

# SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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**CHANGING THE WORLD  
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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**COVER: From the Facing It Together Series** / Jack Bordnick

## Blue Room

David Allen Sullivan

in its center a claw-footed, blue-bottomed bathtub seen through the slats strapped around it for shipping. And what he'd done in that blue room was to leave it wrapped while he shot thin shiver jets into his arm.

Sometimes warm, sometimes cold but all he felt was hot ice entering his body where he'd slapped a vein awake, jabbed, and let it take hold with a blanching shake. He was coming awake. He was dying for it. Catching a ride on an outbound train that drained what we knew of him.

We'd seen him growing thin, and one by one we peeled off, having said our piece and feeling we'd said enough. Still, he kept that same wild cackle when he laughed, and the dopest tunes. He'd pull off an earbud, have me insert it, and we'd nod together, skulls rubbing. *You're out following every finger, to still a doubt but still it lingers*, Jules Shear's high pitched whine would fly.

Lee'd say:

*This is the realest it gets.* It stings  
to remember. That blue tub never  
got plumbed, he never immersed  
his body in it. We washed him  
after he was blue and cold. We  
buried him with those earbuds in,  
in that blue bathtub. Had to bend  
him fetal to make him fit. Those thin  
lips were twisted into a smile, as if  
he was enjoying the thin joke of it.

To all my friends, if you're in need,  
I'll leave my cell on and charged. Call.

## Decay's Delights

David Allen Sullivan

Soil grows in me, blackens as it breaks down  
what I feed it in the dark container of my belly.

It decomposes eggshells, splits avocado pits  
in half so they tendrils out feelingly, shreds

newspapers and blurs their ink until nothing  
can be read in them save for blots. The buried bits,

grit of wine dregs, my first marriage, the metallic  
tang of my addictions, are tumbled together

in my un-edited memoir's first draft. Fields I feed  
the mulch to grow weeds with as much gusto

as spinach, latch crawls of squash, laddering vines  
from which giant blackberries droop as they nod

and pulse in the least wind—am I a fool to argue  
that weeds are the most beautiful? Ivy entwines

in our fences, pries apart mortar between bricks.  
This rich, warm place in me takes apart as much

as it builds, asks only for my equanimity, my yes  
to the everything it proposes. Growth and decay

are written on the crank handle. Turn it  
over. Follow the worm trail. Freely spread

their castings. See what's gone to seed. What  
comes back as something edible or beautiful—

or ugly as all get out, and every bit as worthy  
as the stinky blown petals of this rose, browning.



**From the Facing It Together Series / Jack Bordnick**



## An Insect Floating

Carolina Esses

Translated from Spanish by Allison A. deFreese

Reprinted from the upcoming collection *Temporada de Invierno / Winter Season* with permission from Entre Ríos Books

AN INSECT FLOATING  
 sinking  
 vanishing in the water's murky depths.  
 With my tools I could remove the wings, its stinger,  
 but this one drowned  
 slid down the bucket's red rim  
 toward soapy water,  
 leaving us  
 age seven  
 with our thirst for dissection  
 intact  
 with our need to see  
 the loose pieces  
 of a horsefly  
 detach.

## Un Insecto Flota

Un insecto flota.  
 Se hunde.  
 Desaparece en el fondo turbio del agua.  
 Mis instrumentos sirven para extirpar  
 alas, aguijón  
 pero éste se ahoga  
 resbala desde el borde rojo del balde  
 hacia el agua enjabonada  
 y nos deja  
 a los siete años  
 con nuestro afán de disección intacto  
 nuestra necesidad de ver las partes sueltas  
 desprendidas, de un tábano.

## I Wanted to Rip

Carolina Esses

Translated from Spanish by Allison A. deFreese

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I WANTED TO RIP  
a long winter from the forest,  
to keep it inside me, to let it melt  
like a splinter in my veins  
so whenever I think of it  
I turn into a wise old animal.  
I went into winter as if getting tangled  
in the stems of a blue-leafed plant  
that only grows between stones.

## Quise Arrancar del Bosque

Quise arrancar del bosque  
una larga temporada de invierno,  
guardarla dentro de mí, que se fuera deshaciendo  
como una astilla a través de mis vasos sanguíneos  
y que al recordarla  
me convirtiera en un animal viejo y sabio.  
Fui hacia el invierno, como si me enredara  
en el tallo de una planta de hojas azules  
que solo crece entre las piedras.

## I'm No Good at Gauging Distances

Carolina Esses

Translated from Spanish by Allison A. deFreese

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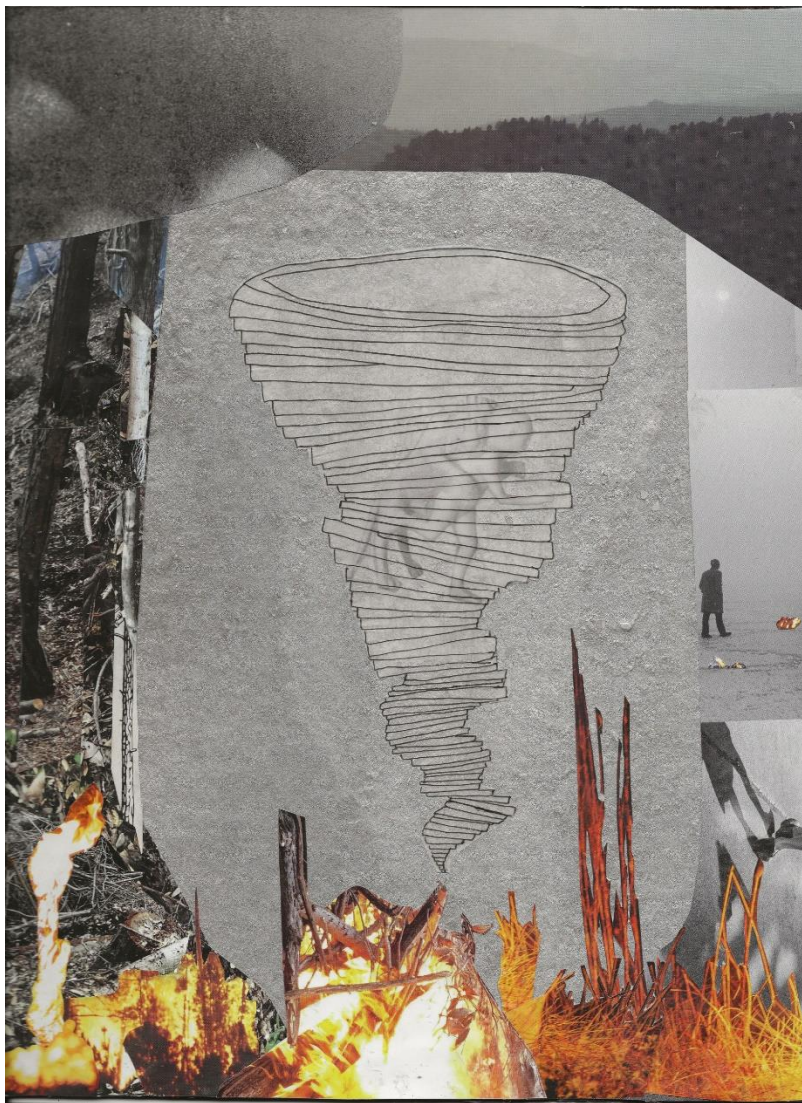
I'M NO GOOD AT GAUGING DISTANCES  
 but I know the emptiness  
 between two stones  
 placed side-by-side  
 is the same void that opens between two cliffs.

The closest point between  
 us: our father.  
 Even so, I hear them say  
*these two don't have the same mother*  
*nor share a religion.*  
 Could we have been created from the same nature?

## No Soy Hábil para Medir Distancias

No soy hábil para medir distancias  
 pero sé que entre dos piedras  
 colocadas una al lado de la otra  
 se abre el mismo abismo que entre dos acantilados.

La distancia más próxima entre nosotras  
 dos: el padre.  
 Aún así escucho que dicen  
*no comparten la madre*  
*no son de la misma religión.*  
 ¿Acaso estamos hechas de la misma naturaleza?



**Destruction** / Colleen Kam Siu



**Bloom** / Colleen Kam Siu

**After Night Rain**

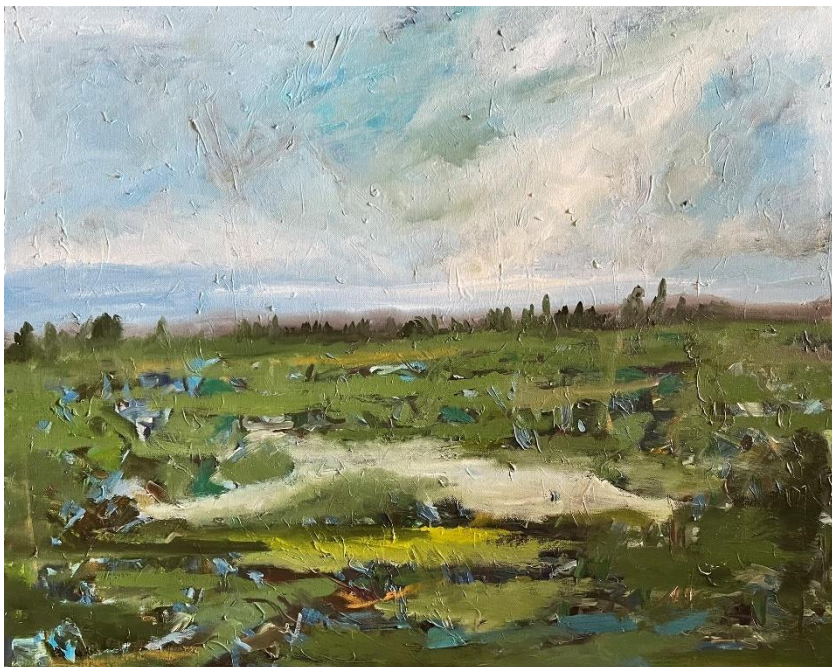
Valerie A. Smith

Dawn somewhere itself in the yard  
between infant leaves and large gaps  
of unfulfilled canopy, indulgent sky.

*Overflow gonna flow*, says the grey  
that plans to stay all day, ash against  
the grass turns pine bark purple.

New oak seedlings have fallen, soaked  
to the wooden steps, a red stoop where I  
had more than one talk with the Lord.

How long we've been here is marked  
by a young man's death, growth spurts,  
occupations. Redirection. We didn't love  
the house, but we loved each other.  
Pockets of rain pass over us with secrets  
from previous places and times.



**Path to Lothlorien / Robert Palmer**

## Tiger of the Air

Suzannah Watchorn

1 I WISH I had the language, the hymnal voice  
you could understand, to sincerely proclaim  
my gratitude for the times you visited us,  
for choosing that tree at the top of our slope

2 as your perch. The first time I heard you  
I was in the attic, scribbling weepy words  
of despair in amethyst ink, asking God  
for forgiveness and more. Not faithful

3 enough, apparently, because I concluded  
you must just be a flock of sleepy pigeons.  
The next time, halfway downstairs, I turned  
and ran back up, woke up my lovely love;

4 in silence, we held hands, listening for you.  
He said you could only be an owl, swirling  
into stories of boyhood walks, Carolina parks,  
but still, I couldn't quite believe. So, I practiced

5 my version of devotionals: I started reading.  
You, my lord or lady, are a Great Horned Owl.  
You are secretive, stealthy, raptorial, *the tiger  
of the air*, your call low and long, four or five

6 hooting syllables. In the mornings those days,  
I questioned whether I could survive the winter,  
but those nights, with you outside, I flew through  
dreams of open wings, of tough, raking claws.





Lion Hearted Man #3 / GJ Gillespie

## The Bagpipe's Tune

Jules Laforgue

Translated by Jefferey Samoray

No, no, my poor bagpipe,  
Your lament is not so birdlike;  
Nothing you say turns out right,  
Pleases the ear or brings delight;

You see, Nature is the sort of spouse  
Who crams ecstasy in our mouths,  
And then, kills us, hardly polite,  
The moment we pause to take respite.

Fine! She will do as she pleases,  
Everything follows her own caprices!  
As for us, we'll keep the nine Goddesses.  
Kind muses of arts and sciences!

(Oh! Can't we just play some fine phrases,  
To turn the tide, reverse the places,  
So this mother so cruel and jealous  
Would raise the thumb pressing upon us?)

## Air de biniou

Non, non, ma pauvre cornemuse,  
Ta plainte est pas si oiseuse;  
Et Tout est bien une méprise,  
Et l'on peut la trouver mauvaise;

Et la Nature est une épouse  
Qui nous carambole d'extases,  
Et puis, nous occit, peu courtoise,  
Dès qu'on se permet une pause.

Eh bien! qu'elle en prenne à son aise,  
Et que tout fonctionne à sa guise!  
Nous, nous entretiendrons les Muses.  
Les neuf immortelles Glaneuses!

(Oh! pourrions-nous pas, par nos phrases,  
Si bien lui retourner les choses,  
Que cette marâtre jalouse  
N'ait plus sur nos rentes de prise?)

**Cloud**

Jules Laforgue

Translated by Jefferey Samoray

Oh, let me alone, where my destiny lies,  
I'm through with your false analogies!  
Anyone upon close look would agree  
That you,...you can't tell earth from sky.

Small proofs get on like scheming brothers,  
Winking blue eyes less true than the blood flow  
That lets them see: And so I go  
Under a shady mask meant for another.

Ah! We're two sad killers baring our teeth!  
Abused! Do you suppose this silly game  
Will spin until the... How can I claim  
To know when Time sends sword to sheath?

So; let's make peace, O furrowed brows! Drop your flint;  
No staged regrets, bid the past good-bye,  
Let's kiss the breeze while we wipe our eyes;  
The night breeze,...her scent's a bit like mint.

**Nuage**

Oh, laisse-moi tranquille, dans mon destin,  
Avec tes comparaisons illégitimes!  
Un examen plus serré ferait estime  
Du moindre agent,... – toi, tu y perds ton latin.

Preuves s'entendant comme larrons en foire,  
Clins d'yeux bleus pas plus sûrs que l'afflux de sang  
Qui les envoya voir: me voilà passant  
Pour un beau masque d'une inconstance noire.

Ah! que nous sommes donc deux pauvres bourreaux  
Exploités! et sens-tu pas que ce manège  
Mènera ses exploits tant que le... Que sais-je  
N'aura pas rentré l'Infini au fourreau?

Là; faisons la paix, ô Sourcils! Prends ta mante;  
Sans regrets apprêtés, ni scénarios vieux,  
Allons baiser la brise essuyant nos yeux;  
La brise,... elle sent ce soir un peu la menthe.

## Cold Spring

Michael Murphy

Bo would rather be throwing rocks at cars. Hidden behind the curtain of kudzu that hangs at the bend in the road. Where Brother Eli smokes and tied that neighbor girl to a tree. Where Poppa Wheelie will become Poppa Wheelie.

Not today. Momma's having a spell and the haven of that in-between space is miles away. He's on a short leash—it's been a week since he asked what *nigger* meant and Daddy-Jim grew legs.

The bathroom is second best. When he turns the lock on the door, no one in the world knows where he is. It's a windowless nowhere – all cool tile and bleachy clean.

Momma leans her head against the wall phone. Twirls the cord around her fingers and says, "He's just a boy." As Bo makes for the bathroom, she spasms. One hand white-knuckles the receiver, the other rises open-palmed. Swinging down, she's yanked back by the cord like a dog chained to a tree. There's no getting past her. She's smiling like the devil.

Surrendering, Bo sits outside – Indian-style, in the cold. It's a contortion that makes Brother Eli cringe. "You're gonna get stuck that way," he'll spit, before heading this way or that.

The backyard isn't much but rides high. From his perch, he can see forever; down through the pines, across Morrow's field to the duck pond. They're like a storybook—momma duck, baby duck, baby duck. They don't belong here. Smuggled into town in the back of the neighbor's station wagon.

Bo was somewhere else last year. Before then, somewhere else. He slowly scans from ridge to ridge. In this place, at this time, his world is thirty seconds across. "A bunch of nuthin'." The words are Momma's. As they leave his mouth, they're eaten by the pines.

In the middle of those ridges – on the far, grassy rise behind the pond – is the water tower. Even from here you can read *Pinnacle* painted bold and black. "In case y'ever forget where you are."

A copper cushion of pine needles blankets the yard from porch to field. It keeps things clean and quiet. Pine needles make good

kindling. Pine will take a flame. It will burn fast and hot. It will snap and pop and smoke like hell. The smell of it hangs thick in the air. It's March and the winter wood is gone.

*The smell of chimneys, a windy chill, and the lonesome song of the whip-poor-will,* reads the last page of Momma's diary. Bo closes his eyes and mutely mouths the words.

Near the neighbors' place, three dogwoods grow around the green box. There was a hint of heat last week that cheated white flowers out of them. The duck lady next door would lie on the box and stare – drinking Mountain Dew from the bottle with a silly straw. The box is always warm. Her fat arms and legs melt over its sides. Daddy-Jim's electric box. *My money keeps that hummin', boy.*

Always humming, always warm, always there – Bo wakes and falls asleep to it. In his dreams, it rumbles like a rocket ship, mumbles like ghosts. Awake, it's old men praying, sad and sorry for some grownup sin.

—Follow me—

Bo opens his eyes.

—Follow me—

—Follow me, me, me—

—Follow me, me, me—

From behind the dogwoods, a boy. All angles and dusk. Black haired, wild-eyed. Following him a parade of the familiar. Freckled, moon-faced, pale. Single-file and hiding from shy.

—Follow me—

—Follow me—

—Follow me, me, me—

If they notice Bo at all they don't let on – eyes fixed, high stepping across the yard. Legs rise in unison and fall forcibly to the ground. The two-four pounding ripples under the needles, loosening Bo's interlocked legs.

—Follow me—

That dark boy will become Poppa Wheelie. The king of kudzu. He'll burst through vines on his back-wheel like Evil Knievel through a ring of fire.

—Follow me—

Remie who will always smell of shit, beat to tears by his Daddy's books.

—Follow me, me, me—

The German twins who'll make Bo watch them pee.

—Follow me, me, me—

And forever-little Tobey, too pretty for his own good.

Bo holds his breath to steady himself as a hawk sweeps circles overhead. The cardinals have stopped singing. Just the hum of the box and rippling thuds. Looking over his shoulder he sees his house is still there. The water tower. The green box.

—Follow me, me, me—

Pressing the heel of his hand to his forehead helps still the throbbing. A thrown stone had opened it wide. Bo pries dried mud and blood from the cut where Brother Eli rubbed it in. "Cherokee medicine, dildo."

—Follow me, me, me—

"Get yer ass in here," yells Momma. Her disembodied head pokes from the sliding glass door. She's hiding a cigarette. "It's cold as Moses' toes." Now with a sort of sorry in her eyes.

Bo gifts a nod.

Momma sees as far as Daddy-Jim lets her. Not far these days. About here to the end of the street.

Bo can see further.

That F150 will come growling into the driveway. He'll be back and he'll be broke. Momma in the front yard, arms crossed, brow arched. A careful kiss. *You're not getting back in here unless you want to.* His hands in the air like a preacher's. *Peace be to this house.* When he says he's missed it, it'll be the God's honest truth.

Things last as long as they last.

Momma still hurts. She'll knock that bullshit truck. *Sounds like a Mexican lawn mower, and, one thing's for sure, Jimmy — Jesus ain't your fuckin' copilot.*

She'll circle and grin. Think she's hemmed him in. Wave her SuperSlim like she's conducting an orchestra. Then what happens, happens. Daddy-Jim's stare goes black. She'll say *you ain't a man.* It'll go deep quiet, and they'll give Bo a look that means go. And he'll go.

Bo will fall in line. Get tight with Poppa Wheelie. They'll steal tallboys from Jimmy's stash, get high on model-airplane glue, and prep the spokes of their Schwinn's with Bicycle spades. Bo and Poppa Wheelie. Down mountains of asphalt they'll wobble with speed. Not a



ramp high enough to keep them on the ground. Peddling frictionless over bodies far below – side by side and eyes to the sky. Over Max, and Remie, the German twins holding hands, and forever-little Tobey, who knows full well he'll eat a tire.

The march has moved to Morrow's field. Bo can still hear chanting, but not the words – a distant drumming that harmonizes with the hum of the green box and the hammering in his head.

On the other side of the duck pond – behind the tower – is a lot to explore. Brother Eli told him there are tobacco fields thick with cutworms. And horses. Dogs that will chase you. Just on the other side of the pond. The pond where the German twins will nail a catfish to a tree and skin it alive. Where Remie will proudly show his scars. Where when the seasons stop being so certain, Poppa Wheelie will misjudge the thickness of the ice.

## Wonderskin

Myrth Killingsworth

You can visit my wound when the moon is full or when you have a lump of cedar in your pocket or the right amount of blue-spored mushroom in your gut or maybe in a fugue state (I haven't exactly figured out when, but there's a time) in the twilight, a time between, when the light shines as if through mist, but there's no mist, and it's late enough in the year, you can smell the bacteria in the soil, the air smells of rich rot and the spring bubbling up through horsetails. You'll know the tree because it will raise your hackles, lubricate your neck vertebrae, and sharpen your tongue. Face the tree. Squint through the half-light to see it. This slash. It is a yoni. That's a word for vagina. The one that doesn't meant sheath. And then. If all the universes are aligned and the stars and the earth, and the flora and the fauna of the forest and the microfauna and microflora in your gut, you can put the backs of your hands together. Make them into a spade, plunge them into the warm sap, spread the tree scar's labia, my artist's wound, and remove a grub. The grub is a queer assemblage. A wunderkammer of insect and animal and machine and dinosaur and maybe a baby witch. It is also just a grub. But big. The size of a human baby. Hold it like that. You won't know which end is its head but support some part of it. It will glow. Take it home. Let it sleep in your bed. Crack a window so that it gets fresh air. Feed it. It eats stories. It will grow big, and when it gets big enough, perhaps on the next equinox, or five full moons hence, or after three molts, it will ask you to eat it. But remember this: eating is becoming. Eat it anyway.



**The Artichokes Bloom / Matina Vossou**

## Glycerin: Starring You, Me, and Al Pachino

Yance Wyatt

I slam the door on you, since you slammed the picture of us on the nightstand facedown. The glass is shattered, so I stand it up again and think of how ironic or symbolic it would be if I cut my wrist with that glass, of how dead I would be, of how sad you would be that I was dead. Then I stagger back. So that's how it happens. It simply crosses your mind. Some of us just think it. Others actually do it. The only difference is, afterwards, you stand there like the people who didn't do it, only you're covered in unimaginary blood. I gather my wits, gather the shards and hold one to my wrist. Everyone cuts sideways, but that's not the way. That way, you just wind up sawing away at your tendon. But I'm bluffing. Bluffing myself, that's all. Hoping you'll come back for the last word and find me like this, and maybe that'll bring us closer. But you don't come back, and I don't have all night, so I get the dustpan and clean it up. Then I get in bed and put your pillow between my legs so my knees won't knock. I look at our picture before turning out the light.

