

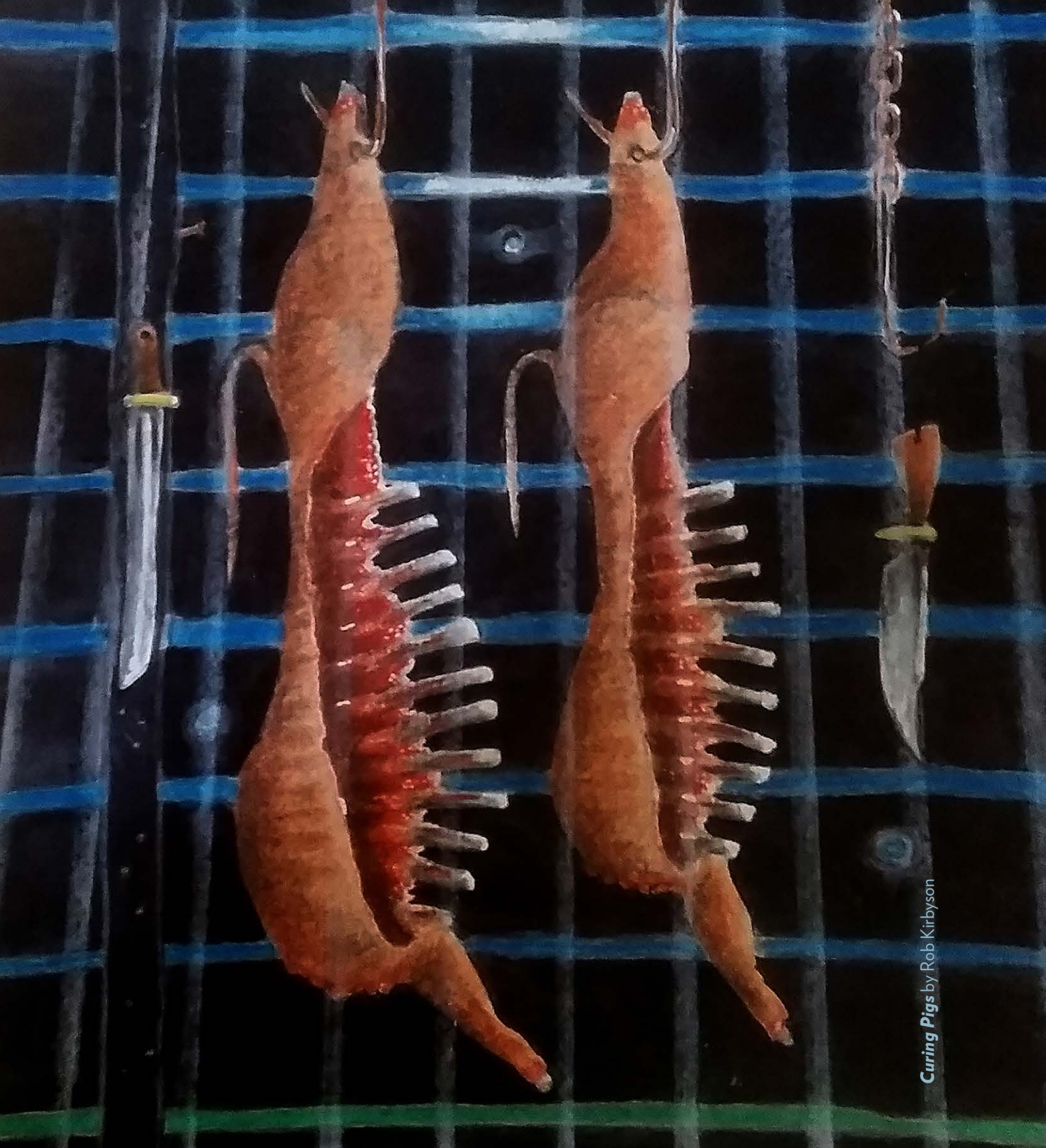
# THRICE

## FICTION™

ISSUE No. 18 • DECEMBER 2016







*Curing Pigs* by Rob Kirbyson



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Issue No.18 • DECEMBER 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.

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# Thrice 18 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

This month's issue contains more undiscovered genius, known quantities and bright flings into the wilderness. All the great stuff you've come to know and love after all these years of publishing *Thrice Fiction*.

We have been trying most of 2016 to get out two stand-alone titles, the start of the library of books we want to produce. Outside of the usual production foibles and hiccups, the single largest roadblock has been funding the promotion and production of these coming titles.

We've tried for grants but sometimes it feels like a small business going for a loan – you have to have money before anyone will give you money. And there's not enough of a streak of subservience in us to whine and beg. The plan was to "act like we'll get nothing from these agencies and entities." And so far? HA – we were RIGHT.

Joel Allegretti's *Our Dolphin* is out now and Lorri Jackson's *So What If It's True* will be out there shortly. We're proud of these efforts, and are as much in love with the contents of these two books as we've ever been.

What I'm asking is for help in promoting and production. We make no money on this magazine, and so far just about everything we've put into this has been out of pocket. But a donation to *Thrice* is tax deductible. Meaning, in the end, it comes back to do you a favor. We are a 501(c)3, and can accept tax deductible donations from anyone.

We may not be willing to be subservient to the brokering boards of charitable granting agencies, but we actually will beg our audience for help. And we do need it.

A check to **Thrice Publishing NFP** can be sent to:

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**Roselle, IL 60172**

Or you can fire up the inter-tubes and donate through

**[thricepublishing.com/donate.html](http://thricepublishing.com/donate.html)**

We do need your help. And thank you ahead of time for all your support.





# The Tale of the Two Sisters

## for Jollene

Lynn Mundell

**T**he sun followed them everywhere, a villain posing as a hero, leaving them cursed a dark red. Mornings out on the ocean they caught dozens of fish, the floor of the fiberglass boat shimmering with dancing silver, a pirate's stolen riches. On the ride back to the beach, Father seated like a king in the boat's swivel chair near the motor, they bounced against the waves, the gulls matching their excited screams, the foamy wake like the train of Mother's Mexican party dress. Later they devoured bass and halibut at every meal until they sweated it, stinking of the sea as though they were becoming the fish, a fable's punishment. Each afternoon the bikes waited for them in the shed like horses under a spell, coming alive when mounted. Settled into the cracked seats, they rode down each street of the trailer park, past the ruined tennis courts, the cheap pink hotel tall as a castle. They called *hola* and *adios* to everyone, then were struck mute as they passed Ilona, the old German with her platinum plaits, asleep on a plastic chaise lounge, glistening with turtle oil, her record player blaring a war-time march, her wrinkled face burnt black. Just around the corner, the four Sylvester boys waited in crew cuts and boat shoes, appearing suddenly to dislodge bike tires stuck in sand and later hold sparklers against the sky, like torches chasing back the moon. Finally, night with its magic cape switched one day for the next, over and over again, until the sisters grew old retelling this very story, one too perfect to ever change. 🕒

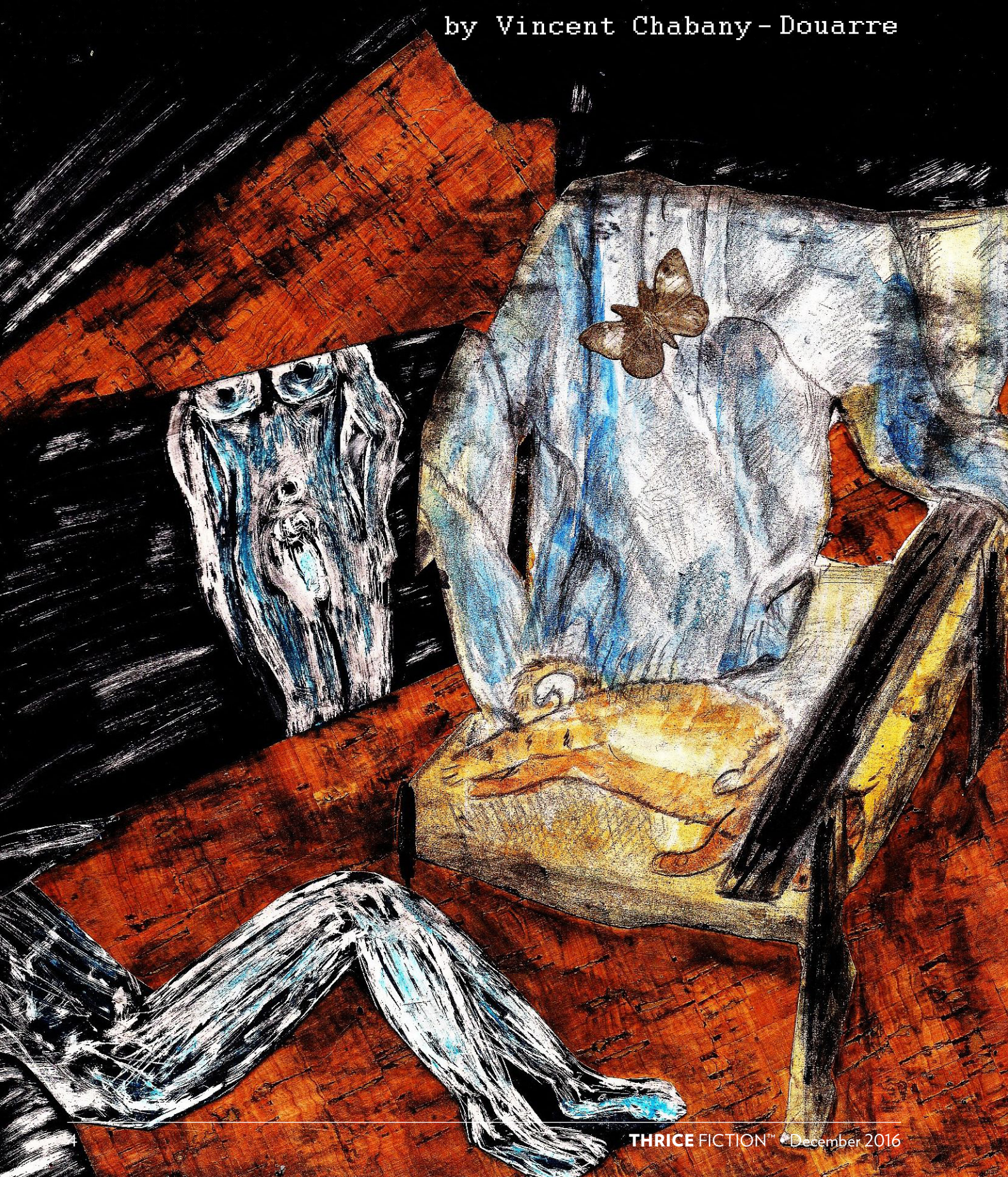


**LYNN MUNDELL's** flash fiction has appeared most recently in *KYSO Flash*, *Split Lip Magazine*, *Tin House Flash Fidelity*, *Dead Housekeeping*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *A3 Review*, *Thrice Fiction*, and *Jellyfish Review*. She lives in Northern California, where she co-edits *100 Word Story*.



I keep my mattress  
on the floor

by Vincent Chabany-Douarre





Before the oven has even pinged, I have finished washing the dishes and started crying.

I sit down on my bed and remember a conversation my mother and I had about my grandfather. She had fiddled with her wine glass and said that even when he was alive he was like a little ghost. I suppose this is why we do not feel him haunting us when we visit my grandmother. I sit in his chair when we play Scrabble. I wear his cotton pajamas. I go to his office to read and smoke like he did, one pack a day and about as many books. If you consider time like a series of superposed microscope slides, isolated moments would show my body occupying his outline.

I stare vacantly at a dusty beam, wondering why I cried or thought about my grandfather or cooked capsicum-stuffed crepes. I try to string together some logic, some pattern or chain of consequence. Had we eaten crepes when we talked about my grandfather and had that made me sad? No, we had not, or if we did I do not remember. I cross my legs and blow my nose.

My phone rings and I am afraid someone has found me out, *he was crying, have a look* some muffled cackle trills from the wall. I want to silence it but snapping at layers of stones feels inappropriate. I pick up. The voice on the other end is familiar.

"I'm downstairs."

I try to keep an air of coolness. "You should have called before."

"What else would you be doing?" I can guess he is grinning.

"Well, I could be out with friends. Or I could be on a date. In fact, I could have a man right here, you know. That would be embarrassing. You wouldn't be that cocky now would you?"

"It's raining, buzz me in."

As he walks up the six flights of carpeted stairs I look around my apartment for something to fix, but cannot come up with anything. My clothes are shut away in my dresser, their limp cotton arms trying to push free but falling short. My books I keep in a wooden chest the last tenant left and so do not see anymore. Sometimes when I fish one out I have the impression they have swapped colors or shuffled words around the jacket. There is hardwood and clean white sheets. I keep my mattress on the floor. I am perhaps still afraid of monsters. This way if they lurk they are paper-thin.

Ben knocks, which startles me. Maybe I thought he'd disappear on the way up. I open the door.

"Wipe your feet." I point at my doormat.

"Don't I get a kiss?" I consider it for a moment and kiss him on the cheek before leaning against the wall, hands behind my back prodding for something (I do not know what).

"I feel like you're always in your pajamas" he tells me, unbuttoning his woolen coat and dropping it on the floor, pointing at my black leggings and swallowing gray T-shirt. I shrug. He crouches in front of the oven.

"What's that?"

"Stuffed crepes. Take one, I'm not hungry anymore."

He eats it standing up, leaning against the sink, surveying me like some strange plant (unsure of if I'll pass the winter or not).

"Something wrong?"

I want to be snappy and mean, to ask him if it matters and laugh a little careless laugh, tell him to do his business and be gone.

"No. Just tired. How was your day?"

He chews for a moment and shrugs.

"Alright, nothing interesting. I bought an amaryllis."

"Did you now?"

He dumps his dish into the sink with a clang and sucks a bit of cream off his thumb.

"What? I like flowers."

"Yeah, well flowers need to be taken care of. Who's going to water it when you're here, or you know," I point at the window as if it were a destination in itself, "elsewhere."

He grins and kisses me.

"Maybe I should just give it to you then. You seem like you're always home."

I kiss him back.

"Maybe you should."

For the rest of the night the extra limbs around my bed feel poorly assigned. The shadowed hand I keep turning around again and again seems to be mine but is his. I fold into him because there is no point in wriggling away. A mattress is a small attic, and you never know what lives up there. Your body is doubled, tripled, refracted and prismatic, and these reflections lie in bed with you, staring through half-formed faces. I snuggle closer and he squeezes me a bit tighter.

"You're cuddly tonight," he mumbles, half-asleep. I wait for him to open his eyes but get the feeling that something else has although I do not know what.

The tinkle of morning rain against the roof wakes me and I make more crepes. Ben stays in bed for a while longer, exposing his triangular back and just one pointed foot. When I am not looking he slowly crawls out and grabs my ankle. I let out a yelp and tell him he's an asshole. He laughs and tugs on my leg.

"Come back to bed."

"I will. Let me just finish this." I pick out a China-red plate and roll crepes up with my grandmother's blackberry jam.

"Do you have any honey?" Ben asks me, sitting up.

"Yes, but it's chestnut, and you told me last time that you only wanted honey if it came out of a plastic bear's head."

He lies back, arms outstretched as if pinned down.

"I do hate chestnut. Do you buy it just because of that?"

I carefully put the plate down on the bed.

"Yes."

Ben squeezes my hand and goes to the bathroom. I hear him flip the switch, one, twice, thrice. He cranes his neck out of the doorframe.

"Is your light off?"

"Yeah. Well no. I mean, it is now. It kept flickering, so I took the light bulb and like I shook it because I'm not that handy, and then it broke but I put it back because I don't remember which bin it goes in."

Ben comes back and chews on a crepe, his jaw bobbing up and down.

"And I'm the one who shouldn't have a plant" he grumbles, tugging at my royal blue sweater. It is too large, like most of my sweaters or T-shirt. (I must look like a walking bundle at times.)

When we finish I cling to his torso as he sits, my legs protruding from his back. Ben strokes my neck, I cannot see his face but I am sure it is changing somehow.

"You alright? You looked sad."

I bury my chin deeper into his neck.

"I think I just have a sad face."

Ben laughs. "You do have a sad face. It's a good face, don't get me wrong, but it's a sad face."

"Well if it's a good face that's all that matters I suppose" I answer, my eyes fixed on the yellow wallpaper.

"To say the least. I'm going to get some cigarettes."

I tell him he is not smoking inside because I don't so why should he. All right, he says, and kisses me. He comes back smelling of Marlboros and brandishing two light bulbs.

"You feeling handy enough to screw them in?"

"Always down for some screwing. Thanks."

From the bathroom I ask him if he wants to stay for lunch. Up to you, he shoots back. I feel the chair being tipped back and loudly gasp.

"Everything good in there?"

"Yeah. Yes. No really, do you want to stay for lunch?"

I walk out of the bathroom and he has plucked a book out of the chest, but I cannot tell which one.

"Sure."

We have green bean salad, apple beignets and play video games. He keeps sneaking up on me and shooting me in the back of the head, but I always resurrect. Ben asks me if I'm going to put some clothes on apart from my pajama. I ask him what the point would be.

"Can I get a pajama?"

And just like that we are dressed the same. I cook strawberries and pear compote.

"They kind of look like guts" Ben remarks as I stir in cinnamon.

"Yeah, I guess they do. Do you want a fairy cake too?"

"Don't mind if I do."

We read for a bit, I lie on his lap and he balances his ashtray on the small of my back (I have caved).

For dinner, pasta Alfred and ice cream. Ben does the dishes. The t-shirt I have lent him hangs severely from his back (his gravity seems to be superior to mine). He stands

where I stand, washing dishes like I would, his body slipping into whatever trace I left behind.

I want to cook ginger snaps, but Ben stops me. You've done enough, he says, taking the whisk from my hand and kissing my forehead. We reflect in the window, dressed exactly alike with similarly ruffled hair. I put my hand on his chest and he puts his on my back.

"Shower?"

"Sure."

We take turns hoarding the water, scolding each other until we stand face to face and watch it trickle from both our noses. Ben pours some shampoo into my hair and starts singing some Carly Rae Jepsen. Between verses he hurriedly tells me to join in, you know you want to. We yell the chorus out together, and I nearly slip but catch the door's handle. Ben turns around and I notice five parallel red lines on his back.

"Did I scratch you?"

He looks at himself in the mirror and runs his finger on the glowing marks, duplicating the motion before shrugging.

"I guess you have."

It is unlike me to do that but I do not want to think of other options.

"Sorry."

"Kind of a compliment, really"

"I mean, I guess. I feel kind of trashy to be honest."

"When are you not."

We go back to bed, feeling slightly soft and slightly warm, our hair dark and algae-flat, our fingers intertwined and the small rustling I hear everywhere but dare not inspect.

"I'm leaving in the morning." Ben says

"I'm a heavy sleeper."

"I know."

Bits of limbs escape from the comforter, random as corrosion patterns.

"It was nice seeing you."

"You too." 🌀



**VINCENT CHABANY-DOUARRE** is a student at La Sorbonne, Paris. His work has been featured in *The Belleville Park Pages*, *the Bastille*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Gravel*, *45th Parallel*, the podcast *No Extra Words*, and will appear in *Glassworks Magazine* and *Cecile Writer's Magazine*. He is also a blog writer for *The Isis Magazine*, and will launch in the following months a *Twin Peaks* podcast with his friend Shelley, *You're The Worst, Audrey Horne: An Unpopular Twin Peaks Podcast*.





