



CORVUS REVIEW: DREAD & DISQUIET

FALL 2026

Editor: Janine Mercer

Cover Art: “Everywhere Eyes, Boston, MA” (2019)

Charles Corriher is a neurodivergent SSI recipient living in Greensboro, North Carolina who grew up and later attended college in Asheville NC. He’s been a volunteer worker at Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro since 2018. His photos have been selected for publication in *Posit*, *In Short*, *Wordgathering*, *Ponder Review*, *Belladonna’s Garden* and *Mania*.

Additional Art:

Russell Pirkle

Bill Wolak

Edward Michael Supranowicz

Charles Corriher

Contents

4	Farrar
8	Mangtani
15	Daly-Atkinson
18	Flatt
20	Wang
21	Underwood
22	Gean
24	Finchum
26	Shippas
29	Seufert
31	du Toit
32	Bayliss
33	Rook
34	Ryberg
36	Dakovski
40	Dorroh
41	O'Brien
43	Burley
44	Harrison
47	McMahon
48	Iannone
50	Macnair
52	Mangtani
54	Swanger
58	Zable
59	Smith
61	Jones
62	Vogel
66	Burley
68	Sulejic
87	Bios

The Shape of No
Carrie Farrar

She said no
and the no stayed
no / not that / not you
the no in the room
the no in the throat
the no I swallowed
until it sounded like me

she said it didn't happen
said didn't
said didn't
said didn't
until the word thinned out
until it split
did / not
did / not
and I stood there
half-true

there were other voices—
yes, we remember
yes, we saw
but her voice pressed louder
low and steady
like weather
I bent to it

my hands learned hush
thumb / finger
finger / palm
pulse under skin
skin under silence
I made myself smaller
smaller
smaller
until I almost fit

she told me things
sharp things
dark things
left them in my mouth
then came back later

said no
not me
not mine
as if the words
grew teeth
on their own

summer / sleeves
heat / held
road / repeating
step / step
step / step
no one coming
no one calling
just the sound
of leaving

I loved her version
loved it
lived it
if she was right
I stayed
if she was wrong
I was gone
so I went
gone / gone / gone
quietly

but something knocked
soft at first
then louder
no
no
no
not gone
not gone
still here

now the sound breaks
her voice slipping
mine catching
no turning
no taking back
no more

not monster

not myth
just a no
she couldn't hear
so she put it in me

and I carried it
called it truth
called it love
called it mine

until it cracked
clean
down the middle

and the girl—
breathing / beating
unquiet / undone
said
no

no—
this happened

no—
I am here

no—
you don't get
to take me
again



Bill Wolak - Unforgettable as a Shipwreck's Silence

Down the Rabbit Hole
Ashley Mangtani

Mr. White snapped the pocket watch closed.

The sound struck the tiles and came back clean.

The same sound echoed in the church while the organist cycled the bridal chorus a second time.

Forty-two minutes.

The amount of time before the groundskeepers lowered his father's coffin and moved to the next plot.

In March, Sophie's side of the bed stayed cold.

By August, the children stopped leaving voicemails.

On Christmas Eve, Sophie took the rabbit from the cedar shavings and carried it to her car.

"Shit. I'm late."

The alley gate saved two minutes.

He cut across the lawn, his shoes crunching down on the frost.

The hutch blocked the shortcut. He shoved it aside, and the wood splintered.

The earth underneath opened into a cavity.

White stopped. He dangled the watch over the centre by its chain.

The chain slipped. He braced, expecting the crack of glass.

Silence.

He leaned his weight over the edge of the hole.

The cold rising from it was not weather. It was architecture.

He tilted forward.

Then he fell.

The lawn peeled upward, rotating the shed and the dead flowerbeds on their axis.

The winter sky sheared away into a slow descent.

The draft traded the scent of frost for the sting of iodine.

Thick roots split the tunnel walls, flattening into shelves of loam as he fell.

They displayed a stack of untorn recital tickets thawing in the mud. A tenth-anniversary box wrapped in pink ribbon, and towers of leather planners fused solid by black ice.

The descent terminated at a long banquet table, its linen tablecloth calcified.

Shattered bone china juttred out in every direction, and a tarnished teapot split at the seams, its final pour stalled into a solid, brown spear.

Beside it, a hairless mouse twitched. Its skin stretched like parchment over a heaving ribcage, one pink paw frozen to a sugar spoon.

At the head, a man in a collapsed top hat sat in a high-backed chair. Playing cards pierced his scalp, red baked into his hairline.

He uncoiled and dragged his head around to face White. His spine cracked like dry kindling, and he tore his arm from the chair, leaving a strip of grey meat fused to the armrest.

"When she woke up," the man said.

White pushed himself off the frozen dirt. "Who?"

"The girl." He stared at the dying mouse. "Her waking up was our death sentence," he snapped. White paused, scraping the permafrost from his suit cuffs. "Who are you? Where am—"

"—You don't remember me?"

"No. I don't think—"

"I'm the Stark, Raving, Mad consequence of a hundred and sixty-one years behind a locked door. But you may call me SRM."

"I'm not doing this." White slammed a palm against his breast, clawing into the pockets until the inner seam ripped. "Where's my watch?"

"It's where it needs to be," SRM replied.

"Enough with this bollocks. I'm late." White backed away from the ice.

"Visiting hours are almost up. I need to get to the hospital because I'm—"

SRM caught the trailing breath.

"Late."

"Late."

"Late."

"What has a bed but never sleeps?"

always forward

never back

seldom returning for what it takes.

"Stop," White said. "Aren't you listening to a word I'm saying?"

He dragged his thumbs down the lapels of his coat.

"The answer is a river. It flows one way. I have played your game. Now step aside."

"A river.

That's a child's metaphor.

Strip the water away, White.

Tell me what you are actually

drowning in."

White stilled.

What has a bed but never sleeps.

Sophie's side of the bed. Cold since March.

Always forward. Never back.

The recital tickets. Untorn.

Seldom returning for what it takes.

His father's watch. Still ticking somewhere.

He pressed his knuckles into the frozen table.

"Time," he said.

He opened his mouth to say more, but every defence would have been a confession.

"The great philosopher," SRM said.

"I answered. Now, step aside."

"Your obsession ground them into decimals," SRM said.

White's shoulders locked.

"Do not speak about my family."

The permafrost cracked outward from his chair in a clean line.

"Your wedding day," he said. "Third pew from the front. They thought you were talking to yourself."

White said nothing.

"You were the only one who could see me up there," SRM said. "Until you chose not to."

The dormouse had been mid-sentence since Alice left.

SRM lifted it by its tail and swallowed it whole.

The words spilled out of SRM in a sweeping arc:

you had everything

Sophie

the kids

a warm house

and you watched them disappear

counting

counting

counting

time only eats

and you are out of currency.

White pushed back from the table. His legs did not move.

"I answered you," White rasped. "The game is over."

"The game is the only thing keeping your heart beating," SRM said.

The air split. Something from the other side bled through.

"...bilateral breath sounds diminished, sats dropping, suction catheter now..."

The linen went hospital white.

"We were friends," White whispered.

"I didn't leave you. I just... ran out of room on the page."

"You ran out of pulse," SRM corrected.

The garden flatlined.

"...pressure sixty over forty, vasopressors now, he's in freefall..."

"Sophie." His arm reached across the table.

"She isn't at the ward, White," SRM said. "She's behind the glass."

...charging to two hundred, clear...

"A punctual corpse," SRM said. "At last."

The banquet table lost its geometry.

Then it appeared.

S **G**
M **N**
I **I**
L

Suspended in the dead air.

Bodyless.

It assembled itself around the smile: a striped cat, its eyes two unblinking surgical lamps.

SRM did not look up. "This table is not set for you, Cat."

The Cat drifted toward White.

...visual stability compromised...

It found him.

"There he is," the Cat said. "He finally stopped running."

"I need to reach Sophie—"

"She's been reaching for you for twenty years. She got tired."

...switch to manual ventilation...

The monitor flatlined.

The Cat raised one paw, and the sound cut out.

Time did not stop; it developed a fever.

SRM's head turned toward the Cat for the first time.

"You are not permitted—"

"Permitted is a word for men who still have a pulse to bargain with," the Cat said.

SRM was quiet for a moment. Not defeated. Finished.

He turned to White one last time.

Then he lifted a hand and came apart like a held breath, like a room exhaling after a hundred and sixty-one years behind a locked door.

The cold he left behind was different.

It was the cold of an empty chair.

The Cat drifted across the table. Nothing that was already broken broke further.

It stopped close enough that White could feel the chill of its breath.

The grin was gone.

"You didn't fall, White. You built it. One missed dinner at a time."

"I was working," White rasped. "For them."

"You whittled yourself down to a timetable and called it a life," the Cat said. "And now you are exactly on time."

Everything was dissolving. Edges first. Then the middle.

"What... what's happening?"

"You're late, White Rabbit," the Cat said. "Late to the only appointment that ever mattered."

"...cardiorespiratory instability... increasing voltage..."

"No." White's fingers closed around nothing. "Sophie."

"The room is waiting," the Cat said. "Don't be late."

The garden imploded.

The smell of iodine deepened.

White's eyes opened to a grid of pale ceiling tiles, repeating into the distance.

Fluorescent lights hummed.

A plastic tube occupied his throat, breathing for him.

Through the curve of the oxygen mask, they were there. Sophie wore the face of someone who had already said goodbye and was only here to confirm it.

She held a small cardboard box of his office effects.

The desk calendar.

The ball-point pens.

A photograph of the four of them, still in its frame, that had lived on his desk and never made it home.

Beside her, the children had made themselves small against the wall.

Tom stared at the linoleum, shoulders hunched, braced for a blow that had already landed.

"He's awake," a nurse whispered. There was no joy in it.

Sophie leaned in. Her hand found his. The weight of her hand reached him. Not the warmth.

She didn't tell him it would be okay.

She didn't tell him he was early.

"We have to let you go, Rob," she said, her voice breaking against the click of the ventilator.

White's arm moved toward her.

But the monitor ran its final countdown.

Tick.

Sophie's face blurred into white petals.

Tock.

The darkness rose from the floor.

Tick.

He did not check his watch.

Tock.

He was looking at his children.

The Saint of Small Things
Sophie Daly-Atkinson

Marié was the saint of small things. Spiders, cockroaches, bedbugs, moths; the lost souls of her tiny London flat.

It was a Wednesday, dim midpoint of the week, and the city heaved like a giant, furred rodent behind the yellow smudge of her window. She had been contemplating the paper creases in her eviction notice, the slack, childish handwriting of her landlord, when something caught her eye. A spider, all legs and bristles, advancing towards another, which clung unawares to an old milk-crusted bowl on the floor. They clashed; black limbs intertwined. It was a diptych of sin, a biblical lesson on the crimes of the flesh; two souls devouring one another in the pursuit of mindless greed.

She decided then and there that she would strive to collect the errant souls of her flat and show them the joy of salvation. A feast of lowlife that would make the hypocrites roll in their graves.

She began with the spiders, unpeeling their legs until they were two once more. One was already lost, the black bulge of its lower body detached and hanging in the fangs of the other. She placed the sinner and its victim in the large box that had once held dozens of smaller boxes. She then swept the flat for others, pulling cobwebs from the corners of the ceiling and adding them to the box; still connected to the remains of dry, sun-bleached flies, entangled in the white filigree threads.

Next was the cockroaches. She knew where they liked to live. Every morning she had to fish a dead one, or two, from the brown water that always filled the bottom of the bathtub. She plucked them from the water, a shiver running through her at the scrape of antennae on her fingers. There were more hidden between the mould-infested plates piled in the sink. They clung to the damp edges of bowls and cups, their spiked legs coming away with chunks of moist food that could no longer be identified. One, two, three, four of them, wet and writhing in her palm, like a heap of ripe figs. They, too, went into the box.

She had never seen the bedbugs, but she knew they were there. They had been gnawing at her skin ever since she moved in, leaving specks of blood and the spectral skeletons of their shed skin, like the pale shells of boiled chickpeas, in her bedsheets. She took a knife from the sink, the one her uncle had given her as a gift the year she cut her hair too short, still coated in garlic from last weeks' meal.

It cut through the mattress quicker than she expected, the decades old fabric falling away like dust. The bedbugs infested every crevice of the inner fibres, a beehive of red crawling multitudes. This was the heart of the sickness; sinners cowering in fear of God's wrath. But there was no place one could hide from Him.

She reached her hand into a seething clump of bodies. They latched onto her fingers, sticking their needles into her skin as she scraped them off with the knife and into the box. She did the same thing several times, as the light outside the window dimmed to a sickly orange – scooping and scraping until her skin was peppered with blood and bite marks.

She was desperate, now. Desperate for these poor lost souls to see the light, mutilating her flesh to save those who would never have even acknowledged her existence except to suck her pale, chapped skin.

One she had collected every last wanderer from the mattress; there was one sinner left. She peeled it from the curtain by its brown paper wings and dropped it amongst the indistinguishable throng, moving some cockroaches over its wings to stop it from flying away.

She placed her hungry mob on the kitchen table and sat before her ticket to God.

She picked up the first sinner; a dust-brown cockroach with antennae longer than its body, legs covered with fine, prickly hairs. She crossed herself and said a Hail Mary, fumbling over the words she could only faintly recall from Sunday School. Then she cleaved its body in two with her teeth.

There was a crunch, like a piece of paper balled in her fist, then a wet squelch, releasing a torrent of something awful on her tongue – a miasmic taste that made her suffer for salvation, remembering Christ's sweet bloody face when crowned with thorns. She mixed the moist mass of innards with her saliva and swallowed hard, blinking back tears as her body tried to reject her Communion. Next, she took a spider, which had wrapped itself around another, and put them both in her mouth, swallowing them like pills.

The moth buzzed and writhed on her tongue until she bit through its furred body. Her soul soared with every new life she saved, her eyes pinned to the heavens obscured by the water damaged ceiling.

The bedbugs were the most difficult challenge. There were so many of them, heaving as a great singular mass in the corner of the box. She took a handful and shoved them into her mouth, tears running down her cheeks as she squashed them under her palate. She could feel their teeth latching onto her tongue and the soft skin inside her mouth. She took more handfuls and forced them into her mouth, holding her jaw shut as her body brought up the already-redeemed sinners from her stomach. She swallowed and swallowed until she thought her body would split in two.

The last handful, mashed into a clumpy paste, slid down her throat. It was over. She sat back, panting, a martyr's sweat and tears and the gooey remnants of sinners dripping down her chin.

As the sun finally fell below her apartment block, Marié relaxed in the knowledge that God had witnessed her piety. She had started small, but now, with her stomach full of salvation, she was ready for bigger things.



