

**Corvus Review**

**Issue 24 – Spring/Summer**

## Featured Artists

Donald Patten is an artist and cartoonist from Belfast, Maine. He creates oil paintings, illustrations, ceramics and graphic novels. His art has been exhibited in galleries throughout Maine. To view his online portfolio, visit @donald.patten on Instagram.

Michael Moreth is a recovering Chicagoan living in the rural, micropolitan City of Sterling, the Paris of Northwest Illinois USA. (Cover Image: “Impartiality”)

Bill Wolak has published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind’s Unfinished Kisses* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

John Swofford is forty-six years old and lives in Rex, Georgia. His schizophrenia makes him, according to him, neurodivergent, and he identifies as queer—where queer would mean that his sexuality doesn’t fit any category. This identity influences his identity as an artist. He was featured in a L’Exposition show that was shown on one of the screens at Times Square (2025). He was featured in a L’Exposition exhibit in Montmartre, Paris (2025).

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based artist and art instructor. She shows extensively in the Pacific Northwest. Past shows have included Seattle University, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. Her art is housed in numerous public and private collections.

## Editor

Janine Mercer

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The Racing Pigeons of Two Geese, Minnesota  
Roger Brezina

*Tap-tap-tap*

“Is the microphone on? Can everybody hear me?”

(A high-pitched, ear-piercing whine comes over the loudspeakers.)

“Ouch! My ears! Damn! (*Ahem*) Good afternoon and welcome, Ladies and persons with male appendages! And children and racing fans of all ages! I’m your host, Terri Trainwreck, here with your super-host Tom Barnyard broadcasting to you live from your smart-ass backtalk radio station, IQ 92, and we wish to thank our sponsor The Goose You Too Saloon for allowing us to use their parking lot for the first annual Two Goose Pigeon Race. Uh-oh. That tom cat on the fence looks hungry and he’s smacking his whisker-twitching lips because he thinks we’re providing a free buffet. Somebody get him off there.”

*Whap!*

“Me-ow!”

“Thank you, you heartless bastard you, for throwing a rock at a cat. I’m sure that you fans have already noticed that our racing contestants are wearing miniature YIKE brand tennis shoes—footwear shaped like tennis racket covers that comfortably fit over their pigeon toes! Ha, ha, ha! I couldn’t resist that joke!”

“Yo! Terri! You *should* have resisted it because *I* have pigeon toes and I’m offended!”

“Sorry, but it’s too late to enter the race. Besides, hybrid humans or unreasonable facsimiles thereof aren’t allowed to race against the sky rats. To keep their wings in place at their sides so the pigeons don’t fly away, their trainers have fashioned body stockings from nylons or tube socks and one is wearing a hand-knitted vest, but maybe duct tape was a bad idea for Bob the Squab. Dude! How do you expect to get it off him without plucking him to death?”

“Hey! Watch your language! There are children in the audience!”

“Plucking! I said *plucking* with a ‘P,’ you hard of hearing, gutter-minded liberal! Our twelve contestants and their trainers are patiently waiting at the starting line and from left to right the contestants’ names are: Poo Bomb, High-Low Silo, Statue Plaster, Bob the Squab, Adam Eaves, Rafter Laughter, Arnold Schwarzenbarnstormer, Sky Rat the 15<sup>th</sup>, Stoolie Pigeon, Flew Through the Flue, Whitewash Willie, and Koo-Koo Ka-Choo. Are you ready, Racing Fans?”

“Yeah!”

“Yay!”

*“Yahoo!”*

“Are you ready, Pigeon Handlers?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, huh.”

“I guess so.”

“On your mark! Get set...”

*Bang!*

“And they’re off!”

*Foo-ooo-oosh!*

“Uh-oh! We have a cheater with a heater! Flew Through the Flue took off like a rocket and I mean that literally because he was fitted with a concealed bottle rocket but without the firecracker or starburst report! He impacted against the brick wall. Ouch! That’s gotta hurt.

Looks like it broke his neck and killed him. He crossed the finish line first but he’s disqualified because he’s dead. And he’s on fire! His crooked pigeon handler chickened-shitted out and sprinted away. Oops. Sorry about the language. I forgot we’re on the air. Will somebody grab a fire extinguisher and put him out? Anybody? Nobody? Oh well, what the Hell... Yo! Pigeon Handlers! Round up your birds and bring them back to the starting line! (After several moments of silence) Are you ready, Pigeon Handlers?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Again.”

“On your mark! Get set...”

*(Click. Click. Click-click-click-click-click.)*

“Hey, Tom! What’s wrong this starting gun?”

“I only brought one blank cartridge.”

“Ha, ha, ha! You’re kidding.”

“How many times did you expect to start this stupid damn thing?”

“Okay then! Pigeon Handlers! When I say ‘Go,’ release your racers! On your mark! Get set! *Go!* And they’re off! High-Low Silo and Statue Plaster are neck and neck in front but it looks like duct tape was a bad idea for Bob the Squab who toppled over onto his side and is just kicking his legs. Dude! You can’t stand him up again! Interference! He’s disqualified! Or should I say ‘dis-squab-ified’? Uh-oh! Stoolie Pigeon must be in heat because Rafter Laughter is after her! Whitewash Willie is more interested in pecking at pebbles than racing! And I don’t mean Pebbles Flintstone. The pecking order of the contestants is—“

“*Booooo!*”

“Which bad joke of mine are you booing? No matter. Out in front is High-Low Silo. Then comes Statue Plaster, Adam Eaves, Koo-Koo Ka-Choo, Arnold Schwarzenbarnstormer, Sky Rat the 15<sup>th</sup> and Poo Bomb. Rafter Laughter and Stoolie Pigeon are just circling around each other. Whitewash Willie is still pecking at pebbles, and he left some whitewash behind him. Statue Plaster has spotted a beetle and I don’t mean John, Paul, George, or Ringo! Ha, ha, ha!”

“*Booooo! Booooo!*”

“You insensitive bitch!”

“Yeah! Have some respect for John and George who are no longer with us!”

“Hey! Stop throwing things at me! Okay, okay, already! Sorry, Beatles fans, and Paul and Ringo if you’re listening. What’s that buzzing noise? Is something wrong with the equipment? Oh, it’s Tom snoring. Now it’s Adam Eaves in front with Arnold Schwarzenbarnstormer closing up fast! Koo-Koo Ka-Choo stopped and it looks like she’s trying to pull her nylon body stocking off. Sky Rat the 15<sup>th</sup> stopped and is ogling her while she’s doing a strip tease. Poo Bomb is living up to his name and is bombarding the race track with land mines for people who’ll step in them later. Adam Eaves reached the finish line first but he isn’t crossing it because he’s trying to eat the ribbon. Arnold Schwarzenbarnstormer crossed it and— Arnold Schwarzenbarnstormer is the winner!”

(Loud cheering)

“Whew! What a race! *Phew!* I just *hate* the smell of burning feathers! Will someone *please* get a fire extinguisher or a bucket of water and put out that goddam stinking dead bird! Oops! Sorry about the language. I forgot we’re on the air. Good-bye for now. Be sure to tune in tomorrow when we’re back in our studio. Hey, Tom! Wake up and say good-bye.”

“(Yawn) What? I must have dozed off. Is it over? Can I go home now?”

“Yes, yes, to both questions respectively. Should I give the traffic report now?”

“Uh... no. I’m too drunk to drive.”

Two Bags of Ice and A Rocky Horror Reference

Or

“One From the Vaults,” With Further Acknowledgements to Aleesha “Puck” Davis

Ronald Garcia Orrantia

Yes, you have to get up, ignore the blanket, singing sweetly.

“No don’t go, I’m warm and cozy, No one knows you like me.

You know what’s out there waiting, annoyances and frustrations!”

Ah but you must get up, my son.

Fuck you, sunlight, you’re forgetting I’m nocturnal, Annoyance #1,

And society won’t allow us work time medicinal fun,

Frustration #1, THANKS A TON!

So, if perseverance prescriptions are required, I give you “Puck’s personal preference”

Which is two bags of ice, and a Rocky Horror reference,

The ice is for each temple to more easily decompress

The pounding, screaming and ever building stress

Of the inane, the boring and relentlessly mundane.

And might I further recommend anesthesia for pulling the teeth

Out of mouths that never shut up

As if they know your journey, know your dreams, the eyes in the oubliette,

How the laughter you need so much keeps your hands and feet moving?

The synapses racing so instead you’re not pacing

Back and forth like the wolf that growls inside just before it starts chasing

So, you employ the Rocky reference and push on instead,

Because what could possibly go wrong with Meatloaf in your head?





Young Woman – John Swofford



Down South  
Danny P. Barbare

Just make it  
simple  
says the poet  
blossoms  
on a magnolia  
and sweet gardenias  
words of  
a poem in  
summer  
down South.

After Hours, Every Hour  
Nicholas Chiofalo

It's a stagnant dark pool, an opaque abyss whose depth is impossible to ascertain.

In less dramatic terms, it's a cold cup of coffee. I should also acknowledge it's not wholly dark. Every now and then, the fluorescent bulb above me flickers back on, its light reflecting off the surface of my black coffee. It illuminates the diner's window-side counter, if only for a minute, before it dies out again. But man, what a minute that is! To see that bright light smack-dab in the middle of my coffee—what an image!

After staring up at the bulb's luminescence in awe, I'm compelled to look back out the window. It's more like a waterfall than anything else, the torrential rain drenching the glass paneling. This diner becomes a cozy grotto, a safe haven from the violent storm outside. I sometimes wonder how people cope out there in the thick of it. All I have to go on are imperceptible flashes of light that speed by, always going, never stopping. One of them will stop for me, though. I know it.

Sam stops by again, asking if I'm ready for my bill. He reiterates its closing time, and I'm the last customer in the joint. I beg him to give me more time, assuring him that one of those drive-by lights will stop for me. He says he's not sure. I promise him a bigger tip. He gives me an "okey-dokey" and a thumbs-up before returning to his place at the counter.

The bigger tip is an empty promise. I don't know how many more pennies I can tack onto the bill before I'm out. But this is why I have coffee, to keep my mind off such anxieties. A miniscule sip is all I need, yet the bitter taste disturbs me. I call over Sam and ask if he has any milk. He looks peeved, as if I've struck a raw nerve.

"The milk's *been* expired." The light goes out.

I lower my head, feeling guilty I asked. I apologize and tell Sam I'll settle for the sugar packets next to the napkins. He grunts and returns to wiping down the counter.

Emptying one packet into the abyss, I take a sip to see if the bitterness has been assuaged. Instead, I have more questions. I ask Sam if I just put sugar or salt in my coffee. To this, he shrugs, muttering something along the lines of, "It's *your* coffee." I blink, a realization dawning upon me. Although my coffee remains absent of any flavor, I'm affirmed by the fact that this *is* my coffee. Tainted by salt or sugar, it didn't matter because this was my beverage. I was lucky to even be drinking it. Proudly, I take a sip.

The doo-wop song crackling on the diner's radio makes itself known as I come to this conclusion. I keep forgetting to ask Sam for the name. You'd think I'd remember, considering it seems to have been playing for as long as that storm has persisted. So for a good...I'm not sure. Anyway, all I know about the tune is it goes like this:

*bah BOM bah BOM bah BOM BOM BOM*

I don't know if that helps. I just know it's beautiful and I love thinking about it and listening to it and I can't wait to listen to it with somebody else and talk about how beautiful it is. Good golly, I can't wait.

But still...I am. He's taking his time. I mean she. No, they. It? I forget. I suppose that's the price you pay for waiting so long. How long have I been here again? I move to check my watch before I forget I don't have one. I ask Sam what the time is, to which he responds, "Closing time," to which I retort, "Oh yeah, that's right." So... how long has it been closing time?

I look down at my hands clasping my mug. They looked coarser since the last time I checked. Glancing at the window's reflection, I barely make out the bags under my eyes, carrying the burden

of so many sleepless hours, days, weeks, months, years? No. Couldn't be. No storm could go on for that long. Then again, I'm no meteorologist.

However long I've been here, at least I can pride myself on making the most of this coffee, considering it's lasted so long. Still, I can't help but look back at Sam and feel guilty. I must be a burden, drawing out closing time the way I am, taking advantage of his hospitality so I can wait for someone to come or something to happen. He's been a real pal during all this. I can't let him forget it.

So, I thank him for tolerating me. He assures me it's no biggie and that he'd be a real jerkass if he let me out into the rain. But I tell him it absolutely is a biggie. I explain that the light I'm waiting for outside is the biggest thing that'll happen to me, and the fact he's letting me wait here where it's nice and dry...it makes him a true friend, one I'm forever grateful for. I promise that when that light stops by to talk about that beautiful doo-wop, he's free to join.

Sam smiles faintly and nods. "I just might."

I beam back, before turning to the window. A stray light gets my hopes up, but it keeps going. The rain refuses to let up, denying me any sort of clarity. I refuse to stop waiting, denying the storm any satisfaction in intimidating me. I'm invigorated, hope coursing through my veins, affirmed that I'm not alone. Sam is behind me, humming to the doo-wop music as he continues wiping that counter. Fatigue threatens to get the best of me, so I have another sip of Joe. Lowering the mug from my lips, my eyes remain fixed on the beverage.

It's a stagnant dark pool...

Mother's Intuition  
Zary Fekete

You saw it first in the curve of her spine. Not the way a back bends in laughter or stretches in summer sun...but the folding in, the quiet subtraction of presence. A retreat. She had begun to disappear without making a sound.

You did not ask at first. You measured instead...the spoonfuls left on the plate, the hesitation before a meal, the long stares into nothing during family dinners, the hours she spent in her room. You counted the ribs that slowly announced themselves beneath her cotton shirt. You heard them before you saw them, bones ringing out a kind of alarm only a mother could hear.

And still, you did not ask.

Because to ask is to speak, and to speak is to risk the whole thing cracking open. Better, perhaps, to wait...to hover at the threshold like a prayer that has not yet found its breath.

She began to wear her clothing like armor. Not to protect, but to hide. Layers upon layers, as though flesh were a thing to be concealed. You watched her become both smaller and heavier...smaller in frame, heavier in silence. Her footsteps were whispers. Her presence a parenthesis.

There were mornings you heard her in the bathroom, water running longer than it needed to, muffled weeping folded into the sound of the faucet, muffled retches. You waited outside with a scripture you would not read aloud.

"Fearfully and wonderfully made," you wanted to say. But you kept it to yourself and recited it through each night.

It was clear she did not believe in the body. Not hers, at least.

The days passed. Slow and sharp.

Until one morning you sensed the time had come. You stood outside her bathroom door.

You reached for the handle.

And, still, you hesitated hearing the Instagram advice in your head: Give them space...When they're ready they'll come...Don't push...

Except you sensed today was the day for...a little push.

You opened the door.

There she was, all cheekbone and shadow, and something inside you gave way. You spoke her name.

She turned to you from the lying mirror, and for one fraction of a second, you saw her...really saw her...as she was before the forgetting began. Before hunger became her only language. And she saw you and your deep, clumsy care.

You reached for her. Not with arms, but with the word you had been holding back for weeks.

“Please.”

And the silence broke.

She cried.

So did you.

The road back would be long, uneven. You knew this. Knew that healing was not a straight line but a pattern, a rhythm. A liturgy of return.

But in that moment, she was not alone.

And neither were you.



Out to the Lake  
William Matthew McCarter

Piankashaw County, a backwater realm gripped by the faded echoes of honor and tradition worn like shabby overcoats, once held tight to its semblance of decency and decorum. Mind you, not the abundant airs of wealth, but a more rustic nobility, a code of honor and respectability that had weathered time's erosive touch. Yet in the underbelly of this sleepy southern town existed a phenomenological fissure in the fabric of time itself, where the veneer of old-world manners crumbled like a neglected dirt-dobbers nest, smashed underfoot by the weight of irreverence.

The era of chivalrous cavaliers interred their honor and decorum festering like roadkill on the shoulder of the new highway. It was a time ripe for rebellion, where the allure of transgression whispered sweetly in the ears of youth. It was a time when it was good to be bad. Architects of our depravity, cultivating an aesthetic of decadent decay- distilled, intentional, and deliberate white trash manifesto of taste – a cracker gumbo – a regenerative rebirth – a reconstruction of all things new out of the ash heap of that which had yet to become history – zombies in the sarcophagi of the 20th Century.

