

THRICE

FICTION™

ISSUE No. 19 • APRIL 2017





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Published three times yearly

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Ideas by Katelin Kinney

THRICE FICTION™

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RW Spryszak, Editor
David Simmer II, Art Director

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THRICE PUBLISHING NFP, a private corporation registered in the state of Illinois, reaches outside the mainstream to publish the work of selected writers whose efforts, we feel, need to be seen. It's flagship publication, **THRICE** FICTION, has been a platform for presenting this work alongside exceptional artwork since 2011. **THRICE** ARTS provides design and editing services to writers at large.



Thrice 19 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

You will notice that the darker the world gets the stranger the offerings we present in our pages. It is no slight coincidence, but a full-on conspiracy. I come from the era of going harder the more one is ignored. It's an egocentric mode of operation, I admit. But it serves well in the land of the continual underdog.

And even though we've been doing this for years now, Thrice is still the underdog. It is an underdog in a pound full of them. I sometimes wonder if there are any actual readers of these notes.

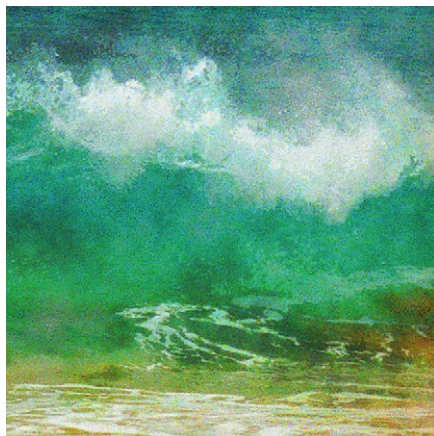
Other people have scared me all my life. I don't know what they're thinking. I never know if they think I look fat in this dress. But I can always seem to hear the wheels and gears of judgment clicking and whirring somewhere beneath the replicant skin.

What was I saying? Oh. Right. Nobody reads this part.

It's true that Thrice has taken a new course in the last few issues. Close readers (please raise your hand and let us know you are there if you actually are one) will note a decided turn to the more fantastic and irrational. It's a planned thing, and really does skirt us out from a lot of the descriptions of our magazine we, ourselves, have offered. I will have to go and correct them. But they're like submission guidelines in that very few read them anyway.

Here's April. She's wearing a beautiful pink camisole with a light-hearted puppy design. Suitable for Spring and available at any of your better retail outlets.

Scathe on, fellow travelers.



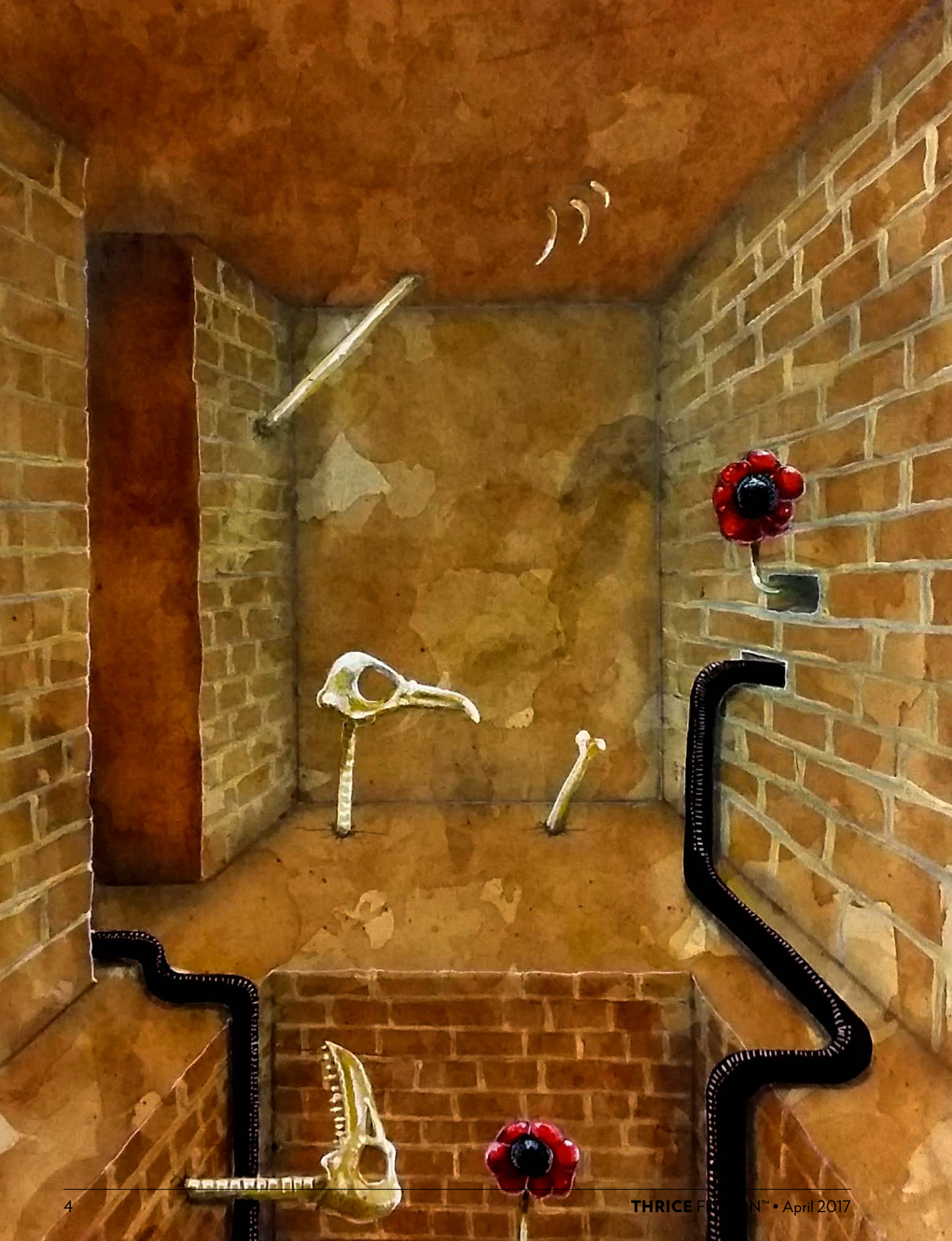
Weight

Nidhi Arora

The gentle king was gripped by a frenzy of reclamation. Having gnawed at his own hills and rocks, he turned to his neighbouring kingdoms, buying their sand for its weight in gold. “We cannot claim what isn’t ours,” his councilmen forebode, but he marched furiously on. Within one year, new ports and cities sprouted on the expanding shoreline and his people hailed him as the conqueror of the sea. “We are getting too heavy,” the engineers warned in vain. “If we don’t stop, the island will tip over and sink back into the sea. And it will take us with it.” But he was too angry to heed. When the rains started, the neighbours had to suspend dredging and exporting their earth. He then turned his gaze downwards. He ordered a mass exhumation of all graves on the island. Bones were pulverized to a fine, sand like powder and poured into the ocean. All graves, except that of the little princess who was swallowed by the waves last monsoon while she played at the beach making sand castles, for it was empty. 🌀



NIDHI ARORA was born and raised in India and currently resides in Singapore with her family. She is a business consultant by training and a writer by passion. She writes fiction and poetry exploring meaning in the everyday events that eventually stack up to shape our lives. She also writes essays and reviews for literary magazines. Her work has been published in an anthology of fiction in Singapore, *Open Road Review* and *Mothers Always Write*. Find more of her work online at openroadreview.com/nidhi-arora/ and mothersalwayswrite.com/i-did-not-know/



Haven

C.J. Silver

I came here, from the In-Between, as an observer. Young. All hope and faith and wonder. I was small so I found another small one. He was sitting alone in a building of brown bricks. I saw him through the glass. He saw me hovering in the space between the clouds and the ground. He opened the window. He beacons me into his space. He was dusty, empty, and alone so I became the same – dusty, empty, alone and male. He was drawn to me because I was fearless, so I kept that part of myself for him.

He ran to a door and called into the darkness. More small ones came from the rooms beyond. They were like the building: hollow, strange, and somewhat threatening. Clear, wild eyes peered out from dirt stained faces. Instinctively they were wary of me. I saw carnage in their eyes. Or was that fear? The one I'd found, was older than most of them, but not all of them. He was not stronger, nor was he smarter than them. But they trusted him. And I stood by his side. He made them braze. Fear turned to curiosity. They became more human before my eyes.

The small ones called the one I'd found Chisel. The walls of this room were his. He carved words into the walls using a metal spike. He carved faces sometimes. He had carved all of their old names into stone so that they wouldn't be forgotten. "It's important not to forget who you are." He told them. When they asked me what was my old name I told them that I had none. They filled me with their sadness then. Their faces were severe but kind. It weighed on me, their concern. I absorbed it and made it my own.

The small ones gave me a name and it was like a chain being tethered to my leg. It grounded me to them. Suddenly, I was a tangible thing. I was something that they could see, touch and feel. I was Manji with skin brown like leather, with eyes red like rust and with hair as black as the void in winter. I was the companion of Chisel, their leader and his most loyal friend. I was one of them now. All this in just the utterance of a word.

An ache started in me then. It was a slight change, but something one such as I would feel and not be able to ignore.

The small ones dispersed then, left from the room where Chisel had found me and flowed into the wider space beyond. We went passed the door into the lightless hall and down a stair. I later learned that the toxic horizon never dims. It glows bright as a twilight sun through all hours of the day and night. The small ones need darkness to sleep. They felt safest where they could not be seen. Each of them returned to their own chambers. Chisel took me into his and arranged a spot for me to sleep under his nest.

Some time after there was a loud bellow. Chisel sprang from his snoozing. I heard from beyond the door the feet

of the other small ones running. Chisel joined them. The energy of Haven shifted from the higher levels to the lower. I'd absorbed enough human curiosity for it to lead me to follow the energy.

It was a large one, an alpha male. He called himself The Caretaker of Haven. The small ones called him Mr. Milleridge. As he approached each of them the small ones generated fear. Mr. Milleridge seemed to feed from the chemical excretions for he drew nearer as their fear energy grew more intense.

Once he'd fed to his liking he presented the small ones with canned meats and greening cheeses, which they fell upon with eager desire. In the presence of Mr. Milleridge the humanity of the small ones evaporated. They fought over the food with the savagery of predators over a kill, moaning for more and shoving one another out of the way.

Mr. Milleridge seemed to feed off of this too. I thought perhaps he is like me. Perhaps he too is from the In-Between. Perhaps he is one who has chosen. For those of us from the In-Between there is a thin line between angelic and demonic energies. Once one has chosen to tilt one way or the other the being is changed forever. One must service the side of extreme blinding order, or the side of ruthless, unforgiving chaos. For beings like us the only balance is indifference. Once one has chosen, one can never go back.

I approached Mr. Milleridge to ask of his decision. If Mr. Milleridge was from the In-Between perhaps he could expedite my research. His first act upon seeing me was to pummel me to the rotted carpet and force my face into the sludge of an acidic puddle. Chisel pushed him off and claimed me as his own property. I felt the tether to him grow stronger. I felt the ache within me began to pulsate in the presents of Mr. Milleridge.

Mr. Milleridge declared Chisel would have to pay for me. I was a drain of resources and obvious trouble. If Chisel wanted to keep me he would have to do Mr. Milleridge extra favors to make up for it. A seed was already taking root in the empty spaces between Mr. Milleridge and myself.

I wanted to return my home. But tethered as I was I was stuck in that space. So looked away as my friend preformed these favors. I looked away as his soul became sick from the performance. Whenever he was done he'd come to me for comfort, and I would offer what I could all the while struggling to remain what I was. Offering comfort, or opening up to it is a sway one direction or another.

I tried sharing my balance with him, and the other small ones. If they had no concern, no fear or hatred then Mr. Milleridge would have nothing to feed on. He would leave then. Or perhaps allow them to leave.

"But who will bring us food?" The small ones asked.

"Who will protect us from the gangs?" To inspire is divine. I kept my silence. Chisel stepped forward. "We shall feed our selves. We shall find our own food and be our own protectors. We don't need him or his gang." The ache in me grew. I withdrew to let Chisel influence his gang.

I went out into the yard. The city was Dangerous. That is what the small ones called it. It was full of ash, and kipple, and acid. The air was poisonous and turned minds to muddle. The clouds glowed and the rain stained the stones yellow and the metal orange. Nothing that happened here, in Haven or on the streets would matter for much longer.

I sat beneath a bent old tree. It's softened trunk leaned just enough to block the ever glow of the horizon. I sat there studying the stones, the unchanging, unmoving rocks. No matter how they were tossed they didn't care.

I spread my wings just to remember that I had them. I studied by feathers, black as the void. I considered just flying away. I could leave this misery for the quiet gray stillness of home. The problems of the small ones were not mine. I stood up. Climbed up the tree, sinking my claws into the plum soft trunk. I sat among its purpling leaves, allowing the warm wind currents to lick my wings. The poisonous air had no affect on me. I didn't feel the toxins burn. I could fly away.

But the name still held me like a rope of gold attached to the hearts of the small ones. Could I leave them in this place of dust, and agony? I couldn't save them without losing myself.

The air here would kill them soon. Their lives were so fleeting. Before they could grow they would add to the dust of their world. And I would go on as I am, or as I will be, unaffected by the atmosphere. Unable to ever return to the In-Between.

I resolved to return to my mission to observe without judgment. My indifference restored I folded my wings back beneath my leather skin. I tried not to think about the stone gray eyes of Chisel and I tried to forget his sacrifices, and his charm, and his warmth. Self-hatred is a step towards the chaotic.

I climbed back in through the same glass wall Chisel had opened to me. At once rage energy assaulted me. Mr. Millridge had found Chisel's art. He'd taken a hammer to all of it. The brick walls were scarred by dents and slashed, wild swipes of metal against stone. The names of the small ones, the faces of the friends that had died, lay as red-brown dust on the floor. Chisel had discovered this just before my arrival. His anger filled him with fire. The room was so filled with emotion that I could not maintain balance in their presence. So I fled.

I spread my wings and embraced the air. I flew towards the ever glow of the horizon. I could feel myself getting closer to home. Soon I would be able to leap away from this plain. Away from feeling and emotion. I was nearly at the rip, nearly beyond the reach of my tangible form when I realized some part of me was draining away. I hesitated. I realized that this ability meant that the tether on my leg had weakened. I realized that the source of my connection on this plain was fading. Possibly, it was dying. And I didn't want it to.

I turned around gripped by this something I had no name for, something stronger than fear, more powerful than curiosity. As I drew closer to Haven all the other energies attacked me. They joined forces with the emotion drawing me in, causing the ache in my guts to pulsate and burn. When I landed, back among the small ones, I hadn't even bothered to put my wings away. I accepted the gasps and awe of the small ones. It had been hours since I'd left. The small ones had had time to get hungry again. But I did not see Millridge. More importantly, I did not see Chisel.

The others told me that Millridge had returned with his gang of men before Chisel could go after him. The other small ones had cowered in fear. Chisel's gang had abandoned him. I had abandoned him. Chisel had been taken away and they did not know where. Many of them looked to me to help them now that Chisel was gone. But they all had seen how I had fled. Their eyes pleaded with me to do something but their faith in me had gone. Even now that they saw my wings they didn't know if I come back to help them or even if I could. They could no longer sway me with their feelings. They had no power over me without Chisel in their number.

It was on me alone to choose my destiny.

There is a thin line between being angelic and demonic for a being from The In Between. It all comes down to choices. To forgive, or to kill. To forget, or to avenge. To stay and guard the weak many, or to seek out the one who'd protected me. I looked down at my hands. Skin brown like leather, with blood red like rust and nails as black and sharp as a raven's talons. And I chose. ⑤



C.J. SILVER was born and raised in Albany, Georgia. She received her B.A in Multi-Media Communication and Creative Writing from Georgia Southern University. She now lives in Atlanta where she works with her husband creating false realities for an unsuspecting public. This will be her first publication but certainly not her last.



