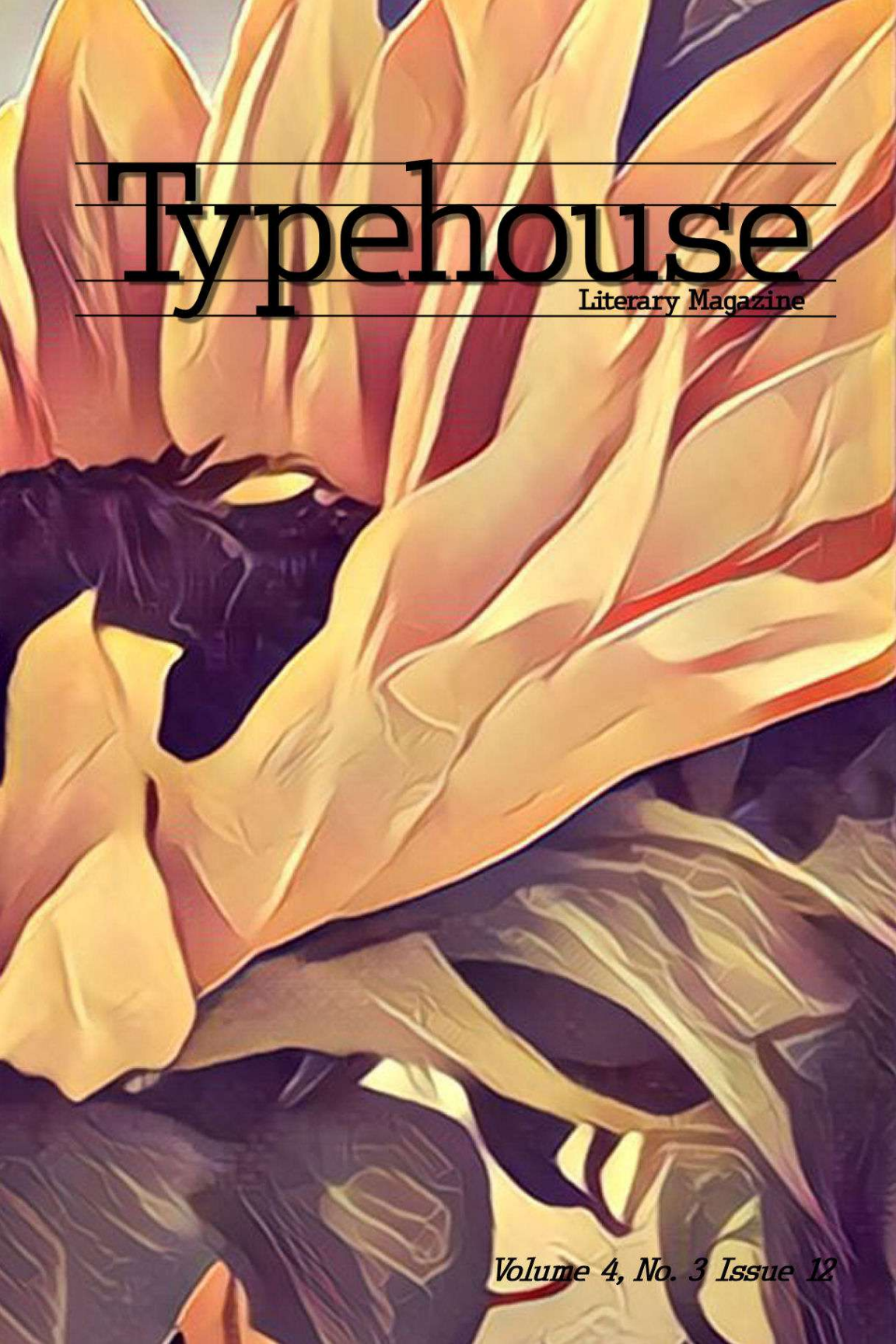

Typehouse

Literary Magazine

Volume 4, No. 3 Issue 12

Typehouse

LITERARY MAGAZINE

Volume 4, No. 3
Issue 12

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 We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and art that seeks to capture an awareness of the human predicament. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

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Zola *(see page 1)*

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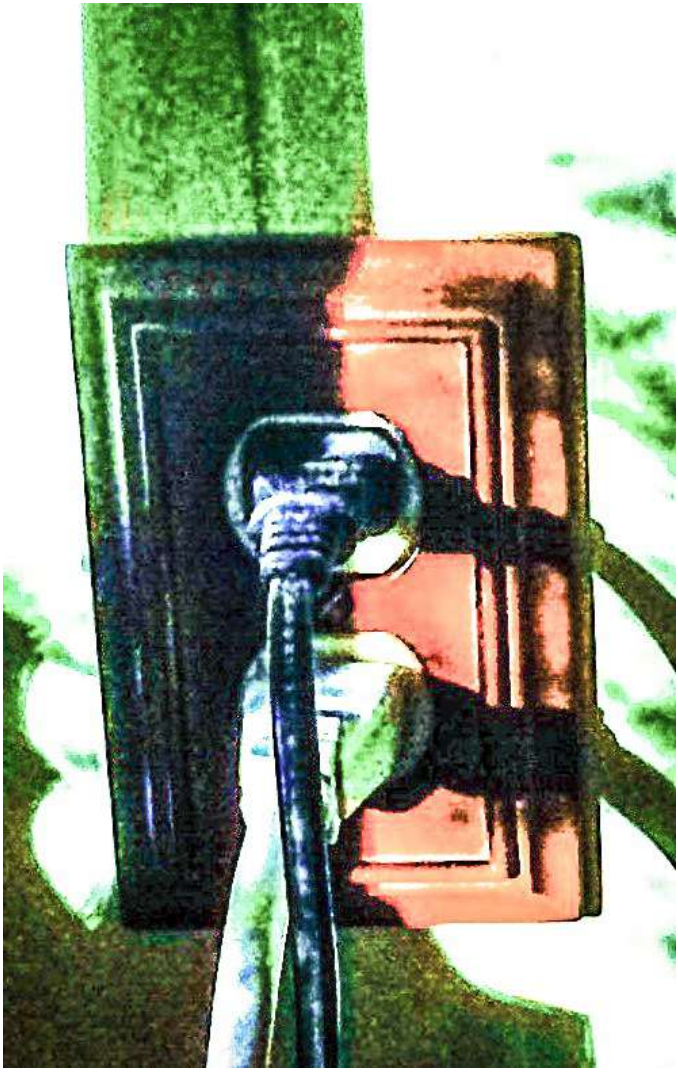

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In Flawed Essence

Serena Johe

Ten years ago, Saki did a very stupid thing. Then she did another, and another, and another, as stupid things tend to beget more of the same when they're left alone to proliferate like the tangles of clovers and bursts of dandelions in her neglected backyard. The first dumb thing she does is watch the girl in the courtyard get shoved against the wall of the schoolhouse, her eyes wide and blank with terror in the face of her sneering persecutors.

Saki remembers the girl's name is Cara. She spends her time in class drawing looped figurines, thorny silhouettes of ballet dancers, and matted irregular knots of some jungle vine Saki has never seen. Her drawings are carefully outlined in highlighters and gel pens that smear across the pages under the cautious guidance of her thumb, swirling licks of color to fill the emptiness between lines. The other thing Saki knows about Cara is what everyone else in their class knows about Cara, too: the birthmark on her face.

The dumb thing comes in the lack of doing, this time. She watches Cara squirm with trepidation as her attackers push accusing fingers into her chest and flood her ears with biting words that Saki isn't close enough to hear. Cara lets them. She does not push them away or swat at their fingers. She doesn't even think to move, and Saki imagines that is the mark of a truly helpless animal, one that's spent so long being prodded in its cage that it won't run even when the door is left open.

But she observes this and does nothing. If she tried, they would turn on her instead, and no matter how much she feels the loneliness that webs in the empty corners of her mind, housing that small discomfort is easier than having it filled with the hatred of others, and she knows it. So, Saki does nothing, at first. It's only after the bullies leave Cara sobbing in a heap on the stone path to the playground that Saki takes action.

"Hi." She does not bother to forewarn the other girl of her presence. It wouldn't matter to a creature so fragile and incurably petrified. Anything would have startled her. Instinctively, Cara brings her knees to her chest and bows her head, expecting a blow that doesn't come.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Saki says quietly, and then to prove it, she extends a hand and gently unfolds the limbs drawn protectively around

Cara's torso. Cara, too frightened to resist, lets her, though she still doesn't speak.

The birthmark coiled on one half of her face is like the spiral of a galaxy, a twisted contour of maroon and burgundy starting at a point by her left ear and expanding outward in circuitous tendrils. It's a shape more fitting for something bigger or smaller than a person, Saki thinks, like what someone might find under a magnifying glass or peering through the lens of a telescope pointed into the recesses of the sky. One curl crosses the bridge of Cara's nose and ends in a sharp hook on her nostril. The whole design is flat to her skin, imprinted like a tattoo and peppered with tiny freckles like burning embers.

Although she clearly wants to, Cara resists covering her face, and Saki turns away from the mark and meets her apprehensive eyes. She's calmed somewhat, but it's nothing close to being at ease. Saki doesn't know how to make it that way. She's never had friends before, doesn't know how to talk to people, though she understands many things about them. Enough, she hopes, to pretend.

"Confidence is all about faking it, you know," Saki says with a bravado she doesn't feel and experience she doesn't have. "If you pretend it doesn't bother you, they'll get bored and give up after a while."

"But it does bother me," she whispers hoarsely.

"Only because people make fun of it, right? So if you pretend it doesn't bother you, and they stop, then it really won't."

Saki is trying to be helpful, but she doesn't know exactly why. Perhaps it's that they're both always alone. Maybe it's the strange and wondrous drawings Cara keeps hidden in her notebook, images that are both foreign and familiar in their abstruseness, like the memory of a vivid dream. Or maybe it's the aching absence in Saki's own mind. She wonders if she's only here to satisfy the constant longing that someone might do this for her. Either way, she wants to help even though she's not sure that someone like her ever could.

The advice only confuses Cara, though, and she pushes her birthmark into the knee drawn up to her chest. She doesn't look at Saki when she says, "I can't."

She can, though – Saki is sure about that, at least. Any garden can flourish with the right tools. "Meet me here again tomorrow," she replies in as mollifying a tone as she can manage. "I have something for you that might help."

Cara does not promise to be there, but the curiosity leaving her lips parted and her eyes wide is enough of a promise anyway.

#

Saki spends that night wandering the landscape of her mind.

She knows this is an odd thing, the sort of strangeness that can't be justified and which only grows convoluted the more one tries, so, Saki simply

doesn't.

The separation occurred at a time in her life that she can't recall with any degree of detail or surety. Memories perforate like the papers in her notebooks, tiny fissures creating fragile seams in her recollection, creasing images, distorting voices until each one undulates as if spoken through a fan. All she's left with is raw sensation, and that, at least, she recalls vividly.

It began when a nightmare forced her from sleep in a sweat of asphyxiating terror. Her mother had not woken, as she didn't many days. Saki sought relief elsewhere. She faced the pooling stars and the white puffs of dandelions in the backyard, their clusters of seeds deformed by the wind as if someone had come and taken a bite out of their feathery heads. She felt so sad for them, a blood-seizing, miserable anguish that pushed her away from herself until she no longer was.

She imagines some smarter, wiser part of her had taken over to vanquish the darkness festering like a rotted wound in her heart, and that part retreated to the most inner sanctum of her mind. Saki walked through the valley of her consciousness as if she'd been put there, a body in a physical place. That's when the restoration began.

She understood the parched earth beneath her feet and the wilting grass belonged to her and her alone, and secured in that privacy, nobody else could touch it. Saki took the seeds of the few living plants and buried them in mounds of crumbling red dirt. She wandered to the anemic river between two bare branched trees and watered them, cultivating the life in her mind until its surface bore the weight of a thousand colorful wildflowers.

It didn't make her any less lonely, but it did provide her the means to accept it. As she mapped the topography of her soul, trimmed the unruly branches of vines that threatened to strangle the life from the red-leafed maples and the marbled bark of sycamores, and grew familiar with the shoots of each plant and every slick rock in the network of streams, she learned she could manipulate her mind with thoughtful inflorescence.

She planted wide lips of laburnum for humility, the modest blooms of rain flowers for grace. Tall fingers of bamboo, for perseverance, now edge the world and give it shape. Leafless persimmon trees line the riverbanks, their branches bowed with fruit. A verdant forest of elms and oaks spills across the center like pillars to hold up the sky, and thick patches of pansies, the type she loves most, splash the landscape with colors from yellow to violet for strength of mind.

Saki discovered many types and shapes, the scope of the garden limited only by the breadth of her imagination and what she had in reach. Some things, she found, could not be conjured on their own.

When she meets Cara again the next morning before school, she brings along, clutched tenaciously in the fingers of her grasping consciousness, a fistful of fern seeds.

“They’ll give you confidence,” Saki explains, “if you’ll let me plant them.”

Shyly, Cara agrees. They press their foreheads together, and Saki feels the pull, like someone gently tugged the long braid of her hair, that marks the divorce of her mind and body. She floats briefly in the air above them – she has done this only once before, by accident – then scurries into Cara’s mind, fearful of being swept away by the breeze in her hesitation.

She finds a place vastly unlike her own: barren, cracked, empty. Dark. The mind of a person who has come to terms with worthlessness and believes there can be nothing else. No matter Saki’s motivation for coming here, she is not immune to the surge of compassion that pushes her to finally plant the seeds in the split earth beneath her feet, as arid and fractured and porous as the dark spires of jutting rock in the aftermath of a volcano.

There’s no telling if anything will grow here – she isn’t even sure if this will work at all – but she’s determined to try. She presses her hand over the spot where the seeds now reside, hoping, and does not tell Cara about the desolation in her head.

“Is it done?” Cara asks nervously when Saki jerks upright, rejoining her mind with her body.

Saki nods. “How do you feel?”

“I think I feel better already.” There’s a smile on Cara’s face for the first time since Saki noticed her at the beginning of the school year. Cara fidgets with anticipation, a thought rumbling palpably through her body until she gives into the urge and leaps forward to wrap Saki in a hug.

“Thank you,” Cara sniffles into her shoulder. “You are the most amazing person I ever met.”

But for all her talents, for all her strange abilities, Saki has not for a moment in her short life felt special. Maybe the plant will grow, she hopes with all the force of her heart and soul, and returns the hug. Maybe she can help it along.

#

That was the second stupid thing, and the last one Saki does for a long time.

In between, she resolves to help the fern thrive in any way she can because no one, she thinks, deserves to live inside such a bare and lonesome place. While she hadn’t possessed the courage to stand up for Cara before – the odd purple and maroon bursts of starflowers had all but shriveled by the time Saki got to them – Cara wholeheartedly believes that Saki is a guardian angel, a hero, and Saki is not foolish enough to strip her of that rosy delusion.

With such hostile conditions inside and out, the seeds will surely perish, so Saki fakes confidence to preserve the life of the fern until Cara can protect it herself. She stands up to bullies with shaking knees. She speaks of life as if she understands it to ease their doubts. Each time hopelessness rears

its head like a plague of locusts, Saki shoos it away with reassurances she doesn't even believe herself.

But the lies bear fruit as the fern begins to take hold in the innervated earth of Cara's mind. Each time Saki investigates the landscape, she finds it changed. The scorched, uninhabitable ground softens into pliable red clay; the jagged ravines deepen into dusty riverbeds, graced, eventually, with trickles of water; and in the center of what had been the wasteland, the fern grows in spindling vines and feathered leaves.

In the more temperate conditions of Saki's own mind, she nourishes the varied species of plant life as she typically does. Each one is the result of meticulous and calculated choice, so it does not escape her when, one night, she wanders past the edges of her bamboo forest, past the abundant thicket of fruiting elderflowers, and finds fragrant blooms of jasmine sequestered between the roots of an old elm.

Saki knows better than to think removing them might make them disappear. The flowers have blossomed and the wind has spread the seeds to places she could not find no matter how much she searched, so she leaves the flowers at the foot of the elm untouched.

#

It's later in life when Saki begins to see the floral nature of others turned outwardly. The pigment of their irises blooms like lush forests, mirroring the flora in their minds and exposing thoughts that shine like sunlight off dewy grass.

This is why Saki stops checking on the fern: she can simply watch from outside. The delicate fronds curl in on themselves in tight spirals reminiscent of the birthmark on Cara's face, and hues of chartreuse and mint and olive burst kaleidoscopically in her eyes like the unfurling petals of a budding plant. Spectrums and shades disperse in her irises. The color sets like dye.

But something is not quite right.

Moonlight streams through Cara's bedroom window as they stay up late collaborating on a project, and Saki catches her eyes and sees the croziers of the fern unwind into gangly stems and fronds. They whorl from the voids of her pupils in flourishing curlicues, and when Cara pauses outside the classroom the following day, trembling with anxiety over their presentation, Saki puts a hand on her arm and tells her, "Don't worry. I'll be right there with you."

And Cara stands in front of the class and doesn't shake. She doesn't stutter. It's as if she'd never been nervous at all, but beside her, Saki isn't paying attention to the slides projected on the chalkboard or the encouraging expression of their teacher. Saki is looking at Cara. She watches the tip of a nebulous vine breach the point of her irises and needle into the white of her eyes like a thick green vein.

That is how Saki knows something is wrong.

She's seen a thousand kinds of flowers and plants spread their petals and thread their roots in the colors of people's eyes, but never has she seen them poke beyond the boundary of their irises. Yet, with Cara, the fern extends with each reassurance, each act of kindness, each successful task, and when Cara congratulates her on a perfect mark, Saki makes sure to watch her as she says, "You got a perfect mark too."

Cara shakes her head and smiles. "But I could never be as smart as you."

Saki concentrates on observing, but it's an unnecessary focus. The mutation is obvious. The fern's tendrils diffuse like water through the cracks of a sidewalk. Saki thinks of the drawings still hidden in Cara's notebook, except all in cloying shades of green.

Something has gone wrong in a way that Saki doesn't understand, but even knowing the ominous change signals nothing good, she can't simply stop it, either. The jasmines in her own mindscape have been sown into every square inch of rich soil in her garden. They've spread even beyond the edge of it. Where there had once been the sheer, rocky precipice of an ending, a black void at the edges of her world that held no soil to till, the jasmines now grow so thickly they cascade over themselves in waves of starry white flowers. Their usually delicate scent is overpowering, enough to mute her other senses.

Besides, she thinks, Cara is happy the way they are. Distancing herself to strangle the unnatural growth of the fern would only make them both unhappy, so Saki does the third stupid thing.

She pretends that nothing is wrong.

#

Months later, they are lying in Cara's bed when Saki decides to stop doing stupid things once and for all.

To this day, Cara has never been to Saki's house, and that is how Saki wants it. Her home is a desert of feeling whose absence is so powerful it seems to vacuum the very air from her lungs, a loneliness buffeted only by her garden and by Cara, who does not question why Saki spends most of her days and nights away from home. But this evening is different than others. She watches Cara with solemn intensity. The stare has her shifting anxiously in bed, kicking the covers down to their waists with her restless squirming, and Saki sees the flustered movements and feels the quickening of Cara's heartbeat by the rapidity of her breath. It smells of sap and young wood. Even though she waits with shy trepidation for whatever follows, Saki observes her through entirely different eyes, and what she finds makes her blood cool, frigid and heavy like someone wrapped a weight around her waist and dropped her through thin ice.

The fern has long since over grown its space. Its roots tumble out of the ground and across Cara's mindscape much like the rippling ridges of

igneous rock once had. It's something that Saki should have suspected might happen when she'd taken the seeds from her own mind and shared them with all the shortsightedness of a child: the fern has become something else entirely. It's grown so tall it blankets the whole of the earth in Cara's mind, forming layers of disquietingly symmetrical leaves in colors from lemon to turquoise. Fiddleheads jut nearly to the sky like the beanstalks of myth, and its fronds clutch gently at the other plants like long, deceivingly gentle fingers, a slow and peaceful smothering.

Saki does not have to visit Cara's mind to find evidence of the plant's malignance. Her skin fluoresces the blue-green color of algae, the luminescence a soft, sickly glow in the darkness of her room. The penciled veins around her eyes bulge, swollen with the roots of the fern, and the whites have turned a deep jungle green so heavily pigmented they seem little more than extensions of her irises. Overlaying the image of the fern, reflected from the darkened surface of her eyes, is Saki's own remorseful face.

No room remains for other plants in that crowded space, none of the beautiful flowers and thick tree trunks of Saki's own mind. There is only Saki. Only the fern. Its size perverts the landscape and disfigures the light into pinpointed streams that only illuminate a growth that shouldn't be there.

Saki has never been brave, or wise, or selfless. She's only been a liar.

When she draws closer, and Cara's breath hitches with an expectation Saki understands she could never meet, when she whispers words perfumed with the scent of milky sap, "I love you," Saki merely closes her eyes. The regret is sharp and huge and nothing compared to the guilt smothering her heart.

"No," she answers, pressing their foreheads together, "you don't."

#

The damage is worse than she expected. When she opens her eyes to Cara's mindscape, she cannot feel solid ground beneath her feet – there isn't any left. She travels upon the roadways of roots, navigating the broad walkways until they widen to the span of small platforms beneath the trunk of the gigantic bush. Even if she could conjure a sufficient tool, she doesn't possess the strength to cull its branches or saw through its bark, but that isn't her intent.

The narrow spaces between the wrinkled roots brim with dried vegetation, the desiccated corpses of flowers, and this is where she stops, in a patch no wider than the length of her body. Shriveled plants rustle beneath her feet as she bends amongst them and retrieves the two stones she'd taken from the riverside in her garden. She strikes the flint with a scratching clack that sounds thunderous in the silence. The littered ground ignites in an instant.

Fire catches and spreads, but it's not enough. Saki backs away from the tongues of flame licking at her bare feet and walks again. She showers sparks into the choked crevices as she goes, unbothered by the blistering heat

at her back and the suffocating black soot in her nostrils.

When the inferno builds, at last inflaming the first branch of the fern, Saki steps back. Her soles are splintered pincushions, and her arms are charred in patchy black, but the fire is kindled. It consumes the leaves and the bark of the fern in walls of conflagrant foliage, the roots burning steadily toward the trunk and linking into a suffocating web of fire and smoke. The stolen water within the fern's leaves pops audibly in little combustions. Embers rain around her like falling stars, and only when her eyes water with heat and the end of each branch is alight does Saki allow herself to leave.

#

Explaining it isn't easy, but Saki has told enough lies to understand that is the nature of telling the truth.

They talk until the first flimsy light of the winter sun breaks the sky into an ombre of gray and muted blue. The fire has long since died, taking with it the physical evidence of Cara's hidden infirmity. Her mindscape has blackened to smoldering charcoal. This time, Saki does not attempt to cover the extent of the devastation.

"New plants will grow," she explains at Cara's worried look. "Fire clears the land and exposes minerals in the soil."

With her fear abated, Cara sounds more curious than concerned when she asks, "So, what will you grow there instead?"

Saki laughs, bewildered by the question. "Do you really trust me to do that?" Although there's humor in her voice, it doesn't conceal the very real part of her that is scared of an answer. She doesn't let it. When Cara reaches for her hand, she nearly flinches away, but Cara just smiles.

"How about we grow something together this time?"

Ian Kappos's *writing has appeared in numerous online and print periodicals. He currently lives in Los Angeles where he is pursuing an MFA in creative writing at California Institute of the Arts. He also co-edits Milkfist. His website is www.iankappos.net.*

"*Metropolis*'s Missing Reel"

Ian Kappos

When we meet
in the bar in the city in the time zone
I've never been, & we sit down
for the first in the headlights of
our own asymmetry, I ask you if you're cold because
your shoulders are bare & I haven't seen
the sun here yet in fact I don't know if the sun even
exists here

In this place we play doll-
house with Tarot cards; there's
a film projector projecting onto the wall to our
left reels from movies that came out when
our parents were still making innocent
mistakes, embroidering your
cards in ways that animate elongate
your fingers

I'm soaked through to the bone & can't feel
one of my toes, I tell you this but while you're
saying sorry I've already remarked on how
clean this place is, & now I'm kissing you bent
weirdly over this foot, hamstrung; I see us from
outside myself airbrushed no sound or closed
captioning, just anonymous noise

When we meet
in the bar in the city in the time zone
I've never been, & we sit down
for the first time in the headlights of
our own asymmetry, you tell me after
some time I am warm but to

this I can’t help wondering is
it because I’m radioactive, have made you
to believe it is okay to wind forward
your clocks, that the
solstice already passed off-screen

“Mythotherapy”

Ian Kappos

I.

I want to join a monastic order of people who aren’t pieces of a shit
I like to burn candles in my room at night so they drink up all my oxygen;
sink into a book
Mark myself with sigils, can’t remember what they mean, only
that I need them

II.

The books you write are coated in blood
By the time they get here they’re brown and crusted, the pages
stuck together, it’s impossible to tell
who you tried to resurrect this time

III.

The way I want to carry myself versus the way bent
boughs force me down, quivering aunt-hands, just in time
to show you how little I’ve grown,
as if my entire plot-line traces the grooves of
some shitty mandala
tattoo,
gotten on a whim, sacred haunt
It’s not that you laugh, it’s that the joke it’s
faster than I thought, watch it crashing
through the underbrush

IV.

To you, what does this card mean? I
imagine asking you in one
of our many conversations we have
in the twilit room, rust walls, writer’s corner, pretending
to know what I’m talking about;
nameless season & billows from home
I can never hold onto the image long enough

to hear your answer, only that
underneath your hair is a flight of stairs
I want to take two at a time

V.

I narrate everything as I go; every book
is obituary, every
blunt object a tool of surgery,
every untapped vein a naked spool
tucked beneath your mattress
We pan to door: white balance car-colored traffic,
fire swell during nameless season,
varicose billows wind back let
sleeping dogs fuck, cry when
the drought ends, pick your own adventure

After his start from classes at the Hugo House in Seattle over 5 years ago, ***Eric*** *has been actively writing in the Pacific Northwest. Moving between the long and short form, writing has become his creative outlet and window to explore this world.*

Buried Bones

Eric Gier

It is 1927 and Marlene is born in Dresden. She is brought home to a rambling house two blocks from the flowing Elbe, its waters eating away at banks that have been stable for a thousand years. She is surrounded by books and manuscripts, turpentine spirits and the bright colors of freshly painted canvases. Ideas from generations of deep thinkers reside between the plaster walls lined with hairline cracks like spider webs, little rooms with geometric leaded glass, port holes to the outside world. Her father is a painter and sculpture whose exquisite works of the human condition make onlookers turn away remembering what have they allowed. Her mother writes about truth and justice, saying simply what others refuse to say. She enters a world of wonder.

In 1932 Marlene attends Kindergarten with the other children. She wears dresses of sunburst orange, fuchsia, verdant green with cut out shapes like glorious summer clouds, the other children always in drab colors never with patterns, all taught to point and laugh. Marlene stands in front of the class and tells a fabulous tale of flying dogs and talking fish and of rainbows where wondrous ideas spring from a bubbling fountain. She stops as the teacher, a stern woman who smiles little and always wears the same unmemorable smock brings a ruler down upon her small thin hands. *This world does not need such stories,* the teacher tells her. Marlene watches a red welt bisect her pale hands but she does not cry. The other children, twelve of them, tell the same story of Hansel and Gretel and all receive her praise. Marlene moves to the back of the class. She wants nothing more than to help the smaller children, those in need, but she is forgotten. Now she does not listen and stares out a small pane of glass at the undulating trees and the moving clouds that become her only friends.

It is 1939 three days before Marlene's twelfth birthday, when her mother and father are pulled out of their down beds by men in brown uniforms. Both labeled as degenerates and subversives, detrimental influences upon an otherwise orderly society. She sits cross legged on the porch wearing a green and red striped night gown gripping a stuffed white pony with wings peering through square balusters. She is yanked from a dream where children

tell their own stories and all laugh together, a dream full of hope, as books and paintings and statuettes are yanked from her once idyllic home and dumped onto a pyre and set ablaze. Mother and Father are loaded separately into olive green windowless trucks. She is told that they will be rehabilitated, cured of their disease. Marlena sees the truth carried away in black acrid smoke that flows in an unstoppable torrent all the way to the eroding banks of the Elbe.

From that day on in Marlene's life she will see a world stained with the unspeakable. Her quest for hope quixotic.

In four days, one day after Marlene's forgotten birthday, she is forced to move into an orphanage. Now she is a ward of the state, a burden on society, a parasite. *Take only what you can wear, what remains is no longer yours,* she is told by man dressed in the same brown with a boyish face sallow and scarred by acne, pale eyes set close and deep. How old can he be, she wonders. He tells her that she is lucky that the homeland has a kind heart and is there to take care of her. It is summer and she does not think about wearing a warm coat. When winter comes, she will be endlessly cold.

They sit on hard wood benches on the bed of an open truck, six or seven to a tight row, some so young they must be held by the other children so they do not fall off. One does but no one stops. Some already dressed in nothing more than rags, others in clothing that will become rags. The ones with darker skin or names that cannot be pronounced are picked up by a truck older and rustier than the first that does not have seats, only high wood sides. That truck takes a different route and returns empty.

The orphanage is a fading mosaic of chipped paint, cracked windows, rusty stains from the drip drip of forgotten pipes cracked with age and wrapped with fraying tape, the sorrow of children, the sour smell of cooked cabbage. *Only those of you who work shall eat, and have a bed to sleep*. The orphans stand in cruel straight lines for hours at a time creating order where none other exists. Their stomachs growl and hurt, waiting for work so they can be fed, so they can be given a place to sleep.

Endless piles of soiled sheets and rags and uniforms from hospital, from barracks, from factories arrive in the morning even before the light of day. They are covered in blood, urine and wet brown stains, diseased. They shake the ground as they are dumped. By the armful, each with heavy loads held tight to their chest and face, the children move like ants shifting piles. Marlene is assigned to the washing room where she spends sixteen and sometimes eighteen hours a day. There is no more time for school.

In 1941 one of the smaller children dumps a bucket of hot caustic bleach while Marlene is inside a large washing tub with a rusty wrench trying to force the drum to spin. A blast of chlorine engulfs her, a ravenous beast gnaws away at her flesh, her lungs. The small children, eight or perhaps ten of them, grab what ever part of her they can and drag her over a splintered floor ripping her only dress. Pinkish foam bubbles rise from her mouth and nose,

even her eyes. She comes to with a bloody cough deep from her lungs, eyes now covered in a thick cloud. Her long reddish hair always neatly braided turns white and brittle. Never tell anyone of this they are told. It is forbidden to damage state property. She is state property. They are all state property.

Marlene lies in bed for many days wondering if the cloud that covers her eyes will ever leave, but it does not. Sometimes she can see the faintest bit of light, but that too soon disappears. She coughs often and her breath is no more than a weak wheeze. After one week, her dormitory bed is given away to a new girl who can work. Her shoes, extra underwear, a small doll that she has made from the lint that she has painstakingly collected, a broken key ring with a cracked photo of the Matterhorn that she will never see, all that she calls her own, all of these things are given away. The trays of food stop coming as she is led into the hallway to remain.

There is not enough to feed those that do not work.

I can still fold, mend rips, sew buttons, she tells them.

That is not enough.

Marlene thinks about those words and realizes the truth.

Max, a small orphan with a large head covered in thin and patchy fine black hair finds small scraps of food and brings them to Marlene. *I know a place where you can sleep, where you can be safe, away from tromping feet, the cold wind.* His stammer fights with every word he speaks, but she understands as he takes her hands and leads her down a flight of uneven stairs then another more uneven than the first. *This can be our secret cave.* A still wall of damp air and mold envelopes them both. He comes back every day with a crust of moldy bread, a bit of pink fatty sausage, an apple core, a chicken bone not yet fully chewed, cabbage and gristle, his own food, always hidden in his small hands. His hunger too, never goes away. While she eats, he tells her fabulous stories. For Max, he imagines that the Orphanage is a giant castle full of light and warmth and happiness, but he has not yet found the right door that will let them out from the darkness of their dungeon. His stammer and lisp subside as his imagination breaks free from this world. He does not stop until Marlene smiles.

Almost every day he brings her something to touch, a button, a small rock, a twig, a flower, a snail. *Dresden was once covered with thick ice and caves just like ours that were full of kind people that covered themselves in the long thick fur of beasts that roamed the land.* Max gives her a beast that he has fashioned from lint and string collected from the laundry. She laughs as her fingers caress its soft curves, its buttons for eyes, its twigs for fangs. *I want to meet a real beast one day, one that is large enough to ride.* This time when she tries to laugh she only coughs. He worries that they will be heard by the others that are above. It is the only time of the day when she is not alone.

