



CORVUS REVIEW

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Cover/Included Art

Keith Nunes (Aotearoa-New Zealand) has had poetry, fiction, haiku and visuals published around the globe. He creates ethereal manifestations as a way of communicating with the outside world.

Additional Art

Bill Wolak has published his eighteenth book of poetry entitled *All the Wind's Unfinished Kisses with Ekstasis Editions*. His collages and photographs have appeared as cover art for such magazines as *Phoebe*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Baldhip Magazine*, and *Barfly Poetry Magazine*.

Editor

Janine Mercer

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Feature

The Chinese Water Dragons

Natasha Navarra

Camile noticed the first scales on her body during one of the hottest heatwaves of the summer when temperatures broke record-breaking highs. She was sixteen when the first scale made an appearance. It started out as one small, round patch peeling on the epidermis of her skin, flaking and as wrinkled as a piece of crumpled loose-leaf paper. Her shoulder blades scorched as if she had an intense sunburn. Her mother rubbed Aloe Vera on her back, and after a few weeks, although her tan had begun to fade, the scales did not.

She looked in the mirror, turning her head as far back as she could to find the circular patch of reflective scaly skin that had grown to resemble fish scales. The very sight of it terrified her; it was as if she had begun to morph into some sort of monster right out of a horror movie. She went on the internet and started to read up on every skin condition imaginable but couldn't pinpoint an exact photo resembling her own. Her scales had an odd purple, pale greenish hue and close up resembled a pattern of mosaic layers with thousands of tiny hairs.

Her scaly skin changed from a flesh-colored tone to an unusual iridescent, shimmering array of prismatic colors that gave rise to panic and an overwhelming feeling of alarm. She tried everything from calamine lotion to bathing in oatmeal and applying all sorts of moisturizing oils, hydrocortisone creams, and even holistic treatments in hopes of healing the patch that had begun to expand, none of which made any bit of difference. After a few weeks of trial and error in quiet hopes of eliminating the scales without medical intervention, her parents booked an appointment with a dermatologist.

"The appearance resembles *Ichthyosis vulgaris*, but I would have to run further tests for an exact diagnosis," Dr. Reid replied with uncertainty in his eyes as he examined her exposed skin with the curiosity of a scientist stumbling upon the discovery of a new planet. He found nothing unusual except for the color of the scales themselves. "The scales do have a peculiar shade..." He paused, clearing his throat for a moment. "I must admit; I haven't seen a case quite like this one before." His words did not instill confidence but instead posed more questions, which now lingered and prompted even further fear into the black holes of speculation.

The doctor prescribed a topical ointment containing alpha hydroxy acids, which didn't seem to do much to the scales themselves except make Camile's skin feel sticky and covered in creamy goo. She applied the cream over her scales every night before bed, hoping to find them gone by morning. After a follow-up, she was referred to another specialist, and yet another. After a skin biopsy and a series of exams, each doctor had a variation of the very same response: "Hmmm, I've never seen anything quite like this before... a rare and obscure skin condition." Her parents did their best to conceal their mounting uneasiness.

Camile could feel herself mutating slowly each day. Her flesh-colored skin fused with what began as a small, circular patch into wider scales on both her shoulder blades. She began to wonder how much of her skin would remain isolated from this nightmarish plague. None of the exams showed any harmful abnormalities that were rooted from any illness; in fact, she was the picture of perfect health with the exception of the scales.

Camile, afraid to be exposed, began to wear blouses and baggy tops that would hide any uncovered areas of skin in embarrassment. She was ashamed of her alien skin and refused to go outdoors to the pool or the beach unless she could keep her t-shirt on. She questioned if her

condition was hereditary, a bad gene that somehow skipped a generation and to her detriment landed in her chromosomes.

Her parents knew puberty was a hard-enough time, but now with this unknown skin condition, it would be ten times worse. They researched behind closed bedroom doors and murmured in hushed whispers to find nothing completely resembling her oddly colored skin. They found numerous photos on the web sharing a somewhat similar resemblance but none of which were an exact match.

Camile laid in bed staring at the ceiling, lost in a daze when she heard her brother strumming his guitar. He inherited his natural aptitude for music from their father. Since he started his band, he'd begun to let his hair grow out, and it was amongst the recent "hot topics" of family debates, a welcomed break from the focus of her newfound deformity. Her father had been pestering him to cut it in the last few months. His thick, curly hair fell over his ears with a center part. Her brother was popular in school, often having friends over for sleepovers.