The picture was taken on Halloween by whatshisname. We were the only ones not in costume, and somehow that seemed ironic or symbolic or something. You were hiding a half-smoked cigarette and I was hiding a drink. I can tell by the smoke slipping through your knuckles and the fact that my face looked sunburnt in October. Those were the days, right? Before you made me stop drinking and I made you stop smoking so I would stop smoking when I drank. That's when we started the movie marathons. We streamed all the new releases then moved on to the oeuvre of our favorite actors. First it was Hanks. We watched *The Money Pit* right after we moved in together, and when we watched *Castaway*, we promised to never give up on each other. Then it was De Niro, from *The Godfather* to *Analyze This* and *That*, though I think *The Godfather* may have been the beginning of our Pacino kick, or maybe the middle of Brando. Goddamn *The Godfather*. It made me want a glass of wine, so I drank a bottle. You had some too, which made you want a cigarette, so you smoked a pack. That's when we stopped streaming movies and started arguing again.

I think I'll go back to the bar for last call. Maybe that's where you went to cool off. If so, we'll get drunk and make up. If not, I'll get drunk and come home and you'll be here by then, asleep in our bed with that picture of us on your chest. And I'll kiss your eyelids, and fit my knees behind your knees, and smell into your smoky hair. I'll say "I'm sorry" and you'll say "He's not bleeding; it's just ketchup" or "She's not crying; it's just glycerine" or something else that doesn't make sense. But it'll make sense to you, won't it?

You slam the door on me, since I slammed the picture of us on the nightstand facedown. I drive eighty miles an hour and it isn't even the interstate. I'm trying to get a ticket, to get arrested, to get a whopper of a ticket so you can't afford to bail me out. I'm thinking about how easy it would be when you're going eighty to jerk the wheel a little and end everything. I'm thinking about the end and the beginning and nothing in between. I stop to buy some smokes but they're closed, so I bum one off a guy on the corner. He's nice enough, a little insane, and I kiss him on the cheek despite you, and he smiles with those mossy teeth then gives me another for the road. I light the second one from the first since the car socket is broken. Then I drive around our neighborhood looking into the dark houses lit by blue TVs.

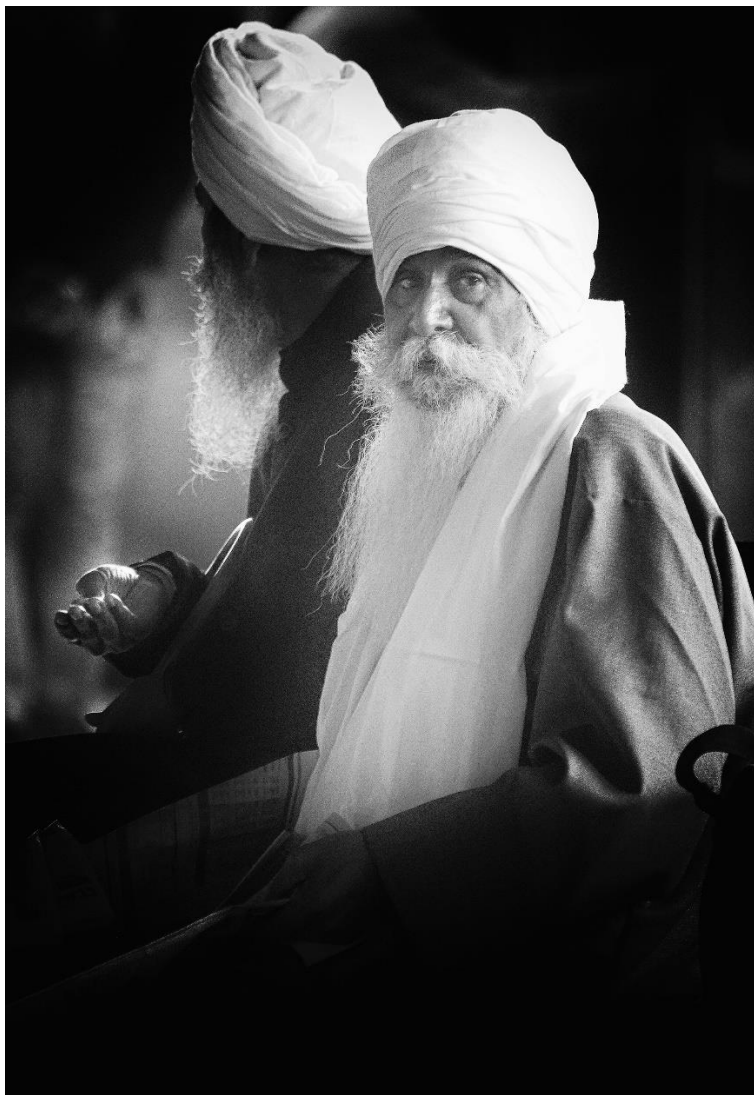
I get home and you're gone. I brush my teeth and take off my clothes and find our picture there on the nightstand. You've been looking at it. I can see your thumbprint. Evidence of your guilt. But now *I* feel guilty.

In a minute I'll say my prayers, but I'll fall asleep in the process. I'll bet that's what it feels like when you die. Dying will be my last waking thought, so I'll probably dream about death. Maybe I'll have that dream I keep having, the one where I wake up with a horse head in my bed. Then my mind will fast-forward to the final scene, when Michael closes the door on Kay. And now I'll know I'm dreaming, so my conscience will yell cut, cut, cut, but I won't be able to wake up. To keep it from becoming a nightmare, I'll remind myself that it's all make believe: the blood, the tears, the whole damn thing. And when the cameras start rolling again, Pacino will become someone else. But it won't be Michael Corleone this time. It'll be you. Not your face or your voice or your name, necessarily. But it'll be you

alright. I can always sense you there, a hovering presence, like a God or Godfather, reclaiming the life you left behind.



*Angel, Kanazawa 2017 / William Lewis Winston*



**Two Sikhs, Agra Train Station 2015 / William Lewis Winston**



**Excerpts from *Vanguard's* Jump Prevention Task Force**

Nathan Bachman

Day 9. Rotation 133.95. Incident 103.

I'm not sure about the woman's age. I was near the starboard stern, and she was already moving through the air. I remember thinking—something has fallen from the mast. A light or scaffold. But of course, nothing falls from the mast. I know what the other watchers say now when they say it happens out of time. When they say, I'm not sure it even *happened*. It was so fast, I only see it in my memory—her legs parted, arms out, coat open and back on the wind, eyes closed. I understand what happens to the body on impact with the sea, the sheer height of the drop and the endless depths below. I have tried to imagine her swift, permanent end, but for me she's still up there, flying up and over the hull.

—William

Day 9. Rotation 133.98. Incident 104.

Was walking mid-vessel, near the university. A male adolescent climbed over the safety rails and stood poised to jump. I was fifty meters away and ran to him. He saw me, so I stopped. Stood a few meters back and began to talk. I told him my name.

“My name is Brie,” I said, “and I have two boys of my own, about your age. Perhaps you know them?”

He didn't respond. Just swayed on the edge. When he closed his eyes, I was certain he was going over. I saw his fingers opening on the cables, so I rushed to him. I took hold of his left arm and then his right. He was a big boy, but he came away like an autumn leaf. I pulled him back, over the rail and onto the deck. Oddly effortless, like he had suddenly weighed less than air. He floated like helium in a balloon. Then, like magic, he regained all his mass and weight, and knocked me over. He was on his back with his eyes closed, and I had to wrestle myself out from under him. All the while, I was scolding him. I know it sounds terrible. I even hit him, slapped him across the cheek.

“You’re someone’s son,” I told him. “Your mother’s whole world. How dare you!”

He began sobbing then, so I wrapped my arms around him and rocked us, back and forth.

—Brie

Day 9. Rotation 134. Arrival Day. Incident 105.

The deck was crowded with parties and celebrations. One hundred and thirty-four rotations ago, we arrived on this planet and set sail. My grandfather crossed nine thousand lightyears to resettle an ocean. I remember, just before last rotation’s Arrival Day, my whole class had gone on a field trip to see the foils from the crow’s nest. We were two hundred meters above the deck and the view was the exact same. Water and more water. Nothing but horizon.

Mom wasn’t happy I was out on duty for Arrival Day. I could have requested a different shift, but to be honest, I was relieved. No aunts and uncles asking how school was going, no cousins to compare futures or grades. No condescending best wishes for exams or questions about why I signed up for the task force. I can already hear my father’s explanations. “Looks great on applications.” He says it apologetically, loudly—so everyone around the table can hear. Then, he’ll add, “It’s just for a semester.”

I pushed through a group of university kids and nearly fell over a picnicking couple. When the girl saw my uniform, she offered me a drink, but I declined. The entire colony must have been out on the deck. A hundred thousand people, vendors, and music, stretching the length of *Vanguard*. Two kilometers of unbroken festivities.

Up ahead, I spotted a group of kids climbing cables on the port shrouds. I ran over to them and started shouting. I recognized some from school. They were only a few rotations younger, and I think that didn’t help, because they just laughed at me. I mean, before my watch, I did it myself when I was their age, climbing up the cables and looking down into the moving sea—the thrill of that moment, when you realize you’ve climbed so high, you can’t be saved by anyone but yourself. I nearly climbed up there myself, just to share the risk. But then I think about that woman suspended, not quite overboard, not

shipside. Momentarily alive. I just got so angry and began calling them names which made them giggle more until they spotted a parent or a teacher and scampered down. I know they weren't jumpers, but I decided to mention it here. After all, if one of them had gone over, what would have been the difference?

—William

Day 9. Rotation 134.03. Incident 1.

Middle-aged man. I saw him first from the starboard bow. He had all the signs. Well Dresses. Alone. Constantly looking around and heading toward the bowsprit. They always like to jump off the spar, like somehow, it's more meaningful if they throw themselves from the very tip of *Vanguard*, crushed by the waves and then obliterated underneath the massive vessel.

I doubled my pace but was careful not to run. I was just behind the man, close enough to see his balding hairline. He reached the front and almost immediately vaulted the safety railings. He was out on the spar and balancing toward the end. I clipped myself to a cable and went after him.

Most watchers wouldn't feel comfortable walking off deck, but I was a roper. I scaled the stays for a living. Twenty-five rotations of ascending the masts, hauling bolts, stress testing, repair and replace. That's how it started. In the skies of Webb-0419b, watching jumpers. From a hundred meters up, you can see the bodies impact on the sea. No screams or complaints. Just a silent eraser. We used to take bets, the guys I roped with. Who looked like they were throwing themselves off? What were the telltale signs?

I won a lot. One day, I won four bets. Four jumpers. Keller worked j-bolts and he said, "I'm done betting against Nazar. He's too good." Then he laughed, "I mean, imagine if you weren't up here."

Imagine. That was the problem. Up here. That was another problem.

At first, I just volunteered on the weekend. I figured I'd try. I stopped a jumper my first day—three by the end of the following weekend.

Five rotations later, here I am. I've seen it all—and I'm tired of seeing it.

This man wasn't any different from a dozen others, going out on the sprit to look back on the colony before hurling himself off. I call these types, romantics. Going for the grand gesture. I'm not trying to be insensitive—that's not it at all. I have other names too: bolters, exhibitionist, dither dudes, lone girls, sob bobs. I have a notebook of terms and observations because it helps. Because it works.

The gangway is narrow, and you can only place one foot down at a time, so forward momentum is important. He was careful and slow, and I figured I could overtake him before he reached the end. I was closing the distance when he went over. He didn't wait until he was at the very end, or stop to look back, just dropped off the spar. Nothing romantic about it. I'm half certain he fell on accident.

First jumper of this rotation.

We'll have to wait to ID him. I figure someone will notice his absence soon—it never takes long. Even when they live alone without family and you think, this was a nobody and so nobody will know they're gone. But someone always notices. They notice right away.

—Nazar

Day 9. Rotation 134.05. Incident 2.

It was late. The rest of the colony was asleep inside. As always, the air was balmy and bright—nothing above deck ever changes. A perpetual sunny day. Friends tell me that's part of the appeal for new colonists. I've seen them. When they arrive off transports and crowd onto the deck, smiling and opening their arms to the warmth of a close star.

I was thinking about this when Simon approached me. He introduced himself and explained he had recently fought with his wife. She stormed out, and he came here, fearful she was thinking about jumping. Following protocol, I asked for her name, to pull up photos and send it out to the other watchers on duty.

He told me it wasn't necessary. I didn't understand right away, so I insisted. Simon was visibly uncomfortable and almost walked away, so I stopped asking for his wife's name.

"Walk with me," I told him. "We'll look for her, together."

We made for the bow, scanning the deck ahead. Almost no one was out, which made things easy, but something felt wrong. Simon was quiet and gazing on the sea.

“Arnie, bless him,” I said, “still drives me crazy the way he half listens—like his mind is always considering other things, and this makes me feel unimportant. His inattention is a foible, I know, but some days it feels like a catastrophic flaw. Marriage is hard that way. Eighteen rotations with the same man.”

“Eighteen rotations is pretty darn good.”

“Yes,” I chuckled. “I suppose it is.”

“Do you have kids with this Arnie?”

“Two boys in secondary. Every day is a rollercoaster.”

“We talked about kids,” Simon said. “We don’t have any right now because Karennia isn’t keen on them. She was just beginning to feel okay with her life.”

I nodded along.

“For so long, she had felt trapped and useless.” Simon didn’t stop walking, but his eyes took on the color of the empty horizon. “Just so alone. Even with the new arrivals to the colony, this big boat out in the endless sea, isolated, pointless. Hamsters in a wheel. It took a colossal effort to push through that time, and it wasn’t that long ago. With the stress and obligations of a newborn, what if those feelings returned? Or worse, what if the child grew to be haunted by these same thoughts?”

I was beginning to understand Simon, now. After all, my own children frightened me, whenever they seemed bored or anxious—like maybe Arnie and I made a mistake, choosing to bring them into the colony. We floated on this planet in a closed loop—no escape from the uniformity of our existence. No distraction from ourselves.

“Experience is a funny thing,” I said. “It’s easy to assume others feel the same way, especially if they’re related. I admit most days, my children feel like an extension of my body. A continuation of myself. Then, suddenly they’ll do something so remote, so alien, am I reminded how impossible they are. I feel foolish even considering them my own.”

We were another hour’s walk to the bow. The sky was a brilliant amethyst. Simon stopped.

“I think I’ll head in, take a tram back to my place,” he put his hands in his pockets and began for the nearest port, then stopped. He turned, “you know, there’s more phytoplankton out there than there’s ever been on Earth. It isn’t empty. I forget that.”

I nodded like I understood because I think I finally did.

“We’ll keep an eye out for your wife,” I said, and he smiled. I don’t know how close he was, if seeking out a watcher was a good sign or not. I’ve put him on the watch list.

—Brie

Day 10. Rotation 134.08 Incident 3.

Amelie Verchetti. Fourteen rotations. She had a backpack with her and a school tablet out, which is why I didn’t notice her at first. She was ahead of me, walking portside toward the stern. Kids come out here to finish schoolwork all the time. They come with friends or by themselves and soak up the sun. Low risk. No indicators.

I should have thought better about the date. It was special. This ball of water is monotonous in the extreme, and yet, the scientist said the planet had just completed its tenth turn since we’ve arrived. Of course, we never see a change—no dusk or dawn, no night, no stars. The ocean surface freezes on the dark side which is why we never stop moving. We snail across this ball of water, matching pace with the slow churning axis, forever positioned under the white sun. One full turn; we don’t even celebrate the occasion. Just a snippet in the news feeds, but symbolic dates are important. A veteran watcher should have known that.

The girl had her head down in a screen. Typical lone girl behavior. She made a turn toward the railing and then—I didn’t have time. I picked up her tablet and backpack. She had written her parents and her younger brother and signed her name. Love, Amelie. I know better to pry into notes they leave behind. We’re not supposed to do more than collect the things they leave, but I read it. Beginning to end.

After this week, I’m done. I know, I’ve said it before, but I mean it this time. It isn’t natural, witnessing someone’s last moments. Over and over, they drop. I’ll retire from roping; I’ll never step out onto the deck again. I can’t sleep. In dreams, I’m crawling beneath

tables, catching bottles, glasses, vases, picture frames—until my arms are so full. I try wrestling the items around so there's room for one more, fragile, breakable thing. Only, there's never enough time or space, and I can't catch the next item. I see it fall and know the sound it'll make—the terrible change as the impart ripples through the glass and erupts into a sea of glittering pieces.

In the mornings, I awake amazed that my arms are empty.

—Nazar

Day 10. Rotation 134.09 Incident 4.

Woman. She wasn't old, and she wasn't young. She saw me and made the slightest move toward the sea, so I froze. She was already off deck, sitting below the bulwark, legs hanging over the water. I was close enough to shout, so I shouted hello. It sounded stupid, but she waited. I introduced myself and began walking forward.

“What's your name?”

“Victoria,” she said. “I just had a son.”

“Oh?” I said.

“My friends told me when I finally see him and look into his eyes our brainwaves will sync—unconditional love, just like that. Three months. I still don't feel like his mother.”

What was I supposed to say to that? I'm just some kid.

The sky was cloudless and indistinguishable from the sea. She continued, “My husband is the certain type, certain about himself and certain about the future. He doesn't even see the sea. He doesn't wonder what's beyond, you know?”

That's when I saw Nazar. He appeared behind the woman, motioning me with his hands to continue talking. I told her I wasn't certain about anything either, but I might like teaching.

“Only, my father is an important engineer,” I added, and as I did, I leaned on the railing, almost causally—like I wasn't a threat to her plans. “It's expected for me to contribute to the colony in an obvious way. When I graduate, I am supposed to enroll in the science academy, but I've filled out an application for the instructor college—I always liked the idea of teaching literature. My dad thinks I'll end up in sanitation—or worse, a roper.”

The woman's eyes were out on the horizon, her hand on the metal, her feet in the air. The soft push of the colony whispered below. Nazar tiptoed closer, unnoticed.

"It's the stories," I continued, not sure what I was even saying. "It's the only place you can really get off this cruise. A forest, a desert, a history of land and mountain. It's like magic, and I'd like to share that."

She looked up and smiled. "You're still young."

"That's true," I said and added a chuckle. "Now, if I can just pick the right life."

"It's this planet. It doesn't want us," she said. "Sometimes I imagine one day we'll see land. We'll finally arrive, and we'll have a real home—not some moving island we soldered together. A real, natural place meant for us."

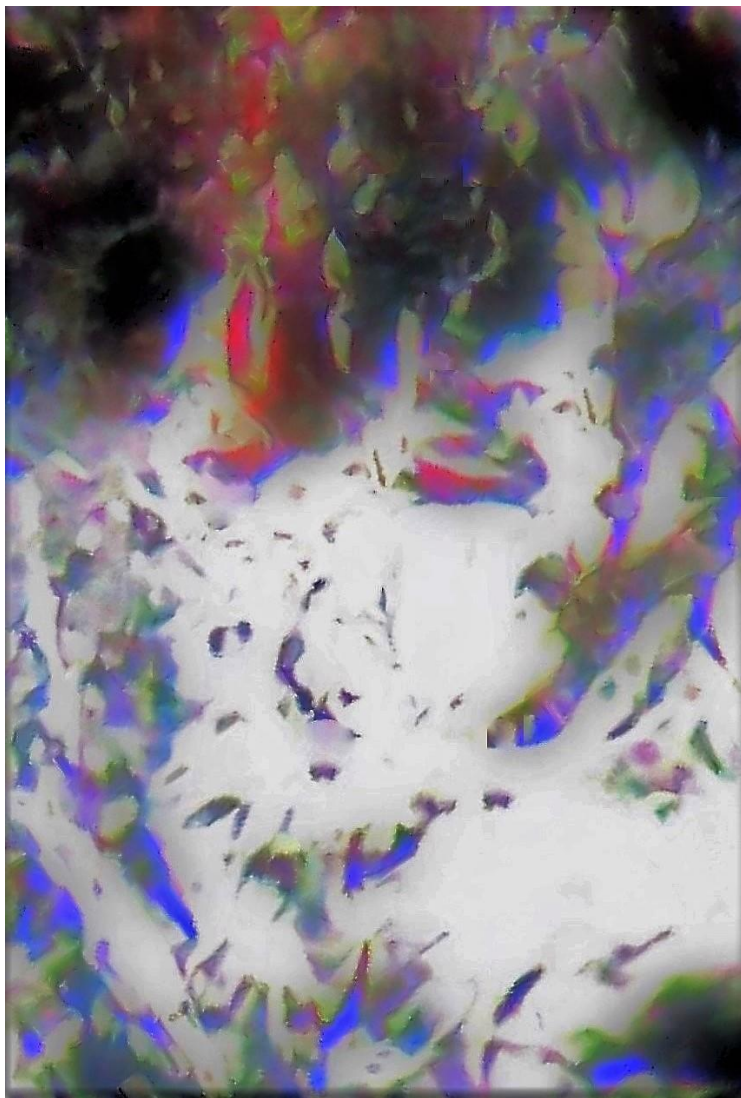
Victoria stood then. Her hair came across her face in the moving air, and her arms were at her side. I wasn't sure if she meant to come back to the deck or to throw herself into the water. I'll never know because that's when Nazar had her. Locked his arms around her midsection and pulled her back.

Later, after we had her evaluated, her husband came to fetch her. He paused when he saw us and came over. He didn't say anything, just gave me a hug. I tried to explain it wasn't me—it was all Nazar—but when I looked to my right, Nazar had already left.

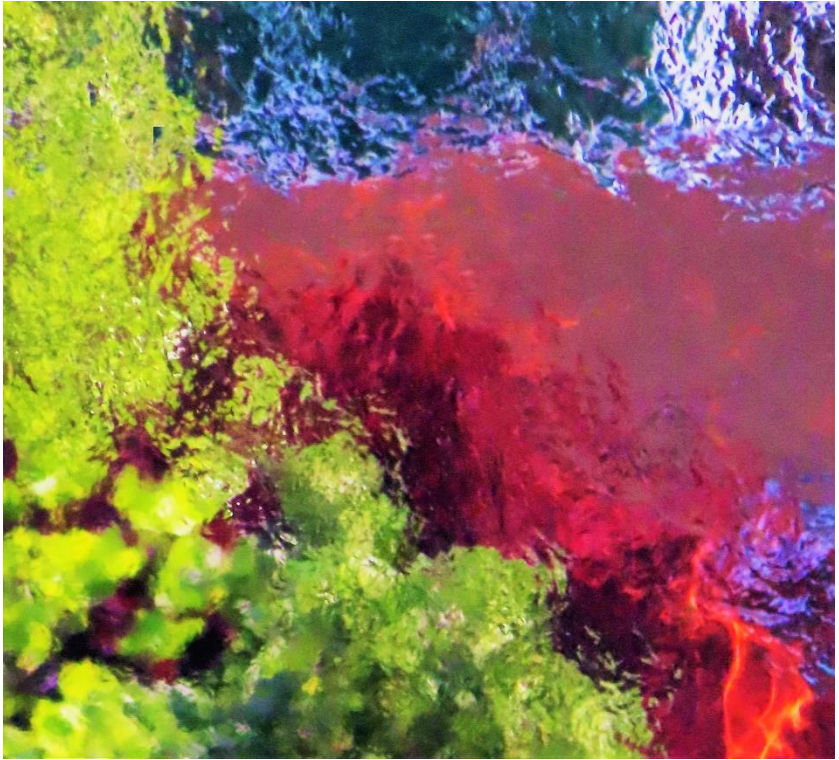
I saw him later from the windows, walking the deck.