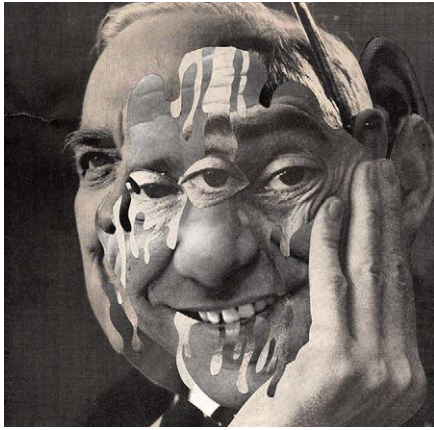
# Cape Fear, Open road to the ferry Hurricane season

Lis Anna-Langston

**M**orning. On a sidewalk. Standing beneath a sky about to storm I witness a murder of crows chasing a falcon known to stalk their young. Relentless in spirit and vengeance, the birds whip the air. Thick feathers soaring, wings wide, made to look bigger, more frightening. A fierce caw devours the grizzly morning light, forcing the piercing cry of the falcon out of sight. Everyone in the neighborhood knows this business of crows and falcons so I stand tethered to the ground thinking how fitting it is that when grouped together they become a murder. Like most predators the falcon does not want a fight, cannot compete with sheer numbers, is only looking to bully and intimidate, like humans, and hope the world backs away. But crows cawing through a dark morning sky tell a different story and I listen. There is wisdom in this confrontation and I wonder why all mothers aren't called a murder when protecting their young. 🐦



**LIS ANNA-LANGSTON** is the author of *Tupelo Honey* and *The End of the Century*. She is the recipient of many awards including: a 2011/13 Pushcart nominee, a Chanticleer First Place YA Book Winner, a five time WorldFest winner, Telluride IndieFest winner, Helene Wurlitzer Grant recipient, New Century Writers winner, and a finalist in the prestigious William Faulkner Competition. Her fiction has been published in dozens of literary journals including: *Petigru Review*, *Emyrs Journal*, *Literary Laundry*, *Barely South Review*, *Flashquake Literary Journal*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Cactus Heart Press*, *Bedlam Publishing*, *The Merrimack Review*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *Kaaterskill Basin Journal*, *Sand Hill Review*, and *Conclave*. You can learn more about her at: [lisannalangston.com](http://lisannalangston.com)



## Revisiting Carol Smallwood

**T**o steady myself, I anxiously looked for things that hadn't changed, begrudging improvements while memories of when I'd been there competed with each other. The fast food restaurant was one I hadn't been to for years; it'd been remodeled.

The new ceiling lights increased a naked atmosphere but perhaps it was because the light imitation wood floor was so reflective: the dark, hospitable patterned carpeting was gone. Seeking to rest my eyes, I saw some landscape photographs that were good but the enjoyment was brief noting the frames were plastic.

The order counter was in the same spot—so were the windows, doors, which gave some sense of grounding. I looked in the direction where I'd always sat but sadly realized it was no longer mine so selected another closer to the door I'd entered because there had been no curb to climb.

Country music twanged but couldn't remember what it was before, just Christmas music that seemed to come earlier each year. The napkins were as generic as the prescription I was on the way to pick up. Voices seemed as if they were bouncing off the hard floor and the new tables that wobbled.

The traffic outside still streamed and the silent parade of the impersonal cars somehow offered comfort, assurance,

took on the look of the passage of water of a countryside river—and tried to grasp once again that the water was never the same. I saw myself going back and both in my car swallowed up in the stream of summer, fall, winter, spring—a road I'd passed over half a century ago on the way to college before the freeway skirted the city.

The soft drink lids came from dispensers naming the sizes. The new self-serve soft drink machine offered a bewildering variety of choices and searched for something familiar; the ice didn't seem the same size but it could've been; cups had unfamiliar drawings of hearts. The salt packets were now trendy sea salt. Prices had gone up but the menu was pretty much the same. The catsup cups were plastic and I took it back along with the food boxes for recycling. The clock I didn't remember.

I wasn't sure I'd come again but now I knew what table was the most convenient, it would be easy—the shock of change wouldn't be so great and wouldn't need to wait standing in disbelief to get the layout by calling on a sense of place that'd been honed, finely tuned—a sixth sense much more than the sum of the other five. And for some reason I thought of threading a small quilting needle—needles hard to thread, easy to lose and not easily located again. And remembered D.H. Lawrence's, "... the spirit of place is a great reality."

When I'd gone back to my old college, I'd felt betrayed that it'd changed, and to ease my resentment went back to remembering a library ivy covered with Ionic columns instead of the new complex with computers. It was most likely better not to look at the place when driving by next time even if it looked the same on the outside. 🕒



**CAROL SMALLWOOD's** recent books include *Divining the Prime Meridian* (WordTech Communications, 2015); *Water, Earth, Air, Fire, and Picket Fences* (Lamar University Press, 2014). A multi-Pushcart nominee in *RHINO*, *Drunken Boat*, she's founded, supports humane societies. *Library Outreach to Writers and Poets: Interviews and Case Studies of Cooperation* is forthcoming from McFarland.





# The Octopuses Swim, Barely Disguising their Obliviousness while we Rustle Newspapers Carelessly and Demand Another Coffee, Barely Disguising Ours

Samuel Rafael Barber

## **Responding to Captivity**

The octopuses escape from aquarium tanks. They squeeze through any crack, flee to the room's nearest crevice. There they wait for a guard to pass by, earphones dampening diegetic sound, dampening the extradiegetic critiques offered by those startled by the dereliction of such a vital civic duty when observing the security tape in the morning, a blue collar worker punished for the exploits of the reckless octopuses once again read the morning headlines rebounding off garage doors and doorsteps and freshly manicured lawns.

## **Philosophical Legacy**

Aristotle has slandered the octopus thusly: "The octopus is a stupid creature." Meanwhile they crawl through our laboratory mazes and build tools to remove food from boxes and insist Aristotle is the stupid one, "for his inability to recognize the malleability of morals depending on ever shifting societal values in favor of the fruitless search for objective truths."

## **Artistic Legacy**

Mesopotamian treasures were looted thirteen years ago when the invading force failed to station troops at the museums following the occupation. In this way thousands of years have been erased from the record through destruction, our notions of certain techniques relating to

the construction, preservation, and facilitation of pottery as the most practical means of recording prehistoric data regarding diet and economic activity and the demographic development of settlements irrevocably altered in this all too predictable aftermath. Certain ancient works of art depicting sexual relations between our noble species were lost, to our great consternation. It slipped our minds the soldiers said, at the behest of their generals, at the behest of their president, to the locals. We escape with language into the nearest crevice.

## **The Octopuses Learn from the Snakes**

The octopuses slip down shower drains and into city pipes. The octopuses rejoin the ocean and its static brand of malaise. Snakes slither up shower drains and coil around unsuspecting ankles. Snakes slither up toilet bowls and clamp their mouth apparatus around the male sexual organ, a deserved punishment for our libelous intent toward that people in our parables, but a decidedly uncouth response all the same. The octopuses slip away from us even as we wave, bid them a farewell exempt from the many misgivings of those among us who resent those among us who feast on our comrades in captivity, some 270,000 tons yearly.

## **Language and Rhetoric**

Octopuses, not octopi. Preferring the latter, I cannot ignore the former, despite my revulsion at the crudeness of it

all, despite the latter having no etymological basis. Perhaps this is why they abandoned us, this bastardized coinage in all its galling splendor. There are several possibilities, each less possible than the last, each portending an alluring certainty. Students of mine insist on octopi, despite the corrections scribbled in the margins of their typo-ridden screeds, as if to ignore the Greek root exempts critique from the lazily composed ravings in the dead of night, the night before the papers are due, each and every printed copy placed in an octopus-themed briefcase received as a sort of gift from a former relative now dead, even the neophytes whose performed ambivalence only belies their moral uncertainty on this matter cling to the obfuscatory tactics of the sophists, disbelieving the sympathy engendered by these provocations.

### Sociopolitical Hindsight

We should have had to distinguish the idea of our relationship with the octopuses from what the octopuses have done from what we have done. This failure reflects poorly on both species, though the instigator receives the bulk of responsibility, in keeping with our most sacred of vows. There seems little choice but to defer to the octopuses on this matter insist the academics. Their nonverbal communication makes clear the response in the undoubtable redness. Their willful disdain for our way of life is surely a cause, but an inadequate justification for the extermination. Seventy percent of the octopuses have died, and biological warfare, while suggested by the expected parties on Sunday morning television programs unbecoming of any serious person or octopus, has yet to be confirmed through the appropriate channels.

### Past Transgressions

To pre-empt a popular counterargument: Sure, the Nautilus was subjected to a brutality unmatched before or since from a cephalopod, but then again conflicting reports bring the true culprit into question, suggesting a squid might have been responsible for that episode. Or better yet a scientifically-engineered squid-octopus hybrid as some eyewitnesses and historians alike continue to insist even to this day. Or better yet a particularly flexible human disguised as a giant octopus intent on further slandering their kind if one anonymous source with connections to the Verne estate is to be believed.

Individual Complicity when considering Institutional

Accountability the blue-ringed octopus is recognized as one of the world's most venomous marine animals, and even the most ardent defender of our bilaterally symmetric friends would pay lip service, at the very least, to the unconscionable devastation inflicted by this clan on beachgoers and architectural tourists and theme park attendees just this past fall through a coordinated campaign waged simultaneously in Australia and Japan, the natural habitats of the blue-ringed octopus. But then again, even when acknowledging the octopuses' murky track record in

adhering to international treaties, it is crucial to note that they are no worse in this regard than our people, which recognizes the International Criminal Court only when convenient, having been repeatedly sanctioned for sponsoring death squads in the southern continent, facilitating torture through rendition sans due process, and even convicted of war crimes in absentia by authorities in Kuala Lumpur not a decade ago. Still, this rhetoric, so effectively used by the vilified octopuses, at least in the estimation of academics, falls on deaf ears.

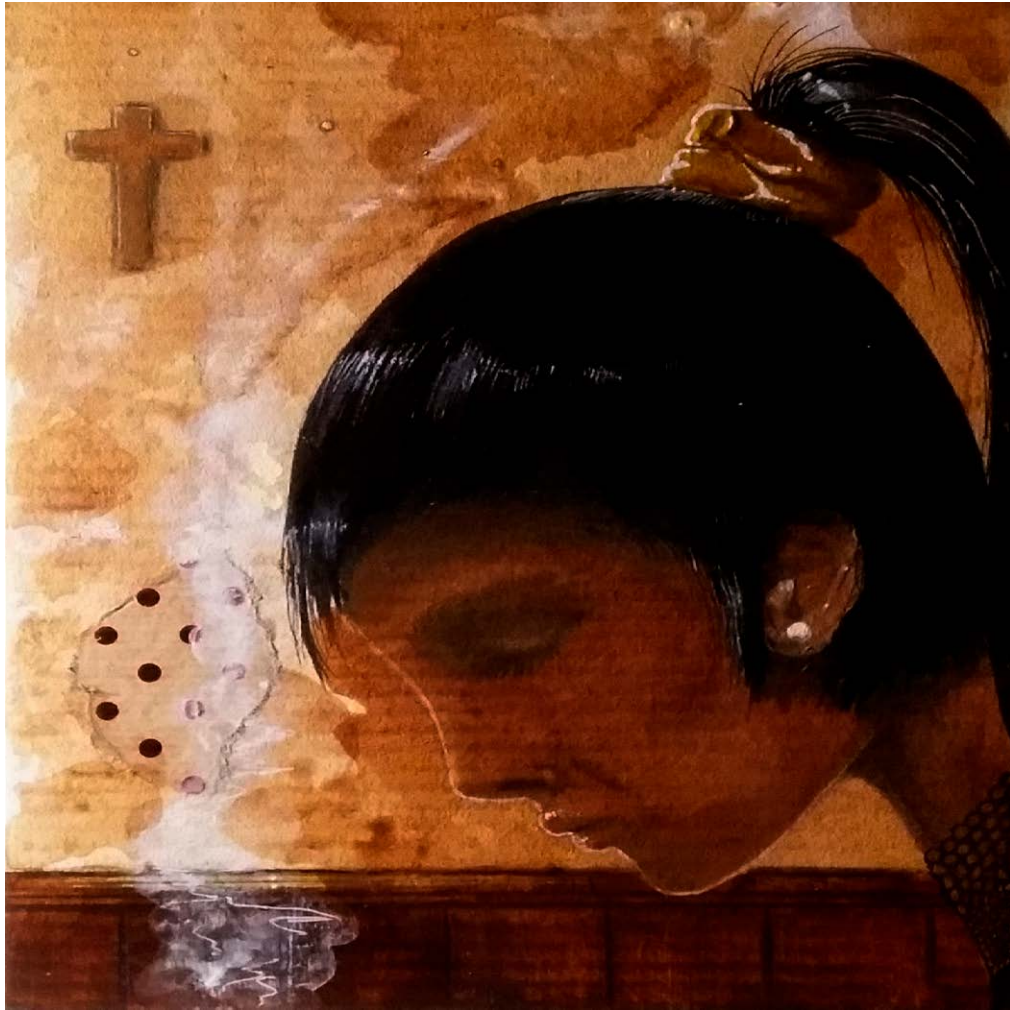
### Failures of Analysis

My students analyze what the institution to which we pledge allegiance refers to as the rhetorical situation—considering purpose and audience and organizational structure—of these arguments and they are shocked. Tears in their eyes they insist the octopi deserve better, that the octopi are right to highlight this hypocrisy, even allowing that they cohere to expectations in being less inclined to comment on their own imperfect past. Tears in my eyes I insist that they stop calling the octopuses octopi, under threat of automatic failure. Grade point average is a sufficient motivator when push comes to shove, but were we to utilize this technique on the octopuses in the present arms negotiations, their invertebrate nature would surely enable a swift escape, the sticky residue from suction cups lingering on our blood-soaked hands. 🌀



**SAMUEL RAFAEL BARBER** was born to a professional octopus hunter and a purveyor of repossessed aquarium-related memorabilia. The marriage did not last, but his love of ocean life transcends any sociopolitical disagreement, to say nothing of matrimonial disputes regarding the optimal use of closet space.





# Bambi

Kiara A. Breedlove

**H**e kill her. A little bit every day. Drag her out to the big oak tree in the middle of the overgrown backyard and do the deed.

A knife dug just deep enough to draw the red rivers from her veins. He wants her pain, every slow sip of it. Once she give up, he done. The nectar ain't quite as sweet without the struggle.

She lies there, the dirt and dead leaves crunching into her split open veins. Then she spot me.

I don't look away. Hiding ain't my thing. I stare at her like she there for my entertainment. And she is. Why else would she let him drag her all way out to the yard?

I suppose she expect me to do something. Yell at him to stop. Let her alone. Guess she think since we both bleed by nature, I'm supposed to cry over her spilled blood.

It's always hunting season for her kind. The doe-eyed and helpless. When the rifles is loaded, I ain't never jumped in front of no Bambi. Not about to start.

She still there. All big-eyed and wounded.

"You always watching. Why don't you do something?" She lob the question at me like I'm the one beating her upside the head every night.

She look surprised that I ain't all ate up with guilt over her wretched situation.

I light the cigarette I been saving all week, take my time feeding it to the flame. Take that first long pull, then let the smoke curl out my lungs like I'm made of fire.

"Why don't you?" I ask.

Bambi ain't got no answer to that.

She turn and limp back into the house, mad as hell at three people, two of which don't care.

I go back to my herbs. Back to minding my side of the fence. No thoughts of Bambi and her doe-eyed problems.

•

It's late when he start all that hollering again, home from the Hyundai factory and hungry. The roast burnt. Mashed potatoes ain't got enough butter in 'em. The tea ain't sweet or cold. But his blood sure is.

I sit on my back porch, waiting for my own supper to finish cooking, and listen to him throw Bambi from one end of that clapboard shack to the other. She screaming for help that won't come. Begging for mercy that ain't there.

After while, he must sling her into something too hard 'cause she shut up. Then he start hollering, the frantic kind now like he give a damn.

The day's dying outside. Something doe-eyed and helpless might be joining it. The fireflies is lighting up the yard, dancing with the night as it eat up my garden.

He stop hollering. Start giving out they address, telling someone to please hurry. His poor deer done hurt herself real bad this time.

It get kind of quiet for a few minutes after he hang up with help. Then he come out the back door. Breathing all heavy, sweating and looking 'round like a runaway slave.

He catch sight of me and my eyes.

Though we done been neighbors almost a year, he look at me like he ain't never seen me. Which may be true. Men like him don't never see women like me. And when they do, the gaze ain't nothing nice.

The cat who lend me her company sometime come creeping up the alley behind the houses, squeeze her way beneath the fence, cross my yard like her name on the deed. She see him, look, but don't stop, eye him like she don't too much care what he over there doing with blood on his shirt and a bag of broken dishes, long as he don't mess with her. She make her way up the porch steps, slinking her midnight body across my bare feet. Me and my sometime pet go inside for supper, leave him to find his own conscience.

Sirens tear into the middle of nowhere quiet of my little street. I turn on some Nina Simone, listen to her tell a man to either love her or leave her. My chicken with the french name is about ready. I pour myself a glass of the wine I drowned the bird in, sit down in front of the player, put my feet up on the coffee table.

The cat come in, have herself a seat on my lap. I stroke her dark fur, happy to have something living and breathing in the house. I know she belong to somebody. Ain't no street cat this clean. But I guess she know I need her more than her owner. Or maybe she like me 'cause I buy the fancy cat food.

Supper start to smell like it's done. And it's right on time. Nina's voice working on me, touching something I don't want touched.

I open a can of food for my guest, set her dish on the table next to mine, because she won't eat no other way. Like a proper companion, she wait until I arrange my chicken and summer vegetables on a plate, sit down and say grace.

We only started eating, when a bunch of none of my business start knocking on my front door. I tell Nina to sing a little louder.

The knocking stop. Me and the cat keep eating. Nina keep singing, determined to root out something I need to stay buried.

I'm still smack in the middle of minding my own, when someone else's business start knocking again. It's at my back door this time, knuckles rapping on the frame. Ain't no ignoring it when it come up all dressed in blue, looking through my screen door, measuring the slice of my life it can see.

I tell the cat to stay off my plate. She look at me, no intention of minding. I walk slow over to the record player, ask Nina to take a break. I make my face smile, not too much, just enough. A smiling woman living alone make folks wonder. Especially, a woman like me, who done did what I did. And this man in blue been looking at me sideways since we was both in diapers.

I stand at the screen door, but don't open it. He can hear me just fine from out there.

"Good evening, Ms. Vincent."

"Officer," I say, staring death into his eyes.

"I'm sorry to bother you. But it's about your neighbors, the Fishers, over here on the left." He say it like a question, like he ain't sure I got neighbors. Far as I'm concerned, I don't. "There's been a ... an incident."

An incident. So that's what the police call it when a man use his fists to sing his wife to sleep. I'm not surprised. I was *an incident* once or twice.

He stop talking, waiting for me to pick up the other end of that rope and tug on it with a question of my own.

"Did you maybe hear anything? See something?"

More rope I ain't picking up. I lift my shoulders up and down, acting as simple as he think I am.

He take off his hat, and tuck it underneath his arm. Then he hitch up his belt. His pants don't fit him right. I'd offer to take them in for him. But his sagging waist and crooked cuff is more of the same none of my damn business he trying to leave on my doorstep.

"Ms. Vincent, please." His officer tone take a dip. "She's hurt pretty bad. The EMTs are taking her to the hospital. Her head's split clean open."

For a moment, I wonder what Bambi's head must look like "split clean open." Was it all red and raw like a piece of beef. Did it squish out the crack in her skull, gooey and sticky like silly putty. Plain curiosity was biting at me. But that wasn't my side of the fence territory.

"I didn't hear, or see nothing, officer."

"You sure about that, ma'am?"

I nod.

Things get quiet. That eerie kind, where you start to notice things you ain't never realized was making so much noise. Little things, like the tick tock of a clock.

I don't keep no real clocks, don't even set the digital ones on the microwave and stove. Time don't make no difference to me. No sense keeping up with its passing, when it don't care none about mine.

I look at his wrist. It's his watch making the noise.