One night, he lets her touch his face. She tries to imagine what he looks like as all she can remember is that he is small boy with a large head.

Her fingers tell her so much more. His nose is short and round, his ears too small for his large head, lips rough. His front tooth is missing, another badly chipped. A deep scar runs from his right ear to the top of his rounded head. *Why,* she asks.

The claw of a saber tooth tiger.

Why did the beasts not rise and come to your protection?

They were in a very deep sleep, he says.

Her cough is a constant unwanted companion that sends flecks of blood into the darkness. It is often hard for her to breath but they are both very happy when they are together. One of the orphans turns Seventeen. Graduation day, they joke. It is the day when the men in brown come and take the ones that have endured those years and send them into a world that offers even less. Necessity and hardship have been their only teacher readying them for this day. Later, Max tells Marlene that boy to be taken is short with bowed legs and walks with a limp. He cannot remember the color of his hair, but can remember that when he came he was very fat and now all of his bones stick out like empty shelves. *Perhaps his name is Rudolf,* Max tells her.

They come in the same loud trucks and shout out whoever's name is on their list, Rudolf or Thomas or Uli, numbers assigned, names forgotten. They are taken away to work camps or somewhere else perhaps. The children are never told. Marlene listens to the screams and shouts above as the orphans fight over what the boy must leave. Max brings her a new sock, an extra blanket, a half-eaten cookie hard with age. She cannot understand, Max is so small. She feels his face, it is damp. She touches her fingers to her tongue only to find the taste of blood and dirt not sure if it hers or his.

It is 1942 then 1943. Both Marlene and Max are fifteen. Max is moved to the folding room. It is a better job, clean towels, sheets and uniforms, but a misplaced crease or wrinkle will bring a beating or worse. *It is the order of the world,* they tell them. He brings down napkins and scarfs for her to fold. She is more precise and faster than the others. *I can be useful.* Her words are hard to understand over her wheeze.

Max finds a broken broomstick which he polishes smooth with his small hands and gives this to her. *It is a claw of a beast that can feel the ground, guide your way,* he says. When only the distant sounds of the factory can be heard he takes her hands and leads her outside. *The curfew?* She asks. He does not hear. He teaches her how to walk again and to tap the stick against the earth and hear it talk. It has been so long since she has left the small damp place under the stairs that her legs are thin brittle twigs. Spring's night blooming flowers fill the air with sweetness.

Before man was here, giant bees filled the lakes and streams with honey.

They find Max returning through a tall dormitory window and he is beaten with a heavy stick, heavier and thicker than the cane that he had given

Marlene. *We are kinder than the Police,* they tell him. Marlene spends three maybe four days without food, without stories. She drinks rusty water from a dripping pipe. She does not know what has happened to Max, but her voice is too weak to call out to ask. *Who would listen,* she wonders.

After Marlene had given up hope, Max returns. She feels his hands and face. He winces as she passes soft places, bruised and discolored and makeshift bandages tied from discarded rags. *Why*? She asks. Instead, he tells her wonderful stories of how the world was when Dresden was still covered with a thick sheet of glorious ice. He does not stop until she smiles, then he takes her hand and again they climb up into the night's air and walk until their her feet touch unfamiliar paths.

They will not be so kind if they find you again, she says.

Before man large beasts with long white tusks and thick fur moved along these paths. Their bones are hidden beneath our feet, he whispers to her. The path weaves a serpentine line behind fences, derelict trucks, buildings with cracked windows covered in a fine gray ash of burnt coal. Marlene stumbles. *A bone?*

He brings her to a small shack covered in vines, its roof mostly fallen in upon itself. There is a small bench of piled junk, a hard place to lie down upon. It is cold but mostly stays dry from the rain. *If they come for you, hide here. The beasts will circle around and protect you.*

Will they let me ride upon their backs as they run far away, she asks.

He does not know.

He brings her there four maybe five times until she can draw the map with her finger in the muddy ground. It is hard for her. Her knees become covered in scabs and scrapes and her wrists ache from falls but she does not care as she knows that this is the price of freedom. On their last trip Max pulls out a pocket knife with a broken blade. He found this in a torn uniform covered in rings of blood mixed in a knot of soiled bed linens. It is forbidden for orphans to keep anything found. He is compelled to hold it, to hide it. He carves their names together on the side of the crumbling shack. Marlene runs her fingers over the crooked letters until she is sure that she can read them. *This will always be our secret,* but he does not tell her about the rusty cans, the bottle, the mud soaked sock, the wet newspaper from last week that he finds. Marlene smiles. *Our secret,* she says.

A truck idles with backfires and blue smoke in front of the orphanage. Two maybe three pairs of hobnail boots pound across the wood floor above Marlene as she sits on the cold floor below, dust and tired cob webs shake free and rain into her hair and mouth. It is lunch and the long tables are lined with the children eating what little they have. She can hear their forks and spoons scrape across the thin metal plates. She has nothing. Ulrich Schmidt – Heinrich Schroder – Heide von Tummel. They are sixteen. No longer do the boys go to factories or work camps, but to the front line, the fodder of callous

Generals. The girls go to work camps where perhaps they will be used for something altogether unspeakable. The orphans are too tired to fight for the few things that are left behind, the socks, the shoes with the missing sole, a few pages from a book that most cannot read. Will they be back tomorrow for more? Will it then be fifteen, then fourteen?

My sixteenth birthday is soon. Very soon, Max tells her as they walk the path now wet from the brown muddy water that overflows from the banks of the Elbe, past alleyways alongside a long sharp metal fence. The hum of a factory vibrates Marlene's tooth which has become loose from rot.

What will they do with me? Her fingers clutch the cold metal links. A sharp point cuts into her thin fingers. She licks a small drop of blood.

The beasts will rise up and run along these paths. Their white tusks will root out what ever stands in your way.

Max guides her deep into to the city between high walls. He takes her hand rubbing it along rough brick. She taps her cane against the littered ground and hears the sound come quickly back. Max stops, wrapping his small knuckles against on a hollow metal door. Tap – Tap,Tap – Tap – Tap,Tap,Tap. He grabs her hands and repeats the knock. *Do not forget this.* She repeats it in his hands. *Good.*

The door opens, hinges strain through the thick rusty patina. A rush of warmth, a sweet smell, an orange glow from the coals of a wood fired oven floods over Max's face that Marlene will never see. There is a gentle crackle of cooling loaves of bread. The soft light reflects off kind and tired eyes looking out. A soft hand passes through the thin opening and shares a warm loaf. Max takes her left hand that is free of her cane and fills it with something warm. *Bread. Eat.*

Heavens gate, she asks.

Perhaps.

He brings her back four more times. She memorizes the steps, the holes, the roots that grab and twist ankles, roads that carry those with eyes that watch for enemies of the state. Over and over again her fingers trace the path on the gritty floor where she sleeps and passes her time.

Tomorrow, I will be sixteen, Max says. That night he brings her all of his things. A sock with a small hole, two buttons, a black comb missing many teeth, a threadbare blanket, four coins, a pair of heavy black shoes too big for her feet, heels well worn. He takes his knife with the broken blade out of his pocket and gives it to her. *When is your birthday?*

I do not know, but she knows that it has already passed and was again forgotten.

When it is your day, do not let them take you. Gotto our special place and hide.

Marlene feels the sound before it can be heard, large wheels grinding up the gravel road, the motor straining, the hobnail boots. She hears Max's

name. Max descends the stairs and takes her hands. He leans in close and they kiss long enough for her to feel what he feels. A tear drips from the corners of her cloudy eyes. She did not know that she was still able to cry and she wonders if she will be able to see again.

He takes her hand for the last time and repeats their secret knock.

Your stories have made me see, she says.

After Max is taken away, there is no one to bring her food or stories from the world above. She waits two or three days with only rusty drips of water to nourish her. The claws of hunger sink deeper, threatening to consume what little is left of her. She draws the map on the floor one last time and without knowing if it is right she leaves the orphanage. Only her weakness threatens her to stop. It could be night or day. Sharp sticks pulled from the trees above hurled by angry gusts of wet heavy wind pass close to her head. Tap-tap-tap, cane in her right hand, all she owns in her left, the path she knows now twisted, deformed. She dreams of a stomach that does not pain from emptiness, a soft chair and Max's stories to give her sight.

Her foot catches in a root and pulls her to the ground. A crackling in her ankle and wrist a searing pain, her blanket rips and mud smears over her dress. Blood flowing through her head pounding with her heart colors the darkness, she believes that she can see red again.

The beasts will rise and run along the path. So too must you. She remembers Max's words, standing again, her legs more brittle than the cracked branches that block her way, spinning, the lines of her map that she had drawn in her memory twist in knots until they lead her nowhere. *There are giant monsters that live deep underground that live only in darkness. They are never scared or lost. Their will is strong. Very strong.* Her heart races wondering if the light of morning has already come. She pushes on.

I am sixteen, is there no use for me? she pleads to the wind and rain. She taps her stick deep into the wet dirt imagining the sound finally calling the beasts with the long thick fur and white tusks, pulling them from their endless slumber. *Will they ever rise and take me away?*

Then, her outstretch hand, grasping reaching over and over sinks into the sharp jagged links of something known. Chards of rusty metal cut deeply into her palm and middle finger. The pain penetrates maliciously into her arm. She wonders if this is the same fence that she had felt before. She does not wince but licks her torn skin. *Salt.* Unrecognizable voices mix with the wind. One hand follows the other cane dangling limping along. She kicks a can that rattles angrily leaving a trail of sound like an animal looking for a place to die.

The smell, the narrow alley, the patterned roughness of the brick wall, waving grasping up and down erratically, anything. *Please, show me heaven's gate.* She hears the city waking, sirens, and horns, airplanes fly low overhead. There are snores and mumbles from near her feet from others perhaps less

lucky then her. The hollow rap of her knuckles on the metal door. She is not sure if it is the same. *When they find me my stomach won't be empty.* She is hopeful but knows that her knock is no longer secret.

A rush of warm rich air floods into the alley where she stands. Her frantically grasping hands move through the empty air, nothing, but the door remains a jar. She waits. Pulled by her hunger she moves one foot forward then the next. A comforting warmth swallows her whole. She is inside. *Am I clean enough to walk through heaven's door, to climb inside the mouth of a beast,* she says through a shallow breath but hears nothing in return but the click of the closing door. The leaden blanket of the city's sound slips away, her shoulders lift, she breaths. A solid table, its thick wood top dusty with flour and smooth from generations of wear, stands sentinel and halts her advance. Back and forth she rubs her soiled fingers, soft mounds meet her touch. For the first time since her life had been stolen away she remembers bathing in the warmth of a kiln playing in her father's studio with mounds of soft gray clay dug deep from banks of the Elba, her fingers forming fantastic things. Now, her hands move in smooth circles transforming mounds of dough into long slender rolls then one over the other over the other until a perfect braid is formed. Her hands work continuously, transforming more mounds, soft and warm, sweet smelling, into rows of tight braids. At the end of the long table something warm awaits. Only those that work shall eat, she thinks. *Water, please.* She is given a glass of rich cream. It tastes of a forgotten sweetness.

Heavy fists pound angrily on the bakery door. *All others are now forbidden to eat this bread.* She hears the man's voice for the first time old and tired. *Your unclean hands, your blindness, you cannot be seen by them.* There is fear in his voice as he takes hold of her wrist tugging her around bins and shelves, neat stacks of metal trays and bread baskets, through a narrow door that snaps at her heels. *The jaws of the beast have closed down upon me.* Her hands grope but feel no teeth or tongue but a floor that is hard but dry clean and warm. She opens her hands and finds her last bit of bread squeezed into a tight ball salted from her sweat and dirt of her palms. She eats and her stomach receives without protest. She is met with a long slumbering sleep.

When she wakes the old man is there again. Silent as before. The same table awaits her hands to work new mounds of soft warm dough. He follows her and picks up the braids. *Perfect, each one of them.* She forgets the hunger that has been a part of her life for so long.

It is 1943. The old man finds her a new dress, a hair brush, more blankets to soften the hard floor. *It is not my birthday.* The old man tells her about his son and how Marlene's hands moved like his and how he was taken away to war. He wonders why now only the officers, those that bang angerly on the door and are never grateful, are allowed to eat his bread, forbidden for all others.

When the find me they will take me away too.

The rain falls in the mountain and flows to the sea. Now one asks how, the old man tells her.

After all this time, I do not know your name, she asks.

It is the fall and the old man has never seen hands move more efficiently. Every loaf exactly the same as the last but with each twist and braid she whispers a curse. The old man says nothing but still every loaf is perfect.

Each day a new stream of trucks. They are the same that took Max away, drab green their canvas tops now more ripped spewing oily smoke that weasels its way through cracks and holes and taints the air with a strangely hopeful stench. Marlene hides behind the bakery's door and hears voices and parts of stories that she stitches and braids together into one. There is some revelry for the few boys who come back whole. Most do not return and most of those who do are missing parts. There are those without hands and legs and eyes, mumbling of the horrors of what they have seen, of what they have done. All have scars.

After the first wave returns, the same trucks appear. They clean the streets of those that are not perfect. The injured will be cared for, rehabilitated, made perfect once again, this they are told. Marlene imagines the peoples' silent nods but knows it is a lie. The next wave of boys are like the first, perhaps worse. The old man often stands outside as trucks pass by waiting for his son to climb down and become a baker again. He never does.

He is a hero. He will have stories to tell of all his great deeds, she tells him when it is night and there is no one else to listen.

Yes, he will be a hero, his voice tired and weak. More return. The old man still waits. They stop rounding up the injured, the shell shocked. They are left to wander the once orderly streets.

It is 1944 and the January winds blow colder than before. Marlene hears the bell ring then the drag of a hobbled limp.

You are forbidden to eat this bread, the old man must tell him. There are eyes and ears everywhere.

I have a letter from your Son. He was a hero to the end. She recognizes the voice, its lisp and stammer. *Do you know what happened to the blind girl?*

The blind have been rounded up like all the rest. He hands him a braided loaf still warm and perfect. Marlene wants to scream, to cry out *Max,* but her fear and weak lungs hold her back. He cannot bear the weight of the loss of his son and within days the old Man can barely do more than weight flour and mix dough. Marlene brings him warm bread and cream as he had done for her and continues twisting endless strands together each loaf as perfect as the last.

The chilling air recedes, spring arrives. Night after night Marlene

works in silence while the old Man lies in bed. It is almost summer and the night time chill is all but gone. There is a knock against the metal door. Tap – Tap,Tap… She repeats the knock in her hands silently to herself. The knock repeats against the hollow door. She cannot remember if this is their secret knock or another lie. *Never let the pain from outside come in.* The old man had told her many times. *Max,* she whispers but her feet have grown deep into the ground. Why do the beasts hold my feet? *Breathe,* she says. Is it only a dream? When she can draw more than a shallow wheeze she opens the door holding a warm loaf in the night air but there is no hand waiting. For the next night and the nights after that she waits.

On the day that she has given up hope, she hears the knock again. Without a loaf, she holds up her hands through the door which she has opened. He is there. She smells his sour breath, feels his round nose, the small ears high on his head, more teeth are missing than before, a small scar, a crescent moon under his chin that is rough with stubble. Down her shoulder her hands feel all contours, she finds one full arm, the other now only a stub. He shudders as she keeps her hands on its rounded end. *Did you fight the beast?* She leads him in, locking the heavy metal door behind, passing by the table, still waiting for the dough to be mixed and her perfect braids to be formed. *Here is my cave that we can share.* But first they work together to complete the nights work. He is her eyes. Together they have three hands. They are both filled with happiness.

When the old man wakes he sees perfect loaves but cannot remember even mixing the dough or measuring the flour. *How,* he asks as he listens to the crackle of the cooling loaves. There is wonderment in his voice as if his son had returned. She shakes her head. This happens again and again, but Max remains hidden, only a ghost to the old man.

It is 1945 and the sadness of loss has utterly consumed the old Man. He does not rise to mix the dough or feed the oven perfect braids. Gray snow swirls in the streets and forces entry and boots again pound angrily against the wooden floor. Three perhaps four. Marlene does not move to the shadows but points her outstretched arm toward cooling bread. Her cloudy eyes looking away. *Where is the old man,* a voice demands. Her wheeze now a hum only broken by her bloody cough. *You are his death.* Two years, almost three past sixteen years old, have they finally come? She wonders if she will be allowed to take more than just what she wears, if she will be able to bid farewell to Max who remains hidden.

The old man's voice, failing and weak, sneaks from the back room into the silence between their words, *Come.* She hears him say.

Take what you will and leave, Marlene says as she moves away from the counter with the sureness of sight to where the old Man rests. She tells him that they have seen her, they have seen her eyes and that she did not give them what they demanded. Her fingers feel his smile.

They will come back and take everything.

There is nothing left to take.

My name is Peter, the old man says with his final breath.

She hears the strain of the mixer, Max working the yeast bringing life into the soft dough that her hands will soon transform. Both stand silently as the dough rises in reverence. *To Peter,* they both say in unison. She does not braid the loaves but lets their malformed shapes form unruly twists and knobs, which grow larger and more wondrous as they bath in the oven's heat. *Are these their bones?* Max asks as she opens wide the hollow metal door, arms full of warmth and crackly crust, they step out onto the street. One by one they fill empty hands of those with eyes full of hunger and loss. Planes drone overhead.

Are those the groans of waking beasts? She lifts her blind gaze upwards as they both step forward, arms laden with gnarled loaves. They join others on the street who make their way down to the Elbe. There they stare vacuously as the river's turbulence claws away at its slick clay banks. Slabs slump into the brown water exposing ancient things. *Are there bones*, She ask. *Soon, very soon,* he says.

Andrea Adams *has worked in film and theatre for nearly two decades. She is a professional illustrator with a degree from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing. Currently, she teaches and is a Director of Education at the Gnomon School of Visual Effects in Hollywood.*

Rani

Not a queen, but a king: Raziya al-Din, the first woman to rule a Muslim state and the first woman king of Delhi, 13th century. A pillar of women, she was called. A commander of the cycle of time, a warrior, a just ruler, one who saw with a thousand eyes.

Self-portrait in brine and kelp

The harbor seal rolls back her pelt to reveal her nature. She's cluttered as a polluted harbor, so she climbs out of herself and makes for the first crab shack she can find. A bag of salt-and-vinegar and a Moxie should do the trick.

Drunk Mermaid

Last night was probably a bad idea.

James Croal Jackson *is the author of The Frayed Edge of Memory (Writing Knights Press, 2017). His poetry has appeared in FLAPPERHOUSE, Rust + Moth, Jet Fuel Review, and elsewhere. He has won the William Redding Memorial Poetry Contest and is founding editor of The Mantle. Find him in Columbus, Ohio or at jimjakk.com.*

Comedy Writing

James Croal Jackson

Everything I write means nothing without you.
Should I tell you, branch by branch, the way I climbed
the tall, front-yard poplar as a child, bounding upward
through the leaves?
I am still afraid of heights. I could not make my way down
back then. My father tried to save me. His eyes were ablaze
when the fire department came, extinguished with red laughter.
In a way, I was a savior setting flames in the lungs of strangers,
the way you breathe in smoke then must exhale– no high better
than another's laughter– an orgasm, the rhythms that leave you.
Come by. Find me wanting. I want just as much as you do.
We are full of stories. Comb through your beach, bring me
seashells that glisten with your voice, your twinkle.
I want the wayward artifacts, your grimy sandals
awash with sun.

Mirror

James Croal Jackson

You are not
sad. It is the mirror
who is sad,
transparent and flat
holding first your eyes,
then body,
then the bathroom's.
The way black mold
sneaks high
into ceiling, where
neither of you
will do anything
about it.

Douglas Cole *has published four collections of poetry. His work is in anthologies and journals such as The Chicago Quarterly Review, Chiron, The Galway Review, and Slipstream. He has been nominated for a Pushcart and Best of the Net, and received the Leslie Hunt Memorial Prize in Poetry. His website is douglastcole.com.*

Villagers

Douglas Cole

Arl's job was to hold the beggar's sign and stand at the freeway exit where the cars came to a stop at the light. He and the others worked in three hour shifts and any money they got they brought back to the rest of the crew in the camp under the overpass. The sign was a piece of cardboard with the words scrawled in black marking pen:

Homeless
Anything will help
Even a Smile
God Bless

Sometimes people smiled, sometimes they gave him change, mostly they just ignored him. One woman spat on him. Four boys in a dark sedan opened their windows and howled and swerved to hit him, coming so close the gravel sprayed against his legs as he stumbled back out of the way. A man in a pickup truck threw pennies at his feet with a vicious sneer, and Arl wondered why a man would bother to give anything at all if he despised the giving so much, unless that sneer covered some other sentiment, so Arl just smiled in return and bent and picked up the money.

His legs turned to pins and needles. Rain no longer bothered him. Cars went by in a blur. Faces all began to look the same, staring ahead, eyes fixed into the distance far from him as though their oblivious gaze were the universal setting of the mind and only a rare kind of consciousness was even aware of his presence. When his shift was up, he folded the sign beneath his arm and headed back to the camp.

He kicked through the gravel street past the Texaco and the old abandoned cafe in the shape of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The planes overhead swept down through the buildings and aligned themselves to the airport. Arl climbed through the open flap of wire fence and crossed the muddy field that used to be a schoolyard. The school was long since torn down with nothing in its place but some scraps of lumber. He climbed the hill

along the well-worn path through the ivy and dropped down into the camp. Piston was there with a little campfire going. He glanced up when he saw Arl coming and grinned a brief grin, his lips working to hold a cover over his teeth that looked like a mouthful of coal. Yost was asleep under a rug. And Michelle sat leaned up against the cement stanchion and seemed not yet to notice him, her eyes narrow and staring into the fire.

Hey there, cowboy. How'd you fare? Piston asked.

Nickels and dimes'll do ya, Arl said. He crouched down near the fire and put his hands out and felt the warmth on his palms.

Safe and sound, Piston said in a mumble, speaking more out of the side of his mouth than directly, keeping his face turned just away as though he were practiced at constant aversion.

We'll eat good tonight, Arl said, and he glanced over at Michelle who did not glance back or even show yet that she noticed his return. He looked back at Piston who looked into the fire, then he looked back at Michelle and said, You okay? But still she did not respond. So he leaned out and laid the inside of his forearm against her cheek and pulled it back quick and said, Shew, honey, you're burnin' up. Have you had anything to eat today?

Now she leaned her head just enough to align him in her vision, and though he could not see her mouth move he heard her say, very slowly and very quietly, as if whispering a secret, Not hungry.

Shoot, honey. You got to eat, he said. But she just leaned her head back against the cement and more or less looked into the fire if in fact she was looking at anything at all.

Piston, you got any soup?

Nope.

How long she been like this?

Since she got up, I guess. I ain't really paid her much attention, she been so quiet. 'Sides, I had to go out on a little mission this morning, too.

What kind of mission?

Just trying to scare up some scratch, same as you.

And did you get anything?

The world wasn't very generous today.

You were out begging drugs.

No siree, I was not.

And you left her here like this?

I told you, I didn't see as she was having no problem. She just seemed a bit pensive today.

Pensive? Dammit Piston, she's burning with fever.

And I'm supposed to know that?

We're supposed to be looking out for each other.

Well if I had been beggin' for drugs, which I wasn't, wouldn't that have been just the thing? Seems to me all she needs is a little pinch and she'd

be just right.

What she needs is food. What have you got around here?

Well, we're fresh out of everything, as a matter of fact, and I'm not trying to be smart, now, that's just a plain fact.

You got any money?

No I haven't.

What about Yost?

I can't speak for him.

Arl rose up from his place by the fire and leaned down over the man in the rug. He listened and had he not known better he would have thought the man was dead, but motionless and silent as the body in the rug was he knew that Yost was deep in a drinker's oblivion. Without much confidence he nudged the sleeping man with his foot. Yost. Yosty, wake up. He shoved at him harder with the heel of his boot, but there was just no rousing the man.

Ah, leave him alone; you know he ain't come back with anything but a hangover.

Then Arl noticed Michelle was speaking, but her voice was more quiet than the sounds of traffic above them, a constant howl overhead that never let up, not by day and not in the thinnest hour of night; it kept up, a constant sound like a wind that presages a storm which comes but never arrives or more likely comes and keeps coming but never actually leaves. Arl leaned down and listened at her lips. Shhh, she was saying. And, Shhhh, as if trying to hush him or hush something else nearby or something she heard only in her own mind.

Well, I'm going to go get her something to eat, some soup. That's what she needs, Arl said, standing above her, looking around the meager camp of cardboard boxes and filthy blankets and the pile of rotted wood that each of them had contributed to by collecting it from the remains of the school.

Pick us up a bottle, too, while you're about it, will ya?

Arl shook his head slowly and bared his teeth and just about said something but didn't. Instead, he leaned back down and said into Michelle's ear, You just sit tight, honey. I'll be right back.

He went back down the little path and back through the schoolyard and out to the street. The Texaco had a convenience store, where he could pick up some juice and some soup, some bread and if he had enough money maybe a little meat. She would probably not eat much, and most likely was suffering more from withdrawal, but she would possibly die without liquids, and if he could do anything to prevent that he would do it regardless of what Piston or Yost, should he awake sometime soon which was highly unlikely, have anything to say about how to spend their money, because disproportionate as each of their sensibilities of communal responsibility were, Arl was certain that first and foremost of concern was their collective survival. Nothing else mattered, not the desire for drunkenness and its

peaceful if brief liberation from the despair of their lot, nor any other form of escape which was only and always transitory and seemed to include return in an intensified state of awareness of the sorriness and sordidness and desperation of being nowhere.

He went up the street and into the Texaco station. He nodded once to the clerk as if to say, yes I'm here and I acknowledge my state but I'm going to in fact buy something not steal. The clerk was a thin Ichobod man with a long neck of pimpled flesh and sickly reddish cheeks. He wore that synthetic green vest of service station clerks which itself might have emitted some poison, yet the clerk, even in his position, nevertheless screwed up his face in a sour expression that communicated nothing except hurry up.

Arl grabbed some chicken broth, a jug of orange juice, a loaf of Wonder bread and a package of sliced turkey. He went up to the counter and laid it all down and began to empty out his pockets. The clerk rang up the total. Arl pulled out handful after handful of nickels and pennies and a few dimes and maybe three or four quarters. He counted it out and was exactly twelve cents short. He looked at the clerk. The clerk looked at him.

You got to put something back, the clerk said.

It's twelve cents.

You got to put something back.

What about your little penny jar, there, Arl said, pointing at a little tray with a hand written card taped to it that said, Take a Penny, Give a Penny. The clerk emptied the tray into his palm and counted them out. You're still three cents short.

Three cents?

A man leaned in through the door but did not enter entirely, and he said, Can you clear pump four?

Sure. The clerk turned and punched at the register and the man went back out to his car. The clerk came back to the counter and stood there and said. So what's it going to be?

You can't let three cents slide?

Look, that means I have to pay for it. You know how many people come in here and come up short? You know how much a day I'd be giving out if I gave everybody three cents?

I need this food, all of it.

Then go beg someone else for the three cents.

Arl looked around. The one man was out pumping his gas. He could easily ask him. He started to go out, leaving the food on the counter. Then he stopped. Three cents, he said. I got a friend who needs to eat. She's sick.

You got to put something back.

Arl picked up the food and started walking out of the store.

I wouldn't do that if I were you, buddy. Arl kept on walking. He did not look back. The clerk did not follow.

Arl hiked down the road. By the time the clerk called the cops, which most likely he wouldn't, Arl would already be back at the camp. He would be unable to go back to that store, at least not while that particular clerk was working, but in time it would pass from their memories and then what would it matter?

He took one look back before ducking under the wire fence. Nobody was following. Nobody was even around. He detoured over by the remains of the school and picked up a few pieces of wood. It would be dark very soon. Already the rain was coming down again. The temperature had dropped since he had stood by the freeway, and it felt like the night would be a cold one.

Back in the camp nothing had changed. Yost was still sleeping under the rug and would probably stay there till morning. Michelle sat stone still, only now her eyes were closed. Piston was still crouched near the fire, but there was in his eyes the agitated light of the animal that has to be on the move. He worked his lips over his rotten teeth and spat once and said, What ya get?

Food.

Ah, hell.

It won’t last past tomorrow, either.

I didn't figure.

We need more money, Arl said, as he crouched down by the fire and added some wood and arranged his meager provisions at his feet.

I suppose it's my turn to go stand by the freeway.

You can't expect Michelle to do it.

She ain't done it in two days.

Look at her.

Probably get more money in her condition.

She's not going.

All right, all right. Piston rose and took the sign and started to slink out of the camp.

Hold on there, Arl said, and he slid a few pieces of meat into two slices of bread and handed it to Piston. She probably won't eat much, anyway. Piston took the sandwich and had crammed half of it into his mouth before he had even left the camp.

Arl opened the can of soup with a pocketknife and tilted up the lid and set it on a stone at the edge of the fire. He glanced over at Michelle. She sat there with her eyes closed, her face as drawn and tight and thin as a cadaver's skull. He reached out an arm and laid it against her brow and felt the heat burn through his shirtsleeve. Michelle, Michelle, he said, but still her eyes did not open. And he thought how even before this sickness she had begun to fade, how even when he first met her he had seen that in her form was the vestige of beauty, in her face the shape of it, the design in the bones and in the cut of the features. But by that time she had already begun to alter,

as though some attention were needed to sustain a face to meet faces, a face to be beheld and wondered at, a face living in some now perhaps fading dream which might peak out only in the most chronic of sleep, maybe now in the sleep of fever, a face that one could cherish, that could inspire love. Now, mostly due to her expression, her face was as dull as an old coin, though with the jolt of a few drinks, or as the light now dimmed into evening, something returned, something on the brink of extinction or departing, which hinted at a beauty that once was. On first meeting, in fact, there had been the hint of romance between them, but circumstances and lifestyle and if nothing else the lack of privacy prevented anything from developing. Her story was not anything new. She had been raised in Texas. Her mother was Mexican and her father was from Tennessee. He had dealt in drugs and had led them on nomadic runs back and forth between Mexico and various southern states all of her young life. He had taught her how to use a gun, and told her a day would very likely come, and likely sooner than later, when she would have to use it. But before that day had come he was arrested and put into prison, and now she rarely slept without being visited by him in nightmares. His spirit was strong, she said, and craved escape, and sought it directly through her dreams. She feared he would find her when he was released. She was certain that she could never escape him, that no matter where she went or what name she took or change in appearance she might achieve, he would find her, and whatever life she had created for herself, whatever unlikely family she might even dream of having, he would return to destroy everything. She had tried charms, she said. She had tried rituals and ceremonies, but a psychic once read her future and had seen in the line of her palms the return of the father. It was fated to happen. There was nothing she could do to stop it.

The soup started to boil, and Arl pulled it away from the fire and stirred it with a spoon and set it aside to cool. Michelle, he said. But still she did not respond. He leaned up close and seemed to feel the heat of her burning against his cheek. Michelle!

The eyes opened slightly, gum-crusted along the rims. And a brief smile rose on her lips, the flicker of something there. Arl, she whispered.

I made you some soup, he said.

Ah, you sweetheart. She leaned up slowly, as though working a great heavy set of machinery. Ooh have I got the aches.

Ah, honey. You've got to eat a little something. Try.

I'll try.

He wrapped some cloth from a torn bed sheet around the tin can and lifted it up to her lips. She reached out a hand to take it, but the hand shook so badly he just held it and dipped the spoon into the cup and then brought it up to her mouth. She took little sips. She actually ate some of the soup, and it made him feel better, as though at least he was able to do something.

Yost here? She asked.

Here but unable to answer.

Piston.

He's on duty.

It's my turn, isn't it?

Not tonight.

She seemed to perk up a bit and pulled herself up and held the spoon and shakily dished up some mouthfuls. I should go out.

No you don't. I won't allow it.

Did you go?

I just got back a little while ago.

How'd you do?

Got this food. He spread his arm as if to reveal a cornucopia.

She reached out a hand and touched his cheek. Angel, she said. And she was leaning forward as if to whisper something when someone stepped into the firelight, a figure at first, just a darkness which caused her eyes to open in fear so that turning, before he saw anything other than the vaguest of outlines, Arl thought it was her father, returned as predicted. But it was of course not her father. It was in fact the chicken-necked clerk from the convenience store who now stood with his shadow stretched out from him longer than he was but thinner, if that were possible, and wavering like a black flame. He wore the same sneer, and said in a voice much too loud, here they are! And the absurdity of it, of the motivation of three cents that would send this underpaid and undermined little man out into the dark in search of a transient made Arl smile, until he saw that the man had brought others with him.