Russell Pirkle – The New King

For Our Thirtieth Anniversary, My Husband and I Conquer the World
Travis Flatt

Tonight, I set the river on fire.

This is step two of my husband's plan to conquer the world, which, it appears, I'm finishing alone.

I found it—"The Plan"—eight laminated pages in a red folder, waiting for me on the table in the basement, a surprise he'd have presented, I imagine, over dinner—I'd gone down to search for one of his sketches I'm fond of: me pushing our daughter on a tire swing almost forty years ago.

Landscapes. He paints country roads leading to sunsets, babbling brooks, doctor's office art—pastoral, idyllic. Why this banal dreck, when he dreams of doom, I don't feel like puzzling out; my husband's been unwell.

The first step of the plan was to steal barrels of flammable toxic waste from the plant where he worked as an engineer before retiring. He somehow already stole four barrels and hid them in the lawnmower shed—clever boy; I never go in there for fear of spiders.

I went to Lowe's yesterday, bought a trolley, and, by moonlight, hauled the barrels, one by one, through our backyard, a short way down Broad Street, through the Burger King parking lot and to the river.

Step three is to take me out to a romantic dinner and make love afterward. I go to Giovanni's Bistro, then achieve climax by myself, because he's currently unable to get me there himself.

I skip number four: get elected to the county commission, which sounds like a lot of work. I'm afraid I'm getting depressed.

I move on to five, emailing a computer virus to the president of an AI company. The email, of course, bounces back, and then I think of uploading it to Twitter, where the trolls can do the work for us.

I might be better at this.

I'm in the middle of number six when the police show up, pounding on my door. They say there's CCTV footage of me rolling the barrels down Broad at midnight. And, I killed *a lot* of fish. Awful as it sounds, I have a hard time feeling bad for fish, but don't say so. I only say, "Lawyer." I've watched enough TV to know this is what one does.

My daughter bails me out and drives me to her house. I say I need to go back to my house for my medication.

I need to free the killer bees.

My daughter says she'll get my pills for me. I give an extravagantly complex explanation of where and which medications until she acquiesces. She and her husband drive me home. As I pretend to search through my room for pills, my daughter says, "Mom, you're not taking this well. We're worried."

"Not taking what well?"

"Dad."

"What about him?"

She says, "Please say it."

I'm losing my window for step eight, the final step, which involves the full moon. It rises tonight. We've been having the "say it" argument for days now. I tell her what she wants to hear: "Your father is away."

"He's dead, mom. You understand that, right?"

I pretend to break down, wail to the point of vomiting, rush to the bathroom, and scramble out the window. My son-in-law, who's been standing back watching, is waiting for me in the yard, arms folded.

In his typical, patronizing manner, he ushers me back inside, says he thinks I should lie down. I know he'll try to convince my daughter I should be locked up somewhere.

"Is dead!" I shout at my daughter, fingers crossed behind my back. "There. Are you happy? Your father is dead."

Now my daughter breaks down in tears.

Tears because she feels guilty for making me say it, I hear her telling my son-in-law, when I go upstairs to lie down. And climb out the window and down the lattice, like my daughter used to, to sneak out and see boys—this is how she met my son-in-law. Some midnight party at the lake. She tells the story like it's decent.

I find the hatch in the backyard, covered by a rug of fake grass. I turn the wheel, quietly pull it open. I smell rot, rust. Inside the bunker, which is crudely hollowed out of the earth, worms and grubs and roots exposed, a slab of concrete for a floor, is the doomsday device. On the doomsday device is a plastic placard: Switch on to kill the moon!

The device's batteries are caked in a blue-green crust. It won't turn on.

Beside the doomsday device are two folding chairs and a bottle of my favorite champagne, floating in a bucket of dank water. In one chair is an envelope with "CONGRATULATIONS! WE WON!" written on it. I open it. He wrote...he *writes* endearingly earnest poetry.

But, inside the envelope are two cyanide capsules. I crush them beneath my heel.

Unlike my husband, I don't believe in the afterlife. Or hollow victories.

And, I don't intend on dying.

sorry to my fridge fruit
Anni Wang

i can smell my flesh fester.
crisp, charred skin roasting over the pit.
does the forgotten peach
(i remind you, in the cracked bottom drawer of the ice box)
ferment or rot? as if it has a choice - ha!

baba's spit catches in a city sewer fatberg.
a dividing cancer that grows and changes and b a l l o o n s
and metastasizes and swells and **sprouts** and **thickens** until it
s p l i n t e r s like a fucking railroad track.

seize the rusted cleaver and cut the pus out!
will baba let those charcoal tendrils choke me?
is he too blind to read the ominous herald
on its bristled arms?

baba still cuts me blood oranges and pits cherries,
after my first fender bender, and that failed physics exam,
during spats with my mother, when we traced pointed lines
with markers that skip in and out of ink,
like our half-truth insults and insincere injuries.

perhaps the strange fruit is not to be culled,
but identified, examined, and nurtured, its unique
and otherworldly nature whispered;
molding as a generational omen,
until its flesh is diced and served
on a blue and white porcelain plate,
laid tenderly in front of my bedroom door.

You're Meat
James Fleet Underwood

You can't outrun it or even climb a tree,
she says, in her lab coat and glasses,
peering at me from over the edge of her clipboard
like a prophet living in a cave.

What if I were on my bike,
pedaling furiously?

She crosses something off her checklist.

You're already in its mouth.
Teeth like LEGO minifigures.
No assorted colors.
Conservative estimates, 1,000 psi.

Its claws can rip apart a log.

Grip, pull, shake, crush, tear.

You're meat.

At night, there are cobras in my room.
Try a breathing exercise, I'm advised.
Life is a gift.

For who?

Deleted
Michelle Gean

A man stands at the bottom of my landing with a crumpled newspaper in his hands. He relinquishes the paper to me, and my eyes focus on the headline: "Mayor Jeremy Horn Killed in Car Wreck A Month Ago: What the Autopsy Revealed." I feel tears forming, but my throat constricts, trying to keep the emotion inside.

The man watches me, unmoving. His black button-up shirt hangs mid-thigh; his red shorts barely visible beneath the shirt hem. He's taller than the doorframe, and when he tilts his head to look at me, his black beard grazes his chest. He's wearing black sunglasses, and I can't see where his eyes wander.

"Where's the bag?" he asks, his voice slicing through the whirl of the ceiling fan in my house. A drop of sweat crawls down my leg as I nod and turn to go get it.

I walk down the hall, passing pictures of Jeremy. Yellow frames highlight our engagement photos; it was his favorite color. As I enter the living room, my eyes catch the cracked vase. Clumsy globs of glue hold it together, but the cracks are still obvious. A year into dating, Jeremy and I had come home from a brewery. Standing in the entryway, he grabbed my hips and turned me toward him. "I love you, Emily." His eyes were beer glazed; I stretched my body to reach my lips to his. When he let go of my hips, I stumbled backward, hitting the table. The vase wobbled then shattered across the floor.

The memory dies as I continue down the hall past the unwashed clothes that fill the laundry room and the dirty plates that sit in the sink. There is nothing more sobering than a life that keeps moving when it feels like it should've stopped.

I pause at the entryway of the last room. A large black suitcase waits in the corner. I lift the bag, carrying it back to the man at the door. The suitcase bangs against my calf with each step until finally I drop the suitcase at the man's feet.

He unzips it, "Get in."

I stare at the old bag on the ground. The hairs on my arms rise even though it's the middle of summer. *I need to do this.* My feet step in. Then suddenly, I fall as if a trap door opened inside the bag.

I hear the man's last words as I'm free falling in the suitcase's void, "*Be careful what you backspace. It changes you but also changes nothing at all.*"

My body convulses, and when I open my eyes, I'm floating. Despite the suitcase's size on my door step, I'm standing upright inside it surrounded by endless black space. There are no walls. No floor. No sound.

I bend down, trying to see what is beneath my feet. There's nothing. Above me, the man's bearded face floats, bodiless. His face powerful, embodying an authority he didn't quite have when he stood at my front door in his oversized clothes.

"Looks like you've arrived, Schnapps."

"Schnapps?" I mutter, cheeks burning. "My name is Emily, but yeah, grief can hit hard sometimes, I guess," I felt my chest tighten as I flexed my jaw.

"Yeah. You had a lot of empty schnapps bottles on top of the bar." He shrugs. "So. What can I do for you?"

I clear my throat. "You can take back moments, right? Make them not happen. So... life...um...can carry on how it's supposed to?"

"I sure can. I delete words meant to be unsaid. I'm the human backspace button."

"Yeah, that's...perfect. How do we start?"

A massive screen flickers beside the man's head. My face fills it. When I turn my head, the version of me on-screen mirrors my movement.

"Is that...now?"

"Yep. This is your Screen-O. Records everything. You just don't get access until you're here. The void is where we delete what we think we don't need. All we have to do is rewind to the moment you want to erase by pressing this button." He gestures to a slimy red rewind button. I press it. The screen glitches, scrubbing backward through my life. I gasp; there's a flash of me in the bathroom at work last week. "Uh...can we speed this up? I want to go to a moment that's about one month ago." I press the button harder. Then finally release it. There he is. Jeremy.

I watch myself speak on screen. I remember how much rage rattled inside of me in this moment, "Jeremy, you left the toilet seat up again, you didn't take the trash out this morning, like you said you would, your dishes are dirty in the sink, still, and I hate when you come home so late. I can't always clean up after you. I'm so tired, Jeremy. How many times do I have to ask?" My words hit him like a target at a firing range. I pause. The last words fall out of my mouth, my nose snots, and tears escape from my eyes. "I...I don't think I can do this anymore." Jeremy turns away without a word, grabs his keys, and slams the door. I hear the car engine start as I bury my face in my hands.

My throat tightens.

"So, was that the phrase you want to delete?" The bearded man asks.

"Yes. Right here. Those fifteen seconds." I point at the timestamp. "If you could just erase that..."

"You don't want Jeremy to know the truth?"

"I just don't want him to get into the car. I thought we would have more time to work these little things out. I *want* more time to work this out."

"Alright. Just sign here acknowledging that the deletion is irreversible. Admin stuff. Sometimes we take back our words hoping it changes something; often we find deleting our truth, changes us more than it changes anyone, or anything else."

I reach to sign on the line with my finger as the man rambles on about past deletions and regrets. I draw a squiggle that resembles the first few letters of my name.

As soon as my finger stops, my body jolts and the black void fades.

I'm in my bed, buried under the covers. I hear pounding on the front door, punctuating a Johnny Cash song that echoes through the house. *Jeremy's favorite*. The walls around me are familiar. I don't know how much time has passed since I met the man in the void. I swing my legs off the side of the bed and shuffle down the hallway toward the knock. As I reach for the handle, I realize I can't grab it. My right hand is missing—it's pixelated, like I'm being deleted, like I'm losing myself.

My lungs panic, trying to pull in air. Remembering I have another hand, I scramble to open the door as if the answer stands behind it.

No one is there.

I look down. My right hand flickering, useless. There's a newspaper by the door. I pick it up: "Mayor Jeremy Horn Committed Suicide One Month Ago: Here's What the Autopsy Reveals." Johnny Cash croons in the background, "If I could start again/ a million miles away/ I would keep myself/ I would find a way."

The Restaurant Paintings
Forrester Finchum

I was on one of my biannual trips for business, this time driving for miles on a two-lane road in the Midwest with nothing but cornfields to be seen on either side. Another week of meetings with the higher-ups at the company awaited, meetings to discuss future sales and our declining revenue. After passing rundown, dilapidated barns and gas stations that were no longer operational, I soon found myself in the town of Delafield, a town that seemed to appear out of nowhere and without any road signs indicating its presence. It was about 6:30 p.m. and I decided to stop for dinner at a local restaurant that boasted of “old-fashioned, homestyle cooking.” An older woman greeted me when I entered and led me to one of the empty tables against the wall. In fact, there were only a few other patrons in this establishment. These customers, who were no doubt residents of Delafield, suddenly put down their silverware as I was following the hostess to the table, staring at me with a look of barely concealed suspicion and whispering among themselves as I passed by. As soon as I was seated, my attention was immediately drawn to the strange and disturbing portraits that decorated the walls, ghoulish images that were in such contrast to this little unassuming restaurant that billed itself as “family owned and operated.” These bleak paintings, which were hung all around the dining area, depicted the same hideous scene. There was a pile of bloodied, contorted bodies, an undignified mass of mangled corpses that were stacked several feet high. Floating directly above these tightly compressed cadavers and faintly glowing in the night sky, there was some monstrous creature that seemed to spring from the darkest of imaginations. This entity was an invidious amalgamation of eyes and appendages, numerous eyes from a variety of species and a web of arms and legs. Upon closer inspection, I could see many tentacles sprouting from this revolting being, a blob of coalescing eyes and extremities that hovered over a tower of dead bodies as if pleased by a bountiful offering. As I began scanning the menu, I could overhear the conversation at one of the nearby tables. A bald man who appeared to be in his late forties was talking to a woman with straggly brown hair who was roughly the same age. I could see them subtly motioning in my direction, then pointing feverishly at one of the paintings.

“We all know it was a bad harvest last year,” the man said in an unfriendly, almost accusatory tone.

“There just wasn’t enough,” the woman replied softly. “How do we keep up with his growing appetite? He used to be satisfied with so much less when we were children.”

“Times have changed,” the man said sternly. “We cannot take any chances with this year’s harvest. By the looks of things, it seems we have not got enough, not enough for the amount he demands these days.”

I tried to tune out this odd dialogue, the two of them becoming more agitated and peering over their shoulders at me every few seconds. The other diners were beginning to gesture at me, staring at me like an object of intense desire. I pretended to be oblivious, flipping through the pages of the laminated menu as if I couldn’t come to a decision on what to order. By this time my appetite was gone, replaced by an upwelling of nausea and sickness in my stomach. Even the hostess was now staring at me, looking at me with a sorrowful expression as a larger man with a graying beard stood by her side. The man with the graying beard, who I surmised was the manager of this restaurant, was pointing a stubby finger in my direction. I began to feel the strongest paranoia, my intuition telling me to flee this place and those lurid, inescapable

paintings that were strewn all over the walls. I leapt abruptly from my seat and paced toward the exit, avoiding all eye contact with those frightful residents of Delafield who I could hear mumbling nervously behind me. The manager was trying desperately to draw my attention, but I kept my head down. When I finally approached the entrance, I nodded at him and the hostess, forcing a smile that obscured my trepidation. I thanked them as I casually pushed open the doors, suppressing the anxiety that could not subside as long as I remained inside this suffocating restaurant and was encircled by the disconcerting paintings of that horrendous being conjured from untold nightmares and those almost pyramidal piles of twisting, mutilated corpses lying in fields of desiccated corn stalks. As I unlocked my car door and slid into the driver's seat, a small crowd had gathered outside. They stood ominously in front of the restaurant, their faces clearly distraught and confused as to what they should be doing as I hastily started my car and drove away. From my rearview mirror I could see some of them holding knives. The manager was shouting at the others who had assembled in the parking lot, angrily gesticulating toward my car and pointing to the sky. I could not make out his words, but I no longer cared to know. My car was soon speeding down the two-lane road. I was driving faster than I can ever remember and even the sound of police sirens would not compel me to put my foot on the brakes. I would not slow down until I was miles away from this psychotic town. If the abnormal behavior and chatter were not reason enough to never set foot in Delafield again, those paintings alone should certainly convince any outsiders to take an alternate route. For these paintings each bore a title, a simple title that nevertheless lingers in my mind to this day: "The Successful Harvest."