He got a right to time. It's always on his side, like everything else. Bambi, even with her doe-eyed problems, she got time too. And she got this man in blue caring about whether her old man had something to do with her head splitting clean open.

I got a wayward cat, and a drunk chicken that's getting cold.

The cat come up beside me, settling herself at my feet. She glance his way, ready to make him scarce if I say he ain't welcome, which he ain't. I pick her up, ignoring the bit of my supper she got stuck in her whiskers, because she making my life seem a little less threadbare in front of him.

"All right, then. Well ..."

He let that part hang in the air a moment, still dangling something for me to get caught up

in. "If you think of anything, please let me know."

I nod again.

He put on his hat, tip the brim to me. I laugh at that, a quiet one just for myself. Not too long ago, this man in blue sat across the table from a defense lawyer and denied ever knowing me. Now he acting all polite like I ain't who I am, and he ain't who he is.

"Goodnight, Ms. Vincent."

"Night, officer."

The cat and me turn and go back to the table. Just as I'm setting her down, the screen door creak. When I look around, the officer is in my kitchen. Everything in me get real still and wait.

He take a step forward, his polished shoes tapping the cracked tile. He take his hat off again, hold it in front of him. His eyes go all soft, like a clear sky. I ain't never liked when a man look at me that way. Too hard to tell what's coming next.

He take another step, too close now. I move back, put some safety between me and him. But he reach over and take my hand, the one that don't work too good. He set down his hat and run his finger over the scar stretching down my wrist like an ugly mountain range.

"That night. Nick was ..." He look up at me. "I never forgave myself for what he did to you."

I look down at the scar. There's another one like it on the other wrist, just not as deep. Each year, they get even uglier, never fade. Neither do the memory.

We had the officer over to our place. Nicholas worked an early shift that day. So he and his crisp uniform that I pressed the night before, walked through the door at four in the afternoon, instead of eleven that night. I helped him change into his jeans and the new sweater I bought that matched his brown eyes.

When the officer rang the bell, I answered the door and led him into the study. I fixed them both a drink, went back to the kitchen where I belonged, let them talk about things I was too something or other to understand.

Supper was on the table at six sharp. All the silverware was in line. None of Nicholas' food was touching. His peach tea had four perfect ice cubes and a lemon wedge on the glass rim.

I was doing everything right. But then, the universe noticed I hadn't messed up yet.

The officer made a joke. Nicholas didn't think it was funny. Probably because it was about him. Before I could catch it, I laughed.

I started stuttering. Nicholas started hollering. Then the officer started stuttering and hollering. After that, came the silence.

I knew what to expect from Nicholas. He was a man who thought the world owed him something, and by default, I did too. I was willing to pay my debt. Didn't want or need nobody getting in the way of him taking his due.

But the officer, he was supposed to be different. His momma and daddy had said so. He was one of the *good* ones.

That night, he showed me there was another kind of man in this world. There was ones like my Nicholas. And the good ones like the officer, who make it alright for them to do what they do.

It's good he ain't never forgave himself. I ain't forgave

him neither.

I slip my hand from his.

"Mona Lisa." He say my name like it's a new car he got his eye on. Like it's already his. And all he got to do is sign on the dotted line.

His radio start to crackle. Another officer call him back into the fold. He turn it down, still eyeing me.

When we was six, I caught him looking at me the same way. He told his momma he was gonna marry me that day. She found him something to do that didn't leave no time to play with the help's daughter.

Took me another ten years to understand the reason his momma always told me he couldn't come play. He was one of the good ones. The good ones didn't play hide and seek with the maid's kid. The good ones didn't marry little girls that wore knockoff Keds, and only had two second-hand dresses to her name.

The good ones smile, and leave little hand-me-down girls to pick the dirt out her own skinned up knees. But they get altogether crazy over a doe-eyed Bambi.

Another boy in blue come up my back steps, walk through the door, pay no mind that this a home. His hand already on his gun. He take one look at me, and undo the holster.

"Everything all right in here, Officer Miller?" He talking to his partner, but still staring at me like I'm some rabid dog he ready to put down.

"It's fine, Collier. I'm just asking Ms. Vincent some questions."

"You sure?" He take another step over to us. "You know she's the one who—"

"Rick." The good one turn to the other one, drag his hand over his face. "I got this. Why don't you go across the street and ask Mr. and Mrs. Bullard, if they know what happened over there. If anybody saw something, it was one of them."

Officer Collier keep looking at me. I dare him to do something with that gun. The good one step in front of me, blocking my stare. His hand reach back, pull me close up behind him.

"Collier. Please." He point him to the door.

It take him a minute, but he button up that gun again and get out my house. He leave the screen door swinging open, giving whatever flying nuisance a way in. The good one go pull it up, and lock the wood door. Then he face me again.

"I know, you heard what went on in that house tonight." He rest one hand on his belt, the other on the back door. "You know better than anybody what happened to that poor girl."

The good ones and their Bambis.

Wonder how many kitchens he stood in asking, if they knew what happened to the chief of police's wife. If they'd ever seen Chief Nicholas Calvin come out the back door of his cute victorian house with a bloody shirt and a guilty bag of dishes. Was I ever doe-eyed and helpless to him?

"I told you, officer. I ain't see nothing. I ain't hear nothing."

"Derrick." He shift his weight to his other foot. "Call me Derrick ... please."

The cat come rub her head against my hand. She been waiting for her cue. Guess she figure if things ain't gonna get



juicy, we should go back to our evening.

"I think you should leave now, *officer*."

The cat jump off the dining table, and make her way to the sofa in the other room. I ask Nina to grace us with her presence again, turn the player up enough for her voice to fill the house.

His mouth say something. But don't nobody here care enough to listen. Nina got her own problems. The cat don't give a damn, 'less it's something in it for her. And me, I reckon the words ain't meant for me no way. He leave my world the same way he came, shutting the screen door behind him.

Next morning, one of the ladies who knew me when I was Mrs. Chief Nicholas Calvin come by. She stand at the chainlink gate to my garden, her hands tucked real close to her like she afraid some rock bottom might jump on her skin and follow her home.

Never liked her much. She always made sure to point out a bruise I didn't cover well enough, or ask how come I could sew the "most darling," little dresses and short sets, but ain't have no kids of my own.

The whole town knew why I ain't never have no little one hanging off my hip. Even if they didn't know, they could guess. And it wasn't because the Lord hadn't seen fit to bless me with the gift of life. It was because He *had* seen fit to bless me with a man like Nicholas—a blessing who never took off his disguise.

"Mona, I need your help."

No hello. Just start talking about what's going on with her. She a Bambi, too. Not as pitiful as the one next door with her split open head, but still.

She going on about "being in a bad way," and how she ain't got nobody else, and she hate to ask.

I know why she here. What she like to do when her husband at work. She want that bad way that gone come out looking nothing like her husband, and a whole lot like the man just passing through from wherever, to go in the opposite direction.

Her husband one of the good ones, like the officer. Honest enough, but too damn afraid of they own shadow to stand for nothing. I know he know what she do. He know that oldest boy of theirs, the one named after him, ain't no more his kin than I am. But she must know this "bad way," is too far off mark to pass.

She wait outside, while I gather up what she need. I ought to give her the wrong thing. Then next time I see her ducking and dodging me at the grocery store, I can ask her how come she skin and grin in Jesus' face every Sunday morning, but two of her children don't look nothing like they daddy.

But my momma didn't teach me about herbs, so I could be evil. I take it out to her. Explain everything real slow and careful.

"How will I know, if it's um ... successful?" She look around like anybody here give a damn what we talking about.

"When you not holding something that's screaming for your breast."

She turn her nose up at me.

I could tell her what to look for to make certain the product of her afternoon petting ain't still multiplying and

dividing itself into proof of how wholesome she really ain't. But nobody ever told me. You see enough of something, you learn how to tell when it's beginning and ending.

She try to pass me something over the fence. I tuck my hands in the pockets of my jeans. I never take nothing for cutting off "bad ways."

Even if I wanted a thank you, she don't offer one. We just nod. She tiptoe her way along the side of my house back to the cab she got waiting. I go back to my garden, and try to convince myself I just did some unknown clump of cells a favor.

They don't keep Bambi at the hospital but two days.

I watch him help her inside from my kitchen window. She got a bandage on her hand. Few cuts and bruises on her face. They must have put her head back together, because ain't nothing oozing out nowhere. She a little unsteady on her feet. But don't look too bad. That boy who do yard work for the Bullards will still jog across the street, all shirtless and full of teenage hormones, when she offer him a glass of lemonade.

Bambi will live. I go back to my coffee.

A little while later, someone come knocking on my door. I ignore it. The knock come again, louder this time.

I answer it, ready to tell whoever that whatever they need, I ain't got. There's a man on the other side. One that I was expecting sooner or later. Seeing as he seen my eyes the other night, I figure there's something he want to discuss.

"Afternoon. How you doin'?" His voice sound softer up close than it do when he screaming at Bambi. It don't fit him. He too rough for a soft voice. "I'm Johnny."

He too rough for a name like Johnny, too. A Johnny is a shy loan officer at the credit union. He come home with a box of chocolate just because, and help with chores. Bambi got the wrong kind of Johnny.

"I'm your neighbor over here." He point to his house. "Something happened the other night. My wife, such a stupid woman, she tripped and hit her head. Had to call the ambulance."

I wait for the part that got something to do with me.

"The cops got it in their head I done something to her. That it wasn't no accident." He take a step closer. His soft voice start to crunch like gravel. That sound more like him. "Been going around bothering people with questions. They come bother you?"

His stormy eyes rake me over. That look I know. I can guess what he got brewing behind 'em. I wonder, if he can guess what I got just inside this door.

"You some kind of mute or something?"

I'm some kind of fed up. I lean against the door, letting my left hand—the one with the better grip—slip closer to the only kind of talking I bet he understand.

"Look, I know one of them cops was over here too long for you not to be running your mouth."

Folks always seem to *know* something about me, without me saying nothing. They always know what to expect from people like me on sight.

"What I do with my wife is my business." He prop his foot on the threshold. "Ain't no nosy bitch, or no Mayberry cop, gonna tell me how to handle my house. You hear me?"

"I didn't catch that, Johnny." The good one come hopping

up my porch. Chest puffed up, wearing a pair of Levi's with a hole in the knee.

"It was nothing, officer." Johnny's too soft voice is back. "I was just looking in on my neighbor."

"That right?"

Johnny stare down his nose at him, then look over at me. My hand stay on the shotgun.

"How's Rebecca doing? Heard they released her from the hospital." The good one look him up and down.

Johnny still ain't talking.

"Listen here." The good one take a step, put himself chest to chest with Johnny. "If I ever catch sight of you on this property again, my badge won't matter."

That must make some wheels start turning in Johnny's head, because he tell us both to have a good afternoon, and get off my porch.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Vincent." The good one give me a smile.

"Officer Miller."

"May I, come in for a moment?"

I straighten up. "I was in the middle of something."

He walk up to me, get close enough for me to smell his sandalwood cologne.

"If you worried about that shotgun you got by the door, don't be. Not here as an officer." He meet my eyes. "I just want to talk."

Whenever somebody say they just want to do one thing, they got a whole other thing in mind. Ain't no room in my life for other things. I'm about to tell him that, when Mrs. Bullard come outside. Before she can look across the street, I take a step back and open the door for the officer.

I shut the door and lock it, wishing I'd left him on the other side. He wander around my front room for a minute, looking but not looking. I tell him to have a seat, while I make some tea. He nod. But instead of sitting, he follow me to the kitchen.

I try to act like him being here don't make me feel all loose in my skin. He start picking up the mason jars on the shelves, reading each label like it's in another language.

"What's this one for?"

I glance at it. "It's good for hypertension."

"They make medication for that."

"Not everyone can afford the white coat."

His face flush, and he put it back. The kettle whistle. I put some Earl Grey in the teapot. While it steep, I warm up two tea cups with a bit of hot water. I remember the shortbread cookies I made yesterday, and put those on the table. I make his cup, two cubes of sugar and a dash of cream.

"You remembered." He smile at me.

I don't smile back.

He drink his tea, eat half my cookies. Still ain't said why he here. He can bring it up when he feel like it. Whatever it is he need to say is about a decade too late anyway.

He put his cup down, stare at his hands. I can see words building up in his mouth, making it hard for him to keep it shut.

"I'm sorry." He look at me so long, it start to hurt.

I don't know what to do with his apology. So I tuck it in the pocket of that little hand-me-down girl's dress.

The honeymoon's over. Took all of thirty-six hours for Johnny's softness to wear off. Now, he over there hollering about her ruining his best suit. I can't blame him. Seem like that woman burn everything she touch.

He storm out the house, and tear off in his truck, kicking dirt and gravel into the half-paved street. He'll come home after he's drank most his paycheck, and got some attention from a woman who always so understanding of what a man's wife done misunderstood.

I go get the picnic basket I used to bring Nicholas' lunch to the station in, make sure I got everything. Careful of the sagging second step, I make my way off my porch and across the little patch of balding grass that separate Bambi's house from mine. I set the basket on the worn welcome mat, and ring the doorbell.

"Johnny?"

Sound like she sitting right by the door like an obedient puppy. By the time she up and peeking her head outside, I'm on my side of the grass.

When I get back to my kitchen, my sometime pet scratching at the screen door. I open it enough for her to squeeze inside. We settle on the couch with a book and some wine to enjoy the peace and quiet I bought us.

There's a deer on my porch, carrying a picnic basket. I open the door for it.

"I believe this is yours." She hand the basket to me, her lips smile like they ain't sure how. "Johnny loved it. Kept going on about how it was the best pot roast and pecan pie he ever had."

She tuck her arm across her waist, let her eyes fall for a second.

"I let him believe I made it."

Bambi got a little sense. I glance in the basket. She done washed all my dishes. Deer got manners, too.

"I know who you are. Who your husband was." Her doe eyes find mine. "What did it feel like when you shot him?"

I watch her, until I see it. Something in her stare die a little. I wave her inside.

Guess I got a soft spot for Bambis, too. 🐇



**KIARA A. BREEDLOVE** is a university graduate with a degree in psychology and anthropology, which she uses to host a growing colony of dust bunnies. She is beginning to fall in love with the challenge of the short story. And her ninety-five year old grandmother is her best friend. When she isn't acting as the friendly nursing home Dum-Dum pop pusher, she posts sporadic chapters of her ongoing novels on the mobile reading site, *Wattpad*.



# Mother-Of-Pearl

Melinda Giordano

I had a grain of sand caught in my eye. For days it nestled between cornea and eyelid, a microscopic foreigner buried in its viscous confines. For days my eye was as irritated as an oyster that feels the initial birth pangs of its pearl, the hoodlum particle invading its soft flesh.

The pain increased, spreading beyond my eyelashes, pooling in the corner like a red shadow - all of the physiological consequences of a battle with an unwanted object. My eye felt as rough and dry as the hide of a mollusk. I waited for it to glaze over with nacre, for the hazel-colored iris to turn iridescent: opaque with lavender and turquoise. I waited for my vision to be awash with the ocean, its incandescent light challenging the reflections and refractions of my new eye.

The act of blinking became difficult - as if the stubborn child was grating against the ceiling of the lid: a crib too small for its subtle growth. Every time the grating pain

returned, I wondered at the strata of translucence that layered my infant gem. The pain wasn't curved, but jagged: perhaps my pearl wasn't round; but malformed, Baroque. Such stones were rare, impossible to match: they were not used for necklaces, to be threaded with a string of equals. They were singular, their bodies used in brooches: as the hull of a ship; the torso of a god. My pearl was going to be unique.

But one day my eye began to water. And in the belly of one of those tears the infant grain escaped. It traveled a smuggler's way down the cartography of wrinkle and jaw. The saline tracks curled down my face like the footstep of a snail. Then, in a fit of forgetfulness and annoyance, I brushed the tear away

No matter. I would have been a terrible mother. ↻



**MELINDA GIORDANO** is a native of Los Angeles, California. Her written pieces have appeared in the *Lake Effect Magazine*, *Scheherazade's Bequest*, *Whisperings*, *Circa Magazine* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal* among others. She was also a regular poetry contributor to *CalamitiesPress.com* with her own column, *I Wandered and Listened* and was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize. She writes flash fiction and poetry that speculates on the possibility of remarkable things - the secret lives of the natural world.





# Old Water

Sharon Frame Gay

Old water passes through, underneath this bridge, spanning what once was. On sleepless nights, I travel down to the river, dipping my cup into memories. The taste is still sweet, slides down my throat like a recent dream.

I come to the river to wash my spirit clean. Set fire to the bridge and watch it scorch the stars. The rotted beams tumble into the water, embers hissing at the night air, then swallowed up by the tumult, rushing down through rills and rivulets, a remaining stark scar of timber piercing the night sky.

This must be where dreams come to wake up. Lovers filling bowls with remorse, then pouring them into the ghostly current, the water bitter blue, laced with tears. Canyons and gullies, carved into the spirit, follow hope downstream, caught up in swirling eddies.

I see your face once in a while, a time traveler, come back to haunt me in our dance around the sun. Age has

etched the lives we've led, but our eyes reflect the sorrow that shadows the years.

Water under the bridge, they say, as though it flows to nothingness and dries, spent upon some desert floor. But where do all the memories go, leaching into regret and slowing to a mere trickle. For me, when I see you, the clouds rain down again; the river overflows with the struggle of a heart that was given so freely, like a child, not understanding that it would be handed back to me in ashes.

I return, night after night, destroy that bridge, watch the sky light up again and again, only to find it rebuilt by morning, spanning old water like outstretched arms. 🌀



**SHARON FRAME GAY** grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road. She has been published in several anthologies, as well as *BioStories*, *Gravel Magazine*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Literally Stories*, *Halcyon Days*, *Fabula Argentea*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Write City*, *Literally Orphans*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Luna Luna* and others. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee.



# Looking for Bill

## Diane Valentine

Donna was sure the trip home would be just what she needed. Her husband, Neil, died several months ago. They moved around so much, she never felt at home any place but her hometown. She'd been gone for over thirty years.

Things had changed. The downtown area was full of little boutiques and coffee shops. Nothing like the grocery stores, department stores and banks when she was growing up.

Her parents went out for the evening. "Donna, are you sure you don't want to join us? We're just going out for fish with Ed and Alice," her mother said.

Donna didn't want to go. Ed would brag about his executive son and Alice would brag about their brilliant grandchildren. Donna didn't have any children and Neil had been a school janitor.

She went into the living room and flicked on the TV. Sitting down, she leafed through an old photo album. The pictures of her childhood brought back memories of the fun she had with all her cousins. The picnics, birthday parties and sleepovers. After finishing that book, she picked up another. There were pictures of high school dances. She stopped and looked at her

Prom pictures. What ever happened to Bill Smith? No one would believe him when he told them his name. Actually, it was Willard Smith the Third.

Donna's face warmed as she remembered that junior prom night. Bill had a flask of vodka, that was the night she lost her virginity. There was her graduation picture. Bill, who was the year ahead of her, was home for the summer. That summer was wild, love, rock and roll and lots of sex.

She hadn't thought of Bill in years. Neil was man enough for her. The love of her life. But now he was gone. She decided to look up Bill. She got on the Internet for a quick search. There were several Willard Smiths, but nothing definite to indicate it was him for sure. She didn't want anyone to know she was looking for him. She wanted to make sure she wouldn't disrupt his family if he had one.

The next day, she visited her brother. He was in Bill's class. As nonchalant as she could, she asked, "Do you have any books from your class reunion?"

"Sure. No rush for me to get it back."

Donna took them home. She paged through it, but there was nothing by Bill's name. Disappointed she gave it back to him.

"There were a lot of people we couldn't find," her brother said.

"Well, people move around so much. Look at Neil and me. Some places, we were only there for a few months."

