

THRICE

FICTION™

ISSUE No. 23 • AUGUST 2018



Kinetic by Brelynne Gunderson

THRICE FICTION™

Issue No. 23 • AUGUST 2018

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 23 Notes

RW Spryszak, Editor

Thrice Fiction Magazine has never won any awards. We've never won, placed or shown in any finishing list of "Best Of" or any other kind of race or contest. We have no Pushcarts for ourselves or for any specific piece written by any particular author. We've had a handful of generous reviews from time to time but are rarely found on any of the lists anyone (whoever they are) creates pointing to like journals. Is it that we just suck or what?

Not exactly.

Thrice has no awards because — even if we were good enough — we never apply for them. We never hold contests either. Maybe this is a disservice to our contributors — both artists and writers — who (along with Dave and me) get no compensation for all this effort. I've thought about that. It seems kind of unfair. But let me explain.

I knew the late Hugh Fox, and even published him once in a long-ago fledgling magazine I ran in the late 1980s. I know he was in on the creation of the Pushcart Prize, and I know it was done to bring attention to the vast amount of excellent work being done in the small house world of indie publishing. It was a legitimate promotional plan, a noble endeavor done for all the right reasons. But — twenty or thirty years down the road — it's become one of those things that everybody seems to have. And, while it may have been a grand marker of accomplishment at some point, the only time it gets mentioned anymore is when someone writes up their bio. Make no mistake, I understand the achievement and applaud everyone who has one or is proud to mention that they were nominated. But, you know, a lot of writers find ways to "get" themselves nominated, if you know what I mean. The true, honest honors of such are the ones others do in your behalf without your prompting. To my way of thinking, those are the only truly legitimate honors, and I wouldn't object one coming *Thrice's* way from this method. But there is simply so much self-service about this, I'm not going to hold my breath.

But in a larger sense, speaking more to what I believe as someone who collects the writing for *Thrice*, awards are actually rather odd in a philosophical sense (not as odd as contests which, I'm sorry, are vile, viciously quotidian, and out-of-place in this artform). Like "Best Director" did this film but "Best Picture" is by this other director over here. It's still too much like competition and too often nonsensical to fit my idea of this art.

Divergent opinions are your right — should you disagree. You're just wrong, is all.

Think about the magic of having someone read your story or your poem or your novel. It's a thrill, for a writer, to know that someone they don't know likes what they did there. So there are no medals handed out here at *Thrice*.

The work is absolutely enough.



The Wait

Angelica Oluoch

The waiting is what hurts the most. Waiting for love to be reciprocated, waiting for men who will never wake up, waiting for children who will never come, waiting for grown children to leave home, waiting for your husband to die so you can inherit his farm and his cows—the cows which he gave to your mother for your dowry.

I sit here for the third time in a row this week, waiting to see the promised e-mail from Jah Bijd Manu. And I know the e-mail may never arrive. With promises of holidays taken in Zanzibari, sipping sdoujuop and pretending to know how to ride the non-existent ocean waves on surfboards we do not own. And him telling me how we will weep as Kwesta and Fena Gitu serenade us.

I am tired. I am tired of the waiting. Of begging strange men to come home to marry me. Of taking photos upon photos to help peddle the image of the good wife. Come now, she whispers, come now and smile nicely at the camera and tell the nice men why you want them to take you home and not anyone else.

I am a thinker, I smile and tell her. I kill people for a living.

Here in East Africa, in Kenya, we do not have winters, I tell him. We have two definite seasons: the cold, rainy season and the dry, hot season. There is no in between. My Motherland is one of absolutes.

He writes to tell me about how they have such cold winters where he is at, and how autumn is beautiful and how everyone waits for summer with such desperation.

But I really do not care.

In fact, I wonder why he felt the need to give me this information.

I tell him that I think winters must be miserable. And that there is nothing beautiful in the loss of life, as is autumn's nature.

Your people are interesting, I tell him. They are

interesting because they have fooled themselves into believing life is four quarters in certainty. With two of them being allowances for undecipherable pools of gray.

And that can never be so, you see. Life is split in two; always, always.

Like so: the sun's heat, and the rain. Day, and night. Black, and white. Life, and death.

Right, and wrong.

That night, he stops speaking to me.

Marriage is a bizarre ultimatum to place on oneself. This, this object you gift yourself after you have completed your education and earned a degree and you have a job and you are powerful and no longer walk on the ground like the rest of humanity.

Marriage is nothing like that. Marriage is to be a part of the mess, not a peaceful interlude from it. Marriage is me learning to grow my dreadlocks, and me having to fold (sometimes clean) shirts the right way and repeating socks three times in a row. Marriage is sunny, lazy Sunday afternoons spent on unmade beds and endless cups of tea, while brooding over the day's copies of *Taifa Leo* and *Sunday Nation*.

Therefore, the people who refuse to make it so, cannot be my friends; I refuse them to be. Because you cannot claim to understand human nature, if you make no allowances for it in the one institution where it is birthed and brought to life.

The next morning, when I wait in queue to buy milk for my tea at Kigocho and Sons' General Shop, the gossip weaves around me in loops of loud whispers and outrageous laughter and exclamations calling upon Yesu to come down on a motorcycle and fix the world.

"Uuui! Have you heard now? Hm! Let me tell you, imagine Wambura's brother is dead!"

"Ati? Ati what? When!"

“Hehehee! You don’t know? He was caught stealing a phone at the Showgrounds, and the people beat him up. Imagine! Can you just imagine?”

“And he is the same one whose mother died last year! Heeh!”

“In fact! Today is the day they are praying over her grave. It has been a whole year since she died!”

“How can he do that his mother? These children!”

I drift away from the small crowd and greet the shopkeeper. He sells me milk that looks like flour interspersed with water and margarine. It sloshes in the plastic bottle it resides in as I place it in the kiondo I carried with me. The bottle is warm to the touch. Too warm, in fact, to have come from a cow just this morning. More like warm from a cooking pan where it was engineered to look like cow’s milk. Unreal.

If you sit on a sisal mat under a tree’s shade, and think about it and think some more, death anniversaries are peculiar things to recognize. It is almost as if, we are congratulating the dead for managing to stay dead *all* that time. Imagine! All those hours and days and months.

One year, then two, then five, then ten, then twenty-five. Imagine.

•

He decides to keep speaking to me after all, and agrees to our first phone call, finally. We calculate the hours between East Afrika and Canada, and arrive at a plausible time. Dawn for him, lunch hour for me.

When I first hear his voice, my heart does not melt and I have no butterflies in my stomach. Instead, my heart’s muscles frost over with ice even thicker, and impatience fills my gut. I am irritated by his incessant chattering, and his rude-sounding cackle.

“Do you have any lips?” I interrupt him with the random question, not caring that he wasn’t done yet, not caring that my tone is biting, not caring that I speak at him

rather than to him.

“Ahahaha! That’s so funny! You are so funny! But yeah I do have lips, honey.”

I want to tell him that no part of me is his honey, and that I disagree with the assessment of his face’s components.

“You don’t worry,” I tell him, “when you come to see me here in Nyeri, your lips will catch frostbite, and they will die and fall off. Do you know why?”

“Hahahaha! No, I don’t, not really. Why?”

“Because, my cold heart; that is why.”

A strangled noise drones through my phone speaker. The line goes dead.

•

The men we choose to bring home to our mothers. The men we choose to bring home to our mothers. They must be willing to speak and willing to keep quiet and willing to learn when to employ which. They must learn to be good fathers and yet, go along this obscure path named life as if they have never grown up. Because to grow up, means to lose the tenacity children are known to possess for accepting life’s disappointments with no anger, no loss of hope.

The men we choose to bring home to our mothers are to prove to us, that the immature father who raised us is not the sole prototype of the human male species. They must bring with them a world of ordered clutter; where everything runs in perfect tandem, with no clock to dictate the passage of time. All this they must do without invading the home they are brought into.

The men we choose to bring to our mothers do not truly exist. But still, here we sit, waiting for them. Writing of them as if the words will summon them from where they lay. Here we sit, consulting doulas and the village midwife to teach us to prepare for sons, who may never come. 🙄



Plums

Natalie Warther

He runs his hands under the back of my shirt, cold practiced stones against my skin. He does not bother to remove my coat. He unhooks my bra easily and I feel the teeth in each hook lose their fight to stay married to the other. We moved systematically, his wet mouth on mine, fistfuls of his thick hair in my hands, pushing into the laid down driver’s seat of his old Toyota Camry. He has nine minutes until his shift. It’s dark. He calls me baby. The Palo Alto Mall parking lot is empty.

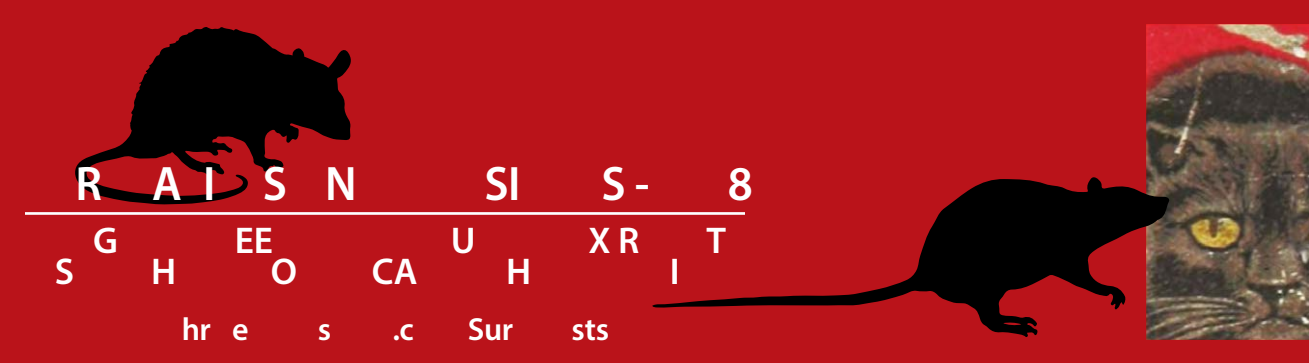
Before him, I made decisions and ate pizza and did my homework and argued with my parents like everyone else. And then he came, and suddenly I had no say in whether I lived or died at all. He could touch me, choke me, spit me out, spill me across the floor, convince me that I was the moon and then make a home in the nape of my neck. He would plant ripe plums beneath my eyes, watch the juice

spill out my nose, then kiss them until they were sweet again. Sometimes, we spent entire afternoons driving around in his car listening to 1990’s top hits until the school buses made traffic on the freeway. In the beginning he was soft.

I wore a pink dress to his sister’s quinceanera, light pink silk and a lace bodice that fit me like tree bark. I picked each of my breasts up, resting them just-so in the center of my chest where they sat like two bowls of coffee ice cream, soft and melting into one another. I painted my face with the twisting tubes of colored clay in my mother’s top dresser drawer. Miniature vanity mountains, growing and shrinking in my fingers. I traced the curves of my face and took care to stay in the lines. My cheeks blushed pink, my eyelashes grew into violin strings. One at a time, I slipped my feet into the new white heels I’d picked out with Esme on her lunch break. My ankles puckered, my



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calf muscles grew tight, the length of my legs grew tall and thin. When I'd finished I showed him. He knew I felt pretty. I spun for him.

After the Misa de acción de gracias, after the damas y chambelanes, and los bolos, and the photographs, after the speeches, and the tea cakes, and the espressos, after Juana had been given to the community, now a woman and no longer a girl, she had twirled around a square dance floor on the fingers of her primos, and he played piano keys with my body across the stairs.

“¡Bienvenida a la feminidad!” we chanted at her as she gave herself, a soft pink present for the men to unwrap. “¡Bienvenida a la feminidad!” I sang down the staircase piano, my dress high above my hips, my long legs catching in the chords beneath me. He arranged my ribs like a hopscotch court, threw a stone across my chest, stomped his feet into each square in perfect rhythm. My spit washed the chalk off the pavement; he used my collarbones like rowboat oars. I sailed myself to somewhere else while he buried his fists in my one-day womb, the sacred temple that made me Woman, the garden where he would scatter his seed and I would water them with sunlight and the warmth of a mother's love. He made tiny stomach knots, untied them and tied them back together again, this time red ribbons, this time in bows, because he loved me. Because I was “su alma”.




Staring up at the wooden banister I thought mostly of Juana's dress. The collar was lined with tiny white pearls. I had helped her abuela fasten the ones that were too small for her fading eyes. On the morning before la fiesta she had called me into the sun room. Her sewing kit laid open like a confession across the table; a strong woman admits when she needs help. She held the light for me so I could sneak the splitting lilac thread through the center of each bead. “Eres una buena chica”, she said, but I am a Woman, not a girl.

On the very last stair he whittled my forearms into shields, so I kicked shingles off the roof of my mouth. Juana had flat ironed her hair so she looked like the gringas in the nail salon posters. My painted eyelashes wilted and washed black across the collar of my dress. He dug holes with his shoes in the shores of my waist and I waited for the surf to fill them with salt water. It didn't hurt until he stopped. Scarlet honey dripped from my forehead. Pink milk leaked from my mouth. Later, I'd ice the blood bouquets blooming beneath the skin on my knees. When they opened themselves I'd collect each petal, press them in the back of a heavy book, hide them from him so he could not plant them again. My legs were blue now and I felt foolish remembering how I spun for him. Stupid Puta. “¡Bienvenida a la feminidad, Juana!” we had sung from the top of the stairs.

Now, it's 6:57 and he slips a practiced hand into my waistband. He asks me if it feels good. My kneecaps blush blue against the plastic. I can't remember why I've come back so instead I remember Juana, spinning across the dancefloor like a doll in a white girl's jewelry box. He moves beneath me, into me, repeatedly, so I keep my eyes still on the center console. There is a receipt from a Mexican fast food restaurant, six gum-coated coins, and an empty plastic cup from the gas station by his mother's house. The straw is bent at the tip and crushed shut. He grunts. I look for a place to put my hands, I look for whatever it is I was hoping to find when I climbed into his car, but there is only black plastic, and an old futbol sweatshirt, and a tiny rip in the dark gray upholstery lining the ceiling by the left rear window, and a tree outside by a flickering lamp post that makes a shadow, and the image of Juana, spinning like a teacup as the men around her raise their arms high into the air. “¡Bienvenida a la feminidad!” we had sung from the top of the stairs. He grunts loudly and I make fists. 🐾



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Snakes & Ladders

Rob Hill

As the bathysphere rose surfacewards, Horace Mint shook the lint from his hair and gazed through the porthole at the charcoal fish snickering at him as they rippled past. The vessel had been depleted of oxygen ever since the breathing regulator had broken down at 2,500 feet and Horace had been holding his breath ever since. He longed to reach the surface and suck the entire stratosphere of the planet into his quivering tycoon lungs.

Toted by steel cable, the bathysphere plowed upwards through a balmy cloud of ambergris. Horace kept an impatient eye on the bathometer. The rapid change of pressure made his cotton head swell. The groaning rivets of the metal casing jarred his nerves.

Dripping like a chrome sea beast, the bathysphere surfaced to a busy subway platform. Horace hopped out and had a look around. A snowhaired busker entertained the rushing crowd with bebop licks on his scrimshaw flute. Horace tossed a quarter into the man's upturned derby. The coin bounced once and transmogrified into a smokecolored pigeon which flew off down the subway tunnel.

“Sorry.”
“That's okay, son. I appreciate the gesture. Come over here and sit with me while I take my lunchbreak. Care for a sardine?”

Horace politely declined. They sat there on a scarred bench, watching the commuters pass. In particular the female ones.

“Get a load of her,” indicated the jazzman with compulsive liplicking. “Say, I'd like to pinch her in strategic places.” The woman in question overheard and shot him a none-too-enthused glare. He tossed the last sardine in his storky beak. “Well, gotta get back to my tunes, sporto. Catch you later.” He repositioned himself before his empty music stand and launched into a twittery version of “Tiny Bubbles.”

Horace boarded a toothpastecolored train bearing north. He always sat at the front of the train so he would

arrive at his destination sooner. As the underground lights streaked past, he watched a squinteyed drunkard harassing a paperbag. Across the aisle from him, a schoolgirl in a cardiac sweater was engrossed in a novel called *The Haunted Toilet*. Beside her sat a nervous sweatspeckled man with earphones strapped to his flimsy head like calipers. A pearshaped mother in milkstained brassiere cradled an infant with a smoking thumb.

The loudspeaker bellowed “next stop, Rheumatic Heights.”

Horace disembarked. A transvestite folksinger occupied the far end of the platform, tapping her lavender foot and singing Phil Och tunes to a disinterested crowd. Daylight trickled down the stone steps. Horace spun through the turnstile and headed for the surface. The fresh breeze felt like a maiden's handstroke across his cheek.

The city, on the other hand, snarled at him in contempt. Towering obelisks of glass poked holes in the clouds. A menagerie of birds shrieked at the intrusion. Pedestrians with hate in their eyes crisscrossed the pavement, trampling anything unfortunate enough to get in their path, including, but not limited to, aluminum cans, squirrels, cigarette butts, mounds of dog vomit, and small children. A melee of taxihorns registered their protest.

Horace turned down Flabbey Road, past the ol' Smash and Grab convenience store advertising a sale on razorblades and lightbulbs. He followed the spittlestreaked sidewalk, lapping up the city's wounds. Women in sandals scuffling by under centipedes of viaduct construction. Urchins asleep in oil drums. Taxidriviers mugging their passengers. A mummified wino dancing his way into the auto supply store for a gasoline chaser, bugs leaking out of his coat lining. Legless Lucretia in her little red rocking chair, poking in the fusebox, searching for epiphany. In the arched doorway of The Groinery a beggar with a complexion like peanut brittle crying “a penny for your hat” to passersby was arrested for noise violation. Waiting for the bus, a mother clutched her

child’s hand, told him all about what fun he’ll have on his uncle’s ostrich farm while she is abroad, the child gnawing off his own limb to get away.

A roadster roared past, goggles strapped to the driver’s forehead, an Ojibwe dreamcatcher dangling from her rearview mirror in the event that she should fall asleep at the wheel. From her car radio a newscaster announced “angel piss expected all weekend with a slight chance of scorched earth.” Meanwhile she contemplated spiderlove. The thought of all those writhing arms and sensitive feelers makes her tingle with excitement. Octogasmic.

Horace followed the directions on a tourist sign pointing the way towards the Fire Museum, but was disappointed on reaching it, finding only a charred foundation. A German schoolmarm bearing an uncanny resemblance to Eva Braun traveled by magical hula hoop, pausing long enough to ask directions from a street vendor selling quickdry licorice. She’d been invited to the grand opening of a nightclub called the Kinky Panther which was reported to be an exact replica of a notorious beerhall in Munich. A bleached former lounge singer crouched in a vinyl booth, injecting methanol into his eyeball. Edgar Allen Poet groaned in the urinal after a round of cookietossing. Or as his editor called it, a rapid review of lunch. Outside, the agonized wail of a fire engine streaked past, through red light intersections. There was always something on fire in this town, even if the firemen had to start it themselves.

Down in Leper Park the children played a rousing game of Yank the Pickle while the Ambassador of Sleep reclined in the photograss, wearing a cologne that smelled of narcoleptic roses. A five-year-old in a sailor suit stood on tiptoe to insert a nickel in the wooden indian who sprang to life, only to scramble up a box elder and refuse to come down. Meanwhile beside the stone fountain a silent clown grinned, cleaning the blood off his violin.

Beyond the iceskating rink Horace encountered a hot

air balloon vendor minding his booth. Horace paid the fare and climbed into the wickerbasket, opened the blast valve. Moments later he was aloft. The balloon carried Horace past the incrementing floors of a platinum skyscraper. Janitors, clerks, and administrators alike gaped at him through mirrored windows as he rose past, some in irritation that he blocked their view of the scenery. Horace tipped his hat politely from habit. A dapper executive squatted on his swivelchair with his trouserlegs rolled up, fishing pole extended, nylon line leading into the wastebasket.

Near the sixty-third floor Horace was briefly overtaken by a swarm of schizophrenic moths caught in a dragon’s gust. They fluttered past him like suicidal confetti and were gone. Horace fired the propane burners, propelling him higher. As the balloon cleared the top of the skyscraper he spotted a monstrosity large onion impaled on the lightning rod. The air grew very cold at this height, icicles forming from his nosehairs. Far below, a giant lizard crawled through the city streets, scooping up waves of scurrying people with its enormous coil of tongue, drawing them into its maw, smacking its lips tastily. At a traffic circle the clumsy beast swung its heavy tail, toppling a war memorial of a general riding a giant mastiff.

Drifting out to sea, the hot air balloon ascended through the crimsonstreaked atmosphere where it fell under attack by vultures with razorwings. They laid siege, making kamikaze runs, attempting to slice open the balloon fabric. Horace unscrewed several incisors from his mouth and hurled them at the aerial assailants. They cawed fiercely as teeth embedded in feathery flesh, veered homewards to roost. The fabric escaped unscathed. But the drifting balloon climbed too high and Horace bumped his head on the floorboards of Heaven, where nails protruded from planks along with bits of electrical wiring. The balloon folded and the basket upturned. Horace plummeted fast, down towards the pissgreen yawn of ocean spread out below, waiting to swallow him. ③



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SURREALISTS AND OUTSIDERS - 2018

I WAGERED DEEP ON THE RUN OF SIX RATS TO SEE WHICH WOULD CATCH THE FIRST FIRE

ThricePublishing.com/Surrealists



Dish

Anika Jhalani

I like to watch my little darling dance. I like when she becomes scared, asks to hold my hand. Did I have too much candy this time, she asks. I say no, you’re doing great, isn’t this wonderful, you are so beautiful.

My skin feels like water, she says, feel it.

And because I’m her best friend, because I’m just as feminine, she couldn’t even guess.

That there was something advantageous about my fingers up her dress.

Touch me, I tell her, and she is so high so scared. Come here, and she puts her hand in mine, my mouth to her neck, lipstick half-moons waning towards her breast.

