

# Corvus Review



ISSUE 19 - Fall/Winter 2022

*This issue is dedicated to*  
**MARY ELLEN MERCER**  
 (1938-2022)



### Cover Art:

Kim Silva is an artist and writer who lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. She graduated with an MFA from Savannah College of Art and Design in 2011, and with a BFA in Writing and Painting from Vermont College in 2005. Her writings and artwork have been highlighted in publications such as Litbreak, Poor Yorick, BarBar, Fleas on a Dog, and Corvus Review.



Painting "Poor Clown..." in SCAD studio.

The images in my paintings arise directly from my subconscious, similar to dreams. One night's dream is different from another night's, yet a crew of familiar symbols and archetypes runs through them, over the years weaving together an intricate tapestry of psychic story-telling. Each painting tells a different story based upon the urges intrinsic to that particular painting time, yet common motifs unite them all.

For the most part, I work without sketches or preconceptions, drawing and painting directly onto the canvas. The painting process then becomes a roller coaster ride full of dips, curves, and heights as I take a back seat, following impulses the painting instigates, trusting that the end result will be striking and necessary.

The writings of Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, have

profoundly influenced me. His view that humankind cannot be healthy until as individuals we embrace our shadow, or the darker, more unruly parts of ourselves, has become crucial to my work.

In my late 20's, I began painting alone for myself, without censoring anything, eager to discover my own buried Self.

That was many years ago, and the thrill of that ride has not subsided.

**Editor:** Janine Mercer

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And Still, I Collect the Corks  
Annie Marhefka

*Save me your corks*, mother said, so I popped a bottle of prosecco, a cork sprung from the rim, and a dainty glass to drink from. It was sweet and crisp, the zing of lemongrass sticking to our tongues. *I have an idea*, she smiled, *something to make with the corks*, so I found a basket to drop them in and plucked them from bottle tops. In February, a rioja, its tannins staining the speckled cork. *I'm going to make something neat*, she teased, so in May we shared a rosé, pink breath and honeydew lingering between our lips. *Don't forget my corks*, she reminded, so in the summer we sipped Riesling, savoring jasmine's sweet notes. *I'll take the cork*, I winked, when she held her glass out for the chardonnay, hints of pear dripping down its sides. *You'll never guess what I'm making you*, she sang, the cabernet tinting her thin lips. I breathed in her oakiness and offered guesses: *A corkboard? Too easy. No, a purse!* She laughed as the ends of her blonde bob swished across slim shoulders. In September when she died, I inhaled a Tempranillo, blackberry currant and dry, a piece of the cork peeling away. The time before she died blended into the time after she died like an oak barrel absorbed wine. I kept overflowing the basket, a solitary swish of pinot noir, silky on my tongue but thick in the throat like grief, a bit of mocha when you swallow. A sauvignon blanc on her birthday, citrus verses and biting acid tinging the inner flesh of my cheeks. She's been gone seven years now. And still, I collect the corks. They stare back at me from their basket, a mosaic tribute to her, wondering what she would have made of them.

Tangerines in Winter  
Mykyta Ryzhykh

\*\*\*

tangerines in winter  
a feeling of hopeless procrastination  
when your favorite porn actor dies  
inside you

\*\*\*

I play war games and watch scat on TV  
My freckles are gone  
And yes, I will have to pay back the loan for this

\*\*\*

Houston, you're in trouble  
The gypsy's prediction did not come true  
And a lot has happened  
Ever since someone jumped off a bridge

The dew from under the eyes has not dried  
Where did it all go  
Where does it all go  
Republic of the Dusk Star  
Your cold palms sparkling in the sun  
Whisper that it's very cold

The sun has completely faded  
The universe is tensed up  
And lives in constant tension  
around you ever since  
How someone jumped off a bridge  
At the same time, they started selling  
Watermelons have risen in price this year

Note:

Strengthening the internationalization of economic relations between states and the deformation of the economy are possible causes of inflation, causing food prices to rise.

Winter's Soul  
LM Maggio

The Earth, sleeping through the coldest months of the year,  
Incites an ancient fragment within that, too, longs for slumber.  
A glacial Dark shadow, as blood diverts to deeper, vital regions.  
As if in mourning, stillness shrouds; silence envelops,  
While stars twinkle wanly in indigo skies -  
Holding promise of a rending brightness soon to burn.  
The Winter Soul aches.

I settle into the midnight duvet filled with feathers, stones - Steadfastly hibernating;  
Isolating from those who blindly proceed like newborn rats fleeing floodwaters -  
As if death hadn't won, sleep doesn't call, insistent -  
Scurrying to purchase, consume, chatter, push.  
Prey to obligation, a captive of familiarity.  
Enduring as though earth isn't in requiem.  
The Winter Soul cowers.

This swirl of people spurn What has come before - Who has come before -  
Those who, in these months, paused, perished - if but for a season-  
Following the cycle of the beasts: Repose, reflect, restore.  
Should we not, too, stay silent, absorbing nutrients as the roots do?  
Gathering energy like seeds? Shaking off pretenses, expectations -  
As trees shake off their leaves as the month darkens?  
The Winter Soul eases.

The Old Ways demand we willingly, with grace, accept our death -  
Wrought Spirits mourning buoyant Summer Souls -  
Sheened with sweaty tequila and ocean mist.  
Amidst cold stasis, longing flares for sun that once seared skin.  
But The Lady was laid to rest on a gray October day,  
When the mercury first plummeted; when skies first turned dull.  
The Winter Soul elegizes.

And replacing that brash Summer Soul -  
The Spirit of solar force smeared sticky with melted Popsicle -  
Rises an ancient mountain - a steadfast crag -  
A Winter Crone laughing from deep within that unyielding peak;  
Rumblings reverberating like tectonic plates,  
And guttural moans of a pine, snow-covered, cracking in the forest.  
The Winter Soul howls.

Winter Crone pleads we pause, slumber, reflect.

“Follow me to silence,” she implores in dark, shuddering waves,  
Violently condemning modern, empty obligation.  
Resist Her not - vainly grasping for oxygenated sunlight -  
Summer’s epidermis has decayed, petrified.  
Accept solitude; pray to the beauty of muffled, silent darkness.  
The Winter Soul decomposes.

Devoutly descend into the stillness of death, into gratitude of life -  
And under vast layers of ice and frost and leaves and dirt -  
Through thin, papery, blanched skin and into a heart in torpor -  
The sleeping Earth shall seep into bones, marrow, sinew,  
Forming a new layer of Self, as if another ring on a tree -  
That will endure the blazing demands of looming Summer.  
The Winter Soul galvanizes.

Surrender deeper into death. Then, embrace rebirth.  
Winter Crone’s call quakes within those apostles  
Who, obeisant, on bended knee, succumbs -  
Furiously railing against demands, routine -  
Divesting conformed obligation, forced productivity;  
Until that fragment within them awakens, incited.  
The winter soul arises.

Out of Time  
Hannah Glickstein

The geriatric ward smells of piss, dinners, antiseptic, and an undercurrent of something worse – decomposition? The bloke in the next bed has gone off his rocker. He’s been making funny noises. That’s why the family keeps his curtain shut. He didn’t want to see the poor bugger anyway. It wasn’t right to gawp at someone losing their grip; losing control of their face. He’d never slowed down for car crashes and he wasn’t about to start now.

His curtain is half-closed. Doctors come and go, talking slowly and clearly to him as if he’s simple. Edging away; murmuring. He thought he heard them mention pathways. A rock-solid blond, who looks like she could snap him in half with one hand, hands him a tray of slops with a spoon. Soft potatoes and soft meat; jelly that tastes of the plastic container. He eats it anyway. As always after eating these days, he nods off.

He’s a boy standing on the thick hoovered carpet of his mother’s immaculate lounge. It must be home because Mr. Sheen is stinging his nostrils. There aren’t any books, or much of anything in there: women’s magazines on the glass coffee table and a white statue of the Virgin Mary with her arms outstretched next to the soft-focus wedding photograph over the mantelpiece. Lace curtains create permanent twilight. She’s shouting: she told him before she doesn’t want him going out at night. God knows what they get up to and God knows where; he was going to get himself arrested one of these days and it would be nothing more than what he deserved; shouldn’t expect his father to come and rescue him when it happened. If he wanted to destroy his education for the sake of some stinking foreigner she wasn’t about to stop him; he was old enough to earn his living and shouldn’t expect to feel welcome in their house forever. If he only knew how hard they’d worked to give him a good education. He was throwing it away. Laughing in their faces. She’s hamming it up. Her face is a lemon collapsing inwards from decay. He knows what he’s about to say.

She pauses, savouring her power. He opens his mouth before she can start again. Speaks slowly at first and quietly. ‘Take your ignorant beak out of my life Mummy. You walk around this house swallowing pills, cleaning and polishing like it will scrub the dirt out of your soul and blame Daddy for all our problems – but only behind his back.’ His hands are shaking. ‘You’re too scared to live your life. *And* you’re a junkie. A pathetic druggie. I hate you. You want me to be scared like you are – to slave away for money; the rest of the time, sit indoors watching TV looking down my nose at other people through your spotless curtains.’ He’s shouting. ‘But you never can make me do what you want! I’ll see who I like. It’s nothing to do with you. How do you know it’s a girl I’m seeing anyway? I only told you they were black. What if it’s a man?’

He slams the door; walks about the streets for an hour. With no money, he realises, you can’t even warm your hands on a cup of tea.

She didn’t speak to him for months. He found it difficult to sleep after not saying a word to a single soul all evening; it was hard to concentrate. When he finally couldn’t take the silent treatment another day, he quit his A-levels and got a job in London. She rang him once, at Easter. Probably wanted to know if he had kids. Said his name in a frightened voice. He hung up. That was nearly fifty years ago. He didn’t go to her funeral though he heard about it from the one cousin he was still friends with on Facebook. The relatives would have loved seeing him as a failure. It didn’t bother him much anymore: only sometimes when the skinny bastard from his grammar school who’d skipped off to Cambridge surfaced presenting the news.



His eyes open. A movement behind him makes him turn. The fragile woman he was screaming at stood there silhouetted against the light blue hospital curtain, an antique China doll; Michelangelo's Virgin holding the dead body of Christ. He tries to shout, 'It's still your fault you mad junkie.' But his voice comes out thin and whining. Still, each word shakes her like he's smashing her.

A nurse is talking. It sounds like noises when your head's underwater. He keeps his mouth shut while the nurse is in there with them. When she adjusts the tubes hanging above the bed the tops of her arms move like jelly.

Someone somewhere cries out in pain. He knows his mother's there, but can't find her. As if she has a right to hide from him! She hated him first; he can feel her hate in the centre of him. It burns. Nothing will clear it out. None of the women he knew ever could: when there still were any women - or men - who wanted to know him.

The nurse's hands move his body carefully like you would a sedated predator. The nurse is at the other end of the tunnel. He has to find his mother again before he falls into that hole. Say sorry. To say sorry. Sorry mummy. He means it now. Finally. There's another cry: it's himself. The nurse makes a lazy noise: like you would with a baby you didn't care about. He doesn't want her meddling. He closes his eyes and hears someone laughing – his mother. What's she so happy about all of a sudden?

As the visions pass away, so will the old man, with no one to register his absence but the interfering grandmother next door who complains about his increasingly senile incontinent old bulldog going mad at butterflies - scaring her grandkids rigid.

The World, As Broken in the Last War  
Robert Beveridge

This is nothing new, just  
reconfigured. Provincial  
has always been the lay  
of the land, whether  
in countries or on meteors.  
Scads of redwood dictators  
arise to quell the curdled  
masses; you wonder if it's  
your job to put them down.  
Your barstool says no, not yet,  
quaff another drink first,  
plan your assault. Whitestone  
will be there tomorrow,  
and tomorrow, and tomorrow.



What happens in Nebraska? Follow Cat Dixon's journey across the state as she explores misconceptions, unrequited love, and longing. Dixon believes what happens in Nebraska doesn't stay in Nebraska; instead, her poems wade into the Missouri River and then launch readers into the clouds above, the ancient stars light years away, and eventually, they plummet to the heartland's cornfields where the distance between people is simultaneously vast and fleeting.

Get your copy at:

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CAT DIXON is the author of *Eva* and *Too Heavy to Carry* (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2016 and 2014) and *The Book of Levinson* and *Our End Has Brought the Spring* (Finishing Line Press, 2017 and 2015), and the chapbook, *Table for Two* (Poet's Haven, 2019). Cat is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review* and an adjunct instructor at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. Her poetry and reviews have appeared in numerous journals. She was the co-editor of *Watching the Perseids: The Backwaters Press Twentieth Anniversary Anthology* (BWP, 2017). She lives in Nebraska with her children, Pierce and Leven.

Lizard People  
Kris Green

“What are you doing down here?”

Wishing he could just take a step back into the musky basement shadows and disappear, Ed froze. Dale tried to be a good brother. He just didn't understand. The creek of each step told Ed it was too late to hide anything. Dale could already see.

“Nothing. Leave me alone.”

Ed leaned over the table and put down the screwdriver. It was pointless to hide the device. It was pointless to even try to lie about it.

“Mom tells me you've been down here for weeks. Barely eating, working on...” Dale's voice trailed off as if he surveyed the odd dome-shaped device that looked like a child's fat rocket.

“I'm fine.”

“You're not fine, brother. The institute should've helped you with this.”

“I'm fine. They helped me to see what I needed to see. They helped me to see what must be done.”

“And what is that?” Dale pointed at the table.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? It looks like a bomb.”

Ed shrugged as if to say, so what?

“You know mom can't handle you when you're like this.”

“I'm not bad. I feel a lot better. I'm doing a lot better!”

“Then what are you doing?”

“When the doors of perception....”

“Don't quote me, Huxley! I did not leave work to come here and have you quote Huxley to me!”

“I didn't ask you to come.” Ed's voice was barely a whisper.