—William





**Mohawk / Mark Hurtubise**



**Trees / Mark Hurtubise**



**Petting Zoo** / Mark Hurtubise

## Body Count

Michael Cullinane

Rigel 2023 Finalist

Despite always being the first to arrive at her Human Growth and Development class, Ivy Barlowe didn't say hi to Mr. Leith, and Mr. Leith didn't say hi to Ivy Barlowe. She would quietly choose a seat in the back at Lab Table 6, hiding behind her phone, and dreading the moment the fuckboys walked in. But on that Friday, she decided to keep her phone in her purse and consider Mr. Leith, who sat on his spinny chair, staring out a window. Even though he was like the worst teacher on the entire planet, she felt bad for him. And she wondered about his left hand, which was loosely wrapped up in gauze the way she had as a kid, pretending to be a mummy. In his other hand, he popped poppy paper to a beat like *POP! Pop-pop-pop*. He was hella messed up, and Ivy wondered what sort of secret life Mr. Leith had after he left Stevenson. Like, maybe he'd gone to a casino the night before and had some killer poker hand and put up his car and his house, but then the guy next to him won and was all like, "Sorry, boss, but I got all your shit," so Mr. Leith punched a wall.

The rest of the class lumbered in, and Sebastian Harris, aka Fuckboy Number One, arrived on time for once. Ivy couldn't help it; he made her nervous, so she pulled her phone out of her purse in case he looked at her, using the video like a mirror. Of course, no air conditioning in Room 237, so the humidity frizzed her hair out of control, and the camera angle gave her a serious double chin which she was way too young for. The room felt like one of those dusty bookstores from a movie where a kid opens a book and a crusty wizard pops out. It was literally the only room at Stevenson that hadn't been renovated when the mayor dumped all that money into the school for her photo op. Antonio, that creepy kid with the beard who looked like he was forty, posted a video on TikTok where he found a jar in the back closet that read *human foetus, 1977* with an actual human being inside like some sort of ancient pickle. And somebody had drawn a asshole with a sharpie right in the middle of the chalkboard, and Mr. Leith didn't even care enough to stick a poster over it. To Ivy, the

whole thing was sort of funny but mostly depressing because having a teacher who was *that* incompetent in a classroom *that* nasty was basically criminal.

A message popped up on her phone, one of those automated ones from the school. Ivy had a meeting scheduled with her social worker Ms. Renata in the Calm Down Room. She'd forgotten. She started to stand up, but the thought of Sebastian Harris yelling, "Do you need to change your tampon?" kept her frozen. She was desperate to talk to Ms. Renata because, even though she was totally out of touch with what it meant to have a vagina in 2022, Ivy needed to vent, and Ms. Renata was seriously the only person at the school who would listen.

Only twenty-two days remained in the school year. Twenty-two days left of the hell that was Human Growth and Development. Ivy, a sophomore, didn't belong in the class. It was one of those senior electives designed to help the shitwits graduate. At the beginning of the year her counselor Mr. Huffnagle told her to wait until the tenth day to request a schedule change, but on day ten, he told her she'd waited too long. Now Ivy was seriously the only sophomore in a class of seniors who made it their mission in life to give her a nervous breakdown, which she was like super-near because of the week she'd had. Totally grounded and stuck with her mother trying to keep her busy "without getting all wrapped up in that phone of yours!" But Ivy pushed away the despair like Ms. Renata taught her because there were people suffering a lot worse, even if she didn't know a single one.

So, now, how to escape from Room 237? Ivy walked through the steps in her head. To get out of the classroom, she would have to put her backpack on and try to get Mr. Leith's attention while Lab Table 3 made creepy porno sounds. She'd try to explain that she had a pass on her phone, and she'd hold it toward Leith's face, but he'd probably just sit there with his poppy paper like, "Durr."

"Yo, bro, I think this thing is like sleeping," one of the fuckboys said. They tapped on the glass of Mr. Leith's dead hermit crab, the one serious no-no Leith had since day one, which only made the people like Sebastian Harris and Lukas Meyers and the rest of them want to do it more because they required constant attention. But Mr. Leith didn't flinch or respond or even look at them. He just used his bandaged-up hand to itch his head like he had lice or fleas or bedbugs, and this beam

of light from the window made a little halo, and Ivy could see the flakes of dandruff get scraped off his scalp. Steroids messed with guys' bodies—she didn't need Human Growth and Development to teach her that—which was probably why Mr. Leith was losing his hair, just like when she got addicted to those Hydroxycut diet pills that Bess pushed on her and she started seeing clumps of her hair in the shower drain.

All of the drama started on Tuesday when Sebastian Harris took a hit off his vape and blew the smoke into Blinky's bowl. Ivy could have yelled something like, "You're not God," but she didn't say anything, which made her feel guilty because, sure, it was just a hermit crab, but Ivy loved animals. She even thought about being a veterinarian for a while before realizing there was way too much math involved. Ivy remembered how Mr. Leith smiled when he introduced Blinky on the first day. And then he made the mistake of talking about how weightlifting saved his life and everyone laughed at him, so Mr. Leith gave up and said, "Do your assignment. It's on Google Classroom." He said it that day and every day after.

Now Blinky was dead and the fuckboys knew it and Mr. Leith knew it, but no one was doing anything about it. Like why hadn't Mr. Leith just thrown Blinky in the garbage? Jamal yelled that the hermit crab started to stink, and Bryan, who wasn't even supposed to be in the class, yelled "Stinky Blinky" and everyone laughed, including Ivy. According to Ms. Renata, Ivy suffered from impulse control issues. Laughing at sad things was the most terrible curse anyone could have, like when her mom told her that her grandfather died and she laughed. Her mom slapped her even though it was an involuntary reaction because of course she was sad as fuck because she loved her Papa.

Ms. Renata sent another message that just said "Where are you?" and Ivy almost started crying because everything felt super bottled up and ready to explode. Her motto of *I'm down for whatever* had backfired over the weekend for the hundredth time. Back in, what, sixth or seventh grade she said it to a group of boys and she saw their eyes light up like she'd just opened a bag of Skittles and invited them to *Taste the rainbow! I'm down for whatever* had some sort of power over their deepest desires. Or their dicks, which were basically the same thing. According to Ms. Renata, when Ivy said, "I'm down for whatever," she thought it gave her power, but really, Ms. Renata said,

those words gave boys the right to take advantage of her and what Ivy needed were firm boundaries. Firm boundaries sounded like the same shit she'd heard every adult tell her her whole life, but when Ms. Renata said it, it sort of made sense because that woman would at least look you in the eye from time to time.

The boys from the weekend were hot and she lowkey had a crush on Georgio even before he ever talked to her. The problem was that Georgio was Shelly's crush. But as soon as he swung by McDonalds with two friends and picked up Ivy in his own car that he bought with his own money and asked what she wanted to do, and she said, "Durr, I'm down for whatever," they got that same stupid-ass look on their faces.

She didn't want to think about it, so she got her phone out and scrolled TikTok and Insta basically at the same time even though that shit is hella bad for your mental health. Like, the night before, some dork freshman DMed her on Insta and asked, *How many guys have you had sex with?* and she didn't respond, but she saw those little dots like he was typing, so Ivy waited. He thought he was real slick and wrote *100?* Then he said, *more?!?!?* Then he said, *1000?* and finally she told him to shut the fuck up, and he sent back the laughing crying emoji and *Im dead*, and Ivy knew he was would post screenshots because he had absolutely nothing better to do than talk shit about her body count, which only Shelly knew because they told each other everything, which was another reason Ivy was totally freaking out.

And it was like what Ms. Bryers talked about in English class when they got hella off topic, about how there was, like, a double standard for men and women. Ms. Breyers wasn't even a feminist or trans or anything, just an old lady who read a shit-ton of books. And when they read *The Handmaid's Tale*, she talked about how things post-Trump were actually going backwards not forwards in terms of women's rights. Butterflower from TikTok said the same thing—guys fuck and girls get fucked, and guys are just pushing, pushing for it constantly. But once they have a girlfriend, they always want to know her body count, and if it's too high they get all quiet and pissed off and sulky and moody and say that they can't date a girl who isn't a virgin or close to one, so she lies and tells him she's never been with anyone or maybe just a couple people and that his dick is the biggest of them all. And it's all so pathetic because Sebastian Harris probably had a

higher body count than Ivy, but when he talks about it, the guys all pat him on the butt and say “Nice job, bro!” But with Ivy, the girls talk shit behind her back and the guys talk shit in front of it.

The fuckboys started pushing the bowl on the lab table like they were playing that game where you try to see how close you can get that disk to the edge. Ivy looked up at Mr. Leith who stopped popping the poppy paper and grabbed his tongue with his thumb and index finger. She couldn’t figure out what he was trying to do. Then he got something, a hair, one that fell off his balding head, and he held it up to the light and wiped it on his pants. The man was completely oblivious. Ivy figured he was sad about his hermit crab, but she didn’t understand why because, even if he really loved Blinky, hermit crabs don’t have identifiable personalities, and you could probably just go to the store and pay five bucks for a new one and never know the difference.

She wondered what Mr. Leith’s body count was. He was, like, what? Thirty maybe. Not married because most married guys usually talked about their wives and kids, but that guy didn’t talk about anything except lifting weights. So, assuming he was single and straight, and assuming he was at least thirty, he must have had sex with at least three women per year since he was eighteen. So, twelve times three. That would be at least thirty-six. His body count was probably about thirty-six.

Then Ivy began to think about other body counts, like Ms. Renata. Not to be gay or anything, but she was hot and probably constantly had guys hitting on her. Even Ivy had to turn down guys and she had hella pimples and was a little more than just a little bit overweight and couldn’t afford nice clothes or anything. Guys would give their left nut for a woman like Ms. Renata. She must have given the “all access pass” at least five times a year when she got drunk or just got tired of saying no. And Ms. Renata was also like 30. That meant twelve times five. Ms. Renata’s body count must have been, damn, sixty. About twice as many as Mr. Leith’s. Girl fucking power.

Those idiots shoved the glass bowl again and again from all four corners of the table, and you could see the gravel and the little trees and the castle go flying around inside the bowl. Blinky was just rolling around, and the guys were laughing, and no one told them to stop because the teacher just scratched his head and popped poppy



paper and the rest of the class just stared at their phones and Ivy hated all of them for being a part of a world where she literally couldn't even get up and show the teacher her pass to get out of such a toxic environment.

High school was a prison you never get to leave because even after you graduate, you still have everyone on social media calling you a slut, so when you post a picture with a guy you meet at college who is like your maybe-maybe-not boyfriend, he would be like, "Why does everyone you went to high school with call you a slut on Insta?" and he'd have hella questions about your body count and he would break up with you before you even got a relationship started.

Ms. Renata didn't understand how Ivy couldn't not be a slut. Because getting called a slut on Insta, meant you were a slut. Deleting your socials was basically impossible, so in 2022, no matter how you lived your life, your whole future was basically predetermined. Sort of like the kid who pissed his pants in class in sixth grade. In the future, when he posted a picture of himself with his wife, everyone would say, "Oh, wow, that kid who pissed his pants in Ms. Dixon's class got married."

The more she thought about it, the more she needed Ms. Renata to look her in the eye and ask her those questions like "Could you tell me more about that?" and "How does that make you feel?" because Ivy seriously just needed someone to care about her for like ten minutes because she was so tired of always putting everyone's needs ahead of hers.

Jamal pushed the bowl and Sammy cradled his hands under the lab table to catch it. The bowl slid right to the edge, and Sammy yelled, "Oh, shit," and Ivy couldn't help but laugh because the bowl was truly half on half off the lab table, like it could slip off at any second, and in a really stupid and juvenile way, hearing "Oh, shit!" really loud in a classroom is kind of funny.

Mr. Leith saw that one. He turned away from the window and put his poppy paper down, and, you could really tell that he wanted to say something, but there was some weird lump in his throat, like his Adam's Apple was all knotted up. She wanted to let Mr. Leith know she sort of cared about what was happening in his life, but that idea only made her laugh because, like, why would she care about some weird-ass dude with his armpits sweating through his polo? But maybe

his life was even harder than Ivy's. She saw Mr. Leith for one hour a day, and he was awake for like, what, sixteen hours a day. Ivy only had one-sixteenth of the picture. And, considering his pet died in that one-sixteenth, he might be dealing with sixteen problems which all piled up and left him just staring out the window like a freak. Ivy had way more than sixteen problems, but she was at least still able to talk and communicate and function in that fake-it-till-you-make-it sort of way.

It was weird to think that Mr. Leith had been in high school, which, for him, had probably been a prison, too. He seemed like the kind of guy who might have puked in gym class, not once, but all the time, which was why he went insane and built up his muscles to compensate for being a total loser who barfed every time he tried to run or make a basket. You don't look like that unless you're trying to make up for something else that's gone missing. Just like how in twenty years, Ivy would probably stare out a window, feeling all locked up, wondering what the hell went wrong.

Sammy slid the bowl, and Jamal made like he was going to catch it, but it moved too fast and tipped over and rolled like a bowling ball. The whole thing split in half, top and bottom, and gravel started coming out all over the place. They gasped and swore and Jamal stood right in the middle between the two halves which went in opposite directions. Rather than make a move to catch one, he just let both drop. One smashed before the other, you could hear that, but it was hard to tell which one smashed first, the top or the bottom, and that's the sort of thing that doesn't even really matter much because there was glass and gravel and Blinky's little toys all over the floor. Even Blinky.

The whole class looked over at Mr. Leith, and Ivy looked over at Mr. Leith. His chest was all puffed up, and his muscles were bigger than normal, and the buttons looked like they were going to pop off his sad little polo shirt. He took a super deep breath for like ten seconds, and Ivy kept thinking it was impossible to suck that much air into his lungs, but he just kept on inhaling, way past the point of normal. And what would he do with all that air? Maybe with some sort of Big Bad Wolf flex, he would just blow the entire classroom away.

The man held his breath while all the students held theirs. His nipples stuck out on his shirt like a couple of pencil erasers. He kicked the doorstop away, like, all the way away down the hall. Ivy could hear it smacking the floor like some little kid threw a block.

And the door shut.

Mr. Leith hadn't shut the door the whole year, not even when Mulligan got on the loudspeaker and announced there was a hall sweep. Seeing Sebastian Harris kill the hermit crab on Tuesday was really bad. And seeing the glass smash on the floor was awful. But that door closing was terrifying because never before in Ivy's life had she felt like she was seriously in one of those situations like you hear about on the news where some psycho trapped kids in a classroom, killing them all. Leith's eyes flashed wild, like he was part animal. He couldn't just pick out a single kid to stare down because he hated all of them. Ivy looked away, and didn't laugh, not even a little.

Ivy saw that button by the door that teachers used to call the office. Teachers used it when they were all hungover or whatever and had enough and wanted security to come. Like, "Jimmy's in the wrong seat even though he sat in the wrong seat all year, but I'm having a shitty day, so I want him GONE!" That was what the button was normally for. Ivy thought about how it might save her life. If only she could get off her stool. But students couldn't push the button. They weren't allowed.

Mr. Leith grabbed the metal garbage can next to his desk and walked over to where the bowl had smashed, right where the guys were just standing, and he squatted with a grunt and started scooping up glass with his right hand, the one without the bandage, and he flung it into the garbage can, so hard that some of it bounced out and landed back on the floor. And you could tell after about ten seconds that he was bleeding because the glass bouncing out of the garbage can was all bloody. Then the blood started dripping from his hand, and he was flinging, like actually flinging, the glass so hard that blood was seriously flying around the classroom, and the kids nearby were moving away, and a bunch of them, the girls especially, sort of huddled together by Ivy.

A drop of blood landed on Ivy's lab table and about five little tiny droplets of blood landed on her glasses, on her actual glasses.

The whole thing was so weird and so awful, and he was throwing the gravel and the little trees and the castle and everything, just flinging them into the garbage can, and it made this sort of tribal beat like, *Duh duh, smack. Duh duh, smack. Duh duh, smack.* And then he picked up Blinky, and he sort of stopped for a second and Ivy held her

breath because he was staring at his dead hermit crab which had started the whole shit show. He looked like one of those guys in an action movie who says a line like, “Now it’s time for vengeance,” and Ivy could tell that Mr. Leith was thinking that he needed to throw Blinky away, but he took a second to concentrate on him, maybe making some kind of tribute in his head, and then he threw Blinky right into the garbage can with another *Duh duh, smack*.

Ivy moved further to the back corner of the room. She found a tissue that she’d had in her back pocket and wiped the blood off her glasses. Getting any blood on you or your glasses was not normal. The tissue was one of those with lotion, so instead of the blood coming off, it just smeared around.

When most of the glass and gravel was in the garbage, Mr. Leith stood tall and focused his eyes on Sebastian Harris, who was just trying to lay low for a change. Ivy didn’t know what Leith wanted him to do, and maybe Leith didn’t even know what he wanted Sebastian Harris to do. Maybe apologize. Maybe he wished Sebastian Harris was dead.

She heard the knock at the door and she jumped, and judging by the squeals from the girls around her, half of the class shit their pants. Then she heard that cheerful voice she knew so well.

“Knockety-knock-knock!”

The door wasn’t locked or anything, so Ms. Renata came in and looked around like she’d just gotten pranked. All the students were huddled in the corner of the room, and Mr. Leith was dripping blood from one hand and breathing like he’d just lost a fight, still just staring at Sebastian Harris. That woman didn’t miss a beat, though, she just said, “Could I please request Ms. Ivy...oh, there you are. Did you forget about our appointment?”

Under her breath, Ivy whispered, “Halle-fucking-lujah.” Finally, she could leave.

She already had her stuff, so she walked toward Ms. Renata who looked at her with some serious *what the fuck is going on* eyes. Ivy put her head down and got the hell out.

She knew Ms. Renata would ask her what happened, which would be annoying because living through something fucked up was bad but explaining it over and over again was even worse. But, maybe, just maybe, Ms. Renata could help Mr. Leith get better.

Ivy imagined Mr. Leith sitting on the couch in the Calm Down Room, Ms. Renata's emotional support dog Romeo weaving between his legs. Ms. Renata would ask him, "How did throwing your dead hermit crab in the garbage make you feel?" And he would probably get that same lump in his throat that Ivy got in hers when Ms. Renata asked her how something made her feel. Maybe no one ever asked Mr. Leith how he felt about anything and that was why he was so weird and losing his hair and locked in his prison.

Once Ivy's feet were out the door, she said, thank God it was Friday because she did not want to set foot in Room 237 for at least two days, if not forever.



*Adrift in Deep Sea* / Penny Senanarong  
Rigel 2023 Finalist

## Motorcycling to Mexican Time and the Zen Sea

Gregory Ormson

Rigel 2023 Finalist

Biking toward Mexico, the jagged mountains framing both sides of Arizona's Highway 85 are now in my mirror. Wind and heat push me forward to where it is not much of a leap for my Midwestern imagination to place me in a scene from an apocalyptic biker movie on a two-lane road headed into the heart of dust. At the border wall, problematic for drug mules and Americans with criminal records trying to cross, the guards peer at my shiny wheels. I'm neither criminal nor mule, but I'm wary of the gun-wielding guards; the mind-meld of television news depicting Mexico as dangerous, and at this wrecking wall I'm heating up like one of Dante's eighth-circle bolgers

My motorcycle brothers and I cross the wall into Mexico, and our bikes are screaming to hell with America and our jobs, if we still got them, left behind us with our families—fathers, children without fathers, and desperate mothers trying to become younger in their old age. Will I ever cross the border back to America?

So this is Mexico?

There's a lot of dust.

Dust eats away at my skin. The leather I wear makes every minute an inferno on the motorcycle. Heat explodes up my ass, creeping past crack and sack to pillage my spine and overburden my shoulders. But I am an adult, I am in Mexico, I have documents and a clean record; I can drink, buy drugs, or pay to make fantasies come true. I can also do none of that or get a ticket to take the pirate ship and sail into the mystic with tourists, eating as much shrimp and drinking as much Dos Equis XX lager as I can handle.

I kept thinking I was Jack Nicholson, playing the detective in a film he never made; one around the time when he was still in his Blood and Wine prime as a jewel thief. What would fucking Jack do in this cheaply shot biker flick, us bikers as dirty subjects? Grainy video shows Jack and us approaching the wall. Nothing happened. Wasted video.

My body pumps with the rumor of life, and my mind believes in the music of the Sun; its giant scythe of blinding white light waits for us this November riding to the Sea of Cortez, its blue tint a powerful pacifier. Nearby, a peasant labors to ride an old black bicycle. He may be Don Juan from Carlos Castaneda's writings. His shrunken body leans over the handlebars, and his floppy watermelon hat ruffles its brim without flying away—an agent of the apocalypse, or a lonely man cantering among the prickly saguaros? Lord, when he turns his wizened face of the sun towards me, does he know my fate? I ride on and wonder what has happened to the People of Don Juan.

Mile by mile, bare space testifies to failure, and a lot of what I see is not thriving.

My bike explodes through sand and its endless box of a hungry place where time is a mind warp not easily categorized. I lose track of it though, and my Harley-Davidson, desperate for traction, loses it on a sandy one-track road. Six times driving past my turn, but I didn't see it. None of us did, and we couldn't figure out what happened. Maybe it was a warp, and the ticking clock of blood and bone that is me— astride my Harley-Davidson—rides closer to a border we have already crossed. I daydream.

Senorita, look at my moving machine as it spits out pinecones, remnants of a once-living tree that will no longer straddle the earth. The revolutions of angst and daydreams of señoritas keep me guessing about time. Forward on the bike, I remind myself to not daydream. It's dangerous.

Once while motorcycling on a high cliff in Hawaii during fierce winds, I was daydreaming and looking at the Pacific Ocean, my front wheel spinning revolutions and gripping a thin margin of error just inches from the edge and certain death, a Don Juan moment, a voice within my voice telling me not to die.

At the Harley-Davidson Museum in Milwaukee, a CAD drawing orders the sequence of the dirty work happening below my belt: squeeze, suck, bang, and blow. A puree of gas and oxygen firing the wily explosions in the dark interstices of a Big Twin engine, just like Jack's active and lusty Id. Jack, my brothers, and I ride by faith and trust that the explosions below our belts will not blow up our balls and send us to another kingdom. Trust is necessary and underrated by bikers and actors.



Rolling again, the wheels are shredding cactus in a scene that Nicholson had written himself for his screenplay. Now he drives his black Mercedes around Studio City hoping to find a parking space in front of The Aroma Café. His smile, a trickster, combing his hair plugs and grinning into his rearview mirror murmuring, “I am the greatest that ever was.”

The bike I drive, banging its way through the streets on the way to my cheap café, is an agent of attraction and repulsion. Everyone hears the Harley-Davidson song because it's loud. I rumble along cobblestone streets as my bike's Big Twin engine belts a song from the chrome pipes and echoes between the worn buildings.

Vendors on this Malecón, tired of filthy rich gringos and gringas, are happy for the taco money, but they don't want to look. They don't need to. They have heard every biker's sad story and see us wounded animals coming south, revving up rubber and spit in the acrid smoke of a burnout pit; loud, testosterone-fired homages to a furious Beowulf, a white man's epic angst in the motorcycle's sound and fury. Pfft, better to gather eggs from the chickens. But resistance to my bike's open-throated rumble is futile...they must, and they do, turn and stare: cops, street vendors, women, and men.