I’ve dressed her in mesh, and it’s lush seeing the strobe lights sneak between holes in fabric. She lights up like glittery snakeskin. A cobra and I’m high off it. Her pupils dilate her eyes don’t look green anymore, black, black. Just like mine.

She snakes towards me. Men are watching. I run my tongue along the underside of her upper lip, she grips. Grips my mouth with hers.

Our tongues forked, crossed into each other. Scissors.

She grips because she slips into the void. Grips to hold on a little longer.

When I had her like this, I could do anything I wanted.

Do you want another one, I ask? Do you feel happy here with me, I ask...

Her body deteriorates because I rip it apart. I see beauty crumble and it fills me up.

I know she will burn next time she shits. Mascara bleeds out from under lashes, she’s suffered a wildfire in her eyes, and smoke is smudged in the aftermath of it. In sync with the bass, she trembles. On her breath is the hint of mint and pill. I can taste both.

Do you want another one, I ask? Do you feel happy here with me, I ask...

Warehouses are miserable. Lonely lonely these people whom no one takes care of. And there are animal cartoons projected across the walls. And there are people with lion face paint, fat men looking to touch each other, play with the occasional woman.

I keep her close.

Sparkles splayed across her breast plate, playing with me, my baby paralyzed because I fed her too much candy. You’re doing so good, so good.

Having fun, she asks me, the green of her eyes eclipsed to black.

I wipe her nose.

Having so so much fun!

Hunched over the toilet, we choose sweets in the stall. The candy is white or bubblegum pink, or clear and filled with powder. I roll them back and forth on my palm, drops of light fall from disco ball stars.

She checks her phone to see if he’s called.

You know, I smile saccharine. ‘He doesn’t care about you any longer.’

I reach for her phone, exchange it for a pearl.

Rectangles of light form pendants on her throat. Jewelry shimmies as she swallows.

You know, I smile with teeth. ‘He doesn’t love you anymore.’

And she winces under the moon shadows. Irises limpid. Liquefied. And she submits to the pill’s control, consumed by the fire. I want her to push me, to resist the assault of my smiles, but she’s resigned the poor thing is mine so I feed her just as I want tell her to take another line.

Snowing in the summertime.

By bringing her body to decay, she gets to feel alive.

Shower, we're in there together. Her naked skin slides onto mine. I squeeze soap into the loofah and sud sud her up, she leans forward with her back to me, breasts against the tiles, and I'm touching her from behind. Glide, glide. I'm so happy she says I'm so high.

She pulls on a single nipple, and it sends ripples of sex through her.

I turn her around to face me. Reach behind. And the water faucet, I turn it to hotter and hotter until I see roses ripen on her skin, scarlet bouquets tumble into place, until her dilated eyes are wide open, until she breaks out of the high and feels fear once again.

I kill her.
Addicted to watching her die.

Of the brands of loneliness there is missing something, reminiscing, nostalgia of what had been could still be.

And then there is what I have.

An absence, a void, something that snags only to let go. Opalescent, impossible to hold, I have nothing to be hollow for.

But her loneliness is another.

He. Him. His. He.

I don't want to be lonely alone.
And so empty I go to her.
And empty her out.

She licks the filter paper of a cigarette. Pink tongue rolls over the thin sheet. Rolling, she offers it to me. And at my first hit thunder blooms like fungi, fills my insides.

I wake up beside her, bedside the morning after. Her spine turned to me. Freckles dot her skin like constellations, starry eyed I take her in. I know she is awake. She is looking at her phone. I inch my chin up behind her shoulder. Careful not to touch. And watch her.

Staring at a photo. Of a boy with deep, deep dimples.

She's hung up and I'm only hung over.

And she tells me she used to sit with her chin in her hands, elbows on the wooden dining table. And he'd take the citrus dishwasher soap and squeeze it onto a sponge. Clean the plates one by one. Under the orange tint of her kitchen she looked out the apartment window and saw all the other lights in all the city buildings knowing all over people were doing the same thing as them.

Saying how was your day.

How was yours.

Saying can you help load them in the washer.

I think the machine broke, maybe we could just use paper towels.

All the yellow lights of the world winking back at them, everyone in on the nutrition of domestic sweetness.

But the lights in the warehouse are not plain yellow but kaleidoscopic, they are brilliant little gems that clatter

on my pupil's surface, I bring my hands to my lashes to try to catch, but the lights slip through, burst and spill color, scarlet and then blue.

Can you feel it too?

She's next to me. Her feet can't stop moving. She's with me.

We're running, running away.

But the ones who run fastest are the ones escaping something.

I'm only chasing chasing.

She's winning, winning...

I hid some in the strap of my thong, the boys laugh and tell me not to do that, it can dissolve through the cunt. I shake them off, she looks a bit nervous. Because we eye it in the light and it's a large one. Is this the amount we usually take? She asked me if I would split it. I don't know how to. Where did you get it from? I told her some guy gave it to me. Some guy or the same guy?

I'm sure it's fine. I'm sure there isn't going to be a problem.

And she's getting good at it. She's starting to like it. The bouncer tells her to open her bag. She weathers a leather backpack, scuffed corkscrew heels. Glossy lips glassy eyes, she looks pretty messed. I open the bag for her, here, and the bouncer shakes his head.

Big hands abuse the fabric folds, run through each crease. Slow, a thorough tease. And then between his thumb and pinky he pulls out a wrapper.

Oh shit now we're in for it I think, think.

Chest skips a beat. Bass. Beat.

He touches the plastic. Fingers it further. I breathe breathe.

But when I turn to her she winks, the wrapper glints empty, candy lodged between her teeth.

With a swallow evidence disappeared. And then so did she.

Her appetite for it grew, she got skinnier as it happened. I liked to see her diminish. Her thin wrists made me proud, her thinner ankles I relished. Doe like she tripped around in slim stilettos, everyone asked her 'how do you dance in those,' but she did and nothing compared to witnessing it, her frame shrinking as she clinked to the sparkling music.

But the boys stared at her not me and I didn't like it. She felt herself more, touched herself more, raking fingers through her hair. Thirsty she kept drinking from the water bottle until her lips looked liquid.

But I'm pretty too and I want to feel wanted.

I stumbled out the warehouse door, past the rose-tinted mirrors, towards the bathroom, 'I'll come with you,' she said, but I pushed her. Get away from me, but she kept coming and then hovered behind me as I thickened the liner and my hands shook as I applied mascara, and here let me help you she said blowing my lashes dry and I looked up and the club bathroom was painted baby blue a seaside sky.

Music notes like pieces of metal, little nickels and

dimes, plopping into me.

Can you come here, she asked, her voice the friction of insect wings.

She whispered and I saw dragonflies

Together in a gold gilded bathroom, in a stall mosaiced with a thousand mirrors, our reflections shining and crashing into one another, she told me.

'I don't feel very good.'

'Did this one not hit you yet? It'll hit soon, it'll come out with the music. Here, I can give you some more.'

'No, stop. Stop. I mean don't you think this feels like nothing compared to...'

Soap on a sponge. Sponge to a dish.

But the boys come to us and tell us it's shit. It's baking soda. How do you even feel it, how lightweight can you get. All night they complained, what the fuck is this filled with?

Here., We know. All you have to do is take some more. Up your dose.

And she's telling us about how he'd stress out about parking tickets. Come back from his hospital rotations to see the sticker on this car and he'd slam the door in frustration and she could see the dimples even when he was mad. 'Parking tickets, can you believe it,' she laughs incoherent, and I want her to shut up she's embarrassing us.

But she can't stop because she's still full of love.

I've tried to clean her of it but it hasn't been enough.

Driving towards the morning. Towards the side of the city where the sun comes. Rich kids in some daddy's apartment, a palace draped in marble and there were sculptures, and oil paintings so thickly lain that the color pricked upwards like icing on a treat.

Ten of us boys and girls in a mass of bodies, limbs intertwined, up against the window waiting for a lemon disco ball in the sky. Yeah yeah yeah let's watch the day rise.

And she looked at me as the clouds switched on, as the yellow lights in the buildings came on. Do you think they are just like us? She asked. Do you think they are doing the same thing?

Martinis spill over. Olives and toothpicks roll to the floor.

Foam froths from her mouth.

I call over one of the Swedes, asks if she's ok. He tells me not to look panicked because that will make it worse for her. Just keep smiling he says, smile, smile for me.

I adore her. She's a part of me.

And she blazes center floor. Like pills on a palm she rolls, her hips spill back and forth. She peacocks. A thousand eyes open from her pores and soak, soak in the terror because she comes and slips out of control, do you want another one I ask. Do you feel happy here, I ask.

One day she will have it all. She's going to have someone who she gets to wake up with, who makes sure the water is warm not too hot. And he's going to bring her bowls of cherries tart sour like she likes them and listen when she's telling him about her day.

I know it's going to happen for her.

But for now, she is so beautiful when she dances, I feed her more so I can watch. And she is so gorgeous as she dances. I gorge on this dish. As she massages her hair backwards, I see sweat collect on her neck, perspiration becomes a necklace, a chain dragging her into darkness. I grip the rope.

Pull, pill by pill.

But for now she is mine to play with. So, I invade her body with my fingers, my thumb under her skirt. She's so high I know she isn't going to remember. I'll make sure. I taker her down with me, my lovely lovely girl, I press the candy another between lips, and another.

She looks at me and I see she knows what I'm doing.

She registers my intent.


The last song is coming and we're coming near the end.

'Just like that, watched him wash the dishes.'

Opens up her legs. Presses my thumb the pill to her clit. Rubs in circles and asks me if that's what I want if I want her to love herself to death.

She whispers to me and says...

You can't kill us. He already did. ↻



ANIKA JHALANI is a recent graduate of Columbia University, where she studied creative writing. She now works at Scholastic, the children's book publisher. Her work is forthcoming in *StoryQuarterly*.



The Practice Session

Leia Johnson

The latches pop open under your thumbs like ripe fruits bursting. The top half of the case falls open.

You slip my fingers underneath the cold, unresponsive metal and carefully lift her out. The dent in her throat feels as familiar under your fingertips as the scars on your own body. A flick of the wrist, and the mouthpiece settles a quarter turn into the lead pipe. The metal ring is cold at first, when it touches your lips, but quickly warms to your breath and your flesh.

The first notes are often hesitant, grating, cracked, out of tune. Warm-up fixes that. Scales and arpeggios and lip slurs and jumps. As you continue to play, becoming more and more comfortable, it plays better and better, responds to you more. You start to become one being, like a bareback rider and her horse.

The vibrating metal warms to the touch. You feed it with your breath and your spirit. Fingers on the left hand ply the shining silver keys; your palm curves around the grip. The right rests, nestled snugly in the pregnant curve of the bell, ready to give life to the music that you must hear before you can recreate. You speak through the twists and curves of brass, pour out your soul for everyone to hear. And she listens, adds her own rosy voice, sings back to you, creates a duet.

The connection, like that of two long-lost lovers,

surges back, an old passion reignited. The lacquer is worn away from hours and years of practice, caressed over and over. The strength required to maintain the relationship is in your arms. The left holds steady; the right lies still and supporting inside the bell. Its rim bites into your leg, leaving pressure lines, remnants of a long history. You cradle it like a child, as familiar with it as with the body of your own infant daughter. Your body curves protectively around her.

The same melody, different every time, with every mood and every note and every nuance. Lips—embouchure, in musician’s jargon—and breath control the pitch; volume and tone express the emotion of the player. Abstract feelings into technical, palpable applications. It is a medium of sound for those who cannot speak their thoughts and feelings aloud. “Music is the expression of emotions that cannot be spoken.”

Finally, when you fell as though there’s nothing separating you, and when the session is over, there is a sense of loss. Pulling the mouthpiece from the horn is like snapping a wand; the magic is gone, the spell broken. But you know it will be there, waiting, for the next time. Slumbering in the cold, abandoned metal; shut away in the cloth-lined case. 🎷



LEIA JOHNSON grew up in Waco, Texas, with parents who supported her reading habit and a plethora of pets. She graduated from Texas A&M University in 2015 with a degree in English. Leia currently works as a rare books librarian, and recently became engaged to the love of her life.

This piece was inspired by her love of music, particularly playing the French horn in bands and orchestras. You can find her work in *Down in the Dirt* magazine and online at *Ariel Chart*, as well as in some local publications.



Patient 49

Scarlett R. Algee

It’s the second day.

His name is Henry. He has to tell himself that, when a snatch of thought swims up through the fuzz. His thin cotton uniform is stained and blue and says only 49, but his name is Henry.

He had another electroshock treatment this morning. Doctor Haskins says the treatments will make him better, will help the—spasms?—*seizures* stop, though all he remembers of the experience is the dampness of the pads clamped to his temples, the sudden jolt that fills the back of his mouth with the taste of iron and feels like being struck between the eyes with a fluff-covered mallet. They leave a lot of blank spaces, the treatments, and the spaces only fill back up slowly.

He sits on his bed, which is bolted to the wall. The sheets are white and coarse. The room is all concrete, clean-scrubbed, walls and floor and ceiling, and from here he can see all of it. Desk: a concrete slab built into the opposite wall, and a chair. He hasn’t tried the chair; nail heads stick out of the seat, and the frame looks splintery. Sink and naked pipes, but no mirror, because mirrors can mean glass shards and cutting. Shower and toilet in short open-faced stalls. Drain in the middle of the shower floor, surrounded by something that looks like rust but which he suspects is not, but his cotton-wool brain is too afraid to conjure the word for what it might be.

Iron bars in a cut-out square in one short wall, and no glass, because it rained last night and he sat up shaking in his blanket against the thunder, watching the water run down the wall and pool on the floor. Door in the other wall, steel door through which Doctor Haskins comes every day, steel door slightly ajar because he can go out if he wants, but the idea terrifies him. Outside is people and noise, and the darkness in his head, and *not knowing*. There are no clock and no calendar. The sky, through the barred square window, is dead white.

The room is eleven steps wide and sixteen steps long. He

knows this. He walked it this morning when he was brought back from treatment. He counted. It made him feel better, counting. It was something he could hold onto.

There’s something in the pocket of his shirt. Big black 49 on the back of the shirt, small black 49 on the front pocket. There’s something in the pocket and he takes it out: a brown stone, oval, flattish, bigger at one end than the other and very smooth.

Someone gave him this. It could not have come out of the concrete.

Henry holds it in his hands and tries to remember. His head aches; his hands ache, though the stone is warm and silken. Someone had—

Yesterday.

It’s the first day.

He can’t remember the name of the woman who had brought him here this morning, though her eyes had been blue and soft and kind. Sister? Wife? Does he have a sister or a wife? *Things will be better soon*, Henry, she had said before she’d walked out of his room, but everything else beyond that scrap of sound eludes him. Jean? Joan? June? *Jean*, he decides, maybe, but he can’t be sure.

Right now, he doesn’t remember his own name, either. He doesn’t remember why he’s here. The *where* is equally a mystery, though *psychiatric hospital* flits through his mind and whisks away like a goldfish. Someone had taken him away for the first treatment and someone else had brought him back, but their faces are blurs he can’t conjure. He lies on the bed and stares at the ceiling and sees nothing. His mind is fuzz and wool and soft-edged warmth, an abyss, a void, a sponge that can’t hold water.

“You the one they brung in this morning?”

The voice is soft and sudden, and it makes some deep instinct bring him to his feet, his heart thudding, his nails biting his palms. Standing brings nausea and he stumbles, coughs, pitches forward into huge cold hands. There is a long blank moment and when it breaks, he realizes someone has held him over the toilet so he could vomit. His stomach clenches on emptiness as he’s pulled back and set down on the floor.

“You catch your breath, now.” The toilet flushes. His chin is lifted and his mouth wiped with something wet and soft, and abruptly the patterns click back into place. He is sitting on the floor and a huge dark man is stooped over him: bald, scarred, his uniform numbered 37 straining across broad shoulders. The man smiles and is missing teeth. “Better. What’s your name, son?”

It’s...49. He knew that before he came here, didn’t he? But he starts to say the number and feels a broad finger beneath his lips. “No,” says the black man numbered 37. “Real name. Before. You think, now.”

Think. That’s what the treatments are for, the thinking. He’s bad at thinking. Everything goes dark. Fractures. He tries, feeling his eyes start to twitch, and closes them. Before. There was a before. “...Henry.”

“Henry. Good.” The black man squats so they’re more even in height. “John Henry.”

“No.” Shaking his head hurts. “Just—”

“Henry. I know. Good name. Still. John Henry. Steel driver.” Another gapped smile, and the black man pulls him

upright. “I’m Russell. Big Russ, room down the hall. This 37 don’t mean nothin’.” Once Russ is standing, his large hands tremble. “They say I got the nerves real bad, but I still got a name.”

Russ slaps his numbered pocket, looks thoughtful for a second and reaches into it. He pulls out a brown oval rock, puts it in Henry’s hand. “My granny called this her worry rock. Ol’ river rock. You rub it, real nice an’ smooth, talk to it, put your troubles in it, Granny always said. Helps a lot in a place like this. Me, I just look out for the new arrivals.”

There are footsteps in the hallway. Russell guides Henry back to his bed and pushes him down gently. “Best I’m goin’ on. They don’t like catchin’ you out o’ your room here, but you in a good place. You give your troubles to that ol’ rock an’ get some rest, John Henry.”

It’s the third day. He’s found a faint green streak in his stone, and this delights him. Out of the mind-fog that follows treatment, he has named the stone Jade, though he doesn’t know why; the word connects to nothing in the furry blank of his mind.

But in Henry’s eleven-step-by-sixteen-step world, this pleases him too.

It’s the sixth day. During the day Henry keeps Jade in his pocket, though he’s learned to hide her under his pillow—he doesn’t know why *her*, but his mind insists—when Doctor Haskins comes in, or when he’s taken out of his room for meals. He hasn’t told the doctor about Jade. If anyone knew, he thinks, they would take her away, and the thought brings a strange shaking terror.

At night he strokes her, whispers to her, when the blanks of his mind begin to fill in and he has things to tell again. Memories. That’s the word. Memories.

I had a job, before. Shoe salesman. I have a sister who looks like me.

His sister. Henry knows she looks like him, but he can’t envision his own face. He runs his fingers over his skin—bushy eyebrows but thinning hair, long nose, slender lips, but no cohesion, no clear image—and tries to remember her name again and fails, and not knowing makes his hands shake.

At night when it rains—and it always seems to be night to him, when it rains, but maybe that’s just inside his head—he puts Jade on the edge of the window with iron bars and no glass. He isn’t a tall man and it’s a stretch, but he lets Jade be washed by the rain, lets his secrets be washed out with her.

And this, too, pleases him. Somewhere, between shocks, he loses track of the days.

When Henry opens his eyes, he’s on the concrete floor beside his bed. A woman in a white cap stares down at him as she empties a syringe into his arm. He screams, weakly, and tries to turn away, but his back aches and his hands are clawed, and his clothes are wet.

“...not working like I’d hoped.” The words, tinny and muffled, come from a man standing behind the woman, a thin balding man in a white coat. Doctor. Doctor...the name

won’t come. “I think he’s going to need surgery.” Later, after Henry’s been redressed, after he’s slept off the sedative and been given water, the doctor comes back. Doctor Haskins: the name is embroidered on his white coat. Haskins smiles and pulls up the rickety-looking chair, and Henry reaches under his pillow to brush Jade with his fingertips. She’s cold and soothing. He doesn’t trust this man with the coat and the lined worn face. He doesn’t trust the chair.

“You’ve had two weeks of electroshock treatments, Mr. Dillard,” Doctor Haskins says. “Your seizure episodes have decreased in frequency a little, but not in severity. Not as much as I’d hoped, anyway. Your memory’s affected, you’re not retaining things, you don’t vocalize properly. The nurses say you never talk.” He shifts his weight and the chair creaks. “For the sake of giving you a chance at normal life, I think surgery will have to be our next option.”

Seizure. Frequency. Severity. Those words fall through the sieve. *Surgery*: that sticks. Surgery on his brain. Henry has to work saliva into his mouth and concentrate hard. “Will it hurt?”

“No.” Haskins puts a hand—warm, leathery—on his shoulder. “It won’t hurt. You won’t even remember it.” His voice is gentle, and Henry feels reassured. “The procedure’s called a trans orbital lobotomy. We’ll do it in the morning.”

It’s the fifteenth day. Henry knows because he’s asked. He’s taken from his room early and put into a wheelchair, pushed down a dull gray corridor he doesn’t recognize into a room he’s never seen. He’s guided onto a draped metal table and pushed down flat, and hard leather straps are fastened around his wrists and chest. Doctor Haskins is standing at the head of the table, and Henry rolls his eyes up to the doctor questioningly, mutely.

“You’ll be fine, Mr. Dillard.” Haskins is wearing gloves and holding a thin metal instrument in one hand. “We just need to keep you still. That’s all.”

He bends, and his shadow falls over Henry’s face, and everything fragments.

“How are you feeling, Mr. Dillard?” He opens his eyes and blinks heavily. Nothing will focus: the voice tickles some faint bell of memory, but the face is a smear. His vision twitches back and forth; his tongue feels thick and furred. “...Hurts.”

“Don’t worry. You may have a headache for a few days, but your surgery went splendidly.” Something creaks. “Can you try to stay awake? I just want to ask a few questions.”

His eyelids feel massive and swollen. A word. He needs a word. “Y...yes. Try.”

“How old are you?” “...Thirty.” “And what year is it?” “Nnn.” So easy to just keep his eyes shut, to slide into oblivion. “N-nineteen. Fifty. F-five..?”

“Very good. Mr. Dillard?” No. Quiet. Sleep. Something leaks from his right eye and is wiped away with a piece of gauze.

“Mr. Dillard?” He drags his eyes open. The right one leaks again and is

wiped again. The gauze is a white blur streaked with red. “... Who?”

Days pass, all blank, unnumbered. The blanks are filling in.