“Mom did. She's worried about you.”

“I see the world as it should be. You don't know what's coming?”

“What's coming?”

“Knowledge is power.” Then seeing something in his brother's face, he wondered how detached his brother was from this. Did he understand? “You don't want this power. With power comes responsibility and that is a....”

“A burden you should share.”

“What's your game? You don't want it.” Ed slammed his hand so hard on the table the device rocked back and forth. Ed steadied it making sure the wires hadn't slipped out.

“Maybe I already know.”

Ed's eyes narrowed as he looked at his brother.

"I know. How would I not know? This isn't the way."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"But with the Lizard People coming... the uprising!"

"It's not the way."

"The revolution is here."

"It's not time yet."

"It won't affect us. It won't affect mom. It'll destroy the monsters that are out there living there day to day expanding and growing constantly in power. They are hiding who they are in plain sight. Don't you understand? This could be a quick victory for us!"

"That's not the way. If someone found out what you are doing? What then? How would we be able to help you? If anything, you'd take mom and me down with you!"

"It's too late now. The device is ready. I'm not willing to wait for the revolt to fight. We must draw first blood."

"We already have."

"Come on, upstairs."

Ed turned back to his machine and fiddled with the wires.

"Come upstairs, brother. Let's eat and rest."

"You know the difference between warm-blooded and cold-blooded?"

Dale shrugged.

"Cold-blooded animals adapt to the environment while warm-blooded internal temperatures have to stay the same."

"So?"

"It's a weakness that can be exploited."

"I don't get it."

"Don't worry about it." He lifted the dome-shaped device and pressed the two sides together. He heard the small click.

"Come on," Dale said. "Let's go upstairs."

Ed put the device down and followed his brother up the stairs. He paused to look back at the blinking red light. He felt tired in his skin, thinking it was time to shed it soon.

His stomach rumbled hearing the crickets and the other crawling things before he saw them. Dale sat down at the table and scooped a hand full of them into his mouth.

His mother smiled at him. "Eat." She said handing him a bowl where he could see the crickets and spiders and caterpillars crawling over each other. "Eat! I found a

wonderful stash in the garden this morning.”

Ed took a bite. There was nothing he could do now. The revolt against the humans would happen soon. He would eat. He would gather his strength for the revolution.

Princess on Parade  
Martin Pedersen

I got carpal-tunnel  
from my dreams  
of being a Princess  
in a parade  
waving to the crowd  
especially young girls  
dreaming of being me  
not knowing or imagining  
that I menstruate  
that chocolate makes me break out  
that heavy makeup feels weird --  
my job here is to wave  
to be adored and perfect  
to wear a happy mask --  
and it's funny because  
I need a cigarette  
to check my voicemail  
maybe even lie on Malibu Beach --  
this is a Christian nation  
they adore a perfect one  
a dusty man of color  
in raggy clothes, bearded  
not waving, talking funny  
smelling of garlic and wine --  
no thanks -- his wrists  
hurt too from the nails  
but there the comparison ends  
on a flowery float or a jackass  
we all have to enter the city --  
somehow, someday, on time  
to disappoint those young girls  
when they see me & you leaving  
by the back door  
in street clothes  
no wig, no smile  
rubbing our sore wrists  
going home to Netflix and ramen:  
knowing how it's lonely  
up on the pedestal.

Under the Apple Tree  
Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar

A simple man, Edgar Cummings lived in a cottage with his mother long past the time when others began courting for a wife. He fed the chickens, milked the goat, and helped his mother, day after day and year after year. Broad-shouldered and strong-backed, Edgar earned extra money as a hired hand on the neighboring farm, sowing the corn and reaping the harvest.

After his hearty dinner of meat and potatoes every night, before he lay down to rest, Edgar sat under the apple tree, at least for a few minutes, even when the land rested under a blanket of snow. A quiet man of simple pleasures, he looked out at the sky and counted the stars, shining and distant, as he enjoyed a glass of ale and maybe a few pieces of taffy if wages allowed. Sometimes, his mother joined him.

And so it was, day after day and year after year, and the trajectory of Edgar's life probably would have continued in this vein until he turned old and decrepit. But then the Robertson family moved into the old forge across the way, and everything changed.

The Robertsons slid into the rhythm of village life, adding new and exciting chords to the melody. A blacksmith, Mr. Robertson's skills became the talk of the town, and men from far and wide traveled to the village to shod their horses with his superior wares. Mrs. Robertson's blackberry pie won the coveted first place prize at the Independence Day picnic, and every lady in town yearned to discover the secret to that recipe. Embraced into the bosom of the community, Mrs. Robertson soon received invitations to sewing circles and Bible study groups. Little Martha Robertson's cherubic cheeks and warm brown eyes radiated sunshine to everyone she passed as she held onto her mother's skirt with her chubby paw.

Once Mr. Robertson met his neighbor, the brawny, taciturn young man who worked like an ox, the parsimonious blacksmith began giving Edgar odd jobs, paying him half what he'd grant another lad. Edgar lacked the mental faculty for the finer skills of the trade, but he took orders and hauled metal, and cleaned out horse stalls with nary a grunt or complaint.

Little Martha, shy and quiet herself, adored her neighbor, this gentle giant, and the villagers became accustomed to seeing the two unlikely friends sitting together under the apple tree, large and small, chewing their taffy in companionable silence. Edgar's days had played a single note for many years, but now he embraced this unexpected harmony of friendship. A thirty-year-old man and a four-year-old girl: separated by decades and gender, they were yet so similar in their ways.

At dusk one warm, hazy evening in late September, Edgar could scarcely contain his excitement. A new taffy flavor! Peppermint! Little Martha would jump for joy, clapping her hands in delight and giggling in glee. He waited under the apple tree as the sun set.

Night fell, and the stars shone, and *still*, she did not come.

Where *was* she? He got up, unwrapping a piece of taffy and popping it into his mouth, to ease his craving and worry.

Edgar skulked through the cornfield and around the smithy, peeking into corners in case Little Martha wanted to play her beloved game of hide and seek. How naughty she was! He looked past the garden and under the haystack. He crept into the stable.

And there he found her, in the horse trough, hiding. Face down, her two yellow braids floating like water lilies. He turned her over, ready to surprise her, but Little Martha's open brown eyes were flat, not warm. Was she sleeping?



Edgar did not know what to do. He wanted his friend to wake up. He picked up Little Martha's cold, wet form and carried her back to her parent's cottage.

He knocked on the door, still chewing his taffy. He hoped Mr. and Mrs. Robertson would help. He wanted Little Martha to come to sit under the apple tree with him.

The Robertsons opened their door. When their eyes absorbed the corpse of their daughter, the Robertsons also did *not* know what to do. They keened and wailed; their family now forever shrouded in grief.

Suddenly, the Robertsons were like wolves, thirsting for blood. They yelled and screamed, shrieked and bawled, and the other villagers appeared, creeping out of the night like mist.

They raged at Edgar. They roared at him, "Killer!"

Edgar's hulking frame seemed to shrink. He *tried* to talk, to say that Little Martha was sleeping and he wanted her to wake up, but his mouth was clogged with taffy.

He gurgled as they grabbed him. He cried and finally screeched, the taffy eventually loosening his jaws. But it was too late to explain, and the noose was upon him. The villagers hanged him from a branch of the apple tree.

The stars glimmered in the bleak, moonless night, and only his mother mourned him as Edgar's large, lumbering body swung like a pendulum, back and forth, back and forth, until finally still, under the apple tree.

The Colour in Which We Love  
 Brian Lee

*The Straits Times, 4 Sep 2022: “Who of these two prospective suitors would most appeal to women here - a handsome man with little to no savings, or an average-looking chap who is savvy in managing money?”*

paint the streets green—forget  
 about red. red on flags, red  
 of the setting sun, red of  
 our blood, red of saga seeds and  
 passion; you shall discard them

for the lushness of our trees  
 and our laurels, yes, that is  
 what we are, or rather, what  
 we by the wisdom of our fathers  
 have willed ourselves to become:

now behold the city we built  
 in a garden. now convert yourselves  
 and surrender your hands to the  
 irrepressible forces of our  
 manufactured nature. green.  
 green are the triumphant alleyways;

green are our garlands upon  
 the PIE, BKE, SLE, ECP—  
 and if you watch closely  
 with a keen eye for flotsam,  
 even the dew that rises from  
 the quay at dawn is our manicured green.

watch now, even the rice you  
 are about to spoon into your  
 hungry mouth is green: the  
 chicken is green, the sprouts  
 green; all is green. your fingertips, they

carry the scent of the \$5 wads  
pressed into your wallet,

they are a reminder  
that we are up and alive today  
primarily because of green.  
do not waltz benighted  
into your lover's kiss—  
pause before eyes pool unto lips.

the hand round the waist  
in the raging disquiet  
of the underground east-west line  
(probably somewhere

between raffles place and city hall)  
I am not asleep. are you  
watching the interchange  
of passion and prudence,  
of love and trees?

King Arthur's Rectangular Table  
Alex Dermody

Mr. McCloud, the owner of McCloud's Furniture, raised a fist to knock on the castle's thick wooden door, but before he could do so it swung open, and there, wearing pajamas and his crown, looking like an impatient child on Christmas morning, stood King Arthur.

"About damn time," said King Arthur, anxiously staring over Mr. McCloud's shoulder, watching as ten McCloud's employees opened the back of a horse-drawn wagon.

"My son Michael, he spent the last two months perfecting your table," said Mr. McCloud, pride in his voice. "It was his first solo project, and I'm more than pleased with the results."

King Arthur accepted a clipboard and pen from Mr. McCloud. "I *need* this table. My knights, they are refusing to sit at a rectangular..." King Arthur stopped his sentence short as the table emerged from the back of the wagon. "What ... what is that?"

Mr. McCloud watched his workers struggle up the driveway. "Your table?"

King Arthur's head grew fuzzy. His legs felt like pudding. "The table I ordered, is supposed to be round! That table is rectangular!"

"There a problem here?" asked Michael McCloud, one of the table carriers arriving at the castle's front door.

"There is indeed!" said Mr. McCloud and King Arthur in unison.

"I specifically ordered a *round* table," said King Arthur, pointing to his handwritten request on the clipboard.

"You were serious about that?" Michael replied. "I thought you were joking. I mean, come on ... a *round* table? For a king? What? The king sits at the head of the table. It's a power thing."

Through gritted teeth, King Arthur said, "I have hundreds—no—*thousands* of rectangular tables, all of which my juvenile knights refuse to sit at. They say the round table is a symbol, meant to show that we are all 'equal,' and that when we fight, we fight as 'one,' or whatever."

Michael, positive he wasn't explaining things properly, rubbed the rectangular table's polished and shiny stone surface. "Look at this bad boy," he said. "Talk about a table that maximizes your majesty. You sit at the head of this thing, not one of your knights will question who they're fighting for."

King Arthur could no longer stand it. "I'm not paying for this monstrosity!" he roared.

"Like hell you are!" Michael said. "I sank my heart and soul in that stone!"

"Enough, Michael!" said Mr. McCloud, smacking his son's chest with the clipboard. "Take the table and load it back into the wagon this instant."

"But, Dad—"

The look Mr. McCloud shot his son sent shivers down the boy's spine. Michael motioned for the other workers to pick up the table, and away they went.

“A thousand apologies, your majesty,” said Mr. McCloud. “Michael, he’s been a mess ever since his fiancé broke things off last year. I thought an assignment of this magnitude would ground him, give him some direction.” Mr. McCloud sighed. “But that’s no excuse for the inconvenience he’s caused. If you can accept my apology, I will expedite the building of your round table, which I will construct.”

King Arthur wanted to trust his gut—he wanted to behead the whole lot and burn McCloud’s Furniture to the ground—but before he could act, something gave him pause.

A teenage girl began to climb down the vines on the side of the castle, having exited through Prince Amr’s window. She expertly scaled the stone wall, and upon reaching the ground, the girl turned, realized she was amongst mixed company, and said, “Oh, erm, good morning, King Arthur. A bit cold for September, no?”

King Arthur massaged his temples, jostling his crown up and down, up and down. “Elizabeth—I *really* want to behead someone this morning. Please do run home before it’s you.”

Elizabeth vanished into a cloud of dust and dirt.

King Arthur looked up at his teenage son’s bedroom window, fire in his eyes. This was the third maiden this month. He then gazed out at the McCloud’s Furniture wagon, out at Michael McCloud. King Arthur’s face softened. The two boys couldn’t have been more than a year apart in age.

“Let’s forget this morning’s events,” said King Arthur, shaking his head. “Kids ... I don’t think they’ll ever listen. I might as well board up that boy’s damn window.”

Mr. McCloud couldn’t believe his luck. Relief pulsed through his veins. “Thank you, King Arthur! Thank you! I’ll have your round table completed the week after next.”

King Arthur extended a hand towards Mr. McCloud, two fathers trying their best. They shook and parted company. As the McCloud’s Furniture wagon rolled down the dirt road, King Arthur, pajama pants flapping in the morning breeze, thought about the proper punishment for Prince Amr yet again sneaking girls into the castle.

The sound of galloping horses and jangling metal filled the air. A group of knights in shining armor rounded the corner and came to a halt in front of the castle.

One knight flipped up the visor on his helmet. “What of the table?” he asked.

King Arthur realized bad news was due. He held up his hands as if to say don’t shoot the messenger. “The round table, it is not yet ready.”

“We knew it!” one knight said.

“You think you’re better than us!” said another knight.

“I bet he didn’t even *order* a round table!” said a third knight.

King Arthur groaned. “I can assure you, the round table was ordered. It will be here in a few weeks. But, in the meantime, we have a battle to plan, so please step inside.”

The knights obeyed their king, armored shoulders sagging, dragging their sword tips through the grass and mud as they trudged into the castle.