Joe Bob, John, Bubba, Lottie, Dottie, and Everybody – each a dangerous archetype, a ticking time bomb of delinquency waiting for our lives to begin – echoed like a roll call of miscreants. Initiated into our existence is a motley crew of unborn souls waiting for the gods of creation to follow through finally. Clad in the tattered remnants of bygone days, we wore tattered jeans frayed by time's relentless march, artifacts of the hazy yesterdays that time was, and, at the same time, never was at all we embraced that aesthetic of decay. "Who wants to wear that Gypsie leather." Wife beater shirts, concert tees, neatly wrapped up in a black leather or blue jean jacket – the uniform of rebellion.

Old Buicks, Oldsmobiles, Pontiacs, Chevelles, an occasional Camaro or Mustang, and the all too rare LTDs and six poppin' station wagons roared with primal fury, reaching for that elusive second gear scratch at the three-way stop – a tee in the road; a crossroads near the edge of town with the only stop light in the county, blinking out the seconds in pulsating amber rhythms of light.

With that amber glow in the rearview mirror, we made the quarter-mile journey to Snaggletooth's – the old general store outside of town, still sporting an old Falstaff sign and a faded red turned-pink advertisement for 3.2 Sunday beer where the promise of intoxication waited.

Gathered like pilgrims at the temple of excess, imbibing Boone's Farm and California Coolers, we danced on the precipice of adulthood, finding solace in the chaos, teetering between yesterday's regrets and tomorrow's possibilities. In the shadowy embrace of night, we reveled in our defiance, thumbing our noses at the suffocating embrace of convention, oblivious to the dawn that eluded us in that time/place where it was not quite night and still not yet morning.

In the cool of the evening, just after supper, some had dates, some had to work, commitments with this decaying mundane world: splattering scalding hot vegetable oil all over the kitchen at Quantrill's, serving up platters of what passed for high falootin' cuisine or carrying out groceries at the IGA or working at the Piankashaw Country Club. But after the witching hour, Cinderella went home from the ball, and we shed our earthly shackles and went out to Possum Holler Lake.



Honoree - Michael Moreth

Red Gums  
Anabela Machado

The leather of the dentist's chair was soft and supple, baby blue a contrast against the white walls. Mara's hair fell down in waves, almost reaching the floor, as she stretched out, hands gripping the armrests. The light above her was incredibly bright, blocked occasionally by his head, blue surgical cap covering his hair, dark eyes staring intently inside her mouth. The smell of his gloves filled her nose, rubbery and clean.

Mara felt him press his fingers down on her teeth, probing her bright red gums with the dental mirror. Her mind drifted as she tried to swallow the saliva pooling in her throat. It was strange how afraid she was to come to his office, the tight fist of anxiety firm inside her chest. The fear was eased under his clean presence, bleached and cleansed. A deep breath of oxygen and there you go, peaceful between the blinding walls, baby blue in the edge of her eyes. The rustle of his lab coat as he moved his arms, bending her to him, studying her sharp teeth...

The dentist hummed, turning his attention to his little table, the clink of metal loud to Mara's ears. Drool ran down the side of her pink mouth, wetting her chin, as her head fell to the side. It felt so heavy. Maybe that was why French royalty had theirs cut off, she wondered. A white tissue in his gloved hand mopped up her face, a chuckle deep in his throat.

She had always been afraid of the syringe, but he was kind about it, told Mara to close her eyes, it was nothing but a little bee sting. Such a big metal thing, scary looking, like a torture device. He had laughed when she had mentioned that in the beginning.

Mara couldn't bring herself to fear any other tool, she was all nice and numb. The clinking sound of the forceps was soothing in a way. The taste of iron was a surprise, red saliva pooling inside her mouth, the loud sound of the metal against her teeth, white like the walls, like his lab coat, like his own sharp smile, canines resting against his bottom lip, mask under his chin, a bloody tooth in the palm of his hand.

There it was, the bee sting again, a metal syringe with a long needle, gleaming and menacing. Mara's gums tensing up, the scraping sound inside her skull...

The sickness came up suddenly, closing up her throat, no word uttered. Nervous fingers loosened, and she couldn't swallow or hold her head up anymore. In a second, she became a rag doll, pliant on the chair, pink sweater damp with sweat. The light flickered inside her mind, eyes losing focus, darkness creeping in just to be banished by the brightness of the room.

The dentist gripped her jaw, gloved fingers keeping her mouth in the right position, white gauze sticking to the inside of her cheek, pieces of bone on her dry lips. He smiled again, eyes a black hole, forehead glistening.

Mara started to cry, fat tear drops falling down her face, mixing with the reddish saliva that covered her chin and neck. The dentist, with a hand full of crisp white tissues, cleaned her face carefully, latex warm against her skin as he turned her face to him. Soothing words fell from his mouth, as the taste of blood stayed on her tongue.

On the wall, the clock had eaten up the hours, time had slipped away like sand between her fingers. Her tooth rested on the little tray, a piece of her forcefully taken. Mara's strength had been ripped out too, taken from the root. She missed that little tooth, the space it had fought for inside her mouth was never going to be the same. It was terrifying and beautiful like a weed.

The snap of his gloves brought Mara out of her trance, the wheels of his chair gliding on the white floor. The dentist cleaned the tooth in the sink, cold water taking away the blood, and

wrapped it in cotton. He turned to her, the girl still sprawled on the chair (tear tracks showing on her cheeks, drool still pooling on the edges of her mouth), and presented the little bundle like it was a gift.

The dentist still smiled, lips frozen in that position, all the pearly whites on display. His dried sweat was like a second skin; the baby blue mask dangled from one ear. There were more teeth to be taken.

Finding My Way Back: A Journey Through Anorexia  
Claudia Wysocky

I beheld a stranger in the cracked mirror that once doubled as my best friend and worst enemy. Thin, sunken cheeks stared back at me, hollowed out by anorexia's relentless grip. My ribs jutted out like a macabre xylophone, each bone a discordant note in the song of my life. I hated who I'd become, yet I couldn't let her go. Anorexia had me in her clutches, and she wasn't about to let me go without a fight.

The first time I ever starved myself, I was 15. It was the fall of my sophomore year, and puberty had painted my body with a cruel brush. My once-slim frame had rounded, and the boys' once-admiring glances had turned to leers. One day, my English teacher pulled me aside after class and slipped a dieting pamphlet into my notebook. "For your good," she said, her eyes filled with concern. But her words lingered like a poisonous seed, taking root in my vulnerable mind.

At first, I just cut out desserts, then carbs, and then entire meals. I became an expert at hiding my secret behind nonchalant excuses: "Oh, I'm not hungry," or "I already ate." My parents didn't suspect a thing; they were too preoccupied with their battles as immigrants trying to make it in a foreign land. And so, I slipped further down the rabbit hole of starvation, drawn to its false promises of control and beauty.

My poetry and photography became my only solace, the only places where I could express the maelstrom of emotions raging inside me. I found solace in the dark and emaciated portraits of models like myself, girls who looked like modern-day saints, their gaunt frames adorned with halos of bones. They were my unhealthy inspiration, and I yearned to be just like them. In my mind, their skeletal frames represented the epitome of beauty and control.

The more I starved myself, the more I withdrew into my world. My grades plummeted, and my once-vibrant social life shriveled up like a raisin in the desert sun. Family dinners turned into silent battles, with each morsel of food a battleground upon which my parents waged war against my emaciated willpower. "You're wasting away," my mother sobbed one night, her accent thick with fear. But I couldn't hear her over the deafening voice of anorexia in my head, which told me that no matter how much I starved myself, it would never be enough.

I continued to slip further away from reality until that fateful day when my camera and pen, once my loyal companions, turned their backs on me. My photographs were lifeless, devoid of the emotion and depth I'd once poured into them. My poems echoed with the hollow laughter of a girl I no longer recognized. In a desperate attempt to recapture the girl I'd once been, I reread my old work, hoping to find a glimmer of the passionate young woman who once breathed life into the world around her. Instead, all I found were the ramblings of a girl consumed by self-hatred and anorexia's lies.

It was then that I decided to let go—to let go of the false image I'd been chasing and embrace the woman my parents had raised me to be. A woman who was smart, talented, and beautiful, despite what the mirror told her. But it wasn't so easy, and still isn't easy to this day. The journey back to myself was long and arduous, paved with setbacks and relapses. But with the support of my loving father, understanding counselor, and a nutritionist who understood my cultural background, I took baby steps towards recovery.

"Klaudia, moja droga," my father would say as he embraced me one evening after yet another therapy session. "You are so much more than what you see in that glass. Your beauty radiates from within, from your kind heart and creative soul." His words were like balm to my fractured spirit, reminding me that outer beauty was only skin deep. But I felt nothing, because what was I supposed



to feel if he never said that to me? All he did was yell... Criticize me more, saying that I was the reason why we had it so tough. I couldn't take it anymore. After arguing with my father for hours on end, he left me and isolated himself. He was overwhelmed and probably needed a breather. I sought solace in my old habits, lunging for the wafers in our cupboard. My hand trembled as I devoured the whole pack while staring at myself in the mirror. Anorexia's grip tightened its hold on me, luring me back into its cold embrace.

Weeks passed by like a blur of sleepless nights and bingeing followed by purging. The vicious cycle continued until one day, while rummaging through our family photo albums, I stumbled upon a picture of me at my Confirmation; plump cheeks, bright eyes, and a smile that could light up the world. My mother had taken that photo just moments before we left Poland. The contrast between the radiant girl in the picture and the hollow-eyed stranger staring back at me now was jarring. I realize...was this even worth it?

Obscenity– Yes, I'm God  
Kimvalrie Neal

Rolling over their backs,  
I see a relentless summer.  
Beneath my feet is the blue sky.  
I am worshiped,  
forced to make promises.

On the curled-up earth,  
they frolic unawares  
like mindless laborer's labor.  
Weaving rugs of all colors,  
their indulgent dyes change the sky.

And I'm still worshiped.  
In various names,  
I appear here and there in their scriptures.  
forced to endorse disagreements  
among childish frolickers.

Eyes  
Joel Woodard

‘What foul creature is this?’

Your enthusiasm is almost believable. A trick to cheer him up, like the papier-mâché mask you made him: The Creature from the Black Lagoon. The mask he now wears, emerging from his bedroom for the first time in three days. You can vaguely make out his blue eyes through the crude sight-holes cut in the mask.

He has been unwell since the fishing trip. Not just nausea, but a withdrawal. He still won’t speak, but you picture his smile under the mask. You realise you’re just imagining it; tricking yourself, too.

He rushes to the bathroom, shuts the door. Turns the lock. You hear him vomit. He hasn’t eaten in days, but something heavy and viscous splashes into the toilet bowl nonetheless.

*Click.* The door opens. He runs back to the bedroom. The mask is in the bathtub, thrown off with haste. The bedroom door slams shut. You continue to fake a smile, even as hot tears well up.

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Sat in your armchair, your mind wanders. The bottle in your hand recalls the soda bottle your father used to christen the boat on her maiden voyage, all those years ago. He let you choose the name: The Kraken. A name to strike fear on the high seas. The scratches from the shattered glass are still there.

You think too of the latest trip. The long drive to the coast in the baking sun. The comforting familiarity of the old dock, the same small-town faces. The thought of selling the boat hurts, a knife to the chest. A betrayal of the old man’s memory. But the house will not pay for itself, nor the divorce.

These thoughts do not help. You re-focus on the trip.

Your son reaches into the ocean, pulls the catch over the side, onto the deck. He recoils; shouts that it bit him. You run over and check his hand. No blood, no marks, not even a scratch. Just a... swelling. But his tears are real, his pain. You take him in your arms, then look down.

It’s the ugliest fucking fish you’ve ever seen. Everything about it seems... off. Wrong. Fleishy, anemic scales. The repellent, voluptuous bloating of its lips. Milky, almost translucent eyes, pupilless. Even the size of the damn thing. And... teeth?

You move to toss it back into the water, and immediately regret touching it. You vomit. You muster your strength, and kick it, again and again, until it flops out of the boat and hits the water with weirdly little commotion.

It is gone.

Neither says a word on the way to the dock, nor on the journey home. He sits in back, wrapped in a blanket. Despite your best efforts, you cannot catch his eye in the rearview mirror. That night, the sickness begins.

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‘Dad?’

‘Son?’

‘Can... can we go fishing again tomorrow? I think... I’ll feel myself again, out there on the water. Sea air, you know?’

You resist the urge to rush upstairs and hug him. Baby steps. You look at his little face poking through the banister, and smile.

‘Sure thing. Might be the last one for a while, OK?’

His blue eyes stare at you, until you avert your gaze. Why does it feel so... uncomfortable? You brush these thoughts from your mind. Be happy he’s talking, engaging. You look back, relieved to find him smiling, too.

‘You’re the best!’

He slips his head from the banister, puts the mask back on. He lingers almost too long; the mask’s dead eyes locked with yours. Eventually - *finally* - he turns, goes to his bedroom.

You finish your beer, drink two more, call it a night.

\*\*\*

The sea is rougher than anticipated. Unfriendly clouds gather. A chill wind freezes you to the marrow. He sits at the stern, staring at the waves, then his hand. All the colour has drained from his face.

You decide to head for shore. Thunder rumbles overhead. You look up - a lightning flash cracks open the sky, revealing its secrets. Your vision is violet, then green. You blink desperately to recover your sight. You rub your eyes, then look at your son.

He stands, contorting in a violent frenzy. He removes his clothes, and it is worse. He seems to throb; to *pulsate*. Surely a boy cannot... *convulse* like that.

And then he’s gone. Into the cold embrace of the ocean.

You scream his name as you run sternward and dive after the boy, wild waves hammering the boat. Panic robs your strength, your capability to swim. You gulp lungfuls of seawater as the ocean pulls you to her depths. You open your eyes, hoping to catch a glimpse, to know that he will survive even if you do not.

Fear bubbles from your throat as a mass, an ungodly shape, approaches. The water surrounding it seems to thrash. To boil. Something wraps around you, something prehensile, some hellish, constricting, *grasping* monstrosity.

It hurls you into the boat. A rib cracks as you hit the deck. Struggling to gather your breath, you look up. Wriggling, writhing, the abominable appendage seems to be searching, blindly groping, reaching out. Nausea rises, constricting your throat. And then it opens its eyes.

Hundreds of eyes. Blinking, pupils dilating and contracting as they adjust to the light above the surface. Eyes that you recognise.

That recognise *you*. *Know you*.

Blue eyes.

You scream as madness takes you, as the tentacles reach for you, cold yet warm, pulsing with life, viscid and muscular and curious and *new*.

You pass out, enveloped in darkness.

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Eventually, you wake. The sun shines down onto a calm sea.

You are alone.





Gratefully - Michael Moreth

Armada  
Angela Lavelle

Some nights I have the sort of beauty which can climb struts of piers and sink ships. And other nights I am not a siren, but a crying heap of myself. And unto myself I delve— deeper than I should.

But not into things of glaring reason of course...

One night of many in Lower Manhattan, I'd sunk another ship. It didn't smell of rum, but of tequila. And his name was something. I found myself licking spice off a rim— (something with an R?), and craning my face up to suck the starboard side of a neck. (A, I think.)

In a haphazard flick— I'm outside. I'm trying to think of names, holding onto the night's black and yellow-glow. That glow of being the siren in an ocean of hot wet people— who sunk the tallest in the armada.

Larry Hannigan's Fever Dream  
Devin James Leonard

Sick on the couch. Fifth day zonked out on nighttime cold medicine and nasal decongestants. Liquids evacuating from every orifice but my ears. Fever high. Hot and chilly. My door bashes inward and two baboons dressed like mechanics come in and jam their pistols in my face. Ugly sumbitches. Either they're burglars or I'm tripping or this is a dream.

Humongous men. One wears a baseball cap. The other is bald. Blockheaded mouth-breathers with droopy eyes wandering in dumb puzzlement. All they need is a bit of dribble hanging off their bottom lips and they'd look exactly like sedated mental patients. Hovering over me, guns cocked, neither speaking. They demand nothing, only frowning at each other as if they are waiting for the other to take the lead. I lie there, blankets up to my chin, snotty tissues on my chest, my lungs whistling.

"Help you guys?" I say.

The bald one presses his gun against my cheek. "Are you—?" He shifts his eyes to the one in the cap. "What was his name again?"

Cap sighs. "Larry Hannigan," he says. "That you?"

I blink, too weak to nod. "That'd be me."

"You were at the wrong place at the wrong time," Baldy says. "Tough break."

"Haven't been anywhere," I say. "You got the wrong guy."

Cap frowns. "You're Larry Hannigan."