Since the surgery, the treatments have stopped, the ones that left his brain soft and liquid and empty. There have been other things since, bitter pills without the needles, without the shock that feels like nothing. The man in the white coat talking to him, pouring things in, filling the holes. Sometimes the new thoughts feel real, solid, like things that have happened; sometimes they’re vaporous, twisting in his grasp, but still better than the nothingness of six weeks ago.

His name is Henry. He knows that now, and stands straight for it. Someone had called him John Henry once as a joke, but that was a long time ago and he doesn’t remember the man’s face or his name, only a steady hand on his shoulder and a tooth-shaped gap in a smile.

And Jade. He still has Jade. He remembers her. He sits on the bed with Jade closed in one hand, waiting. Waiting and listening. She’s listened to so much.

“You’re improving,” the man in the white coat had said—this morning? Yesterday? “Your seizures have stopped, at least for now. Maybe they won’t start again. As for everything else, I think with time, it’ll all come back. Another week or two, Mr. Dillard, and I think you might go home.”

He doesn’t know why the man keeps calling him Mr. Dillard. His name is Henry.

But Henry had heard that, and told Jade as soon as he could, cradling her, hands shaking a little as he stumbled over the words. Out. Away. Improving.

Home. He doesn’t remember *home*: doesn’t remember place, or people. He’s been too far away, too sick, too long. His stomach twists at the thought of a family, of a job, of more faces that blur and names that slip through his fingers, yet the word nestles in his mind in a little niche of comfort.

He sits on the neat white bed and strokes Jade’s smoothness, whispers to her the last of his fears. Then he gets up and makes the stretch to push her onto the windowsill, not too close to the edge, because someone else might need a friend. A listener. It’s looking out for the new arrivals. Henry wishes he could remember who’d told him that.

Then he takes up his seat on the bed’s edge, arms folded, head down, and waits.

Home. He hopes he’ll like it. It’s the forty-ninth day. “I can’t.” Jean Dillard doesn’t watch as Henry is shuffled

back into his room; she can’t stand his glassy stare, or how he fumbles to say even a single word. Instead, she stuffs her fists into the pockets of her long coat and turns on Doctor Haskins. “I can’t take him home like this. I can’t give him the care he needs. You said the surgery would make things better!”

“And it will,” Haskins says soothingly. “The healing process just takes time, Miss Dillard. Give him six or eight months and you’ll see a great improvement. Without the seizures, without the neurological burden, with a special therapist for his verbal deficit...your brother can dress himself, he can feed himself—”

“*That* is not my brother!” Jean wheels away to face the wall, clenching her jaw. Her blue eyes are flinty, and when she speaks, her voice is choked.

“I remember the day Henry had his first seizure. I was twelve. He was ten. Our father worked at a textile mill and he’d made us kites out of yellow silk scraps. We were flying our kites up on the hill behind our house, and Henry’s got away. He was running after his kite and just—” She pauses, mouth working. “He cried, later, when he remembered he’d lost that kite. And as much as I’ve hated seeing him suffer all these years, at least I always knew he was still in there somewhere. But now you’ve just cut the kite string. That’s all. You haven’t helped him catch the kite, Doctor. You’ve just cut the string.”

He puts a hand on her arm. “Miss Dillard—” Jean shakes him off. “No. I can’t. I can’t. Maybe in a month or two, when I can see real improvement, but not now.”

She smiles bitterly, her mouth a thin tight line. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

When Doctor Haskins comes back into Henry’s room, the pretty lady isn’t with him. Henry frowns, clutching Jade in both hands, and says guardedly, “Home?”

The doctor winces. “No, Mr. Dillard. Not today, I’m afraid. Change of plans. But soon, I promise you.”

“Oh.” Henry nods limply and looks down, keeping his eyes on Jade. “All right.”

He doesn’t hear anything else Doctor Haskins says, or hear him leave the room; he’s already forgotten the man. Henry’s thinking of the lady, and the blue softness of her eyes. He’d had a sister once, he thinks, that had looked like her.

He wishes he could remember her name. 🕒



SCARLETT R. ALGEE has fiction published by *Body Parts Magazine*, *Pen of the Damned*, and *The Wicked Library*. Her short story *Dark Music*, written for the podcast *The Lift*, was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and she was contributing editor of the bestselling sci-fi anthologies *Explorations: War* and *Explorations: Colony*. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle and an uncertain number of cats, skulks on Twitter at @scarlettralgee, and blogs occasionally at scarlettralgee.wordpress.com



The Man with Big Boots

L. Shapley Bassen

Once upon a time, there was a humble man who wanted to be a hero. An old woman he met upon the road told him the way to become a hero was to find a pair of big boots and wear them through the world. “These boots,” the toothless ancient cackled, “will let you walk seven leagues in one step!”

So the humble man who wanted to be a hero set about to find the shoemaker who could make the biggest pair of boots.

After a long time and many difficult adventures, the humble man found such a shoemaker, who for a great fee presented the humble man with an enormous pair of boots whose magical properties were just as the old witch had predicted.

When the man stepped into the huge boots, he grew in size as well, so that he towered above all the people amongst whom he had previously been so humble and friendly before. He could, indeed, walk seven leagues in one step, and he saw from his long walks around the world that things did not look the same to him as they had when he walked with humble men.

Finally, the man with big boots grew so tremendous in size to fit into them that he no longer felt the desire to help the others by taking the steps he could.

Like all giants who take advice from witches and pay a great fee for big boots, he became a terror to be feared and hated by humble folk.

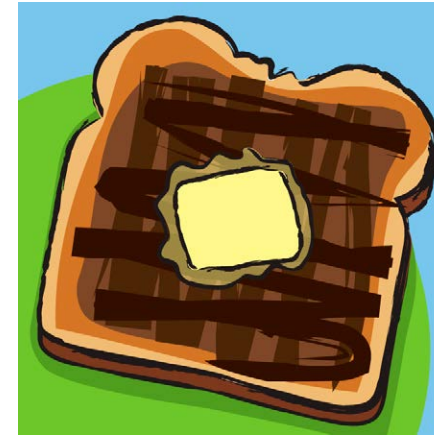
The man with big boots ended by stepping on the people he had originally hoped to save.

The witch had tricked him, which is the nature of witches, into believing that what makes a humble man into a real hero is not one big heart but two big feet.

Duplicity is ever the nature of evil. 🕒



L. SHAPLEY BASSEN’s novel **NEW MARWA** (seeking publisher) is a multi-cultural/gender novel whose coda chapter is at beneaththerainbow.com/that-is-the-question. Her story **Portrait of a Giant Squid** won first place in the 2015 Austin Chronicle Short Story Contest. She was Fiction Editor for prickofthespindle.org and is the indie-published author of **Summer of the Long Knives** (Typhoon Media), **Lives of Crime & Other Stories** (Texture Press), and **Showfolk & Stories** (Inkception Books). She a 2011 Flannery O’Connor Award finalist, was a 1st reader for Electric Literature, won the 2009 APP Drama Prize and a Mary Roberts Rinehart Fellowship, and is a poetry/fiction reviewer for **Brooklyn**, **The Rumpus**, and others. Her website is lsbassen.com



Toast

Chris Espenshade

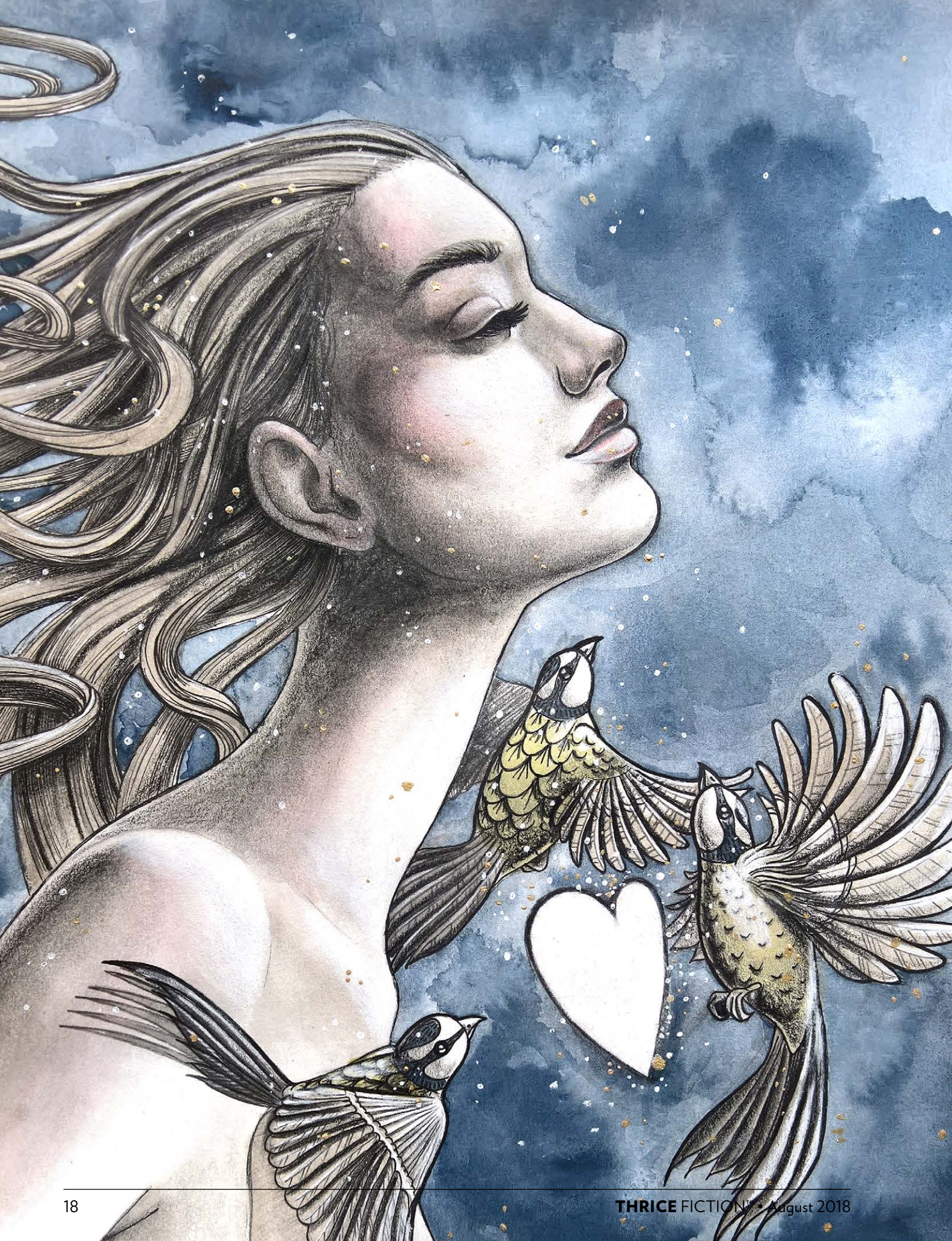
You had become sick of the same old bagel. You wanted something different. You and your pals cried, “We are not bagel people. We are white-bread toast guys! Let’s get back to our roots.”

However, your toaster made a mess of the white bread. It turns out that your bread could not handle the heat as well as the bagels. You could see the toast burning, getting worse and worse by the second. It was quickly becoming a sad mockery of breakfast foods everywhere.

How burnt must the toast be before you lose your loyalty? How badly must the crust bruise your upper palate and the char catch in your throat before you recognize that maybe change for change’s sake is not always the wisest course? Will you ever admit that bagels never did this to you? When are you no longer willing to swallow the toast? 🕒



A professional archaeologist, **CHRIS ESPENSHADE** branched into creative writing in 2017. He’s had flash fiction accepted for publication by **Thrice Fiction**, **Agora Journal**, and **The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature**. He placed second in a Brilliant Flash Fiction contest, and he is currently one of 22 published finalists in the Micro-Madness Contest of National Flash Fiction Day New Zealand. He lives with his wife, Linda, in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania.



Girls in the Shape of Birds in the Shape of Girls

Emma Harris

"...through the fusion of meat and machine, man does not simply name the animals, he creates them."

—Thomas Edison, inventor of the Bird, 1896

In the Bird Museum the rooms are red, like ourselves on the inside. It's autumn and the windowsills are sticky with dead wasps, leaves rot and slip off trees, but the exhibits are constant and indifferent. Windup fists of flesh twitter and crack their delicate bones. Shiny, sharp, singing.

"Welcome to the Bird Museum.

"I work here on Saturdays."

It's just me, has been since Ellen ballooned and started on her drifting. There are always eyes to polish, feathers to replace, pitches to graph.

To tune a bird one must un-jewel their feathered throats, pull taught the strings until they give a faint twang when gloved hands brush against cat-gut.

I've tried at craftsmanship, laboured over manuals, constructed DIY kits with "5 years and up!" printed on the side in fire-truck red, but my birds are always mute and wingless. They fizz on the ground like firecrackers.

"No sir. That's not a bird."

This place is mess. Notions manifest themselves as solid objects and form crusts along the edges of glass cases. Always more fork-shaped sadness to collect for the recycling. When I eat peaches, pit and pulp, my mouth grows soft and fur-lined. Perhaps Ellen inhaled her own spit bubble and it nested inside her. Perhaps her mind was just preoccupied with zeppelins.

If you squint your eyes you can blur the edges of blood and bird. Heart-beat, wing-beat. Avian arteries. In here it's all the same anyway. In here we crack eggs like knuckles.

Once upon a time people dipped their birds in radium paint. Their need for luminescence thrashed and filled their mouths until they brushed their teeth in it. Until even their drool glowed in the dark. In those days you could

pluck fingernails like feathers. In those days women made dolls with all the hair collected in shower drains. Now the radium birds light up led walls and we keep their boxes stacked in the back beside the Dettol and dust pans. Every four weeks, with held breath and heated pulse, I carry them outside.

I brush my hair until it hurts and scale the mound of crates. The wind splutters and dies, splutters and dies. Ellen's orbit is cyclical; soon she will bob over the horizon, grazing rooftops like a wet, inflated lung. I sit on my hands to pass the time, count to a hundred then release them so that they flush with humming blood.

Before she shed the constraints of gravity it felt like we had lived side by side for so long that our edges had fused. The two of us, joined at the hip in foaming underwear, flesh the shape and colour of soft fruit, scented in sticky sweet decay. Now my edges are messy and uneven, like she tore off little scraps of me in her ascent.

Here she comes, floating, buoyant, buoy, boy, girl. I lasso an ankle that just barely sticks out from the sphere of her. She blinks vacantly. I want to ask about the way space curves around her, about the logistics of deflation and why she left the walking world, but there are wings shifting in my stomach, down crusted in the folds of my lungs. My tongue tangles talk, I say "solecism" when I mean "solar system". I could open a lead box, let the radium birds shine their beacon beaks on me until I mutate, until synapses become synopses and I am a walking summary of myself, simple and digestible, built to draw her in.

The rope chafes my palms and she flaps her protruding fingers like squat pink paddles, straining against my weight until it slips and she is free, turning in the wind. I launch myself into the wet grass and leaf mulch, waiting for the shock of muscle and bone to crack me into my new form, blinking through visions of floating, of my hair tangled in telephone wires. But I am wingless, flightless. I watch until I can no longer see her, a flash of sun staining my cornea in the shape of a bird. 🕒



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Hearse and Jockey

Jack Garrett

On the way back from somebody's Arkansas, he has a bowl of soup. Through Gum Springs, Gurdon, Reader, down into Emmet and a bed, up out of Hope and Homan, and on out of state, he turns west, 300 pounds lighter. He stops in Paris. In a truck stop spoon he regards himself thinking Blaise, but a name isn't a man.

Aldinger, womanless, culpable, had burned his clothes and gone nightwalking cross-country in his drawers. Blaise drove him home in the back of the Cadillac to the lone last cousin who would bury him. Small and swaddled against the chill she let him in, and Blaise imagined peeling off those wrappings, setting her in that old tin tub, lathering her butter-colored back. "He's in a better place," he said.

"Sugar mouth," she replied.

Reminds him of Anita. Last summer. He spoons his split pea remembering spray-painting the chapel lawn, her coming up from the cold room peeling off gloves saying she was going for steak fingers did he want some? He puts down the spoon, eases aside his erection, gets up and walks.

Besides once to Lubbock and the crematory this '66 diamond-black Fleetwood Brougham covered the same slow mile back and forth to the memory park. Now Blaise

has it passing school busses, a brat at every window, hands flat, tongue out. Well past Jolly he descends into the low rolling prairie west of Electra. Behind a hundred miles of barbed wire and linear dead forests of phone poles cattle graze, soon to be a hundred million hamburgers. It begins to snow. "A drop of water is enough to kill a man," his namesake said. "But if the entire universe were to crush him, he would still be better than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and knows that he's feeble, and the universe knows no such thing."

In Floydada he fills up, leans pumping, ice in his face like thrown rice. He goes and pees and locks the door, spits and puts his hand in his pants, looks in the mirror, thinks twice, gets back in the Cadillac. *If It Ain't Love Let's Leave It Alone* wails Connie Smith, KWKA Clovis.

Anita came back with her bucket of lunch smiling her dust-colored smile, making Blaise wonder about the taste of her tongue, the smell of the pillow she lay her face. Through Sudan and into the blizzard he watches her feasting in the pea green grass, watching him back. Such an appetite. He'd take her to *The Spread* what he'd do, order the 64 ounce. Sirloin. If you eat it all in an hour it's free. That and the baked potato, corn bread, salad bar more bean than green and pudding too, all of it. They'd hang a clock over her, watch. She'd like that. Side by side they'd stagger out, collapse into the back of the Cadillac.

What happens between people who are no longer strangers? Bucket in her lap, the greasy napkin tucked into her bosom falls out, an undulant white field opens up, and he turns into it. "I'm yours," he says.

"What for?" she replies.

The road disappears and he slides sideways, turns out of it, accelerates into the whiteout. He reaches for her and the ground drops away. She puts down her lunch and hits him. He flops, ditched, snow against the windows. Tongue bitten tastes blood. Crawls in the back where Aldinger'd lain.

"See how you are?" she says.

Curled on his side in the dark, he kicks the tailgate latch and the door swings into the night. Snow falls soft, clinging to itself in lopsided clumps. 🌀



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Wakeweaver: The Huntress

Leah Baker

I close my eyes to weave.

Darkness — then the blackness begins to vibrate. Slowly, streams of muted jewel tones start to spread out from the center of my mind's eye. They arch outward in waves of subdued color — eggshell, mauve, marine. The colors grow more vibrant as minutes pass. Outside of the dream, I place my hands instinctively on my ribcage, attempting to smooth the rapid beat of my heart. I run my fingers back and forth across my sternum and belly, soothing my organs now flooded with adrenaline.

My vision goes to black again. Inside the dream, I step forward, placing foot in front of foot onto the matte onyx glass beneath me. I have seen all this before; it is common for those who weave. My leather shoes are soft and soundless against the smooth path of empty darkness. And then, a small figure appears on the ground in the distance and I glide towards it.

A deer head.

I know it is him because I have seen this shape before. It dropped into its final rest on a miniature bed of moss, lush and verdant. A snake moves soundlessly through one eyehole, while smoke drifts upward from the other. Beneath, extinguished ash. Now, a tremble on the ground below. A tendril emerges from the soil, shaking — a sprouting fern. Up, it crawls and unfurls. His decomposition has made the earth here rich. Flowers shoot up and bloom: thistle, marigold, nettle. The image is sweet enough to pluck, picturesque enough to etch with needles and ink on one's skin.

I settle on this picture, unmoving, grasping for its meaning. Is he dead? Is my part with him finally finished? Without warning, a choke seizes my throat, my eyes fill with water and I am suddenly sobbing with relief. Saltwater pours from my eyes and I can feel it wetting my throat, my

wool collar.

When my eyes open, I am seated beneath a tall cedar in a ring of other trees. Beneath each is seated a weaver, legs crossed, eyes closed. Some have a book beside them, a blanket folded around them. Others have come with nothing, sitting with straight spines and their hands placed in empty laps.

They have come here to enter the dream, the liminal space between the spirit world and ours, where we go to ask for images of guidance. In our country, this is a practice done only by those who choose. It is not for everyone.

I swallow, realizing my parched throat and reaching for my flask of water. I usually give myself a the better part of the hour to settle in, breathe, and reflect before leaving — but this time, my exit is immediate.

Nearing the outside of the ring, I approach the archway at the exit, beside which there is a woman seated under a canopy of ash trees. I look into her grey eyes and she nods, handing me a letter. A rust-colored orange is painted in the corner of the envelope, and I open it knowing already which handwriting I will see inside. "I dreamed you shot me with arrows," he has written. I fold the letter and place it back into the envelope, closing my eyes. That he had the backbone to write me is incomprehensible. I forbade him from contacting me years ago, but he continues to insert himself to maintain his influence over me.

As I make my exit from the place of weaving, I pass a ranger on my left, meant to guard the weavers. He nods at me as I pass, the only movement apart from his standstill. I recognize him vaguely, as my hunting outfit has been contracted by the ranger force before.

Tracing through backroads, I make it back to my quarters. I yank open the doors and immediately peel my soft layers off, then pull woolen clothes over my undergarments — green for hunting. A simple brown jerkin goes over my bodice, bracers on my forearms, hardy socks, and the same soft leather shoes as earlier. After pulling a hood up over my ears and forehead, I clasp my hands around my bow and run.

My feet graze moss and stone as I navigate the jagged landscape of these woods. As I dance across the landscape, I remember the words he spoke to me after the first time I tried to push him away.

"Come, wounded doe. You will be safe here."

Deer imagery, even then. It's strange how these things follow us, emerging and resurfacing even as time passes. My feet land one after the other more quickly. Safe? I was anything but safe with him.

A figure moves in and out of my sightline in the distance. I see him. His long legs carry him swiftly as he saunters around each trunk, brushing his slim fingers across bark, lichen, moss.

