

Typetthouse

January 2015, Issue #4

LITERARY MAGAZINE





Call for Submissions

Typehouse is a writer-run, literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We publish non-fiction, genre fiction, literary fiction, poetry and visual art. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished, writing that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting fiction, poetry, or visual art, email your submission as an attachment or within the body of the email along with a short bio to: typehouse@peoples-ink.com

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Table of Contents:

Fiction:

The Fountain	Julia Gilmour	5
L'ERMITAGE	Saytchyn Maddux-Creech	10
Down by the River	Ashley Lamb-Sinclair	31
Robots Don't Have Souls	Josiah Spence	43
Full Up Sick	Graham Bowlin	55
The OTIR	Salena Casha	65
The Man in the Ambry	Gwendolyn Kiste	69

Poetry:

Yuan Changming	9
Ginna Luck	29
Ariel Hafeman	42
Emily R. Frankenberg	64
Seif-Eldeine	81

Visual Art:

Margaret Karmazin	26
John Koch	Cover / 50

Julia Gilmour is a copywriter in Las Vegas, NV. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

The Fountain

Julia Gilmour

On what seemed like an ordinary day in Middle America, recess had just ended on an elementary school playground, signaling the students to line up for lunch. Only a sliver of light passed through a sky growing heavy with dark and looming clouds. One ordinary young girl stood at the front of a long line of students waiting to be excused.

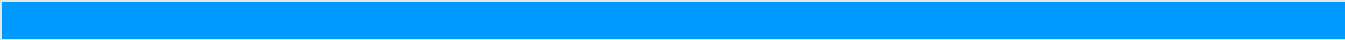
A breeze rustled through the air and she pulled her puffy coat tight to her body. The cool air smelled like rain water preparing to drown a desert. She stood still, holding a brown bag lunch at her side, the top fold clutched tight between her palm and fingers.

She looked up and was lost in the beauty of the sky above.

As the clouds shifted, seeming to give the Earth motion, she wondered if it were she who was moving, or if it were the clouds? To outsiders, she seemed to be frozen in time in space, lost in both the quietness of her thoughts and the beauty of the sky above. A young teacher dismissed her line, but she stood with her feet glued to the pavement, her head angled toward the sky. The teacher mistook the young girl for a misbehaving student and as punishment decided to leave her outside to miss today's meal.

The young girl continued to stand still while classmates wove around her, and she continued to stand long after lunch had ended and students filed into classrooms. When the final school bell sounded around two o'clock, students raced past her to make it home in time for an afternoon snack. The playground emptied. The sun descended behind purple mountains to the west.

The girl remained.



Later into the evening after the sun had descended, a mob had formed around the motionless girl, led by her parents of course, who had been standing outside all afternoon. A large white moon hung in the sky, fully exposed by a break in the clouds. Her father and mother each held an off-white wax candle flickering in the breeze. The young girl's father draped an arm around her mother who patted a handkerchief against her wet eyes. "Why won't my baby come home?" she asked between sobs. "She's been out here all afternoon and she hates the dark." Her father pulled her in closer against his chest.

"Excuse me. Please, excuse me." The school nurse pushed her way from the back, lantern in one hand, medical kit in the other. She set the lantern down beside the girl and pulled out her stethoscope, placing the cool end against her warm back. She listened closely as the crowd silenced in wait of a response. "All signs point to life," she finally said. "The girl is paralyzed, but fully aware of what is happening around her. I suggest you all go home and get some sleep."

As people filed away, the father turned to the nurse. "But nurse," he spoke quietly. "It's much more than that. We tried to pick her up, to move her, but she won't budge. We can't get her home."

"Then I suggest you try to make her as comfortable as you can here."

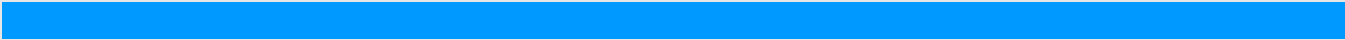
"But nurse –"

"Be patient. The world works in mysterious ways, sir." She closed her bag and turned to leave, pausing only for a moment to place a hand on the shoulder of one sullen teacher, the woman responsible for dismissing the line this afternoon.

For weeks that followed, the young girl stood with her feet locked to the pavement, her coat fastened to her body, her lunch clutched between her fingers. Like a statue, she stood.

Her best friend, Marsha, visited every afternoon at recess to catch up. "Mr. McDermott is at it again, this time with times tables," she giggled. "He's always mad because you are the only one who could do it, but now you just stand outside and look at the sky. Johnny though," she paused and cupped her mouth with one hand to muffle her laughter, "Johnny tries to do his math on the board but he can barely draw the numbers. His nines look like South America and Mr. McDermott never counts them!" Laughing harder this time, she fell at the young statue's feet. When the recess bell rang, Marsha jumped back up, wiped a few dried bird droppings from the frozen girl's purple coat and skipped off to join her classmates in the lunch line – which, on account of the frozen girl, had been moved to the other side of the playground.

Marsha wasn't her only daily visitor.



Her parents visited frequently at first. They would hold her tight and cry, “Come back to us, dear. We miss you so much.” But as time went on and no change occurred, daily visits turned into weekly – on Sundays after church. With time, her parents only visited on her birthday or Christmas. They’d bring her gifts – some bought, some donated from the members of their church – a new hat to protect her from the rain or a scarf to keep her warm, always clothing.

Then, one year, her parents failed to show up at all.

Years passed and the school closed for good. Builders tore it down and bulldozed the playground. A shopping mall took its place. They built a fountain around the young girl’s body to mark the entrance. Bored teenagers stood outside and posed with her for photos. “Take a picture of me with the girl that stood!” They shouted, splashing around in the fountain, poking at her puffy coat, climbing the small wall that surrounded her on all sides.

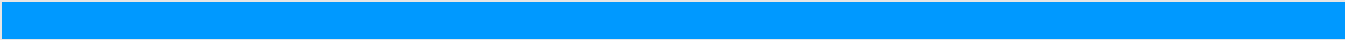
But the girl stood.

When she still did not move after several years, city historians considered her important enough for a plaque. On the front of her fountain hung the words “Here stands a girl who keeps her head high in the clouds and her feet firmly on the ground.” After that, she became an attraction, bringing tourists to the small town. They roped her off so onlookers could gaze in admiration, throw pennies in the fountain, beg that she share her secrets to staying young. But she never told.

When her parents passed away, the town held the memorial at the fountain. News reporters made a spectacle of the event and broadcast it to the world. If she were to awaken, they thought, surely it would be brought on by the death of her parents. But the young girl did not shed a tear. Instead, the broadcast reached other nations with a plea that they report any other cases of what doctors were now called “Mature Paralysis.” But no other cases were ever reported.

As the only person on which time had no effect, she became the worldwide symbol of youth.

Marsha showed up to visit her one last time after being diagnosed with cancer, to bring the news that she would soon leave this world. “You really escaped the hardships of life,” she said. “Not everyone is given the gift of immortality.” Marsha looked up into the now cloudless atmosphere. “You know,” she said. “It’s funny, I don’t know what caught your attention that day. I was here too, standing right behind where you are now.” She pointed to a spot in the rushing water of the fountain. “It could have been my clock that was stopped, but it was yours. And I’ll never understand why. But, you know what? I was blessed with a family and three beautiful children and a life. And if I had the choice I would do it all the same.” She sat with her a while, listening to the rushing water and wondering if the words she was speaking were true, and when she stood to leave, she knew



that what she had said was nothing short of honest. She smiled one last sympathetic, toothless grin and again dusted a few dried bird droppings from the now weatherworn purple coat. She leaned in close to inspect the statue's hard face. After a moment, she said, "My kids are about your age now." And with that, Marsha left the fountain for good.

A few months later on one late September night, the last tourist had gone home and an elderly woman hobbled up, cane in hand, and sat down on the wall of the fountain. She was the teacher responsible for the lunch lines, now ripened with a long life. She dangled her feet over the edge of the fountain wall and let her shoes brush the top of the water. The air was still, the water motionless. Looking up at the girl's youthful face, she said, "It's my final wish." She kicked her feet around and looked over her shoulder, just to be sure no one was hearing the final thoughts of an old woman like herself. "I've wondered endlessly, blamed myself, blamed the sky, but no one knows the truth." A breeze drifted by and the teacher hugged her body close. "Please tell me," she said, looking down at the purple veins protruding from her legs. "Why didn't you just go to lunch with your classmates that day? I did what I was supposed to, I always did what I was supposed to." She looked up at the small girl, now hardened from the sun, from her rare diagnosis. "Just tell me it wasn't my fault. Give me a sign. Tell me there is a bigger reason you didn't move that day so many years ago."

The young statue twisted her neck, now stiff from time, and looked down from the sky, flakes of rock and debris flinging from her body. She stared into the eyes of the saddened teacher, but neither spoke a word. She stepped one foot across the water to the ledge, then hopped from the fountain wall to the ground, landing like a boulder falling from a cliff. She turned one last time to look into the fading eyes of the old woman and then the young girl skipped away, lunch bag in hand.

The old woman sat for a moment and watched her go as the water rushed over her arthritis-ridden legs. When the small girl did not return, the elderly teacher stepped up to take her place in the center of the fountain. Water rushed around her.

She looked to the sky.

Yuan Changming, an 8-time Pushcart nominee, is the most widely published poetry author who speaks Mandarin but writes English. Tutoring and co-editing Poetry Pacific with Allen Qing Yuan in Vancouver, Changming has poetry appearing in 919 literary publications across 30 countries, including Best Canadian Poetry (2009,12,14), BestNewPoemsOnline and Threepenny Review.

[on another rainy day: for liu yu]

Yuan Changming

It rains a lot in Vancouver
Often does this rain remind me of
The days when you sojourned here
With my family, after Father left all of us

While walking in the rain, you would
Recall, under my big umbrella
How you once waited in a drizzle
With me in a broken basket on your back
To cross the widening river, not far
From our village when I was crying hard
For a large spoonful of flour soup (you were too
Weak and too hungry to produce any milk)

Seeing you do nothing about my hunger
The ferry man asked, *Where is its mom?*
I am his mother! You replied, tears rolling down
With the raindrops on your childish face
How old are you then? – Almost 17.

It is raining again in Vancouver, and beyond this rain
Your voice echo aloud on the other side of this world

Saytchyn Maddux-Creech has published numerous stories and poems in journals such as Petrichor Machine, Flashquake, and Word Riot, all under her former name of Sandra Maddux-Creech. She lives in Colorado with her husband and four cats; all five have learned never to put their feet on a writer's keyboard.

L'ERMITAGE

Saytchyn Maddux-Creech

I returned to where all my ghosts were, to the Grand Hotel on the Great Lake, with no guarantees and no clear plans. June was too late to apply for a seasonal position, and the year-long positions were always filled. But the compass in my head sent me north, on a bus between Huron and Michigan, around Whitefish Bay, to the top of the world. Knowing I'd be turned away.

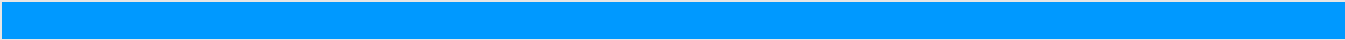
The bus left me a block from the island's dock, where I thought I recognized faces from two decades before. But these faces were too young to belong to the friends I'd made on that two-thousand-acre chunk of rock laced with fossil coral on Lake Superior.

The aging ferry driver had grown fatter and grayer but was the same smiling man who'd taught me to tie a new knot every summer since I'd learned to toddle. He squeezed my shoulders and introduced me to the young docking crew. "This is December," he told them. "Bert and Rae's daughter." The mention of my parents' names drew a small crowd of both ferry line employees and the island staff waiting for passage.

"I was so sorry to hear about their passing," said a girl who looked no more than sixteen, and I wondered how she could have known my parents, who had died too young.

"They inspired my father to leave Wall Street and teach," another teenager said. My parents had inspired all manner of beautiful, insane acts.

"My parents remember them from back in the seventies," said another kid. "They have all these great old photos." I had boxes of the same, my young parents with the old lake folk, long dead now. Employment on the island ran in families, like musical aptitude, like sea-colored eyes.



The freshwater breeze pulled me to a place where I stopped hearing their voices, but I smiled and nodded, made eye contact, sat with them while they told their stories old and new on the nearly hour-long ferry ride. I stayed silent. I was here because I'd lost a job I didn't like, a lover I didn't love, and a house that had never been home. I've tried to live up to the legacy of kindness and wisdom my parents left me, but the children of heroes are almost always disappointing.

Twelve miles out, the crew left me at the long walk leading up to the white four-story hotel that had seemed monolithic when I was a child but had shrunk during my teens. It had grown overwhelmingly large again.

"December?" Jogging over from her riding lawnmower was Kashmir, my dark angel of a friend from those gone years. Her parents had named her after the city where they'd met. She threw her arms around me, and I felt homesick for the past. "We were teenagers," she said.

"Once. Yes, we were."

She laughed as she released me. I remember her always laughing. "I meant the last time I hugged you."

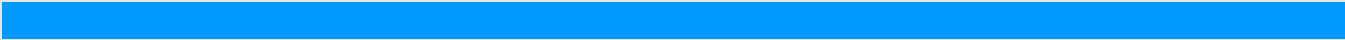
I'd been twenty, but I didn't correct her. I'd been halfway through college and so stupid. Kashmir knew why I hadn't returned the summer I was twenty-one or the summer after, or all those years since. For a flash, I felt I'd imagined the last twenty years, because the fossil-riddled stones along the shoreline hadn't changed. But why would they have? Their outline was burned on my memory like an afterimage.

"You know Jon is the island director now," she said. "But he never comes to the public side." She took my lone duffel and led me toward the hotel. If she hadn't been there, I might still be standing on that spot, time-travelling in my head.

Kashmir, the island's first female caretaker, hadn't changed much other than the few crinkles around her eyes. The gale-worn porch lined with white rocking chairs hadn't changed. I finger-combed the salt and wind from my hair as Kashmir escorted me through the squeaky double screen doors into the polished antique lobby. The young woman behind the front desk asked my name.

"December Hesse. I'm not registered. I'm looking for a job, actually. I know it's late in the season..."

Her worried frown said I was going back on the next boat.



Kashmir swooped in to save me. “She’s applying for the archivist position. She’ll check in after her interview.”

“Oh. I didn’t know we’d opened that position yet.” The young woman smiled at me and moved on to some paperwork.

When Kashmir grinned, a few more face lines appeared. I knew they matched mine, and they reminded me, more so than if I’d been looking in a mirror, of how old I’d grown. “What the *hell* are you doing here?” She laughed.

“Hide me. I’ll live under the porch.” I’d been lost for so long. And now I’d stumbled on what felt like home.

She led me toward the coffee bar off the dining room, which hadn’t quite opened for the summer, but the staff was busy getting it there, wiping down the cappuccino machine, updating the menu board and prices. Kashmir kept laughing, laughing. I felt time halt and then slowly resume in reverse, dizzying me, making me reach for a wall, a chair.

The past was no place for me. I had not done well there.

#

Kashmir called Jon on the island’s far side. He okayed my early application for a position they hadn’t officially opened, and he agreed to interview me. My heart flipped around in my chest as Kashmir drove me on a wild ride over the rocky terrain in a truck with no doors. She dropped my duffel bag and me as close to Jon’s house as the truck could get.

To reach the house that had been home to every Island Director since 1949, you had to walk through a fossilized stone formation that looked like a huge pitted hand with the fingers and thumb curling up around you, like you stood upon the hand of a god. When the house was being constructed, helicopters had dropped off the building supplies, and the builders had hiked in over the hand. I eased over the mound of Mars in the giant crusty palm and stood there for a moment, where the old folks said the Noquet had held their coming of age ceremonies.

It was time I came of age.