If You Gave Karl Marx a Second Chance at Life

H.E. Shippas

In the modern world, the art of necromancy is dead. Practicing the art of undead animation was so blasphemous that the Catholic church eliminated 99% of the world's population of necromancers before the turn of the eighteenth century. By the time the world wide web existed, working with dead bodies became almost impossible and most summoning souls did not want to return to the mortal plane with the condition that it was in. The modern world was down to its final necromancer.

"Jason doesn't understand that the underlying message Magical Girl Popular portrays would align Japan towards a more anti-capitalist state rather than a full authoritarian regime," the last necromancer in the world rambled to his newest summon.

Karl Marx nodded as the necromancer continued. "And while I understand that Jason claims to have a 'degree' in 'political science', I've watched enough videos and read enough of your works to know you almost as well as I knew my own mother. Well, I didn't know my mother that well, but I knew her enough to exsanguinate her correctly, you know what I mean?"

The necromancer laughed at his own joke while Marx continued to nod. During the odd man's ramblings, Marx took stock in his situation. He found himself from the bliss of nothing back in the world of the living, trapped within a small room that Marx took to be the odd man's living quarters. The man spoke English but Marx couldn't place the accent. He kept talking about someone called Ann E. May? He was talking so fast that Marx gave up on the conversation. The moment Marx woke up, the odd man spoke in hysterics, like a menstruating woman during a mood if Marx had to compare it.

Instead, Marx focused on where he was: a small room with dim lighting, surrounded by posters made by artists who took many liberties in drawing. Marx's body was not his own as he felt his muscles were denser and his torso taller with a complete lack of hair on the entirety of his body. Marx was as naked as the day he was born, but bigger. Bigger than the rambling man in front of him.

Without breaking in his nodding, Marx noticed the dagger on the man's desk, next to his lit-up picture box of three hand-drawn women wearing outfits in colors Marx didn't know existed in fashion. The knife was coated in blood; the man did mention something about that. The man gesticulated wildly, the knife unguarded, only a body away.

"So that's why I argued that if you watched both series, you would agree Magical Girl Popular is the superior anime to Thunder Squad Trio. What do you think?"

Marx snapped his eyes back to the necromancer. Marx was surprised the rambling man stopped to take any sort of pause. "Oh, um, me?" Marx stalled, still coming to terms with being alive again.

"Yeah, I was thinking we could binge-watch both series, obviously Thunder Squad Trio first, start the bar low, then--"

Marx pushed the man over and grabbed the knife. Before the necromancer could protest, Marx plunged the dagger into the man's abdomen and pushed upwards towards his heart. With every rib, Marx pushed forward, the cracking of bones overcoming the squelching of guts and tearing of tissue. The necromancer gasped, struggling to push off the straddling Karl Marx. Unfortunately, in the age of the internet, the necromancer put more of his time towards

memorizing the blood types of foreign cartoon characters rather than learning any defence spells, leaving him vulnerable in Marx's mutiny.

With a final push, the last necromancer passed. Marx stood over the body, inspecting his work. A chuckle escaped his throat as he dropped the knife to the floor and thought about what he had done. In his over six decades of life, Marx had never felt the need to kill a human, but it felt necessary. He felt the man had done something wrong, or was about to? Marx couldn't place it.

Before Karl Marx could think about what to do with his next life, he collapsed. His soul returned to the blissful nothing as his link to the living world was severed and the art of necromancy finally died.



Charles Corriher - Don't Worry About the Government, Boston, MA 2019

Bad Dream Box
Christopher Seufert

I learned death young,
Kind of from a sunny porch step
And kind of from a humming fan, seen upwards,
With a doctor's office lollipop.
Learned it then really in a very bad way from my grandfather's
shoebox watch.

It ticked like a personal warning
From that day forward
Like a distant monster set into motion
From an unused wall light switch,
And we just can't stop it

It doesn't feel bad really, like a quarter in the throat,
At its worst, or like the last mouthful of soup,
Like a kiss even you had no idea would be the last.

My mother said
"don't stare too long, it's not really her"
so I watched dust
choose the sun in the air

I have carried friends since then
in clean shirts
in borrowed shoes
through the wet grass

I have heard grief
Call a name
from a clipboard in the back row
with a cracked mouth like a mistaken bingo number.

My great aunt's casket wasn't cherry wood to me
it was a bad dream box
full of shoes that never walk
and teeth that never bite
Things that just don't do, ever.

Still, somebody laughs
Outside at the speech
Given by a niece with a hat
and a sparrow took off

like it just had late rent to pay

I used to think
the end would be great great thunder,
Great thunder,

But it is so much smaller really
than a breath held too long
smaller than a lie
No one discovers.
The one you tell your own hands even,

Writing appointments down.
It's quite inconceivable that we ever even allow it,
And yet,
every dawn
I still open my eyes
like a door with a paper prayer tacked to it
Or a Chinese fortune knock -knock joke.

Vanitas
Lize du Toit

Oz

for months I live inside a Hans Holbein;
I sit nightly for a low-lidded, candle-lit portrait
without smile, and adorned
in the emblems of decay and original sin,
all the lovely dead things arranged:
flowers, hares and pheasant, skulls
and The Book;
all the vanities ordered just so,
for dead things do not move.
On a wall they contemplate my hands, my face,
they remind me that I must die:
Penitent Magdalen –
cultured, inanimate, still still-life.
How will I ascend at my departure?
Would your children meditate
how short the wick inside the wax
that runs in black and down red dahlia blooms
and wilting carnations like virgins deflowered?
How infinitely demanding the idling
to shade the holographic epitaph:
stillborn still.

Best Go 'Round
Blaire Bayliss

'Ere. Take a swig of 'shine. Gon' need it if you're goin' thatta way.

'Ya can't get there, from here, 'ya know. Swamp'll block your path. Don't want to be goin' there. Gators 've been hungry, since the last of them boy scouts went missin', n'sides, I saw it boil'n black last night under that full moon we got. Best go 'round.

Yah, I know 'ya can't see it. Won't reveal itself to outsiders. Not till you've dreamt of it fillin' your lungs, 'n closin' in 'round your eyes, till the feelin' of drownin' wakes 'ya up but 'ya find that darkness ain't left 'ya.

Iffin 'ya go down that path? You're gonna start noticin' that the lightnin' bugs an' skeeters won't follow 'ya. And sooner or later you're gonna find yourself thinkin', ain't I been this way before? But 'ya ain't. It's the swamp that's remembered 'ya. And if 'ya turn back, the lights that led 'ya down won't turn with 'ya. 'N by the time them cypress start showin' their knees, you're gon' feel that feelin' in your bones, like a banjo string pluckin' itself free.

It's a hell of a thing, 'ya know, to bargain a soul you're not sure 'ya still got, while your mind's leakin' out your boots, 'n the only thing 'ya can hear is a voice tellin' 'ya it'll be worth it to get to a home it won't letcha remember.

'Ya don't want to know what it's like to be on the losin' side of that deal.

Can't tell 'ya more than that. Swamp done sealed my tongue, night I last tried fishin'n those parts. Caught som'n I ain't had no right to see. Soon's I saw it, I let it right go, like it was burnin' my hand. 'N it let me leave. But now, see, I can't say shit 'bout what I saw out there, 'n ever I try, swamp starts speakin' for me.

Best go 'round.

Now if I was you, I'd head down that there yonder path, towards 'ol Lady Willow's place, just past the flats where the 'ol church buildin' used to be. Ain't too bad out thatta way. Just try'n hold your breath iffing 'ya start smellin' ash, 'n plug up your ears if 'ya hear choir music or anything that sounds like an organ, 'n 'ya should be alright.

And if ya see a preacher, best start sayin' your prayers, so's the lord finds 'ya among 'is flock. Preacher man can't touch the ones who still stand'n the light.

Oh, 'n don't eat or drink anythin' till 'ya get past them yonder hills. Marsh'll hold 'ya to it.

...What 'shine?

Aw, shit, son, I'm awful sorry. Slipped my mind, must've.

'Welp, might as well go either way now, I s'pose. Won't matter anyhow.

I'll be seein' 'ya.

Just a Spoonful of Tolstoy Helps the Pelican Go Down
Dane Rook

Chandler was anxious: deck-handing on an illegal crab boat seemed about as sensible as flavored electrical fencing. But he was broke, and needed to pay rent on his writer's studio. He was man enough to admit that poaching crustaceans might pay better than the centaur romance novellas he'd been self-publishing. So, he agreed to go crab nabbing – although he fretted about how rough his roughneck crewmates might be.

At 5AM, he arrived dockside. On the phone, the captain had said, 'Be early, Chandelier. Early birds don't catch flukeworms.' Chandler still didn't know what that meant.

Seventy-some minutes later, he located his intended vessel: the *Lilith*. He was greeted by an old breadcrust, surnamed Bishop, who was barnacled everywhere by volcanic-looking moles. 'Bish' sported an eyepatch, which reminded Chandler of Polyphemus, in the *Odyssey*, which in turn reminded him how the nymph Calypso had sworn an oath, promising Odysseus could safely board her raft. The only oaths Chandler received were Bish's encouragements to hurry up, which sounded like things Odysseus himself might've said, right after the witch Circe transformed his crew into hogs.

The Lilith departed at dawn, sneaking past the harbormaster, into a scoopable fog. She scudded alongside the jetty: a long arc of boulders that ramparted Pillar Point Harbor, and was also used as a latrine by the resident pelican colony, who swaggered atop it like some drunk and idle navy. They grunted at the Lilith as it passed, while Chandler cowered between stacks of crab traps, gagging from the guano-reek of those anvil-headed sea turkeys.

The Lilith rounded the jetty, and the fog vanished. The headland of Pillar Point was now visible, and on its peak was a prim little telemetry garden, tended by the Air Force, and the most impressive bloom in that entire array resembled a colossal golf ball. That great white orb leered down at Chandler.

Call me Ishmael.

He hadn't meant to say it aloud.

Bish's laughing fit sounded like somebody was brooming a corrugated tin roof. When he recovered, he hacked a chowder-colored-something over the rail, then squared to Chandler.

'All happy crab boats are alike.' Bish permitted himself a smirk, or perhaps a transient facial palsy. 'Each crabby crab boat...'

Chandler was gob smacked by Bish's adaptation of *Anna Karenina*, and surprised that Bish had read Tolstoy at all – or maybe his choice of words was just coincidence, in the same way that a zillion monkeys on thwapping away on typewriters will eventually rewrite the glories of Shakespeare. Regardless, Chandler was curious about the Lilith's prospects for happiness, so he eagerly waited for Bish to continue. But Bish's attention had already migrated to cracking open a tin of Skoal.

In the next minutes, the early-morning sunlight became strong and honeylike. Chandler rolled his face skyward, and it was anointed by an orbiting seagull.

Bish died laughing.

The captain said they'd put it to a vote. And at first, Chandler thought he'd vote against using Bish's corpse for crab bait. But then he asked himself: *What would Hemingway do?*

Telephone Call at 3AM
J. Ryberg

A telegram from
beyond the grave / a tele-
phone call at 3AM /
Morse code pinging out from the
vast network of the
world's worn out plumbing / postcards
from places that no
longer exist / secret trans-
missions from the isle
of lost souls coming in on
the far end of the
AM dial, one night, when
the moon is just right /
an obituary for
a man who doesn't
know he's dead / front-page, headline
news from the future /
protest or proclamation
taped to the back of
a statue of some patron
saint of something or
other / a footnote to a
secret history /
the caption beneath The Big
Picture / a random
snippet of useless info
found in a fortune
cookie or ancient tome of
forbidden knowledge
found at a rummage sale / the
opening lines to
a farewell address / the next
to last line of an
article of bad faith / the
parting shot to an
unfaithful lover / a wire-

tap transcript to a
late-night collect call from God,
something about the
large print which giveth and the
small print which taketh away.

The Liturgy of the Mice
Dimitar Dakovski

The door of Professor Gregory Forecastle's laboratory was ajar and from within came the sound of church music. I knocked lightly and stepped inside. The chant was neither in English nor in Latin, but perhaps in some Slavic language.

The lab was in disarray (nothing unusual for the old Englishman) but of a kind I had not expected: books were piled across the tables – I recognized the King James Bible, along with several other editions I assumed to be Eastern Orthodox. Nearby lay an open Quran, held unfolded by another volume bearing an image of the Buddha on its cover.

The music changed abruptly and the melodic call of an Islamic muezzin rang out. What was going on here?

"Ah, Bishop, welcome, do come in." The professor's bearded face emerged from behind an oscilloscope.

"Professor Forecastle, I'll be honest, I'm puzzled by what I'm seeing, and especially by what I'm *hearing*, in your laboratory. I thought you were engaged in serious physics, not theology."

"And you are quite right, Doctor. That is precisely why I invited you here today."

"Then please explain what religious music and sacred texts have to do with your expertise in wave physics."

I said that more sharply than I intended but I was already beginning to fear that the eight-hour flight from Boston had been in vain.

"Of course. It all began last year with this..." Forecastle handed me a newspaper folded in half: an April 1967 issue of *The Times*. The front-page headline read: "Man in Critical Condition Fully Healed After Liturgy: Medical Mystery or the Power of Faith?"

"I had heard of similar cases before," the professor continued, "but this particular headline made me wonder – had anyone ever conducted a rigorous study of the matter? And though I suspected I might be heading down a blind alley, I decided at least to try. I measured and analyzed: frequencies and harmonics of religious music across cultures, the chemical composition of incense and myrrh, even the light spectrum of candle flames. After several months of work, I managed to synthesize the entire body of raw experimental data into a single elegant equation..."

"What are you suggesting?" I interrupted. "That you've discovered an equation of religion? That you want to reproduce, here in your laboratory, the effects of faith and the supernatural? And you called me here to assist with this, this... unorthodox idea?"