My fingers grip the handle of the bow, pulling the wooden curve toward my cheek. Breath escapes my lips and fills the narrow space that is the belly of the bow, a sheen of light passing through it as though electric. I feel the purple vibrancy of the fletching as I reach back, its soft sharp edge grazing against my fingers as I pull it forward and set the arrow into place. My hold is steady on the nock, fingers

placed on either side of its notched sides.

I hear his voice reach me from across the glade. “Come, wounded doe. What is this about?”

I close my eyes and hear my voice as loud as a shout. Whether it’s my inner or outer voice, I can’t distinguish. It is firm, and carries none of the shy, conciliatory tones that I used to use with him.

“Wake up.”

He moves slightly, shifting from one foot to the other. “I am awake. What are you—”

Crack! sounds the first arrow.

My voice in my ears again. “Stop enacting the same pattern with vulnerable women!”

I squint and I can see his face writhing. His upper arm is hit. “I knew when I’d ultimately have to witness you doing to other women what you did to me — using your authority to pose as safe, trustworthy and nurturing, then dismissing us through manipulation, exhaustion, and gaslighting. You trained us to trust you and we did! Your tribe shakes its head at you though it won’t open its mouth except to me. Now I open my mouth to you!”

I watch him as his feet stutter forward, and then his body slumps toward the ground. He’s on one knee, one arm grasping toward the arrow in his skin.

“Rise, man, rise!”

Rapid silence fills the space in the between us, a screeching depth of blank air vibrating with my force of my ferocity.

“We are waiting for you to rise!”

Slowly, he gets up, stumbling as he turns, and begins to take steps in the other direction. He jogs forward, zig zagging.

I steady myself, grasp another arrow, and set it, pulling back my arm.

“What you did was psychological abuse!”

I let go. The arrow whirrs forward and cracks, splitting in two. Looking ahead, I see his body separate, becoming two forms. The two arrows blast forward and thock! simultaneously hit both bodies.

“When I called upon you in moments where I needed support, you grew angry, cruel, and blaming. You told me I was crazy as you grew crazier. You laughed at the idea of consent when you knew I had been hurt by him!”

He turns and looks at the figure next to him: a balding, older man, a smattering of age spots across his face. They are nearly mirrors of the other except for the age: both of them lanky and deceptively imposing: towering, but ultimately slight.

The balding man smiles a grimacing smile at his near-twin, the arrows that hit them lodged securely at their

navels, pools of blood forming around the wounds. The older one reaches for the younger, bony fingers outstretched, rubbing the shoulder of the other — then letting his hand fall to touch his crotch.

It the opening scene from what he did to me.

The younger twin jerks away, then slumps over helplessly. “Hey, man! What are you doing?” The other one laughs, his mouth writhing and ghoulish. Is he a hologram? He appeared from thin air, after all. No matter.

I’m standing my distance in the grove, smiling darkly at the irony of the scenario. When I was violated, he urged me to grow stronger, to protect myself. I could do that. I did do that. I am a warrior, after all. But I also needed him to stand up for me. I needed someone untouched to go after the balding man. Instead, I dissociated — denying my hurt, stuffing it away.

I prickle and adjust my bracers as if to guard myself from this familiar display. Both men are now heaped on the ground, lying nearly huddled.

My senses are turned to full volume. I inhale sharply the vibrancy of the crisp air, eye the verdant leaves surrounding me. The frost resembles a crystalline substance hanging like strings of diamonds from the branches. Everything becomes clear.

In a reality I could never enact in another place, I aim decisively to end the madness. No other sister will experience what I have, falling under the spell of these men who call themselves “safe.” I raise my bow, reach back for an arrow, steady my stance.

“Hold, woman!”

A ranger appears at my left, a hundred yards away on a mound of decomposing forest debris.

“Hold!”

His keen voice echoes and everything stills.

“You have not been authorized to hunt this soldier! He has not stood trial!”

I laugh, raising my bow to position. I hear the clamor of a team of rangers racing to join their captain, their husky voices shouting directions as they approach.

I look to the heap ahead of me, the two bodies. I can already see their bones, and superimposed onto these, my vision weaves an image of peonies, columbine, and mug wort sprouting from the eyes.

Ranger, ranger tries to shoot.

No, I shoot the last arrow. ↻



House of Folly

Peter Cowlam

These three were watching: a surprised face in a pointed arch (a determined woman who still enjoyed the plasticity of corporal life); and petrified, a pair of crowned gargoyles — two homuncular soldiers.

Major and minor, these latter two had warred for centuries, for the right to plant a national soul, and at the world’s appointed hour rise to a gilded throne.

Michael had his back to them all — to Nicola, a Christian rebel, and to the bestial pair fixed in stone. He gazed down the mountain slopes, into the blue mists enveloping a now less tragic Europe (that was, less tragic by its sequestration). It was hard to believe that under the swirling cloudlets, governments persisted, their dogmas and liberal virtue a kind of bankruptcy. Harder to believe in a cabinet with ministers, and the forlorn hopes placed in a professional hinterland, in its tradition of searching, and reliance on innovation: cans on a string, or nowadays microchips.

In these quiet moments, in the tranquil suspension of Western life, Michael had turned away from all of that.

The live face, Nicola’s, was no longer wedged between the inanimate two, though the towers, turrets and arches were no less real for that. Michael had paused to study his tracks in the snow — tentative footsteps winding through a continental mist — and projected their entry into that medieval dwelling ahead of him, a huge house filled with shadows. The pure mountain air had flushed some colour into his cheeks, while the cold sharp stabs of pain in his lungs were responsible for this, his sluggish pace, and all these reflections. The haven ahead promised relief.

A bell tolled and echoed moodily in the scrolls and flutes. In the body, mind, and soul of the ringer, a thousand years of analytic life had brought with it simplified hopes for a lasting inner triumph. Nowhere here had God-the-imperfect strewn that bloody symbol, the crucifix, into the world’s violent tragedy and its school of ignorant offspring. Here, the

essential mysteries were written in the stone arch over the visitors’ portal—

Abandon all impedimenta, ye who enter here.

Michael shook the snow from his feet and pushed open the door. He adjusted his eyes to the darkness, and, blinking, saw portraits, a folding chair, and over a mantel a relief in plaster, a moral depicted in three parts — but failed to understand.

II

Not new to these cloisters was one impatient student, who had come to consider Occidental principles — should he or shouldn’t he cheat? Nicola, the most recent of Mertzburg’s guests, gazed from her dizzy summit, flanked by those primordial monarchs. Incredibly — for her own had been whirled away in the bitter night winds — another set of prints, another procession of black hollows, meandered from the vapours, like coals in pristine snow. Their contest was Frame Solutions, and her opponent reached his decision while her back was turned. She ignored him, musing on that solitary speck of a man (meaning Michael, a fortuitous presence, surely!). If he turned, and looked up the mountain, at the sun and sky, and the clouds, it was only a matter of time before Mertzburg, or its one last bastion, also entered his view. She didn’t wait, but with a toss of her hair swung away from the ledge and faced the interior of her room, without returning to the game. Even if, she thought, Michael understood the inscription at the door, and entered, it wouldn’t be for long. For how could he remain? A cold stone floor and naked walls, a rudimentary bed, a low table, icy winds that howled in at the uncovered windows — no one was given more.

So, she reasoned, while a mess of guilty thoughts in her opponent threatened to stay his hand, an impulse he suppressed once it had formed as a possibility. What he said was a veil on his clumsy machinations—

‘You had begun a list of books.’

Nicola studied the board and the new, illegal position of some of its pieces, and thought about how to answer. A few summarising sentences were impossible. What would a mere student of Mertzburg understand of her own student life, with its autumn afternoons? Could it mean as much to him, those sudden gusts, the flutter and flurry and shower of leaves?

She heard the bell — they both heard the bell — and was certain of what to say, was equally positive that the broad, extended lawns in the grounds of her orthodox life, cut and rolled into alternating light green bands — these as phenomena were a dissimulation. Yet you cannot consign everything to the world’s history, from a surviving reality measured as private experience. Details were important.

One day she looked outward from a bench in the convent garden and conjectured at the surrounding symbolism. Urns or sanctified vessels that hadn’t stood the test of time, smeared as they were in lichens, moss and mould. Neither were the holy statuettes of unassailable stuff when limbs were fractured and noses broken off. No. She, Nicola, had nothing to say, nothing at all of the books she’d read, and anyway a chilly wind was rising. (By now Michael was puzzling over



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that relief.) Squatting down at the board, she accused her opponent of cheating. Honourably, he conceded a fourth consecutive game.

III

Here in the House, a benign old mystic in a creaking chair had trained his mind to ignore the woody friction when he leaned forward to dip his pen, or back to gaze into the shadows and contemplate. He had never stopped wondering at the seasonal rites of peoples beyond the perimeters of Mertzburg. That consideration reinforced itself as he beheld the careworn faces of the Westerners who occasionally sojourned here, his life at a remove from theirs, invested with other meanings. They arrived with their signs and symbols and burdens of prejudice, for the wise elders of the House to examine, so to speak in the full flower of human folly.

He'd dipped his pen for the last time that morning. He put it aside and glanced through his open arch. In the conical blueness, a solitary cloud had been busily disintegrating, and in that other perspective, in the oblong whiteness when he stood, a new set of prints curled up the mountainside.

The bell tolled and he left his desk. He took down a heavy book from a shelf and blew away the dust. When he opened it and turned to the page he wanted, too many hands had been here before, and he was obliged to smooth away the creases, to flatten out its script, before placing in a marker. A spiral of steps led him into the lower chambers, and here he met Nicola in one of the passages. Dusty shafts of sunshine filtered in at intervals through slits in the wall. He apologised, but handed her the book — not too late, he hoped. Well, this had been a long time coming, but anyway, Frame Solutions wasn't a game one learned overnight. The old man chuckled.

'I hear you're beating all our best students,' he said, adding, 'I shall have to see if I can't upset that winning streak,' though it was years since he'd played.

Down, down again, and at the very foot of those stairs a young English head turned with a start. The old man had begun to interpret that plaster relief over the mantel, whose three divisions — one upper, two beneath — represented what? One in the pair depicted an unhappy village husband left holding the baby, with an empty jug of ale. His suspicious wife knew his evil ways, and where you saw her creeping round from behind, she clutched at a wooden shoe and wound back her arm in preparation for a blow to the head. A cowardly neighbour, keeping his own head down but determined to miss nothing, reported what he saw. What *we* see is a luckless husband condemned by the village fathers. On the right of the pair, local worthies come together and are unanimous — the drunkard they hold aloft rides the skimmington.

Michael looked at the old man, and at the relief, and at the old man again. 'And that, the upper?' he asked.

'Ah, that is the just god in his heaven, who sees that his law is carried out.'

IV

Here on another winter morning, the sun in its ice-cool heaven rose above Mertzburg, that country with its House of Folly. A hole appeared, or the tiniest chink, where a glimmer of light briefly penetrated a diffuse wash of moisture over Europe. A wrinkled old rustic in his mountain shack looked

up for a moment and fancied he'd seen *something* but heard only cars and a tourist coach.

Michael was in the gallery, where students had gathered, contriving to ignore him. Neither did Nicola speak, coming in to find herself a seat. Michael nodded. She opened a book. It was noted for its commentaries, its author an expert on the game of games. Michael marked her progress page to page. She tossed her hair over her shoulder. She paused, to take in the changes acted out in the courtroom below.

The affable old mystic sat at a bench with two others, while the man accused took his oath from a cleric in attendance. That official withdrew, leaving in view a Westerner in early middle age. His dark hair had thinned to greying wisps at the temples, and had receded to the crown, and that made it all the more unclear to Michael that a poet was about to be tried, his eyes bulging behind the lenses of his spectacles. Two deep furrows demarcating flabby jowls accentuated the flare of his nostrils. His thin lips formed an intelligent, whimsical smile. He stood waiting — a poet of the English municipality — in a shabby blue suit, a white shirt stiff at the collar, and a two-tone broadly knotted tie.

The case against was roughly this, while the three old men were loose with their metaphors. Our poet took his afflatus not from any potent commingling afloat in the atmosphere, but from something much less elemental, bound up with the naked mastery of form. This was not to deny the necessity of rules — that was understood. The objection was one of emphasis, for what was the character or ingenuity of present architectonics other than plain, arithmetic workings out, and the trivialisation of lived experience?

The defence was less vague. Historical problems couldn't be ignored, and the poet confessed to a growing sense of intimidation in the presence of his technological colleagues. For example, he, the poet, was capable of this: he could conceive a regular figure, a tetrahedron, in his mind's eye, and could tilt it, rotate it, examine its lines and surfaces. But the crudest schoolboy, with his home computer, could do as much and more. Or on a grander scale, think of this inscrutable planet Earth, and make of that a vision — a blue ocean sphere suspended brightly in an enveloping darkness. Can any lyric prefigure again so stunning a photograph? Even Armageddon, that most vital conceptualisation in his repertoire, has been subsumed into mere technics and delivered up as a political possibility.

The accused was a man of conscience, whose observations had something of a Janus nature, being both involuntary and the source of ceaseless irritation. If all our medieval visions were now the acquired, bastardised property of governments and technocrats, then the only freedom left was in an art that wallowed in the bourgeois and puerile, or in the frustrations of social protest. And anyway, they seemed to want to consider his case in a theological light, with accusations levelled at him answerable only in the realms of the unknowable. The four looked up. The sentence seemed a mere formality — condemnation to the world again — but Nicola had allowed that open book to slide from her knees and fall with a thud to the floor. This first session was adjourned.

V

Late evening. Michael sat in the gathering dusk on the edge of his bed — hands and forearms dangling, elbows on

parted knees. He approximated the cardinal points of the compass. North was cold and damp — the wall opposite. East was a window on a country in darkness. West, an open door on hinges that creaked, allowing in the last warm rays of a decaying world. There he hadn't guessed that the poet's dying emblem was a dull red segment as the sun underwent its final stage of descent.

In the early morning, the position was much the same, but now he heard voices rather than the mechanical whirr of his thoughts (the trial repeated itself *ab ovo* in all its developments wherever he concentrated his mind). He looked out of his eastern window and saw a distant country, its clouds of dust, its plumes and billows of brown smoke rising through an early frost, a dew. Nearer — below him on the courtyard — the poet had just snapped shut his tarnished cigarette case and returned it to a hip pocket in his jacket, which was crumpled where he'd slept uncomfortably. He lit up — a tarry, unfiltered cigarette — and drawing deeply looked east himself, though from his own elevation couldn't see over the bright icy slopes into the valleys. Six, seven students just out of earshot had formed their own circle and discussed concluding details in confidence, until at last an elected spokesman, whose warm breath Michael saw exhaled excitably into the cold air, detached himself and strode up to the smoking poet.

Later, a much older man was looking on, from the highest window in Mertzburg's southernmost tower. What he hadn't seen — Nicola and Michael together again — was immaterial, when his opinions concerning the two had already formed. Michael was immobile at the foot of the stairs, pointing up uncertainly to the apex of that triangular relief.

'The just god in his heaven,' he said.

Nicola, shrugging, said only, 'Just god, no. It's a landowner, that peasant's employer.' That was its meaning — a loss of revenue and the moral collapse of the workforce. Our parables are of ownership and regret.

Six or seven students set up a small table, while Nicola stepped outdoors with a playing board and a canvas sack for the pieces. The unbidden young Englishman followed, bewildered, while the older one was guilty as accused. The poet as he loses his voice reveals his remoteness in what he says for those who have lost their faith.


VI

Dreary grey scholars, who for generations had sneezed and drawn their secret signs in accumulating dust, consulted their archives, and were able to make one assertion: in its breadth of possibilities and relationships, that historic discipline Frame Solutions, first appearing in the fourth millennium BCE, had helped its adherents achieve superhuman powers

of assimilation. If that was its extent, what of the rules? Well, exquisitely simple. The players began with twenty-four identical pieces, the opposing sets being differentiated by colour, and to each individual certain powers and scope of movement were ascribed, though not declared until its first move or capture. Thus, an almost limitless range. Half a dozen students now formed a semicircle together with the silent Englishmen, while a seventh, large-framed and pale, could feel the colour rising in his cheeks. He would retract his confident offer to commentate on every move, or explain the rules, when almost certain to result was a first, embarrassing defeat.

Nicola considered her options but wouldn't make the decisive move. This much Michael understood. The bell tolled again and the poet tossed down his cigarette butt onto the cold stone, crushing its smoky ember under a polished toe, a city shoe. A biting gust rolled in round the frozen peaks of that far eastern country, still twitching in its slumbers, under a long, feudal shadow. When the old man from the southern tower came out to the courtyard — robed, in open sandals, supporting his tottering frame on a staff — the sun in the east behind him settled on his grey hair bright as a halo. Nobody stirred. This wasn't the game he'd come to see. He shuffled forward to those two seated at the board and crossed his arms, waiting. It was a hopeless position. He smiled. The student was lost. Like so many before him, he conceded — he retired, scratching his head. Then the old man put the tip of his staff to his lips (he cautioned the gasps, the hubbub, the euphoria), and next it was Michael, a wrinkled hand pressed to the small of his back, who was pushed in from the circumference to the newly vacated place. 'Play, play,' he was told, and unaware that the passing of only a few more days would see the commencement of his own trial, he squatted down nervously and took his place against that all-conquering female. A slight flicker of amusement crossed her features, but she restrained a smile and set out the pieces again. Michael, the challenger, made a first tentative move. She snorted when he named his opening piece — a choice revealing a naivety unsuspected even in him. In the shadow of that tyrant god her failing religion had sought to vanquish, her compulsion to teach a lesson, and punitively, re-emerged.

The old man chuckled, but didn't remain, and when the poet took *his* place, assured that his own system could never be so vulnerable, no one foresaw his defeat, until late afternoon, when in the lengthening shadows, and a rising wind, only one spectator remained. But even he — pallid, large-limbed — turned away before the final outcome, consoled by the sure knowledge that both must turn to that distant country, to those shadows over the mountains, for any hope of salvation. 🗨



PETER COWLAM is a poet and novelist. His latest novel *New King Palmers* is at the intersection of old, crumbling empires and new, digital agglomerates. He is the 2015 winner of the Quagga Prize for Literary Fiction. His latest collection of poems, *Laurel*, is of love, loss and rivalry. Poems forthcoming in *Fulcrum*. Poems and short stories have appeared in *The Battersea Review*, *Literary Matters*, *Easy Street*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, *The Four Quarters Magazine*, *The Galway Review*, *The Liberal*, and others. His books are published by the UK indie CentreHouse Press.

Kneecapping the Muse

Bill Yarrow

In 1997, I was exploring a used bookstore in Camden, New Jersey, when I stumbled across a two-volume hardback copy of The Dictionary of the Khazars by Milorad Pavić, a book I had been meaning to read since it came out in 1984. At \$10.00 for the set, I couldn't pass up the bargain, so I bought the books and rushed home with them. The volumes were quite handsome, orange dustjackets with bold red lettering, and quite pleasant to hold. I sat down in the wing chair in my bookroom and started to flip through them. Tucked midway in the second volume was one sheet of very thin paper covered, from top to bottom, from edge to edge, on both sides, with tiny, crimped handwriting. My curiosity was aroused. I tried to read what was written on the paper, but the writing was impossibly small. I couldn't decipher it with my naked eye. I got out a magnifying glass I had lying around but that didn't work, so I put the paper back in the volume and gave up.

Years later, I bought a printer that had a magnification function. I remembered the piece of paper in the book and played around with magnifying and printing as much of the paper as I could. After much experimentation and frustration, I was able to generate a fair amount of readable text but only from one side of the paper. The writing on the obverse side had deteriorated and could not be deciphered. I was, however, able to piece together those sections of text that, when magnified, often multiple times, were legible, so a portion of the document became clear. On the paper I discovered a narrative in labeled sections consisting of a "poem" of a mental patient followed by analyses of it by a doctor, a literary critic, and someone who claimed to be the patient's wife. The narrative ended, unfortunately, in media res. What follows is my best recreation of the substantial, but incomplete, part I was able, through much tedious effort, to recover.

I. Poem of Patient A:

"The Glittering"

Look, I couldn't help it. I took her. I took her dancing. In Strawberry Mansion. And the night expanded. And she was pressed up tight against me. And the music, though I was allergic, was magnetic. And I could feel her breasts all tense through her dress. But it was not like I was ever going to marry her, carry her across the merry threshold. She was not like the others, those archetypes, those mother types who had smothered me with their tender needs, their needy tenderness. Oh no. Oh no no no. That tactic did not attract me. That resourcefulness did not ensorcell me. They were not even appositely attractive. Just the opposite. I was repelled. Impelled away. I rebelled. What did I wish for when I was twenty two? Not just a woman. A woman I could hold. Who would not hold me back.

I can still taste her perfume on my lips.

II. The Doctor Will See You Now

An interesting case. Let's analyze the poem he wrote. Seems to me a poem about a man afraid to state the case. He can't admit his desire, the urge to "take" this woman, the free spirit, the anti-mother who doesn't want to get married as all the "others" do. He wants an unconventional girl—he's a rebel! Says "he took her" but only "took her dancing"! Then says the night "expanded." Interesting verb. But it wasn't the night that expanded; it was his pants, his penis, which she felt as "she was pressed up tight [nota bene] against" him. He wants to feel her breasts but he can write only that he could "feel" her breasts "all tense" and only "through her dress." Then there is the obsessive, almost pathological, triple wordplay—breasts-tense-dress, dancing-mansion-expan[sion], music-allergic-magnetic, marry-carry-merry, other-mother-smothered, tactic-attract-attractive, repelled-impelled-rebelled. One notices also the double wordplay (was he incapable of more triplets?): archetypes-mother-types, tender needs -needy tenderness, resourcefulness-ensorcell, appositely-opposite. Then unexpected alliteration kicks in in the last line—what-wish-when-was-woman—but one could argue it is echoed (or forecast) in the consonance of "K" sounds in line one. Finally, a concluding pun (holding the final ambiguity): "hold" vs. "not hold me back"—i.e. not return my embrace and not prevent me from fulfilling my desire. But the last line (separated) has none of the verbal yoga, none of the sonic contortions of the rest of the poem. A simple line. Iambic pentameter even. Well, pentameter but perhaps not iambic. The accents fall on "still," first syllable of "perfume," and on "lips." The return of the triple. Here three accents in a pentameter line. Lots of playing with threes and twos in the poem. Also a poem of seventeen lines, a prime number. His experience, he believes, is unique, indivisible. He craves the wildness of three but is reduced to the commonness of two. In the end, ordinary alliteration, dissolving into a paradox—something not to be resolved. Except by memory—something on his lips, but a scent not a kiss. A confusion of the senses. A confusion of intention. The poem of a man who thinks he knows exactly what he wants but who doesn't have a clue.