The director’s house, a quarter mile beyond, was large, one story, wood and stone. When I knocked on the screen door, a little boy with straight dark hair rambled into the hall. “Let her in,” his mother called. He was three or four. He held the door open and smiled a tiny version of Jon’s



smile.

Wind had dusted the wood floors and scented the house with lake air. I followed the boy down the hall, to a small room made even smaller by numerous easy chairs and coffee tables.

Her name was Annie. Kashmir had told me. And as Kashmir had warned, she did look like me.

She smiled up from her softly stuffed chair as Jon stood to greet me, but he didn't step forward, didn't offer his hand. Those light teal eyes both warmed and froze me. He had the same light brown skin and handsome silly smile. I hoped he couldn't tell my legs were trembling.

I struggled through several moments of "um." My thoughts were too loud for me to think over them. *Maybe I made those mistakes intentionally. Maybe I gave away what I longed to keep so I'd have to come back someday and be here, now.* "I'm sorry. It's just so...to be back here."

Both Jon and Annie remained silent—their son, too, tilting his head up at me.

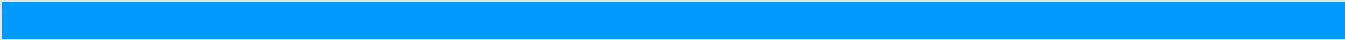
"I haven't seen this side of the island since I was a child." Why did I think that explained anything or was relevant? If I had made the mistake of planting my feet an inch closer together, my knees would be knocking, and my eyes felt in danger of growing moist. I held them open as wide as I could.

I suppose Jon could see I was about to have one of my miniature breakdowns, possibly remembered the signs. He probably didn't want to subject his wife to it. "Knowing as much as you do about the island..." He had the same soft voice. "I think you'd be perfect for the position at the hermitage. L'ermitage." His attempt at a French accent was as beautifully atrocious as ever. "This is December Hesse," he told his wife and son, remembering his manners, slow about it, but smooth, as always. "This is Annie," he told me, "and Victor."

Part of me had forgotten how tall he was, how broad. Luckily, heartbreakingly, I didn't have to look at him for long.

Annie walked me to the hermitage, along a path of crushed shells and beach glass, through a grove of white pine and over a field of shrubs. She chatted about the passing years. She'd heard of me during her summers working at the hotel. Her first year had been the first I'd stayed away. Maybe she knew why I hadn't come back. But she was tactful.

I'd never spent much time at the stone cottage someone had named l'ermitage decades before my birth. Its perch at the highest edge of the island was only a ten-minute hike from the director's



house but thirty minutes from the hotel across a plain of fissured stone. I'd never needed to make the pilgrimage to study the island's history. I'd known the stories from childhood, from listening to the old islanders. They'd died off as I'd grown up, another one every few years.

"I'm sure you know how to operate the generator," Annie said, handing me the keys.

"If it's like the one at the hotel." I didn't remember how to operate it, exactly, but I hoped it would come to me and I wouldn't have to ask.

"Smaller," she said, "but yes. And the hours are still two to four." For two hours every day, the archivist opened the library, and usually, no one showed. Most frequently, the archivist was someone on a retreat to finish a book or some other project. In return for the solitude and a freezer and pantry full of food, the archivist cared for the library and helped the rare visitor find information on local and island history. It would have been perfect if I'd had something to create, something to complete.

I told myself this was what I needed, a place to breathe. But I'd been breathing fine all those years I was away. It was only upon my return that I felt breathless.

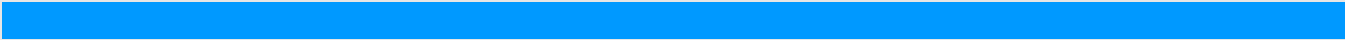
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I visited the hotel on Kashmir's next day off. On the thirty-minute hike, I stuck to the densest rock, where the fissures were mere cracks, some filled with the fossilized remains of tiny ancient sea creatures. As I walked, the hotel grew on the horizon from photograph-sized to dollhouse-sized as the sun drifted down to meet its reflection on the lake, turning the water gold. And I couldn't help it. I drifted into the past.

My first year working at the hotel, I'd roomed with two college freshmen. I'd still been a high school senior, only seventeen. All summer, one boy in the room beside ours wrote poems about us and posted them in the hallway, romantic innocent poems about the three girls next door, often hinting at mild protectiveness. This was Perry, Jon's best friend. They'd both worked there for two summers before me, and they seemed so experienced, so together.

Perry was exuberant. Jon was the cool-shy guy with the guitar, singing to himself. Serenade-Me Lacey heard him sing the chorus of "Cathedral" and asked, "Is this song about the Vietnam War?" Jon laughed and ignored us all.

But one day in late July, when we were alone on the back deck and the sun had nearly set, he looked down at me from the corners of his eyes and asked, "Do you know 'Helplessly Hoping?'"



He sang it, nodding to me, inviting me to join in. I hadn't known the words then, but one line he sang stayed in my head: *He worries, did he hear a goodbye? Or even—hello?* It was the way he sang the word, *hello*. I thought I heard hope in it. But I wasn't the sort of girl who thought anything was about me.

More than two decades later, the setting sun turned the lake orange and finally red, and the hotel grew from dollhouse-sized to life-sized. I entered Nipigon Hall through the double screen doors, where Kashmir presided over happy hour, entertaining the guests and a few older employees, swirling her wine and laughing through stories of when we were young and when others were not young, but younger. She carried herself with the same brilliant confidence, whether sipping cabernet or tromping out of the electrical room wearing her tool belt.

She filled a glass for me and said, "I can't get over how much you look like your mother."

"Nor can I." It had happened when I was thirty-six, like a magic spell, growing stronger each year. But I never inherited Mom's confidence. Her open-mindedness, maybe. Never her open-heartedness. Kashmir always seemed more my parents' progeny than I. I'd have said something about this, but Jon and Annie arrived, each holding hands with Victor.

Annie and Victor broke off to mingle. Jon headed for the bar in the slow, casual way of men who've never been drinkers, stopping to talk to everyone, waiting for each of them to break off the conversation first. I'd forgotten how small he made other men look, how literally pale. He didn't appear to see me, or appeared to intentionally not see me, so it startled me when he made a sharp right turn toward me and didn't stop walking until he stood so close, he was like a tower of a man. "Red wine?" he asked, lowering his eyebrows at my glass.

"Someone poured it for me." Red wine had never been my choice. "It isn't bad."

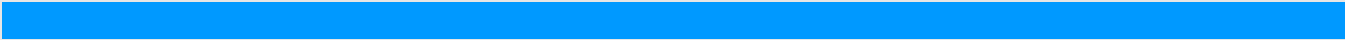
"I've never seen you drink red wine." Very unlike him to repeat himself.

"I heard you never came to the public side."

"Not often." He seemed a dream version of Jon, a medley of my memories. I'd never seen him in dress shoes before.

Someone across the room picked up Victor, who laughed like I'm sure his father had as a child. I wondered where Annie had gotten to.

She stood at my elbow. Jon and I turned toward her like soldiers upon the entrance of a



commanding officer. I was about to say, “So...” or “Well...” with nothing to follow it.

“December, my dear!” Kashmir beckoned me away from my nightmare.

I switched to sparkling wine and managed to avoid answering questions about how I’d spent twenty years. Only Kashmir knew I’d wasted ten switching degree programs twice and ten more with a man I won’t even give a name to. Jon and I socialized, circling the room at the same pace, keeping on opposite sides. When I joined the people getting air on the porch, Annie practically pulled him out to me.

“So...” she said, and I knew that, unlike me, she had something to follow her *So...*with, although she did torture us with a five-second pause. “Do you two have a history?” Smiling, so direct. You’d never catch *her* having sex with your best friend because she doesn’t think she has a chance with you.

Jon’s “No” felt like a kick in the stomach.

#

After four glasses of wine, even in bright moonlight, the walk from the hotel to the hermitage was arduous. Half my concentration went toward balance and footing, my arms straight out like wings. The other half went toward making sure no one was witnessing it.

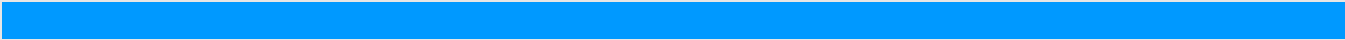
When I got in, I avoided looking at the clock, feeling the push of sunrise. I tumbled into bed and immediate dreaming, a dream of that summer I was twenty, the last truly happy summer I’d had.

My father had led the carpentry crew since before I’d been born. My mother was head cook. They ferried over every April and stayed through October. Vague memories of the apartment we shared with my aunt and uncle in Michigan were dim compared to the ones of high rocky banks, hard-packed earth coated with loose sand, tall lake grass swaying on the cliffs.

The minimum age to get an island job was eighteen unless you were a freshman in college, and then you could be hired at seventeen. Mine was the only exception I ever heard of. But by seventeen, I knew everything about the island or at least enough to convince others I did.

My first summer, I met Jon. He sang “Helplessly Hoping” to me.

My second summer, his fourth, he had to go home for three weeks when the chicken pox broke out and he caught it. He sent me two postcards from his hometown of Red Lake, both addressed to, “Hello, my friend.”



My third summer, he was the caretaker's apprentice. I'd been promoted to assistant manager of the bookstore and admitted to the ranks he'd enjoyed for two years, affectionately known to the greener employees as the Hags, practically decrepit we'd been around so long. I guess I'd say Jon and I were good friends. My mother lost to cancer that year. He rocked me while I cried.

Dad never returned to the island. He lived almost another year before a series of heart attacks took him. The island director back then was Kashmir's now-late father, who told me on the first day of my fourth summer that I would have a place there until I grew senile and maybe after. Jon was still the caretaker's apprentice but would be the island's youngest caretaker the following year. I'd learned the words to "Helplessly Hoping" but was too shy to sing it when he played.

Twenty years later, on the night of my tipsy trek over the rocks, I dreamed of that evening during my fourth summer, when Jon asked me for the second time if I knew the song.

"Not really," was what I'd said in reality. But in my dream, I sat beside him on the deck railing and sang the first line with him, so quietly I could barely hear myself: *Helplessly hoping her harlequin hovers nearby, awaiting a word.*

He sang the rest of the song, mostly bashful, but locking his seawater eyes onto mine each time he sang that drawn-out word, "hello..."

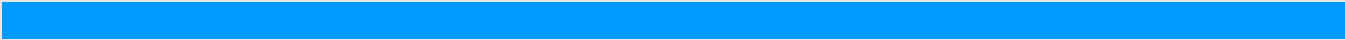
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Not usually a drinker myself, I'd suffered through few hangovers. But the next morning brought the most pleasant hangover I'd had, allowing my star-dusted night-dreams to tumble into daydreams of what could have been.

Maybe to keep his visit public, Jon showed up at the cottage during visitor hours that day, five minutes after two in the afternoon. I invited him in and followed him to the little reading room they called the library, where his head nearly touched the ceiling. I wanted him to sit down, but even the chairs were small.

"Do we need to talk about anything?" he asked.

He still looked young. The soft lines around his eyes only gave him a rugged edge. The little dots of gray in his hair, too short to be called strands, made him look wiser than he probably was. He'd always been built like a man: big hands, wide shoulders, yet with a softness that made him childlike. It was still there, countered by the cynical look he gave me when I said, "We should have talked twenty years ago." He'd never have been capable of that look when he was twenty-three.



“Deci, you fucked it up.”

I nearly lost my balance at hearing that old nickname. “We were only friends.”

“You knew I wanted to be with you.”

“I didn’t.” I’d only helplessly hoped.

“Everyone knew,” he said.

“Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

He laughed. “You need other people to clue you in about these things?”

I know not every twenty-year-old is as stupid as I was. All I ever did was hope. And he was forever singing me that song. I probably should have known.

A head of dark hair flashed in the window and was gone. Jon and I both jumped, and then he rolled his eyes at me. I expected an exasperated or annoyed line. Maybe he just couldn’t think of anything to say.

He didn’t look back as I followed him outside and found Kashmir around the corner of the cottage, crouching in the shade.

“I wasn’t spying,” she said, “and I’m not hiding. I just wanted to let you two be alone.”

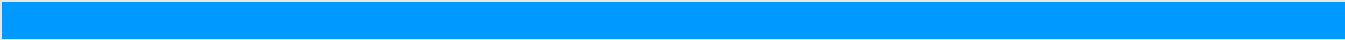
“He left.”

“Damn,” she said.

“He’s married.”

“I said be alone, not have an affair.” She took a small bundle from her back jeans pocket. “I found these in my dad’s old stuff.”

We went inside to have tea and look at the photos, mostly of my parents, some of me growing up, two or three of me as an island employee. Finally one that she might have intentionally placed at the end of the stack: Jon playing rockball with Perry. One of them would toss a rock. The other hit it with a stick, sent it sailing into the lake. And me, sitting on the hood of one of the trucks, smiling



eyes on Jon. Admiring him. Loving him, I swear. If I didn't know that girl in the photo, I'd have believed she was Jon's lover, had been for years.

Why the hell wasn't I? I almost said it out loud. But I didn't confide in Kashmir as I had when we were young. Maybe if we'd never lost touch or if she hadn't made the "I said be alone, not have an affair" comment. But we managed to have a friendly pot of tea with no revelations.

#

I kept dreaming of the summer I was twenty, little scenes more vivid than my memories. Like the night we all jumped off the pier and Jon swam away underwater, hiding until a gaggle of girls hung off the moorings screaming his name. I hadn't been one of them. Not because I wanted him to drown. Because, like Perry and the other Hags, I knew Jon. He was watching us, stifling his laughter until the time was right to come out and say boo. *Maybe I should scream his name*, I thought in the dream, but I didn't.

And like that day we built the stone stairs on the bank above the hot sandy beach, when I caught my hand under a stone and pulled it free, scraping the skin on my ring finger back like rolling up a tiny sleeve. Jon drove me to the island nurse and when we reached her cabin, he came around the truck and held his arms out as if he'd bear me inside like a bride. It had embarrassed me, and I'd laughed and walked myself in. Another regret.

So in my dream, I curled my arm around his shoulders and let him carry me. I smelled his deodorant, cheap but nice, manly. I felt his warm chest against my cheek, worn cotton shirt covering soft flesh and hard muscle. I heard his breath, felt it on the top of my head. "Hang on, Deci." As if I'd mortally wounded myself.

The morning after this dream, he visited again. I stood at the cottage window, coffee mug to my lips, and watched him stride over the shrub field as if he had news.

I met him at the door. He headed for the library. The hall ceiling was lower than in the rest of the cottage, and he had to duck walking down it. I went the opposite way, to the minuscule kitchen to pour him a coffee.

When I met him in the library, he took the cup I offered, and he spoke in that rushed, run-on manner left over from his youth. "I wish you had a phone out here thank you." He sucked the hot coffee up. "I'm sorry I was a jerk yesterday." He still wore work boots, out there away from the hotel.

"Me, too," I said. "Twenty years ago."



“Ah, let’s forget it, Dec. We were friends.”

I *liked* this, him feeling comfortable enough to slurp, being fond enough of me to owe me an apology, to call us friends. “I dreamed last night about skinning my finger,” I said.

“That scared the hell out of me.”

I thought he would have forgotten it.

“But it was just a finger,” he mumbled.

“Do you want to sit?” I almost added, *Or are you afraid you’ll break the little dollhouse chair?*

We talked like friends, about the island. How it had changed and hadn’t. After our coffees, he stood to go. I walked him to the door, mentally discarding phrases like *It’s been nice* and *Hope to see you*.

“It’s weird that you dreamed about smashing your finger.” He barely turned to face me on his way down the stone slab steps. “When you let me carry you into the infirmary, that was when I was sure you knew how I felt about you.”

I wondered if I remembered it right, that I’d only let him carry me in my dream.