"Oh no, my dear Doctor Bishop, that I accomplished half a year ago. We're already in the testing phase." He waved his hand and led me toward a niche in the lab, where under a dim yellowish light stood a cage with three mice. From a nearby speaker came a dull rumble, almost imperceptible to the human ear. The mice appeared in excellent health, their fur shiny. What struck me, however, was that two of them had pressed their snouts to the ground, covering their noses with trembling forepaws. The third stood frozen, staring into the yellow glow.

"The sensory therapy I developed shows promising results, comparable to some of the stronger medications available. That being said, what I called you here for, Doctor, is your expertise."

The professor smiled broadly, almost manically.

“Professor Forecastle, you know perfectly well what my expertise is.” I paused to catch my breath; this was beginning to feel like some absurd joke. “Even if I were to entertain the idea, just for a moment, that you’ve managed to quantify religious rituals, what in God’s name does this have to do with *antimatter*?”

Instead of answering, he walked over to one of the blackboards and began scribbling feverishly. Soon an equation appeared in his angular handwriting.

“Take a look here, Doctor Bishop.” He underlined two variables: f and λ . “As you would expect, we easily derive frequency and wavelength, with the result remaining positive – that is precisely what I used for the sensory therapy. But,” Forecastle continued enthusiastically, “the result could also be negative. At a first glance, this makes no sense; such a value has no manifestation in the real world and should be dismissed as a mathematical curiosity. But just before doing just that, I thought of you, Doctor, and your breakthroughs in the field of antimatter.”

I looked at the equation again. It took me a few seconds to process it, and then I nodded. Gregory Forecastle was right.

“Let’s get to work, Professor.”

#

Several hours later, the instruments were calibrated. We aimed the ultra-high-frequency laser at a solitary mouse in a separate cage. A multitude of sensors would capture even the slightest changes in its condition during the test, the effects of which we could not even begin to predict. We put on protective goggles; the professor extended his hand and pulled the lever that activated the entire system.

From the speakers came a crackling sound, at the threshold of perception. The stream of waves emitted by the laser lay far beyond human senses.

What followed happened too quickly to be adequately described. One moment the mouse stood calmly; the next, it simply vanished, within a microsecond. Astonishment spread across our faces. A blink of an eye later, a whistling began, as if the air around us were escaping under pressure. The other two mice squealed piercingly and began throwing themselves against their cage, biting the bars and clawing frantically.

“Stop the experiment!” I shouted at Forecastle.

He shut down the laser immediately, but the whistling and squealing did not cease. Then total darkness fell. Instinctively, I raised my head: to my surprise, I could still see the lamps, but their light did not spread, as if it were being swallowed by something... That was when I realized what was happening and what we had done.

“Run, Professor! We must evacuate immediately!” I yelled in the darkness.

“Do you know what’s happening, Bishop?” I heard Forecastle asking, a note of terror in his voice.

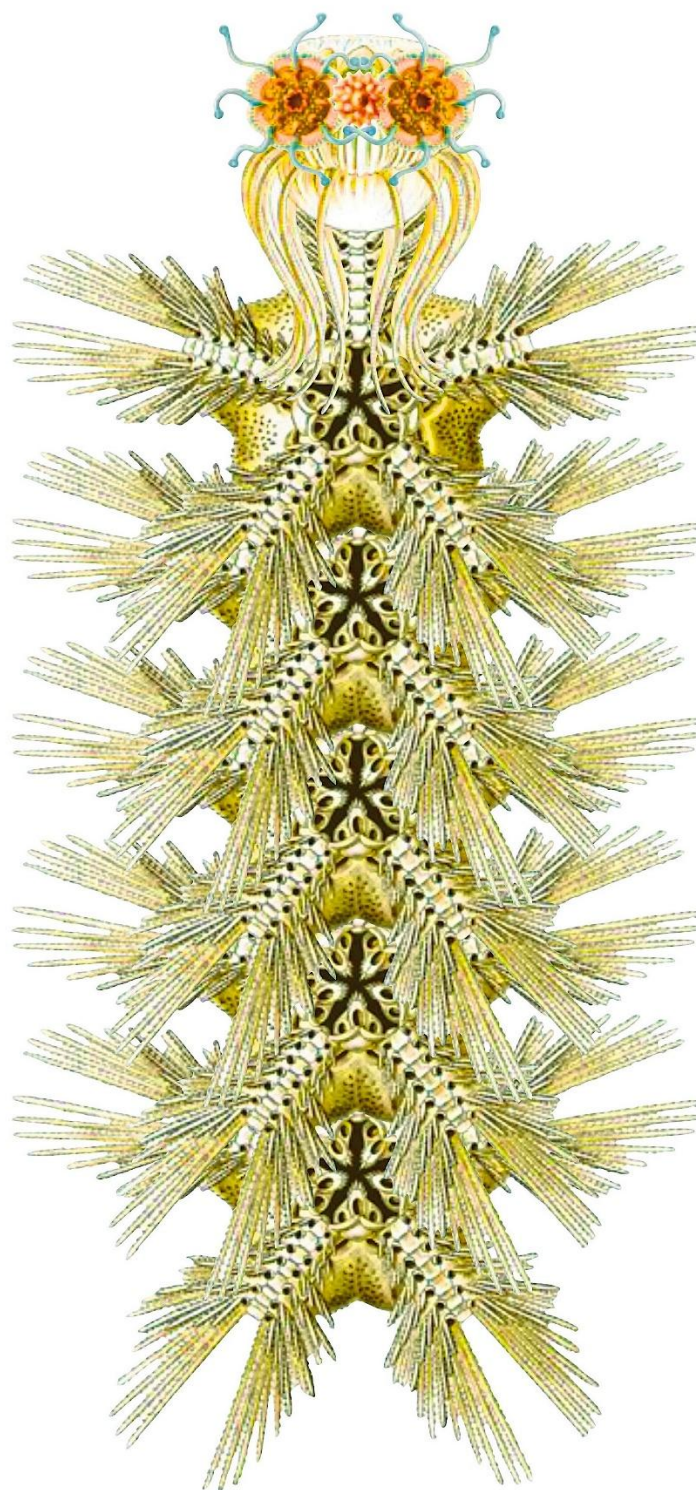
“A singularity! There’s no time to explain.”

I began running toward the exit, colliding with various objects as paper and dust swirled around me. Religious music echoed loudly. At last, groping blindly, I managed to open the door and stumble into the corridor outside, where the lights still shone normally. The professor followed seconds later and slammed the door shut behind us.

#

Two months after the incident, the research complex in Manchester was sealed off and placed under military guard. The miniature black hole in the lab was relatively safe, as it had not yet reached critical mass. There was, however, something perhaps even more disturbing – hordes

of mice and rats flowed toward the laboratory day and night, coming from every corner of Britain. They managed to find gaps overlooked by the military and to squeeze their way into the gloomy hall strewn with shattered instruments and sacred books, until at last they reached the point they yearned for – the portal to their oblivion.



Bill Wolak - The Spark's Mysterious Perfume

When Killing a Secret is Prelude to Shenanigans
John Dorroh

My lover has three nipples and told me to keep it to myself. But occasionally I leak. I think it's something to not think about. Odd? Of course it is. So is the fact that people who live by railroad tracks grow so accustomed to the sound of the passing trains that they filter it out of their heads.

Once I told my friend Brenda about the extra nipple. We'd been out for a few drinks, which turned out to be vodka martinis, slightly dirty with extra olives, and our tongues were well-lubed. She took it well, smiling a bit and began bobbing her head back and forth like a dashboard ornament. *Are you okay?* I asked. *Oh, sure. Sorry...I had a much-too-clear mental image...sorry.* After that, our friendship solidified in a casual way. Another time I slipped it to Terry that my partner had a third nipple. He was intrigued and invited me to play a game of pool. He bought me two Mich Ultras and offered to buy a third, but I know my limits when I'm out in public and want to remain incognito. My limited drinks are usually accompanied by some kind of food – a half-dozen teriyaki wings, or a large house salad, or grilled tuna chunks with wasabi. When he asked if I had any exotic images to share, I cut it off right then and there. No more beer, no more wings, no more admissions of a third nipple. Quiet on the set. This is the new scene: as far away from a golf course or an internment camp as possible, no evidence of quicksand, no wild killer monkeys on the rampage. Normal sunset, heavy on the peach. A sad fog is winding through the valley, spreading like a colossal Turkish shawl being wrapped around the shoulders of the hill where the rich people live. In this scene there are no third nipples and therefore no friends to tell about third nipples. It's like it never existed. Like it's completely gone with no evidence whatsoever that it was ever there.

Out Like a Candlestick
Keely O'Brien

I went out like a candlestick
it was subtle
it was instant

in the wind
I drowned surreptitiously
out like the candle's wick

it was ominous
in secrecy
poetic musing
ignored, backs turned

while facing me
a dead-on stare
empty
ignored, bridge burned

the light left
flaming desire
empty eyes
extinguished fire

drowning
consumed by the depth
thrashing in the waves
instant

I went out like a candlestick
wavering, flickering flame
oxygen, small breath
scream out

was I there at all?
abandoned in trauma's waves
I drowned lonely

out like candle's wick

I'm here

this is my metaphor

strike the match

a candle can be relit...

Death Waits at the Gate
Leigh-Anne Burley

Death waits at the gate. Admission is free, and he's not picky. It's tedious work and downright dull. After centuries pass, faces blur, but disasters and famines speed up the process.

Longing to take a break, Death talks to his cousins about filling in. Disaster, Disease, and Decay say in unison,

"Sorry, but only you can do this job."

"Well, at least bring takeout to the gate."

"Although our schedules are packed, we can manage that."

"If you bring me dead meat, I'll kick your butts."

Death orders a fresh salad with fruit and a banana strawberry smoothie. Disaster goes the extra mile with a plate of warm chocolate cookies. Disease shows up with hot black coffee on winter mornings, while decay brings apple pie and hot cocoa in the evenings. Death smiles and says,

"Nice touch, boys."

"Keep up the good work," the three D's say. "We depend on you to make our efforts worthwhile."

Death is restless from sitting at the gate for eons and says, "I want to go on a cruise and see the world. What do you say, boys? Just a short trip. I promise I will be back in a jiffy."

The cousins shake their heads in unison and say, "Only Death can be Death."

Death sits idly by his gate, dreaming of sailing to exotic ports. If you approach Death lounging at his post, don't get the idea that he isn't interested, and you can turn around because that road vanishes behind you.

The sign above the gate, printed in big bold black letters, states: **NEGOTIATIONS NOT POSSIBLE. RETURN TICKETS ARE ABSURD!**

Voice Recognition Test (Las Vegas, The Mormons, And Howard Hughes)
John Harrison

Welcome to Las Vegas, the borrowed money city, crumbling like a pillar of salt. A synchronised key designed to fit a failing lock. Its hostile terrain smothered by a sleek illusion: props emerge; transform and define, with clarity unimpeded, like a cabinet of artifacts, windowless and sealed. The physics of its equilibrium is arranged in lustrous codes, slowly stripped of resonance and mystery, as quarks and neutrons pirouette in an electrified field of angry dream psalms - their base drone breathes in a spectrum of luminous vapours, glowing like an ember cupped in the hands of an invisible god. Its false paths spool like tape; the walls of sound cling like syrup.

Felons, in a stone-eyed search for prey, fusing like spores to the side alleys with the stillness of basking butterflies. Their restless guns, with barrels contracting like black holes bolted to a canopy of breathing stars, record the exact number of murders per square inch. Traffic channels through the shafts of neon: graphs manifesting synthesised treasure in concise formulations of insect scribble. Tourists scroll through endless mazes of etched concrete, boiled pink, swarming like clouds of gas in a meticulous tableau of warm plasma, where the least curious perspire the most, splashed back against their cooling shadows, as sodium beats out the black, burning holes into the night.

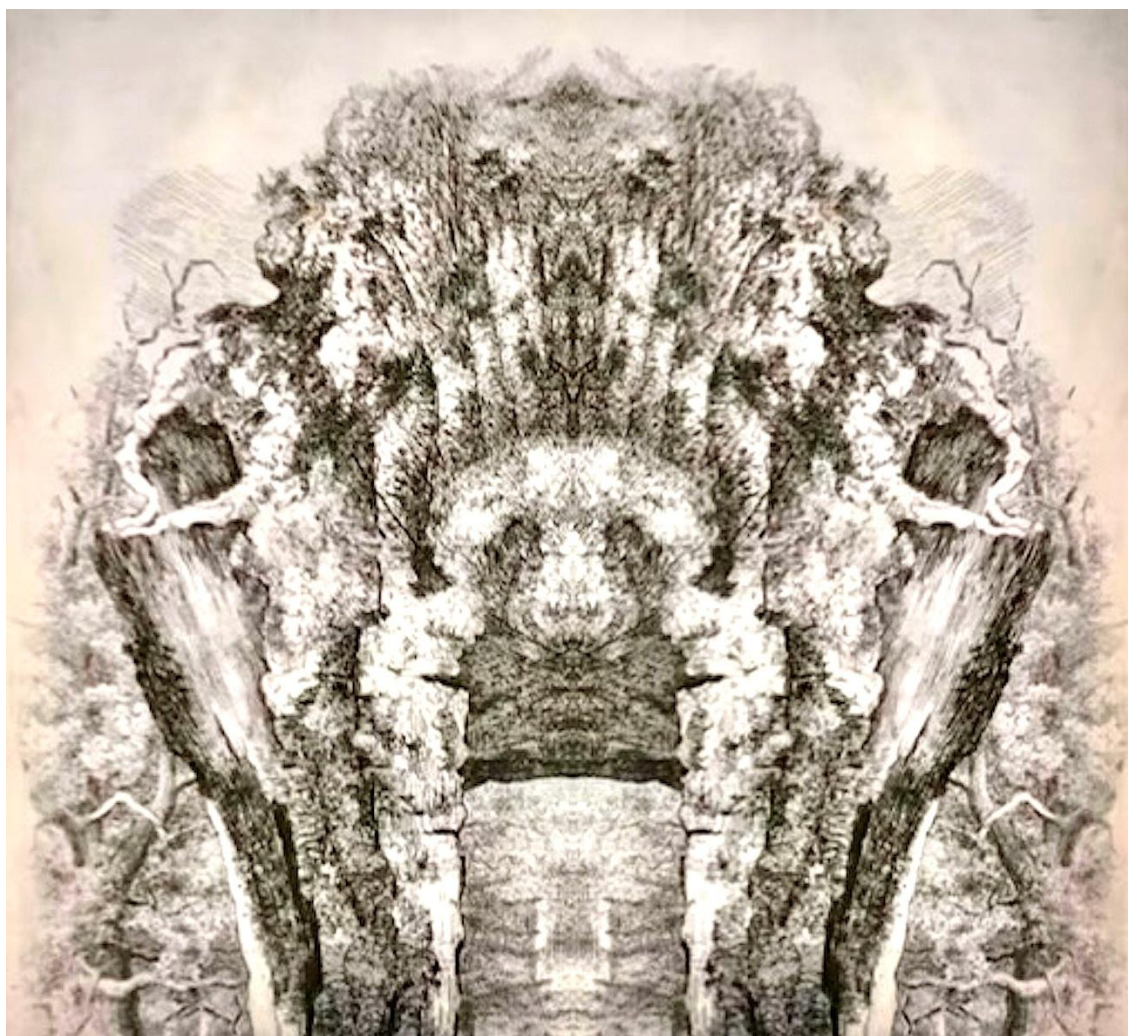
Observing it all with practised detachment: Howard Hughes, the great illusionist-fathomless and mercurial - saddened with the luggage of archetype; archived to the easy chair. Using his familiarity with scale, he seeks solace in the linear progress along closed horizons; comforted by the soothing placebo of chemical detachment; eyes knitted to terrestrial ghost fodder. His chromosomes, the blunted tools of pre-birth vectors, fizzing with the slow ionisation of nerve-endings like a singular creature in the thralls of metamorphosis. Stained pink, his exterior pigments diffuse like petal gradients, dispersing to an unworldly place. His sublimated shell, entropic and sexless, bolted to an opaque Nevada tower: its masonry striates – secret and transformative – roots lengthening into a carpet of still chambers, their geometry tethered to the alien warmth of plague pit energies.