Then she had an idea. What about the newspaper? Most were indexed. The library was the next stop. Donna spent several hours going backwards through the years. Then, there before her eyes was a story about a sentencing of one Willard Smith the Third. He was serving a twenty-year term for manslaughter for the beating death of his live-in girlfriend.

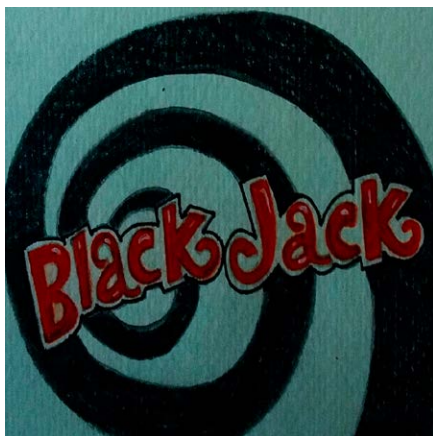
Donna recalled some not so pleasant memories. The memory of the bruises he inflicted in anger. Then there was the time he pushed her down the stairs.

Donna turned off the machine and returned the films to the clerk. For a moment, she thought she would throw up.

She was happy not to have told anyone she'd been looking for Bill. ☹



**DIANE VALENTINE** has been a part of a critic group through AllWriters' Workplace and Workshop. Her work appears in various literary magazines and journals. Her novels, *Family Secrets*, 2014 and *Daring to Soar*, 2015. Both were published with Black Rose Writing.



## On Bus 15

Helen Sinoradzki

I'm riding downtown early Wednesday, still hung over, not ready for work, trying not to think about Danny and me fighting at breakfast. This skinny guy gets on at Grand and stops by my seat. There are other empty seats where he'd have room for that giant backpack he's dumping off his shoulders, but no. He lurches as the bus driver swings out into traffic, cutting off one of those little blue and white Cars2Go.

The guy plops his butt next to me and drags the pack between his legs. His leg bumps mine and I scoot closer to the window. At least he's skinny. His hair is growing out from a buzz cut, kind of sandy, that color that's almost no color. Probably ex-Army, back from Iraq or one of those other places. He rummages around, takes out a pack of American Spirits, pulls one out and studies it like he's going to light up right here on the bus, then sticks it behind his ear. He has big jug ears, lots of room for a cigarette back there. I laugh to myself and turn toward the window to watch the river. It's calm this morning, like a big sheet of metal. They said it was going to rain, but the sky's pale yellow, sun just coming up in back of us.

I quit smoking a while back, couldn't afford cigarettes and booze, picked booze. Always happy to see that amber color splashing in a glass in front of me on the dark wood bar. This guy next to me smells like he can afford cigarettes and booze. His pack's worn, but it's clean, and so are his camo pants and jacket. He's wearing shit kicker boots.

A poke in my ribs. "You laughing at me." Not a question. I keep staring out the window. The elbow again, harder. "I said, 'You laughing at me.'" I edge my leg away from his but don't look at him. He laughs, a rusty chuckle, like he hasn't found much to laugh about lately. His elbow is just touching my side. I shake my head no and he slaps his leg and laughs loud enough for the man sitting in front of us to lift his head from his newspaper and turn sideways. The guy next to me, why not Ray, stares him down. The man faces front. Ray digs that elbow into my ribs again and cackles. It takes more than that to bruise me. That chirpy recorded voice says, "SW 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue," and I pull the cord and stand up. "My stop," I say, even though it's not, and bump his leg with my bag. He doesn't budge and there's no way I'm getting past that pack.

I sit back down. I don't need to get off till 15<sup>th</sup>. Maybe I'll get lucky and he'll get off before then. Not that I've been lucky so far this morning. He unzips his pack and rummages around, pulls out a big pack of gum, thrusts it at me. I didn't know they still make Black Jack. I take a stick, unwrap it, and pop it in my mouth. "Good, huh." He pokes me again. I give him the smallest jerk of my chin.

The bus driver pulls over for the stop at the bus mall and a bunch of people get off. Sweat's oozing down my sides. Just one more elbow in my side. That's all it would take. I lean my head on the window and close my eyes. Danny on the floor, one hand reaching toward my feet. Beige linoleum. Me backing away. Grabbing my purse. Closing the side door. I rub my eyes hard until I don't see Danny anymore.

I pull the cord, stand up and swing my bag onto my shoulder, just missing his head. "You shouldn't mess with me this morning," I say.

"Really," he says. I look into his eyes, they're hazel, more green than brown. He nods and swings his pack out into the aisle, stands up, and lets me out.

I nod at him as I move into the aisle. 🐢



**HELEN SINORADZKI**'s writing has appeared in various journals including *Alligator Juniper* and *Pitheas Chapel* and is forthcoming in the *Bellingham Review* and the *Bookends Review*. She has written a memoir about her experiences in a Catholic cult. An English teacher turned technical writer turned indie bookseller, she now writes full-time. She has lived in nine states, settled in Portland, Oregon, almost twenty years ago, and plans to stay there for the rest of her life.





# Lydia Wakes

Tara Roeder

Lydia wakes from robust and satisfying dreams of tiny, gregarious babies who drop neatly packaged pearls of wisdom about sex, textual politics, and violence to find that moths have over-run her house. Moth births and moth baptisms in the bathroom; moth wakes and moth funerals on the kitchen windowsill. Lydia tenderly shuts the lights off and hopes for the best.

Outside the sky has turned a deep purple and Lydia wonders if this too is a dream. She pinches herself but it hurts. Wake up, she says cautiously, scrunching her eyes closed, willing herself into a cocoon from which she will emerge tousled and pajamad, an island in her A-Team sheeted bed. When she opens her lids the sky is still purple and an old woman and a young boy with a strawberry shaped birthmark stare at her quizzically. Abashed, she continues past the church, which has, overnight, become prey to a graffiti artist with a predilection for anatomical correctness and a particularly nasty shade of blue.

The most ambitious bakery in town sells imitation fruit and croissants filled with assorted jams. The baker has no

short term memory; each bite yields a surprise. Tiny veins of lightning flash in the sky, which is slowly becoming an oddly comforting shade of green. Lydia splashes in a puddle, gravely musing on wetness.

Lydia encounters the entrance to a tunnel frequented decades ago by various ill-advised classmates and the most daring raccoons. She recalls several dreams of other tunnels spinning themselves around a heavily guarded center or sprawling under her great-aunt's house on the outskirts of a city noted for its unusual exports. She naturally decides not to enter.

The sky is the color of a mushroom. Lydia's nails are more brittle than she remembers them. She smells of a soap she has never used.

Lydia reaches a crossroads. She feels the impulse to float away. She sits on an unfamiliar bench and, spotting an acorn on the ground, summons a squirrel. He absconds with the loot.

The sky is hibiscus. Lydia remembers the moths. Should she have left them water, or don't they have mouths? 🐛



**TARA ROEDER** is the author of two chapbooks, *(all the things you're not)* (dancing girl press) and *Maritime* (Bitterzoet Press). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in multiple venues including *3:AM Magazine*, *Hobart*, *The Bombay Gin*, *MonkeyBicycle*, and *Cheap Pop*. She is an Associate Professor of Writing Studies in Queens, New York.



# The Vase

Martin Keaveney

**H**e was tidy, she was not. They extended the kitchen. He brought her a flower one day, name not important, put it in a vase on the table in the new section.

She was laughing about it, much later, why he had brought in the flower, can never ask him now. Soft idea, she said, silly man. ⑤



**MARTIN KEAVENEY's** short fiction, poetry and flash has been widely published in Ireland, the UK and the US. Work may be found at *Crannog* (IRL), *The Crazy Oik* (UK) and *Burning Word* (US) among many others. His play *Coathanger* was selected for development at the Scripts Ireland festival in 2016. He has a B.A. and M.A. in English and is currently a PhD. candidate at NUIG.



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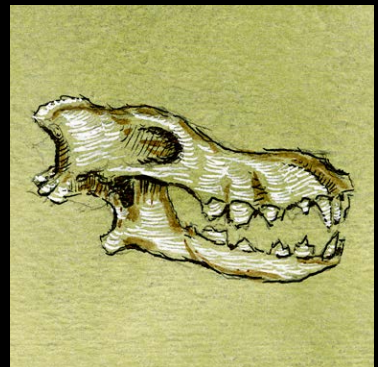
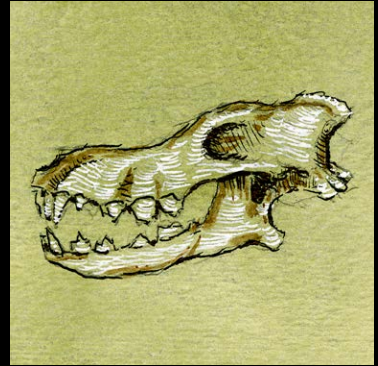
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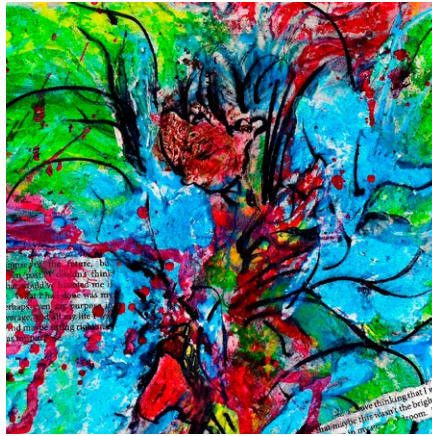
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**JOHN M. BENNETT** has published over 400 books and chapbooks of poetry and other materials. He has exhibited and performed his word art worldwide in thousands of venues. He was editor and publisher of **LOST AND FOUND TIMES** (1975-2005), and is Curator of the Avant Writing Collection at The Ohio State University Libraries. Richard Kostelanetz has called him "the seminal American poet of my generation". His work, publications, and papers are collected in several major institutions including The Museum of Modern Art, and other major libraries. His PhD (UCLA 1970) is in Latin American Literature. His latest book is **Select Poems**, Poetry Hotel Press/Luna Bisonte Prods, 2016. Visit him online at [johnmbennett.net](http://johnmbennett.net) — (photo by C. Mehrl Bennett)



# Above Average

## Ashley Marie Dantzler

I consider myself an average woman. I make less than the men in my profession; I menstruate regularly; and I wouldn't mind having a woman president, not because I'm a woman, but because I just think it's time. I have a charismatic voice and striking features; that's what landed me the job at WHNC, as the only lead anchor who was a woman and of color, in its forty years of existence. Landing in a town like this, with no more than a piece of paper that said I was employable, I'd like to think that it was my knack for journalism that got me that job. My pursuit of the truth, though the trail had grown cold.

Like I said before, I consider myself an average woman, but when is it time to be a little bit more? I realized that I was living without a purpose, one night when I stepped out into the chilly air, coming from a day of reporting the news. I wrapped my Chanel coat tight with its cotton belt around my waist. Burying my head in the trench coat like flaps, now turned up. Now, alleys aren't a place for anyone to be in around eleven o'clock at night, but I found myself passing a dark passageway. I had walked this way several times. I would hustle up, take quick steps, and then let out a sigh of relief once I made it to the other side.

That night, the cold air kept me at bay. It seemed I couldn't pick up enough speed. Dead in the middle of my walking dilemma, I heard a scream, an awful skin-crawling scream. It caused me to stop, almost stumble. The lights from the restaurants, whose back doors faced the alley, illuminated the middle of my path almost perfectly. I took a step into the alley, maybe that's where I went wrong, but my feet were doing the thinking, not my brain. I positioned myself behind a dumpster, crouching next to a stack of rotting pizza boxes. I peered over, following yet another scream. What I saw I had only seen in movies: a girl being beaten by a man, with no sign of help. I turned away thinking, if my feet were fast enough, I could make it out of this thing unharmed. But what about that girl? She looked no more than twelve! What about her? Didn't I have empathy for my fellow man? Would leaving her make

me no better than the men that were beating her? Guilt sat on my lap, and I turned back to the scene. The man pushed the girl down into a stack of garbage bags. She lay there, not moving. If something was going to be done, I needed to do it now. The man reached back to slap the girl, spitting profanity in her face. I reached in my purse, maybe something in there, anything would help me. I slid over my cell phone, deodorant, and eye liner. In other words, I came up short. My eyes caught my lunch bag. I was so hungry, the turkey sandwich I ate for dinner had dissolved quickly. I remembered there was a rotting banana inside. I was trying to be more health conscious; a resolution I had made on Chinese New Year. I grabbed the banana and stuck it in my coat, to appear that I was armed. I peeked over the dumpster one more time, and then emerged into the light.

"Get your hands off of her," I yelled, waving the fruit within my jacket.

I noticed there were two guys. Why had I thought this was a good idea? One man patted the other on the shoulder,

"Let's get out of here,"

He shrugged him off.

I thought quickly, "I'll shoot," I said.

The man took a step towards me.

"Don't come any closer," I yelled. "Now, do as I say and back away from her," I waved the fruit again. "I said move!"

My yell caused the men to both shutter. The man, I assumed to be the leader, stepped backwards.

"You can have her," he said a smile crossing his lips as he walked down the alley. "She's not worth the trouble," And the man left.

I stood still, maybe I was frozen. I couldn't believe any of that had worked. I was immobilized with my own courage, until I heard the girl grunt as she tried to stand. I ran over to her, as she fell back into the trash bags. I kneeled down at her side. She was badly beaten about the face. Lacerations across her cheeks. I took off my coat, and wrapped her body in it, all the while looking over my shoulder, thinking those men could be waiting in the shadows.

"Who are you?" the girl breathed.  
 I lifted her to her feet,  
 "Can you walk?"  
 She nodded,  
 "I think so,"  
 "My car's not too far from here," I said grabbing my equilibrium.  
 We hobbled down the alley. At one time I felt her dead weight against my shoulder, and I almost collapsed. It must have been the adrenaline that allowed me to get her inside my car.  
 "I'll take you to the hospital," I told her as I pulled on my seatbelt. "St. Luke's is just down the street,"  
 "No!" she yelled.  
 "You're in pretty bad shape," I replied.  
 "I can't go to the hospital ... I ..."  
 I gripped the steering wheel,  
 "I'm sure you have your reasons why you don't want to see a doctor, but there has to be someone I can call, someone that can take care of you ... where's home?"  
 She looked out the window,  
 "There's no one, and there's no home,"  
 "How old are you?"  
 She looked down,  
 "Thirteen,"  
 Then, with the light of the golden arches, I saw her whole face. It was much like the faces of the people I worked with, peach, and in some places milky white. I looked at my chocolate knuckles as they covered the wheel in a way I had never looked at them before. I saw the delicate nails attached, and dared to think different about race and ethnicity. I had grown accustomed to the stares in this small town, and though we were in the 2000s, racism was still very alive.  
 "I have a spare bedroom," I began. "You'll stay there for the night,"  
 I stared at the road ahead when she spoke up,  
 "I don't want your sympathy. I know you look at me and think I need saving, but I don't. Especially, from someone like you,"  
 "Someone like me?" I said confidently. "What do you mean by that?"  
 She looked away,  
 "Nothing ... please just let me out of the car,"  
 Tears fell from her eyes and soaked her shirt. She wiped them away with her sleeve.  
 I pulled the car over under an underpass, and turned to the girl,  
 "Technically, you did need saving. And it's not sympathy, that I was giving you, it was empathy," I turned back to the

road. "There's a difference,"  
 She rolled her eyes and reached for the handle. I quickly locked the door,  
 "What's your name?" I asked her.  
 "Why?" she said and attempted to unlock the doors, but I got there first.  
 "Because I want to call you by your name when I say what I have to say to you ..."  
 "Aria," she replied. "Happy?"  
 "Aria," I began. "You owe me a little more gratitude, seeing as I rescued you from a pack of wolves tonight."  
 "Do you want a medal?" she asked me.  
 Maybe that's when I should've unlocked the door and forced her out, but I resisted the urges.  
 I turned to her,  
 "I'll unlock the door, and you can crawl back to that alley, and we can forget about this whole incident. You can even keep my coat. But I want you to know, that you did need saving tonight, and you were saved by someone like me," I rubbed my forehead. I was getting nowhere. Her hand still resting on the handle. I sighed. "If you can't see past our differences, maybe you do need to go back to the alley, and your backwards thinking,"  
 I sat back, feeling that I had said what I needed to. I pressed the unlock button and waited for the door to open, but thirty seconds went by and nothing happened. From the corner of my eye I watched her put her hands in her lap. I started the car, and we pulled off. I drove thinking that I was reacting on an impulse, that maybe this wasn't the brightest idea, inviting a stranger to sleep in my guest bedroom. It all sounded like a day in the life of an impulsive person. But that wasn't me. I needed lists. I needed structure. I needed rules, and I had bent one tonight.  
 I reached in my glove compartment and pulled out a pack of baby wipes. As I drove, I pulled out one and placed it against Aria's face, dabbing it gently. Her eyes were closed. She was obviously exhausted and asleep, I thought. Until she spoke.  
 "Thank you," she whispered.  
 I nodded, having no glimpse of the future, but nightmares of my soon forgotten past. I couldn't think about the amount of anxiety that would've haunted me if I would've left her in that alley. What I had done was my duty, my job for humanity, perhaps even my purpose in life. Maybe I was born to be average, and all my life I was waiting for this night to come. And maybe sitting right next to me, scarred and wounded, was my purpose.  
 The night turned to morning as I pulled into my average driveway, of my average house, not as a heroine, but as an average woman, walking in her purpose. 🌀



**ASHLEY MARIE DANTZLER** lives in Omaha, Nebraska where she writes daily. She is a contributor to *The Omaha Star*, an African American owned newspaper, where she writes the column *Something to Talk About*. Her column speaks on topics surrounding Mental Health Awareness. Ashley strives to walk in God's purpose for her life and aspires to someday be a notable writer. Until then, she lives to write and writes to live.





# Hole

Eric G. Wilson

**Y**ou are now old enough to bathe on your own," his mother said.

"But the water is deeper than before," the boy, not yet six, replied.

"Your head will be above the water line," his mother replied. "You will be fine. I must cook the bird for your father. He might be coming home tonight."

"But the water will get cold," the boy said.

The mother said, "Not for a long time. It is almost boiling hot. Please get in."

The boy persisted. "But what if the lights go out?"

"They will not," his mother urged. "Now get in. You are dirty, and your father might be returning."

The boy's mother left the room. The boy became naked and stepped into the tub and lowered himself into the water.

The water in the porcelain tub looked white. The whiteness turned the room around it black. The boy sat in the darkness the white made. He loved the warm water on his skin. His mother was right; the water would not get cold. He leaned his head back against the rim of the old tub. He fell asleep.

He awoke choking. He had slid under the water. He heaved himself upward and coughed and spit until he caught his breath. The water was now cold, and it was no longer white. The darkness in the room did not make the white whiter. The dark was dark.

The boy cried out, "Mommy, mommy."

His mother did not come.

"Mommy, mommy," again young the boy cried.

Silence.

The boy would have to climb out of the tub on his own.

He placed his hands on either side of the tub and pulled his knees to his chest. But before he could rise from the water, a hole opened in the ceiling and through it rushed hot white light and a blur of gray and the water splashed into his eyes and it stung them and then he forced them open and hovering above him was the man from his father's book,

giant and silvery in the glare, circle of black for a mouth, no eyes, nose, ears, in his left hand holding by the hair the head of a boy, in his right an ax so black that the light turned it white.

The boy could not cry Mommy. He could scream. He screamed a scream.

The man dropped the head into the water. The water splashed into the boy's eyes. He closed them and opened them. The man was now holding the boy's hair with his left hand and was raising the ax with his right.

A wall of smoke slid between the boy and the man from the book. The smoke was hot. It burned young the boy's eyes. Someone was lifting him from the water. He was carried out of room into the house. He was outside the house. He was in the yard. It was cool. His mother was holding him, chest-to-chest; his chin resting on her left shoulder, like when he was a baby. He was turned away from the house. It was almost night. He was still naked.