His big shoulders looked small when he shrugged them. “Oh well.”

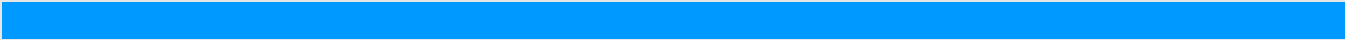
#

Each evening, I meditated on that final summer when I was young. And every night, I dreamed it, rearranging the past to conform to what I wanted it to have been. The changes I was able to make in these dreams were subtle at first. In dreams, I sat beside Jon at bonfires rather than by myself, staring out at the waves.

In waking hours, he brought me vegetables he and his wife had grown and stood closer to me than before.

In dreams, I touched his hand or rubbed his shoulder, gave him spontaneous hugs.

In the daylight, he brought fuel for the hermitage generator and left me with a one-armed half-hug that warmed me hours after he left.



But in my dreams, although I ached to pin him to the plank floor in his attic bedroom, I could only change what had really happened in the tiniest ways: an encouraging smile when I was sure I hadn't offered one in the past, a dip of my head toward his chest when he was near, a warm hug at most. Still, in the present, his visits became daily, growing longer. I nearly convinced myself I'd dreamed his wife out of existence because I couldn't imagine she'd allow him to spend so much time with me.

"Annie says we should have you over for dinner," he finally said.

I'd forgotten her name.

"She says it's silly for you not to come over, since we were such good friends."

Yes, we were only friends. And I wasn't sure we'd even been "such good friends," other than in my dreams.

I could attribute everything that had happened to soft delusions.

#

That summer when I turned twenty, through a series of missteps and misunderstandings, I'd convinced myself that Jon wasn't for me, that I couldn't have him. I wasn't airy enough, beautiful enough. Maybe it was half his fault. Maybe he was just too shy. But my confidence had never matched that of the girls who followed him around, the ones who shot me smiles that might have been friendly but looked gloating.

And of course, I'd been drinking that early September night in my youth, just having fun. And I'd shared a roll in the sack with my casual pal, Perry, Jon's best pal, as close to Jon as I thought I could get.

I never dreamed Jon would care. Why should he? Who was I to him?

#

The night after Jon's oblique dinner invite, I dreamed of the little boardwalk beside the hotel where he used to play guitar and sing with whoever joined him there. He was never shy with that guitar against his chest.

I looked around for Serenade-Me Lacey, for anyone. But we were alone.



“Do you know ‘Helplessly Hoping’?” he asked.

Although I was afraid the dream gods would make my voice a frog’s croak, I sang it with him.

He was Steven Stills. I was David Crosby. Maybe vice versa. But our voices together sounded like I’d known they would, as perfectly matched as we were.

#

In the morning, I watched Jon from the hermitage windows as he trudged through the bush field more than ever like a man with a mission. I’d have thought he was coming to drag me to dinner to be checked out by the missus if it weren’t for the guitar he clutched by the neck. Like a soldier crossing a battlefield, his rifle in his fist.

“Doesn’t it bother your wife and son that you’re over here so often?”

“Victor’s taking a nap.” He slid past me as if he didn’t want to be seen coming in. He fit himself into a chair in the library and waited.

When I sat opposite him, he began to play.

Some of what he played might not have been songs, just pretty notes that fit together, slipping from key to key. He didn’t sing or look at me, and after a while, I wasn’t sure he remembered I was there. But I couldn’t stop watching his hands. Then it was his dark eyelashes as he blinked slowly down at the strings. Did he know what he was doing to me?

He sighed but kept playing.

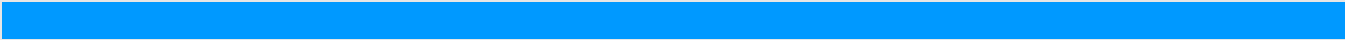
“Jonny,” I said.

He looked up, pretty sea-green eyes of that boy in the lined face of a man who’d never been afraid of the sunshine.

More to get the possibility out of the way than anything, I tried to make a joke of it. “I’d invite you up the tiny stairs, but I’m afraid you wouldn’t fit through the hall.”

He looked so sad. “I could crawl.”

I did feel guilt. If I’d let myself consider Annie...but I did not. I wanted the man so much more than



I'd ever wanted the boy.

"If you go," I said, "I'll follow."

He left his guitar propped against the chair in the library.

He only had to duck a little on his way up the stairs and down the hallway.

He barely fit in the bed.

I started to ask him, "Are you sure..."

"Shh," he said.

He was exactly the lover I'd spent so much time imagining him as. Quiet. Gentle. Nervous. But it had never felt so fine with anyone else. I'd never known what fine felt like. He was built like a sculpture, just over life-sized. Maybe that was why I felt childlike, as if I could get away with what I was doing, too young to be responsible.

#

He might have slept afterward. Maybe he was playing possum. I thought I should get up and give him a chance to leave. I went to make coffee.

He clomped down the stairs a few minutes later, into the mini-kitchen, possessing the room, fully-dressed, short hair sticking up. I expected him to be beside himself. The boy would have been.

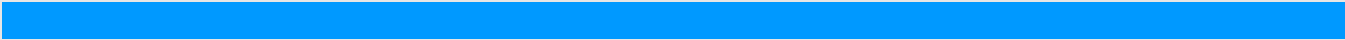
"I don't know what I want this to mean," he said, "or what you do."

"Nothing, this time. It's okay."

"This time."

"If there's a next time," I said, "we can talk about what it means." I felt so wise, so magnanimous, sending him back to his wife as if he had nothing to feel guilty about, and her, nothing to worry over. As if these were my decisions to make.

He nodded, kept nodding, was still nodding on his way out the door.



I didn't call him back for his guitar. I figured he'd remember it halfway across the field, and maybe he did. But he didn't turn around.

#

The next night, I dreamed of an evening when Jon and I had shared a bottle of warm Schaefer on Sunset Lounge, a strip of concrete on the secluded side of the engineering shack where employees watched the sun go down. The sun had long since sunk into the lake that looked as wide as an ocean. We were the last ones left. I stayed because he stayed, eating chocolate-covered peanuts, and every time we passed the bottle, our hands touched. I tried to catch his scent, taste him on the bottle, but all I tasted was cheap beer.

In life, this was all that had happened.

In the dream, I said, "You know, one day, twenty years from now, you and I are going to enjoy a one-afternoon-stand in the bedroom up in l'ermitage. It's going to be magnificent!"

I could barely see his face. "Miraculous," he said.

"Staggering." When I passed him the beer again, I kissed him. I still tasted cheap beer, but I also tasted chocolate. Salt. And something distinctly Jon.

He set the beer aside, against the wall, and leaned in. He overwhelmed me backward, but holding onto me with one arm to keep me from cracking my skull against the concrete. He didn't kiss as well as the man, but the man was in there, waiting to surface.

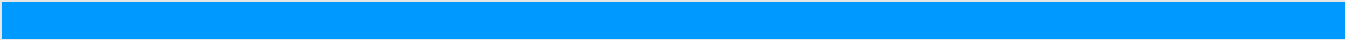
"I don't want just one afternoon," he said. "Or one late evening. Early morning. Whatever time it is."

We made awkward, uncomfortable, quick love there on Sunset Lounge.

In the morning, I woke with the ghost of his warmth against me, though I was alone. I dressed and took his guitar from the library, made my pilgrimage across the shrub field, through the poplar grove. Maybe I had finally dreamed his wife away, or maybe she'd be waiting for me with a sock full of pennies. But I had to see him.

The windows and doors of their house were open, the front screen door rattling in the breeze. As I approached the porch, I heard her.

I didn't round the corner of the house. I didn't want her to discover me there, and I didn't want to



know whether she was singing to herself, to her son, or to the man I had always adored. She sang our song, the part about him heartlessly helping himself to her bad dreams. I'd never realized what a troubling line that was, in the middle of that delicate song. She sang clearer and prettier than I, with a special something she might not realize she had, but I knew he did.

I left his guitar on the porch and ran away before I could hear what I feared hearing—his voice joining hers.

The last line I heard her sing was, "...he worries, did he hear a goodbye? Or even—hello?"

#

To his credit, he did not visit again.

Or maybe that makes him an opportunist.

I worked the rest of the summer with visits only from conferees and Kashmir, who brought fuel for the generator and nearly made me faint by not asking why Jon didn't bring it. I didn't try to reach him, not even to say goodbye. But it wasn't generosity on my part, letting him go.

When I dreamed, finally, of that night twenty years before, when Perry and I got drunk and decided to get it on in his room two doors down from Jon's, I changed nothing, did everything exactly as I recalled it, knowing it would get back to his best friend. Whether Perry would tell him in innocence or malice, I'd never know.

Not generosity, no. At least that wasn't what it felt like. Kindness might have been part of my motivation, but not all. Maybe I feared that I would become the wife with his child, and Annie would be the one returning, and she would take his heart away from me. Maybe I'd just never been brave enough to fight for him.

But I keep my phone number on the island employee website updated. Twice, he has left messages, on mornings after I haven't slept well, when I've awakened recalling fuzzy dreams of lake waves and boulders crusted with tiny fossils. He doesn't chat with my answering machine, doesn't say much at all. Just a short intake of breath and his soft voice drawing the word out, almost singing it:

"...hello?"

Margaret Karmazin's writing credits include stories published in literary and national magazines, including Rosebud, Chrysalis Reader, North Atlantic Review, Mobius, Confrontation, Pennsylvania Review and Another Realm. Her stories in The MacGuffin, Eureka Literary Magazine, Licking River Review and Words of Wisdom were nominated for Pushcart awards. Her story, "The Manly Thing," was nominated for the 2010 Million Writers Award. She has a stories included in STILL GOING STRONG, TEN TWISTED TALES, PIECES OF EIGHT (AUTISM ACCEPTANCE), ZERO GRAVITY, COVER OF DARKNESS, DAUGHTERS OF ICARUS, M-BRANE SCI-FI QUARTERLIES, and a YA novel, REPLACING FIONA and children's book, FLICK-FLICK & DREAMER, published by etreasurespublishing.com. Her artwork has appeared in SageWoman, The MacGuffin, The Adirondack Review and other literary and regional magazines, and in various galleries in Bucks County and Scranton, PA, Binghamton, NY and on St. Thomas and St. Martin.



Blue Aimee

Margaret Karmazin

It's a portrait of a young woman who used to be my student when I was a substitute teacher at the local high school. Aimee is an unconventional person, so I wanted to do something different with her portrait, hence making the skin blue. That is one of my best portraits and it looks exactly like her, other than for the blue skin, of course.



Belly Dancer
Margaret Karmazin

I painted after hearing about the exploits of my friend who used to belly dance. I made the woman mature looking since a lot of the dancers are and the skill is one that makes a woman feel sexy no matter her age.



Bridget

Margaret Karmazin

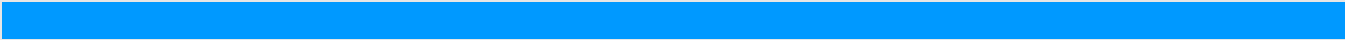
Bridget is a friend I met at the pool where I swim regularly. She is an interesting person who works politically to promote the legalization of marijuana, loves blues and partying and works hard reupholstering furniture, painting buildings and renovating. She is tiny with a huge head of beautiful dreadlocks that are now down to her waist.

Ginna Luck is a writer living in the Seattle area with her husband and three kids. Her work has appeared in Pif Magazine, Burnside Writers, Otoliths, and Rawboned.

Keeper of the Dead

Ginna Luck

He runs his fingers through the frost-covered sand and waits
for the moon to come down on the lake
noticing every wrinkle in the water
and how they tremor like the slow moving clouds.
His clothes are ragged and his shirt is torn.
The skin around his eyes is sallow and flaking.
And what does it matter that she was beautiful?
Her elegance, her shining hair means nothing.
And what does it matter
since she walked into the lake and let the waves take her?
Her dress bloomed up around her like an echo.
And hour after hour there is only this grayness
this starless sky, these shapeless paths of moonlight
stretching out like the blurred and faded images of her ghost.
He thinks he too will disappear like the colors, the light, and the stars.
He thinks soon he will be no longer.
He will no longer be cold,
when slowly it begins to happen.
Three lights blink on
one is red, one is yellow and one is a bird and the bird is singing;
its song, big and empty enough to hold two hands, two hearts, their movement
and thus for a moment his heart detaches and spills into the water
this steady stream of sadness
so cold, so bright white.
He closes his eyes and feels himself lifting off



the bird gripping his shoulders
carrying him across the lake
more beautiful from above
reflecting the moon, the mountains, the light that spreads freely
up even further than he could have imagined
over the tops of the trees, the forests that expand across the land
and further up through the wind, the weather, and the clouds
to where the air is still, all black like an open field in the night
where the sound of the bird's wings
beating the air travels in every direction for miles
can be heard in the heavens as the sound of ghosts, their voices
warm and pure and always constantly and forever spilling back toward them.
He feels first her breath on his cheeks
smells her skin and then sees her words:
soft and sorry and breaking open like black shining jewels all over his skin.
And the bird becomes what he could not have ever imagined
is not a bird at all
but is his grief that grows so large
inflates into the shape of silvery feathered wings
that fly crazily now
twisting and twirling and plummeting through the night
shivering in the darkness these laments of his heart:
"I forgive you."
"I love you."
"I miss you."
He tugs at the bird's dusky skinned ankles
claws at its soft black under feathers and yells: "I can't take it. I can't!"
He didn't know how much he loved her.
He didn't know grief has wings and wants to be something alive.
He didn't know it could almost bring her back
in the night sky
where a man can fall in love again and again.
It could almost bring her back
in the wings beating and eyes glancing down at him like a dark companion
glancing down at him and saying:
"Death is a way of getting to know someone."

Ashley Lamb-Sinclair spends her time writing fiction and teaching talented young writers. She has studied creative writing at Oxford University in England and Chatham University in Pittsburgh, and currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky with her husband, two daughters, and two dogs. Find her at beautifuljunkyard.wordpress.com.

Down by the River

Ashley Lamb-Sinclair

Marnie waded slowly into the water, the river climbing up her feet, ankles, then legs like a silken boot; all the while, the baby boy whimpered from the bundled blanket she cradled in her arms. She hushed into his ear, his little lobe sticking to her bottom lip, pulling it like static as she looked up to the horizon again. The water rushed around her knees, the thicket of brush along the bank swayed with its rhythm, and the thick mud on the bottom leveled into rocks that rose up like a mountain top.

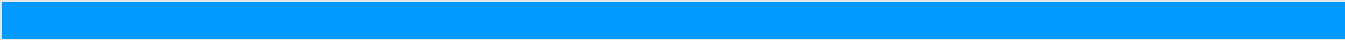
Thirty-two times she walked into this river with a baby boy, and thirty-two times she walked back out alone.

Glancing back at the other Water Mothers, who watched her with despair and determination, she stepped forward, tip-toeing on the rocky river floor as the water now scrambled up to her thighs.

“Okay, baby boy, it’s getting closer now,” she said to the package in her arms, all the while glancing at the riverbank for something to catch him. If he could somehow make it.

The bundle wiggled a little, but made no sound. The river boomed louder as it tumbled along, and Marnie’s waist pushed against its current. Tiny fish jetted around her knees and the rocks beneath her feet smoothed to large pebbles that felt like soft, wet cotton against her heels. When it was done, she turned and walked back toward them. No one looked her in the eye.

Except for the Birth Mother.



Marnie wanted to look back at her. But she never could. The Water Mothers circled up, corralling the lone Birth Mother in with them. Marnie approached and linked hands with someone near her without thinking, reciting the words that had become her life's chorus.

Cradle him in the river. Rock him in the white sky. Send him back home. Amen.