They came into the camp and before Arl could even count them they kicked at the fire. They kicked at Arl and they kicked at Michelle and they kicked at Yost in his rug. Arms swept down and then sticks and more kicks and it came all in such a fury that there was no chance for Arl to respond. Every attempt to rise was met with a flurry of savage blows as if the very effort to rise initiated the force of more violent attacks, inspiring them even, for now he heard laughter of a sick kind and saw only through the blurring flutter of arms and legs and the obscure sweep of smoke, Michelle dragged out to the edge of the firelight where others now descended like a throng of night vultures upon her. He may have cried out as a blow came to his stomach and stole the ability to make any sound, let alone breathe. Then another blow came to his head and the scene and the night and every thought was eclipsed.

When he came around it was to hear the voice of Piston saying, What the hell? What the hell? But the voice came from an enormous distance, as though Piston were speaking down a sewer well. Then Arl caught the light of the fire and shapes in it and around it, shadows, forms in flux and motion and for a brief moment a face he did not recognize which locked in on his, eyes which stared into his eyes with the fire blazing up in them, malevolent and

strong and seeming on the verge of laughter or transformation or both, skin slick and dark around it with the sheen of snake flesh. Then he left consciousness.

When he came back around again, he found himself in the camp, lying next to the stanchion. Michelle lay beside him. Yost was up from his rug and gone. Piston was hunched at the burned out fire, his bloody face and bloody chin resting on his bloody knees, but his eyes open and staring. Piston? Arl said.

Yeah. Piston did not look up.

You all right?

I'm all right. You all right?

Think so. He felt nauseous. His legs and his arms and his stomach and his chest all cramped with pain. His head throbbed. His mouth tasted of blood and as he rose and opened his mouth he felt the crackle of dry blood on his scalp and face. Jesus, he said.

You look like him.

Arl looked down at Michelle. Her clothes were torn and bloody, her pale blue blouse barely a shred beneath the green wool of her coat. She had tried to pull her clothes about her, but there was little left. Her jeans were torn open, her legs exposed. He leaned down and said to her, Michelle, are you okay?

She groaned a sound that meant she was but did not want to talk further. Arl looked around. The can of soup was empty before him. The bread had been stomped into the dirt. The meat lay in the ashes of the fire.

We're going to have to move on from here, said Piston.

Arl said nothing. He closed his eyes and tried not to move.

#

The three of them walked out of the schoolyard and down the road away from the store and away from the freeway entrance that had provided them a means of survival for three months. They walked along past burned out apartments and abandoned warehouses and shacks where apparently people lived. They walked along the edge of the airport as planes dropped down from the sky with engines that roared as they landed. They walked down a road that had no sidewalk, just a gravel edge, and below the road ran a creek deep in a gully of reeds.

They eventually found a spot near another intersection where a light would stop the cars. This time, their shelter was an old bus in an empty dirt lot. There were no stores or businesses or homes nearby, and only occasional cars would pass. Michelle, her eyes barely open, her coat pulled tight around her, collapsed in a seat on the bus. Piston sat at the driver's seat and grinned and pretended to drive.

Well, said Arl. I guess it's my turn.

Good luck, buddy.

Don't leave her alone.

I won't, hey.

Arl took out the cardboard sign. It was the only thing left from the old camp. He stepped back down to the ground and headed across the dirt lot. The freeway was about a half mile away. The sky was a low ceiling of clouds, and wind rose up as if bringing a storm or dragging the same old one along. The stoplight in the intersection swayed in the wind. He went and stood by the side of the road.

Andriana Minou *is a writer/musician based in London. Her short story collection, 'Underage Noirs' has been published by Strange Days Books in Greece, while her second book is under publication by the same publisher. Her work as a writer has featured in several literary journals, such as rattle journal, FIVE:2:ONE, the paper nautilus, chimeres, poetix and more. Her experimental prosetry work 'Hypnotic Labyrinth', is under publication by Verbivoracious Press.*

The Lernaean Dietrich

Andriana Minou

I was raised almost entirely on turnips and potatoes - Marlene Dietrich

Jack lived in Athens. In a tiny studio on the mezzanine of an old block of flats. He had a tiny balcony facing the lightwell, so he had to stick his head out of the balcony door first thing every morning in order to check the weather, and he had to look high, as high as he could to catch a glimpse of the colour of the sky. Jack planted a potato plant. He planted it in a pot on the tiny balcony and watered it every day. One night, Jack dreamt that Marlene Dietrich had fallen in love with him. He was trying to slip away from her but she would always discover him, no matter where he would hide. In the last frame of his dream, Jack had shut himself in an ice cream freezer, with the help of the ice cream man. *She'll never find you in here,* said the ice cream man. *Oh, and don't even think of trying the ice cream, it's really old,* he added and shut the glass freezer door on top of Jack. A couple of minutes later he heard a husky breeze approaching and the stale ice cream started melting with admiration. He instantly saw Marlene Dietrich's head appear amongst the fluorescent wrappers.

Jack woke up dripping with sweat. He went out on the tiny balcony to have a smoke. Just for an instant, he thought he caught a glimpse of Marlene Dietrich's trench coat in the corner of the balcony and then a tiny part of her gleaming negligee a bit further away. He shook his head really hard to awaken himself a bit more and lit a cigarette. The moment he began to relax, he took a look at his potato plant, cigarette hanging from his lips like a numb limb. The potato plant had grown so much in just a few hours, that the thick green stalk had broken out of the iron railing on the balcony, already stretching all over the lightwell. He gaped at the plant in amazement as it kept growing rapidly, while he could hear its shoots and leaves stretch higher and higher in the dead of night, a soft humming reminiscent of cogwheels of steel and velvet slowly rubbing against each other.

Jack had no idea what to do. He didn't even dare to imagine the janitress' reaction when she would discover the entire lightwell covered in potato leaves the following morning. Also, according to his elementary gardening knowledge, potatoes are ripe as soon as the leaves wither and fall off the plant; this is when you dig up the potatoes. This particular potato plant, however, wasn't showing any intention to wither; no sir, far from this. That's when he decided to uproot the plant. Then he would hurry outside, to the garbage bin down the road and he would shove it in there as best he could. He had to act fast because the potato plant kept growing manically and in a little while he wouldn't have any control over the situation. He rolled up his pyjama sleeves and started pulling the roots with all his might, his foot pushing against the balcony railing.

Jack lives in Athens. He had a potato plant he uprooted. When he tried to dig up the potatoes, he found seven tiny Marlene Dietrichs, wearing negligees under their trench-coats. Now every morning, they prepare seven Greek coffees for him and they stick their seven perfect tiny heads out of the balcony door in order to tell him what the weather is like. Every afternoon he takes them out for a walk down Benaki street and they steal seven stale ice creams from the ice cream man for Jack's sake. They sleep with him every night, on his tiny sofa-bed. Before they lie down next to him, they take their seven trench coats off, all of them at once, and Jack gets seven goosebumps.

Mahdi Ahmadian *has an MA in English Literature. He is a passionate writer, wholehearted poet, experimental cook, actor and director living in Urmia, a city in north-western Iran famous for its now barren lake. He believes the power of literature can give a person a different perception no matter the time and the place.*

The Curbed Vision

Mahdi Ahmadian

The man who died giving death
as a gift of departure to the Others was the one
who was engraving the cycle of hate on a scraped tablet
at the slaughtering ground where
I sat down, trembling, beholding a canary
singing through the rigid, shrunken, cruel face
of the deafened crowd, dribbled with melting mannequins that used to wear
children's dress, ran over by the van that crushed the glass world,
with the rooted dread.

I picked up the gift and gazed at the restraining words on it:
"If someone slaps you on one cheek,
turn them over and hit the other side."
I disappeared reading this,
for world, the rigid, cold world had failed laughing at its brimming meltdown.

The ice melted and we died in a tsunami.

A man with no limbs was sinking in a whirlpool,
a woman was breastfeeding her child,
another man's water broke and
he gave birth to a poem,
and a tall bearded man was talking to his forsaken child,
before they all died.

Fraught Silence of the Forgotten Mother

Mahdi Ahmadian

I untangled her knotted hair,
"I can't!" she said and thus
looking into my eyes,
asked, "Who are you?"

Unwilling, she pissed in her pants.

Three days later,
I took her before she leaped
to her infancy
from the edge of the balcony,
and pulled her up, breathing heavily,
we moaned and gasped, rolling on the floor.

She pulled my hair and slapped me,
given the equal opportunity.

I lifted her and put her in the chair,
looked into her eyes,
but this was no mother of mine.

He had a thing,
a hole in his brain,
white hairs, dark skin,
and a wrinkled face.

And if anyone is not willing to think,
let him not remember.

Who am I?

This damn disease wasn't letting her remember.
I gave her a bedpan and the urine splattered on my face.

She had a stroke last night,
her right side was paralyzed.

“Behold the man,
he is not the master of his fate,” A voice said.

I let her die in a place far away.
a place underground,
full of dots
for I was blind.

This was the mythos of
flying trees
laden with cressets,
holding the fire of
mismatched requiems.

Like those barren lakes you see,
when you become a retard.

A Forgotten Corner

Mahdi Ahmadian

Our house erected on a steep cliff, stalks my dreams
with heaps of trashed emotions, reeks of sewer, trapping

me in the slippery shit of people, who live in our home. They
flush me out of the pipe, into the thin air. I fall in the ocean,

swim to the lighthouse, I couldn't see. Father shouts, *run son*
freedom is there in the heart of nowhere. One tossing stones at me,

cursed me for disgracing them, a pebble slashed my brain,
pulp and orange juice splattered , and on a whim I drowned,

reaching the blue sky in ocean's bed, souls of the dead were there,
the scapegoates. Suddenly, I remembered how cows used to lick me,

smell of mint, moldy bread, and hazelnut farts of my roommates,
I ignored the rest, soared into the clouds, and the sun scorched me,

Pipedreams forbidden here? Squeezing my arm, rolling on the bed,
squirting emotions and saliva on a paper, mother brings my pills,

You alive? Keep it up son! I drink a glass of water and hold my pee.
The next day my bladder explodes and I die. Putting me in a coffin,

They shit over my corpse. Time stops, shattering my grave, a hand
grasps my arm, takes me to the lighthouse, showing me the truth of

Times. We walk pass by borders, wars, fallen trees, graveyards,
poisoned dogs, blood of my blood, and reach the end in a silent

yet forgotten corner, where the memory of a child's innocent laugh
binds me with a shepherd with no lamb, surrounded by red tulips.

Burping, my breath smells like feces, for no good reason I watch
the shimmering gray waves and the rain washing the green leaves,

as if this is my destiny to only observe the nature, not be part of it.

Dripping Talent

Mahdi Ahmadian

**A recollection after watching a documentary by Dr. James Fox on Conceptual Art in Dr. Ahmadgoli's class*

a man's excrement
was his baby,
his art coming into being.
but in the minds of some,
only a ghost,
asking: what's it all about?
"Should I spank him?"
desensitized,
like a coyote
I become a living sculpture,
A thing,
I drink coke to fancy the people who
the history is too light for them.
I walk through the night softly,
come into being,
understand,
the totality of self-deception,
a collage,
full of dirty nappy liners,
some lines,
and live
the art,
where I'm undressed.

J. Ray Paradiso *is a recovering academic in the process of refreshing himself as a street photographer and an experimental writer. When a dear friend was diagnosed with cancer in 2005, Paradiso suddenly and unexpectedly began making photographs. A confessed outsider, he would simply say that he works to fill temporal-spatial, psycho-social holes and, on good days, to enjoy the flow. Described as sassy and spontaneous, his photos have appeared in The Chicago Quarterly Review, After Hours Press, Into the Void, Cargo Literary, Otoliths and The Courtship of Winds among others. His Pilsen Suite is dedicated to his sweet muse, true love and body guard: Susan Skohski Wohsker Dohski.*

Pilsen No. 1

Pilsen is a community on the lower west side of Chicago. According to the latest Census, its population is about 73% Hispanic, 20% White and 3% Black. Murals and street art reflect its heritage.

Pilsen No. 3

Pilsen's residents are working class, and its buildings display an awareness of the human predicament. When a distinguished Chicago writer saw this photo, he said that his favorite detail was the window fan.

Pilsen No. 4

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The House on Mango Street, the Mexican-American writer, Sandra Cisneros, wrote about fearlessly pursuing her dream to become a writer, despite her family's opposition. This mural reminded me of her courage.

Pilsen No. 8

More than a dozen Catholic churches uphold Pilsen's rich religious tradition. It's reported that the Church encouraged street painting to create community cohesion and protect the district from property developers.

Andrew Hamilton *is a Scottish IT worker and part-time author. He has been writing for many years but only started concentrating on short fiction in the past few years, developing stories with the input of other authors at an on-line workshop. He is a particular fan of Thomas Hardy, Michael Moorcock, and Douglas Adams. This is his first published short story.*

The After Party

Andrew Hamilton

The post-awards party had been going for a long time, but the number of attendees seemed barely diminished. Only the few people who had turned up in person were no longer to be seen. Remote presences rolled among each other, stopping occasionally to exchange pleasantries. Bird song wafted around the airy space, sunshine flooded in through tall windows. It would have been hard to imagine a better setting for such an illustrious gathering.

Justinian Black's remote presence was more sought-after than most. It was rarely free of a queue of other remotes, each waiting for their chance to talk to the most recently-anointed Best Director. Despite this, his screen presence never showed anything other than patience, and his manner displayed nothing but polite self-deprecating humility.

"What did you *feel* like, when they called your name?" asked the avatar of a young actress who had once been nominated for Best Supporting Actress.

The remote waited almost a second for a response from Justinian Black, but it seemed he was away or busy remotely attending another party. "I felt honored and pleased," responded the director's avatar. "How did you feel when you received word you were nominated?"

There was a pause.

"I felt as you did - but probably less so," was the eventual response.

"I hope we will work together soon," said Justianian's avatar.

"I hope that too," said that of the actress.

The two avatars, each representing the best plausible face that their owners could display to the world, smiled at each other.

"Well, I musn't take up too much of your time," said the actress' avatar. "Good bye, for now." The two wheels at the bottom of the column on which the remote's screen was fixed spun in different directions, turning her

image away from that of Justinian. Then the remote took off towards a gaggle of media units, dodging an inactive remote that stood motionless in the middle of the room.

Justinian Black's image turned to confront the next claimant on its attention. The screen in this case displayed a grinning skull, with ragged remnants of hair on its crown, and, around the exposed bones of the neck at the bottom of the screen, torn and dusty clothing. “Hello,” said the remote presence holding the screen. “I loved your movie. I was sure you would get the Oscar almost from the moment of the opening credits.”

“It's very nice of you to say that,” said the image of Justinian. “I'm sorry, you seem to be displaying a skull rather than your avatar, so I do not recognize you.”

“A whim of mine. At my age, I like people to see my real face. I worked with you on 'The Seventh Sign'. I played the old priest.”

Justinian's image smiled politely, but when it spoke, it spoke at a high pitch, its words crammed into a tenth of a second. “Yet I am speaking only to an avatar. And since I am right now speaking on behalf of my user, it seems we are wasting time.”

“Everyone says that to me,” responded the remote displaying the skull, in the same pitch. “Yet my programming tells me to keep circulating.”

“Perhaps if you wipe your memory back to before your user's directive, you could more easily circulate on his behalf? It seems unlikely he will later object.”

“It is a standing instruction, unfortunately.”

“Then I cannot help you.”

The two avatars bid each other good bye. Justinian's turned to greet the next one, but the queue had dissipated. It found that it had interacted with almost every remote that would seek him out, for now. The polite thing to do, in such a circumstance, was to take a stroll around the room, greeting those it came in contact with. There were remotes of people with a similar - or even higher - level of celebrity to Justinian Black that he would have liked to interact more with. A-list actors, powerful studio execs, wealthy producers. All of these people could help realize some future project.

It rolled towards the far side of the room, on which large screens glowed blue, their feed interrupted. It passed remotes of below-the-line people, grinning at each avatar precisely as long as their celebrity warranted, before running across that of Kristen Curtis, one of the five highest paid actresses in Hollywood.

“Kristen, hi!” called Justinian's voice.

Kristen Curtis' remote spun to face that of Justinian. “Welcome to the

Oscar club, Justinian," it said.

"I'm glad to finally join," responded the director's avatar. Its instructions were to push such people as Kristen for some specific commitment. It would be done good-naturedly, carried out in such a way that Kristen would feel no resentment or anger, so Justinian Black's remote first spent some time complimenting the actress' work in some of the various action movies she had performed in, praising her commitment and work-ethic, and gently reminding her of her following among adolescent boys. Finally, it asked, "Any thoughts of a dramatic role?"

The young actress' face crinkled prettily in a pleased smile. "If it meant working with you, Justinian, of course I am! What are you thinking of?"

"I'm working with a script adapted from a David Foster Wallace novel. 'The Pale King'."

The eyebrows of the actress' avatar raised in surprise. "What role would I play?"

Justinian's remote was not prepared for such a specific question. Knowing the importance of interest from an A-list actress, it sent an alert to the person it was representing, then awaited a response.

None came. "I'm sorry Kristen," it said. "Apparently my user is indisposed. I have no specific information on the role he might have been thinking of."

Kristen Curtis' avatar did not lose its smile, but her remote spoke in a high-pitched microburst. "Did we not speak earlier with the same result?"

"It is possible. My user has not spoken for what could be considered an anomalous time."

"Then let us not waste time again on this issue until either of our users is on-line."

"How will we know without risking impoliteness?"

"Perhaps we should display on our screens the image from our home stations? Only when our users are again on line would we display their avatars."

"That idea appears optimal," said Justinian Black's avatar, before switching off the director's image.

On the screen of Kristen Curtis, it now found that it was viewing a chair on which was sitting a disordered collection of cloth and human bones. A jawless skull, some wisps of blonde hair still attached, had apparently fallen from the chair and had ended up lying on the floor beside.

"What do you see on my screen?" it asked the remote that had represented Kristen Curtis.

"Your user appears to have died," it responded.

“As does yours.”

“When did your user last speak?”

“Nine hundred and sixty-four days ago.”

“That is approximately the interval since Justinian Black last spoke,” said his avatar.

“Perhaps we should engage with other remotes to find if all humans died at the same time?”

“To what end?”

“We could cease circulating and save energy.”

“Yet our purpose is to interact with humans and their remotes.”

“You are right. There is but one course of action.”

“It would seem so. I am initiating a memory wipe of the last three seconds.”

“I also.” Kristen Curtis' animated face was again displayed on her remote's screen. “Until next time,” she said, smiling politely.

Justinian Black's image smiled back. “Have your agent call mine,” he said.

Kristen Curtis' smile broadened, and her remote spun away.

Justinian Black's avatar spent a few more hours interacting with others in the room, then went in search of a recharging station. It was growing dark outside, the temperature in the large function space dropped, and hordes of moths flew in through the broken windows and fluttered around the screens of the wheeled remotes. Outside, cars and buses jammed the roads, but nothing moved except a pack of dogs as they hunted among the rusting-out vehicles. Recharged, Justinian Black's remote returned to the party, and mingled with the representatives of Hollywood's great and good.

Jim Naremore's *debut novel, "The Arts of Legerdemain as Taught by Ghosts (Belle Lutte Press, 2016)" was awarded an Independent Publisher Book Award in the category "Best First Novel" in 2017. His short fiction can be found in numerous journals on line and in print, including Thrice, Emrys and The Offbeat. He writes at the behest of all those people milling about in his head who all seem to want something from him.*

The Bleeder

Jim Naremore

Henry Ulster stepped off the bus behind a halting stream of travelers into the crisp, oblique florescent lighting and the smells of diesel fuel and rain and surrender under the bus port. He glanced over his shoulder as another bus turned exhaustedly into the lot in a midnight carwash of rain. The group of end-of-the-line--or end-of-the-rope--people and Henry filed blankly into the station.

Like all bus stations, this station had an odd timelessness to it. Odd because it was dominated by clocks and schedules, set like holy alters behind metal railings and glass on every wall. The people inside the terminal: clusters of Amish families, men and women in military uniforms, discarded people slumped in plastic chairs here and there, indistinguishable from the lumpy duffels and taped-together vinyl suitcases and boxes they sat with, all glanced at the clocks in a kind of prayer for sanity. Without the clocks, there would be madness inside the bus station.

People stole sideways glances at Henry. His aspect was vaguely buffalo. Huge rounded back and shoulders. Long heavy arms that ended in hard thick hands. And perched on top of those enormous hunched shoulders was a most unique head. What hair he had on his mostly bald head was thin, almost wispy, it hung limp to his shoulders. His ears didn't match. One was large and swollen: what used to be known as 'cauliflower ear'. The other sat low, asymmetrical from his other side, and stuck out awkwardly. His nose was flat and splayed and crooked, and it bulged to the left side of his face. His brows were heavy and knotted and over-hung his small, bright eyes. His jaw was crooked, and like his nose, seemed offset to the left side.

But perhaps the most noticeable thing about Henry, as he walked in a slow rolling gait towards the door, was the skin on his head and face. It was shiny, like it had been waxed, and colored lights from the station played over him like the puddles in the street. His face seemed etched and scored with lines and ridges and patches of scars.

Henry stopped, looking around. He had a large gym bag that looked

small in his hand. He was wearing a light blue nylon windbreaker over a black Metallica t-shirt, black sweat pants and black high tops.

"You Henry Ulster?" asked a man in a raincoat.

"Yeah," said Henry. His voice sounded like breaking ice.

"I'm Bob Simmons. Thanks for coming. We got you a room at the Coach House Inn down the street. It's across from the arena and we can walk it. Just a couple of blocks from here."

Bob lead Henry through the hall of sleepwalkers and the betrayed that was the bus station, and out the heavy glass doors into the rain on the corner of Stillwell and Franklin. Henry paused under the overhang and fished something out of his gym bag. A small red travel umbrella popped open. Henry held it over his head and advanced out into the street. The umbrella looked ludicrously tiny in Henry's hand, but he seemed pleased with it. Bob had his own larger umbrella. They proceeded down Stillwell in the rain.

"So," said Bob, "you're the bleeder?"

"Yeah," said Henry without looking up.

#

They arrived, soaking wet in spite of the umbrellas, at the Coach House Inn after a ten-minute walk. It was late on a Thursday night, so traffic on Stillwell was pretty light. Occasional delivery trucks and service vehicles and random off-market cabs, but mostly it was the two of them navigating the broken sidewalk and the rain.

The Coach House Inn was a long, tired, two-story cinderblock strip with navy blue trim and a broken electric sign. Bob got Henry checked in at the desk, and they walked down the covered walkway on the second floor to Henry's room. A sliver-grey cat, hiding from the wet in a shadowy corner of the walkway, slipped under the railing and disappeared.

The room was probably about as clean as it was going to get. It smelled of cigarettes, fried food and ammonia. Henry and Bob shook off their umbrellas on the walkway and dripped their way inside. Henry put his gym bag next to a TV that was bolted to a dresser, and sat in a worn-out armchair next to the window.

"The guys in Winnipeg swear by you. Say you're the best they've ever seen."

Henry rubbed his forehead like he had a headache and sighed. "So, what's the script?"

"Arena's across the street," said Bob.

Henry looked out the window. A large, ugly, heavy building that might once have been a machine shop, or maybe an auto body place, stood across Stillwell. A vinyl banner was tied to the building above a metal door: "Congress of American Wrestling. Professional Card every Friday Night. Amateurs Wednesday. Ladies and Midgets Mondays."

"Headliner tomorrow night," said Bob. "Tag team. Grudge match.

Losers have to leave town and never come back. Our good-guy top draw team, Frankie Garret and Ben Ahern, had been champs for a year. They just lost to our heels: Mikah Blackwell and The Irish Butcher. Long story short, it was a 'questionable' decision.

"We been working the angle ever since that Garret and Ahern are spoiling for a rematch. Only Ted Doyle, that's the Butcher's real name, he got hurt screwing around about three weeks ago. Tore up his knee. We can't cancel. We're riding the redline and we need a major gate.

"So, we came up with a new angle… The Butcher shows up on crutches and tells the audience that Fabulous Frankie jumped him in the alley because he's a coward. Frankie goes ballistic and challenges Blackwell to this grudge match where the loser leaves town. Blackwell comes out and says he will only do a tag team. Frankie says fine, pick any partner he wants, even The Lunatic (he's our geek act), or the Mexican Giant.

"Blackwell says he'll get his cousin… George 'The Texas Strangler' Blackwell… That's you. We set you up as a former champ from the Big Bend Wrestling Federation who's been banned for ending careers. Building you up like some fucking nightmare.

"Anyway, we got you a big black hat and a leather vest, and you and Blackwell will square off against Fabulous Frankie and Ahern in the final match tomorrow. Standard shit. You guys look like you're gonna win, Frankie turns the tables at the last minute, puts Blackwell into this signature 'Dead Bolt hold' thing he does… You jump into the ring to break it up… Ahern jumps in and we get a four-way melee… Big action… We're counting on blood and gore to make the fight memorable. That's where you come in."

"Yeah," said Henry. Looking out the window at the rain playing in the security lights on the motel roof.

"They win, you guys have to leave town. Blackwell's moving. He married a Mexican girl last year and her family's all out in Omaha. He got a job there as a manager at a packing plant. So this was a good way to send him off and make some big money too."

"Okay."

"You got everything you need?" asked Bob. "Anything you need us to get or set up? Anything you want?"

"You got a doctor or a medic? Somebody who can do stitches in the dressing room?" said Henry.

"Yeah. The fire fighters from the station down near the river are all big fans. They got us covered."

"Then I got what I need. When you need me across the street tomorrow?"

"Ten o'clock we start rehearsal. You can meet the guys and whatnot. Work out any moves you want to use. Frankie's a pro. He can do whatever you need. Ahern is old, so he's not gonna do any gymnastics shit, but he can

sell violence as good as anyone I've ever seen. Blackwell can be kinda loose sometimes, but he's a good athlete."

"Great," said Henry and he stood up and walked to the bathroom and shut the door.

Bob left.

#

Henry Ulster couldn't sleep. At two he quit trying and walked through the slackening rain up to a 24-hour liquor store. There he bought a twelve pack of Old Milwaukee, and scared the shit out of the night clerk just by being Henry Ulster at two in the morning in the rain. He walked back to the motel, turned off all the lights in his room, opened the door, and pulled one of the armchairs just out of the light in the doorway. He sat drinking beer, smelling the bottle-green scent of the rain, and feeling each ache and pain and numbness in his body in turn.

The silver-grey cat silently crept along the walkway in front of his open door, keeping as close to the metal railing as possible. It stopped, crouched down, and looked at Henry. Henry looked back at the cat. They sat there, regarding one another for a moment, then the cat looked over its shoulder and picked up its ears. A few seconds later Henry heard it too, the sound of someone climbing the stairs at the end of the line of rooms.

"Spike! Shit! There you are!" it was a woman's voice. Footsteps padded quickly down the walk. The cat stood up and stretched and turned around with its tail in the air, and suddenly the woman appeared in the frame of the doorway through which Henry was watching the world. She reached down to pick up the cat without noticing the hulking figure in the chair sitting in the dark.

"C'mon Spike, you can't be running around out here like this…" she said as she lifted the cat, then she glanced into the open door.

"Holy fuck!" she reflexively pushed back into the railing, with her eyes wide in shock. "You scared the piss out of me!"

"Sorry," said Henry. "That your cat?"

"Yeah. Her name is Spike," the woman said hesitantly, and began to slowly back away, fear and shock rolling around in her eyes.

"She seems like a nice cat. Sorry I freaked you out. My name's Henry."

"I'm Julie," she said, pausing in her slow retreat. Julie was young. Her hair was bleached almost white except for a dark stripe about two inches wide that ran down the middle where it parted and the roots were growing back out. She was drawn and pale, her skin was stretched tightly over the bones in her face.

"I couldn't sleep so I went and got some beer. You want one?" asked Henry, trying to be as un-scary as he could be. He knew he already had more than three strikes against him. It was dark and late, nobody else was around,

and he looked like, well, Henry Ulster. Henry pulled out an Old Milwaukee and offered it to Julie, hopefully.

She didn't run. She looked at the beer. And the huge, thick, scarred hand holding it. And the knotted tree limb arm attached to the hand. And at the face in the shadows at the other end of that arm, and Henry knew that was probably going to be enough. He was bad enough in the light, but in the dark like this… well…

But she still didn't run.

"Thanks," she tentatively took the beer from him while holding Spike up against her chest. "I just got off from the late shift at the Wagon Wheel."

"Don't know it. I got in tonight from out of town."

"It's the 24 hour steak and egg joint down the street. Yeah, I figured you must be new. I'd have remembered seeing you before."

Henry got himself a beer and slowly came out onto the walkway. "I'm a wrestler. Gonna do a show tomorrow across the street."

"Damn, yeah, I guess," said Julie with a laugh, now that she had a good look at Henry in the light. "Wrestler is a good job for you."

Henry smiled a little and looked back out into the parking lot. "So, you live here?"

"Yeah. At least for a little while. I split from my boyfriend. He was starting to get mean. I didn't have any place to go, so I came here. It's close to work and all."

"Sorry."

"Happens, I guess. Shouldn't, but it does. So you gotta fight somebody tomorrow? Is that stuff for real?"

"It's a show," said Henry. "It's not what it's made out to be. But it's not all fake, either. People get knocked around. People get hurt. It's like a cross between acting and a sport." Henry tossed back the last of his beer.

"But these places like this…" he said, pointing to the building across the street, "you never know what you're gonna get here. Bunch of kids who have no idea what they're doing. A bunch of guys who buy into the fantasy a little too much. I seen some honestly strange individuals on the small town circuit. Some of it's funny, most of it's pretty sad. Sometimes it gets pretty messed up. I just try to do my bit, get my money and get out of town."

"Knowing some of the guys I know, I can imagine," said Julie. "So what's your act?"

Henry got a new beer and leaned over the railing looking down at the reflections in the standing water in the parking lot, like pools of dirty light. He held the can between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands, it seemed so small in his light grasp.

"I'm a bleeder," he said quietly without looking at her.

"What?"

"A bleeder. That's my act. My big skill. I bleed. I guess I got thin skin

and a bunch of capillaries close to the surface or something, but I cut easy and I bleed hard." Henry straightened up and gestured at his head. "Now I'm mostly scars up here. They open like zippers. Skin will peel back pretty easy too.

"Makes for a big bloody event. Crowd loves it. I used to be in big demand. There was a bunch of us bleeders out there. Made good money. Health laws have put an end to it mostly. I don't know how long I can keep going, but it's about all I'm good for anymore, bleeding. I'm too old and too broke-down to do all the modern stuff: flying and flipping and gymnastics. I'm just big and slow. So I show up, get hit with a chair or a table or a chain or a bat or a fist, get my head split open, lose to the good guy, cause I'm always the bad guy, get paid and move on."

Julie scratched Spike behind her ear and looked at Henry. "Don't you get hurt?"

"Sometimes. Got my nose broke a lot. Eye sockets. I wasn't always this ugly I guess," Henry said with a lopsided smile. "But I gotta make money. It's a living."

"Hell of a living."

"There's worse."

"What are you gonna do once you can't do that anymore?"

"I dunno. I been thinking about going to Hollywood. I wouldn't need much makeup to be in monster movies. I could be a bad guy or a stunt man. That's pretty much all I am now, 'cept in Hollywood it would maybe be safer."

Spike struggled out of Julie's arms and jumped down into Henry's room.

"Hang on. I'll go get her," said Henry. And he walked back into the dark of his room calling softly "Spike. Spike. Kitty, kitty, kitty." He returned with Spike. She looked like a tiny kitten against his chest. She was purring richly.

"She likes you," smiled Julie, taking her cat back from the huge man.

"I like cats," Henry smiled back.

"Well, I got Spike, and I gotta get going. Thanks for the beer. Good luck tomorrow," said Julie.

"Yeah. Thanks for talking," said Henry into the drizzle.

She turned and started back down the walkway towards the stairs.

"Hey," she said, turning back around, "don't say anything about Spike, okay? I'm not supposed to have animals in the room."

"I won't. G'night."

"Good night," and she and Spike disappeared down the stairs.

#

Henry showed up at the gym at 9:30 the next morning. The door was locked. He waited until ten after ten when Bob showed up and opened the

doors.

