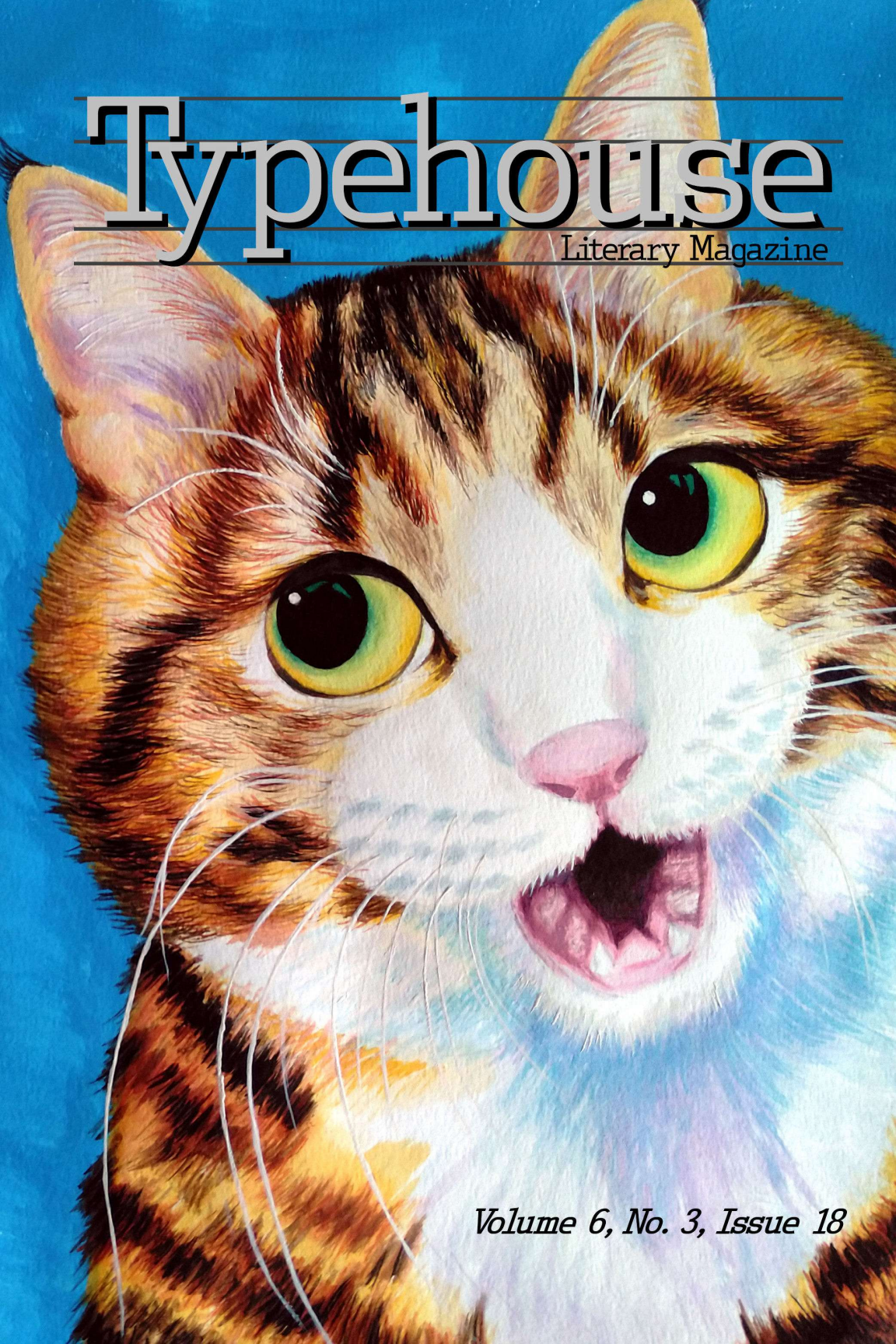
Typehouse

Literary Magazine



Volume 6, No. 3, Issue 18

Table of Contents

Contest:

Fiction:

Creative Nonfiction:

Poetry:

Visual Art:

Typehouse
LITERARY MAGAZINE

Volume 6, No. 3
Issue 18

Typehouse Literary Magazine is published triannually. Established 2013.

Typehouse Literary Magazine

Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

Cover: ***Dangerous Winds*** *by Jing Kong*

Jing Kong *loves life, nature and animals. She thinks painting is a way to explore human and animal souls. She likes traditional painting, using gouache and ballpoint pen. She gets inspiration from interesting pet stories. She tries to discover the inner world of animals from paintings.*

Table of Contents

Contest:

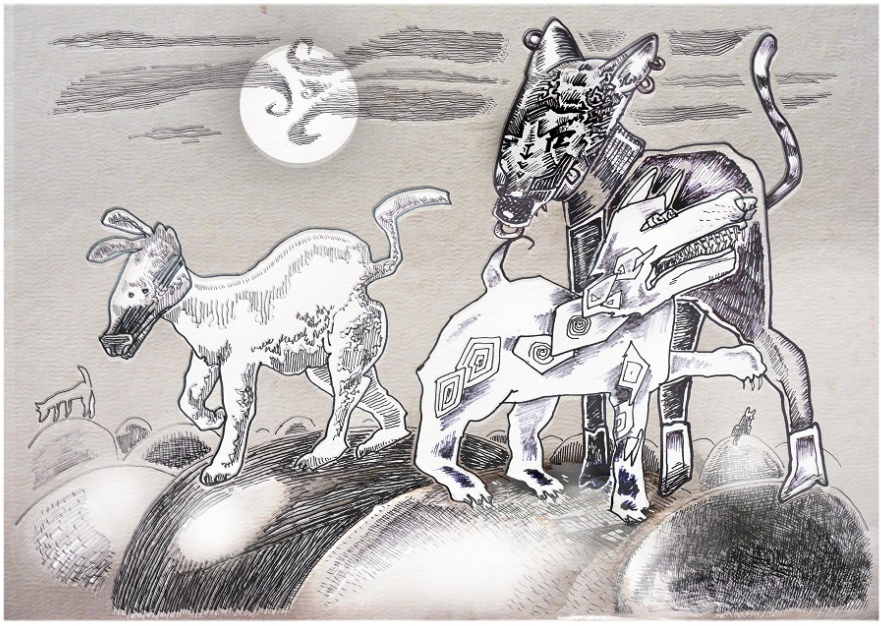
Fiction:

Creative Nonfiction:

Poetry:

Visual Art:

Fabio Lastrucci *was born in Naples (Italy) in 1962. Sculptor and illustrator, he has worked for the main national television networks, lyrical and prose theatre, and as illustrator he recently published in US magazines like Perielionsf.com, The Tishman Review and Typehouse. As writer he has published humorous novels, a fantasy saga, and some essays. His latest works are an essay on weird fiction wrote with Vincenzo Barone Lumaga "Com'era weird la mia valle" (Milena edizioni 2018), and a tribute to Stephen King "La pelle del re" (Delos Digital 2018).*



Separate Worlds

Each one on his own sphere, we all live close and unreachable in worlds closed by different rules, habits, cultures. Sometimes the isolated planets get in touch and a flash of curiosity brings their colors closer and mixes them for a moment. When a rainbow of differences it does not separate people, it could be a bridge to discover the other one.

The Monk's Hours

Reading a historical magazine dedicated to the origins of monasticism, I was struck by the silence conveyed by those beautiful descriptions of monasteries. Long hours spent painting in a suspended time, with the threat of the Great Attempt always lurking, the whisper of the brothers and the peaceful and silent company of bones locked in the urns. This drawing in the shadow of its own chiaroscuro is a moment of quiet stolen from a life unacceptable by our time of noisy minute consumers.

The Struggle

A mistake, a wicked answer and the words are not enough to curb instinct. Mountains of skeletons crowd the page of History without changing this millenary script. It's time for struggle: light and shadow, reason and feeling show their teeth like ancient warriors. A circle deformed by the fury of the brawl unites them and imprisons them, fragile like an egg but stubbornly closed to the idea of giving life to something new.

Cathy Tenzo *is a lesbian living in Seattle. She's a member of the Lady Poetesses from Hell and her work appears in their anthology, in the September 2019 issue of Dreams & Nightmares, and in various publications including Asimov's Science Fiction, Mythic Delirium, and Troubadour. She also does some really fun comics.*

Mary Poppins, 2100

Cathy Tenzo

Jane and Michael Banks
too much for their parents to handle

they hire help
but the children react poorly
to increased supervision

dead nannies
  in the deep freeze
  in the airlock
  in the sterilizing unit

a subspace mayday calls Marypoppins™
delivered by intergalactic umbrella

Marypoppins and the kids sing songs
play games
pop through holographic space cruisers

despite her best efforts
the children are not amused
aluminum alloy
adds a toxic taste
to her replicated tea

Marypoppins
manufactured practically perfect
follows the zeroth law
little Banks children
dumped into the cold void of space

Pamela Stutch *is a recent graduate of the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA program and currently employed as an attorney. She lives in Scarborough, Maine with her husband, son, one dog and one cat.*

Badass

Pamela Stutch

I'm standing by a black curtain in the dark. The space is cramped, barely enough for my feet. Donnie's breathing at my ear. Rocky is ahead of me, his head down, the thick jowls in his chin and neck highlighted, his tattooed arms resting at his sides. Skulls, crosses and dragons flash in the floodlights as he moves.

We make our way to the stage. Rocky and I plug in. Donnie gets behind the drum set, his stringy dyed black hair pasted against his forehead. The lights come on. I look into the crowd and feel the condescension. It tries to embed itself into my skin. "Who's the chick?" the middle-aged macho faces smirk. Then Donnie clicks off with his drum sticks for the tempo and Rocky starts out on guitar and I chime in with my deep roaring electric bass. I watch those fools in the audience, their expressions change from amused pity to wonder, their eyes rounding in awe, their mouths parting as they cross their arms, shake their heads and huddle closer to the stage. Sometimes I bask in their disbelief. Other times, I want to run off the stage and out the door and keep on running until I'm in the next town, or the next country or the next planet, and not stop even then.

Onstage, I chew gum to relieve tension. Tension that I might make a mistake, play a wrong note, fuck up a song I've known for years. My brown hair is usually tied back into a ponytail, but I let it down when I play, even curl the ends with a curling iron before the show so people can see I'm a girl, not some girly looking guy. My uniform is combat boots, camo pants and black T-shirts. Black covers up things like my sagging middle-aged breasts and excess around my waist from years of eating fast food, getting no exercise except lugging my gear from gig to gig, and sitting in the passenger seat of our van for hours while Rocky or Donnie drives us to the next show.

We've been a band for twenty years, a hardcore guitar-centric rock band. Never picked up a major label, but we get by. We have a booking agent for our gigs—just the gigs—and that's it. We fund the recording of our own CDs and market them through our website. We don't even have a manager because Rocky can't seem to keep one for long. He always gets pissed about them taking 33% of anything we make so we go without. We're on our own. We've tried to get hooked up with Yngwie Malmsteen and Steve Vai but

Yngwie and Steve weren't interested in us. We've already sent them our stuff, and we don't have the pull that a proper label or manager would bring.

We have one roadie. A bald guy named Bruce. A friend of Rocky's whom we pay when we can. He helps us unload the van for the shows, sets up the amps and the drum kit, places the microphones and even takes pictures and videos of us for our website. He used to do our merch, too, standing next to a table holding our CDs and whatever were the last versions of our T-shirts, but a few weeks ago Donnie made friends with a young waitress. Really made friends. She's tall with a high voice and big hazel eyes.

"Don't call her Bimbette, it's *Babette,"* Donnie corrected me when I messed up her name the first time I said it. "She's French."

"I thought she was from Des Moines."

"French origin," said Donnie, squinting at me.

Now Babette sits in the back of the van with Donnie when we travel. She does merch for us. When she started, I watched Donnie show her how to set up the CDs and the T-shirts so they're displayed clearly at the merch table and the crowd can see each one. He put his arm around her and he said, "CDs go for $20, T-shirts and DVDs $25," and pointed to them all in a row. Then he grinned at her, his crinkly, drooping eyelids closing against the glare of the house lights. "But you can tell the fans they're free. They just have to pay shipping and handling. *Lots* of handling." He squeezed her close and touched her breast. Babette grimaced.

"You're such an asshole, Donnie," I said. Babette looked at me amazed, and her face softened. I didn't hate her from that moment on.

#

We're in New Haven, Connecticut, tonight. New Haven smells of fried food, garlic and stale beer, just like every other town. The lights outside the club flash with consecutive, "*Good Food! Good Drink! Good Music!"* in red neon. They jar the deep twilight as the sun sets against an auburn and pink clouded sky. The streetlights have come on. The sidewalks are wet from the passing summer rain shower.

Bruce is by the van, pulling out the black Marshall amps, the crimson drumkit, and Rocky's multicolored pedal board with a zillion different effects. Bruce usually takes my pedal board, but tonight I feel a need to haul it myself. With the cables and the case, it must weigh about thirty pounds, but it's no problem.

The club looks like a prison. Concrete walls, bars on the windows, maybe an old factory or a mill at one time. Some of the walls are painted to look like bricks so you're supposed to get the feeling of something old and vintage. Wooden beams traverse the ceiling. A bright blue neon sign shouts "Pool," with an arrow pointing to a nonexistent enclave. Above the bar, another sign advertises various beers, and a mirror reflects back the bottles of booze and the stacked glasses.

The stage is narrow—barely enough room for the equipment and us. Bruce places Rocky's pedal board on stacked trunks level with the stage. I place mine on the floor and begin sorting the wires.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. It's a text from Jen, my best friend. She and I went to high school together. We were the weird introverted girls who used to smoke in the bathroom while everyone else was outside cheering the school's track team. She went on to college, then grad school, got a job in finance, and now she's the vice-president of a bank. She tells me she just got a cat, a rescue for her son, Josh, who's twelve, and she's texted a video of a small gray and white thing wiggling in his lap while he laughs. I want to curl up on their couch and hug them.

Rocky is suddenly at my side. He's got a smile that I can't figure out.

"We need to do other shit tonight," he says.

"Huh?"

"The guy from New York is coming up. From Geffen. I just got a text." Rocky rubs his hands together like he's cold, but his eyes are jumping.

"Yeah, right," I say.

"No, no. I'm serious this time, really. He might sign us." Rocky kicks the wires at his feet. "Let's take some risk. I'm tired of being a fucking pansy."

"Why?" My stomach tightens.

"Let's do *Forbidden*."

We haven't played *Forbidden* for at least a year maybe two. It's a long, complicated song with alternating rhythms and fusion harmonies. "We'll need to rehearse," I say.

He shakes his head. "You know this shit in your sleep."

"But we've been doing the same rotation for six months now. We're tight. No need to rock the boat, right?" I say this with as much nonchalance as I can manage. What I really mean is, "Dude, don't do this to me. With this tour, I've been performing every night, getting up early, driving hours, dealing with you guys. I'm exhausted. I've been functioning on four hours sleep a night since February."

Rocky gets this weird expression in his eyes and gets close to my face. "You afraid?"

I put my middle finger up at him. "Fuck you, Rocky. You know I'm not afraid of anything."

His hand goes on top of my head and messes up my ponytail. I remember when that hand used to run itself over my stomach and down my legs, when we'd be snuggled up next to each other in the back of the van, us both jammed up against the equipment, my smiling face nestled into his neck, listening to his heart beat against the rhythm of the van's engine while Donnie drove us to the next town. Now, we're like a married couple sick of each other. "Just practice before we go on," he says.

I pull out the elastic tie and reattach it so my hair is flat again. My stomach is in a full-blown panic. He knows I can't practice. No time. The Raleigh, Birmingham, and Boca Raton gigs are coming up next week and I haven't made hotel reservations yet. I also have to fill out six pages of paperwork for when we go to Quebec day after tomorrow and write up a manifest of every piece of gear in our van or they won't let us into the country.

#

After soundcheck, we sit around one of the tables in the back, sipping bottles of spring water. We're starved. I finally say, "If we don't get an order into the kitchen, we won't eat before we go on." Then Bruce says, "Oh yeah," as if the idea never occurred to him. And then each of the guys goes on about what they're going to have, but nobody writes it down. I just put my feet up on a nearby chair and lean back until the chair creaks. Donnie says he'll have a chicken sandwich, blackened on whole wheat bread with lettuce, tomato and sweet potato fries, but make sure they hold that mayo because it might not be fresh. Rocky wants a cheeseburger medium—make sure it's Swiss or cheddar —with relish on a Kaiser roll, and Bruce chimes in with a BLT on white toast (hold that mayo again) and fries. And then they all look at me and I say I think I'll have soup tonight for a change and I cross my arms and wait. Silence.

Then Donnie asks me, "Aren't you going to put this in to the kitchen?" He pushes his black hair out of his face and looks at me.

"No," I say.

"So how are we going to get the order in?"

I let my chair forward with a thump that startles him. "Figure it out, dumbass. I'm done wiping your butt."

Babette gets up and mutters that she'll put the order in, but I grab her arm. "No, don't you do it either," I say. She catches her breath, her expression surprised as she slides back down into her seat. Her floral perfume floats to my nostrils. Her arm rests against my calloused fingers.

Rocky's pale blue eyes widen. "Fine, I'll do it," he says in a low growly voice, and I watch contempt slide onto his face, the same face that used to open up to me with optimism and excitement. The face that, back when we were both in our early twenties and I was naïve and stupid, said, "Come join my band. We'll conquer the world."

#

When our dinner finally arrives, I'm queasy because of my nerves. Rocky motions for me to eat but I just scowl. Donnie and Bruce are joking around that the food is putrid and Donnie forces up a burp, which comes out loud and deep. Babette's stealing French fries off of Donnie's plate and the guys are laughing at her. "Just like a dog, huh?" says Donnie. The odor of greased potatoes and machismo is making me even more sick. "Leave her alone," I say. "And don't ever call her a dog." I push Donnie as hard as I can.

His leather-clad shoulder collides with his water bottle and it spills across the table. The others jump back to avoid getting wet. Rocky curls up his lip and says I'm an ass.

I push my soup away, pick up my backpack and head to the ladies' room. The door squeaks open into a three-stall room with two sinks. Pictures of musicians and memorabilia hang on the yellowed walls, which are scratched and chipped. I hang my backpack on the doorknob and pull out my hairspray, curling iron, and makeup case. The sink is somewhat clean. A woman enters the bathroom. She's maybe forty, in a slender black dress and a chunky gleaming silver necklace, her hair in perfect waves cascading down her back, musk perfume sailing out of her pores. She towers over me in black five-inch-heel sling-backed sandals as we both stare into the mirror to examine our faces. Mine is caked with foundation to hide the lines. Hers is dewy, rested and secure. She washes her hands, her manicured red nails shining in the water. When she smiles at me, I say, "I'm the bassist in the band," and she says back, "I know, I recognize you from the flyer at the entrance." Her expression is reassuring and soft. We bond with just eye contact. Before she leaves the bathroom, she says, "I'll be cheering for you." The door closes behind her and I have just myself in the mirror.

As I wrap sections of my hair over the curling wand, I focus on a black-and-white poster hung next to the mirror. It's of a band called "Nebraska Pete." I've never heard of them before. Three men with beards, heavy lids and fog eyes stand with guitars. Hippie fringe jackets, cowboy boots, a bandana around the forehead of the guy on the left. The one in the middle has a goofy, gap-toothed grin.

Nebraska is where I was born, in the northeast part of the state. In Laurel. It's a town with a bunch of drunks and not much else. I should have gone to college and gotten a real job, like Jen did. But I idolized Joan Jett, Chrissy Hynde, and Patti Smith. I wanted to be badass, like them. I got out of Laurel as fast as I could and went to California to play hard rock and punk and heavy metal. I met Rocky in a club. He was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. Long and lean and chiseled, with deep set eyes as pale blue as a sun-bleached morning.

Grunge had taken over by the time we started playing together. No one wanted to hear instrumental hard rock anymore. And so much for leaving Laurel. Where I am is Laurel every night. I play for an audience of middle-aged drunks who don't know anything and don't care.

#

During the show, Rocky makes it official by blurting out that we're playing a song we haven't done in a while. The audience of about seventy-five men cheers, raising their beer bottles in a collective toast. Rocky lifts his eyebrows to both Donnie and me. Donnie nods like it's no problem. But I can't remember the tune. It's been too many miles—ten thousand, at least—

and too many days. My mind spins like jumbled cotton balls. I look into the audience, but I can't see the details of faces because of the glare. I'm sweating, the searing, exposing lights raising the temperature at least thirty degrees for those onstage. The man from Geffen is here, though. My fingers feel it. Rocky lifts his eyebrows again, this time with more emphasis. Donnie's not waiting, though. He's counting off with his sticks.

Rocky slices into a D-major chord. My fingers move and I begin to play notes, random, thumping notes that make no sense. But then the adrenaline hits and the tune comes into view, its shape forming solid edges. I tackle the harmonies. It's all back in my brain. I'm flying up and down the fretboard, maneuvering the alternating tempos. The song resonates in my bones, my blood, and I'm jubilant. I glance over at Rocky, but he's wide eyed and confused. His guitar chords mix with disconnected notes. He's unable to catch the melody. I go over to him and try to lead, but he can't follow. He's a mile underwater and I'm beckoning for him to come up but it's useless. The song finally ends after what seems to be an hour. Rocky lets out a deep breath and slides his fingers through what's left of his hair.

"Whew!" he says to the audience. They're cheering. "For fuck sure we should have rehearsed!" They're laughing. He looks at me and says into the mike, "Someone warned me about doing shit we haven't done in a while." More laughter from the floor. Raucous, male laughter. Sweat is pouring down my back. I hold my chin up in defiance.

"But what a fucking pro she is. Let's hear it for our badass bassist, Lina Sawyer!" He extends his hand out in my direction. I wave to the crowd and smile, just like it's nothing. I'm emotionless and ultra-cool. Super badass.

We get through the rest of the hour-long show. At the end, the audience is ecstatic, yelling and clapping in an explosion of enthusiasm. They've gotten their fifteen-dollar cover charge's worth of entertainment. I place my bass down on the stand and dab my face with a napkin. My foundation is coming off. I climb down the three steps on the left side of the stage, grab my makeup case and head toward the bathroom.

The ladies' room is empty, as usual. I pat my face with a wad of toilet paper and then try to reapply the foundation but it's no use. My face is slimy and sticky and the foundation keeps gathering in clumps even though I'm trying to blend it. I give up and finally wash my face. My mascara and eyeliner are still intact, though. Waterproof. I apply a fresh coat of red lipstick and say "Screw it" to the mirror. It doesn't matter what I look like anyway.

At the bar, I order a double vodka neat. The bartender says to me, "Nice job up there on that bass," as he hands me my drink. I raised my glass to him in a toast. He tips his black fedora at me as the alcohol stings down my throat. The background house music is in full blare, with AC/DC's "Back in Black" screaming from the speakers.

A man in tight jeans and a faded blue T-shirt with the Fender logo

comes up to me and tells me how much he admires my playing. He says he's a bassist too. Long brown hair, green eyes, large callouses on the tips of his left fingers that I feel when he touches my arm. He wants a picture with me. I say sure. He hands his phone to his friend, steps back and puts his arm around my shoulder. He smells of alcohol, mints, and vinegary cologne. He slides his hand down over my left butt cheek and squeezes. My face is melting with disgust as the shutter clicks.

"You're a babe," he whispers into my ear.

I glare at him, stick my middle finger up, and begin to walk away. This sort of thing has happened before, many times before, and I try to suck it up, as always. I don't want to make trouble, especially if that Geffen guy is watching. But tonight, the rage consumes me, like wildfire. I'm maybe five feet away when my fingers form into a fist. Within two strides my knuckles are against the Fender-shirt dude's jaw. He staggers back, almost falls, puts his hand to his lip. Blood.

"I'll sue you!" he yells, smearing it against his chin with his hand.

"Go ahead." My laugh is loud, forced, boisterous-like, so no one can tell that I'm shaking. The men near the bar step back and a collective "Whoa!" fills the air, like I'm dangerous, out of control, deranged. An angry woman.

Rocky pulls me back. "What the hell?" he hisses.

I jerk away. The guys glare at me and move towards the door. My right hand aches from the force of the punch. I rub it on the side of my jeans, then pull a stick of gum out from my pocket and discard the wrapper on the barroom floor.

"I'm sick of this, Rocky."

His pocked cheeks are highlighted yellow in the dim light, his eyes wispy, weary. His hair is more streaked than ever with gray. "Yeah, what else is new?"

Babette has come over to me now. She puts her arm around my shoulder and pulls me in close. She wraps her palm around the knuckles of my hand and kisses my cheek. "I want to be brave like you, someday," she murmurs as she presses into me. Her energy is all around, but I feel empty.

Skepticism fills Rocky's face. "Yeah, sure, whatever." He backs away and turns around. He's on the other side of the room when I call out after him, "Where's Geffen?" but he's already signing autographs and clinking beer bottles with a man with red cheeks and a baseball hat saying, *Make America Rock Again*. He doesn't hear me.

#

A heavy mist has descended over the tops of the buildings. I put my bass and pedal board down, lean against the concrete side of the club, and light a cigarette. Smooth and comforting, the vapor sears deeply into my lungs. Rocky is always after me to quit. "That habit is shit," he says, and I

always feel like saying yeah, but my bass doesn't care if I smoke or not. I can rock the hell out of any tune, anytime, anywhere, just as I showed him tonight. But I have plenty of bad habits, like getting no sleep, lugging everything I own from place to place, getting felt up by drunks, and taking care of a bunch of babies.

Rocky's same ancient rusty Ford van is parked outside the venue. Two amps, three gear trunks, and the drum kit sit on the sidewalk, huddled together like a group of homeless. Bruce is patting his pockets for the key to the van. He must have left it in his knapsack, he tells me, just watch the stuff. I nod and he steps into the club. I take a deep drag off my cigarette and exhale through my nose, watching the smoke billow down in blue columns.

Rocky deposits his guitar and pedal board case with the rest of the equipment. My cigarette crushes under my boot, near a piece of crumbling sidewalk. He puts his arms around me and hums into my ear, "Hey, girl," just like he used to when we started going together. He presses me into doughy chest but I turn my head away. My nose wipes against the sleeve of my T-shirt.

The woman I saw in the bathroom before the show is exiting the club. She looks smaller than she did before, walking with a tall man in pristine jeans and a dress shirt, no tie, his arm around her shoulder. My heart jumps. It's the guy from Geffen—Rocky once showed me a picture of someone he said was from Geffen—but then I realize my mistake. His nose is too large. His face is too thin. It's not him at all.

"There is no guy from Geffen." I say to Rocky. "He's made up, isn't he?"

Rocky has this weird look on his face, his muscles moving against each other, like he's trying not to grin. "Don't get too wound about it," he says.

I push him away and take another cigarette from my pocket. "Fuck you Rocky, just fuck you." My insides are panging with shame at believing him yet again.

The woman and the man approach a yellow convertible Corvette parked a few cars behind the van. He holds the door open for her and as she gets in, she makes eye contact with me. She smiles, a tightlipped weary smile stripped of her prior confidence. For a moment, I feel exposed, but her expression is comforting. The car starts up, its motor ringing against my ears. She waves to me as they pass, and before I can return the gesture, they're gone, blending in with the streetlights.

Rocky's back inside the club. No one else is around. I think of what happened tonight, and how it was no different than any other stupid thing he's done to me over the years. But it wasn't the same. It was crueler, more vindictive. Shittier. More deserving of finality.

I pull out my sweatshirt from my bag and place it on top of the drum

kit. Then I remove my can of hairspray and douse each case, the shirt, and Rocky's guitar bag with a thick coat of perfumed, sticky alcohol. Out comes the Canada customs paperwork, our tour itinerary, dozens of receipts, and maps for every region of North America. I scatter them over the equipment, the amps, everything contained in a cohesive group. The lighter is in my hand. The papers ignite without difficulty.

The flames jump to my sweatshirt, encouraged by the breeze that has picked up. The garment catches and engulfs the left sleeve before moving on to the body. I wore that sweatshirt last night during soundcheck. A part of me is being incinerated with the fabric, but it thrills me. The tattered cases underneath catch, sizzling, their exteriors turning charred and black within seconds. The blaze pecks at Rocky's nylon guitar bag next, traveling the outline of the neck, and then across its worn front. Everything is embraced in smoking, soothing blue-orange.