Marnie dropped the sweaty palms. Mother Corrie and Mother Hannie embraced her, the pungent oils they used to cleanse their skin and hair swarmed around her face. She hardly noticed any of it as she watched the Birth Mother walk back up the winding rocky path alone.

"Word from Mother Frannie is no more 'til Thursday." Mother Corrie whispered to the others for comfort. Then, to Marnie alone, "Rest. For now."

Marnie nodded and the Water Mothers gathered their things from the pebbled shore, leaving the sacred river. Until Thursday. There was always another Thursday.

#

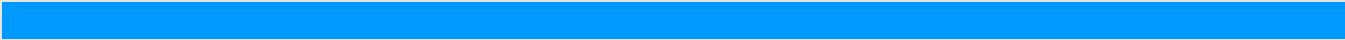
On a gray Wednesday, the Water Mothers set out from the River House for the Birth House. They walked in a line like a cord wound through each of their middles, pulled taut by Mother Corrie in the front. Marnie fell in behind Mother Hannie whose coarse red curls exploded from beneath the hem of her white hood. Hannie turned around once and lifted the side of her mouth like someone had jerked it up from above. Today it could be her.

A small girl outside the Trade House hopscotched on the cobbled street alone. Mother Corrie patted her head gently as she passed. Two young women, neither wearing a robe yet, brushed Marnie's elbow as they scuffled along, gossiping together. When the Water Mothers turned the corner of Eleanor Street, a vibrating group of Trade Mothers buzzed by, no doubt calculating yesterday's inventory, barely noticing the Water Mothers filing along like ducks.

At the end of Susan Court stood the dilapidated Birth House, sinking crookedly into the broken pavement around it. The Water Mothers halted slightly in the rhythm of their walk as they approached; indiscernible to most, but obvious to Marnie.

Mother Frannie stepped out of the slanted doorway to greet them. Mother Corrie approach her and they held hands like old friends, as the other whispered in her ear. Nodding solemnly, Mother Corrie gestured for the other Water Mothers to enter.

Once inside, the metallic scent of blood and a sweet palpable smell of sweat dripped from the walls



like thick paint. Some of the Birth Mothers, only a couple of them currently with child, lingered on the sofas in the living room beside the foyer. Marnie strained a bit to find the Birth Mother from the shore, but couldn't see well enough to know if she was there. Abruptly ending their conversation, the group of women looked up with what felt to Marnie like disdain. And fear. The two pregnant ones quickly dropped their gaze. One kneaded her hands in her lap, her protruding belly shadowing the movement.

"Welcome, Mothers. Mother Sonnie is close now. She won't go past midnight. Come, see."

They all fell in behind Mother Frannie as she led them into the dark tunneled hallway, from which sprouted various birthing rooms--white with a lonely bed, table, and chair. They crowded into a tight, stale room at the very end, where a large and uncomfortable Mother Sonnie awaited.

"I hope it's not me this time," Hannie mumbled to Marnie, but seemed to say it mostly to herself. She had pulled her hood down now, her hair a wild, red halo. Marnie nodded in reply, hoping the same for her friend. She at least had a respite this time.

"When did you determine the sex?" Mother Corrie asked Frannie, surgically, seemingly planning the logistics in her mind.

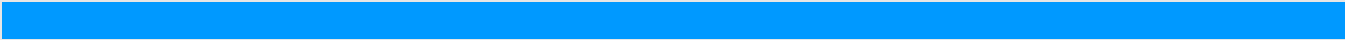
"About a month ago it became clear. Mother Sonnie has been saying her daily prayers ever since, haven't you dear?"

The swollen woman on the bed said nothing, not even looking up to acknowledge the question. She was one of the silent ones. Sometimes they screamed and hollered, both in pain and anger. Other times, they played along like everything was fine and they were happy to do their duty. But the silent ones were always the worst. It was impossible not to feel like an executioner around them.

"Well anyway, he's ready and that's why you're here. So let's get started then." Mother Frannie placed the Book on the bed beside Sonnie, lit the candle at the window, and repositioned the statue of the Mother neatly beside it. The Water Mothers began softly singing the hymnal, and Sonnie begrudgingly opened the Book of Birth to the page of the Choosing Prayer.

"Go on, dear," Mother Frannie urged after a few moments had passed and Sonnie had not yet begun. Her words held just the slightest taint of a threat--enough to force Sonnie's voice.

"And so it was decided," she began, "for the sake of peace. Because peace is a sacrifice, and so we must sacrifice for the good of us all." Her voice trembled as she read, yet she finished with,



“Amen.” She didn’t look up from the book when the rest of the women answered, “Amen.”

Marnie studied Mother Sonnie as the words left her and remembered the silhouette of the Birth Mother at the river--the hatred and grief embroidered on her face.

“Water Mothers, please place yourselves around Mother Sonnie,” Mother Corrie commanded as they shuffled about, forming a half-circle around the birthing bed. Marnie scooted closer to Hannie and could feel the buzz of anxiety bouncing off her skin--it would be only her second if she were chosen. Something you never got used to, but the second was almost worse than the first.

The room swelled with silence until Mother Frannie said, “Sonnie, dear, it must be done. No use in dwelling.”

Sonnie looked up then, her face contorting with contempt as she scanned the crowded faces staring back at her, soon catching something and locking there. Like a fish on a line.

“Her.” She pointed. Hannie half-squealed, either from confusion or relief. Marnie didn’t have time to decipher it because of the finger aimed ominously toward her.

Mother Frannie began, “Okay, well then, let us pr--”

“Oh, I’m sorry, we should have pulled Mother Marnie back. I guess we just forgot, with the hesitations and all. You’ll just have to choose again, dear.” Mother Corrie interjected, a bit aflutter with the break from ceremony. The elder Mothers were nothing if not for ceremonious.

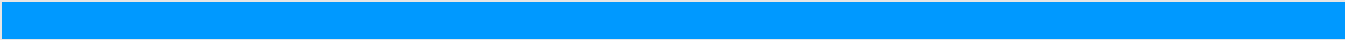
“Choose again, Mother Corrie? There is only one choice. And she has made it.”

The room stilled. All the women in the village surely knew that the ruling Mothers squabbled behind a thick wooden door sometime or another, but it was unheard of in front of civilians. The Water Mothers, even Mother Sonnie, gawked like the elders had just stripped down naked.

“Mother Frannie, rules are rules. A Water Mother has respite after a deliverance, as you very well kn--”

“Exactly. Rules are rules. A Birth Mother makes her choice after days of prayer and deliberation. Think of what she’s going through! I’ll not have the rules broken now when this poor woman has made her choice!”

Mother Corrie narrowed her eyes and said, “Mother Frannie, I think it’s best if we continue this



discussion elsewhere. Excuse us, Mothers.”

The Water Mothers parted for them, and after their exit, all looked to Marnie. Sonnie too.

“Don’t worry, Marnie, they won’t make you do it. You know that right?” The panic rose in Hannie’s voice, almost as high as if it had been her. The other Water Mothers mumbled in confusion and alarm--if there was no respite, there was no escape.

And a Water Mother needed the hope of an escape.

Marnie tuned it all out and saw Sonnie eyeing her, almost challenging her.

“I’ll do it, Mother Sonnie.” The low rumble of whispers silenced.

Sonnie looked at Marnie squarely, nodded, and looked down at her book. Her face contorted slightly, one of the early pains passing through.

“Mother Marnie, you don’t have to--you get a respite, it’s your turn. You don’t have to--”

“I know I don’t have to, but it’s what Mother Sonnie wants.”

Mother Corrie led Mother Frannie back into the cramped room. “Well Mothers, we’ve come to an agreement and--”

“I’ve decided to do it, Mother Corrie.”

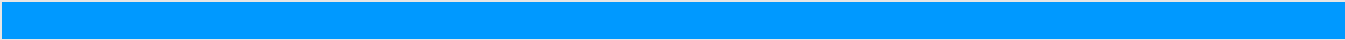
Mother Frannie smirked while Mother Corrie’s face twisted with disbelief.

“But we decided that it is not necessary. It has always been that after a Water Mother performs a deliverance, she earns a respite. It has always been, Mother Marnie.”

“I understand that, Mother Corrie, but Mother Sonnie has chosen me and I will honor her choice.”

Mother Sonnie whelped in pain, wringing the Book she held like two frayed ropes in either hand.

Victorious, Mother Frannie interjected, “Well, I need to attend to my Birth Mother now, so please wait downstairs until he comes. It’ll get worse in the coming hours.” She began to shoo the women out as Mother Corrie scuttled along, clucking on about the rules.



The Water Mothers filed back out as they had come in, most failing at hiding their anxiety. Marnie started to follow Hannie, but Sonnie clenched her arm, pulling her down toward her.

“Don’t do it.” Her eyes peered at Marnie, her face shining with sweat, reminding Marnie of a beached catfish drying in the sun by the river--trapped and hopeless.

“But you chose me. You asked me to.”

“Just don’t. Please.”

“Mother Marnie, it’s time.” Mother Corrie, clearly agitated, called. Marnie gave a last look to Sonnie who had begun to disappear behind the pain coming on. Sonnie’s groans followed them all the way downstairs.

Most of the Water Mothers returned to the river. Only Marnie, Mother Corrie, and Hannie, Marnie’s chosen attendant, remained. Hannie barely spoke, stiff on the wooden bench where they sat. Mother Corrie fumed at her loss of control. And Marnie watched the Birth Mothers gathered in the common rooms with the eye of a surgeon, inspecting and dissecting. The desperation hung heavily from the pregnant ones, the resentment sat upon the others like a cat on a windowsill. They held hands and touched each other lovingly, like family. The Water Mothers cared for each other--the camaraderie of a shared burden--but not like this. The Birth Mothers shared a common loss, and that was even more powerful. It felt like they conspired together--an unspoken treaty had been written between them--a war waged.

Don’t do it, Sonnie had said. Hearing her wails from upstairs, looking around at these women now, those words pounded into Marnie, like a rushing river against a sharp cliff.

Mother Corrie broke their shared silence. “You know what you’ve done here, you’ve planted the seed for chaos.”

Mother Marnie didn’t respond, but she saw Hannie nod beside her.

“This is how we got here in the first place, you know.” Her mouth twitched in agitation as she sat up straighter on the bench.

One by one, the Birth Mothers drifted into dark hallways around the house, kissing each others’ cheeks in loving dismissal. Long after the last had disappeared and Hannie fell asleep against Marnie’s shoulder, apparently immune to the cries from above, Mother Frannie tip-toed down the stairs, holding a blue bundle close to her breast. She still smirked when she looked at Mother



Corrie, but the latter pretended not to notice.

Marnie's insides jangled around her like a church bell in a steeple when she saw the bundle. A tiny limb pushed out the woolly blue blanket like a twig bouncing upright in water. Mother Corrie rushed to Mother Frannie's side to take in the wonder of fresh skin and new life--the two women amending their quarrel temporarily in a maternal haze. Hannie fidgeted and lifted her head slowly at the disturbance, jerking herself up quickly when she saw him.

"Mother Marnie, he's yours now. Deliver him safely." Mother Corrie stretched out her arms toward Marnie, who still sat upright on the wooden bench at the bottom of the stairs.

Don't do it. Just don't.

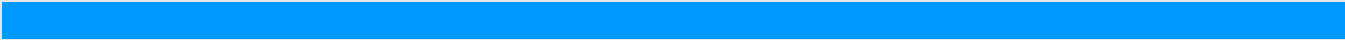
"Mother Marnie?"

"Hmm? Oh." Marnie finally stood up and took him mechanically. "I will!"

The boy whined and trilled softly on the walk home, bubbles drifting up from a calm pool. Their shoes clacked along the stones; Mother Corrie first, carrying a supply of milk for the night, Hannie next, alert now, and Marnie behind. She almost never looked into their faces, usually covering them with the corner of their blanket, only lifting it every now and then to offer some fresh air. But she couldn't help it this time. His face was squished together like an old, sopping-wet sponge, heavy and light at the same time. He hadn't opened his eyes at all, at least not that Marnie had seen, meditating like an old priest.

When they reached the riverbank, Marnie turned for the nursery--a separate shack in the back with a bed and a bassinet--while the other two trudged toward the River House. Mother Corrie handed off the wicker basket containing the milk bottles sleepily before retiring and said, "Soon after dawn. I'll prepare everyone."

Marnie nodded and went inside. She put the basket on the floor and the boy in the bassinet, setting about organizing to prepare for the morning. The boy fussed and twitched in his bundle, but did so patiently, almost as if he knew making too much of a fuss would be a waste. Marnie tried to forget the reality of her task, and simply prepare for bed just as she would any other night. She bent down to pull the glass bottles of milk out--just a few--some belonging to his actual Birth Mother and some to another still swollen from unused milk. The bottles clinked and the baby mewled and the river crackled, but Marnie only heard the gravelly whisper, *Don't do it*. It ran through her mind like a wheel, turning and turning.



Normally she would sit by the bassinet holding the bottle without looking or thinking about the little person sucking on the other end. But when she looked into his face, she saw Sonnie's--the solemn, determined, pleading expression--compelling her to pull him out and bring him close as she fed him. He ate eagerly, hungry to be filled up with milk and life. Marnie thought then how a person's yearning to live and survive began with the first breath, but it was dangerous to think these things. She had a duty. She made an oath.

Don't do it.

The bottle emptied and he kept sucking. Sometimes they couldn't eat it all, but he did. He relaxed his arms and legs and sank into Marnie, his face serene. Having never held the babies this way, Marnie sat unsurely for a while listening to the slow hum of the river outside as he slept in her arms. She didn't want to put him down, but tomorrow would be a hard day, so she needed to sleep. Instead she decided to bring him to her bed with her where she fell asleep with his heart beating against her palm. Life in her hand.

She slept lightly, in and out of consciousness as she woke to check on him, and then back to sleep again. Finally she awoke and couldn't go back to sleep. He hadn't woken for another feeding yet, so they hadn't slept long. As she readjusted herself a little, Marnie caught sight of the empty wicker basket on the floor beneath them.

Just don't.

She rose, gently placing the baby in the bassinet where he nestled himself comfortably in, picked up the basket, and walked out the door toward the river. The River House stood darkly in the pitch black, not a soul stirring. Marnie tip-toed lightly down to the bank and scanned the shore for the perfect rock. She spotted a large, cragged one and picked it up with her other hand. It was heavy; it would do. She looked back to make sure no one saw and she stepped slowly into the water, letting it rise up to her waist as she stumbled over the rocky bottom, placed the heavy rock in the wicker basket and let it drop. She tested it once, bending slightly to feel the top of the handle with her fingertips.

She could be renounced for this. And she probably would be. Thirty-two times before she never considered such a thing; sure, Marnie wished from time to time that the boys would live somehow, but she never would have imagined taking action like this. But a Birth Mother had never asked her to either. Sonnie's whispered words knocked something loose inside her--the frantic bounce of doubt and courage knotted up together like a ball of yarn.

With the basket secure, Marnie turned to go back, when a silhouette standing on the bank startled



her and she jumped. A wild crown of curls framed the shadow's head.

"Hannie!" Marnie struggled with what to say as she walked back up through the pulsing water. "You scared me." Marnie hoped she hadn't seen.

"What are you doing?"

Hesitating, she replied, "Nothing. Just thinking." Marnie reached the bank, her sopping nightgown stuck to her legs like a leech. She glimpsed Hannie who looked older than her years without her hood, lined and drawn from sleepless nights. "Heading back now. He'll want another bottle soon."

Marnie made to walk away, punctuating her statement with a few fast steps when Hannie spoke to her back, stopping her in her tracks. "You can't do it, Marnie. It will never work anyway and you'll be renounced. It's not worth it."