III. The Literary Critic

I find the doctor's analysis interesting but wrong. His reading does not take into account the poem's title. Why is it called "The Glittering"? Doesn't the doctor find the title odd? There is, after all, no literal glittering in the poem itself. The title, clearly, is an allusion. We find the word in the following works:

1. Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One*:

And like bright metal on a sullen ground,
My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.

2. Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes":

Next, when I cast mine eyes, and see
That brave vibration each way free,
O how that glittering taketh me!

3. Boswell's *Life of Johnson*:

He observed, that the established clergy in general did not preach plain enough; and that polished periods and glittering sentences flew over the heads of the common people, without any impression upon their hearts.

4. Dickinson 479:

She dealt her pretty words like Blades—
How glittering they shone—
And every One unbared a Nerve
Or wanted with a Bone—

5. Whitman's "City of Ships"

CITY of ships!
(O the black ships! O the fierce ships!
O the beautiful, sharp bow'd steam-ships and sail-ships!)
City of the world! (for all races are here;
All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)
City of the sea! city of hurried and glittering tides!

6. Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli":

Accomplished fingers begin to play.
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay

7. Auden's "Deftly, Admiral, Cast Your Fly":

Salt are the deeps that cover
The glittering fleets you led

Taken all together, the use of the word "glittering" suggests personal failure, sexual arousal, elaborate oratory, treacherous diction, animate Nature, wisdom, and warfare—all of which I find in the patient's poem. The author's personal failure is his sexual arousal (he "couldn't help it") expressed in euphuistic (i.e. over-elaborate or I might even say "treacherous") diction in which Woman's animate (smothering) nature mingles wily warfare ("tactic") and sweet wisdom ("perfume"). But what of "Strawberry Mansion"? "Dancing" and "mansion" are half rhymes but why "strawberry"? What does a strawberry have to do with a mansion? Why is that particular fruit mentioned in the poem? Well, strawberry is, the doctor will surely attest to

this, sexual slang and artists' icon for a woman's genitals. "Mansion" likewise, as in Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop": "But Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement." Quod est demonstratum.

IV. The Wife Has Her Say

Strawberry Mansion. That's what intrigued me too. I wondered why it was capitalized so I looked it up on Google. It's a section of Philadelphia where my husband's father was born. This leads me to wonder whether this poem is even about my husband. You both assume it is, but could it not also be about my father-in-law? None (or nearly none) of my husband's poems are about himself, even when he uses the "I." They are all persona (that's the right term, right?) poems, they all intuit (that's the verb my husband uses) a speaker, a speaker of some kind. I don't recognize my husband in the speaker in this poem. My husband is faithful. He's loving, he's kind. I married a veritable saint.

V. The Doctor Has a Question

Why do you keep saying "my husband, my husband"? Why don't you refer to your husband by his name?

VI. The Literary Critic Thinks He Knows

Why doesn't she call him by his name? Don't you see? She thinks her husband "saintly, faithful, loving, kind." There's no such husband! Never been such a husband! Who thinks like that? No one. A fictional character! I suspect this wife is pretend, a hired actress perhaps. I'm not even sure the patient is married. This may be just an act. I think he wrote those lines for her say. There's a long respected tradition in literature for that kind of thing.

VII. The Doctor Turns Suspicious

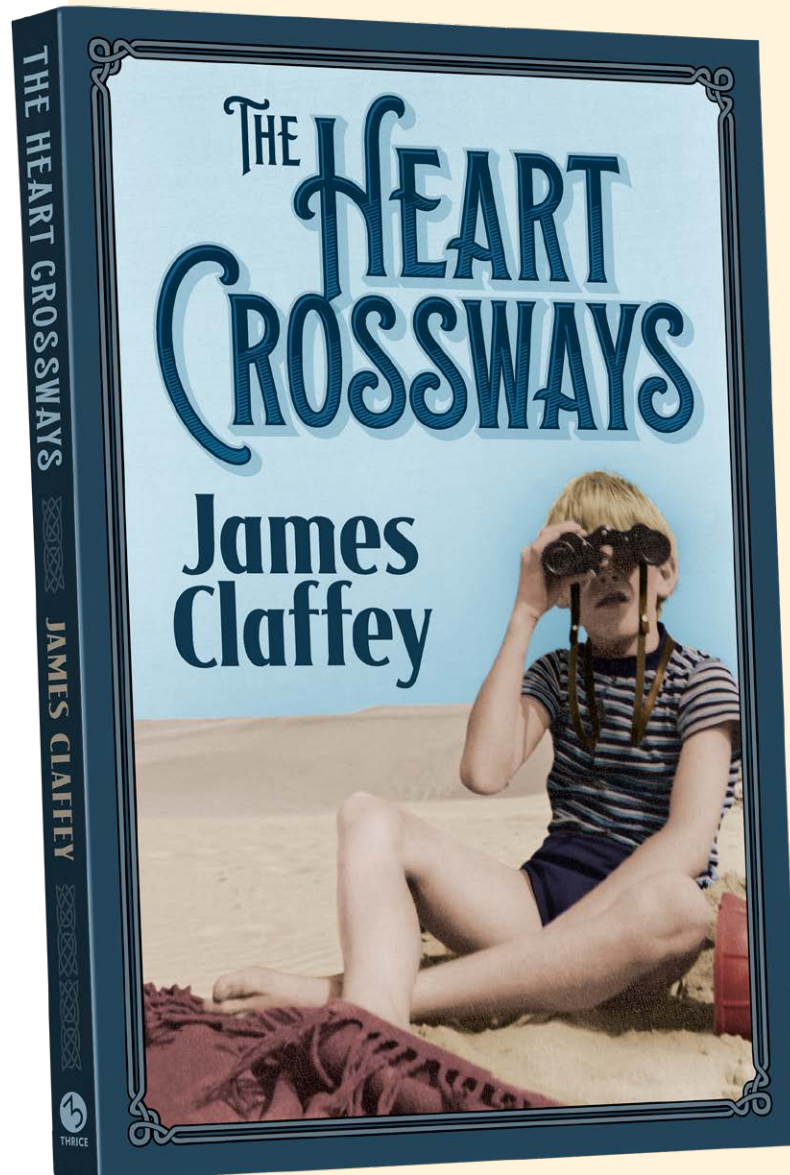
So you don't think a husband can be saintly, eh? That's interesting. What makes you say that? Why do you see that as an impossibility? What makes you so certain? Tell me about your own father. What was he like? How did he behave toward your mother? Was she—

Here the manuscript breaks off. ☹



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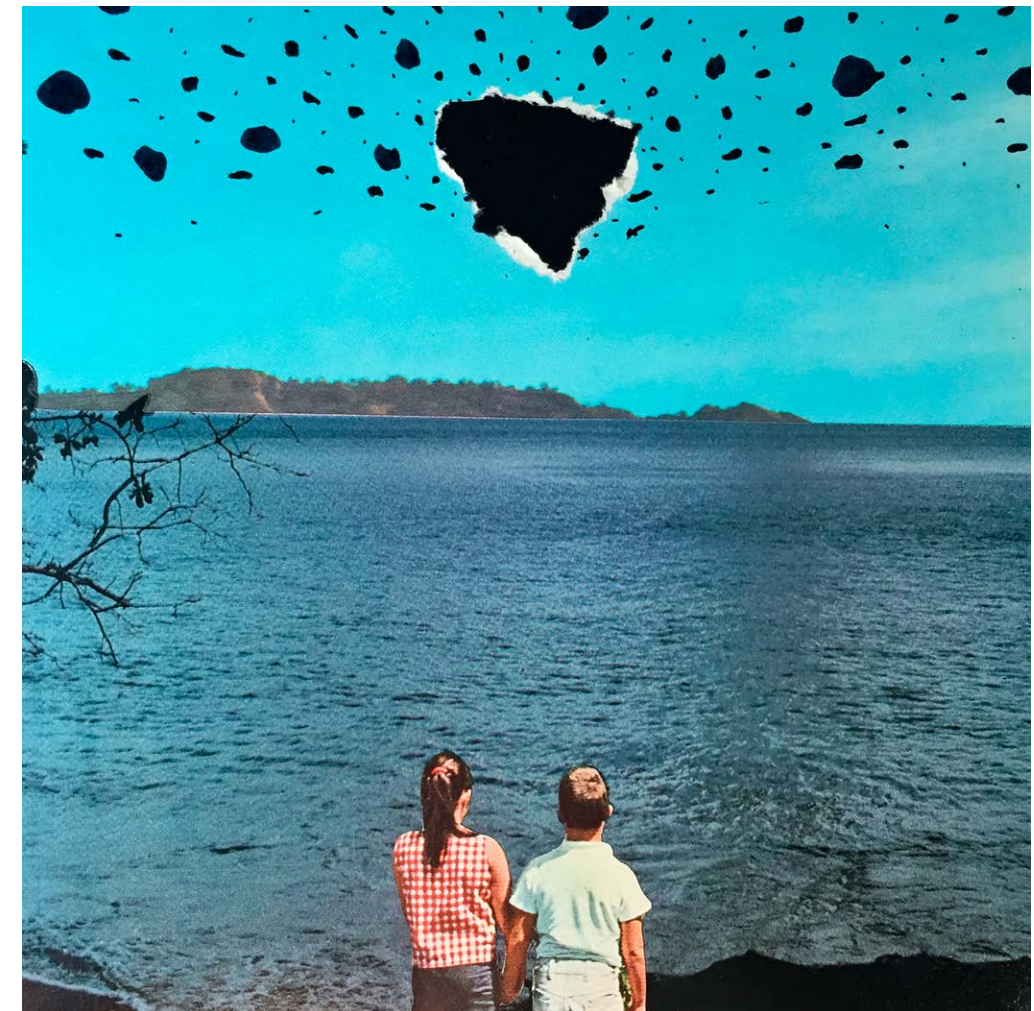
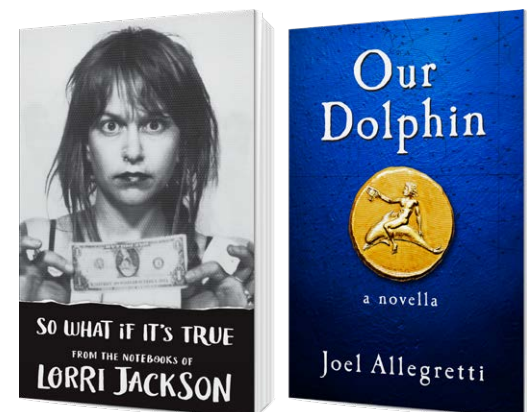
— Andrew Stancek, author of *Wingy Unbound* and *The Mirko Stories*

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Forward and Back

Daniel Vollaro

In the hour before dawn, Lucy comes for me in an aluminum rowboat.

"They say we are wiping the dust of Romans from our shoes," she says as her boat materializes from the wall of fog at the edge of the wooden dock where I sit—no 'hello' or 'how have you been?' but something I said to *her* long ago. That's what I remember most about Lucy Feingold—within ten minutes after meeting her, we were talking about Romans and stardust and the hour of our own deaths, which at eighteen years old, had been almost impossible to imagine.

Sometime after midnight, I had walked from the cabin down twenty-five cement block steps to the beach, and then, out to the end of the dock. The dock is thirty feet long and shaped like an "I"—wood decking sitting atop orange styrofoam floats; it creaks and sags with each footfall. Behind me and up the steep embankment, the light from

the kitchen window is framed against the hulking black shape of the cabin shrouded in darkness, but I can see inside the place in my mind, every knot in the pine paneling, every square inch of it crowded with memories from a lifetime of summer vacations, ski trips, and weekend getaways. The cabin is built chalet-style, with the kitchen and bedrooms opening into a big oak-lined living room with a black wood stove at one end. Standing inside, you can look up and see the peak of the roof in polished oak beams, and the steps rising to a loft bedroom that hangs out over the open space like a balcony. Marissa is still asleep up there in the big four post, her purple chemise draped regally over the top half of her body, breathing softly like the woman-child she is. For the past three nights, I have watched her sleep from a stool in one corner of the room, with the bedroom window propped halfway open near my head, to let in the autumnal mountain air. Tonight, her arm is draped over her stomach,

her legs are crossed at her ankles, and her soft blond hair spreads out on the pillow around her head. I see so clearly the woman-child to my man-child—Marissa in her thirties, me in my forties. Sleep reveals us as we are, our souls drawn in the soft lines around our eyes and mouths. And we have the souls of adolescents.

My mother believes Marissa is The One, which explains the new towel rack in the bathroom, and the six-pack of sparkling water in the fridge, and the satiny sheets she left folded on one corner of the dresser top in the loft.

“I like her,” Mother said as she handed me the key to the cabin. “Don’t screw this one up.”

Mother doesn’t say it, but she believes that the cabin will exert a magic love spell, carried on the breeze like pixie dust—the sweet smell of balsam pine drifting in from the woods, waves splashing on antediluvian granite boulders, the soft whispering of a breeze through the treetops. She believes that we will be inevitably carried away by its currents. It is the old, dead hope of the romantic, that nature can reflect its essence back on us—and that we will see ourselves in it—but I know in the pit of knowing that Marissa will never see the cabin again after this weekend, because in *our* world, it is desire that drives the wind and the waters, not the other way around.

It is easy to forget on the dock. Since I was a child, I have wandered down here at night to stare up at the Milky Way and count shooting stars, each one a hair-thin streak of white light that briefly slashes the blackness before dying out forever. The clear night sky in the Adirondack Mountains is eternal, as if a hole had been burned in the atmosphere long ago, allowing the universe to spill through in all of its unfiltered glory. The air, the trees, the rocks, the familiar rise and fall of the mountain horizon, the glassy surface of the lake—these are holy, immutable things. The cabin was here before I was born. My family has never painted it or changed the shutters or even replaced the front door—all of it built by a great-grandfather I never met. I know him only as the pudgy old man in a three-piece suit who sits on the buckboard of a Model T in my favorite of the old black-and-white photos my mom has framed and hung in the hallway of my parents’ house in Connecticut. He built the cabin by hand, having carried with him on the ship from Naples to New York in 1901 the clothes on his back and a storehouse of useful knowledge—how to frame a house and lay shingles, how to cobble shoes, how to live just beyond the law and not get caught smuggling gunpowder and liquor across the Canadian border. Even the trees around the property are as familiar to me as the surface of my own hands. This place is the navel—still, unmoving—and everything else in my life rotates around it.

I lay on the dock for a long time, hours folding gently into the void. Eventually, the soft splash of water on granite boulders fades out, replaced by the sound of my own breathing. The fog moves in, closing around the creaky wooden platform, and a damp night chill covers my face and arms. The cabin disappears in the mist.

•
Sometime later, Lucy appears at the edge of the dock in her rowboat.

I hear the creak of oars in oarlocks first, and then she materializes, half-shrouded in mist, sitting in the center of

the boat. She wears cut-off jeans and a white halter top, and her blond-streaked auburn hair hangs in a thick, wavy mass around her shoulders.

“Where are we going,” I ask.

“Back to the scene of the crime,” she winks.

I step into the boat and take a seat in the stern. She dips the oars into the glassy lake and gently pushes the bow out into the mist.

“I haven’t been there in ages,” I warn her. “Are you sure you know the way.”

“It’s easy,” she leans towards the bow and lifts the oars dripping from the water. “We go forward,” she dips the oars back into the lake again and pulls hard, “and we go back.”

Lucy rows into the fog, gently rocking to and fro with the motion of the boat.

“What is it?” she says after a long silence. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You haven’t changed in thirty years.”

“Neither have you, Peter. Not really.”

She rows in silence. The fog is lifting off the lake in a solid mass, and for a few glorious minutes, a ceiling of soft white mist hovers over our heads, close enough to reach up and touch. The mountains begin to take shape in the distance, hunkered around the lake in softly eroded tree-covered green mounds. For a long time, we hear nothing but the light rhythmic splash of oars breaking the surface and the soft *chuck chuck* of the oarlocks. The sun is beginning to warm my shoulders.

I can see the sandy point of Schroon Manor ahead, jutting conspicuously into the heart of the lake.

When we near the shore, I jump out into the shallow water and tug the boat ashore with Lucy still inside. She stands and steps lightly onto the beach.

“Well, what do you think?” she asks.

The beach is exactly as I remember it.

“This is about where we were standing when we met, right?”

“Yes, the summer of 1983.”

I am standing at the water’s edge, watching the tiny waves ripple in silvery shards of sunlight. Between the flashes, I see familiar sparks of memory.

“What is it?” Lucy asks.

“Your last name is . . . Feingold.”

“Yes, you remember.”

There are other names between the flashes: Ellie Strong, Camilia Castaneda, Sharon Wunder. There are first names without surnames and nicknames and faces without any names at all and scenarios that play out in short twenty-second clips. There is a basement apartment that smells like vanilla candle smoke burned into wallboard and a gold chain draped over a deeply tanned ankle that looks like it is sculpted from bronze and a woman with an eyeball tattooed in the small of her back. I hear a giggle like Sally Field’s in the “Flying Nun” and groans of pleasure that pitch and slither through my ears. I am thinking about Ginger, but her last name has slipped away too. I remember the Che Guevara poster on her dorm room door, and her scent, like patchouli mingled with spearmint.

“What is it?”

“I know this place. I’ve been coming here my whole life. Summer vacations . . .” I stop talking. The words seem

automatic to me, as if I have been speaking them in a long chant that predates the origin of the universe. I am suddenly sick to death of my own voice.

“I know this place,” she mocks me. “No, actually, you don’t really know it.”

“This is where . . .” I am about to say, where the old resort hotel beachfront was located. This used to be one of the great Adirondack resorts, a playground for rich New Yorkers, long ago gone to seed. I could walk her back along the broken blacktop, through the waist-high dry grass to show her the old golf course, overgrown now, but its main contours still visible beneath a tangle of waist-high grass and brush. I could show her the ruins of the old amphitheater, tucked away in the woods.

“You’re gonna tell me that they filmed *Marjorie Morningstar* here,” she says.

“They filmed *Marjorie Morningstar* here,” I mutter.

“But everyone who comes up here knows that.”

“I said that, didn’t I, back on the beach, when we met.”

Lucy nods.

“Your father was a realtor, I remember now. He sold lakefront properties. And you lived in Manhattan, with your mother.”

She grabs my hand then and pulls me towards the top of the hill. When we reach the top, she sits down in the grass and motions for me to join her. From this spot, we can see the lake stretched out below, gunmetal gray, with flashes of silver moved by the wind.

“I figured out part of it,” she says.

“Figured out what?”

“But the most important part,” she punches my arm lightly. “You’re gonna to have to help me with that.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You had sex with all of them, right.”

“Sex with who?”

“The women you were thinking about back there at the beach.”

“How did you know I was . . . No, I didn’t. I mean, I don’t recognize all of them.”

“How could you not recognize all of them? Were there really that many?”

“I just don’t remember them all. Is that a crime?”

“You’re such a *guy*, Peter. All that *sex*, and you can’t at least do them the honor of remembering their names. Is there anything more important than remembering their names? If you don’t have that, it was like it never even happened. It’s like they never existed.”

At that moment, I notice something overhead in my peripheral vision—a streak of black that originates in the east and cuts diagonally across the sky. I can’t bear to raise my eyes.

“It was forty-five minutes,” I remind her. “An hour tops. We stood down there, right there, and we talked. Do you remember that? You were going to William and Mary; I was going to Rutgers University. It was an amazing conversation. I can remember it . . . so clear in my mind.”

“And then my parents walked over that hill there, and we said goodbye and went our separate ways.”

“And on the boat ride back across the lake, I kept thinking, why didn’t I ask you for your number?”

“My sister was standing there the whole time. She

wouldn’t leave us alone.”

“But I could have found a way, right. That’s what you’re thinking. I could have found a way.”

She shrugs. “Who says I’m thinking anything?”

“After the worldwide web, I looked for you, but it was a real needle and haystack thing. Do you have any idea how many Lucy Feingolds there are out there?”

“Did you really just say that . . . ‘after the worldwide web’? You sound like an ancient one.”

“Did you just call me an ‘ancient one’?”

“Ancient, like the granite.”

“I couldn’t find you. I looked and looked.”

“But not like it was life or death, right.”

“I should have looked harder, that’s what you mean. This is always my problem. The follow-through.”

“You wouldn’t have found me.”

“What happened to you?”

“The ether, Peter. I was in the ether.”

“It was less than an hour down there on the beach, but I remember it . . . so clearly. Isn’t that crazy, that I remember something like that. Decades later, I can still play it over and over in my head, like I am watching a movie.”

“I’m flattered,” she says.

“You seem different to me.”

“Different, like how.”

“I don’t know, like maybe I know you, even though I don’t really.”

“Of course we know each other silly. We’re star stuff contemplating star stuff.”

“What?”

“It’s Carl Sagan.”

“I know, but why did you say it?”

“That’s what *you* said to me, that day on the beach. ‘We’re star stuff contemplating star stuff.’ I thought you said you remember it like a movie.”

“Maybe there are gaps, I don’t know. Jesus, what a dork I was.”

“Peter, I’m not one of those girls who thinks like all the girls you see on TV. I didn’t think you were a dork for saying something smart. And,” she wraps her temple with the knuckle of her middle finger, “I remember it after all these years.”

