *Brethren, that's too cool. Where'd you dig up Pickett?* Eyes from turned heads roll. Heads shake.



CYNTHIA A. ROBY currently lives in New York City, where she works in publishing and as an adjunct professor. Her works of fiction and poetry have appeared in journals and chapbooks including *Black Denim Lit*, *The Manatee*, *Amoskeag*, *Voices of Brooklyn*, and *Writers from the Web*. She earned her MFA from Lindenwood University, specializing in fiction.

Wigs shift. Strong exhales are released. Party man's body stiffens, yet his eyes roam. The ringtone continues. He plays deaf. Tired mom sighs at the judging eyes. Lowers her chin. Rocks suckling baby. Pickaninny, on the cusp of waking, stretches. Tired mom's face shifts in my direction and reads: *I just came for the Word.* I mouth: *Me too.* We smile. No teeth. I cross and uncross my legs. Shrug my shoulders. Our eyes refocus on the religious circus. Party man's eyes squeeze shut.

7. Coworker's hat catches the dust from my breeze outside of the church. *Where you going so fast? Stay for the fellowship luncheon—meet some people. Where did you sit?* She takes a breath, hugs me, leans back, gives me the up-and-down-church-woman look as the grip tightens on her insignificant-in-the-world-of-real-things Lana Marks Cleopatra clutch. *Why didn't you tell me you didn't have anything to wear? And I could have had my girl, you know, do a little something with, how can I say it without being misunderstood, your hair.* Inside I respond: *Diarrhea lips of judgment.* Outside I say: *This was fine. Thanks for inviting me. We aren't the same size. I'm mad cool with dreads; they are a part of, how do I say it without being misunderstood: who I am.* Coworker blinks hard. Behind my back, my middle finger struggles to extend. I snatch it back and instead squeeze my fist tight. *This judgment stuff ain't for me.* My head turns. My eyes trail sounds of Wilson Pickett calling from musty, expensive jacket. On his heels: church-hat woman from the front pew—in a state of obvious agitation. 🙄

Poorly Drawn Lines

Reza Farazmand - PoorlyDrawnLines.com

HOW CAN I HELP?

YOU CAN LEND A HAND. PUT IN SOME WORK.

LIKE, IN A WAY THAT GETS ME ATTENTION.

HOW CAN I... APPEAR TO BE HELPING?

SMALL CAT, LOOK AT THAT PECULIAR ASTEROID.

IT MAY CONTAIN CLUES TO THE ORIGINS OF LIFE.

CAREFULLY TAKE A SAMPLE FOR—

SMALL CAT, NO.

SMALL CAT GOD DAMMIT NO.

SMACK

SMACK
SMACK
SMACK



Third Wheels

Lou Gaglia

Long before we reached Raymond's upstate cabin I knew the score. It was one couple to three third wheels—two of the wheels namely me and this guy Steve, whom I'd already pegged as an asshole, so to speak, because of his little red chin-beard, and because of the way he scoffed at me in the car when I suggested we take the Palisades instead of I87.

Between us in the back seat sat Bonnie, the other third wheel. She was sensible and friendly and somewhat pretty, depending on the angle. She sat between me and that guy Steve, her legs squeezed together. As for my legs, they were pressed against the door, and as for Steve's legs, they were splayed out importantly, the way an asshole might splay them in the back seat of a little Honda on the way to a weekend cabin retreat.

Raymond shared his apartment with me in the East Village, and he had found Kelly at last after seeing some girl named Sylvia on and off for close to a hundred years. She was always yelling at him. But Kelly was different. She

didn't yell, she giggled, and she was so very happy about everything. I stopped staring at the trees to look at her profile. She was trying and failing to see the sky, so she stuck her head out the window. "Look, a bird," she said to Raymond, and he laughed a little and said, "Yeah, I see them."

"No, just one bird," she said. "Look at it."

"I can't," he laughed. "I'm driving."

"Look, there he is."

"I can't." Raymond always laughed after he said anything at all, so he laughed again.

"Don't look at the bird, Ray, watch the road," I said. Raymond laughed but everyone else was quiet. The wheels of the car rolled beneath us. "Because when you look up," I explained, "you don't see the road." Everyone was still quiet. "And you'll—you'll kill us all." Raymond made a chuckling sound but no one else chuckled, and I held my breath a little, which was a habit of mine, and gazed out the window. It was quiet for a while longer, until Kelly wondered if they'd

brought enough spaghetti.