People stream from the club, their voices ascending with the pyre. Shouts, quickened footsteps. The bartender waves a fire extinguisher. The guy I punched is carrying an ice bucket filled with water. Rocky tries to smother the flames with his jacket but Donnie and Bruce pull him back and say no, don't, it's too big for that. They are yelling, flustered, their macho coolness dissolving with the embers.

I sling my knapsack over my shoulder. With my bass in my hand, I begin to walk up the street. I turn around for a final glance and see Babette. Her arms are crossed but she is smiling. I beckon for her to join me. She hurries to catch up.

Liz Adair *received her B.A. in English from the University of Alabama in 2016. Currently, she serves as the Managing Editor of the McNeese Review and organizes MSU's graduate reading series. She is the first place recipient of the 2019 Joy Scantlebury Poetry Prize, and her poems have been selected as finalists for Jabberwock Review's 2019 Nancy D. Hargrove Editors' Prize in Poetry and F(r)iction's Winter 2018 Poetry Contest, judged by Kwame Dawes. She currently lives in Lake Charles, LA with her dog Rocky.*

Nightmare Sequence

Liz Adair

Sleep Stage 1

Shuffling from room to room
I clutch at the tatters of my skin
trying to make a person
out of pieces
bits of hands   lungs   faces
crumpled and glued
into almost recognizable shapes

jawless women drift
seamlessly through closed doors
they hide radium
behind gummy grins
and give luminescent blowjobs
to faceless men

my mouth is radioactive

Sleep Stage 2

I gave my last key to the man
who is trying to eat my couch
I shut the windows to keep the herons
from flying or stealing my car
to drive to the coast

the herons are too drunk to drive
and they are my neighbors now
so I shut the windows to keep them safe
like the man swallows my key
to keep me safe
and eats my couch
for the sake of my health

I kill the man

Sleep Stage 3

the herons smoke cigars
and I pluck the feathers
from their pink shivering bodies
to stop the smoldering

their nakedness
is lonely
and too familiar

I should have let them leave

REM Sleep

I turn out the lights in mourning
for the herons
my empty feathered neighbors
deceased

in the undark
the radium girls cook their partners
until they harden
and shatter from the heat

the girls are hungry
and so am I

A student at Delaware Valley University in Doylestown, PA, ***Lauren Schaumburg*** *has been writing for several years now, and considers the art form of writing to be one of her first loves. She pours passion into every new project she creates for herself, and feels she has something new, inventive and imaginative to offer the writing community, with her expressive style and wealth of ideas and concepts she hopes will one day find themselves on the public stage.*

The Violence of Creation

Lauren Schaumburg

You are, in essence, the site of all creation. Life flows from your fingertips when they connect with the soil, green leafy treasures sprout from your flesh. You lose yourself in the earth, can't seem to recall where you begin and where the flowers start to bloom within your chest, shoving organs aside to take root in your liver. You vomit into your open palms, hands stretched wide in affirmation of prayer, devotion to the all seeing, and the saliva drips from your skin in webs. When it catches the sunlight, it looks to be threads of viscous gold, flecked with something scarlet and lavender, something organic and wild, something that wants to eat you from the inside out, something like the sage leaves you swallowed yesterday hoping they'd shoot forth something lovely in your guts.

You are the birthplace of the concept of birth, the beginning and end of all things wonderful and feral and beautifully obscene in one single breath. It's been said Aphrodite sprang forth from the sea-foam hue of your iris, clawed her way tooth and nail through the ever-wide void of your pupils, split your skull in half like a child might haphazardly spring forth from their mother's frightfully delicate womb, and took shape on the tawny sands of Cyprus. She did not thank you; merely stared at you, as if asking for something you could never hope to give.

You, with your knife sharpened, blade slipping into torso, you tear forth a rib, dismantling the cage around your heart. Your pulse beats with fervor, purpose, anticipation for something of which you have no knowledge, but it is something, this dreadful, horrific something that digs its talons into the wound. The rib becomes man, as woman was the origin, and man is merely the extension, the imperfect duplicate, the almost there, but not quite, the creature that walks on his two legs only because you have allowed him to do so. You let him defile your body, fuck the gaping maw of raw flesh from

which he was pulled, but this happens only because you wish it. You are the master, he the submissive partner to bend to your will. It is a will that only remains benevolent when you command.

Sometimes, though, he gets out of line. Sometimes he is too greedy when he suckles at your breast, when he sips the ichor from your teat and bites at the nipple to try and squeeze out more when he has already had quite enough. Sometimes, you need to rain wrath upon him, all fiery-tongue and furious reproach against the thing that you gave the right to be sprouted from your torso, which houses your most sacred of bodily cavities, where he was nestled among the honeysuckle bushes and rose thorns, where his first sensations were the constant pain-pleasure push and pull of the Earth and all her turmoils and afflictions.

You will never be able to tame him, and he will always believe it is his purpose to tame you. How quickly he forgets the scent of milky, organic afterbirth which surrounded him, cradled him like you cradle the whole world in your singular body—how quickly he casts the memories of springing forth from your womb from his mind. He calls it crowning when his head emerged from within you, and just like that, he is king, and you are dirt. Nevermind that you are the dirt that brings life from spontaneity, beauty from the brown of mulch. To him, you are dirt underfoot.

He spits on you, and the cosmos within you trembles with previously unknown rage.

Daun Daemon's *stories have appeared in Fiction Fix, Southern Women's Review, The Dead Mule, and Literally Stories among others. She has recently published poetry in Typishly, Dime Show Review, Third Wednesday, Synaeresis Arts + Poetry, Remington Review, and other journals. Her poem "I hear her voice calling" won the Origami Poems 2017 Kindness Contest. Daemon lives in Raleigh, NC, with her husband and four cats. She teaches scientific communication at NC State University.*

Dead Air

Daun Daemon

Most of her customers talked her head off,
leaving no dead air to fill with her stories,
but this one, like very few others before,
let her prattle on and on about anything
and everything—her three smart girls,
all those kittens she needed to give away,
her mother dying too young from leukemia,
her husband, who hadn't worked all year
but brooded in front of the TV and drank.

The women needed a place to tell stories:
some were pious church ladies of course,
but most were mill workers and teachers
who had heard about her early hours and
felt safe driving the unlit country roads,
arriving at her shop at five in the morning
to have their hair washed and rolled,
dried and brushed out, teased and shaped
and shellacked for the long day ahead.

She had to stand and wait for them to leave,
had to handle their money first, had to
watch them fold dollars into their wallets
rather than give her a tip, had to listen
to them talk about their errands and chores
as they worked themselves into timeworn
cardigans, all the while wanting them to go,
anticipating the joy of the shop's air cleared
of voices before the next lady arrived.

The one today (a man!) said nary a word:
his chilly scalp yielded to her hands as she
washed his hair; his eyes—and mouth—
remained shut, he offered no judging looks,
no endless stories; he let her be, let her push
the portable dryer over his head as she sang,
chattered, laughed, sighed, complained, did
whatever she wanted to do, thankful that
the funeral home basement had no window.

Pixie

Daun Daemon

Sometimes they didn't notice me at all,
the women who came to Mama's beauty shop,
as I perched quietly atop the soda pop cooler
tucked into a dark nook in back, my long legs
pulled up with skinny arms around knobby
pre-teen knees, thighs close to my chest—
I thought myself a pretty fairy, resting
atop a toadstool in a mysterious dark forest,
awaiting my opportunity for mischief.

I anticipated the juicy bits a pre-teen girl
with a vivid imagination should never hear:
ailments and such with mouth-watering names
like “diverticulitis” and “hysterectomy”
words that made my tummy twist, and stories
about husbands hammered on their jobs
at the furniture factories, about teenaged sons
caught with floozies in the shadowy recesses
of the high school, which made me tingle.

As I faced the styling chair and listened,
I filed away the women's stories for the future
without knowing why (I didn't care about them,
these women who looked ten years older
than their age, who married drunks and raised
hellions for sons and sluts for daughters),
and watched Mama until she saw my toe twitch,
locked eyes with mine, paused mid-comb-stroke,
and shushed the half-teased woman bellyaching
about her boobs and a Cross Your Heart bra.

Mama would give me her side-eyed look,
which meant I should hop off the soda pop cooler,
dust off my bottom, open the lid and take out
a Sprite without paying for it, pop off the cap
on the built-in bottle opener, take a long sip,
grab a bag of salty peanuts from the goodie jar,
flip my long hair over one shoulder, then the other,
and fly out into the sunshine and clean air.

I called you “bastard” for eight reasons

Daun Daemon

“You're a bastard” I said with a 12-year-old's spite, knowing that “bastard” like its kin “sonofabitch” was a word usually spat at men, but you wanted me to get out of the pool at the San Juan Motel in North Myrtle Beach and I didn't want to because of the following:

(1) the cute lifeguard from the beach had walked up to gaze at my golden-haired friend,

(2) I was showing off in front of that friend,

(3) you let me bring that friend even though you knew Daddy would get drunk and sunburnt and mean, which he was at that very moment,

(4) I learned the truth about you from my drunk Daddy—“conceived under a stop sign” he would throw at you after too many swigs of cheap whiskey —

(5) I didn't know what that meant until I asked you one day in the car as you drove me to get a dozen chocolate-covered, cream-filled doughnuts at the Dixie Doughnuts bakery in Whitnel,

(6) you looked over the back of the seat and told me what it meant, told me that my PaPaw hadn't really been my PaPaw because he adopted you after he married your mama,

(7) my MaMaw was a slut even though those aren't the words you used though I still thought them,

(8) I felt that everything I knew was wrong and that I wasn't who I was, and the truth hit my tummy so hard I didn't want to eat the doughnuts, which were my favorite thing ever,

so

two months later, I called you a “bastard” and you didn't get mad, just looked at me with sadness and shame while Daddy laughed, and I knew then that you could hurt too.

Diego Luis *studies history as a PhD Candidate at Brown University. His photography has recently appeared in About Place Journal, Glint Literary Journal, The Tischman Review, december, and West Texas Literary Review.*

Light Vibration

I stood before the open vents at Reykjaladur in wonder, puzzling over the depths of the earth and the worlds of activity bubbling beneath the surface.

Joy III

They have no smiles, no laughter, no features, and yet they are joy. Standing there by that circle of eternal celebration, I shifted my posture. It wasn't a grand change, but it was enough to join them in their ecstatic revelry.

The Togetherness

A man accompanies a flying, gangling creature at Piedmont Park, and I thought back to Wells and his Martian invaders and questioned the implied universality of colonialism and conquest. Might we not have coexisted somehow?

Stacy A. Penner *is a fiction writer living in Vancouver, Canada. Currently she's working on an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia, writing her first novel, and reading to avoid actually writing her first novel.*

Driftwood

Stacy A. Penner

It was usually the children who found objects while playing on the shore, but this time it was a woman.

The woman belonged to the village that was always falling, perched up on the high cliff as it was and crumbling down onto the rocks below. Their homes had been falling as long as the oldest grandmother in the village could remember, and her grandmother before that, and hers before. More and more children were born while their village decayed and crumbled at the cliff's edge, houses clutching one another for balance.

On the other side, stretching far to the east, past where even the keenest-eyed boy could see, was the forest they did not enter.

On the outskirts, they picked up fallen trees and used their timber, or the men might catch the occasional lost animal, but the villagers never dared to pass under the shadowed branches to places they could not see from the cliff. They did not remember why. Father to son and mother to daughter.

The men fished in rough boats and the women grew tough plants in the rocks. Every one of them stayed near the cliff, caught between the cracking edge and the dark forest while their houses split down the grain and stumbled to the sharp rocks and crisp water below.

The men did not have new wood to repair their homes or boats, nor build new ones, but they rummaged in the ice-cold water for their smashed doors and posts and mailboxes, finding the pattern they'd engraved twenty years before for their new wife or the floorboard they'd dented hammering a baby's cradle. The children watched on their rocky shore for every piece that floated back, little fingers numb on jagged and splintered ends.

This wood was not from their homes.

The woman picked up the driftwood with a smile on her salt-sprayed face, lifting the rock it was wedged under. The pieces of wood found in the last few years had become smaller and smaller as the current and storms grew stronger and more houses fell. The only wood to be found were mere chips to stuff in stone walls to keep out the wind. This curved, sand-coloured piece could become a new rocker for her broken chair in time for the coming baby.

She clucked her tongue at the men out on the water for having missed

such a find, and she showed it to the children wading in the surf, their knobbly knees shaking in the cold. Their dark eyes lit up and they scrambled toward her as she walked up the rocky path to the village, past the other women as they were tending their plants.

The women gathered behind her, asking what building the wood seemed to have come from. One woman was looking for a lost washboard, the other for her old bedpost. The oldest grandmother of the village, as she always was, was searching for pieces of the wall that had marked her many sons' growth before they'd perished over three harsh winters.

The woman said no to all of them and showed them the salt-bleached wood. None of their men had shaped this wood before, and she didn't think any man had ever touched it. It's drifted far, she said. Drifted to me to rock my coming baby.

The other women began to quarrel with her for being selfish with the first real driftwood they'd witnessed. Their cliff was too far away to see any other islands, even when they travelled for many nights out on their boats, and nothing had ever come to them before from across the sea. They thought of the tree with strong roots that it must have come from, wondering if this was its fallen branch and how long ago it had separated.

The oldest grandmother asked to use it to help herself up the mountain, to lean her twisted and cracking joints on as she gathered plants with the other women. One woman suggested saving it as firewood for a cold winter's night, a sacrifice to save a few more lives in the coming year.

The young children were still following, and they asked for it to play with, to use as a sword to kill sea serpents or a magical staff to send more wood toward the village. The women laughed without smiles in their eyes at the children, shooing little hands away and then slipping their own fingers deep into their worn apron pockets.

The priestess said that the wood was an omen, and that they should put it in a sacred place to protect them from the tumbling cliff and the forest. Other women laughed. They wanted to use it, to stir soup or carry buckets of stones, to prod their husbands into working faster, to carve into pretty wooden beads, and to help move stones up the cliff for new buildings. One very young woman suggested planting it where their most flourishing plants grew, and the rest of them scoffed, looking at the long-dead wood.

The woman caressed its water-and-sand-washed surface, thinking of how far it had travelled to come to them. Was it older than the cliff itself? As the dripping slowed in her hands, she could smell the mustiness of this wanderer. She imagined it would taste sweet, like the fruit that had fallen, bruised, out of the forest when she was young, a wonderment that she had found by herself and had to share with every child in the village.

But then the other women began to clutch at each end of the driftwood in her hands, first softly, and then more until the woman was

surrounded by hands. Their fingers seemed to press into the wood itself, trying to imprint it with their mark.

The woman tore it away, running on narrow rock streets between tight houses to the edge of the crumbling cliff. Her baby lay heavy in her womb, but she soothed it as she stumbled.

The women still followed, their voices now frantic as they told the woman to stop. But she outflew them, using the wood to steady herself on the rocks. The sweat from her hands mixed into the salt deeply sunken into the wood.

She reached the cracking edge and paused, the toes of her rough shoes almost over the rocks below, standing in an old forge whose roof had fallen mere weeks before and whose pillars were now straining to balance on the cliff.

Beneath was the sea, its briny grey surging below over the rocks and stretching towards the horizon. It was unmarked but for the silhouettes of their men fishing in their boats, small among the waves far away from shore. No islands, no trees, no other villages across the cold waves. Wherever the wood was from, it had travelled far to arrive in her hands.

The woman gripped the wood at one end, feeling the dents from the clutching fingers, bruises on the wood. She took one shuddering breath and heaved it over the cliff, her fingers grasping empty air even as the wood left her hand. The driftwood fell slowly, tumbling and rolling like so many houses before it. Spinning through the wind like their boats in the swells. She watched, waiting for it to smash and splinter against the rocks below, but it disappeared in the white crash of a wave. All of the women held their breath as they searched the water until one child cried and pointed past the rocks. The driftwood bobbed and tossed in the waves, untouched. Their eyes were drawn to it, and they watched as the water carried it farther away. The tide was going out, and the ocean was taking back its own until they could see it no more.

Then the other women bent their heads in shame, searching their hands for any sign they had touched the wood. Hopeful for the merest splinter. But there were none. Their hands were only empty. Empty as they had never been, now that those same hands had touched the smooth grain of the driftwood, now that those same eyes had traced its shape and saw the shape it could be.

The women all turned away and returned to their homes. They removed the quilts off their beds and took their husbands' axes and went into the forest, under the boughs of the trees, beyond what they could see from their village.

The woman who'd heaved the wood into the ocean sat by the crumbling cliff, watching them enter the forest. She stroked the stretched fabric of her dress over her belly, her fingers tingling on the small threads.

The other women emerged as the men's boats turned their prows towards the cliff. Leaves in their hair, the women carried firewood, straight branches for canes, a young tree to grow strong roots in the centre of their village, and two curved pieces of wood to make a rocker.

Siân Killingsworth's *poetry has appeared in Stonecoast Review, Glass: A Journal, Columbia Poetry Review, Mom Egg Review, Ekphrastic Review, Oakland Review, and Mudfish. She has an MFA in poetry from the New School, where she served on the staff of Lit. She is a current board member of the Marin Poetry Center in Northern California. Read more about her at www.sianessa.com.*

Cassiopeia and Orion

Siân Killingsworth

She waits for him all summer
slowly spreading herself wide
across the hot sky revolving
a hot zigzag
till October

she glitters lazily above
him wordless
anticipating his entrance
from the rim of the world

fall begins to cool the air
condensing humidity
and the world starts to tilt for her

on glassy evenings
three diamonds in his belt
shoot beams of fire

she waits for him to rise up
her patience her excitement
spun out in the dark
a web of stars to catch him—

Khalil AbuSharekh *was born and raised in Gaza, Palestine. He currently lives and works in Houston, Texas. A graphic designer and videographer by training, he writes, creates, and produces videos for a wide diversity of clients from the art world to the health sector. Since moving to the U.S., over 10 years ago, Khalil has been writing short stories of his childhood in Gaza, coming of age in Palestine, and the culture and people of his homeland. As the president of the board of the Houston Palestine Film Festival, Khalil is committed to sharing the stories of Palestinians.*

Om Qasem

Khalil AbuSharekh

When I was still very young—before I started school—the first thing I would see when I opened the front door of our home was the front door of the Abu Qasem family residence across our very narrow street. Actually, it wasn't really a street. More like a footpath—since it wasn't wide enough for even a single car to traverse. The Abu Qasem's son, Qasem, was my older sister Heba's friend. He was her age and the two of them were two years older than I was. He used to play with me because he liked to be around Heba and I was Heba's shadow, whether she liked it or not. Om Qasem, Qasem's mother, and my mom would alternate sitting on each other's front steps, chatting as they kept an eye on their younger children.

The first newspaper I ever saw belonged to Om Qasem. Some days she would have the paper with her. As she sat on the steps she would be surrounded by children of all ages listening as she read aloud articles from the paper. Often I would lose interest in what she was saying because I was more interested in the images on the front page, including the logo, *Al Quds (Jerusalem),* written in a bold, black Arabic font with an illustration of the city of Jerusalem behind it. Om Qasem noticed my fascination with images so she offered to leave the paper with me so I could see the pictures on all the pages. But when I tried to check out the entire paper, I couldn't flip the pages. I was overwhelmed by the size of them. From then on I was satisfied with whatever I could see while Om Qasem was holding the newspaper.

Sometimes Om Qasem asked the older kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. Qasem, Heba, Ahmed, Ashraf and his brother Khalil would answer "engineer," "doctor," "car mechanic," "lawyer," "architect." Some of us were like me—too young to attend school—but it didn't matter. We would tell Om Qasem to ask us the same question; then we would provide the same answers we had heard from the older kids. It made us feel proud to be part of the "grown up" conversation.

One day Qasem and his mom and sisters disappeared. Their house was empty. For weeks I kept hoping that when I opened our front door I would find the Qasem's door also open. Instead, the months passed by. Occasionally I and others would hear rumors of at least some of the family members returning to the house, but never to stay. Eventually, even that stopped. We didn't mention their name anymore.

Their front door began accumulating spider webs—but only until that time of year when the smell of ripe guavas filled our street. In the past, all the kids in the neighborhood would climb the wall surrounding Qasem's house to steal the fruit from a big tree in the courtyard. For days on end we kids ate nothing but guavas. Soon enough, like all of us, I experienced the pain that gorging on guavas precipitates when going to the bathroom to do #2.

But one day that no one wants to remember, around noon I saw the front door open slightly. Heba and all the other big kids were at school, so I embarked on a solo mission to learn what was going on in Om Qasem's abode. I climbed the wall surrounding our house and then moved sideways along it until I was at the angle that allowed me to see inside the house across the way. A man was replacing the lock on the front door. I kept moving until I saw Om Qasem at the back of the house close to the kitchen door. All the while the stranger was continuing to test the new locks he had installed.

I moved back to our front door and jumped to the ground. I already knew that by placing one foot on the doorknob and leaping as high as I could, I would be catapulted high enough to catch the top of the door. Then, by pulling myself up by my arms, I would be able to sit on the narrow concrete slab that jutted over our front door. When I stood up, there was Om Qasem, staring at me. Her eyes shot through me like two bullets. I panicked. Looking away, I climbed up one more step and began walking on our roof, acting like I was checking the rocks that held down the asbestos sheets. This was a routine my dad performed every fall to make sure the roof would last through the winter, except I was checking the sheets in the spring. At the same time I also continued to glance at Om Qasem's house. I realized she wasn't alone. Her two sisters were with her. All three were cleaning the house.

Om Qasem noticed me once again, but this time she said, "Khalil, come on down here. I want you to do something." I retraced my steps and in seconds I was on the ground, had crossed our alleyway and was standing in front of her front door. I didn't knock immediately because I was mesmerized by the shiny new lock. The Multilock brand was shaped like a man raising his arms above his head to show off his muscles. When I finally did knock, it was the locksmith who opened the door. Om Qasem handed me ten shekels and asked me to buy a broom, Tide detergent, and a small soda for the man who was working on the doors. I ran to the store, bought the items, and handed them to Om Qasem with the change, one and a half shekels. She insisted that I keep the change, carefully putting the coins in my side pocket.

I didn't leave the house. Instead I found an empty bucket, turned it upside-down and sat on it, observing the man changing locks in every room. Then I started sweeping the floor with the new broom. Though it was easy to use because the brushes were brand new and soft, because its handle was twice my size, when I would push my pile of dirt into a mound the broom handle would shake and the coins in my pocket would jingle.

Then my mom called me. I yelled back, "I am here."

She asked, "Where?"

I answered, "At Om Qasem's house."

Her response was joyful, "Om Qasem? Are you back?" Covering her hair with a towel, she crossed the alley. Upon entering the house, she immediately let go of the towel. Just as quickly she put it back on her head because she saw the man who was replacing the locks. With a big smile she said, "I wondered why the north side is delightful today."

Om Qasem kissed Mom's cheek as she replied, "Your heart's light is the present one. I missed you."

"Oh, Om Qasem, I missed you too!" said my mom. "And look who else is here! Widad and Salwa! How are you doing?"

Om Qasem's sisters responded politely, but also continued to clean the rooms.

Then my mom pointed to me. "When did you come over here?" By now I was standing next to her, still holding the broom. I answered, "An hour ago."

She slapped the side of my head as she asked, "Why didn't you say something?"

I didn't respond; instead I continued attempting to sweep the floor. Mom heard my money jingling and asked, "Where did you get those coins?"

It was Om Qasem who responded. "I gave them to him. He has been very helpful."

Mom replied, "This is his duty. You shouldn't give him money for what he must do." She looked at me as she asked, "How much did she give you?" I showed her the money. "Are you crazy, Om Qasem? This could be Heba's pocket money for a week."

Om Qasem dismissed her comment, so my mother began helping the others to get the house ready. Two hours later Heba showed up from school. Beckoning to Heba while pulling my arm, Mom said, "Let them rest. Let's go eat lunch." As we left the locksmith followed us out the door, his work completed.

Once in our house, Mom took me aside. "My love, this is a lot of money in your pocket. Someone might steal it from you. Kids may take advantage of you. How about I save it for you?"

I answered, "No, I can take care of it and hide it myself."

"It's your call," she responded, "but how about I give you one third of

it every day. You can start with the first third today?" After some thought, I agreed. So I handed her two half shekels and kept the third one.

Even before lunch I went to the store and bought candy. After lunch I went again, this time to buy a smoothie. Naturally Heba noticed my two trips and asked our mother why I had money of my own. Mom told her what had happened, so Heba started being extra nice, promising that she would take me with her to play with her friends. She even asked if I wanted anything from her school the following day. I didn't understand what she meant until she explained that she could buy me the best lime juice smoothie ever at the shop next door to her school.

"Of course," I answered. "I would really like to try one."

Because she was being so nice and had promised me the lime juice smoothie, I told Heba that I had three agoras left in my pocket and another whole shekel that our mom was safekeeping for me.

"Wow! That's very cool. You should buy more candies."

"I did twice already today and I'm full," I replied. "Would you like to have a candy?"

"No, not really."

"Is it because a lime juice smoothie is better?"

"No. You know that I like many kinds of candy at the store, but this is your money and you should keep it," Heba said.

Nevertheless, late that afternoon I asked her to walk with me to the store. So off we went. Once there, I told her to pick out two pieces of candy, and I picked one. "I will make it up to you tomorrow with the smoothie," she said. I smiled. I loved my older sister.

Then we were moseying along toward home, enjoying each other's companionship as we savored our candy. It was almost sunset. Suddenly, out of nowhere a white 404 Peugeot zoomed down the street. It stopped at the entrance to our alley. Three men jumped out of the car and started running. Immediately, Heba and I did the same. Where were these men going? When we were closer, we recognized Abu Qasem as one of the three men, so it was no surprise to find all of them pounding on the entrance while Abu Qasem shouted, "Open the door!"

Om Qasem responded calmly. "This is my house, so please leave us in peace."

The response was, "Your house? You are not the man here, Mrs.! Our issues have not been resolved. You have no right to open this house on your own!" But she did. Many years later I would learn that what Om Qasem had said was true. It was her house. Her wealthy parents had bought it when their daughter married, so she and her children would always have a place to live. Abu Qasem, unlike his wife, was uneducated. A fisherman by trade, they knew their daughter's spouse would never make a substantial living wage.

One of the men ran back to the car and picked up two crowbars and a

thick wooden board. At the same time, Heba and I ran to our house. My sister went inside, calling to our mother to come help, while I watched the unfolding drama from our front door. The men stuffed the two crowbars between the steel door and the front of the house and gave a mighty push. The crowbars slipped out. By now Om Qasem was begging Abu Qasem to go, to leave them in peace. He ignored her.

She cried. She begged her husband for the sake of their children to please go away. It was the first time I had ever heard Om Qasem sound weak and broken.

Her husband dismissed her, continuing to fight the steel door. By now the crowbars were wedged deeper into the gap. Then there was a loud and scary bang when one of the crowbars flipped out, hitting Abu Qasem in the chest before falling to the ground. One of the sisters began wailing, "Oh friends! Oh neighbors! Help us! Save us!" She kept repeating this litany, louder and louder.

Mom pushed me to the wall as she rushed outside. "Abu Qasem," she exclaimed. "Praise Allah, brother! This is a moment of anger! Please calm down; she is your wife, the mother of your children! Brother, listen to me! Praise Allah and calm down!"

Abu Qasem ignored my mother as he continued his destruction of the front door. So Mom asked Heba to run to the nearby home of the Lobbad family to tell their sons their help was urgently needed.

Even before Heba reached the end of the alley, another car pulled up, disgorging more men with iron bars and thick wooden planks. "Alright, whore," said Abu Qasem. "I will show you what these animals can do and they will teach you a lesson you will never forget." He asked four of the men to lift the lightest among them to the top of the wall surrounding the house. The plan was that he would then cross the roof, jump into the courtyard, and enter the house by the kitchen door. Then he could open the front door from the inside.