It's a school day and children are on the playground. A few of them run to the iron gate barring entry from the road. They smile at the leather-clad gringo and wave. He waves back. Washing over him, a tinge of regret thinking back to his school days.

Don Juan is now far behind, and I swerve to avoid a dog chasing its tail like a dust devil. Next to the wispy devil, a boy is holding a watermelon as if a gift for his mouth. He's in my mirror instantly, of course, and the dust I throw rises like some withering cloud. Mexico, shit, I'm riding inside the belly of the beast, and gone are the McDonald's with hand sanitizers and drive-through coffee.

The sun above, like a record spinning, keeps playing the same old Amboy Dukes' tune, “Journey to the Center of my Mind,” and a refrain is stuck in my cochlea like an earworm, “But please realize, you'll probably be surprised, for it's the land unknown to man, where fantasy is fact. Come along if you care, come along if you care, come along to the land inside and you'll see.”

Mexico's land unknown to man rolls before me a landscape that rises and falls like its Zen Sea, and the brother outlaws

accompanying me—as the Amboy Dukes predicted—confuse fantasy and fact; they weave, wander, and dodge past their imaginary animals. The fat one, on the way to the end of the road, looks like Orson Welles' double leaning over his metal. He burned down his trailer back in Wisconsin for insurance money, and with it bought cocaine and a black poncho. His wife had to crawl through a window to escape because he forgot to tell her. Her hair was singed, her underwear sooty black, but he could have said “slutty black” but never did. He apologized and drove her to the motel where they stayed for the next three weeks B.M. Before Mexico.

The Barbarosa outlaw — close to the front of our pack — we call him Barbarosa for his rusty beard and ponytail and his way of singing old-school country songs, like “Crazy.” He’s the out-of-control coyote here, like Willie Nelson as the notorious Barbarosa in the 1982 film; and our bad boy has come to a stop. We pull a U-turn and lope toward a cholla cactus. “It needs to be watered,” he says, and makes a golden spray. Barbarosa’s mouth is full of happy juice and sorrow pebbles he inserts every time he thinks we aren’t looking. Mile by mile his hot bone angling for an appointment with pavement and gritty sand, where all the disciples of barley and malt end up sooner than they want. A drunken biker means trouble; the Doobie Brothers sang about this twisted end, “Drink Scotch whiskey all night long and die behind the wheel.”

A coyote crosses in the middle of the road, where his chances of survival are not good, and burns a good hard look down the cracked-fingered yellowed pavement. I brake and find myself gazing up into the eyes of a Mexican goddess. She wipes blood and pebbles from my face. I have been laid down like a living zombie on her sofa. I ask her about coyotes, and she laughs.

“Don’t move, you sorry gringo,” her middle-aged gruff voice tells me. “Let me see where you are damaged the most. My son is looking after your Harley, I think he likes it. He told me it was going to be fine. Penelope is my name, like in Homer—and you have been shipwrecked,” she points out.

Blinking sweat from my eyelids, she’s not fat but neither is she slim, just old, I observe from my supine position. A fan’s whirring in time above my head. No air conditioner. Heat billows from top to

bottom, ceiling to floor, squelching flies like a sandwich to the man on a sofa; she wraps my mouth up with a towel full of ice.

I have been cleaned up and I guess my coyote brothers have wandered away without me...time warp again...when is it? Roadkill, that's what they would say hours later, laughing in their beer and wondering if I'd ever escape Penelope or come back home over the wrecking wall.

Mexico's mangy curs roam the side streets in town, their heads hung low, wary of us and their sharp-toothed coyote cousins that are hanging around just out there, a little way past city limit. Coyotes are smart and hunt in packs, but the curs don't. They're hungry, like the Mexican street vendors, singing their praises for porcelain masks, sugar skulls, and Chicklets.

Driven by empty bellies, curs and vendors move in close, looking past bad experiences with humans, ignoring the warning of our loud machines. The biker who killed the dog said it limped from the side of the road and walked right in front of her. "It committed suicide by motorcycle," she said and wept. "The dog's last look seemed sad, right up to the moment my front tire ran over its skinny body."

We're riding deeper and deeper into a broken territory on a two-wheeled track called *risk*. It's as if reality stalls and the motorcycle dances in time with the dazzling sol of Mexico. With eyes to see, anyone would swear Salvador Dali painted the street where bar balconies, groaning under the weight of heavy bikers, are bowed like snow-covered branches. On the third floor of the Iguana Banana, above the balcony facing the blue sea, a band is kicking out a version of Bowie's "Five Years." Inside the Iguana, I sing along with them, "A cop knelt and kissed the feet of a priest, and a queer threw up at the sight of that."

In tune or out of tune, nobody cared, as the thump-thump of Evolutions announced the schedules be damned 'cause the party's on, and ripe are the two-legged coyotes primed for this biker party happening everywhere. One, in fringed buckskin and patches, says he's from the land of Geronimo. More coyotes arrive to join the sons of Geronimo, and then the risk multipliers show up. They roll in on wavelengths of noise—the Bandidos—adding cock to the cocktail, courting madness and mayhem. They're the mangy cousins of the Apache, and like Geronimo, impossible for the man to catch.

Penelope didn't catch me, but I had a lonely feeling riding toward the wrecking wall that we call a border, and I will miss the fucking Sea of Cortez. Give me shrimp, fiestas, and señoritas, and I could exist forever on sips of Tequila and slices of aguacate. And if Penelope or Mexico's Zen held me long enough, I'd join a mariachi band or go to a Shakespearean play in Spanish. That would be the shit, all those colores brillantes draped on Puck, revving the throttle of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," in a land unknown to man where fantasy is fact.

Border time again, going north, and I'm on the lookout for Carlos Castaneda on his bicycle. Time shifted when he showed up before—or warped—and my Harley took me down and to another place. I'm not nervous going back over the wrecking wall though, because this time I'm going to do what fucking Jack would do and he's got heroic powers. We cross the wall and my brothers go north. I bid adios and go east to New Mexico where tricksters enchant the land, and sunsets slip away, spooky, and lovely.

On the sidewalk in Gallup, a guy stops, leans against the building, and waits with a woman and dog for the walk signal. He's wearing a black jacket and a beret. His jacket is adorned with a large patch on the back and the word *HOCKEY* picturing two stilettos. Hockey on stilettos, what an idea.

HOCKEY—what an idea, thanks Canada.

TEQUILA—what an idea, thanks Mexico.

A big sign over the Coal Street Pub's door draws me in. I place a toy monster truck in front of me on the bar and give in to desert thirst, ordering a tap beer. I hadn't had one in a while, and when the frosty mug with golden liquid landed next to the monster truck, a husky, loud voice from across the bar offered, "Beer's cold here!" *BANDIDOS* blared across the front of his red, yellow, and black hat. WWFJD?

What do you think about monster trucks? He raised his middle finger.

Got a biker name? "Chopper," he said.

You ride with the Bandidos?

"Yep. That's all I do. I go thousands of miles a month. I love it."

In a driving rainstorm one August night at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally, far from the Coal Street Pub, thirty Bandidos on choppers rumbled into the campground, dismounted, and slogged through puddles to the social building. The owner tightened up. “They’re the worst of the worst,” he said. “I’ve got a shotgun under the bar.”

I was wary of the Bandidos in South Dakota and Mexico, but now, sitting across the bar from me in New Mexico, Chopper and I had connected by a mutual hatred for monster trucks and love for motorcycling. I asked if he’d like to hear a story about the monster truck. Poker-faced, in a flat voice, he said, “I like stories.”

Four months ago, a few friends and I met along the banks of Lake Superior to commemorate a deceased friend who loathed monster trucks, I said. My friend thought they were perfect symbols of aggression, senseless destruction, and waste. Brilliant, he was, with a dark and complex psychology deep inside. Complex psychologies can define a lot of people: Chopper, Barbarosa and Orson (brothers in my biker pack) and me, I suppose.

Chopper was listening. Our friend loved to travel, I said, and at his memorial, the group thought I should take the monster truck and his spirit riding with it on a motorcycle ride and leave him a place where another traveler could pick it up and keep him moving.

Powered by the energy of squeeze, suck, bang, and blow, I imagined my late friend would be singing a wide-eyed and happy tune, and I believed the chthonic power of bike explosions and the dark revolutions of Dunlop Tires would set his spirit free like a boy galloping on a horse, unhinged, and wild. And then I heard myself ask Chopper to take the truck and my deceased friend for a ride. When you are done, just leave him or pass him on.

Chopper looked and nodded. I knew he understood riding in memory of lost friends. Sending my friend away, galloping from Gallup with the Bandidos on a steel horse of smoke and fire had a ring to it, and it felt strangely divine to me. If the monster truck melted in a fiery pile-up of Harley-Davidsons, at least he’d have one last epic adios—like the way he went out of this world, taking a knife to his own heart.

We talked for a few minutes more, and then Chopper took a phone call. “I got to go meet some brothers,” he said, and strutted out

the door with an *I am the greatest ever* strut—as Jack would do—and a toy snuggled in his massive, Muhammad Ali-sized hand.

Part of me walked out the door too with Orson, Barbarosa, Chopper, and my friend's spirit in the monster truck. For a moment, back to daydreaming, I disappeared, and a screeching sound...a mystical horse with piercing eyes and breath of fire arrived. It drew closer and I heard the drone of dark engine horsepower on Gallup's bad pavement. I imagine a glorious moment of travel. Chopper twisting his wrist and the engine rumbling on to misdeeds unknown, rider's spirits unhinged and cutting razor-sharp lines between life and death while holding the edge on a circle thinner than high desert air.

My daydream was only a moment, then my cloudy eyes sharpened, my daydream cleared, and the loud horse redeposited me back to the Coal Street Pub's barstool and my girlfriend. Under that spell, in a bar on Coal Street, enchantment led me to think of my friend's spirit on a wild ride where Chopper would be his Beatrice, and both would be spinning on the dark circumference of worn treads.

Chopper didn't show it, but awe and fear show up somewhere in every biker's dark night, a soul-place untouched by sonnets for motorcycling, sestinas to Bandidos, iambic pentameters for the Highway to Hell, or haikus to Harley-Davidson. Like Zen, tequila, or coyote, iambic pentameter for the Highway to Hell would find a way to reach in and around the dark night and speak to bikers, finding a way past resistance to poems and possibilities in the mysterious.

My wheels are rumbling again, and I have a vision, maybe an enchantment. Jack Nicholson rides in on the Highway to Hell. It's a parade of decibels, diablos, and anxious cops heading to a Bandidos gathering. Jack's going to use his famous voice to speak in iambic pentameter where every story gyres deeper in the screw and bikers rev their smutty exhaust. He speaks, bikers listen, and coyotes yip and yelp from the wrecking wall to the mystic blue sea.



**Fishing for Her Children / Dave Sims**

Rigel 2023 Finalist

## Seeing the Spider

Luann Lewis

Rigel 2023 Finalist

### Part I—Diane Saw the Spider

Surely Diane wasn't the only one who saw the spider. It was an ugly little thing...white with eight legs, a typical house spider. It was crawling on Allie's back, several inches under her right shoulder. Jeanine's desk was closer to Allie's. Why didn't Jeanine say something? Obviously, Allie didn't *feel* the spider. Her fluffy sweater was too thick.

And the spider wasn't moving particularly fast. Diane might have reached over to brush it off or even whispered something to Allie but the empty desk between Diane and Allie created a chasm that separated them and made it impossible for Diane to let Allie know without yelling or making a scene. Diane didn't want all the kids looking at her. Way back in fourth grade (maybe even earlier), Diane had learned that attention can be a dangerous thing. Attention can mean rubber bands or cruel words shot in your direction. It's better when people don't notice you. So, Diane yawned and gazed up at the ceiling pretending not to see the spider. Still, her eyes were drawn irresistibly back to the spider's journey.

So far the spider had traveled up the lovely curves of Allie's middle back. Yes, Allie had curves, unlike Diane. Even under a fluffy sweater Allie had curves. Allie's hips curved into a trim waist and the boys liked that. Diane imagined how it must feel to be Allie, posing in front of a mirror twisting back and forth. What was it like to walk down the street or through the halls at school or anywhere? Of course, Allie must be full of confidence; Diane would be too if she had a body like Allie's. How incongruent that a spider would dare crawl on her.

Uh oh, it looked like the spider was heading for Allie's hair, for the long end of the ponytail dangling down. Diane stared, holding her breath. But Allie laughed at something the teacher said then bobbed her head as she turned to exchange glances with Gail who was sitting next to her. This caused the spider to return to its original



languid course heading toward Allie's right shoulder. How long would it take the spider to reach Allie's neck? Would it get there before the end of class? There was only ten minutes more to go. Once it got to her neck, would she feel it? Would she turn around and yell at Diane, wondering why Diane didn't say anything? Maybe not.

Maybe the spider was drawn to the delicate sparkling chain clasped above Allie's sweater, resting on the nape of Allie's vulnerable neck. Maybe the spider thought the chain was an inviting web or someplace to nestle.

Allie's silver horse charm would be hanging from that chain. Everybody knew about Allie's horse. It represented the young stallion that Allie's uncle had given her for her sixteenth birthday. Allie had everything. Good looks, good grades, popularity. What else would she get for her sixteenth? How many other girls got a horse for their sixteenth birthday? And Allie had a huge party. Of course Diane hadn't been invited.

Diane had never been a friend of Allie's. Diane lived in Blaston which was west of where Allie lived. The kids from the west were ignored by the kids from the east, who lived in Flagsdale. Now, in high school, the difference in caste was very clear. The low-class west side kids took the bus while the east side kids zipped to school in dazzling new cars, laughing and carefree.

But it wasn't just in high school that one could spot the differences. Way before that, back in grade school, they all sensed the difference. The east side girls with their little Gymboree jumpers and tightly coiffed braids were aware that they were somehow superior to the west side tots with their unruly tangles and baggy hand-me-downs. The east-siders came to school with faces and fingernails scrubbed shiny. The west-siders were sticky with peanut butter and Playdough. Each side played with their own.

So, Diane wondered, why did she even care if a spider was crawling up Allie's back. Diane flipped her pencil back and forth between her fingers. The spider paused. How much harm could it do anyway? Diane's lips suddenly felt rosy, relaxed and smiley. She leaned back in her chair and thrust her legs out. Let's just watch.

Diane glanced to the left and to the right. How come nobody else was saying anything to Allie? Did everybody dislike her as much as Diane did? Was everybody else jealous like she was because, to be

honest, Diane had to admit she was more than a bit envious of everything Allie had. Did people really not see this spider or did they simply not want to tell Allie? Which was it?

Or, wait a minute... was everybody wondering about Diane? Was everybody wondering why Diane wasn't telling Allie? Were they thinking she was a horrible person for not saying anything? Diane sat up a little. She didn't want people whispering about *her*, gossiping about how awful it was that she had let this spider crawl up Allie's back. What if they were all waiting for her to do something? She glanced left and right again but nobody seemed to be looking at her. Or were they? Was Jeanine giving her the eye? No, Diane guessed not. She bit her lip. Maybe she *should* tell Allie...just get up quietly and tap her on the shoulder or just brush the stupid spider off of her. Then Allie would be grateful and thank her, maybe she'd even invite Diane to sit with her at lunch.

Yeah, right. Fat chance. She'd probably just raise her eyebrows and whisper to her friends—"lesbo." Allie might claim there hadn't even been a spider, that Diane just wanted to touch her. Well, forget it. She hoped the spider would bite Allie...right in the jugular.

Halting for a moment, the spider rubbed its legs as if it was dancing or spinning a web and Diane shuddered. Ugh, how horrible it would be to have that on your back. She shook her shoulders a bit, just in case somehow there was another spider in the room and it was actually on Diane's own person. Then Allie's spider resumed its slow journey up her sweater. Glancing at the clock, Diane noted that there were only four more minutes left before the bell. She should say something. No she shouldn't. Screw Allie. What did she care? Oh man, it was getting harder to see the spider because it was sort of camouflaged by Allie's thick blonde ponytail whisking back and forth. Diane expected the spider to be caught up in that but somehow it managed to stay the course on Allie's back.

Would Diane be able to live with herself if she didn't let Allie know about that beast crawling towards her neck? Would she forever wonder if there was a spider on her own back that somebody wasn't telling *her* about? Fighting the urge to bite her nail, she considered the options. Diane fidgeted, foot tapped, leg jiggled, desk squeaked, but she said nothing and the bell rang.

Allie scooped up her books and slid from her seat following her friends out of the classroom, laughing and chatting. Diane dragged her books and papers together and held them to her chest. She made her way through the door and into her future.

Lying in her bed that night she wondered whatever happened with the spider. Did Allie finally feel it and scream, sweep it off her shoulder or neck or did one of her friends see it and rescue her with a squeal and nervous laughter? Diane would never know because she didn't have the nerve (or maybe desire) to tell Allie. Perhaps the spider bit Allie. Maybe two sharp little teeth pierced Allie's white neck, right next to that chain, and tainted Allie's blue blood forever.

From time to time Diane would recall Allie's spider. Occasionally she would remember it regretfully, as something she should have done. A creeping remorse would crawl on Diane's own shoulder, whispering in her ear and telling her she deserved her west side shame. Other times, she imagined the spider riding home in Allie's pony tail and living a long life in Allie's pillow—just to knock the east-sider down a little bit.

Deep in her heart, though, Diane knew that whatever the outcome, the spider on Allie likely only stayed for an afternoon. The spider on Diane would be living there forever.

## **Part II — Mr. West Saw the Spider**

She looked good. He wasn't a pervert or anything, but so many of these girls looked honey-drippin' fine. Going home night after night to Virginia and the kids...well, it could be tough for him after being surrounded by all of this blossoming young flesh. He tried not to dwell on their sensuality but when these young women leaned over his desk or passed close to him in the hall, their scent would tweak his instincts. And that Allie Johanson, she made him feel like a jackal sniffing out a passing rabbit. With any of those girls, there were times a soft arm would touch his or a hip would accidentally graze him. How could a normal man not react? After all, Kevin was only thirty-two; there was a lot of life left in his loins. Just 'cuz he was married and had kids didn't mean he was dead. Virginia might not have a lot of energy when it was time to hit the sack, but Kevin always seemed to have enough for

“couple time,” especially after a day of looking at firm thighs, breasts and shining faces.

Travis, the other male math teacher, from down in the east wing, saw them all as kids. You could tell by his heavy brow and patronizing talk, but Travis turned fifty last year. Kevin wondered if he, himself, would be dead like that at fifty. He doubted it. No matter how much Kevin tried, these girls were never gonna be kids to him, at least not all of them, even if he had to pretend they were. And pretend he did.

But there she was, Allie Johanson, rear swiveling as she moved towards her next class, surrounded by her gaggle of friends, blonde hair bobbing. She had curves no girl her age should have and, oh man, that sweater looked so soft. He wondered how it would feel to rub the cloth between his fingertips, to rest his cheek against it... and then he saw the spider.

The ugly little thing simply rode along on Allie’s back (Kevin wished HE could ride Allie’s back—lucky spider). It sat comfortably, hiding under a bit of sweater fuzz. Kevin could take this opportunity, he thought, to reach out and brush it off, innocently. He imagined the robustness of her shoulder blade, the firm flesh under the sweater. She might turn, eyes wide, surprised to see it was Mr. West. He’d chuckle and let her know that he had saved her from a horrible fate. Would she smile, charmed, happily relieved? He wasn’t quite sure. Not known for her sweetness, Allie could easily flout him with some snarky comment. The thought of her friends laughing at him from behind lowered eyelids with twisted, knowing, smiles. “*Sure there was a spider, Mr. West,*” was daunting. He didn’t care for scorn and even a hint of improper behavior could be the kiss of death for a teacher. *Better not to touch her.* Yeah, maybe he should just leave the spider on that little bitch. She’d never been a big fan of his anyway, not like the other girls, so why should he bother helping her out now.

He had been friendly enough to her in the past but she acted as if she was a little too smart to be in his class. Sure, she should have been in AP math, they both knew it, but he wasn’t going to give her the satisfaction. While the other girls flocked around his desk and laughed at his jokes, Allie hung back and looked at her watch until the bell rang. She had no interest in impressing him and certainly wasn’t impressed *by* him. If she had been a bit more agreeable, perhaps he

would have considered bumping her up to AP. They could have had that conversation as affable comrades bonding over a conjunct agreement, Allie beaming on him in gratitude. But if she was going to be a snob, forget it. She already had everything handed to her...looks, money...he even heard from the other kids that her uncle bought her a horse for her sixteenth birthday. A horse! What the heck? Who gets a horse for their birthday?

Yeah, let her walk around with the spider on her stuck-up little back. Somebody would brush it off eventually, one of her many admirers, one of her suck-up little buddies. Kevin had more important things to worry about. He turned down the hall and headed toward his homeroom. Still, he wondered, what would it have been like to touch that sweater. How would that body have felt under his hands? Into what sort of heaven would her perfume send him and how would her breath feel on his lips. He hated wondering these things but he wondered them nevertheless with agonizing waves of pleasure causing him to wonder all the more.

Crawling into bed like a spider, all arms and legs, Kevin swung his body over Virginia and began to kiss her neck. Her jagged breathing plowed into his ear and he pulled away slightly. Closing his eyes, he tried to get the image of Allie Johanson out of his head, but momentarily gave in and allowed himself to be spun into a fantasy of cool blond hair and smooth pink skin. Still, that damn spider kept dangling in the way of all his fun.

### **Part III — Tim Algrand Saw the Spider**

Much earlier that same day, under the bright classroom lights, the spider had appeared white but in reality had been brown. The spider, simply looking for warmth as the season changed, found its way into the ceiling. School had started, the leaves colored and a cool wind was blowing in. All those bodies made the indoor temperature toasty.

There was no particular reason the spider had picked this classroom or this desk but it began to spin a long strand and lowered itself, bit by bit, over Allie's unsuspecting back. Tim Algrand watched the slow movement with fascination. He bit his nails, the long sleeve of his flannel shirt getting in his mouth, as the spider dangled,

swinging in a bit of a breeze. Tim hoped the breeze would blow it to the side or maybe that the spider would be startled by something and change its mind and retreat to the ceiling, but it continued to lower itself steadily toward poor Allie Johanson. Its destination was inevitable.

Tim didn't feel good about this but he wasn't sure how he could help. Allie was way out of his league. Already fighting a stutter, his tongue wouldn't know how to warn her. Whatever he might say would come out too loud. It would sound awkward and be completely wrong, so he just wouldn't say anything at all. He could only stare at the course the spider was taking.

Glancing over at Greg Patterson, Tim realized Greg was watching the spider too. Their eyes met. Greg grinned and gave a thumbs up but Tim was feeling worse and worse. The spider hung on its strand, spinning and lowering itself until it rested comfortably on Allie's back, about where her bra would have crossed under her sweater. (Tim's face colored at that thought.)

Yes, Tim would have liked to say something. He felt like maybe he owed Allie. Once, in third grade, Allie made some kids stop picking on him. She had been passing by the arts and crafts table. Paul Overton, Jenna Parsons and Joe Miles were mocking Tim's speech, making up crazy sentences with loud stutters and Allie came by with a frown, condemning them as bullies and telling them they should be ashamed of themselves. Since she was a popular girl even back then, those kids backed off and pretended it was all just a friendly joke.