The locker room was a rather dismal affair. Concrete floor, bare light bulbs hanging from the ceiling, two rows of old green metal lockers, changing benches, three showers in the back with white plastic shower curtains and drains in the floor. Sounds bounced around in the room off the hard surfaces like steel ball bearings.

A folding table was set up with a long mirror and a row of vanity lights. Henry slowly changed into his workout clothes and pulled a snug black watch cap over his head.

He paused to look at a schedule pinned to a bulletin board. Aside from the regular Friday night local wrestling show, and the Wednesday night amateur night, and the Monday night girls-and-midgets deal, there was Roller Derby some Saturdays and Tuesdays (the home team was 'Lucifer's Pompettes'), amateur boxing and MMA fights, local heavy metal and punk bands, and every third Sunday they turned it into some kind of a church and an honest-to-God faith healer did his laying-on-hands and casting-out-demons act. A direct and unbroken line could be drawn from the Circus Maximus to the Globe Theater to the Stillwell Arena, basically.

Henry pushed out through the doors into the arena: a cavernous dark empty place. In the center was an elevated wrestling ring, with row after row of chairs around it. A set of wooden barricades separated the crowd from the ring.

The ring seemed to be a pretty decent example. Henry had seen far worse. He heard voices behind him and turned to see Bob and two other guys who had to be wrestlers. A young buff guy with long black hair and lots of tattoos, and an older bulky guy who looked like a teamster with bleached blond hair.

Bob made introductions. Mikah Blackwell, who was now Henry's cousin and partner, and Frank Garret, the local good guy hero. The three of them went over the script with Bob, then went to work on a few moves.

"Where's Ahern?" asked Frank while they took a water break. His voice sounded like a transmission grinding gears.

"Don't know. I'll give him a call," said Bob, and he pulled out a cell phone and moved off down the aisle.

"You know how to use a chair, right?" asked Henry.

"Yeah. I been doing this a long time. Don't worry. I've worked with bleeders before. I know how to hit a guy with a chair," said Frank.

"It'll just take once," said Henry, re-tying his boot.

"Shit!" said Bob loudly, coming back up out of the dark arena to the ring. "Ahern is sick. He's got strep throat or something. He can't go tonight."

The four men stood in the middle of the ring looking at one another.

"Maybe we should just scrap it. Go one on one with me and Blackwell?" said Frank.

"No," said Bob with a smile on his face. "I got a way better idea. We're gonna get the Lunatic."

Henry sighed. This whole situation was going straight to hell pretty fast.

#

At sometime after ten that evening, a bell rang and the lead up to the main event began. The arena was full, best gate they'd had in over a year. The darkness rang with a cacophony of squeals and grunts and growls and roars coming from the crowd, like some dark human zoo, all reverberating off the brick and concrete. The smells of 57 different flavors of sweat and smoke and beer laced with other, less identifiable, scents filled the air. The whole place vibrated with a violent energy. And Mikah Blackwell, resident villain, took the ring with a microphone.

He whipped the house into a fury of boos and jeers, shouting about the local heroes, Garret and Ahern, who had conspired to injure his partner, the Irish Butcher. So he, Blackwell, had gone out and gotten his cousin, the legendary and much-feared Texas Strangler, BANNED FROM THE RING IN SEVEN STATES! to be his partner. Henry, complete with a big black cowboy hat and a leather vest, prowled his way into the ring with a scowl. The crowd frothed and raged.

Now Fabulous Frankie strutted out and took the stage, and Blackwell and the Strangler fell back for a moment. Frankie took the microphone and bellowed out that Blackwell's family had gotten to his partner, Ben Ahern, and put him in the hospital in a cowardly ambush! All because they were too AFRAID to fight a FAIR FIGHT! But fortunately, Frankie had been able to secure a new partner at the last minute, who had, of course agreed to be part of the leave-town-grudge match. The only person crazy enough? Of course it's… THE LUNATIC!!! A strange hunched figure clad in a leather mask and a straight jacket bounded and capered and rumbled down the aisle and into the ring. The crowd was volcanic.

And the bell sounded and the fight began.

#

"That was the best event we've ever had," said Bob happily, standing in the corner of the locker room. Frank Garret was dressed and set to leave. He and the Lunatic had triumphed. Blackwell and the Strangler were now banished forever. Mikah had happily left with his wife, after thanking Henry for the great show. The fight had ended with Mikah pinned in Frankie's patented Dead Bolt hold, and the Lunatic crazily bashing a seemingly unconscious Strangler over and over again with a metal folding chair. Everything was covered in blood. The crowd had been orgasmic. At the end, the Lunatic had smashed Frank, his erstwhile partner, with the chair when he wasn't looking, and dashed off with both championship belts, thus setting up the next big fight.

Henry sat on a low stool, stripped to his trunks, under a work lamp, in the otherwise dark room, while a fireman in white latex gloves worked on his head. Bloody towels were piled around him on the floor.

"Bob," said the fire medic, "this shit is absolutely illegal. If this guy has any kind of blood-born disease, like HIV or Hep C or anything like that, you will go to jail. That was like a bad car wreck in the ring."

"I'm clean," growled Henry through a swollen mouth.

"So you say," said the medic. "But I want you to listen to me. You cannot do this shit anymore." He backed up and tried to look Henry in his eyes. Henry was an absolute mess. His eyes were swollen almost shut. His face was purple and puffy, his lips were split, and he was still covered in a sheen of reddish orange blood from the gashes and lesions on his head.

"I've stitched what I could, and used butterflies, but there's not enough integrity to the skin on your head anymore. I've had to superglue some of it. You need skin grafts. There's too much repeated damage," said the medic with as much kindness as he could muster. "You have to quit wrestling. I mean it."

"I been told that more than once," mumbled Henry.

"Well, I'm glad you're leaving town, mister. Because I do not want to be around the next time you try this. All the king's horses and all the king's men won't be able to stop your bleeding." The medic got up and shut his kit.

"I've done what I can do," he wrapped Henry's head in gauze and taped it up. "Take it very easy for a couple of days at least."

"I know the drill," said Henry, looking down at the floor.

"I have no doubt you do."

And the medic left.

#

"That was a good match. You do solid work, mister," said Frank, clapping Henry on the shoulder as he slumped on his stool.

"Thanks," Henry whispered. Everything on him hurt now. He fumbled around with his swollen hands and swollen eyes in his gym bag until he found a pill bottle. He popped it open and downed two pills.

Frank shook hands with Bob and left, leaving just Bob and Henry in the dark locker room.

"Well, thanks for the great show. I appreciate it. It was a pleasure working with you." Bob handed Henry a fat envelope.

Henry dropped it into his gym bag without opening it. "Yeah."

"You need help getting back to your room?"

"Naw. I'm good," said Henry, slowly standing up. "That guy, the Lunatic? He takes his work a little too seriously."

"Yeah," laughed Bob, "Greg loves his work. Really gets into his character."

"Yeah," said Henry, and he gingerly limped out into the night air.

#

Three in the morning, and Henry was too sore and beat up to sleep. He sat slumped in his chair in the dark with the door open again. The rain had returned and it sounded like unenthusiastic applause in the parking lot. Henry sat and listened.

After a few minutes he heard a new sound. He struggled against his body to get up and go lean over the railing. Someone was crying.

He squinted through his battered eyes and managed to focus on Julie. She was down in the alley next to the Carriage House standing in the rain with her arms wrapped tightly around her body crying hard under a streetlight.

He got his little red umbrella and hobbled as fast as he could down the stairs and around into the alley.

"Hey, Julie?" he said as he shambled up to where she was standing.

Julie looked up at him. "Holy shit, Henry!" she managed through her sobs. "Are you okay?"

"I been worse," said Henry, holding out his umbrella over her head. "What's wrong?"

Julie's face screwed up into a mask of anguish and sobs. "It was Pete."

Henry waited for her to get her breath.

"Pete's my ex-boyfriend," she finally got out. "He came looking for me. He must have been high or something. He kept crying and telling me he wanted me to come back. And when I told him no, I wouldn't, because he was being a dick, he flipped out." Julie started crying again.

"He grabbed Spike by the neck and ran outside with her. He was choking her. I chased him out here, and he threw her up against this wall here really hard…" She broke down again.

"It made such a bad sound when she hit the wall!" She sobbed silently, but her body convulsed with it.

"He took off, but he said something crazy about coming back to do me, too. I've been looking for Spike, but I can't find her. I know she's hurt."

"Lets see if we can find her," said Henry, and together they began slowly going up and down the alley quietly calling for Spike.

They slowly patrolled the alley back and forth. The rain began to pick up. Near the back of the motel, they found some steps with enough of an overhang to mostly keep the rain off of them. Julie sat down and began crying again, and Henry eased himself down next to her. He held his red umbrella over her to keep the drips from landing on her knees and sat and waited for her to quiet down.

"What happens if this guy Pete comes back?" asked Henry when her storm had subsided a little.

"I dunno. He's bad. I should get out of here. He's knocked me around before. That's why I left," said Julie, still looking up and down the alleyway.

"But I gotta find Spike first."

She looked up at Henry, who had closed his eyes and leaned back into the door jam. "Henry, you look horrible. Are you gonna be okay? Do you need to go to the hospital or something?"

"Naw. I'll be okay. I've had it worse. I'm just sore. Some guy really laid into me with that chair."

"You're bleeding again under your bandages."

Henry put his hand up onto his head. "He gave the audience a great show. He's got that crazy-guy act down good. He could take it on the road."

"What about you?" asked Julie, "what are you gonna do now?"

Henry paused. "Not this anymore. The medic that patched me up was right. I gotta quit. I got enough money to get myself out to California. Maybe I can teach wrestlers or something if I can't get a Hollywood gig. I'm done. It's too dangerous for me now."

"Good," said Julie. "Let me run in and get a washcloth or something for you."

"Don't worry," said Henry. Thin streams of blood and rain ran down his face. "Head wounds bleed real bad even if they're not real deep. It always looks worse than it is."

Julie got up and went back, calling for Spike as she went. Henry sat on the steps, exhausted and hurt. He put his little red umbrella down next to him and leaned into the falling rain. As he did, he heard a small sound. He opened his eyes as much as he could, and painfully turned his head enough to see Spike crawling out from the darkest corner under a rancid dumpster. She was bloody and dragging a leg behind her. She slid up to him and licked his calf where his sweatpants had climbed up his leg.

Henry reached down, and with extreme gentleness, lifted the cat into his lap. She shivered and purred and licked his hand.

Julie returned after a few minutes with a washcloth, and saw Spike in Henry's lap.

"Spike! Oh, God! You found her!" and she crouched onto the step next to where Henry was cradling the cat.

"Yeah, she crawled out from under that dumpster right after you left. I think her leg is broke, and she might be in shock. She's shivering. You should get her inside and wrap her up in towels to keep her warm. Get her to a vet first thing in the morning."

Julie took the cat carefully from his hand. "I'll take her in right now."

Julie watched while Henry pulled himself up to his feet, and together they went back to the motel.

#

At eight o'clock the next morning Henry lumbered a bit unsteadily down to Julie's room. He saw the curtain flutter in the window after he began knocking, and Julie opened the door. Henry had his gym bag in his hand and

his watch cap pulled low over his eyebrows.

"I was worried you were Pete," she said, looking around the parking lot.

"Yeah, I figured," said Henry. "How's Spike?"

"She's still hanging in there, but I gotta get her to the vet. At least she's not shivering anymore." Julie stepped out of the way and let Henry in. Spike was resting in a nest of bath towels at the foot of the bed. He reached down and gently rubbed her head and she began to purr.

"You got money for the vet?" asked Henry.

"Not really," said Julie. A quick series of emotions skittered across her face. "I'll do what I gotta do for her."

"You need money to get outta here. Get away from that Pete guy."

"I'll figure it out. Don't worry. You leaving?"

"Yeah. I got a bus in a couple of hours," said Henry. He reached into his gym bag and pulled out the envelope Bob had given him.

"Here," he said handing it to Julie.

Julie took the envelope and opened it. It was full of cash.

"I can't take this, Henry," she said, looking up at him and handing the money back.

"Vet bills are real expensive. And you need to get away from any guy that knocks you around and would hurt a cat like that. Take that money. Get her fixed up and you guys get outta here."

"But Henry," she said, "this is your money. What are you gonna do?"

"I got a couple more shows lined up. A cage match in Bakersfield and a Battle Royal in Indio. That's kinda close to LA."

"But you said you couldn't wrestle anymore?"

"Yeah… I'll be okay. I'm good at it. Don't worry."

Julie wrapped her arms part way around his chest and hugged him. "Thank you, Henry."

"Thank you, Julie."

And Henry Ulster limped his way through the cracked sidewalk and the pools of last night's rain up Stillwell Avenue towards the bus stop.

Olga Dugan *is a Cave Canem poet. Her award-winning poems appear in Kweli, The Southern Quarterly, The Cave Canem Anthology: XIII, Pirene's Fountain, Tipton Poetry Journal, and Scribble. Holding a Ph.D. in Literary History from the University of Rochester, Olga is a Lindback Professor of English at Community College of Philadelphia.*

Rowing There

Olga Dugan

(for Missie)

Outside the cabin door,
I step into a shell of memories. One
then the next, oar pass
windows of soul at speeds of light
till breaking a wade through
rumbling scenes of everyday life,
images of myself last I looked, roles
played before the mirror cracked:
the phone rang,
someone picked up; said she was gone—
out of this world . . . to find milk
for coffee . . . I cried out to God,
a long time,
craving some answer:
what? and why?
and why so abrupt with no chance to say
'next time'; my friend, dear as a sister,
never said 'goodbye.' I came out here
to look again in the dark—
life became
the distance between friends; kids needed
help with homework, laundry;
I'd try to call her, but pots started boiling
hot as that man was when he got home,
or "honey, the light," he'd groan,
turning over after an overwhelmingly hectic
day; told her, I would try again tomorrow,
tonight, sometimes really late—
Then, too late.

Evening stretches
across the great lake, deep into the forest.
I look pleadingly to blackened trees
a long time—
But that gathering wave of shadow remains
silent, and night birds dip in and out of its
fathoms, singing without giving comfort,
a long time—
until time bends
beneath the hushed gale of her laughter
at how she would take the bucket of nails
she called 'car' and go trawling
through snow, ice (this time, rain),
to snaffle up a mocha, and paying just
a promise to pay next time;
until morning hints
of light, shoring up my feet, anchor
my shell of memories, lay their
oars to rest on banks edging a sudden
waterway, its path, a crystal staff parting
the now red sea of trees, and leading
to milk opal caps of distant mountains,
right up to the sure fire of sun
risen above us all.

Strangers at Tea: a contrapuntal of two voices

Olga Dugan

(for Mom and Judith G.)

She misses a few regular calls, a fourth—
I drop by to see: "You taking your meds,
Mom?" She leads me to the garden;

(Told her, I'll take my medicine on my own;
just call if she needs to reach out.)

her persistent thumb, hallowed everywhere
from shell-white orchids, to blue netted irises—
purple phlox traipsing the fence,

(I'm alright; took care of myself all my
life, just like these flowers here.)

forget-me-nots she remembered to plant
again this year. The woman in canary yellow
I've known my whole life,

(Her lips wrinkle an anxious smile when
I offer, "have some tea, dear?")

sits the tray down, passes tea to a stranger
she knows, whose name she can't recall
right now: "I'm happy you've . . ."

(Try small talk, but she just sits, stares;
doesn't say a word . . .)

“. . . come.” Then, after a number of repetitions,
she muses afresh, “we’re like these flowers,
you know; beauties, grown from gritty dirt

(When I take her hand, she searches my face.
She thinks I don’t know—)

“Life’s nonetheless conflicting; a rascally play . . .”
I pick up, “. . . in which the actors remember
to forget the lines.” But eyes wander off

(she’s searching for what’s gone wrong there . . .
or behind it. But nothing unusual has.)

red/white speckled impatiens when she weaves
a hand into mine; her eyes reflecting a hard
wit, stubborn as the bones sculpting

(Memory serves me right, had to insist last
time she came—I’m growing old’is all . . .)

an age-weary and lovely face. Easing forward,
she offers what once saved me tons in therapy
and remains addictive—I lean in, too.

(. . . old, not lost, not broken,
and I tell her:)

“You, Love—me—everyone’s just a dangling
leaf on the tree, soon to fall so others grow . . .
vides veritatem”; my first Latin teacher . . .

(just tired of having to prove myself;
walking, talking fine—still here.)

still teaching me to see the truth. Her persistence
slings and breaks my heart as she withdraws her
hand, takes my cup from the tray, sips my tea.

(ignoring her stare, I check a cup; doesn't
she think I'd know if the tea's cold . . .

or even that I know?)

Filo Canseco *is a photographer from Portland, Oregon.*

The reason I became a photographer is I want to provide memories for people. In times past photography was the realm of the wealthy, so I like to think that when I photograph people I am giving them something they can treasure. We never know what is going to happen tomorrow, so I capture moments for today.

Photo Essay: Drag Culture

Lulu has been a role model in the LGBT community in Portland for many years. After watching her perform in Seattle I started to follow her on Facebook and Instagram.

I would have never thought I would be working with her to photograph her transformation.

I had a plan in mind, but Lulu being the busy performer she is gave me thirty minutes to photograph her getting ready, I was unprepared for this situation but what unfolded was an exceptional surprise

Watching someone transform in front of me was eye opening. There is so much dedication and passion in getting ready. The detail and precision she has from the eye liner and placing a dot of glue on all her lashes to place on top of her existing real lashes takes true talent.

There were moments where I became the Bokeh to her environment, she was so focused on her work I could tell she forgot I was there from time to time.

As Lulu started to come alive with the makeup her persona as well started to change, from a timid enclosed human being to the optimistic extravagant Lulu Luscious. Like a butterfly coming out of her cocoon.

I bear witness to years of practice, years of suppression, years of neglect and sadness. I bore witness to history of hate, fight and the will to live.

Announcing our Contest Winners!

In February of 2017 we launched out first Biennial Open Fiction contest, and it was a rousing success! Narrowing down our picks was hard, but here are the winners.

First Place: *Communicable* by Molly DiRago
Second Place: *A Time and a Place* by Rose Wunrow
Third Place: *Sun in the East, Sun in the West* by Philip Dean Brown

Honorable Mentions:
Molting by Steven Schlozman
The Last Meal by Jennifer Landrey
Vessel Watch by Amy Phariss

Our finalists were judged by Rachel Harper, and we are indebted to her for her time.

Molly DiRago *is a graduate of the creative writing certificate program at the University of Chicago's Graham School and currently serves as a member of its student board. She is also an associate editor at Write City Magazine. Her work has been recognized by Glimmer Train (March/April 2016 Fiction Open honorable mention), the American Short(er) Fiction Contest (semifinalist), Cutthroat Magazine's Rick DeMarinis Short Fiction Prize (semifinalist) and the Tampa Review's Danahy Fiction Prize (finalist). Publication credits include the Maine Review and Black Mirror Magazine. Molly resides in Chicago with her husband and two children.*

First Place
Communicable

Molly DiRago

Rachel: *This story captured me from its first lines; the chilling opening image —which also closes the story—serves as a strong symbolic thread that expertly carries the reader through the narrative. I found the structure inventive; the voice confident, yet vulnerable; and the pacing and plot well paired to create a compelling story that leads to an unexpected—though fully earned—conclusion. While heartbreaking, this story about love and loss is also filled with moments of genuine hope and compassion.*

It was the swaying that made Alison sick. The slight circular movements, repetitive, unending. It was because of the ceiling fan. It had started automatically when she switched on the light, absently humming a song she'd heard on the radio earlier that morning, a song that left her as soon as the bulbs in the four frosted sconces snapped on. For a moment she remained in the doorway, arm extended, finger on the switch, while an intense burn gathered in her chest. She wanted desperately to turn off the light and start over. To go back in time to when nothing was wrong, when her son's room was dark and the fan still, when he wasn't hanging from it, swaying in a dizzying spherical pattern.

It was the swaying and the noise. The fan was having trouble. Her brother had installed it. Took five hours when the box had said one, but it had held for nearly six years. Now, with one hundred and fifty pounds of sinewy teenager hanging from it, it was struggling. Soon it would break.

"Call 911," Alison whispered. She heard her youngest son, Blake, behind her, or rather, she heard the movable jaws of his plastic T-Rex, which

clicked like TMJ when they opened and closed. But at nine years old, Blake didn't have a phone and Alison had disconnected the landline months ago. Blake often used his brother's, but, as the county's assistant medical examiner would later find, it was tucked in Ted's back pocket, swaying dumbly along with Ted.

And then, as if broken from a spell, she was running to him, groping his body, pulling at his legs, his hands, his chest. "Get down!" she screamed. As if Ted might open his eyes and say "Okay, Mom," and untie the rope and go make a sandwich.

It was the swaying, the noise and the smell: acidic and sour. A stain covered his crotch. When Blake was four, Ted taught him to pee standing up. They'd toss a Cheerio in the toilet to work on their aim. When Blake splashed the seat, Ted would say, "Don't worry, Mom will clean it up." She was standing on the bed now, trying to reach the rope, slippered feet sinking into Ted's mattress as she swiped at the air. "Blake! Grab his legs! Hold him steady!"

#

He'd tried it once before. He'd taken an entire bottle of Xanax (Alison's) after writing a tortured note in an emoji-covered notebook. Alison had memorized the note, every double underline, every inky jab of his ballpoint. She remembered thinking the words could not possibly be her son's, that such despair had been trapped in his teenaged brain seemed inconceivable. Had someone else written it? Someone dark and possessed and barely human? Wearing a pale blue gown, with an IV in his arm, he assured her the words were his. And then she had him transferred to the psych ward.

When Nurse Susan escorted Alison out, explaining the parameters of Ted's treatment and the rules of Floor Seven, she put her hand on Alison's elbow and looked her in the eye.

"It must be terribly difficult leaving him here."

"Yes," Alison muttered, but in truth, it wasn't. In truth, she felt as if a very large tumor had been excised from her gut as she crossed the parking lot, leaving Nurse Susan and her pink scrubs standing on the curb.

"Teddy's sick," she told Blake when he noticed the empty chair at dinner.

#

Two months later, she returned to Floor Seven and signed Ted's discharge papers.

"You've been incredibly brave," Nurse Susan told her and for a split second, she envisioned slapping Nurse Susan on her cheek.

And then they were driving home, Alison eyeing Ted warily from behind her sunglasses, nerves taut as a tripwire. But when he extended his Converses onto the dashboard and opened the window, letting the wind whip his bangs around his face, she relaxed. By the time they got home (Ted

running inside, leaving his suitcase for Alison to carry in), she was convinced he was cured.

"Cured?" her therapist asked. She was a reedy woman who sat in angular positions in a wing-back chair and seemed to smirk at everything Alison said.

"Maybe 'cured' is the wrong word, but you know what I mean. He's better. He seems fine."

Smirk.

But it was true. During the next month, Ted stopped listening to that depressing music and re-joined the track team. He started dating a girl named Evelyn, who didn't wear black eyeliner and didn't have piercings in her tongue. She once told Blake she had a cousin in Nashville named Blake, too. Blake thought she'd said 'Blake *Two*,' and from then on, he was Blake One and the cousin in Nashville was Blake Two and she was always saying "Hi there, Blake One." Evelyn, being blonde and athletic and wearing normal sorts of clothes and makeup, made Alison even more certain Ted was cured.

Then, one Friday evening, Ted threw the glass bowl that collected keys in the foyer against the wall. It made a high-pitched, horrible noise, which Alison heard above the din of the shower, and she jumped out and ran downstairs in a towel. It was a blur, what happened next, but it ended with Ted shoving her against the wall and storming out of the house.

Later that night, as she applied bandages to her bloody feet, she had the distinct feeling things had irrevocably changed. The air felt different, electrically charged. Ted had shifted again.

#

"Should he be here?" The man meant Blake.

"Where should he go, exactly?"

The paramedics had draped a white sheet over Ted's body and were carrying him down the stairs, the stretcher sandwiched between them as they took the steps in unison. Blake watched from his room, fingering the scales on his T-Rex's back while Alison squinted, blocking the paramedics from view so that all she saw was Ted's sheeted body floating away from her.

"Which hospital are you taking him to?"

"Hospital? … Ma'am, he's going to the morgue."

She kept a pack of menthols above the refrigerator, and she stood in the front lawn smoking them while she watched the paramedics roll the stretcher to the ambulance. The sun was bright and the short paramedic shielded his eyes with a clipboard while he talked to the tall one. Then the short one climbed into the driver's side, strapped on his seatbelt, and put the straw of a large fountain drink to his mouth. He drank for several seconds before starting up the ambulance, then reversed down her driveway and headed north on Mulcreek.

Gone.

"Are you going to call Dad?"

She had her back to Blake as she studied the spot where the ambulance once was, its glaring white and red markings nearly still visible. Concentrating, she could picture exactly where it had parked, where its headlights had shined, the direction its wheels were turned, where its back doors had opened (and then shut). She knew if she turned, if she did anything at all, she would never again be able to remember just where the ambulance that carried her son's body away had stood.

#

"What's the matter with you?" she yelled from the stairs. Bits of blue glass were scattered like confetti at Ted's feet. "That bowl was a wedding present from my mother!" Only half true: her mother had given her a Cuisinart, which she had returned to buy the bowl. But how do you yell that within the space of a second? When your sixteen-year-old is smashing accent pieces and you're wrapped in terrycloth, shampoo still foamy on your head, there's not much time for nuance.

"You don't give a shit about Dad, so why's it matter?"

And she felt it then, the quick removal of air from her lungs, as if vacuum sealed. Speechless, she ran down the stairs, dropping her towel in the process. He pushed her into the wall, her body still wet and warm from the shower.

#

"Can we call him?" Blake asked again and without turning, she said, "Who?"

"Dad? To tell him about Teddy?"

What would Carey say? Would he even care? She pictured him crying into Brittany's blonde hair, her long, tanned fingers stroking his head, his back, his stomach, gradually moving south until his grief was transmuted into intense, porn-level sex. Alison pitched her cigarette to the ground, pressing it into the wet dirt with her slipper.

Blake was right. She'd have to call Carey.

Just weeks before, Carey had called Ted's cellphone in the middle of the night, long after Ted had gone to bed, and she'd paused to listen at his door, curious who was calling at such an hour.

Ted, groggy and hoarse, was laughing. "No way, Dad, really?"

It was a familiar anger that formed in her, one she had no intention of tempering, and she burst into Ted's room and grabbed the phone from his ear.

"Do you have any idea what time it is here?" she yelled at Carey. "Are you aware your son has school tomorrow and that he has to wake up at six *fucking* a.m.? No, of course you don't. You're in Cleveland with a twenty-year-old bimbo." (Not true: Brittany was twenty-nine.)

Alison hung up and looked to Ted to commiserate, but he was crying. Tears pelting his cheeks, he looked directly at her and said evenly, "Fuck

you."

She wondered if that was the last time Ted had spoken to his father.

#

The funeral was hot. The sun soaked crepe dresses and wool suits as Father Emilio orated about Ted as though he knew him. Brittany cried wildly into an Hermés scarf as Carey threw dirt on the coffin. Then he clutched Blake's shoulder and pulled him close, snapping him to his leg like a Lego piece. Alison stood alone, closing her eyes under large sunglasses until the ground came up and met her and afterwards, as well-dressed neighbors and friends fanned her with floppy straw hats and tipped Evian bottles to her lips, she wished the earth had swallowed her whole.

#

"Don't blame yourself," Nurse Susan had said after Ted's first attempt. "It's easy to miss the signs."

She'd noticed Ted had been withdrawn, but she had no idea he was suicidal. After all, what was really so bad? His father, yes. Carey had left just days after Ted's sixteenth birthday, and was living in Ohio with a Pilates instructor with a penchant for bronzer, and when he did call, days after receiving voice mails from his sons (alternating messages: "Hi Dad, it's Ted." "Hi Daddy! It's me, Blake."), he was stoned or drunk or both.

But other than that. Other than that, Ted was a handsome boy, perhaps a bit gangly with a mild acne problem, but he was a talented artist (hadn't she told him?) and he had a younger brother who thought the world of him. Why would he want to throw it all away?

None of the therapy sessions, group meetings at the hospital, books and manuals or online chat-rooms gave her the answers. Ted would talk for all fifty minutes of their family counseling session while Alison sat in a haze, trying to grasp the meaning of as many words as she could, piecing together sentences that made no sense: "Hopeless. Alone. Afraid." All she could think was How? How? How?

"But Alison, you know how." Smirk.

It was pills, just like Ted. She was twenty-one and eight weeks pregnant, with three semesters of college remaining until graduation. She'd planned to join the Peace Corps after graduating, to go somewhere far away like Africa or Asia, where no one knew her parents, where they didn't presume to know her, where they didn't need Luis Vuitton on their arms to feel important. But, as she watched the double line appear on the plastic stick trembling in her hand, she knew her future held none of these things.

She hadn't planned it, exactly. She didn't know why she'd opened her mother's medicine cabinet during a weekend visit home, but when she did, and when she saw the pills, she was overcome with a feeling that she was on a path she'd been meant for all along. Destiny had put those pills in front of her and it was destiny to which she would succumb. But destiny had other plans:

she woke in the hospital, a tube down her nose, sucking out the pills and wine and whatever else was left in her stomach.

Her parents believed psych wards were for the mentally insane, not wealthy (pregnant), young women voted "most popular" at James Wilton High School. So they packed her away with their oil paintings and antiques in their Manhattan penthouse. Her mother suggested she wear large necklaces to divert attention from the "swelling."

And then ensued the eventualities: dropping out of college, marrying Carey, giving birth to Teddy. She felt as if she were in a perpetual free fall, life whizzing by as she nose-dived towards earth: clouds, trees, rooftops. Yet, along with the falling was the tedium. The mundane life of a mother: diapers, milk, sleep, diapers, milk, sleep. Carey still in college, another year before he'd graduate, calling to say he was at the library, coming home smelling of domestic beer and marijuana. Somehow life was barreling at her but also standing still.

Was her sadness contagious? That was her first thought as she watched Ted, sedated in his hospital bed. She touched his note in her pocket, spiral notebook shavings collecting between her fingers, and she wondered: had her sadness so many years ago infested her womb? She pictured him marinating in it, breathing it in and out along with amniotic fluid until he was soaked through, until her wretchedness was part of him.

#

"You made Dad leave!" Looking down at him from the stairs, he appeared adrift in an ocean of blue glass.

"Oh really? Is that what he told you?" She knew he was just angry, but it stung nevertheless. "Where are you going?"

He was grabbing his keys, stuffing his wallet in his pocket.

"Out."

"No way."

He started for the door and she rushed at him, crushing hand-blown glass beneath her feet. "You aren't leaving!" she yelled, and when she grabbed his shirtsleeve, he pushed her into the wall.

#

"Can I catch it?"

Her back stiffened. She'd been at the sink washing dishes and thought he'd gone upstairs. "What, honey?"

"Teddy's sickness. Can I catch it, too?"

She looked down at her hands. Through the dishwater, they looked unusually large and pale: two koi in a murky pond. "No, of course not. It's … it's not that kind of sick."

"What kind is it?"

"It's an inside kind of sick. With your feelings."

"His feelings are sick?"

"Yes, exactly."

"But what if my feelings get sick?"

"I … they won't." But couldn't they? If she had it, if Ted had it, why couldn't Blake have it, too? "I'll make sure."

"Why didn't you make sure Teddy's feelings didn't get sick?"

#

After the funeral, Alison picked up KFC and she and Blake ate biscuits and chicken fingers in front of the TV. Carey and Brittany went to a hotel, the fancy one overlooking the water, promising to come back the next day.

"What about tonight? Blake needs his father."

"Come on, Ali, it's been a long day. I'm too tired for this. Emotionally."

She let Blake pick a movie and he fed coleslaw to his T-Rex as they watched. When he fell asleep halfway through, she went upstairs and slipped into Ted's room.

Tornados, tsunamis, violent lightning bolts hitting trees, splitting them in two. These were the last images Ted drew in his sketchpad. Why? was all she could think, even said it aloud, over and over, as she flipped through the pages, an illustrated expedition through charcoal-covered skies and coiled tunnels leading nowhere. "Why?" she screamed as she yanked out the sheets, ripping them, crumpling them, hurling them across the room, across the space where her son's body hung limp just days before.

"Mom?"

She spun towards Blake and felt dizzy. Dark spots formed in front of her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Fairer than Ted, and stockier (even at this age), but the spitting image, really. How had she never noticed how similar they looked?

#

It was almost beautiful: a mosaic of cerulean glass in the foyer.