"Correct."

"Then you're the guy."

"How's that?"

"We got your address off your insurance papers."

"Okay?"

"That's how we found you."

"You're looking for me—why?"

"You know why," Cap says. "You saw what we did."

"Haven't seen anything other than my ceiling the past week," I say. "Don't know if you noticed—I'm sick as a dog. You should keep your distance in case I'm contagious."

Baldy warily pulls his gun away. Lunges backward. Cap snaps at him. "Where are you going?"

"I don't wanna get sick."

"Get your gun back on him."

Baldy resumes his position—three feet away.

"Get up, Larry," Cap says. "You're coming with us."

"Where?" I say.

"Back to the pond, where you saw us."

"Never seen you before. Don't know no pond. You sure you got the right guy?"

"We're sure, Larry Hannigan," Baldy says. "Guilder pond? Ring any bells?"

"No bells."

"You drive a green Toyota pickup," Cap says. "Name and address was inside, so, yeah, we got the right guy."

My eyelids, heavy and half-shut, widen. "My truck?"

"That's right," Cap says.

“Where?”

“At the pond!” he shouts.

I pull my arms out from under the blankets. Raise my palms. Pat the air. “Where is it right now?”

Baldy considers Cap, says, “Still parked up at the pond, far as we know.”

“Then how’m I here if my truck’s there?”

Mouths agape. Stumped. Cap adjusts his cap. Baldy scratches his chin with his pistol.

“Fellas,” I say, and pause to clear my throat and hack a glob of lung lard into a tissue. “My truck must’ve been stolen.”

“So?” Baldy says.

“I gotta spell it out for you?”

The dumb, pistol-packing primates think it over, squinting at each other. Baldy says, “Wait a minute. If Larry’s truck was stolen...”

“And Larry’s right here...” Cap says, pointing to the couch.

“And if his truck is still there...” Baldy says, pointing to the door.

I sniffle and snort. Cough into my fist. Wait for the bells to ring.

Cap says, “Must mean—”

“Whoever stole his truck is the witness!” Baldy calls out. Like he’s shouting an answer on a game show.

Cap lowers his handgun. Shoulders slouch. Becomes apologetic. “Sorry about this, Larry. Our mix-up.”

Baldy mimics Cap’s gestures. “Yeah, sorry, Larry. I feel bad about this.”

“Simple mistake,” I say.

“Well, we can’t very well leave him like this,” Cap says.

“You’re right,” Baldy says. “Hey, Larry, would you like a ride to the hospital? You don’t look so hot.”

“I meant we can’t leave him alive,” Cap says. “He saw our faces.”

“Oh,” Baldy says. “Well, now I feel even worse for him.”

“It’s okay, fellas,” I say.

“There must be something else we can do,” Baldy says. Sounds sympathetic.

“Hand me that bottle of pink medicine,” I say. “I’ll chug it.”

“Hell’s that gonna do?” Cap says.

“If it doesn’t kill me, it’ll at least make me forget this whole ordeal.”

Baldy frowns at Cap. Shrugs. Cap purses his lips at Baldy. Nods.

“I’m good with that.”

“Me too.”

Baldy brings the medicine to my lips. Tips the bottle back. Nurses me like a baby.

Glug, glug, glug...

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I wake up. God knows what day it is. The wife walks in. From God knows where. My head’s drowning with grogginess. Can’t see straight. All blurs and fuzzy streaks. Even Wifey’s hair looks out of whack. Disheveled. Lipstick smeared. Clothes ruffled.

“You won’t believe the night I had,” she says.

“You won’t believe the *nightmare* I had,” I say, recalling the dream of the two lemons with lugers.

She passes through the living room. Tosses the keys to my pickup on the table as she heads down the hall. Her shape is a blurry phantom in my delirious vision.

“Think I took too much medicine,” I mumble to the ceiling.

Wifey returns. Buttoning on a clean shirt.

“Just getting in?” I say.

“I was at the police station all night,” she says. “I saw some scary-looking guys *murder* somebody.”

“Jeez.”

“I had to hide out until they were gone, and then we—*I*— went straight to the police.”

“Quite a night,” I say.

She leans in. Pecks the top of my head. Nose is stuffed. My sense of smell practically gone. But the stink on her. Cologne. Sweat. Latex. It’s loud.

She went out last night. The pharmacy. For more medicine.

Didn’t need it, I’d told her. Bottle was full, but she insisted. It’s empty now, and she didn’t bring any home with her.

Must’ve forgotten after the night she had up at the pond.

She Told Me Her Secret  
Diana Raab

The day after I found my grandmother dead, my mother bought me my first journal. On its pages, I spoke with her, every day sitting in my walk-in closet, clothes draped over my face and a pull string bulb on the ceiling. Twenty years later, I visited a psychic, nestled in the spiritual camp of Cassadaga. She invited me to sit in her faded needlepoint chair, just like Grandma's. She had no crystal balls or tarot cards just deep dee; eyes putting mine under a microscope, stripping me of all that I thought was only mine.

She seemed to know all about me. I shook beneath my olive skin, tottering between wanting to know everything and nothing like a therapist telling you like it is, as you want to remain buried in your pain instead of facing its reality.

A yellow light surrounds you, she told me confidently, lots of psychic energy.

For an hour I sensed my calling to be a medium, but reality hit when on my way home, a young girl leaped from the overpass on the highway, causing me to slam hard on my brakes.

Birdie said that like a healing vapor, Grandma's spirit surrounded me. She instructed me to channel with Grandma because of a secret she held.

That night I lay in bed staring at the blank ceiling obstructing my view to her heaven. I told Grandma I wanted to speak with her the next day at eleven.

At the strike of eleven as I sit at my writing studio desk, she whispers my name; her voice velvet to my ears. She asked if I recalled the hours before her death, our walk around the block and her secret. My memory and limbs went numb. I felt as if I was lifted up and thumped down again. Was I on her heaven or was she on my earth? I lost all sense of place.

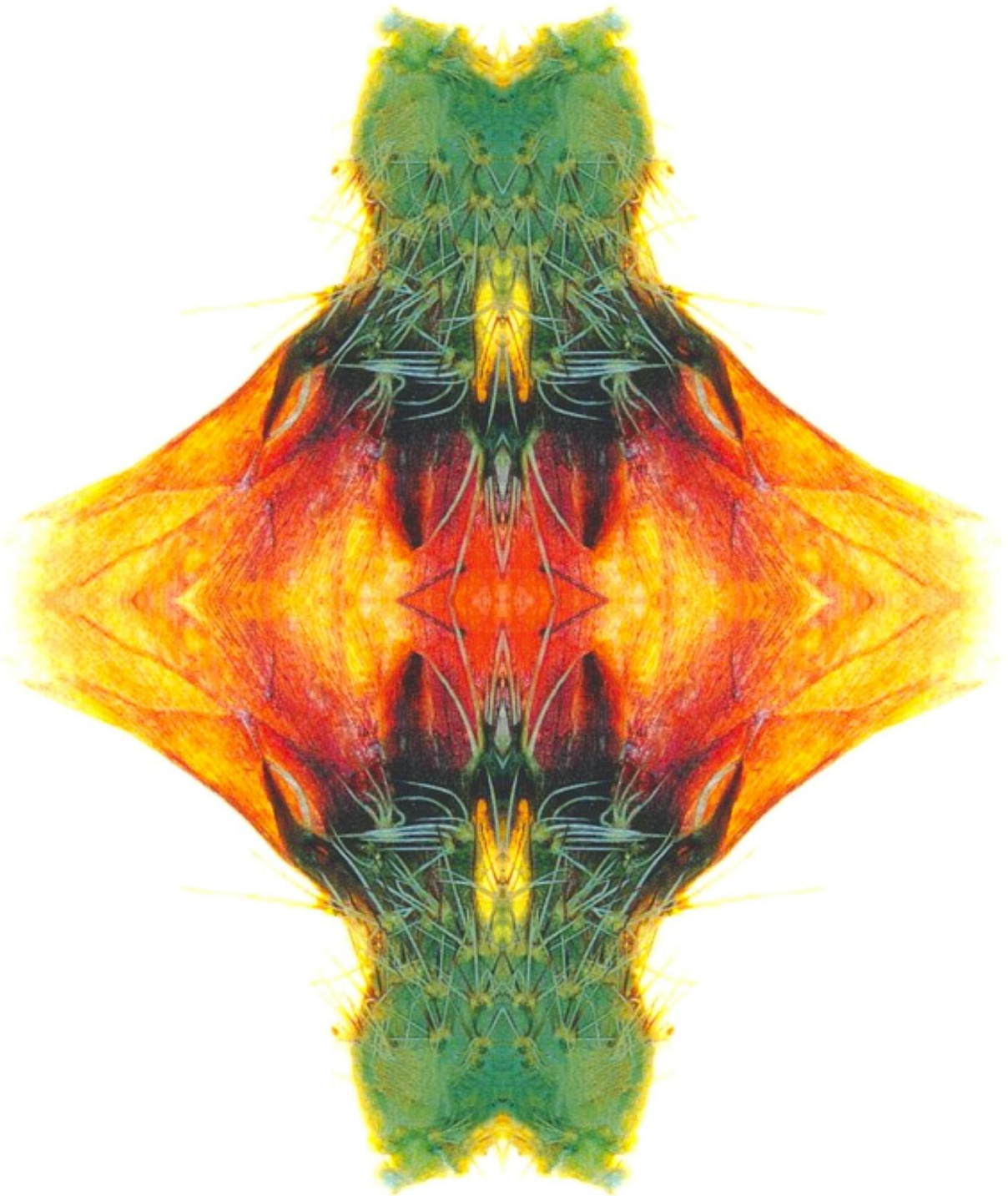
After a paralyzing silence, my grandmother's whispered of a gift in her closet in her room next to mine. Just for me, she said.

The next day I ran up the creaky stairwell and frigid iron banister, flung open my grandmother's closet in my childhood home, pulled open the closet door, mirror on the back where her fragrance, *Soir de Paris* still lingered. Her image flashed like a spoon of honey to my heart.

From the shelf, I pulled down her journal—typed musings on loose yellowing papers laden with strikeovers, crafted on the same typewriter

where she placed my six-year-old fingers. Her life spilled over those pages like merlot upon a white tablecloth—the wars she fought, the dances she danced, the bridge games she won, the lovers she had, and the demons which haunted her sixty-one years.

I sat on the closet stool, head buried in knees, crying until my ducts became dry wells, thinking that now I know all her secrets, but she'll never know mine.



Delirious As the Enigma's Perfume - Bill Wolak

Still  
Nadia Mustefa

7 kids in the backseat of my uncle's 5-seater car.  
2 on the floor, 2 lapped up, 1 skinny enough not to count... according to my uncle

That is still against the law.

15 people at my high school graduation I got 4 tickets for  
5 underage who shouldn't count ... according to my aunts

I still do not have enough tickets.

6 emergency contacts on my blue card  
2 parents, 2 relatives, 2 family friends  
My "uncle" swings by to pick me up on his way uptown  
But there was no space for him on my blue card,  
So, I wait at the office with my drawstring bookbag until they verify, he is in fact my 7th  
emergency contact, and not a stranger.  
They add another line for him to fill his name in  
After yelling "Mr MusTAFa ya running out of space" on the phone  
You shouldn't count my parents as emergency contacts; they are a given... according to my  
dad

I will still have to wait when my next unlisted emergency contact shows up.

3 suitcases each, 4 of us in total  
I cry when my mother gives away my clothes  
We return with 1 & ½ luggage's each if you count the carry on. You don't ... according to my  
mom

She still thinks we could have given away more of our things.

4 nuclear family members, 30 friends, 200 extended family members  
These are just preliminary numbers; I am sure there is more.  
My side alone has reached most venues' capacities.  
Plus, ones do not count ... according to my cousins.  
A small wedding was never an option.

I still want one.



Babyland  
Nolo Segundo

My wife and I  
went to say hello  
to her mother and  
put flowers on her  
grave  
and as it was such  
a vivid day shining  
like life's most  
poignant dream (you  
know, that feeling  
you only get in late  
autumn as the last  
reluctant leaves  
finally fall and old  
man winter sends  
hints of his coming  
harsh arrival),  
I suggested we go  
for a quiet walk  
through the large  
silent park where  
the dead reside in  
undemanding patience.

We walked the long paths  
of this community of souls,  
stopping here and there  
to read the grave markers  
(and without telling my wife  
I would compare their years  
against my own, so often  
amazed I had more, and  
knowing my own youth of  
unsweet carelessness, had to  
wonder why).

Then we came upon a small  
stonewall enclosure, with  
a sign at its entrance:  
BABYLAND

Within low walls of dead-cold

stone we saw the tiny grave  
markers, most with but one

date beneath a name and often  
an appellation ('Little Bo', 'Our  
Angel', 'My Lost Dream')  
though some had two dates,  
usually only a few days apart,  
sometimes a few months of life  
were testified to.

As we left that saddest part of a  
very sad place, I said to my wife,  
'It's good they're all together,  
isn't it?'  
She nodded her head but turned  
away so I could not see her eyes....

A Cold Night in Paris  
Benedict Pignatelli

Adèle sat in Le Piment Café in Le Marais and stared out of the window, watched as fire erupted from the building opposite. People pushed into one another to try and get the best video of the events in real time. A woman from Le Monde was speaking into a microphone, her back to the flames.

Adèle's mind was on other things. She hadn't been to see her sister in hospital for over a week and felt bad about it. Prodding pangs of guilt at the back of her head. A woman from a miscellaneous Eastern European country was talking loudly on the phone next to her. She kept saying something that sounded like 'pasta', really enunciating the 'p'. Pasta. Adèle practised it in her head a few times. She probably wasn't even saying pasta, but it sounded like she was.

She was hot and muggy. Her wine glass sweated in front of her. She'd woken a clammy mess, only an hour or two ago. Pissed so dark it could have been Coke. It was June. It was boiling. Rolling storms came and went in between the blistering sun, like the tide ebbing and flowing. The backs of Adèle's arms were badly sunburnt. Around where her triceps would be if she still had any muscles. She always forgot to put cream there. She didn't overly care, burns didn't bother her.

The fire across the street had started out of nothing; without warning a vast, menacing cloud of black smoke erupted from the creperie, orange flames bursting through the windows, eventually being thrown back inside by the powerful jet of the pompières' hose. The scent of it, of burning wood and melting plastic, had swam towards the cafe and engulfed Adèle and the other customers. The crowd gathered, phones up and filming. Traffic stalled. Adèle was only mildly interested, in fact all she could think of was that she had planned to have dinner there and now she would have to find somewhere else. A couple behind her were discussing what could have caused it. With the speed the fire started, Adèle knew it could only have been an electrical fire. She didn't bother telling them.

Someone had asked Adèle the other day how she had come to be a fireman, and why she'd quit. She didn't correct him that she had never been a fireman.

Why had she joined? Her sister, forever in and out of hospital with her illness, needed someone to care for her once their mother passed, and the army had seemed a good way to guarantee free healthcare. She'd been put into the pompières, which was run by the army in Paris. They did a lot of the paramedic stuff as well, so it was largely just collecting old dead people from their homes. Could be thirty dead bodies a day, on some days.

The bodies were fine after a while. She could handle them. Some things weren't as easy to handle. Personal space was nonexistent in the army, for one. Physical and mental bullying, which got worse the longer she stayed. As her colleagues grew more brazen. She was the only woman in the station at the time.

She would wake up with her male colleagues in her room. Masturbating over her. She once went into the break room to make a coffee and an officer was wanking into the pot. *She* had apologised to him. Fuck knows why.

She was the only woman firefighter in the history of Caserne Blanche not to be raped in the firehouse. She remembered saying once, half joking, that it was because she was too ugly. She'd said it as a joke but felt somewhere that it might be true. As if she had to come up with a reason why she hadn't been raped. As if it were her fault somehow.

There had only been two female officers before her in that station. Both had been raped while working there. While serving. Adèle had her own room, and had asked for a lock, to give her some safety from the testosterone-filled thugs she worked with, the 24/7 porn and the aggressive sexual advances. She'd been refused.

Firefighters get much more training in the bedside manner, trained to kiss the baby and save the kitten, and it pays off. They still wear the coat of heroism.

It had been a cold, biting night, last January. Freezing, her brain couldn't focus and her fingers wouldn't work as she tried to pull her gear on. Her senior officer sent her home, said they didn't need her anymore, the fire had been put out. She remembered feeling odd about it, but could think of nothing but the cold. That terrible cold. A girl had been standing with the senior officer; it was her apartment that had gone up. Young, in her nightdress.