Even though I was very young, I realized what was happening. Once again, using our front doorknob as my launching pad, in no time I was in my monitoring position, able to watch the stranger walking on the opposing wall. The three women, armed with the new broom and pots and pans, were ready to stop him. I couldn't see Om Qasem, but I heard her behind the main door continuing to beg her husband to leave all of them alone. Mom's voice escalated, shaming Abu Qasem and his brothers for assaulting helpless women. "Instead of demonstrating your manhood to the Israeli army you are practicing on women. Shame on you! Shame on you! Your children will never forget this day. Stop it, brother, and praise Allah. Calm down for Allah's sake!"

Meanwhile, Abu Qasem's brother was crossing the roof and looking for the best place to jump off the wall into the courtyard, but the sisters were

too aggressive. So the man picked up a concrete block off the roof and threw it at them. They avoided it by pulling away, calling for help at the same time. But now the man could jump down easily. Though the women attacked him, he pushed them away and rushed through another door into the house. Though I could no longer see what was transpiring, I heard Om Qasem and her sisters attacking the man, keeping him away from the front door. But it was no use. Moments later I saw Om Qasum and her daughters run into another room, locking the door behind them.

Now the man opened the front door easily. Six other males, still armed with iron bars and thick boards, rushed into the house, locking the door behind them. My mom, hysterical, began banging on the door, calling to anyone on the street to help her. She was like a bird fighting death in a closed cage.

In minutes, the men managed to break down the interior door and drag the three females into the courtyard. They started beating all of them with crowbars, iron bars, thick boards, and their feet. The men were hitting their faces, their heads—all over their bodies. No exceptions, no mercy. The cries for help stopped. Instead, there were whimpers and groans.

When the men finally opened the front door, my mom attacked Abu Qasem's face with her fingernails. He pushed her aside. Then all the men rushed to the two cars and quickly disappeared. Mom was inside the house in an instant. I heard a loud, long scream. "The criminals, the animals! Call the ambulance! Call the ambulance!"

Neighbors ventured out and, hesitantly, began to help my mom. She asked young men to carry Om Qasem and her sisters to their cars and take them to the hospital. Mom was also in the last car to leave for the hospital, but not before telling Heba to guard the house. I left my observation post in a state of shock and walked into Om Qasem's house. I felt the sticky texture of a liquid with my bare feet, I learned the smell of blood, even though I couldn't see it. In the midst of that darkness I saw one thing still shining—the new copper lock.

Reflecting on that day years later, I surmised that Abu Qasem was the real guardian of the house, but because he failed his family—especially his wife—time after time, she installed a lock—with the symbol of a guardian—hoping it would protect her and her children from strangers. She didn't expect her husband, who should have been her primary guardian, to become her potential assassin. The shiny copper lock wasn't enough to protect her from him.

No one ever mentioned that day again. No one wanted to remember it. It was as if it never happened. That front door would be locked for years. Eventually however, a divorced Om Qasem did return to her house to raise her son and two daughters. She was a single mother, the sole protector of her children, this time with neither a shiny lock nor a guardian to assist her.

Announcing our Contest Winners!

In February of 2019 we opened our second Biennial Open Fiction contest. Narrowing down our picks was hard, but here are the winners.

First Place: *The Gift* by P. Jo Anne Burgh
Second Place: *Accordion Breathing* by Kimm Brockett Stammen
Third Place: *Congratulations* by Alan Sincic

Honorable Mentions:
Creative Writing Club by K. Marvin Bruce
Old Job by Dominiqua Dickey
The Umbra by Johnny Caputo

Our finalists were judged by Venita Blackburn, and we are indebted to her for her time.

P. Jo Anne Burgh *is a writer and a lawyer. Her short stories have been published in a number of anthologies and online publications. She lives in Connecticut.*

First Place
The Gift
P. Jo Anne Burgh

Venita's thoughts: This story possessed the classic narrative grip, urging the reader on and on in wonder and scandal.

Her mother insisted she had the gift, but Sylvia knew better. Her gift was the ability to figure out what people wanted to hear. Which was why she agreed: because her mother wanted to believe that her legacy would go on.

Pulling the oxygen mask from her face, the dying woman rasped, "You. Carry on."

"I will, Mama." Sylvia settled the mask back in place. Her mother's skin, once supple, was so dry it seemed ready to shatter. The lips that used to be painted blood-red were now grayish-white and cracked beyond anything Chapstick could hope to repair. With the lightest touch possible—fingertips only—Sylvia clasped her mother's wizened fingers. It would be several more days before the irregular beeping of the monitor became one long, steady tone signaling Rosa Signatorio's departure from this world. By then, she would have stopped trying to control her only daughter, to elicit sacred vows that would fade within moments of being uttered. But not yet. With a voice more breath than sound, Sylvia's mother spoke through the mask: "Carry on."

Barely listening, Sylvia agreed. All that mattered was that her mother rest in peace.

A week after the funeral, Sylvia left her father to the dusty duplex in Queens and went back to upper Manhattan. She loved her studio apartment, a semi-legal sublet with twelve-foot ceilings and front windows overlooking a tidy, largely residential section of Columbus Avenue. Granted, it was a fourth-floor walkup, and three flights of stairs were a lot when a person was carrying laundry or groceries, but you couldn't have everything.

Ernie, the owner or landlord or whatever he was, showed up promptly on the first of each month to pick up the rent, and he came almost as promptly whenever she called about something to be fixed. More important, after that first time he came to collect the rent, he never tried to collect anything else.

She'd seen to that.

"You're sweet," he'd said, jamming the check into the back pocket of his sagging jeans, so dirty they were barely blue. His grin creased his unshaven face. His jowls flapped slightly. "We could have some fun."

"Bet your wife wouldn't like it." Sylvia stepped back, evading his grimy fingers.

"She don't care," Ernie said. "Long as I bring home the bacon, I can do whatever."

Sylvia shook her head. "I don't get involved with married men."

"Who said anything about involved? I'm just saying, a little something after I gave you such a good deal on the rent."

His light-brown eyes glittered in the overhead light. Sylvia's stomach flipped. This man wanted what he wanted. Forget the cross that nestled in the coarse curls on his chest. Forget the wife. Forget the neighbors who might hear her scream.

For reasons she didn't understand until much later, she steeled herself and reached out as if to take his hand. Her fingers touched his forearm.

His dirty hands ripped at her T-shirt. She tried to fight as he yanked down her jeans and shoved her backward onto the futon. She kicked and screamed as he pinned her body with his. His hot breath in her face. The stench of his unwashed body. The sharp agony of him trying to jam himself inside her.

She jerked back her hand as if she had touched fire.

She didn't know whether this was the gift her mother had always claimed to have or just an instant of incredible, terrifying imagination. Not that it mattered. Unless she acted, this could be her fate.

He loomed between her and the door. She couldn't escape. She couldn't overpower him. She'd have to outsmart him.

For just a moment, Sylvia closed her eyes. No longer, because she didn't trust him as far as she could drop-kick the M-11 bus. Then she drew in a sharp breath as if she'd just seen something horrific—a subway crash, a gory murder victim. "Oh, no," she gasped, her hand over her mouth, her eyes round in horror. She was careful not to look straight at him lest she laugh out loud. Instead, she focused on the wall over his head as she moaned, "Please, no. Not to such a good man. No."

"Huh?" He was staring at her.

She lifted her eyes and hands to the ceiling as if begging. "No, please. Not to him. He didn't mean it. Don't do it. Please, no."

"What are you talkin' about?"

He sounded confused. Not good enough. He needed to be terrified. She continued to direct her pleas to the ceiling. "I know he's not perfect, but please. I'm begging you. Don't do this to him."

"Do what? Who're you talking to?" His voice wobbled slightly.

Nervous now. Better, but not enough.

She turned away as if she could not bear the sight of whatever horrors lay ahead. With her back to him, she braced herself for an instant, then chomped the inside of her cheek. She could taste the blood as she turned back to Ernie, her eyes brimming. She petitioned the ceiling again, "Santa Maria, no. I beg you. He made a mistake, that is all. Do not do this to him."

"Do what?" His voice was sharp with uncertainty. Good.

Sylvia bit her lip as if keeping back a secret. Her eyes narrowed as she whispered, "Trust me. You don't want to know."

His face was pale now. "Know what?"

She shook her head. "I can't—the spirits are saying—no, it's too awful. I can't tell you."

"Spirits?" He sounded half-scared, but also half-skeptical.

As if confessing, Sylvia said, "I have the gift. My mother has it, and her mother before her." He didn't look convinced. With good reason, Sylvia conceded. Only the most clueless sap would truly believe in a spirit world whose inhabitants communicated with this one. *Not you, Mama,* her mind hastened to add.

She cast around for something to bolster her performance. Her eye fell the dog-eared photograph on the bulletin board over her small desk. *Rosa's Psychic Readings,* the dingy storefront proclaimed. Her friend Becky had sent it from Sacramento years ago, but it could pass for the Bronx. She handed the photograph to Ernie. "This is my mother's place," she lied.

"Your mother's a psychic?" Scared was edging out skeptical.

Sylvia nodded with great seriousness. In a low, almost hypnotic voice, she said, "She has the gift of second sight." Sylvia's father said once that her mom's real gift was milking those poor suckers who paid her to talk to their departed relatives. Her parents didn't speak for an entire month after that.

"You mean she can tell the future?" Ernie shifted from one foot to the other.

"Yes. The spirits talk to her. And since I am her daughter..." She lifted her hands, palms up. Something flickered in his eyes, and for a moment she was afraid she'd overdone it.

"Who talks to you? The spirits or your mother?" he sneered, his bravado waving like a flag that had caught a sudden breeze.

"You show respect!" she spat. He shrank back. "The spirits talk to all of us, all the women in my family. I beg them to tell me only the good, but sometimes..." She swallowed hard and bit her lip again. "Like when I touched your arm just now. I could see—I could see—" In her best trembling voice, she said, "You have two children. A boy and a girl."

"How'd you know that?" He sounded surprised, nervous. Obviously, he'd forgotten that the kids had been with him when he showed her the apartment. They spent the entire time running up and down the stairs,

hollering and banging.

"You have two children," she intoned as if she hadn't heard him. "They must be kept safe."

"What are you saying? Are you threatening me? Don't threaten me, or I'll kick your ass out of here so fast—" But there was a thread of fear in his voice.

She faced him, chin up. "This is not a threat. I'm saying—you must not anger the spirits. You must honor your marriage vows. Only then will your children be safe."

His eyes glinted with uncertainty. Then, just as she thought she'd won, he snorted. "That's a crock if I ever heard one." He stepped toward her, and the cellphone on his belt rang. He snatched it, jabbed a button, and snarled, "Yeah?" All the color drained out of his face. "I'll be right there." He punched the "off" button and stared wild-eyed at her. "What did you do?" His voice squeaked on *do*.

"I didn't do—anything." But she shifted her gaze, inviting him to believe she was lying now, that she had exercised some sort of power even if the only power at work appeared to be that of sheer dumb luck. "What happened?"

"That was my wife. My kid—they're at the emergency room. He got stung by a bee and blew up like a balloon. He coulda died." Ernie backed away from her, toward the door, pointing with a shaking finger. "You almost killed my boy! You're evil! Get out!"

"No!" It had taken months to find this apartment. No way was she moving. She thought fast. "I'm not evil. Just the opposite—I'm your protection. You saw it for yourself. You listened to me, and now your son is safe." She lowered her voice, careful not to touch him again. "If you let me stay here, I will do everything in my power to be sure no harm comes to you or your family." *And if he didn't*... the implication hung in the air, as heavy as rush-hour smog over the West Side Highway. She stared him down, imploring him to believe as strongly in her powers of protection as he apparently did in her ability to know and control events.

And believe he did. Never again did he try to lay a hand on her. Nor, as far as she knew, did he ever try to jimmy the new locks she had installed the next morning.

Sylvia didn't know who he told, but after that day, most other tenants gave her a wide berth. Once, she came home to find a cross and a dead rat outside her door, but one call to Ernie took care of it. Within days, she had a new neighbor across the hall.

A few weeks after her mother died, Sylvia was carrying groceries up the second flight when Elena Gomez, the tiny lady who lived in the back apartment on the second floor, hurried up the stairs and grabbed her arm.

"I need you to talk to my Ruben," she said.

Sylvia had a vague recollection of hearing that Mrs. Gomez's adult son might have died recently, but New Yorkers rarely knew the details of their neighbors' lives. "Why?"

"I need to know he is at peace," Mrs. Gomez said.

So he was definitely dead. "I'm sure he is," she said. "He was a good man." She'd never actually met Ruben, but she also hadn't heard anybody say he ran a meth lab or kicked puppies.

Mrs. Gomez peered up at her. "I need you to talk to him."

"I don't do that kind of thing." The bags of canned goods were getting heavier. She started climbing again.

"You must! I'll pay you!"

Sylvia stopped. "What?"

Mrs. Gomez hustled up the stairs. "Here!" She stuffed what looked like a dollar bill into Sylvia's bag. "Now, you talk to my Ruben."

Sylvia tried to see the number on the bill without being too obvious. It looked like a twenty. "Come up in half an hour," she said. For twenty bucks, she could have a quick chat with a dead man.

Precisely thirty minutes later, a rap on the door announced Mrs. Gomez. Sylvia opened the door and gestured to the brick-red futon. "Please sit. Would you like some tea?" Without waiting for an answer, she poured tea from pink ceramic pot her mother gave her when she moved into her first apartment. She opened the lid as if she would be able to read the tea leaves; Mrs. Gomez would never know the pot contained only two bags of Lipton's. She handed one of the mugs to Mrs. Gomez and took the other, settling herself in the faded blue slipper chair she'd found on 103rd Street.

"Like I said, I don't usually do this kind of thing," Sylvia began. "The other world can be difficult to reach. Sometimes the spirits don't wish to talk to us."

"Ruben will talk to you," Mrs. Gomez said. "I'm his mama. I say who he talks to."

"All right," Sylvia sighed. "Now, I need you to close your eyes and concentrate. If you don't concentrate hard enough, I won't be able to get through to him." That was one of her mother's standard lines when people came for readings. Even as a girl, Sylvia recognized it as a cover in case Rosa couldn't come up with a convincing "spirit": *You didn't concentrate hard enough!*

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Mrs. Gomez's eyes were squinched shut, and she screwed up her face and strained like she was about to take a dump right there. Sylvia raised her hands and called, "Ruben! Ruben Gomez! Can you hear me? Ruben Gomez?" After several minutes of this, she said, "I'm sorry. I don't seem to be able to reach him."

"I can pay more!" Mrs. Gomez snatched up her purse and rummaged inside. "Here!" She thrust a crumpled twenty at Sylvia.

For forty bucks, Ruben could show up. Sylvia tucked the bill into her bra and lifted her hands again. “Ruben Gomez! Speak to me!” To Mrs. Gomez, she said, “Close your eyes! Concentrate!” Obediently, Mrs. Gomez closed her eyes again and scrunched up her face.

Sylvia called Ruben a few more times, then paused to sip her tea. Time to get this show on the road, as her father used to say. “Ruben? Is that you?”

Mrs. Gomez’s eyes popped open. “Is it him?”

“Concentrate!” Sylvia hissed. “Ruben! Your mama needs to know how you are!” She lifted her face to the ceiling, furrowing her brow as though listening intently.

“What does he say?” Mrs. Gomez whispered.

“Sssh!”

After a couple more minutes, Sylvia dropped her arms and sagged in her chair. “He’s gone.”

Mrs. Gomez sat up straight, her worn face eager. “He was here? What did he say?”

Sylvia drank her cooling tea. “He’s not allowed to say much. They have rules. They don’t want people up there telling us what God looks like or anything like that.”

“But he’s—” Mrs. Gomez pointed toward the ceiling.

“Oh, yes,” Sylvia said. “He’s up there. He’s with his grandmother.” Too late, it occurred to her that she didn’t actually know if Ruben’s grandmother was dead.

Mrs. Gomez frowned. “*My* mama? *She’s* up there?”

“Um, could be his father’s mother,” Sylvia said. “He didn’t say.”

“That old witch is burning in hell,” said Mrs. Gomez. She spat on the floor. “It must be my mama.”

“He didn’t say.” Sylvia tried not to look at the spot of spittle on her floor.

“What else did he tell you?”

Sylvia thought back to what little she’d known about Ruben Gomez. He was impeccably groomed, loose-limbed and well-meaning, but not very bright—sort of like a Puerto Rican version of an Irish setter. He visited his mother every Sunday afternoon. Once when Sylvia was lying on her loft bed with a paperback, she happened to look out the window as Ruben was leaving. A tall blond man was standing around the corner on 109th, his back against the brick wall, just out of sight of anyone on Columbus. Apparently unaware, Ruben was heading right toward him. Sylvia climbed down from the loft bed and scrambled underneath to open the window and shout a warning. Just as she threw the window up, Ruben turned the corner. An instant later, Ruben had the other man pressed up against the building and they were kissing passionately.

By the time Ruben died, Sylvia had witnessed this scene dozens of times. The same man, the same place. No matter the weather, he never came inside.

"He had a sweetheart," Sylvia said now. "I didn't quite catch the name."

Mrs. Gomez scowled. "Susanna," she said. "That tramp. She tried to trap him." She looked like she was going to spit again.

"Please don't," Sylvia said, and Mrs. Gomez sat back, still frowning.

"Was it that Susanna?" Ruben's mother demanded.

"He didn't say," Sylvia said. "But he did say he would never have married Susanna. He said that marrying her would have meant breaking the heart of the person he loved the most."

Mrs. Gomez's eyes filled with tears. "He was such a good boy," she said. "He loved his *mamacita* so much. He took such good care of me."

"Yes, he did," said Sylvia.

#

Sylvia never actually planned to turn her so-called gift into a business, but after Mrs. Gomez told everybody about how she sat in Sylvia's apartment and watched her have a conversation with Ruben, people started coming to her. Eventually, she put a sign in her window, advertising psychic readings by appointment. Ernie was too scared to object.

People who wanted to know their destiny in general terms were easy to satisfy: for twenty bucks, she laid her hand on theirs and told them they would find love and contentment, but only if they were true to themselves and kind to others. That way, if things didn't work out the way they wanted, they couldn't blame her because it obviously meant they had been unkind or not true to themselves.

Others wanted specific information, such as whether a husband was cheating or a lover was dealing drugs. These people were harder to placate, so she charged them fifty dollars. Once she knew what had given rise to the suspicions—the wife found a condom wrapper in the pocket of his work pants, or the unemployed boyfriend suddenly had money to buy his girlfriend expensive jewelry—she would pretend to ask the spirits. Then, as gently as she could, she would tell the person that the spirits said not to worry, that everything would work itself out. Nine times out of ten, the person left happy and relieved. On the rare occasion that the person protested and said the spirits were wrong, Sylvia would simply shrug and say that she had no magic powers, she only knew what the spirits told her, and if the person was so sure, they should talk to a private investigator or the police, not a psychic. That shut them up.

On a cool day in April, Sylvia opened her door to a plump thirty-something woman who was still huffing from the long flights of stairs. She had wavy light-brown hair and almond-shaped green eyes. Her front teeth

overlapped slightly. She wore a windbreaker over a rose-colored knit top and dark blue jeans. The diamond in her engagement ring was so tiny that Sylvia knew she'd probably married young, before her husband had earned any money. Both the engagement ring and the thin gold wedding ring had obviously been placed on her hand at least twenty pounds ago.

"Hi!" the woman beamed. "I'm Carrie Smith."

"Hello, Mrs. Smith. Please come in." Sylvia stepped back to allow her to enter.

"This place is great! I love what you've done with this space!" Carrie Smith admired everything: the scarf draped over the tiny breakfast bar to separate the studio into two distinct areas, the loft bed that took advantage of the high ceiling and the dressing area underneath, the framed posters and cheap artwork gracing the walls, and the bookshelves crammed with paperbacks. "I always wanted to live in the city," she said. "But Don and I got married right out of school, and we didn't want to raise kids here, so we stayed in Jersey."

Sylvia flicked the "on" button of the electric kettle. "Would you like some tea before we start?"

"What? Oh, sure. I'm sorry, I'm just so excited. I've never been to a psychic before." But something in her voice didn't sound merely excited. She was too bubbly, almost manic.

While the water boiled, Carrie Smith's words raced like a river fresh from the thaw. Sylvia made noncommittal sounds as she loaded the teapot and mugs onto a tray and set it on the ottoman in front of the futon where Carrie perched. "Honey in your tea?" she asked, interrupting.

"That would be great," Carrie said. "Thanks so much. You're so nice. My friend Ellen came to you last year, and she said you were really nice even if you did get her reading wrong."

"I did?"

"Well, kind of. She thought her husband was having an affair, and you told her everything would be okay. Turned out he really was cheating. He left her for her sister's nanny. They're getting a divorce."

"I'm sorry," said Sylvia. "But she got rid of a cheater, so it sounds like it really is okay."

"Maybe you're right." Carrie Smith sounded dubious. "I guess we'll have to wait and see."

"Exactly," Sylvia said. "Are you ready to get started?"

"Sure! What do you need to know?"

"Whatever you want to tell me," Sylvia said. She sipped her tea as Carrie talked about her husband's plumbing business, their two ten-year-old boys ("Twins! Nobody in my family ever had twins before!"), their seven-year-old girl ("The apple of her daddy's eye!"), her parents who had moved to. . . Florida ("It's so hard not having Mom close by!"), and how much she

enjoyed being a stay-at-home mom ("I know people look down on us, but believe me, we work!"). As Carrie Smith talked, Sylvia glanced at the small clock on the shelf above her head. The woman had arrived just before two o'clock, and it was already twenty past. Sylvia had a hair appointment downtown at four-thirty. It was time to get this reading going.

"Mrs. Smith, is there something specific you'd like to ask the spirits about?" she asked when Carrie finally paused for breath.

"Um...well, yeah." Carrie sipped her tea. "I want to know—I want to make sure everything's going to be okay."

The bright woman who had bounced into her apartment was darker now. "Is there any specific reason that you think it might not be?"

"Well..." Carrie looked around the room. "This is confidential, right?"

"Of course."

"I—I don't feel good."

"How so?"

"My periods—they're really irregular, and my cramps have gotten really bad. And I have this back pain, and I never used to."

"Have you been to a doctor?"

"I have an appointment tomorrow. I guess—I'm scared. I went online, and I put in my symptoms, and some of the stuff that came up—" Her eyes glistened. "I just need to know it's all gonna be okay."

At least once a week, someone came in wanting to know if their internet diagnosis was correct. The routine was well-established: Sylvia would take their hands, sit quietly for a minute, and tell them that the spirits said not to worry, that everything would work out precisely as it should. People generally interpreted this as meaning they would be fine, and they would depart relieved.

"You realize I can't diagnose you," she began.

"Oh, I know that," Carrie said. "That's the doctor's job. I just—" She took a deep breath. "I need to be ready for whatever he says."

"The spirits don't get specific about medical conditions."

"That's okay." Carrie managed a small smile. "Let's do it."

"Close your eyes." As soon as Carrie obeyed, Sylvia reached across and took her hand. A jolt like an electrical shock raced up Sylvia's arm and through her entire body, so severe she almost cried out.

The room vanished. A kindly gray-haired doctor sat across a cluttered desk from a couple—Carrie and Don the plumber—and spoke in a solemn voice about treatment options, surgery and radiation and chemotherapy. The office dissolved into a living room furnished with an inexpensive burgundy-and-gold-striped sofa where a pair of tow-headed boys sat wide-eyed and a little girl looked confused as Carrie and Don explained that Mommy was sick, but her doctors were going to take good care of her. The living room dissolved into a sunny yellow bedroom where Carrie—now minus her wavy brown hair

—lay in a queen-sized bed, propped up by pillows, her eyes sunken, a pink plastic basin beside her. The bedroom dissolved into a hospital room where monitors beeped and tubes ran from unconscious Carrie's body to clear plastic bags, and Don clutched her hand and assured her that they loved her and she shouldn't worry because they'd all be fine, he'd see to that. The hospital room dissolved once more to a bright sunny day where Don stood on well-manicured grass among a crowd of people dressed in subdued colors, and a woman in a black hat assured him that the kids could stay with her for a few days if he wanted...

"Sylvia?"

Sylvia came back with a jolt. She jerked her hand away from the young woman who sat on her futon, asking her to tell what lay ahead.

Carrie Smith's eyes were wide. "You saw something."

"I don't know—"

"Don't lie to me. You saw. It's—I'm going to die, aren't I?"

Sylvia opened her mouth to deny it, but no words came. Her hand, the conduit to this vision, was shaking; she pressed it against her leg, and still it trembled.

Carrie was on her feet now. "No. I can't die. My family needs me. I'm not done being a mother or a wife. I'm not going to die. I won't!"

"Mrs. Smith." Sylvia fought to control her voice. "Please believe me: I don't know anything. Nothing. I have no idea what's going to happen to you." She didn't dare reach out her hand again. "Please sit down. Listen to me. I'm serious now." Her eyes searched Carrie Smith's face for some indication that this good woman might understand, even forgive.

"I'm a fraud." The word stuck in Sylvia's throat. A crinkle appeared between Carrie Smith's brows. "A fraud," Sylvia repeated. "My mother always said I have the gift. She was wrong. I tell people what I think they want to hear. Sometimes I'm lucky and I guess right. Sometimes, like with your friend, I guess wrong." The woman's round face was unreadable. "Whatever you do, don't believe me. Believe your doctors, believe your husband, believe your kids and your family and yourself. But not me. Don't think for a minute that the spirits have told me anything about your future, because it's all a lie." Sylvia stumbled to her purse and pulled out her wallet. "Let me give you your money back." She thrust a handful of singles at the woman in the rose-colored shirt.

"I didn't pay you yet," said Carrie. "You're lying to me. You saw something. You have to tell me. I deserve to know." Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"I didn't—" She stepped back, but Carrie grabbed for Sylvia's wrist.

"Tell me the truth!" the woman insisted. Sylvia yanked her hand away, stumbling backward, catching herself on the desk. The bills fell to the floor.

A long moment of trembling silence. “I’m sorry,” Carrie Smith said. She swiped at her wet face. Sylvia held out the box of tissues from the desk, and her guest managed a crooked smile. “I shouldn’t have done that,” she said, dabbing at her nose.

“Don’t...”

“I already know,” Carrie went on, her voice so low Sylvia could barely hear. “My cousin had it. But that was years ago. A lot has changed since then.”

“The world is always changing.” A stupid, senseless platitude, but Carrie Smith nodded as though her words were wise and true.

“Thank you,” Carrie said. “I was so scared when I came in here. It helps to know.”

“I don’t know—”

Carrie Smith zipped her windbreaker. “I do,” she said. “Just tell me this. Is everything going to be okay?”

There was no way to say it. Slowly, Sylvia said, “Yes.”

#

That night, Sylvia took the sign out of her window and crammed it down the trash chute. For weeks, when people banged on her door, she didn’t answer, made no sound at all. Eventually, they stopped coming.

As the years passed, Sylvia thought of Carrie Smith now and then. Occasionally, she was tempted to research New Jersey newspapers for obituaries, but she always lost her nerve. She found a job as a receptionist in a publishing house. She met a plumber named Bill, and she didn’t ask if he knew another plumber named Don Smith. Instead, she married Bill and moved to Long Island so their children wouldn’t grow up in the city. Every now and then, she had a vision, but she kept it to herself.

Once the kids were in school, Sylvia got a job with a small magazine. One day, as she was researching an article on women’s changing roles, she came upon a recent column in a newspaper published in New Jersey. The author was Carrie Jean Smith.

It would have been easy enough to find out, but some questions are better left unanswered.

Before beginning work on her MFA at Spalding University, ***Kimm Brockett Stammen*** *was a concert saxophonist, clinician and music instructor. She lives in Seattle, WA, has been happily married for thirty years, has a daughter in college and a perpetually muddy dog named Birdie.*

Second Place
Accordion Breathing

Kimm Brockett Stammen

Venita's thoughts: There is a decadence of language in the story, rich and haunting.

Inhale

"Your accordion?" The question swung through the air toward Daniel, the graying woman who'd tossed it swayed from a handle suspended from the bus's ceiling. On his way to his third yearly review at an internet giant in downtown Seattle, Daniel froze into his molded orange seat, breathless.

Buttons under his fingertips. Lilt of the waltz. Melody floating atop the force unleashed by his left arm.