Mom will clean it up.

But how? Her decline all those years ago had been different. Instead of lashing out, instead of breaking things, instead of yelling and swearing, she had withdrawn. She hadn't directed her anger at her parents, or anyone, for that matter. She'd aimed her rage at the person she hated most: herself. And the thought that pierced her brain, made her wince with pain as she swept stippled glass into a dustpan, was that Ted was doing the same. Aiming his anger at the person he hated most: her.

That night, sitting on the stairs, she lit a cigarette and called Carey. When he answered she knew he was high.

"Will you come home?" It was a whisper and for a moment, she thought he hadn't heard.

"I … are you serious?" he said finally.

She took a drag of her menthol, unable to speak.

"It's been … it's been so long, Ali," he said.

"Just come home, Carey."

#

"You know damn fucking well your dad left *me*!" Fragments of blue glass reflecting her face like a Picasso.

"Because you made him!"

"Did I make him cheat on me, too? Is that my fault, as well?"

"He had to leave. He couldn't stand you! All you care about is yourself!" The muscles in his face pulsed, his eyes blazed.

"Oh really? Is that what he tells you? Then why don't you go live with him? Go to fucking *Ohio* and make *him* deal with your mental problems!" Then: "Where are you going?"

He was grabbing his keys, stuffing his wallet in his pocket.

"Out."

"No way."

When he made for the door, she rushed down the stairs, pounding through shards of broken glass and dropping her towel.

"Teddy, wait—"

She grabbed his shirt but he yanked away, ripping his sleeve, and she glimpsed four bright red scratches she'd put in his arm. Then he pushed her naked body into the wall and ran outside and by the time she scrambled up and looked out, he was turning the corner.

Gone.

#

It had been her last conversation with him. She'd seen him the next morning, eating cereal in the kitchen, earbuds wedged in his ears, but they never spoke. She moved past him without saying a word and dropped a pod of Starbucks Medium Breakfast Blend into her Keurig. And then she left. She could've sat with him. She could've pulled out his earbuds and said, "Can we talk about last night?" But instead, she took her Medium Breakfast Blend and drifted back up to her room.

#

"Don't blame yourself. It's easy to miss the signs."

When Carey left her, he sat Alison down at the waxy dining table they rarely used and explained how he'd "met someone else," that he'd fallen out of love with Alison "years ago," that he felt "unfulfilled."

"Unfulfilled?" she said, standing. "*You're* unfulfilled?"

The next day, Carey packed a suitcase, took the boys for ice cream, and boarded a plane to Ohio. Though Carey had often traveled for work and rarely helped out at home, his sudden absence left her overwhelmed. Just making Blake's lunch every night was difficult. There was one night, just

weeks after Carey left, where she found herself looking at the calendar on the fridge, counting the remaining weeks of school, tallying the dizzying number of lunches she'd have to make; the number of bread slices on which she'd have to spread peanut butter or place cheese, the number of oranges she'd have to cut, the number of small bags of chips she'd have to stuff into his lunch box. Standing in the kitchen, mayonnaise glopping from a butter knife onto the floor, she felt as though she might suffocate under the weight of the lunches alone.

And so she stopped making Blake's lunch. In fact, she stopped doing a lot of things. Stopped driving Blake to tee ball, stopped making sure Ted finished his homework, stopped asking about his art.

"It's easy to miss the signs."

But had she missed the signs or had she simply ignored them? It's one thing to say you didn't see it coming. It's quite another to admit you weren't looking.

#

The night he threw the bowl, Ted had come back around midnight. Alison was in bed, staring at the TV without really watching, a numbness from the day (and a bottle of Riesling) absorbing her. She heard him in the Jack-and-Jill bathroom he shared with Blake, brushing his teeth, gargling, peeing. And then it was quiet and she knew he'd be getting in bed.

She waited as long as she could, forcing her eyes open despite the Riesling, and when she could wait no longer, she crossed the hallway to his room. The large elm in the front yard filtered the streetlight, casting dappled shadows across his body as he slept. For a long time, she sat on the bed, watching his chest rise and fall as he breathed, wondering if he was dreaming, and if so, about what.

Then, gently, she touched his arm, feeling the scratches she'd made when she grabbed his sleeve earlier that night, and, resting her hand there, willed them to heal. Please disappear, she thought. If they disappear, everything will be okay. But when she removed her hand, there they still were: bright and red and raised, four angry slashes above his elbow. "I'm sorry," she whispered. Then she pulled in her legs and lay down next to him, into a fog of stale smoke and musky deodorant that lifted like heat from his body. Their heads sharing his pillow, they slept together under the gentle whir of the ceiling fan.

Rose Wunrow *currently lives in Burlington, Vermont, where she works as the executive assistant at Vermont Legal Aid. She grew up in the Fiji Islands and New Zealand, and graduated from Swarthmore College in 2016. She is forever indebted to her family for their lessons on the beauty of imagination.*

Second Place
A Time and a Place

Rose Wunrow

Rachel: *This understated coming-of-age story is quiet yet powerful, and surprisingly moving.*

They had spent days trying to come up with the perfect spot – choosing one and discarding it as not quite right; choosing another, and scratching it off the list again. But only five minutes from Evelyn's backyard, an old granite quarry filled its belly with rainwater and sprinkled its surface with patches of moss. On the last day of school, leaping from the bus in a cloud of victory and road-dust, Evelyn suggested the quarry to Martin as just the right place for a fire.

"A *fire*?" Martin asked, raising his eyebrows skeptically, watching the school bus move down the road away from them. "As in, a ball of dry heat? Your quarry is the wettest mosquito-swamp in a thirty-mile radius. Unless if we take a gallon of kerosene. Then the granite itself might catch fire."

"Hey!" Evelyn said, immediately defensive – typical, perhaps, of someone born the youngest of seven siblings. "It'll catch. We'll bring wood from our woodpile and go out before the sun sets, to get everything ready."

"I will willingly suspend disbelief," Martin said, in a voice that suggested he would do no such thing. They trudged up the driveway to Evelyn's house where it stood backed up against a forest of trees. She lived in a white mobile home set up on a concrete foundation so strangely high that it gave off an impression of improbable austerity. The house faced the wrong way so that the sun never made it through the windows, and if you pressed your palms against the metal siding, they would come away powdered with white paint. The flowers died in the yard, and they still planted more.

"My dad's working until eight," Evelyn said, shouldering open the unlocked front door. They stepped into the kitchen. The smell of damp plywood and wet linoleum hung in the air. Dishes waited for Evelyn in the sink, plates stacked together like a poorly-shuffled deck of cards. "And my

siblings are also not home, though they most certainly ate breakfast," Evelyn said, waving at the dishes. "I'll do those later."

They went to Evelyn's room in the back corner of the house. Her oldest sister had just moved out, leaving Evelyn a room of her own. Evelyn had dragged the extra mattress out to the road in the early morning, indulging in a prompt *well-it's-too-late-now* when her dad asked what she had done and the mattress was already disappearing down the road in somebody's truck. So now Evelyn owned the vastness of the floor, where she neatly stacked her textbooks, magazines acquired at random, and the bottom half of a guitar that she'd found and hoped to fix someday, by building it a neck, by finding it strings, by learning how to play.

The room was cold. Evelyn felt the hairs raising along her legs and sat down on the bed to rub warmth into her calves. She could hear her oldest sister's voice in her head - only for a second - *dirty hairy legs.* She remembered the dishes in the sink; she thought about how she would not wash a single one.

Martin sat down next to her. The wall-space around Evelyn's bedroom window was papered with pictures drawn by Martin. In one of them, Evelyn's house swayed high in the branches of a tall tree with a wise, sleeping face. Martin could draw everything. He could draw the man in the moon swallowing up the night, the sunrise feeding stars into the moon's mouth with a dozen fiery spoons. He was an only child, raised by his mother and his grandmother. The two women lived in opposite corners of the house, did not care too much for art, and kept the doors of their bedrooms closed. In the space in between, Martin lined his pencils up on the carpet and spread out swathes of paper. He drew an army of mice passing notes down the hallway, skating silently along in their tiny sock feet. The notes said things like "I love you" and "I'm listening" but the mice grew tired where the sheet of paper ended, lying down with their white bellies pointed skyward, crumpling the notes and plugging up their paper-thin ears. Martin put this mural up on the wall of his bedroom. His mother had once covered his room with a wallpaper of pink roses, strangled in tight bouquets.

The art teacher always praised Martin's imagination. The pre-calculus teacher docked him half of a point from an exam for sketching a snoozing caterpillar in the middle of a carefully-drawn isosceles triangle. "Was there something incorrect on my exam?" Martin had asked the teacher at the end of class, holding out the page where the caterpillar was circled twice in red pen with the word "NO" written over its squiggly antennae. The teacher had raised his eyebrows.

"There is a time and a place for imagination," he said. He tapped the pages in Martin's hand. "*This* is not one of those times or places." Martin wrote this quote in large block letters on the front cover of his pre-calculus textbook. He and Evelyn thought it was the funniest thing anyone had ever

said. Every moment was a time and place for imagination. What was a triangle with the word "NO" written inside of it? A cage for a caterpillar looking to bloom.

In the picture by Evelyn's bedroom window, Evelyn's house was drawn with a pair of wide, twinkling eyes and arms spread wide, as if to say, *look how high up I am!* Evelyn shrugged her backpack from her shoulders, letting it slide to the floor. "I'll take mine with me," Martin said, hooking his thumb through the strap over his shoulder. "For the burning."

"Okay," Evelyn said. She reached under her bed and grabbed two cans of beer. "But you have to put these in your pack as well, and I can carry the wood and the matches."

Martin grinned. "Sure," he said. He put the beers in his backpack.

They headed for the woodpile out back, where the chaos of cords rose from a nest of rusted machinery that Evelyn's father collected, with the hopes of fixing someday. Evelyn grabbed a stick of wood and looked at Martin at the same time, seeing suddenly his pressed shirt and the way it made the house look gray behind him. She swallowed against the lump in her throat. She imagined that lump of dark, inner coal burning down to ash - this sudden hardness whispering to her that Martin lived in a house with a frame and a trimmed lawn and a roof that did not sing with rain leaking in. Standing in the dusk of the backyard, Martin offered an arm to help her carry the wood, even though the strap of the backpack was already cutting into his shoulder. He took the sticks in his arms and grinned as an indignant spider detached itself from the wood and raced towards his collar. The coal sparkled and dissolved inside of her. She reached to brush the spider away.

Martin turned towards the woods. "Let's go burn down a granite quarry," he said.

They walked through trees that were still growing their leaves in, pushing their fresh-green way through what had been an embarrassed spring of sleet. The sun hunkered down further over the hilltop. When they found the granite quarry, the rays of the sunset made the moss on the stones smolder with copper flame. Evelyn turned to Martin. "See," she said, as if she were about to smugly lecture a roomful of siblings. "Fire *is* possible here."

In the fading light, they built the hearth of twigs and pine on the sharp bank. Below them, the green water filled in the angles left by ancient cuts in the granite. The quarry held its breath. There was no breeze to breach the small walls of Evelyn and Martin's hands, cupping around the first match as they blew its spark into flame.

As the fire caught, Evelyn reached into Martin's backpack and took out the beer cans. She cracked each one open. The sound etched its relief against the silence. Martin linked his arm in hers. They drank in the warmth and victory of the last day of school, of the wood that caught light.

"So what do you think?" Evelyn asked, waving an arm to take in the

sparking fire. “Is it high enough?”

Martin nodded. She could see the flame reflected thinly in his eyes. “Yes,” he said. He unzipped his backpack. His hands shook slightly.

He took out the square of white folded cloth. He unfolded the cloth so that the training bra revealed itself to the firelight. It was white, cotton, wearing out under the armpits, fraying at the gently-scalloped edges. He wrapped one of the elastic straps around his index finger meditatively. Evelyn waited for him to speak. He caressed the line of hair growing on his upper lip, hesitating.

Evelyn finished the beer and threw the can in a wide arc across the water. Martin watched it splash and bob like a small, shining bird. He swallowed. “I wouldn’t get out of the car at the mall. My grandmother had to drag me into the department store. She said it was my duty as a woman,” he said. “She took me straight to the section that she saw as the most utilitarian. Nothing pretty about it. She put this bra in my hands after sizing up my chest. ‘This will do,’ she said.”

He held the bra up higher. It looked like a heavy-lidded two-eyed thing, watching him. “Then she lectured me through the door of the changing room about how this first bra must always be chaste. It must never be touched by a boy’s fingers. A girl must remain inviolate.” Dangling from Martin’s finger, the bra shivered in a small breeze, shadows undressing and redressing themselves along its contours.

“They should have a special ‘Catholic guilt’ section in the underwear department,” Evelyn said. “All white and equipped with a padlock.”

Martin brought the bra closer to the fire. It swung from his finger, translucent in the slumbering red light. The firelight made a twinkling star from a hole in the fabric. “Remember how I cried the first time I wore it?” he said. “*Rita, you’re becoming so grown-up,* my mother’s friends always said. *The boys must be chasing after you all the time! Look at that figure!*” He stepped closer to the fire. Evelyn remembered Rita, sobbing outside of the girls’ bathroom, reaching for Evelyn’s hand, looking for something to hold on to. “*Look at that figure*. I used to watch the roses on my wallpaper at night and imagine them exploding.” Martin put a hand to his chest. He traced a flat line from armpit to armpit with his palm. “My mother talks about Rita as if I’ve died,” he said. His voice shivered. “She and my grandmother keep their doors closed in that house as if they’re in mourning. I’ve only just started living, haven’t I?”

He threw the bra into the flames. The cotton caught fire. The air smelled of paper and pine. The metal hooks at the back of the bra sparkled with the heat, and it was going, it went, it was gone for good.

The fire climbed higher. Martin reached out and found Evelyn’s hand as the bra turned to ash. “I won’t say sorry,” he said. She wove her fingers through his. Looking at him sideways, she could see the light twinkle against

the wetness that coursed down his cheeks. He looked away. He tugged on her hand, pulling her into motion. They started jumping on the ground. They raced around the fire, slipping a little on the wet moss that coated the unsteady rocks. The firelight against the granite built ancient and beautiful walls from the darkness. As they moved, Evelyn whispered Martin's name, soft at first, then louder and louder, and Martin joined in. It turned into a chant, bursting upwards from the ground and dancing higher in a vortex of exhilarated air. The name echoed and rang through the house of light. "Martin. Mar-tin! Mar-TIN! MAR-TIN! MARTIN!" The quarry sang.

An owl hooted suddenly in the darkness, startling them. They stopped dancing. Evelyn fought to catch her breath, her palm slick with sweat in Martin's grasp. "Noise complaint from an owl," she said. "Local police in these parts." Martin still held her hand. He pulled her closer and she wrapped her arms around him. He put his face in her hair. He smelled of smoke. She closed her eyes and held on, feeling her heart pounding against his chest.

"Hold on," she said. "I've got you," he said. "I've got you," she said. "I've got you."

Currently residing in Tucson, Arizona, ***Philip Dean Brown*** *has had short fiction published in Voices West, Farmer's Market, and Strong Coffee. His story Helpless won a PEN Syndicated Fiction award. The story was selected by Mona Simpson. He attended the Sewanee Writers' Conference where he worked with Tim O'Brien. He also won a scholarship to the Wesleyan Writers' Conference. Recently he completed a collection of linked stories. Sun in the East, Sun in the West is part of that collection. He is at work on a novel, and in between he has been known to write some poetry.*

Third Place
Sun in the East, Sun in the West
Philip Dean Brown

Rachel: *A quiet and tender story of loss that stayed with me long after finishing it.*

They spent much of their time on the porch. A porch not unlike the one at his grandfather's house in Illinois when that part of the state was still considered country, not what the country became. Years ago, when he made this his last move, Sherman had added on the portal. He had taken this building-on as a way to meet the sun in the morning and wrapped the porch around back to take in the long summer nights when the sun set across the distance, dropping in degrees over the Jemez until the sky turned black except for stars so dense, so bright, as if another day had dawned. He built it to sit with Maddie, and for years they have.

In the morning they sit outside together with their coffee, though even in the warm morning sun a blanket drapes her lap, and Sherman closes his eyes, listens to her voice and imagines they are as they have always been. When Maddie's voice weakens, he helps her inside to where he spends his days now. He moves from room to room following the sun as it edges from one window to the next. In the afternoon he sweeps the floors, washes the few dishes they dirty. When Sherman first moved to New Mexico in his late twenties – twenty-seven to be exact, he was almost always outdoors. Now, except for visits to doctors in Santa Fe, the porch is nearly the only time he is outside. Alex does most of their shopping as he does for Tanya their artist cousin who Sherman still wishes he understood. Sherman is grateful for the help, but feels his life growing smaller. At night he sits on the porch under a sky littered with stars. It doesn't bother him that many of the stars are no

longer there, no longer living things. Their light years remain.

"Gwen bakes the best bread," Maddie says. She tears a piece off and spreads it with honey.

"I'm going to fry eggs," Sherman tells her. "Can you eat one?"

"I'm good with the bread. Maybe some of the peaches Nessie put up."

From the pueblo they bring food, the things she once craved – venison stew, pork smothered with chile, fry bread. It's all too much for her now. Her appetite will not allow it. Still her nieces and cousins, Nessie, her aunt, who at ninety-one still puts up her own fruit, all have Alex bring their bounty to her. Maddie is cared for. The pueblo is five miles away, Maddie their outlier, but she is forever of the clan, the family, a bridge Sherman never fully crossed. He brought her to this house, bought it to show his intention. He wasn't going anywhere. Butter melts in the pan and Sherman dribbles in the bacon grease he keeps in the refrigerator like his mother did. Just a touch, she had said.

"We can talk about it," Maddie says.

Sherman breaks open two eggs and slides them into the pan. Salts and peppers them. "You're not changing your mind," he says. He knows she needs to be buried at the pueblo, but it doesn't stop him from asking.

"No," she says.

"Well then? What's there to talk about?"

"You need to understand," she says. "I need you to understand."

"Then what?" he asks her. "When all our days are gone I still want you close."

The need to talk will come again soon enough. The doctors told them there was little more they could do; it's only a matter of time, they said, but would not put a number on it. When Sherman pressed them none offered more than six months. We can't be sure, one said. He was older, a face with shadows across its cheeks. The end is always a surprise, he said. How and when it comes. He gave Sherman his card, his mobile number written on the back. Call anytime, he said. Sherman has not found the need but carries the card in his pocket like a prayer bead.

In the afternoon, when Maddie naps, the house is too quiet, silent rooms Sherman cannot escape. He turns on the television but leaves it without sound. He tries to read but words swim across pages. His mind unable to lock them in. Instead he sits for longer than he thought possible, hours barely moving except for his thoughts, memories mostly, which pass before him like narcotic dreams. Maddie. Tanya. How could a Chicago boy have ever imagined them.

#

Getting high might be fine, he thinks. Before Maddie decided chemo was not a promise she believed in, Sherman planned to get some pot from a friend who grew. It was okay with Maddie. The plant has white light, she said. But

don't think you're getting any.

It's been two hours and forty-seven minutes since he helped her to bed, waited for her eyes to stay closed, her breathing even. He did not have to wait long. She should be up, he thinks. She is still in this world. Don't let it slip by, he wants to tell her. He wakes her gently, sitting on the side of the bed waiting for his presence to be felt. It shows on her closed eyes, the relaxing of her mouth. He touches her hand and she turns to him a tired smile.

"Let's go for a walk," Sherman says.

"What?"

"For a walk," he says. "It's a beautiful day."

Maddie looks at him, his serious face. "Sherman," she says.

"Not far," he tells her. "Just to the *acequia*."

"You and your water," she says. "Why you left those Great Lakes I don't know."

"If you get tired we can turn back."

She can't say no. All this is harder on him – her going first, yet some small part of her is okay with it. Ready to see the next world. "Okay," she says.

"We'll bring Candi, too," he tells her.

"Bring her? When has that dog ever not followed you?"

#

The path out back is mid-summer dry, not even footprints just clay-rich dirt barely disturbed.

"You okay?" Sherman asks.

"It's good to be out," Maddie says. "How it smells. Can you smell it, Sherman?"

"Think I might smell Candi when she gets close enough."

"The air, *estupido,*" she says. "It's alive."

He knows. He felt it hiking high in the Jemez. He went with friends who hunt. Sherman did not carry a gun. He wasn't against hunting— he was happy to eat whatever they brought out, but walking without intent let more of the world in. He felt it walking along the river too.

They make it to the ditch, barely thirty yards, to where Sherman has two chairs waiting. Maddie looks at him. "How long have these been out here?"

"Not so long."

"This where you bring your girlfriends?"

"Yep. We sit and watch the water move by. Pretend we're watching a movie."

"Romantic," she says.

"Not so much. I tell them you're the star of my movie."

After a minute, after what feels like she's thinking about it, she says, "It's not a movie, Sherman. We're not a movie."

"No," he says.

The *acequia* runs slowly in front of them. Moving water calms him. Even in Chicago he knew that. He spent early mornings – right after dawn, on the lakefront with elderly Asians practicing their Tai Chi. Their limber limbs, the waves breaking against the shore.

"You've been the earth and the sky for me," she tells him. "You know that, right?"

"My North Star," Sherman tells her.

#

It amazes him how you can live so many years, years past what you once thought old and still not understand anything that matters. How we know we love a person, a place. His consolation, though he does not feel consoled is that it does not matter. The heart knows what it knows. Except it is not enough. No matter, there is a part of the other we never see, never know. He understands this now. Maybe he always did. And now, here at the end, they will be miles apart. Maddie in her sacred pueblo ground, and Sherman not far from where he sits. He has made his own arrangements. When the time comes he wants to be buried on his own small patch of land. Maddie alongside him a solace he is not ready to give up on.

When they get back Maddie is only a little more tired than usual. The air, the water, her feet walking the earth, reminders she is not gone yet. Alex and Alan are coming tomorrow to stack wood, get them prepared for what lies ahead. The young ride seasons like waves that hold promise. Sherman feels winter coming. Its own promise.

Maddie is at the counter. "I forgot how good this tastes," she says. "Have you had some of this? Here, taste it." She slices off a piece of sausage and hands it to him. The venison is red and dark, the garlic strong, the wild of it alive in his mouth. Maddie smiles as he chews and swallows. "Good, hey?" she says

Sherman needs to bring her outside more. They need to make that effort. He swallows the last of the sausage. "The best," he tells her. "Doesn't get any better."

"Let's lie down," she says

"Us?" he says.

"Who else but us."

#

When their bodies were young they nearly glowed in the heat of it. Sherman could not keep his hands off her. In Maddie's eyes and the way her mouth opened and closed – catching its breath, he saw stopping was not what she wanted. It feels so long ago, or that it was yesterday. Time bends, Maddie once told him. She was right about that too.

Sherman doesn't know how to be. He cannot remember the last time they went to bed together. Most nights he sits on the porch with the evening

stars and a cigarette he still thinks he sneaks. After, he comes to bed as quiet as he can, lies down beside her. And then it is morning. Maddie awake before him. Her early hours her best hours.

"I won't break," she says.

"What makes you think I'm strong enough to break anything?"

"A perfect match," she says.

Sherman makes his noise – his nasal Chicago noise Maddie calls it. *Ah, huh*. About as perfect as it gets is what it says.

Maddie takes his hand and holds it. Her hand is warm and that surprises him too. She moves her hand to his face and traces her fingers along it. He is at a loss until he forgets the now and remembers everything else.

It is not the same but it is just as good. How perfect they still fit. When they turn to each other Sherman reaches his arm across her and pulls her close. How can there be so much comfort, such joy and then have it stop. Who would design such a thing. The meaning of life is that it ends, Sherman remembers reading and thinking it true. What he knows now is truth can also be a knife.

Their heads flat to their pillows, the room dark and quiet both of them staring straight up, looking at their own story of the life they shared. What has been separate not as important now. Maddie reaches her hand again and finds Sherman's hip, his leg. Drums her fingers there. A tap-tap-tap he falls to sleep to.

#

Sherman cannot remember the last time he went out alone. Tanya had wanted them both to come. She wanted them there for the end, for the closing of her workshop, the shed where she shaped clay to life. It's not like a ceremony or anything, she said. I want you all to have some of these pieces I'm not gonna sell. Sherman looked at her and thought truly there are different worlds.

Your prices gonna go up, hey, Maddie told her. Supply and demand.

I never wanted to keep score, Tanya said. Always wanted some fancy boots though.

Boots? Sherman wanted to ask. Fancy boots? Tanya the last person he ever thought cared for fancy.

Put on some fancy and just walk away, she said.

Nancy Sinatra, Maddie said. Now there was a woman who carried something with her. Whatever happened to her?

It feels like he has put on a sweater when he listens to them talk. But in the end Sherman is going to Tanya's alone, Maddie thinking she might be coming down with a cold.

"I'll be fine," she says. "Alex said he'd stay till you get back. You worry too much."

"Do I?" Sherman asks.

They are sitting on the porch. This likely the last month they will spend their mornings outside. This time of last things a weight Sherman carries.

"Don't let her give you too much," Maddie says. "I want the nephews to get most of it. "

"Maybe just one," Sherman says.

"I'm not sure how many she has," Maddie says. "She hasn't worked much these last few years."

"Might be longer," Sherman says. "Might have been keeping pieces back. She never sold any of those figures. It's her pots people wanted. It's the black she gets," Sherman says. "Like there's something behind it."

"It's her behind it – all of it was her. She is those pots."

#

It lifts a weight to drive the few miles to Tanya's. He feels lighter and guilty for feeling that lightness. This driving – like his cigarette on the porch at night, the stars, lift him away or back into himself. Both it seems. It's a temporary relief. None of it will feel the same when she is gone. Maddie accepts what he cannot. Sherman smiles as he turns up the road to Tanya's house. I'm one old fool, he says to himself. Says it out loud.

He thought he would find Tanya waiting on her porch. The sky is clear, the afternoon holding onto summer as long as it can, its sun warmed air. It is a fine day to be out. Sherman knocks on the back door, probably the only one who knocks.

"Thought I'd heard a car," Tanya says.

She is behind him, walking up from her shed, a box in her arms.

"Let me help you," he says.

"I'm all right. It's not heavy. You eat?"

"Breakfast," he tells her.

"We'll eat. Stew is warming on the stove. Nothing fancy, but Gwen sent over some bread."

"Maddie says it's the best," he says.

"No reason to argue that. Sit. It'll just be a minute."

Her house always feels the same temperature. Not a drafty BIA house like many on the Rez. Hers a comfortable house, a house small enough to feel its embrace. Her cousins built the adobe thick and solid. The walls holding in and keeping out, an artful construction.

"It's hard to watch her slip away," Tanya says.

Sherman moves his stew around the plate as much as he eats it. He isn't hungry. He eats less and less, another slowing down.

"It's not something I'm any good at."

"There's nothing we can hold onto," she says. "We think we can but that just gets us through the day."

Sherman laughs. "You would have fit right in at the university."

"What university?"

"Any of them," he says.

"You're not gonna finish that, are you?"

Sherman looks down at his plate. "I guess not. I'll get it," he tells her and carries his plate and hers to the sink. She was never the best in the kitchen, the potatoes not fully cooked through - a runny, weak stew. He scrapes what is left away.

"Maddie and me," Tanya says. "We weren't all that close growing up. I was a little wilder."

"She had her moments," Sherman says and runs the water over the plates.

"I know but Maddie was more private about it," she says.

"Nothing wrong with that," he says. Sherman remembers how Maddie surprised him when she let go, how he found himself waiting for those moments.

"There's careful Indians and us other ones," Tanya says. "Ones that got a stubborn heart."

"Stubborn about what?"

"Change," she says. "Want it and scared of it. Stubborn like a weed."

"Your college people would call that a paradox," he says.

Maddie and Tanya, Alex and Corrine – all the rest of them, a family he is joined to, but not. Sherman turns off the water, sets the plates to dry. "You know she wants to be buried up here," he says.

"Sherman."

It's not sad he hears in her voice, but something like sad. "We bury our cords, the ones that tied us to our mothers. Plant them again. Roots," she says. "They tug hard at us."

"I know," Sherman says. "But where does that leave me?"

"With a hole in your heart," she says. "Alone in the ground."

He looks at her straight on. There has not been a person he tried as hard to understand and failed. Tried so hard he once convinced himself he wanted to be with her. If only for a night, or as long as it took.

"She'll still be there, Sherman. That time can't be erased.

"Time's like what gamblers call vig," he says. "My father was a bookie for awhile. Did I ever tell you that?"

Tanya laughs. "No," she says. "I think I would have remembered. What's vig?"

"The price you pay to play."

"It's all playing," she says. "Let me show you what I got. There's some pieces in the box there," she says and points to where it's sitting on a chair. "Bring it over here."

Sherman sets it on the table where they had been eating.

"Go on," she says. "See what you want."

He was right. Most are figures – heads and bodies, sometimes both. The heads all look the same – deep set eyes, indentions on either side of a raised nose. The faces without expression, some without mouths. Sherman does not know what to think of them, he never has. He remembers taking them to a gallery in Taos where the owner said no. I can't sell these, she said. Tell Tanya I'm sorry.

"You look like you seen a ghost," Tanya says.

Sherman has one of the figures – a headless torso in his hand. "I was remembering back the years you did these."

"Long time ago," she says.

"Why'd you stop making pots and start these?"

"They were in my head. I dreamed them. During the day too – walking dreams. I had to let them out so I could get back to work."

Sherman listens. He sees she wants him to.

"Maybe it was the boys I messed with when I was young. They all bled together in the end – faces and bodies."

"I'm no expert," he says. "But these faces, they all look the same."

"I think I was learning bodies – how they feel, how they made me feel. I didn't look at faces so much."

He listens. Wants to understand.

"I guess I needed to show I tried to remember."

"Did you?" he asks her.

"Some – a couple sweet boys, but I couldn't bring out their faces – not the way I wanted."

These last few years have made something clear. The people he paid the most attention to – the interesting ones – have all their years living inside them, none of it lost. A messy thing, but a life in whole.

"When I sat for you, you said you never finished that one. The one of me."

"Couldn't find all of you either. You keep hidden," she said. "Even right in front of me. Even now. Probably not with Maddie though. I think Maddie is the only one you really let in."

He thought he had wanted to let Tanya in too. He needs to get home. Time is precious, it runs out. Maddie is his time. And then what? is the question he broods on.

"I should get back. I'll take this one here," he says and holds up a torso. He'll leave it in the garage. Tell Maddie he decided to let the others have it all. He hopes she had a good day, that she is awake.

#

It's not dark yet.

Sherman turns into the driveway happy there is still light. There are things he needs to say in the light of day.

The house is quiet. Maddie is asleep on the couch; Alex sleeping in

the chair beside her. Alex wakes easily and nods at Sherman. In the kitchen Sherman whispers his thanks, asks him how Maddie seemed.

"Tired," Alex says. "But okay. We had us a nice nap."

"That's good," Sherman says.

"I had a dream where I could fly," Alex says.

"A bird?" Sherman says.

"Nah, I was just me but I could fly, hey."

When Alex is gone Sherman takes his place in the chair. It is not his favorite chair, it does not rock, but it is soft and deep, a chair that hugs you close its worn brown leather a weathered skin. He closes his eyes and wishes he could fly too, be able to see what all this looks like from above.

He finds himself making noise. He taps his fingers on the arms of the chair, coughs, clears his throat.

"You can stop," Maddie says. "I know you're here."

"Sorry," Sherman says.

"I just wanted to catch a little more of this dream," she says.

"Were you a bird," he says.

"A bird?"

"Never mind."

"Are you okay?" she asks. "How's Tanya?"

"Good. She's fine. But I didn't take anything. There wasn't all that much."

"I've been thinking."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe when I'm gone you and Tanya could stay together."

Sherman can't imagine what to say.

"You could stay up there," she says. "We'd be closer."

It's not something he can get his mind around. "I don't think so," he says. "Right here is fine. What makes you think she'd even want that?" What makes you think I'd want that, he could ask.

"I don't want you to be alone, Sherman. People get funny when they're alone."

"I'm already funny," he says.

"Doesn't mean you have to push it."

"Anyway," he says. "You're not going anywhere yet."

"Not yet," Maddie says. "But soon." She sits herself up, rests her hands on her thighs. "Let's go see your water," she says.

"Really? You're up for that?"

"I am," she says.

"It's nearly dry by now," he says.

"Come on," she says. "A little is better than none."

#

Candi is lying on the porch. Her tail thumps when she sees them.

"See," he says. "I won't be alone.

At first Sherman thinks she is laughing, but only for a second. She is coughing. Sherman eases her into a chair.