Marnie didn't respond. It would be dangerous to talk anymore about it. Instead, she left the anxious frame of Hannie standing alone, and went back to the cabin where the boy still slept soundly. Apparently he knew someone was looking out for him.

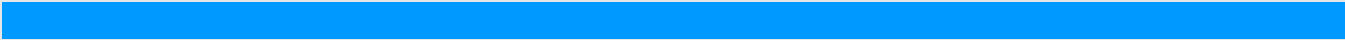
#

The Water Mothers had already gathered around the bank when Marnie and the boy came out of the cabin at dawn. The river was still; a fact that worried Marnie for a moment. How would the basket be carried away now? But she cut off her thoughts--it would work. The river was fickle. Various Water Mothers sat about, some talked quietly, others stood alone--all of them blurry with the wavy outlines of morning sun around them. Mother Corrie hadn't yet appeared to collect them and begin. Marnie recognized Hannie standing with her back to them, facing the river alone. She was loyal enough not to tell Marnie's plan to anyone, but not so loyal that she would help if needed or support Marnie when the worst happened. That was okay. Marnie, too, stood alone in this.

Until she noticed some of the Water Mothers looking past her, whispering to one another. Marnie knew what she would see when she turned--Sonnie. The Birth Mother was always allowed to attend the deliverance if she chose to do so; Marnie had never doubted that Sonnie would come. She stood at the top of the hill and came no farther, her eyes never leaving Marnie and the boy.

"Alright, Mothers, let's go. All together now, come in, come in," Mother Corrie's voice boomed as she exited the River House

They huddled together, allowing space for Marnie and the boy to pass through, until the pair stood



in the middle facing Mother Corrie. The other Water Mothers formed a circle, linking hands around them, and spoke the words together.

Cradle him in the river. Rock him in the white sky. Send him back home. Amen.

The prayer was for the boy, but what about Marnie? Who prayed for her and the others?

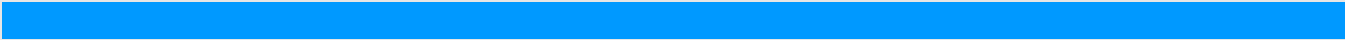
A terse nod from Mother Corrie indicated to Marnie it was time. Hands dropped to let her pass, and she could feel Sonnie's eyes on her back--tapping like a pointy finger against her shoulder. Marnie just kept her eyes on the boy, and guided her steps toward the bank at the exact spot where she entered last night. The boy mewled and stretched; he'd wake from his morning nap in an hour, if he woke at all. What would he think when he awoke and saw open water and a wide, gray sky? Would he scream and wail or would he take it in stride? Marnie thought she knew the answer. This boy had a still soul.

The cold water stabbed her feet like pins as she descended onto the rocks. It rose higher and higher, splashing across her waist when her toe nudged the wicker basket still sturdy on the river bottom. The touch singed through her, igniting her nerves. She could feel everyone's eyes on her. They would see immediately. There would be no excusing herself. But the water rushed faster than she initially thought from the bank, enough to speed him along quickly. But where would he land?

They'd all heard stories of mountain villages to the north and huts on the shores of the sea to the east. But they were just stories. Glancing at the bank down the river, Marnie remembered something. And it flooded her faster than the water around her.

She was seventeen, maybe even sixteen, just beginning her training. Mother Corrie, younger then, but just as formidable, had escorted them to the Male House beyond the village. She wanted them to see what became of the men who stayed--the boys who were allowed to grow into men. Like many buildings in the village, the Male House was worn with age, paint peeled itself from the sides and flew about in the wind, hard, red clay imitated a lawn, and shutters dangled sadly from the windows. But unlike most of the other buildings, this one had a perimeter of a familiar, yet strange odor surrounding it--the scent of sweat and tough skin and unwashed hair--the scent of men. Marnie liked it, but feigned disgust like the others as they entered.

The men and boys sat about aimlessly, dazed and drooling, staring at the blacked out windows and bare walls. Each one was hooked up to a small machine beside him through a tube attached to his arm. No one moved. No one blinked.



One well-groomed, alert man approached them, speaking and looking only at Mother Corrie in whispers, while the trainees tried to find someplace to hold their eyes. None had ever seen a man before that day.

Mother Corrie nodded at the man and spoke to them, "One in ten males are permitted to survive as you know for mating purposes. In order to subdue their violent nature and tendency for conflict, they are given a mild, sedative until they are needed. Food and water are given to them intravenously as you can see," she paused for effect and added, "This is what we save them from as Water Mothers."

The memory faded and Marnie looked down at the boy's truthful, innocent, pure face. He was a little person with a personality; one day he could be a man with one too. He snuggled closer to Marnie, and she squeezed him against herself. She looked back, all the faces in hoods a blur except two--Sonnie and Hannie. Marnie allowed herself a brief moment of eye contact with each, but looked only briefly. She looked back at the boy, kicked the basket over knocking out the rock, and watched it float up, bouncing on the water--a buoy of life. Gasps erupted from behind her when the other Mothers saw what she had done. Marnie didn't turn to acknowledge them. Instead she watched the water pummel the basket away from her down the river, rushing toward the bank. She kissed the boy's head, let the soft down of his hair tickle her face, and let him go.

Thirty-three times.

Ariel Hafeman studies writing as a graduate student at Mount Mary University. Works have been published in Inscape magazine and The Phoenix.

Hush

Ariel Hafeman

It's Halloween. It's dark in here, his hand is on my leg. "Where you want to go?" the driver asked when we got in. I turn my head away, and from the front, she talks and talks and talks. But everything I'd lose if I spoke up.

And outside, all the bright things. Red Riding Hood, her petticoat beneath, linking with a sailor arm in arm, the distant sounds of party from the bars. A girl in heels who stumbles on the side.

And we move on and the cars move on and the people move beside; all of it passes in the window and I see.

But back here we don't move; I'm frozen where we're sitting; his hand on my leg, his girlfriend's in the front. She wiggles in her seat. "I'm glad we left," she says. And "it was crowded", "it was hot."

But from the back, the eyes of the taxi driver reflected in the mirror, dark and bright. He sees it from the front, all that's happening behind; in the crowds and the people that shuffle in and shuffle out. Skirts and coats, money changing hands, take out your phone to calculate the tip.

And from the back, all the things I've had with her pass by. I remember when we met; she lent me her book on the first day of class. Art History. The history of art, and people, the patterns that we make and leave.

In the background she talks; and back here his hand rests on my leg; and if I said something—but all the things I'd lose if I spoke up. And from the front her voice goes on and on. And now I can't remember what she said.

Josiah Spence is a founding editor of the independent poetry journal Rust and Moth and has been published in Rare Magazine. He lives, writes, and tinkers in the great state of Texas.

Robots Don't Have Souls

Josiah Spence

The first I heard of the problem was when Liam walked into my office in the back of the store. I was sitting there doing the books, and in he waltzed and asked if I had a minute.

"Sure," I said. "What's the word?"

Liam was a good worker. Didn't talk much, but I liked him well enough.

"It's Elvis, Mister Carter," he said. "I was talking to him a bit, and he was wondering if we might consider letting him keep powered up at night. Says he needs time to think."

Time to think? Didn't that just take the cake.

"First of all, it's LVS, *not* Elvis. Second, it's an *it*, not a *he*. I don't know what a robot thinks it has to think about, but I pay the electricity bill around here, and I'm not gonna watch it skyrocket so some stupid contraption can stare up at the stars."

Liam's eyes wandered all over the office, just like they did every time he saw me get mad. He never could look me in the eye when I was fuming. He just stood there in silence like he was waiting for me to get started up again.

"Well, is there anything else?" I demanded.

"No. Uh, I'll tell him. I mean *it*. I'll tell *it* what you said." And away he went.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so hard on him. It wasn't Liam's fault if LVS was full of bugs and saying crazy things. I just wish he wouldn't be so naive.



#

A couple days later, I went fishing down at the lake with my cousin Earl and told him about LVS's request. I wasn't angry at Liam anymore, but it still fussed me up a little that the robot wasn't acting right.

"Damn thing's supposed to just do what it's told and be done with it. That's why I got the stupid thing in the first place," I told him. "It cost me eight thousand dollars."

"Yeah, well," he said, taking a long pull from his beer can. "This kinda thing's been happening all over. I hear people are giving their robots all kinds of considerations up in Austin."

"What do you mean 'considerations'?"

"I heard there's people who give them time off. I don't mean powered down. I mean *time off*. Like go out and grab a beer, watch some TV kind of time off!"

"What the hell for?"

"Don't know," he said and readjusted his fishing rod. "What I heard, it sounded like the robots go out and meet up with other robots."

Earl didn't sound like he was bothered by it, just sort of passively amused, but the thought of such a thing really rankled me. I don't know why. I figured maybe I should change the subject.

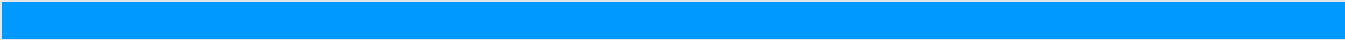
"Did I tell you about Jess?" I said. "He made first-string this year at his junior high. Once that boy makes it to high school, he's really gonna be a hit!"

"Yeah, he's something all right," Earl agreed.

"Yes sir, he is. He's a good boy."

The two of us sat in silence for a while, staring out over the lake and occasionally uselessly swatting away at the mosquitos. Usually, I liked just sitting out there and listening to the water lap at the wood of the dock, but the day was getting hot and the plastic of my lawn chair was sticking to my arms.

"Those city folks are crazy, letting their robots go out on the town. Robots aren't supposed to want things like that. They ain't programmed to." I said at last.



“Well, I saw this guy on the news who said that robots can think on their own now. Like without being told.”

“Robot doing something without being told sounds like a broken robot to me. That’s what I’m thinking about LVS.”

Earl sucked at his beer sympathetically.

After a second, I said, “You know what the boys at the store have been calling it? Elvis. Like they expect it to start singing *Heartbreak Hotel!*”

That set Earl’s jowls wobbling with laughter.

“Ain’t funny,” I said. “The damn thing doesn’t need a name. It needs an overhaul!”

#

On Sundays, after church, I always let Jess work a few hours in the store so he could earn a little money without me having to just give it to him. I never liked the idea of an allowance. I figured that if you didn’t teach children to earn things, they would always think everything was just going to be given to them.

Anyway, Jess was about thirteen, so I never let him do anything too hard. Mostly he just cleaned up in the stockroom. He was a hard worker and didn’t need much supervision. I dropped him off, told him what work needed doing, and picked him up a few hours later. He could call me if he needed any help, so I didn’t see much reason to be at the store myself on a day when it was closed.

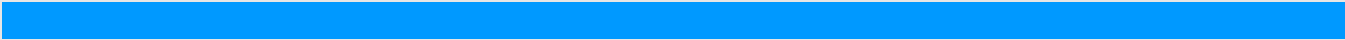
That particular Sunday, as Jess hauled himself up into the passenger side of my pickup after he had finished his work, I asked him how his day had been.

“Oh, it was great,” he said. “Elvis asked me to tell him all about football!”

My jaw tightened.

“Don’t call it that. It’s LVS.” I told him.

“Yeah, well, LVS asked me to tell him about football, and I told him all the rules and how much fun it is and how I might go pro someday.” His face was lit up with excitement.



“And why in God’s green earth did LVS want to know about football?”

“He said he wanted to know about the things that make people happy. He said he was interested in how people know what we want to do with ourselves. So I told him about what I want to do.”

“What damn business of the robot is it what people do with ourselves? All it needs to worry about doing is loading the stock shelves, organizing the inventory, and doing what it is told.”

I guess Jess could see how angry it made me because the excitement dropped right off his face.

“He was just curious,” Jess replied in a mumble and turned to stare out the window at the passing fields.

I shouldn’t have raised my voice, but I just don’t understand this kind of thing.

#

The next day as I was getting the morning coffee going at the store, I saw Liam walking toward the stockroom with a big book clutched under his arm. I figured he was going to do a little reading on his break. I never knew he was much of a reader.

“Whatcha reading there, Liam?” I asked in a friendly tone.

“Oh, it’s a book about great sights and wonders from all over the world. I told Elvis, er, LVS that he could borrow it..”

“I am getting pretty sick and damn tired of that robot and it’s cotton pickin’ *curiosity*,” I said.

Liam’s eyes started wandering toward the floor like he expected me to chew him out again, but I didn’t bother.

“Go on and give it the book, then.” I said. “I’ll deal with it later.”

I stalked off into my office, slammed the door, and sat down at my desk.

I couldn’t believe how easily everyone could be fooled into thinking that bucket of bolts had feelings. What was wrong with everybody? They were treating it like a stray puppy. Worse, they were treating it like an orphan kid. I had to put a stop to this madness. If people started acting like robots were people, the next thing you knew they would be giving them rights and the whole world would go to



hell. No, something had to be done. Right here, right now.

I turned to my screen and started searching. Pretty soon I had the number of a good robot repair shop and dialed the phone.

“Countywide Robotics - What can I do for you?” answered the voice of a genteel young man.

“Well, son, I’ve got a robot needs fixing. The sooner, the better.”

“What kind of problem are we talking? Mechanical? A.I.?”

“Yessir, I think it’s the A.I.. It’s starting to ask questions it ain’t supposed to, and it’s getting friendly with my staff.” I couldn’t think how else to describe it without sounding as crazy as everyone else.

“Wants to be a real boy, does it?” he said with a laugh.

“That’s it exactly. It’s hard to believe that its programming could get screwed up so bad.”

“Yeah, that kind of thing is happening all over these days. The problem is that the manufacturers are making them too smart these days. They give them all that fancy adaptive cerebral architecture and neural modelling protocols, and what do they think is going to happen? Some people love it though.”

“Well, I don’t,” I said, maybe a bit too abruptly. “So can you fix it?”

“Sure. What you want is a little thing we call The Digital Lobotomy. We totally rewrite the O.S. and flash the memory to clear out any residual data paths that have built up. It’s expensive though.”

“How expensive are we talking?”

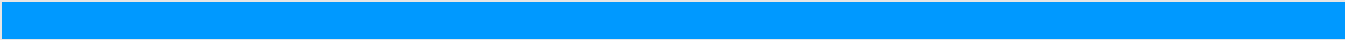
He told me.

I let out a low whistle and said, “I am going to have to think about that. It’s probably worth it, but I just can’t spend that kind of green without at least sleeping on it first.”

“No problem. You just give us a call when you’re ready to give the thing a personality-ectomy.”

#

At dinner, after my wife was finished saying grace, I decided I should let her know that we might be



looking at a big expense.

“Maria,” I said, tearing open a roll to butter it, “That old LVS at the store is acting up. I think I’m gonna have to take it in for an overhaul. It’s sitting in the bed of my truck right now, powered down, so I can take it in first thing if I need to.”

Jess whipped his eyes around from the TV and fixed them on me as Maria was saying, “That sounds like it might be expensive...”

“What are they going to do to him?” the boy interrupted.

“What their gonna do is clear all of those behaviors and questions out of the computer core, and then...”

“You can’t do that! It’s not right!” he shouted.

I’m not used to that kind of lip from Jess, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“It’s my robot, and I can do anything I please with it. I am your father, boy, and I don’t expect to be interrupted when I am talking.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with Elvis! He just wants to understand things, and you want to kill him for it!”

His mother looked from me to him and back again. She clearly wasn’t going to get involved.

“It ain’t killing if it ain’t alive!” I was shouting too now.

His eyes were blurred with tears, but his expression was defiant like I had never seen.

“He is alive! He is!” he yelled.

“Robots don’t have souls,” I said. “Robots don’t have souls any more than beasts of the field have souls.”

“How do you know? How do you know he doesn’t have a soul?”

“What would make you think he does? Where would it have come from?” I demanded.



“Well, what makes you so sure *you* have a soul? Where did *yours* come from?” Tears were streaming down his cheeks now.