Kim Silva – The Fugitive

## Pinky

Cameron Vanderwerf

One morning, she awoke to find that her pinky was missing. There was no sign of violence or injury. The skin and joint were simply smoothed over. Later that day, she heard noises in the walls, and she knew that it had to be the pinky. It had fled from her hand and was now roaming around on its own. She tried to coax it out of the walls, but she didn't know what fingers liked. Maybe something that would be pleasant to touch. But no matter what soft or interesting items she left around, the finger never showed itself where she could see it. Eventually, the noise in the walls stopped, and she resigned herself to the idea that the finger had either died or fled.

She did her best to adjust to life with nine fingers. She considered herself lucky that it was just a pinky and not a more important digit, like a thumb. Still, she could never completely put the pinky out of her mind. She wondered if it was out in the world somewhere, and if so, what was it doing. The thing that nagged at her was the question of why the pinky ran off in the first place. Would her other fingers be tempted to disloyalty? Would she awake one day to find only palms on her hands? She did her best to treat her remaining nine fingers with utmost gentleness and kindness. She got weekly manicures and hand massages, and she gave up tennis.

Eventually, she grew accustomed to the missing finger. On the few occasions that someone asked about it, she either evaded the question or made up a mundane excuse. "Kitchen accident, you don't want to know." Sometimes, people seemed to treat her differently, either with pity or even slight revulsion, but most people didn't seem to care. Her love life experienced virtually no change after the pinky's flight. Some men even seemed intrigued and attracted by the four-fingered hand.

The man she fell in love with was one of those men. He often said that he loved every part of her, "including the missing part." And then he'd kiss the place where her finger had been. He kissed that place repeatedly whenever they made love. One evening, after they'd dated for a year, he took her to a fancy restaurant, and she could tell that he was going to propose. He'd probably do it during dessert. Toward the end of the main course, she went to the bathroom. As she washed her hands, she saw something crawling, wormlike, up the side of the sink. It was her pinky. It dove into the ceramic basin and swam-crawled towards her. She watched, transfixed, as it reattached itself.

Back at the table, he proposed during dessert, just as she'd predicted. But when he put the ring on her, he noticed the pinky. He froze and went silent for a moment. He did not rise and hug her. Instead, he grabbed both of her hands and scrutinized them. When he fled the restaurant in a daze, she was at least grateful that he hadn't awkwardly attempted to grab the ring off her finger. She returned the ring to the small jewelry box and told the waiter that it would have to stand as payment for the bill.

Out in the warm night air, she looked at her hands under electric lights. She inspected the pinky closely, trying to see any marks it might have sustained during its unknown wanderings. And maybe, if she looked hard enough, she could discern the qualities that drove it to run off in the first place.

She got into her car, and as she gripped the steering wheel, she worried that none of her fingers felt quite as secure as they had before. If they decided at some point that they wished to be free of her, well there was nothing she could do about it. She hoped that her pinky had returned not to recruit the others to leave, but to warn them about the dangers of the outside world, and to praise the warmth and safety of her hands.

Pretty Flowers  
William Ogden Haynes

His footsteps whisper through the tall grass in the dark,  
as he crosses the field on his way to the wetland. Even at  
night he can see the colorful beauty of the rose mallow,  
marsh marigold, and water hyacinth through the tendrils of spring  
sweetgrass edging the swamp. He follows the trail around  
the marsh and comes to a clearing where a quarter-moon  
sleeps in the branches of the tall live oak overhead. This is where  
his six-year-old daughter disappeared five years ago. She was  
attracted to the wetland flowers and one late afternoon explored  
her way into oblivion. He comes here at night so no one  
will see him, or cast blame. He comes with the hope he will  
see her, knowing he will not. But what can one do when  
nothing can be done? The routine is all he has left, and it gives  
him some measure of comfort to know he still hopes, waits, and  
bears witness. He doesn't cry or become emotional, but  
feels he still must complete the empty, mundane daily ritual,  
like showering or cleaning the house. And then, he returns  
home, his vigil completed, gratifying as a well-swept floor.



Come Along and Laugh  
Paul Smith

I like listening to Edith Piaf while I read Soils Reports, the engineering studies that tell you the stability of the earth and how deep water is for the structures we build. Her voice is sharp and penetrating, like a split spoon sampler. Sometimes she's real sad and other times she sounds happy, but not happy like you and I get happy, but a bitter happiness like she just swallowed something that doesn't agree with her. As an engineer, I'm looking for where water might be when we dig. If it's shallow, we'll have to put in well points or at least have a few sumps and run a pump or two twenty-four hours a day to keep things dry till the base is constructed. Sometimes water is at the surface, sometimes you have to go deeper. One of my favorite Piaf songs is *Non, Je ne regretted rien*. – 'I don't have any regrets.' She spits out the words with the contempt of a centrifugal pump. Her sass is right up there at the surface, like groundwater.

However, we all might have regrets. My friend Vito says he has no regrets. He's a good guy but probably hasn't listened to Edith Piaf. He's not in my line of work, either – tunneling, excavating, probing into Mother Earth. And I'll say this about Mother Earth – she doesn't like to be tampered with or mistreated or dug up. She is resistant to change and can frustrate you with her stubbornness. She can flood you out when you take your turbocharged Koehring 1266 backhoe or your humongous Manitowoc 3900 crane with its 4 cubic yard clamshell bucket and start digging and suddenly find yourself up to your hips in water because you and your company didn't pay any mind to the Soils Report. You either didn't read the soil borings that closely or you were busy or thought that water couldn't be this close to the surface. When Edith sings, all of that spiteful contempt she has for men is deep but also right up there below the surface. You have to listen closely and this might take years – years to really listen to a woman and decipher what she is saying behind the disguise of her pleasantries. Once you have caught on, you'd best tread carefully, or maybe don't even tread at her doorstep at all! Women are dangerous! Just ask Mother Earth, if you can get her to talk! Sometimes I can even hear Mother Earth talking with the voice of Edith Piaf, like in *Milord*, a jaunty, chanteuse style song where she comforts us and tells us to 'take it easy' -

. . . *Life gives you all your chances to take them back afterward.* . . .

So have no regrets about anything, like my pal Vito. But what I'd like to tell Vito is that a life lived without any regrets is probably a life not lived. No matter who you are – Beethoven, Churchill, or Piaf, you'll make some mistakes along the way.

Did you know there is an Edith Piaf store? I found it on YouTube. You can get a new, unopened Edith Piaf CD in its original packaging. It sounds corny and mercenary. Would she have any regrets about her songs being marketed this way? She's been dead for years. Who knows? Even Edith probably made a few mistakes and had a few regrets.

Beating Hawthorne to It  
Vern Fein

Herman Melville worked as many jobs as Colonel Sanders,  
store and bank clerk, farm hand and teacher,  
but none but the sea and whaling  
satisfied him into writing the popular *Typee*,  
and other novels of the noble savage,  
first rejected because the critics  
said the tales couldn't be true.

He wrote as deep as Moby Dick  
when the white whale plunged,  
snatched Ahab's leg and soul.

But fame swam off like the white beast,  
flayed by British and American pundits,  
sliced and stripped like a dead whale,  
never to be enjoyed in his lifetime,  
his poetry and *Billy Budd*  
drowning in anonymity,  
Melville ended in a pauper's death.

For thirty years, his masterpiece  
lay in the shallows on a few library shelves  
until the great American scholar  
Carl Van Doren discovered his genius  
and brought it to the shore of fame  
where it will swim forever.

When I get to Heaven,  
I want to be the first to tell Melville  
of his glory unless his best friend  
Hawthorne beats me to it.

Rescue  
Mike Lee

They were never supposed to meet. Larry often mused that one, the other, or both had done something shitty in their respective past lives.

Larry first saw Adra in the smoking area in front of the high school. It was in late November, the day of Thanksgiving dismissal. Breezy, the cold of winter shortly arriving.

He failed to graduate due to excessive absences from a Health class. It turned out later Larry never had to take it. He could have gone into something simple, easy—like taking basic math or Media Theory.

Instead, it was one last semester—then moving on to the community college.

In the covered atrium, while walking to the parking lot, he was when he looked to his left and saw her.

He paused to stare. The girl wore a white shirt, brown pants, and high-heeled sandals. The grace in her effortless, natural movement and how she smoked made her singular and memorable.

Then she leaned against the wall, lifted her leg, and stubbed out her cigarette with the sole of her sandal.

Larry moved onto the parking lot, jamming the keys into the ignition. He had 20 minutes to get to work at Texaco.

The radio came on: “President-elect Reagan...” Larry immediately turned off the dial. He recalled Election night. He was at Club Foot, watching Gang of Four perform. The electoral results showed on a big screen behind them.

“Get out and fuckin’ vote!” the guitarist said. After the show, Larry silently walked to the car, knowing his life was changed, maybe forever.

Larry pushed the cassette into the slot. Echo and the Bunnymen filled the car. *I don’t know what I want anymore. First, I want a kiss, and then I want it all.*

*Won’t you come on down to my...*

Yes, rescue. I know, Larry thought while pulling out of the parking lot and taking the ramp to Sixth Street.

Decades later, he told his therapist the story about the girl in the fisherman’s cap and the Echo and the Bunnymen song.

This had been a challenging year. Larry needed someone to fix his life for a change.

“Life is hard, but it does not need to be so. Stop punishing yourself over this relationship. Focus instead on prioritizing your needs,” she said.

With a sigh, she continued. “Yes, this can feel downright alien and awkward. But you are dealing with an apparition--a babadook.”

She didn’t skip a beat. “She doesn’t want your help. Only craves your attention and does things to scare you.”

Her therapist finished with, “This is about control. You need to forge a pathway to lead you from this.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been in the relationship for 40 years. In a box. Think about it. Next week, I will see you still in that box.”

After cutting out of the telehealth session, Larry picked up his cell phone to check his messages. This was an unending scroll. Larry thought of a Greek fisherman's cap, brown pants, and a cigarette stubbed out on the sandal's sole as he read.

Yet, Larry would never have seen her if he had not taken that Health class or glanced to his left while jangling his keys, thinking about how much he hated working at the gas station and that Reagan had won the election.

Sobbing, Larry recalled that afternoon in November was forty years, six months, and 22 days before Adra Gallagher finally found rescue at a subway platform somewhere in Brooklyn.

Tesseract of Two Homes  
 Jesse Fleming

Once  
 by sea  
 I found  
 my toes  
 curling into  
 a black sand  
 bursting, oozing  
 with waters from  
 all other waters  
 all other rocks  
 absorbing &  
 becoming sand  
 breaking back into  
 the beyond three inches from  
 puddled jellyfish and  
 lightyears  
 from those clotting waters

Once  
 in city  
 I ate  
 an air  
 of claybreak  
 motorbreath  
 more sunshine  
 asking how kind is  
 a cement education  
 when people insist on  
 where you're from?  
 I cannot say  
 my own bloodstream  
 a fickle thing in light  
 of such petroleum ecstasy  
 and unfurled invitation

Fishing Vest  
Paul Hostovsky

I don't like fishing.  
But I like hyperbole.  
It had a hundred pockets.  
I saw it in the window  
of the sporting goods store  
and I thought: now every poem  
shall have its pocket. And I thought:  
let there be plenty of pens  
and pocket combs, a pocket  
dictionary, a box of raisins,  
a pocket watch, a deck of cards,  
and a pack of cigarettes.  
I like a poem that can hold  
numerous small swindles  
and lots of harmonicas,  
a childhood memory  
of an imitation turd  
from a novelty shop  
on Hancock Street. I hadn't  
smoked in years, but now  
I wanted a pack of cigarettes.  
And I wanted a deck of cards.  
I didn't want to go fishing.  
I didn't give a shit  
about fishing. What I wanted  
was a poem that could hold  
everything. Everything I wanted  
and everything I didn't want  
but was dealt anyway.  
I wanted those pockets.  
A hundred of them.  
And the one that got away.

The Jump into Oblivion  
John Grey

Her grandfather dove from the very same bridge.  
He dove. He didn't jump.  
And he was only twenty-five at the time,  
a fine swimmer  
and the cynosure of all you women's eyes  
off the high board at the local swimming pool.

Sure, it was a little reckless.  
But he was confident  
that he knew what he was doing.  
He could hit the water,  
hands together in perfect prayer,  
but without the accompanying plea to God.  
And he'd only go under as many feet  
as he could safely ascend.

The cops hassled him about it.  
When they weren't applauding that is.  
He got off with a warning.  
He was allowed to go on with his life,  
marry, have children who, in turn,  
had children.

Now one of those kids is nineteen  
and she's up there now,  
right at the spot where her grandfather  
took that famous leap.  
But she's not out to show the gathering crowd  
her skills, her bloodline.  
She's all screwed up on opioids.  
She's been kicked out of the house.  
Her head is a shambles.  
Her guts are all wrenched out.

Her grandfather was near-balletic.  
She'll just be a dropped stone.  
He hit the water with barely a splash.  
She'll be all splash.  
But he made a big splash after.  
That's where the irony comes in.



In and Out in Thirty Minutes  
Jon Wesick

The shortness of breath and pain in my chest finally convinced me I needed coronary bypass surgery. I don't trust doctors. They were wrong about margarine, carbs, and eggs. I guess you could say, I'm a skeptic, a free thinker, and a man who does his research. That's why I went to Lube-a-Chevy. I didn't even need an appointment. The guy on the phone said to come right in. A clean-cut employee met me outside the garage while I was still in my car.

"What can we do for you, today?" he asked. Nikolai wore gray coveralls with his name embroidered on a patch over his left pocket. His eyes were the deep blue of Lake Baikal.

"I'm here to get coronary bypass surgery."

"Why don't you give me your keys and help yourself to some coffee in the waiting room while I check your odometer?" He wrote down my mileage while I entered the waiting room.

I inserted a K-cup into the coffee machine and pushed the button. The comforting smell of petrochemicals filled the air and a sign next to the window that looked out onto the garage said, "No Entry for Insurance Purposes." A display included a vial of dirty, transmission fluid. There was a stack of vintage *People Magazines* on a table next to a chair upholstered in gray fabric. I took my coffee and sat down.