After Adèle had left, this girl had been brought back to the station. Late at night, freezing and alone, unaware the men she was with were not her saviours, were not keeping her safe. She'd been gang raped. By eight of them.

The girl had gone to the police, the courts, but they threw her out, said she was insane. The guys still laugh about it now. Laugh about gang raping her. That had been a few weeks after Notre-Dame. The same men. The same heroes. Adèle had quit soon after.

Back in the cafe, the woman had hung up her phone. Adèle's wine had gotten warm. The fire opposite had been quenched by the pompières. The excitement had subsided; people went back to their lives. Adèle remembered wanting to burn the Caserne Blanche down after that cold night. Unfortunately, fire stations are rather well prepared for that eventuality. Maybe she'd have another glass here then head to the station and block up all the windows and doors and turn on the taps, drown the fuckers.

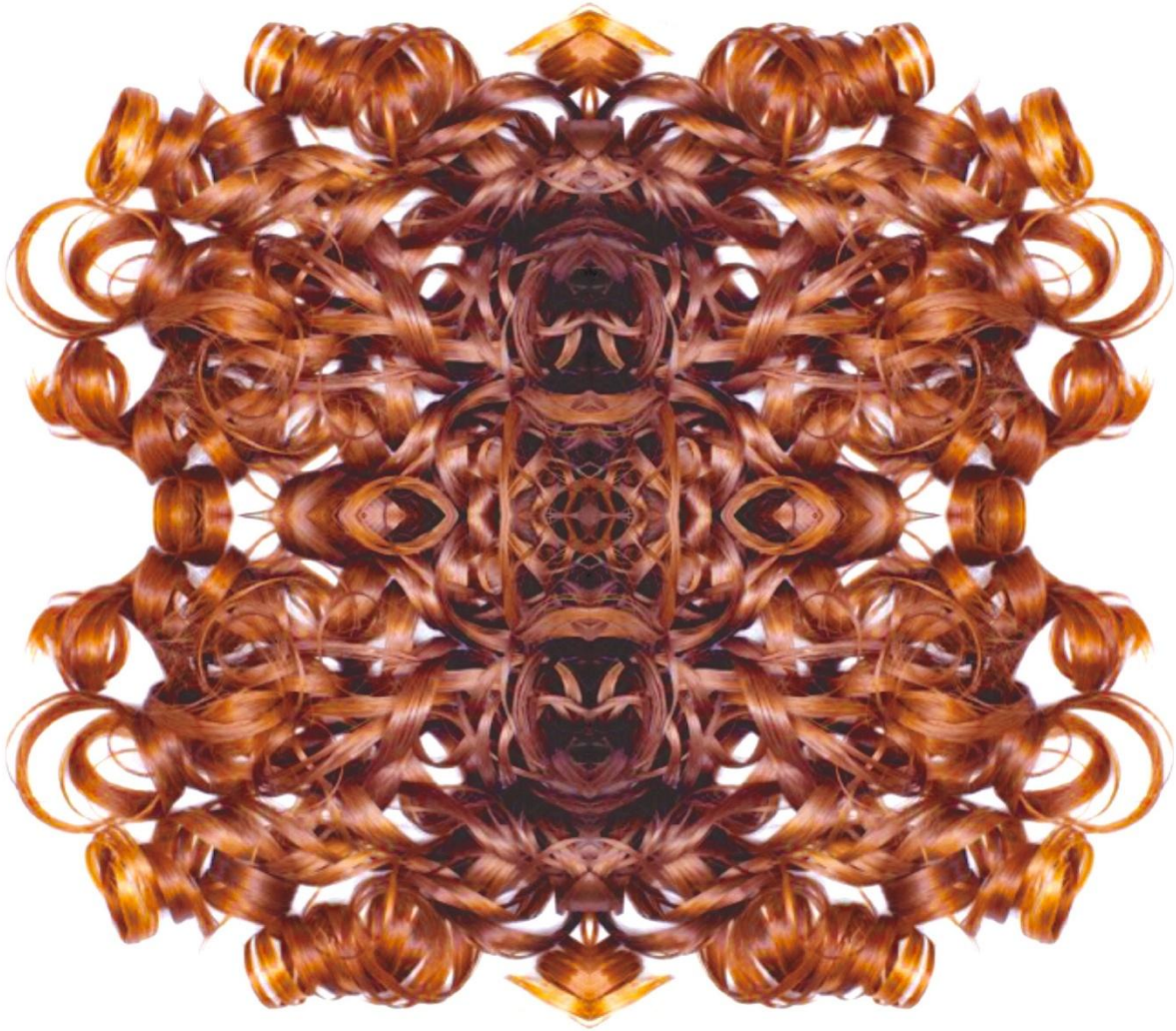
On Watching Films in the Dark  
Ihor Pidhainy

There are pictures  
That are not double-tapped,  
Where lives were lived, and lost,  
On the first go-around.

There are thoughts  
That are occurring once  
And are being written down  
and will not be forgotten.

There are moods and swings,  
Loves and sets,  
Tennis and fucking,  
Vermin and worms, too.

Too passive-aggressive,  
But the world bites back,  
Ignorant, gnawing through its own brain,  
A zombie movie waiting to be realized.



Fleeting As a Button's Lipstick - Bill Wolak

Drenched in Auburn Light  
Mark Moran

You may question the merits of venturing into the westernmost extremity of the Sahara Desert in the searing heat of mid-July on a bus without air conditioning. And, indeed, you would be correct. As my vehicle lumbered into the rugged, ochre-hued expanse of the Agafay Desert, it was impossible to be enveloped by any sentiment other than an overpowering sense of relief that my ordeal from Marrakesh had concluded. After the torpor of fatigue abated, however, I was struck by the sense that I had entered a world apart.

The Agafay region is demarcated from the greater Sahara by the imposing Atlas Mountains, whose peaks form a natural bastion against the endless seas of sand beyond. Unlike the vast dunes of its more illustrious parent, Agafay is a harsher domain – a red, rocky swathe of gentle ridges that unfold in majestic desolation beneath the open sky. The barren terrain here feels lunar, Martian, or something from a science fiction film. The visitor is constantly conscious of Agafay's absolute isolation and remoteness, offering a degree of serenity and separation that feels transcendental.

The moment the teeming metropolis of Marrakesh dissolves into the shimmering mirage of the horizon, the transformation is stark. The bustling souks of the city are entirely left behind. In their place reigns a silence so acute that it hums. There is an ineffable stillness in the stifling heat here that appears untouched for centuries. The harsh and unforgiving land nonetheless glimmers with a distinct and enthralling atmosphere of atavistic beauty. The raw power of nature courses through the air and the veins of all who dare challenge it.

As the bus perseveres deeper into the heart of the desert, the landscape becomes increasingly primordial and untamed, bereft of any vestige of human imposition. The somnolent glow of the afternoon sun soothes the parched austerity of the land. Surrounded by unbridled nothingness, Agafay exists on the precipice of the earth itself, teetering in a purgatory between reality and something far more unnervingly ethereal.

Largely untouched by human hands, Agafay is a land where nature speaks for itself. As the sun descends, the desert seems to awaken in its own quiet but forceful way. Its boundless tracts of gold stretch unbroken. The Atlas Mountains fade into the dusky twilight, both a symbol of the wide horizons beyond and Agafay's seclusion from them.

I sit beneath a woven canvas tent as the fragrant aroma of sweet mint tea wafts through the desert air. Hydration feels like a luxury in this unyielding crucible. The rhythmic pulse and mellifluous strains of Bedouin music are hypnotic, echoing against the desert floor and complementing the natural tranquillity. Time feels immaterial in this tract of serenity.

The Sahara's grandeur is often romanticized for its smooth, undulating dunes sculpted by the wind. Yet, Agafay feels raw. Its terrain is unsoftened by the powdered sands that define the Sahara. The land here is a testament to primal nature, unrefined and harsh yet undeniably captivating. Agafay's beauty is unlikely; it lies in its arid desert pavement that extends infinitely under the vast sky. The wildness here seems both liberating and formidable. Your connection to the earth is elemental as the desert delivers you from the myriad quandaries of the world.

As night falls, a transformation sweeps over the region. The potent heat of the day is replaced by a cool, whispering breeze rushing across the desert floor. This feels like a world away from the scorched, auburn land of the midday sun, a sanctuary of stillness and peace.

It is almost unfathomable that one can escape the hectic commotion of the Red City to this austere yet beautiful enclave in a matter of hours. The journey is not defined by mere geography; it

feels like a transition between two disparate realms of existence. Agafay is more than a destination – it is an immersion into elemental quietude and otherworldly beauty.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry best captured the arcane magic of the desert: “I have always loved the desert. You sit down on a sand dune. You see nothing. You hear nothing. And yet something shines, something sings in that silence...”

Amid the embrace of solitude, with an infinite expanse stretching for miles before you, Agafay offers a peace that is as unique as it is unforgettable.

And, please – book an air-conditioned bus trip.



He Works from Home  
Alexei Raymond

He works from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He would turn other days into WFH days whenever he could, whether by excuse, illness, or a lack of attention from those who expected him to make an appearance at the office. Home for the 30-year-old man had been an apartment he lived in for the past two years of his life along with his mother and younger sister, following two significant failures in love. His mother accepted him back into the fold without question, though the prospect of her son setting out on love again seemed unnecessarily dangerous to her. She let him know in stern tones that it would be in his best interest to let love lie for the time being, to focus elsewhere. Elsewhere for her had been to see her son go and study once more. A bachelor's degree was merely a first step, in her mind. And so, the mother refused the son's larger contributions to cover rent and other miscellaneous costs, making do with more modest ones in the hope that more money saved in her son's bank account meant more chances for her son's late blooming. She tried turning a blind eye to her son's miseries whenever she could, or to what she thought of as signs of it, when contrasted with her 10 years younger daughter. Where the daughter made a habit of socializing to her heart's content—barely being seen at home on most evenings—the brother's habit was to sit and lie secluded in his darkened room, the one haunted by work. Where the daughter's gallery of friends was difficult to keep up with, the son's had faded to one or two portraits. For what it was worth, the son had been making life's lot easier for the mother, trained as he was in mild domesticity, while the younger sister had been spared from it altogether. *I wanted her to be my friend. I have no one. And you close your door to us. If I insisted, she'd have grown to resent me, and then...*

Besides, the mother had been much too preoccupied with her secret life's tribulations to motherly pester her son. Dr. Melnik, Dr. Melnik—unobtainable lover, seen only at the crack of dawn. An affair conducted over phone, car and text. Though if the son's appearance grew too worrisome, or if another month passed without news, she felt compelled to ask him if he'd been working on his plans. And even if the son's answers had been vague and none too convincing, to distrust them would go against love's natural course.

It had been difficult not to wonder about her son's recent falls from love. For a time, it seemed that with each of the past two women who'd loved her son, his path to the kind of life he desired was open, was promised. His eyes glinted and so did he. She could see him about to take flight, and fly he did. Until he came rapping at her door with clipped wings. Of the first she dared not ask, for the son himself had made the topic an unspoken taboo. But of the second she inquired now and again, seeing that her son had been more open to giving some vague, sad answer that grew less and less believable as time went on: *Yeah, we still talk. It's all the same. Nothing new.* Still, she felt proud. He'd been the smartest person she's ever known. She truly believed it was so in an inexhaustible reverence for his intellect, his emotion. Her ardent belief in him helped blur his physical decline, or at least make it sting less. She'd seen him on late Tuesday mornings when she'd come home for half an hour at most to store the groceries Dr. Melnik helped her purchase. *I'm coming up in about 20 minutes,* she'd text. *The door is open,* he'd reply—sometimes. And as she'd open the door to the apartment, their dog would run to greet her, while her son would peek out—head of brown, disheveled hair—from his room with a clipped *hi*, before ducking back into his dark room to work.

That particular Tuesday morning, he failed to reply to her text, to which she paid no mind, knowing the myriads of expected possibilities for his lack of attention to a text. She moved her bags into the elevator, then emerged at their floor. Her hand instinctively went for the handle that had always given. *Click*. The door, it seemed, was still locked. Her son's cavalier habit to always leave the door unlocked bothered her, but she'd grown used to it, and trusted the vulnerability he'd decided on. Some days she wondered whether it was easier that way for him—to not have to greet her face-to-face—if the door had been his to unlock at the coming of a knock. She pulled out her keyring, already hearing the dog's claws tapping the floor before the door in excitement, and unlocked the door. She brought in the bags while barely fending off their elderly dog's fathomless love. Her son's shaggy head of hair did not peek from the door to his room. *Is it an office day for him?* She walked over to his room as was her habit when he'd been out—some remnant of her inclination to check for appliances he'd forgotten to turn off.

She opened the door while apprehensively calling out his name in case he was merely asleep. Then, hearing no response, flicked on the light switch he was so averse to using. The room hung with stagnant air, and seemed final, somehow. His bed was empty, ever unmade and perpetually ready to receive him. Everything was in its disorderly place, and the computer screens cast their blue glow onto the black, fraying chair.

Before feeling turned to thought turned to action, she knew she would not see him again.

Mother  
 Nathaniel Tok  
 Reprint: The Bangalore Review

The only thing you could never bear about your mother was that she'd always been a terrible liar, an atrociously unconvincing one. She'd only half-look into your eyes as she told you the things, never acknowledging that her son was listening, really listening.

*The moment a man's heart betrays him; you can almost feel the universe pause. Just for a heartbeat.* She sets down her chopsticks before intensely fixing her hazel brown eyes upon you.

Distractedly, you mumble a response as you take a large bite out of a steaming hot *siu mai*:  
 "How nice, Ma."

The prawn inside the *siu mai* is almost bitter, not quite sour. You can't quite place its flavor - but it stirs something deep within you, an ache that threatens to swallow your chest into itself. Reaching for a cup of tea you gulp, hoping - begging - to wash the taste away. The bitterness intensifies as you drink, but the tea is deliciously metallic.

Your mother continues: *I was your age. Your grandmother and I had just discovered that the man had been the one stealing for years from our-*

Her lips are pruned together tightly. You realize she must see the smirk that coyly threatens to show itself upon your lips and suddenly you feel a sharp sting on your left cheek. Instinctively you jerk up and your eyes meet hers.

*He was wearing a green polo shirt when he collapsed,* she's saying softly to nobody in particular.

Her right palm is bright red.

Your mother is a lover: she describes how she had grown up in her cousins' house, *a condescendingly big one in Singapore* - a laugh - while Grandmother had given her life to her little shophouse in Malaysia and Grandfather gave his to alcohol and Marlboro cigarettes and younger women.

Your mother won't tell you how she struggled to lift heavy boxes of Tiger beer to Grandfather's room whenever she could. *Summers were so hot and so wet you could almost feel the ghosts of your future choking your skin,* she says to you instead.

A pause.

*Do you remember your father and I at eighteen?*

"Yes," you say. *"Young and naive and you - so blissfully unaware -"*

*We were so poor, she sighs wistfully. That summer your father took me on a date at the fanciest restaurant in Singapore just so we could feel some air conditioning together. We could only order the cheapest: a singular sizzling prawn served on a stone hot plate. The stares from other diners were unbearable.*

She releases a slow breath as if having overly exerted herself from remembering.

*Your father didn't care. He held my hand and laughed as they looked. In that moment I knew deep in my soul I had found the man who I wanted to die with.*

A nod; your knuckles are white, clenched. It's odd to think that the balding foul-tempered ashy spitting man you know was once so valiant; kind, even. Maybe with another family.

Your mother glances at you. *Every time he walks out our door, a small part of me still wants to follow him into the unknown, just to see if he turns around to check if I'm there,* she says softly. And all of a sudden, the tablecloth in all of its fine cream grain is more interesting than anything in the world.

*"Why?"*

Your ask is desperate, embarrassingly primal. The miasma of sickly-sweet alcohol threatens your nostrils, and the scar on your left arm pulses with a sudden, sharp pain.

Maybe the summer heat has opened it again.

Your mother is you and you are Mother. Bunny-toothed, soft noses. Round, friendly faces that made Swensons servers and old uncles you both had never known smile widely and swear they knew you from *somewhere-just-couldn't-remember-where*. The mole barely behind her right ear is hers just as it refuses to leave your left no matter how hard you scrub. You are her stories unafraid and her worries released and her fear and her pleasure and all her pain in this world. *Pain, more than anything else,* she admits one day, still half-asleep.