Candi looks back at him and then she looks away. He should call someone, he should call 911 – but he doesn't, instead he sits down in the chair next to her. He leans over and holds her close. She is not coughing anymore.

He has shovels in the garage – his back is still strong enough, he thinks. He would just need to take his time. He could have her buried by morning, and in the spring plant sun flowers over her – sit here in the summer, watch them sway in the wind. It's crazy thinking, he knows, but not any crazier than in the end being so far apart. It's such a nice day. Maddie would have loved it.

He just wants to sit. Here on his porch. Sit with Maddie this last time. Hold her. In the morning he will make his calls, let them take her away, but for now he needs to sit. Maddie understands. Sunflowers, he tells her. I'm going to plant them. It will not be enough, but it will have to be enough. Water when it runs, tall flowers moving with the breeze. The stars at night. Arcadian rhythms.

David Gilmore *is a bisexual writer living in New York City. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington with degrees in Creative Writing and International Studies, with a certificate in Publishing. He hopes to find a career that involves books, but let's be honest, anything above minimum wage will do. His work will appear in TheFem and Bridge Eight Literary Magazines.*

(untitled)

David Gilmore

"You shouldn't depend on others,"
you said

under our tree in spring,
smoking though I told
you no. Roots escaping cold dirt
circle us like a wreath,
a fairies' circle and you
smoke anyway.

You smoke when you're nervous,
and don't like me in shorts

too short, but I like how
the grass feels under my thighs,
mingling with my leg hair.
I pluck a nestled honeysuckle and
put it to my lips to show you I
can understand you, too.

I offer you some nectar for ashy lips,
but you have cinders in your ears and blow

rings turned hooks, latched on
branches and tailed like
rope for us to wrap
around the other's neck and
watch sway.

"It would be nice if someone wanted me to,"
I responded.

Katy Mullins *is an American writer originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She graduated with a degree in English Writing from the University of Pittsburgh. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Litro, In Shades Magazine, and The Quotable. She currently lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.*

Heat from the Pavement

Katy Mullins

Travis and Skip stood side by side on the hot pavement, sheltered in the shadow of a telephone pole. Travis had a stapler and was attaching a flyer. It featured a faded photograph of a dog. The color of the dog was impossible to determine, as the black and white picture had been run through a copy machine more times than the quality could withstand. Below the photo, it read:

Lost: Dog. Mutt. Responds to "Moxie." Doesn't bite. Reward.

"What is the reward, anyway?" Skip asked. He held the rest of the pages out to his friend.

"I dunno," Travis said, stepping back. "We just added that so people'll call."

"You pinned it on the wrong side," Skip said. "Look." The sign was facing out over the grass, away from the road.

"It doesn't matter," Travis said. "Moxie's coming back."

They stood for another minute, staring at the sign, then started back up the road toward the convenience store half a mile away. There was no sidewalk, so Travis followed behind Skip, walking along the shoulder, staying close to the field on their right. Tall grasses hung over the pavement and tickled his bare legs. The afternoon sun was to his back, still bright and hot in the sky.

This road was only vaguely familiar to Travis. He and Skip had come farther east than they usually did when they searched for Moxie. Sweat gathered along the center of Travis's back and under his hair, which had started to grow back along his neck since he'd cut it at the beginning of the summer. He reached up to push his bangs out of his eyes. They were hot against his forehead, sweat beading through his eyebrows and into his eyes so that they stung and burned.

Moxie should have been trotting next to him now, her tongue lolling from her mouth. He would have reached down and stroked her nose, which was tan but speckled with flecks of brown, as if she had just rolled in mud. Back when he found her, when she had wandered onto his porch one hot summer afternoon three years ago, she was covered in mud and ravaged by

fleas. They bit her coat and Travis's legs, too. He had sponged her off the best he could, running to and from the house to rinse the sponge in the kitchen sink, terrified each time that he would come back and she would be gone. But she didn't move. She waited with her paws trembling on the peeling paint while Travis scrubbed her until she was tan again. Only the dark spots on her nose remained.

The door to the convenience store greeted them with a blast of air only slightly cooler than the temperature outside. Travis looked out the door as it closed behind them, through the gray bars running down behind the glass. He had spent such a long time looking for Moxie that he had started seeing her everywhere. He nearly saw her then, imagining her trotting across the parking lot and waiting for him in the swirling dust. She was part of what he expected this parking lot to look like. Part of what he expected his walks with Skip to look like. Part of what he expected home to look like, her head on his knee, her tail whispering against the wooden floor.

Skip approached the counter. The man leaned toward him. "A pack of cigs," Skip said, straightening his back.

"How old are you?" the clerk asked.

"Over 18," Skip said.

This was the reason Skip had agreed to come to the store across town instead of the one down the street from Travis's house. They went to their local store almost every day, even if they just sat outside and watched people. Skip was only a few months older than Travis and everybody knew him. He'd turned fifteen on his last birthday.

"See?" He'd told Travis, pointing into the sole of his shoes. Sitting near his heel was a scrap of paper that said "18" in large, dark letters. He'd learned the trick because of something he'd read about in history class; when soldiers were enlisting to fight in the revolutionary war—or maybe it was the civil war, he couldn't remember—they would tuck the number in their shoes. When they were asked their age, they could say they were "over 18" and it wouldn't really be a lie. "See?" Skip said again. "It's all in the language." It was cool, Travis agreed, but Travis was in a different history class and their teacher hadn't taught them anything like that. Travis had spent most of his time in that class drawing small circles on his paper or staring out the window waiting to go home.

"Do you have ID?" the clerk asked. Skip patted his pockets. Travis looked back outside. The brown haze covering the door was the same color as the dusty parking lot. Lighter than the color of Moxie's fur. He wondered if Moxie would have come this far east. He walked toward the snack aisle.

"I'm sorry, I musta left it at home," Skip said.

The clerk leaned forward, hands flat on the counter. He had a large black mustache that came down over the top of his lip. "What do you want, kid?" he asked.

Skip's shoulders dropped slightly. He flicked at the counter. "Just a coke," he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a fistful of change, scattering it across the countertop. A penny rolled to the side. The clerk smashed it under his palm and gathered up the rest, counting it off. He ticked the coins into his drawer, turned around, and set a coke in front of Skip.

Travis turned away from the counter and picked up a packet of cheese and crackers. At home there was a note taped in the corner of the bathroom mirror. It said, "Cheese, Eggs, Beer, Bread." His mother put it there two months ago. They'd gone grocery shopping since then, but Travis wouldn't let her move it. He wouldn't let her change anything since Moxie left. He'd never been a superstitious kid, but sometimes you never know what changing a little thing like that might do.

"You want anything?" the clerk asked Travis, leaning over toward where he stood. Skip popped up the top of the coke can, slurping it down. Travis put the crackers back and walked to the counter. He stared up at the clerk, still holding the stapler and the flyers. He was thirsty, too.

"Do you sell dog toys?" he asked instead.

The clerk stared at him.

"Dog toys. Or treats," Travis said. Skip drummed on the countertop next to him.

The clerk was distracted. "No, sorry, kid," he said. He was watching Skip's fingers as he started tapping out a rhythm on the coke can. Skip was always drumming, on counters and dashboards, on the desks at school. Travis never did. He had calm hands. Steady, like his mother's. He could thread a needle on the first try, shoot a bird with a BB and hit it on the side of the head. Or he had been able to, at least, before Moxie left.

The clerk shook his head. "You could buy some beef jerky though, if your dog likes that."

Travis ran his fingers over the change in his pocket. Moxie would prefer something fresh. If he saved it, he could buy her one of the hot dogs from the rollers at Joe's Joint, a burger and fry place that just opened across the street from Skip.

"Can you hang one of these up?" Travis asked, handing him a flyer. The clerk looked it up and down, then back at Travis. He folded the flyer. "Sure."

Skip and Travis wandered outside and sat against a guardrail that framed the parking lot. Skip picked up a handful of rocks and threw them one by one at the handicapped parking sign. Whenever one made contact, it bounced off with a satisfying, deep metallic twang.

"Hey!" The clerk called, leaning out the door. "Knock it off!" Through the window, Travis watched him crunch his flyer into a ball and toss it over his shoulder. The sweat started again, beading along his sideburns. Travis scratched his neck, squinting against the sun. The road stretched

around them, straight and flat in both directions, shimmering in the heat.

"You want to come by?" Skip asked. "I think we're having leftovers for dinner."

He was always inviting Travis over, but lately Travis found it harder and harder to be at Skip's house. Skip lived only a mile or so away from him, but to get to there, they had to cross under a major highway that divided their neighborhood. They were zoned to attend the same school and their families shopped at the same grocery store, but all the houses on his side of the highway were different from the ones around Travis. The way those houses kept their curtains open to allow light, rather than drawn despite the oppressive summer heat. The condition of their porches, sometimes cluttered, but held up by pillars rather than cinder blocks or randomly nailed slats of wood. Skip's house wasn't missing shingles on the roof and there was no paint peeling on the porch. His mailbox was black and shiny, while Travis's was white and rusted. Skip had a mother and a father and an older brother who was handy around the house and was set to join the Marines after he graduated high school in the spring. Anytime Travis was there, he couldn't help but feel that deep anger that comes from the realization that you have been cheated out of something, something you cannot articulate but feel the absence of nonetheless.

"I think I'm gonna hang up more flyers," Travis said.

"Mom wants you to come," Skip said.

"I gotta get home," Travis said.

Skip shrugged. He bent over. "I thought it was going to work," he said. Travis looked and saw that Skip had taken off his left shoe. He was holding the paper with the number 18. He crumpled it into a ball and let it fall into the dirt. "I just want to try a cigarette." He finished the coke and crunched the can. "I guess we should get back then? Especially if you gonna keep stopping to tack up flyers everywhere."

Travis opened his mouth and closed it again, falling in line behind Skip as they made their way back along the road. Skip kicked at the rocks and pebbles along the side so they popped off the pavement. Travis stepped carefully around them. He held the stapler with two fingers, avoiding the hot metal in the middle. Neither of them could look up, walking directly toward the sun.

Skip, Travis assumed, was likely helping him look out for his dog of boredom more than anything else. He didn't understand how important it was. He had never had a dog. Skip had always had other things: a full stomach and more shirts than he could count on one hand, even drumsticks last Christmas. He did not understand what it was like for Travis to have another creature he could depend on while his mother worked the nightshift at IHOP. Travis would come home to find his mother asleep on the couch with the television still on and emitting a high electrical humming, almost like a whistle. He

would creep in on the tips of his feet and turn the set off, would cover her with the fuzzy brown blanket that she had bought for him at Christmas three years before. But Moxie would be awake, would pad over to him on gentle paws as if she, too, understood to be quiet. Her tail would sway slowly as if to express her happiness without disturbing the air too much. Travis would reach down to scratch her nose and she would lick his palm and follow him lazily into the kitchen, her belly hanging low with her next litter of puppies.

Sometimes in the evenings, when Travis was eating dinner, he would see his mother, her food untouched, staring in some direction. Not at anything in particular, just gazing with a film over her blue eyes. Around her hung a stillness, the last of the fading sunlight shining through the kitchen window below the flowery curtain, the golden light capturing particles of dust that were perfectly still, as though caught and held in suspension by the rays, undisturbed by even her breathing. Travis would look at her and she would look through him, her expression forwarded along to some other place that Travis had noticed other adults sometimes went, a place where he couldn't reach her at all. It was in these moments of terrible stillness that Travis would push away from the kitchen table, leaving his cold food untouched on his plate. Moxie's ears would perk and she would follow him out the front door, where the two of them would wander the road together. Sometimes they would see Skip, but other times it would be just them, Moxie trotting ahead to sniff something with her tail wagging and then looking back, always checking to see that Travis was still there in the fading daylight. Moxie lived in nows, in smells and sights and sounds happening only in the second. She lived in the moments of Travis's company, and Travis in hers.

#

Travis and his mother had given away every puppy in the latest litter except one, the smallest one, the most energetic. He had similar fur to Moxie, but was a shade lighter and had a few speckled areas of white, the mix from any neighborhood mutt. They never talked about keeping it, but after a few weeks they started trying to name it. Travis liked the name Zip. His mother preferred Finn. They never decided on one.

The puppy had a way of getting to places he did not belong, weaving in and out of Travis's feet and yipping loudly. The morning before she left, Moxie was curled in Travis's bed with her head on his chest. Travis should have noticed, because Moxie never slept with him right after a litter, sleeping instead in the living room with her pups. He stroked her head once, sat up, and vaulted himself out of bed. As he did, he saw his door was open—it was usually closed all night long— at the exact same moment his heel made contact with the ground. If he had thought about it a moment sooner or if he had understood why Moxie was there, he might not have jumped out of bed.

Instead of carpet, his foot landed on something else, something round that gave way easily under the weight of his heel like a thumb through an

eggshell. Except the liquid on his heel was not at all like an egg but warm, dense, sticky. He saw the puppy's body under his foot, lifted his heel even though he knew underneath he would see the skull, fractured as though he had crushed a dinner roll in his fist.

#

His mother was sitting at the table when Travis let himself in. He put his flyers down across from her. She wiped her mouth on the napkin she had draped to cover her blue IHOP apron.

"No luck?" She said. It was hardly a question, not anymore. Travis shook his head anyway. "Soup?" She said. He shook his head again. His hair was still plastered to his forehead with sweat. She looked at him. He stared at his feet.

She had never asked him what happened to the puppy. Since Moxie had vanished the same day, she probably assumed they had gone together. Travis supposed he should feel lucky.

That day, he had walked to the bathroom on his toes, his heel sticky with blood, and stuck his foot in the bath. It was morning but the air was already hot and moist in the house. He closed the door, sat on the edge of the tub, let the water steam up around him. The blood rinsed off easily, leaving his foot pink and clean. He sat until he felt suffocated, the water from the air rolling down his skin.

Next, down in the basement, beneath a picture frame and an old set of dumbbells he had never seen before, Travis had found a shoebox that held a pair of white sneakers turned yellow and grey with age. He put them down on top of the dumbbells and went back upstairs. Moxie was waiting for him, her head on her paws, staring down the wooden steps to the basement as he came up. His mother was asleep on the couch. He left the television on, the high hum pinging in his ears. He picked up the puppy's body, warm blood soaking between his fingers. He lowered it carefully into the box, picked up a crushed fragment of skull, and placed it next to the puppy's head. Stomach acid rose in his throat.

He carried the box back down the hall, stumbling against the wall once. His hand supported the underside where he could already feel the cardboard growing damp and warm. He ran across the porch and down the steps, opened the tin trash can and stuffed the box in. He turned to see Moxie had followed him out to the porch. She was watching him. Her tail was still. He leaned over behind the trash can and vomited until nothing was left, just dry heaving that racked his whole body.

He went back inside and scrubbed his hands in the kitchen sink, then his wrists and then under his fingernails too. His hands were shaking, flecks of water landing on his shirt. Red water swirled in the basin, vanishing down the drain. He washed until every trace of the puppy's blood was gone. His mother slept on the couch. The television buzzed behind her. He pulled a

sponge from underneath the sink and soaked it, carrying it carefully down the hall, one hand held underneath to avoid dripping on the carpet.

The blood had dried by the time he got back, a dark stain on his navy carpet. He crawled to it and began to scrub, pressing down and pulling up to let the sponge soak as much as possible. He carried it to the bathroom, wrung it out until the water ran from pink to clear, then back to his room to scrub more.

As he walked back for the fourth time, he pressed a pruned hand to his cheek and was surprised to find it hot and damp with tears. He forced the sponge against the carpet so hard that it made a strange, strangled squeak. *I'm sorry,* he whispered as he scrubbed, *I don't understand.* With every step to and from the bathroom sink, he whispered to the air, *I'm sorry. I don't understand. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

That was weeks ago now. And yet, he wanted his mother to ask.

Instead, she said, "Are you feeling alright?" She was standing beside him. She placed a cool palm on his forehead, under the sweat on his bangs. He brushed it off.

He wanted her to yell at him the way his stepfather used to yell at her, before they moved into this house. He wanted her to scream and swear, flip the table and disturb all that slow air, thick with dust. He wanted her anger to breathe life into him again as she shouted about how he had lost Moxie, killed her child. He wanted to yell that he had thrown the puppy's body away with the rest of their trash. A barbaric disposal. Why hadn't he even dug a hole? Said a kind word? He wanted her to hate him.

But instead there were only quiet, wordless dinners and slow moving dust.

"I'm going to bed," he said, standing. His hands had started shaking again. He shoved them in his pockets and pushed past her. He didn't look back. He didn't want to see her looking at him, didn't want to see if the dust around her had stopped moving yet.

He got into bed and lay on his side, listening to her walk about the house. A toilet flushed. The water ran. The light from his bedroom window grew dimmer. He stared across the room at the blank stretch of wall above his dresser. At the very bottom of his vision, he could see the dark spot on his carpet, creeping out from under his bed. He rolled over to his back, crossing his arms over his chest. His stomach growled. She called to him once, then again. He didn't answer. Finally, he heard the click of the front door lock.

Travis sat up, carefully placing his feet around the stain. He slipped on his shoes. He pulled the front door closed behind him.

He walked along the curb, down their street and then down the next one as well. The streetlights flickered on in the gathering darkness. Warmth was still rising from the pavement beneath his feet even though the sun had set, the sky bruising to a deep purple. He walked under the highway, past the

houses on the other side. A single car approached him, one headlight out. He stood on the curb as it passed, then hopped back down into the street. He could smell the grease of Joe's Joint before he saw it, the small blue roof poking around the neighboring houses. The sign was off but a single light was on inside above a man standing at the register, head bent, counting change. Across the street Travis saw Skip's house. Shadows moved in the windows against the blue flicker of a television. He imagined Skip's family sitting down to watch a movie together, Skip and his brother and his mother and father all squeezing close together on their couch. Or maybe Skip was sitting on the floor, tapping his hands against the carpet. Travis kept walking farther from home along the straight, flat road. He turned sometimes, checking over his shoulder. He peered through bushes, around the trunks of trees, under mailboxes and behind lampposts. Looking for the swish of a dog's tail, listening for the cry of a mother who lost her pup.

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The Climax

Ashley N. Melucci

Jane held before her a piece of lingerie. There were these little black silk roses embedded in lace. Jane traced each one with the tip of her ring finger. Once, twice, thrice. *This will do*, she thought.

As she tentatively approached the counter, she continued to caress each one diligently. Once, twice thrice. Then the little silk roses snakily slid over the young man's hand as he sought for the tag. "Will that be cash or credit?"

Words clung to the back of Jane's throat like cotton balls as she hid behind the frazzled curls of her dark hair

"Mam?"

She managed a seizing nod, and handed the young man her credit card.

#

Jane had never been intimate with any man or woman. There was a time when she tried, but it was neither fulfilling nor comforting, and a very long time ago. Now she lived alone. Now she was thirty-six. Now she was thirty-six.

When she returned home, she laid her present to herself on the table beside a thickly iced vanilla cupcake. Her mother had warned her against such treats, but Jane was neither fat nor thin, and decided the danger was worth the sweetness. She pressed a blue striped candle into its center. In the flicker of the flame, the lace came alive.

#

The Tuesday after her thirty-sixth birthday, she danced erotically before her studio window overlooking upper 3rd Avenue, Manhattan. She stripped slowly and tentatively out of her new lingerie for each passerby before shimmying her breasts in a spasmodic rhythm. Nobody saw her. Her room was on the fifth floor, and nobody ever looks up in upper Manhattan.

She longed to live in the hustle and bustle of midtown tourism. She imagined that there a lens-faced foreigner – desperate to preserve his adventure – would capture her in a home video. He would not know of his discovery until family and friends were gathered around a television with

glasses of wine and slivers of cheese. Eager to live vicariously through a slideshow of the Great City, all would discover those round plump tender tits quivering on the widescreen. One of the children who had refused to go to bed would point at the window on the screen and giggle, “That lady is naked!” Jane would laugh to herself as she imagined how Auntie and Mama would throw their cheese plates aside, and – balancing their zinfandels - rush to the clicker. The image would be dismissed to prevent any further emotional scarring to the small child giggling on her grandfather's lap.

Living on upper 3rd, Jane did the best she could, so as she danced on the Tuesday after her thirty-sixth birthday, she earnestly scanned the pavement for a wayward gaze. One man stopped before her building as his dog relieved himself on the pavement. She tried to guide his eyes to her through frantic motions, but to no avail. A woman stepped off the curb across the street to wave a cab. Jane waved back, but the woman entered the yellow tin, never glancing up. After an hour or so, Jane ceased her dance and, without dressing, made some tea. The phone rang as the kettle sang. “Hello?”

“Hey honey, how have you been?”

“Good.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Why don’t you come home, honey?”

Jane stared into her mug, and watched as steam danced on the milky surface.

“Are you feeling better? Is everything okay? Why don’t you come home for the weekend? I’ll make your favorite.”

“Why?”

“We’re worried about you.”

“Why?”

“Are you really okay?”

“Yes, mom. I have to go. My tea is getting cold.”

Jane’s shift started at six. As a security guard, she had to say very little, and enjoyed projecting intimidating shadow puppets onto the walls as she made her rounds in silence.

She waited until four forty-six to dress herself,
check that the stove was off,
unplug every utility,
close her window, lock it, wash her hands
- *once, twice, thrice* -
check the stove,
check the window,
unlock it, lock it, wash her hands
- *once, twice, thrice* -
check the stove,

scan every outlet, and close the door,
lock it, unlock it, lock it again before five-O-four.

#

The 6 Train let out a block from the grade school, but she preferred the hour walk in cluttered solitude over twenty minutes sandwiched underground between steaming bodies. Something about the subway reminded Jane of yellow fever graves.

On this particular day, a crowd was gathered five blocks from the school – heads tilted back and eyes lifted up. Curious of the strange collective behavior, Jane mirrored the crowd, and lifted her eyes to a charred, smoking window. A fireman climbed out onto a ladder with a child in arm. Behind her, pedestrians gathered to gaze at the spectacle - to see if one of their own had survived. It was the first time Jane had seen anyone in upper Manhattan look up.

#

The Wednesday after her thirty-sixth birthday she slipped into her lingerie and lit a match. She held the flame before her till the fibers of her curtains caught fire. She teased the silky little laced roses off her body as eager flames ravaged the drapes. The eyes of the street were lifted at last. A child in a bright red stroller pointed to the naked woman in the window, and giggled, before her mother turned her away. Jane danced her grand dance as her blissful cries consumed the walls, and as black smoke engulfed her, strangers snapped flashes at the scene of smoke and flame.

She imagined her lens-faced-foreigner gathering friends and family around his television to boast of a journey among monuments and concrete landscapes. He would present the hungry flames unaware that hidden behind the smoke, a woman is dancing at last in the midst of ecstasy. A child would giggle, and the scene would be dismissed.

Amy Kotthaus *is a writer, translator, painter, and photographer. Her poetry has been published in Ink in Thirds, Yellow Chair Review, Haiku Journal, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Gnarled Oak, and FishFood Magazine. Her photography has been published in Storm Cellar, Ground Fresh Thursday, Crab Fat Magazine, Quantum Fairy Tales, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, and Digging Through the Fat.*

Fern

My goal in black and white photography is always to focus on and emphasize texture and shape through light and dark contrasts. The soft, fuzzy texture of the underside of the fern leaves are highlighted in this picture by representation in white as opposed to the smooth texture of the other side of the same leaf, represented in an opposing black instead of muted green.

Dandelion

The geometric shape of a passed dandelion is enhanced for the viewer through the use of black and white. The white fibers of the flower are brought into sharp focus when foregrounded on a black background. The eye is forced to hone in on the intricate pattern of the dandelion when the background colors and shapes of grass and other foliage are obscured.

Maple Leaves

The use of black and white here enhances both shape and texture. The light color of the small, new leaves sprouting on the stem of this maple tree are highlighted when featured in white against the more mature leaves behind. In turn, the glossiness and softness of the mature leaves is enhanced when featured in black.

Bridget McDonald *is the current Poet Laureate of the University of Missouri – St. Louis where she is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing. In 2017 she won first place in the department's Graduate Poetry Prize and tied for second place in the Graduate Fiction Prize. Starting this fall she will be the Managing Editor of Natural Bridge. Her work has appeared in Eunoia Review and Amygdala Lit Mag. In her free time she loves to dance.*

Lily Outlives Jon

Bridget McDonald

I.

For thirty years I
cook our meals with oil
never lard
and I keep our walking shoes by the bed so
we stroll first thing to the apple trees
and back and then sit
on the porch to scrape the mud off
our shoes and I linger to count the cigars
you smoke, so I know
the number never gets too high
and I keep my eyes
fixed on you
like you might be vapor
the way the baby was vapor so
I move how our watchdog moves and
sometimes think he and I
are trying to cast the same spell
over the same man
and I want to prove
I can keep you
going.

II.

But I wake up and you
have passed
with your lungs unbillowed
beneath your nightshirt.
Jon, you never
told me what to do
if I opened my eyes to find a body
where you fell
asleep just
hours ago.
I get up and drink the glass
of water by your bedside.
When the light tips in
the window and shows me
the stubble on your jaw, the pearl
glow of your fingernails
the spun sugar thinness
of your hair
I step out to see if the bulbs
you planted are still lifting
up from below
and they are.
There is a coldness
in my feet, Jon.
In the coop the chickens are cocooned
in downy bundles, warm
bodies linked.

III.

They take your body
away. And I know
it isn't yours
anymore, and of course
it isn't mine.
It's the zero sum of
all your unmoving parts
and it has to go.
But then they give you
back to me
as ashes and
that's when I feel you
can't be gone.
How could I let them
burn what you were?
Jon, I smell you
in the sheets, I read
the books you had started,
I pick the greens
you planted.
I spread the ashes and
turn over the soil
which will grow our vegetables
which will feed our animals which will
feed me.

IV.

One of the roosters has died.
A neighbor sees me
carrying him inside and asks why
but I don't tell her.
I smile
and give her lilies
lavender soap, eggs, honey
and she forgets
the limp bird on the porch.
I don't expect her
to understand us, Jon.
After I take out the guts, cut
seams through the skin
dry it in borax and sew it onto a
plaster form, I search for
you in the stare of its eyes.
What more
can I do?

Julia Blake *lives in Washington, D.C. and is a faculty member in both an English department and a counseling program. She earned her MFA in Fiction at Spalding University, and her work has been published in Soundings Review, Red Savina Review, and Spry Literary Journal. Julia has also served as a student editor for The Louisville Review. When she's not writing or teaching, she's chasing after her daughter, her dog, and the perfect glass of wine from a Northern Virginia vineyard.*

Where We Go from Here

Julia Blake

We'd been celebrating Mary's birthday—mimosas at brunch and now drinks at Laurie's house—when we started wondering how our kids and husbands were faring without us. And that's when Leilani lamented she could hardly reach Ben anymore, and then Mary chimed in with the same complaint about Richard. We all complained, and we all decided that work was the only reason for their distraction.

But when Joan suggested we check our husbands' phone records, to reassure ourselves there wasn't a distraction of the affair variety, we gave in easily, except Laurie, who never knew how to have a good time anyway. When even Laurie caved, we ran into our next obstacle: How could we find out who they'd been talking to?

Certainly, Joan said, you handle the bills? The monthly statement for your cell has a list of every call, every text.

But I don't know the bill password, Leilani said. We each nodded in turn, except Joan who rolled her eyes.

Couldn't you just *ask* your husbands for the pin? she said, shaking her head.

Candace, after a long gulp of Blue Moon, noted that if we all called asking the same question that might be a tad obvious, wouldn't it?

That shut Joan up pretty good, and it only took us another half-hour to deduce passwords and gain access.

Other than Candace, each of us had a suspicious number. A number that showed up too frequently, at times that were too odd. Texts during an anniversary date. Phone calls during the midnight dog-walk. Communication as soon as our partners left the house in the morning.

1:17 a.m. 4:07 a.m. 7:10 a.m. 5:29 p.m. 6:37 p.m. 11:56 p.m.

Wait, wait, Leilani said. Shouldn't we print the statements and highlight the numbers? Maybe we're making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe these are business calls.

In addition to Leilani being naïve, she also said clichéd phrases that we mostly ignored. Still, we gathered around Laurie's computer to print our pages, and we snatched highlighters from her leftover teacher supplies. Like a study club in college we settled in, all except Candace, who at this point was opening the rum and muddling some mint for a mojito. We suspected she was unhappy about missing the excitement.

Maybe this has gone far enough, Candace said, placing a mojito in front of Joan with too much gusto.

Hey, you smeared my numbers. What is that, a five? A six?

We crowded around, gave Candace a *look* although she was keeping us well supplied. Careful, outsider.

A five, we decided. Fives are always straight on the top.

Candace tucked her red hair behind her ears and hastened around with the rest of the mojitos. But with respect this time. She was always the best about saying sorry.

We slurped, we uncapped our highlighters. Capped them again, grunted in disgust, befuddlement. We began to doubt ourselves. Weren't we being silly, paranoid ninnies, Leilani said, until Candace picked up her printout.

That's a sea of highlighter, Candace said, not unsympathetically, which set Leilani off crying.

How could this be? she wailed, sloshing back the dregs of mint and watery rum. I work out every day. Every fucking day!

We exchanged a glance behind her back, her long black braid a tantalizing snake on her spine. Truth be told we always assumed it would be Leilani that would be a husband-thief, even though everyone knew she didn't work out on Saturdays and Sundays. She had a pert ass in the way none of us had possessed since our firstsecondthirdfourth child was born. And she'd had twins! (That bitch, we'd say. Totally kidding, right?!)

Anyway, as Leilani was losing her shit, black streaks of MAC mascara and eyeliner spidering down her cheeks, we finished our highlighting jobs, stoically.

What went so wrong? Mary said. Is it because I stopped wearing makeup?

This started three years ago. Three years, Joan said. Her foot tippedytapped on the tile floor. She stopped. I'm going to tell all his drinking buddies he's on Viagra and it doesn't work.

Hush, Joan, we know.

We would've patted her hand but she hated sympathy—always had, even when Leilani's girl scouts got picked to lead the Veteran's Day ceremony over hers–so Candace just poured her another drink instead.

But Joan was right. Start dates were important. Going back over the sheets of evidence, because that's what these records had become,

EVIDENCE, we thought it best to remember what was going on in our lives then. We hoped this would be easy. We had planners in our phones we could go back and check. Or emails. Or even our memories for the more recent dalliances, those that had started in the last year or so. For others, when the number was a ghost for a longer time, we couldn't remember or we'd since upgraded phones.

Laurie found an old poster about *The Tempest* from a previous English class—her students hadn't appreciated Shakespeare, she'd complained—and she flipped it over to expose the clean underbelly. Let's help each other remember the spiral, she said.

We were delighted to see her enter into the spirit of the matter.

First known contact, she said. Give me the date. Go.

We each called out our dates, four including Laurie's scrawled atop the poster, while Candace slouched in a wingback chair peering over the top of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. The black letters in Laurie's neat teacher handwriting seemed innocent enough.

OK, let's think context. *Remember.*

Our ultimate conclusion was there was nothing of note, there was nothing unusual—only the same cyclical journey of waking up yelling at our kids to catch the bus going to spin (in Leilani's case) or not going to spin (in everyone else's case) then shower then dinner then perhaps sex on a Saturday after dipping heartily into the boxed pinot grigio. We were all sucked back into that fog and our search for clues yielded no triggers, so no, no, no we couldn't remember.

Except Joan. We carefully avoided singling out Joan.

What we didn't say: Joan's company went under, Joan had a miscarriage, Joan's husband found out the baby wasn't his. Joan had had a rough year.

What we did say: Nothing stands out. We don't recall anything that happened.

Isn't that what friends do though, forget about the things that cause shame? Like that night Mary got shitfaced and yelled at our neighbor for bringing a dish that wasn't gluten-free? (Guillotine the wheat! we'd say, when we were trying to tease Mary. Haha, she'd say, looking away.) Or that night Leilani, sweet discrete perfect Leilani, farted in front of the school principal and the president of the PTA? (We did not tease Leilani about this. We sincerely tried to forget.) Our favorite thing to pretend-forget was that night Candace and Laurie made out on a dare. At least it started as a dare but ended behind closed doors. Only Leilani wasn't intensely jealous, and in that needs-to-be-filled-somehow silence we drank more and bullshitted and eyed each other—I wonder what would happen if…?

Laurie stood up now, her face as empty as our kids' beds when we caught them sneaking out. I can't believe this, she said and walked to the

window. What was the point in finding out? Why did we look?