Sun Shadows

Howie Good

“Do you have any metal in your body?” the guard asks and then, without waiting for the answer, waves us through. We have only ever been modern. Octogenarians struggle to keep up with us on their trembling sticklike legs. I leave the rest of the adjectives for the critics. Someone once told me the 10 words to avoid in writing. “OK,” I said, “Will do,” but now I can remember just one, sort of. Where there’s sun, there’s also shadow, and it’s kind of beautiful in a way, the king and queen surrounded by swift nudes. 🍷



The Umbrella Revolution

Howie Good

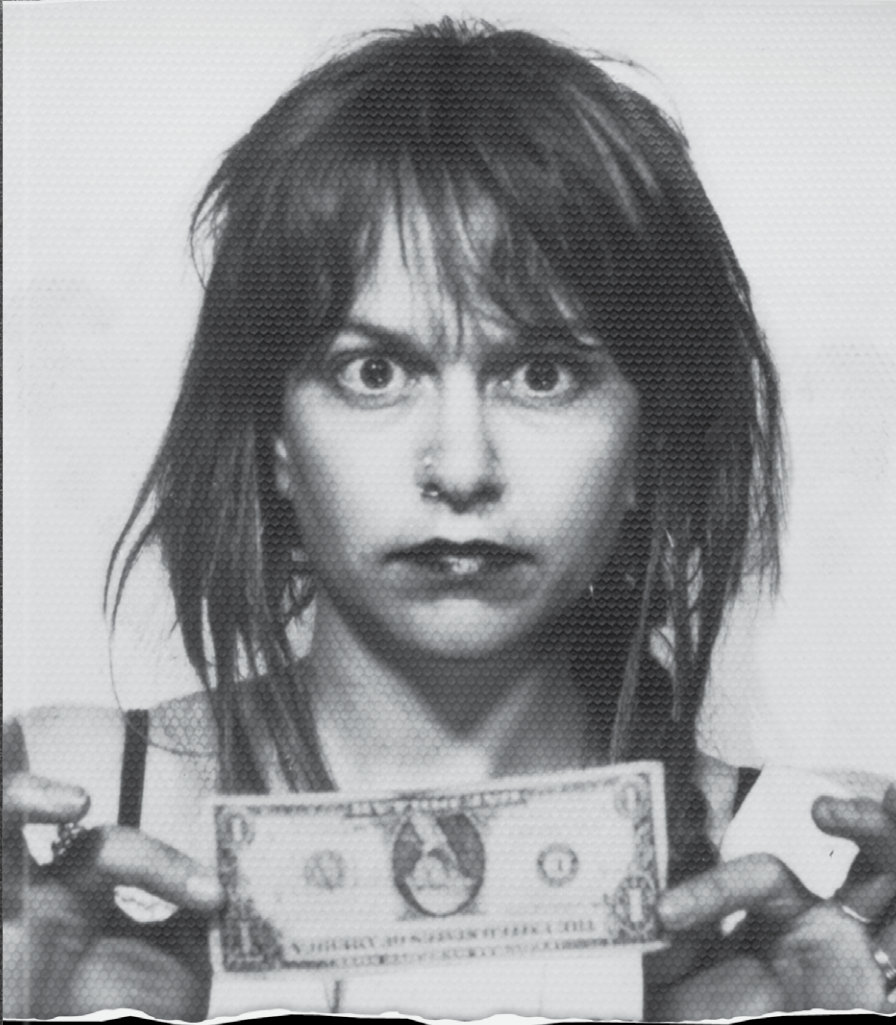
An umbrella in your dream means you should ask for help. This is a good dream if the umbrella is open. In all of Dallas on a beautiful sunny morning, there appears to be exactly one person standing under an open black umbrella. Can anyone come up with an innocent explanation for this? Hmm? It’s like: “Fuck you. Don’t tell me what to do.” And that’s maybe the start of a so-called Umbrella Revolution, the streets full of people singing dirty songs and others with bleeding faces uselessly pleading, “Please save us.” 🍷

Written in collaboration with Dale Wisely



HOWIE GOOD is the author of *Dangerous Acts Starring Unstable Elements*, winner of the 2015 Press Americana Prize for Poetry. His other books include *A Ghost Sings, a Door Opens* from Another New Calligraphy and *Robots vs. Kung Fu* from AngelHouse Press (both 2016). He co-edits White Knuckle Press with Dale Wisely.

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LORRI JACKSON

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MEMENTO MORI

FOR LORRI JACKSON BY JOANI REESE

It's in the blood. the hood, the glove. the white train idle at a crossroads X'd with branded love veins pumping dope, mud, horse, skag, junk, h, arteries stove in. sandman waits to open her gates, straight as the Illinois Central grates down tracks scab scratched into sungold flakes where detached limbs grow eightball bold in this *nothing like Kentucky* place.

She ties off, slaps off, jacks off, slips away piece by piece, seeks relief, she's a penitent, sentient, she worships it. her daily supplice skins her loose, a fitting noose the spike dips in she digs thin skin for a needle misplaced, for a woman encased in a fog-faced run toward the clay-floored grave, the burst waste, the cursed wave, those dogbitten moments that grace can't erase. skag hunger transforms her sweat-streaked face,

fingerprints dig a cheek full of flesh mixed with equal proportions of poetry, bigotry, wrath, it's a race against time, count the hurts, do the math, pen the words, suck the wind, cleanse this planet of skull, write each moment before every moment fades, dull, then ignite what was soft and rewrite words that kill. she must murder the child kept in bondage inside her, the poet slips fingers down over the ledge, poet hands stop their shaking to chronicle rage. a cotton ball dangles, then rolls from the cage of her ribs while she lays and embraces the recklessness, pisses inked pages, spits knife-swallowed lines, starts to vanish from stages. she supperates,

supplicates, operates, dredges through phrases she shakes, licks the truth from burnt edges, attempts to articulate fate from the ashes while Pluto, her final date, waits without passion. she slides it home, dogs the bone, triple heads spitting foam, no witness, she's alone, ink tattoos wave and groan, tangle her track strewn arms, skin blistered magic charms tumble from flowered skin, mumbles stumble within, thick-strewn pearls perishing, slicked back like everyone, frees up her pheromones,

kneeing in pavement piss, swan-like neck swallows this, followed by tangled fists, tears in the world exist, bedsores, a rag of this condom, a knife, a lip, straddle the purple stick, wait for him all alone, dead lovers bullet bone corpses from casket lids, foam as she asks us to please make it last as a murder of crows wings its way past her eyes, claws the clouds, open-beaked, screaming Y Y Y Y ?

this woman, this wordsmith seeks corners, hikes skirts, feels her thigh pit for veins, takes a taste, flicks the spike, sinks the pin, one last score, one last win, and again she will rock for a fix and forget how it feels not to lie, how it feels to exist and the waters flash green with the effluence dumped from a warehouse upstream where each poet crafts lampshades sewn

out of dead skin bitten into by needles and heedless young men,

on the nod in a room, bats swing blind from each beam, sweat stains bother her head as her vision constricts, she pukes razors and stains herself, wipes up the sick. other nights she's a chanteuse exposing her veins to a crowd, swaying drunk, acting tough, slamming fists into walls as her pretty mouth rat-a-tats out a list poem that shoots silver and clitoral rings from the stage, other objects appear which she simply names plagues. the crowd cheers, she glues brother Icarus' wings sagging, sad, mustache-waxed, semi-shored with blue string and she slipstreams away, loud, impossible singing pours out of the needles she's knotted to fingers gone turquoise with wringing.

she flies from the ravages, savages, navigates angles toward cliffs where she thinks the advantage is. raves in dank rooms where she flays every nerve while she waits for the pulse-ending night she's reserved on that singular flight winging south like a bird toward some god of the nod who, perversely, is dead.

and finally breath humbles, it rumbles, then stops, --a heart stilled, a watch wound and wound round till it pops. in a kitchen a little girl fondles a knife, and she slices through wounds while she archives a life, the detritus she throws flashes neon-streamed light shooting grief in pale ribbons that wind one last night, the wax almost maxed, she mumbles in deadpan, *i think i fucked up, this time. Yeah, I fucked up, man.*

the clock dings its midnight song, slippers detach as her body slips limp through the eye of the latch, through the lips of the world, dribbling dead down its chin, shirt streaked Cabernet red, face aflame in the candle-pool's bronze just ahead, smell the ozone, the dead, smell a place where each limb tells a story of beds and quicksex beneath elms, pulls dry leaves from her head seeking dime bags and fixing, her spoon smells delicious, her dragonfire viscous, her hero, her witness to bone prickling wishes that tug without mercy, demand that she bend she's a butterfly pinned to her own fisheye lens.

burnt hands flutter at windows, closed doors where she lies on the floor, sour skunked, still she pulls out her pen and begins to ascend in a perfectly scripted striptease dropkicks words lobbed like bombs from the blood clotted sleeves of her life. she's aware at the climax the only true fear is to live without living or die without leaving

these words
written
here. ☺



JOANI REESE is an editor, poet, and short fiction writer. *Night Chorus*, her first full-length hybrid collection, is available from LitFest Press and Amazon.com: <https://www.amazon.com/Night-Chorus-Joani-Reese/dp/1943170029> Reese lives and works in Texas.



The Glass Furnace

J.V. Hilger

In his wooly mind Cole incanted God whenever, with great delight, Sandy found the maraschino cherry in the ice at the bottom of her mixed drink. When she popped the cherry into her mouth, he usually looked anywhere but at her and drank deeply from his bottle of beer and drowned God as an afterthought. *See His ice-white body caught up in a branch at the side of the river, all our prayers resting in His cold brains.* Cole belched. It was Tuesday again and the light from the jukebox and neon signs was doing its lurid work on the young couple's faces.

"Want another?" Cole said.

"No thank you." Like him, she knew her lines. In another nine months, they'd be married nearly a year.

"I think I'm starting to warm up to this place." He laid his tattooed forearms flat on the plastic tablecloth and looked around approvingly. His heavy arms wobbled the table and Sandy watched her glass break against the floor. The violence complete, it lay there with the stem neatly broken at the bowl and the lipstick-marked rim flat against

the floor. Embarrassed, they looked around, but nobody came with a towel to console the spill or hands ginger enough to remove glass from the scene. A couple at another table looked and then leaned in to whisper something over their candle.

"It's your liver's lucky night."

Sandy stared down at the transparent globe of glass. To her it looked like a bubble, proof of something breathing under a deep lake. Cole repeated the joke. Sandy looked up, afraid the clever look would never vanish from his face, if she didn't.

•

Upstairs the dull aqueous roar of the toilet spooked the house. From his easy chair, Cole listened to the cataract of water carry away the jalepeño poppers he'd paid for at dinner. When the bathroom door opened he hoped, as he always did, to hear her hundred and twelve pounds pause or even slow at the door to the empty nursery on the way to the bedroom. When the floor complained the same he

cracked open the beer he'd been holding between his legs and drank by the red, unwinking diodes of their digital devices; a sum of eyes spider-like and calculating, watching him as his chest rose and fell in the dark and his esophageal muscles swung open the door to poison. When he finished the second can of beer he surprised himself by stacking it on the first. By the third beer, Cole wondered how you built a ship in a bottle and then moved onto what the worst torture would be for a man. He found he had some ideas. At beer four he decided it was being sealed into a metal barrel full of a mild, but not-too-mild acid with only a scuba mask to breathe from. Naturally, it would be pitch black. As you breathed millions of silverfish would be piped into the mask like Muzak. You liked it when the torturer kicked the barrel because it would toll like a heart beat.

Six times Cole rose and the salad dressing in the refrigerator door rattled. Each time he drained a can he stacked it on the previous. After he finished stacking the last can he switched on the lamp that sat on the frayed doily next to him. On the second try, he was able to stand. In the wan light he surveyed his tower with primitive pride. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six he counted aloud. How many inches that? Too many inches. It's feet. Inches like counting person in months forever. Cole felt good until his eyes found Sandy's open violin case on the sideboard in the gloom. Laying on the velvet inside was her violin. Six.five. four.three.two.one. He swatted the tower over, re-buckled his belt, and went upstairs.

Cole knew he would enter the nursery. It was empty, uninhabited for the second time now, and tonight, as usual, the night had come for the cheerful pastel paint on the walls. They'd left it pink after the first one and now 3am had gummed up the color until it was the color inside a closed mouth. Cole put his finger into his belly button like he was trying to get it into a bowling ball. Time broke; Cole found himself in their illuminated bedroom. Parts of Sandy's anatomy lay on the bed. They were made of clear glass unentered by light—an arm on a fluffed pillow, a leg displayed on their polyester blanket, neither with any memory of gore. Somehow it had been blended away by the fine horsehair brush of canned beer. Cole recoiled.

"Whuu?" said Sandy from under the blanket. "Turn ... the light."

"How come you never play the violin for me?" Cole demanded. Mercury bubbled in the crags of his molars.

"Go to sleep,"

"I'm serious. I wanna know," He marched over to her side of the bed.

"I don't know," She was curled up all the way under the blanket.

"The hell you don't," Cole said down to the bump. He should not have looked at the baby monitor sitting on her night table.

"C'mon," he shook her harder than he normal.

"It's ... mine," she said after a long pause.

"Yours and fifty penguins at the goddamn opera house,"

"You're drunk," She was still under the covers, refused to come out.

"Not drunk enough,"

"... "

"Why are you shaking like that?" He hoped, at least, she was afraid of him now.

She said something he couldn't hear.

"What?"

"It's cold,"

"I couldn't hear ya,"

She tore the covers away. There were tears in her eyes. *"I said the furnace is broken."*

•

There was a scratch and some of the basement gloom gave way to the match. He was on his hands and knees in front of the furnace. He could feel the sand from the floor through his jeans. He shut his eyes to steady himself. The draft, then the smoke in his nostrils, then the dark. No the smoke, the dark ... never mind. He tossed the match away and rattled the box—then, a moment later, sat down, let his leash of musculature out on his drunk bones, and rattled it again in the darkness. The basement was quiet. A childish look appeared on his face. He rattled it again.

Cole worked himself back up to his knees. The sand on the undulating floor had made deserts of his palms. He shook a match out of the box, struck it, but the wind snuffed it just as it was flaring up. He turned his head and looked out cleanly into the night through the windowpane that had been broken over the summer. When the wind picked up he could hear the sand whispering at the unbroken glass over his heartbeat. It hit him: the pilot light. Cole lit another match, and straining reached into the furnace. By the light of the match, a nervous bundle of wires resolved itself to a foreign body and a large brown spider on the gas jet recoiled, lifted its front legs. Cole's hand flinched, but he didn't drop the match or snatch his hand back. He held the match until it burned his sandy fingers. The spider, somehow familiar, watched this. When the match burned out Cole reached in deeper first sensing then feeling the weight of the spider on his hand in the darkened furnace. 🕷

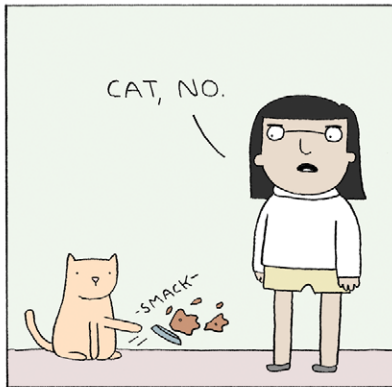


J.V. HILGER is an unreformed nature boy. He lives with a woman-sized Bengal tiger and nine million other lovely, bristly souls in New York City. He is currently at work on a novel

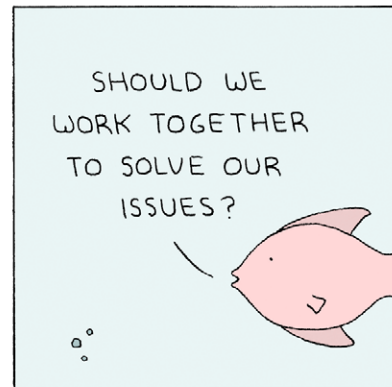
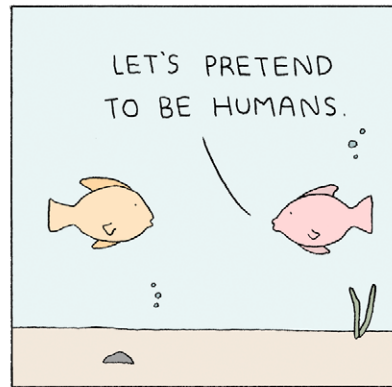
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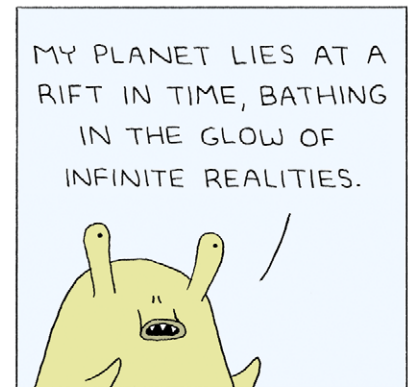
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Late Stirrings

Erin Kyle

Adam had been wearing the same suit for four months and, despite the pile of dog shit he was lying in, probably would be wearing it for another four. The buttons were gone, the lapel flapped impotently down his spine, and the rest was either patterned by gaping holes or stiffened by questionable stains. But he never noticed what he wore anymore.