The odd ache that siu mai had given you that day so many years ago has long gone, but its taste has remained at the back of your palette all these years, spreading. Permeating almost every portion of yourself: permanent, painful, protective.

One night you're hunched over at your desk cluttered with spreadsheets and stuffed animals collected over the years when you finally realize the siu mai's taste and collapse into your chair, eyes wide. Remember its bitterness, swallow the sourness, realize the prawn's... sweetness.

Two hearts beat together until one is drifted away by time forever.

You can feel when its pumping will cease soon, when its flow will begin to ebb. Older, but young now as you feel your years fade away for the last time. You've made sure you're there with her, alone.

“Why?” you ask again, softly. As if understanding the question for the first time.

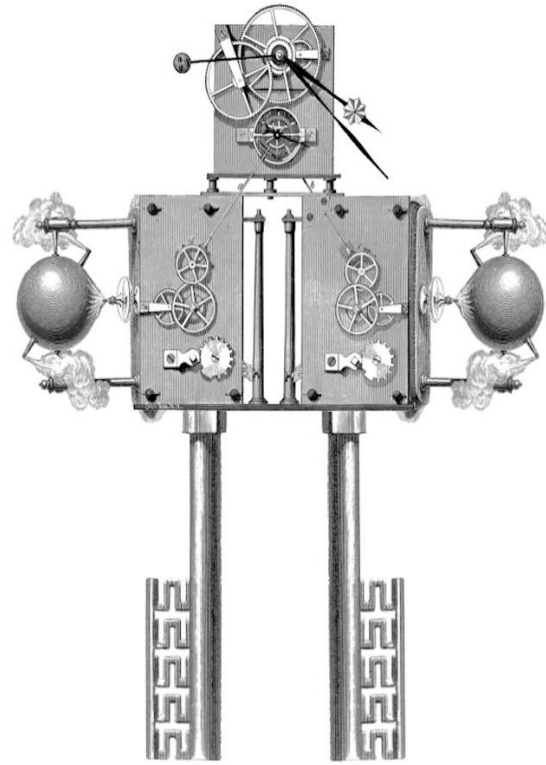
She squeezes your hand. *Bitter, sour*, she whispers. *Sweet. We savor it all at once.*

*As family.*

Your mother’s eyes are open - faded taupe, fierce. They hold yours - a thrumming hazel - steadfast into the Great Beyond.



The Razor's Fleeting Whisper



A Scream Trapped Without Warning

Bill Wolak

Shut Down  
Mitchell Waldman

Sitting in a folding chair in a room full of people. Bigshots from the main office in New York standing up by the podium in the front of the room. Why? They never come here. A week before Thanksgiving. Opened boxes of tissues spread around the room. On the way in, three of our site's managers standing together outside the door, close together. None of them looking directly at us. And then the doors to the room close with an unexpectedly solid bang and echo in the suddenly silent room.

People looking all around. Not to worry, I think. This is just another reorg meeting. It doesn't affect us, any of us. We're down there, we'll still do our jobs like before while the bigshots will shuffle around, take on different sheep.

Dan Sykes beside me gives a sidelong look of distress. I smile to reassure him. Nothing to worry about. Just another one of those meetings. He, on the way over to the hotel, being the one to tell me, they always do this before Thanksgiving. But I tell him, C'mon, Dan, there've been these rumors for the past twenty years. They're not going to do anything like that. We're the only ones who know how to do the work we do here. Don't worry so much.

But then big rotund Robert Haywater, VP, gets up to speak, with a *smile* on his face (yes, a *smile*, I will always remember that, it will always be imbedded in my mind.)

"Good morning, everyone. Thank you for coming. Today we have some very important news." Then the pause as he looks down, then, quickly back up at us (or past us?) "The decision has been made to close the Fairdale plant."

"What?" I mutter under my breath.

Dan is just staring blankly ahead. He's twenty years younger than me, got a house he just bought, a spouse, and two little ones.

The room is silent. "What the fuck," I say, unbelieving, feeling the blood freezing in my veins. (Or in his, Haywater's, veins. But, no, that couldn't be because he, and people like him don't have blood running through them. They are not human. But maybe that's a conclusion I don't come to right then and there, but something I conclude in the days ahead, just how monstrous these corporate-types are, with their revenues, profits, and pie-charts.)

Twenty-five years of my life dedicated to keeping this company's profits high. Printing papers. For what? I'm just an expendable "head" as they like to say in the business, come right out and say it at recent company meetings; we're not people, we're heads. (Better than bodies, I guess, but we've been called that, too, at times, like soldiers at war, on the front lines – we need more bodies to feed to the war machine).

So, what do I do now? What do I tell Loretta? I'm not qualified for any other business – my job has pretty much been replaced by machines now in other places. It's all computers. Nobody's reading newspapers anymore. There's nowhere for me to go. I don't know how to do anything else.

When I get home, I open the door, kiss Loretta on the cheek, grab a beer from the fridge and plop into my chair. She asks "How was your day?" but I don't say a thing. My hand's shaking as I put the beer bottle to my lips.

"Earl," she says, "what is it?"

I break down, tell her the whole story. My heart is in my stomach. I'm thinking about the shotgun in the upstairs closet, envision myself with the muzzle in my mouth, finger on the trigger.

But Loretta kneels besides me, wraps her arms around me and tells me, “Everything’s going to be all right, Earl, we’ll figure it out. We’ll figure it all out together.” And I let the tears fall, let the tension in my body recede, and let her hold me, till the waterfall’s drained, it’s almost goddamned empty.

And then, I take a breath, wondering what’s to become of us.



Minding Gaps Between Stops  
Michael Roque

Sharp whistle shrieks  
between stops  
from December Street to Jan Way—  
Two, four, eight  
eye to eye,  
face to face  
on a one-way train—  
thu-thud  
THU-Thud!  
THU-THUD!!!

On track to a transitional pause,  
doors seal all into a lit tube  
engulfed by black  
for an extended enough time  
to get attached—  
to feel connection  
while speeding spark-lit rails  
to a next destination—  
THU-THUD!!!  
THU-THUD!!!  
THU-THUD!!!  
JOLT!

Meeting eyes break  
with a whiplash  
at a platform where all migrate  
on, off the train.  
Last looks,  
farewells, goodbyes,  
wonders—  
if any meet again face to face  
on surface,  
in train, someday,  
while simultaneously swapping each out  
for a fresh gaze—  
THU-THUD!!!  
THU-Thud!  
Thu-thud  
thu—  
thud.



Irresistible as the Lipstick's Deepening Moonlight - Bill Wolak

Senior Recital  
Nancy Chapple

You push open the dark padded door to the stage, tentatively at first, but when it resists (maybe something out there doesn't want you to perform?), you push harder. Now that you're wearing a tight knee-length skirt and high pumps, the path from the door to the shiny grand piano seems farther than at the dress rehearsal. The spotlights along the front of the stage tilt upwards, drawing you in, but you wrench your eyes away and head for the corner of the piano where the top of the keyboard meets the grand's sinuous curve.

It's a big hall with only a few people sitting in the long rows of seats. Supporting yourself on the piano and taking a small bow, you absorb the atmosphere: cold, unwelcoming. Though you have no chance to identify all the listeners scattered about in small groups before sitting down to play, when your vision will alternate between the keyboard and the far side of the stage, it's as if they've all crossed their arms in front of their chests: so, you think you can play the piano, huh? OK, we're waiting: show us your stuff.

You sit down on the piano bench and turn both knobs to raise it to your preferred position. Your skirt rides up in back—you'll be drawing attention to it if you stand up and smooth it down, but wouldn't it be worse if it tore along the seam?

This recital is essential for getting your degree. Three blasé professors with notepads are definitely sitting among the thirty-odd listeners in the hundreds of empty seats. You can't do this again. This is your very last chance, you say to yourself. Again.

Moving your hands to the keys is a no-turning-back moment. Gathering your thoughts beforehand—the Bach *Prélude* starts on an F# upbeat in the right hand—you're off. Okay, that was fine, you think, and now the *Fugue*. You struggle to stay present in each phrase as it comes along. You're obsessed with that bitch of a passage towards the bottom of the second page, where the same chord can take you in two directions: forward towards the dramatic coda, or back into a loop, repeating the beginning, going around and around ... Well, now they're clapping—you must have found your way out of the maze.

You've got two works on the first half of the recital. It's the second piece, the Chopin *Scherzo*, that's really got you freaked. You've practiced the passage with the chord jumps, each a slightly different contortion of the fingers, for hours with the metronome, challenging yourself to master it at an ever-faster speed.

The passage works about 40 percent of the time.

But not today. Lots of extraneous notes make at least half the chords sour and off-color. And then you stumble into a murky glade and careen around. Is there any way out of the dark forest suddenly shooting up around you?

No longer able to judge time (was that 20 seconds? 7 minutes?), you jump to the much-practiced last page: this will get me out of this thicket. And it works, you build one phrase, then another, the piece takes on its own momentum, the end is in sight, home free, intermission approaching. You inhale sharply and land heavy-handedly, blatantly on an irreconcilable dissonance, left and right hands one tone apart, hitting almost the entire chromatic scale. (Wasn't Schönberg celebrated for his policy of inclusion, for making all notes equal under the law?)

You stand up, pushing the piano bench back and directing your gaze solely at the dark, heavy door, and you leave the stage, leave the professors judging you, leave your senior recital performance, leave the conservatory, leave the degree program, leave it all behind you.

Just a Man in a Rubber Suit  
Kevin Brown

While waiting to watch the original, post-WWII *Godzilla*, I saw a father and son sitting on a bench, ready to go in and make memories they would talk about for years, remember at Christmas two decades later when one buys the other some small Godzilla tchotke, a magnet maybe. The boy seemed too young to appreciate the critique of nuclear testing and the echoes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that Ishirô Honda was making, so I imagined him being bored for ninety percent of the time, much like life in general, but I could have been projecting.

When I was his age, I saw *Son of Godzilla* on a small, black-and-white television in our seldom-used living room, and I cried in the closing scene, when snow blankets Godzilla and his (or her, I suppose) son, leading me to believe they had died. My crying at such scenes was common—*Snoopy Come Home* devastated me, as I was convinced Charlie Brown would never see Snoopy again, and I didn't even like dogs.

Maybe I just wanted to love something or someone that much, a hopeless romantic already, even before I turned twelve. My father made fun of me for crying over the child of a gargantuan reptile and an animated canine.

My father wasn't a monster, but he was raised by a coal miner from Coffee County, Tennessee who made him into the man he became.

My father wasn't a monster, but he was born during a depression and grew up with a lack that defined his life, kept him from finding the feelings a father might need.

My father wasn't a monster, but he didn't know how to hug me when the cold reality of life fell like snow, freezing me until it felt like death, until I learned another way to be a man, like coming back to life in a sequel.

Sturgeon Grandfather  
Sabrina Green

Reach out in August,  
    grace my now adult hand  
over the cool St. Lawrence  
water. Stroke the sunny golden  
water lily and  
    tamp down my dead Papa's threats still  
whispering to keep my hands in the boat for  
fear of grabbing teeth.

I didn't know it then  
    but I do now. No time for me, no space;  
squash your hope of small joys for  
    the ease of others.  
Avoid the darker (out above the water),  
murkier (did he even realize?)  
    truth and let him walk away,  
let the repeated warnings fester.

I just want the petals soft  
between my fingers.

Make yourself small so  
    the world doesn't carry the  
burden of having to pay attention.  
It is the guise of safety, always  
safety, stay small (so nothing can see  
you) stay safe (so there's nothing you  
need). I am no small thing.  
No little kid, barely seen for a girl.

Your tomboy out of place.  
Now a woman sometimes,  
making themselves monstrous.  
No pike or muskellunge  
    can take me. They tell their grandchildren  
stories; stay below the surface, below the lilies,  
beware the tempt and taunt  
    of soft pale flesh, for it also has teeth.

We Moved to Italy and I'm All by Myself  
 Lauren E. Dodge

I. Via dell'Arancio

Before, the homesickness was looming and blunt  
 Elephantine on the chest.  
 Today it is dexterous,  
 Plaited down my sore skull, sullen back  
 Foot bottoms blood and dust.

Finally, the rain arrives, but I'm under the sheets  
 If only fresh herbs  
 Or great goddesses  
 Bloomed where my tears wet the street.

II. Torre delle Ore

To quench my thirst for earthly things  
 I tumble the sheets with balls of wool.  
 They finish on the top rail of our terrace  
 A crisp and shocking white against the terra cotta and  
 worn  
 Yellow dwellings.  
 My pillowcase smells of sheep soon to be shorn,  
 Citrus flower shampoo and the scent of a woman scrambling  
 Up a remaining clock tower, collapsing and faceless and  
 Striking  
 The pool's surface  
 Swimming free of age  
 in the wisteria-cloaked garden below.

III. Cafe Pacini

Next to me sits a handsome and restless man with a beard and a nose ring  
 And a cigarette  
 He is holding a paperback book- my husband's favorite  
 The sun stares arms crossed between two stucco towers  
 At my exposed table  
 As if I'm behind bars  
 As if he's disappointed in me  
 A callous sweat swells from breast to neck  
 Sinful  
 I ask for a second cappuccino.  
 It is soft and I don't stir and the sugar sits  
 Sparkling on its cushy foam pillow  
 I imagine passers-by gawking while I slowly lick the white  
 From my lips

The man with a cigarette finished his smoke and  
 Never opened his book and  
 Never glanced in my direction.

#### IV. Piazza San Michele

Convenient-

My first storm is on the first day of September  
 And we are wading through it- a familiar thrill  
 Like the slick flip of a perfect omelet or  
 Every morning's first sip  
 Gazing at San Michele I say "I could write a poem about this"  
 But you don't hear me.  
 The man spinning an umbrella follows.

My second storm is the next day  
 The second day of September  
 You are at work all day and night.  
 I open the balcony doors- even the skeletal remains  
 Of our rosemary bush show green  
 The fat heads of the coneflowers rise as if finished  
 With prayer  
 The lemon tree's leaves unfurl  
 I pull our big armchair up to watch the men jog  
 Through the courtyard  
 Jackets over their heads.  
 How many of them sat under the beastly sun of August  
 And prayed for this blessed day  
 As I did?  
 I take a picture  
 And never look at it again.

My third storm begins September third  
 And ends September tenth.  
 The armchair remains, gingham mouth wide,  
 And you haven't questioned it.  
 Maybe you haven't noticed and  
 Maybe you don't care.

#### V. San Martino Cathedral

Monday evening mid-September  
 Full moon and a breeze straight from God  
 Sweeps smoked cigarettes down the marble steps  
 Of the San Martino  
 For once  
 A cool silence, aside the dishes chiming  
 In the apartment across the way.

A pregnant moon sleeps nestled under a blanket of clouds  
Perhaps tonight I'll sleep well, too.

Tuesday morning mostly dawn  
The street cleaner shuffles and sucks those cigarette butts,  
Among other sounds-  
The garbage truck's croaking starts and stops,  
The warm chords of an opera student  
And the sharp cackle of a seagull  
Like a pleased witch at her kettle.  
I wonder who she's having, and  
If she'll save a sip for me.

VI. Piazza San Salvatore  
I hope  
When I think back  
Memory skips the hammering sun,  
My stomach ulcers, your dad's staggering silence  
And the afternoons I begged to go home.  
Instead let me remember  
The dead grass behind the duomo  
Your brother trading a cappuccino for a musty cigarette  
One dog's grin as she chews warm pizza crust and  
The other belly-up in bed, dreaming of me.





Cloud of Insects - Cynthia Yatchman



Cirrus - Cynthia Yatchman

Harmony  
Mary Ann McGuigan

Great-Aunt Bridget couldn't dance anymore. Even standing upright was a challenge. But when her turn came, she heaved herself to her feet, gripped the arm of the chair with both hands, and danced to "Lark in the Morning," her favorite jig, as Daddy pounded the beat on the coffee table. Aunt Bridget could barely lift her knees—she was at least seventy-eight by then—but she kept the rhythm and the living room thundered with feet stomping and hands clapping until the tune ended and the needle shrieked its way across the record. It was my brother Sean's job that night to man the Victrola, but my brother Danny, always the troublemaker, couldn't resist poking Sean's elbow as he hovered over the turntable. They were lucky we had company, because mistreating Daddy's '78s could easily set him off. That's when someone was sure to get hurt.