"Mommy," he said, "the gray man from the book dad made came through the ceiling."

"No, child, he didn't," she replied.

"He did," the boy said, "and he had an ax and he was going to cut my head off, just like in the book."

"No, boy," his mother replied, "what you saw was smoke. The bird I was cooking for your father was burning in the oven. I had gone to the woods to pick blackberries and forgot the time and remembered it only when I heard you scream."

"I screamed when I saw the gray man," the boy said.

"Son, you did not see the gray man," his mother replied. "You saw smoke. You screamed. You saved us. The house would've burned. I threw water on the bird."

The boy did not say anything. He closed his eyes and did not want his mother to put him down.

She whispered in his ear, "What's happened here is grace. That's a stroke of luck saves you from dying."

She put him down. He did not like it.

"I guess your father isn't coming," she said. "Let's go



clean up the mess.”

Then the boy’s father was home. It was later. His father had made a new book. It was about a boy who has a ball the size of a man’s head, and the ball is magic. It turns everything it touches, except the boy, into water. One day the boy is very thirsty, so he touches the ball to a book, and the book turns to water, and he drinks the water. When his parents discover this—they did not know about the ball, which a gray man had given to the boy during the night—they scold him. They tell him never to turn anything to water again. But the boy is thirsty. In secret, he turns a plate into water, and then a jug, and then a chair, and a table. When his parents find out, they scream at him. The boy is startled by the scream. He drops the ball. It bounces toward his parents. It touches them. They turn to water. The boy is sad, but he drinks them anyway.

The father read the boy this book soon after he returned. At the end of the book, the boy. —he was now almost nine—asked his father, “Whatever happened to this boy?”

His father replied, “The boy walked all around the world, turning everything into water. He was extremely thirsty. Eventually he turned the entire world into water. But he had not thought that there would be no place to stand. He drowned in all of the water he had not drunk. Nothing was left but a world of water and a ball the size of a man’s head floating on the water.”

“That is a sad story,” the boy said.

“Perhaps,” his father replied, “but also true, for it tells us what kind of people we are. I brought you a present.”

The boy’s father reached inside his coat. He was always wearing a coat now, a thick gray one. He was always cold. Out of his coat, he produced a purple ball, the size of an apple. It bounces, his father said, and he dropped it onto the floor and it bounced back up and he caught it.

Soon after that the father left again and did not return. The boy played with the purple ball. He loved to play with the purple ball. He dropped it onto the ground and it bounced back up and he caught it.

But one morning the boy woke up and the ball was gone. He always placed the ball beside his pillow before going to sleep. But the ball was now not beside his pillow. Nor was it under his bed, or anywhere else in his room. Nor was it in the house he lived in with his mother, the house whose kitchen had blackened walls. He could not find the ball

outside, either, not in his yard, not at the edge of the forest.

Where had the purple ball gone?

The boy lay down in his bed. He was sure that last night his ball had been right beside where his head now was. He did not believe in the gray man, as he once did, so he did not wonder if the gray man had taken his ball. Then he thought that he might be in a dream, that all he had to do was wake up from this dream, and the ball would be right there, beside his head. He reasoned that if he closed his eyes and fell asleep in this dream, if this was a dream, then the dream he would have in this sleep would not be a dream, but reality, himself as he really was, waking up and finding his purple ball beside him.

The boy closed his eyes. They had not been closed long before he heard crying in the kitchen. It was his mother. She cried in the mornings.

The boy opened his eyes. He looked where his ball should have been. It was not there, but he did notice for the first time a small hole at the base of the wall between his room and the bathroom. The hole was roughly round, and just big enough for his purple ball to fit through.

He sprang from his bed to the wall. He lay on his stomach and looked into the hole. He expected to see the bathroom on the other side. He hoped that his ball would be there.

But the boy saw darkness in the hole. He should have seen light, light from the bathroom, through whose window the morning sun shone. But he saw darkness.

What was this hole?

He wanted to reach into the hole to find out if his ball was there, but he was afraid. Anything could be in this hole. A rat, or a spider, or something else—even though he no longer believed in the gray man.

The boy wanted his purple ball very much, though. It was the last present his father had given him, and he liked dropping it on the ground and watching it bounce back up and then catching it.

The boy was afraid, but he overcame his fear. He reached into the hole with his left hand. At first, he only went as far as his wrist. He felt nothing but cool air on his hand. Then he pushed in farther, up to his elbow. Still nothing but cool air.

He was growing unafraid. There was nothing dangerous



in this hole. He reached in all the way to his shoulder. That's when he felt something round. But in touching this round thing, surely his ball, he pushed it away, out of his reach. He stretched his arm as far as he could, but it remained out of his reach.

He thought, I can use a broomstick to pull this round thing, my ball probably, toward me. Then I can reach it.

The boy removed his arm and ran into the kitchen. His mother had stopped crying, but her face was still red and puffy.

"I need a broom," the boy said. "Where is a broom?"

"In the closet," his mother replied. "Why do you need a broom?"

He thought it best not to tell his mother the truth. "To sweep my room," he said.

"What?" his mother said. "What's gotten in to you? You've never swept your room before."

"I'm going to clean my room to cheer you up," the boy said. "I'm going to clean the entire house."

"You are a sweet boy," his mother said. "That is very nice of you."

The boy took the broom from the closet. He hurried back into his room.

He lay on his belly again and extended the broom handle into hole. He felt it touch something. This had to be the ball. He then positioned the handle to the left of the thing and slowly tried to angle it back towards him.

But the thing rolled away to the right. It had lost contact with the broom handle. The boy slid the handle to the right as far as he could, but the handle touched nothing. He slid the handle to the left as far as he could. Nothing. He slid the handle back and forth, once, twice, three times. Still nothing.

Where had the ball gone?

"What are you doing?"

Had someone spoken?

"Son, what are you doing?"

It was his mother. He turned toward her voice. She was standing in the doorway. He pulled the broom from the hole and stood up.

He still thought it best not to tell her the truth.

"I was sweeping," he said, "and just noticed this hole and wondered how deep it goes."

"How did that hole get there?" his mother asked. "I've never noticed it before. Did you do it while you were playing?"

"No," the boy said.

"Don't lie to me," his mother replied. "I hear you playing roughly in here all the time. I bet you did it while playing with that ball your father gave you."

"No, I didn't," the boy said. "I swear I didn't."

"All you do is play with that ball," his mother said. "I'm sick of it. Give me the ball."

"I don't know where it is," the boy said.

"You lost it?" his mother asked.

"I woke up this morning and it was gone," the boy replied.

"Are you lying again?" his mother asked.

"No. I swear." Now the boy would tell the truth. "It rolled into this hole."

"Impossible," his mother said. "You've disappointed me again."

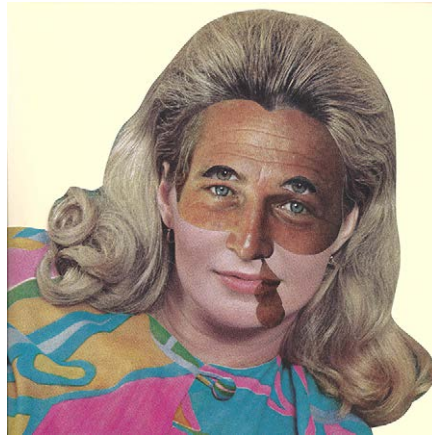
She started to cry. She walked out of the room.

The boy's mother did not speak to him the rest of the day.



**ERIC G. WILSON** is author of several books of creative nonfiction, including *Against Happiness*, *Keep It Fake*, and *How to Make a Soul*. His fiction has appeared in *The Collagist*, *The Vestal Review*, *Cafe Irreal*, *Eclectica*, *The Dr. TJ Eckleburg Review*, and *Posit*, and he has placed poetry in *Prelude*, *decomp*, *apt*, *The Notre Dame Review*, and *Crack the Spine*. His essays can be found in *The Fanzine*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Oxford American*, *Salon*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Paris Review Daily*. He teaches creative writing and British Romantic Poetry at Wake Forest University. For more information, see [ericgwilson.net](http://ericgwilson.net)





# The Square

Elisa R.V. García

Sunshine crept into the room, forming a white frame around the short dark curtain that barely covered the window. The glow around the darkened window reminded him of Malevich's black square. He sighed. Vera would have laughed at this ludicrous thought. He sat at the edge of the bed, uneasy about his plans. The box was in the living room and he wanted to go, open it, and have a mystical experience.

He decided he would cover all the mirrors in the house. He didn't want this to be a moment to face reality, but a time to flee from it. Should he change his clothes? He'd excused himself from work today and had put on his leisure clothes out of habit. But was this appropriate? Maybe it was. After all, most of their time together had taken place on weekends and holidays.

He began his task by shrouding each mirror with meticulous care. When he was finished, he dusted the ottoman Vera had loved to sit on.

He took the package and placed it carefully next to the ottoman. He opened the box and found another one inside. In the smaller carton was a Styrofoam head that held the wig in its place. He removed it and took a deep breath. It didn't smell like her, but it looked perfect. He placed the wig on his carefully combed hair. He sat still and read a note on the invoice:

"According to your wishes, we have arranged your wife's hair as in the picture you sent us." ⑤



**ELISA R.V. GARCÍA** is a Mexican author living in Germany. She has a PhD in comparative literature from Aarhus University (Denmark). She works as a researcher, but she dedicates part of her time to writing fiction. In her short stories she likes to explore questions dealing with identity, foreignness, and the complexity of human relationships.



## Salt and Pepper

### Cate Camp

**T**here's this party trick I have. Well, it's a trick, but only for me. A party for me. You see, I like to go to friends' homes, restaurants, the kitchen isle at Target, wherever, and steal salt and pepper shakers. Always one, though. Salt or pepper. Never both. Sometimes it's the salt, sometimes it's the pepper. I never know which one I'm going to take until it's already done.

Right now I have thirty-seven salt shakers and fifty-four pepper shakers. I used to keep them in a box under my bed. Then one box became five, and now I have an entire closet full of them. Some of them are completely full of their little salt and pepper flakes. I'll tell you one thing, I'll never run out.

You probably think it's kind of odd. Why just salt and pepper shakers? Why not a coffee cup, or a lighter, or a gravy boat, or a wallet for crying out loud? And why just one? Why not take both?

I'll tell you why. Plato said that human beings were originally made with four arms, four legs, and two faces. Then Zeus split them in two, forcing them to spend their brief, mortal lives in search of their other halves.

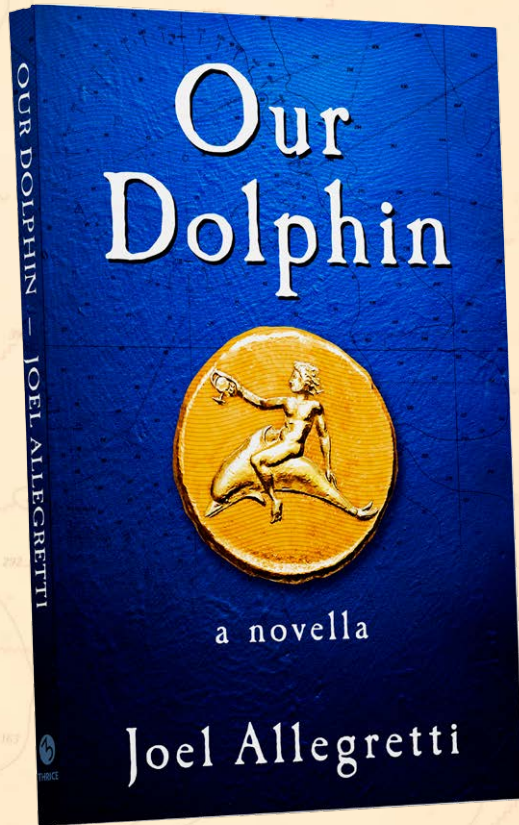
Completeness. Unity. One. Gone. I like the feeling of taking away part of a whole, just like Zeus. Only I never give them back. That's the real trick. They just disappear, never to be found again. It's almost like magic. 🌀



**CATE CAMP** is a writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. She took a few creative writing classes at Texas Tech University, after a short-lived journalism career. She has recently been published in *Firewords Quarterly*. She is trying to get more of her stories "out there," wherever "there" is, and is often intimidated by other contributors' impressive biographies.

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# JOEL ALLEGRETTI



Enough water and waves and you get smoothed coral. Enough poetry and sun and you get Joel Allegretti's new novella, *Our Dolphin*—a fairy tale less Grimm than hymn to a de Chirico landscape sliced into heat waves. The main character is a curiously disfigured lad who—in his despair—allows a tragic magic world to enter his heart. *Our Dolphin* has a flashing spine of story that combines Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" with di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*—but the real pleasure for me is Allegretti's poetic prose. Nearly every paragraph contains a surprise such as "The wind had a narcotic effect" or "His temples tingled with the electric charge of jellyfish stings." Pour yourself a tall one and let the beach simmer twixt your toes while reading this masterful novella—just don't flinch at the cruel parts.

—Ron Dakron  
author of *Hello Devilfish!*

[ThriceFiction.com/OurDolphin](http://ThriceFiction.com/OurDolphin)  
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COMING SOON FROM THRICE PUBLISHING

# LORRI JACKSON SO WHAT IF IT'S TRUE







# A Thousand Paces

Kawika Guillermo

A thin stream of ants crawl over the juice of stomped open redcurrant berries, leftovers from King John's procession. With the religious pageantry now gone, those of us still clinging to life search the streets for anything edible dropped by the courtiers. Drawn to anything colorful, pleading to god to find just one crumb, I happen upon the small stick of berries, squished open and covered in a squirming black mass of ants. I grab the berries and shake the ants off like crumbs. Six of the berries still seem edible.

Do all ants think the same? Do some ants go to heaven, some to hell?

I hide the fruit in my palm as I dart through the red-bricked city square, once inhabited by stray dogs, before we realized that dogs too are edible. Since our religious rebellion over a year ago, the devil has tested our faith, and sent the old Bishop to lay siege to our city. Now we search for other things that could be edible. Cats. Desiccated corpses.

Horses. Ponies. Also edible.

With the berries' red juice staining my palm, I arrive in my small cottage near the city gates. There Corina, wife of the Shepard Walther, sits at my empty wooden table with her child in her arms, an unnamed child, for so few are surviving anyway. Until the miracle we are all waiting for happens, anything can be made into a meal.

"I was able to save three," I tell her, opening my palm. She puts one of the berries in her child's mouth and one in her own. She leans back, eyes towards her child, letting her tears fall into her child's mouth.

"Please swallow," she says.

Corina was a regular customer at the bakery where I apprenticed before the siege, and for years I loved her from a distance: her dark wavy hair just touching the counter when she bent to smell the almond pastries, her tall fingers as they squeezed the bread, testing the dough. She requested extravagant cakes made with rosewater and cinnamon, with chocolates and raisins sprinkled throughout.

"Michella and some others are still determined to go," she tells me, her tongue licking her teeth. Teeth: not edible.

"They've lost their faith already," I respond. "We will never see them again on earth or in heaven."

"If we beg the Bishop to let us live, perhaps he will have mercy."

I watch the unnamed child. Dark spots are forming around its eyes.

"You too?" I say. "And what if the Bishop refuses you?"

Her thin, freckled arm points to the city gates just outside my window, near the chapel, to the thousand paces of grass. The once bright pasture has become a no man's land for the impure. The heathens who wander there have given up the city, but have also been refused by the Bishop's army of drunken Catholic idolaters who lay siege.

"We will leave tonight," she tells me. "Will you join us?"

They will die, no doubt. I can convince her to stay. I can tell her I love her. But that would change nothing. Loving her would not give us His blessing.

Clouds of river fog stream over my ankles as I pace past the city gate with six others, each of them the sister, brother, son or cousin of one of the exiles who left with Corina. Like the others, I carry food: small patches of berries, unleavened bread, and rat meat. In the thousand paces, nothing is edible. Not the dirt or the grass.

The group of heathens has wandered the thousand paces for days, doing their best to avoid the archers of both armies. Our city's new Lutheran King declared that the exiles be forgotten, condemned to hellfire. Those of us who venture to the thousand paces are moved by something other than belief.

It is cold and growing colder. A few birds roost near a single pine tree, each one as edible as edible can be. My lantern bobs among the fog, nearly scorching my white robe.

Past the tree I find the exiles. The men, it seems, were all killed by archers. Only a dozen or so women remain, huddled in a tight circle with their children in the center, absorbing the group's warmth, bunched together like berries.

Those of us from the city say nothing to the exiles, for fear of catching their disbelief, like a flu of the soul. I search

for Corina until my eyes meet a woman with a child cradled in her arms. Her eyes glaze over my figure, and I place my piece of unleavened bread just near her whitened legs, crossed and folded onto her body to secure warmth. Each of the women has the same tired eyes, the same protruding cheekbones, the same twitching neck veins. None are ugly, none are beautiful, none are lucky, none unfortunate. Any of them could be Corina.

The King has closed the gates, cutting off any visits to the exiles. I kneel in the city square alongside hundreds of other worshippers, each of us bowing to the cross, while the King stands solid as a tree, speaking with an ecstatic energy that the rest of us lack. "At the end only we remain," he shouts. "God's chosen, who will be rewarded like a flower that only blooms when closest to death."

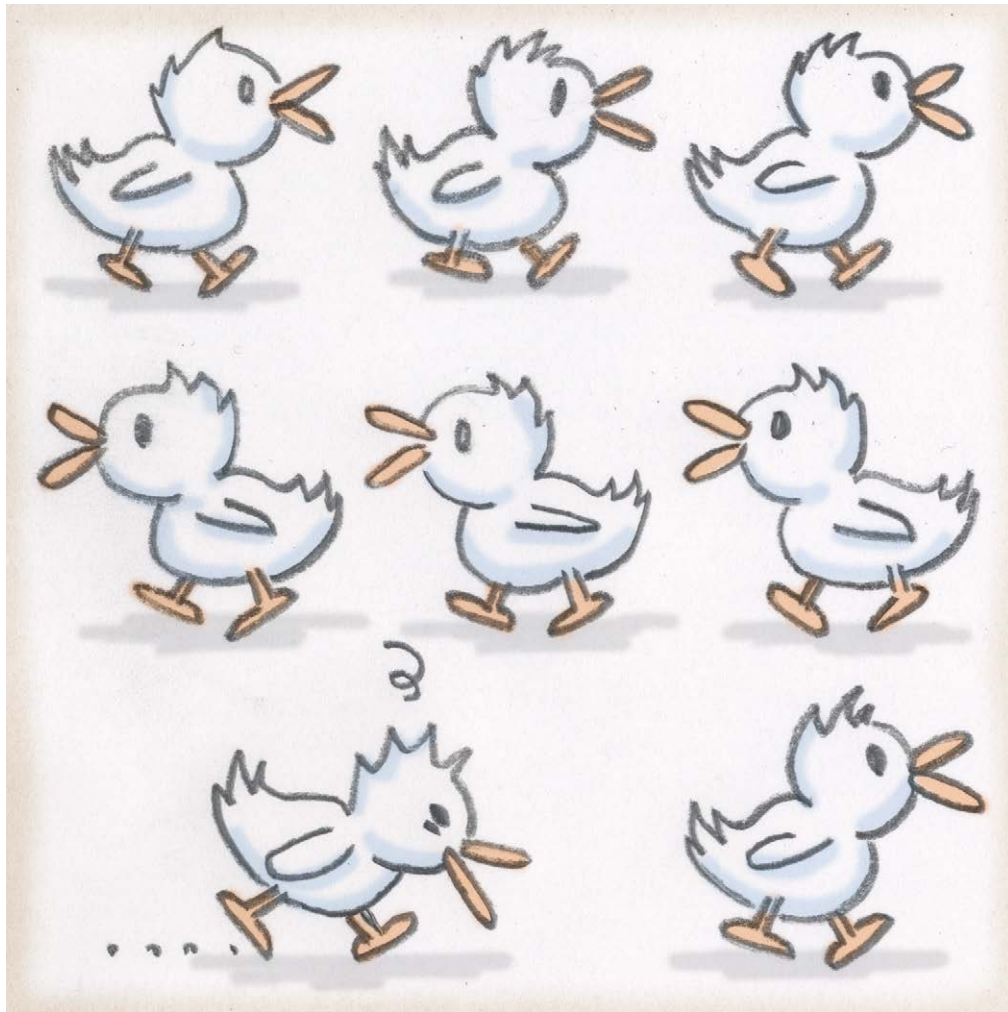
A stream of ants marches between my knees, heading toward my head that sits upon the earth. I stick out my tongue and invite them into my mouth with the juices of my saliva. Soon they form a line, and I feel them.