He woke in the middle of a dog park with no memory of how he'd gotten there. He lurched to his feet, pulled by an inner compulsion to stand and stumble away into the rising sun. His steps were deliberate—if wobbly—as he followed the route he felt deep in his bones. It was one of the only things that stirred him nowadays.

He stopped at a large garden plot. The gardener lay on the ground in front of him, red hair tangled and wispy in the wind, gloves hiked high over sunken and greying forearms, skin pockmarked everywhere with scars. Flower petals were strewn across dirt and sidewalk—some even layering the scarred gardener—but only a few flowers were left in the plot, now crowded by cancerous weed pockets. Adam reached in and came back with a handful of thistle weeds. He didn't even look down at them. He detoured around the gardener, his goal a beige stucco house with an apple tree in the front yard. Cars littered streets and sidewalks and yards and everywhere in Adam's way, bodies were slumped in bloated, messy piles. Adam slopped through a layer of overripe apples on his way to the door. It was hanging open

and dangling from one hinge.

Adam's hand was slack, his fingers limp, and it took him nearly five minutes to swing around and hit the door. His knock was the bare scrape of knuckles along the wood, but Susan still answered. She shuffled to the door, barely lifting her feet as she approached.

The suit Adam was wearing was in rough shape, but the silk dress Susan had been wearing for months was tragic. It showed more than it covered, the fabric a gauzy net ripped in places and straining to contain her bloat. Susan's body was broken and barely held together. Her right side was savaged from the curve of her neck to below her bellybutton, scooped out and almost empty—you could see daylight through the thin skin of her back—and her left side was deflated. The flab of her left breast sagged into her armpit, the skin and muscle drooping away from her bones. Her heart was barely visible where it was cradled behind ribs bent in until they almost touched her spine.

Adam stopped on his side of the threshold; she stopped on hers. Her head lolled at an uncomfortable angle, eyes fixed on something over Adam's shoulder. His lolled at a different angle, eyes fixed on the hardwood inside the door. It had been very fine, once. Susan wasn't very steady on her feet and swayed back and forth, brushing against Adam with every pass. For a handful of minutes, the only break in the silence was the low-tone humming coming from both Susan and Adam, and the creak of floorboards beneath Susan's shifting weight. Then, with no warning, the

humming in his throat rose to a dry groan. Adam swept his arm up and around. He missed his mark the first time, and the sun had disappeared behind the cul-de-sac of homes before his arm swung again, this time shoving the thistle weeds against Susan's nose. Susan made no move to take the bouquet. She creaked, she swayed, she brushed against Adam, and the minutes passed.

Down the long and empty street, a shutter clattered against a wall in the bare breeze, a woman screamed, and the sound of running feet passed them by. Susan groaned and swung up her arm. Her hand flopped onto his forearm before the momentum carried her hand toward the weeds and back down to her side. Adam shifted back the way he came, and Susan turned toward the house, bouquet dangling from slack fingers. Then they went their separate ways.

Adam woke sprawled on asphalt warmed by mid-morning sun. As soon as he opened his eyes, he lurched to his feet.

Adam stopped at the sprawled gardener and balding plot, reached for the nearest handful of greenery. He stretched too far, though, and his reaching arm made a loud pop as the shoulder and arm fell limp. He collapsed onto one knee and tried to get his other arm to work. He grunted then groaned a long groan when he stood. Then he was off, past the gardener, past cars and pets. But there were more bodies in the street today, new bodies.

Adam stopped. There was a still-beating heart among them. He turned. There was a woman lying in the middle of the street surrounded by a dozen bodies. She hadn't seen Adam yet, hadn't heard him, and he was mere feet from her before she saw him. Her eyes were fever glazed, she was pale and shaking, covered in sweat. Her leg was bent at a sharp and unnatural angle, and her elbow was slided in a pool of vomit.

She raised a knife and managed to slice through his suit jacket, but the swing was weak, and Adam barely noticed. She had a pulse, but not for long. She was soon-to-spoil, and he hadn't eaten in days. His cracked lips split as he opened his mouth as wide as he could, and he clamped his ground-down teeth on the flesh just below her chin. So desperate was he that his teeth crushed her windpipe, and the force of his lunge snapped her neck. She died very quickly. Her arm swept and flailed again—stronger this time, in the throes—and she coughed blood across Adam's face with the gust of her last, held breath.

After scraping his teeth on bone, and nearly choking on a knot of chewy tendon, Adam stumbled away still hungry, his fist still clenched tight around the bouquet of weeds.

He met Susan at the threshold and she took the weeds. Just as she turned to go, she stopped. Then her head snapped toward Adam again. She took one step across the threshold and bumped Adam chest-to-chest. Her nose wound up pressed to his chin for a second before she reared back and licked the fresh blood from his face. She licked once, twice, three times, to get it all. After the third time, in the wake of her tongue, the side of his face collapsed. A chunk of flesh and skin slid down his chin, throat, jacket, and plopped onto the ground while the other chunk fell backward into his slack mouth. Susan rattled and shuddered as her broken body registered the bar smear of blood.

She stayed pressed against Adam's side for a moment before Adam turned aside, and Susan turned toward the house. Then they went their separate ways.

Adam woke in aisle 7, Crackers; Cookies; Spices. As soon as he opened his eyes, he lurched to his feet.

He entire store smelled stale, and he shuffled past aisle after aisle on his way out, past overturned carts and a shelf of outdated newspapers on his way into the daylight. Adam reached for the last clump of weeds but missed and grasped only one. He lurched and wobbled more than usual, stopping more often to sniff the air. But he made it to Susan's side with no mishaps. Just as Susan appeared at the door, Adam felt something in him release and burst. All the roiling, cramping, and clenching that Adam had been ignoring in the search for food finally peaked. In her death throes flailing, the broken woman from the day before had managed to slice Adam open in a gruesome arc. He'd strained it hunting then reaching and traveling today until finally the wound split wide open.

His rotted insides, only contained by the thin case of skin, rushed out and splattered onto their feet, tissue and fluids coating their legs. His heart was last to go. It sloshed and slid down the slide of spine and intestine just as Susan leaned and swayed forward. It didn't fall flat like the others, his heart. It gained enough momentum to bridge the gap between them. It barely grazed the flesh of Susan's left side before plopping into the cradle of her still-fleshy hips.

Susan grabbed the greenery from Adam then they both turned aside. Before Adam could descend a single stair, there was a press against his eye and a faint itch at the back of his head. He lost control of his arms and legs and the ground rose up to meet him as Susan disappeared into the house.



ERIN KYLE is a magical realist from Minnesota. She received her B.A. in Literature and Creative Writing from S.M.S.U. in southwestern Minnesota, and earned her M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Fiction, from the University of Colorado, Boulder. She specializes in infusing elements of the unexpected in her stories, and loves to bring quirk and enchantment to the fore.



Letter's from Summer's Grave

Phil Gallos

“N”

It is very November here, and has been for the past week—stratus-grey skies drizzling indifferent snow, the late-afternoon light full of melancholy, the streets empty even when there are people about. I don't know why, but I find it strangely comforting—and beautiful: the way a cemetery can be beautiful. This is the grave of Summer, the burial place for swimming-holes and picnics and making love on the moss; the casket still uncovered, the memory still a taste alive on the tongue, the pile of earth not yet shoveled in by December and January and February.

I stand here alone by this gap in the ground, unable to follow, taunted by the memory of your hips twitching away from me in your peculiar gait as you make your way down the street south, your steel laced leg limping and your damned cane thumping silently the snow slick sidewalk. Now where are you? Asleep on your sunny isle, fulgent at the foot of the cloud forest, your cane cast into the glory...

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Oh, it's just the ghost of Goddess past come to claim her pound of passion. I throw in a fistful of stony dirt, a futile gesture of finality (nothing ever ends). Knock, knock—like your steel-shanked shin against a hollow box. Knock, knock, knock—the pebbles popping up and down on the lid in their own spastic dance. Knock knock. Knock knock. Knock knock (you are nothing if not insistent)—the dark wood splintering (hey! I paid good money for that—and plenty of it, too), the crook of your cane crashing out into the open pit. The terrified stones scatter in all directions. The snowflakes, quickly cured of their ennui, take off like startled starlings. (I don't care if they're not white! What is this cold cloak white to the eyes only if not the black shroud of mourning?). Now what am I supposed to do? There's this thing sticking up where it shouldn't be like the erection you'd wished I'd had more often. What is this need of yours always to shock?

...That damned cane: thumping on my ceiling because I've got my skip jigs too loud, brandished at your canvases

because they mock you with their whiteness, pressed across my throat as you sit astride me strapped like a sacrifice upon your soft alter...

Comforting? Did I say comforting? I've gotta get outta here

I walk up the hill: past the house where Adelaide Crapsey wrote "I will not be patient," alive in defiance—shaking her fist out the window at Trudeau's Garden where the bloom of her generation had been prematurely planted—as if her wild poetess' will could stop the turning world.

And down the other side: the house Ernie Burnett occupied shuffling by on my left, his spirit unsettled still searching for another "Melancholy Baby", musical notes poking their noses out from under the porches and scurrying away like mice; but he's got competition across the street—three days before Thanksgiving and some idiot's playing Christmas carols.

Up another hill, and down again. Up another hill and home. I throw my boots at the dust bunnies in the corner, but they refuse to move. They know my aim's no good. I slip beneath the covers and down into sleep. I'm just a bear under a blanket of leaves. Do bears dream of the Goddess?

You told me you would return, that it'd be like old times again, that all you needed was a few months away, a few months smoking your heavenly ganja and swimming in the amnesiac sea. You said you'd be coming back and you'd be as good as new.

I dream you are camped beside the railroad tracks, and I lie down with you. You have no cane and no scars. "You're gonna get hurt," you say. You tell me my skin is too thin. I tell you that I am not there to fall in love. I say, "I'm hot for you, but not in that way." You look at me like I hadn't been born yet.

"D"

Everyone celebrates in December, so why should I complain? It's December that makes you come back, even though you don't arrive until June.

"J"

Don't ask me about Winter in these bitten-bark mountains—the Algonquin driven to mimic the porcupine or starve—the blind obsessive snow building up, building up covering over, covering over so pretty that nobody notices the stains where Bambi was butchered by Fido and Bowser and Spot—ice everywhere in every thing: ice in the air in the scattered singing light; ice on the waters of the low-moaning lake; ice under the earth in the worm-stilled dark; ice ringing in your bones, ringing your bones like steel chimes. Don't ask me to even whisper the word "January."

"F"

February the bear turns over in his bed. February the snow fleas first come out. February the coldest nights, the bluest days. February you feel farthest away.

For Lent, I am giving up popsicles, air conditioning, and mint juleps. In Rio, Carnival revelers are dancing nearly naked in the streets. In New Orleans, Lestat and his friends are engorging on Mardi Gras: so little time, so much to drink! Here we are spared such problems. We build palaces from ice cubes (400 pounds per cube). Our parade puppets wear mittens. I write these words with purple ink.

"M"

March is the month of promise (I promise, you said—so I wait), the month of the Vernal Equinox when above the Tropic of Cancer the sun stares down on the slums of Havana and the beaches of Deadman's Cay, the bleached mountains of Ahaggar and the scorched sands of the Fazzan, martyred Bhopal, hallowed Iwo Jima, the faraway French Frigate Shoals, and miles and miles of bald blue ocean. Hot.

(Here, we get no heat—just the sweeter end of an even trade: twelve hours of darkness to twelve hours of light.)

For the pagans, it is a holy day—it is the marriage of the Sun and Moon—but the pagans were Italians: the pagani, the worshippers of trees; and this is not Italy. Our trees are not ready for a bacchanal, and they will not be ready for a long, long time.

For the astrologers, it is the birth of a new year, this first day of Spring, Primavera. I don't look for Botticelli's barefoot maidens; I wait—I look out at the snow banked above the window sill, and I wait. I am older than Adelaide was, and I am still patient.

"A"

Eliot said all there is to be said about April.

Alright. You want a story? I'll tell you a little story.

They were world travelers. They were not married, but they were husband and wife. They were handsome and young and unprepared. From Australia, they came. They had trekked in the great ranges of six continents. Now they planned a little walk, starting out in soothing sunlight to climb Mount Marcy, our highest mountain, so small by their standards.

They left their Winter gear in their packs and ascended from Johns Brook to the music of melt water and chickadees. By the time they reached the summit, they were enveloped in a freezing cloud, and the only sound was the hollow huffing of an ill wind.

They ate their lunches quickly with stiffening fingers. Everywhere they looked, the view was exactly the same. Up, down, out in all directions grey-white blankness. There was something invisibly menacing here. No one else was climbing. They began to feel a chill. Time to go. Why they descended south when they had come up from the north is simple enough. It was part of their plan. (People think they know where they're going when they don't.) Why they didn't change into warmer clothing was never told. (People think they know what they're doing when they don't.)

They were tricked. Cruelly deceived. They had begun this walk warm and dry on a different trail on what seemed a different day. They stood seven hours later at the crossroads, soaked and shivering. They were a thousand feet down the wrong side of the mountain. The map told them what they thought they needed to know. From Four Corners: 1.2 miles left down to Panther Gorge lean-to; one half-mile straight ahead up to the summit of Skylight; 1.6 miles right, past Lake Tear of the Clouds, down to Feldspar lean-to. The trail ahead was not an option. Which way to go? Left or right?

She was miserable, but he was in trouble. She knew the signs. He'd had hypothermia before—in the Alps or the Andes or somewhere it made sense. It had begun to rain—a soft, frigid rain. The cloud was coalescing around them. They had to get to shelter as quickly as possible. Feldspar lean-to was almost a half mile farther away than Panther

Gorge. They took the left hand path.

The map had not told them that the Panther Gorge trail was one of the worst in the mountains—steep and rough, with streams running down it for more than half its length; nor that the lean-to—if they made it that far—was a wreck; nor that its location made rescue extremely difficult. The map had not told them that the Feldspar Brook trail was heavily used, would be well packed and relatively easy walking. It had not told them that almost no one went into Panther Gorge in Winter, or that the unpacked snow cover was turning into a nightmare of mush.

Winter? But it was April! The calendar said it had been Spring for nearly a month!

Like everything else, the calendar had lied—like the pleasant air, like the chirping chickadees, like the dripping icicles, like the shining sun itself, and like the helpful map (half the truth is a whole lie), what they saw and felt and believed was a sham, a sleight-of-hand.

The sun was setting, hidden, colorless. The air was getting colder. The rain less gentle. Icing on contact. If they could get to the shelter, they could get out of this. They could build a fire in front of it—a *huge* fire, throw whole fir trees onto it, make an oven of the lean-to, strip off their sopping clothes and get warm and dry...

So down they went—and down, and down, and down. And down.

Wearied to death slogging and post holing through hip-deep snow, their thinly shod feet plunging with every step into six inches of ice water, they stopped a quarter-mile short of their goal. They rested. But for him, no rest would be enough. When she said they had to move, had to keep moving, he could not. He couldn't feel anything. He couldn't see anything. Drifting in and out of delirium, the only thing he wanted was to sleep. "No. You mustn't!" "I don't care. I don't care..."

She hadn't the strength to carry him (though once she had) or even to drag him. She tried to get him to put on dry clothes, but he threw them down the slope. She tried to wrap their tent around him, but it kept falling aside. Alone in the merciless night, she held onto him, held him close to give him what heat she had—how long? Ten minutes? An hour? Two?—Feeling his life ebb away into her chest. She stayed until she thought he was dead—but he might not have been. She was afraid if she stayed any longer, she'd be unable to save herself.