The cabin was really a two-story townhouse. When we got there, I looked with awe at the apparently rich Raymond, then briefly at the too-perky Kelly, and finally at Bonnie, who somehow looked more beautiful in profile than head on. While Kelly and Raymond and Bonnie unpacked the spaghetti and Ragu, I lifted a pack of napkins out of a paper bag and tested my theory about Bonnie, alternately moving to face her and then moving to the side of her, until at last she noticed the napkins in my hand and grabbed them. "I know where these go," she said and tore the package and carried all one hundred napkins to the dining room table, where she stuffed them into a small napkin holder. I watched her profile and sighed, but then held my breath a little when she finished stuffing the napkins and looked up.

"What's wrong," she said. "No good?"

"One napkin is just a little out of place, maybe," I kidded.

Her face tightened. "A little controlling, aren't you?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"First about the bird and now about the napkins."

"The bird? What bird?"

She breezed past me on her way back to the kitchen, mad about the bird and the napkins. That guy Steve laughed to himself. He was looking out the living room sliding door into the woodsy back yard.

"A guy can go hunting right from this window," he said loudly, and Kelly and Bonnie came running to see what he was seeing, which was nothing but an empty yard and some woods.

My old neighbor and high school friend Nancy had scoffed when I told her that I wanted to skip the cabin trip and forget ever marrying and having grandchildren with Bonnie.

"Hey, just because you're thirty, your life ain't over, you know," she said. "If it don't work out with what's-her-face, then...whatever."

"But you know, this is crazy. I still get that thing where I hold my breath when I'm nervous."

"So don't hold your breath then. Simple."

"But I do it anyway."

"How about...if you hold your breath on this trip of yours, then just call me, because if you're talking to me then you can't hold your breath."

"Not a bad idea," I said miserably.

Dinner came fast because the spaghetti didn't need a lot of planning and care, except for the task of opening the stubborn Ragu jar, which fell to Steve because the girls seemed to trust him with that delicate job. Meanwhile I looked around for paper so I could maybe write a letter to Nancy, but there was nothing in the house, and nothing in Raymond's car. At the dinner table I grabbed a napkin out of the holder and then pulled out five or six more. Bonnie caught on and rolled her eyes. When she looked down at her plate I stuffed all but one napkin into my pocket.

Meal conversation soon turned to the movies. No one knew what movie to watch after dinner, until Bonnie mentioned *Pretty Woman*. There was some general agreement about it, but I didn't say anything until Bonnie

asked me if it was all right with me too.

I brightened a little. "Sure, I've never seen that one."

"*Pretty Woman*?" Bonnie said. "You never saw *Pretty Woman*?"

"No."

"*Pretty Woman*? Richard Gere?"

"Who's Richard Gere?"

Mild outrage traveled around the table. Raymond laughed.

"I never heard of him," I said.

"Who *have* you heard of then?" Steve broke in.

"I don't know. Al Pacino?"

Steve scoffed.

"Robert De Niro?"

"Oh, God, De Niro."

"What do you mean Oh God De Niro? He's great. He's the best."

"Oh yeah? What did he ever do?"

I laughed, keeping to myself what De Niro ever did, but soon I discovered that I wasn't breathing much, and I had to casually leave the area to sip in a few deep breaths.

Afterwards, while everyone was getting comfortable for the start of *Pretty Woman*, I drifted upstairs to the bathroom where I wrote a five napkin letter to Nancy.

Early the next morning, everyone was excited over the canoeing part of the weekend. Bonnie seemed to have forgotten all about the birds and the napkins and Richard Gere because she gave me a run-down on where we were going and asked me what I wanted for lunch.

"There's salami and there's peanut butter," she said.

"Salami's good."

"But then there's only enough for—I'm not sure who else wants salami..."

"Peanut butter's fine then." I smiled.

"Oh, good. But whenever it's hot, peanut butter gets really old and mushy and yukky."

"That's okay."

"I'll make you salami then."

I almost made everyone late for the launch because I was upstairs reading over my napkin letter to Nancy. In it I wished we were kids again and could just play tag all day around Cherry Street. "Back then we could say what we thought and no problem," I wrote to her. "But now everything is a big deal. I think of how big the world is, but how hard it is to find just one person who..." Napkin space had run out, and I thought of throwing all the napkins away and starting over, but Raymond and Kelly called to me so I shoved all the napkins into my shorts pocket.

Downstairs, that guy Steve was looking out the back window. He told everyone that he'd just seen a raccoon, and they were impressed. Bonnie told me on the way out the door that she'd slipped an extra slice of salami into my sandwich, and I thanked her and wondered briefly what our grandchildren would look like.

It turned out we weren't going canoeing after all, only row boating, but that was all right with me because I hated falling into lakes. Soon Steve helped Bonnie warm up to me by pretending to tip the boat.