“I am a human being, goddamn it!” I had had enough. “And you’d better shut your mouth if you know what is good for you. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but I am putting an end to it.”

“But... But he’s my friend...” His lower lip was trembling.

That was the final straw. I had reached a boiling point.

I knocked over my chair as I stormed away from the table, but I didn’t bother to pick it up. Jess just stood and watched me as I strode back into the bedroom, but as soon as I strode back in clutching my twelve-gauge shotgun, he erupted into pleading.

“No, Dad, no. I’m sorry!” he cried and followed me through the front door. “Please don’t! I’m sorry!”

I ignored him and slammed down the tailgate of my truck. Lying there, without power, on its back, its eyes dark and staring, was LVS. I grabbed its metal shoulders and, with a mighty tug, slid it backward off the tailgate. It slammed to the ground with a clang.

Jess’s voice was ragged now and his pleading had turned to screams. Maria stood in the doorway, her eyes wide.

As I raised my shotgun, Jess rushed at me and grabbed my elbow and screamed, “No! No! Elvis!”

I gave him a rough shove and he fell backward to the ground. Wasting no time, I raised the barrel to the robot’s head, gave it a pump, and squeezed the trigger. Boom. Just like that, LVS’s head exploded and bits of plastic and electronics came raining down onto the grass.

Jess was rocking back and forth on the ground where he had fallen.

“No. Elvis. Please.” His screams had turned to whispers now.

I kicked at the crumbling shell of LVS’s cranium with the toe of my boot.

“See?” I told him. “No soul in there.”

John Koch is a photographer based in Portland, OR whose photographs concern Oregon broadly, particularly its unhoused and rural communities. His portfolio is currently available online at www.flickr.com/photos/orphotographer.

Secret Place

Photography by John Koch

Abandoned places have fascinated me from early on, since my teenage years. What interests me most about such scenes is a glimpse of the ordinary routine of life stalled or reversed. Instead of a manicured yard, one sees a yard overgrown with weeds that penetrate the doors and windows of the former home; instead of a tidy, compartmentalized interior, one sees rooms with personal effects spilled everywhere.

I admit I find a certain romantic poetry—in the sense of a “letting it all go”—that these scenes represent. There is also a hint of *amor fati* in the attempt to find beauty in the midst of desolation. Yet such feelings are counterbalanced by the pathos of what remains.

These photos are part of a larger series of photos which I have tentatively titled as “Secret Place.” Roughly put, they include photos of places I have seen during my travels through Oregon that have triggered an emotional response in me. Abandonment is only one of their various aspects. That said, abandonment could be the most extreme manifestation of the photos’ shared aspect: a disjunction between places that are interesting to see and places that are good to live. In the other photos, there is more room for confusion. It led me to write, in a draft of the companion essay: “the grass is always greener on the other side, even when that grass is brown.”



Untitled

John Koch

Arlington, OR

Digital; Nikon Coolpix 5600



Untitled

John Koch

Dodson, OR

Digital; Nikon Coolpix 5600



Untitled

John Koch

Arlington, OR

Kodak Gold 200 (expired); Minolta SRT-101



Untitled

John Koch

Near Jefferson, OR

Kodak Portra 800; Minolta Autocord

Graham Bowlin is from North Carolina though he is currently transient. If you're looking for him, just ask. His short stories have appeared in Needle, Crime Factory, and The Laser Crab Revue, amongst others.

Full Up Sick

Graham Bowlin

The pool of blood set to boiling. The steak became a sizzling frenzy. The Boy prodded it with a knife. Watched the juice leak. He jabbed the Marlboro menthol between yellow nubs. Head down to the gas burner. Long drag into hungry lungs.

A clumsy flip of the steak. The fat popped and crackled. He liked the way meat cooked, spitting grease at you. Last breath fighting back.

Some box potatoes and the steak would be enough for the two of them. The Old Man was late. He could find his own. The Boy took a Codeine. Swallowed dry.

He set the food down in front of the Man. His head rolled around, trying to look over the blindfold. Blindfold rolled too.

"Is that- What is that?" Sniffing like an animal.

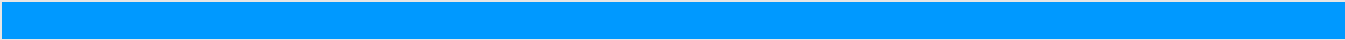
"Food," the Boy said.

His mouth twisted. "Feeding me?"

"Gotta eat," The Boy pushed the plate toward him. An unseen gesture.

"You have a plan for how I'm going to eat with my hands tied?"

He didn't.



“Can’t untie you, hand you a knife...” He cut off a little lump. “Open your mouth,” he said.

The guy shook his head. Tight jerks.

“Gotta eat,” the Boy said.

Lips parted a crack. Ready to shut at the wrong thing.

He let the Man pull the meat off the fork. He gnawed, hungry, and didn’t take a breath until he’d had another few bites.

Breath. “Stop.” Breath.

The Boy put the fork down. Blood was trickling down the Man’s chin. Moved to wipe him with a rag. He wrenched his head back.

“Sure, sure” the Boy said.

The Man was quiet. Then, “Why did you do this?”

Been a while since he’d thought about it. He’d almost forgotten. “I need- Uh, we need the money.”

“You can’t get a job?” The things people say with a sneer.

“Factory closed.”

“Doesn’t white trash get paid for being white trash these days?”

He fingered his torn jeans. He covered his teeth when he spoke. “No, sir.”

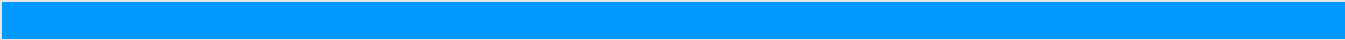
A grin flashed across the Man. “We’re still in North Carolina, correct? We didn’t go that far.”

The Boy squirmed. The barrel of the revolver in his belt bit into flesh.

“It felt like mountain air outside. And it smells like a musty shithole in here. Hunting cabin?”

“Whatever you know, best not let me know,” he said. “Ain’t tryin’ to hurt you.”

“This must be effortless then.”



The Boy chewed on his lip. Kept quiet. Wasn't his fault the Man's wife had all that money. Old money. Good as new money to the Boy.

It was his fault that his big house was so easy to get into. Confident people just didn't lock their doors.

Maybe the Old Man had been right. Maybe the guy deserved this.

"Where's your partner?" he asked. "He's been gone a long time."

"He ain't late," he lied. "We planned this timing out."

The Man started to scream. Loud and high. The Boy jumped out of his chair.

"Stop it!"

He screeched like he'd never run out of air.

"Aw, dammit! Please!" The Boy pulled the gun, realized he didn't know what to do with it. He didn't want to hit him. Didn't want to shoot him. He looked for something but the room was empty save for the furniture and meat.

He slid his boot off. Peeled back the sock. It had been on a couple of days. The rancid cotton went in the Man's mouth. Duct tape over that.

His screams continued, muffled.

"Aw, dammit," the Boy muttered.

He grabbed the chair and dragged the Man across the room. Scars followed in the wooden floor. He left him in the other room and shut the door. It was dark in there.

He sat down at the coffee table and tried to ignore the Man. He took another pill even though it was already too many. Poked at the meat. Potatoes gone cold. Thought about the money. Thinking about the money made everything make sense. Everything focused.

If the Boy didn't get the money he'd find himself in trouble real quick. Drowning in a river, deep and wide and dark. He'd carved it out with the habit and now he didn't know what to do with it. The Old Man was real sick, but he was sick too. A guy he knew once told him that if you quit all of a sudden



you could die.

Finally the Man quit screaming and there was quiet. Then came crying. Choking sobs, coughed out from behind the gag.

The Boy's stomach churned and buckled. Out the door, quick. He fell in the dirt. His body coiled and the vomit came. Bits of graying meat. A small white disk. He picked that out and swallowed it. He fell onto his back beside the pile and looked up at the night.

His muscles quit twitching and he walked to the porch and he sat on the steps. He thumbed out another menthol. Only one left and his other pack was in the car with the Old Man.

He couldn't hear the crying anymore and he felt a little better. Wind kicked up, cooling the sweat on his skin. He tried to go back to the money, but his head ground to nothing.

Light cut through the trees. Headlights of a car. The Boy dashed across the gravel to some shrubs, pulling out the revolver as he ran. He cocked the gun and crouched, waiting.

The car hauled by him, slammed to a stop in front of the cabin. A shadow climbed from the car. Stooped and bulky.

The Boy stood, finger shivering on the trigger.

"Freeze," he said.

Shadow turned, cleared its throat. "It's me, retard."

The Old Man. The Boy walked toward him, holding the gun.

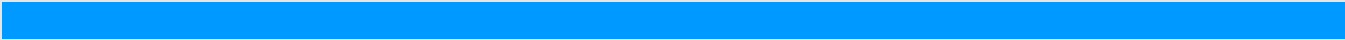
"Hey."

"Yeah." He sniffed the air. "You puke out here?"

The Old Man laughed and walked up the steps into the cabin.

He flopped down onto the sofa and unzipped his work jacket. A gnarled hand ran through thinning gray hair and down his face, all stubble and slack.

The Boy lit his last cigarette and paced nowhere.



“How’d it go?” he asked.

“Didn’t. We got anythin’ to drink around here?”

“What do you mean ‘didn’t’?”

“I met the bitch personally. Under the bridge, like where we said. She ain’t had no money with her. She say she don’t deal with terrorists or criminals. She say she wanted him back or she was callin’ the police.”

“Aw, hell!”

“She say we dumb white trash an’ we’d fuck it up anyhow.”

“She say that?”

“‘Bout like that,” the Old Man muttered.

The Boy bobbed nervously on the balls of his feet. Naked skin rubbed rough against the leather inside of the boot. A blister coming on.

“What we do now?”

“Prove we ain’t messin’ around,” the Old Man said.

“Naw. No way.”

The Old Man sat up, looked the Boy in the eye.

“Son,” he said. “You gotta be willin’ to prove you ain’t messin’”

The Old Man slid a hunting knife from a sheath on his boot. He held it out to the Boy. The Boy backed away, hands up, stammering.

“Nuh-uh, I, I ain’t doin’ it!”

“I sure as hell can’t, bone all full of cancer...”

The Old Man held up his hand, shaking badly.



“This work you gotta be steady. Better for him that way.”

The knife blade caught the light. It flickered warm.

The Boy dropped the smoke on the floor and stomped it out. His heart hammered. He took the knife from the Old Man’s trembling grip.

“What do I do?” the Boy asked.

“Just cut at it. You know, like a deer, like when me and your mom took you huntin’. No different. And, uh,” the Old Man thought for a moment. “Take the ear. Good place to start.”

The Boy moved silent into the room. Somehow, it seemed like it would be better if it were done quietly. He adjusted to the dark and found the Man. SnORES trickled out, light and ragged.

Even close, right there above him, it was difficult for the Boy to see his features in the darkness. He ran his hand lightly down the side of his head until he found the left ear.

He did not wake until the metal sliced in. He thrashed, screamed through the sock, then went limp and silent and let him finish.

The Boy bit into the sides of his mouth until he tasted blood.

He walked back into the room. He felt like he had never existed.

The Old Man gulped from a Budweiser. “Anymore steak left?”

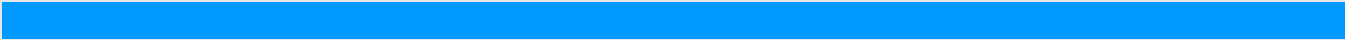
He was holding the Man’s ear. He didn’t know where to put it.

“Few more of these, you want one,” the Old Man said to the beer.

The Boy held out the flesh.

“Oh, uh, here,” the Old Man picked up the dinner plate. Blood and gristle remnants of the steak. “Just for now.”

From his work jacket he pulled a small box for jewelry or trinkets. “Picked this up on the way back. I’ll pack it up nice. Mail it in the mornin’.”



"I need to go outside."

The Old Man called over his shoulder, "Don't monkey with that car! I gotta get it back to your mom un-fucked! I don't need you pukin' in it!"

The Boy let the door slam shut, cutting short the Old Man's laughter.

Outside, he yanked the car open and sat in the leather. He fingered open the glove compartment. Half of it spilled out.

The Boy grabbed the smokes first. Tore off the cellophane and lit one. He started shoveling everything back in. Maps, pencils, a flask. A tight stack of paper. The Boy stopped. He held the little brick up to the light. Not just paper. Cash. Twenty dollar bills in a bank strip. A lot of them.

When the Boy walked in the Old Man was sitting at the table. He wiped the sweat of a new beer on his pants and flipped over a solitaire card.

Eyes on the card, he said, "Good. I'll deal a hand of five card. I ain't no damn good at solitaire."

The Boy didn't say anything. He tossed the brick of money on the table. The Old Man dropped a card. His mouth made odd sounds.

"Where this come from?" The Boy asked.

"I- I- I dunno," the Old Man said.

"You're better at lyin' than that," the Boy said.

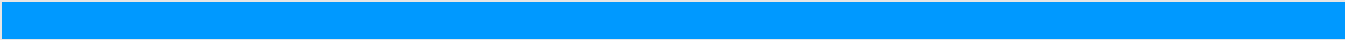
The Old Man stood up and tried to inch toward the door. The Boy stepped back and blocked it. The Old Man approached him, his palms held out.

"I was gonna tell you," he said.

"You did tell me. You told me she wouldn't deal. You said there's no money."

"Well now, that ain't exactly- "

"You lied to me."



“No, no,” the Old Man said. “I just... Listen now, I got to thinkin’, why should she only pay us this much? You know? That rich bitch deserves to give us everything. So I figured we’d just up the bet a little bit. Show her we weren’t fuckin’ around with her husband’s weak ass and she better pay up.”

“Where’s the money? Where’s it at?”

“It’s uh...” His eyes darted. “It’s in the car. In the trunk.”

The Boy thought of the Man in the other room. Blood pouring from his head. He saw the ear on the plate. He realized he was holding the gun.

The Old Man’s face went wide, and he shuffled his feet in a weird little dance. “You woulda put all that money in those pills. We needed more ‘cause of you. ”

The Boy’s face went hot and red. “You made me cut him up. You made me cut him all up.”

“Son, please... I- I shouldn’t have said that.”

“This was all your idea.”

“You gonna kill your own dad?”

The Boy did not lower the gun.

“Jesus! You gonna kill- Okay. Here’s the truth, okay? The money ain’t in the trunk, it’s – ”

“No more lyin’.”

The bullet ripped through the Old Man and smacked into the wooden wall behind him. He fell on his ass and sat there, arms hanging at his sides, blood bubbling from his mouth. Like a rolling boil.

The Boy looked into the Old Man’s wrinkled eyes. They were open and silent. He wanted to hug him.

The other room was pitch black.

“Who is that? What’s- What’s happening?”

The Boy couldn’t leave him the way he was, all cut up. Besides, the Man would tell them everything.



He didn't know what to do with him. He pressed the barrel against the Man's temple.

"I'm sorry," the Boy said.

He walked outside to the car. Took a pill, lit a menthol. He thought about how the last thing the Man ever saw was the back of a blindfold. Tears welled up. He thought about the money, and how it would make it all go away.

The trunk popped easy. A duffle bag sat in the back. Heavy, a good sign. He dropped it into the dirt and fell to his knees and unzipped it and reached inside.

Paper. Stacks and stacks of blank white paper. The Old Man had made a decoy. A fake. He had been lying. His dad had started to tell him the truth.

The Boy fell back and sat in the gravel. He wondered where the Old Man might have hidden it. Wherever it was, he wasn't telling.

The Boy flicked the smoked butt into the puddle of vomit. Embers sizzled back at him.