She started to fall back into her thoughts and plush pillows of comfort when she heard her brother, Frank, barge in. "Hey, you ok? You've been quiet lately." His eyes wandered around her bedroom to find her clothes in piles on the floor and books tipping over her nightstand. "I'm as good as can possibly be expected," she replied in a low, humdrum, singsong sigh of a tone. "Hey, you know, I was thinking maybe Mom is right. Eventually, it will fade away, give it some time. I'll be honest, it doesn't look half as bad as you think. I think it looks pretty cool actually, almost like a tattoo." "Thanks, but I'd like to think if I ever decided to get inked, I'd at least get to choose which tattoo I'd get stuck with," her face frowning in disappointment. Frank and Camile shared a silence in understanding as he paused before continuing, "It really does look cool... at least I think so." He said softly. "Hey, do you want to play rock band?" "Maybe, later..." Camile said with her eyes still fixed on the ceiling fan above as if halfway stuck in a trance, twirling her long hair around her fingers and biting her lower lip, habits she had grown to acquire out of nervousness. She remained unsettled; she knew there were no words of comfort to be found in the English language or any other to erase her terror, unless they were rooted in magical chants and incantations of "abracadabra," which she only knew to be true in fairy tales.

She began to try to accept her amphibian scales and kept it a secret from the prying eyes of anyone outside of her family. She avoided wearing tank tops and any revealing pieces of clothing to keep her reptilian scales a secret until one day it happened.

Camile couldn't seem to talk her way out of avoiding gym class, so instead she would arrive several minutes late, sparing herself just enough time when she was sure the changing areas would be empty. This routine seemed to work for a while as she fell into a pattern of being the last student to arrive, but she was never penalized for her tardiness. She was, after all, a grade-A student, every teacher's dream. They all seemed to pick up on Camile's recent change in behavior and simply chalked it up to teenage angst, the pressures of applying to colleges, and other stresses of a normal teenager—not enough to stir up any cause for commotion or confrontation as her academic performance remained her crowning achievement.

Tuesday rolled around, and Camile was running much later than usual. She rushed into the locker room stall to change and must have forgotten to slide down the metal latch when the door swung open to reveal the biggest blabbermouth at school, Bianca Wiles, eyes widening in horror as she screamed at the sight of Camile's moving scales. Camile quickly tugged her shirt over her head, yelling, "Get out!" as Mrs. Parson ran in to find out what all the fuss was about, before finally leading both girls to the principal's office. Camile, feeling her face turning red, knew she would now be the weirdo in school, the freak, the outsider. If there was one thing

Bianca couldn't do, it was keep her mouth shut. That's when the onslaught of constant teasing and torment began from the snickering and smiling faces of her peers.

Bianca was the head cheerleader and the most popular girl at Crestwood High; she could easily be one of the plastics right out of the movie *Mean Girls*. Camile could feel her heart race like the thumping of a drum. She could hear the sound whooshing in her ear with the same rhythm. The news spread like a California wildfire throughout school. She could hear the loud murmurs of students whispering as she walked past their faces that bore a look of disgust in the halls to class. She wished she could cut the scales off with a knife in the girl's bathroom, spilling the blood on the walls, but the scales had grown thick and seemed to have taken over a significant portion of what was once her flesh-colored back.

She lived in constant fear that one day she would wake up to look in the mirror and find herself completely immersed in scaly, lizard-like blotches which would spread to her face, and how would she cover that? Before bed, she dove into dread, pondering over every worst-case scenario that sent shivers down her spine. Her anxiety was in high swing, the pendulum that wouldn't stop moving no matter how hard she tried. She worried she'd have to be homeschooled and sent to some science lab to be poked and prodded like a lab rat. She feared the monster she could one day become.

The cheerleaders could always be seen grouped together during gym class or in the lunchroom, glaring and laughing as Camile had become their recent target of torture. The students followed Bianca's every word as if they were mindless drones, and it was only the natural order of things for everyone to follow her lead.

Before her scales were discovered, she was considered one of the most beautiful girls in school; her beauty rivaled Bianca's even. But now she knew Bianca shuddered at remembering the sight of her scales and thanked God she didn't have her hideous, unsightly skin.

The scales which had grown over her shoulder blades seemed to have a thickness that couldn't be easily cut into; she seemed immune to cuts and abrasions. After being discovered, she decided to no longer hide her back when she went outside for a swim at the beach. The ocean water caused a soothing sensation that she had grown to enjoy.

After time passed, she'd come to learn how to ignore the whispers in the hall or curious looks of her peers as they went about their day. By the time she reached the end of senior year, her confidence slowly began to peak again, and the rumors and gossip died down. As with all things, as time passed, she had begun to get past her affliction. Her scales had become no more than any other distinct feature of imperfection, a birthmark, or any other skin pigmentation discoloration or gap teeth or freckles.

Her parents continued their pursuits in search of new experts in the field and modern medicine, but each failed in finding a cure and prescribed various topical ointments and other steroid medications that didn't seem to make an ounce of difference. Despite her acceptance of her scales, her fear remained that one day she would wake up and be covered by the scaly skin which had chosen her as their host.

Her mother did everything to console and calm her worries to assure her this wouldn't happen, which did nothing to ease the fears which lay dormant in the back of her mind as a sleeping bear ready to awaken at any moment to swallow her whole. No doctors could ever come up with a reasonable explanation.