"That was uncalled for, Steve," Bonnie said, while Steve

was getting a kick out of himself.

“Richard Gere would never do that,” I chimed in, and he stopped laughing to stare at me, confused.

Bonnie and I decided to row first, and soon the conversation turned to books, like *The Great Gatsby*.

“Was stupid De Niro in that one?” broke in Steve.

“You mean in the movie?” I said. “No, it was Robert Redford.”

“Same difference.”

Bonnie tried to remember the last line in the book. “I think it’s boats beating back ceaselessly into the past,” she said finally. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“What do you think it means?”

“Well...”

“It means don’t think about the past,” Steve cut in.

“No it doesn’t,” I said.

“Oh yeah? What does it mean then?”

“It means we can’t escape our past.”

“Same thing!”

Bonnie frowned, and I watched her profile, which looked prettier than usual. I planned to marry her, even though I’d have to find a way to stand to one side of her most of the time. Still, she was fine face to face too, and she had slipped me an extra slice of salami, after all, and I had secured the edge over Steve because he’d tried to tip the boat over and because he didn’t know what the last line of *The Great Gatsby* meant. I could only have gone wrong with Bonnie if she preferred ignorant bastards, I mused as we closed in on land for lunch.

“Geniuses go first,” Steve said, motioning me ahead and picking up Bonnie’s salami basket. He stepped behind me, and I balanced myself at the head of the boat and tried to clamber onto land, but I slipped and fell sideways. The boat tilted and I caught my breath, and then there was a splash as the boat righted itself again. Bonnie was still there, but Steve was in the water, spitting and swimming for land. The salami basket was floating away, emptied of all victuals and napkins.

Dinner wasn’t as much fun as it had been the night before. Steve was in an extra pair of Raymond’s shorts and an extra t-shirt of his that said, “Dorny Water Park.” Bonnie sat next to him. She’d been caring for and feeding him since his traumatic entrance into the lake, and now she spooned peas into his dish. He glumly looked down at the spoon and the peas.

I’d already asked Raymond if I could borrow his car the next morning because on Sundays I liked to grab a newspaper and find a coffee shop. “Sure,” he said, and laughed. “Why don’t you have breakfast here?”

“I will. I just like to get the paper first. It’s a habit.”

“Sure,” Raymond laughed.

The rest of my plan involved swiping a few more napkins so I could rewrite my letter to Nancy, because maybe she was more than a pal to me and I just didn’t know it. So while Bonnie poured wine for Steve, I grabbed three napkins and stuffed them into my pocket.

The movie for the night was *Ghost*. I’d never seen it, but this time I smiled and nodded when word got around to me. Kelly and Raymond cuddled on the couch, and Steve and

Bonnie sat stiffly next to each other. I sat on the same chair I had dinner in.

“Wow, Patrick Swayze,” Bonnie said when the movie began.

“Oh yeah, he’s really funny,” I said from my chair.

“And don’t forget Demi Moore,” Raymond laughed, and Kelly elbowed him in the ribs.

“Demi Moore, really?” I said. “Which one is Demi Moore?”

“That one, right there, you see?” said Kelly.

“She’s a very good hugger,” I remarked.

“She’s a dog,” broke out Steve.

“She is?” I peered at the TV.

Bonnie knit her brows and scowled, and I wondered if it was about the birds, the napkins, Steve, the salami, Demi Moore, or all of it combined into one knit brow.

“Look at her,” insisted Steve, pointing at Demi Moore.

“Okay...”

“What’s so great about her?”

“Well...she seems like a very nice person,” I said. Raymond laughed, but Bonnie asked Kelly to restart the movie because she’d missed the whole scene.

Taking Raymond’s car to town in the morning was a pleasure because I had Nancy’s letter in my pocket, the air smelled like pine needles or something, and I was free from Betty’s scowls. I breathed easier and thought about the future—that maybe there’d be a woman like Nancy or Demi Moore in it.

Halfway through *Ghost* I’d escaped upstairs, and in my rewritten letter I let Nancy know that I liked her more than as a friend, and that maybe we could get a hamburger some time and Ketch-Up. I laughed at my own joke as I turned into the shopping center, anxious to pull the napkins from my pocket and take another look, but the coffee shop was closed and so was the stationery store.

“What kind of town is this,” I repeated on my way back, using different tones and many voices, starting with John Wayne and Henry Fonda and ending up as Joe Pesci by the time I parked in front of the townhouse.

Inside, Bonnie and Kelly had just finished putting away the dishes, and Raymond was sweeping the table free of crumbs. “Wow, Bonnie made muffins,” he laughed, and I took in a thin breath.