"Mr. Blumtrapster." Nikolai entered. He held an air filter that was black with soot. "We recommend changing the filter for \$29.99 and those windshield wipers look a little worn."

"What about my coronary bypass?" I asked.

"How much are you thinking of spending?" Nikolai asked.

How considerate of him. In the hospital, you don't know what a procedure will cost until you get the bill. At Lube-a-Chevy the prices were posted on the wall: Oil Change \$49.99, Radiator Flush \$89.99, Balance Tires: \$39.99. I didn't see the price for a coronary bypass, though.

"I don't know." I stroked my chin. "Maybe three thousand dollars."

"Three thousand dollars, huh? Yeah, I could do that." Nikolai typed at the computer behind the desk. "Using polyethylene, windshield-wiper-fluid tubing will save you a bunch. We usually close at 9:00 PM. Why don't I book you for 10:30 PM on Thursday? That way I can do some research. Cash upfront before the surgery, okay? By the way, it'll be \$129.99 for the oil change and filter."

I could tell he was a straight shooter right away. He was confident, had a firm handshake, and didn't talk down to me. I handed him my credit card.

"See you then."

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Just when I thought I had everything worked out, a fly landed in the ranch dressing. My wife said, "You need to get a second opinion." I told her I'd ask the guys at the Last Call but Enid was having none of it. That's how I found myself at Norma's Hair Salon.

“Just take a seat and the next stylist will be right with you,” a woman behind the register said.

I sat next to what looked like the same vintage *People Magazines* I’d seen at the Lube-a-Chevy. Three stylists were fussing with women’s hair, leaving about half the stations empty. The youngest, in a sleeveless shirt that showed off her armpit hair colored a furious magenta, was doing a dye job involving clips, a plastic shower cap, and bits of tinfoil on an older woman. The air smelled of chemicals more noxious than anything you’d find at a plutonium recycling plant. I picked up a magazine and flipped to an article about Princess Di.

“Hi, I’m Darla.” The punk stylist interrupted my 1980s nostalgia. “You want a trim or are we thinking of something more daring?”

“I need an expert opinion on coronary bypass surgery and couldn’t come up with a better place to ask than here.” I could think of a better place, the Last Call, but saying so would have hurt Darla’s feelings.

“Got it covered!” Darla said. “Come on back and take a seat.

“What about her?” I pointed to the woman in the plastic shower cap, who’d passed out from the fumes after I sat at Darla’s station.

“The dye needs another twenty minutes to set.” Darla spread a barber’s cape over my shoulders and sprayed my hair with water. “She’ll be fine.”

I was beginning to have second thoughts. I liked the three-by-five photo of Ultraman Darla had taped to her mirror but with all the loose hair on the linoleum floor, Norma’s Salon looked less clean than the garage at Lube-a-Chevy. Nevertheless, I continued.

“I don’t trust the medical establishment so I arranged for a mechanic to do my coronary bypass. Well, not a mechanic. He’s a technician at an oil change shop.”

“I know what you mean.” Darla measured a lock of my hair, held it between her fingers, and snipped. “Big pharma’s the worst. First, there was Vioxx and then the opioids. You know, my roommate’s sister-in-law had good luck with Ephedra, malaria tablets, and horse pills. Have you tried them?”

The pain was back. It felt like the Loch Ness Monster was standing on my chest.

“Too late for that,” I said. “I need the surgery.”

“My boyfriend knows a lot about cars.” Darla gazed upward like a saint from a medieval painting. “He doesn’t work out of a garage or anything but I bet he could do your surgery in the parking lot behind the dollar store.”

I turned her down. Darla’s boyfriend couldn’t match Lube-a-Chevy’s twelve-point inspection and free oil top-offs. I mean, I’m not an idiot, you know.

## Carnivorous Bunnies

Hana Cao

### I

When the Ancients lived in hearth  
and dined in thunderstorms,  
when blight of fleas rode the sea,  
you locked your door tight, not against bears  
or slinking shadows of the night,  
but her naked soles warming fallen berries and acorn husks.  
Eyelashes wet with moondrops. Red gullet of teeth.  
Beware of those conniving, carnivorous bunnies! Beware  
of her soft throbbing belly, grumbling for fresh flesh.  
Palimpsestic tracks in the tangled mist.  
Nowadays, where pleasure is contained  
inside forget-me-not pills and cyber clouds,  
she wears shimmery lip gloss and sucks on lollipop.  
Hide smelling of drugstore vanilla.  
Hoppity-Hop. Skirt flaring. Hopscotch on nimble legs. Ivory legs.  
Fidgety legs. Chlorine-kissed legs. Exposed legs.

### II

Cavernous pink, dunaliella salina leaks  
onto the linoleum, gaping wounds  
fringed in fur. Those rickety bunny ears,  
too big for her head, maniac  
twitches in untuned fugue, grasping  
for people sounds, car sounds, dog sounds,  
washing machine sounds, cloud sounds, sounds yet to be born.  
You pray she wouldn't notice, you pray  
she would.

### III

Munches. You hear her munching behind you  
and you imagine little sacred bones breaking,  
french fries scented metacarpals.  
You wonder if she prefers milkshake over latte, liver  
over pancreas. Someone should write a manual

for the heart. Don't look. Heart-shaped sunglasses loom. Don't move. Naked soles, hopping between narrow margins, sooted as if donning black socks. Don't breathe.

Her ears twitch. Don't mistake carnivorous bunnies for anything other than carnivorous bunnies. Round in circles she goes, knees bend, then extend, tender calves, breadcrumbs falling from her lap. As she is about to hoppity-hop down the flooded curb, you seize her ear. Open the door.

#### IV

How to Take Care of Carnivorous Bunnies

(if you must repudiate previous warnings):

she likes her ears scratched, but not too much;

remove your hand immediately

when her lovely button nose flares; take her to Dairy Queen

at least twice a week; avoid strolls in the park after dark;

she has no scut, don't look for one;

keep the bougainvillea out of her reach,

same with flammables and your grandpa's war

memorabilia; maintain bath water at the degree of deliquescing;

bury all chocolates in your vicinity;

never store raw meat at home;

try your best to ignore

all the missing person posters;

try your best to overcome your fear

of sharp objects and sudden bursts of giggling.

If you find yourself plagued by insomnia,

remove her teeth.

Do it while she sleeps.

#### V

Those floppy bunny ears now flightless wings.

Carnivorous no more.

Moving Day  
Katie Coleman

We chase scraps on the driveway. The dustbin lies on its side. An apple tree bursts with fruit. Inside the house, we meet the previous owner.

‘What about our contract?’ we say.

‘I’ll soon be out of your way.’

We enter the living room tutting. The man’s portrait hangs on the wall, we raise our eyebrows. There are no cardboard boxes, no signs of him going. Outside a black sack of rubbish lies under a tree. We race to move it but it unfolds on its hind legs and roars. Its jaws are open wide, and we’re given a flash of teeth.

‘Bear!’ we yell.

Our hearts are like drills. We retreat and the man wrenches us in.

Outside the bear consumes apples, taking them whole, cores and all.

‘Why didn’t you warn us?’ we say.

Every Dog Has His Day  
Roland Goity

It's said the Devil is in the details. Sometimes, however, it's a Guardian Angel.

When Katherine Whitehouse updated her contact information in the online directory of the exclusive El Dorado Country Club in Corona Del Mar, she accidentally fat-fingered the last digit. What should have been a "7" became a "6."

It was a mix of rare circumstances, bad fortune, and downright indolence. There was a bit more, but those are the essential reasons why Ben Maddux had turned out the way he had: jobless, out of shape, and couch-surfing for weeks on end after his girlfriend kicked him out. Reluctantly, but not as reluctantly as one might expect, he gave up on Southern California and moved back to his Midwestern childhood home and the daily expectation of three square meals made by his single mother. They didn't have much in common besides both hating his father, but his mother loved him and hoped beyond hope that Ben would soon land back on his feet.

No surprises here, but while Mrs. Maddux was out all day at the factory, ensuring machines properly stitched back pockets on denim jeans, her son was home reclining on the same twin-size bed from a generation before, pillows stacked under his head, as he played video games on his laptop (really, a "chest-top" in his case). Oh... and texting! He loved to text his old friends from the coast. So, he'd often pause the game and check his phone for replies to his messages. Unfortunately, they were few and far between.

So, indeed, it was quite unusual when his phone bounced and buzzed on his bedside table to wake him up bright and early one morning. He rolled over to read the following text: *49 and still looking fine!* Below it was a clickable image of an Amazon gift card. Curious and not thinking clearly, he followed the link to discover he now had a \$2,000.00 credit at the online store. An hour later another text arrived: *Happy Happy—Have the best birthday ever!* and then another: *Live it up. You deserve it!* They, too, included \$2,000 credits at the e-retail monster. By day's end, a couple more trickled in. Quite a haul! While his birthday wasn't for another two months yet, and he couldn't say for certain who Esmeralda, Gerry, Stefani, Maria, and Aileen were, he didn't question it. After all, he did deserve to live it up, didn't he?!

A week later his mother wrapped herself up in her new winter coat and Ben enjoyed three new video games: *Hellbent Destroyer*, *Beg for Your Life*, and *Choose Your Destruction*. Oh, and he opened an eBay account and told his mother he'd pay her \$1,000 a month's rent for the foreseeable future. She was so proud, she baked him a special dish of rigatoni that evening and opened a fine bottle of red to celebrate.

You see where this is going... Exactly a year later, Ben was again struggling to get by, still at his mother's with the rent payments a thing of the past. Then, lo and behold, a slew of text messages awoke him that morning. *OMG 50!*; *Kiss me Kate—You're still so hot!*; *You don't look half a century!* and so many other messages that streamed in from morning 'till night. Overwhelmed with so much joy he spent most of the day in a stupor, Ben eventually managed to tally the gift certificates that accompanied many of these digital missives. Wouldn't you know it? Ben figured it was enough to last a lifetime! His and Mama's too. Thus, the irredeemable was redeemed, along with all those gift cards.

The rest is simply an epilogue and the need to address a few unanswered questions. Of course, the clues were there. Big ones! But Ben never recorded a phone message for others to hear his voice, nor did he ever answer or return calls he didn't recognize. He wasn't entirely

clueless. He knew how the world worked, and it didn't work this way. People like him rarely ever got lucky. So, why not accept luck unconditionally and without question if it happens to come your way? He embraced it and is now heavily invested in a cryptocurrency venture that's doing phenomenally well.

And what about Katherine Whitehouse? Well, she lost more than a few so-called friends whom she was certain had "ghosted" her on her monumental birthday. However, she hired a private investigator and an attorney or two to look into the matter. As it stands, while she learned she can't lock Benjamin Randall Maddux away for grand theft as she'd hoped, she's angling for punitive damages and a whole lot more in civil court on grounds of defamation of character, among other things.

That's just pissing in the wind, though. Her legal team is telling her she doesn't stand a chance.



Kim Silva - Two Men Smoking



Achilles in Love  
John Walser

To lean careless as a stone worker  
balancing friezes  
on the temple's teetering columns:

to totter slip let go  
like a sparrow  
until he hits the ground:  
the bas relief map of his broken back  
his broken neck: the tributary bends  
of his leg, of the arm behind his head.

Through lamplight like the smoothest horn  
through lamplight like polished ivory:  
no trash swirl of birds calling the night sky.

If only for a moment: this house: this worship:  
these lozenge throated songbirds:  
the silk snap of their wings  
against the bars of cages:

I will simply name the parts:  
ankle, ribcage, hipbone  
browline: her wrist  
soft as fletching:  
tongue, liver, brain, voice, heart:  
I love.

Now I understand his helmet:  
the plume lighted like a thousand wicks:  
his need to fight.  
Even more: his need to run.

Now I understand the shoreline plowed  
into musical scales  
of sunlight and shadows  
through the slats of a blind:

washed away: recut:  
washed away: recut.

Now I understand how he looked beyond me  
beyond the field edge  
beyond the wind  
toward his front door  
toward her waiting  
when I raised my sword.

This, the risk  
for crouching low  
for forgetting for just a second  
a prophecy:  
to love the dark whisked grasses:  
for following the grind of my heart:

how one of us someday must go on  
without the hand held in the middle of the night  
without the sound of floorboards upstairs  
shifting as the other gathers laundry:  
without morning eggs and toast together  
without the orange yolk puncture oozing.

Two in the morning:  
sunrise birds:  
nautical twilight:  
iris, tulip, chrysanthemum  
all flip quick as a card trick.

Not my life as much as hers now.

Love as delicate as any joint,  
as any tendon, any cartilage  
any muscle.

Love: the temple of my own demise:  
this human condition  
the bronze casting of my breaking down.

Murder As a Wake-Up Call  
Joseph Farley

It's quarter to five in the morning. The sun won't rise until after seven. A woman is screaming outside. Sounds like she could be getting assaulted or murdered. She becomes my alarm clock. I try to muster the energy in the January cold to get out of bed and look out the window. It is so warm under the covers. I don't know if it is worth seeing if a homicide is in progress or soon will be.

I should be used to it. This is the way the world is now. Crime is everywhere, every day, every night. And the crazies and the addicts going gaga all over.

I decide to stay under the blankets, keeping warm, a little longer. I listen as the woman continues to scream. I can't move. I'm too tired. It's too cold. She'll have to wait a while if she needs my help. Might be better for her to hope another neighbor is more awake and more considerate.

Someone will call the police I figure. They'll call about the noise, disturbing the peace, if not to report a potential crime.

After a while the screaming stops. By then my legs are half out of bed. That shows due diligence on my part. I slide back under the blankets and go back to sleep. I don't have to get up until nine and rarely go to bed before 1 AM.

No sirens wake me.