The Irish have some odd rituals, customs handed down that are truly peculiar. Until I was in sixth grade, I thought every family formed a circle when they got together for parties and took turns singing or dancing or reciting poems. Once I realized these ad hoc variety shows weren't normal, I never mentioned them to anyone again. I didn't even know it had anything to do with being Irish until I wound up in a tavern in Spiddal, a tiny town along the West Coast of Ireland, and heard music coming from the back room. I went to investigate and discovered a large circle of people, each taking a turn at a poem or a story or a rebel song. No other experience in Ireland, not even hearing my last name pronounced correctly, made me feel so much at home.

Mama's turn came next in the circle, and she liked to sing standing up. No one was obliged to stand, but she preferred it that way. She never chose Irish songs. Her favorite was "Pennies from Heaven," and that's what she sang. Her style was bluesy, like Billie Holiday's, not the chirpy way the McGuire Sisters did it. Her voice was so fine it stilled the room—even my cousins stopped goofing around—but it was hard for me to listen, because I knew that moment would come when she'd tilt her head back a bit and close her eyes, as if imagining a time when things could be right for us.

These evenings when we sang, when we had aunts and uncles and cousins in the house, laughing and teasing and enjoying each other, were a reprieve and I cherished them, wished they could go on for days, keep me from having to face how lonely we were, how isolated. Such a big family, so many children—seven of us—but we never figured out how to comfort each other, to ease the dread of harms a moment away.

When Uncle Johnny's turn came, we knew he would get up and dance and that Mama would join him. They'd danced together in parish shows when they lived on MacDougal Street, where they were born, and then later in Brooklyn as they got older. As usual, they started with a soft shoe, then moved into some rapid-fire tap shuffles and paradiddles. Daddy used to put a pinch of sawdust on the linoleum, but he stopped after Uncle Johnny fell and broke his wrist. Aunt Bridget wanted the sawdust back. She insisted he went down because he was plastered, had nothing to do with what was on the floor. She was probably right.

Sean and Danny always sang together, and always more than one song because their voices blended like cream in coffee and we'd want more. They started with "Up a Lazy River" because my mother loved it so much, then "In the Still of the Night," by the Five Satins. I never understood how they managed such harmony, because they spent so much time at each other's throats. They were barely more than a year apart, but so different in so many ways. Sean was always trying to do the right thing, get a job to help out, keep the peace at home. Danny was trouble. He stayed out late,

answered Mama back, played hooky from school. Sister Mary Cornelius told him there'd be a special place in hell for him when his time came. Mama finally told the old hag she could save a place for him, because she'd surely get there first.

My brothers fine-tuned their sound in the entrance to our apartment building, the perfect echo chamber. The first time I heard them do the Moonglows' "Sincerely" I felt like I'd been taken to some other place, a place where notes floating on the air determined everything, changed everything, kept me from thinking about the toys I couldn't have, or the suppers we'd skip, or the beds we'd hide under when Daddy came home drunk.

When the circle was done hooting and howling for Sean and Danny, it was Daddy's turn. "Come on, Jim," Aunt Bridget said. "Let's have a tune." He waved her off, insisting on passing. But nobody got a pass, not even him, so he sat up straight in the chair he'd brought in from the kitchen, crossed his legs, rested one hand on his thigh. Smoke rose lazy and slow from the Camel nestled between his fingers. He loved Tony Bennett, and he sang "Because of You" like a lullaby, in a voice that made him sound as if he wouldn't hurt a fly. If I didn't know better, I'd never have imagined that in another couple of hours, after all the relatives had gone home, he'd send a lamp across the room, or have another go at Mama, maybe land Sean on his ass if he tried to protect her. Another family ritual I learned to tell no one about.

Vallée L'Enfant Sutra  
Tyler Del Ciotto and Coby Kassner

*Il y a encore un aveu à vous faire auparavant,  
c'est que je commence à perdre enfit le sommeil.*

I stumble forward, down the Crystal City escalator  
& slouch my way into a half-empty metro car.  
A tap on my shoulder, a gentle rasp:  
*Je m'appelle R. Mutt. Pleasure to meet you.*  
A hand thrusts itself into mine ... pulls me close.  
*You too... nice moustache, by the way—*  
I mutter through neutral lips, pushing away.  
*Where are you going?*  
I drag my hand out & point the moustache towards a  
poster advertising the newest Smithsonian entourage.  
(The Many Faces of Mona Lisa)

I stumble back, jolt as the car trips,  
and  
fall.

*WOULD YOU MIND?!*  
The squeaky voice shudders from the floor,  
grasping for a thin piece of plastic.  
*Herr Samsa, surely you don't hold yourself  
in the same regard as the roaches?*  
The train car turns; a metro card slides  
between my feet; the voice scurries in pursuit.

I stumble right into a seat &  
my head falls into the lap of a man,  
toppling a ream of paper.

Up, up, up the pages go,  
piloting themselves  
to the far corners of the car.  
*Creepkled scores!! Luost variations!! Everywhere!!*  
A borscht-heavy sigh  
perks me up—*Sergei, my apologies!*  
I pick up what I can, hand it over,  
and continue to my seat,  
humming an old Paganini tune.  
I notice the good sir hurriedly writing  
in the lines of his pages, his score upside down.

*Where are we going?*  
*Is this the way to the Big Apple?*  
 The words bounce over me, drawing my eyes  
 to a straphanger in the aisle.  
*To the Big Apple, man?*  
 I grin back up at him.  
*The name's Jack, by the way,*  
*but some call me Sal!*  
 I grin again.  
*My pleasure. NYC?*  
*Gallery to Red,*  
*to Union,*  
*hop on Amtrak—*  
*keep on going till you get there!*  
 He jots a note & continues through the cabin.

*Sacré bleu! Arrêtez-vous!*  
 A man sitting across the aisle, sketching, snaps at Sal.  
 I stumble, left confused, and glance at his draft  
*Monsieur Seurat—sorry, but you can't*  
*keep your pen down on the page!*  
 Baleful eyes dart up  
*Those broken lines, maybe try*  
*some other mark.*  
 . . . . . This I pointed out.  
 The car lurches to a stop—  
*PENTAGON! Next up, L'Enfant Plaza!*  
 the conductor bellows.

A man gets on, in robes not hailing from a spa.  
*A subterranean chariot?! Fascinating!*  
 He grumbles, thick grey Eyebrows  
 contracted in scrutinizing demeanor.  
*It's called a subway! Underground!*  
*It's all sticks, circles, shadows! I holler.*  
*Yees, yees... angles... mm... m-metro... metrima...*  
*Yees, fasceenating! Eyebrows mutters, unrelaxed.*  
*You're a long way from the Lykeion, Eratosthe—*  
*SORRY! Khave you the time?*  
 Interrupting, Eyebrows fashions a pole from a loose handrail  
 & erects it along the prime meridian of the train.  
*SKREEEEEEEEEEEEK* the brakes howl!—starving hysterical naked.  
 The car sputters toward a standstill and  
 I am tossed forward and  
 tossed back and I turn and  
 the doors open and

exhale me and  
I don't know where I am!

I reach back toward the shutting doors. I left my bag.

A loudspeaker murmurs the station name in crackling, hiccupping static.

Mr. Kerouac, are you laughing at me?





Stratocumulus - Cynthia Yatchman

The Hundreds of Bodies I Walk By  
Kathryn Hatchett

The sign on the church reads '*Contact us for baptisms and weddings.*' They don't like being reminded of their mortality, of the possibility of contact with the dead. Despite funerals being the first thing many think of when a church is mentioned, they fail to advertise this as a service.

They don't want a sign on their dog walk reminding them that they are a few years from death. They don't want to think about the invention of spiked contact lenses to hold their cold eyelids down. They don't want to think about embalming, or their jaw being locked in place for eternity. They don't want to think about it, and neither do I.

Every day as I walk around the village, strewn leaves gathering at the curbside, the dog trotting behind me, I see them. The village has placed them above us, so my eyes are level with their names. A squirrel scampers up a tree stepping on graves and making me shiver. I am fascinated by the history of those who came before, but in a graveyard, I find myself playing a macabre version of Twister to avoid stepping on any gravesites.

One of the graves is leaning, propped up by wooden slats. It must've been grand once before the weather decayed it to a shell. The roof slab is broken in half. Three sides lean in different directions. The name has been eroded. I try not to think about that happening to me, how fleeting life is, and more so memory.

There is a house next to the graveyard, and I know I could not live there. The house touches the hamstone wall enclosing the graveyard; a wall that stretches down to and along the pavement. Four trees stand sentry to the place, blocking advancements like concrete blocks against tanks. They stand there boldly losing branches and leaves every winter, allowing the evening light to warm the stone of the church tower. The tower that holds the melodious bells of a Tuesday evening, and the clock that strikes ten minutes too early, so much so it has become a method of time-telling itself.

Despite their effort to maintain a sense of joy in their signage, I am reminded every day of time slipping by me, each day a leaf caught in the breeze. I've wandered through there before sticking to the graveled paths, and recognised surnames of friends and classmates. I don't like it, but I am drawn to it like a child being warned not to touch a hot plate and doing it anyway.

My school hall overlooked the graves. We'd dance to the Sugarplum Fairy in PE, and I'd catch sight of them watching through the sweeping arced windows. It felt like we had an audience to our endeavours.

They try to shelter us from the truth we all know, but our demise is around us. Often hidden behind homes, walls, cars, stones and boxes, but it's there if you dare to seek it.



The Younger I Get  
Ethan McKnight

Eyes jitter-jolt-jerk, a glitch in the system,  
a VHS tape warping in fast-forward,  
frames blurring, stuttering—did I blink,  
or did my body just short-circuit?

Hands tremor like a Richter 9 quake,  
fingers curling into claws, then stretching,  
grasping at nothing, at everything—  
the air, my ribs, the floor tilting under me.

Thoughts shatter like glass in reverse,  
pieces flying up, reforming wrong—  
sentences backwards, inside-out, sideways,

*"Did I think this thought before?"*

*"Was I supposed to?"*

*"Am I thinking too fast or not fast enough?"*

A blender screams in slo mo—fruit obliterated,  
guts smeared across steel walls—  
What was whole, what was pulp,  
what got swallowed first?

*"I look stupider when I get younger—"*

*"A mirror fractures and the cracks spell wisdom—"*

*"I age in reverse but only in the worst ways—"*

Veins drum-roll, body on amphetamines but I took nothing,  
muscles jitter, nerves electrify—  
overclocked processor, overheating motherboard,  
screen flashes blue—reboot imminent.

Can you overdose on adrenaline?

Or am I just stuck here, lungs locked mid-inhale,  
heartbeat stammering, the drop never coming,  
only the infinite *almost*?

*"I wanna die stupid—"*

*"The younger I get—"*

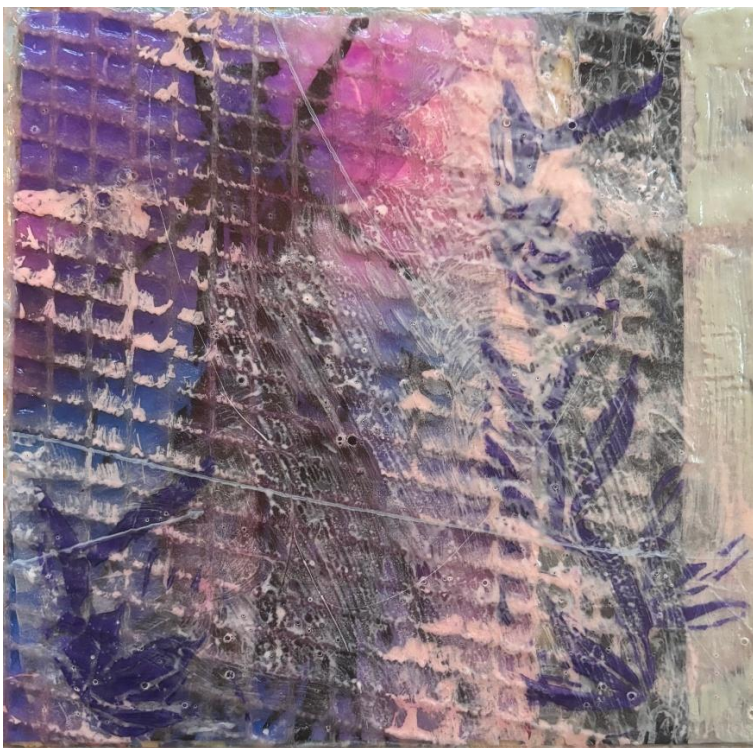
*"But only if I don't know it's happening."*

TikTok  
James Croal Jackson

It would be good for me  
to be honest  
with my expectations. Technology  
the tyrant tells me stories  
with no reality  
except I exist in an ice rink  
wanting you  
frigid in my false  
narratives my brain  
is reckoning. Such as  
the world  
demands so much  
energy and attention, why should  
I expect a mug of tea? Trust is  
devotion is  
the branches we have  
stacked,  
a bonfire  
I am sitting in  
the heat of.



Cirrostratus - Cynthia Yatchman



Nimbostratus - Cynthia Yatchman

mise en abyme  
Tom Busillo

Your voice drew me down a wide city boulevard lined with red flags where I strutted like a peacock in the middle lane of a five-lane street. Throngs of people on either side as far as the eye could see cheered me on, and there I was, marching along by myself like a one-person parade—no drum, no costume, just me heading to your voice emanating from some type of stone temple I could barely make out ahead of me in the distance. You were so far away, I don't know how I heard you. Since you're normally so soft-spoken, you must have been using telepathy. I could only register fragments of what you were saying with all the cheering and applauding for me. The general gist sounded like if I didn't make it to you soon, I was going to miss out on something really special. So, I picked up my pace in the scorching heat and continued to forge ahead. Soon, I was drenched in sweat. My bra straps started slipping down my shoulders from under my ribbed, yellow tank top. I was mortified that they could see them and me having to self-consciously keep adjusting them while trying to look dignified enough to deserve the honor of all the attention I was receiving.

At long last, the parade ended, and I walked up the high stone steps of the temple. But once I got inside, I heard your voice from above; you said, "I'm up here." I looked up and saw you splayed out, your arms and legs going in nearly impossible directions, stuck in a giant web—and I started laughing my head off. You looked ridiculous, and I was sure there must be a story behind this. Before I could ask you any questions, I needed to leave because the people from the parade had gathered before the temple expecting me to make a speech.

Someone placed a wooden podium and a microphone in front of me and suddenly there I was, facing a crowd filled palpably excited by the thought that they would be there to witness me saying something great and memorable for the occasion—whatever it happened to be. I had no idea what I should say. Extemporaneous speeches were never my forte and I certainly couldn't give a speech on Emily Dickinson like I do in my lectures at the college, so I decided it never hurts to say thanks. So, I thanked everyone, and I mean everyone I've ever known. I was stalling until I could think of something better to say. But they seemed pleased and absorbed in what I was saying, nodding as if they knew Andrea Webber or Lydia Fink. They burst into applause when I mentioned your name. I decided to end it there on a high note.

Someone on my right side handed me a pair of giant scissors, then turned me to my left where two dignitaries held either end of a red ribbon. I knew I should cut it, and so I did, with much pomp and fanfare on my part, smiling as if I knew exactly what my actions meant. They cheered, and I waved goodbye to go back into the temple to see if I could get you down because I knew we had a dinner party at the Davis's later. But there you were, coming out clapping your hands as well, looking none the worse for wear.

The crowd rushed up the steps, lifted me off my feet, and started to bear me on their shoulders back down the broad boulevard. Halfway to wherever I had started, a few people carrying me fainted from the heat, causing me to face-plant on the asphalt. Everyone stood still for 10 seconds then started running away as if I had been Godzilla—even you. It must have been all the blood pouring into my eyes and down my face from the gash in my hairline.

So, don't mind the bloody fingerprints on this note. I'm leaving it here where I know you'll somehow find it. Look for me in the temple. Hopefully, I won't be up in that web thing. Also, I'm

anticipating my appearance will have changed to that of another person, possibly even a man, but I'll be the person bleeding from the head, passed out due to blood loss.

When you find me, I want you to take what is left of me to the highest place you can and cast my body down, preferably on jagged rocks if you can find them, so my eyes can break their seal and see again. I know there's another you here, not the you who ran away, was stuck in the web, and was probably poisoned by some giant spider, but the real you. The you who's never let me down. I know it's a big ask, but can you do that for me, honey? Can you cast my body down onto jagged rocks? It will be much appreciated, by both myself and the Davises, who expect us at seven.