In the grey morning, she left him. Back up she climbed through the same horrible mess to the saddle at Four Corners, where there had been a lean-to until the State of New York in its wisdom decided it was incompatible with the high wilderness; then across the ragged tableland a

third of a mile, past Lake Tear, where there had also once been a lean-to, removed for the same reason as its neighbor; then down the length of Feldspar Brook under virgin cedar and spruce and balsam fir, past the lean-to they might have reached; and then down through the canyon of the Opalescent River to arrive finally in the late afternoon at the ranger's outpost on the shore of Lake Colden. The place was locked, its steward away on his rounds. She broke into the cabin and used the radio to call headquarters at Ray Brook. She told the dispatcher she was alive but that someone else wasn't, someone she'd left five miles away on the far side of hell.

"April is the cruelest month."

"M"

It is the last day of May. I walk below the piney ridge pursued by your scent and the songs of birds. It is so strong I nearly swoon: sap in the veins; green in the bones; a stirring in the dark below; an almost forgotten pulse returning. In three weeks, you say, you'll be coming home.

Beside the dreamless railroad tracks, among the stones of the dead, under the awakened trees, no sign of the unfilled pit, the heap of earth erased (if it was ever there), the risen cane an indistinct twinge at the base of the brain like a nearly lost legend or a half-remembered hallucination.

In the place I left last with a puff of congealed breath and a lewd gesture, wild flowers wander in from the woods and fields and gather at my feet like messengers of your return: Spring beauties and trout lilies and the downy yellow violet, bluets and colt's feet and the Dutchman's breeches. But behind them like a shadow, clover and flea bane and the tooth of the lion, Clintonia and trillium and Jacks in their pulpits; and behind them, cinquefoil and wild carrot and St. John's wort; and behind them, the golden rod, the purple aster, the velvet dock; and behind them barely visible like undertakers at a wedding, toadstools and nightshade and the ghostly Indian pipe crook'd like a cane.

I know there are only two seasons. There is you, and there is waiting. There is this intoxicating balm, and there is the boreal lash. The paradox is that within one resides the other. Your arrival heralds your leaving. With the longest day begins the lengthening of night. We are born to die. In all this lush fruition are the seeds of its decay. The wind is warm; the earth is fertile; and Winter is just around the corner. ⑤



PHIL GALLOS has been a newspaper reporter and columnist, a researcher/writer in the historic preservation field, spent 27 years working in academic libraries, and has a history of published non-fiction going back to 1971. Longer works include *Cure Cottages of Saranac Lake: Architecture and History of a Pioneer Health Resort*, Historic Saranac Lake, 1985, 186 p. Examples of shorter work can be found in *Rooted in Rock: New Adirondack Writing, 1975-2000*, Adirondack Museum/Syracuse University Press, 2001; and in *Adirondack Reflections: On Life and Living in the Mountains and the Valleys*, The History Press, 2013.



Insomniac

Tim Frank

I'm crawling up the walls. I'm howling at the moon. I'm drilling holes in the floorboards. I'm eating butter straight from the butter dish with my fingers. I'm smoking rollies the wrong way round, sucking on a mouthful of tobacco. I'm discombobulated. I'm texting my fiancé in Nigeria. She's asleep but I'm texting her anyway. When she wakes there'll be over a 100 messages waiting for her.

I'm sneaking into the attic and flicking elastic bands at dead rats. I find an old painting of my grandmother. She is elegant and her eyes speak to me. They're my eyes. I'm going to hang them on my wall.

I'm shutting myself in my room, in the dark. I'm listening to Radiohead, Pink Floyd and The Smiths. I'm listening to the radio. There is war, and famine and tsunamis. There is football. I hear the whole world spin. I am writing. I eat more butter, this time with toast. I'm hungry. I want Chinese food, Indian food, Pizza and crisps. I drink water, Coke and squash. My cravings never end. The more I eat the more I want. I wrap the duvet around me; burrow my head in the pillows. I take a couple of pills and wait, and wait.

Moths are charging against my window.

My fiancée is up. Why aren't I asleep, she says. Have I slept at all, she asks. She's worried about me. I'm worried too. This is new, she says, what's going on?

My dad can't sleep either. His room is across from mine. We pass like zombies in the night. Oaaann, we grumble to each other.

The pills aren't working and that's bad because it's all I've got. I can only wait.

I'm listening to some clips on my phone. I'm not supposed to because it exacerbates my problem, but I have to do something to fill the void. I'm a lonesome sailor on windy seas. My mind is awash with racing thoughts and surreal images. I see cat's eyes, slugs, boiling kettles and hardcore porn. I see my brains on the carpet.

I'm listening to a Buddhist monk. He speaks of mindfulness, concentration and well earned happiness. His voice is peaceful and his accent is strong, preventing me from understanding his every word. But I get the gist. I know I will never achieve what he is saying. I see his brains on my carpet.

I went to bed at 11pm. It's 4am now. What can I do? I turn the overhead light on and look through my book shelves. I have a large collection. I've tried to read most of them – probably finished 5% of them. It's like my sleep patterns; aborted. No, no I can't read. I've got to go to bed. I must try. Back into darkness. Lasso my mind with a rope and drag it to the ground. Keep on it, keep it still until it wilts and breaks and bows to my force.

I feel something happening, maybe this is it. But the more I notice that things are progressing I lose my momentum and realise this is me trying to sleep, and gradually I slip out of unconsciousness.

But finally, I'm out, gone, under.

5 minutes later my alarm goes off, shaking my brain off its hinges.

Time to get up.

I'll sleep when I'm dead. 🌀



TIM FRANK is an up and coming writer, specializing in the comic and the surreal. He has been published in magazines such as *Bourbon Penn*, *Bartleby Snopes* and *BlazeVox*. He is currently looking to find a place for a collection of short stories and is working on a semi-autobiographical novel.



A Perfectly Rounded Dot

Abhishek Sengupta

The first chapter of his novel, he released before the publication of his book, is a period. A dot on the white.

The chapter is as long as you look at it. Some readers have claimed that it went on for thirteen pages, wherein five characters are introduced, one of them being the corpse who, a few experienced readers among them claimed, was murdered by the fourth character introduced, which was a woman who didn't have a face. However, all of them agreed that they were intrigued by the plot and the cliff-hanger at the end of the chapter.

Most criticisms were centered on how the second character was fleshed out in the chapter. The character was genderless and never moved from the position where he/she sat, which was a dark room devoid of furniture, but more importantly his/her every action and reaction were described with adverbs quite inadvertently. Although the feelings the second character had towards the third, who was the husband of the fourth, were noticeable, the nature of those feelings was difficult to gauge due to the absence of gender. This criticism, however, has been severely criticized by a section of readers who claimed gender cannot be a yardstick when it comes to measuring feelings.

The setting which readers described as the “non-illuminated night” worked for most. They felt the setting was a sheer brilliance that propelled the starting scene wherein the fifth character stumbles across the first, who is the corpse. The author, at this point, steers away from portraying any emotional response from the fifth character at the discovery which, readers claimed, is a sharp deviance from the standard storytelling and a welcome change to make the narrative more engaging.

A particular high school student has conjectured a theory that is currently doing its rounds on the social networks. She claims that there are only four characters in the chapter and not five. The first character which is a corpse and the second character who never moves, she says, are one and the same. Some readers have, however, questioned her theory stating that a corpse couldn't effectively have feelings, which the second character most obviously harbors for the third. But the girl has brushed off such criticisms by making another startling claim. The corpse isn't dead, she states, it has been planted in the dark by the third character to victimize his faceless wife, whose motive to kill would indeed be assumed to be the feelings the second character has towards the third. It is too obvious to be true, she shrugs in her vlog.

The role of the fifth character in the chapter could not be ascertained, though the readers could safely speculate that his part in the plot couldn't have the mere significance of one who stumbles across a corpse. This has been further substantiated by the fact that he is introduced in the very first scene, but is yet the fifth character. Such role reversal couldn't have been for nothing. His character has been introduced as a painter-author who has been painting a perfectly rounded dot on a piece of paper, which, he professes, would be the first chapter of his novel. 🔄



ABHISHEK SENGUPTA is imaginary. Mostly, people would want to believe that he writes fiction & poetry which borders on Surrealism and Magical Realism, and is stuck inside a window in Kolkata, India, but he knows none of it is true. He doesn't exist. Only his imaginary writing does, and have appeared or are forthcoming in *Sheepshead Review*, *99 Pine Street*, *Kaaterskill Basin Literary Journal*, *Five 2 One Magazine*, and others. If you're gifted, you may also imagine him in Twitter @AbhishekSWrites. His website: abhishek-sengupta.com



Of Nowhere And

Raji A Samuel

She took a wrong turn a while earlier. Between the woman who fried fish on the charred container and the woman who said she was a pharmacist, she had decided to take the road that led forward—which was really her only option—and when she got to the End of the Road, she had had to decide again which way to go. This time it was either left or right.

Well right is always right, she thought. So she took the right turn, which turned out to be the wrong one, as she found herself back between the woman who fried fish and the woman who said she was a pharmacist—but who now claimed she had never claimed to be a pharmacist. She was a tailor.

And truly something had changed about her shop. Earlier it was white, all white inside and outside—although she could not really see the inside; truth be told she had only guessed what color it was. Perhaps she had guessed the woman's occupation too? Well it doesn't matter, she concluded, since she said she was a tailor now, and her shop

isn't white like before. It's brown-ish now, and charred.

—Well what way is the right way, then?

She asked.

—The right way?

The fish-fryer said. —why, the right way is always right.

She thanked her and walked forward, like she had done the last time. And when she got to the End of the Road, she turned right again, just like the last time.

She had just started on the right road when, noticing something about the End of the Road, she turned right back to it again.

She remembered that earlier the End of the Road had been blocked by a fence, which she had assumed belonged to a church, since she could see spires and gargoyles projecting upward, but now as she returned to it, she saw it was not a fence at all—alright it was a fence, but in the middle, right in the middle of it right in front of her, was a door. A door, brown like the fence—perhaps that was why she could not see it in the first place? No, she was sure there was no door

in the first place.

Something deep inside her had told her; something deep and omniscient; something that could not lead her astray; had told her: this is the End of the Road, and so she had taken the right turn then. But now there was a door.

There was a door, wasn't it? Just now she stood in front of the fence and there was a door. But now it's gone? It's gone, really. It sounds absurd, she thought, but it's really gone. Her first thought was to hold up her wrapper and clamor to the fence, shake it and examine it, and find out where the door had gone. But it was pointless, she concluded.

Of course it was pointless. She would take the right turn again, like she had done earlier. Right is always right.

She started on the right turn again then, and after she had walked a few feet she became certain she was on the right path. Well she must be, she thought, since, first, she could see neither the fish-frying woman nor the pharmacist and/or tailor anywhere, and second she could just catch a glimpse of the tower right ahead. Yes, the tower, it was right ahead.

Picking up her wrapper by the hem, she dashed towards it, and as she ran, like time on a pleasant day, she discovered that the more she ran, the farther the tower became. Well damn, she thought, damn. But she mustn't stop now, she thought. Wasn't it her dream, all these years? To get to the tower? Of course it was. And of course dreams run fast. Isn't that why we're told to chase them? Because they run faster than us?

Well this dream will not elude her, she thought, as she dashed and dashed, chasing the tower as it kept receding from her.

She got tired after a while, and wished she had procured some pure-water from the fish-fryer or the pharmacist/tailor. How funny, though, she thought, stealing a moment to catch her strength, how funny that the woman called herself a pharmacist, then a tailor, seeing as her own father had wanted her to become a pharmacist and her mother had said she wasn't smart enough, that she should become a tailor instead. But she wouldn't be all that; no, she wanted to be a -, be a -. Why can't she remember what she wanted to be, she wondered, perhaps her brain had become foggy from all the running. Yes, that was it, she concluded. She was tired, but she mustn't stop now.

The tower had stopped running for good, and she figured she must be about twenty feet out. She halted, and smiled to herself, and touched her knee in languor. Looking down at the hot dusty road, she realized she had no shoe on. It must have fallen, she thought, while she was running. Or maybe she had no shoe on all this while. Well it's no matter, she thought, since the tower is right in front of her now, just right in front.

It was just right in front of her, she thought, perplexed, perspiring, but where is it now? Where? It had been just right in front of her, now it's gone, and in its place was the End of the Road, that same fence. What the hell, she thought.

Well right is always right, she thought. So she took the right turn again, leaving herself no time or chance to consider all the trouble she had gone through; all the hardship she had endured, only to lose the tower right in front of her. And for what? She thought, for only a minutes rest. Well she mustn't think about all that now, she

concluded. Now she must go right again. Yes, right is always right.

She had taken just a step towards the right road—or was it even a step? More like a half step; she had taken more like a half step towards the right road, when she found herself, renewed and refreshed, back at the End of the Road again. This time, however, the brown door was back in the middle of the fence:

Well, well, she thought, then she decided against thinking, lest the door should disappear again.

She moved in to kick the door with fervor, but it gave in by itself, as if it knew her intention immediately she decided on it. The force she moved in to kick the door with sprawled her on the floor, and, as if her day wasn't unbelievable enough, she found herself back in front of the woman who fried fish on the charred container.

—Well get on up, will you?

The woman who fried fish said.

Getting up as fast as she could, to shake off the embarrassment she felt, she noticed something odd about the woman who fried fish on the container. One of her eyes was dark, on the left, and the other was blue, on the right. There was a slight cut on the right side of her nose, and—this was the weirdest of all—she was missing a front tooth.

Like a scientist in search of the final piece to confirm a hypothesis, she ran toward the pharmacist/tailor who was now herself dressed in a white laboratory coat. For a reason or another she was not surprised.

—Oh,

She said. —So you're a pharmacist again now.

—Have I ever been anything else?

The pharmacist/tailor said.

Her mouth opened in disbelief—not because of what the pharmacist/tailor said, no, she heard nothing that came out of her mouth. Her mouth was opened in disbelief because of the things she saw.

She saw, on the pharmacist/tailor—no, pharmacist for sure now—she saw on the pharmacist for sure now two eyes—normal enough—but one blue, on the right, and he other black, on the left, and—and she had to feel her own arms to know which was which—there was a slight cut on the left side of her nose. And, most weirdly, she had two of her front tooth missing.

When she was young, growing up with her parents in their house on the dusty road beside the church, she remembered she had had an *accident* once. She had just gotten back from school and on entering the house she had found a pack of chewing gum on the porch, which she picked up and licked. Her mother had arrived at the very instant, and seeing the chewing gum in her mouth, said:

—Where did you get the chewing gum?

—On the porch,

She said.

—The porch?

Her mother said. —You found a chewing gum on the porch and you're chewing it? Do you know how it got there? What if it was Satan who put it there? And haven't I told you to stop chewing gums if don't want to lose your tooth, or teeth? Go inside and bring my cane now!

And when she returned with the cane, there was an *accident* and it made a slight cut on the—was it left or right?

—Side of her nose. It healed immediately, though.
 Well then, she thought, well then.
 —Why are you staring at me?
 The pharmacist/tailor said. —Like I stole your chewing gum?
 Startled, she said:
 —I'm sorry ma'am. I just wanted to know if you're a tailor or a pharmacist.
 —Well I'm none of those things,
 She said. —I'm a chemist.
 —But,
 She said, startled. —But you just said earlier – I mean, just earlier you told me – o never mind.
 She said. —Thank you, I must continue my journey. I must find the right way.
 She said.
 She turned to be on her way.
 —Wait,
 The pharmacist/tailor/chemist said. —Maybe this will help.
 She did not see what she was proffering at first.
 —My shoes!
 She said. —How did you get it?
 —3D printer,
 The pharmacist/tailor/chemist said.
 She thanked her and she left. She also thought to take a final look at the woman who fried fish on the container but she was nowhere to be found.
 At the End of the Road was a fence. A fence with no door. She took a right because right is always right. But wait, she thought, right is always right, right? Maybe she should take a left this time, she thought. No she would take a right; yes, she would take a right until left is the only thing that's left.
 The second she got on the right road, however, she found herself back at the End of the Road. There was no door. She took a right again. End of the Road. No door. Right again. End of the Road again.
 But right is always right, she thought; right is always right, right? Right? Maybe not.
 She would take a left, yes. Yes, she thought, left is all that's left now. Left.
 She had barely gotten to the left road when she saw the tower, most amazingly. The tower, yes. The one she had been searching for, for how many minutes now? Oh not minutes, definitely, hours now! Yes, or had it been days? Or months? How many months now, then? She had no idea. It sure feels like she had been searching all her life. At any rate it was there now, the tower, yes! It was there. It's over.
 And, how amazing, that it has a light on it this time; a

beacon, like the one at the lighthouse. Like the one she had visited with her parents when she was just a girl. The same lighthouse where she had decided she would be a pilot. A pilot? Yes, that was it. That was what she wanted then. That was her dream. But now her dream is the tower. And now she must chase it. But this shoes, she thought, they hold her back way too much.