Later, when I'm up and dressed, I go to the sill and push back the curtains. I don't see any police tape, chalk lines, or other signs of foul play, just a brick laying on a neighbor's tiny lawn.

I shave, shower, and do my usual morning routine, before stepping outside. I don't see any broken windows on my house or car. I don't see any damage to any of my neighbors' properties.

I walk over to the sidewalk, look up and down the street, and see nothing. No legs sticking out of a trash bag, no blood on the concrete, and no knives or bullet casings left behind. Only a brick on the dead grass of a lawn.

I listen to the news on the car radio while driving to the Frankford Transportation Center. There are no stories about a crime outside my house. Maybe it's too soon. The police reports haven't been snoopied over by reporters looking for a lead. Maybe the media knows about a crime but it's not serious or odd enough to make the news. All crimes can't be on TV or the radio or get in the newspapers. Broadcast time is short. Newspapers only have so many pages.

I park in the SEPTA lot for commuters and walk across the pedestrian bridge, down the steps to where the buses wait for passengers. I go up another set of stairs in a brick and chrome building to get to the turnstile for the elevated. Along the way, I avoid puddles of urine, feces, used needles, and the sleeping or nodding homeless.

I check the news on TV and the radio again after work. I even pick up the next day's newspaper. There's nothing about a murder on my street.

Maybe the killer knocked the lady out with a blunt object, such as a brick, before throwing her into the trunk of his car. Maybe a body, or pieces of one, will turn up in a wooded area, or a river, a few years from now. Maybe it was run-of-the-mill domestic violence, the kind that too many women put up with, the kind that doesn't get reported to the police because of economics (can't lose hubby's or boyfriend's paycheck), the blindness of love (he only hurts me because he cares about me), or the victim's fear of worse violence being directed towards her or her children if she complains.

Who knows? I have no proof of anything because I was too tired to look out the window.

All I know was a woman was screaming outside my house long before dawn.

Downright rude I'd say. It's hard to be someone's hero when you don't have enough sleep. If anyone wants me to save them, it would be wise to schedule your crisis to occur at a better hour.

And if she was just one of the occasional nut jobs that wander up and down Frankford Avenue?

In that case, I'd say, "You won this round. You had me fooled enough to care."

Almost.

A little.

That's often too much. Enough to get you in trouble, make you feel guilty, or need to buy an extra coffee before starting work.

As for the thugs and killers, I'd like to make them scream.

Scream for some peace while they're trying to sleep.

Hopefully in a prison cell.

Down  
Holly Day

You have to get down on your knees to scrub a floor. There's no other way to do it.

You have to get down on your knees and put your back into it, like some kind of supplicant like a penitent crawling towards the altar of a vicious deity that demands you prostrate yourself in front of him or her, you've got to crawl and crawl to get that floor clean.

Perhaps this is why some women insist that their children learn to clean a kitchen floor properly as soon as they are able, to pass on the humiliation of working on one's knees or why maids make such a big show of crawling around on their hands and knees to generously impart a feeling of power to the woman or man who hired them who might otherwise feel trampled and pushed to the ground themselves every other day?

My husband once told me that the only way to clean a floor was to get down on my hands and knees and scrub it, only to be dismayed to find I clean a floor with a mop, and if I have to scrub, it's by pushing a rag around with my foot. "It works better if you get on your hands and knees," he says.

"Show me," I answer back, but he never does.

Do Not Associate  
Coleman Bigelow

The tests, which seemed an exciting next step in their relationship, now appeared to mark their final chapter as a couple. The likelihood of their children being born with a terminal disease tripled by a shared mutation in their DNA.

Evangeline wished she'd never suggested the test for genetic compatibility. Abel had resisted, but she'd explained her friend could get them access to diagnostics which would have been otherwise cost-prohibitive. It was too good an offer to refuse, except now it devastated her to have been the one who pushed. He was kind; he tried to make light of it. If they'd wanted to see the future, he said, "they should have just gone to Madame Portia down the street."

For all he joked, she could tell he was upset. If they stayed together, there should be children—just like they'd said they wanted in their online profiles. Abel maintained, with brow furrowed, they "could overcome almost any medical challenge", and Evangeline had concurred "because babies defy the odds all the time." Neither of them sounded convinced or convincing.

Still, it was hard to deny the fit of their bodies. His chin rested on her head as her knee tucked between his thighs. The feel of her fingers as she traced the ripple of his spine. The undeniable current that cycled between them. Even the discovery of their complementary strengths in trivia had been a thrill. She'd delighted in their domination at Putnam's Pub—Evangeline handling History and Entertainment, while Abel shouldered Arts & Leisure and Geography. They had almost all wedges covered. And yet they weren't a full pie, especially not when their ingredients shared a hidden rot.

Evangeline didn't want to stop seeing Abel, but he was already forty-three. She'd read somewhere that older fathers had higher rates of autistic children. Then, at thirty-eight, there was her advanced maternal age to consider and the notion of the dreaded geriatric pregnancy. Complications loomed: preeclampsia or other equally frightening sounding conditions. But Abel was worth the risk...wasn't he?

As they lounged in bed on a Sunday morning, she thought of how complicated life would be with a child, and then she thought of how much more complicated it would be with a sick child. She rolled onto her side and propped her head on her fist. He lay on his back, his chest hair peeking out from the top of a white sheet. His eyes, normally inviting, now less so.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked, trying to draw his attention. "We could always adopt," she said, forcing a smile. "Isn't that less selfish, anyway?"

"It's a possibility," he said before placing his thick forearm over his eyes. The skin on the underside of his arm was pale and hairless. Beneath the surface, blue veins raced like icy rivers down to his curled palm. And there, lurking in the shadows of his hand, was a hidden fortune waiting to be read.

I Know What You're Thinking  
Harry Carr

I know what you're thinking, but it's not all it's cracked up to be, being a widower.

I too thought it would be impossible to go to Starbucks without being accosted by life-affirmingly upbeat women.

Like, er, Zoey Deschanel?

I thought if I sat on a park bench, head in my hands, staring at the horizon, women would sit next to me and ask me if I was ok. And then, when I told them I was a widower, they would clutch me to their bosom.

I've yet to be clutched to a bosom.

It would help if I had a baby. If I was struggling with childcare, that would have been much better all around. I'd be a magnet for the life-affirmingly upbeat women.

Er, Meg Ryan?

But I don't have a baby. And now, since I'm a widower, I'm unlikely to have one for at least 3.75 years (two years of dating, one year of marriage, and nine months of pregnancy). And that assumes I'm going to meet the perfect woman right now! Today!

And then, ok, I've got a baby now, but what are the chances of becoming a widower again? I probably wouldn't want to be a widower again after meeting my (second) soul mate and starting a family. So getting a baby is a non-starter.

I did get a dog. A dog is the next best thing to a baby. They're a lot of work, though. Yes, they're babe magnets, but when you want to go on a date, you can't leave them by themselves. You get a babysitter. And when you get home, with your date, there's a weird bit where you have to talk to the babysitter and play with the dog. By the time the dog settles down, you're ready for bed.

The biggest benefit of being a widower is that when you want to go to sleep, you can pretend you're sad and you want to be alone. And people will give you a lot of space. People love to give you space when you're a widower.

The grief, as well. The grief is a pain in the butt. You think you'll shake it off. When you're married to an alive person, you think, if they were dead, I'd shake it off. But when they go, it's a bummer. A lot of weeping!

In summary, despite what you may think, it's not so great being a widower.

Stuffed Pikachu  
Wayne Turmel

Ten goddamned years measured in Carnival Time. Knockdown Sunday night, drive Monday, ready for Wednesday when school lets out. Plus, every town's got a mid-week meeting to keep my head straight.

Different towns, same rubes. Sometimes I try to figure out their stories while taking their money. Most times it's not worth the effort.

"Come on. Baby, I loooove Pikachu." The eternal siren song of mildly stoned women bewitching their beaus into risking ten bucks and public humiliation to prove their love, if that's what it is.

I stand by reflex, offering my best 27-tooth grin.

She's country-girl hot. Cutoffs. A tank top (Cherokee brand, so Target not Walmart,) with no pit stains. It's new. Classy. Prettiest fish in a muddy pond.

"Nah, babe. These things's rigged. Everyone knows." Ah. They've been together a while. He wouldn't turn her down if he was still trying to seal the deal.

Eyes locked on him, I toss a ring behind me without looking and get rewarded by the tinkle of plastic circling glass. Easy from this distance. From three feet further across the counter, it's damn near impossible. Physics or some shit.

"See, babe? You can do it." She grabs his bicep and puts on a baby pout. "Pretty pleeease."

He's the last to know he'll play. I've handed over three rings and stepped back before his wallet's out. She squeals, rubbing her chest against his arm.

Takes me a minute to figure out what's different about this one. She's got tats. They all do, but this one's a bit of a puzzle. I study her while the boyfriend tosses, loudly cussing.

Her left arm sports a gorgeous, multi-colored sleeve. Garden of Eden, snake, big red apple. Eve looks like a stripper. Expensive as hell, real art. Not local. The right arm has something in cursive. Squinting, I make out the word "dreams," but that's about it. Inspiration ripped from a Facebook post. Color's uneven.

It dawns on me that she's trending up or down, depending which she got first.

Maybe, inspired by her inky motto, the kid headed for the city. Got a good job—or a man with one. That's how she could afford A-one art. Girl's got a future. Or skills. Just home visiting and gloating.

Flipside, she's slinking back, tail between her legs. That'd explain being with Junior there. That quote on her tricep is a silent, permanent reproach for whatever sins or failures dragged her back.

"Ooooooh, nice try, kid. Two out of three gets you this one." I dangle the six-inch Ninja Turtle wannabe. "Or you can go for the giant Pikachu. One more round. Whattaya say?"

He snatches the turtle and shoves it at her. "Come on." A possessive arm snakes around her waist.

"Really?" Her mouth pouts more than her eyes do. She follows him, kicking dust.

That solves the mystery. She was sure she was worth a plush Pikachu but the world says different.

Welcome home, girlie.

"Who's next?" I yell.



Group Therapy  
Virginia Nelson

For millennia, we were an atoll, a semi-circle of folding chairs, ankles crossed and toes swinging, skimming a turquoise bay. We harbor secrets, hiding them from the wild sea, sheltering the dark that eddies beneath us. It's deep, black shit, like how Lisa put a knife to her little brother's throat when she was eight and laughed at first because it was all just for fun, but then as she held it there, she found she liked how the flesh under his chin fought the blade and so she pressed it further and further, just far enough.

Gloria reminds us of our craters and the magma that roils below the rim. She says we can't build new land if we keep all that heat inside. Let it crawl down the mountainside till it meets the water. You'll know it's over when you hear the sizzle. She tells us that yoga can help.

Jasmine is the oldest, overgrown with waxy leaves bigger than my face. She moves through with a machete, hacking at vines that curl around her calves and trip her as she hikes. It's slow work in the jungle, but she knows the trail and that just over the ridge is a beach with an all-night tiki bar.

"I'm fucking Bora Bora," she says and Gloria nods and tells her to order her daiquiri sans rum.

Gloria thanks us for buying in. It's a tactic and she tells you so the first time you sit down. Veronica is the smallest and sits at the end. She doesn't buy in. She crosses her arms and sighs loudly when Jasmine leaps from her chair and charges through the underbrush, grunting and raging like a wild boar. Gloria asks Veronica to stay after but she rolls her eyes. This isn't the way we work. We start to feel a seismic tremble under the floor, just a hum at first, but each week it grows. Gloria warns us that it's dangerous to stay so quiet but Veronica is unyielding.

It's not a matter of if, but when, she will take us out. We want to do something. We think if we huddle tightly in our ring, Veronica will drift off to sea, far enough so that when she blows, the spew of tephra can't reach us, but still, she lingers close. We whisper to Lisa for help, just a prick to relieve the pressure, but Gloria scratches in her notebook while we scheme and we remember that we've bought in. So we wait, shaking with every shift of Veronica's chair against the tile.

We worry the tsunami will ravish our coastlines, decimate the palms and monstera and our sweet-smelling hibiscus, and uproot it all from our infant soils. We will try to escape the hot, choking gas and cover our heads out of fear of pyroclastic bombs. It's futile. Not long now and we'll be something different, ashen white limbs, cemented in the shape of our retreat.

Gloria says it's been a pleasure and we beseech her to stay. We are not ready, we plead. She assures us her funding says otherwise. With a nudge of her shoe, she waves us off, her dock shrinking to a dot on the otherwise blank horizon. Jasmine charges northward and we paddle hard to keep up, eyes forward and trying not to peek behind us. We know she is there, Veronica, dipping below the whitecaps, steadfast and dormant. All we can do is run.

Midsummer, Midnight Dream  
Emily Tracy

Helena thinks that everything clear is healthy:

    running water

    gin and tonic

    his glittery, glistening spit.

She ties up all her impulses into a great knot-like fabric,  
like the hem of a skirt, she doesn't want to get muddy,  
but the good deed gets too tight around her ankles and rips.

Helena scratches a few times though she's too old for an itch like that,  
muddies the folds and finds herself again a mother in the laundry room,  
again a girl at the church stoup, looking for something clean.

This must be clear, yes, must be healthy. She wades into sweet bubbles, simple syrups, sticky  
mouths, streams in the wild midsummer wood.

Helena does not mind that the man she lies with is sweaty or in love; she admonishes him only  
for the coffee grounds he spills in the dishwasher and the dirt he kicks into her perfect little  
pools.

One day she will reach into him and find his insides bloody and opaque and *regular*, and before  
he leaves her for his wife, Helena will leave him for the shimmering air over hot concrete in the  
distance.

She will put on a sheer dress and marry the warm season, throw out all the salt in the house so  
that the slugs will leave their shiny trails all over her glass floors, and glass walls.

When he is gone, there will be rocks, still, but no one to throw them.

Clear quartz. Diamond. Helena in perfect health.