Love,  
Doris

My Scientific Career  
Evelyn Pae

In specificity we trust,  
in the incredibly crisp edges of numbers.  
In delineation we backstroke up a river  
and the river is a segment and the segment is a bone  
and the bone belongs to a body, a liquid dark.  
In speciation we place the world,  
in the wetness of genetics  
and computability,  
in the marrow of life, in the curl.

The way anything can be  
an essay personal enough  
it's honorary surgery.  
The way it makes those men  
shake like fish on a wet plane of marble.  
This knife you take to your own  
mouth. *Anything*:  
it doesn't even have to be about love,  
because love will come creeping back in  
on its own, on the legs it built alone  
made of moon and mirrored glass.  
And it will soak like oil  
into your leathery eyes.  
It will ruin everything  
you sharpened in advance.  
Your numbers will soften  
on your dinner plate.

I think you will be thirsty.  
Love swims with feathers and flies with fins  
and steals bones. You  
swallow something sharp in place of music  
claw the shores of the great green  
scientific dream, where  
your missing parts come home.  
There is something more than this,  
but you don't know what it is  
or if anyone else feels it too  
and whether you're alone or not  
and what that means for the sparrow  
that arrows a line of broken glass  
across an aging street in the city

where love happened and faded  
and the calculators paraded  
their two-colored flags, on the night  
someone of yours was born.

A Bravery Betrayed  
Tom Peer

He acknowledges my arrival by standing. I'm not surprised. Manners matter with the British. He offers me a chair. I don't move. He holds up a cigarette. I shake my head. I seek neither attention nor sympathy. I want nothing more than being left alone.

"I'm Major Greene," he says, "we're quite keen on you, you know."

I remain silent.

"We believe your escape from Marseille presents us with a promising possibility."

A lingering pause evolving to an awkward lull speaks for me.

"The Americans are about to launch six bombers from Corsica to Marseille-Fos Port. That attack is irrelevant if," he hesitates in choosing his words, "you come aboard."

I keep still.

His lips tighten as he sinks into his chair. "You understand that even precision bombing can result in hundreds of civilian casualties."

I say nothing.

Upon hissing a held breath, he spins a map before me. "I trust you know the importance of this rail bridge to the Germans, for their defense of Southern France."

I know what all of France knows, and I don't need a map. "The Viaduct de Caronte."

He raises a lip. The expression isn't a smile as much as a peek inside. "If properly trained and equipped for an operation, might you consider returning to Marseille?"

When our eyes meet, I turn away.

"Might you care for a drink? Some tea perhaps? A cognac?"

My cutting reply carries a bit more bite. "Proper training for my holiday, is it?"

He straightens in his chair. "No holiday, I'm afraid."

"Oh pity." The letdown less convincing than my sarcasm, I toy with an anticipation of renewed interest. "Please tell me. There's more?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "You will take the night train from Lyon to Marseille. When you disembark, you will fall back from the departing passengers to an adjacent track of empty coal skips. In the shadows, you will climb aboard the first car. When this train leaves for the harbor, across the Viaduct de Caronte, you open the dumper, trigger the acid fuse of a satchel charge, then drop the explosive into the mechanical pit of the turning tower."

"Brilliant, is it? My suicide in exchange of a bombing mission?"

"You'll have thirty seconds to make an escape."

"I already escaped from Marseille. What are my chances of getting away again? If detained and thought a spy, a saboteur, a Jewess—I should be fortunate if earning only a bullet."

He swallows. "Nonetheless, your bravery will not betray you."

"For what? For some tin plaque on some cold stone?"

The way of the British, he doesn't reveal what he feels. Perhaps, he has doubts. He sees through me. I'm not so brave. He's made a mistake.

"How old are you?"

I've no reason to withhold the truth. "Too much older than I am."

#



If I move, heads turn. If I stay, eyes stare. There's no hiding from them. It's apparent that my spectators, consumed by suspicions, are wondering the purpose of my presence on their train. I should ignore them—if I could.

I don't feign well and fear far worse. If I'm noticed, I'm watched, likely followed, then possibly discovered. This is my new life, a life of what I'm now aware, wary, and afraid. My eyes close. If I sleep, I might forget my unease, escape the thought of what awaits.

#

My eyes open to a trainman shaking my arm. In the darkness of the car, he lifts a lantern to my face. "Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, we cannot proceed. We must be off."

"What? I don't understand. We're going to Marseille, yes?"

His free hand chops the night air. "Impossible."

"What are you saying?"

"I am saying the bridge is no more."

"The bridge is gone?"

The Germans exploded the Viaduct de Caronte."

"The Germans."

"In retreat, they destroyed the bridge to contain the forces retaking the city." His trembling voice now insists, "Mademoiselle! Please-please, no more questions. We are in the midst of them. We cannot delay."

My mission for naught, my bravery betrayed, I still retain a foolish fear.

The trainman dips his lantern and looks about the car. A seeming assurance that we're alone, he whispers, "At last, we are free."

"Free," I breathe, the word no longer a hope.

#

A German officer, a file of soldiers on his heels, charges into the car. He's behind a blinding light concealing his face. The trainman grips my shoulder while my arms tighten around the satchel. Upon a soldier pulling me from my seat, I squirm a hand inside, push, twist, and shatter the glass of the acid fuse. I begin counting.

The officer claims that the train, commandeered by the army, is leaving at once for Lyon. When he orders us off the car, he spies the satchel. "What have you there?"

A jolt of fear stuns me still. In desperation, I concoct an explanation befitting some schoolgirl's invention. "A handsome German forgot this bag at Lyon. The trainman here insists that I turn it over upon our arrival in Marseille."

A pair of squint-tight eyes emerge from the light. "I'm sorry, Mademoiselle. Your description of a 'handsome German' is redundant."

Only twenty seconds remaining, I don't refute the correction. "Please, with the train now returning to Lyon, could you be so kind as to leave this satchel with the stationmaster?"

When a whistle wails, a strain of rods and chains clatter underneath. The brakes released, the train jerks in response. Too soon, we're moving.

"Monsieur," I appeal with a mere ten seconds to spare, "you can please do this for a fellow countryman, yes?"

Without recourse and his overbearing authority now challenged, he extends his hand. "Of course, my pleasure."

I make the exchange and race to the end of the car. The trainman in tow, we leap before a searing blast hurls us over a track, through a scrub, and into the night—all the way to Marseille.

Loaded  
Joe Oppenheimer

Early spring morning, cold, East of the Med Sea  
in the land where Abraham, and the first temple used to be –  
where God sent Jesus, Joseph, and Abraham,  
just hours from Jerusalem.

Early spring morning, cold, in the past present or not at all  
no longer on the green line but within the wall  
somewhere specific between here and there  
now reportable only as nowhere.

Early spring morning, cold, sun peeking in the East.  
Ari stands guard with his Uzi beast  
loaded. Two dogs, just in case  
meaning his mind can adjust,  
not race, when problems come up.

Early spring morning, cold, still shadows where she walks,  
Hajar – knows what to say but not to talk  
Hebrew. Under her black abaya Hajar's mound grew  
heavy, threatening, and out of view.  
Up at the checkpoint now.

Ari sees the bulge, points and asks in his tongue  
what under there might be slung.  
She says, *My baby! I am in labor.*  
Begs for help, asks for favor,  
But he does not speak, Arabic.

He barks for her to raise her gown  
she only understands the frown.  
Ari calls his sergeant over  
Moshe speaks, in Arabic – *Raise*  
*your smock!* which she – for a man  
– certainly cannot.

*Feel my belly* - is what she said  
*Don't!* orders Moshe, *If it's a bomb we're dead!*  
She screams in pain, turns around  
takes some steps; kneels on the ground  
prays to Allah for his help.

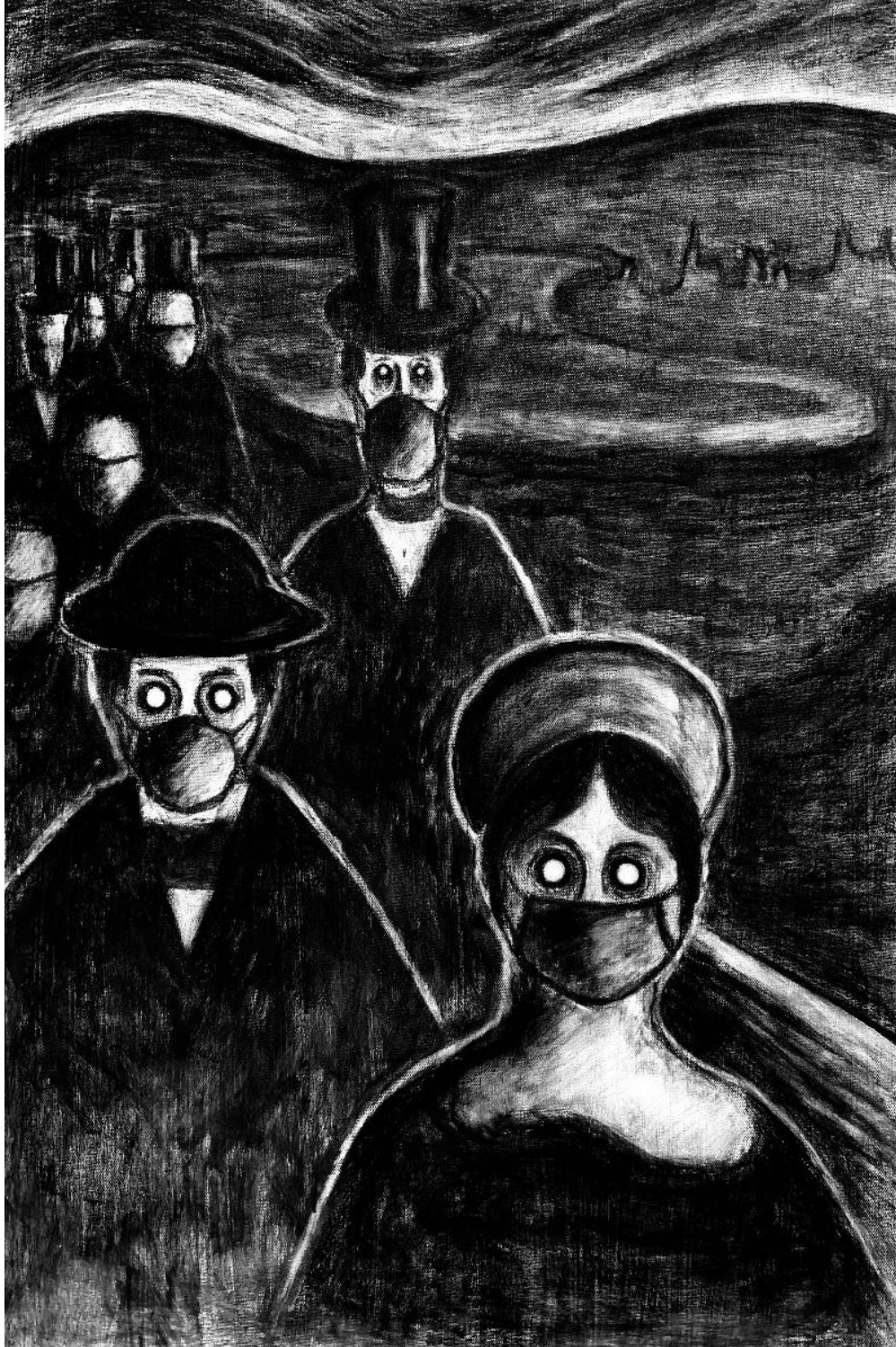
Late spring evening, cold, sun sets.

Behind a burned-out vehicle she steps,  
delivers now without flair  
her baby boy gasping for air.  
Again, she prays, *Allah, mercy.*

Late spring evening, cold, some poor Arab screams,  
*Bastards! Don't you see! It's just what it seemed!*  
The mother cries demanding care  
The babe needs help but it isn't there.  
Ari, Uzi loaded, and with dogs

watches the infant gasp and die  
goes home to forget, forgive and try  
to understand the reason why  
occupation  
is still imposed on this  
woman's nation.

Then celebrates freedom at his Sedar.



*COVID Anxiety* - Donald Patten

Inheritance  
Simon Collinson

Can you hide forever from your fate?

What future does a person with no past have?

The search for answers led me to a grim and bleak place across a precipitous bridge called Erskine.

It was in the dreich and dreary drizzle of a gloomy night in Milton that I met my father for the first time.

I encountered the shuddering shock of seeing a face that I well knew, eyes glaring and glowering towards me.

Those wild fervid eyes ablaze that looked so aghast at me will be seared unto my soul till my dying day.

My burning ambition had led me to this meeting. From an early age I wanted to know who my father was. I had to know.

I often asked about my father as a child.

But upon this subject all my family remained tight lipped and silent.

My mother would only say, "You don't want to know."

"Is he a bad man?", I asked.

"No, but it is better that you never see him. Some doors are best left unopened." she replied.

"Best leave things the way they are", I was told, time after time.

But the questions swirled in my mind. Like a burrowing beetle it bored away incessantly inside my head. It was a creature that would not rest, but day and night weedled away inside. A constant tap tap tapping, that would not go away.

That desire to know my father, my ancestry, my blood, grew stronger as I grew into manhood.

I did well for myself. Got a job and worked my way to promotion. Found someone to settle down with. Bought a house and had children. I prospered and had enough money for savings.

In the community I was respected, all looked up to me.

But still, I could not settle and be content. That burrowing creature had dug deep and was embedded into my brain. And it kept constantly stabbing away.

"Who was my father", became for me a quest that would not let me rest.

When I was in my mid 20's I decided I would stop at nothing, brook no obstacle in my desire to seek my real father.

Years later I finally found my father.

It led me to that tremulous meeting in Milton.

I met my father, in Milton's gloom.  
The following day he died.  
But before departing,  
He passed on to me a message,  
That chilled me to the core.

He told me,  
"I was once like you,  
With ambitions and dreams.  
I see a man stand before me,  
With the McCallister mark,  
Upon your lips and ears,  
You are my son and heir,  
But beware,  
No worldly wealth will you possess,  
For what is to be passed,  
Onto you is the family curse,  
The curse of the McCallister's,  
For this family name is cursed,  
And all who possess it,  
Are truly cursed and doomed,  
No McCallister is unmarked by it,  
Or can ever escape its grip,  
All because an ancestor,  
Cast a stone at an owl,  
Under the protection of,  
Artemis, the Huntress,  
Look at me, my son,  
And listen well,  
The unavoidable truth is,  
The family curse has been,  
Passed onto you,  
You will be as Midas,  
But in your case, everything you touch,  
will turn to dust,  
That which you hold dearest,  
Will wither away on the vine,  
All men will hate you,  
And the dogs will bark,  
And snap at your heels,  
Woe unto you,  
For your destiny,  
Will be one of,  
Unending misery,

I can promise you,  
Nothing but a life of,  
Scorn, sorrow and turmoil.  
That shall be your inheritance.

So hence every disaster and breaking  
That befalls all I touch or everyone around me.  
Every time it happens,  
I know it's all down to me.  
And that unbreakable curse of the McCallister's.

My past had been revealed to me and it pointed to a bleak and barren future. The curse of the McCallister's was unavoidable.

I often think of that fateful meeting in Milton, where my father told me of the family curse. Life has, indeed, taken a turn for the worse.

I lost my well-paid job. I couldn't find another. I lost my house. My marriage crumbled. My savings are all gone. Those who respected me now despise me. I am now little better than a beggar.

The bad luck that followed me was unrelenting and unremitting.