The sky is growing darker, but still, I can’t look up.

“That afternoon was perfect,” I say. “I’ve never had an afternoon more perfect than that one.”

“Ok, Ok, it was pretty special.” She touches my arm and gives me a serious look.

I glance up finally. The sky is filled with black dots now, thousands of them, like a swarm of locusts streaking across the blue cloudless expanse. They are clustered around a black triangular shape in the sky that looks like a hole torn in the atmosphere by some unseen hand. There are no stars inside the perforation, only blackness.

As I watch, the hole appears to grow larger, pushed open by the frantic boiling cloud of black dots that have clustered around the perimeter like parasites, chewing away at the edges.

“Can I go back . . . across the lake?”

Lucy shakes her head.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, my voice cracking. I am desperate to freeze this moment, to capture its fragrant

essence before it passes.

Lucy smiles, and then lies down on her side curled into a fetal position, reaching one hand up towards me. I lie down gently on the grass beside her, spooning around her back, my left arm reached around her back to rest against her smooth arm.

“I never married,” I stifle a sob. “I had so many chances to do that.”

“It’s OK,” Lucy reaches back to stroke my face.

“I never had kids. In a hundred years, no one will even remember that I was ever here.”

At the very edge of my vision, I am aware that one of the black dots has detached itself from the swarm and is darting down towards us, growing in size against the sky as it approaches. It hurtles towards us like a black meteorite and then crashes into the upper branches of the white birch tree nearby in a loud rustling of leaves and cracking of wood.

“Would you have let me . . . that day?”

“No, silly. But that’s not as important as it seems.”

I am trying to ignore the tumult in the treetop just twenty feet behind Lucy, but whatever has fallen from the sky is now thrashing about in the branches trying to free itself. I try to keep my attention focused on Lucy. I rub my palms down the side of her torso and feel her life force there, warm and breathy—all inhale and exhale—the powerful rise and fall of ribs and muscle and skin pressed up against me. It is as if I am holding the only other human being in the universe. I draw her close to my body and tuck my chin tightly into her collarbone.


“You feel so good,” I say. “Better than I ever imagined.”

Staring over Lucy’s shoulder, I can see the thing untangling itself from the treetop, wrestling itself to the ground in a shower of leaves and snapped branches. It is a creature, standing twice as tall as a man and girded almost entirely in shiny black skin like an insect’s. The creature shakes itself furiously and then snaps its wings open in a sudden taut unfurling of slick black feathers. I watch its head emerge slowly from the shell—disproportionately small and definitely human. Then, turning up towards the sky, the head opens its pinkish human lips and utters a shriek that burns the sky.

“I don’t want to let you go,” I whisper, my voice nearly gone.

“Don’t be afraid,” she says.

The creature snaps its head towards us then, noticing us for the first time. Its eyes are human, but the whites are a rheumy yellow-green. The top of its skull is covered by a triangular patch of black insect skin, with one of the points terminating between the eyes. Furling its wings, the creature takes a long, stomping stride in our direction,



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covering half the distance between the tree and us. At that moment, a series of shrieks echo across the lake from the east shore, and the creature’s head turns to scan the water. Then, as quickly as it had dropped from the sky, the creature hurls itself off the hill in a single explosive leap. I watch it soar across the lake in a series of powerful wing strokes and then disappear into the trees on the other side.

“What was THAT,” I gasp finally.

“They take everything apart.” She pushes me far enough away to stare into my eyes. “But don’t worry. Everything gets puts back together again, more or less. You’ll see.”

I draw her close again, and we stay like this for a long time, with my arms wrapped around her slight torso and our chests pressed together. I focus on the sound of her breathing in my ear and the light fruity tang that wafts out of her hair. After awhile, our breathing synchronizes, her exhale meeting my inhale.

“Is this all there is?” I ask.

“Yes,” Lucy says. She does not hesitate for even an instant.

She does not rush me. When the moment is right, she stands and takes my hand.

“Come with me. I’ll walk with you some of the way.”

The creatures overhead have intensified their feasting, and nearly half the sky is gone now. A stiff wind is coming off the lake, and the water has turned a gunmetal gray color, punctuated by whitecaps. I can hear the waves splashing on the beach. Soon, the whole world will be gone, subsumed in black, but I am less afraid than before.

“How do we go?” I ask.

“It’s easy,” she squeezes my hand. “We go forward, and we go back.” 🌀



The Edge of Things

Robert Ciesla

At first, it was the fire alarm that attracted no fire brigade, late in September. Then, weeks of restless fingers tapping on walls, like they were plucking harp strings made of steel wire. The four AM knocks would rummage inside my room, eventually leaving a sonic trail out of the dingy Helsinki council apartment. Something wanted me out there. It took a good two weeks to say fuck it, while tying my steel cap boots’ laces, the ones with Union jacks printed on them. I needed a path to tread and so I was out at four past four in the morning, breathing in a cold night, expecting an answer.

I would at least dine on the darkness of the forest by the train tracks. Nothing could surpass the splendour of the transient, half-empty railroad cars. The air by the tracks was rife with delicious, tinnitus-inducing darkness. And it only got darker. After each grimly lit train had done rolling on the tracks, there were shadows where there were no shadows before. Then, the meat of the footsteps hit the atmosphere; the sounds of another pair of boots just like mine were approaching.

We stood still for minutes. She could’ve been a hunter on his way back home, all out of cigarettes and prey, or a homeless person eager to jump anyone to get some clothes. There was no nervous anticipation, merely acknowledgment.

A face full of luminous skin emerged from the branches. She was quite beautiful for a night stalker. But like many before-pictures in meth galleries, she had a foreboding quality to her beauty, just waiting to ooze through her pores. I couldn’t place her in any particular timeline, but even in pitch black I could tell where her arm ended and a neon orange snap bracelet begun.

She faced me then with some menacing, cold green eyes. A second train passing in the opposite direction finally lit her up. There were two strands of dyed blonde hair with the rest of her highly processed hairdo pulled way back. A duotone red and blue t-shirt hugged her brawny midsection

tight. She could’ve looked corny, but her striking eyes kept coming closer, expressing and garnering more interest. Junkie eyes, I thought, someone’s definitely gonna jump me.

Oh, that’s not gonna happen buddy, she said in a buried voice. My blood froze and I had to take a step back. I’m not a junkie and no one’s gonna jump you. I just want your time, that’s all, she continued, signalling me over with her left arm and pulling me deeper into the wilderness.

She looked like a Dolores. She refused to give me a name so I had to privately give her one. By the tracks, in the dark, homeless Dolores had a grove where she entertained her guests. She seemed confident in her skin, but each passing train shattered her calm. She would turn away from me as the fleeting lights flickered on us. Dolores would fight the revealing brightness by becoming as talkative as she could.

I needed to know why she wanted me there. But Dolores had no answers, only questions. Do you watch Friends? How about Northern Exposure? That Ed guy is cute. Did you ever read the Unabomber manifesto? That shit was awesome. I hope they never catch him. Dolores’ eyes would come alive and illuminate her gorgeous cheekbones when she was firing her barrages of questions.

Okay, call me what you want. Call me Dolores. That’s not my name, but I’m not tripping over it. My eyes caught her right side. She had no arm there. Yeah, I lost it, okay? Big deal, mofo man, she scoffed. Says she had a bass-related accident. She played for a couple of years and toured a few bars, but they broke up. Grunge is so dead.

Dolores’ surviving arm had thick pink rivers of cutting wound scars. She too had been put through the heavy machinery of unmanageable angst. For a few moments I heard nothing but the owls. A loveless and primordial moment unfolded around us. We were tired old wolves looking for a sanctuary.

And then we found the mutual language of music hardware. Dolores knows all about bass guitars and amps. For once during the encounter she listens to me like a

boot camp kid to a drill sergeant. I share a few war stories from my own band days. Awesome, dude, she says, almost smiling, nearly caring.

I snapped out of the moment. The grove was a site for a first date set in motion by wall noises and speeding car alarms. Hallucinations can be completely realistic to those experiencing them. Oh, is that what I am? Well, fucker, have some of this.

Lights by the train tracks began to flicker and diminish. The sky, too, lost its stars. Only Dolores self-illuminated then as she began: you don't need to share any war stories. I don't need to ask you a single thing. I know what you are and what you want, she says, raising her remaining hand in a fist. After a surge of defiant confidence, a longing pours all over me from her eyes. In a state no doubt familiar to her, she is no longer in control of things. Help me, she says. Just help me. That's why you're here.

Dolores handed me a ravaged old bass guitar. It had remains of stickers all over it like leprosy. Two of the original four strings remained. The thing had chipped red paint. Dolores sat down on the ground without cracking a branch. Play something for me, please, she whispered.

I obliged, mostly out of empathy for my strange acquaintance. I went with Red Hot Chili Peppers first, transitioning into generic metal, and finishing my nocturnal set with some classic punk. Hours must've passed and yet I wasn't any more tired or hungry than when I left my council house. Dolores had kept a careful watch on every aspect of the performance. Her hungry eyes were fixed on my fingers and their position at all times. The notes I plucked out of the poorly instrument seemed to resonate much louder than what seemed possible.

Dolores opened her eyes in shock when I stopped playing her bass. Don't stop, please, she begged. Put the pick back against the strings. Cut out the music, stranger.

Nothing will happen to me, she insisted. There wasn't much waiting for me back in the real world. I wasn't hungry. We'll just sit here for a day or two then, punk boy. Maybe longer. Before I could formulate my question, she responded. I don't care what year it is and that's not what you want to know, either. To answer your question, honey, I'll be here for you. I'm your audience. Forever if need be.

At some point Dolores had changed her eye color to deep black, probably with some contact lenses. Light travelled down her cheeks then as tears. Now Dolores was the girl getting knocked up at sixteen. She was an oblivious victim of a school shooting. She was that terminal diagnosis, caused by too much smoking. The intact skin on her remaining hand was not only scarred, it was wrinkled

beyond her years. Yet she would never grow old. Dolores will never change.

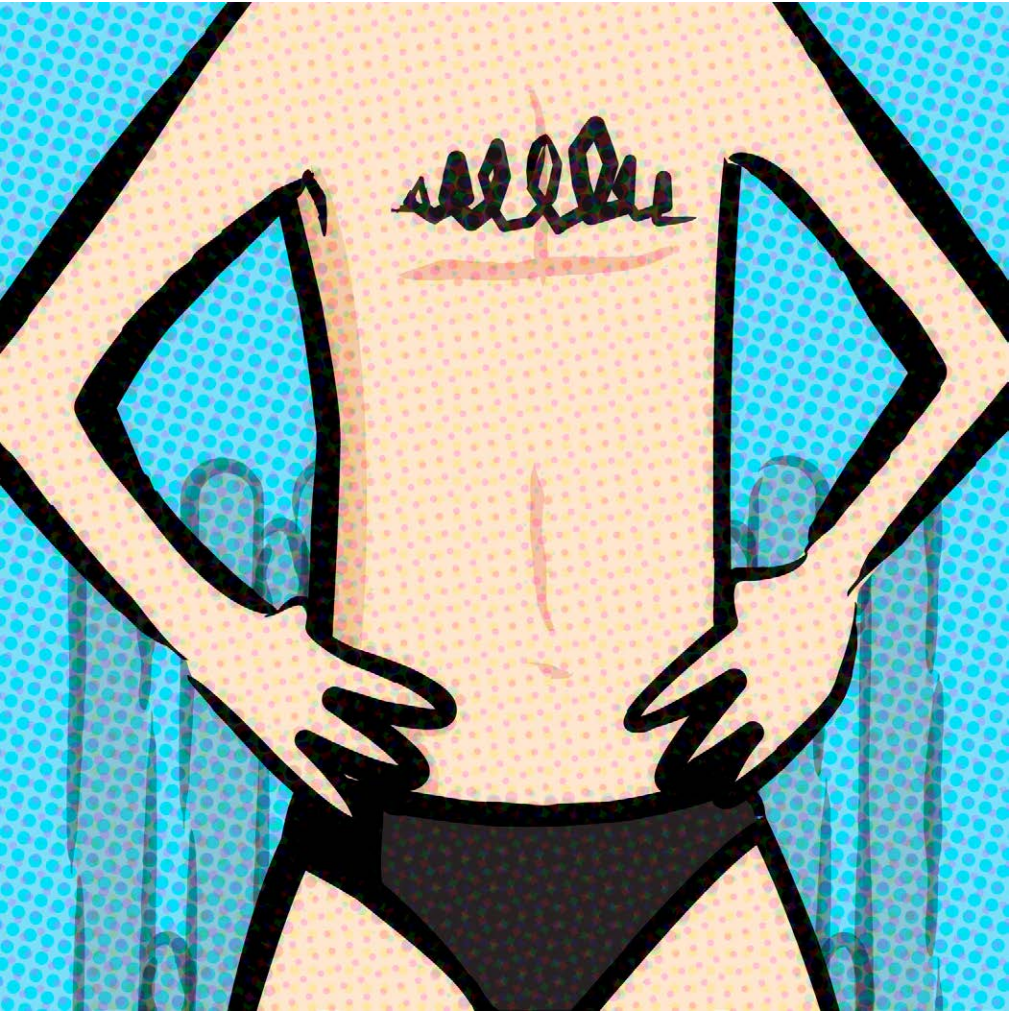
The least you can do, she says. Please, Dolores insisted, offering me a razor. She pulled up her jeans shorts. Her thighs were almost completely overrun by thick strokes of blades. The sight repulsed me, but she didn't care. A single faraway light flickered first in her ravenous eyes, then in the cold obscurity around us. A second pack of wolves had emerged, on their way to feast on us.

This is the least you can do, Dolores said, squeezing the razor until her hand was drenched in fresh blood. As I backed off from her she lunged forward. Don't you fucking dare leave me, she shrieked. The blueness of atmosphere returned. A winter afternoon opened up above us. Sounds of passing trains tunnelled air again. It's on my neck, fucker! It's on my neck, Dolores yelled after me, bloodied by loathing and disappointment.

Hunger and cold caught up with me immediately outside of Dolores' grove. I dodged hundreds of trees and rocks, breathing as deep as I could, falling frequently over uneven terrain and scraping the paint-job on my steel caps.

At some point during the following night numerous blood-stained footprints were pasted on my council ground zero. Alternating low frequency noise and screaming keep me up most of the night. But I didn't budge. Six nights of terror later a series of bangs ring out, louder than gunfire, inside the apartment. They wake up but one person at four past four in the morning, right on the cusp of daybreak.

Dolores will hold her razor and feel any passing light cut wounds in her sorrowful eyes. Others will not see the razor itself, just the hands that made it in some faraway sweat shop. And that's when Dolores falls asleep in her grove, followed by all the other demons the forest carries within herself. 🌀



A Meditation on Swimwear

Cameron L. Mitchell

Knowing he won't return for a few hours, I finally let go, abandoning the idea that what I'm about to do is wrong. Left alone with the clues and artifacts of his life, of his essence, I stop resisting and fling the door open to whatever comes next. I've never allowed such freedom in his presence, which might be half the problem.

After pulling my shirt off as I walk from my desk to the window, I drop it on my bed, not his. I push my shorts down, the ones I lounge in, the pair he calls my "sleeping" shorts, and I gently kick them across the cold, hard floor. Next, I make an escape from my underwear, bunching them up before tossing them aside. There, spread across the radiator, the thing he left behind calls out to me. It is his and only his. We never exchange clothes, on purpose or by accident. I know where I end and where he begins. It's a boundary I know all too well.

He's left his Speedo hanging out to dry on the radiator, which currently emits no heat; he would have never left it there if the radiator was on. I look down and take in my nakedness — my chest with light tufts of hair, my cock hanging down like a sad, defeated thing. If I turned to look in the mirror on the back of the door, nothing remarkable would be reflected back at me. I do not have a chest that bulges with muscle, nor do I have anything else that demands admiration. Right now, I cannot face that image of me since it would stop me from doing this forbidden thing. This clandestine act belongs to me. In his presence, I'd be feeling bashful right about now, hoping to slide beneath the covers as soon as possible. But he is gone and I am free.

Not long ago, he brought a hand to my chest, delicately feeling his way around. Crawling higher, near the base of my neck, he found a hard knob. *You have bones poking out everywhere*, he said, smiling. I turned away, blushing, and



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mumbled something about how it's true, that I'm dreadfully thin. Instead of tight abs, I have the noticeable imprint of ribs to gaze upon. I've always been thin, but never frail.

Like a curious child, his fingers searched my body for answers, but I could allow it for only so long before grasping his hands in mine, to make him stop. He offered massages I could never accept; for something that seems so giving, it demands total submission. A massage is supposed to be relaxing, he argued. *Yes, I shot back, but if it makes me tense, what's the point?*

So, we never traded massages, though I kneaded his shoulders and neck as he sat between my legs, sore from his long swims.

For a moment, I almost reconsider what I'm about to do. Questions, always questions, wash over me. What if he came back and saw this? Would he be angry? Would he snatch the black swimwear away and see me nude once again?

But the lingering smell of him wafts over, flooding my senses. It's the scent of chlorine more than anything, the smell from the campus pool where he works. Even after he's had a few days off, I can still smell the chlorine on his skin, like it's seeped deep inside, never to leave. He's a lifeguard, trained to save lives. He has the scent to prove it. I wonder if it's an eternal thing, this smell of his.

The scent — *his scent* — is strong upon the swimming garment he's left to dry beneath our single window. As I draw closer, the smell becomes too much, overwhelming me. I grab the cloth from the steely cool radiator and bring it to my face, covering my nose and mouth. I inhale, I suck it in. With my eyes shut against the light shining through the panes of glass, I breathe in the salty chlorine smell, taking it deep inside my lungs. With my face buried in the cloth, I sense him, I feel him inside me. His smell is not just that of the pool but a mixture of ingredients unique only to him. The chlorine is most dominate, but there's a subtle hint of sweat mixed with something sweet; there is also his own bit of saltiness, as if he rose from the ocean itself. I take it all in and succumb to the spell, forgetting everything as I fall down, drowning.

Slowly, one foot at a time, I step into his swimwear, feeling the damp cloth press against my body. I make adjustments, bundling myself in place within the confines of the garment before opening my eyes once again.

The sheer swimwear hugs me tight, cooling those parts of my body he knows so well. I sit upon his bed and notice the posters on my side of the room like I'm seeing them for the first time. They look so tacky and naïve, each poster held in place by strips of tape. There's a Dali print that makes me smile because of the memory it holds. I explained to him that I loved the way the clocks hang limply like they might turn into water and drip away. I confessed that the print sometimes leaves me frantic, paranoid that too much time is slipping away. He laughed, pointing out I'm only twenty-one, that I have all the time in the world.

The black cloth tugs against my awakening cock, and I recall in vivid detail how his cock looks — the only other cock this garment has ever held. Tender, his is a bit smaller than mine, and the skin is a shade darker. Ever sensitive, he has shown me how careful I must be, for the skin is so tight — much tighter than the skin around my own. Both of us are circumcised, yet I need no lubrication for pleasure; he, on the other hand, requires it. Otherwise, the act of touching,

whether it's by his hand or mine, causes great pain. The things we do, the mixture of pleasure and pain — I wonder, is this what it means to be close to another?

Staring at my forearm, I see how much paler I am than him. Here at school, he works at an indoor pool, but back home, he's outside for hours at a time. Jealous of his consistently brown skin, I shudder at the sight of my own pale flesh. I can't imagine what it feels like to have one's skin so perfectly kissed by the sun. Where he is dark and real and adamant, I am soft, pale, and faint. But in this moment with his garment clinging to my skin, I am real for the first time. I know his secrets, I know what he must feel every time he slips this thing on. He has grown used to the sensation, but it's brand new for me. In his image, I am born again. Like a teenage boy touching himself for the first time, I feel myself grow hard.

Disappointed to see the tent in his swimwear, I wait the erection out. Slowly, it dissipates, and the bulge appears as it's supposed to once again, as if I were the one getting ready for a shift at the pool. As if I wore this garment every day, and the newness had long worn off, I sense what it must feel like for him to put this thing on without the sexual jolt that just shot through my body.

Staring over at my bed from my position on his, I recall a promise made months ago. He said he would teach me CPR, that he could certify me and everything. I'm not sure if it's his fault or mine, but the promise wasn't kept. He knows the magic involved, and it is his secret to keep. There will be no demonstrations now, no lessons on what it takes to breathe life into someone desperate like me. I will never know how to resuscitate a heart.

What an amazing thing it must be to breathe new life into drowning lungs. Someone else might be able to revive my heart one day, but it is no longer his job. Just the other night, when he made a show of touching himself, of bringing himself to orgasm, I wonder if he wanted me to crawl in beside him and kiss his body again. But I didn't. I hesitated like I always do. I also wonder what he thought before, when it was acceptable to crawl into his bed, when we nestled in close together, face to face, and he reached out and touched my cheek; I wonder what he must have thought when I pulled away, turning my face to the side.

What are your secrets? Why do you hide?

Questions I couldn't answer even if he dared to speak them aloud.

Our twin-sized beds sit on opposite ends of the room. A dormitory room is like a prison cell. Ours is divided in half with each side reflecting the other: beds across from each other, two tall, boxy chests for our clothes, and old wooden desks, chipped in different spots with ragged, matching chairs. Like any other pair of roommates, we decorate our sides differently, but they are basically the same.

We will never push our beds together, he said early on.

Of course not, I agreed. We had to maintain a cool distance and keep certain rules in place, for what I'm not sure — to make it easier to back out, I suppose. But I don't think it worked.

I don't know what to call what we had. There's so little to compare it to. There was one other, but that doesn't really count. It was all a mystery to me. I had no idea what I wanted or what I was doing. I knew nothing. As for him, he had no

point of comparison at all. I'm a first for him in many ways, a trial run. I hope that means he'll remember me always.