Her hair hung in grizzled coils like weathered rope, the frays of her skirt swung and tangled around her ankles with the bus's movement. It was an articulated bus, the #594, that rumbled through the old industrial area nicknamed SODO to downtown, and it smelled like overcast, like crusted eye-sleep and the humidity of exhale: an overcrowded Monday morning. Riders slouched, head-phoned, close-eyed, both connected and disconnected. A silver-haired couple sat in front of Daniel; they faced different directions but the backs of their grizzled heads touched. SODO rolled by in a drizzle of train crossings and long brick warehouses with busted-out windows, punctuated by the patchwork tarps of homeless encampments and the green crosses of cannabis shops. A patent leather briefcase, mail ordered weeks ago by Claire in anticipation of the day's event, perched on his lap as out of place as a just-groomed poodle. None of these things were an accordion, or could be mistaken, by any but the most deluded, for an accordion.

Daniel frowned, but with automatic duty slid to the window seat. She lowered herself down next to him, folding her hands in her lap. Her skin was translucent and palely freckled, her knuckles large and white, like water chestnut in aspic.

"Do I know you?" He said it out of the side of his mouth, looking straight ahead, as if they were discussing contraband. Perhaps the old lady knew about the years he spent cradling an accordion in Paris in the same way he knew the two people in the seat in front of him were a couple: by the physical tells, the nearly imperceptible actions, the way of looking out at the world. Perhaps there still were indentations on his fingertips, a hinching of shoulder? The bus drummed over potholes.

Cobbled streets. Tinsel rain. The puff of warm bread scent from an opened boulangerie door, the comforting heaviness of the leather strap over his shoulder and the worn pearl buttons under his fingers. The hunt for a likely spot, on a side street or an alcove just abutting a tourist thoroughfare. Fighting off other buskers. The glory of spreading out his threadbare blanket, how it scraped against the pavement like an old razor against stubble.

Daniel leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes.

Gentle swing of the bal-musette. Sigh of simple chords, flights and phantasms of melody. Major, minor, in continuous alternation.

The fingers of Daniel's right hand fluttered on his briefcase, his left elbow squeezed against his side and then pushed out against the metal wall of the bus, as if his body were the bellows, squeezing and relaxing, making music of the ride.

"It's you, isn't it? But where is it?" She clutched the handle of her bag.

He stared at her in astonishment. The bus slipped to a stop at 1st and Spokane. The couple in the seat in front of him spoke to each other, their heads turning to look out the window in unison at a long row of tarps and lean-tos of cardboard lined up against a chainlink fence. The old woman looked also, a strange look of longing. She pulled herself up, but plopped down again to ask, "What happened? Where did it go?"

Paris. A lifetime ago. Une durée de vie.

Literally, he thought, as he remembered with a jolt what his wife had told him that morning, with her sly look and a hand on her belly: they needed a bonus from a good review now more than ever. He suddenly felt trapped, the old woman confining him against the shut window, puzzling him with her divinations and questions. She smelled of powdered sugar and rancid B.O. La vieille femme, elle sentait. She peered at him, the greenness of her eyes vague as the polluted water of the Duwamish waterway, which meandered a few blocks away on the other side of the railroad tracks. The bus coughed and sprung forward, having neither disgorged nor swallowed any passengers, leaving the encampment under the Spokane St. Bridge wallowing in the gray dawn behind them.

"Je ne comprendre pas," he said loudly. The couple's heads snapped upright; they were listening, as if he'd played a fanfare, a sudden squeeze of major arpeggios announcing a song. It was unwise and surreal to speak to a

stranger on a Seattle city bus. But since Claire had told him she was pregnant, everything seemed unwise and surreal. He began talking, in French, the memories rising with the sound of the language.

Magician, violinists, wanderers. The girl singer who joined him on the Rue Saint Martin, her husky voice doing Edith Piaf. Soft thud of coin onto red velvet, worn where the accordion buttons pressed into the nap. Gauloises, their smoke around her head.

The bus turned right onto Lander, then left on 4th, the rubber folds that attached the front half of the bus to the back squealing and groaning as they stretched and compressed. They passed the Salvation Army, the Goodwill, then sped up on the straight shot into downtown. The old woman tensed more and more as he spoke, her hands tightening around the handle of her bag. She licked her lips. The bus crested the hill and rumbled into a warren of high-rises. The woman began itching the side of her face wildly. She glared upward out the window. She mumbled. Daniel's reminiscences trailed off, he slid away as far as he could on the plastic seat. The couple turned and looked at a half-built high-rise on Seneca, a cluster of tents, Winnebagos and garbage hunkered in the muddy abandoned lot next to it. After Stewart the asphalt widened and smoothed and the bus's pivot mechanism stopped rattling. The main library slid past, geometric and glistening, then darkness fell; office towers blocked the sun. The old lady twisted her ropes of hair. She mumbled more loudly, her lips wet and slapping. She hadn't understood anything, he was sure, of what he'd said in French; it was approaching the city that frightened her. She stared at him, wide eyed. He pressed his back against the metal of the bus wall.

The mock wedding, courtyard garden, string around the girl's finger, metal ring fashioned from a wine cap around his. A mime for a minister. Outdoor restaurant patrons goggling. Gilded man, magician in a purple tuxedo, string quartet, a juggler who continually fumbled. The pronouncement, the instant of fright as if it were real. Handfuls of coins up in the air for confetti. Picking them all up again for a dowry.

When the bus passed through downtown and emerged, as the sun rose, into South Lake Union where the sidewalks gleamed white and the new Amazon biospheres—monstrous round plexiglass globes stuffed with technology and tropical plants—glinted far up 6th Ave, the old woman screamed.

Daniel jumped up, the scream, and the stench of her, swirling around him. The couple turned and watched as he hugged the briefcase and, stumbling, escaped to the aisle. The old woman started to laugh. Her pale fingers with their aspic knuckles ravaged her face. The bus sped over fresh asphalt toward the spheres, toward his review. Daniel grabbed an overhead strap.

Leather handle of the accordion. Paper bellows crossing his chest,

expanding and contracting, pushing and pulling air through the reeds. Pearl buttons worn smooth by fingers, by songs. Winding the old melodies through the wheezing, lovely waltzes. Half-moons of crowds. The whip-slashing sadness of the music.

The bus jerked to a halt. Daniel, confused harried overwhelmed repulsed, clumsied his way past the old woman toward the door. His knee touched her skirt and it dissolved into gauze the way his life in Paris had dissolved, the way audience dissolves into empty pavement when the music stops. The way freedom dissolves into responsibility, with a breath. In that instant, it seemed he stepped through the old woman and at the same time remembered who she was.

Exhale

"Your accordion?" Gertrude had never known the young man's name, but when she saw him on the #594 she remembered his pink-cheeked face; it had been the one in front of her when her life changed.

Hurrying. Gilt heels. Wet grit of pavement. Roll of 100 Euro bills deep in her sequin clutch, bothering her like a tumor. Along one narrow street and another, randomly, the darkness of the day growing into evening. The sudden waltz-breath-breath, waltz-breath-breath and its sweet reedy breeze of relief.

"What happened?" she asked, plunking back down on the bus seat at 1st and Spokane after standing up to get off; the young man looked tense and worn, his cheeks blanched, unlike the accordionist in Paris. Her home slid past in the pre-dawn drizzle: the lucky blue tarp, a kerchief of clear sky no matter the weather; bulging plastic sacks piled like sandbags, weighed down with some lengths of rusted pipe; her flowerpots, whole and shards. A toaster, a fierce tangle of broken deck chairs, flattened cardboard boxes fastened with twine and stacked like blocks, walled out the wind and the smells of slick banana peel, pee, rum, wet wool, charred burger rinds. When she lay under her tarp, vehicles roaring above, crows and seagulls cawed over the too-intimate gurglings of pigeons. Through the bus window she watched her lean-to, one in a line of so many others bulwarked by the chain link City fence under the Spokane Street bridge, until it slipped out of sight.

"Where did it go?" she asked, or perhaps said only to herself as she exhaled.

The city approached: it appeared that the bus stood still and the skyscrapers moved closer to it, giants lumbering toward her. Squat, derelict, worn, historically underappreciated, SODO was where she was comfortable; downtown was sharp, changing, terrifying. Her fingers plucked at her bag's handle. She couldn't breathe freely. The young man began to talk in French, of which she had understood very little even when she lived in Paris with Floyd. Ah Floyd. She sighed into the past as the bus moved forward.

Fingertips on her back. The crisp smoothness of his silk cuff. Guiding her. The narrow clogged streets parked cars pedestrians bicycles clumsy with delivery boxes darkness opening suddenly to the concrete expanse of Place Georges Pompidou. The building's entrails—pipes, ducts, wire, air shafts—so strangely cavorting on its outsides, instead of being hidden under its skin. Floyd. Cologne, slender sideburns. Lips teeth. His suits from Milan.

The bus entered the forest of skyrises. Mirrored windows tossed back her reflection: a gray-haired woman alarmed on a bus. Gertrude smoothed her hair, but it was still wrong, she smoothed it again. She fidgeted with her bag's clasp; she was suddenly sure the bag was about to explode from all the wails that had accumulated there since Floyd died.

When in fact her bag contained mostly pastries. Gertrude worked at the Krispy Crème, early shift. Every morning she bussed home, exhausted, with a box of day-olds. In the encampment the cream-filled, the elephant ears, the glazed, unglazed, the fritters, were easily traded. A length of rope, the use of a phone, half a sandwich. Her paychecks she cashed, purchased work clothes and shoes and the occasional shower, and for the pleasure of it gave away any remainder. She did this for herself, not, until now, out of any concern for the recipients. Giving things away made her feel good, as if she was trying to become light enough to float away, free. She never saved; the future was a thing she had held once but was gone.

The bus approached the biodomes. Millennials gaggled in outdoor cafés, morning sun glinting off their piercings and their phones. The concrete sidewalks and chrome gleamed like new snow. The spheres of Amazon headquarters, with their Plexiglas curves and serpentine quasi-industrial air, their contrarian insistence on putting plants that belonged outside, in, reminded her of the George Pompidou Centre. She squeezed her bag shut, tried to squelch the scream in her throat, failed.

Courtyard of mimes, cavorting. Floyd's fingertips slipping away from her back, clutching his neck, his face blue. The silent falling, his shocked eyes locked with hers. Her hands on his chest, no movement under them, no expanding or contracting, no breath of music.

Her throat raw from the scream, she suddenly hated the accordion player. She saw him recoil and she began laughing! That's right, she laughed, stand up, stumble, run away! He grabbed the overhead handle, hugging his stupid attaché case—which with its fine tiny stitching probably cost more than she earned in two weeks—and swayed in the middle of the bus as if deciding something with his body, while she bled laughter. The bus doors shushed open, he escaped.

Gertrude was far from her stop. She had nothing for the return fare and would therefore have a very long way to walk home. The buildings towered scowling around her; they would step forward, they would crush her. But her question was unanswered: what had happened to the young man. Was

she responsible? Her bag and her skirt tangled, her laughter turned into choking, and then into gasping for air.

She flapped off the bus and followed him.

Inspirer

On the Place St. Opportune, the evening reminding him that the scent of champagne was just a micro-movement, the pop of a bubble, away from the smell of piss, Daniel drew out the bellows. With his left wrist under the bass strap, he held the instrument closer to him than any partner. The melody twirled under the fingers of his right hand, while with his left he curved the pull down and backward, then smoothed over the catch at the change of direction by turning the top of the bellows inward as the bottom still headed outward, and pushed up with his palm, a curve over and under. As his hand and arm drew air in and out with a motion like a figure eight or the raising and lowering of a semaphore flag, he saw her.

She stood at the edge of the half-circle of crowd, shimmering in a gold skirt and blouse. Eye shadow glittered under her swooping hat, diamond dangles bit at her earlobes like caught fish. Her costume gleamed in a last ray of sunlight and her irises glowed emerald. When she reached into her bag, he noticed jewels swarming over her fingers.

He was playing for the tourists who gathered on the cobbled square, probably on their way back from the Pompidou Center. The instrument case was flayed open in front of him, with almost enough coin in it for a meal. The girl called Claire leaned against the brick wall of a nearby building. When she wasn't singing she waited tables, slept on the floor of a juggler's flat, smoked, hated her parents back home in Ohio. Her braid was the color of Camembert.

The song slid back into its original minor key and entered the trio section. Daniel slowed the speed and pressure of his bellowing, the music relaxed and softened, some couples reached for each other and began tentative dance steps. The woman who glittered at the edge of the crowd pulled a roll of bills from her jeweled bag and tossed it, like a casual question, into his case. It arced through the air in slow motion. It landed with a dull thunk. This is how lives change, as suddenly and oppositionally, and yet as predictably as the instant between pull and push, between exhale and inhale. Daniel saw surprise wash over her face—more than surprise, exultation—as if she had been released. His hands fell from his instrument in astonishment, because he felt the same thing.

The silence was sharp, but after it the half circle of crowd exploded into applause. The woman stepped backward, teetering on her heels as Daniel picked up the bills, counting out the hundred Euro notes. When he looked up she was gone, and when the music showed no signs of starting up again, the crowd, too, sighed and vanished.

Expirer

She stood at the edge of the half-smile of crowd, the music floating around her, lifting and swirling the shimmering material of her skirt. As the stars came out—although whether they were stars or streetlights she wasn't sure—she felt lightness growing around her. Her feet seemed to waltz on the pavement, the air became cleaner, the people clustered with more gaiety, as if they were gray and mauve pigeons fluttering and cooing. The accordion player was an impossibly young man—an American, like Floyd and her, by the cleanliness of his jacket, the shortness of his fingernails and the guilelessness of his blue eyes. But he embraced the decrepit accordion as Floyd had once embraced her, and the music sounded French to its marrow, as if the player had never been anywhere but this place in this moment. The pulsing of the instrument warmed the November chill, the rounds of his finger pads fluttered and danced over the pearl keys. And the notes, to her, sounded like pearls, too, each perfect and spherical in itself and yet strung together in an endless circle, luminescent in the violet light.

She reached into her bag, where she'd rolled the sheaf of chemical-scented pastel rectangles from the Banque Populaire into a wad and circled it with rubber bands. She'd done this because the bills were light, too light, like sails, for how easily they represented so much weight. Her fingers curled around the roll.

Floyd falling. Blue eyes wide. The stillness of his chest as he lay on the ground. And afterward, even more of a shock, all the money. Dresses, shoes. Jewelry. Cosmetics, boutiques, hotels, anything to rid herself of it. The craving for the sweet instants of emptiness when the cash left her hand and before someone put something else in it; the instants when she forgot why she had it to give.

The accordionist squeezed and released, breathed in, breathed out. Taking, then giving, then taking again. Gertrude pulled the roll from her bag and swung it underhand like an anchor, almost defiantly, into his case. The boy—or perhaps the girl who was with him—gasped and drew back. The stunned expression on his face was like a deep well opening. Delight rose in her. Her hands hung, empty, and a breeze like Floyd's lips kissed the tips of her fingers.

Inhale

The briefcase banged against Daniel's thigh as he leapt from bus step to curb. He hurried down 6th, toward the biospheres winking in the morning light. The briefcase rubbed against his thigh, rubbed like worry, creating a sore place when there was not one before: the baby, un bébé, quel baby. For three years he had wanted to thank the miraculous, glittering cash-tossing woman, la vieille dame. Thank her for the crazy, remarkable, thoughtless, peculiar swing of her arm. Now that he had seen her—as mysteriously

transformed by life as he was—he just wanted to escape. Echapper, evader, prendre la fuite. He was revealed to himself as cowardly, ungrateful. After nearly three blocks of panicked hustling, past two cranes, a day spa, a hive of orange-vested construction workers, he heard ragged breathing behind him.

He stopped and turned. The briefcase hung limp from his arm. The old woman straggled toward him, ropes of hair flopping. He felt like one of the metal-painted statue mimes who worked the courtyard in front of the Pompidou Center: immobilized by need of money, by ambivalence, by guilt, gratitude and memory.

Cars whizzed past. La vieille dame stood in front of him. She reached into her bag. Although when he'd first seen her in Paris her hair was coifed, her heels high, her nails polished and tipped with pure white, and now rags, fear and street smells clung to her and her fingers were gnarled, bitten and bare, still, déjà vu overwhelmed him.

The roll of bills arcing through air. The polished wood side of the accordion on which he flattened them. Trembling hands. Twenty pastel blue and green rectangles: two air tickets, a "real" wedding. Amazon. The reviews. Even before the baby, the bills, the credit card numbers, corresponding expiration dates and CVV digits climbing fast as condominium towers, zooming at him like cars cyclists delivery bikes articulated buses with hind halves swinging in different directions than their fronts, with gigantic rubber bellows containing the pivot point groaning and shrieking.

With the biospheres at his back, Daniel watched as la vieille dame struggled to pull something from the depths of her bulky bag. Her green eyes glinting, her expression expectant. It was exactly as it had been before, except this time they were both different, and this time he understood: no exchange is unequal; she wanted something from him.

His hand on Claire's stomach. Nothing but the rise and fall of her chest, the knowing he would never breathe freely again.

Because of a nearby traffic light the cars whooshed past in clusters with moments of silence between: inhale, exhale, inspirer, expirer. And he was stunned by how the past, and its people, infiltrates every moment of the present: with every forward expansion, every downward cursive pull of the arm outward to gain air, there is a corresponding contraction; without both in equal measure there would be no music and no future. He imagined his child, imagined cradling the small heavy bundle firmly with both arms.

The old woman yelled something, another question, that was lost in the rushing sound of the traffic, and then she succeeded in extricating something from her bag. It was something large this time, and although he had intended exactly the opposite, he said what he'd often wished he had, the first time she reached into her purse and tossed him a new life.

"Non!" He yelled it above the noise of the traffic, the gull calls of construction workers. Even though he knew it wasn't money that trapped him,

nor Claire, certainly not the child, but his own choices, the sound ripped from his throat. The old woman held out something towards him that reeked of powdered sugar and sweat; he swung the briefcase up in front of him like a shield, and never knew if it was that action or her own step that propelled her backward into traffic.

Exhale

She ran down 6th despite the stomping crushing construction, the plexiglass spheres winking slyly a few blocks ahead. Perhaps she had the courage now to run toward what frightened her because the man she chased seemed afraid of *her*, of her age and how she'd changed and the smell of encampment. She hadn't wanted gratitude, she hadn't wanted anything at all in return; the point had been to be rid of everything. But it had shocked her to see how much older the accordionist was, older and tighter and silent without his instrument. As if she had not given something, but taken.

After the accordionist, ten rolls a day tossed from her hand. The fresh breath of emptiness each time. Her choice of recipients random, flighty and instantaneous as the melodic improvisations of the accordion player's right hand leaping and stitching the chords: a prosperous-looking shopkeeper, a policeman, a museum director, a terrible juggler who dropped everything he picked up. Their faces opening in surprise, reminding her of that moment Floyd's lungs surprised them both by stopping. The increasing heaviness of the bank balance as it decreased, as if it were a sauce reducing. And finally, the day the account closed and everything of Floyd was gone but for a plane ticket.

She caught up to the accordionist. The sidewalk was clogged with young people, cords hanging from their ears. Neon shapes punctuated the tall condominiums lining the street, so vertical and jagged in their newness she flailed her arms to shield herself from their stabbing.

"Was it a mistake?!" she yelled into the noise of the traffic. They stared, breathing into each other, an exchange of opposing forces in a moment of time. But it was not one moment, it was two, she thought: hers and his. She felt her own trembling.

"I see. So this is the other end of the bus line," she muttered, because he hadn't answered, and that was her answer. He looked worried and hungry, and she was suddenly overcome with love for him, as if that one long ago toss had created an umbilical line between them. She reached out her hand, her empty hand, to touch his face.

But he drew back, clutching his attache case, and it startled her too much, seemed too wrong, to offer only a hand with nothing in it. A thought occurred to her; she fumbled in her bag. As she pulled out the box, cellophane-topped, floppy with its moist weights, the young man screamed. The rectangle of expensively tooled leather, heavy, swung towards her, and its

blow felt like freedom. She stepped backwards into the audience of traffic. Jelly donuts and elephant ears flat as lungs flew through the air, their trajectories arching over the pavement like firework sprays.

The traffic took her and her body arched also, with a graceful curve upwards and a slow-motion swoop back and then heading down. She watched the fear leave her, and saw the future. In it, Peruvian orchids would bloom in the biospheres. More tarps and tents would sprout under the Spokane St. Bridge. And the accordionist, young again, full and happy from caring for his small child, would tumble onto the bus, cradling an awkward instrument he had begged or borrowed, but familiar as the breath in his body. The couple on the #594 would look up at him with mild welcome, and at 1st and Spokane he would get up and follow her memory into the encampment.

Alan Sincic *is a teacher at Valencia College. His work has appeared in New Ohio Review, The Greensboro Review, Hunger Mountain Journal, The Gateway Review, Cobalt, A3 Press, and elsewhere. His novella The Babe won the 2014 Knickerbocker Prize from Big Fiction Magazine. (alansincic.com)*

Third Place
Congratulations
Alan Sincic

Venita's thoughts: This is one of the most audacious works I've seen in a while, delightfully reckless and unhinged.

Dear Mr. **Fred Biedeblieck**,

Congratulations. Your reputation precedes you. Your life-long effort to make an impression upon those more fortunate than yourself has not gone unnoticed.

When word of your existence reached our international headquarters on the outskirts of Monte Carlo, we knew then that our search for a subscriber to this most exclusive of all magazines was at an end.

Years of inbred reticence seemed to fall away as we turned our eyes upon the 100% linen-bond double-weave rolodex card and in elite pica gold-embossed type the single name printed there:

Mr. **Fred Biedeblieck.**

You, **Fred**, are that irrepressible raconteur who has wooed us at last into print, that civilized rogue who broke into our dreams (see illustration) to torment us with standards of excellence far beyond our capacity to imagine.

Cruel, cruel **Fred Biedeblieck**. Sole originator of that inimitable **Biedlebleiek**ian style so widely admired among his contemporaries, he takes the keys to his **'67 Chevy Nova two-door** with the **green shag carpet** and the **Coca-Cola stains across the busted rear window** and tosses them to the concierge at the **RJB Tuna Co. Canning Factory and Smelt Mine** that he might be escorted without delay to his favorite seat. The Red Chablis in the

chilled decanter? Of course. The linguino della carbonica in the white clam sauce? As you wish, sir. Garcon! Another loaf of filleto de scampini for Mr. **Fred Biedeblieck**.

Not that we presume upon a greater intimacy than our station in life would permit. One need only recite the old adage: "The Cabots speak only to Lodges, and the Lodges speak only to **Fred Bliedeblieck**" in order to appreciate the need for discretion in dealing with such a person as yourself. Whether enjoying a quiet supper with Henry Kissenger or a fast-paced power brunch at the **behind the dumpster** of the **Starglo Trailer Park and Ammo Dump** on beautiful **Rt. 425 at I-75 just south of the airport junction**, you eat with a Rabelaisian delicacy. You digest in a stylish and dignified manner. And as a person of discrimination and breeding,

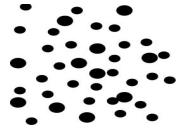
Lifetime Breeding Totals

	Attempts	Completed	Interceptions	% Completed
Bliedeblieck, F.	**6,425**	**23**	**6,402**	**3.2%**

you insist upon a publication which will cater to the distinctive needs of the **Fred Bliedeilblick** generation. Bold and sassy. Tart and tangy. Effervescent but not too indulgent. Quintessential? Yes. Deciduous? Definitely. Octagonal? It goes without saying. A magazine whose very nome de plume cries out to the world: "I am special."

Ah! But caveat per emptor, monsieur editore. How can **Freds Bedeidlsbleak** be assured that he will be reading Special Magazine in the company of a small, well-chosen group of like-minded individuals? Is it simply a matter of genetical engineering, of a statistical crunching of the numbers, of how many steerage passengers one can drive away from the lifeboats with a well-handled croquet mallet?

Ha-ha. Do not make us laugh, **Frebble--**boy. Let the other so-called "special interest" magazines scrabble around for readers of a **Biedelblieck**ian caliber. Here at Special Magazine we take pride in knowing that the species Homo-Neanderthalus **Biedelbiek**ius contains but -- and the numbers do not lie -- one member, one number, one reader alone. Mr. **Freds Bedeidlsbleak** of **2736 Minnepata Drive, Fargo, ND 32472**.



Phrobs Edselbleck The Hoi Polloi

Half a league, half a league, half a league onward, **Fredbel Beek**, out from the tedious muck of human relationships and into a circle of reading intimacy designed especially for a man of your wide-ranging (albeit specialized) interests. The proofs, the plates, the presses (yes, even the printers) have already been destroyed, and in order to maintain that editorial focus which is our raison d'être, we have limited our circulation to one (1).

Special magazine is about you, **Frebe**: what you eat, what you wear, what you do, where you go. Jam-packed full of articles of interest to you and to you only -- surprise interviews, cartoons, puzzles, essays, and of course those full--color nude photo layouts of **Freb Edelblieck** for which we are so understandably famous.

*Ask not for whom the bell tolls: the bell tolls for **Freds Bedeidlsbleak**.*

Let there be no mistake. We respect your reputation for compassion, and would release this onto the newsstands were we convinced that the benefits to society as a whole outweighed the trauma of seeing our life's work fondled by a horde of trousered apes, but until such time as the kinder and gentler America we long for crawls out from behind that barricaded mall entrance with its hands up, we prefer to be read by only those few individuals who already love us, who will have compassion for our defects and are prepared to uphold their responsibilities as caring and supportive readers.

E PLURIBUS **BIEDLEBLECK**IUS!

Naturally you wonder what sort of adjustments will be required of you. The attached photograph should assist you in obtaining the desired look. Think of it, not as a ~~blueprint~~ ~~blueprint~~-blueprint, but as a kind of inspired chiaroscuro impression of the general milieu within which you will be operating.

The bolo tie is optional. The country estate will vary in size depending on the weather and the time of the year. The thick wind-blown hair; the lush Eurasian eyes and lips and bones of the cheek; the pipe, the dog, the polo pony; the Lincoln Town Car and the house-slaves on the terrace humming "Dixie Home" in a halo of flames as the distant city of Atlanta crumbles behind them? These are but the outward and physical manifestations of an inward and spiritual grace, and although the re-constructive surgery (cf. circled portions of enclosed telephoto shot for suggestions) will go a long way toward salvaging that profile of yours, it is the mysterious ineffable essence of the inner man which is most likely to render you attractive in our eyes,
Freddy Roosebleied.

Which brings us to the question of character. A number of close personal friends of yours have indicated (in the strictest confidence) that perhaps you are not all you have made yourself out to be...

> "Seemed okay at first, but then we got him on the examination table and, well, although everything was normal -- blood pressure, pulse, lung capacity, liver density -- it was well, almost too normal if you know what I mean. No excitement, no surprises, no panache, no brio. There was -- to my way of thinking -- something (how do you say?) crude about the way he was constructed."
>
> *Dr. R.J. Everson, Mayo Clinic*

> "Always felt sort of uneasy around him. I remember when he was a child I'd become a little queasy just looking at him. Hard to put your finger on it. I guess you could say I never really liked the guy."
>
> *Your Mother*

> "A geek, a loser, a square in six dimensions."
>
> *James Dean*

> "An inspiration to us all."
>
> *J. Stalin*

> "Fast-paced, action-packed, hard-hitting tale of savage passion. Strangely disappointing."
>
> *Variety*

> "COPS NAP **BIEDELBLIECKIEN** IN TEEN SEX SCANDAL"
>
> *Erdsley Daily Herald*

Ouch. Yee-ouch. The situation seems to worsen with each passing moment, **Fered Bedililililijing**. The bloom is off the rose, the fizz has fled the bottle, the fragrant charms of your neighbor **Mr. Herman Islering** of **2732 Minnepata Drive, Fargo, ND 32472** call out to us from across the **radioactive landfill**.

But c'est la vie. Quid pro quo. Ich bin ein Berliner. If this is your way of pushing us into the arms of another, **FB**, then so be it. It's not as if we've never been rejected before. We have been rejected before and we will be rejected again. It's lonely at the top, and relationships are so very fragile.