Emily Frankenberg is a New Jersey-born writer and English teacher residing in Seville, Spain. She writes in both English and Spanish. Her work is forthcoming in both *Strong Verse* and *The Apeiron Review*, which recently featured one of her poems on its website. She was also chosen as a finalist in the poetry contest held by Editorial Zenú (Colombia).

Oh Swift and Sturdy Winter Cockroach Drawing Near

Emily R. Frankenberg

Oh swift and sturdy winter cockroach drawing near,
I hear your footsteps in the night and ask:
How long have you been here?

The moths and butterflies turned south out of a fine-winged, flighty fear,
but you remained, oh hard survivor of the year's atomic blast,
oh swift and sturdy winter cockroach drawing near.

You see me darting past the beggars with a cell phone to my ear
and as we cross paths at my door, I ask:
How long have you been here?

You see the harvest of my minutes and the hoarding of my year
and you esteem me because we were made to last,
oh swift and sturdy winter cockroach drawing near.

I ponder summer and late fall and wonder: When did you appear?
I scour the cupboards and the shelves and ask:
How long have you been here?

And at my crackling hearth of plenty you, too, share in my good cheer.
You gird my present and you feast upon my softer summer past.
Oh swift and sturdy winter cockroach drawing near,
how long have you been here?

Salena Casha's work has appeared in over 30 publications. She was a finalist for the 2013-2014 Boston Public Library's Children's Writer-in-Residence and a 2011 Bread Loaf Scholarship Recipient in Fiction. Her first three picture books were published by MeeGenius Books. Follow her on twitter @salaylay_c

The OTIR

Salena Casha

According to the OTIR (Official Teleportation Incident Report), Jeffrey Gallager's wife departed from Red Hook at 7:53 AM eastern standard time to arrive, moments later, in her lover's arms in Rio. The record was visible in every major database across the world; Jeffrey would even be able to view the report at town hall as a hard copy. Her passport had been approved well in advance so there were no deportation police to meet her upon arrival. And Jeffrey had no intention of intervening. He, resigned husband that he was, no longer wanted her back.

That day, he drank coffee from a stained brown mug at his steel counter. It did not have its desired effect and he drank another. The liquid slid down uneasily, a dot specking his lab coat. Still, the caffeine made no difference. Shoulders slumped, he stepped toward the leftmost closet. His wife had commandeered the right-hand closet and although he knew none of her shoes lay within the door, a fact to which the OTIR would attest as her belongings followed her shortly to Rio, he did not open the wooden door. Instead, he turned the handle on his closet and stared at the two pairs of shoes shelved within the boxed space. The first pair was made of cloth, no ties or buckles or Velcro; they looked more like socks than shoes. A layer of dust coated the second. Walking shoes, he reminded himself.

He did not think much about it but rather, pulled the sneakers onto his bare feet. At first, he could barely remember how they were worn. The strings were awkwardly long and it took him three tries to manage a functioning bow.

"Jeffrey, your transport departs within the minute. Your OTIR shoes are recommended."



"I won't be needing them today," Jeffrey replied impatiently to the robot.

"Command invalid. Please repeat."

"I don't need them."

"Please repeat."

"Stupid piece of shit," he muttered to himself. He bounced on the balls of his feet, the dusty, crumbling sneakers squeaking beneath his legs. The shoes were not used to supporting the weight of a person, let alone a forty-year-old man. He hadn't taken a real step outside his door since his childhood. It had been years. He grasped the front entrance handle and the jam stuck. That was what happened with disuse, something he and his wife had become familiar with over the years. Some things, with age, became awkward.

The air was crisp for September, the scent of fall striking his nostrils. He blinked in the light, his pale skin effervescent. One step at a time.

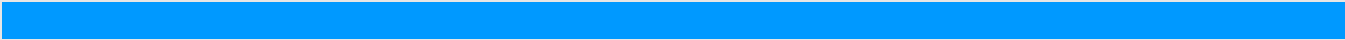
The sidewalk was devoid of humanity. Cracks pervaded the concrete; weeds grew liberally throughout the stones. He passed apartment buildings, counting the steps in his mind. His wife had traveled hundreds of miles in nanoseconds. She'd been leaving him for years, but when she'd actually done it, it had taken less than a blink of an eye.

His chest hurt as he kept moving forward. Was he that out of shape? He'd been taking his exercise meds, his health meds, his heart meds and other organ meds. Everyone was on a strict pill regimen. Perhaps though, as the rumor suggested, they were just placebos. Still, the thought was fleeting and he refocused on his feet. At this moment, he did not know to where he walked; he just needed to get away from the house with her smell and the OTIR device that had ripped her from him. Humans didn't understand distance anymore, how far people were from one another, even when they lived in the same house, the strange transports had long since made walking, driving and flying obsolete. He intended to walk every step of those lost miles.

Those who ran the OTIR saw Jeffrey Gallagher walk from his house. His teleport device reported his refusal to utilize the machine. The man in charge removed his filtered lenses to stare at the screen. Yes, Jeffrey Gallagher had indeed walked from his house and was currently navigating the broken streets of Red Hook.

"Attention Captain, we've got a Code Red on Brook Street."

The situation could be contained if they hurried, but it was already 8:20 AM and other residents of



the neighborhood had started to notice. They gazed out their windows, curious, as Jeffrey passed them by. What was the man doing, walking out in the cold? He could catch his death, expose himself to unknown bacteria. He might even fall and expire on the spot. Yet, they stared out the window to watch the walking man.

“You all right?”

Jeffrey blinked at the human voice but he did not stop walking. His legs moved automatically, continued on their way.

“I’m fine, just fine,” he replied.

Hesitation, then moments later the pounding of footsteps. Someone breathed heavily beside him, a little girl, her bare feet pale against the asphalt of the street. “You’re not allowed to be outside, mister,” she said.

“Neither are you.”

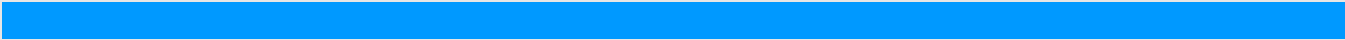
She seemed to realize such a fact at his words, looking at the ground beneath her feet in surprise. “I’m here to save you,” she replied.

“Then walk with me,” he said. He wished someone had saved him before, when he proposed to his wife and then neglected her, threw himself into his work, logged miles in the OTIR as if it were nothing, failed to notice the distances some traveled.

The girl walked with him for a few more minutes, but her legs were short and she soon fell behind. He seemed, at least superficially, that he did not notice the others who had joined him, who walked timidly behind him without speaking. In expired converse and boots and clogs that hadn’t seen the outside ground in years. An army of walkers with no destination. The empty OTIRs rang on the network, forming a group hum that began to filter through the building walls and out into the streets. Still, Jeffrey did not stop.

He was well-aware of the code he had violated. But his wife would not be there to reprimand him, tell him again that he had made a mistake. He wished she’d done that in the first place, just talked to him for once. But the world moved too fast for that, too fast for him. His feet began to throb in his shoes, the sides swelling from the increase in pressure. Soreness spread into his thighs as a cramp tightened his left buttock. But he would not stop.

All of Red Hook seemed to walk behind him. The authorities were up in arms. They could not have



so many empty OTIRs. Everything in the world depended upon their use: economics, family dynamic, deaths, life.

“What do we do, Captain?” the man asked, although he did not want to hear the answer.

“We take him out. Cut the head off the snake. The rest will follow.”

The day that Jeffrey Gallager walked out of his house was the first time he'd felt free in years. The relief he felt nearly killed him, just as his wife leaving him had nearly killed him. The little girl that followed him had almost shocked him to death. But it was the authorities who gunned him down on his sixth mile. It was surprising that it took over an hour for the government to react, but given the delicacy of the situation, time had been necessary.

As the man who tended the OTIR watched Jeffrey Gallager fall, his foot twitched. It was a subtle movement, a quick flick and he tried to swallow. Such an instinct needed to stay buried. Jeffrey Gallager's body did not even have time to bleed on the concrete as the OTIR team took him out and away from the crowd. The people shuffled back to their homes. Still, hours later, as the man attempted to fall asleep, his foot twitched again. And he was afraid.

Gwendolyn Kiste is a horror and fantasy writer based in Pennsylvania. She contributes genre editorials to Horror-Movies.ca and Micro-Shock, and she is the resident “weird wanderer” for the travel-centric Wanderlust and Lipstick. Her short stories have appeared in Strangely Funny II, History and Horror, Oh My! and Whispers from the Past: Fright and Fear.

The Man in the Ambry

Gwendolyn Kiste

Dear Man in the Ambry:

I know you're there. I see your shape in the shadows every morning when I pick out my shoes. Nobody else believes me, but that's okay. In my sixteen years, I've found the best things are the ones you keep to yourself. The little truths about the world that everyone else thinks are crazy. Like when I told my aunt I could taste stars, and she made my parents take me to a doctor. I didn't tell anybody about the stars again, but that didn't make them any less real.

Can you read? I'll slip this letter under your door to find out. You can write back too if you want. I hope you do. I'm bored and could use a friend.

Sincerely,

Molly Jane Richards

Dear Man in the Ambry:

This morning, I checked the letter I left you. It was crumpled in the corner, so you must have read it. Or maybe you thought it was a piece of trash and you were trying to dispose of it.

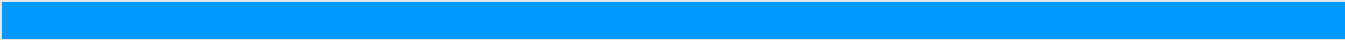
I searched the whole ambry but couldn't find a letter back to me. Oh well. Maybe you don't think you're much of a Shakespeare and would rather not write back. That's okay. I'll keep leaving these letters so long as you notice them.

Molly Jane

#

P. S. While in the ambry, I did come across something small and white near the letter. It reminds me of a thin pillar of salt, but pointy too like a kid's pocketknife. Does it belong to you? I could leave it with my next letter if you want. Or you could come retrieve it yourself. It's in my jewelry box.

#



Dear Man in the Ambry:

I bet you're wondering what an ambry is. That's what my mom calls the place you live. "Molly Jane, stop hanging out all day in that ambry!" she'll say. But an ambry's just a fancy word for a cabinet or closet.

Do you ever leave there? Nobody's ever seen you in the rest of the house, and I've only caught you in the shadows or when the door's ajar. Are you shy?

I'm sure glad I chose the room next to yours for my bedroom. Otherwise, I don't know how I'd spend my time.

Curiously,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

How many years have you lived in this house? We've been here a month, and it's already long enough. Our old place was better. Bigger and with neater windows (stained glass, the whole deal). But according to Mom and Dad, this one's in a better area. A historic neighborhood or something like that.

I'd hoped since it was so old, the house might be haunted, but no such luck. Unless you count. Are you a ghost? I don't think so. Not one chain has rattled in the ambry since we moved in.

Earlier this week, my parents did say they heard something between my bedroom and theirs. Was that you? And in lieu of chains, do you have an accessory you prefer?

More Curiously,
Molly Jane

#

P.S. I still have your little white trinket in my jewelry box. I'll give it back if you want. No member of the Richards family has ever been called a thief, and I won't start such an unscrupulous tradition now.

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Last night, my parents stayed up and listened to some distant scratching. They say it's coming from inside the walls. I didn't hear anything, but my cat Snappy sure did. She's been pawing at the ambry door ever since. And her hearing's not even very good (she's almost 25!), so you must have been pretty busy overnight.

We should play a game. That's what friends do, right? I don't really know for sure. My only friends have been my cousins, and none of them are very nice. They're like default friends, the ones you end up with by accident, not by choice.

But you're my friend by choice. You and Snappy.

I'm not sure what games you play there in the ambry. Checkers maybe?

Your Devoted Compatriot,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Sorry I made you scurry off last night! But you can't roll a soccer ball against my bed at half past two and not expect me to sneak a quick look at where it came from!

I always wanted to see your face. And now I have. Well, half your face anyhow. At least I know you're not a ghost.

And in case you were wondering, I never made the soccer team (thankfully). I only have that ball in there because my parents thought organized sports might be good for me. And what does that mean? Organized sports? As opposed to disorganized free-for-all sports?

Anyway, I think it's a good idea for a game. I'll crack the ambry door tonight and wait against the wall. From there, I can send the ball back to you. No peeking. I promise.

Your Athletically Challenged Teammate,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

My parents are now convinced the house is haunted. "We hear strange rolling noises all night," they say.

Let's please continue our game.

Your Devious One,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

I should give you a name. How about George? No, that's silly. That reminds me of Lenny and George in *Of Mice and Men*. We read that last year in English class, and I liked the part with the dead mouse. It made me laugh (and think of how Snappy never means to kill mice either), but the scene bothered the other kids. The dead girl was awful though. And everyone just called her "Curley's Wife" like she wasn't worth anything except her husband.

So George is out. Here are some other names I like. Let me know which one you prefer.

#

Luke James Andrew Christopher

#

Your Friend in More than Name Only,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

I found the last letter I wrote you, and Andrew was scratched out. The rest of the names were left alone, so I'm guessing you like Andrew best. Or maybe you like it least, and you were trying to tell

me to name you anything other than Andrew. If that's the case, give me some kind of sign. Like rip this letter in half or something.

Eager to Hear from You,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

Last night's letter was in pristine condition, so Andrew it is! I like that name best too. So distinguished.

This morning, my mom came into my room to discuss school—more about my friends (or lack thereof) than arithmetic homework or anything—and she noticed your white souvenir in my jewelry box. She turned it over and over again in her hand and demanded to know what it was. I said I didn't know. She got all angry and quiet. Then she told my dad. He marched up to my room and tossed your bauble in the trash. I don't know what harm it was doing just sitting in an old box. So I'm sorry I can't give it back to you. But then again, you had plenty of time to salvage it, so you probably didn't want it anymore.

Apologetically,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

Mom found my letters to you. She claims she was searching for laundry, but I think she was spying on me. That white trinket really bothered her. And judging from her screeching and screaming the moment I exited the school bus yesterday, she would have been happier if she'd discovered a spoon and syringe or a positive pregnancy test in my room. She made my dad pull everything out of the ambry to prove no one's there. (Sorry about the mess.)

Part of me thinks they were hoping for a secret passageway where some neighborhood creeper was living. At least then their little girl wouldn't be crazy. But there was nothing other than a normal old ambry.

I cried most of last night, which is why I didn't leave you a letter sooner. I tried to write a couple versions of this note, but my tears streaked up the pages and my handwriting was such a mess I don't think you can have read it anyhow.

The only way they'd let me keep my bedroom is if I promised not to write you anymore. So I'll leave this note overnight and burn it in the morning.

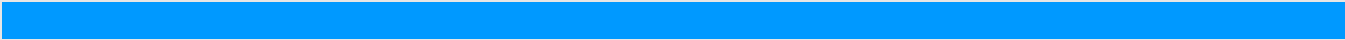
And don't worry about the fire. Mom will think I'm smoking a joint. Imagine how proud she'll be that her daughter has a normal adolescent vice.

Your Surreptitious Friend,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

I graduate next week. I can't wait to get out of this house, so no one will read my letters except me



and you.

College is less than three months away. Will you come visit? I'm going to study psychology. That sounds fun, right? Pedestrian but fun. I'd rather study ghosts and demons and worlds other than my own, but if I wanted that enough, I could move into the ambry with you. Is there available real estate?

No, psychology won't be so bad. My parents said I might finally figure out what's wrong with me. They thought it was funny. I didn't laugh.

Collegiate Bound,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

I saw you again today. Just a glimpse of course, but a good glimpse. Mom was calling upstairs, and all her hollering was distracting me, which is how you must have thought you'd slip by. But when I looked at my mirror, your reflection was there in the fissure of the door. You're beautiful. Or handsome. I should say handsome, even though I mean beautiful.

Did you always look like that, or have you changed to please me?