“Muffins?”

“She had muffin mix stashed away.” He laughed and headed for the kitchen with his crumbs. “She’s got everything, that girl—salami, muffins, you name it.” He laughed again, and from the kitchen Kelly and Bonnie laughed too.

In the back room, Steve had been looking out into the yard, and he rushed back to the dining room. “Shut the hell up everyone. There’s a deer out there.”

This excited the girls.

“Bonnie, get that last muffin,” Steve ordered.

Bonnie grabbed a muffin from behind the toaster and handed it to Steve. “What are you going to do?”

“Feed him,” Steve said, matter-of-fact.

I watched the last muffin in the house head its way across the dining room in Steve’s hand. He stepped carefully outside, and the deer looked over but didn’t move. Steve

edged closer, holding the muffin out at arm’s length.

“What is he doing, is he crazy?” whispered Kelly, and Bonnie was biting her finger.

Steve had moved to within ten feet of the deer and held out the muffin. “He’s teasing it,” I muttered, my stomach growling.

“He’s feeding it, okay?” said Bonnie, annoyed.

Steve edged a little closer, and the deer took a quick step and head-butted him in the chest. Steve flew onto his back, and the deer faked another step forward before running off into the woods.

General pandemonium followed as the girls and Raymond brought Steve back inside. He kneeled on the floor, holding his shoulder. There was talk of a hospital because he was grimacing and looking pale. Meanwhile I took out my napkins and sat on the couch, trying to find the part about how big the world was, but Bonnie strode over and snatched the napkins out of my hand. She rushed over to Steve and mopped his forehead and face, and when her hand came away he had ink over his forehead and cheeks. She was busy looking with horror at the napkins in her hand and at Steve’s inky face when I snatched the napkins back from her.

It was a three mile walk to the bus station. I tried to read the smudged napkin letter but most of it was back at the townhouse, plastered on Steve’s forehead.

In the bus station I got change for quarters and called

Nancy.

“She probably likes you, stupid,” Nancy said, and I felt better. “But if she’s such a nut about every little thing, maybe just forget her,” she added, and I felt worse again.

“She’s pretty nice, I guess, so maybe it’s me who’s not nice. Maybe it’s me.”

“Stop it, you’re nice as hell.”

“How about I come over,” I said. “Maybe we can grab a hamburger and...Ketch Up...”

She was quiet.

Get it?”

“Yeah, I get it. Sure, come on over. But I gotta take my mom food shopping later.” Her mom said something in the background. “Shut up, Ma, I said I’d go, okay?” She was back on the phone. “So I’ll see you here, or if I’m not here I’ll be at Pathmark.” Her mother said something else. “Ma, stop, all right? We’re going, and that’s it.” And then to me. “Are you still breathing?”

“Yeah, I’m breathing.”

“Good, so stop beating the hell out of yourself. People are nuts, you know. It’s not their fault they’re nuts. Get over it and go back there, or get the hell on the bus.”

We hung up as the bus pulled into the station. I got on line, waiting for the fumes to clear before taking a long deep breath. Then I stepped off the line and let it out through pursed lips, so long and slow and strong that an older woman looked over at me wide-eyed, like maybe I had sprung a leak.



LOU GAGLIA is the author of *Poor Advice and Other Stories* (2015, Spring to Mountain Press), which recently won The New Apple Literary Award for short story fiction. His fiction has appeared in *Menda City Review*, *Eclectica*, *Waccamaw*, *Per Contra*, *Main Street Rag*, and elsewhere. He is a long-time teacher and T'ai Chi Ch'uan practitioner—first in New York City and now in upstate New York. Visit him at LouGaglia.com





Baby Muncher

WB Welch

How hungry do you have to be to eat your own baby? Let me tell you.

Days go by. Then weeks. Then months. You set traps. You weave baskets for fish. You look for berries and fallen fruit. A small trout here. A few nuts there. An earthworm dinner or two. All the while your child is sucking the life from you, literally, through your teat.

The long stretches you go with no food, the pain is bad at first, hunger pangs like no other. They fade after a day or two and leave a more hollow pain behind. Eventually that stops too, and you just get tired. *Really* tired. You sleep a lot. What's hard is the inconsistency. If I'm lucky enough to stumble on even the tiniest meal, I know I *need* it, but the cycle starts over once that digests. I know the next day I'll wake up cramping again.

Still, even the worst of it couldn't have prepared me for this last stretch. It had been 32 days since I'd had a bite. Last week I fell over trying to pick up a handful of leaves for the fire. Yesterday I fainted while Micah was nursing. Here I am today, picking meat from between my teeth with a full belly and a satisfied appetite.