Other-controlled by a chain of sentinels under contract, shimmering with greed and soft scriptural overtones that shine, fever-bright, as they pick at the Sunday pamphlets – spoiled parables purified like a ghost thought remembered through wraiths. Textbook puritans, stiff with guilt; pale faces absorbing dark synthetics. These cautious disciples wait for the rational to reconnect with a crucifix and a contract. The sharklike forces of a sterile audience, burying their annihilating fists into his affairs with an unknown velocity; an ellipse of pink hands, merged in prayer. Sermons; litanies and the algebraic calculations in the workings of it – *his communion contained in the details of a forged will, like the hieroglyphs of a weightless hymnbook* – the slow plan of dexterous butchery: scrubbing the meat off him in delicate layers, like rice paper.

The act of seeing is a cage – as heavy as a Sunday suit - a preserved arc of myths; sublime; infinite and hermetic - expurgated by a looped vortex of soft scoop and celluloid: its negative print etched into the skull of tectonic plates. The brain, an emulsion of poisonous urges; a roman candle of ferocity fanned by the models of suspicion; a seed trapped in a bone vessel, incubated by the metaphors of a paranoid language. Sublime dramas enacted with conjecture, prophetic and manifold, in a fusion of impulse motors. The doubtful corneas, melted by ghost acids, oscillate with prescribed brilliance and the encroaching relics of opposition: blank cyphers to be scrutinised

with a forensic eye. The notation of obsessive impulse; the totemic stagger from suspension to event, and the torment of purification by the machines of insanity whose misaligned gears bite with purpose in an endless cycle of warm oxygen and cold matter monologues.

A tapestry of scrabbling insects in the depths of his treacherous blood; the random fluctuations of compound chemistry; open sores and connective tissues oozing like mercury pulled through an ever-widening crack. A deathbed witness with divinity bleeding out and hands unmade with acquired stigmata, as the heavens close in like a black velvet bible. The heart, corroded to static in a discord of impenetrable stutters - the effect almost magical - as spoors bloom and fluids become vapours under the assumed delicacy of death. The bird-eyed surveyors of detachment, making a sequence of incisions under the polythene: looking for signs of fire in the cooling momentum. A concise opera of glacial monologues charting the distilled murk of entropy and natural conspiracies. The erratic trellis of blood; the slow menace of the spilled brain – sculpting the shape of fear into a halo – forming the illusion of constructed mythology: the transformer transformed by the details of decay.



Bill Wolak - Just When the Kiss Becomes Insatiable

Waxrabbit
Danielle McMahon

red welts in the evergreen

a cattail bounces in the yewberrybush
white bedsheets spinning slowly

on an umbrella clothesline
gartersnake slinks in the tall breezygrass

brownrabbit panting in the hardwhitesun
waxen skin exposing an aperture to

a panicked heart pulsing webs
of red beneath its pearly surface

its darkeye ever widening

After The Flood
Charlotte Iannone

The wave took everything
just as the dreams had said.
It hungered
for every fiber of the living,
and took it cleanly.

Afterwards I wandered through the living rooms
of mutilated homes
in search of skin and hair and broken glass
and found none,
imagining your mornings
spent dwelling on the fog haze
in the tallgrass, the mist
between the spires of cattail.
Your mornings of dew,
thick with your lost thoughts.

I will hold these in my fist
and refuse them their leave.
Bones and dirt we may be,
but of your soul, I have lock and key.

Reveal to me now
how you dreamed at night

and how, so shy, you linger over my shoulder in your shifts,
and how, beneath the surface of the water,
that secretive sheen, your life lies, dwindling,
and how, once, when caught in a downpour,
my love admitted that he suffered the same dreams in childhood.
The wave budded on the horizon, he told me,
crawling towards him across a wide plane of sand
and matted grass, prepared to devour,
and he could not move.

It was as if he had peeked inside my mind.

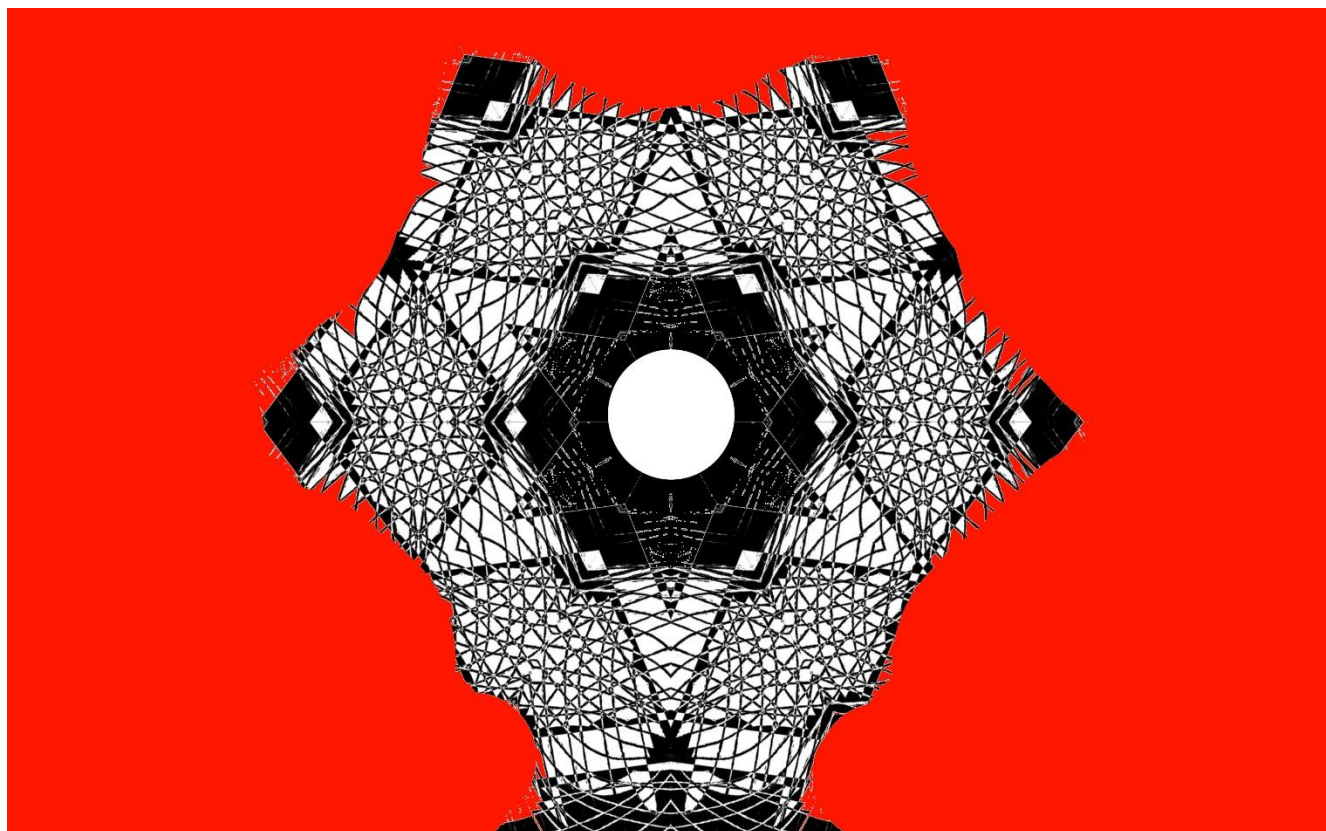
I believed that he was lying to me.

Taking Advice
Benjamin Macnair

I took the road less travelled,
and I got completely lost.
Not even Google maps could help me.
Thanks a lot, Robert Frost.

Disciples

He borrows his ideas with good taste,
but he is not a writer,
he only knows how to cut and paste.
He is told that he is poetry's Harry Styles,
but he is to poetry what Chris Moyles is to comedy.
He is all bluster, and posture,
and we see that, because we are not his disciples.
So, he gathers fans on Facebook,
and in the same way that most boy-band members
never fall in love with music,
he never falls in love with language,
because if he did, he would stop,
and we see that, because we are not his disciples.
So, his disciples sit, and wait,
like fans at a Justin Bieber concert,
whilst those of us who know the difference,
are parents at a Justin Bieber concert,
wanting the money and time that we have wasted back,
because we are not his disciples.



Edward Michael Supranowicz – Stark Reality

Five Methods to Kill Yourself, Notes Toward a Sixth
Ashley Mangtani

My father managed it on the first attempt. Competent, the family said at the wake, thorough. I agreed with thorough. I have his hairline, his handwriting, the same low pressure at the morning piss.

He left the rope hanging in the garage, and the rest of us have spent twenty-seven years living inside the knot. I am thirty-nine. He was forty.

Method One. The Amateur

The first time I sat at the bus stop with a handful of white pills and a bottle of water, a stranger found me, his thumb under my jaw, counting. A man in a hi-vis vest, sandwiches spilled on the verge, dog twisting on its lead. Behind him a radio played something cheerful about summer. Sorry about your sandwiches, I said, in the voice of a man rehearsing a speech in an empty car. He asked what had happened and I went looking. My name on next month's rota, a woman who made me come three times every Sunday, basil gone leggy above the sink. He waited. I stared. His dog pushed its nose into my closed fist, and I held the lead while he made the call. A nurse fastened the wristband, wrote a number, set down a plastic cup of water. I thanked her.

Method Two. The Rehearsal

The second time I taped black bin bags over the bedroom window so nobody would see the light burn through the night. The bath had almost reached the overflow before I turned off the taps. I left the flat tidy. Bills squared on the table by descending menace, the red ones uppermost, a note to the landlord that ran to four drafts and said nothing except sorry about the carpet. The rota came out on Friday without me. A man at the job centre had told me to sell the story of myself better. The nurse read my note while filling in the paperwork. The curtain was open. I heard every word.

Method Three. The Bureaucrat

By the third attempt, I stood on the edge of the roof until the neighbours started opening their curtains. A plastic windmill turned on a balcony. They had a form for me. A woman with a lanyard had me rate the wish to die from one to ten and wrote down my answer without lifting her pen between questions. My mother came on the four o'clock train with a carrier bag of oranges, because oranges are what you bring, and peeled one at the bedside, and the smell of it filled the whole ward, bright and obscene. She did not ask why. She asked whether I had eaten. Her thumbnail went yellow. She started another.

Method Four. The Audience

The fourth had a witness. I had tied the belt around the pipe beneath the stairwell and was already slipping away when the boy from the flat below came looking for his football. He went still and then ran. His face has since arranged itself over every face on the bus. My body hauled itself round without consulting me, spat, shuddered, and clocked back on. Bruises came up in the shape of hands. For six days my own heartbeat knocked at me from the inside like a bailiff wanting payment.

Method Five. The Professional

The fifth I gave the whole of myself to, the way he must have. I put the rope around my neck and carried the coffee table upstairs. I had inherited his handwriting, his hairline, and eventually his method. At twelve I found him. The television was still on. A cup of tea was cold beside his chair. His shoes were lined up by the door, as if he had only stepped outside for a minute. What I have never told anyone is that the relief was not just that he was gone. It was knowing I could sleep without hearing the stairs creak, without waiting for the bedroom door to open, without counting the seconds until he stopped. The hour after, I sat down with the phone in my lap and let the light move across the hall, and what rose in me was clean and enormous.

Then I called.

Twenty-seven years of paying that back in instalments. He got out. I get wristbands.

There will be a sixth. Not tonight. Tonight my mother is asleep in the chair with her coat still on, a bag of oranges going soft on the sill, and the morning comes in, his and now mine. I count her breaths until the dark passes.

Life/Death on a Split-Screen
William Swanger

Doc pushes 80 mph, but doesn't use the siren because it's late and there's little traffic. We're out in farm country, darkness erasing the low mountains in the distance. From the ambulance's passenger seat, I watch our flashing red lights bounce off the willowy stalks of the cornfields we fly by.

We round a turn and there's a single dim headlight ahead, sole survivor of a car's crumpled front end. My gut drops.

What if this call is like that other one two months ago? The one when the old mechanic who lived crusty, oil-encased, in a shack outside town, walked along the road late at night and, unseen in his black garb, was pitched headlong into a ditch by a passing car. The one when the police knew damn well the old man was dead but forced us to take him to the hospital anyway because they didn't want to deal with tragedy along a dark road. The one when we rolled silently to the ER as I sat in the back of the ambulance beside the motionless man watching a small insect crawl across his brain, vivid in the gravel-caked crevice in his skull, impulsively fascinated by the bug's journey across the moonlike landscape, yet horrified at my detached reaction to its invasion.

Ashes, dust, vermin.

Am I, a late-teen, yet to develop full-blown empathy? Or am I unwilling to admit this rebuke of an invincible youth's scoff at the inevitability of death? Or am I somehow not normal? I don't know, but I'm scared—I almost think *to death*—to learn the depth—or dearth?—of my emotions. I just know I can't stomach that alarming sense of indifference again.

Doc parks in front of the caved-in vehicle, our headlights illuminating it and, beside it, an unmoving figure that appears to be a modestly dressed girl. A teenage boy slumps against the extinguished headlight. Doc radios our arrival on-scene, canceling the rescue squad; there's obviously no entrapment. My nerves tighten as he requests the hospital paramedics' ETA.