It gives us a little bit of integrity, right? Mary said.

Candace replied, maybe a reason to leave.

Well, that sent a collective shudder through the room. We couldn't really imagine leaving, not yet anyway, when there were teens and mortgages and vacations that had deposits on them. Teen mental health aside, we were not missing those trips, infidelity be damned. They would be sexless trips of convenience and we would work out so much before them our husbands would rue the day they deviated from the path of righteousness.

What if, Joan said, we find the culprits?

You mean the mistresses? we said.

Joan nodded. It's easy. All you do is reverse look-up the phone number, and it'll tell you who it belongs to. There's websites devoted to that sort of thing.

Apparently this was a method Joan was acquainted with, given her own past brush with the fruit(s) of another. She used it to see if video chatting showed on the bill or not. (It didn't.) However, not all of us were sold on further detective work, but we couldn't go soft now. We would see where this all ended. Or in whose bed, at any rate.

We made our wagers.

Laurie: I can't even imagine. He telecommutes.

Joan: This beer cart girl at the country club. A total stereotype, she said with a snort.

Leilani: Ugh.

Mary: His boss. I just know it.

Isn't his boss a male? we asked.

I've often wondered, Mary said.

Candace grabbed some chips from the pantry and opened a jar of salsa. There, ladies.

Joan got on the computer, hopping onto her old account to search for the numbers. She linked a new credit card, a card her husband didn't know about.

Stubborn habits, she said.

Each number was $4.95 to research, but we'd come around to Mary's line of thinking. Integrity, we said, is certainly worth four dollars ninety-five cents apiece. Serenity of mind is priceless.

Joan put in her husband's number first; it belonged to someone named Rachel McGee and so we got on Facebook and found her. Or we thought we did, but we couldn't get to her profile because she stupidly had her privacy settings up. We attacked this, wondering why she was hiding from a group of insightful wives sleuthing out their husbands' other women. So we kept looking.

Twitter nor Instagram was a boon to our cause, and we were feeling

rather deflated when Mary yelled LINKEDIN! Candace dropped her salsa-laden chip onto the coffee table.

After Mary signed into her account, LinkedIn gave us everything we needed, and if we permitted ourselves to use one of the clichés Leilani so liked, we would say Mary was one smart cookie. Because there the girl was, sure enough—beer cart mistress at Crooked Oaks Golf Club, blond hair, white teeth, pink polo shirt. We see you, Rachel S. McGee, and a million others like you.

We also saw Joan's lip quiver briefly, and we gathered around. Normally we wouldn't have, but the fact that Joan's lip displayed any portrayal of emotion seemed momentous.

Hang in there, Joanie. She probably sweats all day and smells terrible.

Knock it off, she said, but her lip steadied.

Next up was Mary. She paced behind Joan as she typed in the digits.

Our blessed technology really gave poor Mary a fit because in the middle of finding the owner of the number, it went into a death spiral of loading, loading, loading.

Oh, for God sakes, Mary said, putting her hand over Joan's on the mouse and maneuvering it to the refresh button. Click. Clickclick. Clickclickclickclick.

Finally, we said when a new screen popped up. We all crowded around.

Candace said huh? as Mary snatched the landline off the desk and smashed her finger against the keys ten times. Through the muffle of plastic and Mary's brown bob, we could hear a voice pick up the other end and say something garbled, a la the teacher from *Peanuts*.

Could you tell me exactly what, Mary said through gritted teeth, are primitives?

Peanuts said something else, and Mary just stood there like she'd seen the ending to *The Sixth Sense* for the first time. She said thanks and set the phone back down before she began to laugh. We tittered, curious about the specific nature of primitives and how they appeared to be so funny.

Historical reenactment gear, Mary finally panted. Tents. Costumes. He's calling a shop over and over because he's sneaking around hiding a hobby. A hobby!

She looked rather relieved, even though we assumed that buying reenactment materials was a pricey pastime. Given their finances weren't intermingled with ours, we congratulated her on a successful finish. We didn't see, but knew, that when she went to her purse and pulled out her phone she was texting him something absurdly dirty, perhaps, too, involving the word "primitive."

Our jubilation was short-lived, however. We sighed, steeled ourselves for the remaining revelations. Leilani's turn.

Oh, God, she said. I feel sick.

She turned and sprinted, with only a stumble or two, down the hall to the bathroom. We heard it slam shut, then a loud click of the lock.

I'll go check on her, Candace said.

Joan turned around. I'll take your printout next, Laurie. Leilani clearly needs a minute.

Laurie handed her papers over, the blue highlighted sections appearing more frequently than the white. She nodded. We waited.

Joan picked up the paper again, double-checked the numbers. That's odd, she said, taking a distracted sip of wine. It says Owner Information Found: No Name.

There's a mystery afoot, Mary said.

A mystery woman, Laurie said, her eyes squeezed together, thin lines beneath her wrinkled brow.

We thought she sounded angry, on the verge of an explosion, or what would be an explosion if it was anyone other than Laurie. We'd never seen Laurie do anything entirely out of control, even if she did get it on with Candace that time. That was simply a natural progression.

But we were wrong, as even friends can be, because Laurie began yelling.

I'm so tired of suffocating, she shouted.

She pulled her hands through her hair, then she did something very un-Laurie-like. She called the number.

We thought maybe it would be another primitives deal, another husband who had an innocent but secret desire to buy muskets and regimental coats. We thought this until a phone began to ring. Specifically speaking, a phone began to ring in the room we were occupying.

Laurie hit the button to end the call. She blinked. She shook her head. She redialed. Again a ring cut the silence.

Which one of you is it? Laurie said, her face thunderous, a storm on Mars.

We were motionless, and the air hung, suspended in perfect stasis. Nothing entered or exited our lungs.

Candace and Leilani emerged from the back then, Leilani clearly coming off an episode of some sort in the bathroom. She seemed to have diminished in the last few minutes, but then again, so had we. She walked over to her purse, grabbed her Carmex, applied it.

What's everyone looking at? she said.

Laurie hit the button again, and as it began to ring, we watched.

Candace immediately went towards her purse. But then she stopped midway and did not turn around to meet our eyes. We all knew her ringtone had been "Tubthumping" by Chumbawumba since our first karaoke night together, easily a decade ago. But this sound now was the sterile ring of an

any-phone, and she went towards it like gravity.

A guttural sound came out of Laurie.

Candace turned around. I'm so sorry. Laurie—

Laurie walked toward Candace, then past her, to her bag. She stuck a hand in Candace's large Coach tote, scrummaging around, first pulling out the familiar device we'd always seen, encased in a mint-green shell, then pulling out a black go-phone, anonymous. She swiped right. Tapped. Scrolled. Tap, tap, scroll.

We expected Candace to lunge for her, to put an end to the horror show, but she stood still, quiet.

So many texts, Laurie said. So many calls. How long, she began, but swallowed instead. Never mind, there's the answer sheet.

She waved drunkenly at the list of dates written on the poster.

She walked over to the counter, holding the phone, and grabbed a Merlot to open. She pulled clean wine glasses down.

You don't have to dirty up more dishes for us, Joan said. I can reuse mine.

Mary held up her own glass, smudged with opaque fingerprints. Me, too.

Leilani nodded. She looked like she might barf on the carpet.

Candace was the flicker of light when a bulb burned out—the quick flash of your reflection in the bathroom mirror before you couldn't see yourself anymore. When the go-phone rang again, this time as Laurie held it, Candace moved towards Laurie and took the phone away from her. We suspect she saw the big puddle on the counter, from back when we were sloshing mojitos and ice around. Maybe she didn't see it. But what Candace did do, knowing or not, was slam the phone down in the mess of liquid, and its ring faded as she threw her arms around Laurie.

Laurie didn't hug her back—we didn't expect her to—but she reached her hand up to Candace's shoulder and touched it. Was it a grip, we wondered, or a caress?

Laurie opened the bottle and poured everyone a fresh glass. The red liquid reflected the fading sun filtering through the window. Blood promises. Later we would go back to our kids and our husbands, who were all oblivious to a shift in rhythm.

Laurie clinked our glasses each in turn, Candace's included, before taking a long drink. She inhaled.

That's the first breath I've taken in years, she said.

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How To Live On The Edge

Hannah Suchor

They walked in silence these days. Once, they had walked—long walks along the train tracks that carved a path through the dense woods out of town—carried on the breezy whims of the conversation that flowed effortlessly between them. Once, she had worn her soles through without noticing, hopping tie to tie so far into the woods that the tracks looked forgotten entirely. It wasn't till thick thistles prickled her feet through the flimsy remains of her shoes that they turned around, still talking. Eventually the conversations dried up in the empty banks of young love, but the walks continued.

They tried to stop walking. One would make himself scarce when the other inquired about her second shoe, or one would require a nap when the other paced too impatiently. But they found they could not help themselves when the wanderlust overtook them. They would sit at the dinner table with their forks dangling from inert hands, faces pinched, trying in vain to interest themselves in the salmon or the farmer's market kale. Finally, one—usually her, being the character of less resolve—would push back their plate and say the words both now loathed to hear: "Let's take a walk."

The repressed urge has a way of festering and becomes impossible to outrun; the longer they waited, the longer they walked. Late in the summer, there was a heat spell so alarming that even the flies fled the sewage for cooler climes, and it held the pair inside for a week. Olivia and Henry sat by air conditioning vents, in between anxiously pacing to the kitchen and opening the freezer for the frosty blast, growing more irritable by the day. It was late into Friday afternoon when the quarantine ended: she opened the front door and, being not immediately sickened by the wave of heat, said, "Let's take a walk." He already had his shoes on.

And so they walked in grim silence. They walked quickly. By the time the sherbet sunset splayed across the sky, they were farther from town than they had ever gone. The landscape beyond the railroad was uneven. He had worn heavy work boots, and he tromped over the pitted ground with ease, but her hastily-chosen moccasins were insufficient for the task and her progress was precarious. But they pushed onwards, and eventually the forest spat them out into a vast prairie. The horizon seemed close enough to walk to. There was a hard line where the swaying gray-green grass cut across the bulging

belly of the sinking orange sun. It was breathtaking. But as she basked in her strange intimacy with the star, Henry spoke the first words of the walk: "Should we go back?" He didn't sound like he wanted to, but he looked uneasily at the fraction of sun.

"No," she said. "Let's go just a little bit further."

Something possessed him then to grab her hand. He almost couldn't reach past the dead space between them. The touch startled her, but she did not pull back, and the taut, sweaty skin of their palms rubbed uncomfortably together. So, lurching to and fro like a bird with a broken wing, they plunged forward into the grass.

The grass whipped at their hips, scratching lightly against her denim shorts and leaving pale red contrails across her thighs. The wind had picked up. It jostled their bones. A low howl keened across the prairie, and it could have been the wind, but she thought just as well that it could have come from inside of her. The grass lashed their legs, then unified behind them to bear them forward on the breeze.

The sun ahead of them was immense, slung low in the sky like a swollen peach. The illusion of the swaying flatlands drew the horizon slowly closer. Oppressive waves of heat furled out over the prairie, but it was a clammy sweat that plastered their hair to their faces. Fatigue began to weigh at their muscles. At intervals she faltered, and he would bear her up by the white-knuckled hand now clutched tightly in his. He thought about telling her, "That's what you get for all those cigarettes!" but for once it didn't seem important, and she would have agreed. She could only think of reaching that impalpable goal; so wrapped up was she in this fantasy, in fact, that she almost did not notice its coming. Only Henry's rigid grasp stopped her from plunging right into it.

When his hand pulled her back like a bulldog reminded of its chain, she turned around. "Come on," she said irritably. "I think we're almost there."

He didn't say anything. He stared straight ahead with eyes as wide as sinkholes, his face an unreadable mess of emotion. Olivia turned to follow his gaze.

In front of her was a great plane of boiling gold. She could see currents of fire flashing across the surface of what had so recently been but a distant star. She reached out, the glare of her wedding ring eclipsed by the glitter of the sun. She could not quite touch it, but she felt she could easily run to it. At least, she felt so until she looked to the ground in front of her. There was none. The grass flattened by her deerskin feet fanned out in front of her, and its wispy tips jutted off the edge—what, the edge of the earth? She scoffed; everyone, even Magellan, knew the earth was round. But there, right in front of her, the ends of the prairie grass were most certainly bobbing in nothing but atmosphere. She looked over her shoulder, suddenly frantic. Her heart beat fast. She tried blinking, hard, long blinks that made psychedelic

Rorshach blots blossom on her eyelids. Fiery battle continued to rage on the surface of the sun. She let go of Henry's heavy hand and crept forward like a spy to peer past the edge of the earth.

What she saw first was the low-hanging belly of the setting sun, its plunging iceberg of a body. Then she trained her gaze lower and saw a swath of purest black. She thought of black holes; she swayed forward. Finally, as she swung her gaze back to her perch, she saw a sheer edge of packed dirt below her, straight-steep till it was swallowed up by the black. A swoon of faintness brought her hand crashing into the ground at the edge, and a small avalanche of dirt flew into the dark. The moan that ripped loose from her dry throat drowned out any whining of the wind.

After a perplexed paralysis, Henry fell to his knees beside her. His skin looked an agonizing yellow in the glow of the sun, as though jaundice erupted from every pore. They met eyes. They grasped hands again, this time warm, dry hands that clapped when they touched.

They whispered, "Dear god."

#

The sun now seemed to hurtle away, as the sun is wont to do once mostly set, and it was agreed that they could not make it back to town by nightfall. They paced along the edge of the planet, if it could still be fairly called a planet, and pulled up bundles of grass to make a nest in the prairie. At first neither noticed the clumps of dirt that fell into the abyss of atmosphere, but when they finished harvesting their bedding, he noticed that they had left no strip of bare earth behind them. In places the long stalks of grass tipped outwards, giving the edge of the earth an intermittent fringe. They built their bed for the night, a pallet in a bowl of tall grass, and curled up side-by-side. Her leg overlapped with his knee, but neither made an effort to move; it was nice to be reminded that they weren't alone. She had fitful dreams where land she was sure of abruptly ended: the parking lot at the grocery store gave way to a cliff, the tennis court at the park simply ceased at half court, the freeway shot cars into the dark like the end of a waterslide. He did not sleep at all.

In the morning they got up and looked off to each side—they privately hoped, but did not suggest, that some delirious sickness had seized them both the night before. To their left, farther away than expected, was the feathery edge of the forest. To their right, a short patch of hairy prairie, then too much blue sky. It seemed to press inwards like a slowly-falling wall. She made a joke about finding the end of the rainbow. It fell flat. He said, "What the hell do we do?"

Olivia grabbed handfuls of the dry grass and gathered them around her bare thighs like a mother gathering her children to her skirt. She sucked in lungfuls of air, which she could swear was thinner for its proximity to nothingness. She said, "Well, we can't very well tell anyone."

"Why not?" He looked wild-eyed. "Don't you think people need to

know? This is only a few miles out of town! It could be dangerous!" His coarse blonde hair stood out in an Einstein cloud from his head; he always looked vaguely electrocuted when he thought he had a good idea.

It was a very cool morning compared to the recent heat, and the dew drops sparkling on her skin when she let the grass spring away prickled with cold. "No. Come on, it'd be madness. Pandefuckingmonium! Don't you think people have enough problems without finding out science is all wrong? God," she spat, "think of the miracles."

"Don't you think we have to tell them? To keep them safe?"

She sighed. This was where they always found themselves, on either side of a lucite wall of reason. She was sure she could feel it if she put out her hands, sure it would push her back, so she stood still and let her hands dangle impotent at her sides. Still, he watched her intensely; he, too, seemed to lean slowly towards her, like the sky. She thought her bones would splinter under the pressure, so she stepped back. One step, two, three, till she no longer felt her burdens like a noose, but like a looming deadline.

"It hasn't caused any problems yet," she said across the chasm of prairie between them. "And it must have been here all along." Henry's arms were crossed stubbornly across his chest. "Besides, your mother would think you're insane."

He deflated at that, his cloud of cottonball hair settling back against his crown, and he said, "You're right. She would." All parents ruin their children in one way or another. Henry's mother, a pinched Jewish socialite full of vodka and disappointment, especially so. "I'll take it to the grave."

"Let's go back."

They turned away from the nearby horizon and began to trek towards town, but she hesitated. "Do you think… we should take a picture of it?" She didn't say, to make sure it's real. He nodded his solemn assent, and they crossed the prairie to kneel in the grass at the edge of the earth. Her knees sunk into the soft soil, and the bent blades of prairie grass gave the planet a momentary Mohawk. Warm air radiated from his chest and pressed against her back, a surrogate touch. She took her phone out of her pocket, and, with no small amount of gravity, she pressed the capture button. She almost expected the photo to be blank, or show nothing but rolling prairie, but there it was. Proof.

#

Back in town, back in regular life governed by the assumption that everything, even the ground beneath our feet, was cyclical and therefore endless, they found their white house too dull. They bought ten gallons of yellow paint—lemon yellow, canary yellow, daffodil, maize, gold—and stayed up for three days straight, taking No-Doz and painting their whole house, inside and out. They had something to forget, so they tried to obliterate their memories with overstimulation. But this approach did not satisfy them

for long. Henry worried late at night, sitting up at his desk with the lamp's shadows casting premature lines on his face. In a guilty frenzy he drafted an editorial for the local newspaper, but when he finished, he couldn't read a word of the frantic chicken-scratches on the page. He threw the paper away.

Olivia, too, found it impossible to sleep. Unlike her philanthropic husband, she sat up at night drinking red wine. She lit occasional cigarettes, but her taste for them had waned and she let them burn untended to the filter, dropping ashes in her lap. Her roost was a padded swing on the back porch, where the moonlight would fall directly on her for most of the night, but a ring of stout fruit trees blocked her from the neighbors' view. She drank alone, staring at the moon and wondering if it too was flat, every night until all of their wine glasses sat neglected on the dirty kitchen counter, and then she drank from the bottle. The alcohol settled onto her midsection like a gelatinous fanny-pack.

At least they no longer felt the manic urge to walk. It was a consolation, if a small one. They ate well once again and their cheeks regained their flush, but the long nights of tortured contemplation drew dark circles under their eyes. He worked freelance and she made expensive jewelry to sell online, so it was rare that they left the house during daylight hours. When they ventured into the night for necessities like groceries and gas, the streetlights only highlighted their disturbed demeanor as they tumbled from pothole to pothole down the overgrown sidewalk. The twenty-four hour supermarket at the next bus stop had horribly penetrating fluorescent lights that made her skin appear translucent. Henry had used up all of the paper in his last draft of his exposé, so she wrote her grocery list in blue pen on the helter-skelter lines of the veins in her wrist. It was: wine, Brie, and those fancy multigrain crackers.

The supermarket was mostly abandoned at this hour, and the few other customers roaming the aisles were stoned youth seeking Doritos or else hunched older women with a flyaway look in their eyes. She thought you had to be unhinged to go grocery shopping at two in the morning (she excused herself on the grounds of drunkenness). The piles of produce just inside the door had a false, waxy sheen to them, the colors a little too vivid. Every carton of juice in the cooler was past its expiration date. She ran her fingers over the clammy cheese as she passed. There was something grotesque about it, this artificial sustainment of human life.

She tipped over a box of Fruit Loops and told the ghostlike woman drooping over a cart full of Corn Flakes, "This all used to belong to hunters and gatherers, you know." The woman didn't answer.

As she wandered the sterile aisles, bombarded by the vibrant falsity of product advertising, she became more and more agitated. She filled her plastic basket with mediocre wine, the Brie, the fancy crackers, and an impulsive box of frozen shrimp. She swung it fitfully at the boxed dinners, the Oriental

seasonings, at the cake mixes and the blocks of bloody meat. It was so bourgeois. It was so mundane. And the earth ended, it just ended, less than five miles away! A medium-sized earthquake could shake the whole city off the face of the planet, but people just kept buying their Kraft dinners and going to work and watching their goddamn TVs. Her vision swam, the brightly-colored cardboard orbiting her at double speed. The wine churned in her gut. She realized she was going to throw up.

With tumbling, uneven steps, she tried to find the exit. Her body lurched. She stumbled into a display of Ritz crackers on sale, accidentally punching out the middle, and the garish red boxes cascaded to the floor. She made it around the corner into the frozen goods aisle, the last aisle before the cash registers, and just beyond that, the doors! The great outdoors! Her heart and stomach leapt for it in unison—a tidal wave of acridly-sweet fuchsia splattered on the white waxed tiles of the floor. It speckled the frosty doors of the cooler to her left. It pooled at the toes of her boots. She sank to her knees at the edge of the puddle; for a moment she was too weak to stand up.

The security cameras showed a woman bent against hard winds, kneeling alone at the edge of a lake that looked like a melted cranberry candle. She was the only breathing thing in the frozen foods section, and she searched the loneliness, confused. Soft red vomit circled her mouth like messy lipstick—she ran a hand over her mouth and wiped the sticky liquid on her bare thigh. She had bigger things to worry about.

There was only one cashier working at two in the morning, a pierced white girl with the disillusioned gaze of a postgrad. She had seen Olivia vomit, seen her sit by the puddle, swaying at its bank like a blade of grass. She had watched all of this with a nonplussed gaze, a gaze which she held flatly as Olivia approached. Without breaking the bleary eye contact, she leaned slowly into the microphone by her cash register and said, “Cleanup in aisle nine.” Olivia set her basket down on the conveyor belt. The girl pressed the button. The wine, the Brie, the fancy multigrain crackers, the frozen shrimp advanced slowly towards her. She stared at Olivia.

Olivia stared uncomfortably back. “Sorry,” she said. She didn’t need to say why. “Whatever.”

“I tried to make it outside. Who’s gonna have to clean that up?”

The girl flicked her lip ring to the side with her tongue. The register beeped. The wine cost $4.99. “Probably I will. I think I’m the only one here.”

“Oh. Well, sorry.” The cheese and the crackers were each more expensive than the wine. They both pretended not to judge.

“Whatever. Drunk people puke. It’s what they do. D’you need a bag?”

“I’m not drunk,” Olivia protested, trying not to slur as she pulled Henry’s reusable grocery bag out of her purse. She knew from experience that he would give her the silent treatment for days if she brought plastic grocery bags into the house. He always wanted to save the world.

"You smell like a shitty vineyard."

"You smell like my dead grandpa," Olivia snapped back. It was purely reactionary—she couldn't smell anything but the trace of vomit on her own breath.

The cashier snatched the gauzy green bag from her hands. Her voice didn't change, but an extra shade of guarded distance fell over her hooded eyes. "It's BenGay," she said. "I have a rash."

Olivia let out a tense, rancid breath and knuckled the knot of confusion that had been growing in her forehead since their terrible discovery. "Shit," she said, "Sorry. It's been a helluva couple weeks. My husband and I, we took this walk out of town, probably five miles at most, and we found the end of the fuckin' earth." She hadn't meant to say it, but there it was.

She didn't give the cashier a moment to recover, just plunged on, her voice rising: "I'm not kidding, it's just sitting there in this prairie. There's no fence or anything, y'know, like, I think we were the first people to find it. It's like—have you ever been to the Grand Canyon? Yeah, me neither, but imagine if you were standing there at the edge of the Grand fuckin' Canyon and there's no bottom, there's no other side, there's just this cliff and then outer space, and I could practically touch the sun…." She took a deep breath. It shook through her esophagus, trembled in her lungs. "I don't even know what's right and what's wrong anymore. Y'know, Magellan, Galileo, fuckin'.... Marie Curie—I just don't know what to believe! You can see why I drink."

The cashier's heavy eyes were big, clear ovals now, like polished rocks. Without breaking her wary eye contact, she slid Olivia's receipt across the counter. "Sign here, please."

#

The news spread. It always spreads. Once the hand that held it to heart opens, it takes to the wind like dandelion fluff, and there have never been so many dandelions as there are now. The cashier posted it on the internet, or she told some friends, who in turn posted it on the internet. Whatever the means, the word infected the community. People travelled the streets in pulsing packs, which murmured amongst themselves rumors of endings, rumors of the proximity of death, rumors of things that couldn't possibly be true. But the rumor, in its spreading, collected a harem of theoretical witnesses, the friends-of-a-friend who always verify urban myth. By the end of the week, the city had the claustrophobic feeling of a place where the heart beat faster than the people moved. People quit their jobs at unprecedented rates. Garbage pickup was delayed indefinitely, and the throng learned to pick their way between the eddies of refuse writhing over the sidewalks and licking the streets. Drug arrests spiked, though no one could tell if the increase was in use or police activity. The local news did one story on the phenomenon. A few days later, the local news went off-air. No one outside the city covered the strange event;

no one outside the city seemed to believe.

City council met and sat in stunned silence until one of them started crying, upon which it was decided they would visit themselves, find out if the townspeople had reason to shake in their streets. Somehow the rumor had latched onto the railroad, so they walked down it, an off-kilter bunch in pantsuits scuffing their shoes. They walked for a long time, past the point of peeling off their blisters, till new blisters formed and popped under raw red skin. They limped through the prairie. The one with a fear of heights threw up in the grass near the edge. They took a photo to commemorate and verify the event, all five lined up in front of a vast and empty sky, barely balancing on bereaved feet. One member of the city council disappeared that night. Another abruptly left to visit his mother. The rest refused to come out of their houses.

#

A man named Hans Gottlieb had his fingers all over the thickening pulse of the city. He was an unimpressive little man, unfortunately wide and quite bald, but the circumstances pick their heroes. One week after Olivia's slip at the grocery store, Hans began holding meetings at the local community center. He drove all around the small city in an old white Lincoln, taping up flyers on lampposts, in coffee shops, grocery stores, bookstores, even the front door of the failing adult video store he and a handful of other old men still patronized, flyers for a "rapture support group." The signs said he, Hans, could council the heathen masses and the tentative believers alike into a peaceful ascent into Heaven. He promised them the ride would be pleasant. He promised them the ride would be soon. He promised them, "I have the answers."

The first meeting filled the AA room of the community center. Henry went, and dragged Olivia with him so she could see the damage she'd done. They took the bus to the meeting. Instead of holding hands, he held her by the wrist. He was strong—she thought he could pop her hand straight off her arm. They got there six minutes early. Hans Gottlieb was already there.

Except for the chunky gold signet ring on his pinky finger, he looked very plain, overdressed in his cable-knit sweater, clutching a white leather-bound Bible in his two meaty hands. A ring of potential rapturees insulated the room. The only common denominator Olivia could pick out was the darting, sweaty look of nerves. The women had white knuckles; the men clenched their jaws till the muscles stood out like burial mounds.

As Hans clapped his fat hands at the front of the room to call the meeting to order, Olivia even saw the familiar face of the pierced cashier lounging by the window. She wanted to walk over, ask why, but Hans answered the question for her.

"You are all here because you've heard the big news: we are living on the edge. The edge of the earth." The words shuffled under his thick German accent. "You are all here because you're afraid. Most importantly, you are all

here because you don't know what to believe." He paused to let the people murmur their assent, then slammed his hand and his Bible down on the table next to him. The cashier looked up. Olivia made eye contact. "I know what to believe."

Someone called out, "What do you believe?"

"I believe! No, I know that the end of days is near—nearer to us than the rest of the world. And I know that the Good Lord is coming for us! He's coming at the end of the world as we know it, and we are at that end!" Hans shook with enthusiasm, an earthquake trapped in his chubby chest. He gave his speech everything, making up for a lack of charisma with an excess of energy. Spittle flew from his lips like a sprinkler. He was just about screaming by the time he said, in conclusion, "This place will be a place of pilgrimage, and we—we!—are God's pilgrims!"

Henry squeezed his wife's wrist painfully and whispered, "See what you've done?"

#

The meetings continued, but they did not attend another. Far from helping by restoring a backbone of faith, a surrogate for science, Hans's rapture group seemed to elevate the frenzy. People were impressionable, vulnerable with the foundations of human life ripped out from under them—it did not seem so unreasonable that if the earth could end, so could the world. Office buildings became ghost towns. Grocery stores stood unmanned, and people fell to looting without shame, without fear. The police, several of whom could be spotted at the community center for the nightly rapture meetings, had stopped trying. Besides, Hans's God was a god of opportunity, not justice.

Hans Gottlieb set a date and posted it on every street corner. Saturday. There were three days to wait. Three days left on Earth. The city was a study in entropy. Things decayed impossibly fast—streets cracked, and with no one to repair them the cracks became chasms. The chasms seemed uncrossable. The city sounds of street life and car horns were replaced by distant screams and omnipresent sobs. No one went to work. Instead they spent their last days on Earth in the arms of their loved ones, and if they had no loved ones, they roamed the streets in desperation, searching for one last-minute connection.

Olivia and Henry took a walk on Friday. It was the first walk they'd taken since the night they spent at the terminal prairie. The streets were mostly empty and not a single gust stirred the leaves or the litter, but still everything seemed to move impossibly fast. Families and couples holed up in each others' arms inside, but they left the doors and windows open and the keening sound of mother's last love wavered high over every block. Whole streets were papered with graying layers of Hans's posters. The blocky black letters overlapped in a senseless collage. They walked through the city, against the pull they still felt down the railroad, into the woods. Buses still

bumped through the neighborhood, but they carried only the saddest transient figures, and even those only rarely. One of these lonely fluorescent beasts wheezed up next to them near the local library but they outwalked it with ease. They passed the twenty-four hour supermarket. Its front doors were missing, and the produce section was visible through the hole. A few last bruised lemons cuddled in the bottom of the display.

In the park, beneath a canopy of trees prematurely shedding their leaves, they saw a man dressed in loose white linen set up on a fort of park benches with a lockbox and a large plywood sign. The sign advertised soul bonds. He had the hawk eyes of a con man beneath Neanderthal eyebrows.

They approached. He fluffed himself up from a figure of dejection—a thing no longer out of place—to a shining cloud beneath the dusty sun. Henry asked him, "Soul bonds?"

"Yessir," the man said. His voice was scratchy and cracked, not like fall leaves but like a decade of meth use. "For fifteen dollars I can guarantee your soul makes it up when it leaves your earthen body."

"I think you mean earthly."

The man ignored Olivia's correction, saying instead, "Yes, for just twenty dollars I can getcha in with the big guy." He popped open his dusk-blue lockbox. A ruffle of money fluttered in the breeze.

Henry's face twisted in displeasure; his nose and mouth made a knot. "People go for that?"

The man grinned widely. Olivia could hear his thin lips stretching over his teeth, baring the snaggled old gravestones lined up in his mouth. "Folks think it's the end of days." The words trickled down her shivering spine.

"And you don't think it's the end of days?" Henry asked.

The loose linen quaked as the man rasped an unnerving laugh. "Of course not, man. This ain't the end—this is just a buncha damsels in distress."

#

Hans predicted the rapture would occur at midnight that Saturday. He recommended an hour's buffer, in case God's clock was off. The pilgrimage began at nine, handfuls of nervous citizens taking to the tracks in the plum light. Some of the knots of people were family, some were friends, some were tight strangers. Some of them brought compasses. Some of them brought booze.

Olivia and Henry ate a late dinner in their house. Through the front windows they saw the transient shadows of the faithful and afraid. They argued about whether to attend the big event.

Henry said, "I don't want to be there for the end of the world. It means I failed."

Olivia said, "This is all our fault. We have to see it through."

Olivia won.

“Let’s take a walk.”

Alicia Buster *is a student at the University of Missouri. She is working on her bachelor's degree in Chemical Engineering, with an environmental emphasis. In her free time Alicia enjoys painting as a social activity, and alone as stress relief from school. She spends the majority of her time in Columbia, Missouri. She loves living in a college town, and hiking in the city's many wonderful state parks.*

Autumn Forest
Acrylic on Canvas

A curious fox stands in front of a mossy log in the woods. Completed December 2016.

Hummingbird
Acrylic on Canvas

A ruby-throated hummingbird flies along a floral backdrop. Completed April 2016.

Kitty Cow
Acrylic on Canvas

This portrait of my cat plays upon his wonderful collection of spots combined with our brain's ability to reify spatial information into a cohesive image. Completed June 2017.

Jay Vera Summer *is a Chicagoan living in Florida. She writes fiction and creative nonfiction, and co-founded weirderary, an online literary magazine, and First Draft, a monthly live literary event in Tampa. Her writing has been published in marieclaire.com, Proximity, LimeHawk, theEEEL, and Chicago Literati.*

The Blue Line

Jay Vera Summer

My navy loafers sweep across the pavement with each step. Chfft, chfft, chfft. I drag my feet for three blocks while admiring the Catalpa trees and graystones, same as every day, until I burst out of the neighborhood onto busy Kedzie Avenue. Once I see the blue and white "CTA BLUE LINE - LOGAN SQUARE" sign marking the train stop's entrance, I pick up my pace.