Taking off the shoes then, she began to run. Faster than she had ever done all her life. Yes, she must run faster, she thought. Dream chasing takes no less than one's best effort, she thought, one's very best. And oh how certain she was this time. How confident. Now that she had deviated and taken a left. So she ran faster. Faster.

But, she thought, could it be possible that her mother had been wrong? When she said *don't take things off the porch, its Satan's!* When she said it isn't right to do things you're incapable of. Leave strength for the strong, she said. Leave the race for the swift. There is no shame in doing only what your might can; there's no shame in settling—it's only the right thing to do. And right is always right.

Could it be that she was wrong? Because she had taken left and the tower had not only appeared, but has stopped running now. Yes, she thought, the time is now propitious. She decided she would not stop, however. Not this time. Not to wipe off her sweat, or take a breath, no. She would rest when she gets to the tower.

Her speed had decreased significantly, though. She was tired. And, immediately she thought about her tiredness, the tower began to move again, and two shadows sped past her. She could tell they were feminine shadows. She had to run faster, and that she did.

She ran furiously, and as she caught up with the shadows she realized who they were. She was surprised at first, and then, as if she had grasped a hidden message meant to torment her, and not wanting to give her tormentor— whoever the hell it was—the satisfaction, she busted into a menacing laughter. The shadows joined her in it. It was the woman who fried fish on the charred container and the pharmacist/tailor/chemist.

The tower had stopped moving—around the time they began their laughter—and its light began to blare and flicker, as if, as if, as if it was also laughing, laughing at her; laughing at her naiveté; mocking her right to dream.

She was furious. She stopped laughing and her face was angry. The others were still laughing, though, including the tower, laughing at her. But her energy was renewed, and her volition was overflowing, so she tore off her wrapper, hacked a spit on the hot road, and made a final, spirited dash for the tower—but the shadows were running after her, and worse, they were running with her. 🌀



RAJI A SAMUEL is a writer of prose and poetry from Ibadan, Nigeria. He is currently working on a semi autobiographical novel, *Of The Artist as a Mad Man, A Portrait*, about growing up in Ibadan. Follow him on Twitter @rajasamuel or @rasamuelng



The Sudd

Maya Alexandri

The bodies of the seventeen men had been stacked in four piles on two ox carts. The lone survivor had been roped to one of the carts and dragged along, stumbling in the sun, for the duration of the trek to the camp. He was severely dehydrated – sunken eyed – when he was led into the camp director’s office. He gave no resistance.

Of course, we gave him water mixed with electrolyte powder. Even though he was an ambusher, we do not take sides. Even against our own enemies.

As instructed, he sipped the electrolyte fluid slowly. In the shade of the office and the gentle currents stirred by the overhead fan, the man revived enough to look fearfully at each of us. We stared back at him with clinical detachment. His wrists and arms were abraded with rope burns.

I arranged my facial features to be as neutral as possible. We all did the same, with varying levels of success. The

young medical tech had the least experience and looked angry. The camp director could not prevent his sense of superiority from finding expression on his face.

The ambusher seemed to respond to that assertion of power with an acquiescence of helplessness. He began speaking wildly, incomprehensibly, gesticulating and sputtering, until the director of camp security raised his hand in a gesture calling for a pause. The ambusher’s verbiage dribbled away, and he glanced about fearfully again.

“Slow,” admonished the director of camp security, not unkindly.

When the ambusher spoke next, he had collected himself. His words were discernible, though like all of us, he undoubtedly spoke at least three languages, and English was not his first.

“Effendi, it is true that I and my brethren lay in wait

to harm your doctors, but I speak now to warn you for your own protection.” He looked at the camp director for approval. We none of us made any change in our facial expression, and after his searching survey found no disapproval, he continued:

“We know each other’s habits well,” he indicated with his hand, us against him, “and like many times before, last night, we bandits lay in ambush for your caravan. When the Land Rovers came, we saw them halt, as they do sometimes, for some short time, maybe twenty seconds, before driving again, and we know and you know the meaning of that little stop. This time we saw your helicopters make the drops earlier. We saw your doctors, like shadows, running away from the dirt track, across the bush, towards the helicopter drops. We know your strategies of offloading your doctors from the caravan. We have before attacked your caravans of Land Rovers to find them empty of all but drivers and vehicles. We know in the past your doctors have rendezvoused with local guides and helicopter drops of medicines and supplies and made their way on foot under cover of the bush to the camp and evaded our traps. Last night, when we saw the helicopters, we fanned out into the bush to block the doctors’ paths, and when they exited the Land Rovers and ran away from the dirt track, they ran towards us.”

Now the ambusher stopped. His eyes glazed, and his teeth chattered momentarily. An expression of attention flashed across the camp director’s face; he probably thought the man was about to seize. But life returned to the ambusher’s eyes, and he continued:

“One of the doctors hit his chest, like this,” he motioned, his right hand thudding over his heart, “I saw it,” he said, the assertion of bearing witness obviously meaningful for him, but the significance escaped us. “I saw it,” he repeated. He began whispering to himself, redirecting his eyes to the floor, and twitching periodically.

“Where are the doctors?” the director of camp security intervened. His voice was sharp, but not mean. “What did you do to them?”

The ambusher snapped his head up abruptly. His eyes were bloodshot now. We all had the same thought: he belonged on our ward. He was sick with the same plague, the recent epidemic that was afflicting all our patients.

“I can only tell you what was done to us.”

The statement was surprising. We never considered anything to be done to the ambushers. They were an unfortunate fact of life, like mosquitos and malaria. They are beyond government, beyond justice. Nothing can be done to them. They are not eradicable. Wherever there travel caravans laden with goods, bandits lie in wait. We knew seventeen of them were dead and stacked in piles on the carts outside, but we considered them to have done that to themselves.

The ambusher was again gripped by teeth chattering. The camp director turned his head to speak to the ward director. Medical treatment was obviously necessary. But the ambusher preempted any order the camp director might have given when he unexpectedly continued:

“It was too large to see in one sight.” His voice was clear, but his jaw appeared to be moving without the accord of his mind. His eyes were flickering with confusion, and his

hands trembled with strain, as if they were laboring to break loose from tethers. “Its feet were loathsome decay. That must have been the stench, the gut-clenching smell of death. Its feet crawled with maggots and its legs were writhing tendons of snakes. My neck was pulled up. I did not want to look! But my neck was pulled, and my head with it, like I was being hanged, but backwards, hanged upwards, forced to look up to see its terrible groin, an enormous gash of running pustules, sores and open bloody seepage.”

His description had a visible effect on us. The young medical tech now looked stricken, and the ward director had covered his mouth with his hand. The camp director seemed torn between deepening professional interest and disgust. The director of camp security, a man who never showed fear, who (I am confident) did not experience fear, wore a facial expression very akin to fear. The ambusher continued:

“Its abdomen was a block of knife blades as dense as river vines and as high as a baobab tree, and its chest and arms an eruption of furious molten rock. I did not want to look, but I was wrenched, hanged, broken into staring up, to its head and its horrifying face! I remember noticing: no screams. There should be screams. We all screamed! Why was it silent?” He looked at each of us now, pleading, as if we might know, might be able to explain.

“Its face was a mountain shard of ice,” the ambusher whispered. “Demons live in fire, but nothing can live in ice.” He closed his eyes and swallowed thickly. The shaking of his hands escalated. “The mountain crumbled in an avalanche, an avalanche of lifelessness, a wasteland crashing around us, roaring to us. I did not understand. I do not understand its language! It was my bones shaking, the avalanche screaming to my bones.” He opened his eyes and stared at the camp director desperately. “*Effendi*,” he beseeched, “my bones understood. It said, ‘Let my servants pass.’” He heaved and heaved and began hyperventilating now, gasping, his hands whirlwinding the air around his head. “My brothers fell down dead then, and your doctors ran past into the bush! Don’t you see!” he shouted at the uncomprehending expressions that met his revelation: “Your doctors are the servants of Death!”

We none of us spoke, and he ceased to speak. The electric intensity eventually ebbed from him, while indecision slithered over us, and soon a condition of heaviness threatened to freeze us in a tableau, like those pictures Europeans used to paint of the Last Supper.

Then the pharmacy manager knocked on the camp director’s door with the announcement, “The doctors are arrived.”

When I next saw Dr. Salih, some many years later, she was seated in Dubai International Airport, reading and apparently waiting to board flight 1701 to Monrovia in five minutes. Although I was hurrying to my own gate, and although I was sure she would have no recollection of me, my curiosity overrode my anxieties about missing flights and social impropriety. I had no reason to think I’d see her again; if I was to know, I must ask her now. “Excuse me,” I interrupted her and explained who I was, and what I wanted to learn.

She gave me her attention and listened to my request as

if my behavior was most natural and proper, as if she'd been expecting me. When I was done speaking, she smiled to herself, perhaps cheered by some memory.

"I told them that he was quite right," she replied. "I told them I was a servant of death, as were they, as are all of us, in that I must go when death summons me."

Unthinkingly, I sat down beside her. I was astonished. I apologized for having misheard her. "I meant, what did you tell the patients after the other doctors gave up and left you with the entire camp? You didn't tell the patients that you were a servant of death."

She nodded pleasantly. "I did."

I argued with her. She didn't remember the facts. Word of the ambusher's warning had leaked from the camp director's office and terrified the patients. They had refused treatment, accused the doctors of being executioners. The other doctors had expressed their sorrow at the folly of witchcraft and had departed. With so many camps of epidemic patients, doctors could not stay where they were not wanted. Dr. Salih alone had succeeded in persuading the patients to allow her to treat them. She had remained as our camp's sole doctor. And yet, among all the camps that had been organized to quarantine the epidemic patients, ours had been the only one that had suffered no deaths. The only bodies we had buried were those of the seventeen

ambushers.

She continued nodding as I spoke, affirming my summation of the circumstances. "Yes," she agreed, when I finished. "I told them that we are all servants of death, me just as much as them, and that if they wished to begin their service now, I would leave them as they desired me to go. But if they wanted to postpone their service awhile longer, I would stay and do what was possible to coax death to wait."

"And they agreed?" I was flabbergasted.

"Not all of them. Not at first. It was a mother who saved everyone, really. Her baby was probably dying, maybe a day away from dying or so, that's how ill the child was. And she gave me permission to treat her son."

"And he lived."

"Oh yes. He started getting better, noticeably better, in just a few hours, and then everyone else let me treat them."

"But why did she trust you with her infant son?"

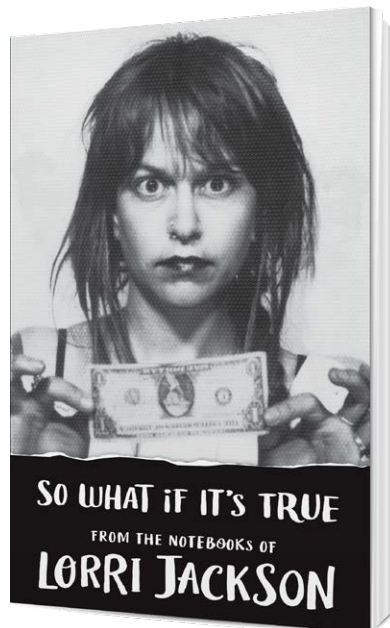
Dr. Salih's smile mellowed into a contemplative countenance. "After I spoke, she approached me. No one else would come near, but she walked up to me. She laid the baby in my arms. She surrendered him to me. She said, 'If my son is to die, let him find embrace among the spirits of his ancestors now. Or, if he is to live, let his suffering from this plague end now.' She was, you know, exceptionally brave." ⑤



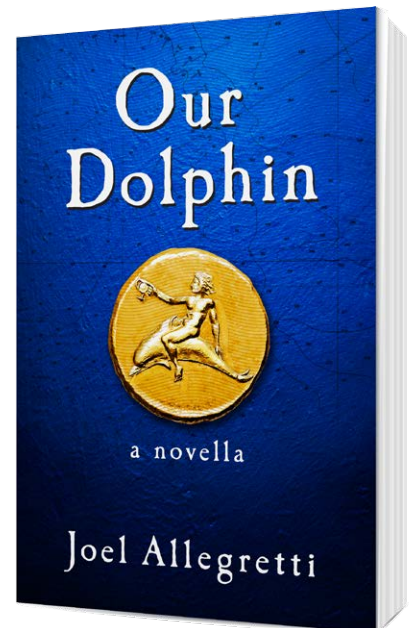
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The Draining

Lindsay Fowler

When my skin grows puffy and my body swells, when I become expansive and immobile and drape over the couch like risen dough, he draws me a bath and carries me to the tub, for I am birthing, and this is the way to draw the children from my skin.

Turn the water hot hot: 148, 149, 150 degrees. No, hotter. Feverishly, blisteringly hot. 174, 175. Better.

He drops me in the water and backs away from the splash. The routine is by now rote. Once I might have whimpered at the heat, stretched my legs above the waterline for some relief, but that only prolongs the process, and I look forward to the sense of relief that comes when this has ended.

He withdraws from the room when the children begin to emerge. When this is all over, he will be waiting to help me forget, to welcome me back to the sharpness of my body.

My pores tight, the children are slow to seep out at first. The smallest child is no larger than a speck of flea dirt, the largest the size and shape of a water louse. My skin cramps around a little polyp forcing itself from my knee, a drop of goo budding from my elbow. Soon the whole of my skin is expanding and contracting as my offspring leave me, and I am grateful for the scalding water that helps to loosen my pores.

The water turns sienna, ochre, muddy brown, the

children expanding like sodden basil seeds. My skin feels slack, my children almost all expelled, lured out by the steaming water.

The last children always hurt the worst. They clamber through pores that feel raw as fresh dug graves. The elasticity is gone. I have nothing left to give.

The temperature is dropping. 131, 130, 129. Too much longer and my children will turn bitter. Too much colder and my children will congeal and die.

I stand up on legs that tremble. Rivers of my children stream down my legs to mingle with their brothers and sisters, and the water writhes. My children sense change, chill. 116, 115.

I shiver and pull the drain plug. I have done enough for them.

My skin is already mottling, bruised. He has left a towel for me, draped over the tub deck, and I wrap myself in it. The towel is permanently stiff and stained from all the times before. No amount of washing can remove the residue.

I step out of the tub quickly, before the water has drained even an inch. I have learned it is best to leave before the end, before the children realize what I have done. When the drain begins to swirl, that is when the children start their screaming. 🌀



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Virginia Slims

Matthew B. Dexter

Our mothers won't stop smoking Virginia Slims. They'll die soon.

Invisible cornfields unfurl forgotten. Blowing plumes eating eternity. Drifts from kitchen windows creep into blizzard, flushed faces, fiends foraging for carcinogens and tonics. Drowning in resin and tar—between cold candlelight, scarecrows stalk. Our mothers cough bubbles of blood—spit café noir phlegm into rusty toilet bowls every morning. They're twins, Siamese snowflakes.

I'm pounding Mom's chest with white knuckles. Dad's howling about the ambulance.

"She swallowed a shit-load of aspirin!"

Guzzled it with the whisky bottle Dad pissed in—to punish me for luring Muslims on the basketball team in the back of the yellow school bus. Dad says "They're terrorists and niggers and ballers."

Dad never wanted another daughter.

I lose my virginity in the cornfield maze during a lunar eclipse. Casey rips my thong with fluorescent incisors, Skoal Straight Long Cut wedging abscessed molars. He reeks of fertilizer. Mom splits Casey's forehead with the shovel.

My eyes burning from blood, Casey's still inside of me moaning.

My neck collaged with hickeys, Mom blows smoke at my jugular as she camouflages my throat with pancake makeup.

She sits on the edge of the bathtub, bush overflowing—camel toe watching—winking with the atavistic wisdom of a Navy SEAL in diving gear.

Corpses stalk through trodden snow. Scarecrows cast shadows on unmarked graves. Our mothers giggle between corny jokes, smoke rings dancing around winking ghosts. There's a pack of Virginia Slims on the counter as wolves fill ashtrays with butts, the sink with wounded soldiers of Natty Light.