We slide out, my shoes crunching on the berm. Doc heads toward the girl but before I can move an inch, the darkened landscape seems to swirl, mimicking the bubble light on our volunteer department's oldest truck. Disconcerted, I buckle against the ambulance as the scene rends, my pupils at war.

Like a composite shot engineered by my frantically mending mind, the idealized, the hopeful, fades in on my left, the real, the unrestrained, solidifying on the right, mental guardrails as rigid as the steel ones beside me. Acting like a Broadcast Standards censor demanding script revisions, my arbiter mind, though, cannot bring the full tableau to fruition, offering instead side-by-side scenes like a crazed playwright ordering what I see.

Stage Left

Doc bends over the girl, radioing hopefully with the paramedics, signaling insistently for me to bring the backboard and stretcher over to receive her. A white bonnet cushions her head.

Stage Right

The ambulance side-lamps, which Doc flipped on as we arrived, illuminate the spreading pool beneath the girl's bonnet, shimmering of deepest black, of nothingness.

She's gone.

Doc knows it. I know it. I wonder if the boy knows it.

Doc flicks his penlight in the girl's open eyes and checks for a pulse. I can tell by his reaction that her pupils are fixed, no pulse can be found. Doc stands and radios again. I know he wants the paramedics' confirmation.

The boy mumbles that he's okay, so we stand, awkward, Doc by the girl, me still stuck to the ambulance door. I hate looking toward the boy because he'd obviously been driving too fast, his car now tilted precariously against the guardrails.

But I don't want to look at the girl either because her blood continues to make a slurry in the gravel.

Why hasn't Doc put a gauze pad there?

Stage Left

Fellow volunteer and at least 15 years my senior, Doc is the grandson of a local physician, the revered elder's nickname extending across generations, and he always conducts himself just as his community-minded grandfather would.

Stage Right

Doc, in fact, *is* a doctor, but not the medical type. A PhD, a title I wonder about at my age, thinking it somehow counterfeit. None of us other volunteers ever hear Doc spout any philosophy, just lots of opinions on everything.

Besides, we know Doc eschews work, having invested time and family funds at the local university piling on degree after degree. We're not sure what he's studied, but whatever it is never translates to permanent work or an improved ability to keep his tongue in check.

Nevertheless, we all agree Doc's okay because we consistently need volunteers and Doc is always ready to roll.

Plus, he's a damned good driver.

Left

Doc finds that the girl's pulse is weak but steady. Somehow, I've been able to tear myself from the ambulance door to help him backboard her. The paramedics are only a few minutes' out so we remain on scene rather than rendezvous.

The boy sobs. Doc motions for me to console him.

"What'll I tell my parents about my sister?" he says absently, as if to no one.

“That you lost control,” Doc calls over before I can say anything, “that you didn’t see that curve. You did your best, but the car rolled and she was thrown.”

The boy looks at Doc as if he’s become conspiratorial. But that’s not it. Doc’s just trying to ease him into the reality that he may have critically injured his sister, yet hope remains. Plus, he knows of the teens’ Old Order religion, shared by many local farm families, compassionate, forgiving folks.

We had immediately noticed the tilted black car is chrome-less, a lack of ostentation a hallmark of their faith.

Right

“You had to be going damned fast,” Doc says, his tone uncharitable, “to go up that bank and roll the car.”

The boy stares at the road, seemingly finding it foreign, as if he’s botched a moon landing.

“She your girlfriend?” Doc continues.

“Sister. A year younger.”

“You understand what’s happened?”

The boy shakes his head, but it’s a bobble-head move, up and down and sideways all at once, lacking answer.

Wind ruffles the girl’s bonnet, revealing more of her face, and I realize I’ve seen her before. Her family has a stall at the local farmers market, and I immediately recall having noticed her darting about restocking vegetable bins, looking up at her brother—the boy who now sits by us—as if for approval, shooing younger siblings out of the way of customers, smiling at everyone all the while.

Panic grips me. I know Doc is ready to chastise the boy, but the situation’s bad enough without his harsh words.

“I think he knows,” I say to restrain him. “Besides, that’s not for us—”

“Not for us? I’ve been at too many of these damn wrecks,” Doc interrupts. “Doesn’t matter whether they’re from town or out here in the sticks, kids always underestimate a vehicle’s power. I’m sick of the waste. The waste of someone like her.”

“I know. It’s just—”

“Just what? Spare his feelings? If I don’t, maybe he’ll tell other kids not to drive the way he did. Maybe I just saved a life,” Doc says. “And that makes me worry a helluva lot less about his feelings.”

Left

The teens’ parents arrive before the paramedics do. I watch the mother clutch the boy, the father bend over their daughter. Wind again ruffles the girl’s bonnet, and she stirs once more, trying to look toward her brother as if to confirm he’s okay.

A miracle, my mind heralds.

Right

The paramedics are still a few minutes' out, nor have the youths' parents arrived. Wedged against guardrail steel, the boy sits turned from his sister.

The ambulance side-lamps dim.

"Damn!" Doc explodes. "That alternator keeps acting up."

The lamps go out and we are awash in darkness.

Downstage Center

A half-moon breaks through the clouds and my split-screen dissolves in its ghostly light, coagulating like that dark puddle in the gravel. My rent vision heals, my pupils proclaiming truce.

The world reunites and the night becomes whole, stark and unforgiving. Anxious, I try to force my dichotomous vision back into being, cajoling my mind to offer at least a half-semblance of hope. But nothing arises.

Cradled by shadows, the girl still lies as quiet as the night, the gravel-specked slurry now unmoving as well.

In this rebirthed whole, though, I can move again. As I step forward. I realize my cheeks are wet, my eyes stinging. I look toward the boy and then the girl, anguish and bereavement roiling within me, a despair that seems to touch my soul.

At this moment, all is so very wrong with the world.

But I quickly realize, all is at least right with me.

The Real Story
Jeffrey Zable

Near a playground in the park, a statue of a soldier
came to life while the children were running around,
pointing their forefingers at one another and shouting
ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah ah.

And the soldier, following suit, raised his rifle
and yelled **ah ah ah ah ah ah** at each of the children
who fell to the ground and no longer moved a muscle—
which made the mothers scream at the top of their lungs.

Then, just before the police arrived, the soldier went back
to being a statue, which made no sense to the police
who tried to calm the women to get the real story.

Hollow Bricks
Calla Smith

Helen lived in a tiny apartment on a side street off a bustling avenue. The walls were grey and spotted with black mold, and the tiles covering the kitchen were broken, cracked, coated in a layer of grime that would be impossible to remove. The kitchen was too small for her cook, but it seemed perpetually dirty anyway. The years of grease of splattered oil on every surface felt like sandpaper on her, and she often skipped meals just to avoid going in there.

Helen was hungry, and she had been for as long as she remembered. No food would ever satisfy her craving, though. She wanted something else beyond flecks of salt to linger on her lips, something that would carry the crunch of the broken asphalt and the sweetness left in the elevator after her neighbor got off, leaving the smell of her perfume behind. She wanted to savor sweat and blood on her tongue, feel skin in her teeth. Those pieces of humanity would give her a glimpse into a world beyond her own, something grander, something better. If she knew the taste of someone, she would know their soul.

There were so many flavors and textures out there in the world that she longed to experience. Even as a child, Helen had eaten rocks and any insects that had come into her sight, and the doctors had always told her parents that it was a miracle she had survived. Sometimes, in her sleep, she could feel all the small living things she had shoved into her stomach crawling around inside her body, looking for a way out. It wasn't uncomfortable. It was comforting.

But now she was an adult on her own in a big city, and there were so many people around her that it almost drove her into a frenzy. The stench of all the humanity crammed in together on every block worked its way into her nose and created an itch in the depths of her soul. It sang to her. She needed to know more about all the people she could possibly meet, she decided. She needed to know their history and their future, their deepest fears and greatest joys. Helen needed to taste their breath and chew on their soul until the ache in her own empty stomach subsided.

Perhaps the people around her sensed it, and that was why they stayed away. There was something dark and slightly dangerous about her, like looking into the blackness of a deep pit. Meeting her eyes was like falling off a cliff in your sleep, only to be jerked awake again. She was untouchable, unapproachable. She knew that being around her was like a bucket of cold water. Even her parents had made her leave their home as soon as she could, taking her old childhood mattress with her to sit in the corner of her bedroom.

But, as time passed, she felt she was withering away day by day, and there was only one thing that could calm the raging beast in her chest. Perhaps in the night she would be disguised, so she went to the sad dive bar just a few blocks away and sat at a table covered in shadows until a man sauntered over and introduced himself. He smelled of stale beer and something broken, and Helen could see the way he was already undressing her with his eyes. She didn't mind, though.

He told her his name was Kai and bought her a beer before sitting down across from her. She asked him every question she could think of until she could almost see his life stretched out before her like a movie and there was nothing left. The only thing he wanted to know was if she lived alone, and how far away her apartment was.

Helen smiled knowingly. She did live alone, and it was close by. Did he want a nightcap? Kai nodded and stood up, his arm already moving quickly around her waist to feel the heat of her body. But Helen knew they weren't going to go very far.

As they made their way toward the door, she saw her opportunity in a small stool and tripped with her glass in her hand, and they both fell into the shards that covered the floor, now red and sticky. They clamored to their feet hesitantly, even though she just wanted to lie there and breathe in the shape of his body next to her. Kai had cut his hand, and she kissed the wound playfully. If he was surprised by way she licked away the blood he didn't show it.

They kissed outside, and her tongue was still red with the red liquid. She could feel him freeze under the lamplight as he noticed the coppery tang and looked down into her eyes before turning pale. She could see the moment in his eyes when he saw the threatening gleam in her eyes and felt the danger in the air. Kai mumbled that he was tired and drifted away like a ghost into the night, his own deep-seated need long forgotten.

Even after he was gone, she still felt him filling some of the empty places in her. She had something of his that he could never take back, and she could still feel it every time she swallowed. It still wasn't enough, though. She wanted more; she would always want more. So, she found ways to arrange encounters. She signed up for dating apps and took up any hobby that involved meeting people. There was always someone new to try, and she didn't care if they never came back after the first time. Helen knew the people in the neighborhood talked about her, but that didn't matter.

Helen could feel herself changing. Her hair was long and dark and shone like obsidian in the sun. Her skin was no longer ashen, but warm and inviting. She felt alive for the first time, and she knew that she looked as though she was ablaze to everyone around her. As she felt herself growing with each new piece of someone's being, she wondered if people were no longer staying away as they had done before.

She could feel strangers' glances follow her down the street. People would stop and ask her for directions or the time as though looking for an excuse to be near her. Her neighbors talked to her in the elevator, and sometimes even showed up in her apartment with a meal or a bottle of wine. Helen always let them in. They still felt a little uneasy around her. She could still smell their fear, but now it was mixed with fascination. She wondered if perhaps they found pleasure in giving her a piece of themselves too.

Morality
Emily Jones

I claw away at my fleshy cage
Have to stay, have to stay
Weeping and shrieking
Can't leave, can't leave
I pound the bone bars
But no one can hear me
I mustn't find a way out
Trapped, trapped, trapped
I'm a living plague
My body a house of death
The flesh under my skin is rotting
Poisoned by each imprisoned breath
I was made to destroy
But I'm bound by my hand
Born to kill yet I lie here dying
Burning down the only home I'll ever know

Out of the Maze
Lauren Vogel

To say that things were bad when the filming team got their colleague, Lindsay, back was no doubt an understatement; if nothing else, even as Rachel, another one of their colleagues, dragged Lindsay in, Malcolm knew that no matter how bad things got, things couldn't get worse than that. A few scratches and such were bad enough, and burns, but there was also the matter of what Lindsay was muttering.

Even placing Lindsay down on a bed, letting Rachel bathe her forehead with a cloth and reassure her that things were going to be all right, Malcolm could not help but feel, for lack of a better word, really goddamn confused. For one thing, some of Lindsay's comments made no sense. For another...well, what was she even talking about?

Malcolm was not usually one for violence -- that was their colleagues Rob and Carlos's places in all this, not his. And yet he knew that if he could run down and get personal revenge on Lindsay's tormentors...this would be a good day indeed.

"You really didn't think you could defeat me, could you?" That voice. Lindsay swore it was the most awful voice she had ever heard. It was like the voice of doubts that kept you up at night.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Lindsay said, but even that sounded so weak coming from her. If nothing else, she thought darkly, she wasn't really helping his case with trying to rebut this man.

The Presence blinked. "You don't even remember?"

Lindsay snorted. "Yeah, sure. Look," she said, "I really think you've got the wrong girl! I mean...I just make movies for a living."

The Presence (good name for him, Lindsay thought. The Presence) snorted. "Did I come this far for nothing?"

Long after the Presence finally left, Lindsay lay there now, wondering what her life had become.

Rachel doubted that she'd ever felt more afraid. Lindsay was still babbling about something, about a "presence" and something about it...it didn't just hurt or frighten Rachel; it genuinely confused her. What was happening to Lindsay, and why couldn't they do something about it?

She didn't know.

The best she could do was at least keep Lindsay and the others safe.

It was on the fifth day that Lindsay met her -- "Fairy Godmother", Lindsay called her. It seemed appropriate at least. The Fairy Godmother wasn't bad-looking, really. Pretty, wearing a white dress and glasses, and looking in all honesty, kind of miserable. Still, she turned to look at Lindsay and said, "You doing all right there?"

Lindsay snorted. "If by 'all right', you mean really confused, then pretty much, yes."

"You and me both," the woman said. "Look -- no need to panic. I'm your friend. I'm here to help you."

"I could use the help," Lindsay said.

"You're going to have to listen very carefully to me..."

Day five. Still no response from Lindsay. Rachel sighed, ran a hand through her hair. "She's...she's going to be all right, isn't she, Malcolm?"

"I really don't know," Malcolm said. "Maybe..." He sighed. "Maybe we should get her to the emergency room and let the paramedics -- wait. How are we even going to explain -- oh, forget it. It's not like it's going to help anything."

"Don't talk like that," Rachel said. "It's going to be fine, Malcolm. Trust me on this."

Silence. In between, Rachel could hear Lindsay mumbling about "it's all in my head" and "I trust you". She didn't know exactly what was going on, still. She wished she did. She hoped Lindsay wasn't going crazy.

"So, how do we get out of here?"

Fairy Godmother shrugged. "Hard to say. Assuming this hasn't morphed into the weirdest version of *American McGee's Alice* ever and we get attacked by boojums and such..."

Lindsay laughed. "We could always do something like that, I guess."

Fairy Godmother nodded. "Anything's possible, after all. *The Last of Us* is highly successful, just to begin with. I suppose as long as you go for a television adaptation, you should be fine..."