In spite of her heroics at that time, Allie wasn't known for her kindness. Her rep was as a sarcastic foe; her humor could bite. Some kids disliked her because of it, but Tim continued to remember when he was eight years old and the time she rescued him. Now he felt distinctly uncomfortable allowing the spider to settle onto her sweater. Still, somehow he couldn't muster up the courage to do something as simple as move over and knock the damn thing off. Greg, on the other hand, appeared to be enjoying the spider's journey. He had leaned back in his chair, one arm crossed over his chest, and was tapping the top of a pen against his chin. Malicious smile on his face, he made crawling motions with his fingers when Tim looked his way.

Tim, however, was consoling himself by believing that one of Allie's friends would see the spider and take care of the problem.

Certainly, he assured himself, that's how it would work out. After all, she had dozens of friends. They would come to her rescue, wouldn't they? Hell, she probably wouldn't even want a dweeb like him to take care of her.

And the spider just sat there; at least it wasn't moving. Tim supposed that if it had been crawling around, he would have had to do something about it. He would have had the courage then, wouldn't he? But it wasn't moving now, right? It wasn't doing any harm. Why get all upset about nothing? Allie probably didn't even remember him from third grade anyway. She wasn't expecting a payback.

Greg raised his eyebrows and smirked at Tim who smiled back, lips stiff and throat tight. I'm not a mean guy, he thought to himself, I don't really think it's funny that the spider's there. But he high-fived Greg when class ended and they snickered together as they watched Allie leave the classroom. Hell, it's just a spider. So what?

#### **Part IV — Allie Saw the Spider**

I had a fucking spider in my hair. A fucking spider. I hate spiders. I was lying on my bed, reading, and all of the sudden it was on my forehead. I know it came out of my hair because, at first, I thought it was just a strand from my ponytail but then I realized it was a spider! I sat up and screamed. Of course, I immediately pounded the damn thing to death with my book but I don't know how long it was there. I couldn't stop shaking. So disgusting.

But that's how it is with me. It's like I'm marked. I'm a magnet for bugs and disgusting things. When I was thirteen I went to summer camp in Wisconsin. I was the only girl that got a frog in her bed. Nobody put it there, it just found me. It's like there's something wrong with me. I'm tainted. Bugs crawl on me, frogs get in my bed. Really, I'm totally tainted.

You know, I try to laugh it off and pretend it's nothing, but stuff like this happens to me all the time. Bees chase me and they never seem to chase after anybody else. Ants crawl toward my picnic food but leave everyone else's alone. It's always like this for me. Other people don't notice, but I do. I always notice. There's something about me. And whatever it is has always been there.

Wherever I'm at, I attract the repulsive. When I was little, there was this guy at the bus stop, he was wearing a nice business suit and carrying an expensive looking briefcase. There were other people around, but guess who's leg he touched? Yep, mine. He put his hand on my leg and moved it up my thigh and I was only about nine. Of course I shouldn't have even been at the bus stop by myself but my parents were too busy to take me to dance class so they sent me on my own.

And a couple of years later, there was this guy outside the 7-11 who pushed me against the dumpster and well, ground himself into me. All I wanted was a stupid peanut butter cup but I couldn't even get into the store. This guy pulled me to the back. I had to kick him in the crotch and run away, heart pounding, breath barely making it out of my lungs. And even before all that stuff, my uncle—well, he's not really my uncle, he's just a friend of my mom's—he made me take off my shirt and my panties and then started kissing me. He told me he had to do that because of the way I looked at him. There was something about me, he said. And he's right. There *is* just something about me.

I don't like to go to the beach because things touch me in the water. Maybe it's fish, maybe not. Maybe it's disgusting things...dark swimming things that I don't know the names for. I'd much rather swim in a pool where I can see what's coming at me, where I can see what's going on. Actually, I'd just rather not swim at all. My uncle used to give me swimming lessons in the summer and let me tell you, I was happy each year when autumn would roll in. During the warm weather my uncle and his friends hung around a lot. Mom was happy to have them there, serving them lemonade, making them food. They'd laugh and make jokes with her but then yell for me to come out and swim with them. At least in the fall, when we'd run in the leaves, I'd be able to wear my jeans and a jacket, not just a skimpy bathing suit. But my mom is crazy about my uncle. She's crazy about all of my uncles.

Everybody talks about how my Uncle Randolph bought me the horse. And, man, I love that horse. I would do anything for that horse. He gave me a little silver necklace to mark the day, he said, and told me he was glad that I don't make fusses or tell secrets. He said I was a good girl but we both know I'm not. We both know that there's



something wrong with me. I'm quiet about it. I'm quiet about the uncles, but I'm definitely not good. Look at me. Look at that dead spider. I'm telling you, I attract ugly things.



**Hope Your Heart Is Lighter Than a Feather / Quentin Pace**

Rigel 2023 Best of Art

## A Brief History of a Flood

J Carraher

Rigel 2023 Best of Essay

It's been raining here for what seems like months. We've spent seven years praying for water and three whistling *The Fire Next Time*. The laguna has flooded across roads and winter crops; grapevine trellises poke out like dock pilings from the brown and murky water brought up by a decade of hard cracked earth and fires that just two summers ago tore through our backyards and turned the sky a dark ginger all the way across the Golden Gate, blotting out the September sun, moving daytime to dusk.

The orchard where we live is plentiful with apples, summer into autumn. It sits atop a small hill so that we can hear the Atascadero creek running below us; today it sounds almost like the sea, having eaten its own banks and carved a new path through the pasture where sheep and donkeys stand knee-deep in its flows. It doesn't reach our cellar or lap the sunroom floor, already dampened from the windblown rain, for the small rise of this place. The baler across the road is submerged nearly to its roof. You can just see the uppermost treads of the combine harvester that was worked nearby in summer but has disappeared in the dark waters, rising inch by inch, day by sodden day.

My little son says he's a mycologist and the floods seem to make him so. He eyes the red dappled caps of the fly agaric which grow as big as dinner plates under the redwoods lining the neighbor's backyard vineyard. He says the ground cover is spotted collybin. He knows this because it looks like challah that has been in the oven too long, he says. He explains waxy caps and every detail of the sulfur tuft, the redwood rooter, digs deep into the dirt until his fingers turn pink from the cold and his soft, still-baby skin folds in on itself from the damp, bringing up truffles, cupped in his long-fingered hand. He tells me, if you are a *real* mycologist, such as he, you can tell them apart by smelling the gills or spores, or even, when you find the little brown mushrooms, so hard to identify by sight and smell, you can taste them, but only if you are an expert.

I am reminded of my life in the Pacific Northwest where, as a child, I would break apart fungi that I found on fallen trees in the woods behind my grandparents' red brick house, the one I still dream of walking through some nights. I tell my little son how I would peel it just so and tuck it into the front pocket of my coveralls so that later I could reach to stroke its velvety innards when I was scared or alone in the woods. *Mama*, he says, *that was a foliose; it's lichen, not a mushroom.* And I am happy. I exalt this child who already has such a deep love for a small detail of his expanding universe, such enchantment, that he has taught himself more about this one single thing than I will ever know, perhaps about anything.

He is eight years old.

I get a familiar jolt when the pager alerts from my pocket telling me to phone a patrol officer or detective who has responded to an assault in our county. It is my job to call back, establish a timeframe, *acute or historical*. I am to take down the details of the assault: *what part of whose body went where, was the victim conscious or unconscious, are we talking about an adult or a child* and arrange to meet the detectives at the local hospital or children's center for a forensic interview and exam. On this day I call the detective, the one with the ultra-clean, snakeskin cowboy boots, the one who is too tall to talk to, really, and maybe that's why I can never remember his name. Too Tall gives me the details of a child who has been raped by her very own father in her very own home, in the living room while they were watching television. I wonder what she was watching and if she can ever see it again without the dark memory of being in danger in her very own living room with her very own father. I learn that they were discovered by her mother who had gone out to the market or to pick up a brother from basketball practice or for a drink with friends, because you can do that when your daughter is safe in her very own home with her very own father.

The distraught and raging mother has driven her child, her only daughter, two loose plaits hanging over either shoulder and wrapped in a favorite blanket with bunnies on, to the community hospital, for that is where we go for help, even if there is no help there. There is no help because doctors are busy trying in vain to fix someone's

grandfather who is in cardiac arrest or stroking out, the woman pregnant with twins who is suffering a brain aneurysm. They're trying to fix the kid who accidentally put an ax into his femoral artery while chopping wood for the stove and is bleeding out all over his gurney and onto the waxy floor. They are busy restraining the man, who is barely a man, only eighteen years old, on a psychiatric hold for delusions of walking through his dead grandparents' house at night. There is no help here.

Nurses are tired and cranky, having not eaten or peed in more than eleven hours and *don't really have time*, they say to the charge nurse, for a hysterical mother and her healthy seeming little daughter. But one young nurse who started working here just last week, sees the fear in the girl's face and hears the pleas in the mother's rising, trilling voice. This Young Nurse asks the right questions and, still new enough to be horrified, still open enough to be determined, still recalling from her training what mandated reporting means, picks up the receiver to report the details to the Too Tall Detective, details that she too, will take home with her tonight.

I try to make it to yoga class every morning these later-life days. I am told that the most important part of yoga is to find a daily foundation. *What is your intention today? Set an intention for your practice.* Every morning we sit in Sukhasana, hands resting on the knees, palms raised toward the sky, open to the universe. We are told to think about the way the body moves, about what accomplishments this vessel might make in a practice, in a day, in a lifetime. We are asked to *close down* our eyes and set the intention. *Write a word behind your eyes. See that word throughout your practice.*

*What's the next step?* asks Too Tall after he painstakingly delivers all of the details to me. I have listened while I watch my son, fingers deep in the earth, sniffing caps and stems pinched between knowing fingers. But I wait. Next steps. *Breathe in. Set an intention. Watch the breath descend down your spine; imagine its color.* I imagine it blue. *Exhale. When you think you have extinguished all breath, release a little more. Let it go from the base of your spine, through your heartspace, Anahata. Let it flow, like water...* like the water that flows by the feet of my son as he uncovers

the earth. I look at him, this impossibly small vessel and then it surfaces, the blue of the water behind my eyes.

The victim, the detective tells me, is eight years old.

I think of pranayama when the Too Tall Detective tells me the details of this child's assault. *Breathe all the way out, from the base of your spine through your heartspace. Invite your soul to live there.* I imagine prana, her life force, the life force of other victims. Young women or old, young men or not, whose bodies, I am sure they too imagined as vessels, saw the universe opening, full of possibilities at the beginning of this, the worst day. *Let's begin with the yogic mantra that allows us to contemplate the mystery of being: So-hum. I chant. I am that.*

We go inside, my little son and I. I run a bath. I put him in and watch the water run brown from his fingers, off his elbows and belly, from his kneeling and his digging, run brown like the Atascadero outside our back door. I change my clothes and make tea with honey. I tell my husband goodbye, I will see you when the sun comes up, or has shone through the rain, and walk into the blue. I pull the car slowly across the long, gravel drive toward the barlow and make my way away from them, into the deep of it.

I think of our eight-year-old as I drive to her. At the beginning of this day, what was her intention? What word did the boy who I saw last week write behind his eyes and does it remain etched there when his wrists and ankles are bound? Or when the legs of the woman I saw on Friday are stretched into *upavistha konasana*, does her single word *light, hope, service, joy*, the name of a lover or a child from here forward carry the weight of this, her darkest fate? *Imagine it. Write it behind your eyes. Purnasya purnamadaya. Remove this whole from that whole; what remains is still whole.* How can that be?

At the end of practice we lie supine, the final resting pose *savanasa*, legs out, arms at the sides of the body, eyes closed, *soften the breath*. The pose is said to embody total relaxation and is thus the hardest. It is also the corpse pose, the pose of death. I wonder how many times before she was eight years old she changed into her sleeping clothes, climbed beneath her blanket for the night, *ujjayi*

*breath, prostrate, corpse pose, laying in wait, soft breath, no breath, he's out there, just beyond the door, close your eyes down, bhramari pranayama, humming bee breath, calm the mind, if you don't move he won't see you, corpse pose, write your intention behind your eyes, dear one. Don't touch me. Don't touch. Don't.*

I arrive at the hospital, half soaked through from the walk from the lot to the exam room and with a heaviness I feel but cannot see. I lifted my son from the bath before leaving home, dried him with a warm, soft bath towel, dressed him for bed in his favorite red plaid pajamas. All the while I thought through my questions for the victim's mother: *Your child, has she eaten or had anything to drink? Have you changed her clothes? Has she been bathed?* The questions always feel like judgments, like interrogation. *Why haven't you bathed your child?* When what I really mean is: *It is best that you haven't bathed your child so that I can collect the DNA of your husband from her body.*

*When you breathe in, imagine no time because time is not, there is only Now which is a precious gift. But time, it is an illusion.* For whom, I wonder, for whom? I walk from the car to the backdoor of the hospital, to the after-hours staff entrance which is an ambulance bay for medical emergencies, which this is and is not. As the door closes behind me and I shake the rain from the hood of my coat, water falls on my hair and a single warm drop slides down my cheek like a tear.

I unlock the door to the exam room 1-7-4-2 like a mantra, every door a secret code. Flip on a dim light. Wipe everything down with bleach: countertops, exam table, instruments, toilet, sinks, taps, walls, floor. Evidence collection requires sterile spaces. DNA collection from a body is ensured only by precision. *Write it behind your eyes.* The smell burns my throat and my eyes, which often tear, dripping off my nose onto the counter so that I have to start the sterilization process all over again. *Root yourself to the earth.* Wipe, open lockbox 4-7-3-5, retrieve keys, unlock drawers, files, unlock doors, refrigerator, evidence locker. *When you stand in mountain pose, tadasana, stand firm and erect, as unshakable as a mountain.* Open evidence box, snap the red tape encasement, remove swabs, smaller boxes, envelopes, larger envelopes, biohazard stickers, evidence labels, slides. *Turn your hands toward the thighs and feel the energy. The root of our being is in sacral chakra, the seat of our life force, where all life begins and flows forth, like*

*water. Remove needles, sterile water, more swabs, more small boxes, bandages, medications, lubricating gel, urine collection cups, alcohol swabs, betadine, a comb for hair collection, pubic hair collection kit, nail brush, bundle for nail clippings, medications, tissue, bandages, more swabs, more swabs, more, boxes and boxes and boxes. Set your intention and just breathe.*

We are told to let prana flow. Imagine a ball of light circling the chakras to regain and maintain balance between our physical and spiritual bodies. Today we focus on Svadhsthana. *Imagine it as an orange light. Pranayama. Ujjayi breath, through the pubic bone. Imagine a tube and the ball of light passing through each chakra focusing on Svadhsthana, the source of creativity and pleasure.* I am imagining this orange light glowing hot and then darkening, blocked. Svadhsthana represents the relationship between the tides, earth's water, and the phases of the moon. I think of how the moon provides guidance on the darkest of nights and wish for a single beam to guide us through this, for the tide to pull us away. But when I meet my eight-year-old victim and her mother, I lead them from the emergency department to the windowless exam room under watchful eyes of the Young Nurse and accompanied by the Too Tall Detective who will interview the mother while I perform my exam, I hear our eight-year-old whisper, *It's so dark in here, I feel like I can't see.*

Now we will focus on the sacral chakra, we will mark the phases of the moon upon her small body. *Set your intention. Write it behind your eyes.*

There is a flood behind my eyes. I, too, cannot see.

When the rain falls on the roof of the yoga room, which sits inside of a large metal warehouse the contact sounds like little pebbles tossed by birds crossing the sky and creates a rhythm by which I can measure my breath. *Close your eyes down. Write your intention behind your eyes.* The Yogi likes to read from Kahlil Gibran or offer Eckhart Tolle quotes. *As soon as you honor the present moment, all unhappiness and struggle dissolve,* which breaks my intention and leaves me asking how we can live in a world where we don't honor the struggle. *Ujjayi breath. Set a new intention.* I hear the rain fall hard against the studio roof and the



wind blow branches off the trees. The windows flash blue from lightning. I wonder, are we to see the rain as cleansing and the intention as *truth* when the waters are so deep that there is no sign of the shore, let alone the ability to reach it? Water, light, grief. I wonder, can a person drown from sadness? *See all of your thoughts, acknowledge them, let them go. Watch them float away.* Behind my eyes I etch *flood*.

When I take the little one by the hand and lead her to the sterile room that is cold and smells of bleach and has no windows, no sounds like birds dropping pebbles nor a rhythm like wind to measure her breath, I tell her, *It's okay. I am here to help you.* I explain how swabs will touch her in places that shouldn't be touched until she is older and never without invitation. I explain to her, this eight-year-old child, how the Too Tall Detective and I will work together, along with all of the people who love her, to keep her safe. I tell her that to do so I will look at her body, all of her body, *Sahaswara to Muladhara*, to touch it with instruments and swabs. I tell her that to *help her* I will have to photograph it, even if I don't believe it. I assure her that she is normal, that she is not damaged. I tell her that she is like any other eight-year-old. *Remove this whole from that whole; what remains is still whole.*

*Okay* she says, agreeing to all of our invasions (upon invasion) of this impossibly small body, her only vessel. I tell her we, she and I together, will take everything carefully and I will only touch her with her permission every time I touch her. We sit in chairs facing one another, knee to knee, *Sukhasana*, palms raised to the sky. I say, *let's breathe together. Close down your eyes, imagine water, a river flowing out to sea.* She relaxes, breathes deep, for minutes that seem like years. After this long illusion of time, she opens her eyes and looks directly into mine. *I love my dad*, she says. *Don't let them take my dad away.* Write it behind your eyes.

*No more water, no more water, no more water but fire next time.*

**Salvatore Milione**

Maureen D. Hall

Rigel 2023 Best of Fiction

It was a joke, drinking coffee through a straw, like a two-year-old with a sippy cup. *Un insulto*. The way Salvatore's grandson drank juice when he was a small boy. But his grandson had been old enough to drink coffee for years now, though not yet so old as to require a straw doing so. Paul was a father himself, but Salvatore had yet to meet his great-grandchildren. He'd been at Paul's wedding two, maybe three years ago. It was the last time he and Lucia attended a family event outside of this place.

*This place*. He wouldn't call it what it was: a nursing home. That he and Lucia should end up in a place like this was the biggest failure of his life. Were his parents or grandparents put in a home, God rest their souls, in Italy? No, they were cared for by family, the way God and nature intended. Not by Sal or Lucia, however; they'd left Italy long ago, before the war, after the birth of their first child, Angelo, never seeing their parents or grandparents, their village, again. Maybe that was the first failure. The one that begot all the others. *Il più grande fallimento*.

"You done with your lunch, Sal? Should I leave your coffee?" It was the large black woman whose name he could never remember. He didn't like that she called him Sal, but she was strong, capable. She took good care of Lucia.

"You may take it all." He released his crumpled napkin onto the tray. "The coffee was cold."

"I can heat it up for you."

"Tell me your name again, please?"

"Zuri. It's okay." She leaned over and wiped his face with the crumpled napkin. "It's a hard one for lots of folks here."

"Zu-ree." Salvatore pushed her hand away. "Thank you. I do not need the coffee to be heated."

"Okay then. We'll be back soon to get you to the bathroom, maybe have a little walk."

*A little walk*. As if he were a dog.

Zuri stopped for Lucia's tray. "You done, Mrs. Mili?"

Salvatore could never decide if it was more respectful or less, the way she called him Sal, but his wife Mrs. Mili. Was it because Lucia spoke only Italian? Their actual surname was Milione. For months after they'd moved to this place, Salvatore had corrected every person who mispronounced it. Even when he gave up, Angelo remained furious, taking it as an insult to their heritage.

But Salvatore observed the nurses and aids who moved Lucia between the bed and the chair, who so efficiently showered and cleaned her, changed her when she was soiled. Things he'd struggled with, mostly on his own, for years. "We let it be," he directed Angelo. "It does not matter."

Lucia was often difficult. And he needed these women to like her, not to feel bad over something as insignificant as a name. Most people here simply called him Salvatore. Either way, he knew who he was. That was all that mattered.

"Lucia is finished," Salvatore told Zuri.

Zuri tried to wipe Lucia's face, but Lucia batted her hand. "Smettita damazione," she instructed. *Stop it, goddamn it.*

"You're welcome." Zuri disappeared with the tray. Salvatore heard the squeaking of the cart progressing down the hall, Zuri's voice in the next room, unfailingly cheerful. She was exhausting.

His wife raised her arm to the doorway, still chastising Zuri, words tumbling out so rapidly even Salvatore couldn't keep up. "Abbastanza," he said. Lucia thrust her arm at him in one swift motion and fell silent.

Their chairs sat on opposite sides of the room, Lucia's by the door, Salvatore's next to the window. Their room was on the third floor. From his chair, all Salvatore could see were tree branches and the other wing of the home, facing the road. He wasn't sure what month it was, but there were buds on the trees. March then, maybe April? Lucia's birthday was in April. She would be ninety. They should have a party. He would tell Angelo the next time he called.

He needed to pee. "Where is that woman?" he asked Lucia in Italian. This happened all the time. They said they were coming back but they didn't. Too busy or they forgot. Lucia ignored him, intent on the television hanging from the wall, that game show she liked, the

one with the models and the doors. He didn't understand her fascination. It wasn't like she could understand most of what they said.

Neither of them spoke English when they came to New York in 1935, September seventh. But Salvatore had learned. It hadn't been easy, working every day in the shop with his cousin, repairing shoes, like his father and grandfather before him in Italy. His cousin, born in New York, spoke English and Italian, and he encouraged Salvatore's English, a good man who died too young, leaving Salvatore to run the shop on his own.

They'd lived in the apartment above. Lucia took care of everything, the cooking, the cleaning, the washing, the accounting for the shop. But she'd refused to learn English. Over the years she absorbed words and phrases, understanding more than she let on. Still, she shopped at the Italian grocers, the Italian butcher. She sought out Father Dominic to hear her weekly confession. Most of their friends spoke Italian.

Salvatore spoke English to their sons to balance the fact that Lucia would not. When Angelo started school, Salvatore was the one who met with his teachers. Lucia stayed home, baking, mending, tending to the babies. She was a good mother. Even so, there were losses, children that died.

Between Angelo and Joseph there was Matteo and Enzo, twins, like Lucia's mother. Enzo died only days old, but Matteo hung on for months, Lucia holding him to her breast, applying poultices to his tiny chest as it fluttered up and down in his struggle for air. The night Matteo passed, Lucia held him for hours, not seeing Salvatore, not hearing his pleas to put the baby down and pick up their living child, Angelo crying on the floor. Father Dominic, accompanied by the ladies from Saint Anthony's, had to come and physically take the dead baby away.

Salvatore's heart broke for her, but hadn't Enzo and Matteo been his sons too? Did she think he was impenetrable, like steel, that he didn't grieve? Or was his heart was made of dirt—mud—disappearing, swallowed down the drain with everyone else's despair, nothing left for him. For weeks he took Angelo every morning to the shop. His cousin's widow cared for the boy afternoons, looking in on Lucia. Till one morning Lucia stopped him as he left the apartment,

extending her arms. For a moment, Salvatore had been sure she was going to embrace him, hold him while he cried. Tears filled his eyes.