I hold Mom, eyeballs shrunken, lungs ballooning. Hospital whispers swarm. Husky esophagus among bubbles, woman whose womb I floated from forgotten, melting, vanishing with the inertia of snowflakes within footprints.

I hug Mom in the stairwell where she summons the energy to sneak a smuggled Virginia Slims. She's happy—charbroiled lungs filled with cancer. I rub her bald skull, the genie inside.

We toss dirt onto her coffin. Cornfields glimmer infinitesimally into golden horizons. Your mother blows smoke into my ear. Her tears curl around my nipples where fresh hickeys sting. Shadows melt into a million shards of nothingness. The afternoon is sweet as tobacco cathedrals engulfing locusts floating from fiery carnivals. ⑤



MATTHEW DEXTER is an American author living in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. His fiction has been published in hundreds of literary journals and dozens of anthologies. He writes abhorrent freelance pieces for exorbitant amounts of pesos to pay the bills while drinking cervezas in paradise with tourists. He is the author of the novel *The Ritalin Orgy* (Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, 2013). His second novel, third novel, debut memoir, and story collection are forthcoming.



The Fish is Fried, Sir

Zoë Wise

A man wakes up one day to find his wife has grown scales overnight. They are just a few skin colored inscriptions starting at the dip in her back. He's okay with the scales because he loves his wife and they have been together for a long time.

The man watches his wife sleep. He watches her chest rise as she breathes, hears the hum that isn't quite a snore. He gently rubs her hair and he remembers how happy he is with their life together.

The man and his wife want a child. They take the necessary vitamins, they count cycles, and they plan to see a specialist if they do not conceive. The man would like very much to have a son. He and his wife try every night, and he appreciates the nights when he is tired and she does all the work.

When the man takes his clients out to lunch, he sometimes goes to a restaurant called Sushi Yum. He has never been to this restaurant with his wife because he knows she prefers to cook. She does not care much for seafood. The man enjoys sushi.

Today there is a new dish on the menu. The man cannot read the Japanese but the picture next to the words looks like a fried prawn. He points to the picture on the menu and politely explains his choice to the waiter when he orders his food. The man has been bragging about this restaurant so much to his client, he pretends to know everything about the menu.

When the food arrives, the man makes his first bite generous. Fish juice leaks down his chin, and the man dabs it away. The food is warm. It is soft and delicious, and it makes the man think of the times when he is not too tired to make love to his wife and how soft and warm her body felt before she grew scales. Now there are so many. She has had them for a few weeks, but he is not concerned. He is so happy with these thoughts of his wife and so taken with the dish that he eats the entire plate without looking at it once.

That night, the man raves about Sushi Yum to his wife.

I'm sure it is great, she responds. But I don't like fish.

I understand, he says. We don't have to go.

His wife is lying on the bed rubbing cocoa butter into her arms. The lotion presses the scales to her body and reduces their metallic luster into a soft presence, but the man cannot help to notice how many more scales have grown to cover her body since their first appearance. He tells her maybe she should see a specialist.

That night when the man is undoing the clasp on his wife's bra, he begins to kiss her neck. He notices that a tiny slit that air pulses in and out of. As he kisses her more, he cannot help but to notice how little she breathes through

her nostrils and her mouth. He kisses her gill tenderly and turns out the lights before he makes love to her. He cannot help but to close his eyes and think of Sushi Yum the whole time.

The next day at work the man is sitting in his office when the phone rings.

It's your wife, the receptionist says. She's on line one. Says it's urgent.

Thank you. The man clicks over to line one.

Honey, his wife breathes into the phone.

What's wrong?

She pauses. I went to the family doctor, like you said.

Are you okay? The man asks.

We didn't about the scales, his wife recalls.

So what did he say? The man asks, annoyed.

There is a silence on the line.

I'm pregnant.

All through the rest of the workday the man is ecstatic. He announces at his meeting that he will be a father.

Good job chap, says his boss when he claps the man on the back.

Finally learned how to do the deed, jokes his co-worker.

The man writes an email to every person he knows in his contact list. He cancels his lunch meeting to design an e-card, which includes a picture of him and his wife and a stork. He does not tell anyone about her scales.

When he gets home that night, his wife is in the mood for celebrating.

Let's go out to eat, she says. I am eating for two now, after all.

Where would you like to go?

How about Sushi Yum? She suggests.

The man is even more pleased with his day. He reminds himself that he really does love his wife.

Ever since I've found out I was pregnant the strangest thing has happened, she says.

The man is not really listening, he is thinking about what he will eat for dinner.

I've been craving fish like no other, she continues.

This gets the man's attention.

Then fish you shall have, says the man, enthusiastically. He kisses his wife once on each gill.

At Sushi Yum, the man tells the hostess that he has just found out his wife is expecting. The hostess congratulates them, and asks when they are due. She is polite enough not to stare at his wife, who is not hiding her scales. The man finds the hostess attractive, he thinks she has radiant skin, but his wife is pregnant and the man thinks that she has never looked so beautiful.

The man's wife has never eaten sushi before so she is unsure what to order. The man feels he is an expert, so he orders a variety of plates for the two of them to share.

Should I eat that raw stuff? Asks his wife. The doctor said it isn't wise.

It's still early in the pregnancy, he reassures her. It won't matter if you eat raw fish just yet. Doctors like to try and scare you.

Okay, his wife says.

He orders two of the fried dish, because he does not want to share and he hopes his wife will enjoy it as much as he has. By the time the plates arrive the man has taught his wife how to use chopsticks successfully. She sits across from him, glowing, chopsticks in hand. The man reminds himself how lucky he is to be with her. How nice it is that she will change for him.

They taste a bit of each dish, being sure to save the best for last.

It will be great, the man promises his wife. Crème de la crème. He puts on a French accent to make her giggle.

When it is time to eat the fried dish, the man takes a second look at his plate. He has told his wife that it is prawn, yet now he is not so sure. He remembers it tasted unlike anything he had ever had before, phenomenal. He picks up one of the fried pieces with his chopsticks and dips it into the special sauce. The man has an idea, a seduction technique to get his wife in the mood. He leans across the table to feed a piece to his wife. He imagines she will find this attractive. She plays along, takes one seductive bite out of the piece of meat, and licks her lips. A grin comes to her face.

That is delicious, she tells the man. A bite of paradise.

I know, he replies.

Unlike anything I've ever tasted, she continues, almost in a whisper.

I know, he repeats.

The woman begins to feed herself and the man focuses on his own plate. The man notices the soft interior of the piece, and realizes that it is in fact not prawn he is eating. Curious, he pulls apart the skin of the meat and notices tiny beige balls that fill up the meat. The sight makes his stomach twist.

While he finishes his inspection, his wife finishes her meal. She leans across the table and asks if she can have the rest of his. He offers her the rest of his plate. Suddenly he is not sure he wants to continue eating at all. She thanks him for being so nice.

He pays the bill and the two of them return home, where the man claims that he is too tired from filling his stomach. He is really no longer in the mood to make love to his wife. The man pretends to snore, making the sound that she no longer does. While his wife thinks he is sleeping, the man is awake in bed thinking about the mystery meat.

The next day at work, the man arrives at his desk and finds a balloon and a bouquet of flowers. There is a card with congratulations written and the man is grateful, but he is distracted thinking about his meal the night before. He can't concentrate on his work or the nice words people are saying. He no longer likes the fact that his wife is pregnant. He looks up pictures of sushi on the Internet but finds no

answers.

On his lunch break, the man cancels his meeting with a client. He returns to Sushi Yum alone. The man asks the hostess if the owner is there, and he is. While he is waiting for the owner he flirts with the hostess, takes down her telephone number. She really does have great skin. When the owner arrives a smile crosses his face and he shakes the man's hand vigorously. The man explains.

I must know what this dish is, he demands. I can't stop thinking about it.

The owner smiles again. His English is broken, and his accent is thick. They communicate through a combination of hand signals and words. The man finds it inconvenient.

Fish is fried, sir, says the owner. Fish eggs.

Tobiko? Asks the man.

Ah, says the owner. Egg inside fish. The owner pauses, struggles to find the right word in his head. Ah, he says at last, moving his hands to form an invisible belly. Pregnant!

What are you doing? The man asks when he returns home and finds his wife lying silently in the center of their living room floor.

Shhh, she tells him. I'm trying to meditate. Her gills open and close in a slow, calculated rhythm.

The man shrugs and walks to the kitchen. His wife has never meditated before. The man is not quite sure what meditation is. A tuna sandwich sits on the kitchen counter. The man takes it for himself and watches his wife while he eats.

Don't mind me, he tells her.

His wife is laying on the floor with her eyes closed. Her arms are placed at both sides with both palms facing up. Between every couple of breaths his wife twitches with a rapid shaking movement. She seems to twitch without noticing. The man imagines his wife having a seizure. Her chest moves up and down but her mouth is closed and she is not breathing out of her nose. The man watches closer. On her neck the two gills move in synchronization with her chest. He watches the folds of her skin flap softly to allow air in and out. The man chokes on his sandwich when he sees this.

Do you think that meditating will stop you from turning into a fish? He asks his wife.

Shhhh, she tells him again.

His wife's once soft skin is now completely covered in scales, and she now resembles a fish more than his wife. Her eye sockets bulge out of her skull. He wonders if she is full of tiny eggs like the ones at Sushi Yum. He takes another bite of her sandwich and remembers that he does not like tuna.

This is disgusting, the man tells his wife.

It wasn't for you, his wife responds.

That night the man is fast asleep when his wife wakes him up. She sounds like she is gasping for air. It is an ugly sound. The man turns to his side to try to ignore it but it gets louder. The man gets up and gets himself a glass of water.

Later that night the man is trying to sleep when his wife sticks her cold wet hands under the rim of his boxers. The man shivers. The cold scales of her hand rub against his human skin. He closes his eyes and tries to imagine

someone else, anyone else. He imagines the young secretary at work and then the hostess at Sushi Yum. He becomes aroused and allows his wife to straddle him. She is used to doing all the work. She kisses his neck and searches for air in his ear. He can feel his wife kiss his chest and make her way down his stomach, pulling off his boxers. She whispers words but they do not make sense. He thinks about the fried fish they both ate.

Right at the moment the man opens his eyes; his wife presses her fish lips against the tip of his penis. The man shrieks, pushes his wife off of him, and runs to the bathroom where he rids his stomach of its entire contents.

The next day the man is sitting in his desk when his office phone rings.

Hello?

Your wife, says the receptionist.

Thank you, says the man, then clicks over to the other line.

Honey? His wife asks. Her voice sounds dry.

What?

I need to you to come home. Something's wrong. Please. His wife begins to cry.

The man is annoyed to have to leave work early, but reminds himself that his wife is now pregnant so he should try to be considerate.

I'll be there soon, he tells her.

On his way out of the office the man walks past the receptionist. She is wearing a low cut shirt and opening a lunchbox. The man recognizes the smell as something peculiar. He stops to ask her what she is eating.

Tuna sandwich, she responds. Everything okay with your wife?

The man turns and leaves the office.

The man drives home. Inside front door is a trail of what the man thinks looks like dehydrated potato flakes. They are gold tinted and each one is the size of a thumbnail. The man lingers in the entryway, in no hurry to find his wife. Instead, he focuses on the flakes, playing a game of hide-and-seek. He follows the flakes to the strangest places- the shoe closet, under the dining room table, the kitchen sink. He follows them into the master bedroom and into the attached bathroom where he finds his wife standing naked in front of a mirror.

Are you okay? He asks.

No, she replies. I'm not okay. My scales are molding and falling off everywhere. His wife begins to sob. They're so ugly! I'm ugly!

Moldy fish scales? The man asks.

He looks at his wife and notices that her scales have changed. Yesterday she was a deep speckled silver and blue, and now her scales seemed to be covered in a yellowish dust and coming off in flakes. He realizes this is what he has been finding in the house. He reaches out and touches one, then picks at it like a scab. His wife bats his hand away.

They're not ugly, he tells her. They look like velvet. Don't you like velvet?

This makes his wife cry even harder.

The man doesn't know what else to say. He has seen his wife upset about a pimple before and a sad dog on T.V., and this is no different. He remembers that fish don't like to be outside of water and begins to draw her a bath.

Waiting for the bathtub to fill, the man thinks about the time that he was a child and his goldfish got a bacterial infection. This infection made it look like its scales were covered in a yellowish dust. His mother called it gold dust disease and he loved it, even though the disease eventually killed his goldfish. The man remembers the excitement of the burial ceremony, how he decorated a matchbox and buried it in the backyard underneath an apple tree.

Would you like me to get some bath salts? He asks. Maybe it will help calm down the irritation.

His wife nods, still crying, and presses her body against his. The man tries pulls away from her; he does not want her scales touching his skin. The man notices fins growing on his wife's body. The man shivers. She pulls away and gets into the tub. His wife sinks her body under the water, eyes closed, and the man walks out of the bathroom.

That night the man sits on the couch in the living room. He is watching TV and eating another sandwich. Pastrami on rye. This one he has made himself. He was out of tomatoes and this made the man upset.

His wife is still in the bathtub, trying to swim around in the small space. The man plans to move her to the pool tomorrow when he gets around to it. This weekend he will decorate a much larger box, just incase. Tomorrow he will call a fish expert to ask about pregnant fish with gold dust disease. He loves his wife very much but he is content by himself, and he would not want to take care of any guppies. He has to be sure. The man enjoys the quiet of his empty house. He is watching an enjoyable television show. 🌀



ZOË WISE is a graduate student at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where she is earning her MFA. During the summer months she can be found in Denali National Park, where she spends most of her time writing stories, exploring the wilderness, and foraging with her corgi, Abbie. Zoë is from Bellingham, Washington and considers herself forever soaked with a love for all things Pacific North West.



The Passion of Pain

Penelope Mermall

She got down on her knees, bowed her head, and danced a slow dance with the midget. He thought she was being condescending, bowing her head and getting on her knees like that. Other women stayed on their feet. But as a child he had been taught never to disrespect a girl, so he just took it.

When the dance ended the midget wildly beat his little feet into the floor (he had hammered bottle caps into the soles of his shoes) and danced like crazy across the room. That's how he got his feelings out.

She was blown away by his moves. So agile. So quick. Such passion! She wanted him for her very own. She'd instruct him how to get into those hard-to-reach-places and to awaken her spirit by tapping those snappy little feet along the crooked curve of her pine.

When the music stopped she asked the midget to walk her home.

Having been raised a good Catholic, he said yes.

She asked him in for lemonade and saltines, but the little man had big sense and politely declined. She considered other options, things a man could not refuse, when he began to flap his short arms and rose up into the night air. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. The midget could fly!

"Come back! Come back!" she yelled. But the little man soon disappeared over the mountains.

Men had left her before. Brutes, she called them. But this was unprecedented. Never had she heard a woman talk of such things.

She flung open her front door and ran into the kitchen and climbed onto the table and danced the dance of her people. She danced of pain and suffering. She danced of passion. She twisted her body and clapped her hands and pounded the table.

In the morning she put on her uniform and rode the old bicycle to another part of town. Inside the house of shiny objects—where furniture sat in rooms like kings—she scrubbed and mopped and dusted and shined.

At dusk she stepped onto the balcony, with its purple plants, potted trees, and elevated views of the city, and thrust her arms into the moonlight.

•
She pedaled home, cutting through quiet villages and past sleeping dogs. The air humid. Gnats hitting her face.

A canopy of trees encircled her. The glow of moonlight disappeared. An owl hooted. ↻



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Cities in Flight

Elana Gomel

When Marek disappeared, I knew he had not been eaten.

The tail segments of our city were being discarded faster and faster as the hatching season approached. Swollen with elongated pale-grey eggs the size of a man, the former apartment blocks, grocery stores, temples and malls littered the golden fields that the city crawled through on its never-ending trek toward the Ocean. There was a lot of grumbling as the displaced tenants were herded into new quarters, their walls still sticky with honeydew secretions smelling of cinnamon and blood. The young segments were uncomfortable and even dangerous, as they had not hardened into proper senescence yet. Parts of them could still be sentient and feed upon their tenants. This is what everybody said must have happened to my son. But I knew better.

Marek had lingered behind because he wanted to see the hatching.