If she is wrong, she will be translucent and gorgeous in her old age. If she is right, she will live  
forever.

The Subway Operator  
Conor Barnes

The subway operator has gone mad. He opens and closes the doors like gnashing teeth. He laughs when the passengers jump back, confused, injured.

The passengers are advancing, car by car, to usurp him. He knows. When they get close, he is going to unlatch his train and ride away. The passengers won't know what to do.

For his final joke, he is going to walk back and sneak in as a passenger. When the others talk about how the subway operator has made it hard for them to trust people ever again, a masked and ball-capped man is going to interrupt them. He is going to tell them that his life didn't have meaning until he suffered.

Dancing with St. Vitus  
Ed Ahern

The patron saint of dancing  
is an entirely legendary figure  
who apparently never danced.  
Saint Vitus, if he lived at all,  
died quite young from torture  
after performing a miracle,  
good deeds often being punished,  
and St. Vitus' Dance currently  
describes a convulsive disorder.

Dance has many aspects—  
religious, intimate, aerobic,  
confined except for slow shuffles  
to the young and youth-seeking.  
Saint Vitus, busy being martyred,  
never got around to dancing,  
but symbolizes the gyrations  
of spasmodic whirlers.

Hunched Humility  
Abbie Doll

Everyone's got their own Jesus. Mine is arched over a stained toilet bowl hurling his guts out, his lanky locks sticky with sour sweat and chunks of regurgitated ramen. This is how I prefer to picture him. Call it a visual aid for combatting the myth of perfection. Hell, I'm not the least bit religious, but imagining this beloved savior intoxicated is a spiritual meditation. For me, Jesus glued to the toilet is a putrid portrait, one in which he's humbled by his humanity—as we all are from time to time. His white robes sag in pitiful disarray, yellowed and soiled by the misery of experience itself. As the purge continues, his sunken face betrays this fall from grace.

I try to remember this whenever I go overboard with a swig or two too many. Turns out though, accepting our imperfections doesn't eliminate the consequences. Flawed decisions still lead to trouble. Who knew? I might regret that last martini and criticize the misguided choices that led me there, but that won't stop my body from punishing me for poisoning it. Of course, no one raises their glass with a toast to guzzling poison, but being knowledgeable about basic health advisories won't prevent the pursuit. Today it's *my* turn to hug the porcelain, clinging to it in desperation—praying for some sense of stability—gagging myself until it's all out, trying to piece my soggy mess of a life back together. Maybe, the pieces never fit, to begin with.

I tell myself everyone begins with good intentions, but that first sip rips the hinges right off my jaw. I pound 'em back until I can't stomach any more and the fluid starts leaving the same way it came. If I leave my tongue dry, it spills secrets, so I try to drown it instead, but each sip loosens the screws bolting me down. One too many and I hurl it all—blurting out an admission of the affair I didn't mean to have but hardly remember and now my partner's packing boxes and moving out and on while I'm stuck with a stomach struggling to settle—staring speechlessly at this atrocious mess I've made, chewing myself out for clogging my own drains.

One True Fact  
Robert Speiser

Like the unscented dizziness when chewing nicotine gum,  
     opening to undercurrents and roving,  
         before tasks and executive privilege take back the mind;  
 like cats lying in the sun before mortality lays on them;  
 like the innocuous curiosity of deer  
     within forests whispering to fungi, flaunting their roots,  
         stabbing at air;  
 like the glistened listening of dew to precipitation cycles of the day.

One true fact.

Like the quiet of steam before the kettle,  
     or wandering pilgrims in  
         the fog of hope;  
 like glowing caterpillars  
     pittering by rival worms,  
         which enrich  
     like yeast and  
         calcium-fortified school milk.  
 Like buildings that block until the fungi  
     collude with the worms and caterpillars to  
         overthrow  
         quietly,  
         through the soil,  
             waking up fault lines  
         when necessary.

One true fact,  
 awaits in sleep,

like dragons who turn on sprinklers before  
     leaving for another home;  
 like wooden fences  
     falling  
         with entropy before  
         floating down to the sea;  
 like waves taking a break from their curls and crashes,

pausing in midsurf for  
    people watching in the sun;  
like sunbathers turning over and seeing  
    the hole to eternity beneath their faces.  
All cool underbreath brown sand tickling their noses,  
    speckling their cheeks, dancing towards  
    their foil-wrapped tuna sandwiches,  
    until the eternity becomes a sand crab poking a wet dog's nose.

Then I spit out. And it's just gum.

## The Wonderful Burden of Karuna

David M. Rubin

“Patient 37. Listen. I am a Bodhisattva of the West sent to help those in need. If you hear me blink each eye twice.”

The heart monitor on Patient 37 clicked, reset, and continued clicking again. Though his sedative level was high enough to take down a grizzly bear, his eyes were partially open. It was very unlikely the patient could hear Sean’s call. According to Jo, it was a fight to get him stabilized and strapped onto the bed.

A harried nurse entered, grunted, and shooed Jo the Clerk, and Sean the Volunteer away from the bed. Sean’s bright blue hospital polo didn’t quite fit and his French tuck had long ago disheveled. He nodded with deep knowing respect, more the lowest monk in Drebung than a Bodhisattva of any direction. Not bad for his first day in the ER.

Three hours and 59 minutes earlier Sean Rivers awaited the call to push his very first patient to imaging. He sat cross-legged on a waiting room couch meditating. Thoughts popped from his root mind to relentlessly steamroll the meditation, the wet tar pavement of his virtual real estate:

*My mind is clarity devoid of form and compositional factors...*

*Oy, the barometric pressure feels amiss. It’s hard to exactly describe. Maybe sinus? A disorientation. Emotional disorientation. Some sort of mélange of distress.*

*Maybe there’s a workup the ER docs do for people with hard-to-pin-down diseases like long Covid and Lyme and those pain diseases and fatigue syndromes. My thighs feel a little weak. Like the musculature is seizing up or an unnatural lactic acid build-up.*

*Made a mess of things. Striving. I don’t need money. Old Subaru is good in bad weather. Could live in an apartment with thick walls near a library and a bagel place that makes egg sandwiches.*

*Hopefully, the grill at the hospital cafeteria is clean. I bet this waiting room upholstery harbors strains of resistant fungus.*

Sean was not without nascent skills, including rudimentary alertness and mindfulness:

*Let these thoughts appear but let them go.*

*My mind is a little tight like a lute string...*

*...or is it loose like a lyre string? Do they both have strings? Which did Apollo play?*

*Mind is empty like space. No form or compositional factors. Its function is to cognize objects...*

RING!!! The small hospital mobile phone in his pocket flashed green.

“Hello. This is Sean.”

“Go to the back nurse’s station, pick up the papers and take 23 to CT Scan.”

DoB 1922! Sean quickly calculated that Patient 23 was born before Niels Bohr won his Nobel Prize. Sean memorized Nobel Prize lists as a frame of reference to place events in time, and that remembering calmed him.

“Hello, ready for a CT scan? What is your name and DOB?”, all of Sean’s lines to confirm the patient’s identity spilled out at once at a woman who was unconscious amidst a tangle of wires and tubes. Whatever facility she came from didn’t bother to clip her grey wispy Thoreau chin beard. Sean was horrified he would see some part of her too naked and was cautiously concerned that these encounters create smell memories that would never fade, and



through his mouth breathing his Imp of the Perverse did check and sensed she smelled of medicine, sweat, and camphor balls. Sean was only allowed to touch the TV clicker, and couldn't unhook her pulse ox or blood pressure cuff, let alone the IV or heart monitor. Without her being unhooked he couldn't perform his great first deed of pushing her to a CT scan, a precursor to his eventually performing succor and true healing.

Sean went into the hallway to find a nurse. No one introduced anyone to anyone and he had no idea which nurse was tending which room. Maybe he would recommend an hourly huddle of the whole ER like a football team so they can get organized better. The first nurse he came to quickly surmised his request. He would learn it was about the only request a volunteer made.

When Patient 23 was unhooked, Sean used his foot to gently release the brake on the gurney bed and sent an explosive convulsion through the bed and the unconscious patient. She groaned and made ghastly noises such that he thought he killed her.

Pure willpower prevented his not passing out. He wondered if it was getting hot and if everyone could see his behind sweating. He pushed the huge bed with Patient 23, but more leaning on it for support, and hoping his rubbery legs were moving them forward.

*Heisenberg, Schrodinger, Dirac*

They passed the cleaning carts.

*Beckett, Solzhenitsyn, Neruda*

He air-swiped the hands-free door opener, waited for the doors to swing free, entered the hallway just outside the ER, and turned the gurney to the left.

*Sadat, Begin, Mother Theresa*

Sean stood frozen at the CT scan unit where the technician was trying to grab Patient 23's papers.

"What are you waiting for? Give me her paperwork!"

Patient 23 was the first and Patient 37 was the last of the 11 patients that Sean pushed to CT scans, MRIs, ultrasounds, and X-rays on his first day in the ER. Aside from all that pushing, Sean ministered to several hurt and sick people by providing warmed blankets and wise and compassionate smiles for them and their families. To say that Sean *walked* to the hospital parking lot reserved for employees and volunteers and to his red Outback would be to dismiss the possibility that miracles happen and fail to describe the gravity-defying physics of his graceful floating on the curd-like clouds. Maybe Sean Rivers had some massive ground to cover in just about all areas, but what else is a Bodhisattva but one who waits patiently, and even lends a hand, until all others reach Nirvana before they try to jump that great divide?



Kim Silva – The Pacer

The Bird  
Tinamarie Cox

She imagined flying was like falling, so she jumped. The thought had germinated and blossomed as she watered it with her time.

Her heart fluttered in her chest, and her stomach squeezed its way into the constraints of her throat. The rest of her insides liquified and abandoned her body through some form of osmosis.

Emptied of life's burdens, she became light as a bird.

The wind on her face was sharp and cold, like a blustery winter's day. But she liked this tangible pain. She liked how it made her eyes water, and how the breeze licked the salt from her cheeks as she cut through the air.

The closer she got to the ground, the freer she felt.

She was falling free through the atmosphere, gravity yanking her from the sky. Nature calling her back to what she was intended to be: another animal bound to the land, another prisoner of the earth.

But for a few moments, she convinced herself she was a bird.

She now had a palpable taste of what it was like to be of the winged variety. Because, despite their feathered advantage, even birds must honor their legs. Return to something solid to rest.

Here she was, free as the birds, returning to her nest.

Her landing would not be nearly as delicate as a true aviary. When she landed, she would not be taking flight again. This was a one-time opportunity to appreciate the privileges of owning a set of wings.

The experience was glorious, though brief.

She returned to the earth with birdsong. As the affair came to an end, screams rose to a crescendo with tenors, altos, and sopranos in a chorus. She did not regret it. For her, this aerial adventure was a happy ending.

Pollywogs  
 Laura McPherson

“The pond is haunted,” Katie announces. Her voice crackles as her Nokia struggles to maintain signal across 2003’s infant cellular network: *Can you hear me now?* “There’s like, a wailing ghost I heard walking by last night. We have to check it out.”

Katie and I are taking an informal minor in the supernatural to fill the bored hours that accrue like dust on the spines of neglected textbooks in a big-small college town like DeKalb. That is, big for a town, small for a college town. Locals waiting in line at Red Lobster on special occasions complain about the total population doubling each September with the annual flood of students. Behind the Red Lobster, the bizarre pockmarks the Northern Illinois University campus like acne scars: stairways to nowhere, hallways that dead-end midway through buildings, and elevators that display floor numbers that do not exist. Katie and I have recently encountered thesis-level work, discovering that the old cemetery is haunted by things considerably more sinister than Winchestrian architecture. Listening to the microcassette recording we made during that adventure was the only time in ten years of friendship Katie had asked for a cigarette. She coughed through it quietly as we replayed the tape, deciphering the voices we hadn’t heard while physically there, a groaning undercurrent tugging insistently at the lower registers of our chipper banter. As we listened, I was seized by shivers, anxiety, and watery eyes—symptoms that all ghost hunters know as telltale signs that a haunting is true.

This parasymphathetic response, my sensitivity to the weird, is why Katie needs me to investigate this pond. She knows it well: Even before the cemetery, she was at the middle school slumber party where a mirror tore itself off the wall and arced across the room to shatter on my back when I said the ghosts were probably listening, the sound of glass shards crackling muted by six girls shrieking. (I can hear you thinking: *Hmmm, I thought this was nonfiction.* It is. I can’t explain why or how; only when, where, and with whom).

In DeKalb, the college’s gothic buildings gloom over miles of musty-sweet cornfields with a foreboding that attracts such malevolent ghosts. When Katie calls me to investigate the pond, I have just dropped a science class because I can’t step foot in its auditorium without anxiety, watery eyes, and chills. The augur is wasted; the Valentine’s Day shooting in that room will remain five years in the future from the moment I drop the class. When Katie calls me to investigate the pond, we fear our campus, with its threat of failures yet to be realized, its embankment of cannily hostile townies—but it is the good-scared, the scared people share stories about at parties. Not the sour-tasting static of bad-scared that will happen after the shooting, the terrified exchanging of texts between friends dispersed from campus to their first professional jobs and those who stayed, becoming graduate students and associate instructors. The long-distance headcount of who might be in Cole Hall at 3 PM on a Thursday is not a story we will ever tell at parties. It will only be many years later, when topics of conversation run thin between the sameness of the days of the pandemic, that I learn a close friend’s husband’s cousin was the shooter. Connections have a way of networking across college towns, spreading in delicate webs that are easily disrupted, like the late summer spiderwebs that guard the path to the pond in 2003, sticking in our faces like the July heat and the weight of the future.

“Listen,” Katie says. I press my ears against the dark. Before long I hear it, a staccato keening floating above the bog-smelling pond. It is a ghost I have known before.

“Katie,” I say softly. “That’s a bullfrog.”