Swooning (not really),
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

Two weeks until college!

I don't think my parents will notice, but you and Snappy will miss me. I'll leave the ambry door open, so you two can commiserate while I'm away.

Homesick Already,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

It's my first Thanksgiving break, and I'm already not sure about school. I live with this girl named Heather. She's got a different idea of fun than me, but then most people don't spend their free time writing to guys who live in the walls of spare rooms.

I hoped you would visit me at college, but the nooks and crannies in the dorm must not be so comfortable.

If you could leave here, would you take the bus? Or would you walk? Or is there some arcane transportation where you're from? Like maybe you ride in the mouth of a dragon or use the fires of the underworld to power a steamship?

Or maybe you walk. You probably walk.

Your Forever Dreamer,
Molly Jane

#



Dear Andrew:

While I was away at school, my parents converted my bedroom into a guest room. They packed all my things and told me to take the boxes with me to school or else my stuff goes into storage.

Welcome home, Molly Jane.

Sorry about them traipsing all over the ambry. But you have a lot more breathing room in there now. Do you breathe? If so, it can't be very comfortable in those stuffy walls.

My parents left my bed (for the benefit of all the elusive guests they must be expecting), so at least I can sleep next to the ambry. But if there wasn't a bed, I'd just sleep inside the ambry. Heck, you'd make a better roommate than Heather.

By the way, Snappy seems livelier than ever. Mom says she disappeared last week for a few days, but they could still hear her meowing. "Like she was in the walls," my mom said.

I knew the two of you would be the best of friends.

Your Faraway Comrade,

Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

It's Christmas again. The holidays are all eggnog and misery.

Sometimes, my parents still hear strange scratching in the walls. And Snappy's gone. She's been missing for over a month now. But last night, I heard her purring, so it must not be so bad wherever she is. Wherever you are.

Do the stars taste like bliss there? Do you have stars at all?

Your Celestial Body,

Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

Heather has this trick she taught me. If there's a guy she likes and he's hanging out in the dorm hallway (that's how it is at college, all communal and whatnot), she leaves the door to our room open a little while she changes for bed.

I must confess I tried her ploy last night when I got home for the semester. Sloughed off my academic garb and prepared for the summer all while giving the ambry a front row seat.

You never looked. Maybe you're too much of a gentleman. Or maybe you don't care.

And now I just feel embarrassed about the whole thing.

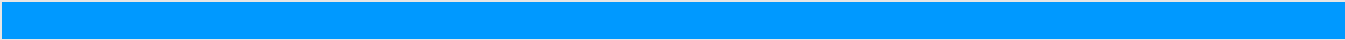
Your Discomfited Coquette,

Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

It's been three semesters since I wrote to you. I guess I don't have much to say. Have you changed? I know I have.



I'm seeing this boy. Derek Adler. He's alright. He says he loves me. Do you think he does? My mom insists he'd make a good husband. We've only been seeing each other for two months, and she's already planning the wedding. A spring ceremony, she says, with pink and ivory as the colors. I don't like pink, and I hate every wretched permutation of white, but May or June is as good a month as any to surrender your freedom, don't you think?

Their Indentured Servant,
Molly Jane

#

P.S. I found another of those white pillars in the ambry. Mom says she's gathered up a couple dozen in the last year. She already discarded the others, but I'll keep this one in case you need it back.

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

On Sunday, I graduated summa cum laude in psychology. With honors too. It would have been a good day if Derek hadn't proposed to me over dinner. And both his parents and mine were there, so what was I supposed to do?

Here Comes the Bride,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

I got married today. People said it was a nice ceremony. They said I wore a beautiful dress. Derek's waiting in the car while I pick up some things for the honeymoon. Will you be the something borrowed and come with me? I don't want to go alone.

A Brand New Mrs.,
Molly Jane ~~Richards~~ Adler

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Have you ever seen Niagara Falls? Even though it looks like the same Niagara Falls from last week or last year or some centuries-old tintype photograph of a daredevil on a tightrope, it's different. The water's always changing.

People are like that too. I've heard every seven years, we shed each individual cell.

If our entire body's changed, are we even the same person? Is Niagara Falls still Niagara Falls?

I don't have many reasons to visit my old bedroom anymore, especially now that I have a new bedroom everyone keeps reminding me about. You probably don't know this, but when you get married, people make it their business to ask about your love life. Like you're an incomparable letdown if there are no swaddling clothes in nine months or less.

Maternally,
Molly Jane

#



P.S. How's Snappy? Mom and Dad haven't heard her in awhile.

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Good news at last! A counseling center hired me. I'll be talking to young kids with so-called behavioral issues (AKA parents like mine). I'm already counseling a girl named Carla. I don't know why her parents think she needs so much help. She seems swell to me.

Do they have jobs where you are? Maybe you work to earn those little white knives, so you can spend them on bigger white knives.

Putting my Degree to Use,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Remember the girl I told you about? Carla? Yesterday in our weekly session, she confided in me about someone she knew. Someone no one else could see. He lives in the family's garage. He's like you, only his hair's a different color and he's a little shorter. At least that's what it sounds like from her description.

I'll tell you more when I meet with her again next week. Maybe her friend's a cousin of yours!

Until then,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

I'm not counseling Carla anymore. My boss pulled me aside and claimed I was feeding her delusions. Her mother must have complained. Now Carla's with another counselor.

As if anyone else can understand her like I can.

Cosmically Disappointed,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

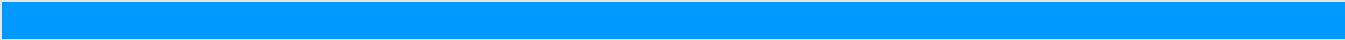
Do they downsize where you are?

Sometimes I've wondered if maybe I wasn't meant for this world. Maybe my job was to taste stars, but everyone got me off-track. I shouldn't complain though. Life's certainly a lot worse for most people. Like Carla's parents. Carla vanished last week, and they can't find her anywhere. I could tell them where she is, but nobody asks my opinion, of course, because they know they wouldn't like what I'd say.

Last night, my mom thought she heard Snappy. But that cat would be over 30 now and couldn't possibly be alive. Especially without any food and water in the walls.

Your Incurable Human,
Mrs. Adler

#



Dear Man in the Ambry:

Mom called me tonight and demanded I talk to my dad. When I got here, he was taking a sledgehammer to the wall in their bedroom. Something was behind there, and he said he was going to scare it off.

With all that pounding, I sure hope he didn't disturb your rest too much. But don't worry if he did. He's calmer now. "Mice," I told him. "It's only mice."

Are there any pests in the walls? I hope not. How unpleasant that would be for you!

The Not So Mousy,

Molly Jane

#

Dear Andrew:

After Sunday dinner, I found the gift you left me. It made me laugh. Laugh like a hopeless hysteric until my parents and Derek ran all the way upstairs to check on me. They didn't laugh. I guess a pile of dead mice doesn't have traditional comic appeal. I explained it was an inside joke, but they still didn't laugh. Not even a slight smile. And Derek was so mad he went home without me.

Something about needing space. He says he'll pick me up in the morning, but I don't care if he does. What a curmudgeon.

Would you like any rat poison or mouse traps? I could leave some with the next letter.

Yours Truly,

Molly Jane

#

P.S. I'm still laughing and will be even after I put this letter in the ambry.

#

P.P.S. Did you like the gift I gave you in return?

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Derek has a plan. A plan he thinks will "even out my disposition".

"And you're not working right now," he said. "It's the perfect time."

I bet he thinks a mother could never giggle at a glut of dead rodents.

My parents are already nudging each other and smiling more than usual over meals. Like the three of them are colluding against me. Like they know something I don't.

Doubtfully,

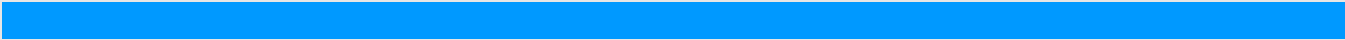
Derek's Wife

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

I found out what my parents were hiding. They bought a new place closer to me and Derek. Closer for when they have grandkids. As if the offspring are inevitable.

Their last day in this house is in less than two weeks.



I offered to stay and help them pack. But I don't care about packing. I care about writing to you as many times as I can before I never can again.

Your Friend,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Twelve days until we abandon the house.
I'm not feeling well this evening, so I'll leave it at that.
Hopelessly,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Ten days.
I'm still sick, but it comes and goes, so I doubt it's terminal.
My dad keeps saying he's happy we're leaving, especially since the scratching in the walls has started again. Mom wants to leave sooner to appease him, but I begged her to wait. I want every moment I can spend in the ambry.
Please visit me soon. I miss your face. I miss it so much.
Eagerly,
Molly Jane

#

Dear Man in the Ambry:

Thank you for coming overnight. It was nice to know someone was there, even if I could only hear you breathing.
Four days left. I'm nauseous. And tired. And out of things to tell you except I'm sorry. But I can't stop them. It's their house to sell.
Tenuously,
Molly Jane

#

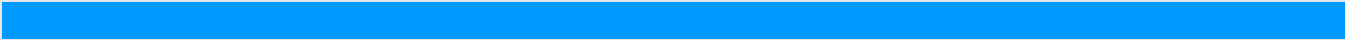
Dear Andrew:

I know now why I've been sick. Turns out it is terminal. I'm pregnant.
I tried to be careful. I tried to avoid it. Whichever time damned me, I'll never know, but I'm damned nonetheless.
Desperately,
Molly Jane

#

Andrew:

This is the last night here. My parents and Derek are out to dinner. Celebrating the move. I stayed home, said I was sick. And I am sick. I need you to come to me one last time. Before it's too late.



They'll be back soon. I'll put this letter in the ambry, and I'll wait.

Maybe there aren't stars where you are. Maybe Snappy's not there either. Maybe the fires of the underworld will turn me to ash.

But I want the chance to discover that for myself.

For the Last Time,

Molly Jane

#

P.S. They don't know about me. And I never want them to find out.

#

To the Man Living in our Former Ambry:

I know you're there. I know because you took my daughter.

At first, we thought Molly Jane just wanted to scare us. We didn't even report it for the first few days because we figured she'd come back.

That was a year ago. The police conducted a search, a pretty exhaustive one I might add, but her father and I couldn't see the point. It was more for her husband's benefit. Did she tell you she was married?

We hired some men to look for you. They pulled out all the walls to see if she was in there. It was like we thought. There's no way in or out of the ambry except the door to her bedroom.

But then the men inspected the walling they'd removed. They all said it was the darndest thing.

They said it looked like someone wrote on the back of that paneling. Not words any of us could read. Maybe not words at all. More like something trying to write. Something with claws. Claws like pillars of salt.

Please let her come home. Her husband and parents miss her. She belongs with us.

Sincerely,

A Distraught Mother

#

P.S. Please stop cooing at night. And stop giggling too. It's scaring the new tenants.

Seif-Eldeine is a Syrian-American poet living outside Worcester, Massachusetts. He graduated with a degree in Middle Eastern Studies from Tufts University in 2009. You can find works by him in Star 82 Review and Vayavya. He was nominated for Best of the Net.

Jamal, the Syrian Revolution and the Good Doctor

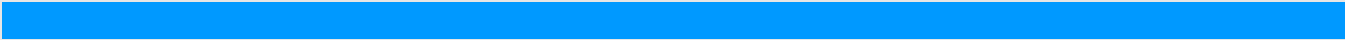
Seif-Eldeine

Even the way the therapist's face hangs is like one of his plaques:
The defined chin line, the high cheekbones, the pencil thin
Eye brows and the teeth like the white picket fences
His Brits invented to pasture their cows.
When Jamal talks, the good doctor never lifts

His head or meets Jamal's eyes. He reads his questions
Like they were from a survey. "What brings you in today?"
"What precipitated these events?" "How did you compose
Yourself before these events occurred?" After 30 minutes
of conversation, the good doctor reveals the conclusion
he decided the second Jamal told the good doctor
he had escaped the Syrian Revolution. "What we have here,"

the good doctor says, "is a psychological response to the traumatic
nature of war. These responses often manifest themselves
in projections of those experiences onto what would
normally be unrelated stimuli. According to the ICD 9,
and the reasonably inferior DSM V, we call this condition
P.T.S.D., an acronym for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
Does this prognosis sound like the experiences you are having?"

Jamal can barely stammer out a "yes." This is the doctor
Who had been assigned to him by the Refugee Council.
He suspects that if he wants to maintain his status,
He has to be compliant to the good doctor,
Even as the doctor's face turns into the officer's,
Those bits of grey stubble, the scar slashed across the eye,
The army fatigues and the belt for his grenades.
And worst of all, the pen that reads "Seroquel," which turns



Into the butt of the rifle directed at Jamal's wife, children
And parents. Does the good doctor know his attempt
To spare Jamal his life is the same attempt made by the officer
To live a life filled with the apparitions that plague
his dreams? Even the mahogany desks begins to turn
into the square buttress of a tank, and the legs into wheels.
The shrubs in the corner is the head of the eldest,
And the gawky trees outside the haggard bodies
Of the officer's privates who looked on with disgust,

if not sympathy. "The marks," the good doctor says,
"on your arms. Do you not remember them? How
Did they get there?" Jamal looks down to the three slashes
Running down the length of his wrists. These are
Manifestations of symptoms. Yes, you heard right,
Manifestations of symptoms, if the good doctor
Is to be believed. Just like a bent fender was the symptom
Of a rocket coming through the back of a Syrian's car.
"I don't know," Jamal says, "I have never seen..."

Before Jamal can finish his sentence, the good doctor continues,
"what we have here is a subset condition of P.T.S.D.
We call this condition D.D.N.O.S. or disassociation for short.
It can cause the afflicted patient periods of self-harm
And temporary memory loss. During our next session,
We will work with this issue as well as your other
symptoms." Jamal never considered himself afflicted,

or that he had symptoms. Maybe Jamal should have come
to the session with a paper and pen. There are so many
letters followed by letters he had to learn, and the good doctor,
good as he is, may have to quiz Jamal on all these letters.

Baba, His Briefcase and the Terrorists

Seif-Eldeine

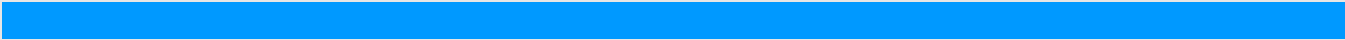
What happened to the chocolate croissants?
Baba used to bring them home
to momma every night
before the bombing started.
He would stuff the croissants
into momma's face,
with little pieces of chocolate
sticking onto her mouth.
He would then take a napkin
and wipe it off. Now he does it
with hummus and bread.
there's lots of hummus and hubz
everyday now. Baba tells momma
even the hubz will run out.

When baba goes to work,
the soldiers do not stop him.
the rubble is nothing,
the road blocks are nothing,
the rebels are nothing.
The good thing about war is baba
shut his phone off when it started.
He did not want to hear about Akhmed.

Baba does not wear camouflage
like the other men fighting the terrorists.
He goes to work in a blue collared shirt,
unbuttoned at the top, and brown slacks.
Handcuffs clasp his wrist
to his briefcase. Maybe he uses the briefcase
to save chocolate croissants for momma
for the war's end. Baba jokes that if the terrorists
cut his hand and his wedding ring off
that he will be able to choose a new wife.
Momma does not like this joke.

If baba does not wear camouflage
and does not own a gun,
how does he fight the terrorists?
Momma tells me he mixes stuff together,
like when we did the volcano
for the science fair. SyriaTV says the terrorists
used chemical weapons in Damascus yesterday.
What are chemical weapons?

The neighbors say my brother Akhmed is a terrorist,
but Baba would not pray for a terrorist.



Baba sits cross-legged at the prayer rug,
with his palms faced up. He wipes his hands
over his face. He cannot imagine
sleeping without the explosions.
He does miss the croissants.