Marek had always been restless and unpredictable. A colicky baby, he had cried so much that my segment committee strongly hinted he would better be recycled. But this was when I discovered that a tiny piece of a bench had suddenly wakened up and burrowed into my buttock, sending tendrils of illegal arteries through my flesh. Of course, it was immediately removed by the first-aid gland but the damage had been done. My uterus was deformed and had to be expelled. And I was past the age when I could grow new organs. Marek would remain my only child.

As passionately as I loved him, we never got along. I found it difficult even to talk to him. It is strange that a mother should be tongue-tied speaking to her son but it was always like this with us. I did not understand him: his roving, restless eyes that probed everything that came his way, his habit of looking aside when talking to me. And most of all, I was stumped by his attitude to the city. He

claimed to be afraid of it.

There had always been malcontents who could not adapt to the flowing stream of our urban pheromones. Often it was not their fault: just some basic chemistry, something going awry in the delicate balance of mutual adjustment during the gestation period. I did not remember much of Marek's gestation, of course; but I still had a mental image of pungent warmth and sleepy contentment. Others were not so lucky: my sister Anna screamed throughout her first gestation, thrashing and flailing hard enough to puncture the pink blister of the parturition sack. Her baby had to be recycled. But Marek's uterine development had been peaceful and uneventful. He should have been perfectly well adjusted. But he was not. And because I believed it was my fault somehow, I forgave that little alien who was my only child.

But when I realized he must have slunk back to the tail segment just before it had been blocked off in preparation to being shed, I was so angry that I was ready to give up on him. I went through my workday, processing the incoming grain flow and allocating food rations to apartment units, sustained by the sense of righteous indignation. If my son cared so little for me that he had left without as much as a good-bye, fine! I didn't care either. It was only when I came back home and entered the empty rooms where the only sound was the booming, monotonous beat of the city's heart, that I realized that I would never hear Marek's voice again. And I could not bear it.

So next morning I said goodbye to my room than answered, as it always did, with a soft shudder. The residential part of the city was deeply senescent but individual rooms were awake enough to be attuned to their tenants' moods. It was y comforting to me, that wordless communion, but Marek had shied away from it. In his own room he had covered the walls with dead straw-plaited rugs. They were ugly, shedding a thin yellow dust that the symbiont cleaner-worms tried in vain to remove.

I remonstrated, telling him it made me itch. He just yelled at his door to keep shut and when it did not obey, kicked it viciously.

The streets were quiet because most people were at work. The facades of the buildings lining the main passage along the axis of our segment relaxed a little, letting their walls flow down in leathery folds, their windows blinking desultorily under the heavy-lidded cornices. The golden light streaming from the ceiling above the roofs indicated that it was around ten o'clock. As opposed to many of my friends, I liked the actual sun and often stood on the membranous decks that jutted out on both sides of the segment – the remnant of the infant wings – to look into the sky. Its mild rosy radiance always calmed me down. Marek, on the other hand, almost never went outside. For all that he claimed to be afraid of the city, he did not like the corn wilderness either. Sure, it was monotonous: golden fields of self-seeding plants interrupted only by a salt flat here and there, or by streams and lakes. The Ocean was a fable; not even the oldest citizens claimed they had seen it. Still, some people were fascinated by the corn which, after all, fed both the city and the citizens. But I was so miffed by my son's negativity that I was even willing to entertain him with wild tales of independent human settlements subsisting on their own harvests somewhere close to the Ocean shore. Such talk was frowned upon but I would rather have my son as a rebel than as a perpetual malcontent.

It did not work. All Marek wanted to talk about was the city and what he called its "bloody secret".

"What IS the secret?" I would yell at him. "We live here, the city takes care of us, we take care of it...?"

"How?" he would counter. "What does it need from us?"

"We clean it..."

"Not true. Symbiont worms do it."

"We defend it against enemy cities..."

"Don't make me laugh, Mother!"

It was true; when encountering another mile-long train of undulating units, marked by alien colors and stinking of harsh pheromones, our city would rear the upper part of its body (occasionally shaking to death the people who lived in the front segments; but that was war for you!); its magnificent jaws clacking and dripping poisonous foam, its multiple eyes and pseudo-eyes flashing menacingly. The two cities would posture like this for a while and eventually one of them would admit defeat and crawl away. Oldsters told of actual fights, in which the giants clashed and tore into each other's enormous bodies; but there was not even a memory of a fight in which human help was needed. We did our best, of course, congregating in temples, beating drums and singing menacing songs, but everybody knew it was for show.

I had an answer but it was not one that Marek would accept. My answer was that the city loved us. But I could never force myself to say this word to my son's scowling face.

I passed through a tiny piazza where soft pink and orange corals fringed the hollow seating area. Old Man Viktor was there; too decrepit to work and not ready to walk into the corn wilderness, he spent his days lazing about.

"Hello, Maria!" he yelled. "Where is that wastrel son of yours?"

I did not reply but he would not let me be.

"Is it true that he went seeking the wild humans?" he cackled.

"No!" I tossed at him. "It's a lie!"

"Wanted to have babies of his own, did he?" he sniggered.

Clearly Viktor was getting senile and I should inform our segment committee, so they would urge him toward the last walk where his useless carcass could at least fertilize the self-perpetuating corn that fed cities and humans alike. He was way too old to be recycled.

"My son is a man," I said, enunciating clearly. "This is why he is called my son and not my daughter. Men don't have babies."

"They used to," Viktor declared. "In old times. When sex was for breeding, not just fun!"

I rolled my eyes and hurried past him. Talking about sex with that toothless wreck was embarrassing. My last partner had left me a year ago: he had not gotten along with Marek and I could not blame him. As for my son, he did not seem to be interested in women or men. I had hoped a partnering would soften his temper but it never happened. I used to needle him about that. Now all I wanted was to have my son back. Let him scowl, let him sulk; let him be abrasive or sarcastic. Just let him be alive.

I rushed through several more segments without noticing much of my surroundings. I had to be inconspicuous, lest strangers would inquire what I was doing here. But I was in luck. Everybody was at work: processing corn in the giant gut-blisters at the bottom of the city, just above its innumerable scurrying legs and undulating mantle, milling, baking, distributing; or working in nurseries; or teaching older kids; or practicing handicrafts.... My eyes filled with tears as I pictured that busy hum of communal life. How could Marek be so dismissive of it; how could he claim that humans had no purpose, were just useless parasites in the city's protective body?

I traversed the last segment and almost collided with the tough leathery membrane that separated the egg-filled tail from the rest of the body. I touched it but it stayed hard and obdurate.

I was stumped. I had not thought much of what I would do when I came here. I had been driven by one need only: to find my son. And here I was. Now what?

Procrastinating, I looked around and saw an oval orifice plugged by a feebly twitching muscle sheet. I pulled at it and it withdrew, letting me outside, onto the wing-deck.

The sun was high in the sky, its reddish glow veiled by haze. The corn stalks rustled beneath me; from my vantage point it looked as if the terrain below was covered by crinkly golden foil. In the distance I saw a gleam of water. The wing-deck clung to the convex wall of the city's copper-colored tegument, dotted with sparse protrusions and dabbed with crimson markings that spelled its identity in a language no human could read. If I stepped to the curling edge of the dried-up wing, I could see far ahead the city's mighty head, looming high in the hazy air, its curved mandibles clacking, its many eyes and pseudo-eye scanning the wilderness. In the opposite direction the corn was trampled and broken, littered with egg cases that used to be homes of my kind. Now they were shriveled and shapeless pods encased in tough grey skin. But I could not actually

see the tail because at this point the walls of the segment ballooned out, their curves obscuring the mysterious process-taking place just beyond my field of vision.

The hatching was forbidden to humans. Soon enough we would be told by the subtle change in pheromones to stay in our quarters for a couple of days. The food stored in public granaries would be distributed in advance, as no corn would be delivered through the gut-blisters. And then the pheromone level would return to normal, we would emerge from our rooms, life would go on as usual...

Except that my son would be gone.

What could I do? A wild thought came into my head that I should leave the city; lose myself in the corn wilderness. People had done so: disgruntled workers in gut-blisters would jump out through the muscular chutes that brought the harvest into the city, and oldsters were escorted outside in the same manner. But there was no way back, and I did not feel ready to die.

Something white glimmered just beyond the swollen curve of the segment wall. An uneven, feverish heat radiated from the restless body of the city. Clutching the edge of the deck with both hands, I plastered myself to the curve, trying to see what it was.

It was a human skeleton, impaled on a tough spur jutting from the asthmatically palpitating wall.

I knew what a skeleton was, having seen pictures in old books. But how did it get here? Children and infrequent casualties were recycled; old people died in the corn. There was no such thing as a dead body in the city.

I reached out, straining to touch it, to convince myself it was real. And somebody grasped my hand.

I screamed but my scream was cut short when I looked down into Marek's face.

My soon was ensconced in a sloppy fold of the city skin that formed a sort of hammock just below the skeleton. He crouched there, dirty and unkempt, his eyes huge and wet, reminding me of the times when, as a baby, he would wake up from a nightmare.

"What are *you* doing here, Mother?" he whispered.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to see the hatching..."

"No, you are not seeing the hatching! You are coming back with me!"

My voice rose up into a commanding yell which, I knew, irritated Marek to no end. But now my son only smiled wryly.

"I wish I could, Mother."

"Of course you can!"

"Look!"

He lifted his arm – no, he tried to lift his arm, and I saw

it was connected to the city's hide by a tube that bulged with blood.

"I have to wait here. The city would not let me go."

"Why?"

"Because the winged larvae are almost ready to hatch. And they need a human to fertilize their mate."

"To..."

"This is how we used to reproduce. Cities still do. You need two entities and one of them sends...it's like a messenger, a tiny little thing...but it carries something, information maybe, or some kind of pheromone. And then the other entity can have a baby. This is what cities need us for. We are...I think it used to be called spermatozoa. It's still in the textbooks, you know. Every reproduction cycle, each city sends one human to another one of its kind, so they can hatch their eggs. We are cities' spermatozoa."

"But our city did not have..." I started feebly. And then I looked at the skeleton.

"Yes," Marek said. "They die. The messengers die."

"And you are..."

"I think this is what I was born for," my son said and there was a note of wistful resignation in his voice I had never heard before.

Something fell over us, a shadow. I thought it was a cloud but looking up, I realized it was not. It was a winged shape as large as a full segment that banked steeply and rose up into the haze.

There was a mighty noise like a thunderstorm but it was coming from below. One of the egg cases cracked and fell apart and a winged larva crawled out. It was blind and shiny-wet, with a dull eyeless head. But its mandibles were already sharp, curving toward each other like parenthesis. It shook out its crumpled wings, exposing them to the dying sun, so they could dry out in preparation for its flight.

"Good bye, Mother!" Marek whispered, and the resignation in his voice was belied by the desperation with which he clutched my hand. "I'm sorry, I wasn't a good son but I tried..."

The larva buzzed softly and the mighty body of the mile-long living city shook in expectation. I looked into my son's eyes.

"They just need a human, right? Any human, a man or a woman?"

"What difference does it make? Sex is for us, not for them."

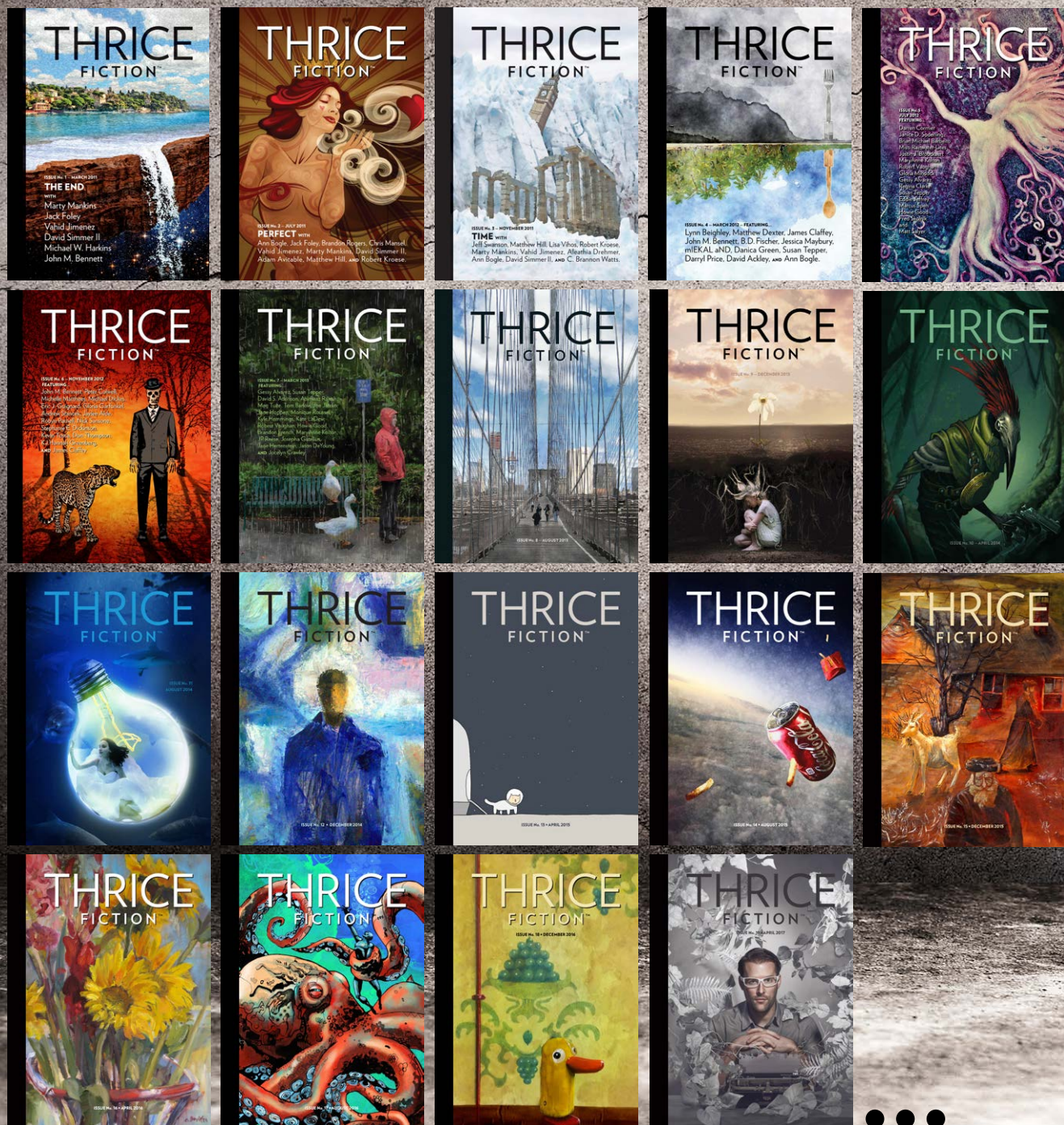
The rapidly drying wings vibrated in the still air. I rushed to edge of the leathery remnant of the wing, which had once carried our city across the golden wastes of the depleted world.