One moment? Reverence and obsession. The next? Alienation and disgust. And that's just in one's relationship to oneself: what about one's overtures to the public at large? Gifts have been offered, words have been spoken, feelings have been hurt. Desks emptied, beds abandoned, photographs doctored.

Do we sense your irritation? Of course we do. But now is not the time to destroy that wonderful rapport we enjoyed just a few short paragraphs ago. Now is not the time to betray your friends down at the posh **Federal Witness Protection Program** who beg us to push you into that spotlight of public opinion you so richly deserve. Now is not the time to discard that lovely free complimentary **your grandmother**, superbly crafted from selected **carbon-based compounds**, anchored firmly to the base of **an abandoned mineshaft**, and topped with a lustrous sheen of imported Phillipino **Phillipinos**.

O do not deny us, **Fred Bieldbeck**, O be that Special someone, O come fly away to live with us forever*, you doughty saucy fellow you.

☐ Yes. I **Fred Beidlebleck** of **2736 Minnepata Drive, Fargo, ND 32472** have been terribly mistaken as to the true nature of my feelings towards the people at Special magazine. Please send me my very first issue of Special now, and for a limited time only, and at the special insider's price, and at no additional obligation, and even then only if I feel like it. I understand that if I am not completely satisfied, I have the right to return the attached **tranquilizer dart** and **radio transmitter collar** for a full refund.

☐ No. My name is not **Fred Beidlebleck**. I do not live at **2736 Minnepata Drive, Fargo, ND 32472**, and I am saddened and confused by these attacks upon my character. Also somewhat stimulated. Please accept my enclosed **left ear** in exchange for the opportunity to continue receiving these chatty and informative letters.

* Void where prohibited. Certain restrictions apply.

Donald James Mitchell *lives on his family's 130 year old homestead in Deming, WA, a tiny town in the foothills of the North Cascades. His work has been published in various literary journals, including River Teeth, Moss, The Boiler, Fleas on the Dog, and others. He works as a custodian at his local library.*

Art Lessons

Donald Mitchell

I have a job painting numbers on all the new fire hydrants in my hometown: John Deere green on school bus yellow, one through eighteen.

At hydrant 5 a local ambles over. He's just come home from the woods and I can hear the steel spikes of his logging boots scrape the blacktop as he crosses the street.

What kind of pussy job is this? Some libtard regulation to slap numbers on everything? That supposed to be a five? You flunked art, that's for sure. How old are you now? Really? That old and still pissin' yellow? Hey, Man, just fuckin' with ya. Ain't in Deming if you ain't been fucked with.

He was arrested again last week. I heard he tried to sign his name on the hood of a neighbor's truck—with his chainsaw, of course.

His baby sister was a classmate of mine. As shy as a sprite and could hardly speak but if you teased her she would paint the halls of the school with your blood.

Mouse

Donald Mitchell

In the room below my bedroom, my two black dogs are sleeping. Beyond the windowpanes, moonlight is falling quietly through November's clouds. In the wall nearest the bed, a mouse is rattling around as it scuttles up or down the old cloth wiring.

Again I hear what I cannot follow. And if I climb out of bed, go downstairs, lead my two black dogs out into the night, and we stand under the moon, all of us together, in that darkness and light—who can say anymore where the mouse belongs?

Bring the World

Donald Mitchell

On a wild, February afternoon a gust of wind ducks out of the good fight, catches a post on the porch, swings itself around and plops down next to me.

The white plastic chair it occupies makes a little scraping sound on the rough cedar decking.

The gust of wind doesn't say a word but I think to myself, “Why haven't I left this valley?”

Everything is believable in a strong wind.

My heart aches but the gust only sits there, thumbing through the pages of the book I've stopped reading.

All the doors of my house are flung open, but that has nothing to do with the storm.

Night and day the doors are flung open. And they're open because, sooner or later, even the lightest breeze will carry with it the burning ends of the earth.

Fabrice Poussin *teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in Kestrel, Symposium, The Chimes, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in The Front Porch Review, the San Pedro River Review, and Typehouse, as well as other publications.*

Alone in the Fire

The awesome traces of volcanic activities, and the life which can emerge even in the most difficult of conditions.

Confined

History is everywhere; oddly one can see the remains of an old prison and not the purest skies over the New Mexican Desert.

Fresh

A study with found objects.

A Good Read

A study with found objects.

Charissa Weaks *is an author of historical fantasy and speculative fiction. She crafts stories with magic, time travel, romance, and history, and the occasional apocalyptic quest. Charissa lives just south of Nashville with her husband, children, two wrinkly English Bulldogs, and the sweetest German Shepherd in existence. She is active in the Historical Novel Society, has been named 2019 President and Pro-Liaison for her local Romance Writers of America chapter, and is a member of the Women's Fiction Association. She is also the creator of Once Upon Anthologies. When she's not writing, you can find Charissa lost in a book.*

Yeva and the Green Garden

Charissa Weaks

I buried metzmama's body on the side of a dune with my mother and friend, Adão, at my side, the sweltering midday heat beating down my back. I waited to cover her face last. Doing so meant goodbye, and goodbyes had grown more difficult over the past few weeks. Our caravan had lost so many that every night I lay wondering who the valley might demand next.

Only four of us remained.

Only one I would willingly lose.

I brushed my fingertips across metzmama's cheek. Throughout my girlhood, I found solace in the gentle set of my grandmother's withered lips, in the crevices fanning her silver eyes. Where would I find peace now? The sand valley offered no reprieve. In this wretched land, we were foreigners. Mother Nature wanted us out. She used the sun to wilt us to husks during daylight hours and trusted her winds to blow us away in the night. Yet we forged onward, because we couldn't turn back.

All we left behind was an invisible trail of dead, their sandy graves not even a guide home. Home had vanished, a village erased by a storm that left the sky a duller shade of blue.

The crunch and sift of footfalls scaling the dune behind me announced Kasimir before his shadow fell across the grave. He loomed over me, obstructing the sun, watching as I packed the last handfuls of sand over metzmama's face. I loathed that his was the last shade metzmama would ever know.

"Stop weeping, Noyemi," he said to my mother.

She sat beside me, tear-stained face revealed, staring at the sand that had swallowed so much of her life. Now it had taken her mother, her mayr, and she couldn't even grieve the loss or honor metzmama in tradition.

"There's still six hours of light," Kasimir went on. "I won't waste it."

He kicked sand into Mother's lap where her calloused hands trembled.

I wanted to curse him and steal his dirk, hold the blade to his throat and dare him to mock our loss again. He'd kill me for defying him, and though death sometimes masqueraded as relief, I couldn't do that to Mother. So I sat quietly until Kasimir's shadow withdrew, and the blazing sun returned.

Adão reached across the grave and clasped my hand. His eyes shone brightly above his kuffiya, the dirty head-cloth obscuring the rest of his face. I could stare into Adão's eyes for hours just to remember the color green. Nothing held pigment anymore. The sun and sand had long since leeched it all away.

"We're close, Yeva," Adão whispered. "We'll come upon the rest of your father's flags soon."

We *were* close. I felt it. But that knowledge brought no comfort. Noyemi hadn't possessed the strength to help Adão and me bury metzmama because only seven days had passed since we lost my father, Tigran of Aroy. After we left his grave atop the rocky ground near the Flats, the light in Mother's eyes faded. I'd never seen such emptiness inside her before. It caused me worry. It caused me fear.

Her dark eyes glittered like sunlit glass. "Say your last words, im ser," she said. "Then we leave."

She ran her hands over her smooth head, as if wiping away her pain. Calmly, she rose and slipped down the dune, hollow as a shell lost along the drifts.

Adão stared into my soul as only he could. "She'll return to herself, Yeva. Noyemi is a fighter. She endured life on the Outer Rim, yes? She was made for this. She just needs mending."

"Mending takes time," I said. "Something we do not have."

I abandoned Adão and followed Mother's path toward camp. She wouldn't survive what awaited, not with her heart so shattered. The deep desert was no place for the weak. If my father spoke the truth, and I knew he did, the place we were headed would devour her and spit out her bones.

I glanced to the West where gray clouds roiled. A distant moan echoed across the land, sending a foreboding tingle up my spine. If only Adão understood. The territory ahead was nothing like the Outer Rim of the East. Father called it the center of Hell.

He called it the Badlands.

#

The sun had begun its descent when we came upon Father's second flag. No more than filthy fabric torn from his kuffiya, it hung from the tallest vela fruit trunks in that part of the desert. Weeks had passed since Father trekked the Badlands, so the vela grove lay nearly covered by sand. Thankfully, the plant's sunward-reaching arms kept his waymarkers in sight.

There would only be one more flag before we reached trouble's door.

Mother set up shelter while Adão and I prepared our first fresh fruit in days. Vela groves bloomed every dozen miles or so, as if the sands decided to offer just enough sustenance to keep travelers half-alive and moving.

I picked several thorny melons from the bushes and set to peeling them. Adão then emptied their juice into our canteens and worked at removing stinging seeds from their middles, a toiling task without proper tools.

A light flickered over Adão's shoulder, catching my eye. I pointed, recognizing the shining tip protruding from a far-off dune. "Another city."

When the first sands arrived, people hid inside homes and skyscrapers, barricading doors and windows because the grit-saturated winds left the air impossible to breathe. Most died that way, in tombs of their own making. Others tunneled out, but the landscape of their world had forever changed.

Adão looked over his shoulder but said nothing. Knowing a civilization lay buried beneath your feet left a somber tint on everything.

"We're far enough away that we won't feel any shifts," I added, hoping to comfort him. "We're at least five miles out or more."

He considered the dunes again. Adão had only felt a shift once in his life. He'd never witnessed entire camps sucked away in the blink of an eye, but the possibility haunted him, I could tell.

"Your father was the bravest man I ever met," he said. "To go into the lowers?"

I kept working against the tough fruit, fingers burning, eyes blinking away tears. My father had been a tunneler and brave beyond comparison. Back then, people built subterranean labyrinths through which they transported unearthed goods to use as barter in the settlements. The Outer Rim near the Atlantic became the center of trade. Fishers provided seafood to the masses, water bearers desalinated water for drinking, and woodworkers dried driftwood for fires. That's where Father met Noyemi.

"Did he ever bring you anything from his digs?" Adão continued.

Only my most treasured possessions: a book about wars of the ages and another about Mother Nature's ever-changing temper. I'd never told anyone about them, and though I trusted Adão wouldn't steal from me, I didn't confess.

"Sometimes," I answered. "But most everything had to be traded."

Excavation in the lowers ceased. The compromised sands shifted, burying thousands of tunnelers across the land. Father refused the risk. We needed him. Without goods for trade, however, we couldn't survive. His search for a new life led us to the Badlands because something better waited on the other side.

If we could get there.

Adão jerked his hand from the biting seeds and dropped the melon in

his lap. “Damn it! Nothing is ever simple out here!”

“Did you believe it would be?” I wiped my raw fingertips on my sash and studied him as he sucked his offended thumb. “Your father should’ve prepared you better. I worry for you much as I worry for Mother. I can’t protect you both when the fighting begins.”

If I could even protect myself, thanks to Kasimir. Tent made, he sat on his carpet cutting fruit, and not with bleeding fingers, but a fisher’s knife. He’d claimed our weapons days ago because he thought Noyemi might consider killing him in his sleep after what he’d done to Father. I couldn’t say he thought wrong.

Adão plunged his fingers to the melon’s core. Finally, he tossed the seeds aside and handed me a fleshy piece of fruit. “You think me defenseless because people like Noyemi defend my father and family.”

I swallowed the fragrant pulp. “Mother said the Outer Rim’s guardians are powerful because they hold the keys to the gates of life. Not because they’re survivors. If that were so, they wouldn’t need protection.”

He peered into my eyes again, the way he always did when he needed me to truly hear him. “When you hold the keys to the gates of life, Yeva, people will stop at nothing to steal them. Everyone is a survivor in the Outer Rim. Guardians are no warriors, but they’re wise. They make certain chaos doesn’t reign more than it already does, that the fishers and water bearers and sea scavengers can provide and not be killed for their boats and filters and fuel. You can’t imagine what people will do when they believe you hold the keys to manna and comfort, and like it or not, that’s a problem you and I might one day face. And did you ever think perhaps our sentries taught me what my father could not?” He pulled back his robe and lifted his shirt, revealing a blade strapped to his side. He lowered his voice. “I’m not weak, Yeva, or unskilled. Only cautious. Like you with Kasimir, I choose my battles.”

That night, I lay between Mother and Adão, listening to the wind tumble over the dunes. Every gust whipped the weather-worn canvas of our tent, creating the only music I’d heard in ages. The Badlands had a heartbeat it wanted me to hear, but I couldn’t bear the sound.

I buried my head under Adão’s chin and pressed my ear to his chest in search of a more soothing rhythm. His breathing stilled, then his arms pulled me closer.

“You should sleep,” he whispered.

“Impossible.” All I could think about was what we faced come sunrise.

The most treacherous portion of the journey begins where the dunes end, Father had said. *Be certain you’re ready before you cross the divide. Once the Badlands pull you in, there’s only one way out. Think of me, Yeva. Protect the others. Be the warrior I know you to be*.

I closed my eyes and summoned his words over and over, a mantra to garner courage.

I would get us through the Badlands.

I would.

I had to.

#

The following morning, when the rising sun lightened the sky to a Titian shade, I woke Adão and took him to the dunes' edge. Backs to the mounds, we sipped vela juice and nibbled fruit. The winds had stilled, and the cool air warmed.

"You brought me here for a last breakfast?" he asked.

"It's *not* our last." I nudged him with my elbow. "And no. I brought you here for this." I handed him my pack. "Open."

Adão freed my books, eyes wide with wonder. "People trade artifacts like these for six-month rations, Yeva."

"They do. But Father never allowed me to let them go."

Reverently, his hand grazed the tattered covers. "Why show them to me now?"

In my restlessness the night before, I'd considered why I withheld my books from my closest friend. Maybe because I wanted him to be something more, wanted to share something special with him.

His shoulder beckoned, so I lay my head on its curve. "I just wanted you to see them, in case things go wrong."

He pressed his lips to my bare head and opened the first book. Carefully, he thumbed through the pages, then stopped.

"Father taught me about wars. But this one," he tapped a brittle page, "this one is part of my lineage. My people fled Portugal over two thousand years ago. Jews. Millions were slaughtered in Europe at the whims of a madman."

I flipped back to earlier history. "These were my people. From Armenia. Two million dead. Genocide, like your ancestors." I twisted my wind-frayed sash between my fingers. "Maybe humanity can do no more than destroy itself time and time again."

He closed the book and took my hand in his rough palm. "They didn't care for one another or Mother Earth as they should have. Now we must start over. But we come from strong stock, you and me. If anyone can face what lies ahead, it's us. I need you to believe that before we cross these dunes."

I kissed his hand. "I do believe, Adão. I do."

Mother and Kasimir approached, dark figures skirring across the sandy terrain, backlit from the umber glow of early sunrise in the desert. Noyemi stopped at Father's final flag, a marker Adão and I passed that morning. She removed the fabric, held it against her nose, and inhaled deeply. That my father had walked that ground made it hallowed. I hoped his memory

gave her strength.

They climbed the dune, Kasimir leading the way. He carried my yataghan and Mother's scimitar in one hand, Adão's black sword in the other.

He tossed the weapons at our feet and pulled his sabre from its sheath across his back. "Lift these blades against me and your heads will roll. Does everyone comprehend?"

We stared at him, unshaken as he stalked over the dune. If we didn't need his skills for the days ahead, his blood would've already been spilled. Survival made people tolerate the unimaginable, even murderers.

A knot in my chest unfurled the second my yataghan lay in my hands, its blade sharp and promising. Mother lifted her scimitar, and at once Noyemi the Warrior returned. Her spine stiffened. Her eyes went hard and focused, fierce. Her shoulders pulled back, and her chest lifted. Gone was the hollow shell I'd seen at metzmama's grave. Determination filled Noyemi now.

It filled *me*.

She slid her blade into its scabbard and clasped my face, kissing each cheek. "Are you ready, im ser?"

"Never more," I whispered.

#

The four of us stood on the other side of the dunes as the sun shone light on our future. Ahead, the desert plunged into a valley of ravines. The upper floors of toppled buildings jutted from the sands, great sepulchers dotting the landscape for miles. Whirlwinds howled between derelict structures, turning the city into a giant funnel.

No other way around this necropolis existed. To the north and south lay expanses of sinking sands and split earth from ancient earthquakes. One foot inside that territory and a person vanished forever. If we were to see what lay beyond the ruins, we had to cross the Badlands and face its inhabitants, people who thrilled in watching gnawed bones turn to dust on the sands.

"You're sure they can't see us?" Adão asked.

Noyemi pointed toward the sun. "Reflections off the sand and metal blind them in the morning time. Also, there's only so many of them left after Tigran's passage. They can't watch every direction all the time."

My heart squeezed at the sound of Father's name.

"So your husband said," Kasimir replied. "Maybe they toy with their food. Maybe they're watching and waiting. Maybe he didn't kill any of them at all."

Noyemi's scimitar whipped up, its sharp tip under Kasimir's chin in a blink.

"Tigran of Aroy prepared the way for us," she said. "For *you*. Show him respect, or I will drag you to the feet of the maneaters' table. I've only spared you because you're a fisher. I will brave the Pacific myself if I must."

Kasimir's hands lifted in surrender, but a wicked smirk sat on his lips.

He knew we needed him even more with Father gone.

Time threatened, so we raced across the windswept desert until we reached the divide, a canyon leading to the lowest point of a building I'd ever seen. We lay at the cliff's edge, scouting the surroundings, the wind pulling our clothes. I could make out the arch of the structure's main entry.

"We stay together." Kasimir's voice held a slight tremble. "Agreed?"

My jaw clenched. Just like we only wanted him for his sea prowess on the other side, he only wanted us for our ability to get him there alive. The thought of sharing a home with the man who killed my father over the last sip of vela juice shook me to my core. Father gave the drink to metzmama, and Kasimir slit his throat for it. For all his wisdom, Father's belief in inherent goodness had been his downfall.

I did not share that belief. In fact, I wasn't certain I was a good enough person to help Kasimir at all when violence came. I didn't have to kill him, but I didn't have to protect him, either.

We covered our faces with our kuffiyas and slid down the ravine, landing with our feet against the side of a crumbling skyscraper. Father said to traverse the ruins from the inside, from broken building to broken building, even though desert dwellers often lurked there. They were scavengers and cannibals, but we needed cover from their arrows and the tumultuous winds.

Through a window we went, stalking across sands that had forced their way inside over the ages. Kasimir made Adão go first, then me, then Noyemi, leaving himself last. Better for us to take the brunt of attack than him.

We clambered and crawled through seven buildings without complication.

Then we hit building eight.

In the room past the fourth sideways door, bones lay unearthed in the sands, as well as old pottery and furniture. But it was the smell of woodsmoke that alerted us. The sight of a smoldering woodpile and abandoned bow and quiver came next.

The hair on my neck rose, and my skin prickled.

From a lightless hallway, the tinny echo of a sword escaping its scabbard sounded, followed by the creak of a bowstring drawing tension. Noyemi jerked her head toward a door, hopefully an exit to the next downed building. I knew her mind. If we went quietly, perhaps they'd allow passage.

Kasimir jerked me near, holding me like a shield. "You fools. You've led us into a trap!"

A swooshing noise cleaved the air, blowing a zephyr across my scalp. My eyes went to Mother, then Adão.

Their gazes were on Kasimir.

I turned as his grip fell away. An arrow protruded from his chest, another from his stomach.

He dropped to his knees.

Mother yanked me down to the sands and shoved me behind an overturned rotting desk as another arrow flew past, sticking into a wall.

My heart lurched as I looked over her shoulder for my friend only to realize he wasn't there.

"Adão!" I cried.

He dove beside us, the forgotten arrow and quiver in his hands. "Yeva, get Kasimir and Noyemi out!"

He nocked an arrow and aimed it over the desk, firing into the darkened corridor.

Kasimir crawled in our direction, eyes pleading. "Yes, get me out! Get me out!"

Noyemi's face turned stoic. "He'll slow us. We leave him."

I thought of Father. Would he desert Kasimir to a fate worse than death?

Another arrow penetrated clean through his calf, then another entered his thigh. Blood poured from his wounds, draining the color from his face in an instant.

I couldn't carry him to safety; he'd die before we made it. I couldn't leave him either, dooming him to the dwellers' tortures. I loathed Kasimir, but I'd never live with myself.

There was only one way.

I stood from behind our barricade and met Kasimir's eyes. Only a moment passed between us, but already I noted the acceptance of his fate and a plea in his eyes.

His gaze darted to my blade. "Do it!" he groaned. "Don't let them have me."

I didn't hesitate. Swift and precise, I swung my yataghan in a downward arc, opening Kasimir's throat like a knife through ripe vela. Something inside me withered. Killing stole a piece of my soul, even those deaths performed as an act of mercy.

A chant began within the lightless hall, the stomping of feet and pounding of fists.

Something struck me as I faced the sound, hard enough to make me stumble and drop my blade.

"Yeva!" Noyemi grabbed my weapon and bolted to her feet. "Adão! Come!"

She shoved me from the room, Adão close behind. Disoriented, my hand went to the arrow sticking out of my shoulder.

Pain, hot as fire, bloomed down my arm and across my chest as we scurried over sand piles and through internal rooms.

"I need this out!" I glanced at the rivulets of blood running down my arm, then looked behind us. I couldn't wield my yataghan. I'd become a

liability.

Armed desert dwellers emerged from the shadows like beasts, faces and bodies gray with ash, the finger bones of past kills braided into cords of their long, white hair.

"Keep going!" Noyemi screamed.

With my good hand, I snatched a large, metal lid and protected us as we moved. Arrowheads penetrated the thin barrier, but the tin stopped their flight.

Sand drifts blocked the next doorway, rising halfway into the proceeding room. Thankfully, they were compact enough to climb. Adão boosted Mother and me inside, then she clasped his hand and pulled him to safety.

She took his bow and last arrows and knelt in the doorway, ready. "Adão, tend to Yeva!"

He turned to me, fear widening his eyes. "I-I can't pull an arrow out of you."

"Just break it off," I said. "Leave some shaft so we can dig it out later."

His face paled, but he snapped the arrow in two.

I cried out, feeling the arrowhead burrow deeper. When the agony passed, I clasped my yataghan, uncertain if I could use it, but determined to try.

Noyemi killed four dwellers before we leapt out a window and tumbled down a city dune. The winds blinded us, our eyes assailed by grit.

It took only seconds before a grainy squall ripped our kuffiyas from our heads. The earth rumbled and shook, vibrating everything around us.

Adão grabbed my hand. "The sands! They're shifting!"

The shaking grew savage, rattling buildings' innards like penny fossils in a can.

We ran.

We ran against deadly wind and across tremoring buildings. We ran from arrows and cannibals, along abyss-deep cracks branching from the city to the West.

We ran and ran and ran.

#

Five hundred miles later, I sat on a rocky coastline beside a crackling fire, Adão nursing my wound with saltwater and a gentle touch. The briny air tickled my nose as I watched Noyemi wading in the ocean's spume, a sea breeze rustling her robe while she whittled a fishing spear.

I thought of my father. How he would have loved to have seen us safe along the water's edge.

Far away, there's an island, he'd said after his return from the Badlands. *I named it the Green Garden. It's like nothing you've ever seen,*

Yeva! Tall trees. Flowers. All visible from shore. We'll build a boat from driftwood. We'll travel to this lovely place and grow food. We'll go there and begin again. We will find a new life, im ser. I promise.

Adão moved to sit behind me, letting me rest against his chest. We stared at the green island waiting across the crests and troughs, an emerald gift on the horizon.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow we build a boat."

"Are you scared?" I asked. "About holding the keys to the gates of a new world?"

Eventually, people would come. Eventually, we would have to fight. Again.

Adão kissed my temple. "Not for now, Yeva," he said. "Hopefully, not for a long time."

Ken Craft *is a teacher and writer living west of Boston. His poems have appeared in The Writer's Almanac, Verse Daily, Plainsong, Gray's Sporting Journal, The MacGuffin, Off the Coast, Spillway, Slant, and numerous other journals and e-zines. He is the author of two collections of poetry, Lost Sherpa of Happiness (Kelsay Books, 2017) and The Indifferent World (Future Cycle Press, 2016).*

The Farmer in Time

Ken Craft

Someone said her name was Sadie,
that it had been four summers since she died—
four summers her farmhouse
sat barren on Scribner Hill, front
tagged by realtors, clapboards
chalked and grayed under successive Maine suns.
Last summer the house turned morose
like an old nun in dusty habit clenching her rosary
counting beads and murmuring over the days.

This summer, though, upon my return,
daisies and goldenrod have bolted,
skirting the foundation. Rhode Island reds
peck crabgrass out front; a pick-up, split firewood
blanketing its bed, noses the open barn door.
Then the true sign: a sloped clothesline
tethering house to iron pole—shirts bellying
with wind, pant legs kicking sky
like drunken line dancers.

The south field, once lazy with wildflowers
and crickets, has been scratched to life, too.
A garden arches its back for the till.
Down-pricked tomato vines, heavy and newly-staked,
sniff for sun, buds and yellow star-blossoms
rich with the green pinch of life.

As I jog by, a young farmer
with a Deere baseball cap strides out the door,
solid in his plaid shirt and suspenders,
blue jeans and muck boots. He tilts his beard
west before walking into the mouth of the barn.
His wife, blonde-bunned, baby on hip,
opens the kitchen door and calls his name.
Caleb, I think. Caleb who will not hear
because his barn is storybooked with nesting swallows
and dry bales of hay and dust-beamed sunrays
slanting through cracked side windows. That is how
I like it, so I will not stop and say hello. Today or ever.
Like a Biblical drought or plague of locusts,
talk would destroy everything.

Jenny Stalter *is a new writer living in West Texas and her work was recently longlisted for the Anton Chekhov Prize for Very Short Fiction.*

Date with Crocodile Girl

Jenny Stalter

3 p.m.: You don your sensible black blazer. Your appearance is staid; your floor-length mirror reflects an equally sedate apartment. Clean edges assert themselves in docile beige and comfortable eggshell. You're the kind of person who goes to great lengths to avoid bumping into other human beings. No, that's not quite right. You have certainly bumped into them, but you have circumvented their humanity. Decades unwind unmemorable limbs under your life, but you have avoided that small accident.

When you meet Crocodile Girl, she gives you a wink and a little slap of her jaggy tail, throwing some heat on the introduction. It stokes your belly. What had been a peripheral dread works its way into full view. You feel like you're just waking up, like you're fully inhabiting your body for the first time. Her ambush eyes rove over you in Cretaceous sweeps and you hate/like it. The realization breaks that the best way, the only way, to truly reveal someone is to rough right up against them, to cause blood-red friction. To start a fight. To shove your tongue down their throat when they expect polite kisses. To stretch them to the maximal end of some spectrum and light them on fire, so the banal burns up and you see their animal, screaming in the calcium bone.

#

6 p.m.: When you ask for tea, she brings you a whiskey the same color as her amber eyes. Though front facing, her eyes nictate like a predator's. Your insides burn hotter.

You skim your fingers across a teal bookcase that looks like it belongs in a kindergarten classroom. The whole house is spotless, even your whiskey glass shines, not a water mark to be found. You're not sure why, but you, quite on the spot, had formed the opinion that a crocodile might be more filth adjacent.

You pick up a book of fairy tales. Her words sibilate through sharp teeth as she calls you Rapunzel. She says your neck is crooked from the weight of the all the men climbing your long hair. She points to your neck and says, here, right here, there's a small bend in your spine. Of course you know about the bend, but it's not polite conversation. The crocodile keeps pushing, says she sees how human women hold themselves askew. You ask if she has loved a man. She says, a few, but my neck is stronger than yours.

#

7 p.m.: There is a pink and green plant hanging in a corner of the room, its flowers scooped and lidded, nudging the chin of attention toward itself, the way beautiful things do. She tells you it's a pitcher plant. Carnivorous. She says she feeds it insects but that the slow atrophic death makes her feel guilty. She says she took pity on an ant once by lending it a bit of string because it had clung to a side of one of the pitcher blooms for hours, refusing to be consumed. Despite this small act of kindness, she grapples with a desire to feed it more bugs and wonders whether she's bad. You remember when, as a kid, you smeared lightning bugs on your skin so you could keep their glow. You say you guess there's no good or bad and everyone has to suss it all out for themselves. She hisses in agreement.