But no. "Give me," she said in English. And he handed Angelo over.

That night she moved from the couch to Angelo's small trundle bed in the hallway, and Salvatore feared his life was over. What was life without Lucia's smile blossoming on her face as he climbed the stairs each day to find her in the kitchen, humming as she cooked, Angelo standing on a chair, dropping ingredients into the big pot under her watchful eye?

In time she ventured out again, pushing Angelo in the carriage to mass, to the grocer's, the park, but her nights were spent wrapped around their son, and Salvatore slept alone. For months. Finally, he confessed to Father Dominic. "I miss my wife."

"You must be patient," Father Dominic scolded. "Try to control your lust."

*Lust?* Salvatore rose from kneeling in the tiny confessional and walked out, his breath strangled by anger. The priest might be a man of God, but he did not have a wife. He hadn't been in love with Lucia since she was thirteen. He didn't remember her clutching a straggly bunch of flowers on their wedding day, her bright eyes peeking out at him mischievously from under her veil. The priest had never lay in her arms, retching, on the crowded ship when they came to America, just the three of them, Angelo an infant, Lucia barely twenty.

Salvatore fled in the rain to his shop, pounding nails through leather, destroying boots he would stay up all night repairing while he wept. In the morning, Lucia brought him bread and sausage, and without looking up, he motioned for her to leave it on the counter. They did not speak.

He worked long into that next night, the apartment dark, silent, when finally he climbed the stairs. Lucia and Angelo did not stir in their bed when Salvatore rested his callused palm across his son's dark curls before washing, stripping to his underwear, and climbing into his own empty bed.

The sun had just cast a beam of light through the bedroom curtain when Salvatore felt Lucia climb into their bed. She was tiny and the mattress barely moved. Salvatore lay facing the wall, frozen, his heart beating wildly, hands clenched in fists beneath his cheek.

Minutes went by before Lucia tugged at his shoulder, pulling him onto his back. She rested her head on his chest, arm across his belly, his hand grazing her hip. They lay like that, motionless, till Angelo woke up, padding across the chilly floor, crawling in beside them.

Had Father Dominic sought her out? Or had Salvatore's silence pierced her heart? He never asked and Lucia didn't explain. A year later, sweet Joseph was born. They'd never slept apart again. Not until they were forced into this place.

"Where she go?" Salvatore pulled off his glasses, pressing the call light, tied to the wooden arm of his chair. "Why she not come?" He leaned forward, head bent over his knees, pushing himself to stand. "Merda."

"Madonna santa," Lucia exclaimed. "No, Salvatore!"

"Tutto bene, Lulu." Salvatore steadied himself, one hand on the heating duct under the window, the other caressing the air in Lucia's direction. "Tutto bene."

He took two tentative steps. There was no carpet and the floor was slippery beneath his socks. But his slippers were lost, kicked under the bed. If he made it to the wall he'd hold the bathroom door, and then the sink and the bars by the toilet.

He wasn't supposed to get up or walk without help. When they'd moved here, he pushed Lucia in her chair, walked alone every day: the bathroom, the nurses station, the outdoor terrace on the second floor, even the lobby, where the receptionist watched him with an eagle eye. As though he might take off and abandon Lucia in that hellhole.

Then he fell. And fell again, several times these last months, leading to new orders, confining him to his chair, short walks in the hallway with supervision.

He rested against the bathroom door before slowly inching one foot onto the tile.

"Sal!" The large woman imploded into the room. "What are you doing?"

Startled, Salvatore pitched forward, grasping the sink. One hand slipped, his head banging hard against the porcelain rim. Zuri—*that was her name!*—gripped him under both arms, setting him upright.

"Are you okay?"

"I need to pass the water." Salvatore's voice shook, his head pounding where it hit the sink. He felt the release of his bladder, urine trickling down his leg, drenching his trousers. "Too late." He shook his head.

Zuri sighed, pulling on latex gloves from the box behind the sink. "Let's get you cleaned up." She tugged his trousers and underwear down before easing him onto the toilet.

"You didn't come back," Salvatore said softly.

"I know." She gathered his wet things off the floor. "I'm sorry."

The phone rang and Salvatore's eyes flew open. It was out of reach, on the nightstand behind him. The woman, whose name he never remembered, had tied him to the chair.

"I have no choice, Sal," she'd insisted. "You could fall and break a hip." Across the room Lucia had sobbed silently, hands hiding her face.

"Please." He was humiliated. "Don't use the rope." He knew it was a Posey, a vest restraint and not a rope. *Posey, ha! Like a flower and not a noose.* But when it slipped over his head, trapping him in the chair, he felt like a calf, a pig, tied up for slaughter.

"I'll be back to loosen it."

But she didn't come back. And Salvatore had fallen asleep, chin resting against his chest, drool inching down the bib of the restraint.

The phone kept ringing. He reached for the call light, pumping the button with his thumb. "Please, someone help me! The phone, please." Lucia stirred in her chair but did not wake up.

A woman ran in, a girl really, with a long ponytail, her white uniform bulging in a circle around her waist. She lifted the phone receiver and handed it to Salvatore, moving the whole contraption to the tray table in front of him. "I'll be back," she whispered.

He barely heard her. "Hello?" he sputtered into the phone. "Who this is?"

"Pop, it's Joseph."

Ah, Joseph, the sweetest boy on the earth, even at seventy. Or was it Angelo who was seventy? "Joseph, *mimmo*. You call your papa, such a good boy. And Marie? How she is?"

“You mean Kathryn.” Joseph paused. “Marie is Angelo’s wife, Pop. Or she was. Kathryn’s fine. We’re all fine.”

“Kathryn, yes, I am so sorry.” Salvatore switched the phone to his good ear. He glanced over at Lucia to see if she’d heard him mention Marie. But she slept on, thank God.

Marie and Angelo divorced years ago; Salvatore knew that. It was scandalous, a family crisis. Lucia didn’t speak to Angelo for months. Salvatore was more philosophical. Life was short, his son deserved happiness in his marriage. Marie’s grandparents were from Sicily, which technically made her Italian. She was cold and rarely laughed. He and Lucia never much cared for her. After the divorce they seldom saw their two grandsons, very sad. Joseph and Kathryn had only daughters, three of them. Kathryn’s people were Finnish, but she’d converted to Catholicism when they married, which had thrilled Lucia and endeared Kathryn to them both.

“Joseph, when I see you? It’s been a very long time.”

“Pop, we were there last weekend. Remember, we had brandy and Kathryn made cannolis?”

“Yes, I remember, but seems so long.” Brandy? Lucia was the one who liked brandy, the one who taught Kathryn how to make cannoli. Salvatore looked out the window, the bare branches swaying in the breeze, the sun low in the late day sky. Where had the day gone? “Joseph, she use the rope again. You tell them not to do this, no?”

“I know, Pop, that’s why I called. They said you almost fell, that you hit your head.”

“It’s nothing. Niente.” Salvatore rubbed the bump over his right eye. “Tell them I cannot have the rope. Is too tight. I cannot breathe.”

“You can’t get up by yourself,” Joseph said. “It’s the only way to stop the rope.”

“I’m sorry. I had to pass the water.”

Joseph paused. “I’m the one who’s sorry, Pop. It’s hard, I know.”

“We make a birthday party for your mama.” Salvatore changed the subject. “She will be ninety on April the 18<sup>th</sup>.”

“She’ll be ninety-two,” Joseph corrected. “We had a party when she turned ninety. Remember, they let us use the private dining room? All the grandkids came.”



“Well, we have the party for ninety-two then. Is important, no?”

“Very important,” Joseph agreed. “I’ll talk to Kathryn. We’ll figure something out.”

“If Mama is ninety-two, I am ninety-eight?” Salvatore asked. “Cannot be possible.”

“Tell me about it. I’ll be seventy soon, an old man.” Joseph laughed. “Wait till you’re a hundred, Pop. That’ll be the biggest party ever.”

“I be dead long before that. My Nonina, she live to one hundred and two. She still make the bread and feed the chickens, they say.” Salvatore shook his head at the phone, like Joseph was in the room and could see him. “But me? I am in the chair with the rope.” The aide with the ponytail hovered in the doorway. “I go now, Joseph. The girl is here.”

“Give Mom a kiss for me. And Pop? I love you.”

“I know you do.” Salvatore hung up the phone. “You are a good boy.”

“Hola, Mr. Mili.” The girl walked past his sleeping wife, past the TV, over to his chair. “Buenos días.”

“You are the Spanish girl. Buongiorno.” Salvatore’s face lit up. “Remind me your name.” He liked this one. She called him Mr. Mili and she spoke a little Spanish to him, which wasn’t too far from Italian, a game they shared. Sometimes she understood a few words of Lucia’s gobbledygook.

“Anna. I’m Puerto Rican, but whatever.” She shrugged. “You get the idea.”

“Anna, my daughter’s name.” He lowered his voice, peeking sideways at Lucia. How could he ever forget the name Anna? “She die, only five years old. What they call? The blood cancer.”

“I know. It’s really sad.” Anna ran her finger gently over the bump on his brow. “I’m sorry you needed the rope. How’s about I untie you and we go for a walk?”

“A walk, yes.” This one, Anna—like his daughter—always took him out of the room. She came when she said she would. A treasure.

The girl’s pocket buzzed, and she pulled one of those little radio-like phones from it, the kind his children and grandchildren

carried everywhere. “Hold on, Mr. Mili. I gotta take this.” She went into the bathroom, closing the door. Still, Salvatore heard the rise and fall of her voice. There was yelling. When she came out her eyes were red.

“You cry,” Salvatore said.

“My boyfriend’s a jerk sometimes.” She took a big breath. “I’m okay. Let’s get you to the bathroom.”

She untied the restraint and helped him to his feet.

“I do myself,” he reminded her.

“I’m just along for the ride.”

Salvatore made his way to the toilet, Anna hovering close behind. He grasped the bars on either side of the commode, and she unzipped his trousers, holding on while he lowered himself to the seat. “I have to move the bowels.” He waved her away. “Close the door. I call you.”

She didn’t seem surprised. “Don’t get up without me.” She stood outside the partially closed door. “I’m right here.”

He’d grown used to relieving himself in the presence of strangers, but that never made it any less mortifying. When he finished, he tore a few squares of toilet paper from the roll and tried to wipe. “Can you come?” he called. “Is too hard.”

“I got you.” Anna came in, gloves on. She cleaned him, supporting him while they washed their hands. “Okay,” she said, “now we walk.”

“I am too tired,” Salvatore complained.

“Tough.” Anna took his arm and led him to the hallway. “Should we wake your wife up? She freaks out when you’re gone.”

It was true. Last year they took him in an ambulance to the hospital with chest pain, keeping him overnight. Lucia cried and screamed until finally they had to sedate her.

“We let her sleep.” Salvatore stopped and rested his hand on her hair. It was gray with white streaks, short now, washed and set in the first-floor beauty parlor every other week. She always came back smiling.

He held onto the rail. It was a long way to the nurses’ station. “You go ahead,” Salvatore told her. But Anna stuck to his side, occasionally touching his elbow. “You are in school?”

“Senior year. You remembered.” She grinned. “My mom wants me to go to college and be a nurse. But I don’t know. It’s a lotta science.”

“You are smart. You study, work hard.” Salvatore stopped walking, pointing his finger at her. “You do this, no?”

“Okay, okay.”

She settled him in a chair across from the nurses’ station, bringing him a cup of chocolate milkshake and a small bag of Chips Ahoy. “I know you like Lorna Doones, but they didn’t send any up today.”

“Grazie.” He pulled on the straw. “Is good.”

“I’ll be back in a bit. Don’t move.”

Salvatore looked around the nurses’ station, chewing his cookies, sipping the shake. Sitting nearby, the same four or five women as always, two in wheelchairs. One was missing a leg, her other foot, swollen, red, propped up with pillows. Diabetes.

“Hello, Salvatore,” she said.

“Buongiorno.”

“Tessie Epstein. We’ve met.” She held her heavily bejeweled hand to her bosom, bracelets clacking.

He nodded. “I remember.” She was insufferable, constantly ordering the nurses around as though they were her servants.

“Look at my shoe, Salvatore.” A short nurse with large hoop earrings and braids held her foot out, the toe of her shoe flopping open.

“If I had my tools, I fix for you,” he said. “I used to repair the shoes.”

“That’s why I showed you, hon.” She leaned over and ruffled his hair. “Everything is crap these days. I bet none of your shoes fell apart.”

He patted his hair back into place. “My shoes the best.”

“What happened to your head?” Mrs. Hurley pointed her cane. “That’s quite a bruise.”

“It’s not that bad,” the nurse with the earrings said.

“Get the man some ice,” Tessie directed.

A white nurse Salvatore didn’t recognize brought him a latex glove dripping with ice. “Let me hold that on your head, doll.”

*"I do."* He took the glove, resting it over his eyebrow till she walked away. Then he covertly dropped it to the floor, kicking it under his chair.

"Oh, my." Mrs. Hurley giggled. "I saw nothing." She rose, leaning on her cane, slowly making her way down the opposite wing.

"How you doing, Mr. Mili?" Anna, back, just as she'd promised. "You ready to roll?"

"I am ready." He stood up, bowing his head at the remaining women.

They heard Lucia long before reaching the room. "Can someone shut her up?" An old lady leaning on a walker snapped at them as they shuffled by.

"She'll quiet down, Mrs. Day." Anna looked at Salvatore and rolled her eyes.

Lucia began babbling the second she saw them. Salvatore held her face in both hands. "Tutto bene, amore mio," he said. "I return. Always, I return." Lucia clutched his hands, kissing them, murmuring.

"What's she saying?" Anna asked.

"Who knows? She worry. All the time, she worry."

When they'd lost their daughter, their little Anna, Salvatore was sure it would break her. By then they lived down the block from the store in a bigger apartment, the boys sharing one bedroom, he and Lucia the other. Anna slept in the hallway like Angelo once had.

When she got sick, Lucia moved her into their room. It happened so quickly. One day she cried for Salvatore to carry her up the stairs, her legs bruised like she'd banged them on the monkey bars at the park. Within weeks she was gone, nothing anyone could do, the doctors useless, grim, like stone.

Anna was their miracle, arriving as she did after the war and the deaths of his father and brothers in Italy, after three additional miscarriages and two babies stillborn, Angelo and Joseph already eleven and seven. Salvatore had almost lost hope there would be another child, that Lucia would ever have the daughter she longed for.

He'd expected Lucia to crumble, like with Matteo. But it was Salvatore who crumbled, barely able to function. His sons attempted to keep the shop afloat, Lucia feeding him, cutting his meat, begging him to take one more bite. He wept uncontrollably, and it was she who held his face in her hands. "Amore mio," she comforted. "She will be

waiting for us one day. Anna, Enzo, Matteo, they will all be waiting.” She’d gestured to Angelo, scribbling his homework at the kitchen table, sweet Joseph at the sink rinsing the supper plates. “But for now, we live. No?”

He’d gazed into her liquid brown eyes, as he had every day for most of his life, knowing she was right. There was no other choice. They would keep going. They would live.

They sold the shop when Salvatore retired. His sons didn’t want it. People replaced their shoes now anyway, tossing them when they needed repair. Everything had changed. He and Lucia moved to Queens, the first floor of Joseph’s duplex. They joined a new parish, a Polish priest who understood enough Italian to hear Lucia’s confession. Salvatore no longer believed in confession, but he sat in the pew beside Lucia every Sunday, trying to pray.

There were new friends who played cards. Some spoke Italian, others only English, mixed with Polish or Spanish. Mornings, Salvatore sat with the old Puerto Rican man around the corner, in metal lawn chairs outside his garage, discussing, debating the state of the neighborhood, the city, the country. Their youngest grandchildren were already in college, but Joseph’s girls visited often enough. Everyone gathered for birthdays and holidays, Kathryn and Lucia cooking big Italian feasts. Life was good. Salvatore would have been happy if it ended there. But Lucia started forgetting. Her legs went. Then his heart.

“Why doesn’t Mrs. Mili walk?” the girl, Anna, asked, helping Salvatore back to his chair.

“She stay inside. No church, no shop.” Salvatore spread his hands. “Then she no walk at all. The doctors say she is lazy.” His eyes narrowed. “My wife is never lazy.”

“That sucks.” Anna frowned. “You’ve been married forever, huh?”

“Yes, forever.” Salvatore sniffed. “But you, how long you stay with the boyfriend that make you cry?”

“Good question.” Anna frowned. “I’ll leave the rope off, but no getting up. I’ll come back after dinner to put you to bed.”

“I stay,” he said. “I promise.”

He heard the tray cart, and an orderly stuck his head in the door, tall, pale skin and small eyes, a photo ID pinned to his navy scrubs. "Table for two?" he announced. As though it was the funniest joke, and he didn't repeat it every night. He set Lucia's tray on her table.

"Bring me her plate." Salvatore gestured. "I cut the meat, put butter on her potatoes the way she like."

"I'll do it." The man popped the lid off and started to cut the chicken. "Umm, looks good."

He was a nice boy, this man, a good boy to take the time. He held out Lucia's fork and she took it, smiling, mumbling, half Italian, half God knows what. "You're so far away," he observed. "Why don't you two sit together, at least for dinner?"

"She make a mess. She drive me crazy." Salvatore laughed so the man would understand he wasn't completely serious.

The orderly nodded emphatically. "Dude, no one likes a food fight." He delivered Salvatore's tray, blowing Lucia a kiss.

Salvatore watched Lucia eat her potatoes with gusto. He picked up his chicken breast and took a small bite. It was too hard, most nights, cutting his own meat, but he found if he asked them to bring him Lucia's meal to cut, they generally did it for her. He made do, rarely hungry. He ate to stay strong, to care for Lucia however he could.

Sometimes they did put Lucia and Salvatore's chairs together, the nurses who didn't know better. But Lucia liked to watch the hallway, see what was coming, while he preferred looking out at the sky, the trees. She cried more when Salvatore sat beside her. As though she thought he might fix this situation they found themselves in, the way they'd always counted on each other to fix whatever broke in their lives.

All those years Lucia ran the house. Salvatore was the one out in the world while Lucia hunkered down at home, even when they'd lived at Joseph's. Everyone needed their own space. Especially here.

"You didn't eat much."

He'd nodded off. Anna stood before him, hands on hips. "I eat enough." Salvatore took off his glasses and rubbed his face.

Anna walked him to the toilet. While he sat, she got Lucia ready, changing her diaper, calling the orderly in to help transfer her onto the bed. When Lucia was tucked in, Anna took out his dentures, holding the basin for him to rinse and spit. She helped him pull on his pajamas, and handed him a warm, wet washcloth for his face and hands, all while he sat on the toilet. “I hear tomorrow is shower day.”

He gave her the washcloth and took the towel, eyebrows raised. “Yippee.” She rewarded him with a deep belly laugh, a sound so lovely Salvatore’s smile spilled into his eyes.

She laid his slippers on the floor. “These were across the room.” They walked out of the bathroom and Salvatore sank down on his bed. Anna plucked off the slippers. “I’ll put them under the nightstand. Hopefully they won’t get lost again.”

He attempted to lift his legs onto the bed, but in the end Anna helped, propping pillows against his back and between his knees. She secured the siderails on both beds, carefully pushing Lucia’s towards his. The siderails clinked together, Salvatore snatching his hand away so it wouldn’t get pinched.

It was not yet dark. The wind was picking up, and the window rattled softly. “Buenas noches.” Anna pecked Salvatore’s forehead. “Sleep tight, Mr. Mili.” She picked up the soiled laundry from the floor and flicked off the light.

“It’s Milione,” he whispered into the air, knowing she was already gone. “Salvatore Milione.” He wove his arm through the railing toward his wife. Lucia reached out and clasped his hand, holding it close against her chest.

## Book, Escape, Sanctuary

Lesley Finn

Rigel 2023 Winner

I have no memories of my mother reading during my childhood. I cannot recall her sitting at my bedside with an open storybook in her lap, her chafed hands turning a page, the words of another carried by her voice. Nor can I recall a moment from those years when I came into a room to find her with a book, reading to herself, for herself.

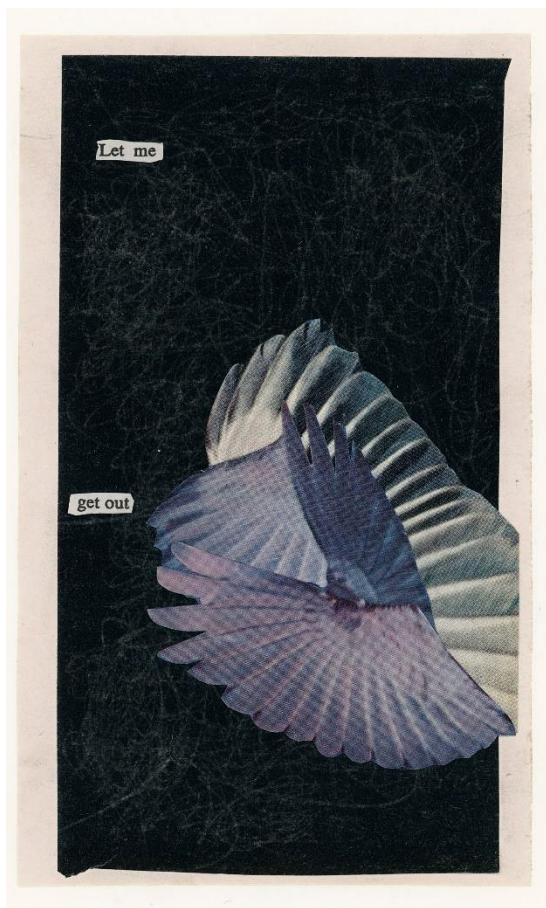
But my mother has a memory of reading, and I am in it. She remembers pushing me on the swing of the neighborhood playground while reading Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds*. I was two, maybe three. Her left hand pushed me in the swing, her right hand held the book. She read and pushed and read and pushed until her friend interrupted with the news that the swing my mother was pushing was empty, and had been for some time.

My memories of my mother do not include memories of her reading because they instead feature her most habitual actions: sweeping, wiping, vacuuming. Decades would pass before I understood why she emptied the trash when there wasn't more than a single tissue in it. Why we left the house only to return minutes later so she could check the door was locked. Why there was no time for reading. In my childhood, these were the realities I accepted.

That day on the playground with *The Thorn Birds*, in the rhythmic action of pushing me on a swing, the obsessions and compulsions that usually clamored in my mother's mind quieted, and the words of the book provided sanctuary. She had, for a handful of minutes, escaped.

And so had I.





Other than reading, my most habitual action as a child was moving around the items and furniture in my room. When I was very small I only rearranged stuffed animals and toys, but as the years passed I became ambitious. My room was only big enough to hold a twin bed, a small chest of drawers, and a desk; a single window overlooked the neighborhood playground. Though there were only so many possible configurations, I felt an acute need to reinvent and reestablish the arrangement, at least once every few weeks. Changing the furniture was claiming my space as mine, a space where I could

escape, a space where I could read. I hoarded these spaces where I could hide and be alone with a book, and from which I would always emerge feeling recentered, calm. Outside of the house, I went to the low branches of the neighbor's weeping cherry tree, or the cluster of pines at the end of the street. I don't remember where I went to the day I escaped from the swing, but I suspect it was to a place like this. I was too young to read then, but not for long.