I hadn't ever thought about how one might cook another human until I was starting my fire. You hear stories of man eating man in a harsh winter lost on a mountainside, or cannibals hidden in the jungles of other lands gnawing on each other, but never had I considered how *I* might go about

the situation were I ever in it. I ended up skewering and roasting bits as I do most meals, but I smoked the majority of the cuts to keep them longer.

How do I feel about it? Let's be honest. I feel shitty. A mother is supposed to care for her child and see them into fruition one way or another. What do you do, though, when that's no longer an option? I was a goner in a couple of days, tops. Micah would have been crawling around, crying, sucking on my dry nipple until he was either eaten by a wild animal - a horrible fate if you ask me - or starved to death. He was dead either way.

Can I live with myself? Sure, I guess. I thought that through before I did the deed. I mean, a hunger-ravaged mind may not make the same decisions a sober one would, but then again, if I weren't starving, I wouldn't have had the decision to make. Either way, I am still around to reproduce and benefit the earth with my womb.

Did I make the right choice? I could use an affirmation so I don't drive myself bonkers over it. I made the right choice, right? 🙄



WB WELCH received a BA in Journalism from SMU, which currently hangs on her wall over a set of dumbbells and various car parts. This is her first piece of fiction to appear in a publication, and she is working on her first full-length novel when she's not plucking out her eyelashes. You can find more of her work at wbwelch.com



Sightless

Martha Clarkson

On Sundays when you were four, your parents took you to visit a blind old lady in a nursing home. She was your not-by-blood uncle's mother. There had been no specific accident; she had just "gone blind," as they used to say.

The nursing home was painted pale pink on the outside with paths of white rocks weaving around gangly rose bushes. You never saw the roses in bloom.

Your parents told you to call her Grandma Sally, even though she wasn't your grandma. She sat in a wheelchair in her room, a yellow crocheted afghan over her legs. She was small and thin and her bright jersey shift hung loose on her bony frame. You wanted to ask her if she remembered color. You had just gotten down the intricacies of color - how blue and yellow make green, that fuchsia wasn't just a flower, and that nothing rhymes with orange. "Blue looks good on you," you wanted to say, to be nice, but what if she didn't answer, because she'd forgotten her colors? Cornflower is your favorite crayon.

The gifts your parents brought her were always the same - a carton of cigarettes and a small box of See's chocolates. Your father set the carton of cigarettes on her lap. "We brought the Salems, Sally," he'd say. "You're looking well." Your mother would lean down to kiss her, angling just so, to keep her lipstick from smudging the wrinkled cheek.

Sally'd set her hands on the carton, fingers spread, like readying to play a piano. Then she'd clasp the corner and

hold the carton out for your father to put to the left of the TV. From inside her dress, she'd pull out a single cigarette. Your father would whip out his Zippo, clicking back the silver lid. If you'd been good in church, he would let you flick the wheel to light it. Then he'd take a gold case from his pocket and slide out two Winstons and put them to his lips, letting you light those, too, expecting you to pass one to your mother.

Your father would fill the time talking about the advertising business. Sally had been in the steno pool of an ad agency when she was young and could see, before she married. All your blood grandparents were dead and you felt cheated by this pretend grandma being all you're going to get. Every week she asked you how you like school.

"I'm only four," you say every time. She blew smoke out her nose, like a cartoon bull. "Well, that just goes to show," she'd say.

Your mother was a journalist and brought articles to read out loud. You wandered down the hall with no one coming after you. Outside on the patio, there's the woman with the paisley quilt over her legs, sunning near the white rock path. She always had a small blue tin on her lap. Her name was Ruby like the crayon and she called you "honeychild." You stayed there with Ruby, who helped you read the book you brought, about a useless but beloved Dalmatian in a firehouse. You ate the carrots off her lunch tray and she let you comb her thin hair. No one was looking for you. 🙄



MARTHA CLARKSON manages corporate workplace design in Seattle. Her poetry, photography, and fiction can be found in *monkeybicycle*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Alimentum*, *elimae*. She is a recipient of a Washington State Poets William Stafford prize 2005, a Pushcart Nomination, and is listed under "Notable Stories," *Best American Non-Required Reading* for 2007 and 2009. She is recipient of best short story, 2012, *Anderbo/Open City* prize, for *Her Voices, Her Room*.



Everything is Always Now, Everything is Always Gone

Sarah Sorensen

It was around midnight that I noticed it, a beer in one hand and the remote in the other. I was doing a DVD marathon of Barbara Stanwyck and that little fucker's leg twitched up, scratched an ear, then froze back into position.