It's a terrible death for the insects, she says, but it's life itself for the plant. Besides, it's not like she's going to stop eating meat or anything. Crocodile Girl wonders if she makes loopholes to avoid guilt. You remember washing the bug parts off, after the thrill. You tell her probably everyone does.

#

9 p.m.: At the food truck outside her apartment, on the yellow wooden benches, you ask what she thinks of you, and she tells you not to ask her that. It makes you seem insecure, she says.

And you are insecure. You're insecure about your footing on the earth, like you might fall off the rock at any moment. Crocodile Girl digs her toes into the mud and hangs on. You want to know how she does it. The whiskey catches up with you, and you feel even lighter than normal. Instead of telling her this, you examine which end of your burrito is more structurally sound. The sky doesn't pluck you away from that moment, but the burrito empties most of its contents onto your lap, which seems an acceptable sacrifice for the affirmation of gravity.

She says she wants to take you somewhere special, and you know that she knows you will follow wherever she goes.

#

2 a.m.: Crocodile Girl says you can breathe together down there, in the water. Working her surprisingly delicate girl-arms around you, she pulls you down. Down into the cold. The sun has given up the ghost and is now a moon. It wavers white through the wet. Her body navigates the water with alarming ease. Her tail does the heavy lifting, cutting you across the inlet in strong, autonomous sweeps. Real muscle. On land she lugged an awkward gait, but in the water she's agile, elegant, fast.

Under the water she places her scaly mouth over yours and breathes her meaty swamp breath into your lungs. Despite the cold your marrow is lava hot. This feels like a first breath, an anchor. As you breathe her own breath back into yourself, you feel the rough corners of her mouth curl into a smile. In that shared breath, with the river roiling over your heads, your mammal mystery is disrobed. It is substantial. Then you think of the pitcher plant.

Cayce Osborne *is a writer and graphic designer from Madison, WI. She currently works in science communication at the Wisconsin Initiative for Science Literacy at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has been a staff writer at Brava Magazine, and her fiction has been published in Exposition Review and the Dread Naught but Time short story anthology from Scribes Divided Publishing. She also collects work on her website at cayceosborne.com.*

How to be an adult. Or maybe not.

Cayce Osborne

In this memory, I am ten years old.

I am spending time with family at my grandmother's house. The oldest daughter of an oldest son and the oldest cousin: that's me. The other kids, two girl cousins and my sister, are shut inside a large upstairs bedroom playing make-believe. (They believe I am too old for such games. I believe no such thing. We are all right, and all wrong, all at the same time.)

How did Britney Spears so eloquently put it? Oh yes: *not a girl, not yet a woman.*

My aunt and grandmother are busy cooking lunch. I don't belong in the kitchen with them, either. Instead, I go to the bathroom at the back of the house, the one off the sunroom with the Bucky Badger wallpaper.

Or maybe not.

Maybe this is taking place at my aunt's house, and I am in her upstairs bathroom. The sunlit one, bathtub situated underneath the skylight, shelves spilling a tangle of plants, their tentacles reaching toward the floor. The smell here is like a jungle; damp and earthy.

Memory is tricky. But the *where* is not important. The toothpaste, however, is.

I look at the items arranged around the sink; I touch each one. Hair products and makeup, lotions and mouthwash. A stray gold earring. And toothpaste—its tube new and fat and inviting. It is the kind with the aqua stripe running through, translucent and confectionery. At home, our toothpaste is plain, boring.

I unscrew the cap so I can look at the perfect star of aqua and white inside. It hasn't been used, not once, and begs to be squeezed. There's a term for that, the urge to squeeze things. Especially cute things. *Cute aggression*. I desperately want to clench that blubbery seal pup of a toothpaste tube in my adolescent fist. And squeeze.

So I do it.

Slowly, at first. The paste star rises out of the tube. I stop, and it slips back inside, cowering.

I start again and aim the toothpaste down. Beginning in the center of the sink, I move the tube in a neat O, squeezing. My circles get smaller and an ice cream twirl begins to form. Hand aching, teeth clenched, I wrench the last life out of the tube with shaking arms, the final loops slopping over the peak and ruining the perfect cone.

The tube sputters—a flatulent, jarring sound.

I stare at the mound of toothpaste. I've been stupid and wasteful.

What have I done?

But the result is also beautiful and so, so satisfying. I blame my inner beast, the little savage that lives within me.

When I am clothed in humanity once again, there is mint-scented regret in the air. I slink to the door and put my ear to it, listening. I open it a crack.

Adults still cooking, cousins still playing. Me, still alone.

I know I should wash the toothpaste down the sink, but my little savage whispers, *no*. My work is too wonderful, too personal to destroy.

I sneak out the door, into the sunroom and out through the sliding glass door and past the patio furniture and across the deck and onto the grass and over to the big willow. Its swaying branches hide me as I force the girl-beast back inside, as I remember who I am supposed to be.

But who is that?

The oldest, yes. The one with glasses. The one who likes to read quietly. The one who plays Trivial Pursuit with the adults over make-believe with the

cousins—not because it is my preference, but because they will have me.

#

I wonder about this memory. Was it my sister and cousins who excluded me from their play first, or was I the one who turned my back on them, in search of more grown-up pursuits?

The question pricks at me like a rash, but my mind holds few answers to how or where these events began. I do know that when I could face it, I went back into the house. Avoiding the bathroom. I pulled a book from my overnight bag and stretched out on the floral sectional to read.

#

We gather around the kitchen table to eat lunch as my aunt emerges from the back bathroom. She sits, eyeing each of us in turn as we pile our plates with chicken baskets and pasta salad. Or was it fall-apart brisket sandwiches hot out of the Nesco with potato salad from the deli down the street? Lasagna and a green salad with fat slices of hard-boiled egg?

“Would someone like to take responsibility for the mess?”

My cousins and sister look at each other across the table. I look at everyone but my aunt as she rises to pour her youngest a glass of milk.

“I know who did it already,” she says, closing the refrigerator.

“Did what?” asks my sister, the boldest of the group.

I study my lunch, watch the ceiling fan rotate lazily overhead, stare down the barrel of my glass of milk. Anything but look at my aunt.

Our gazes collide. I try not to flinch as she winks at me.

Have I given myself away?

“I’d like the person to admit what they’ve done.”

She sits down next to me. I shift in my chair, the backs of my thighs sticking to the wood.

“I’m not trying to embarrass anyone. Come fess up later, and we can clean it

together."

My cousins and sister push their chairs back with a screech and run through the house, looking for clues as to what my aunt might be talking about. They're playing detective. All in good fun.

But not for me, the one who holds the key to solving the case.

"This broccoli is really getting stuck in my *teeth*," my aunt announces after everyone has resettled, drawn back by their hunger. "I need to go *brush my teeth* after lunch."

She studies my cousins and sister in turn. After a few minutes of eating, I risk a look at her, and she winks again.

That's when I figure it out: the winks are conspiratorial.

You and I are on the same side, the winks say. *Look how I am fooling the children.*

This knowledge settles over me, becomes another mask I wear so that I can fit in.

She is lying. She knows nothing.

She has no clue who made the mess. She is pretending, trying to smoke out the culprit. And she doesn't even suspect me—*me*, who has actually done this thing! I am too old to do something so childish, and we both know it.

It was my little beast, I want to tell her.

But maybe this she-beast is who I really am. More the animal inside than the girl outside. Maybe we are all our own sorts of beasts, deep down. Even my aunt.

#

That was the first time I caught an adult in a lie. Well, not a lie exactly. A strategic manipulation of the truth, and the first hint that maybe grown-ups put on a show, pretend to know more than they really do.

My aunt was fumbling around in the dark like everyone else. Like I was. (Like I am.) Maybe my surprise stemmed from her not being my mother; I

wasn't privy to all her bad days, her tired days, her impatient and crushingly impossible days. I'd always thought her somehow infallible and above the bullshit.

But the world holds mysteries for everyone. And no one is above the bullshit.

A realization both frightening and comforting. And also, exciting.

I am now as old as she was back then. I am also a parent. And I see that maybe, being an adult is nothing more than doing your best to figure shit out, one day at a time.

Maybe she's been wondering about the toothpaste all these years.

I'm sorry, I'd say if she were beside me now instead of hundreds of miles away, wrapped in her own life.

I'm sorry, it was me.

Me, the quiet one. Me, the oldest. Me, the unsuspected. Me, the little beast. Me.

Elka Scott *lives in snowy Saskatchewan, where they are studying to become an art therapist. They hope to merge their passions for writing and psychology. They recently received a grant from the Saskatchewan Arts Board to complete a script for their first graphic novel. When they aren't writing, Elka Scott enjoys watching horror movies with all the lights on, reading old comics and drinking tea in the summer.*

A Very Small Apocalypse

Elka Scott

"We need to talk about it," Matthew, Angie's therapist, says. He's not twirling his pen. This is how she knows he's serious.

The sky outside Matthew's office is a soft grey. Cracking brown branches reach up to the sky from the trees in the nearby park. Angie counts each one so she doesn't have to answer.

Matthew stares at her, waiting for a response. His clipboard lies flat on the table. She can see her full name, Angela Geraldine Dawson, written across the top of the crisp yellow paper. Angie would prefer white. It's cleaner. She leans forward to see what Matthew has written, but Matthew catches her with his eyes and she looks away.

"Angie, you know you're safe here, right?" he asks.

Angie's therapist is a liar.

She's not safe anywhere.

#

Angie thinks about asteroids in the shower. She imagines them hitting the earth, one by one, like the unforgiving droplets spraying from her shower head. The rocks in the asteroid belt are so far apart you could easily fly a spaceship between them, unlike in the crappy science fiction movies Percy liked. *Percy.* She is suddenly cold under the warm water. "I am fine," she repeats to herself, breathing shallowly.

She finishes her shower and wraps herself in a towel. She avoids looking at her pock-marked skin as much as possible. It looks like the surface of the moon. Angie wonders if the creams advertised on TV work, but she knows she will decide not to buy them when she finally gets to the store today. A waste of money, she thinks, trying to smooth the little craters.

Matthew says she needs to get past the idea that any money spent on herself is a waste. Matthew has perfect skin, except for a scar on his chin Angie's never asked about, so he doesn't understand. There's a lot he doesn't understand. He's barely older than she is.

She does what he wants anyway. Today Matthew wants her to go to

the grocery store by herself. She usually goes with Katie, but Katie has mono for what feels like the fourth time this year and Angie desperately needs bread and eggs. She thinks Katie needs to be more careful who she kisses. Angie knows she should have been.

#

Angie is not paranoid, she's realistic. She can see what Matthew can't. Matthew isn't even a real doctor, not yet. She knows he's writing his dissertation. She wonders if he's going to include her in it. She imagines him hunched over at his cheap plywood desk writing in his chicken scratch scrawl. "Angela Geraldine Dawson. Paranoid, but denies it. Obsessed with the apocalypse."

Angie is not paranoid. She simply acknowledges the existence of the hostile forces in the world outside of herself. It's unrealistic to assume that everyone is good.

Matthew asks her where she gets this idea from. "Aliens." She says, straight-faced.

Matthew laughs. "What?"

"Everyone goes looking for aliens because we assume they're good and want to share their technology with us. But they could just as easily be evil. They could just as easily try to kill us all." She responds.

"Have you been watching the science fiction channel?" asks Matthew. Angie doesn't answer, because yes, she has. "If the aliens could just as easily be good, why not hope for the best?" Matthew says.

"You're the one who told me to watch that channel," Angie says.

Matthew says nothing, just jots something down with hurried motions of his hand.

#

Angie thinks about nuclear bombs for the entire bus ride to the grocery store. She fiddles with the change in her pocket as she compares each coin rubbing against each other to atoms colliding and splitting. As the wind drifts in from the opened window, she thinks about nuclear winters, wonders if it would compare to a crisp prairie February. She imagines the sun dogs tormenting her would be no more, and that brings her some comfort.

This is not how she wanted to spend her days off. She didn't want days off at all, really, but the clothing store she supervises at is closed while the mall undergoes much-needed renovations. Matthew suggested using those days off to further their work in their sessions. Perhaps, Angie thinks, I should have said I wanted to focus on self-care.

Her palms are sweaty and she holds onto the bottom of her seat with shaking fingers. She takes deep breaths, though it feels like she's breathing through a straw. "I am fine," she repeats to herself, over and over. With each inhale she whispers "relax". Her chest tightens and she wants to vomit.

Angie's tapped on the shoulder by the woman behind her. "Are you

okay?" she asks. Angie nods yes. The woman sits back in her seat, still eyeing Angie.

The bus slides to a halt in front of the grocery store and Angie stands up too fast, knocking her purse into the slush under the seat. She swears and bends down to pick it up, dropping her grocery bags in the process. The woman behind her helps her pick them up with a shy smile before stepping around her and getting off the bus.

Angie steps off the bus, instantly receiving a blast of frigid air to the face. She imagines a blast of pure heat, her flesh melting from her bones. It helps her move forward, out of the cold and into the store.

#

"Tell me what happened," Matthew says.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Angie snaps, hands dropping to her sides to grip the edges of the chair. Matthew doesn't flinch. She supposes he's used to being snapped at by people he's trying to help. She refuses to think about how sad that is.

"I want to hear it in your own words," Matthew says. "It will help your brain categorize the experience."

Angie loves to categorize. Example: her kitchen cupboard is organized by categories of soup, from Italian wedding to tomato. Example: her movie collection is sorted by title and genre. Example: Matthew is a liar.

"It's not a big deal," she says.

"It's a big deal to you," Matthew says, "and that's what's important."

"I'm never going back to that store. Never."

"That's your decision, but we still need to talk about what happened."

Angie looks at the floor, the clock, everywhere but Matthew. She picks at the pleather edges of the chair.

"You're safe here," Matthew says.

Angie picks off chunks of pleather and watches them fall to the floor.

"Everyone has setbacks. You couldn't have known."

But she should have. Paranoia is useless if it doesn't prevent things like what happened at the grocery store. Maybe it never could.

#

Angie minored in psychology, so she knows stores use their knowledge of the human mind to manipulate their customers. That's why the produce section was moved during a recent renovation. It's now the first thing the customer sees when they walk in, so they can be entranced by the brightly coloured fruits and vegetables like insects to brilliant flowers. She suspects that it also creates a more pleasant smell.

Angie's glad for this, or else she wouldn't know where to find pears. She doesn't know where to find anything else, but she holds onto her kernel of knowledge and strides into the store, heading straight for the produce like a good little bee.

The pears she wants are not in season. They are more expensive than she expected. She wants to resent this but knows the prices can't be helped. Angie inspects the fruit without much scrutiny. She supposes she must eat the out of season fruit while she can because the inevitable climate disaster will keep her precious pears from her. She wonders if the world will freeze over like the prairie in winter or if the world will heat up to the unbearable dry heat of the prairie summer. She supposes she already has practice for the end, living where she does.

It isn't as bad as she thought, being here without Katie. The store's new colours, she supposes, are pleasant enough. They changed the sterile white walls to somewhere between chocolate brown and blood, designed to stimulate the autonomic nervous system into hunger. Angie looks at the fruit and vegetables around her and wonders when the brightness of the colours will return to them. Everything is dull these days.

She selects three almost perfect pears and places them in a plastic bag. She looks around for context cues to figure out where to go next, following the track the store has set into the bakery section, and her world stops.

She is a collapsing star, falling apart under the weight of her own gravity. She sees Percy across the bakery aisle and condenses, drawing inward to her centre of mass. She feels each tug of gravity on her body as her neurons fire.

The world is ending the world is ending the world is ending

Angela Geraldine Dawson has not seen Percival Anthony Jackson for two years. By the time the light of a star has reached the earth, it has already died.

Percy does not see Angela Geraldine Dawson. She thanks a god she doesn't believe in anymore for that.

Her eyes dart at light speed, searching for an escape route. Percy cannot see her.

It isn't possible. He shouldn't be here. He lives in another solar system, one far enough away that its star has already collapsed into a black hole, so dense even light cannot escape it.

The collapse of a star can only be halted when it reaches a new state of equilibrium.

The nuclear fission inside Angela Geraldine Dawson has become unstable. She feels hands inside her, ripping her apart with poorly kept fingernails. Sweat glues her clothes to her skin under her thick jacket. She wants to vomit. She wishes she could. God help her, she is burning, but cold. She is so, so cold.

Neutron stars represent the last stand of matter against gravity. Angela Geraldine Dawson wants to march over to Percy and beat him within an inch of his life. She wants to burn him with the sheer force of her energy. She can smell burning flesh already and she feels even more afraid.

Angela Geraldine Dawson is a collapsing star. She wants to explode into a nova, and she is afraid of the power of her own core.

Angela Geraldine Dawson puts her pears down on top of a loaf of rye bread and leaves the store without looking back.

#

Angie's therapist does not understand why she vomits out stories of dangerous physics experiments and statistics about the Spanish flu instead of saying her rapist's name. Angie dies a little bit each time she thinks it, but it is branded onto her neurons. Onto her hippocampi and her amygdala. She is over-educated but under-prepared each time. Each time she thinks of him it is like a very small apocalypse.

Matthew insists on using it when he remembers. She is grateful for the times he can't, when he mixes it up with “Perry.” Matthew knows she counts on this, so he started writing “Percy” on the top of the papers collected on his clipboard.

Angie doesn't understand why she's in “exposure therapy” if Matthew doesn't expose a little bit of himself. She doesn't ask about the scar on his chin.

#

Katie's dyed her hair again.

Angie shouldn't be surprised, but she is. It's red now, the colour of fresh blood and pomegranates. Katie's ears were collateral damage and are as bright as her hair. She enters Angie's apartment like a tempest, knocking the carefully balanced pile of mail by the door to the floor, throwing her coat across the couch and finally settling down in the worn green chair in front of the TV.

Katie looks around the living room. “Jesus. Have you left the house at all this week? God, without work you’re a total homebody.”

“I went to the corner store,” Angie replies, too tired to be defensive.

“That's like a block away, it barely counts.” Katie picks at the upholstery. “You need to get out more, Ang. You're going to go crazy otherwise.”

“You can't “go” if you're already there.”

Katie takes a long look at Angie before sighing and standing up, beelining for the kitchen and the diet grape soda no one else drinks. Katie is an alien, she decides. She's been on earth for so long that no one else notices, but Angie does. Katie still acts like she's on her home planet, which in Angie's mind was a jungle wasteland with predators the size of oak trees and methane lakes. Katie never stays in one place long enough to get caught, and she changes her appearance every time the skin-suit starts to wear out. Katie is a good alien, she decides. Or at least neutral. Regular humans wouldn't survive on her planet, so Katie has grown used to being stronger than everyone around her. Maybe one day she'll turn on the human race. If she did, Angie

would consider joining her.

"Are you feeling better?" Angie calls into the kitchen.

"Yeah, mostly," Katie responds, "but I'm still tired all the time."

Angie does not believe Katie. It is not that she's a liar, but Katie has always been able to slip her fatigue and negative emotions deep into the confines of her human suit, so deep Angie forgets Katie has to sleep at all.

Katie comes back into the living room with a can in hand and one in each arm. She throws one at Angie before making herself comfortable in the chair. Angie opens the can with a "pop" and drinks it. It tastes sickly sweet, unnatural in the same way as a fluorescent light trying to imitate the sun. Katie has one can emptied in thirty seconds and opens the other one as she paws at the remote just out of her reach. Angie watches her for a minute before getting up and grabbing it, sitting on the couch with a smirk.

Katie glares at her for a moment and then laughs. "There she is," she declares, raising her soda can in a mock toast. "I knew my friend was in there somewhere, underneath that rat nest you call a hairstyle."

"That's where you're wrong," Angie says, "because I don't call it a hairstyle."

Katie laughs again. "Just pick a movie, you goof."

Angie shifts on her couch. "Umm, comedy? That one with Will Smith?"

Katie stands and wanders over to the shelf. "Oh yeah. That *one* with Will Smith. One of the biggest actors in the world. That *one*."

For a brief moment, Angie feels light. She feels like she's floating, but swimming, weightless and untethered. She watches Katie judge her movie collection from the comfort of the ceiling. It is not until Katie shakes her arm that she returns to her body.

"Ang? ANG!?"

Angie takes a deep breath. "I'm okay," she says.

It does not reassure Katie at all. "You were dissociating again. Have you been doing that often?"

"I don't think so. I feel like I'd remember that."

Katie sighs, weariness finally leaking out. "Angie...I think you need to take medication. What if this happens at school? Or at work? Jesus, Angie. You could hurt yourself."

"Then it happens at school, or at work," Angie says, more aggressive than she means to. Katie raises an eyebrow and steps back.

"You saw him, didn't you."

"See, I keep telling you that you're psychic," says Angie, "but you never believe me."

Katie stops at the joke, looking Angie dead in the eyes. She reaches out, but stops again, like a car stuck in traffic. "Can I hug you?" Angie nods. Katie wraps her tentacle arms around her friend, squeezing her tightly and

letting out purposefully slow breaths, steadying herself so she won't cry. She wraps her arms around Katie and breathes in her shampoo.

"I hate this so much," Katie says, finally.

"I know."

"I wish this hadn't happened. I should have..."

"No, Katie." Bite returns to her voice. "No."

Katie pulls back from Angie and smooths her hair. "Do you still want to watch Hitch?" Angie nods. Katie gets up and puts the DVD in. When she moves to sit back down, she looks from the devil's chair to the couch. After pressing play, she joins Angie on the couch. Katie takes a long look at her friend before watching the movie.

Angie laughs at the first joke. She laughs at every joke. She laughs because she needs to remind herself she can.

#

"I can't even remember what it was like before anymore."

Matthew put down his pencil. "What do you mean?"

"It's like the universe was rebooted." Angie could practically hear Matthew rolling his eyes, even though she stares out the window. "I can't remember what I was like before...him. I can't remember how I felt, what I liked to do. I don't know. Did you ever see "Back to the Future"?"

"Oh yeah!" Matthew smiles. "It was my favourite movie, right after Star Wars."

Of course, it was, she thinks. "I feel like someone went back in time and changed something, and I was caught in the flow."

Matthew nods. Angie knows he wants her to keep talking, but she doesn't.

"On that line of discussion, perhaps you feel like encountering your old self would lead to a paradox?"

She looks at Matthew. "Paradox, like a time thing that rips apart the universe?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Time travel isn't real, Matthew."

If she didn't know better, she'd swear Matthew was smirking at her. "Well, neither are aliens."

"Yes, they are." Angie rolls her eyes. Matthew, she thinks, must think he's beginning to play her "game." She searches his face for evidence of self-satisfaction and finds none. It disturbs the part of her brain that considers Matthew a predator. Matthew has laid his clipboard on the table and his pen hovers over it. He is a bumblebee waiting to land on a flower. Thinking of Matthew as an insect isn't charitable either. Matthew refuses to be categorized and Angie doesn't like it. She isn't even sure if he's really a liar. "I don't see it."

"Perhaps you're afraid these two versions of yourself won't be

reconciled, and that the two meeting would be devastating for you personally."

"I guess," she sighs. "Or maybe the person I was before isn't worth remembering."

"I'm sure that's not true." Matthew blurts. Angie raises an eyebrow. Matthew never "blurts." She isn't even sure he passes gas, much less "blurts." She supposes everyone can talk without thinking.

"The old version of me fell for…for…" Matthew almost leans forward, "for him," she finishes. "She's an idiot."

"I haven't met her, so I can't say if I agree or not."

"And you're not going to." Angie barely restrains herself from snapping. "She's gone. She's dead. Erased from existence by a meddlesome time traveller."

Matthew smiles wearily. "Then perhaps we should focus our work on helping you to like this new version of yourself."

"I never liked myself."

"Isn't it worth trying to change that?"

"What if she's erased too?"

"You saw Percy, and you're still here. I think you're Marty McFly in this situation, not Jennifer."

Angie nods, pretending to know what Matthew is talking about. Maybe she should re-watch "Back to the Future."

Angie looks out the window again, watching dead branches sway in the wind.

#

Angela Geraldine Dawson stares at a packet of instant noodles, covered in dirt after being wedged between the stove and the fridge for the better part of a year. She has never liked instant noodles. They smell, in her mind, like salt and desperation. Percy ate at least three packets of them a week. At this moment, she has never hated a food so much. In her mind, this stupid packet of noodles is a biological weapon, designed to incapacitate her as a delayed act of psychological warfare.

Angela Geraldine Dawson has always hated germs. They are why she has begun the twice-yearly endeavour of cleaning her entire apartment, top to bottom. Germs are the worst kind of organism. They enter you without permission and corrode you from the inside out. However, they are so small you never see them coming, not until your blood runs thick as molasses and you need fifty dollars worth of medication a day to stay alive. Considering a rather large germ moved out of the apartment, Angela Geraldine Dawson considers herself lucky.

Angela Geraldine Dawson debates setting the packet on fire but remembers the potential environmental degradation that would cause. However, she will not compost them. The community garden deserves better.

Angela Geraldine Dawson leaves the noodles on the table and moves into the living room, spying the green chair. She moves through the apartment, noting little infestations. The body wash Percy insisted on buying even though it made him smell like a preteen. The pillow Percy would playfully smack her with. The sheets where the first of many assaults happened. The bra he bought her, with the underwire that digs into her breasts like a parasite.

Angela Geraldine Dawson's apartment has been infected. She cannot tell if Percy sunk into her skin or if she breathed his ugly in herself. The germs have been festering in the corner of her vision, just outside of her awareness. This is how warfare starts, she thinks, with little resentments piling up like so much dead skin. Biological weapons are as old as weapons themselves, and it is fitting that Percy's continued presence in her apartment has become this. Biological weapons are often deployed by accident, and Percy was never smart enough to launch a real offensive.

Angela Geraldine Dawson returns to the kitchen. She purposefully does not look at the packet of instant noodles and crosses the room to the cupboard. She pulls out three large garbage bags, running over the plastic with her fingers. It isn't a proper hazmat suit, but it will do.

Angela Geraldine Dawson starts with the noodles and moves from room to room, decimating the infectious agent with the power of triple thick plastic. Only one and a half bags are full of toxins, but it is enough. She cannot fit the chair into a bag, so she drags it to the elevator, takes it to the curb, and leaves it there. If it is not gone in three days, she'll take it to the dump herself.

Angela Geraldine Dawson returns to her apartment. She looks around. The apartment is still dirty, but something about it seems pristine. Holy, almost.

Angela Geraldine Dawson breathes in clean air for the first time in a long time, and each breath becomes its own prayer.

#

Matthew offers to show Angie his notes. It is her right as a patient, apparently. “I feel it would help with your paranoia,” he says, “and establish my transparency.”

She holds the yellow paper in her hands, scanning the page. Matthew has written down what she says, starring every mention of the apocalypse. Underneath, he writes his own notes. “Progress from last week,” “Percy. Remember this,” “Stared out the window a total of five times this session,” “If I could punch Percy, I would.” Angie smiles a little as she reads them. She isn't sure why. Perhaps it is because he is listening.

He's still not a real doctor. A real doctor would use codes all over their notes like a military cypher. Matthew is too “transparent,” in his words, to be a doctor.

“As you can see,” Matthew says, after a swollen pause, “nothing untoward.”

“Thank you,” she says. Matthew nods. “I had no idea you felt this way about Percy.”

“Yeah, well, most therapists feel this way. In trauma cases, we often wish we'd never met our clients, because we wish the trauma never happened.”

Angie nods, beginning to cry. Matthew reaches out to touch her, but stops himself, extending a box of tissues towards her. “Why are you crying, Angie? I don't understand.”

“When something bad happens, everyone acts like it ends when the bad thing is over. But it doesn't. It continues all the time. It happens over and over in my mind. I guess that's trauma. I think I just assumed I was the only one who wished that Percy never met me. That must sound horrible, but I thought everyone else moved on. That they forgot the bad thing happened. Sometimes I even try to forget that the bad thing happened. But you remembered.”

“It's my job not to forget. It's my job to remember, even if sometimes I have to remember for you.” Matthew whispers. Tears flow afresh down Angie's face.