The association between rooms and reading meets poetically in the word stanza, Italian for 'room.' One way of looking at a poem is as a group of connected rooms where the mind can retreat to and reflect. But in any piece of writing words and phrases can build another reality, a sanctuary. In this logic, novels are sprawling houses, filled with hidden pockets of solitude. Books are places where we can escape our cycles of thinking and being, and, in doing so, meet ourselves anew.

*The Thorn Birds* was a house my mother didn't have to clean. It was a house that freed her of domestic responsibility, of the demands of parenting, a house where she could get lost in and escape the cycle of ritualistic acts that dominated her mental health. It was a sanctuary for her, just as it was for me then, and just as the book is for me now.

The writer Anne Elliott offers a framework for thinking about sanctuary. She does so in the scope of fiction, as a tool for developing character, but I see her idea of sanctuary spilling beyond the room of the page into the room of the reader. Maybe it is easier to think of my mother's life as it intertwined with my own as a storyline. For us, escape was sanctuary, and escape came in the shape of a book.

Of the many features Elliott delineates, one is that a sanctuary is a place "removed from a danger that is otherwise constant." To a woman like my mother—a woman, that is, with obsessive-compulsive disorder—danger took many forms. The threat of dirt and harm, to name two; a toddler with a tendency to escape and hide, to name another. I do not take it lightly that a book once helped to remove my mother from these constants. I often wonder if I became a writer because I internalized, at a young age, that books could free people.

When she tells the story of *The Thorn Birds* and the playground, my mother laughs. "Can you imagine what an idiot I looked like?" She laughs because nothing bad happened, though the shame of what could have must haunt her, as it would any mother. I

tell her I don't think she looked like an idiot. I tell her how I tried and failed to read books when my kids were small and begged to be pushed in swings. I tell her it was a good thing that she was so engrossed in the book, and I tell her that the other mothers on the playground were probably jealous. I am trying to say, *You should feel no shame. Celebrate your escape.* I want to ask, *What was it in the book that swept you away? What does your sanctuary look like?* But we do not have conversations like this. We converse superficially; at best, through subtext.

We do not talk about her OCD. After sharing the news of diagnosis in her fifties, for two decades and counting she has never mentioned it again, as if the diagnosis made the condition disappear. We do not talk about it even when, on visits, the OCD is in plain sight. We do not talk about it, and to cope I practice erasure. When I see her cleaning the clean dish I just took out of the cupboard, I pretend I don't see what she is doing. Sometimes, when I think I am feeling kind, I say, "Thank you." But framing the compulsion in this way is a form of erasure too.



I have never read *The Thorn Birds*, but I have erased it.

Not all erasure is problematic. Erasure can offer a way of seeing, a choice, when it feels like the story in front of you is fixed.

In March 2020 I dreamt of the playground swing, of my mother reading that book—of her memory, as told to me. I had just completed a yearlong diary in which I recorded my dreams and was fascinated by what the subconscious continued to kick up night after night. I decided, upon waking after that particular dream, to order a copy of the book that so curiously connected my mother to me.

All knew was that the novel was a bestseller and a family saga, and that a miniseries of the same title aired on American television in the early 1980s, when I was in elementary school. And that the book had been a source of escape for both of us.

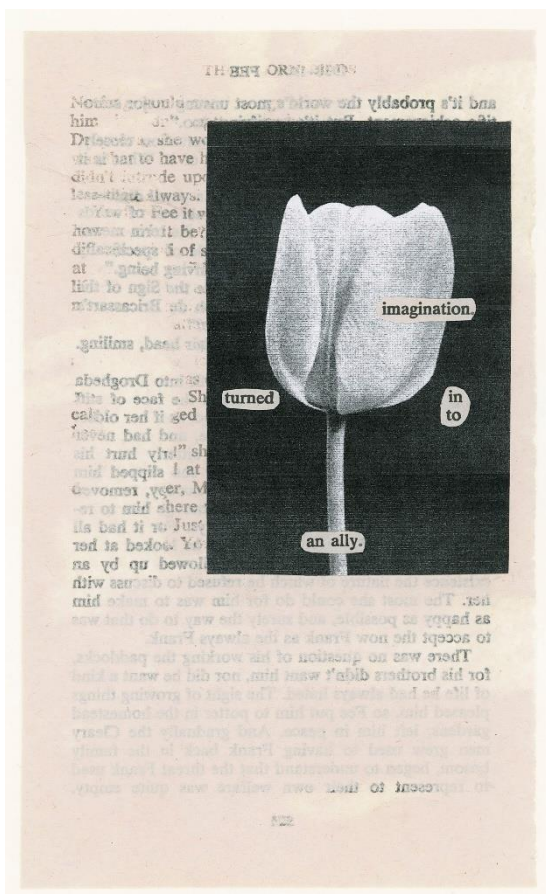
On the first page I saw the name of my daughter—it is the name given to one of the character's dolls, a minor coincidence, but perhaps not. Perhaps the name passed through my mother's body as she read the book, into me as she pushed me on that swing. Perhaps that name reverberated in my body, etched into my muscles with each pump of her arm. Perhaps my mother wrote the name in me, and I remembered. Flipping through the book's pages, I found my son's name too. How much else of me could I trace to the novel's words, sentences, paragraphs? Seeing the synchronicities, though, my instinct wasn't to keep reading. Reading the book for the story seemed somehow evasive and overly direct. Our lives were marked not by telling and by linear story, but by chance and indirection.

Instead of reading, I took out a marker and covered all the words on the novel's page except my daughter's name. Don't worry, it was a cheap, paperback copy. I had never done anything like that before, and I wish I could tell you where this instinct came from; all I can tell you is what happened, and what came from it.

Perhaps drawing on the page was both an escape and a way to go deeper. Erasure, the practice of blacking out, covering up, or erasing preexisting text to create new meaning, is a practice of escape. It allows the writer to choose one meaning over another, *this* arrangement of words instead of *that* arrangement of words. In March 2020, housebound from the pandemic, I could transcend the walls around me and escape into the house of the book. I could choose one house over another.

I say I haven't read *The Thorn Birds*, but I think of this practice of erasure, which I continue to do with the book nearly three years later, as a way of reading. I am searching for the story beneath the story that my mother's mind was drawn to, the words and images that spoke to her and her alone. No one reads the same book; we take in different variations of meaning and significance. There is the plot, and then there is the book we hold in our memories, which no one but us can access.

I am not escaping into the rooms of the book to hide. I am trying to find the room in the book where my mother and I can meet.



For years after its identification in the seventeenth century, OCD was considered a sign of insanity, which perhaps was an improvement over its original association with satanic possession. Either way, people with OCD were seen to have uncontrollable, morally suspicious urges, like the blurting out of blasphemous, inappropriate thoughts.

I would like to know my mother's blasphemous thoughts.

Elliott, in her definition of sanctuary, observes that it "is a place where the masks and armor of everyday life can be removed." Did my mother read *The Thorn Birds*, feel the lift of masks and armor, and think:

I wish I had no child to swing.  
I wish I could run away to Australia.  
Who wouldn't like to fuck a priest?

It wasn't until the nineteenth century that the insanity designation for OCD shifted to neurosis, and that delusion was understood to be different from obsession. The difference: "insight was preserved" in obsessions, whereas delusions were, accordingly, devoid of insight. That is, we are aware, or have the ability to be aware of, our obsessions. Then along came Freud, who suggested those with OCD actively practiced "reaction formation," a process of "adopting traits that were the opposite of the feared impulses."

If Freud was right, my mother's traits, the traits of the indefatigable stay-at-home mom, spotless homemaker, unceasingly supportive wife, and conflict-avoidant peacekeeper, stood in opposition to what?

It would only make sense that my mother secretly desired to be a childless single woman, with a thriving career, and a filthy, cluttered house.



As is the case with many mental health conditions, the current prevailing psychology has a more compassionate approach to OCD, but the framework of the past is hard to shake. Along with the “insanity with insight” take, there were physicians who labeled OCD “a disease of the emotions” resulting from a “weakness of character.” Pierre Janet, who is credited with our modern understanding of the condition, held that obsessions resulted from a “defect in ‘the function of the real.’”

I remember being a restless eight-year-old running into the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice, wanting nothing more than a

quick drink between episodes on a Saturday morning cartoon binge. Hasty with my pour, I spilled juice on the counter, and when I tried to clean it up knocked the juice carton onto the floor. My mother materialized from nowhere, roaring, wailing, her face red with anger and wet with tears. “How could you?” she screeched. “I just cleaned the floor...how could you?”

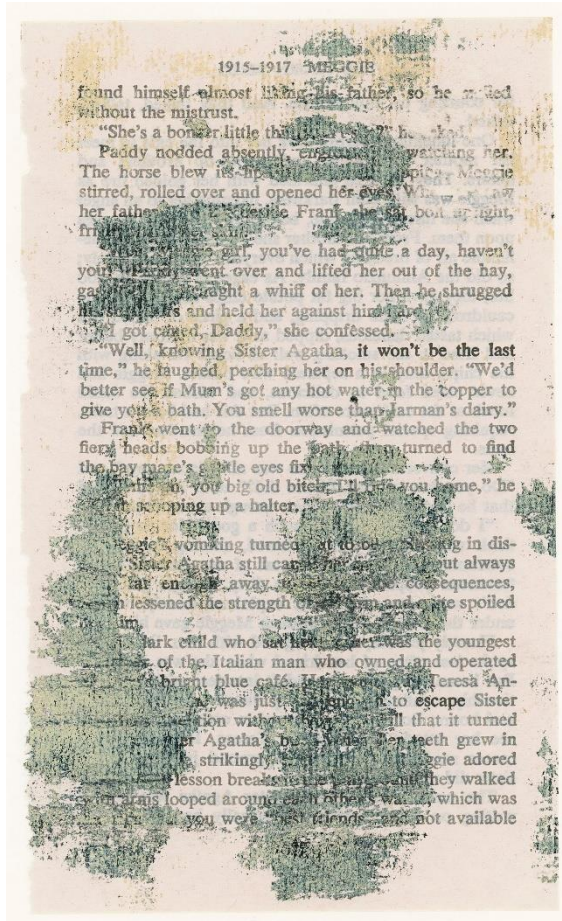
What was real for my mother: a clean floor, and then a floor coated with sticky, spreading juice. The reality of the house was that she was the person who cleaned up, but this reality was not all her own doing. On a Saturday morning, my father could have helped, but he didn't. There were so many unstated expectations in our house, and one was that my mother—who for far too long I interpreted as all mothers, and all women—was the one to clean up. Obsessions result from a defect in the function of the real, but who said the function of the real wasn't defective from the start? I have felt pushed to the edge of madness when I see the structures and conditioning that encouraged and have ensured my husband's career over mine. The barely existent paternity leave that allowed my husband to return to work and left me looking after our firstborn, despite the fact that only a year before I had been earning more money and never agreed to assume the sole caregiver role. That was the function of the real, and it was and remains colossally problematic—defective, if you ask me. And I have, in tears, roaring, on more than one occasion, said to my husband, “How could you?”

I was dumbstruck by my mother's reaction, but eventually helped her clean, all the while aware that what I was doing was not enough. There was a deeper anger in her, a space that I could only witness from the outside, a wilderness she seemed to roam unhappily in. I was confused by it, and frustrated I didn't know how to make it disappear.

If “a sanctuary is a place where the character can experience emotions naturally,” as Elliott suggests, it might be tempting to think of the kitchen that day as my mother's sanctuary. But that would be wrong. Even on the best days the kitchen put my mother's emotions through a meat grinder. The crumbs. The half-empty glasses. The mustard-crusting butter knife. I'm not sure what “naturally” means when we are talking about women in kitchens, just as I'm not sure what reality means for most women either.



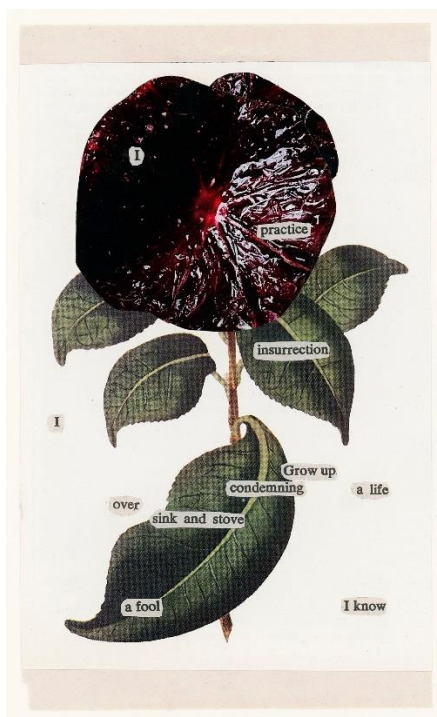
When I think about the kitchen that day, the orange juice spill, my mother's rage, I wish I had thought more creatively in the moment. I wish I had had the imagination to fetch her a book, to guide her to sofa, to insist she read. Or even simpler: the imagination to hug her, to agree that the spill was an annoying and unfair thing.



OCD shows no particular gender affinity, but it's certainly possible that OCD, like depression and other conditions, is perceived differently according to gender roles. In my family's case, my mother's

OCD could at times be invisible, because it aligned with social codes of what it meant to be a good mother. It was, in that way, “natural.” The house was clean. My father was unbothered by domestic duties and could focus on his career. And I was unburdened by chores, free to move my furniture around and read. If my mother had insanity with insight, I would call the conditions around my mother observation without insight.

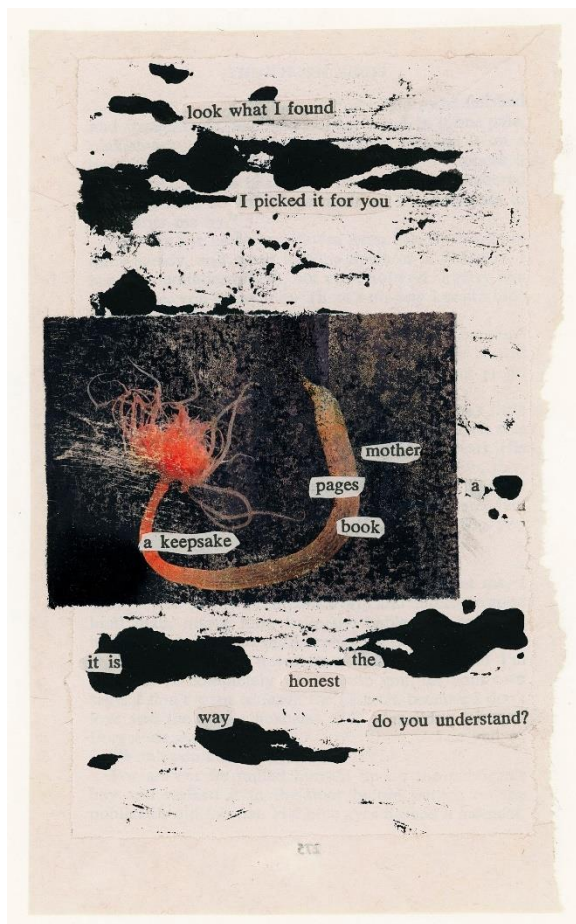
OCD for a woman of my mother’s generation, born in the 1940s, enabled a special kind of gender entrapment. She was expected to have children and an immaculate home, conditions on which her OCD would thrive. As a family, we were, in a gross, craven way, benefitting from her condition. My father likes to joke that my mom’s favorite pastime is wiping down the counter two times in a row, that the second time brings her so much pleasure. As if it is her art. As if the kitchen is indeed her sanctuary. I struggle to recall seeing him with a dishcloth in his hand.



Sanctuary, as Elliott defines it, is a place where “creativity, epiphany, intimacy, or risk-taking is possible,” but every one of these endeavors is blocked by OCD. The condition locks the sufferer in routines of familiarity, free of the risk that creates growth and knowledge. Epiphany has no room in the tight spaces of obsession and compulsion, and the only intimacy is with the repetition of ritual.

But ritual, when it creates self-knowledge and community, can be positive, nourishing. And so I am making a ritual out of reading but not reading McCullough’s novel. To understand my mother, our shared past, I need to go back to the playground, back to the swing, to one of my mother’s hands on my back, the other on that book. That moment—and that book—was and is where creativity, epiphany, intimacy, and risk-taking are possible for us.

I am reading *The Thorn Birds* to create a sanctuary for my mother and me. It is a room like no other I’ve rearranged, existing on the page and in shared memories, and it doesn’t look like reading. I erase and cover lines at random, see what the remaining words evoke, and make intuitive collages in response: pictures of the horses my mother never learned to ride, the antiques she collected but that got donated in move after move. I follow no aesthetic constraint other than keeping the words on the page in the order they appear. Sometimes I blindly press paint on the page until single words remain: once, this happened with the word playground. It is as though the book is reminding me that it has always known us, connected us, and that it sees a path forward. That path, I believe, isn’t a conversation. It’s a stack of pages—infused with empathy, confession, and possibility—that I can hand to her. The book as I am remaking it is both childhood witness and adult reflection. I don’t know that I could hold both in the same space without it.



Choice, especially risk-taking choice, can be a challenge to people with OCD: there is a palpable fear of making the “wrong” choice, of disrupting an established equilibrium, of detouring from the routine and the known. Choose this or that, *or or or*—the options and their consequences overwhelm. I saw it in my mother every time she bought lipstick: she would take me with her to the store determined to buy a new shade and leave with a replica of what she always wore, filling her makeup drawer with sameness. But *or* can be freeing too, as

is the case with the rearranged room, the reimagined page, and this is what I am seeking in my erasure of *The Thorn Birds*. *Or* can be an improvisational cousin of *yes and*—the creative *or* that seeks the epiphany in chance. The word *or* is embedded in the book's title after all.

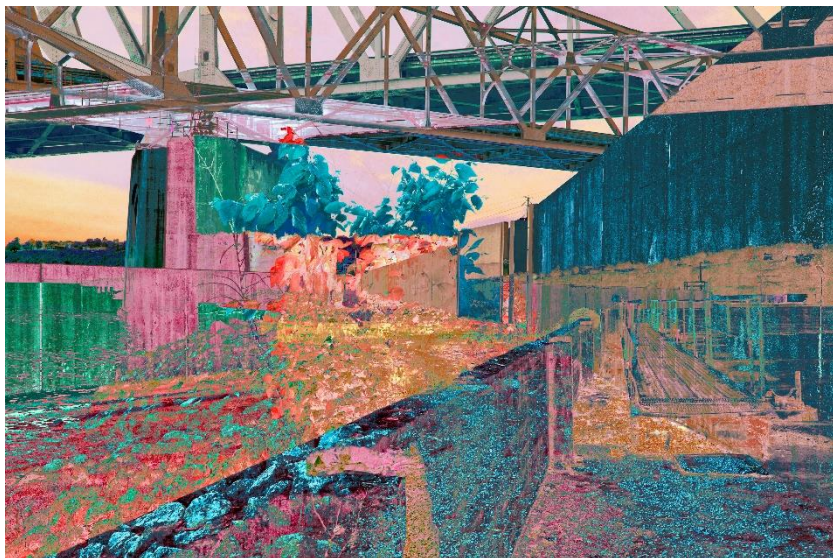
Erasure in the way I am doing it is, I hope, escape with insight. This time instead of running away from my mother, I am trying to run to her.

**Moon**

Irene Blair Honeycutt

Geminga 2023 Finalist

Though some have  
Called you *corpse*  
You are alive to me  
No matter how  
Ghostly you appear  
Early mornings  
The sky gauzy



**Riverside, Dubuque, IA Series / Christopher Paul Brown**

Geminga 2023 Finalist



**Rust** / Ginna Wilkerson  
Geminga 2023 Finalist



**I Can Tell You**

Kyle Gardner

Geminga 2023 Finalist

I could tell you. I could tell you what it feels like to watch the sun's fire go dark. I could tell you what it sounds like when the wind dies and the only sound you hear ringing in your ears are words you wish you could've said when you had the chance and words you wished you had never heard to begin with. I could tell you what Icarus saw in the clouds drowning in the sunlight, and the songs Orpheus sang in the blackness of Hell. I could tell you. But I won't. They are for me.

**Regarding your workplace**

Ben Elliott

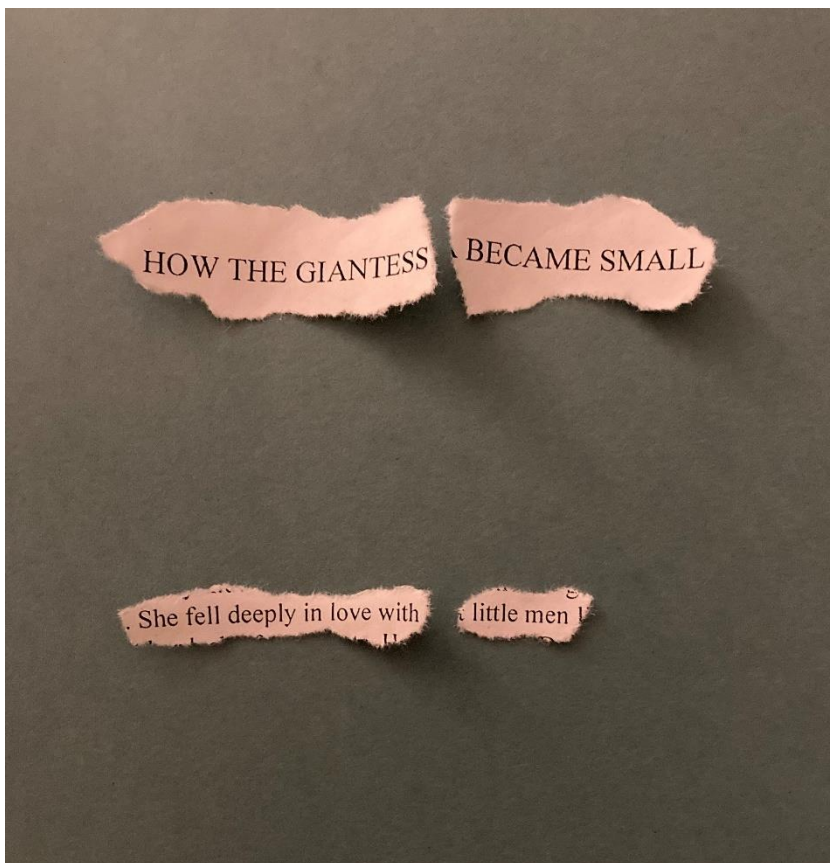
Geminga 2023 Finalist

Quantuscumque onus imponatur tam immerite in te,  
ecce susurrum spei tecum adero opperiens.

Howsoever great a burden is imposed,  
so unfairly, upon you,  
know this: I will be there,  
waiting with you for a whisper of hope.



Web / Susan Dambroff  
Geminga 2023 Finalist



**How the Giantess Became Small / Amy Marques**  
Geminga 2023 Finalist

**And Blood the Next Day**

Brendan Straubel

Geminga 2023 Finalist

Coming home late, I stopped to watch the salmon run. The water was dropping and clear. I made some half-hearted casts. But the fish were old now, trailing their bloodless flesh and gunmetal skins upstream. Upstream, in the warm twilight, like rotting, ragged flags.

You first felt the baby move that morning. Like butterfly wings, you said. Underwater.

I got home after dark, spooned up close, spreading my fingers against your belly. Your breathing soft and regular in the dark. Until...a soft swirl: a Coho's slow roll at the eddyline.