We retreat from the pond. The heavy-bellied bullfrogs smack into the sucking black water in response to our vibrations. Our footsteps winding back to campus are faint echoes of the gunshots which will always be five years in the future from the bullfrogs, forever five years from the belief that the hauntings we collect here will always be slipped as easily as spiders' silk, filaments as weightless as bullets' contrails.

Dancer  
Ace Boggess

Man in a hospital gown pirouettes through the crosswalk, ignoring signals, cars, indignant drivers. His eyes, skyward, stare at points his fingers shape. He has caught the sun in his palms, blinded by medication or what used to be called madness. He dances like a light-hearted sprite through gray of city, over the broken curb, onto a sidewalk, past pedestrians who dance with him using angry tongues. He hears songs on the soundtrack to his inner being—a flute concerto, scoring the ballet. None of us feel his freedom, seated as we are behind steering wheels that turn us left toward normalcy, right onto the highway of routine.

Winter Nor'easter  
Gerry Fabian

Better days are coming.  
We wake without electricity  
as the storm has slaughtered power lines.  
The house is fright frigid.  
To our amazement, the gas fireplace lights.  
Better days are coming.

You immediately quarantine the refrigerator.  
We fry bread on the gas stove top  
and coat it with pantry shelf clover honey.  
I boil water for Chai tea.  
Better days are coming.

The Brittany is at the door  
as snow still falls  
with malevolent indifference.  
Donning boots, coat, gloves, and a hat,  
I dig a path to the yard  
and then a small square for him to use.  
Better days are coming.

Returning to the house,  
you dry the Brittany  
while I shiver and shake off  
melting snow-covered clothes.  
Standing there, in my undershorts  
and slightly damp t-shirt,  
a sly smile breaks across your face  
the likes of which I haven't seen  
since we were young lovers.  
Better days are coming.

Breakfast with the Early Birds  
Kirk Wareham

Each morning during breakfast, my wife and I listen to the news, as reported by Northeast Public Radio. It's part of our early-morning ritual as we tinker with steaming hot cross buns, sunny-side-up eggs, and a robust coffee brew.

But much as we appreciate NPR, the news can sometimes be depressing. We've discovered that it is more beneficial to pay attention to the birds outside our window. As a prelude to hitting up the birdfeeder, they gather in what I call the "ULB", an Unidentified Large Bush lurking near the azaleas. Each morning, the ULB transforms miraculously into the Grand Central Station of birds, who land in droves, milling about, twittering, chattering, chirping, and launching sneak attacks on our rickety birdfeeder. Perhaps the bush provides them with that "I'll meet you at the village well" sense of community that humans also inherently crave.

The congregation swells minute by minute. A tufted titmouse, bobbing his gray-crested head. A raspberry-tinged house finch, and a skittish mourning dove. A couple of playful juncos.

Today's special is a pair of cardinals pirouetting inside the ULB. The male is fiercely scarlet, a supremely spectacular color. The female, brown and bashful, is difficult to see in the bush, but you certainly can't mistake her stellar morning anthem, her distinctive *summa cum loudly*. We like to imagine Mr. and Mrs. Cardinal planning their Sunday, just as we do. "Let's see now . . . maybe after church we should swing past Zambo Swamp, pick up some goodies for the children, then head down Mossybrook Road for a tour of the local birdfeeders."

Evenings, we can't help smiling at the awkward concert presented by the bullfrogs in the soup-bowl pond across the driveway. It sounds like the entire double-bass section of the orchestra has suffered the same affliction, G-strings popping loose and unwinding with a *twang* and a *boing*. One can just imagine the performers, under the withering glare of the concertmaster, hitching up their belts and scrambling to retune their instruments in time for the next movement.

But in the first light of dawn, the bullfrogs are quiet, and we know that Herkimer is stalking the shallows, his razor-sharp spear held aloft and ready. The crafty old Great Blue Heron brings poise and intensity to his frog-hunting operation. It's not unusual, when opening the curtains in the morning, to see him launch out of the weeds and elephant grass, like a startled 747 struggling to go airborne, and flapping loose-winged into one of the trees nearby, slime dripping from his toes and a grin of disgust on his face.

"Don't move!" hisses my wife.

One of our favorite birds, the white-throated sparrow, has just touched down on the birdfeeder, a plump little fellow bundled up in his designer waistcoat. Nearby, a white-breasted nuthatch is swallowing his breakfast while poised upside down, a near-impossibility. (If you don't believe me, try it sometime.)

A woodpecker swoops in, black and white with a splash of red on his head, and we debate whether it is a Downy or a Hairy. After sagely consulting Google, we agree that it is a Downy, the smallest of the woodpecker family, identified by its short stubby beak. The tuft at the back of the head of these pleasant little characters always makes them appear somewhat disheveled as if they rolled out of bed just a few minutes ago.



A few days ago, the pussy willow by the pond was filled with maddened bees, humming and buzzing excitedly. Now the bees are gone and already the buds have fallen to the ground, where they lie like a moldy carpet that has seen better days.

Two ancient apple trees, and relics of an orchard long deceased, are favorite landing spots for the birds. The buds on the tips of the branches are so dark purple that you could mistake them for black but don't be fooled. They are alive and coming on strong. The lower branches of the trees, gnarled and twisted, appear to have been truncated long ago and are smothered in some sort of moss or lichen. Several deer, "our private herd," as we call them, enjoy the succulent spring grass in the cool of the early morning.

Squirrels . . . now don't get me started. When one of them attempts to scale the supposedly squirrel-proof birdfeeder, Libby, our three-year-old Sheltie, goes ballistic. From the perspective of the dog, there's nothing quite so much fun as chasing a squirrel. But forget about NPR while the dog is baying at a volume that would do Wagner proud.

Near the chimney, the azalea bush is another attractive landing spot for birds, and endearing black-capped chickadees flit from branch to branch. At the end of each limb is a dormant clump of five buds that look like miniature nuts, ready to be harvested. When the buds open in a few weeks, the flowers will dramatically celebrate the color purple. I love purple. I have other faults, but this particular one doesn't embarrass me.

Spring invariably transforms our breakfasts into a refreshing scramble of eggs, coffee, news flashes, and feathered friends. We love it that way.

Please pass the hot cross buns, my dear.

The Mother of the Boy Who Went Blind from Staring at the  
Solar Eclipse Complains to the Psychologist  
David Henson

Something ate the roses  
behind the garage. That night  
my son's lips  
were swollen big as slugs.  
I tweezered out three stingers.

Last week, I thought he'd cut  
his hand until I noticed  
seeds sliding down his fingers,  
squished tomatoes on the kitchen sill.

This morning making the bed  
I found his pillowcase  
stuffed with yesterday's fresh mown grass.

He sneaks into the basement,  
somehow fills a jar with spiders,  
takes off his shirt  
and turns them loose on his shoulders,

she sobs,  
putting her foot  
on her son's to still  
the tapping to the ticking  
of the doctor's watch.

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A Small Cup of Desire  
Harris Coverley

*please bring me beauty...*

a slender frame  
and blue eyes like jewels  
set in the amber of pale flesh  
hair like the sweet laughter of the sun

*please bring me beauty...*

and let me kiss away those tears  
on cool soft cheeks  
hands in hands  
in a crevice far away from the rain and the wind  
before a toasting wood fire

*please bring me beauty...*

a woman perfectly natural  
and simple in her form  
knowable in a pure instance of desire  
from her nose to her nipples  
    pert to pert  
skin sugar-salt to the lips

*please bring me beauty...*

so my dreams can rest easy  
and my eyes palliated  
as I part that burning hair  
and embrace the holy daughter of infinity

*please bring me beauty...*

and hope my mortal love will be enough.

Dress Up  
S.F. Wright

The dress code  
At my school  
Is lax.  
I'll wear a  
Knit shirt,  
Baggy chinos,  
Worn shoes.  
Often, I don't  
Shave for  
Days.

Then the  
Notion will  
Strike me  
That I should  
Dress nicer.

For a few days,  
Even weeks,  
I'll wear  
Elegant shirts,  
Smart pants,  
Nice shoes;  
I'll even  
Shave every day.

But then  
I'll want to be  
Comfortable again;  
And I'll revert to  
Knit shirts,  
Baggy chinos,  
Worn shoes—  
And my more  
Relaxed shaving  
Schedule.  
I'll wonder  
If my students  
Or coworkers  
Even noticed;  
And I'll think about

Novels  
And movies that  
Took place  
Decades ago,  
In which characters  
Dressed up  
Just to go  
A friend's house  
For the evening.

I'll consider  
Those scenarios  
And wonder if  
I would've been  
Happy in them.  
I would've felt  
Something;  
But part of me  
Would've longed for  
Baggy chinos—  
Options,  
That is,  
Or something  
Like them.

View From the West  
Markham Sigler

The man comes to life in the morning like another other creature, a fetus bloom of torso and limbs. Dawn's gray light splices through the east window. He's forgotten when he stopped wondering how long he's been here. He almost remembers owning a calendar, but that could very well be a past life or someone else's misplaced memory.

He steps into the center of the room and exercises. Breathe, stretch, activate the lizard body.

When the door opens he is in seated meditation. The advance of day shows in rose-yellow shadows across dense terrain. Giant leaves rise from the ground like lost warriors, fawning toward the sun. A pack of ungulates moves northeast at a 30°, their horns small boomerangs. Ollie cranes his neck to see if they are chased by *Coelophysis*. The server asks him what he wants today. It is tall and slender; its blonde skull holds blue eyes.

"Jester 6. I'd like to talk with someone."

The server asks him if they'll be going out.

"I'm not sure. You'll know when she gets here. Thank you. You can go."

The server smiles and leaves breakfast on the table.

"I love you," the server says, bowing slightly.

The ungulates have disappeared. A handsome toucan sits on a lone fence post. Breakfast is pigeon and strawberries.

He's looking out the west window, auburn hills tossing like digital waves. There's something that pulses in this westward view, something he wants to capture in a painting. Four camels walk slowly toward him. The riders have long noses and blue dreadlocks, they ride with tall postures. Ollie sees one weapon: a turbo cannon strapped across a server's back. In their wake, an idiot sits on a donkey that pulls a wheeled cage.

Ollie sees the idiot's lively eyes as the troupe comes to rest beside his abode. He stands straight and loose at the window, loose pants, sandals, and bunned hair. The idiot giggles as he runs to unlock the cage. Jester 6 emerges. She stretches and yawns her arms in the shape of a Y. She circles toward the door, the servers barely noting her, scanning the silk horizon.

She pushes the door open and greets him, smiling.

"Let's go for a walk today O," she says. "It rained last night. Not sure if that was the servers or nature. It will be nice in the false jungle."

Ollie agrees and looks at his pipe. He looks at her. She's almost as tall as him, thin, with an easy long face and a reserved nature. She's looking at the pipe too.

They walk north. A server breaks off and follows at a respectful distance. Ollie looks over his shoulder, curious if the rest will inspect his house. There's a path marked by navy flowers, gibbons chattering in the canopy.

"Tarzan has been asking about you," she says. "He misses you."

Tarzan is the ruler of these parts. Ollie was one of his best friends and most trusted advisers before he denounced Tarzan's hyper-manipulation of the environment and was sent on sabbatical. A small gibbon appears in the path, hanging from a branch by its tail. It watches them with coffee-disc eyes. They admire the creature. Amelia pats Ollie on the back of the arm. There's something off in her patterns.

“You know, my great idea was teaching monkeys how to speak.”

“The world-made movie. I can see it. It’s you, O.”

She looks at him. Her long face blends into the chorus vegetation.

“Listen, O. I’ve decided to leave. I’m getting away from this place. I want you to come with me.”

The chatter of the gibbons seems to reflect the dramatic implications of what is said. Ollie laughs silently. He asks where she will go, how she will get there, and she shrugs.

“They say the jungle is the only place where escape is possible. I’ll be a jungle woman. A jungle joker. A junglewomankjoker.”

She laughs and kneels beside a random stream, fingers brushing the surface.

“Do you know why they say that, Amelia? Because even the servers are wary of entering. There are all manners of wildlife out there, generated by our poor old friend.”

She looks at him. He sees her disappearing into the overgrowth, cap, and bells another dreadful flower.

Four days thereafter he is invited to dine with Tarzan. A server escorts him; it wears an emerald robe, its long hair cosmic red. Ollie remembers the last time Tarzan wanted to dine with him. It was the day his 9<sup>th</sup> son was born. He and Ollie met when they were 9 years old; he wanted Ollie to be the boy’s godfather.

The length of the table gives it the aura of a boat. Tarzan is at the head. His voice calls to Ollie to sit beside him. He is looking more and more like one of his servers, pure avatar of pure being.

“You know, you should have named yourself Solomon,” Ollie says. “It encapsulates what you’ve become.”

“Take your hair out of that ridiculous bun.”

They laugh and talk, looking at each other with the faintest sense of eroticism. Accomplishing opposite things at once, Tarzan touches Ollie’s arm. Ollie’s large smile once again brightens the inside of the castle.

The servers bring an arrangement of dishes. The nearest is Amelia’s head. Her mouth is open; a peach holds it in place. Ollie watches himself smile. He can end his sabbatical and ascend to his rightful station whenever he so desires.

## Symptom

Rob Johnson

It began like this:

He dreamed he was being eaten by dogs. His withered carcass was alive with maggots, and the air was torn by the frenzied growls of the hounds that tore at his flesh. Above him a figure stood engulfed in shadow, watching in silence as the scavengers' snouts burrowed deep between his ribs. He made to scream, but the figure poured from a porcelain gourd a stream of thick and bubbling mud that stoppered his mouth and drowned his cries. He felt the mud course through him, the black sludge racing down his gullet and into his belly and his heart, and then pumping through his bulging veins, splashing across the gums of the dogs even as they devoured him. He saw his ripped and rotten skin disappear in flashes of pink and white and muck as their jaws stripped his bones. All the while the figure stood in crackling silence over him, and the moments before he woke, he felt the mud dribble over his chin and down his neck, sliding rhythmically over that fading scar, drop by drop, like a pulse.