The rabbit bank had been with me since childhood. It was white with red plastic eyes and a black plug for a belly button. It was purchased around Easter out of an enormous bin of brown and white bunnies. I'd stared hard into all of their faces in an attempt to make the correct choice. Finally, I'd settled on this one and it was placed in the big metal shopping cart alongside of the bread, milk, cereal, and other family groceries.

That was probably thirty years ago, give or take. I belched in its general direction and selected the "play" function on *Double Indemnity*. How many beers had it been? Surely not enough to be hallucinating about a toy. I checked my phone for messages after hearing a ding.

There was a text from my mother that read "grandma is in hospital talk to you later bye" and another from my best friend that read, "I think I am at an orgy. YAY!"

I typed back to mother a frowny face and back to the bestie a smiley face. Then I opened up my jalapeno cashews and stared at Barbara Stanwyck's tight sweater. I was sitting on the sofa in my ex's underpants and a beater with the back slider open as far as it would go, letting in nothing but more hot air. I downed the rest of the beer and made for the fridge. As I passed the rabbit sitting on my desk, I saw its nose twitch in three distinct little pulses.

I got the beer and sat back down. It just wasn't possible and I was resolved not to look at it anymore.

But in ten minutes the beer was gone and I was feeling kind of loose and it seemed worth exploring again. I walked up to the rabbit and leveled my eyes with its little plastic red ones. Neither of them blinked. I stood up, turned around and farted on it. But nothing.

I opened another beer. There was some implied sex in. I checked my phone again. Nothing. It wasn't late yet, so I texted Katrina.

"wish you were here. drunk and lonesome."

I followed it with the little face with heart eyes and pressed send. I also sent a photo of my cat Alfred wearing a sailor suit. It was a photo from an hour earlier, before he had passed out on my bed from all of the excitement. I lit more incense and took a hit off a bowl I'd packed and half smoked the night before. The rabbit wiped a cleansing paw over his face.

A new text popped up from Katrina.

"take your pants off and think of me."

I wanted to, and the thought would no longer be so

theoretical. Not after last night. But I was really absorbed now by the rabbit. It was undeniably moving and then refreezing. It made me uncomfortable and happy. I knew, of course, that it was pointless to share with anyone that I was stoned and drunk and witnessing a toy related miracle. But I was stoned and drunk, not psychotic.

"C'mere," I said. "Hop over here."

But it was not going anywhere. It sat back looking about as non-sentient as anything possibly can.

I saw a new text pop up from Katrina.

"talk dirty to me. tell me how it feels."

I felt myself getting wet considering that proposal, but typed back only the word "wait." Usually, "wait" meant something like my folks were calling or a buddy was dropping by and we were drinking. Sometimes it meant I was getting up to go to the bathroom or to microwave something to eat.

I opened the freezer and removed a sliced disc of carrot from a bag. I placed the frozen piece in front of the rabbit bank. The corner of its eye twitched and then, in a swift motion it nipped the carrot and gobbled it down. I patted its plastic head and it leered at me. I sat back on the sofa, unable to think of anything else to do. I picked up the phone again and texted back.

"wet and swollen. ready to be fucked"

And it was, but I wasn't masturbating. I was still sitting and staring at the rabbit. It took a shit on my desk and hopped down, begging at the sliding door. I guessed that it was okay to let the rabbit bank go outside, but I jotted down my address and pushed it into the coin slot in the back before releasing the bunny. When the door opened he or she (how could I really know?) hopped out into the grass. I shut the slider and started to masturbate, but by now I was stoned enough to get distracted in the middle and ended up staring out at the yard. The rabbit, sensing my gaze turned around and met my eyes briefly, before returning its gaze to the lawn and parking lot.

"Some kind of cosmic little motherfucker," I said under my breath.

A neighbor walked by and waved. I waved back and he stared hard at my muscled legs and wet underpants. I'd forgotten that I wasn't wearing pants, but whatever. He was late sixties, always in tie-dye and unlikely to have more than a brief sexual fantasy about me that would be forgotten by the time he hit 2B.

When I felt something tickle at my feet, I presumed it would be Alfred, but he was still passed out. It was Mackinaw Horse. He nuzzled at my ankle, so I opened the slider and out he went, taking his place next to the rabbit.

Mackinaw Horse was another childhood toy that I'd

kept around. He was not normally sentient either, but let's just say I was getting used to things being weird by now. He'd been chilling on the bookcase, right in front of my favorite novel, *Wuthering Heights* and my second favorite, *Factotum*. The first made my heart feel like an overripe strawberry, dripping sweet rot through all of my veins and filling me with longing. The second made me feel like a life lived in the aftermath of the first, a life without expectation, a life of gratitude for immediacy. A drunken meander of days, hell "It's a Family Tradition." Hank Williams Jr., man. That guy knew.