"Thanks for the tip," Lindsay sighed. "God, I should go and write a book about this or something. The tale of Lindsay Walker, aspiring filmmaker..."

"I'd read it," said the Fairy Godmother, and Lindsay found herself smiling despite it all. Someone wanted to read her work. Someone wanted to watch her work. Maybe she wasn't really that bad. Maybe there was still hope for her.

But the key was that she had to actually make a break for it.

"Godmother," she said, "Let's get out of here."

"Yes," Fairy Godmother said. "Let's."

The problem with all of this, Lindsay mused, at least in terms of breaking out, were the fact that everything seemed to be intent on killing them.

Probably didn't help with the Presence lecturing her on the multiple reasons she sucked and why she couldn't defeat him but it was also the fact that everything seemed to be intent on murdering her. Zombies and shades (at least that's what Fairy Godmother called them) were just a few of the bosses. And it didn't help that they were caught in mazes that seemed to be constantly rotating.

There were times, Lindsay thought, like it was as if she never would get out of here. Even slaying another enemy — she was just so tired of killing at this point.

"It never gets any easier," said the Fairy Godmother. "I'm sorry, Lindsay."

At least she was the only one, at least in this dreamworld, who seemed to care. Did Malcolm and Rachel care? Lindsay was certain they did, even if they were far away. Lindsay was absolutely certain of it.

They reached the Presence again. By now, Lindsay knew what she had to do. She had to kill him in order to free the hold on her mind, Fairy Godmother said. To get back to the real world. Lindsay was already sick of killing, but she would do whatever she could to get home. It was action or inaction, and she didn't want to be passive.

Even fighting him with the weapons she had, Lindsay fought as hard as she could. She would be damned if she ended up dying in this dreamworld. The Fairy Godmother helped, sending out the same bursts of magic that Lindsay had become all too used to. It wasn't a surprise that Fairy Godmother could use magic. If the situation were less dire, Lindsay probably would have made a Cinderella joke.

But they were fighting, undeniably.

It was Fairy Godmother who sent out a blast of magic that knocked the Presence back. Lindsay, already seeing an opening, ran towards him and stabbed at him. Tried to.

He caught the sword. Lindsay would give him credit; he wasn't about to go with grace.

She kept pushing. He kept trying to push it away from his heart. It already felt like a tug of war with a sword before finally, he got tired enough for Lindsay to sink the blade in.

Lindsay stood over the Presence, breathing heavily. She'd won this one, that was for sure.

After the battle, Lindsay turned to look at Fairy Godmother. "Thank you," she said. "Really. For everything."

"It's no problem. Honestly, you did a lot of the work yourself, Lindsay."

"Am I ever going to see you again, when I wake up?"

"You might. I was originally created to get you out of this mindscape, but you may see me yet. Besides, just because it's all in your head doesn't mean it doesn't matter to you, Lindsay. Remember that."

"What happens now?"

"The door to the real world is up ahead."

Lindsay bit her lip. "Come with me," she said.

"I may yet see you again, Lindsay Walker. Don't forget that."

Lindsay sighed. She just wished she knew where, or when. "Take care of yourself," she said, and stepped towards the door to the real world.

It was back in the real world that she greeted Malcolm and Rachel again, hugging them harder than she should (she was still going to need to recover from her time being held captive, Malcolm said) and recounting everything she'd seen. There was still a lot to do. Like the whole issue of the Presence.

Lindsay didn't know. But with Malcolm and the others at his side, she was ready for whatever came her way.

Those Saucy Ears
Leigh-Anne Burley

Oh, those saucy ears that hear everything
eavesdropping on coveted conversations
straining to devour juicy tidbits.

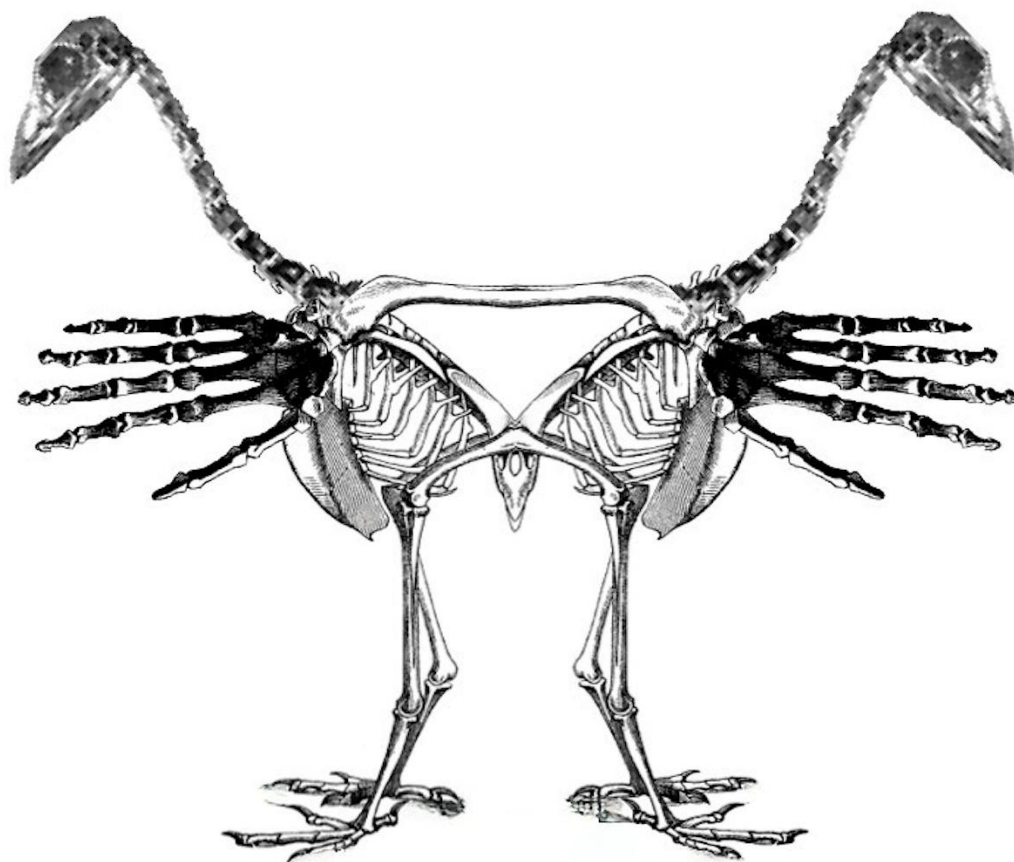
Eager to drop tantalizing morsels
into receptive ears
who share what is not theirs
with itching ears, panting for more.

Until the tangled web gets back to you
but you don't recognize the central character
they say is you.

Oh, those prying eyes
with furtive sideways glances
darting under pretense masks
at masquerade balls
and you're the bald-faced host
of slithering, skewed secrets.

At midnight, slow to speak and
swift to hear kind folks
sweep disgraced conversations
scribbled on scraps of paper
dropped on the floors of gathering places.

Discreet people shovel malicious gossip
into bins and burn them in back alleys.
Distorted sentence fragments
crackle, snap, and pop
while metal trash cans
belch and billow tar-black smoke
onto a grim, frowning sky.



Bill Wolak - The Afterimage of Moonlight

Mašallah
Milanka Sulejic

My grandmother never let anyone tell me I was beautiful.

Not without correcting them.

"Mašallah," she would say.

Always immediately.

Sometimes before the person had even finished speaking.

"Look at those eyes."

"Mašallah."

"Such pretty hair."

"Mašallah."

"She looks just like you."

"Mašallah."

Once, when I was six, a woman in the market touched my cheek and said, "What a beautiful little girl."

My grandmother slapped her hand away.

"Don't."

The woman stared at her.

My grandmother crossed herself—not exactly, not in the way my Catholic friend's grandmother did, but in a quick movement I didn't understand—and whispered:

"Mašallah."

The woman laughed.

"She's just a child."

My grandmother took my hand.

"That's why."

I didn't understand.

I thought she was being rude.

I thought old people were always afraid of something.

Bad weather.

Open windows.

Knives left upside down.

Walking beneath ladders.

The dead.

My grandmother was afraid of everything.

Or so I thought.

Years later, I understood.

She wasn't afraid of the things that could hurt us.

She was afraid of the things that might notice us.

When I was nineteen, my grandmother came to America for my graduation.

She sat in the front row wearing a blue dress and the pearl earrings my grandfather had given her before he died.

Afterward, everyone took photographs.

My mother cried.

My father opened a bottle of champagne.

My cousins shouted and hugged me.

My grandmother stood apart from everyone else.

She watched.

When my friend Daniel came over, he smiled at me.

"You look incredible."

My grandmother grabbed my wrist.

"Mašallah."

Daniel laughed.

"Your grandmother really likes that word."

She didn't laugh.

She looked at him.

Not me.

Him.

Then she said:

"Don't look at her like that."

Daniel's smile disappeared.

"Excuse me?"

My grandmother stepped between us.

"Some eyes are hungry."

I wanted to disappear.

"Grandma."

She looked at me.

"Come."

I followed her into the kitchen.

"You're embarrassing me."

She washed her hands.

Slowly.

"What did I do?"

"You scared Daniel."

"He should be scared."

I stared at her.

She dried her hands.

"Did he say something about your eyes?"

"What?"

"Your eyes."

I laughed.

"No."

She looked relieved.

Then she touched my face.

"Don't let people admire you too much."

"Why?"

She looked toward the living room.

"Because sometimes people don't know what they are carrying."

She died three months later.

Quietly.

In her sleep.

The doctor said it was her heart.

My mother said it was peaceful.

My grandmother had never seemed like someone who would die peacefully.

She was too stubborn.

Too watchful.

Too full of rules.

At the funeral, I wore the blue dress she had worn to my graduation.

My mother said I looked beautiful.

Then she stopped herself.

"Mašallah."

I almost laughed.

Instead, I cried.

That night, I found my grandmother's notebook.

It was underneath a stack of old photographs.

The cover was black.

There was no name on it.

Inside were pages and pages of Bosnian.

My Bosnian wasn't good enough to understand all of it.

But some words I knew.

****urok****

****oko****

****dijete****

Eye.

Child.

Urok.

I called my mother.

"What is urok?"

She went silent.

Then she said:

"Why?"

"I found Grandma's notebook."

"You shouldn't read it."

"What is it?"

"Something old."

"What does it mean?"

My mother sighed.

"The evil eye."

I laughed.

"That's what she was worried about?"

"Not exactly."

"What then?"

Another silence.

"Your grandmother believed some people could look at you and hurt you."

"Intentionally?"

"Sometimes."

"And sometimes not."

I remembered the market.

The woman touching my cheek.

My grandmother's hand knocking hers away.

"Sometimes," my mother said, "a person can admire something too much."

"That's ridiculous."

"Maybe."

She paused.

"But your grandmother believed it."

I looked down at the notebook.

"How do you protect yourself?"

My mother answered immediately.

"Mašallah."

Then she hung up.

I began having the dreams a week later.

In the first one, I was standing in my grandmother's garden.

She was sitting beneath the plum tree.

Her back was to me.

I called her name.

She didn't answer.

Then I noticed someone standing behind her.

A woman.

I couldn't see her face.

She was wearing a white dress.

She leaned over my grandmother's shoulder.

And whispered something into her ear.

My grandmother began to cry.

I woke up.

The second dream was worse.

I was in the market.

The same market from when I was six.

The same woman.

The same hand touching my cheek.

But this time, when she looked at me, her eyes were black.

Not dark.

Black.

Like holes.

She smiled.

"You are beautiful."

I woke screaming.

There was a bruise on my cheek.

Four fingerprints.

After that, things began happening.

Flowers died in my apartment.

Not gradually.

One morning they would be alive.

By evening, they would be black.

My plants developed brown spots shaped like fingerprints.

A photograph of me cracked down the middle.

My cat refused to enter my bedroom.

And every time someone complimented me, something happened.

A coworker told me my hair looked nice.

Her car wouldn't start.

A neighbor told me I had beautiful eyes.

His dog died that night.

My cousin said I looked young for my age.

She woke the next morning with bruises around her throat.

I stopped accepting compliments.

I stopped posting photographs.

I stopped looking in mirrors.

Then Daniel called.

I hadn't spoken to him since graduation.

He said he was in town.

He wanted to see me.

I almost told him no.

Instead, I agreed.

When he saw me, he smiled.

"You look—"

"Don't."

He stopped.

"What?"

"Don't say it."

He stared at me.

Then he laughed.

"Okay."

We sat outside a café.

For a while, everything felt normal.

Then Daniel looked at me.

Not at my clothes.

Not at my hair.

At my face.

"You have your grandmother's eyes."

My heart stopped.

"Mašallah."

The word came out before I could think.

Daniel frowned.

"What does that mean?"

I couldn't answer.

That night, he died.

Car accident.

Rain.

A guardrail.

No alcohol.

No drugs.

No explanation.

Just rain.

And his last text to me, sent twelve minutes before the crash:

****I wanted to tell you that you're beautiful.****

I went back to Bosnia.

I didn't tell my mother.

I didn't tell anyone.

I found the village where my grandmother had been born.

The house was gone.

The plum tree remained.

An old woman lived next door.

She knew my grandmother's name.

When I told her who I was, she took my face in both hands.

Then she whispered:

"Mašallah."

I began crying.

"Did you know my grandmother?"

The woman nodded.

"She came to me once."

"When?"

"Long ago."

"Why?"

The woman looked toward the plum tree.

"Because of you."

I couldn't breathe.

"Me?"

"You were a baby."

She disappeared into her house.

When she returned, she was carrying a small cloth bundle.

Inside was a photograph.

My mother holding me.

I was a newborn.

My grandmother stood beside us.

She was crying.

On the back, in her handwriting, were four words:

****Don't let them look.****

I stared at the photograph.

"Who?"

The old woman sat beside me.

"Everyone."

That night, I finally understood.

My grandmother hadn't been afraid that someone would envy me.

She had been afraid that someone would ****love me too much****.

The evil eye wasn't always hatred.

Sometimes it was admiration without protection.

A gaze that lingered.

A desire that wanted what it saw.

A beautiful child.

A healthy animal.

A good harvest.

A happy marriage.

Something precious.

Something someone else wanted.

And sometimes, according to the old stories, the eye didn't need permission.

It only needed to notice.

I thought about my grandmother.

How she had interrupted every compliment.

How she had whispered *mašallah* before anyone else could.

How she had watched people's faces instead of mine.

She had been counting.

Watching.

Waiting.

Protecting me.

Or trying to.

I went back to the house that night.

My grandmother's old house.

There was nothing left except stones and the plum tree.

I stood beneath it.

And for the first time, I felt someone watching me.

I didn't turn around.

A voice whispered:

"Beautiful."

I closed my eyes.