On my lips. Creeping slowly up my tongue. Dropping in the back of my throat and into my stomach. I swallow to keep from coughing. I watch them march on in, never wavering.

Perhaps they are the same ants that ate those redcurrant berries. But who can tell the difference? They all digest just as easy.



**KAWIKA GUILLERMO's** stories can be found in *Feminist Studies*, *The Hawai'i Pacific Review*, *Tayo*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, and many others. He is an Assistant Professor of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University, where he works on prose fiction, Asian diasporic literature, and cultural studies. His non-fiction writing has appeared in journals such as *American Quarterly*, *MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States)*, and *Games and Culture*, and he writes monthly blogs for *Drunken Boat* and *decomp Magazine*, where he serves as the Prose Editor. His debut novel, *Stamped*, will be released in 2017 by CCLAP Press.



# You See a Skein of Ducks

Mason Hamberlin

“Skein:

1 a loosely coiled length of yarn or thread wound on a reel

2: something suggesting the twists or coils of a skein

3: a flock of wildfowl (as geese or ducks)”

—Merriam-Webster Dictionary

**Y**ou’re sitting on an inner-city park bench. Somewhere in America, or not. Its colours: pastels out of a *Good Neighbor* brochure against the navy, grey, and black of the city backdrop. Children play and scream, while miscellaneous objects fly from their hands—sometimes into the heads and faces of strangers, like a somehow more prolific bird-shit. A group of parents sits off to the side chatting, unaware. And

out of sight, several car horns honk.

You see a skein of ducks waddle by. You think to feed them bits of bread from your lunch. But you realize that you forgot to pack any today. The ducks walk on.

You see a skein of ducks. One lags behind the rest with a limp. Pity compels you to offer the lame duck some bread from your lunch.

The duck looks at you. You nod. The duck turns its head and pretends it didn’t see you. It walks on. Both of you try to forget that you ever made eye contact.

You see a lame duck lagging behind the rest. Pity compels you to offer it some bread from your lunch. As it approaches you, one of the men in the group of parents looks up, turns to see you with your arm extended. He raises from his seat and paces towards you, fist raised.

He says, “Hey, jackass! Have some goddamn respect.



That's my wife!"

You offer the lame duck some bread. It politely declines, adding that it's on a gluten-free diet.

You see a lame duck lagging behind the rest. You reach into your bag to offer it some bread, but when you look up, it's already at your feet. It pulls a pamphlet from under its wing.

"Do you have a moment for our lord and savior, Jesus Christ?"

You see a lame duck lagging behind the rest. You recall from one of your high school biology classes that ducks have corkscrew penises, and rummage through your bag for the unopened wine bottle you packed. The duck sees your stares. It flaps ahead to regain the pack. You let the bottle slide back into your bag and think about your choices.

You see a lame duck lagging behind the rest. Pity compels you to offer it some bread. Though it remains expressionless as it chokes down the bite, its disposition seems to have improved. You feel content with your actions.

You offer the lame duck some bread. Within seconds, it nips at the chunks in your fingertips and chokes them down. Instead of leaving when it's finished, it waits for more.

Not wanting to disappoint, you keep giving the duck more and more bread, while it keeps eating and eating. At one point, the duck bites your fingers. You shrug it off as an accident and reach for another piece of bread.

The duck bites off the skin and nails of your fingers. With your bleeding digits, you continue to feed it chunks of bread. The duck bites off part of the muscle tissue, then the bone, then the fingers altogether. You have no more fingers left. You have no more bread to give.

The lame duck waddles away. You feel content with your actions.

You see a skein of ducks. You wonder if you've been to this park before.

From the park bench, you hear a duck honk in the distance. The sounds of cars and birds and city children saturate the air. You look for solace in some simple

assurance. A group of cars drives by. You see a rusted, beat-up buggy lagging behind the rest. Pity compels you to offer it some bread.

You see a skein of ducks. One lags behind the rest. Pity compels you to offer the lame duck some bread, but you hesitate, as a knot creeps through your stomach. Before you can approach it, one of the nearby children throws a rock and breaks the bird's neck. Feathers, blood, and a knifelike hiss fill the air. Bones protrude from the bird's neck, now a ninety-degree angle.

You feel your breakfast try to crawl up your throat. You look around to see if anyone is looking. They aren't. You leave.

You see a skein of ducks. One lags behind the rest. You want to offer it bread, but you can't bring yourself to extend an arm, and instead eat the entire loaf you packed for lunch. Each bite, a pinch between thumb, index, and middle finger. The bread tastes acidic. You wipe beads of sweat from your forehead—fingertips oddly

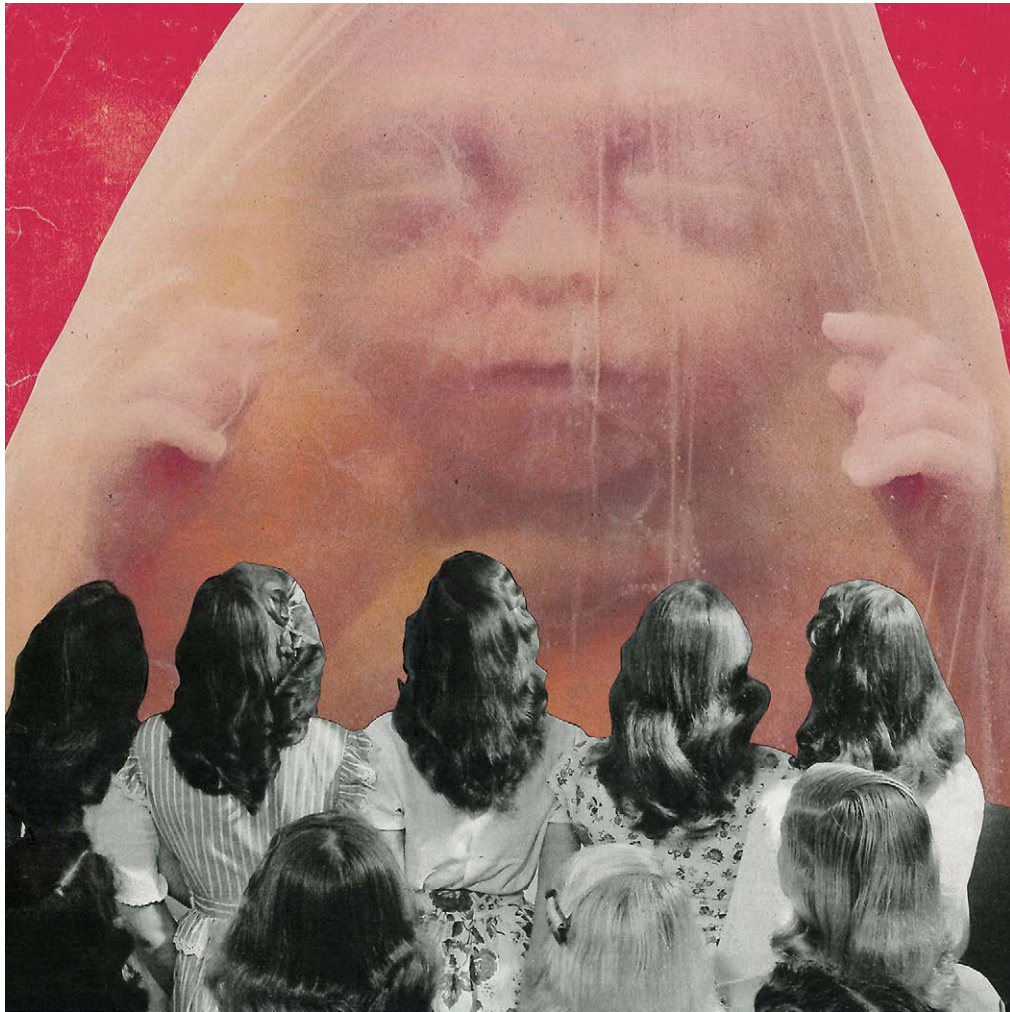
painful—and decide that you will take your lunch break elsewhere—perhaps the decidedly grey coffee shop with the decidedly grey staff.

After standing and walking towards the park exit, you see the skein of ducks one more time. You begin to sweat more. You carve the time and date on your arm. 6



**MASON HAMBERLIN:** frequently described as "a nugget" and "actual human trash." Otherwise, he plans to get BFA in Nonfiction—along with a handful of minors randomly picked from a hat—at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. There, he also serves as the Nonfiction Editor for *Atlantis Magazine*.

His work other work can be found at [voicemailpoems.com](http://voicemailpoems.com) and *Sanctuary Literary Arts Journal*.



# The Mourning After

Alec Bryan

**A**propos! The rain. The slanted drizzle. The gray scale backdrop. The leafless trees drenched, umbratic moss filtering blackness, expanding with dampness. The populace of black parasols, feathering the rain, raven-wing-like, down the acrylic coated nylon onto the already soaked greens. Parasols grouped tight, snug, closer than amphibians morphing into frogs in desiccated ponds, gasping for air, for safety, for space, confined only by circumstance. Closeness like this is never comfortable, never wanted.

The plot of earth is pried open, exposing the wet sloppy clay interior; modest puddles of uneven proportions pock the hole. The 20 gauge steel-gasketed casket already sealed shut, locks out the elements, the onlookers, life and the rain beating down upon it.

An ecclesiastic groan issued forth from the pastor, an imitation of life in a voice, a veritable dyslogy on death,

a fabricated ray of light is battered by the onslaught of rain, battered back into the mouth from whence it came, back into the sealed casket, back into the mother's womb, battered back into the dirt, back into time immemorial, then, no more groans, no more words, just rain and a miniature casket lowered into a hole.

A line of cars, parked, lights on, engines running, heaters pumping, await the bereaved—the black hearse heads the procession of metal and motor. Inside the cars, umbrellas begin to collapse, coats shed, hand rubs asperous against hand, friction creates warmth, tepid breath funnels into flesh-palmed billows—comfort starts to close in around the mourners as the cold comes off them and collides with the heat circulating through the cars. Outside, wet dirt, shovelfuls of clods cover the entire opening until the casket is slurped back into the earth, and all that remains to be done is the smoothing of dirt once the rain stops so the

grass sods evenly, and for two doltish umbrellas to leave the scene—like the others did minutes before.

Home: fire, ignited for its warmth and ambience, casts ghostly adumbrations across the hearth and onto the backs of the nearest mourners, though none stand near it. Whereas any other day, the flame would be vaunted, huddled by, a welcome sign for those stepping out of the soggy afternoon, now, menacingly, outcast and all alone it gloats in feverish fits of heat. The velour drapes, embroidered with mauve orchids and pink cyclamens, close out the grey, darken the room, do nothing to deaden the sound of the constant patter of the rain, enhance the shadows and add to the stifling mood of a house once resounding with joyous sounds and filled with radiant light. Susurrus voices, too low to be heard, express a desire to leave, express grief, express sympathy, express a repulsive type of sickness, a sickness not needing to be heard by family, especially by the child zigzagging in and out of the scattered guests, zigzagging in her bright yellow dress, chrysanthemum-like, anachronistic, almost mocking, with her easy movement, with her six-year old naivety; shining as dauntless as a sun trying to fill up the interstices of outer-space darkness.

The help: volunteers, elderly women from the local chapter, weave in and out, more threaded, more needed. The drab colored clothing complements their dull faces and hunched backs, atavistic, almost unpardonable, hiding the do-good-Christian-smile that so pricks the mourners as they, the help, pass out and pick up the plates and cups. Week old wilted red roses, still in the vase, occupy the main table in the living room. The demarcating flowers of the funeral, the lively flowers: whites, reds, oranges, even majestic purples, line the walls and blockade the main entrance to the kitchen. No day is a good day to give birth to a stillborn, but February 13th? Terribly bad, and for it to have been the second son born dead? Even horrendously bad. Perhaps this is what the wilted red roses hint at. Perhaps this is what the mumbles hint at, this terrible luck, or perhaps the bad taste of five days later having a funeral, something so sanctimonious turned feral, and the weather, good heavens, the weather even hints at the unnaturalness of it.

The couple doesn't speak. They don't move; stand in the darkest of the four dark corners, nod their heads, give assent by dead air; utter silence to the other mourners who

trudge up to them, who try to console, who they themselves, the mourners, find lock-jawed silence the only response when near the two. Faces stay hidden in the corner. Eyes, otherwise able to acknowledge or articulate true sorrow, remain obscured, undefined by light, opal holes in the blank face. Then, mimicking the reticence of admittance to the corner, mourners quietly, and one by one, leave the couple, pat the head of the innocent young girl, leave the oppressing house, leave the omen rain, leave the entire scene where it belongs: locked within the bitter walls where it is able to

seep into the stale and faded pictures of posterity, or slide underneath the creaking wood floor or into the hearts: the fractured, bleeding hearts of the thrice to be mother and father.

The house is empty. Relatives have forsaken the home and found lodging elsewhere, somewhere quaint, somewhere other than that house. Helpers have placed the garbage in the bags and left the bags next to the kitchen door to be taken out. They have saran-wrapped leftovers and overloaded the fridge with funeral food. Rose, in her nescient yellow dress, splayed outwards like a seashell

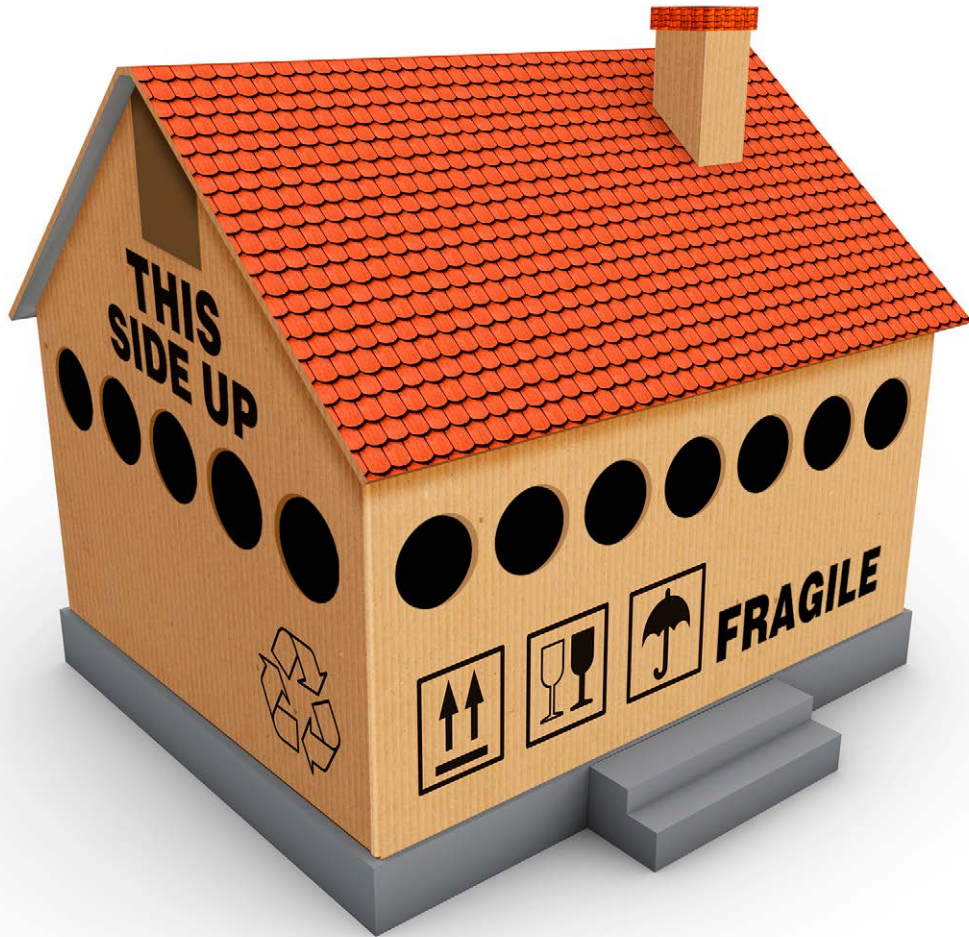
sun, the couple's six year old and only living child, pouts at the feet of her mother and father as they stay standing in their dark corner, unmoved by her display of temerity and her perfectly natural reaction to the loss of her second brother to be. The couple stands in their dark corner as the fire wanes its final, its pariah flames before embers glow unnoticed. The couple stands in their dark corner as night descends, as it deepens the darkness, and as the rain, the constant rain pelts the cedar shingles, sound the ping of small metal nails being hammered into a wooden coffin. Even Rose knows better than to get up and switch on the light at a time like this. The three remain shut-in by the darkness.

Apropos! 🌀



**ALEC BRYAN** lives in Albuquerque and spends most of his time wandering the desert with nothing more than water, a camera, a notebook and his thoughts (and spf 50). He is the author of one novel, many short stories and is currently wrapping up the final chapters of his second novel. For a full listing of his works visit [alecbryan.com](http://alecbryan.com)





# Jokes

## Merran Jones

**T**here is a house in Acacia Grove, cupped in a bowl of Suffolk-green. It has nine-foot ceilings, manicured lawns, and adjacent stables. The house lives in a neighbourhood full of money and bold brass knockers and obnoxious little dogs.

The house contains one husband, one wife, and two children—one of each gender, thanks to genetic selection. *(We considered a black and a white child for a sense of symmetry; a yin-yang, the wife says. But in the end we decided against it. So Harrison-Huntington and Petunia Rose get our lovely blonde hair and blue eyes instead.)*

The house has large rooms with sociopathic furniture. Feature lights hang over glass tables. A grand piano overlooks the flagstone patio. The choked strains of *Hot Cross Buns* emerge from its depths, practised over and over by chubby entitled hands. The wife owns a Pekingese

which gets more affection than the kids. An African maid completes the stereotype. *(She's from one of those countries in the middle. You know, the one that makes great coffee.)*

The house is really a box with airholes.

Every Friday, the couple go to the cricket or rugby. They drink too much and bicker over the quality of the teams. As if they play their game any better.

Every Saturday, the four people gather into a family. They visit parks and owl sanctuaries and strawberry fairs. They picnic and buy jam among families who truly belong there. Families with names like 'Smith' or 'Green'. The dads are farmers or assistant managers of small departments. (Most sit somewhere between blue and white collar; more of a light blue class.) They have a sandy wholesome look; so earnest, sharing so much fun. And live in busy cramped homes with lollopy mongrel dogs.

The couple stare at those families with distaste and curiosity.

On Tuesdays, the Swiss au pair takes the boy (Harrison-Huntington) to *Junior Athletes*, and the girl (Petunia Rose), wearing a tutu the size of a nation, to *Ballet for Tots*. The wife, inflicted with public altruism, attends charity events in a loud manner. And the husband? He comes home early to a quiet house.

He loosens his tie and smiles. He loves the predictability of a Tuesday. He makes two drinks: a scotch neat for himself and a white wine for her.

The girl arrives. She slips into a Valentino dress and spritzes herself with Chanel, feeling richer and whiter than she is.

They retire to bed for one hour. During which, the girl makes jokes to paper over the silence, and distract from the truth. Distract but not detract.