I forgot that I had been texting Katrina and left my toys in the yard while I went back to pick up my cell. There were a few dirty instructions and then she'd said that she was going to sleep because she had a shift at the gas station in a few hours and ought to go to bed.

My neighbors were screaming and throwing shit around upstairs. I went back to the toys to see if they looked frightened, but they were frozen out there and not moving at all. They just looked like toys again. In fact, I watched as a gust of wind toppled Mackinaw Horse into the rabbit's side. For some reason, this made me cry and I walked out into the cool grass and the hot air to collect them.

When I came in, the credits were rolling on *Double* so I put in *Christmas in Connecticut* and placed the toys alongside me on the sofa.

"Get your goddamn kid and his fucking shit and go. I fucking hate you both," the neighbor woman screamed and a cascade of laundry sailed past the slider.

Some more doors slammed around and then the dude and his poor kid were rounding up the shit and putting it all in plastic grocery bags. I could hear him grumbling about what a bitch she was, but the kid was just quietly doing the chore. He was used to it.

I was lonesome now for the toys to do something, but they did nothing. They were just trinkets again. I didn't want to look outside and I went to the kitchen for an ice pack to help me cool down. Barbara Stanwyck was playing a character faking a life. I liked that. I figured the toys would like it too, if they were somehow secretly watching. I put the ice pack between my breasts and took another swig.

"I'm hungry," the kid said as he and the dude got into the dude's car.

"We'll stop at McDonald's," the dude said.

Then they pulled away, windows down and blasting AWOL Nation. Through the back slider, I could see the moonlight shining on a few lost socks. The woman was still yelling, though now she was alone.

I went to take a look at what was left behind and suddenly the toys moved again and followed me. They

wanted back out of the slider, so I let them go. They sat again in the same spots looking out. So I stood there looking too. And then, I followed them. I sat down beside my childhood friends and we looked, I am guessing, at the stars. I knew that I was crying and I tried to stop it by thinking about all of my favorite things.

Wuthering Heights. Catherine Earnshaw is still banging on the windows and her Heathcliff still searches. *Factotum*. Henry Chinaski is blowing every job because why would he give a fuck about any of it? And Stanwyck. She can double deal anybody with that smile.

I felt queasy from too much drinking. "It's a Family Tradition." I started vomiting all over one of the lost socks in front of me, then broke down sobbing again. The man in the tie-dye walked by again, this time carrying out his trash. He glanced at me and the toys, then bent his eyes down, embarrassed.

I tried again to think of my happiest moments, to find enough beauty to make all of the pain stop. I remembered sitting on a porch swing and watching fireflies dance in the grass. I was in love. We were holding hands. It took nothing to conjure the exact notes of honey in Eleanor's dark brown eyes. I watched her shimmer before me like a mirage.

Then I stood up, damp from the grass and still feeling ill. I went in, leaving the toys. After closing the slider, I turned off all of the lights and laid down on my bed.

"This is my life now," I said aloud. "This is my life. And I can't go back."

I thought of Katrina working overnight, sitting on her little stool surrounded by coolers of microwave burritos and the plexi-glass case of donuts. I wondered what she saw when she asked herself for her happiest memory. ↻




Until Summer

John Meyers

They come to you in the sunshine, asking questions about chlorine levels, work schedules and flower petals. This last catches by surprise, she asks you to smell a sprig of honeysuckle and when you lean forward to do so, shifting position in the lounge chair for the first time since morning, a sweet fragrance hangs in the humid June air as a reminder that you are back in paradise, in a world where sun tanning beauties and ice blue water form the backdrop of an easy life. Many will approach during the course of each tranquil summer day, as if paying respects. You may answer their questions or you may send them away if the right song is playing on the radio in the guard shack. One elegant young mother is clearly interested and you spend hours thinking about how it could work, with her stone-faced husband away on international travel and the kids at camp. But the honeysuckle girl is attentive, and unique in her way. She glides across the pool deck like an exotic creature aware of watchers. You watch and the days slip by. One evening you're standing on the diving board in your shredded jeans, sleeveless white t-shirt and floppy high tops. The pool is empty and summer is over. She offers a drawing, her interpretation of the iconic American male in the wild. She has annotated it, noting the rugged countenance, broad shoulders, and chlorine spots on the jeans. Then she's gone, off to school, and you're back at college. Each day you trudge across campus in the dreary gray pre-winter, lost among thousands of dark forms, nothing special about you that anyone can see. If there were an eye in the sky looking down it would never be able to pick you out among the hordes. Here you don't have the black magic or confidence to step forward and show something of yourself. So you do what everyone does. Walk paths, attend class, forge relationships that are supposed to last and when no one is looking you close your eyes and recall the drawing of you standing on the diving board, floating over the water and poised to tell the world — or at least the girl who is watching — that you have a spark inside. ↻