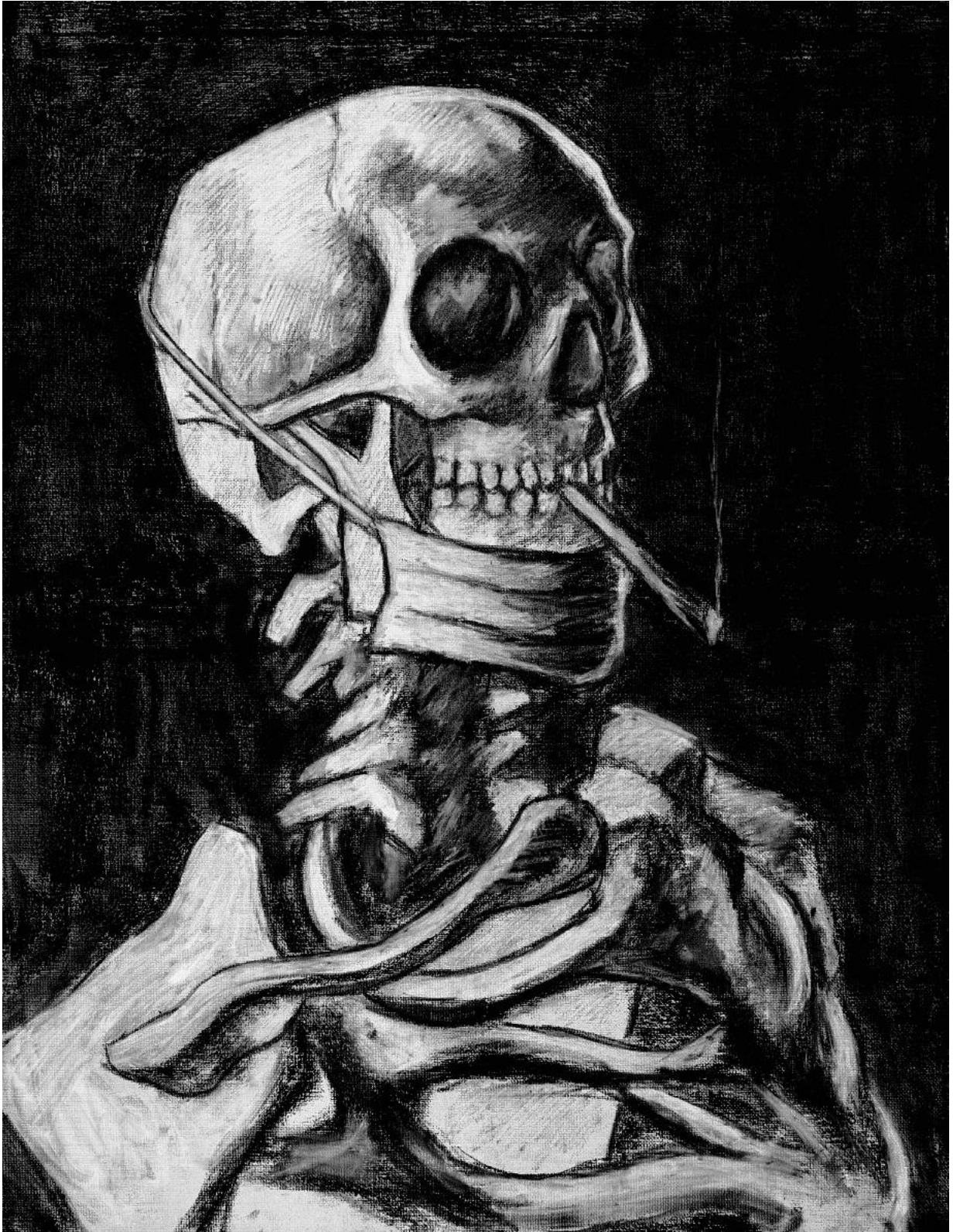
But worse of all,  
Is that my children are still too small to know yet,  
What, exactly, is coming their way.  
As sure as night follows day, they will receive,  
The terrible inheritance of an unshakable curse, that afflicts all the McCallisters.

So, can you hide from your fate?  
Now I know.  
You cannot forever hide from fate, for your fate will surely find you.

A Digression  
Matthew Lee

and the memories of those sultry days, four years ago  
that haunt me still on these balmy evenings, before the last of  
summer's breath expires at the sway of her wrist,  
that discourtesy —  
I watch the cuff of her sweater lick  
against my chagrin as her necklace, gold,  
oblong against her sharp clavicles,  
tremble, but I hear nothing —  
for I am no longer there, but here,  
the illusion lifted, this, here,  
the space between you and I,  
where silence is no longer a mysticism  
but a sure sign of the end of love,  
a prognosis made with that all-too-cheerful signature,  
a final flourish.





*Masked Skull of a Skeleton with A Burning Cigarette* – Donald Patten

Always  
Emily Jones

Keep your heart from falling for their words and outstretched palm  
The good will misdirect you, you're a fool to trust their charm  
Listen to me closely, shut your mouth, don't be alarmed  
Your life was meant for danger; I will always do you harm

I'll keep the air you breathe if you defy me- DON'T SPEAK!  
Restrict you like a corset, choking you until you're weak  
I'll shout into your ear instead of whispering like a snake  
I'll make your life a hell you're never able to escape

I'm in the skin you bleed, in your thoughts and in your hate  
Go cry yourself an ocean but you're mine, accept your fate  
You can hang your pretty neck or throw yourself into a well  
I'd stalk your soul in heaven; I would follow you to Hell

I'll always bring you pain, every second, every day  
You need my striking hand; you know that I'm the only way  
With every vibrant shade, you'll be strong and you will thrive  
Bloody, broke and ragged, you'll be grateful I'm alive

Remember what I said, every single word is true  
You'll blossom in the dark, your pains my greatest gift to you  
Expect a chill of dread when I beat you black and blue  
Remember what I said and you will thank me when I do

## Biographies

Roger Brezina grew up on a farm in south central Minnesota, graduated from Mankato State University (as it was called in 1977) after he'd complicated his mind with physics, math, and astronomy. After 5 decades of various engineering and technical positions, he now resides on 5 acres of the old homestead trying to uncomplicate his mind. Until December 1st, 2021, he had 5 grown children (tragically now 4) and he has 6 grandchildren who reside in his heart.

Ronald Garcia Orrantia is a 48-year-old Southern California native who has recently been published in NBAP Literary magazine's Fall Metal Pumpkin issue and Pens on Fire 2010 Summer issue. He studied Abnormal Psychology as a fascination in college, as these publications may show.

Nicholas Chiofalo is a writer based in the Bronx. His work explores themes such as the struggle to forge connections and the indomitable will of the human spirit. This is his first submission.

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary. He has a debut novella (Words on the Page) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (To Accept the Things I Cannot Change: Writing My Way Out of Addiction) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter and Instagram: @ZaryFekete Bluesky:zaryfekete.bsky.social

William Matthew McCarter is a writer from Southeast Missouri. His work has been published in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Midwestern Gothic, and Fried Chicken and Coffee.

Anabela Machado is a 23-year-old Brazilian writer. Her book, The Sacred Deer and other stories, was independently published on Amazon in the beginning of 2025. Her short stories (including Red Gums) can be found on [Substack](#)

Claudia Wysocky is a 16-year-old Polish poet based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.

Kimvalrie Neal is a Taiwanese American poet and visual artist. Her works invite the audience to join her in subliming our emotions and exploring our shared human nature. Kim (short for Kimvalrie) believes that through joint effort, we can learn to be more understanding of this world and still find ways to be ourselves. Kim's creations internalize many Western and Asian cultural and philosophical elements. Although often informing philosophical transcendence, Kim's works occasionally demonstrate her whimsical humor, too. Kim and her husband, Dan Neal, met in Taipei, Taiwan, in 1998. Currently, they reside by a lake in Dutchess County, New York.

Lauren Dodge (she/her) is an emerging poet from Indianapolis, Indiana. She recently moved to Italy with her husband and their two lovely dogs. In her free time, she stares at the Tuscany hills, drinks cappuccinos, and walks her dogs in the Mediterranean rain.

Joel Woodard is a writer based in the North West of England, but originally from the South East of Wales. He has been fortunate enough to have one or two stories published in various writing magazines and has been invited to read his poetry publicly.

Angela Lavelle is a 28-year-old poet from New York, currently living in Lisbon. Her work blends the collision of darkness and lightness, mixing vivid color with quiet ache. She was previously published in *The Best Worst Years*, an anthology from Acid Bath Publishing. Angela writes to chart her own emotional weather of being alive.

A native of upstate New York, Devin James Leonard prefers the countryside over cities, and animals over humans. When he isn't writing or devouring books, he likes to make crop circles in random cornfields to entice the Men in Black. His published stories can be found on Instagram @devinjamesleonard

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a poet, memoirist, workshop leader, thought-leader and award-winning author of 14 books and editor of three anthologies. Her work has been widely published and anthologized. Her poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and The Best of the Net. She frequently speaks and writes on writing for healing and transformation. Her forthcoming anthology, *Women in A Golden State: California Poets at 60 and Beyond* (Gunpowder Press) is due out in May 2025. Raab writes for *Psychology Today*, *The Good Men Project*, *Sixty and Me*, *Medium*, and is a guest writer for many others. Visit: <https://www.dianaraab.com>.

Nadia Mustefa is a first generation Ethiopian American, born and raised in NYC who currently creates and resides in Perth, Australia. Her form of creation includes storytelling via poetry, comedy and vlogging. You can find her on Instagram and Substack @nadianarrates

Benedict Pignatelli is a twenty-nine-year-old writer from Dublin, currently based in Paris. He has written for Chelsea Magazine, the Literary Review, Injection Magazine, New Sounds Press, and Distilled Post (editor). He has had short stories accepted by CafeLit, Stray Words and the Bull Magazine, and has been longlisted for the Bridport Prize (2021), the Masters Review Winter Short Story Award (2023-24), and the Fish Short Story Prize (2024). He is the current Editor in Chief of the Menteur Magazine.

Born in Canada of Ukrainian heritage, Ihor Pidhainy is a teacher and writer who lives in Atlanta. He had chapbooks with Bottlecap Press and Origami Press. His poetry appeared in Washington Square Review, The Alchemy Spoon, Quarter Press, Northern New England Review and other journals.

Mark Moran is a freelance travel writer whose work explores the sensory and emotional landscapes of the places visited. With a particular interest in less-visited destinations, he seeks to capture the spirit of these locales through evocative storytelling. Mark writes for several publications, including NÓS, Ireland's largest Irish-language magazine.

Alexei Raymond is an aspiring writer from the Middle East. His words seek to mythologize threshold moments. Hopelessly hopeful.

Nathaniel Tok is a student at Redmond High School. His writing appears in *Beyond Words Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Gemini Magazine*, and others. Discover his community work at [futurescholarfoundation.org](http://futurescholarfoundation.org).

Mitchell Waldman's fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *Ariel Chart*, *Corvus Review*, *Fictive Dream*, *The Waterhouse Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *The Faircloth Review*, *Epiphany*, *Wilderness House Literary Magazine*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and many other magazines and anthologies. He is also the author of the novel, *A Face in the Moon*, and the story collections, *Brothers*, *Fathers*, and *Other Strangers*, and *Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart*. His new novel *The Visitor* is due out from All Things That Matter Press later this year. Mitchell also serves as Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. (For more info, see his website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Nancy Chapple is a Berlin-based American who in her four decades in Europe has worked as a translator and interpreter, classical pianist, and co-director of a small business. Her work has been recently published or is forthcoming in the *Seattle Times*, *Caustic Frolic*, *Decadent Review*, *Synkroniciti*, *Bull*, and *Under the Sun*. Her creative endeavors are presented at [www.aptwords.ink](http://www.aptwords.ink).

Kevin Brown (he/him) teaches high school English in Nashville. He has published three books of poetry: *Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (Wipf and Stock); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again*, and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*. You can find out more about him and his work on social media sites at @kevinbrownwrites or at <http://kevinbrownwrites.weebly.com/>.

Sabrina Green is a writer and painter living in Western Montana. They draw on their academic history in ecology to influence their creative explorations and observations of the world. With modern life the way it is, they hope their writing can inspire readers to look more closely and appreciate what is around them. Their writing can be found online at [www.substack.com/@sometimesbadger](http://www.substack.com/@sometimesbadger).

Mary Ann McGuigan's creative nonfiction has appeared in *Brevity*, *Citron Review*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. *The Sun*, *Massachusetts Review*, *North American Review*, and many other journals have published her fiction. Her collection *Pieces* includes stories named for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net; her new story collection, *That Very Place*, reaches bookstores in September 2025. The Junior Library Guild and the New York Public Library rank Mary Ann's novels as best books for teens; *Where You Belong* was a finalist for the National Book Award. She loves visitors: [www.maryannmcguigan.com](http://www.maryannmcguigan.com).

Tyler Del Ciotto and Coby Kassner are two old high school friends from Colorado who are both currently studying computer science, but are still passionate about fine arts and love literature, the symphony, and art museums!

Kathryn Hatchett is a writer and student living in Somerset. Her writing focuses on the natural world, local history, and mental health. She can often be found exploring hidden-away locations with her border terrier, Jasper, at her heel. Her previous work includes 'The Handbook' (Close to the Bone Publishing) and 'Wings' (Falwriting). To join Kathryn on her adventures, you can find her on Instagram @ [kathrynhatchett](#)

Ethan McKnight is a self-taught poet currently based in San Diego, California. He is pursuing a degree in Business at San Diego Christian College. He draws inspiration from his diverse range of interests, including music, comic books, and his own mental health struggles. His work has been published in *The Maudlin House*, *Punk Monk Press*, *The Broken Teacup Department*, *Blue Villa*, and *Suburban Witchcraft*. You can find him on Instagram: @Gunnerman27.

James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet working in film production. His latest chapbook is *A God You Believed In* (Pinhole Poetry, 2023). Recent poems are in *ITERANT*, *Stirring*, and *The Indianapolis Review*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Nashville, Tennessee. ([jamescroaljackson.com](http://jamescroaljackson.com))

Tom Busillo is a writer living in Philadelphia, PA. His work has appeared on *McSweeney's*, *PANK*, and *Weird Lit*, among others, with additional work forthcoming in *Calliope*. When he's not writing, he likes playing acoustic guitar and attempting to sing Leonard Cohen and Magnetic Fields songs.

Evelyn Pae is an aspiring naturalist and poet currently based in Syracuse, New York. Their work has appeared in *Unearthed*.

A retired electrical engineer living in Phoenix, Tom Peer has been published in *Literary Yard*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *Witcraft*. Previous submissions have earned him a Glimmer Train honorable mention and a finalist award from New Millennium. While he writes what he likes to read, he reads James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, T.C. Boyle, Steven King, and Joyce Carol Oates.

Joe Oppenheimer's research on social justice and collective action problems is published and cited widely. He retired as a professor to write poetry and prose and has published poems, stories, and a play in various literary magazines. He has led writing groups in a homeless shelter and a VA hospital and has taught play writing. He has also self-published a short novella, 2 volumes of poetry, one of short stories and essays, and one of children stories. His website: [joeaoppenheimer.wixsite.com/my-site](http://joeaoppenheimer.wixsite.com/my-site).

Roger Brezina grew up on a farm in south central Minnesota, graduated from Mankato State University (as it was called in 1977) after he'd complicated his mind with physics, math, and astronomy. After 5 decades of various engineering and technical positions, he now resides on 5 acres of the old homestead trying to uncomplicate his mind. Until December 1st, 2021, he had 5 grown children (tragically now 4) and he has 6 grandchildren who reside in his heart.



Simon Collinson is a writer from England. He seeks solitude and shadow.

Matthew Lee is a writer living with cancer in Melbourne, Australia. His work can be found or is forthcoming in Farrago Magazine, Neologism Poetry Journal, Five on the Fifth, Literally Stories, and Academy of the Heart and Mind.

A teacher's lesson of similes and metaphors inspired Emily Jones to write, her love of descriptions transforming into stories and poetry. She's a passionate individual who turns almost anything into an idea, even her darkest moments, and carries a notebook with her at all times. Although she has a broad interest in genres, her work tends to be dark and she hopes one day to publish her collection.

Danny P. Barbare resides in the Upstate of the Carolinas. He enjoys traveling locally, writing if free verse about his immediate environment. His poetry has recently appeared in California Quarterly, Cardinal Sins, and Birmingham Arts Journal. He lives with his wife in Greenville.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Michael Roque discovered his love for poetry and prose amid friends on the bleachers of Pasadena City College. Now he currently lives in the Middle East and is being inspired by the world around him. His poems have been published by literary magazines like Cholla Needles, The New Yorker, The Literary Hatchet and others. Social Handle: <https://www.instagram.com/roquewrites2009/>

Nolo Segundo, pen name of retired teacher [America, Japan, Taiwan, the war zone of Cambodia, 1973-74] L.j. Carber, 77, became a published poet in his 8th decade in over 220 literary journals in 18 countries and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and thrice for Best of the Net. Cyberwit.net has published 3 collections in softcover: THE ENORMITY OF EXISTENCE [2020]; OF ETHER AND EARTH [2021]; and SOUL SONGS [2022]. These titles reflect an awareness gained in 1971 when he had an NDE whilst nearly drowning in a Vermont river: that he has or rather is a consciousness predating birth and surviving death, what poets since Plato have called the soul.

## Did You Know?

The name "magpie" is a combination of the English nickname "Mag" (short for Margaret), meaning "idle chattering," and the Latin *pica*, meaning someone who eats a wide variety of things.