"You heard the one about the skeleton who went to the party alone?"

"No?"

"He had no *body* to go with." The girl smiles him a sunbeam.

"Good one, babe." The husband ruffles her hair.

After a pause she says: "Do you think I'm funny?"

"Yes, you're hilarious."

The husband always laughs at her jokes. It has little to do with their humour and everything to do with alcohol.

After an hour, they get up and dress. The girl leaves in a taxi.

The children come home and the chef starts dinner: maple pork, quinoa, pea and cranberry salad; chia pudding with roasted rhubarb compote. The children moan about the food.

The couple share tidbit politics and slices of life: whose dog dug up the neighbour's orchids; how her animal rights group went; when he'll next head to New York for business; where they'll summer that year, Zurich or Bora Bora.

The wife smells faintly of aftershave and does lots of smiling. She talks offhandedly of tennis: *I popped into the club on my way home. Marco's keen to increase my lessons to three times a week. He says I'm really coming along.*

The husband nods and finishes another scotch.

For all the shiny decor, they live a colourless marriage—full of dark lies, grey areas, and transparent disinterest. And each day, the house grows a little larger. Each day, it seems a little emptier.

"It's our anniversary," the wife says.

"Again?" The husband dumps his gym bag on the table.

"Yes." She glares at him.

She's already in a bad mood. She can't find her Harry Winston earrings. And her red negligee has a stain. She waits for him to answer. The silence around them grows colder; the kitchen a little bigger.

"I'm sorry, Sara. I forgot," he says. "I'll make it right. We'll go to Rome. I'll get that Cartier watch you've been wanting." *Presents, presents, presents.* The succour of aesthetics like a mother's hush, telling them their life is okay.

"Well, that'll help. I can't entirely forgive you though."

She pretends to be damaged.

"I really am sorry, babe. You mean the world to me."

He holds her face in his hands. His eyes almost meet hers. He kisses her on the cheek, then leaves the room.

The wife taps a nail against the sink. She hates being called 'babe'.

Another Tuesday afternoon. Another hour in bed together.

The husband gets up to refill their glasses. He returns to find the girl in front of the floor-length mirror.

"Dahling. *Daahling*," she croons. Her posh tones evolve from less posh tones by the pretence of money.

She sweeps her hair up, tilts her chin.

"Do you think I look like Audrey Hepburn?"

The husband climbs back into bed, his buttocks as pert as a peach.

"Absolutely, babe. You look a million dollars."

"A million dollars," the girl muses. "Well, you'd know what *that* looks like."

"Ha ha. Good one."

He downs his drink in two gulps.

At night, the husband lies with his eyes open. The wife snores softly beside him. (*It's not snoring, it's 'deep sleep breathing'.*)

It's been three months since they had sex. She alternates between headaches and periods. A sense of remoteness lies between them. Each night, their king-size bed is a little wider. Each night, their marriage seems more of a joke. Each night, her 'deep sleep breathing' bothers him a little more.

The wife insists on Italian imported bench-tops to go with the new polished floor.

The husband glances around at the sandalwood perfection. He shrugs, then returns to his newspaper.

"Whatever you want, honey," he says.

Every few years, she gives the house a makeover. And weekly, between tennis lessons, she has the furniture rearranged—too bored or fussy or restless. In the same vein, she agonises over her makeup each day, fretting with mascara and lipstick until a fraudulent perfection is achieved. It distances her from the world. And like a landscape or portrait, it's best viewed from afar. Up close, the wrinkles and clogged pores are still visible—not that he dares say anything.

But it does mildly sadden him, the way a sick baby or natural disaster might. How can her skin, or anything else, breathe beneath such a great slab of foundation? Heaven help them the day her implants start to migrate.

Now, the wife tuts at the feature lights.

"We need a change here too," she says. "These lights, they're too oppressive, too close around the table. They're drawing the whole room down." She gestures with braceleted arms.

"Sure." The husband turns to the sports section.

"I suppose it's up to me to fix."

"As if you'd have it any other way." The husband scans the football scores.

The wife sighs. She sips her kale-lime-coconut

smoothie. She comes from a background burdened with the responsibility of pleasing oneself. It's a substantial cross to bear.

The husband finishes his coffee and heads to work. He thinks of the Smiths and the Greens with their simple homes and simple wives, free of imports and implants. There is an odd comfort to their lives. Its appeal unnerves him.

•  
"What stays in the corner and travels all over the world?"

"What?"

"A stamp!" The girl claps her hands and giggles.

"That's more of a riddle than a joke."

"Okay, smart guy. How about this: why did the scarecrow win an award?"

"Why?"

"Because he was outstanding in his field."

"Ha ha ha." *What was he doing?*

The girl sits up, jokeless for a moment. "You know, this isn't what I thought."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugs. "This place. It's nice but it's like a museum. It's too big. There's too much space. It separates you. You don't sound like you've a family at all."

The girl has delivered something poignant without realising.

The husband drains his glass. He doesn't want to see the girl anymore. He has an acute attack of revulsion. He'll tell her to go as soon as he stops wanting to vomit.

*Ahh, there's a difference between money and wealth*, he hears the Smiths and Greens say.

•  
At that moment, the wife comes home early from the Children's Hospice raffle. She finds the two of them in bed: the husband comprehending his life, the girl bored and biting a nail.

"Oh, Luke." The wife shakes her polished hair. *At least her affairs have some class. At least her affairs aren't in their marital bed.* She turns to the girl: "You can keep the nightgown, sweetheart. It's too small for me anyway."

The girl glances down at her neat breasts, untampered by silicone.

"I would like my Harry Winston earrings back though." The wife holds out a firm hand. "I'm sorry ...." The girl scrambles to her knees.

"Save it. You're not the first."

"Oh." The girl's face twists with all kinds of emotion. For the first time, she is funny.

"How old are you, by the way?" The wife pauses at the door.

"Twenty."

"Cute. Stay there."

Twenty is such a cherry-blossom number: young enough to have optimism, old enough to buy alcohol.

The husband looks up from his empty glass. He seems lost, removed from the scene.

"I'm sorry, Sara," he tries.

The wife stares at the lines each side of his mouth. They're like quotation marks. Nothing he ever said was real. She's filled with hatred for him and their life. Filled with suffocating (Suffolk-hating?) thoughts.

What was it they said in their vows? *You make my soul soar.* Or was that, 'soles sore'? Evidenced by the exercise, the long walks, the big strides they take away from each other into the far corners of the house. Money has not made them happy. Money has not bought them love. The



Beatles were right.

"I love you," he tries again.

She slaps him.

•  
Divorce moves through the house with disappointing sighs. The couple pass each other in ever-widening halls. He sleeps in one of the many guest rooms.

They relay criticisms through their kids:

*You dad has never been good at telling the time.*

*I have to work lots because your mum spends so much money on clothes.*

Finally, it's all over, the assets divided and paperwork signed. The husband gets a studio apartment. The wife moves in with her tennis instructor.

The kids are sent to boarding school—a place for children loved in measured doses. During holidays, they bounce back and forth until they're old enough to make their own mistakes.

The house still sits in Acacia Grove. A new family lives there. With a shih tzu. And once again, the place is starting to enlarge from within. 🕒



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# Three Grandfathers

Kathryn Kulpa

There were three grandfathers and all of them smelled of smoke. There was the Russian grandfather with packets of cigarettes that leaked orange-brown strings of tobacco. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and read a Russian newspaper with words the child couldn't pronounce or even recognize as words. Its pages were thin, ironed-looking, and the print smelled like old pennies. There was the bottle of vodka he always kept on the table and once when she asked if it was 7-Up he laughed and made her take a sip and when she spit and coughed, he laughed again.

There was the English grandfather who smoked long brown cigars on the sun porch where the grandmother grew African violets and spicy, orangey-red geraniums in clay pots, and that grandfather always asked questions about what she was learning in school and corrected the girl if she pronounced words wrong. Don't lisp! He'd snap. Does your mother let you suck your thumb? He read the thickest newspaper, one that left his fingers gray. The granddaughter didn't like it. It had no comics.

The third grandfather was not her grandfather at all but he told the girl she could call him Grandpa Jim. He could be her adopted grandfather, he said, because he didn't have any granddaughters of his own, only grandsons, and they

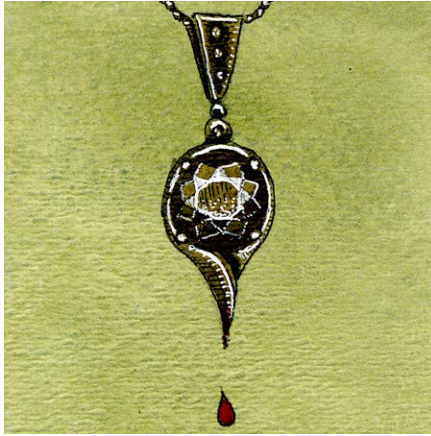
were big boys, grown up now. The girl asked why she never saw them. They lived in California, Grandpa Jim told her, where it never snowed. The girl wasn't sure she would like living in a place without snow, because then she couldn't wear her pink boots with purple fur on the top, but she liked Grandpa Jim, because the pipe he smoked didn't smell as bad as the cigarettes or the cigars. It was sweeter, more like burning leaves or a summer campfire where you could toast marshmallows and make s'mores, and she liked that smell, except for the one time he tapped some ash from his pipe onto her leg, just where her shorts ended, and it left a red blister that faded to a round white patch like a vaccination scar, and even though Grandpa Jim kissed it better and said he was sorry the girl thought his mouth twitched under his moustache and she wondered: was he *really* sorry?

The third grandfather had pockets full of Tootsie Rolls. He got the best newspaper, the one with the thickest Sunday comic section, and they read it together in his backyard next door on the big wooden Adirondack chair. The girl sat on his knee and sometimes he would ask her to read Charlie Brown or Garfield out loud and sometimes his leg shook but he would say that was okay, it was just arthritis, and sometimes he would slip his hand under the waistband of the girl's pants and when she asked why he would say that was okay, his hands were cold, but that was just because he was old, and she should keep reading, and the girl would, because he was old, and a grownup, and really her best grandfather.

Later the girl's family moved away and she never saw that grandfather again, but still sometimes, for no reason, when she overheard adults talking about an old person who died, and about wakes and funerals, she would, in great detail and with great pleasure, imagine herself standing before a flower-draped coffin, looking down into the stiff, still face of Grandpa Jim, and then she would be sorry. But maybe not *really* sorry. ☹



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# Washed Me Clean

Jay Merrill

**L**ate afternoon at the botanical gardens. I am in bits. Think light dry seeds. There's a wind rising which will make them scatter. And the world is soundless, so no voices anywhere. No rustle of trees. No footsteps on the pathway. Even the fish fountain spurts noiseless water. I need to cut through his inhuman silence. Teach myself to hear.

All I can see is the back of his head. The back of his head held high and unforgiving as he walks away from me. Nothing left between us but dislike it seems. And a swamping emptiness. I hardly know if I exist. I'm numb with grief.

I pull off the necklace, which he'd once given me at a sweeter time. Angle the pendant towards my arm; press in. My mouth opens, as if to scream, the black hole of my throat now visible to anyone who cares to look. Surely I must be screaming for I am cut. Yet all is silence.

Cut should hurt – you'd think it would. But I still can't feel a thing. I want to cut my heart out; want to bleed. Want blood as no blood has been seen before. Now he has passed beyond the hedge. I see the quiver of leaves, before they settle.

'Come back!'

I imagine myself calling after him but in reality I don't

say a single word.

All I do is press deeper, harder with the pointed pendant, wanting to reach the centre of me. I

twist the chain a little to be sure of puncturing my skin. As though to find myself. My mouth is

open as wide as the mouth of the ornate fish. If a scream would only come out of me, then I'd believe I'm here. There is blood seeping down my arm now. A lot of it. Dark, and flowing out

of me. A loss, but isn't it true to say that if I bleed, I'm real?

I slip to the floor, cling on to the parapet of the ornamental pond. And I crouch there. Finally the ache starts up. It soon becomes intense but I know I'm alive at any rate. He is walking through the gate and does not look back. I do not see this; it's just a guess. I ache and bleed into the cotton softness of my sleeve; wait for him to reappear though I know he won't.

The finest part of me is an island which I can all too easily lose sight of. But I am reaching it now as the worst of the agony starts to fade. It's the still small centre that you'll find within if you probe far enough. If you can lose yourself you can also find yourself, though I'm not saying you'll achieve this in a breath. You have to fight your battle before you can begin the healing process and arrive at the point where you and the island are one. The necklace is lying on the parapet next to me. I lift it up and fling. There it goes, silver-skittering across the surface of the pond.

I stretch out over the pool and plunge in my wounded arm. Keep it held there till the pain's died down completely.

I am life fresh; new, the water's washed me clean. I touch my body, which feels entire now. Simple. Run my hands up and down each side to complete the process of becoming whole. He has left me for good, but there is a payoff: I am becoming single once again. There's this tune rising up in me at last that I don't need to even think about. Magically, it is just here.

This is the way I paste myself together. This is the way I sing. 🎵



**JAY MERRILL** is published or forthcoming in *3 AM Magazine*, *Berfrois*, *Easy Street*, *Epiphany*, *Hobart*, *Per Contra* and *Prairie Schooner*. She is a 2017 Pushcart Prize nominee and the winner of the Salt Short Story Prize. Further work has appeared recently in *Anomalous*, *Citron Review*, *Corium*, *Foliate Oak*, *Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Literary Orphans*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Spork*, *tNY*, *Wigleaf* and other great publications. Jay lives in London UK and is Writer in Residence at Women in Publishing. She is the author of two short story collections published by Salt — *God of the Pigeons* and *Astral Bodies* — which were nominated for the Frank O'Connor Award and Edge Hill Prize.







# Vapor

## Frank Diamond

Finding these drugs is like suddenly coming across flashing detour signs. Everything changes. I am here in this suburban nook of a playground because I'd read in the weekly that cops had busted teens right by the sliding board and swings. The news had been accompanied by an editorial stating that the scourge of addiction migrates across society. Ya think?

I'd ventured out to see the scene of such urban-like mischief expecting, really, to see nothing. And it's just there, next to a bush. I reach, snag it, stumble, hit the turf and then bounce up, amazingly, since I am somewhat beyond my buoyant years. I stash the bag in my pocket, where it crinkles like litter. No car passes at this particular moment on this dusky edge of rush hour. As I turn about, I slide it halfway out as if I might be checking a message. *Yep*. I stuff it back.

Dormancy being pushed aside flavors the air and spring-set kisses the modest single-family homes across the street. I try my best to hide that I look for witnesses. No one's gardening or grilling, no curtains move. Nothing unusual except for conspicuous me: left foot, right foot, left, right. Robotic.

"You've done nothing wrong," I remind myself, though I can't help adding: "But something big has been done to you." I stop thinking my walk and normalize my stride. Sometimes you really can control your thoughts, or at least turn them off.

As soon as I get home I dump the contents on the kitchen table. *Yep*. Grass, Percocet, Xanax, Zoloft, and OxyContin. And something else that I bet is crack cocaine because there's also a syringe and needle. *Par-tay!* I piece together an abstraction from cop shows. Police crashed in; the stoner tossed and dashed.

"This should do it," I say aloud, and I would say this even if my Jenny lived.

She would have called from the living room: "Are you talking to yourself again, Shope?" That's Shope as in hope, not shop.

It's been two years since, and I still think about her. Some memories I duck, and some I open the door to. *Sit. Relax. Stay a while*. Like the time she'd been undergoing chemo and she wasn't able to drink for months and I stayed off the brew in solidarity and then the two weeks down the shore toward the end of the treatments and hanging out at Harpon Harry's near Cape May and her first wine and my first beer and listening to James Taylor's rendition of *Wichita Lineman* and wishing I could have her for another 20 years but only getting five more. That's memory, but there's also essence. Her bravery, goodness, optimism that not even the demons could dim. She chose to be happy every day, by forgetting herself and trying to make others happy. Did I mention she was a special ed teacher?

"Vapor," I say.

Jenny and I talked about Vapor, sure, though I never spoke that name to Jenny or anyone else. It's a nickname a man shouldn't use on his nephew. And I am not proud to have coined it, but it's a coin never spent. Give me that, at least. It mocks, maligns, marginalizes. It roils about that spot in my brain where gargoyles dine. It squeaks just below the manhole cover.

He's my sister's problem, I keep telling myself. I tried to help Vapor—Robinson, really, and yes, that's his first name. Wanted to ground floor him in a tech startup right here in Darrington County, Pennsylvania; the intersection of—wait for it—art and technology. An internship, thanks to my connections, which would have given him a chance to learn skills that would make him an invaluable employee to 21<sup>st</sup> century companies. Oh, hell, who cares about that? Something fun, I thought. Something that he could dream-state himself into. Something that fixates him so that time stops. I offered him the zone.

My intercession stuck about as well as anything anyone's done to give direction, spark desire, launch him. He'll be 27 in a few months. Strapping, handsome, a nice young man in many ways. Girls love him. Blonde shoulder length hair that he messes with too much and usually ties in a hipster ponytail. A blue-eyed gaze that can chisel ice. He's had a couple of serious flames but then snuffs those relationships when the young women hint that skateboarding might not be the foundation upon which to build something that lasts.

He takes a job, swears that he'll stay with it this time and then he gradually drops out and off. Sometimes the gigs are make-believe. For about two months there he would leave for "work" everyday at a car detailer. My sister noticed that he never seemed to get paid. She went to the place once, told the owner that her son worked for him, which was news to the man. He's adept at dodging. "I got another job already!" True? Lay no bets. He avoids his parents. Sleeps late. Stays away. Vapor.

"My Dylan was like that," Cornelius tells me later that night. "I had to have the come-to-Jesus talk with him. Says to him, 'you have now four options: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines.'"

Cornelius is Jenny's oldest brother. A Marine who fought in the first Iraq war and now one of the township's top cops. He's suit and tie all the way, and those creases and fit make him look uniformed. Pumps iron, jogs. His 6-foot, 3-inch frame tapers to the waist, and a slight beer belly only shows when he sits. Bald head that women call beautiful and a hunter's stare that he shrouds by focusing on some middle distance at social settings and also, I imagine, in the kind of situations that he's told me about. Those times when he talked someone into dropping a weapon after explaining that suicide-by-cop isn't the only option. He displays hands

and forearms like you might see on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Even friends and family call him Cornelius. Never heard Corn or Corny; I wouldn't dare, myself. We still get together about once a month at the Irish Rover.

"So which?" I ask.

"Coast Guard. One last 'fuck you' to the old man, but that is a 'fuck you' I am fine with. Brass running those wars in the Middle East just do not know what they are doing."

The Cornelius/Dylan tangle might be instructive to my sister, I am thinking. The trouble they're having with Vapor isn't that unusual, I've always known that. How many families have a Vapor? Young adults who go wrong, sometimes irrevocably, tragically wrong, even though they'd been brought up by parents who are, as far as anyone on the outside can tell, good, conscientious, sacrificing, doting, and willing to battle (so much a part of raising kids)—people who could be nominated for parents of the year every year. Their other children, if they have any, excel, proving that their love can nurture, lift, then release. And yet, and yet ... a child can go wrong despite all of it. That Cornelius and his wife had been rung through this emotional wringer proves that no one's immune.

Jenny and I have a daughter who's thriving in young adulthood, a dynamo of animal exuberance and kindness, possessed of an indomitable will, and uplifting character. A life-enhancer from the beginning. Teachers used to tell us on PTA nights: "Bottle it." Jenny would say to me after college visits: "Whatever she does, whatever her accomplishments, are hers. I was just the vessel, Shope. Roots and wings!"

Now, I tell Cornelius: "My sister tried to talk Robinson into the military."

"No go, right."