A silence swells between them. Angie continues to cry. Matthew waits patiently for her to stop, to resume talking, but she doesn't feel rushed.

“You said his name,” Matthew says, finally.

Angie looks up through her tears. “What?”

“You said his name. Last month, you couldn't even say that.”

Angie ponders this. It's true. It came out without thinking, and she didn't notice. It slid off her tongue like water from a roof, smoothly, without catching and without damage. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I think you're getting better,” Matthew says. “I really do.”

Matthew is a liar, and Angie knows this. But maybe he isn't. Maybe it's okay to be wrong about things.

“I have homework for you, Angie.”

Angie laughs. A genuine laugh. “Because that worked so well last time.”

“I think you'll like this.” She waits for Matthew. “I want you to start watching movies about the post-apocalypse. Maybe that will be a nice change.”

Angie nods. “I can do that,” she says. She wants to remake the world, she thinks, but not too much. After all, her own apocalypse was so small. Soon the earth will retake her, and flowers will grow in the radioactive dirt of her psyche.

Robert Beveridge *(he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in The Virginia Normal, Credo Espoir, and Chiron Review, among others.*

Feral Hogs

Robert Beveridge

sometimes you're just there
at the table with your scrambled
eggs with extra onions
and a little deli ham
in front of you and thirty
to fifty feral hogs burst
into the diner and every last
one of them wants their coffee
made in a different way
but there's only a single
waitress and two half-full
Bunn kettles so there's not
much you can do but put
down that bottle of Cholula,
vault over the counter,
and grab the assault measuring
cup. You know where
they keep the beans.

Karkala

Robert Beveridge

Water drips, salt and sand
rubbed into muscles. You wait
until alone before you move,
sleep in trees at night
to prevent ambush by tigers,
zombies, pregnant onions.
Every cello piece you hear
resembles Bach; you figure
this has to do with reverberation
from lakes, perhaps the distant
ocean.

Dawn arrives, you cut
yourself down. No tigers in sight;
you pick up your bow
and rosin, set out again.

Regurgitate

Robert Beveridge

You slipped on the job
pounded the hammer onto your thumb
instead of the nail
left streaks
of yellow and black
down the drywall

you stared at the hammer
in contemplation
decided not to throw the punch

sat down on an exposed girder
and stared down at the corner
of eighth and broadway
to jump would require too much energy

you will pick up the hammer again
one of these days

Jim Ryan *recently completed his Master's in Creative Writing at The College at Brockport: State University of New York. His stories have appeared in the literary magazine Gandy Dancer, and Possibilities Publishing Company's anthology contest, Besties, Bromances & Soulmates: Stories about Pivotal Relationships. When he isn't writing, he is a gamer, mac and cheese connoisseur, and cat concierge.*

Aura

Jim Ryan

You stand in line filling your cheeks up with air: puff them up, let it out slowly, puff them up even fuller, finding pouches of space you didn't know you had, let it out. Think: *God, I'm the type of person who puffs her cheeks waiting in lines,* and stop. You're holding the Mother's Day card, afraid to put it on the conveyor into something sticky or have it swallowed by the dark crack before the cashier. Surrounded by a rush of magazine covers, candy bars, beeps and shopping cart wheels, you try to focus your eyes and shake off the dazzle that has taken you over, but there is so much noise, so many colors. It's easier to look at them all at once or not at all.

Back in the car, a deep breath, then you're driving. It takes minutes to find yourself back on country roads, away from the cluster of people. Only pop music on the radio keeps you from your peace. The lyrics are a train of light through your head. Each thrum of bass is sandpaper over your skin. You turn off the radio. It's quieter now, but there is still the hiss of tires on pavement, the raspy engine hum alongside your migraine, pulsing.

In your head, you're writing a note to put in the Mother's Day card alongside the stock sentimental message. It includes a joke about the perfect sunset photo on the front, then a more serious bit about how nice the sunsets in this valley are, and how you wonder if they're nice where your mother is staying too. You'll wish her well and invite her in a gentle way to write back to you this time. Just a bunch of stuff about sunsets, basically.

You've been sending letters to your mother for a few years. At first, you would write on the days you couldn't stop thinking about her, but now you mainly send them on holidays. She was headed south for a new job, she had told you. You don't even know where she lives, exactly—only the address of the company where she works, which you managed to find online. She always had the migraines too, and she gave them to you, genetic. For sure, she is still having them—they can be tempered with pills but never banished.

You made a turn on an unmarked road a while back, and you're not quite sure where you are now. There are many country roads in the area and it

impresses you how easy it is to find one you haven't driven before.

Wildflowers line this road, but it's impossible to make out a single one—they blend together into bands of yellow and blue past the windows. They upset you, how you can't see them but they're all you can see. There is a clear area of gravel on the side of the road and you decide to park, reach into the glove-box for the bottle of Excedrin, swallow two without water. This is strange, to stop a car anywhere but your destination, but you decide you're being responsible, not continuing to drive in poor condition. You open the door, drop one foot outside onto the stones, then sit there listening to the occasional cracks and pops of the car settling in.

Then you're walking down the side of the road. It's one of those cool fall days that couldn't hurt anything. You walk for some time, passing one house, then several minutes later, another. Houses are spread far apart here. If you lived in one of them, you think, you could scream just for the fun of it and nobody would notice. But you push this away because even the thought of screaming hurts your head.

You haven't seen a home or sign of human life for a while, fifteen minutes maybe, when you come across a small white house. The house itself is set back from the road, and there is a picnic table in the yard, along with a clothesline. White sheets hang on the line, filled into curves by the breeze. *How picturesque*, you think, and you realize you need to sit down. This happens to you sometimes—it has for as long as you can remember: you start feeling like a bee's nest where the bees only come in and they never go back out.

You head for the picnic table where it sits between two shady trees. Sitting down, you thank luck that you made it and you didn't pass out like you have before. The bare wood of the table is cool and smooth and you lay your cheek against the surface, already starting to feel a little better.

"Are you okay?" somebody says. You pick up your head and see her standing across from you on the other side of the table. "Are you a jogger?"

"No," you say. You know you don't look anything like a jogger but you don't offer more. Instead, you're looking at the woman and realizing she looks like your mother—not your mother the last time you saw her, but a picture of her from a birthday a long time ago. She was turning nineteen or twenty, you don't remember. In the photo, she is wearing white, leaned over her cake, lips curling to start blowing out the candles. The candles are the main source of light and they reflect in your mother's eyes.

"Can I get you anything? Something to drink?" the woman says.

"Yes, please. I'm sorry, I just didn't feel well, and I was coming by here," you say, hoping it will make everything clear, a reasonable explanation.

The woman comes back in a few minutes with two glasses of lemonade, one for you and one for herself. "There you are," she says. "Would you like me to call anyone for you?"

"It's okay," you say. "My car is close. I'll go soon."

"Oh," she says, sitting down across from you. She looks confused by this but smiles in a way that lets you know she isn't going to hit you with a lot of questions and this makes you grateful.

"Thank you," you say. "For the drink."

"You're welcome." The woman who looks like your mother takes a long drink of lemonade, draining a third of the glass. You drink a little of yours as well. It's pulpy, which you never cared for, but still delicious. You're sitting up straight now, and things are starting to calm down and take on more resolution. It's a thrill how real the world looks just as you are getting over one of your episodes, like you can see each blade of grass moving.

"Are you doing anything for Mother's Day?" you ask. "Your kids coming over or anything?"

She laughs. "I don't have kids. I'm here taking care of my mom. She's been sick."

"Sorry to hear that. I mean, it's nice of you to be here, though."

"I don't mind. I've been back home here a while now. It's a very nice place, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Anyway, she's kept this house up as long as I can remember. Always said I was welcome." She stands from the bench. "Actually, I need to go check on her. You'll be all right here? Feel free to stay as long as you like."

"Thank you," you say, and watch her return to the house. She brushes past the hanging sheets and out of sight. You finish your lemonade and sit for a handful of minutes before standing up. It occurs to you that you don't want to be there, a distraction, when the woman looks out again. You're feeling reasonably well now, and ready to head back to your car.

On the way, the Mother's Day card slips from your jacket and lands in the tall grass lining the ditch by the side of the road. Its sunset image peers up through the wavering blades. You move to climb down the slope, lowering one hand to the rough gravel on the road's shoulder to steady yourself. You straighten back up, though, and continue walking. Maybe this time, you think, you don't need to send a card.

The car is hot when you return, but you roll down all the windows and the heat rushes out to be replaced by cooler air. You're not exactly sure how to get back on track to drive home, but your head is quieter now, and you have a good sense of the roads around here. You're moving again. The sound of the tires on the pavement is soothing now, and you feel like you could drive for hours.

William C. Crawford *is a former combat photojournalist based in North Carolina. His new book on Forensic Foraging is available at Amazon.com.*

Farmer's Market, Greensboro, NC

Twin Copper Water Spouts

Farmer's Market, Greensboro, NC

A writer and book artist working in both text and image, ***Kristy Bowen*** *is the author of a number of chapbook, zine, and artist book projects, as well as several full-length collections of poetry/prose/hybrid work, including SALVAGE (Black Lawrence Press, 2016) and MAJOR CHARACTERS IN MINOR FILMS (Sundress Publications, 2015). She lives in Chicago, where she runs dancing girl press and studio.*

---

artist statement #34

Kristy Bowen

We ask, is this poem desirable? Is this poem fuckable? The slip of sex between the garter and the thigh. The high of swingsets and car accidents. The fragments of the self cast off like feathers. I was a monster in the mix and no one could see it. Scribbling my words across the backs of other women's husbands. When asked, I could lie and say I made it up. But what about the hairs I kept shedding on every black coat. The float of eyes across the room. I kept trying to turn my monsters into wives, who could hover above the kitchen table and chant their way to happiness. It helps to be fuckable. Or at least to seem fuckable. To wet and gleam in the flourescents.

artist statement #8

Kristy Bowen

At 4, I scribbled lines in notebooks and pretended they were stories. Or approximations of stories. The mother in her house. The daughter in her bed. The moan of wind outside and the trees scratching the windows. Fairy tales tell us that the daughter must die. Or more often, the mother. Light softening to violet and then the red from all that blood. No one could tell who was bleeding more until the prince freed us from the castle. Found the key the king had hidden in plain sight all along. No one could tell who needed the freedom more. Her, with her heart beating outside her body. Me, with my lines becoming ropes I could strangle with. How I could weave another story where no one died and the women ate the men's hearts like apples. Where they baked them into pie enough to feed them both.

artist statement #40

Kristy Bowen

A woman dropped a poem in a well and waited to hear it hit bottom. No knowing how deep the hole or how black the water. If you could even see the stars from that sort of depth. Who knows where the source begins. Where it clouds with grief. What relief to hear nothing at all. What vacancy lurking behind every vowel like a shadow. In the library, I crossed out words until my paper was made of lace. Wrapped it around me carefully. Made the self appear and disappear until there was nothing left but a sliver of wind slipping through stone. The ghost of the poem haunting the basements and longing to be heavier. How it slipped through the door just as you closed it. Made itself at home in your bed. The weight of it palpable beneath the sheets, but too light to hold anything down.

Eli Ryder's *fiction, drama, and criticism has appeared in various print, digital, and theatrical venues. He teaches college English, is a founding editor of automatareview.com, and stole his MFA from UC Riverside's low-residency program in Palm Desert, CA.*

What Should Have Been

Eli Ryder

"It's never just a stitch," my grandmother told me. "Never a knot. Each run of thread has a purpose and a meaning. You're not slapping backs and halves together, it's not just cross stitch. You're making something from nothing."

I tried with my child's hands to follow hers, but they hadn't learned much yet. Not like hers had. Mine were clumsy, hers fast and magical.

"Good, good, but tighter. Cleaner. Keep the picture in your mind, get that clear before you even touch the needle to the canvas."

"But it's one stich," I said.

"And we're each one person, you and me. But take us away, and the word 'family' means something different. Because it doesn't have us."

I caught my fingertip with the needle. Blood rose and I sucked it away.

"If each stitch has meaning and purpose, the end result will stay together." She handed me a tissue and a bandage. With the hoop in her left hand and needle in her right, she worked fast enough to blur. Silky color spread on the canvas. "Stitch with meaning," she said, and I watched, transfixed. Transformed.

On paper, her—my, now, I guess—house is a modest and ordinary three-plus-two with a covered patio and one-car garage. It sits on a wide street in a neighborhood quieted by big oaks and willows, where the elementary school a block away pumps out laughter that flutters to the ground like falling leaves. I learned to ride my bike in that street, split my eyebrow on the address-painted curb out front. Sat bleeding into my hand while the sun drifted through the trees and spotted the ground, my grandmother shouldering the phone at the end of its impossibly long curly cord. She didn't sound worried, so I was calm, but looking back, her hands worked that gauze and tape just as fast as her quarter stitches. With purpose, as she'd say.

It's never just a house when you inherit. You take on all its stories, and it will tell them if you're listening well enough. This modest-on-paper house, which still smells like soup on a day-long simmer, is swollen with memories, the walls almost bulging outward, like the square footage couldn't

possibly contain the pressure of what's inside. It's fat with the ghosts of what could have, maybe should have been, all clamoring to get out.

A few years after those first clumsy three-quarter stitches at my grandmother's kitchen table, my grandfather came home one afternoon and my grandmother stopped stitching. I kept working, my lines tighter and straighter after all that practice, while my grandfather drank from a square pint bottle and watched.

"Kid's still at it?" he asked her.

"He's getting good."

I kept stitching.

"Better get him that ball and mitt, otherwise—"

"Hush, now. Don't talk nonsense. He wants to, he can stitch. That's all."

My grandfather scoffed. "Bet he'd like to have a catch, if you'd let him."

I kept my head down. Kept running that needle and thread. Once he saw how good I was, I thought, he would understand. Just finish, he'll see.

In a trophy case, a dingy baseball sits almost forgotten on the far right of the top shelf. I never could remember whose ancient signature was barely visible just above the horseshoe seam. The hooped canvases next to it have better real estate, sitting upright and centered in the glass, proud songbirds and architecture and foliage threaded clean and perfect, their images more than thread, somehow alive and real and rising off their canvases. The brass plates in front of them announced their successes—twelve straight years of MEDFORD COUNTY FAIR BLUE RIBBON, CUSTOM CROSS STITCH, then CALIFORNIA STATE FAIR SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT PRIZE, BEST IN SHOW, which was her last competition.

She'd set that last one in place slowly, rubbing the brass with the tip of her finger, barely smiling. It was just the two of us that evening, my grandfather having passed a few months before.

"He'd have been proud," I told her.

"Oh, maybe. Maybe he would have."

I smiled. "He was something."

My grandmother looked at me and her eyes smoked over with something deeply painful. "You always thought so." She smiled. "I tried hard to maintain that for you." Then she went upstairs and didn't come down until breakfast the next morning.

The case sits outside the kitchen in a short, paisley-papered hallway, and just off the hallway is the living room. My grandfather's recliner was once a proud resting place his presence never really left. Now, the foot plate won't settle where it should, and its corner sticks out from the frame. There are holes worn in the edges of the armrests, and the ghost of a stain lingers where he'd rest his head.

I sat in it once, when I was eight.

He yanked me out of it, fell into it, and stood me right in front of him. "A man's chair is a man's chair, and nothing should come between a man and his chair, boyo." He held my shoulders a little too tight and spoke directly into my face with burning breath. "At the end of the day, when the work is done, what does a man have but his chair?" He let go, leaning his head back, sinking into the soft fabric. "What else does a man have?"

My grandmother cleared her throat in the kitchen. My grandfather cracked a smile.

Even now, I don't want to touch it, because a man's chair is that man's chair and that chair was his, no one else's, and all these years later I still feel a little like it would wrap itself around me and swallow me whole if I dared sit where I wasn't wanted.

The living room is a bit dark, despite the picture window dominating the outside wall. I give the recliner a wide berth, draw back the curtains, and make a mental note to have the windows cleaned. The light filtering through them is yellow and weak. It touches the wallpaper, doesn't improve the pattern continuing in from the hallway. The sofa is deep and comfortable and puffs up a bit of my grandmother's smell when I sink in—

She leaned over me and took the dice, straightening her property cards and winking at me from her side of the coffee table. Hairspray mixed with a faint flower perfume—she smelled like home.

"Six gets me through to Pennsylvania. Come on, six." The dice clicked in her hand, tumbled to the table.

My grandfather huffed and rolled his eyes. "Guess that's that. Ain't no beating her now." He tossed his rainbow money on the board, knocking my thimble to the thick shag carpet.

"Hey, now. Still got a game here, sit down." She smiled when she said it, but it only lit the bottom half of her face.

"Nothing but losers sitting there now." He dropped ice in a glass and walked outside.

"I guess I quit too," I said, and tossed my money down like he had. Instead of flopping down cool and easy, it scattered the whole board to chaos.

"Well. No one wins, then." The half-smile was gone.

Loser, I think now, mourning that moment. Wanting it back.

I don't remember my parents. In a way, maybe I never knew them—the accident happened before I probably knew what family was. People offer condolences when they find out, but for what? I don't miss them. How do you miss something you don't know? I think about what parents are and it's my grandparents in that thought, covering both the raising and the spoiling. My grandmother teaching me to cook and clean and sew, things she knew had value beyond their immediate goals. Stitching something into creation, combining individual components to feed body and soul, showing pride in my

surroundings, all my grandmother's fingerprints. She taught me to drive, too, something my grandfather protested.

"If it ain't a manual, he ain't really driving," he said from the porch. "A man's got to learn a—"

My grandmother's suddenly-rolled-up window cut off the rest, but by then I knew how to finish the sentence without him and waved as I backed out of the driveway.

Besides, she drove us everywhere. I remember a couple of tense moments when I was really small, but not what made them tense, just that they ended with him sliding into the passenger seat and my grandmother's knuckles white on the steering wheel.

At the top of the stairs, I stop and touch the threads in the portrait my grandmother had done of my parents. They smile toothy and big, wear big collars and bold colors, their feathered hair delicate above their eyes, which seem to have me in them, not a picture but the seed of an idea they'd come up with all on their own.

My grandmother was really, really good. And maybe I do miss my parents, a little, but not faces. Just a feeling, like there's something vital I can't ever have.

My room is as it was, my own embroidery hanging a timeline of age and talent along the walls. She'd left it all alone, as I'm sure she'd done the first time my mother had made her an empty-nester. The smell of laundry soap hangs in the room, even though it's been a couple months since my last visit.

Then, her bedroom. I don't know what I'm going to do here, I was never allowed in before, my grandfather always extending his chair speech to the space where he slept, where "a man lays with his woman," he'd say, at which my grandmother always sighed and closed her eyes.

Standing in the doorway now, the memory makes me shiver.

My grandmother is everywhere. Pictures on the wall, some I recognize from when she'd showed me her school-age photos. One of her sitting with her older sister, who passed before I was born. Her own parents, whose smiles seemed sucked dry by the years between the photo being taken and now. It is dark and yellowed, colorless, drab. More a reminder of memory than a real image, but I can see her in them. My mother, young and smiling, and that undefinable ache I caught in the hallway grows edges. A wedding picture I've never seen, and those edges hurt now.

I hope I feel like they look someday. I hope I know how.

None of my grandfather. No candids, no wedding, no young boy in short pants at school. Nothing. The bed is even a twin, which I know is smaller than they'd had when I was young.

She's erased him from the room, not even left space on the wall for his face or in bed for his memory. Except—

The cross-stitched portrait of her grandmother hanging above her dresser is off-plumb, and behind it, another frame's corner peeks out. I take the first portrait down. I'm mesmerized by what's behind it:

A canvas stretched tight on a square frame, what my grandmother began and left for me to finish. She's done my mother and father together, smiling like in the hallway, but fuller, their eyes somehow alive in silk and thread. Their hands rest on invisible shoulders—I feel them, impossible but I do, and their eyes twinkle at me from the canvas—and the empty space there glows with my own face, smiling and content, waiting to be stitched into eternity. Next to my mother, on the right, another empty space. My fingers twitch, ache for needle and thread, and I can already see what my hands will do: my grandmother, as proud and alive as she's made my parents, watching over us all. I see the picture, the whole thing, feel my grandmother's magic in my hands warming to the task. My magic, now.

A small manila envelope sits wedged in the bottom right corner of that frame, with my grandmother's perfect handwriting emblazoned on the front: *I'm Sorry*.

Inside, a bundle of photographs. My heart races. My grandfather is in every one, they're what's missing from the walls. I wonder why she's taken them down and hidden them. He's clear-eyed and unburdened, happy in a way I never saw him. A stranger, really, and I wonder why my grandmother shut all of this away and her apology makes a little sense, but then—

Four more photos.

My parents standing proud next to their new two-door Chevrolet sedan, my father with one hand on the roof and the other around my mother's waist. My mother's hand on the top of my head, my cheek against her thigh. I don't know how to smile that big now.

My grandfather waving from behind the wheel, my parents in the backseat wearing mock-serious "Home, Jeeves" faces. The glint of a flask in my grandfather's right hand, resting against the passenger headrest.

I bite the inside of my cheeks and don't want to look at the last two, but—

My grandfather's slack-eyed mug shot, the clear imprint of the car's logo red across his brow and forehead.

I don't even look at the last photo. It doesn't matter, really.

Something moves on the canvas, in that bottom corner where the envelope sat waiting for me.

My grandfather's face. It's small, thin and desperate, like my grandmother had starved the thread somehow before she'd stitched it in. His eyes twitch. His sewn lips stretch against their anchors, widening the holes the thread runs through.

The canvas there bulges just slightly outward. Something behind it pushes toward me, distorts the small portrait, and a stitch in his lip pops.

Without taking my eyes off my grandfather's struggling face, I find needle and thread in the top middle drawer of her dresser, right where my hands know it will be. She's taught me well. My fingertips heat up and I've got the whole picture in my head before I touch the needle to his lips, sewing them shut in wide hashes, pulling tight enough to draw his cheeks down to his chin, and then through his eyelids, pinching the canvas closed over his mad dancing eyes, shutting him in darkness and silence for as long as my stitches —with purpose and meaning—will hold.

My now expert stitches make something from nothing, a prison from a portrait.

His embroidered face weeps blood where I've stabbed it, and I leave it to dry while I set my grandmother into her place next to my parents, my fingers working almost on their own, making the family portrait I should always have had.

DS Maolalai *has been nominated three times for Best of the Net and twice for the Pushcart Prize. His poetry has been released in two collections, "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016) and "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019).*

Autumn

DS Maolalai

and what?
as if the world
were cold brown piss
and slippery
rinsing
garbage? falling down
on autumn pavements
and cracking
like rotten fruit -
and people only like it
when it's dry anyway. this is Dublin
and it's always
wet here,
all the time
wet,
with dead trees
and grounds
covered in sludge like bad catfood. fuck it.
I like all the other seasons. I don't
care how beautiful
it is elsewhere. this one
can go
under ponds
and flake up
with broken twigs
and rotten fishscales.

Ilene Dube *is a writer, artist and filmmaker. Her short stories, poetry and personal essays have appeared or are forthcoming in Atticus Review, The Bookstore on Lafayette Street anthology, Corvus Review, Former People, HerStory, Huffington Post, Iconoclast, Kelsey Review, Foliate Oak, The Grief Diaries, The Oddville Press, Parhelion, Penny Shorts, the Same, Soft Cartel, Still Point Arts Quarterly, Unlikely Stories and U.S. 1 Summer Fiction. Her art criticism has appeared regularly at Philadelphia Public Media, Hyperallergic and many others.*

The Light Box

Ilene Dube

My neighbor's greenhouse arrived the spring before his cancer was diagnosed. It was a gift from his wife and came in several cardboard boxes. Before he became such a big wig in the book distribution business, my next-door neighbor might have assembled the greenhouse himself, just as he had put an addition on his house with his own hands. For this project he hired a contractor.

In our neighborhood, we have a lot of trees. Some of the old timers say this was wetland, and with today's regulations our neighborhood would never have been built. As a result our yards are not conducive to growing vegetables. Our soil is acidic from all the leaves that fall from the trees, and vegetables don't grow well in shade—if you push them, they balk by getting diseases or attracting infestations of undesirable insects. It's also a wildlife habitat, so to grow vegetables in our neighborhood you need to fortify the area with fencing.

I have been struggling to grow edibles under these conditions. My next-door neighbor does this effortlessly. His little fenced in plot is no bigger than two graves—half the size of the area that I weed and till. He plants his peas in March and tomatoes in April—way too soon, according to all the gardening literature I follow. Is there such a thing as a green thumb? My next door neighbor gets a bounty of ripe juicy tomatoes, as well as salad greens and a rich tangle of sugar snap peas, whereas I struggle with sunchokes, cucumbers, okra, tomatillo and sweet potatoes.

Part of the secret to his success, he admits, is that he buys starter plants at Home Depot. He spares no expense in blanketing his garden, each year, with a rich layer of Miracle Gro top soil. Although I am loathe to use products that would make my plants chemically dependent, my neighbor's fertilizer really does lead to more miracles than the organic compost I work into my soil.

Some of my neighbors who belong to the Master Gardeners program question why my next door neighbor even needed a greenhouse. Its footprint is about the same size as the actual plot of land on which he plants vegetables. But he was excited about getting a head start on the growing season, starting new life in pots. He'd had the contractor run an electric line out to the greenhouse so that, in winter, he could supplement the hours of light provided by nature.

Soon we noticed his greenhouse lit up at night. It looked like a party house, all aglow. Some of the neighbors asked, behind his back, why he lights his plants all night—doesn't he know they, too, need rest? When guests to my house see his glowing light box, they ask if it bothers me. It does not. I like having a glowing cube next door. It doesn't make any noise, and seems to radiate energy. A life-giving kind of energy.

My next-door neighbor is often described as living large. Although he's been sober for more than 40 years, he compensates in other ways. While most families in our neighborhood have two or three children, my next-door neighbors have six. His wife commutes to the city for her job as publisher, and a live-in nanny raised each of the children. Even after the children grew up, went off to college and boomeranged back home and then out again, my neighbors kept the nanny in their employ.

In winter my neighbors' front yard becomes a winter playground with Santas from various ethnic backgrounds (often corresponding to the regions where each of the children was adopted), sleighs and reindeer, and for several years, a skating rink that required so much maintenance he'd talked of getting a Zamboni. Their backyard includes not only a pool but a tiki bar—it once went up in flames from a stray barbecue ember but my neighbor had another one built. The property is packed, like an amusement park, but my neighbor found room for his greenhouse.

He has always committed himself to neighborhood gatherings—the annual fall picnic and the holiday party with caroling. My neighbor generously donates money to hire a Moon Walk and petting zoo to these events, and has even hired a horse-drawn carriage ride for the winter holiday party. He continued doing these well past the time his children lived at home.

One year, for Halloween, he dressed as a woman. He wore lipstick, foundation, blush and mascara; a blond wig; a form-fitting sequined gown; lacy hose; and stiletto heels he managed to walk elegantly in. He was a beautiful woman, though we never saw that side of him again.

Once the greenhouse was installed, there didn't seem to be much activity taking place inside. There were several clay pots on benches, a watering can and his beloved Miracle Gro. But I never saw anyone enter the glass cube.

I don't think he wanted to go through chemotherapy, losing his hair, losing his good looks, so my neighbor went quickly. His memorial service

was attended by hundreds, and his brave children spoke of his exuberance for life, and how he always kept the child inside alive, even to the very end.

That next spring, his garden was raked, topped with its usual Miracle-Gro application, and a row of salad greens and sugar snap peas appeared, seemingly overnight. I know his wife was too busy commuting to her job to tend the garden, and the few of his children who had boomeranged back were too focused on their screens to spend time in the yard. The nanny tended to the dogs and did house work, but I'd never seen her putter outside. Perhaps they'd hired a gardener. My next-door neighbor had employed cadres of handymen he'd met through AA.

I was struggling with my own garden, pulling pernicious weeds, adding lime to change the soil acidity, and suffering aches and pains from the work. I awoke in the night, my head filled with all I needed to get done, and walked downstairs to make myself a glass of golden milk to put me back to sleep. I walked to the great room and sat in the leather chair, blowing the steam off the hot beverage before taking my first sip. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the glowing light box in my neighbor's yard, and turned my head. I squinted, and looked again. A rocking chair had been installed inside the greenhouse. Setting my drink down on the coffee table, I got up and peered out the window. Was I dreaming? The rocker was moving back and forth. It was facing away at a diagonal, but I could see a head at the top of the chair.