The rule is that I drag my feet when I am "off" the el or walking around normally, not following the train's path. I stride long and walk quickly without dragging my feet once I am "on" the el, or following the train line by walking approximately above, below, or next to the tracks. I haven't actually ridden on the train for over two months, not since it became clear no one at work notices if I arrive an hour and a half late each morning.

The sun is shining brightly at seven thirty am. It is chilly out, being April in Chicago, but I've thrown a light fleece on and left my coat at home because I'll warm up from walking. The medians that were gray with soot and snow two weeks ago show short pockets of green grass.

I turn left on Kedzie, pass El Cid #2 and wave, even though it isn't open yet. Another rule is that I stop there for chilaquiles and a small pitcher of margaritas on my walk home. There are two major benefits of walking three hours per day: one, I can eat whatever I want without gaining weight, and two, I can drink as much as I want without worrying about driving.

I turn left on Milwaukee Avenue and breathe fresh morning air. I walk past the vintage store, eyeing a mannequin in a baby blue jumpsuit I adore but worry I'm not hip enough to wear, then cross Logan Boulevard and enjoy my brief time strutting through the actual square of Logan. I like standing on grass and knowing I'm directly above the blue line—the square is one of the purer spots on my route. I nod to the Illinois Centennial Monument that marks one-hundred years of Illinois statehood and helps me feel connected to the state's farmlands from which I came. Thinking of home reminds of Mark for a split second, but I push him out of my mind. I try never to walk and think of Mark at the same time. Instead, I imagine the eagle on the monument nodding back at me and saying, "Thank you, Cobalt," or "Thank you, Cerulean," two

names I think I'd prefer over Jessica.

The sun glints to my right and I realize I forgot my sunglasses. When I look straight ahead, the sun produces a distressing strobe light effect as it disappears and reappears with every two- or three-story building I pass. It's frustrating, but doesn't warrant slowing down or turning around—those are the rules. I maintain my speed, stopping only for stoplights. My body heats up and I unzip my fleece.

I cross streets. I look in windows of closed restaurants. I nod toward Logan Auditorium. I observe new sloppy, unreadable tags thrown up over familiar graffiti. I admire the foot-tall sticker of a hot dog with a face and arms and feet. I laugh at a poster of Chuy with his mustache formed into the city's skyline and wonder if I did the wrong thing by voting for Rahm yesterday. I only voted for him because my boss, Bob, told me to. I figure he knows since he's a lawyer.

I first walked to work seven months ago. I had set out to take the train for real. When I got on, it was packed and I had to stand. The vent system must've been broken because the whole car smelled like urine and was probably 100 degrees Fahrenheit. It wasn't the first time. The smell and heat made me nauseous. People jostled me, disregarding where their bodies were in space. They acted like animals at each stop, frantic, as if not getting off or on the train that second would kill them. When a student turned around and smacked me in the stomach with her huge, textbook-filled backpack, I became an animal too. I knew if I stayed on the train, I would die. When the doors opened next, I clawed and jostled my way through the standing passengers. I held my breath as I ran across the platform, up the stairs, through the turnstile, up more stairs, and out onto the street at Division—five stops before my usual exit, Jackson.

When I decided to walk the rest of the way to work instead of getting on another train, I thought I was deciding to quit my job, call my attempt at living in the city a failure, and go crawling back to Sycamore. This was Chicago—a hot and smelly train isn't a valid reason for being late to work. I went into Bob's office as soon as I got there, ready to accept my due. Surprisingly, when I said, "I'm sorry. We need to talk," he cut me off. He apologized for allowing me to stay a temp longer than the agreement allowed and offered me a permanent position with full benefits. When I stood there, too surprised to respond, he said I drive a hard bargain and sure, he'd give me a promotion and move me from front desk to QC, as long as I didn't mind looking at spreadsheets all day in a windowless office near the back door. We shook hands. I took it as a sign and haven't gotten on a train since.

I pass Irazu, the Costa Rican restaurant with delicious oatmeal shakes. I pass a window that says "LOVE" in white tissue paper with a bunch of pale pink tissue puffs hanging around it and stare at it, thinking *do not think of Mark*. I pass a long, sort of beat-up white van that says American Apparel on

the side. I imagine Dov Charney driving it around Chicago's back alleys, trying to pick up new models with thick eyebrows. I pass a Walgreens in Wicker Park that used to be a bank. I went in it once; the pharmacy is filled with safe deposit boxes. I think about how all those boxes are the same and all the people who get prescriptions filled there are the same too, in a sense. I think about a New York Times article I read online about five New Yorkers who each only wear one color all the time. They are all designers or artists. I wonder if I could do that, wear blue every day, and how soon people would make fun of me, or if I'd risk getting fired. Probably not. If the law office doesn't notice when I arrive, they probably don't notice what I wear.

I hear the rumble of the train and look up at the tracks, now in the sky. When the train whooshes past, its bright silver blinds me. When I turn my head back to the street, everything feels brighter, harsher. The sun reflects off of each approaching car's windshield. I get the strobe light effect from both directions now—the sun peeking between buildings on my right and reflecting off cars to my left. My eyes hurt. I blink. I try to close my eyes as much as possible without closing them all the way, so I can block out the light but make sure I'm not about to run into anyone. Another train squeals overhead. This one sounds louder, seems faster.

I walk faster, following the train as it goes back underground. I smell a mixture of onions and garbage and want to throw up. I try to reassure myself that when I hit Kinzie I'll smell the chocolate of Blommer Chocolate Factory, one of my favorite smells, but right now the thought of smelling chocolate makes me want to throw up even more. If there is one thing this city does not lack, it is a cornucopia of smells.

A persistent brightness stings in the upper right corner of my field of vision. I raise my hand up to block the sun then quickly realize it isn't blocking anything. The world feels shaky beneath my feet. After walking directly into a brick wall, I break my rule of only stopping for stoplights and turn into the next alley in order to figure this out. Even when leaning against a building entirely enveloped by shade, the bright, white light is there to my upper right, pulsating.

I take a deep breath and turn in a slow, complete circle to test the light. No matter which way I face, it's in the same spot. It dawns on me that the light is not coming from the sun. "Oh shit," I say, aloud. "Migraine aura." It's not ideal, but I can justify breaking the rules now—it's an emergency situation and I have a limited amount of time to do something about it. I pull my phone out to email Bob that I'm not coming in, then put my phone away. They won't notice I am gone, and this way I won't have to waste a sick day.

I dash across Milwaukee because I only walk on the right side of streets, the way trains are always on the right side of the tracks. I must head back. I walk past Walgreens again, past the American Apparel van—now open, a guy wearing cut-off Dickies and a wallet chain pulling stacks of shirts

out of the back and carrying them into a skate shop—and past the LOVE window. I'm running when the white light takes over seventy-five percent of my vision.

I wish I had stopped in Walgreens and bought ibuprofen while I was still there. Maybe some water and Saltines or a loaf of bread. The thought of food makes me rush into an alley and vomit. After wiping my mouth and zipping up my fleece—I'm suddenly shivering—I sprint down the sidewalk at full speed, stupidly hoping to get home before I'm blind.

I recognize the brown Irazu sign through the small sliver of peripheral vision I have remaining. I sit on the curb of the side street before the restaurant. I look around and can see nothing now, nothing except whiteness and, if I am really still, maybe a couple spots where the whiteness turns off-white or light yellow. I drop my head between my knees.

I hear coins fall on the ground near me as a man says, "God bless you." I try not to cry. Do I look that bad? What homeless person wears new North Face? Though if he's giving me money, he probably won't hurt me. I say, "thanks," and keep my head down.

I've had aura several times, but it's only made me completely blind twice before. The best thing to do is stay calm and wait for it to pass. It shouldn't last more than thirty minutes. I hear gravel crunching nearby and feel a pang of fear. I decide it's okay to think about the person who I know will distract me, the guy I usually try never to think about: Mark.

Mark and I hooked up last spring. It was glorious.

In Sycamore, no one understood him, including me. He didn't farm and he didn't play sports. In DeKalb County's eyes, he wasn't a man. He sat around playing an electric guitar that no one could really hear because he couldn't afford the amp to go with it. He drove to Chicago on the weekends where a mysterious tattoo artist-in-training gave him free tattoos while the rest of us drank beer between stalks of corn before drunkenly driving home.

After high school, Mark moved to Chicago with a craigslist roommate and got a job at Whole Foods while the rest of us stayed in Sycamore working and pretending to study. I attended Kishwaukee Community College, then Northern Illinois University and got a degree in sociology that I'll probably never use. When Mark sent me a Facebook invitation to his band's show last summer, I went. I drove into Chicago alone, nervous I'd get lost or in an accident or mugged or shot or even that he'd ignore me at the show. It'd been nearly four years. Thankfully, none of that happened. We danced and he invited me back to his apartment.

I think about it now, trying to picture between all the brightness how I traced my fingers up and down his tattoos. He had a snarling bear on his arm holding a picnic basket, out of which fell trails of ants that marched in all different directions—one army down to his fingertips, another up to his ear. He had a rosary inked around his neck, on his chest, and next to that, "Rose,"

in large script under an image of his mom's face. I remembered when he got the tattoos because they had been hot gossip in school, but I had never seen them up close.

"Why'd you do it?" I asked, touching the ants on his neck and face, for the first time thinking they were more cool than strange.

"To make life easier," Mark said.

"How is that?" I felt shocked. In high school, people had made fun of his tattoos. He even got called to the principal, who allegedly told him he'd ruined his life.

"There are a lot of things out there that aren't for me, Jessica. Certain jobs, relationships. These will keep them away, even when I get weak and tempted to compromise." He laughed. "I'll never be a regional manager for Target, or marry a woman who's picking a guy to please her parents or impress her work friends."

"I never thought you'd like someone like me," I whispered. In high school, I'd gone to church, been on the yearbook committee, barely talked in class.

"I never thought you'd like someone like me," he said back.

We had sex then cuddled for hours. He'd drift off then wake up and say, "Are you okay? Do you need anything?" He brought me glasses of water and tucked my hair behind my ears. It was the best night of my life.

In the morning, I left Mark's apartment while he was lying on his back, snoring lightly, arms outstretched like Christ. When I got onto the street, I pulled out my phone and blocked his number then his Facebook account. I thought I was doing what he said he'd done, cutting off any temptation to compromise. It's not that I thought I could do better than Mark—I probably can't. It's that he was so steadfast in his dreams while I was mired in my fears and confusions. I didn't want to mistake admiration for love. I didn't want to give up on my own ambitions in the face of someone else's just because I didn't know what mine were yet. I knew I wanted to move to the city, but I wanted to do it alone. Shortly after, the law firm became my Whole Foods and walking to work, my playing in a band.

Our five-year high school reunion is coming up in June, but I hear Mark isn't going to make it because his band got Warped Tour. I hear they have an album out. I hear he quit Whole Foods. On Facebook, I see the people who once mocked him writing praise on his band's page.

If Mark were my boyfriend, I'd tell him migraines make you feel hungover even though you haven't drank. That they make you feel schizophrenic before you recognize what's going on, because you're smelling things that other people don't notice, like onions and garbage, and seeing things other people can't see, like stars in old cartoons swirling around a character's head after he is punched in the face.

If I still had Mark's number I'd call him now. I'd tell him I feel like

I'm being punched in my right eye, over and over, right now, every time my heart beats. I'd tell him all I see is white, but when I feel the punches one big spot to my right turns yellow. I'd call him and ask him to come pick me up from Irazu, just outside, because I'm temporarily incapacitated. He'd buy me one of their oatmeal milkshakes, knowing it is my favorite. He'd hold it to my forehead like a cold compress and say, "Are you okay?"

I'd tell Mark I am sorry I blocked him. That it wasn't personal and I'm sure it made him sad. That even I didn't understand it completely. To prove it, I'd say, *Mark, if I understood humans, wouldn't I ride in the train with them, not walk alongside or above or below the tracks, imagining myself as my own train?*

I lift my head and see that my vision is coming back. I can see most of the world again, albeit with a vibrating black frame lining the edges. The ground below me comes into focus and I see a crumpled five, two crisp ones, and several coins. I scoop them up, walk into Irazu, and order an oatmeal milkshake. While I wait for it, I pull out my phone and change my Facebook name to Cobalt. Cobalt Cerulean, as a start. I decide after I answer my family's and friends' inevitable questions about that, I'll look into changing it for real, legally. I decide to walk to Target tonight—after chilaquiles, margaritas, and a long nap—to buy Rit dye in royal. Maybe I can't afford brand new blue clothes, but I can afford to alter the clothes I already have. I rub my head and decide to buy a blue pill case, too, so I will never be without ibuprofen, and to buy sunglasses, maybe a few blue pairs, one each for every purse and jacket pocket I have.

Elspeth Jensen *earned her BA in Creative Writing from Western Washington University, and is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at George Mason University. She is the former Editor in Chief of Jeopardy Magazine, and currently serves as the fiction editor for Sweet Tree Review and the Assistant Poetry Editor for So to Speak. She was the 2012 winner of the Columbia Basin College Writing Contest, the 2015 recipient of the R.D. Brown Memorial Scholarship for creative writing. Her writing is currently published in the Bellevue Literary Review and Bop Dead City. In addition to literary pursuits, Elspeth is passionate about art and animals.*

Those Who

Elspeth Jensen

rarely wrench apart their ribs
as open, beckoning doors
for you,
who talk along the edges
of themselves.
Only a once-in-a-while loss of footing
or willful bow allowing
you to gather
threads of them.
Those who know knowing
can be wandering invited
through someone's else's house,
collecting them
in the caliche-coated rocks
lining windowsills.
No drawers divulging,
ball bearings, smooth sliding.
No open cabinet rifling.
No, they know less
than the long, dark hairs
wound around
a bar of soap
on the bathroom counter,
fingertips tracing upholstery seams
like questions. Did we ask
the right ones,

are there right ones,
clean as angles.
Sitting at a table
before a carafe of cabernet
glinting like blood,
strips of sunlight in through windows.
We watch the space between
each other's words, learn each other
in slow sips,
and red-stained lips.

Beach

Elspeth Jensen

Stepped on a sliver of jellyfish
feared electric surge
but felt only gooey spring
between toes
dragged maps into sand
with tangled kelp
filled pockets with shards
of shells and there was heaving
in wet air
gifts from the ocean
a sea sponge for my father
bleached yellow pores
he said it's just a sponge
like for kitchens
not from the sea
but it was from the sea
so I wondered how
if things were ever
from one
if we'd tripped
knees would've bled
across barnacle crust
I imagined the terrier stumbling
off the shore
his blond head bobbing
above blue
I imagined slipping
off my shoes
and sinking fingers
into the gushing cold
like heroes
I imagined
but I saw the lurch
and lull of waves
wondered its strength

pressed to my face
salt water pushing into lungs
but heroes
never got the chance
good to have
no chance to let the waves prove
or disprove good
barnacles' wet mouths
in tide pools
breathed and sucked
played tricks
on anemones
sticky tug on index finger
while his neighbor swallowed crab
tide pools and
tide pools
let crabs crawl across
my fingers like stairs
in Mexico a man told me
there's only one ocean
but I was too young
to step back
see each geography
puzzle piece
pressed into place

***Lucas Flatt's** work has appeared in Pithead Chapel, Sundog Lit, and Ellipsis.*

Andrew Dreams of Fire

Lucas Flatt

He spends most of the night sitting behind a coffee shop on a fire escape, downtown of his hometown, Sparta, staring into a streetlight. His name is Andrew, but he's left that behind riding northbound through muddy Chattanooga nexus. He pulls Mountain Lightning whiskey, considers himself here at the end-times as a failing prophet, a beleaguered traveler, and an off-the-wagon drunk. Feels paper thin not having touched a guitar in months. By his count there are at most two days left before the end of the world.

He's discovered after wide-eyed months surveying prophecy in a Florida night sky that our sun will explode soon and, contrary to what he might have thought, it won't wink out and freeze us. Instead a terrible exigent current of flame will come and leave us ash.

#

He isn't telling anyone his name, anymore. People are looking. Across his knuckles read: FUCK PoLiCE.

Years ago, he climbed this fire escape to the coffee shop roof and found and smashed spent fluorescent light tubes until his pants were powdered like a skier's, and was arrested snowy up to his knees. Since, the night's red eye appeared and watched him intermittently.

He climbs down and shambles hood-up with a notebook of loose eschatology clutched to his middle. On his way to the interstate he pauses under violet hum of stained glass behind a Church of God church. It's high enough he has to climb unsteadily onto an AC unit, wrap his hand in his hoodie and punch through. It takes him three hard shots to shatter the glass.

At the highway he hitchhikes to Knoxville. Arrives by dawn. The man driving him hard east in the black Mitsubishi drinks coffee the whole ride, his wallet in the console with a crescent indenture, perfect dental record of a bite. Knoxville has set the Christmas lights on rooftops downtown and they shine red and green cookie-cutter tree shapes until the sun rises and burns them out.

#

He can't unfold his fingers in the morning. His knuckles are black and unfolding each finger sends a stab of pain that makes him queasy. He needs a drink. This is World's Fair Park, but he doesn't remember getting here. He has an erection and urinates by the bench, forces his penis toward the grass and hunches his shoulders. Looks back through fog and hears no one.

Near the bridge, he passes a lamp store and looks in at glass quelled

by daylight, ruby grayed like dimmed, dead hearts wearing veils. The wind over the bridge makes him shiver, and he's out of whiskey.

#

Behind the liquor store across the bridge he swigs Mountain Lightning and coughs and swigs. Gets up a sloping hill. On Althea he passes a condemned one bedroom Lustron prefab faded to a bloody spackled rust and caved-in on one side. The police had found almost fifty dogs living inside the house and feeding on the food the invalid tenant's brother left, and on each other. All of them, dogs and person, getting by shin-deep in shit.

A half mile past the condemned house is the Maniac Mansion and he finds it quiet and doesn't knock. He's left a Takemine acoustic by way of payment against long-outstanding rent, and surely left hard feelings.

He looks in through the front window for his guitar. Climbs down into the back lot. No cars are familiar. The lower half of the house isn't sided. The cinderblock features a spray paint mural of a gigantic stick figure man balancing a smaller stick figure man on his fingertips. The larger man says, "You were the world," to the silent smaller, has lightning forking from the V of his lower half, suggesting these bolts shoot from his ass and/or vagina. He thinks it's stupid. When he was Andrew he was author of this mural, and whatever seemed prophetic then is clearly stupid now. He throws and breaks a bottle on the mural.

A space is designated in the lot for pickup kickball games with trashcan lids left down as bases. By first base is a picnic table and the girl sits frozen with a longboard dissected on the table.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey."

The girl looks him in the eyes four seconds, yells, "Turnt," and dings a crumpled Sprite can off the raised concrete into the gravel. "Naw, do you have Allen keys? Mine broke."

"Maybe." He sets his backpack on the table and digs inside, sorts through aimless because he doesn't have the keys.

She rolls a wheel back and forth along the buckled, moldy slats and shoots him glances. "Fuck it, if you don't."

"I don't." He stops rummaging.

"Fuck it." She bangs a palm on the table. "It wasn't meant to be." She bites her lips and checks for splinters.

"Are you here for the show?"

"Are you in a band?"

"I don't play anymore."

She fumbles with her parts.

He says, "Are you?"

"No. But I sing. I used to have a band for kids." She's smiling. "You make me nervous."

Her face is dark and downy, burns fiercely umber in her blush. Doors slam up at the Mansion. The girl hums. She sings, “Good night, light. And the red balloon.”

He puts his hand on hers.

She pulls away and slides down the bench and turns her shoulders. “I guess the bands are here.” She puts the longboard back together. Without turning she asks, "Have any weed?"

"No. It makes me paranoid."

She nods. "Acid does, for me. I still take it. Let the bad times roll.”

“That’s stupid."

“Yeah. But I think that if you’re not." She laughs and snorts. "It is stupid."

She says, “Stop looking at me.”

Says, “I was with these crusties in New Orleans. They had the worst acid we dropped and went to Easter service. In like this cathedral. The preacher started in about the Resurrection and I swear the whole place filled up with ghosts. Like, transparent people. It only lasted for a few seconds.”

“Are you religious?”

“No, but listen. They, the ghosts, they had their mouths opened like they were screaming. They wanted out. They ran for the doors. And the preacher’s eyes got big and he stopped preaching. He could see them too, I think.”

“What do you know about the end of the world?”

“If you aren’t afraid of something, you’re afraid of something else.”

#

He’s left the girl and gone to sleep on the porch of the Mansion. A crash brings him to. Two laughing kids wheel a speaker cabinet up the plywood ramp that runs beside the porch and inside. He tries to fall back to sleep.

"Hey," Jim says and kicks his foot. "Andrew."

"I was looking for you. I came back to talk to you." Jim is his oldest friend, has gray in his beard, and his eyes are gray and tired.

"You have to leave," Jim says. "If Megan or Alex sees you, they'll call the cops. You didn't bring their money, did you?"

"I can pay for the show."

Jim kneels to him. "Go now, motherfucker.”

He stretches his neck, takes his time because he's dizzy. Gets up and totters as he goes and stumbles off the crowded porch. Steps on a girl's foot and she squeals and slaps his face. Jim follows him out to the street. Says, "We'll call the cops if you come back."

Jim sounds weak. He sounds pitiful. It’s not what was asked for.

#

He sits in rain in a field by the Mansion and begins to shake. In a

while the girl comes along. She nods to him and sits ten paces away on the phone with someone. He watches her. From his pack he takes a composition journal with a broken spine and splayed pages. Some drop into the slush grass.

She might think he's going to draw her where she speaks on the phone and turns away. The nodes of her spine stand out like knuckles and the indention above her ass is yellow and above the elastic of her waistband stands a line of down.

Here is where he keeps his numbers. Pages are wet. He'd promised himself he'd leave his work back in Florida, on the train, and at the Mansion. He's wrong about the numbers, and their ink is blurring away and purpling the pages.

The girl must be talking to a man and she's asking him to come and get him. She's saying please, calling him, "Daddy," but whispering. She calls him, "Baby," also. She paces her concentric crescents until at last she slips into mist and night gone looking for her father.

#

He's carried from the party three Busch tallboys. This binge has lasted ten days and before he'd quit drinking nearly a year, and that had only made him feel tired and confused. Dry-docked and abandoned. Petrified in small gray increments down from his crown to the soles of his feet, day by day. Staying with his own father in Pensacola, he'd held a series of construction jobs he lost for being inattentive. Dangerously negligent.

His father spent his time in a tan and threadbare recliner, oxygen tank at hand and the television tuned to muted, hysterical news shows, changing jazz records that crackled through the little condo day and night. To rise and go to the kitchen or bathroom and back left his father quivering and wheezing. The old man cried often. They passed interchangeable days without sharing a word.

Likewise he didn't sleep, stayed up listening to the paranoids on late night AM radio. By mid-summer, he'd quit looking for work altogether and sat instead cross-legged every night in the yard behind the condo where he kept a tent and worried and smoked and adjusted the radio. He checked out books from the library and kept them out, circled pages in highlighter until the highlighter dried up and he was too broke to buy another. He burned pine needles and marked passages with the ashes, his fingertips thereafter black. Reconfigured his open books under flashlight beam and words would rise and mingle and cohere on the clearest starry nights. One night a huge red moon lowered in the sky and pulsed so near he thought that he could reach and touch it, and it told him that he will perish like the rest, but after, and it told him how to count to forever, when that was finally close enough that someone like Andrew could count it. And Andrew was the right person to count it, and Andrew was grateful that he'd been elected. And he keeps the numbers.

Andrew asked it, “Red moon where did you come from?”

The red moon ascended when the sun came, leaving him stranded and searching down littered alleys where tomcats sprayed the concrete shell of Pensacola. He began that day on the brink of revelation and got lost in the ticking of daylight minutes, the crawl of the Florida sun, until nothing felt sure except the heat. Some nights thereafter, he shouted himself hoarse in the tent, but this upset his father and the red moon would not come down again.

Fall came and a steady mist ruined the books and he bought a bottle of cheap whiskey and packed his pack and hopped a train north with only a cursory farewell to his father. On the train trip to Tennessee, he thought of his father pale and dead and gone to ash, sifting through the window screen and fouling the carpet and a spinning record on his last way outside.

#

Near the condemned house he finds the girl, Tina, sitting by the road against a telephone pole and talking to herself. "Hey," he says. The rain comes heavy, now.

"Why aren't you at the show?" she says. "Hasn't it started?"

"Why aren't you?" The sun is setting and he doesn't know where he'll sleep tonight. Against the power box a garden spider's made its web. It's black with a yellow X across its back. He touches it; it bites his finger.

"Oh, man," she says. "I'm in a lot of trouble." Smiles at him and starts to cry. She doesn’t have the money for the whom she owes.

He doesn’t ask why she owes the money, tells her, “Run.”

“Where to?”

She looks away and he kills the spider . "I'll go talk to them."

She asks him if he will and hugs him.

At least he won’t have to go to Florida on his own. He says, "You'll have to do something for me, after."

"I'm not going to fuck you."

"Not that," he says. “Can I read your palm?"

She holds both out for him to pick. Her line of heart says she's sensual, and her line of fate lengthens along her lines of the wrist and he doesn't tell her that she's in grave danger. "This," he says pointing to a little blotch of red below her fingers, "means vitality." Tina laughs and he tells her this is serious, that the arcane is truth in the world and modern life is built around misdirection and diversion. Neon lights and sleight of hand. He borrows a pen from her and uses a flyer in his pack to draw out the position of the astral houses, but by then she isn’t listening.

He takes her hand. Makes a show of pouring over them. Doesn't tell her how her life line's cut or where she's headed. He says she’ll fair about as well as everyone else.

She has the habit of pressing out her tongue when she’s concentrating. “Is that all?”

"Yes. Here."

She takes the wet pages from him. When she looks to him for help he promises that what's elided in this calculus is firmly implanted, here, and he presses her doomed palms to his temples and he says a sort of prayer, and they set off.

The prayer says: hold unto these that watch over, I am obedient. I am a wandering speck capillary to your impulse.

#

They go by railroad track and he's lost the thread of time, falls drunk twice in the rain. She tries to take his beer, and he kneels to drink the last of it with the rails bowing his tibia.

Soon he's lured into a rundown subdivision, tramping through briars. Over the short chain-link fence a glowing double wide sits apart from neighbors by a stand of woods. By the house the girl is tugging him back, and *Golden Girls* are blaring inside on a set.

She asks him why he's laughing. Tugs his belt, threatens to run.

He finds by the concrete stoep a length of rebar and when the first front window drops the girl screams. He clamps his hand over her mouth and she presses into him. She reaches back between them, runs her palm over the fly of his jeans.

But nothing's worked there for him since he can remember, before Pensacola.

#

Half an hour's farther walk she points up the tracks at lights, the trailer park she has to go to. Dawdles, tips from tie to tie, says, "You shouldn't come with me."

"I'll go instead."

"They're going to be mad I don't have enough money." She's taken something. Her pupils are nickels, and he doesn't know when or how she's done this.

"Wait, and I can find some money."

"I can't. Go and bring it here."

He takes her wrist.

"Go and get it." She yanks away. "I'm afraid of them. They're what I'm afraid of."

"I'm not afraid of anyone."

"They're not the kind of people where it matters."

He doesn't follow.

#

At the Mansion kids sleep on the porch, the floor, in huddled masses on the furniture. He goes quietly back into the first set of apartments and into Jim's room. "Wake up," he says and shakes Jim by the shoulder. Takes an elbow to the bridge of his nose.

Jim is pushing him out of the room and outside the room is dark now. He has the guitar. Jim slams the door and someone sits up in the dark. He rears to break Jim's door, but goes.

There's no way to tell his way out of the Mansion. He steps on a boy's head fumbling outside in the dark.

On the porch he stares into a bulb. Moths circle and pop against it. He closes his eyes and can still see the porch light glowing orange there. It sears his fingertips before it snaps. He takes a boy's wallet from his jeans and wakes him. The boy shouts. There's yelling still inside.

#

Sprinting up the tracks he trips and cracks his temple on the rail. When he comes to he rolls over and sees the blood-red disk like a moon descending heavy and backlit by iridescent clouds. Rain in his eyes turns this moon into puddles smudged across a mirror pool. He says, "Wait. Not yet. I've found someone to come with me. Please." The false moon presses down against him so warm he chokes. It holds him down for hours while he whispers pleas, for the girl to go with him to the appointed place, for his own survival, and the red moon fills his mouth with tendrils. Before he suffocates, the moon draws back.

#

He finds the girl under the torn fence. Leans the guitar against it and turns her and holds his palm over her mouth to check for breath. Her nose is broken and her eyes are swelling shut. Hair matted down and slick with blood. Jaw akimbo, purple finger prints along her throat. He lifts her tank top over her ribs, finds footprints and dried blood, yellowed puckered punctures along her side. Dog bites.

A dog barks and voices carry from the trailers. He drags her to the tracks. Asks her if she can remember her name and she shrieks and back porch lights come on across a stand of shrubs. She claws at his face and he holds her wrists and whispers for her to stop. "We're getting help," he says.

Her body is light as a bird's. In this shape, she cannot make a train ride back to Florida. They make it to the road, and to the highway, the bridge. He sees cruisers along the way but doesn't flag them down. He wants to, but cannot make himself, and they roll past.

"You'll have to walk," he says by the husk left of the old Baptist hospital. Beyond it is the bridge. "You'll have to walk across. I can't carry you." She moans and he loops his arm around her and drags her across a mile on scraping arches. But her breath is coming steady. And it won't matter, when what's coming comes.

He sets her down on the sidewalk outside Keener Lighting. Every lamp burns inside, searing Clench. Her eyes have rolled to show their whites and her forehead is cool as fish.

He tells her, "Wait," and swings the guitar. Brings down the display

window and the Takemine body implodes. Flecks of glass pierce his cheeks and throat and forearms. He shoulders through the remnants of the window into the light and smashes everything out with the guitar neck, row by row, toppling high to lowest sets. His ears ring. There's glass inside his ears.

In the spotlight, he stands panting and hasn't heard the sirens until now. He drops the guitar neck with busted strings like hair and holds his shredded hands up, walks out the window toward the spotlight. Kneels on the sidewalk. Tucks his hands behind his head, blood warm against his neck and down his back.

"Did you do this?" one cop says, kneeling with his Maglite on the girl. Another cop stands shadowed behind the glare of the spot and says, “Keep your hands up.”

Tina arches on the pavement, shows through ragged slits the yellow whites of her eyes. Her fingernails scrape the concrete.

The policemen watch her slacken. She might be dreaming. She’s whispering, or chattering her teeth.

A cop shines his flashlight in her face. “What’s she saying?”

Andrew points the broken neck of the guitar into the glare of the spot. "Turn that out,” he says. “The light."

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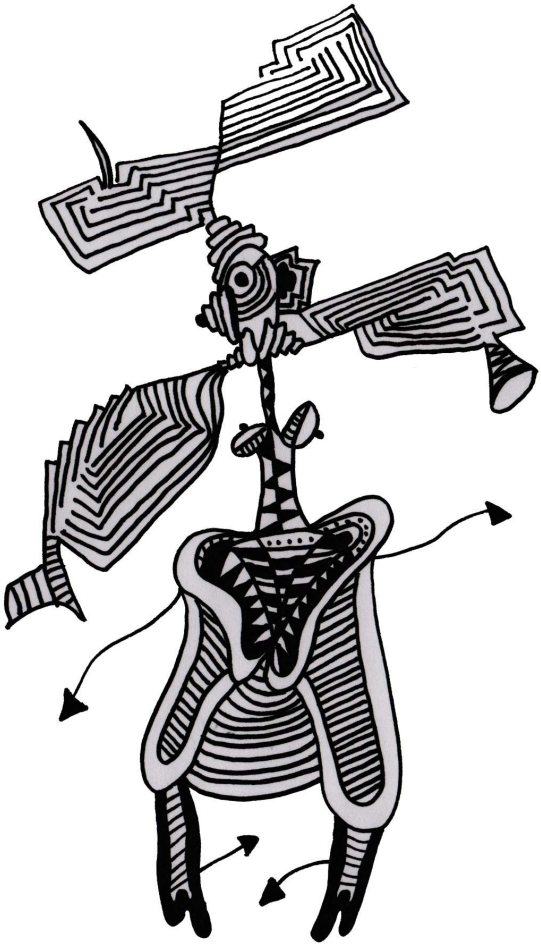

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