This is Cornelius being gabby, by the way. Usually, he's a locked vault. You can't get anything from him when he ponders a case, and he's always pondering a case. He finesses his preoccupations with just enough charm to not be rude. He's a bit unapproachable, definitely intimidating and even someone who's forgotten to pay a parking ticket flinches when around him. He knows it. He messes with people. At family parties he'll say to one of the younger ones, "You look guilty," and suddenly they do. Everybody's guilty of something.

Now, I say about Vapor, "No go for the military. Nothing go for anything. He likes his weed."

Cornelius places his pint on the coaster as if screwing it in.

"You are telling me this." I'd suddenly become an informant.

"Hasn't been caught yet, except by my sister."

Cornelius turns to me and for a moment I wonder if I'd somehow betrayed my nephew; that this man will rain-dance a deluge.

"Anything else?" Cornelius asks.

"He swears it's only weed."

"They all swear that until they are caught with other shit."

"And get this...."

I want to lure Cornelius out of predator mode, so I tell him the story about God's-own-job. My sister's a corporate lawyer and one of her clients saw the potential in fracking early on. She could get Vapor on a rig mid-state that's perfect

for a young man adrift. You live in a dormitory, pulling long days. Room, board, and food all free. The work isn't all that hard and you get paid for a full year even though you're only on the job half that time. A lot of the guys have young families and the owners know that they wouldn't get too many who could sign on for a year. So three months on, three months off, three on, three off. There's a town nearby, bars, girls. Hell, there might even be a library. You start at \$80,000 a year and that can go up to well over \$100,000 no problem with overtime. And you don't even need a GED.

Cornelius says: "I would like that job."

"But let's just say that a young man hates that job. He can't hate the money. And he can find his bliss during the six months he's off. Learn guitar, become a rock star, if it's that. Go to college for a semester, study art history. Whatever. Yet...."

"And your nephew does not want it."

"It's something he's definitely going to do, or so he's been saying for the last five years now. He'll never do it. He lies. Sometimes I think that him getting caught with grass, him getting in real trouble with your team, the law, might...."

Cornelius drinks to the dregs, holding up an index finger.

"You do not want that, Shope. *Scared Straight* looks good on TV, but my experience is that someone like your nephew is not inclined to change and putting him in jail, even for a bit, starts a nasty spiral."

I shrug. He's right. "You're sounding like Jenny, now."

She'd sometimes lose her temper as I spun schemes to get Vapor straight. "Shope, get it through your head. He. Will. Not. Work. He gets everything he wants without working. Car. Car insurance. Health care. Cell phone. Computer. Video games. An allowance so he can take girls out. Why should he work?" Slapping the palm of one hand with the back of the other with each point. Teacher Jenny.

"But what about when his friends talk about their jobs, college, plans for the future? Doesn't that shame him?"

"They probably don't believe him either," Jenny would say. "But he thinks they do, and that's enough. Or they're screw-ups themselves."

Cornelius now says, "Do you want me to talk to him?"

"Let me think on it."

"Drugs these days, um, um, um. Strong."

"Even if you can scare him off the illegal shit, say he just does alcohol from then on out? He's still going to live in my sister's basement for the rest of his life."

Another beer is placed in front of me and I gaze into contracting foam.

"What's going to happen when my sister and her husband die?"

I say it almost to myself, but then shudder out of it. I'd concluded some years back that that's one of Cornelius's interrogation techniques: Make the other person think he's only talking to himself.

"Tricky meddling with free will." He squints at the check. I am about to protest, but he holds up his hand. He wipes beer sweat on the bar with a napkin and lays money. A good tip, as usual.

"Do courts give guys like my nephew a choice?" I ask. "You know, you can either go to prison or you can join the military?"

"That is old school. Happened in Korea. Happened in Nam. Now? Military is very picky. They do not want you if you got a record, especially a drug record."

He slaps me on the back with his plank of a hand.

"I can drive you home, Shope."

I say, "There's my lift."

I nod toward the entrance, where Vapor surveys the swelling crowd. My nephew looks suburban street, down to the backwards baseball cap and loose-fitting workout shirt under which a bulk of muscle shifts. I wave. He grins, waves back. As he comes toward us he tamps down his strut when he sees whom I'm talking to. Cornelius and Vapor's paths have crossed, but I introduce them again.

"We know each other, Uncle Shope."

I say, "You might even be related, somehow, but I can't pin that one down."

Cornelius wields a smile, while his gaze stays neutral. Sweat on Vapor's forehead.

"You have gotten big, young man, since last I saw you," Cornelius says. "What have you been up to?"

Get this: Vapor's working for a handyman, learning about home remodeling, saving his money, hoping to start his own business in a year or so. Cornelius and I poker face it as my nephew serves this bullshit.

"You ready to hit the road, Uncle Shope?"

I shake Cornelius's hand; gulp my last to the halfway mark. My nephew and I turn toward the partiers and pass through their midst.

Listen, now, because here comes the part where Vapor's life changes forever. I can tell you the exact moment. The setting's so Americana, a Wa-Wa that we stop at on the ride home.

"Just need some smokes, Uncle Shope."

"I thought you quit."

"So did I."

He disappears into the store and I open the glove compartment. As I lean over, child-song la-la-lars from a van that's pulled up beside us. Little goobers, maybe 5 or 6 and I even hear one toddler's persistent warble. I remember when Vapor was that young. I recall under the neon island lights of that gas station moments of promise in my nephew's life. Goals in soccer games. Ribbons from spelling bees. I try to name the tune. It is one of those ubiquitous songs that *Sesame Street's* been running for 40 years now.

A few minutes later, I brood in my dark living room among the battery-powered candles that illuminate photos of my dead wife. I speed-dial Cornelius before Vapor even pulls out of the driveway. Tell my brother-in-law of the opportunity that we have to change a young man's arc.

Cornelius's exasperation drags my name over two syllables. "She-ooooope."

I say, "It's right there."

"And you just happened, for no reason, to look in the glove compartment of your nephew's car."

"I looked for exactly that reason."

"You are asking me to break so many rules."

He sighs. I look at the mantle above the fireplace, at the little shrine I'd assembled for Jenny. The photo of her when she was so young and beautiful, the purity of an image that must have twisted the demons into furious industriousness so that they slaved over forges for years on the cancer that

would take my girlfriend decades later. I tell Cornelius the make, model and plate number of Vapor's car. Letting the cop know where the suspect's heading.

He snaps: "Do not go to bed."

An hour later, I let him in. He sits, tells the story. I feel bad when I hear how Vapor had sobbed. "I swear these are not my drugs!" I picture Cornelius sitting in the passenger's side, calmly telling my nephew how much jail time such a haul could bring. Then, like any good preacher, after guaranteeing perdition, the flood of hope. Uncle Sam wants you.

"Did he go for it?" I ask.

"He does not see much choice. I believe him, by the way." Cornelius's gesture indicates his car in the driveway where the drugs are stowed. I wonder just how he'll destroy them. Cornelius says, "That is not your nephew's shit."

I start to protest, but Cornelius cuts me off.

"Best not to say anything. There is a whole world of doubt, things we will never know the answers to and most of it we do not need to know the answers to. I ask: Now where would Shope buy drugs? Where would this man that I have known for so many years even begin to look for this shit? I cannot piece together an answer and even if there is one, I do not want to know."

He stands, his white shirt glowing in the darkness.

"Turn on some stinking lights, Shope," Cornelius says. "It is not good for a man to live in shadow."

"Shadow," I repeat, when he's gone, savoring the word as it bounces against the walls. "Shadow, shadow, shadow."

The shadow closes over all our lives like a full eclipse about a year and a half later. From this darkness memory illuminates some images and sounds. The funeral with full military honors is a truly beautiful sight. The *snap, snap* and folding of the flag. The stalwart men in uniform. The three-volley salute echoing crisply in winter. Cold wind blowing unimpeded through gardens of stone.

Cornelius and I talk, of course, during the days after the tragedy, the funeral reception, and even at a family wedding a couple of months later. There are always others around, so the main topic stays buried, alongside that little box placed in the hard, wintry ground. We both know, however, that the great white will turn at some point, and circle our strand.

He sits in my living room, finally, one night, having come from the Irish Rover. When he called, I turned on all the lights. He slouches, rubs face-stubble, downs one beer and then another. He shouldn't drive, but am going to say that?

"How's your nephew?" he finally asks.

"Thriving. Turns out he loves the regimented life. Loves breaking balls with the guys. Loves chasing the girls on leave. You did a good thing for him."

"Maybe."

"No maybes, brother. You helped that young man. Just like you helped Dylan."

Cornelius's chin droops. "Did I?"

"Your son died a hero."

Dylan had been stationed at Quillayute in Washington State when a distress signal came in about 1 a.m. during a storm. Wind had broken the mast off a sailboat, the vessel taking on water, sinking. Dylan and two comrades jumped



into a little motorized lifeboat and headed into the driving rain and 25-foot waves. The lifeboat rolled several times, throwing Dylan and the other two into the churn. That was it. They gave Dylan a host of medals. Cornelius mounted and framed them, and put on them wall of his study—which he never goes into anymore.

"I want my son back."

"I know."

"I will never get him back."

"He's with God."

"God?"

"I am sorry."

"Yeah."

I say, "When you raise kids, you try to give them direction. That never stops."

Then, the strangest thing. Strange that it happened. Strange that it ever could happen. Stranger still that I remember every word because sometimes I forget what it is I wanted to do when I go from one room to another. Maybe I don't actually remember every word, but these are the words that come to me. Cornelius, this man who rarely strings more than three sentences together, leans back and talks, and talks, and talks, and talks, and talks.

"Maybe giving them direction should stop, though. Maybe it stops when they are young adults, when they are old enough to decide how they want to live. And maybe fools like us should not meddle. I know, I know. We call it helping. But maybe helping needs a time limit. Or helping needs the call for help. That is what took my boy. Someone called for help. We should not help young adults unless they ask for our help.

"Do you know what I whispered when I leaned over that body bag at Dover Air Force Base? I was the only parent who asked to approach the dead, and they were hesitant at first but they saw my badge, knew I would not get hysterical and try to unzip the thing. So I walk over after the honor guard saluted. *Click, clack, click, clack* my footsteps echoing in that big-ass hanger. I lean over and say, 'I am so sorry, my boy, my son, my angel, my Dylan, my hero. I am so sorry, but you are dead.' Cause the dead, you know, they often need to be told. Old man at the VFW, when he came home from Nam he used to take long walks in the woods near his house in the twilight. That is the time. People talk about midnight and the witching hour. But seems as if it is twilight when they are most confused. The dead. Twilight is when they

wander and wonder. These voices would be calling out to this newly returned Nam vet and he would 360 in the woods and see nothing. He knew the voices, though. They were the guys whose dead bodies he had to crawl over in a firefight, saying, 'Forgive me, forgive me, forgive me', the whole time. Finally, one night he called: 'I am sorry, but you are dead. I am alive, and I am truly, truly broken that you are not. But you need to leave me alone, now. You need to rest.'

"He never hears the voices again. Took that with me on the job. First thing I do at a murder scene is lean in

and whisper to the victims that they are dead. They do not need to worry about anything anymore. The evil and madness that brought them here cannot touch them again.

"So I made my boy join the military and now he is gone and I so much hoped that he had heard me that horrible day at Dover. Do not say anything, Shope. Just stop. I need to.... I guess I need to put it out there. I put it out there a lot when I am by myself. Once or twice the wife caught me talking and then I find these pamphlets around the house about mental health services. Believe that



shit?

"I am not talking to you, Shope. I am talking at you. Because we both made the same mistake. We think we can be God and step in and change someone and call it all a good deed. But God goes away in a child's life about the time someone learns to drive. God is a Santa Claus who had forgotten to make a few stops. Like I say, I am not going to help some young adult unless that young man or that young woman wants my help. Sometimes they go someplace where you cannot help them.

"Last few nights I hear it. 'Dad! Dad!' Dylan. And the words that work for me all these years do not work anymore. I do not want to disturb the wife. I go down into the kitchen, sit at the table. 'Dad! Dad!' I say, 'I am so sorry, baby boy, but you are dead. You need to rest.' Still the voice though. 'Dad! Dad!'

"I come to accept that I will always hear it. Maybe I need to hear it. Then, the next day I am up and out and on the job. As if it never happened, but I know it is going to happen again and I want him so much to hear me. But my words have no effect. They're air. They're vapor." 🌀



**FRANK DIAMOND's** poem, *Labor Day*, has recently been nominated for a Pushcart Prize Award. His short stories have appeared in *Innisfree*, *Kola: A Black Literary Magazine*, *Dialogual*, *the Madras Mag*, *Reverential Magazine*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, *the Zodiac Review* and the *Fredericksburg Literary and Arts Review*. He has had poetry published in *Philadelphia Stories*, *Fox Chase Review*, *Deltona Howl*, *Artifact Nouveau*, *Black Bottom Review*, and *eile-Festa*. He lives in Langhorne, Pa.



# Icarus

## Charles Rafferty

Icarus insisted on waiting until the day was bright, saying he wanted to take in the glory of the widening world after his long confinement. And no, he didn't plunge into the ocean while the wings fell away in molten clumps. He just wanted it to look that way. Instead, he screamed after emptying the sack of rocks and feathers he had hidden beneath his tunic. It splashed into the sea just as Daedalus turned around. After that it was simple. Icarus kept himself between his father and the sun until Daedalus gave up hope. Icarus couldn't stand the idea of being known only as the disappointing child of a brilliant inventor, of having to transcribe the life that was greater than his own because of his father's failing eyes. So Icarus landed in a sleepy village. He made what money he needed by knotting the nets of the fishermen and cleaning their catch for market. It was a simple life, though he stunk of entrails and his fingers stayed raw with salt. It wasn't important, he told himself. The wings were still in the attic,

and there was a cliff above his village. If he wished, he could leap again into the nothing above the sea. He thought of his father, and how he had searched the waves much longer than Icarus expected. He wondered if he was still alive — if anyone banked his fire at night, if anyone brought him his tea. Icarus refused to believe it mattered. Even now, he told himself, the ending could still be changed. Strangely, it was this belief that kept him from doing so. ⑤



**CHARLES RAFFERTY's** tenth book of poetry is *The Unleashable Dog*. His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Oprah Magazine*, *The Southern Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, and are forthcoming in *Ploughshares*. His collection of prose poems is coming out with BOA Editions in 2017, called *The Smoke of Horses*. His collection of short fiction is *Saturday Night at Magellan's*. He has a story in the most recent issue of *The Southern Review*. Currently, he directs the MFA program at Albertus Magnus College.



# If Not

Thomas Sanfilip

A blue door once bone-white turns black and curses everything animal, plant or human around. A rabbit found dead in the grass in early spring after nibbling a few fresh shoots of dill and chives left over from last summer. A possum choking to death on a long twig later strangled among hostas. Somehow the trim around every inch of the door's window glass appears black, but the door is nothing more than the product of shadows in spite of the sun's passing overhead, casting penetrative light over its hard surface impossible to analyze. A strange invitation to look inside, but nothing to see, a white sofa coated in dust, hardwood floors glimmering in hot light, every window open. A wall between kitchen and dining room broken through, doors with crystal door knobs torn from hinges, another light along an upstairs stairway to keep everyone continually awake. Bedstead stiles erect and silent, but nowhere the living because the blue door is now black. Someone inside wants all to walk in, but the blue door puts off all eyes. No one knows why. Everyone senses this and simply looks away as they pass with dogs. Even a cat blinks and pauses before passing in the grass. The door looks open, first blue, then black, closed, open, closed, open to silence behind the rising smoke of a dead cigarette, the door's black emptiness still clinging to the light. 🌀



**THOMAS SANFILIP** is a poet and writer whose work has appeared in the *Shore Poetry Anthology*, *Thalassa*, *Ivory Tower*, *Nit & Wit*, *Tomorrow*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *Maudlin House*, *Feile-Festa*, *Per Contra*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Foilate Oak Review*, and *Vestal Review*. Five collections of poetry have been published — *By the Hours and the Years* (Branden Press), *Myth/A Poem* (Iliad Press, 2002), *The Art of Anguish* (2004), *Last Poems* (2007), *Figures of the Muse* (2012), in addition to a collection of short fiction, *The Killing Sun* (2006).





# Fiesta

Sonya Gray Redi

**C**lose up. A girl's left eye. Closed. Her head leaning against the window. A tree waves excitedly unnoticed. Music is heard but not appreciated. Dances are happening, as always, out of reach. Brown hair twirls, pretending not to be dead.

Establishing shot. A bus, in the distance, the size of half a pickle, is drawn on an invisible string across the ribbon of the road. There are olive trees here, there and everywhere. The sky refuses to stop. It is feeling blue, but holding back tears for the show. It goes on.

Time demands time. It is appeased. We jump. A table, plates, smiles. Close up on a boy's face. No war here. Only hippie love. Laughter and flames and bread are served, followed by cake. This fire is blown out. A kiss is born onto lips destined to be foreign. The girl looks down at her breasts because everyone else is. We zoom in for no reason. The word happy is flung about like a water balloon. The hands and eyes play. The mind shivers. The ice cream melts on Laura.

The stars finally appear. Notoriously late as stars are. Drunkenness is encouraged. Memories go unseen but not unsung. We are not here as much as we can't help but be here. Dreams of better days to come are sliced while pain is ceremoniously chopped into bits. Wind scatters it at all and so children swing. The girl and boy push their bodies into each other. A blanket is thrown over the rest. A tally mark is added. A firework in the blood stream sparkles but luckily we are told it is not arson. The mariachi band punches fear in its sleep. The celebration persists. 🌀



**SONYA GRAY REDI** is a filmmaker and writer from San Francisco, California. She studied Theatre and Literature Writing at U.C. San Diego. Her work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Intentional*, and *Girls Get Busy*. She is a frequent contributor for *Screen Slate*.

## ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

### ROB KIRBYSON *Pages: Front Cover, Inside Front, Back Cover, 11, 18-19...*

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](http://RobKirbyson.com)



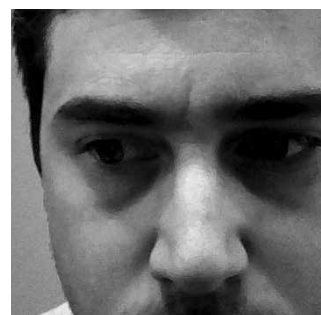
### CATHERINE HOFFMAN *Page: 7...*

is a recent graduate of Kendall College of Art and Design (KCAD) in Grand Rapids, MI where she graduated with a BFA in Illustration. When she's not making art, you can find her hitting a volleyball, making popsicles, planting succulents, watching cartoons, playing video games, or baking sweet confections. She lives in Holland, MI and you can visit her online at [CatherineHoffman.com](http://CatherineHoffman.com)



### CHAD ROSEBURG *Pages: 22, 40-41, 47...*

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: 20-21...*

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](http://KWilsonStudio.com)



## 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](http://rwspryszak.com)





## MIA AVRAMUT Pages: 4, 23...

is a Romanian-American writer, artist, and physician, who worked in laboratories and autopsy rooms from Pittsburgh to San Francisco. Her artwork has recently appeared in *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Knicknackery*, *The Bookends Review Best of 2014* (cover), *Buffalo Almanack*, *Sliver of Stone*, *r.k.v.r.y quarterly literary journal* (featured artist), *Blue Fifth Review*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She lives in Essen, Germany.



## KATELIN KINNEY Pages: 2, 42...

graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at [katelinkinney.com](http://katelinkinney.com)



## CESAR VALTIERRA Pages: 31-32, 48-49...

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](http://CesarValtierra.com) and [OrderFromKhaos.com](http://OrderFromKhaos.com), as well as his comic at [TonyBalazo.com](http://TonyBalazo.com)



## CHAD YENNEY Pages: 8-10, 28-29, 35-36...

makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at [computarded.com](http://computarded.com) or send him love letters at [computardedcollage@gmail.com](mailto:computardedcollage@gmail.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](http://Blogography.com)



COMING SOON

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