The idea that he could forget sends a chill down my spine, and goosebumps break out across this flesh that is not his. Leaping from the bed, I begin to pace, trying to figure out what comes next. There in the mirror I so carefully avoided before, I see the image of myself covered only in his black swimwear. With my lean body and long, lanky limbs, I am not like him at all. He is shorter and filled out, athletic in a way that I am not. I am scrawny and look even more so in something as tight and revealing as his swimwear.

As I stare at the body that is not his, another smell in our room becomes apparent. It's the smell of cheap noodles warmed by the microwave. Once, he laughed at this odor, telling me he knew what I had for lunch as soon as he kissed my neck. I'm just now noticing the lingering odor of noodles when I want only his scent to remain.

After staring in the mirror for the longest time, I remove his swimwear and stand naked once again, breaking the spell. I feel stupid and naïve — no matter how hard I try, I can never really know what it's like to be him. Despite my desire to slip away from my skin and get behind his, to see our dank little room the way he sees it, I cannot conjure such

magic. But there was a jolt of electricity that coursed through my body when I first put the garment on, and I will never forget that feeling. Strange that I felt closer to him inside that moment, with him away somewhere, out of sight, than I ever did with him here in this room with me, back when I could still call him mine.

We are two college students in a small college town, learning something new every day. I tell people we planned this, living together as roommates and lovers in the dorm. But it's not true. It was an accident. We were thrust together at random, no rhyme or reason. If we weren't paired together as roommates, I'm not sure we would have ever met at all. There was an immediate attraction, and, somehow, we thought it could work.

We were wrong.

Now he's off having dinner with the friends he neglected during our short time together. With great care and attention, I arrange the black garment across the radiator, just as he left it. At the end of the semester he'll move out, never leaving his swimwear to dry on this radiator again. His scent will linger in the air for a while, and I'm sure it will remind me of this day, of this moment. When I look back, I won't be ashamed of my crime. Not ever. 🕒



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And they said we wouldn't last...



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Bluff

Kathleen Collisson

We had too much time now. We were driving home from northern Michigan after two weeks at the resort we'd visited each summer since the children were small. We decided to take the long route, along the beach highway that wound down the western shore of Lake Michigan, alternately avoiding and approaching the dunes.

The same owners, with a succession of golden retrievers named Maxwell, had run the place since our honeymoon visit, over forty years ago. In all that time, nothing had changed. Except us! We always laughed at that one. Not the rattan furniture covered in floral chintz, not the wobbly ceiling fans, not the Wednesday night suppers of grilled burgers, sweet corn, and pie made from fat blueberries picked that afternoon. And not the beautiful expanse of empty beach, the water just the right temperature in August.

Virgil and Helen, we were forced to admit, had changed along with us. Over the years they'd become good friends. The resort had a buyer, they told us, and they yearned to move to Vegas. No more sand, no more guests for them. It was their last summer, and we both knew, without needing to consult the other, that it would be ours as well.

We hadn't taken this route in years. Usually we were in a hurry to return to our beautiful home and all its familiar routines, but this time we felt mournful. We no longer had our professions, only our pensions and dividends. All our friends were leaving, a few at a time, for warmer climes. And now our beloved resort would be no more.

We saw all the changes on either side of the road. This area had once abounded with church camps, Scout camps, and resorts for the ethnic workers from Cicero and Berwyn tiny wooden cottages in tight rows, with narrow bands of sandy road between them — and now the faded blue signs were gone and the old cottages had been razed. Stunning new houses were going up on large lots, spaced discreetly

among the trees. Which one of us said impulsively, "Let's stop and take a look?"

We turned off the highway onto a newly tarred road and were so impressed with what we saw that we stopped at the developer's office to get out and look around. Our salesman was so enthusiastic, so persuasive, that before you could shake a leg we ended up putting money down on a lot of our own. The architect for the development happened to be right there in the office, and one of the models was just perfect — an elusive, compelling combination of thrilling and relaxing. We were sold.

Has the story of that day elongated over time, grown to include further elaboration? Did one of us hesitate, one of us cajole? Were there telling details which neither of us noticed then, only to emerge in retrospect? No. Of that, we were certain. Unbeknownst to either of us, we'd been on a quest, and that day in the woods, we both found what we hadn't even known we were looking for.

Until then, retirement had seemed like a long slow hike across an endless plain, distressingly familiar, the only surprises unpleasant ones. But that night -- a new house, a new beginning in our dear Michigan -- we drove back home to Lake Forest feeling hopeful, as though we'd discovered the only way to circumvent the inevitable.

Our old home was a colonial, all its details authentic. We'd spent so many hours finding just the right shade of Federal blue for the trim, the right toile for the draperies. We'd compared chair rails and cornices, sent away for solid brass hardware, and had our front door custom-made to be historically accurate. We sold it all, a complete package, right down to the antique pewter dinner service. None of it belonged in our new life: we didn't want memories dragging us down, making us at first nostalgic, then pessimistic.

The new house was finished in six months' time. It was made of cedar and glass, forest and light, and it hovered over the waves, the lake winking and shimmering through thirty-six floor-to-ceiling windows. We moved in April,

and promptly began frequenting farm auctions, where we bargained for primitive pine cupboards, hand-turned chairs, and faded quilts. We filled hollow lamps with beach glass collected on our walks and bought a cord of hardwood to season in the summer heat. We bought a golden retriever puppy and named her Lucky.

Our new road wound through the tall woods, and we soon learned to be alert. Trees we hadn't suspected of rotting fell during the night; in the morning we'd have to stop the car and heave broken limbs out of the way, their insides teeming with insects.

On our daily walks we hunted for edible morels, overturning stones and fallen limbs until we'd each found a prize, and cooked our dinners using fresh vegetables from the farms along Wee-Saw Road. Our fireplace was energy-efficient, and on cool evenings we sat together with popcorn and a movie in front of its noiseless gathering and blowing system.

The TV reception was exceptional, so high up on the dune. We got channels from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin, all the way across the lake. Four states in two time zones! — we reported to our old friends, who never failed to be impressed. It was one of our little excitements, like suddenly remembering a once-important fact.

We particularly enjoyed the weather channel. Other people wept over splintered roofs, but we were far from Tornado Alley. Other people rowed boats in and out among the treetops, but our rivers flooded miles downstream, into the trailer courts. The fools who had retired to Florida, Texas or the Carolinas worried about hurricanes — not we.

The earth had no faults beneath us. It never quaked, never rattled our flow-blue plates. Wildfires did not ritually rage through our woods, nor did maniacs purposely drop smoldering cigarettes beneath the blueberry bushes. If there was any crime here at all, we never heard a word about it.

Even the winters were pleasant. Sure, there was more snow here on the eastern shore of the lake, much more than we'd had before, but it was more beautiful than our old grimy, city snow. We bought spikes for our boots in order to enjoy tramping through the woods without fear of falling on sheltered ice. We learned to cross-country ski, and ventured out to the only open grocery store, hauling provisions home in our new framed backpacks.

We rediscovered romance. The house did wonders for our sex life, and in the morning, over coffee, we often touched one another in completely unnecessary ways.

We discovered the best restaurants, the ones the locals preferred, away from the weekend people. When we yearned for culture — opera, ballet, the theatre — we drove a mere couple of hours into Chicago, a nice getaway for the two of us. We started a book club with a few other discerning couples and joined a taxpayer's group to make sure our property values continued to escalate.

There was a nonstop stream of visitors: old school friends from years ago, former neighbors, colleagues and clients. We had hoped we'd be missed, and the house was designed with the comfort of guests in mind. The flow of educated conversation, the camaraderie, the promises to stay in touch, reassured us that the move had been a good

one, that we hadn't needed to give up the kind of company most important to us.

In July our older son flew in from Seattle with his wife and baby. Our only grandchild! It was the first time we'd seen her. Each day we gave the kids a break and walked with the baby down our private path to the beach. We bounced her up and down in her framed carrier and sang the same nursery rhymes we'd sung to her daddy. When we set her down in the wet sand, she squealed with delight as the waves lapped against the soles of her tender feet.

We had worried about the boys' reactions to our move — after all, we'd gotten rid of everything they'd grown up with, things they may have wanted to keep — but Robby seemed to love the house as much as we did. (About our younger son, he-who-moved-to-Pakistan — perhaps the less said, the better —)

Robby and Beth sat at the window for hours, gazing out at the lake. They oohed and aahed at the guest room with its mahogany sleigh bed and Amish quilts, and fell asleep to the sound of waves lapping outside their window each night. When they emerged happy and refreshed in the morning, we exchanged hopeful glances over our coffee cups. We wanted another grandchild.

"I could stay here forever," sighed Beth, a lovely girl of whom we've always approved. Robby massaged her shoulders and gently kissed her hair. He put his hand to the huge pane of glass and nodded his head.

"You guys really know how to live," he said. "You worked hard for this. You deserve it, you really do."

It was a week later, just as they were about to leave, that he noticed the crack in the fireplace, a tiny crack, hairline really. He ran his finger along it thoughtfully and then went outside to poke around the foundation, under the myrtle vines.

"That little crack?" We laughed. We'd already noticed it. Don't all new houses settle a bit?

"The house is beginning to slide down the bluff," Robby said gravely. "Very slowly, it may take years, but if the lake level rises — look out." He took out a tablet and began sketching a diagram of triangles and waves, with complicated formulas that made us dizzy. "It's the angle of repose," he said. "It's all wrong. You ought to consider suing your architect."

We looked at one another, stunned. He couldn't possibly be right. Yes, we'd put this son of ours through the best engineering school, and yes, he was in fact a tester of struts and purlins. But wasn't this the little boy who'd believed airplanes fell randomly from the sky, who feared his imminent death every time the wind whistled up the chimney? Our born worrier?

After they'd gone, we went outside and inspected the foundation ourselves, but we couldn't see a thing except ant tunnels in the sand, and the fragile roots of dune grass.

"Imagine!" we laughed to our book club. "Our son thinks the house is falling into the lake!" Our friends sipped their wine and looked alarmed.

"Have it checked immediately," said Edgar.

"Get a second opinion," said Patty.

"Erosion is nothing to fool around with," said LeRoy.

But these people were worriers, too — always suggesting books which forecasted the collapse of the economic

system or the decimation of the natural order. We spread some grout into the crack, just to ease everyone’s minds, and nothing more was said.

A few years went by, not many, but enough, and we became a little less surefooted, a little more fragile. We stopped skiing after one of us fell and broke an ankle. We began thinking about more sun in January, when the restaurants were closed for the season and all of our friends went south.

The crack came back each spring, a little bigger and wider each time, until the fireplace appeared to be splitting in two. New cracks had begun spreading slowly across the brickwork like wayward bolts of lightning. We stopped building fires in the evening, and began checking the foundation daily.

Soon we saw cracks grinning openly across the concrete, as though the house was having a private joke at our expense. We tried calling our architect, but he’d left town long ago. We consulted engineers, who shook their heads silently. We collected the names of several attorneys, but between one thing and another, never managed to meet with any of them.

When our friends returned in the spring, tanned and energetic, we told them about the new cracks, and they averted their eyes. We went to book club meetings and found the dates mysteriously changed, nobody home. The taxpayer’s group regarded us as a potential burden, a loss on the rolls. Our favorite waiters whispered when we came in, and we found ourselves seated near the kitchen, behind the swinging doors.

“Take it as a loss,” Robby advised. Our calls for advice had increased to every Sunday and Wednesday evening. “Get out while you can. And for god’s sakes, talk to an attorney.”

Indeed, the house seemed to be slipping a little more each day, until we could barely remember when it had been such a source of pride. Beth filed for divorce and threatened to take both grandchildren to Costa Rica. Our dog Lucky ran away and couldn’t be found.

The stress was affecting us. We began having fainting spells, forgetfulness while driving. Our doctor recommended assisted living. After the move to Chikaming Manor, time became a bewildering collage of expansion and compression, our needs by turns more basic and ferocious.

And now, in the evenings, our caregiver drives us away from our adjoining suites, away from the recreation room and the event-of-the-day. She turns up the radio to her favorite station, the voice of the Seventh Day Adventists, and sings along, somewhere between tuneful

pronouncement and determined wail:

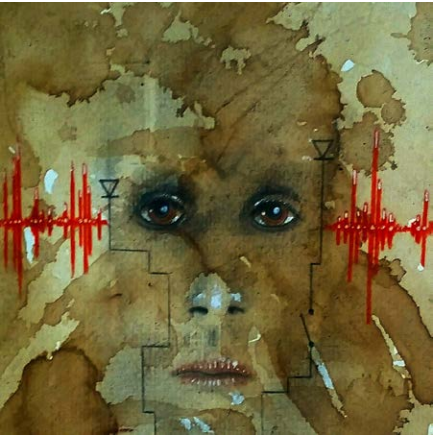
*Be not dismayed whate’er betide,
God will take care of you;
Beneath his wings of love abide,
God will take care of you.*

She pretends not to hear us exclaim at the crops of nodding sunflowers, the increased traffic on the back roads, the latest antique shop on the state highway. She knows where we want to go.

She drives us past the farms and small towns we once knew so well, and then down the familiar twisting road through the woods. We leave the car in front of a fallen silver maple and make our way slowly, walker and cane, down the sloping path to the beach. Our caregiver, our dear angel, clamps on her headphones and begins her own private dance.

*For you I am praying.
For you I am praying,
For you I am praying,
I’m praying for you.*

Her dark hair forms a halo of matted braids as she sings, digging herself into a little hole with the rocking of her hips, the waving of her arms. Her eyes are lifted to the bright sky. She doesn’t notice when we point up the bluff to the house above, the house we loved, and tamp down a wide circle in the sand around us, just where it would have fallen. 🌀



Tinnitus

Daniel Bartkowiak

The woman who self-identifies as a recluse first told herself that what she was hearing was just in her head, that she was only imagining the *knocking*, which she then proceeded to laugh at because what sound hasn’t she heard in her head.

She has a small bump just above her left eyebrow and sits alone in the library’s nook. Her posture in the blue-cushioned chair is somehow quiet. The nook is enclosed on three sides by four-foot tall maple-bordered walls and faces the **EMERGENC** door. The small bump looks like an inflated writer’s callus. The woman has not the slightest clue what happened to the **Y**.

Her initial disbelief to the dull thuds coming from the door’s other side was some time ago. The *knocks* are very much real. How long ago, precisely, it’s impossible to tell, as the woman who quite literally yearns for the silent solitude offered by the library’s nook dropped her cellphone in the library’s third stall last week after being startled by a voice that wasn’t menacing or threatening in any way, a really bland voice, if she’s being honest, but just that the calming quiet of the empty bathroom was so overwhelming that the whole time she was sitting hunched over the slackened rippled waist of her loose-fitting jeans with the cold from the toilet seat rising through the three-layers of single-ply toilet paper she had neatly and sedulously applied before sitting down, the reclusive woman was worrying about someone walking in and slamming a stall door thus ruining the serenity that was, if she can be candid for a moment, as close to a religious experience as she’s had since first discovering her affinity for being alone. So, when she heard the completely normal and almost monotonous voice, her hand sort of lurched backwards, the phone thus flipping in the white air and tumbling between her pasty veined thighs and into the toilet’s icy blue water, and the woman is very clearly not the kind of person who would ever go hand-fishing in a public toilet.

What’s perhaps the most disheartening thing about this whole knocking situation is how wonderful of a library it is. The odds of her finding another like this are worse than Mario Incandenza learning to ride a bike. Such a wonderful library. Silent. Respectful. A soft and amiable color scheme of baby blue and pale pink. The people here apologize when opening a bag of chips and doors are closed in that delicate fashion of holding the handle down until the frame rests comfortably in place so as to avoid any metallic clicking and keen attention is always paid to how one sits, effectively limiting any unwanted creaking.

Thinking about it now, the woman would say that that type of silence, the transcendent, sublime, *immaculate* kind of silence, is meant to be revered more than enjoyed.

It wasn’t until the third round of persistent *knocks* that the woman arrived at the crossroads she so obviously sits at now. It’s rather simple. She either opens the **EMERGENC** door or she doesn’t. There just aren’t other options. Because of the nook’s enveloped design — which, again, the woman truly adores and reminisces about while riding the thunderously loud and eerily bovine metropolitan subway — and its location in the far back end of the library’s third floor, not even mentioning it being a brisk walk away from the nearest water-fountain/restroom, few people ever pass by. There’s no reason to. It’s a dead-end. The seclusion of the nook is so extreme it’s the sort of privacy-in-public that some people get off to, sexually, that is, but that is obviously *not* why the woman is there, to get off. It goes without saying the nook has no windows.

Why the whole nook situation is so incredible is because when the woman is there in the nook, sitting amidst such perfect silence, she doesn’t even hear the internal high-pitched ringing which curses her everywhere else. There’s no explanation for it. Much of her first week in the nook, an incidental discovery which she describes as a *commonplace miracle*, was spent reading a litany of scholarly articles and dense textbooks regarding sound and aberrational defects



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of the ears. Her investigative work yielded little, except that she now knows how the *malleus* and *anvil* and *stirrup* interwork.

She lives off let's just say a sizeable inheritance which was passed down when her severe workaholic, venture capitalist of a father's appendix suddenly erupted. This occurred inside his glass-walled office where tartan drapes shielded any intruding eyes. He always kept the door locked and had a special key created just for the door. None of the other workers had seen him emerge from his office for days, but the thought of *knocking* or even calling was met with bodily shivers and sideways glances. The body wasn't discovered until a week later when the building was evacuated after a second-floor fire alarm went off, which turned out to be a big nothing, some intern frying alfredo pasta in the microwave, and the totally-consumed father's door was unlocked by a Filipino janitor who soon fainted from the smell. The body had apparently rotted quite considerably and so couldn't be identified properly for several days. And she would've gone to the funeral, the reclusive daughter, but she was expecting a large shipment of noise-blocking, moldable earplugs to her house, and she had to be there to tell the UPS guy, from the opposite side of the door, that she could handle the box herself if he just left it on the porch, thanks.

The father's own obsession with his work, if she were speaking frankly, probably started after her mother anonymously left and has since, in twenty-three-years and six months and two days, never resurfaced, not even to collect any of her legally endowed portion of the husband's lucrative success.

The wealthy father did teach his daughter a thing or two about investing, though, before the perforation of his appendix and subsequent death by peritonitis. So, on top of being well-read and all, the woman is financially literate and surely doesn't need the help of an advisor who calls thrice monthly, and as it stands now, barring any unforeseeable catastrophe in the realm of like *Othello* or *Antigone*, the woman should never have to work again.

There's the worry she has, the woman who arrives to the nook pre-sunrise and leaves post-sunset, spending the hours with her arrowed nose deep in like Hemingway and Joyce, that the immaculate silence and holy isolation she sincerely cares about more than any pet she ever had as a child, will somehow never return if she herself is the one to disrupt it. It's sort of like how an athlete will listen to the same list of adrenaline-procuring songs before each game.

The woman prays for this situation to somehow just go away.

Her ears are mushroom-shaped and the lobes were once pierced when she was 13 but the needle-sized holes have long since filled. She cleans them daily with standard Q-tips. They are the first thing she washes when she showers.

Despite her best efforts to replicate the nook's silence, the internal ringing follows her in the way bad luck manages to find some people but not others. The work she's done on her house is extensive. The walls are soundproofed, as are the windows, and she doesn't flush the toilet any time after supper in an effort to avoid the funneled rush of the house's plumbing. She lives in a peaceful subdivision and

doesn't have to worry about obstreperous neighbors or anything like that. She has two *NO SOLICITING* placards nailed on her front door.

If she had people of regular communication, this would be a point of pride for the woman. The house is fucking *quiet*. It's perhaps the quietest house in the whole country, and yet, despite the acoustic ceilings and padded carpeting and Weatherstrip foams below the doors, there's still the high-pitched ringing.

She has this funny fantasy where someday people will look back on her and the house and talk about it being her *masterpiece*. She knows how strange it sounds, but it's nice to think about. Melville had *Moby-Dick*, Dostoyevsky had *Crime and Punishment*, she has the house.

Not even the moldable earplugs help anymore.

The woman has contacted high-end music producers, via e-mail, for possible insights on how to dispense of the ringing. She's been looked at by three of the world's most revered otorhinolaryngologists, who have unanimously agreed nothing is wrong with her ears. There seems to be a direct correlation to how much time she spends in the nook, and the magnitude of the ringing once she leaves.

She counts out the four-beat rhythm in her head.

The woman's first experiences with true silence weren't even positive ones. As best as she can remember, they occurred during her early adolescent years while sitting alone in her room. The woman's mother, before inexplicably disappearing for no discernable reason, according to the father, endured a prolonged stretch post-pregnancy depression. These months were profoundly debilitating for her mentality and she never seemed to entirely recover. It's for this reason that the woman doesn't harbor any conscious derisiveness towards her mother. She can remember how her mother would often bunker down in the guest bedroom at the end of the third-floor hall for days at a time. Even at a young age she sensed something wrong and often prayed for it all to get better, despite not knowing what she was really praying for. She only tried to enter the guest bedroom once and the door was locked with the cumulative result being the woman's earliest years of formative consciousness were largely spent alone in her room. Even as a child she wasn't the type of person to have an imaginary friend. At her father's demand the only pet she was ever allowed was a goldfish. Until noon every weekday, she attended a Montessori pre-school where she was taught basic Latin and her failure to connect with her classmates was let's just say *ignotum per ignotius*.

In fact, she quite dreaded silence. Something about the hollowed emptiness seemed to threaten her sanity. Alone in her room, she'd sit on the carpeted floor and read out-loud to herself. When this became too tiring she'd turn on the overhead fan, which is a curious case in it of itself because it turned out to be like the *only* fan in the entire world that didn't make any sound while revolving, so the girl was forced to manufacture a sort of pulley contraption with the beaded string using masking tape and toothpicks and an already superior intellect than say children years older. All of this just to avoid the silence. Thinking back on it, the woman is amazed at her own resilience at such a young age.