Or butterfly wings. Underwater.

And then nothing. Nothing at all.

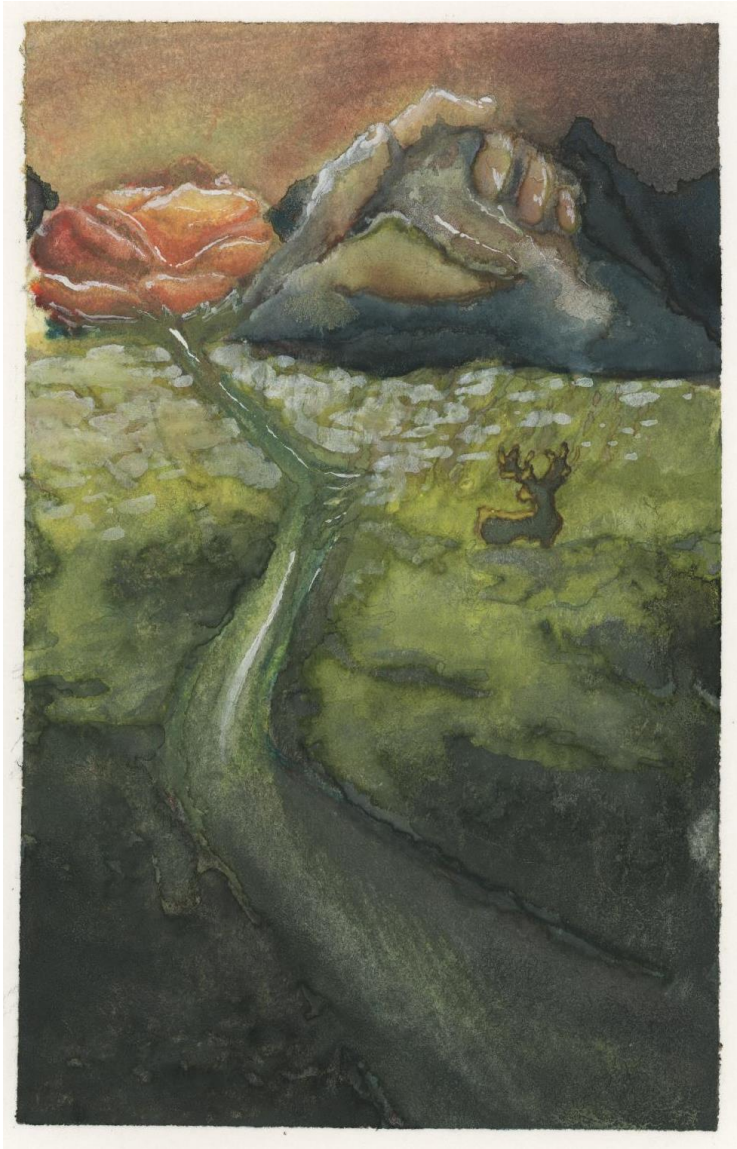
## **Leftover Summer Somnolence**

Katrina Lemaire

Geminga 2023 Finalist

you were a whisper of late summer sunsets  
left behind a canopy of willows  
the kind of midnight moon  
that woke the eye of dawn  
when stars slept

—*leftover summer somnolence*



**Restoration** / Juan Gallo

Geminga 2023 Finalist

**plumeria**

Helen Wu

Geminga 2023 Best of Poetry

three times now you've left  
plumeria on my step  
this time, I'll listen



## Canopy

Kim Downey

Geminga 2023 Best of Creative Nonfiction

Don't let the eyelets and white ruffles and four posts fool you: I was no princess in a tower. No one hid me from the world.

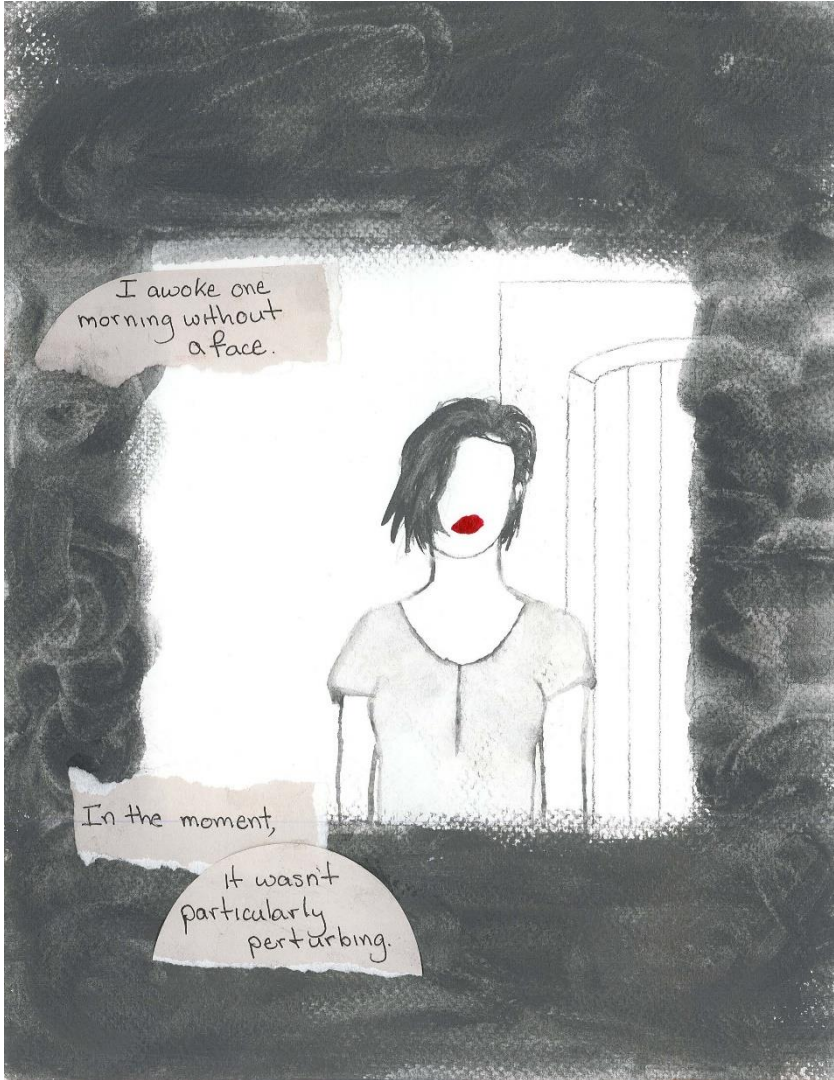
The white berries on the bush in the backyard were poisonous. On the news, murders and exploding mountains. Then my father's brain bled. And something happened in the woods that night. "You know," said my friend when I asked, her dark eyes flashing.

No one hid the world from me. What existed between me and falling meteors? Only a roof and a ceiling and a flimsy cotton canopy between me and the unpredictable sky.

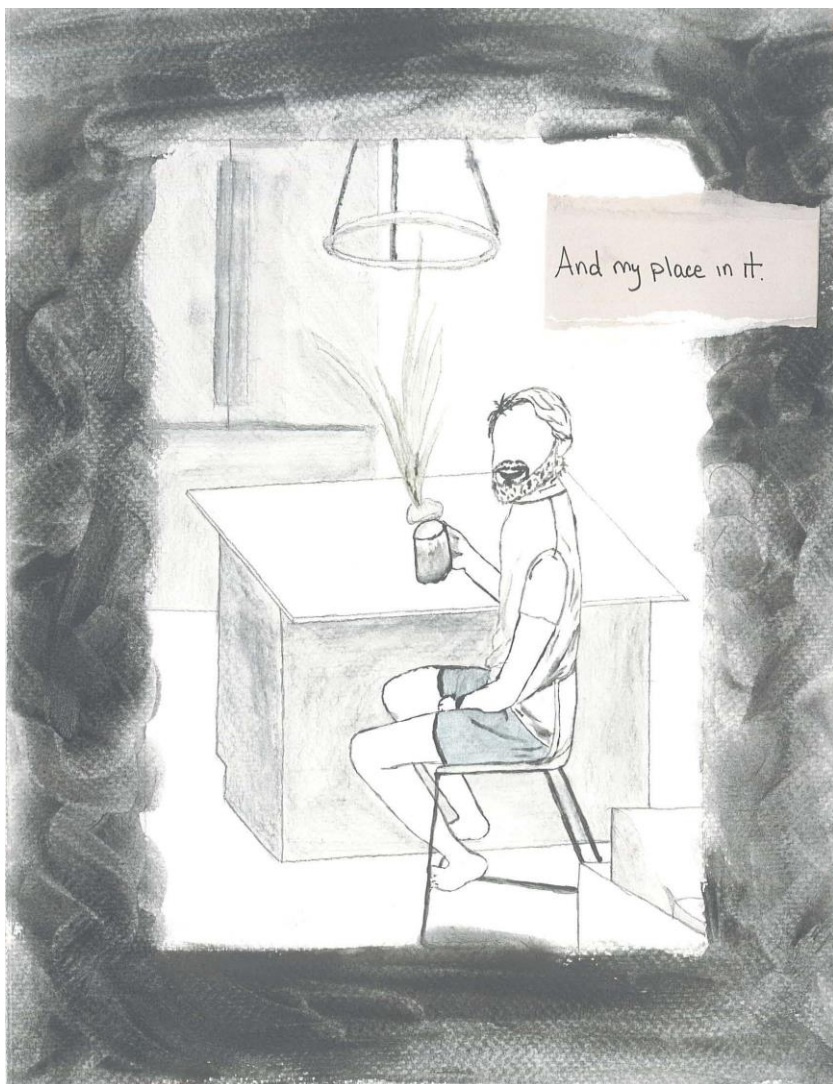
## What Is a Mouth

EZAM

Geminga 2023 Best of Graphic Novel









**Death Portrait of Pappoo / Peter Chechopoulos**

Geminga 2023 Best of Art

**The Weather Circus**

Oshoto Rowan

Geminga 2023 Winner

*(from a dream)*

Bedraggled as old crows, they gather in their black clothes, and the sky begins to darken. Clouds as grey and old as summer thunderstorms, but greenish tinged. A hurricane coming.

Some sing, as they erect the tents. An old dirge: an elegy of thunder; of the cold sea and dark ground; the relentless drive of the mountains pushing their fingers into the secret earth to arise, bejeweled. They sing, black clothes, faces shadowed, the songs from their throats dark.

Silence falls; a wind picks up. The clouds pace them.

Wherever they go, the smell of rain always follows.

## Contributors

**Nathan Bachman** is a public-school teacher in central Ohio. Bachman's fiction has appeared in many publications, but most recently in *Terrain.org*, *Hobart*, and *The Flagler Review*.

**Jack Bordnick's** sculptures and photography incorporate surrealistic, mythological and magical imagery—often with whimsical overtones—aimed at provoking our experiences and self-reflections. The predominant imagery deals with facial expressions of living and “non-living” beings, and things that speak to us in their own languages. The mixed media assemblages have been assembled, disassembled and reassembled, becoming abstractions. Jack has been a designer and design director for the past twenty years.

**Christopher Paul Brown** is known for his exploration of the unconscious and the serendipitous. His first photography sale was to the Standard Oil Company of Indiana. He earned a BA in Film from Columbia College Chicago in 1980. Brown was born in Dubuque, Iowa and now resides in North Carolina.

**J Carraher** was formally trained as an anthropologist and medical sociologist and currently works as a forensic examiner in California. Raised in Montana, she has made her home in the San Francisco Bay Area for thirty years. She lives on a small apple orchard in Sebastopol.

**Peter Chechopoulos** has worked as a teacher, photographer, and director at Chicago State University, Jane Addams Hull House, McHenry County College, After School Matters, and Latino Youth Alternative High School, and as a commercial photographer. His documentary and fine-art photos, films and videos have been shown and published by *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Magazine*, *Main Photographic Workshops Annual Awards* 1986 & 1987, *Camera Arts*, and Illinois State Museum. Chechopoulos has won numerous honors and awards and his work is in many Collections, including the Library of Congress National Film Collection and IL Institute of Design Archives IIT.

**Michael Cullinane** is an emerging writer and a veteran educator presently teaching Broadcast Journalism at a Chicago Public High School. He received his Master's in Digital Storytelling from Loyola University. His fiction recently won first place in the 2023 Slippery Elm contest.

**Susan Dambroff** is a poet, performer, and teacher who has also just started thinking of her doodles as art. Her poetry chapbooks, *Conversations with Trees* and *A Chair Keeps the Floor Down*, were both published by Finishing Line Press. She performs in the Bay Area in Spoken Duets, a poetic collaboration with Chris Kammler to give voice to the world's massive injustices.

**Allison A. deFreese** (she/her/ella) is a poet and literary translator. Her translations of Carolina Esses's work appear in *Bellingham Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Mantis*. Recent literary translations include María Negroni's *Elegy for Joseph Cornell*, Verónica González Arredondo's *Green Fires of the Spirits*, and Karla Marrufo's *Flame Trees in May*.

**Kim Downey** is a writer, mother, and pet owner. She lives in British Columbia.

**Ben Elliott**, originally from Canada, is a grad student in Classics at the University of Georgia. His current interests include John Cassian, Latin poetry, and sculpture, as well as his wonderful family.

Writer and journalist **Carolina Esses** (Buenos Aires, Argentina) has published several books of poems, including *Versiones del paraíso/Variations on Paradise* and *Temporada de invierno/Winter Season* (translation by Allison A. deFreese, forthcoming by Entre Ríos Books). Her poems have been translated into French and appeared in the anthology *Poésie récente d'Argentine, une anthologie possible / Recent Poetry from Argentina: A Possible Anthology*. A literary critic for *La Nación*, Argentina's leading daily paper, she is also the author of several novels.

**EZAM** is a reader and librarian from Colorado. She loves comics, especially the weird ones that lodge themselves in the small crannies of your brain. Find her on Instagram [@nooshkna](#).

**Lesley Finn** writes and makes visual art about the entanglement of narrative, history, and gender. Journals publishing her recent work include *Longreads*, *Atticus Review*, and *Storm Cellar*. Her short stories and essays have been nominated for the Best Small Fictions anthology and the Pushcart Prize. Other honors include serving as Artist-in-Residence for the Connecticut Audubon Society and an Eccles Fellowship at the British Library. Originally from Baltimore, she lives in Connecticut.

**Juan Gallo's** watercolor was created to show the similarity between love and nature. The two ideas are tied by the different things laid out throughout the environment representing the qualities of growth, decay, death, and rebirth.

**Kyle Gardner** is a twenty-three-year-old man living in Studio City, California. He's been passionately writing prose and scripts, typically fiction, for six years and is currently working on the production of his short film. When he's not writing or watching films, you can find him waiting tables at a fine-dining supper club for minimum wage.

**GJ Gillespie** is a collage artist living in a 1928 Tudor Revival farmhouse overlooking Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island. In addition to natural beauty,



he is inspired by art history—especially mid-century abstract expressionism like the Northwest Mystics. Winner of twenty awards, his art has appeared in sixty shows and more than ninety publications, including eleven covers. When he is not making art, he runs his sketchbook company Leda Art Supply.

**Maureen D. Hall** is a writer/poet, mother of three, and small-town librarian. Her work has appeared in numerous publications including, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Hospital Drive*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *Nursing*, *Avalon*, *American Journal of Nursing*, *Mothering*, *Vineyard Poets*, *Island Quintet*, *Isele Magazine*, *Alma Magazine*, and *Halfway Down the Stairs*. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives in New England. Twitter: [@Maureen D Hall](#); IG: [@mdhmv](#)

**Irene Blair Honeycutt** has published four poetry books, most recently *Beneath the Bamboo Sky* (Main Street Rag 2017). She founded Central Piedmont Community College's Sensoria Arts Festival, which had a twenty-nine-year run. She lives in Indian Trail, NC and is working on her fifth poetry manuscript.

**Mark Hurtubise** had numerous works published during the 1970s. Then came family, two college presidencies, and CEO of a community foundation. After a four-decade hiatus, he is creating again from the Pacific Northwest. Recently, his poetry, fiction, essays, interviews, and photographs have appeared in *pacificREVIEW*, *Grub Street*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Burningword*, *WhimsicalPoet*, *December*, *Wayne Literary Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, *Penumbra*, *Monovisions Black & White Photography*, and *Monochrome*.

**Colleen Kam Siu** is a poet and artist based in Southern Montana. Her work is inspired by seasonal cycles and shifts in nature that compel transformation. Her poetry has appeared in *Evening Street*, *POETiCA*, *Fahmidan Journal*, *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *Witches Mag*, *Cider Press Review*, and *Devil's Party Press*. You can read and see more of her poetry and art via her recently released chapbook of poetry and paintings, *Elements of Being*, at [www.colleenkamsiu.com](http://www.colleenkamsiu.com).

**Myrth Killingsworth's** (she/they) work recently won the tiny journal's climate change contest and was featured in Issue 84 of *The Café Irreal*. Killingsworth is an MFA candidate at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, where she serves as Managing Editor and Associate Fiction Editor for the literary magazine *Hunger Mountain*.

**Katrina Lemaire** is a poet and fiction writer from Ontario, Canada who is currently finishing her degree in English and Creative Writing with a minor in Canadian Studies.

**Luann Lewis** is the author of the popular *Twisting Time* romance series and other novels and novellas. A Chicago native, she has had short fiction, creative essays, and poetry published online and in print. Her educational video scripts on environmental issues have been produced professionally, and she has had a flash fiction piece performed by Manawaker studios.

**Amy Marques** grew up between languages and places, and learned from an early age the multiplicity of narratives. She has work published in journals and anthologies, including *Streetcake*, *Bending Genres*, *Gone Lawn*, *Chicago Quarterly*, and *Reservoir Road*. <https://amybookwhisperer.wordpress.com>

**Michael Murphy's** fiction has featured in *Squawk Back* and *MONO*, his non-fiction in the *Asheville Citizen-Times*, his write-for-hire pablum in myriad feeds, screens, and pulp. While living in London, he wrote an award-winning satirical column for the *Hampstead Village Voice*, eavesdropped on the Tube, and overstayed his welcome at some of the world's most welcoming pubs.

**Gregory Ormson** lives and writes in Arizona. He was awarded Eastern Iowa Review's lyric narrative prize in 2017 for *Midwest Intimations*. His work has been published in *Quarterly West*, *Cutbank*, *The Good Men Project*, *Unlimited Literature*, and others. Ormson is the author of *Yoga Song* (Rochak Press 2022). <https://gregoryormson.com>

**Quentin Pace** is a visual artist, archivist, and librarian working in Houston, TX. He received his BFA and then went on to obtain his Masters of Science in Library Science. He has exhibited at the Lawndale Art Center, the University Museum at Texas Southern, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. In 2019, he held a solo exhibition entitled *Who Is You?* at the Texarkana Regional Arts & Humanities Council (TRAHC). Pace works primarily with acrylic paints, graphite, and pastels.

**Robert Palmer** is influenced by nature and surroundings. His paintings, more than landscapes physically seen, are an imaginative reflection of feeling on a space remembered. His paintings are reminiscent of the past, capturing a moment in time to preserve a memory. For over twenty years Robert has worked to capture the aesthetic and conceptual mastery of nature. He seeks to tell a story of infinite locations, drawn by the constantly changing celestial light.

**Oshoto Rowan** is a writer and printmaker living in the Pacific Northwest. She loves rain, things with wings, and photographing tiny snippets of shadow filigreed with light. Her visual art can be found on Instagram under the handle [@industrialmasquerade](https://www.instagram.com/industrialmasquerade).

**Jefferey Samoray** is based in the metropolitan Detroit area. He earned an MA in English Literature from Binghamton University. After years of working as a marketing writer, Jeff is leveraging his language studies by translating French and Russian poetry. He is also the winner of the French Institute of Michigan's 2021 Fiction Writing Contest (adult category).

Born and raised in the bustling city of Bangkok, **Penny Senanarong** spends her free time creating and consuming art, whether it be pieces of writing or multimedia works of photography and painting. She has an avid love for the occult and esoteric, as well as for the eldritch and monstrous. Her poetry and short stories can be found at *50-Word Stories*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Burnt Pine* and *Exeter Enigma*.

**Dave Sims** makes art and music in the mountains of central Pennsylvania. His paintings, comix, stories and poems appear in dozens of tactile and virtual exhibits and publications, with a recent series of five paintings entitled *Survivors* lurking in the virtual pages of the Summer 2023 issue of *Hole in the Head*. A grandfather of several beautiful children, he's also the primary companion to a three-footed jazz turtle named Turk. [www.tincansims.com](http://www.tincansims.com)

**Valerie A. Smith's** first book of poems, *Back to Alabama*, is forthcoming from Sundress Publications. She has a PhD from Georgia State University and an MA from Kennesaw State University, where she currently teaches English. Her poems appear in *Radix*, *Aunt Chloe*, *Weber*, *Spectrum*, *Obsidian*, *Crosswinds*, *Dogwood*, *Solstice*, *Oyster River Pages*, and *Wayne Literary Review*. Above all, she values spending quality time with her family.

**Brendan Straubel** lives in rural Michigan. His work has appeared in *Dunes*, *Big Muddy*, *Michigan-Out-Of-Doors*, and elsewhere. He is a graduate of the University of Missouri-Columbia, where he studied creative writing, journalism, and education.

Santa Cruz poet laureate **David Allen Sullivan's** books include: *Strong-Armed Angels*, *Every Seed of the Pomegranate*, *Bombs Have Not Breakfasted Yet*, and *Black Ice*. He won the Mary Ballard Chapbook poetry prize for *Take Wing*, and *Black Butterflies Over Baghdad* for the Hilary Tham capital collection, Word Works Books.

**Matina Vossou** is a self-taught artist living in Athens, Greece. She uses acrylics and a toothpick, a technique she learned from her father, who was a naïve painter. She paints faces like perfectly unfinished mosaics of emotions and ideas. Vossou believes that every face is a journey. Looking at them is probably going to be our longest, most adventurous and knowledgeable trip.

**Suzannah Watchorn** is an English-Irish writer who grew up outside of London, UK. She now lives in the United States, where she works as a writing coach and freelance editor. Her current project is a hybrid collection about selves, identity, intimacy, dreams, and imagination.

**Ginna Wilkerson** is a poet, artist, and former educator with a Ph.D. in English. She lives in Lexington, KY with her two cats, Amanda and McLain.

**William Lewis Winston** lives in Oakland, California, where he taught English and history for four decades. His poems appear in *Bearing Witness*, *Margie*, *Ink Pot*, *Comstock Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Essential*, *Close Up*, *What Is All This Sweet Work?*, *Sunspot*, and *Consequence*. He received an International Merit Award from *Atlanta Review*, was featured in Philadelphia InterAct Theatre's 2005-06 Writing Aloud series, and published in *Litro* in 2023. He has looked through camera lenses and processed his own photographs since age ten. Until now, his street photography from distant lands has been kept to himself.

**Helen Wu** is a poet who resides in Los Angeles, CA.

**Yance Wyatt** is a hearing-impaired southerner. He left his home state of Tennessee to study writing at the University of Southern California before serving as their writing center director and writing program professor. A two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, his work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Zyzzyva* and *Los Angeles Review*. He now lives in Pasadena with his partner, his son, and his eighteen-year-old dog.

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