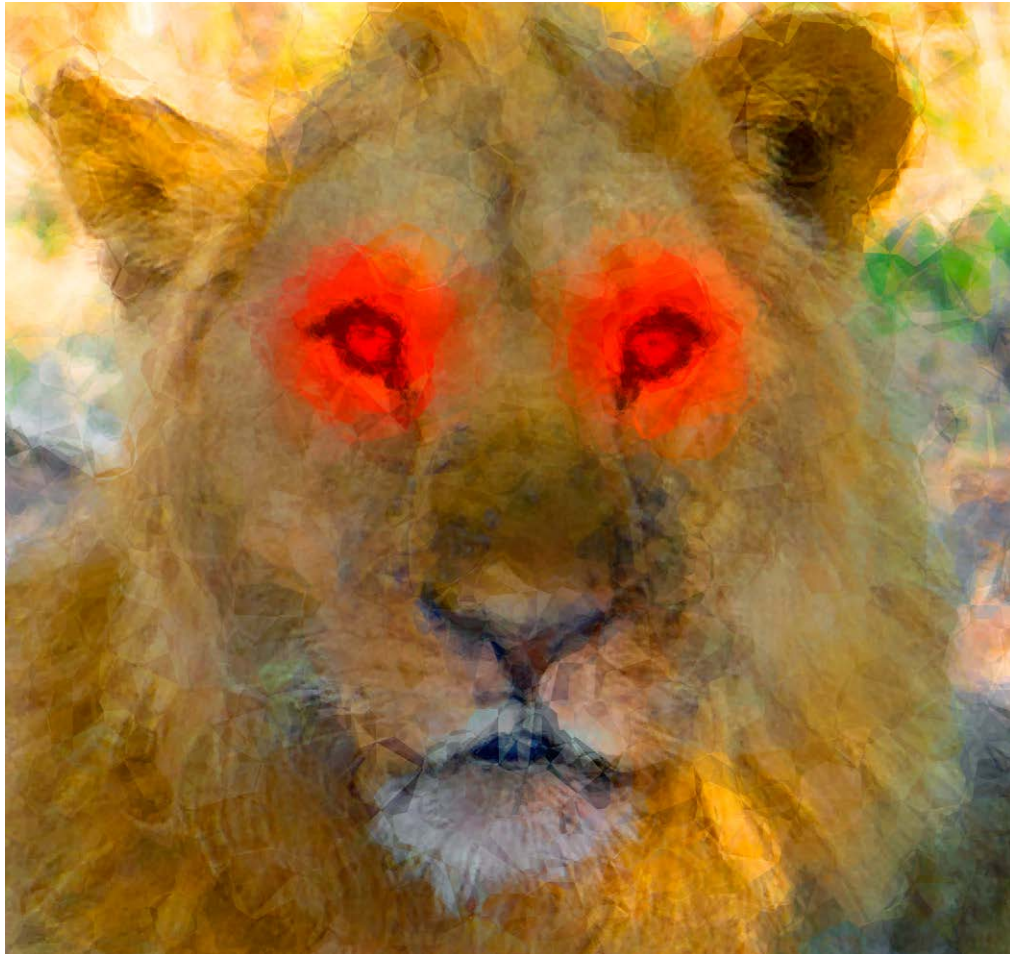
"Take me!" I yelled, waving my arms. "Take me!" ☺



ELANA GOMEL is an Associate Professor at the Department of English and American Studies at Tel-Aviv University. She has taught and researched at Princeton, Stanford, University of Hong Kong, and Venice International University. She is the author of six books and numerous articles on subjects such as narrative theory, posthumanism, science fiction, Dickens, and Victorian culture. As a fiction writer, she has published more than twenty fantasy and science fiction stories in *New Horizons*, *Aoife's Kiss*, *Bewildering Stories*, and other magazines and anthologies (including *People of the Book* and *Apex Book of World Science Fiction*). Her fantasy novel *A Tale of Three Cities* was published by Dark Quest Books in 2013 and is available on Amazon. She can be found on Facebook and on Twitter as @ElanaGomel.

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A Rock and a Hard Place

Lilian Oben

Story in their circles went that no one drove past those hills in their right minds. The car shell was all that showed of the last time someone tried to prove them fools: blood rust caked into old white paint, a funny sort of algae; needle grassweed reaching through the holes like arms through a sweater; tires missing, though one still held on, attached by a corroded nut, rubber part gashed by sharp claws; side mirrors and other beautification pieces gone, robbed in the night; gaping gut where engine once stood now disembowled and left to nest stray night creatures.

How it came to be that lions took over those plainy hills no one knew, just that one day one rabid beast came stalking through, and the next seemed a pride appeared, yellow sinewy masses canvassing the ground, dusty scrawny malnourished things, no visible relation to their storied cousins, forcing the town's inhabitants further and further afield, their abodes now nothing more than misery backyards for frequent violent deaths. Viewed from some

angle one could mistake the giant cats for large hyenas, so little did they resemble their regal species. Fluidy eyes swung back and forth, plowing the landscape for their next meal, while milky saliva masses dripped unfettered from perpetually hungry mouths well hidden by dry needly grass. Waist high on a man, the brittle weeds formed a desert plains curtain tall and thick enough to hide the beasts, rendering them invisible to passersby until too late.

Took no time before all knew to avoid the place, and soon most did not venture even remotely close, carried their business as far afield as they could, did not rise too early or linger too late, made sure doors were bolted, windows barred lest one of the lions wandered off their hills, found their way into their backyards. The few that had need to drove past at a scared curve, bending away from the hill where their neighboring predators roamed.

One day was said someone spied a lone woman staggering towards the plains, some say lost, others say drunk or some other mental affliction affecting her faculties.

More than likely just some late night woman blinded by the light of day. By some saving grace seemed she turned away from the rising hill path, took instead a wide circumference way, giving the lair a wide berth. And none too soon: many heard it later whispered that the particular day had seen hunger turn the lions mad, would have eaten one of their own had it come to that.

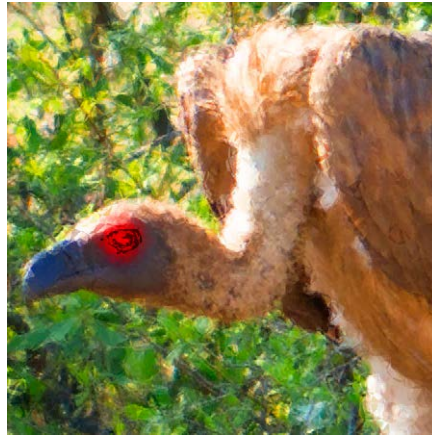
The driver of the now shelled car had not been so lucky. A speedy new Japanese coupe in its day, the ferrous cave and its overgrown innards now sat askew on a bouldery ledge, grisly proof for those who doubted the legend. Now and then, a night creature scuttled out from under the rusty hood, its eyes red in the dark in search of food. Or, as was more often the case, a vulture swooped down from the sky and in one lightening stroke picked up a nestled young so fast, the mother creature could do nothing else but look upward, dazed, its warm body drawing closer to shield the remaining brood.

So it went, the motor car and its cocky driver had raced up the hill one scorching weekday afternoon, slicing through the grassy path like a tiny rocket ship. Its fresh metallic white coat caught the sun rays and threw them back up like a thumbled nose, sending beams of hot silver up and outward, blinding passersby. Music blared from the inside and, had anyone cared to look, what they would have seen was the driver's race- car thin form. Free of safety belt restraint, he moved in the car's bucket seats to the manic beat of his radio, eyes shielded from sun by dark sunglasses, thin, gold-ringed fingers tapping the wheel. It had been one of those heady Friday afternoons where a body could be forgiven for believing him or herself invincible, and the driver was no exception. Driving hard and fast, accelerating higher and higher into the uncharted unknown, the car stereo music lulling him miles away, his mind no doubt already saw deep into the weekend. Looking ahead to a place nowhere near the perilous terrain that threw up dust clouds around his spinning wheels, nor to the road that lay steadily narrowing, that driver saw and heard nothing. Meanwhile, his way rose plum into the crevice of danger hill, slopes and slants jutting forth on either side.

Wasn't until he plowed forth and the path turned sharply into a narrower dirt road, and his front left wheel shimmied right off from a volcanic-sized pot hole, that he noticed his sunlight blocked, a half a dozen yellow fire gazes

piercing into his tint screens. Then the oil slick of his neck hair stood on end, froze the way down his spine.

On the other side, seemed the same vehicle burst through the long bleached grass, an unexpected meteor bouncing a jolty gig down the rest of road, music blasting louder. At first glance seemed all was right, driver with the windows down, same smug look on his face and a lopsided grin, jauntily carried away in his foreign automobile.



Only on closer inspection did the fresh red flash wet and gleaming on the white body paint, streaking down in dark streams, and could be seen that wasn't a smug look at all but a face clear gashed open, hundreds of shards of broken glass piercing the sheets of torn red-slick skin like a weird sort of jewelry. Eyes and other facial features now just flesh caverns; red plateaued top of his head where heavy canine jaws had clean bit through; skull and upper cranium starkly visible, a halved grapefruit; and suddenly the smug look made sense. Was no smile at all, but a death grimace, the heart already stopped, body just waiting to

catch up.

Then the vehicle hit a rock and spun itself suddenly, the driver thrown forward bolt upright then slumped, letting loose the jug head of blood left to do nothing else but pour out and down.

The beasts would come down for the rest of him soon enough, sure enough. The blood trail assured that fact, just as soon as they were through working on whatever part of their human meal it was that lay clenched in their hungry jaws.

No mistaking it, those mountain lions had found themselves a home amongst the far- flung hill folk and it was up to the rest of them—the dwindling number of haphazard neighbors—to figure out what meant the most to them: to stay and hold on to the homes and lives they had known all these years, or to make a move for someplace else. Seemed one hell of a rock and a hard place to be, yet harder still, for some. ↻



LILIAN OBEN is a West African actor and short fiction writer based in Washington, D.C. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times* and in online literary journals such as *Spittoon Magazine*, *Symmetry Pebbles*, *Survivor's Review*, *Some Ways to Disappear* and *Pyrta Journal*, among others.



What is Surrealism?


John J. Trause

sparked an epidemic of juvenile obesity among the Albanian diaspora enthusiastic Vortigern with counterpoise as sanctioned by St. Collodion of Mayagüez Stalin-lipped, heh heh, get it in the house, babydoll.

They were uncertain when Zia Marta mentioned “junk in the trunk”. Not good. I’ll crush all your toy(s).

protesting the marwanification of new jersey, teasing treasure chest of dolly partonismus

deathbed lincoln diagonal
fragonard baise boucher

get me out of here. 



JOHN J. TRAUSE is the author of *Picture This: For Your Eyes and Ears* (Dos Madres Press, 2016), *Exercises in High Treason* (great weather for MEDIA, 2016) and many other books. A book of traditional and experimental poems, *Why Sing?*, is forthcoming from Sensitive Skin Press in 2017. His translations, poetry, and visual work appear internationally in many journals and anthologies. Marymark Press has published his visual poetry and art as broadsides and sheets. He is a founder of the William Carlos Williams Poetry Cooperative in Rutherford, N. J., and the former host and curator of its monthly reading series. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize (2009 – 2011, 2013, 2016).

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue sleeveless dress, is captured in mid-air, jumping or falling. Her hair is flying upwards, and her arms are outstretched. The background is a soft-focus bokeh of warm, golden-yellow and light blue circular lights. The overall mood is dreamlike and ethereal.

Collector of Forgotten Faces

Ellen Crispin

The girl came into the old city by boat. The metal and glass spires had begun sinking back into the ocean before she was born. Their foundations turning into makeshift homes for squids and angry shoals of fish. (Everyone knew city fish were angriest.) But the fish ignored the girl and her boat this day. Perhaps because the boat was squat and grey as it skimmed through wreckage. Like she'd carved off a piece of the city and set herself adrift on it.

She'd borrowed the boat from a second cousin. A man as squat and grey as his boat. She dreaded the favor he'd ask in return. But it had to be done. That familiar itch had formed in her. The itch flexed her fingers at night, made her flip through her collection of scrapbooks upon waking. The pages covered in wheat paste remnants—the only way she could get the plastic cards and rusted metal coins to stick. The faces in the pages lit with sickly yellow light. Most grimacing, a few smiling. Their names and dates of birth stamped out in block letters beside them. Each collection etched into her mind. That page, from a grain tower in New Omaha. This page, from a forlorn convenience store outside former Pennsylvania. How the empty white racks had shone in the August sun as she pulled those wallets from the decaying pockets and purses of husks. She always tried to be careful. But, often, the extraction caused the husks to crumble into dust. As if they knew their identity had vanished into another's hands and they needn't hold on any longer.

The old city. Once beside the ocean, now of the ocean. Still grand in its aquatic state. People in the communities around the bay often gathered at dawn to watch the sun hit the remaining glass. The oldest muttering *wasn't it something* and the youngest nodding, not really knowing but feeling it in the pinch of their eyes as the highest floors turned pink in the light.

The girl tied her boat to an exposed beam on the edge of a building. She crawled through a broken window and pulled herself onto a mold covered floor a few feet above the water line. The girl moved as if she knew where she was going, but in truth, she knew only the shape of the building. She'd recognized it at a distance from a book she'd read as an even younger girl. Gold lions once marked the entrance of this tower. Gold lions for those who spun gold. She found the stairs and climbed. Up and up, until the air became drier and the smell of sea-rot faded a bit. Her legs burned as she came to a floor that made her skin tingle. *Here*, something whispered in her.

Up this high and with the windows unbroken, the husks had settled everywhere and remained undisturbed. In the dark hallway beside the stairwell, the girl heard the familiar

swoosh of dust as she stepped, failing to avoid the dried-out bodies. She reached a set of double doors. Two walls of windows and countless skylights siphoned the dim winter sun into a blinding curtain of light as she pushed open the doors. The enormous room spread in every direction around her. Black boxes hung suspended above hundreds of husks fallen at their desks. Long silenced computers sat still as she moved through the space. This room had once hummed and the absence was palpable. Like the electricity and urgent voices left marks on the building's metal bones that it couldn't quite shake.

The girl sought the husks that had fallen in the most curious poses. There were the obvious ones with their hands still resting on mouses or phones. And the ones who'd stepped away from their desk right as the bombs went off. Though the girl never fully understood what was meant when they said bombs. The word meant explosion and irreparable damage. Yet these husks were the only marker of trouble. The bomb had swept like a wave and, in an instant, stripped the water from each person in its path. Only humans, only their soggy bodies. Death by thirst a thousand times over.

But they still had their names and the girl wanted those. She wanted the half-punched oil change keycard she found in the pocket of a husk by a vending machine; she wanted the gold coin she found in the imprint of a husk's hand near the row of fax machines. She spent hours collecting each card with a face on it, each piece of plastic exclaiming 2 FOR 1. There were more wads of paper bills in this room than she'd seen before. Fat rolls in wallets and pockets. She considered taking them for her book. They seemed sacred in this space. Carried by so many. But paper fades first and she didn't want to spare the room for soon-vanished tokens. Strange how many husks she found with hands around their bills. As if caught counting in a relaxed moment. Or sensing a threat, finding comfort in the repetition.

The girl tried to imagine reaching for her money in fear, running her hands over it. But she couldn't quite picture it. She could see the buzzing people in this room. Could imagine the screens blaring numbers and places and urgency. But if she'd felt the end? Perhaps she would've touched her plastic face on its card, or looked around at all of it and said: "Wasn't it something."

The sun began to drop into the water's edge as the girl crawled back into her gray boat. Her bag sat between her feet as she rowed. It brimmed with cards and coins and hundreds of faces staring out into harsh yellow light. Still surprised by the flash all these years later. ☺



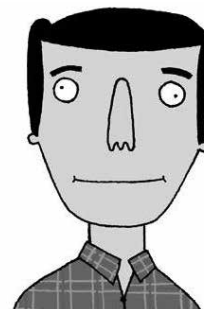
ELLEN CRISPIN is a writer, filmmaker, and occasional performer. The majority of her published work thus far have been journalistic in purpose (with a few poems scattered in between). *Collector of Forgotten Faces* is her first published fiction.

ARTISTS & PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE

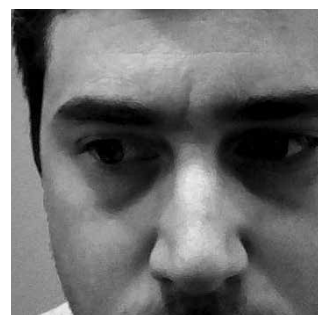
KATELIN KINNEY *Front, Inside Front, & Back Cover, Pages: 2, 20, 40...*
graduated from Herron School of Art and Design in Indianapolis, IN with two BFA's in fine art painting and fine art photography. She uses these two methods together to create digital paintings where photos begin to morph into surreal worlds of fantasy and conceptual dramatizations. Visit her online at katelinkinney.com



REZA FARAZMAND *Page: 12...*
draws comics and writes things. You can find more of his work at Poorly Drawn Lines (PoorlyDrawnLines.com), which is updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A collection of his cartoons titled *Poorly Draw Lines: Good Ideas and Amazing Stories* debuted on October 6, 2015.



CHAD ROSEBURG *Page: 23...*
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.



CHAD YENNEY *Pages: 13, 18-19...*
makes paper collages in Washington state. You can see more of his work at his website at computarded.com or send him love letters at computardedcollage@gmail.com.



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





MIA AVRAMUT Page: 10...

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.kv.r.y quarterly literary journal* (featured artist), *Blue Fifth Review*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She lives in Essen, Germany.



ROB KIRBYSON Pages: 4, 32-33...

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**



KYRA WILSON Page: 15, 39...

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**



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

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



COMING SOON

Thrice Fiction

Issue No. 20 • AUGUST, 2017