The pulley system required the pinning of the string to the fan's circular base so that the string then hung in the

wings' revolutionary path. The fan was directly over her bed and what she did was she stacked her pillows into a heaping plushy pile and exerting serious balance and concentration stood atop the pillows and reached as high as her 42.5-inch body allowed. The parental supervision wasn't good, to say the least, but still wasn't as bad as the whole flooding the bathroom incident.

The woman tells herself daily that her profound adoration for the nook's silence isn't anyway related to past noise-related trauma. She's quite adamant about this to herself, that her love for silence is not fear-based, a conviction which the knocking seems to be questioning, suddenly and dramatically. The knocks are forcing her to remember the sound of her mother's weeping echoing through the vents. Another memory being pulling back into existence by the knocks is one when as a girl she had been trying to speak to a classmate and the gum she was chewing fell out mid-sentence and all the other students laughed and pointed.

She's beginning to be angered by the knocks. At their blatant irreverence for the quiet. At their cockish thuds and determined pounds. Not at the person, or persons, doing the knocking, but the very sound itself.

The woman hasn't considered how one even ends up on the wrong side of an EMERGENC door.

The knocks now come in bursts of three.

There's the smell of eraser dustings and that gray effluvium that's imbedded into the chalky skin of habitual smokers.

For the first time since accidentally stumbling upon the hidden nook some months ago — what feels like a lifetime ago, in a sense, even melodramatically, as the woman's dependence on the nook has grown such that it's one of those how-did-I-ever-live-without-it, type of things — the woman who sits in the tinnitus-free nook and reads without any human interaction whatsoever for lengthy periods of time, wishes that someone would join her.

The possibility now dawns on the woman that the knocker might be in trouble. She doesn't know why this never occurred to her earlier. It's rather alarming. She thinks of herself like most people as a generally benevolent soul. Or at worst, one who doesn't cause others harm, which doesn't seem like the same thing, but when she thinks hard about it, might just be. The same thing, indeed.

The thought of leaving the nook and flagging down the librarian whose nose-breathing sounds like a piercing whistle would be laughable to her if she weren't in the library.

It's not possible to discern if the knocks are getting louder or if she has simply started focusing on the sounds

more keenly.

When she leaves the house, she wears the specialized earplugs underneath her blue earmuffs.

She thinks it can't hurt the silence if she just stands next to the door. She has naturally light footsteps. She hears the knocking in her head. The lightness and soundlessness of her footsteps is partly innate and partly her awareness of the steps' sounds. Sunlight slants down the hall behind her and stipples the opposite side of the maple-bordered enclosure.

She stands about a dictionary's length away from the door that is a metallic gray. She no longer hears the *knocking*.

She listens.

Silence.

She listens some more.

Silence.

She gently presses her right ear to the door and hears a faint howl like that of wind gliding off glass. The image of her empty bedroom comes to mind.

She listens.

The howling.

She envisions the knocker having a heart attack. Writhing in pain. Hands gripping a tightening chest. All alone, dying alone, no one to hear the final words. No one to hear the choked gasps for air. The woman has pale white skin the color of wood-free uncoated paper.

She closes her eyes, her right ear still against the door.

She lays her hands on the lever and listens.

She thinks about her dead father and begins to cry. Her fingers tense around the lever.

She listens some more. 🌀



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The Lie

Selena IR Drake

Parathrope [par-uh-throhpe]

noun (from Greek, *para-* beyond + *ánthrōpos* man):

1. An individual with abilities beyond those which are considered natural;
2. a superhuman

Cowan [kou-an]

noun

1. an individual of the species *Homo sapien* who lacks any power or knowledge of supernatural origins;
2. a mortal human being

There is a Lie spoken in every language in every nation on earth. It is perhaps the oldest deception in... well, forever. I know you're wondering what it is, but I'm sure you've heard it at least once in your life. What is this Lie?

'There's no such thing as monsters.'

If you believe this, you couldn't be more wrong. And I have some advice for you: stop reading right now. Believing the Lie is your camouflage. It protects you from them, which is why the Lie was created in the first place. The moment you realize the creatures from those stories you were told at bedtime aren't just real but alive and kicking, the easier it is for them to find you.

See, there are beings on this planet who predate the Roman Empire, the Pharaohs, even humanity itself. They are called many things. Monster. Spook. Apparition. There are some who are revered for their wisdom and benevolence and called gods or angels. Others have a darker nature and are believed to be the embodiment of pure evil and malice. Those were the ones called devils or demons.

Bram Stoker wrote about one. Guy Endore wrote of another. So did Jane Webb, Shakespeare, Homer, and dozens of other authors over the millennia. Be wary to name them aloud, for doing so will gain you their attention. And that is rarely a good thing.

But no matter what you may call them, these beings used to be found everywhere. They dwelled in the darkest caves and atop the tallest mountains. Walked the vast plains and scorching deserts. Soared the endless skies and lurked in the depths of the forests. Swam the icy lakes and the deepest seas. Of course, that was before mankind seeped into every corner of the world. Before church-sponsored hunters and holy wars that threatened to purge them from existence.

In a way, the cowans succeeded.

The beginning of the eighteenth century saw the decline in the public awareness of the paranormal world. This was due to the efforts of a world-wide secret partnership between man and myth which renewed the reinforcement of the Lie. By the dawn of the twentieth, almost everyone believed the monsters were just myths told to frighten children or warring neighbors. Eventually, they evolved into Hollywood villains and fiction and faded out of mankind's memories until they became nothing more than bad dreams.

Today, they are called parathropes and believe you me, they aren't just urban legends or the stuff of movies and fantasies. They could be your neighbors. That barista behind the counter at your favorite coffee shop. A teacher. Your child's imaginary friend. Make no mistake; parathropes are out there.

I know because I'm one of them.

Since you've read this far, I now present you with a choice: keep believing the Lie (there are people who get paid to assure you of it) or accept everything I told you and pretend not to notice the subtle tells that give away their presence. Perhaps it's a play of the light or a shadow ever looming on the edge of your vision. Maybe it's a sudden chill that creeps up your spine. I promise, when it happens... you'll know. And you'll wish you didn't.

But, if you believe you might be one of us, a parathrope, I urge you to seek me out. You can find me within a secret archive. An archive called... *The AEON Files*.

I'll be waiting. ☺



SELENA IR DRAKE (born May 17, 1986 in Minot, North Dakota) is an American author best known for her paranormal mystery series titled *The AEON Files*. She was home schooled for a few years before first grade, which is when she first took to writing. When she finally entered the school system, she often got in trouble for writing too much. It wasn't until eighth grade when a book report sparked her imagination, and her passion for writing really took off. In 1998, she started writing *Dragon Quest*, which would later evolve into her first novel, now called *Dragon Diaries: Ascension*. She currently lives in Minot with her dog, Pipsqueak, where she continues to work on more books of *The AEON Files* and *Dragon Diaries* series.



Dog on the Tube

Kirsty Capes

The first thing to know about the dog is that he is not mine.

Six months ago he turned up in my kitchen, his wide head in the bin trying to retrieve a chicken carcass. After he picked the chicken bones clean, he stuck around. And that was that. He has been with me ever since.

The dog is some kind of retriever cross. His gold fur is so thick that you can bury your hands in it and they will disappear up to the wrists. He has brown-almost-black, shiny round eyes, and a wide mouth pulled up at the corners so that he always seems to be smiling. He has a long tail, which fans out pale yellow fur and swings in semicircles above his hind legs. In the rain, his belly drags along the ground and goes black with muck, but underneath the mud are thin, white, soft wisps of fur.

The dog's favourite rubs are when I scratch his cheeks, which makes him fall asleep; and when he rolls onto his back, legs akimbo, and lets me firmly pat his great ribcage, his tongue happily lolling out of his mouth and his breath coming in fast pants.

The vet thinks he is two or three years old but it is hard to tell with these things.

The dog follows me everywhere, though I've spent many hours trying to train him to stay put. When I leave the house for work he slips out behind me. When I unlock the car his wet snout nudges the door open and he ends up on the passenger seat, his paws on the dashboard. I don't need to put a leash on him; he follows me to the heel and hardly ever strays away. He always waits with me before crossing the road.

I sometimes think about driving him somewhere far away and leaving him there. A forest or a beach. But I am not so cruel, even though I sometimes hate the dog.

The dog's temperament is mostly docile. He ignores strangers in the street and quietly tolerates the ones who pay attention to him, the ones who stop to scratch him behind

the ears or ruffle his neck fur. I know he doesn't like this because his eyes go from round to triangle shaped, his ears slicked back flat against his neck, and I have come to learn that this expression means 'fear'.

The worst thing about the dog is when he follows me onto the tube. Every morning at 7.50am I take the Piccadilly Line from Hatton Cross to Holborn, where I work at a small-to-medium-sized advertising agency as a receptionist. The journey to work takes around fifty minutes if the service is running to schedule.

But on the tube, the dog changes.

The dog insists on following me onto the train. Every morning I tell the dog to go away, to run home, to wait on the platform until I come back if he must. Every morning he noses his way into the train carriage with me, squishing himself up against the doors and winding around the legs of the other commuters. Sometimes people on the train are okay with this invasion of their space. Sometimes they are not happy: they have allergies or white fur on their dark suit trousers and no lint roller to hand.

Even though Hatton Cross is quite near to the end of the westbound line, it is always packed when I board in the morning. The dog does not like crowded spaces. His eyes go triangle-shaped and he pants hard. He lowers his head and tries to make himself small. But he is a big dog: big even by golden retriever standards. And he is kind of a little bit fat too (which the vet has told me is a common problem for this kind of dog) so he is not hard to miss.

Reactions to the dog on the tube range from:

thrilled to see a dog on the tube; taking photographs of the dog; asking to pet the dog; petting the dog without asking; staring at the dog and smiling; polite indifference to the dog;

to:

frowning at the dog and sighing pointedly; moving away from the dog even when the carriage is full to bursting point; telling me loudly to get off the train with my sodding dog; shouting at me to get off the fucking train with my fucking dog; nudging the dog with feet or poking the dog; getting off the train themselves on account of the dog; calling the police to have the dog removed.

In each case, the dog doesn't like these people and their opinions on the fact of his presence on the tube. His hackles stand up. He snarls, his snout scrunched up to bare long white incisors, the red fleshy insides of his mouth on display, as though he has made a kill and there is blood on his lips. He wants to get off the train, away from these people, but there is no escape until the next station. And more people are shouting, or trying to comfort him, or trying to get away from him, or threatening to get the guard, and each of these reactions make things a hundred times worse for him. He wants to be left alone. He is frightened and full of violence. And I am afraid that the dog will bite someone. I think he is afraid of that, too. But there is nothing we can do until the next stop.

And when we get there and we are off the train, out of the carriage and breathing slowly on the platform, the walls stop throbbing, and after a little while the dog puts away his teeth and licks his paws instead.

And it's hard to believe that moments earlier he was ready to kill someone. But that's how it goes with the dog. One moment he is growling a warning low in his throat, his teeth gnashing, and the next he is watching me with big moony eyes, grinning dopily, his nose wet and his tongue hanging out the side of his mouth like nothing ever happened.

He says to me with his expression are you okay?

And I say yes, I'm fine, what about you?

I'm okay. I'm fine.

Because of the dog, I am now late to work most mornings, no matter how early I leave the house.

Sometimes, when we have finally arrived in Holborn, in the street, a stranger says to me: shouldn't you have that dog on a leash.

And I say I can't, I can't, I can't. He won't let me.

The dog follows me to work and when I settle down at the front desk, my bag propped against the computer tower, he crawls under the table. He sleeps on my feet for most of the day. I answer the phones. I sign guests into the building and enter personal information into the company database. I stir my tea three times clockwise and three times anti-clockwise. Sometimes the dog wakes up and rests his chin on my lap.

Most of the people who visit the building like him. They say, what a good, handsome boy and isn't he a sweetheart and can we pet him and I say no, please don't pet him, he is very skittish, and they go away.

My boss hasn't noticed the dog sleeping under my desk yet, but today she has called me into her office and of course when I stand up and smooth my shirt and leave the reception area to meet her, the dog heaves himself up from under the desk and follows me into my boss's office.

The boss tells me to take a seat and asks me why I have been late to work so frequently in the last six months.

I am not sure I want to tell her about the dog.

But she has a gentle voice and I think I can trust her.

So after a while I say, I can't help it. This dog is following me everywhere.

My boss leans over the desk to see what I'm pointing at on the floor.

How long has that dog been there? She asks loudly, and the dog is startled from his nap and does his triangle eyes, and I am worried that my boss is going to set him off.

He has been in this office the whole time I have, I tell my boss, trying to control my breathing, and he has been following me everywhere for at least six months.

My boss considers this. She ums and ahs. She asks if she can pet the dog and when I say no she doesn't ask again.

I tell her about what it is like trying to take the dog on the tube, or rather how he follows me onto the tube and freaks out and then we have to get off and wait for him to calm down.

He's a good dog really, I tell her. He's no bother. It's just this thing about the tube.

She tells me about how, when she first started working for the advertising agency as a junior copywriter, an armadillo turned up in her living room and started following her everywhere. She didn't know what to do. She went to the doctors, she called pest control, she stopped

coming to work. She tried to set the armadillo on fire. But the armadillo still followed her, a silent observer, and because of it she was always on edge.

What happened? I ask her.

After a while we got used to each other, you know? Learned each other's boundaries. Worked out where our buttons were and how not to push them. We're OK now. We still live together but we don't see much of each other.

I don't know what to say so I just stare at her. The dog is still asleep at my feet, his legs twitching as though he is running in his dreams.

Have you got a name for the dog? My boss asks.

I shake my head no. It hadn't even occurred to me that he might need one.

She opens her Filofax and flips through it with long fingers. She takes out a business card and hands it to me.

She says, this is the number for an excellent animal trainer. He was a great help with my armadillo. I think you should take your dog to him and see what he can do.

I say, what about getting to work? This doesn't solve the problem of me being late.

And my boss says, when the dog won't go on the tube, stay at home. When he's not so bad, try and come into work. He can stay under your desk while you're here. He's not harming anyone. And no one needs to know about him apart from us.

I say OK and thank you, and when I leave her office and go back to the reception area, the dog wakes up and follows me, and gets under my desk and goes back to sleep. I touch his ears, which are warm and soft. I pick up the phone and dial the number on the business card.

I have been seeing the animal trainer for a few months now.

The dog has good days and bad days. Sometimes he will ride the tube with me all the way to work without once growling or snapping at the other commuters. Once or twice he has even let someone pet him without complaint, even when I tell them not to. On other days when I wake up in the morning and see him at the foot of my bed doing his triangle eyes, I know it is going to be a difficult day, and it is. These are the days when I stay home and let him sleep on the sofa, his warm body curled up against mine, his big golden paws tucked up under his chin.

The trainer has encouraged me to do activities with the dog. So in the mornings I take him to the local park and throw a ball or a stick for him to catch. This is when the dog is most at ease, his wide mouth stretched back into a dopey smile and his ears flopping up and down as he bounds through the long grass.

My boss calls me and asks me to come to her birthday party. It's a special birthday and everyone in the office is invited. She will be hiring out a bar and doing karaoke.

She says, I know you've got your situation with the dog, so don't feel obligated, but it would be great to see you there.

The thing is, I do feel obligated, even though she said not to. I think of the looks I will get when I try and talk to other partygoers while the dog snarls at them from behind me. I think of the loud noises — the karaoke, the drunken revelry — that will surely spook the dog and set him on edge. And then I look at the dog. He is on the sofa next to

me. We are watching *MasterChef* and wondering what to eat for dinner. The dog wants lamb chops like on the telly but I want pizza.

He rests his chin on my lap and looks at me with his shiny brown-black eyes, his ears twitching.

And I say to him, can you handle a party?

And he says, let's give it a go and see what comes out in the wash.

So we do. On the day of the party I bathe him — he likes this — and blow-dry his thick hair with my own hairdryer set to cold. I brush out his fur all white and gold and straw with a special brush I bought from Pets at Home upon the recommendation of the animal trainer. He likes this too. Then I put on a collar — also from Pets at Home. The collar is blue and it has a bone-shaped tag on it with my name and mobile number. It doesn't have the dog's name on it because I haven't thought of one for him yet.

We take the tube — him in his new collar, me in my best shoes and smart jeans for going out — from Hatton Cross to King's Cross. It's early on a Saturday night, and the tube is quiet, not yet full with the clubbers making their way into town for a night out. We will be arriving at the party early but I have chosen to do this deliberately so as the dog is not too spooked on the train ride. Thankfully, he seems calm, his tongue and tail swinging as we board the quiet train carriage, and he lies down on the floor next to me. This is a good sign, but it could all change. The animal trainer has given me some helpful exercises to calm the dog down for when he gets agitated. I recite them in my head as sky outside darkens to a deep purple.

We arrive at the party without incident, and we are the first ones through the door. The barman watches my dog as we walk into the main area, his face angry. At the back of the bar, someone is helping my boss set up a karaoke machine. When she spots me she comes over and gives me a hug. The dog is OK with this and does not growl or bare his teeth.

My boss offers me a drink and I apologise for being so early. She says don't worry about it, and I help her and the other person, who turns out to be her partner, arrange tables and chairs, and test the volume on the speakers. All of this is fine with the dog.

A few of my colleagues from the office arrive, and my boss and I go over to greet them. They make polite conversation with me, avoiding the question of my time off work and casting nervous glances at my dog. I wonder whether they have been pre-warned about the dog's sensitive disposition. The people I speak to never ask directly about him — who he is and what he's doing in a pub in Euston — even though his presence is so

conspicuous that more than a few of the party guests are staring openly at him, some of them looking angry but most of them just curious. I know that if anyone makes too much of a fuss he'll get agitated and start barking, so maybe this is better.

The conversation is boring and light, the topics neutral things like the weather and football. As more people start to arrive and the bar gets thicker and fuller, with hot bodies moving too close and people laughing in loud bursts, the dog does his triangle eyes.

This is not a good sign.

I think about what the animal trainer told me — about looking for warning signs and making the dog feel comfortable again. We go out of the bar into the street and lean against the wall in the crisp air. The dog is panting. I let him lap up some of the water from my plastic pint glass.

I check my watch and realise with surprise that we have been at the party for nearly three hours. This is a new record for the dog and I'm proud of him. I scratch him behind the ears and tell him so. His eyes are shinier than ever.

I don't want to push him though, so I we go back into the bar and say goodbye to my boss and a few of my colleagues. My boss tells me quietly that I can take as much time as I need from work to look after and train the dog. But she hopes to see me back soon. I tell her I will try. The dog will try, too. We'll make it, eventually.

The dog and I take the tube home, and he is so exhausted that he forgets even to do triangle eyes at the drunk and loud people who get on at Leicester Square. He breathes in short huffs through his wet-black nose, closes his eyes and rests his chin on my lap. For the time being, he is calm, but I know that our work is not yet done.

I turn my key in the lock at my flat. And I remember something someone told me once. And I look at the dog, run my hands through his thick soft fur, let it fill the spaces between my fingers.

I think that I might finally have a name for the dog. 🐕



KIRSTY CAPES is a PhD candidate and teaches on the Creative Writing undergraduate programme at Brunel University London. She is currently a mentee on the Penguin Random House WriteNow scheme for under-represented writers, and was recently awarded the HW Fischer scholarship by Curtis Brown Creative. She tweets at @kirstycapes, and posts critical essays on femalefriendshipinfiction.wordpress.com. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in *Rising*, *Astronaut Magazine*, *Roulade Magazine* and the *Storygraph* journal. She lives in London.

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CHAD YENNEY

Pages: Front Cover, 29, Back Cover...
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



ROB KIRBYSON

Pages: 23, 38, 41 ...
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



SEB SLINGSBY

Pages: 20-21...
is an illustrator/artist hailing from the Fylde Coast in Lancashire and is a UCLAN graduate after earning a BA Hons in Illustration. He enjoys creating artwork and illustrations that capture the seemingly ordinary, trivial or even mundane elements of everyday life. His artwork is often a mixture of both traditional and digital media.



BRELYNNE GUNDERSON

Pages: Inside Front Cover, 2, 18...
drew a happy face on a lonely balloon and named him Mr. Yellow Balloon Face (MyBF). For the rest of that day the balloon helped her bring a little extra cheer to the people she greeted. Inspired by this experience, she now creates mixed media art to continue to bring that extra bit of delight into people's lives. Brelynne has been in the art and design industry for ten years, with titles including: Freelance Illustrator, Lead Graphic Designer and Fine Artist. She currently sells her original art and art prints in Idaho Falls and is working to expand into the art licensing industry.



CHAD ROSEBURG

Pages: 7, 12-13...
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.



CESAR VALTIERRA

Pages: 44-45...
is a graphic artist. To escape the drudgery of life, he draws. He also hangs out with his fiancée Victoria, and their cats, Chubs and Pretty Boy. Check out his work at CesarValtierra.com and OrderFromKhaos.com, as well as his comic at TonyBalazo.com

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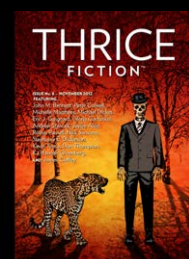
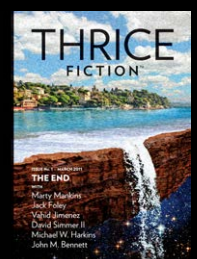
RW SPRYSZAK

Editor, THRICE Fiction...
has work which appeared in **Slipstream**, **Paper Radio**, **the Lost and Found Times**, **Mallife**, **Version90**, **Sub Rosa**, **Asylum**, and a host of other alternative magazines over the last 30 years. After a drunken hiatus his work has resurfaced in places like **A Minor Magazine** and **Peculiar Mormyrid**. He was editor of the **Fiction Review** from 1989-1991 and co-founded Thrice Publishing in 2011. He compiled and edited **So What If It's True: From the Notebooks of Lorri Jackson** and stares out the window for no reason quite often. He has no degrees, does not apply for awards, and works in a print shop where nobody knows about any of this. You can find his website at rwspryszak.com



DAVID SIMMER II

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



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