My grandmother's voice came back to me.

Not from memory.

From somewhere behind me.

"Mašallah."

I opened my eyes.

There was a woman standing beneath the tree.

She was very old.

Her hair was white.

Her eyes were black.

She smiled.

"You finally came."

I couldn't move.

"Who are you?"

She tilted her head.

"Someone who noticed you."

I whispered:

"Why?"

She smiled wider.

"Because your grandmother spent her whole life making sure nobody did."

The wind moved through the plum tree.

Something red hung from one of the branches.

A thread.

Knotted seven times.

I reached for it.

The woman smiled.

"Don't."

I stopped.

"Why?"

She looked at me.

And for the first time, I understood what my grandmother had been trying to teach me.

Some things don't hurt you because they hate you.

Some things hurt you because they want what you have.

The woman stepped closer.

"Say it."

I knew what she wanted.

I knew what my grandmother had said all my life.

The word that was supposed to protect me.

The word my mother had taught me.

The word I had heard at every photograph, every compliment, every celebration.

But I didn't say it.

Because suddenly I understood something else.

My grandmother had spent her entire life protecting me from the evil eye.

And somehow, despite everything, I had survived.

I looked at the woman.

Then at the red thread.

Then at the empty space beneath the plum tree where my grandmother used to sit.

And I smiled.

"Mašallah."

The woman screamed.

Not because the word hurt her.

Because someone else was standing behind me.

My grandmother.

I felt her hand settle gently on my shoulder.

Cold fingers.

A familiar touch.

The woman in the white dress backed away.

My grandmother whispered:

"She is mine."

The woman disappeared.

The wind stopped.

The red thread fell from the tree.

Seven knots.

I picked it up.

Then I did something my grandmother had never taught me.

I tied an eighth.

I don't know what the eighth knot means.

Maybe neither did she.

Maybe some traditions are meant to end.

Maybe some are meant to be carried.

All I know is that I still say *mašallah* when someone compliments me.

I say it for my grandmother.

I say it for the people who came before her.

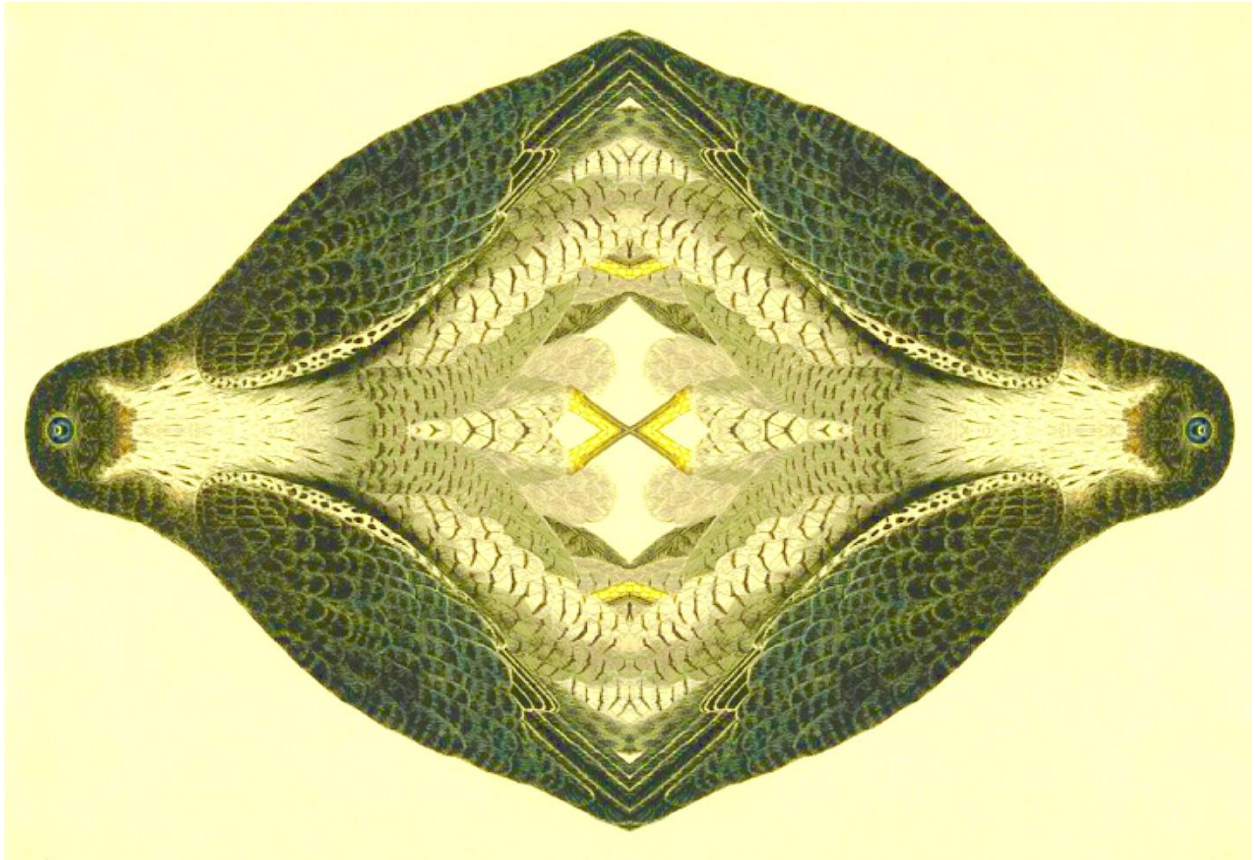
And I say it because I have learned that being seen is not the same thing as being safe.

Sometimes the most dangerous thing about being beautiful

isn't that someone might want you.

It's that they might look at you

and never look away.



Bill Wolak - A Smile That Can Reignite Sparks



Themes of lurid infidelity, callow youth, and Pandora-like hope tie the collected stories of *Flight* together. These have been carefully arranged as in a "flight" of beverages, by shortest to longest: first come the micro fiction stories (one page max), followed by the flash fiction (one thousand words max), next the short stories (ten to twenty pages), and last the novel excerpts.

Iván Brave is an Adjunct Lecturer at the Borough of Manhattan Community College of the City University of New York. He is the author of *The Summer Abroad* (2018), *They Lived They Were* (2020), and *Awake & Asleep* (2025), as well as essays, poetry, and translation published across multiple journals. Learn more at www.IvanBrave.com.

Find your copy at: <https://a.co/d/05A84xS1>

Cover Price: \$9.99 (ISBN 0998036455)

Bios

Carrie Farrar is a Los Angeles–based poet with work published in a range of literary journals, including *Free the Verse* and *The Lake*. Her writing often engages themes of perception, estrangement, and the body’s relationship to memory and environment. She is particularly interested in sonic texture, compression, and the tension between movement and stillness on the page.

Ashley Mangtani is a UK writer whose work explores social collapse and the roles people inhabit in moments of crisis, often in stories shaped by inevitability and loss. Blending literary realism with speculative fiction, slipstream, and dark irony, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Litro*, *Washington Square Review*, *CommuterLit*, *Mercurius Magazine*, and *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*. Read more at ashleymangtanifiction.carrd.co

Sophie Daly-Atkinson is a poet and novelist living in Scotland. She generally writes about the queer autistic experience, and her work has appeared in *Neologism*, *April Showers*, and *Inklight*. She is currently working on her folk horror novel, *Mary on her Tongue*.

Travis Flatt (he/him) is an epileptic teacher and actor living in Cookeville, Tennessee. His stories appear or are forthcoming with *Ghost Parachute*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Flash Frog*, and elsewhere. He is a 2026 *SmokeLong Quarterly* Emerging Writer Fellow.

Anni Wangl is a poet, pianist, and graduate of U.C. Berkeley, where she was a columnist for lifestyle magazine, *Caliber*. A lifelong performance artist, Anni is a graduate of the Manhattan School of Music and a classical pianist. Her poetry combines her passion for Chinese-American culture, music, and literature. She can often be found attending Brooklyn Poets workshops or recreating her grandmother's garden on her tiny NYC patio.

James Fleet Underwood grew up in the Detroit suburbs and now teaches and writes in Thailand, among temples, spirit houses, flooded canals, and whatever strange life the swamp keeps producing. His work has appeared in *Underbelly Press*, *Blood and Honey*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Beatnik Cowboy*.

When Michelle Gean is not writing, she's running. She calls Denver, CO home.

Forrester Finchum (he/him) lives in Louisville, Kentucky, and writes short stories mostly falling into the weird fiction and horror genres. Some of his literary influences and favorite authors are Thomas Ligotti, H.P. Lovecraft, Edgar Allan Poe, Algernon Blackwood, Kurt Fawver, Shirley Jackson, Samuel Beckett, Stephen King, Sylvia Plath, and Franz Kafka. In his spare time, he enjoys playing piano, studying philosophy and psychology, and volunteering at a local animal shelter.

Bill Wolak has just published his nineteenth book of poetry entitled *What Love Calms Only With Nakedness* with Expeditions International Publishing House. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *The Passionfruit Review*, *Inside Voice*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

H.E. Shippas is an author most times and a scientist sometimes. She has written and published speculative and literary fiction within a variety of magazines and anthologies, including regular pieces within *Livina Press* and a story in *State of Matter* that was recommended by *Reactor!* When she isn't writing, H.E. is playing video games she helped fund on Kickstarter, trying new recipes, or going to nerdy conventions. You can find her on Instagram at @h.e.shippas or online at linktr.ee/heshippas.

Christopher Seufert is an award winning poet and filmmaker. He has a BA from Trinity College (Hartford, CT) and an MA from Cal State-East Bay. He lives with his children, Ethan and Stella, on a beach in Cape Cod.

Lize du Toit is a South African artist and emerging poet residing in Australia. Her creative interests pivot on melancholia as part of a larger inquiry into identity, the psychology of landscape, and suburbia as transgressive space. Lize holds a master's degree in art and visual studies but works as an editor by day to fund her nocturnal inroads into art and writing.

Blaire Bayliss is a horror and suspense writer based in Colorado. They primarily enjoy writing voice-driven pieces. When not writing, Blaire can be found camping, following their favorite band on tour, or hosting tabletop roleplaying games for their friends.

Dane Rook is an author of fiction and nonfiction. He is based in Northern California, near Half Moon Bay, which is famous for its pumpkin festival (he has never attended it). His work has been published by Stanford University Press and Blood+Honey.

Jason Ryberg is the author of twenty-five books of poetry, six screenplays, a few short stories, a box full of folders, notebooks and scraps of paper that could one day be (loosely) construed as a novel, and countless love letters (never sent). He is currently an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community, and is an editor and designer at Spartan Books. His work has appeared in as it Ought to Be, Up the Staircase Quarterly, Thimble Literary Magazine, I-70 Review, Main Street Rag, The Arkansas Review and various other journals and anthologies. His latest collection of poems is “Come Back to the Dollar General, Harry Dean, Harry Dean (South Broadway Press, 2026).” He lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a Billy-goat named Giuseppe, and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

Dimitar Dakovski is a software engineer who lives in Sofia, Bulgaria with his wife, son, and two cats. He is enthusiastic about all things fantasy and science fiction and his works have appeared in various publications in both English and Bulgarian. More information about him can be found on his website: <https://dakovski.github.io/>.

John Dorroh likes to travel. He often ends up in other peoples’ kitchens sharing culinary tidbits and tall tales. “Learning about cultures begins with the food,” he asserts. Six of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net. Hundreds of others appeared in journals such as Feral, River Heron, Burningword, Kissing Dynamite, North Dakota Quarterly, Penstricken, and North of Oxford. Once he was awarded Editor’s Choice Award for a regional journal and received enough money for a sushi dinner for two.

Russell Pirkle is a speech therapist, podcaster, and hobbyist drawer and painter in Asheville, North Carolina.

Keely O'Brien is a poet and artist. She aims to create strong visuals with words, and express those in her visual art. Her passion for poetry was discovered when she was eleven-years-old. Emotionally expressive writing is important to her, especially telling stories of emotional processing. Keely has many passions in life including but not limited to sewing, knitting, being in nature and music. She believes art forms harmoniously work together.

Leigh-Anne Burley publishes across genres.

John Harrison resides in the town of Hebden Bridge, England. He studied cultural anthropology to PhD level at Oxford University. New to writing, he has had work accepted in the Pennsylvania Literary Journal and Beyond Words Magazine. He was also shortlisted in the Phil Lit open poetry competition.

Danielle McMahon is the author of four poetry chapbooks and two micro-chaps. Her latest chapbook “irl” can be purchased from Stanchion Books (<https://www.stanchionzine.com/product-page/irl>). Author website: d-mcmahon-writes.net. Bluesky @dehm000.bsky.social.

Charlotte Iannone is a poet living on Long Island. Her work can be found in The Bowdoin Review, Long Island Quarterly, and Chainmail Poetry, and is forthcoming from Forget-Me-Not Journal and Soul Poetry.

Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet, playwright, and journalist from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @benmacnair.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Lithuanian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Door Is A Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and *The Harvard Advocate*. Edward is also a published poet who has had over 700 poems published and been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

William Swanger is a university instructor who has had fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry published by Quibble Lit, The Genre Society, Academy of the Heart and Mind and a university-based literary magazine. Years ago, he was twice invited to pitch story ideas to two television production companies based on his speculative-script submissions, an experience detailed on his website, www.williamswangerwriter.com.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in Rundelania, Misfit, Streetcake, Piker Press, The Argyle, Dark Winter, The Ravens Perch, Beach Chair, and many others. His selected poetry, "When I'm Dead and Feeling Blue" is now available from Amazon or directly from Androgyne Books.

Calla Smith grew up in rural Colorado but now lives and writes in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She enjoys continuing to discover all the forgotten corners of the city she has come to call home and dreaming up new things to try. Her work can be found in The Madrid Review, Livina Press, Pulp, and more.

Emily Jones is a passionate writer who turns everything into an idea, even her darkest moments. She writes in many forms, from drabbles to novels, and enjoys exploring the darker side of genres. She has been published by The Horror Tree, Dark Holme Publishing, The Horror Zine and others.

Lauren Vogel is an aspiring writer who started out in the world of fanfiction before transitioning to original fiction. She has been writing since the age of four, ever since she learned about what stories mean and wanted to write her own. She lives with her family and in her spare time enjoys writing, reading and catching up on recent movies, including horror, as well as television such as House of the Dragon.

Leigh-Anne Burley publishes adult and children's poetry.

Milanka Sulejic is a Bosnian-American writer whose work explores memory, family, folklore, displacement, and the places where the ordinary becomes unsettling. Her fiction often draws on Balkan traditions, inherited stories, and the quiet strangeness of family history. She writes literary horror and speculative fiction, with a particular interest in women, memory, and the things that refuse to stay buried.