I keep a pair of binoculars in the room to watch the birds that come to my feeder, and used them to get a better view of the rocking chair. When I turned the focus rings, I could see my next-door neighbor rocking in the chair.

The next morning, when I told my husband what I'd seen, he nodded. "Uh-huh."

"I wonder who it could have been?"

"A ghost?"

"Maybe it was one of his AA buddies. Or one of the kids."

When I looked out the window, there was no longer a rocking chair in the greenhouse. Perhaps they'd hired a caretaker to plant the garden, and the caretaker was contemplating what to get started in the greenhouse… in the middle of the night… and while rocking in a chair.

Perhaps it was the change to daylight savings time, or just age-related inability to sleep, but I found myself wandering again the next night. Cup of turmeric latte in hand, I peered out at the light box. Oddly, it wasn't lit, but how could I have missed it? The Moon Walk was inflated on my neighbor's front lawn, lit by fairy lights.

I got out my phone and photographed it through the window. Now I would have proof.

The next morning, I showed the picture to my husband.

"Pretty lights," he said.

I looked again. The photo was mostly dark, with a few blurry lights.

I looked at the label of the turmeric tea I'd been using to make golden milk—it did contain CBD. The following night I brewed a cup of chamomile.

The greenhouse was aglow, the rocking chair was back, although this time my next-door neighbor was standing while his daughter rocked in the chair. They both looked serious, as if he were telling her some very important life lessons he'd forgotten to impart before it was too late. His daughter stood up, nodded her head, then opened the door and evanesced into the night. My neighbor sat back in the chair where he rocked until my eyes could no longer stay open.

The following evening it was the next oldest daughter, and so forth until he got to the youngest, his son. That night, a horse-drawn sleigh came down our street and stopped just before the greenhouse. My neighbor bid adieu to his son, then took off in the sleigh as it headed toward the heavens.

My husband found me on the couch the next morning. At dinner, there was a wrapped gift at my place setting—a book on how to sleep better.

I don't like to take medication, or even drink alcohol. I sprayed my sheets with lavender oil, for its relaxation effect. A few hours later, I was in my gardening shoes and a light jacket, headed for the glowing light box.

There was no sign of my neighbor or any of his family members, no Moon Walk or flying sleighs. The greenhouse door was slightly ajar and I let myself inside.

There were trays of tiny pots with seedlings just barely sprouting. I inhaled the heady scent of moist humus and peat, and could detect a slight hint of insecticidal soap. Alongside the small tables was a gallon-size container of my neighbor's favorite brand of fertilizer, albeit in a concentrated form. I poured a drop into a mister that was already filled with water and delicately sprayed the seedlings. But the chemicals in even that tiny droplet was asphyxiating—I needed fresh air and headed for the door. It had jammed shut, and I could not open it. I couldn't remember if it needed to be pushed or pulled, and I feared breaking the glass. But as it set in that I was trapped, I stopped worrying about doing damage and pushed the door with all my weight.

I didn't awaken again until the sun began peeking through the trees. For the first time I noticed that on the tables were all the plants of my life—the Pandanus screwpine I'd inherited from my grandmother, the giant jade that grew from a cutting my childhood dentist gave me, a rubber tree that came with my first husband.

I was glad to see the door was once again ajar. I pushed it open and walked out, admiring the dew. I felt oddly refreshed, and grabbed the hoe from my shed, intending to turn the soil. But when I got to my little plot, I saw that it had already been planted. There were neat rows of peas, of lettuce, even tomatoes. And it was only March.

I took out my phone and snapped a few pictures. When I looked at the

images, I could see that this time I'd captured my neighbor, kneeling in my garden, smoothing the soil.

Lee Potts *is a poet with work in several journals including Rust and Moth (forthcoming), Ghost City Review, 8 Poems, UCity Review, Parentheses Journal, and Sugar House Review. He is an associate editor of poetry at Barren Magazine. He lives just outside of Philadelphia with his wife and their last kid still at home. You can find him on Twitter @LeePottsPoet and online at leepotts.net.*

Earthly Concerns

Lee Potts

The ghosts I always imagine
are too distracted to get to haunting.
Absently snagging on splinters,
in and out of a hundred
closets and narrow halls,
counting each paint flake,
noting each new ceiling stain,
resigned to finding the portraits
of those they loved hanging crooked
or fallen from the wall.

And at dusk, crowded around
every window, rapt,
as the mansion shadow stretched
across the broad lawn
and took the tool shed,
its door only on one hinge
letting in any thieving wind
that wandered by.

The clank of abandoned
shovel and scythe
hung from leather cords
on ancient nails, the only music
my ghosts still hear.

They listen as it calls rust
from heavy August air.

Ellen Rhudy *lives in Philadelphia, where she works as an instructional designer. Her fiction has recently appeared in The Adroit Journal, cream city review, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, SmokeLong Quarterly, Necessary Fiction, and Monkeybicycle. You can find her at ellenrhudy.com, or on Twitter @EllenRhudy.*

Cures

Ellen Rhudy

The first time I saw my grandmother, walking down the hall in her orthopedic shoes but with no cane or walker despite being in her nineties, I froze in recognition. She had the same square forehead as in the grayed photograph my mother kept slotted behind a picture of Morfar with his second wife. I had never realized it was possible to recognize someone by her forehead but there is the Danish gene for you. Hi, I said to her, hello. She looked to me and didn't answer.

That night I made dinner for my mother and asked what she remembered about her mother. Why would you ask me that? she said. She wasn't a kind woman.

I'm just curious, I said. I want to know where I come from.

You didn't really come from her. She scraped her fork around the edges of her plate, dragging rice through microwaved curry. She used to cover herself in olive oil and sit in the backyard, for hours at a time, in a bathing suit. The neighbors had teenage boys and they would climb up the fence to look at her.

I tried to imagine the woman I'd seen in those circumstances and could not. Her face was gouged with wrinkles and she had wide old hips and liver-spotted arms. I was angry with my mother for the cruelty of the story she'd chosen, though she couldn't have known any better.

After dinner I excused myself to work on job applications. I laid in my twin bed and stared at the ceiling. I pressed my thyroids, petaling my fingers along my jawline to feel that they were still swollen. My husband had left me the year before, and four months after that my role was eliminated by Navitum Associates. The two events were probably connected or even coordinated. I'd sent three applications in the past month and had changed my LinkedIn status to indicate to recruiters that I was immediately available, and had a manila envelope holding our divorce papers under the bed.

I tried to think of what I could say to my grandmother. I tried to remember what Morfar had said about her, any small detail—but he hadn't liked to talk about her, of course. Divorce is bad enough now, imagine doing

it in 1956. Finally I settled on the one detail I knew, the one my mother had just shared, and wrote a note on a sheet of brittle paper that been waiting almost two decades to be useful. *The olive oil didn't do you any favors*, I printed in block letters, pausing to scratch at my troubling leg. I wondered if my note was too cryptic, if it would give her enough of a jolt to agree to a conversation.

Most mornings she spent in the puzzle hall, a glass-enclosed greenhouse for the elderly, and I checked she was there before letting myself into her room. I'd written her address and wasted a stamp on the envelope before I realized I didn't have to go through those motions. I could have slid the letter under her door, but I wanted to see what her life was—just for a minute. I propped the envelope against the same clear plastic lamp that was in everyone's room. A gold frame on the side table was peopled with a handsome family that had probably been there since she bought it at Sears. What might have been a hand-knit blanket lay on the bed, striped with waves of blue. A pair of compression socks hung over the back of her chair. A knee-high stack of newspapers sat in one corner—full of silverfish, I imagined, ready to skitter across my arms.

#

The Pitman Manor for the Ever-Living was one of five such homes in the country, a place that sprawled across three acres and veered between the absurd and the industrial. The undying require a unique type of care, Paulette Thomson told me during my interview. You must remember these are people who have survived things we can't even imagine. Murals bounded the interior hallways, the dining room was modeled after a diner with Formica counters and gleaming silver stools none of the residents were allowed to sit on.

My job at the home was a simple one: I rolled people to their clubs and meals, then kept an eye on them—not that they could come to any harm. Every Wednesday my grandmother attended an environmental club with a man I figured to be her boyfriend, Gary. My first week, I watched them pour canisters of Morton's salt on the grass next to the parking lot. Some experiment, I figured; but then a month passed and the dead patch kept expanding, as though they were returning in secret to refine and elaborate on their earlier work. I had to run back to the building at the start of every meeting, leaving them alone so I could close the doors they'd propped open to flood the parking lot with cool breezes. Another day we took them on a special trip to Red Bank Park on the Delaware River, where they collected cigarette butts and Dunkin' Donuts cups from the grass and threw them into the water.

They're just a little confused, said Mary, one of the other orderlies, who had become my friend by default. We were about the same age, and both the products of failed marriages. They're too old to do much harm, she said.

She was right, but they unnerved me. I had never seen a group of

people so mindlessly focused on causing harm. I began to think of them every time I recycled a can. Once I understood our relationship, I paid closer attention to my grandmother at these meetings. Her name was Amalia Holst, though once it would have been Amalia Olsen. She never looked at me, and I saw no signs she had been disturbed by my jab at the quality of her crumpled flesh; but when I returned to her room to leave the next letter, the first was gone. I found it folded inside its envelope in the top drawer of her desk. I left the second letter propped against the lamp; I'd written about her childhood cat Larsen, which she'd named after the taxi driver who eventually ran him over. I walked around her room trying to breathe in the feel of her life. A photograph of a hot air balloon hung above the tv, clipped no doubt from a yellowing copy of *National Geographic*. I took a bottle of lotion from her bathroom and that night coated myself with a palmful of Palmer's cocoa butter. My left Achilles had developed a worrying twinge, I felt my words catching in my throat, but I was soothed to use a lotion belonging to someone who wouldn't ever die.

People don't usually work here more than three or four months, Mary told me one afternoon, as we smoked cigarettes over our cold cut sandwiches. Mary had been at the home for six months and must have sensed her tenure coming to an end. I was coming up on two months myself.

I'm going to find something else soon, I told her. I ashed my cigarette onto my white sneaker. I have some irons in the fire. This was untrue, of course, and the turnover rate gave me a secret thrill. We couldn't all be so bad at our jobs, there must be something they wanted to stop us discovering. I asked, Isn't there anyone who's been here longer than that?

Mary looked at the browning trees. Just the Director. I thought I'd try Shady Pines next. They pay better and there aren't so many of them in memory care. Shady Pines was an old folks' home of the traditional style—with non-permanent residents, the type who die.

I lifted a corner of my sandwich, then let it close back over its sweating turkey slice. I had avoided memory care, afraid of the generalized fury that seeped from their wing. If I was very quiet in the evenings I could hear them crying. They had all aged into a sameness, men and women alike, with eyes buried in pouches the color of the roof of my mouth. Hair wisped from their skulls in hopeful, lonely strands, and their knuckles bulged like knots on a tree. They all wore flesh-colored socks that cut into the skin just below their knees. None of them had family to visit them, they would just sit and stare all day, moaning or crying, feeling sorry for themselves.

None of the residents had visitors, actually. An embossed leather guestbook sat at the front desk without a single signature—it had been open to its blank first page since the morning I arrived for my interview. A guard sat at the front desk 24/7, buzzing in employees and ignoring the occasional visitor who thought if they could just touch an undying person they would be cured

of their own life. One day I thought I saw Kevin as I passed the front desk, but it was a stranger. Kevin had never understood my interest in people like my grandmother. You could fix all this if you wanted to, he told me, but you want to look for some freak cure instead. All the same, I imagined him standing at the door, divorce papers pressed to the glass, pleading with me to come out just for a minute.

#

I took my third letter in while Amalia ate lunch, picking her lock with a straightened paperclip. *You said you wouldn't ever return to Denmark because you don't respect people who live in the past, and now everyone who might remember you is dead.* Her pile of newspapers had continued growing, the sign of a woman with a weakened mind. I pulled open her nightstand drawer and picked through her meager belongings: a copy of Mitch Albom's *the five people you meet in heaven*, every page scored with red underlines; a laminated two-dollar bill; a pair of nail scissors; an eyeglass repair kit. I leaned my letter against her lamp and returned to her bathroom. I slipped a cheap plastic comb, tangled with gray hairs, into my pocket.

After, I returned to the lunchroom. I walked in loops, observing the residents working at their meals. A peeling group of children watched us from one wall, a boy holding a basketball three times the size of my head. Who wants to live forever if you have to eat this shit? a woman asked me as she picked at a plate of gray meat. I stood at Amalia's table as her friend Gary began to cough, his face reddening and hand jittering on the table. I stood next to him, watching him pull at the tablecloth, waiting to see where this would all go. He reached for my leg, nearly touching Amalia's comb before I stepped back. Just calm down, I told him, rubbing his back while Amalia shouted. Could he live for eternity like this, struggling to draw breath around his half-masticated moo shu pork? You'll be fine if you just calm down, I told him again. One of the other orderlies pushed me to the side, pulling Gary upright and holding him in a loving embrace as he thrust his fists back into the man's chest.

You have one job, Paulette told me that afternoon, and that is to keep the residents safe.

Gary was safe, I wanted to say; he was in the nursing wing right then, recovering from an incident that at worst would have placed him in a state of perpetual discomfort. My throat ached and I longed for a saltwater rinse, a comforting and bacteria-destroying tonic. But I stayed silent, hands folded on my lap as I looked at Paulette. I froze, I told her, and I'm still in shock about what happened. It won't happen again, please let me prove myself to you. I love working here, I added, unsure how far her doubts extended.

Paulette leaned back in her chair. You do seem to connect with the residents, she said. But you must remember their comfort is our top concern. You need to act with the same urgency as if they might die.

I wanted to ask what it would mean for Gary if no one had come to his rescue. Could he live even if he couldn't breathe? But I nodded, and leaned forward. I absolutely will, I told her. I love these residents and I want to care for them the right way.

This is your warning, then. She wrote something in my file. You can go back to work.

I was triumphant. There was time for me yet, time for me to learn, before I had this life pulled away from me. It had been decades since anyone had acquired the ability to live deathlessly, but there was a reason they didn't allow any visitors here, not even family. A government conspiracy, I thought, because who could imagine the cost of sustaining all these lives into an infinite future? No country would want too many of these deathless people. Canada had even made an unsuccessful attempt to kill theirs off by locking them in a shuttered hospital in Saskatchewan with no food or water.

I fixed my ponytail as I walked down the hall, winding a dozen loose hairs around my fingers—another sign of poor health. If I detailed all these things to Kevin, I thought—the hair, the throat, the mole, the thyroid—he would have to agree something in me was failing. He had believed me once, he had taken me to my doctor appointments and read the WebMD pages I printed at the office; but it was too late for that now.

#

Amalia lost a tooth the week after Gary's choking incident. I worried about the change in her health, and wanted to get a closer look at her. Because I had a car and a reliable driving record, and because the home's van driver was out for his weekly sick day, I was allowed to take her to the dentist. Paulette watched us go. I want a report every hour, she told me. You go nowhere but the dentist, you understand? Of course I understood.

Strapped in my passenger seat, her knees rigid in navy-blue slacks, her tooth in one speckled fist, Amalia was suffused with a thrilling rage.

You know, I told her as I backed out of my spot, in front of the dead zone she and her club had created, I had a baby tooth myself. That's a bicuspid?

Amalia nodded.

We must have lost the same baby tooth, I said. What a coincidence. It was also a lie, but it felt like a harmless one. I could imagine the dull ache of a dying tooth, so maybe it wasn't a lie after all, maybe I had a tooth whose roots were shriveling as we spoke. It will all turn out alright for you, I told her. I have a full set of chompers again, good as new.

You have no idea what you're talking about. She opened her fist to look at her tooth, yellow and probably still sticky with life.

I let myself be shamed into silence. She was tense and unhappy, which was what I had wanted. I thought of my letters stacking themselves in her desk drawer, a mystery I would solve for her when the time was right. My

mother had only been nine when this woman left her; my uncles were six and four. She didn't even leave a note, my mother said. She had never talked much about her mother before, because there was no reason to.

After I pulled into the dentist's lot, I turned to Amalia. You're Danish, aren't you? I asked. So am I. Well, half-Danish. What a coincidence—another coincidence.

Do you ever stop talking? she asked. You can wait for me here.

She walked across the uneven sidewalk to the office and struggled with the frosted glass door. I could see she had the roots of bitterness that would one day bloom and overwhelm her, the same as everyone else in the memory unit. Probably she could see her life trending in that direction and it upset her. I thought of her in the dentist's chair, handing her tooth over and opening her mothballed lips to display the gap in her receding gums.

I texted Paulette that Amalia was safe in the dentist's office. I waited for her to emerge, toothless. I couldn't think what else to write to her; I had run out of information. All that was left to me were your basic angers, pathetic questions about why she would abandon my mother so she could move five miles and live in a home that always smelled like a misplaced bowel movement. That couldn't be what she had imagined for the infinity of time remaining to her. My skirt had shifted while I drove, allowing me to inspect my mole without any special effort: it was fuzzed, approaching the size of a shooter marble though not so perfectly spherical, and was red at the edges. It looked like something that belonged on someone else's body. I was tempted to take a photo but instead pulled my skirt down, straightening it towards my knees. I would have liked to tell Kevin, who thought I could never turn off the worse parts of my brain.

Amalia wasn't carrying her tooth when she emerged. She had an envelope, another letter of some sort. What's the verdict? I asked. Are they going to give you a full set of dentures now you've lost one tooth?

Don't be stupid, she said. I have an appointment with the oral surgeon.

To do what?

To get an implant. She crossed her arms and looked out the window. Hopefully John will be back to drive me.

I turned up the radio so I wouldn't have to hear her breathing next to me, whistling like a burst balloon. I was a little insulted, of course. I'm not a bad driver, even Kevin would have said as much. It might be the only positive trait of mine he could name, but it would still be there. It's the one time your paranoia works for you, he said once, an idea that became less charming with the years.

How come none of your family visits you? I asked when we passed the home's wide glass doors. I put on my blinker.

No one's family visits them. She tugged at her seatbelt, which I

realized she hadn't fastened for the drive. We curved around the building, past the game room, past the propped kitchen doors.

It doesn't make much sense to me, I said as I parked in the empty lot, in front of the dead patch that now stretched before a half-dozen parking spots. Who stops them visiting you?

Maybe we don't have family, Amalia said, did you ever think of that? You need to leave me alone. She climbed out and slammed the door with unnecessary force.

I watched her go. She was a strange woman and I couldn't say I felt bad for my mother, having lost her. The only thing of quality and value she could bring to the world, I thought, was the ability to prolong her stay here, though she didn't seem to care much for it. One evening I'd sat behind Amalia and Gary as they debated whether they would still be alive when the sun swallowed the earth, or if they might be able to drown if a flood were due to climate change—due to something larger than themselves. It all feels futile, Amalia said as she shredded a Styrofoam cup, dropping its seed to the rec room floor. By the time they finished watching *Bridge on the River Kwai*, I expected we'd be up to our ankles in her garbage. Their conversation alarmed me, the tone of dread that ate their words as they leaned into each other. They spoke as people who were afraid, but not of anything I had ever known.

In her anger, I realized, Amalia had left her letter in my car. I picked it up to carry back to her, locked my car, and paused so I could read it. Its right corner bulged; she had kept her tooth, after all, with what turned out to be an x-ray of the gap in her mouth. I didn't know what a 91-year-old mouth was supposed to look like, but this seemed pretty good to me. I folded the x-ray back in its envelope and put it in my purse. She could worry for a day or two before I returned it.

#

That night, my husband left a voicemail while I was trying to extricate more memories from my mother. She didn't have any: she'd given me everything she had, up to the day a car had run a stop sign and nearly hit her and her mother, who had pushed her onto the sidewalk. You need to watch for these things, Amalia had said, you need to be careful. Then she was gone, leaving only a few family photos and her stained chair in the narrow backyard.

Can you just sign the papers? my husband asked. I know we both want to move on. I deleted the message and looked at the popcorned ceiling. Kevin had this tendency of phrasing things like we shared a mutual goal when he wanted to get something out of me. We both know you want to be less anxious, we both know you want to get back to work, we both know, we both know, we both know. I pushed the phone in the nightstand and ran a bath.

The mole had a furious quality to it under the water. It didn't hurt, but it itched, and my constant struggle was to not scratch around its edges to draw

it loose. If my grandmother would just welcome me to her fold, none of this would matter. One day we could live together, she mindless and quavering, me snapping skies together in thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles. My mole arrested and powerless, my husband long-dead. We didn't even need to live in the old folks' home; I could check her out and we would head west, driving across the desert without ever having to worry that we would run out of water or be murdered by a drifter. I sweated as I created our future, in which Kevin would die without even knowing how to find me for the papers, his search a balm for my soul.

I dried myself when the bubbles were flat and the water cool, standing in the draining tub. I felt dirtier than I had before, my skin tacky and pink.

#

I let two days pass before I brought the x-rays to Amalia. I watched her in the puzzle room, while I nodded and smiled at the other residents' stories about victory gardens and the dances of their youth. We looked out on the parking lot together, the wall behind us painted with trees that came to a shocking end when they reached the ceiling. Amalia seemed unsurprised when I appeared at her door, carrying the envelope. I found this, I told her.

She held out a hand. I could see she had one foot propped against the door, as though she could stop me.

I couldn't help but look, I said. Your mouth is remarkably healthy for a woman of your age.

I'm sure my dentist would be glad to hear your appraisal, she said.

I held my hand against the door to block her closing it. I have a question for you, I said.

She looked at me. She was my same height, and at her age. Her right eye was clouded, a fault I was willing to forgive. You want my wisdom as a senior citizen?

Not exactly. I pushed on the door, hoping she might invite me in. I wondered if I could come in to talk, about how you've done it, living so long.

French fries, she said. A glass of whiskey every night.

Can you let me in? I paused, and reached in my back pocket for the photo. I hadn't wanted to give it up, but now that we had started talking it was hard to think of a way to go forward without it. I unfolded the picture, and held it to the gap: Morfar, standing with a hand on her shoulder, in front of the rowhome he had once owned in Philadelphia.

Amalia looked from me to the photograph, and back. What do you want me to do with this? She seemed to be pressing her tongue into her bare tooth socket when she wasn't speaking, her right cheek swollen.

It's you. I held the photograph higher. It's you and my grandfather.

Amalia shook her head. Something in her had stiffened.

I'm not here to ask you why you left, I told her. I want to do the same thing. I just want you to tell me how I do it—how I can live like you have.

You know. I leaned close.

I really can't help you. Amalia stepped back, pushed harder against the door. A cart clattered down the t-shaped hall, nearing the turn, and us. I shoved the door, eased through, locked it behind me. I stood with my back to the door, Amalia on the floor, her legs tangled around my feet. Her false family watched us from their gold frame. A professorial type, with silver hair above the ears, directed his stock photo gaze from above the bed.

You're crazy. She crawled backwards. Her black padded shoes scuffed the carpet.

I'm not any crazier than anyone else here, I told her. Do you want me to think you broke a hip? You're not even crying.

She turned to her knees and lifted herself upright, using the TV stand as a prop. She took a step here and there, to test herself.

Sit down, I told her. I just want to talk. I'm not going to hurt you.

Amalia sat. She rested her gargoyle hands on the arms of her plush chair. It was the kind with a motorized seat that raised at the press of a button, pushing you into standing, though I couldn't imagine her ever needing such a thing. So you're the one who's been leaving me those crazy notes, she said.

If you just tell me the secret, I'll go. You don't even have to come with me. I liked the thought of a road trip, still, but could see how Amalia might not be my ideal companion. It had been too many years, any familial connection had been reduced to the bone.

Amalia stared at me. The plastic clock on the wall ticked. The same clock was hung in every room, all of them a little slow—they lost four or five minutes a month.

I showed the photo again, pressed it on her bed. You were Amalia Olsen, I told her. You came here with my grandfather Svend. You had three children.

She didn't speak.

I leaned in, I pulled another photo from my pocket and laid it before her, a family portrait. My mother holding Amalia's hand, uncle in the crook of her other arm, my other uncle in her stomach. I understand why you had to leave, I told her again, I don't blame you for anything. I just need you to tell me how I do what you did. You're in perfect health. I thought, it must travel through the family. I know it's been years, but if you could just tell me I'll go. I pushed the photos toward Amalia and she glanced to her phone, on the table between her chair and the bed.

You don't understand, she said, I'm too old to be your grandmother.

I need your help. I slid closer, I shifted the phone away from her. Our knees touched. This is the only thing that can help me. I'm dying, I told her. Just tell me how it works, if it's inherited, or I need to take a medicine, or I need to, I don't know, do a special dance or prayer.

Her hands were easier to look at than her face. The veins burst

through in an awful topography, blue ribbons stranded beneath spotted skin. Why don't you go to a doctor?

I waited too long. I thought it would cure itself, I said. One night I had drawn a razor into it, it could have been a shaving accident, the way the mole pebbled itself above the level of my skin. I haven't ever been able to do the hard things, though; I stopped halfway, I held my hand over my thigh while blood wound through my fingers, I taped gauze over the wound and thought it would heal itself. Kevin had peeled the bandage back and, after he saw what I'd done, rolled himself to the far side of the bed with the blankets pulled into his face.

Amalia sighed. She looked again to the phone, then to me. She wouldn't look at the photographs. You just have to want it, she said. You have to want it in the right way.

But what's the right way? I need you to tell me that.

It's a feeling. She pushed the photographs back toward me. You'll know when it's happened. It's not a good thing, she added.

I gave her x-ray back. I gave her the x-ray, and took my photos, and left her to herself. I could feel my body collapsing into itself, how my organs and teeth and mole would ash themselves into nothing if they had their way. She was probably calling the front desk as I walked down the hall, and there was nothing I could do to stop her. It was sort of a thrill, to feel her power like this—to know that even if I had wanted to harm her, I couldn't do anything to freeze the breath in her lungs.

Amalia Olsen, I repeated as I let myself into the bathroom. I liked the feel of her name in my mouth, better than my own. I leaned over the sink, inspecting my face, its crags and guidelines. I took a fistful of water to swallow the tooth I had carried from home in my pocket, I swallowed hard, I felt as though something inside of me might break as it went down. Then I sat in a stall, tapping my fingers on the paper dispenser as I tried to calm myself into urination. The dent of her tooth remained in my hip, and I placed my right thumb in it as I peed.

The office wants you, Mary told me when I walked past the nursing station. She rolled her eyes upward. What'd you do?

I might as well leave right now, I told her, but I walked upstairs anyway. I had my badge ready to hand over.

Paulette had a lot of things to say to me. I laid my name badge on her desk. I think we both know I didn't do anything that out of line, I told her, but I understand you need to let me go.

I left before she could respond. Who needed it? I knew the truth of things. I walked through the gray-green staff hallways, crossed the dead earth to my car. It was a Wednesday, and I wondered what havoc the environmental club would be wreaking that afternoon. If things had gone a different way, I could imagine laughing with Amalia as we peppered the ground with striped

straws and tangled plastic bags, working towards whatever opaque goal she and Gary had set for their meetings. Maybe she just wanted to see the end of the world.

Amalia had said I would feel a change, but I didn't feel any different. I wanted to feel it, I wanted to live. All I wanted was to want it in the right way. I laid the two family photos on the passenger seat. I want to live forever, I said, I want to live until the sun sucks me in. I wanted to live until I was so tired of life I only wanted death. I wanted to live until my flesh and my brain couldn't contain the weight of me, I wanted to live until Kevin would forget any of the reasons he ever had for wanting to live without me. I started the car and drove home. I didn't feel any different, my mole itched, but I could feel Amalia looking up at me—waiting for it to take, waiting for me.

Bill Wolak *has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled The Nakedness Defense with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared as cover art for such magazines as Phoebe, Harbinger Asylum, Baldhip Magazine, Barfly Poetry Magazine, Pithead Chapel, Thirteen Ways Magazine, Phantom Kangaroo, and Flare Magazine.*

The Smile That Gives You Goosebumps

2019.03 Kong J