That was the dream. When he woke there was relief, of course. He rose and shrugged and almost smiled. If given the chance, he might have laughed. It was only that when he ventured forth, he saw the people were gone. Everywhere there remained the shape and the ring and the rhyme of society, only there were no people. There were houses and roads and cars and hospitals and parks and cafes and shopping centres and traffic lights and bodies, bodies everywhere, only the people were gone. He looked and looked and blinked and looked again. He prayed if it could be said he knew of such a thing as prayer. He stood and waited and wished. He turned his face toward the whisper of the wind, which of course spoke an ancient language utterly unintelligible to him, a language elusive and yet entirely durable, that had always been and would continue to be beyond this, this the end of things, this the what seemed to be the end of things; he heard nothing.

No, not true. He did hear, he heard: yet all he heard was the wind. What he heard was not words. He understood nothing. He did not even know how much he did not know. Could not know. And all the better, ignorance of his ignorance being the only reason he was himself and not one of the bodies. For it was not guaranteed that he would not, could not, be one of the bodies. Even in his ignorance, he knew that. Or at least sensed it to be true. Nobody had told him this and yet he knew it. Perhaps in that, there lies some indication, though of what I cannot say. I cannot say or speak; in a way, I am not here.

There were bodies everywhere – that has been mentioned. What has not been mentioned was the continuation of the simulation of life. Lives. The impression or perhaps confection of lives being lived. There was laughter, even. The shape and ring and rhyme of things rung out all around him with a ceaseless clang. Yet the people were gone, that much was obvious. There was something very wrong, so powerfully wrongfully wrong. A body brushed past him, and another. One body stopped and turned with an outstretched hand, a hand that held an orange or a wallet or a promise of something that does not and will not exist, at which point he closed his eyes and



screamed. And I tell you, I tell you now: there was sound. That is true. That is perhaps some consolation. Though lean closer and know this: the sound of his screaming made no difference to the wind.

It was sometime later, though who knows how long before he allowed himself to know the dream. To see the dream as the final act in the lifelong play in which he had cast himself. There was something about seeing his violent death that had stayed with him, stuck to him. He who felt himself so otherwise unstuck. He began to see that what he had viewed as the ingestion of filth was an invitation. In this sweltering fog of loneliness, he lost all will to return to the life he had lost. He saw only the chance to follow his dream: of swallowing mud to in turn be swallowed; to lie back and be buried in the knowledge of the earth.

So soon he found himself lying down, somewhere far from where he had been before. It was somewhere very much like a forest floor. All was quiet until it was not. And yet he felt no fear, no trepidation. The padding paw-falls that had been so awful he now welcomed with a sigh; the slobbering wheezing hungry moans of the beasts that closed upon him merely underscored the symphony that played inside his mind. His body he gave freely, and his mouth he opened gladly, and he looked into the eyes of the figure above, who in turn looked back at him. You must know that the pain was no less ghastly, the sense of submission to destruction no less overwhelming. Its realness only intensified the potency of the experience. What was happening was impossible. He was rotting; coming apart regardless of the dogs' feasting. He was dying. He was laughing. And yet after the darkness I rose and stood and did not shrug and certainly smiled. And I picked a direction and I started to walk. And then I began to run.

Because, of course, this story is mine. I wrote it about myself. If you wish, you could dream the rest of this story. If you wish, you could die to be born.

## Bio's

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland. Her creative nonfiction and poetry have been published by Lunch Ticket, Literary Mama, Pithead Chapel, Anti-Heroine Chic, and others, and her work has been nominated for Best of the Net. Annie is the Executive Director at Yellow Arrow Publishing, a Baltimore-based nonprofit supporting and empowering women writers, and is working on a memoir about mother/daughter relationships. You can find Annie's writing on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at [anniemarhefka.com](http://anniemarhefka.com).

Mykyta Ryzhykh resides in Ukraine (Nova Kakhovka City). Her work has been Published in the journals "Dzvin," "Ring A," "Polutona," etc.

LM Maggio is a writer, colonial fifer, and entirely sane cat lady. She lives with her husband and a completely reasonable number of cats on the outskirts of Philadelphia, all crammed into an 18th-century abode constructed of log and stone. Ms. Maggio works at the local public library.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Stickman Review, Roi Fainéamt, and Jimson Weed, among others.

Kris Green lives in Florida with his wife, two-year-old son, and new baby daughter. His first story was published in 2018 through Morpheus Tales. Last year, he's had three short stories published. This year, he's published seven short stories as well as two poems.

Hannah Glickstein used to be an English teacher and is now a counsellor for young people. Whilst teaching, she self-published graphic stories about a skeleton called Bill. Her writing has appeared in Huffington Post, The Catholic Herald, and Spectator Schools; her stories have been published by Platform for Prose, Litro, and Stroud Short Stories. She's been shortlisted for the Fish Poetry Prize. Her ambition is to write novels, but - right now - she can't find the time.

E. Martin Pedersen, originally from San Francisco, has lived for over forty years in eastern Sicily, where he taught English at the local university. His poetry appeared most recently in Avatar Review, Canyon Voices, Slab, SurVision, and Helix Literary Magazine, among others. Martin is an alumnus of the Community of Writers. He has published two collections of haiku, Bitter Pills and Smart Pills, and a chapbook, Exile's Choice, from Kelsay Books. A full collection, Method & Madness, is forthcoming from Odyssey Press. Martin's poem, "Gull Eggs," was nominated by Flapper Press for the Best of the Net Award 2023.

Cassandra O'Sullivan Sachar is a writer and associate English professor in Pennsylvania. Her creative work has appeared in over twenty literary journals, magazines, and anthologies including Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work, Adelaide Literary Magazine, The

Dillydoun Review, The Pine Cone Review, Quagmire Literary Magazine, Ink Stains: A Dark Fiction Literary Anthology, The Centifictionist, and Tales from the Moonlit Path. She holds a Doctorate of Education with a Literacy Specialization from the University of Delaware and is working toward an MFA in Creative Writing at Wilkes University. She is currently the fiction editor of River and South Review.

Brian Lee is an aspiring writer and poet from Singapore. Having grown up in three different countries, he writes in an attempt to remember and recreate spaces of memory. He is inspired by our fundamental need to return and belong.

Alex Dermody was born and raised in Florida, currently lives in New York, and is 5'7 (even though he tells everyone he's 5'8). His work has been most recently published in Defenestration Magazine and The Seattle Star. Alex can be reached at [alexdermody15@gmail.com](mailto:alexdermody15@gmail.com).

Cameron Vanderwerf holds an MFA in creative writing from Hollins University. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in the Worcester Review, Moon City Review, Write Launch, Every Day Fiction, Page and Spine, Literally Stories, and other publications.

William Ogden Haynes is a poet and author of short fiction from Alabama who was born in Michigan. He has published nine collections of poetry (Points of Interest, Uncommon Pursuits, Remnants, Stories in Stained Glass, Carvings, Going South, Contemplations, Time on My Hands, and The Works) and one book of short stories (Youthful Indiscretions) all available on Amazon.com. Over 200 of his poems and short stories have appeared in literary journals and his work is frequently anthologized. <http://www.williamogdenhaynes.com>

Paul Smith is a civil engineer who has worked in the construction racket for many years. He has traveled all over the place and met lots of people. Some have enriched his life. Others made him wish he or they were all dead. He likes writing poetry and fiction. He also likes Newcastle Brown Ale. If you see him, buy him one. His poetry and fiction have been published in Convergence, Missouri Review, Literary Orphans, and other lit mags.

A retired special education teacher, Vern Fein has published over two hundred poems on over ninety different sites, a few being: \*82 Review, Bindweed Magazine, Gyroscope Review, Courtship of Winds, Young Raven's Review, Poesis, and The Bezzine. His first poetry book—I WAS YOUNG AND THOUGHT IT WOULD CHANGE—was published by Cyberwit Press.

Mike Lee is a writer and editor at a trade union in New York City and the chief blogger for Focus on the Story. His work appears in or is forthcoming in Corvus Review, Press Pause, Flash Boulevard, BULL, The Quarantine Review, Drunk Monkeys, and many others. He was also

recently nominated for Best Microfiction. His story collection, *The Northern Line*, is available at many online booksellers. Twitter: @lml1962

Jesse Fleming is a Chicago-based writer, musician, and environmental justice activist. Her writing has appeared or will appear in *The Shore*, *Backstory Journal*, *Minnesota's Best Emerging Poets* (Z Publishing, 2018), *ELDERLY* magazine, and others. She copyedits for Haymarket Books and has edited and translated for AWP and Milkweed Editions.

Paul Hostovsky's latest book of poems is *Mostly* (FutureCycle Press, 2021). He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and *The Writer's Almanac*. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter. Website: [paulhostovsky.com](http://paulhostovsky.com)

John Grey is an Australian poet, and US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Stand*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Red Weather*. John's latest books, "Covert" "Memory Outside The Head" and "Guest Of Myself" are available through Amazon. Work is upcoming in *Washington Square Review* and *Open Ceilings*.

Jon Wesick is a regional editor of the *San Diego Poetry Annual*. He's published hundreds of poems and stories in journals such as the *Atlanta Review*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *New Verse News*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *Pearl, Pirene's Fountain*, *Slipstream*, *Space and Time*, and *Tales of the Talisman*. His most recent books are *The Shaman in the Library* and *The Prague Deception*. <http://jonwesick.com>

Hana Cao is a Chinese-Canadian writer and translator based in Toronto. She is an MSt Creative Writing student at Cambridge University.

Katie Coleman's fiction is forthcoming/ appears in *Ghost Parachute*, *Briefly Zine*, *The Ilanot Review*, *Bending Genres*, *Lit. 202*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, and *Potato Soup Journal*. She has a master's in creative writing and works as a teacher in Phuket, Thailand. She can be found on Twitter @anjuna2000.

Roland Goity lives in Issaquah, WA, where he writes and hikes, and contemplates the human condition.

John Walser's poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Spillway*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Plume*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Posit* and *december* magazine as well as in the anthology *New Poetry from the Midwest 2017*. His manuscript *Edgewood Orchard Galleries* has been a finalist for the *Autumn House Press Prize*, the *Ballard Spahr Prize*, and the *Zone 3 Press*

Prize, as well as a semifinalist for the Philip Levine Prize and the Crab Orchard Series First Book Award. An English professor at Marian University-Wisconsin, John is a four-time semifinalist for the Neruda Prize.

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Harry Carr is an award-winning comedy writer and director. His recent live comedy projects (as director) have been critically acclaimed and won the Brighton Fringe Best Show (2021) and been shortlisted for the Edinburgh Fringe Best Show (Comedian's Choice Awards 2022). As a writer, he has worked on shows for BBC TV and radio and is currently writing for a series commissioned by Channel 4 (UK).

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Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty-odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He's also the lead editor at The Scribes Micro Fiction magazine.

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Abbie Doll is an eclectic mess of a person who loves exploring the beautiful intricacies of the written word. She resides in Columbus, OH, and received her MFA from Lindenwood University; her work has been featured or is forthcoming in Door Is a Jar Magazine, OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters (O: JA&L), Black Fox Literary Magazine, among others. Follow her @AbbieDollWrites.

Robert M. Speiser is a Santa Barbara-based writer and English Instructor, teaching at Westmont College and a nearby community college. He's also working on his MFA at Lindenwood University. When he's not writing fiction or poetry, or teaching, you can find Robert hanging out with his family, playing guitar, riding his bike around Goleta, or dancing on or near the ceiling. He dreams of living in Portugal someday as the country partially reminds him of when he first lived in Chile many a year ago.

David M. Rubin has a Ph.D. in molecular biology and has published many scientific articles and lectured on natural language processing, protein folding & degradation, real-world evidence, and Buddhism in ancient India. He has had stories, poems, drawings, and essays published in After Dinner Conversations, Brilliant Flash Fiction, Ffraid, Last Stanza Poetry Journal, The Nabokovian, Piglet Moss, and The Smart Set.

Tinamarie Cox resides in Northern Arizona and has been slowly expanding her universe through her love of writing. Tinamarie's poems have appeared in Nevermore Journal, The Elevation Review, Oddball Magazine, The Sirens Call, and others. Her first flash fiction piece found a home in Dark Entries Journal. You can follow her writing journey on Instagram @tinamariethinkstoomuch.

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R. Gerry Fabian is a poet and novelist. He has published four books of his published poems, *Parallels*, *Coming Out Of The Atlantic*, *Electronic Forecasts*, and *Ball On The Mound*. He lives in Doylestown, PA.

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Kirk Wareham is a father of six (enjoyed every minute of it), grandfather of six, a lover of nature, and an avid reader. His passion for reading led him, inevitably, to a love of writing. His works have been published by Potato Soup Journal, Like the Wind Magazine, Woods Reader, Passager Journal, Agape Review, Halfway Down the Stairs Magazine, and Plough Publishing House.

David Henson and his wife have lived in Belgium and Hong Kong over the years and now reside in Illinois, USA. His work has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, Best Small Fictions, and Best of the Net, and has appeared in various print and online journals including *Gone Lawn*, *Fictive Dream*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Literally Stories*, and *Moonpark Review*. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8.

Including publication in *Corvus Review*, Harris Coverley has had verse featured in *California Quarterly*, *Star\*Line*, *Spectral Realms*, *Scifaikuest*, *Polu Texni*, *Silver Blade*, *The Crank*, *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *Apocalypse Confidential*, *Tigershark*, *Yellow Mama*, *View from Atlantis*, and many others. He lives in Manchester, England.

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Rob Johnson's short fiction has been published by *Overland*, *Aniko Press*, and *Underground*, and his non-fiction by *Audrey Journal* and *Switched On Media*. Rob won the 2020 Albury City Short

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Kim Silva – Yard Couple