SARAH SORENSON has most recently been published in *Whiskey Island*, *The Audio Zine*, *Dirty Chai*, *Cactus Heart*, *Embodied Effigies*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Gone Lawn*, and *Monkey Bicycle*. She holds an M.A. in English from Central Michigan University. Find her at typefingertapdancer.wordpress.com



JOHN MEYERS' work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Louisville Review*, *The Quotable*, *River Poets Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and elsewhere. His story *Until Summer*, which appears in this issue of *Thrice Fiction*, is included in his almost-complete collection of linked stories and prose poems entitled *This Boy*. His website can be found at JohnMeyersAuthor.com

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

CRAIG BRITTON *Pages: Front & Back Cover, Inside Front Cover, 29...*

was born in Chicago, Illinois a long time ago, and began painting seventeen years later. Craig received a BFA from the Art Academy of Cincinnati and MFA from The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. In 1999, Craig was commissioned by South Eastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority to create a permanent installation at the Erie-Torresdale elevated train station in Philadelphia, and in 2015 completed two mural commissions for the City of San Jose, CA. Craig's work is in the collections of Arc Intl., Cincinnati Bell Telephone, Wendy's, Inc., Bethesda Hospital, Cincinnati; the City of Berkeley, CA, and many private collections.



ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: 8, 11-12, 30-31...*

conceives visceral, often surreal ideas and renders them carefully and precisely with acrylic and oil paints, inks and pencils. There are no happy accidents. Inspiration is usually borne existentially from within although Rob also likes to take a personal skewed look at other cultural touchstones. Surfaces used are canvas, canvas board, wooden panel, aluminium sheet and electric toasters. Rob also works in magazine illustration and as a cartoonist. He has worked in independent and newsstand magazines in the USA and UK since the late 90's. Rob works from a camouflaged and secluded studio in Kinross, Scotland. Check out more of Rob's work at RobKirbyson.com



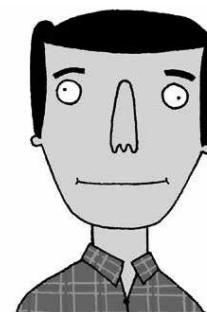
CESAR VALTIERRA *Pages: 6-7, 19-20, 35...*

is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at CesarValtierra.com and OrderFromKhaos.com, as well as his comic at TonyBalazo.com



CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 2, 13-16, 26...*

makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.



REZA FARAZMAND *Page: 25...*

draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled *Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories* debuted on October 6, 2015.



CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 10, 17-18...*

is of possible Jewish descent. Superstition, Klezmer music and Chinese candy wrapper designs inform many of his artistic works. He is interested in the places at which art, music, technology and language intersect.



KYRA WILSON *Page: 21...*

is an artist residing in Vermont with her family, and has been painting for over 20 years. Kyra tried going the expected career route in business, but ended up working in an office with flickering fluorescent lights, zero windows, way too many spreadsheets, and people with suspenders. She escaped, and embraced color and movement as her passion. Creating in Oils, Acrylic, and Watercolor, she works in a predominantly fantasy style, but visits the contemporary and even abstract realms on occasion! Kyra's work can be found at KWilsonStudio.com

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THRICE FICTION MAGAZINE CO-FOUNDERS & STAFF

RW SPRYSZAK *Editor, THRICE Fiction...*

participated in the alternative zine scene in the 80's & 90's and wound up editing *The Fiction Review*. Some of his work from that era (*Slipstream*, *Lost and Found Times*, *Asylum*, *Version90* and others) is included in John M Bennett's Avant Writing Collection at the Ohio State University Libraries. Currently editor at *Thrice Fiction Magazine*. He can be found online at rwspryszak.com



DAVID SIMMER II *Lead Artist & Art Director, THRICE Fiction...*

is a graphic designer and world traveler residing in the Pacific Northwest of these United States. Any artistic talent he may have is undoubtedly due to his father making him draw his own pictures to color rather than buying him coloring books during his formative years. He is co-founder and art director of *Thrice Fiction Magazine* and blogs daily at Blogography.com



COMING SOON

Thrice Fiction

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C. Britton