Her mother, on the other hand, had close to porcelain skin. She was a natural beauty; on occasion, she wore mascara which only seemed to accentuate her features, her eyes round and large, full of light and life. Her hair parted in the center, falling down her shoulders in long,

cascading brown beach ringlets with a natural wave. Her clear complexion had a soft glow which often made her appear much younger than she was. Her father often mentioned she was a mirror to her mother, believing they both shared the same aesthetics, but she couldn't understand how she somehow inherited this mysterious skin. Her father had no skin abnormalities either, except for some razor burn stubble and ingrown hairs, minor skin irritations that accompany rubbing a beard enough times—one among many of his fidgety habits.

Camile had come to the unfortunate realization that she would have to live with new skin. Oddly enough, they weren't painful and only felt uncomfortable when she wore wool fabrics. But besides this minor discomfort, in the sunlight, they glistened and appeared almost otherworldly. She could see dozens of tiny scales up close with detailed patterns that reflected a lime and slight fuchsia color born from the initial purplish hue with almost a pale yellow crystal appearance. What bothered her was the fact that she knew she wasn't like everyone else, no matter how hard she tried to accept herself.

She didn't know why her genetic make-up differed from her brother or why she had the unfortunate luck of having this mysterious skin at all in the first place. But as time passed, she grew to accept her newfound skin. Winter rolled around, and the scales were still in place, only they stopped growing and now bore rough sharp edges and seemed to have taken residence and home in a sort of pattern on each of her shoulder blades, rising and falling, revealing a small area of flesh-colored skin in the center.

As months passed, her appetite had begun to change, and she had begun to lose weight quickly, not enough to warrant any cause for concern. The taste of meat had begun to repulse her, and she had begun to subsist solely on fruit, leafy greens, and vegetables. She excused herself from family meals to make her own, relying on the excuse of her sudden interest in becoming a vegetarian.

Her parents were reluctant to pester her about it and decided to go along with it provided she ate enough to maintain a healthy weight. But there were other noticeable changes: she had begun to sleep more often than usual, for up to 12 hours if no one woke her up on weekends. She noticed a sensitivity to the morning sunlight which would stream in from her windows and wake her; even if she slept with her back facing her bedroom window, she could somehow feel the change in lighting. She bought dark purple blackout curtains to avoid this disruption in sleep which her family simply attributed to her decorating to reflect her own style. Camile's favorite band was The Cure, the soundtrack for the alienated teenager, so this new transformation came as no surprise.

One Saturday, Camile awoke to find the house quiet; her family must have left for their usual activities for the day and must have decided to let her sleep in. Her mom more than likely went out grocery shopping or to the mall for something or other, her father joined his friends for their usual game of golf, and her brother was more than likely at band practice.

She groggily glanced at the alarm clock on her nightstand to find it was 2 PM. She slept through most of the afternoon. She dizzily got up from bed, hair disheveled, feeling much more tired than usual, to brush her teeth as she would on any given day. After she brushed using the new Hello Kitty Toothpaste, she spat the mixture of pink paste and water into the sink to find what appeared upon closer inspection to be particles of bugs and worm pieces. Her mouth also had an unusually earthy taste. Startled and repelled at the sight in the sink and the revolting feeling in her mouth, her mind raced a million miles per second.

She wondered if she had crept out during the night and somehow into the garden to eat dirt. What is happening to me? she thought. She could feel goosebumps on her neck, panic rising

within her as if she was growing roots of fear from her feet, the horror trickling into her bloodstream.

She ran back into her room to find her pillows and blankets covered with particles of grasshoppers, worms, and other insects. Half of her goldfish could be seen on the corner of her pillowcase; half-eaten she presumed. She screamed for her parents, forgetting no one was home and hearing her own voice echoing back in response. She ran back into the bathroom to rinse out her mouth with minty, blue Listerine, gargling several times in between to make certain the taste was gone and her mouth clean. Feeling nauseous, she quickly removed her pajamas and jumped into the shower, feeling the water hit her skin hard like a string of tiny BB gun pellets, as if she was being blasted by miniature soldiers preparing for battle.

She could feel pieces of herself falling off like hair from a scalp. The sound of her body splashing in the water as parts of her hit the tiles was overwhelming. She could hear her own heart beating as if it were being pounded by a snare drum, and her ears had become speakers on a sound stage. The fright rang through her ears; afraid to look down at her feet, she took a deep breath and squinted to find a group of lizards surrounding her. She felt her back and found her scales gone, her skin smooth to the touch once again as it had been before. She looked down at her feet to find several large, bright orange-yellow-colored eyes meeting hers.

Legionella Bacteria

Zoé Mahfouz

Dear Landlord,

I have to admit I was rather appalled by your tenancy agreement. I quote: “We confirm that we believe the Premises are safe and free from legionella bacteria”, really? What is it with you people always assuming the worst when it comes to marginalized communities? Oh, but let me guess, your best friend is probably a “legionella bacteria himself” so “how can you be bacteriophobe?” And I thought you were all for “inclusion” and “diversity”, what a massive lie. So, I’m going to be very straight with you. Legionella bacteria has been through enough. They constantly have to fight for their lives, reaching for air conditioning cooling towers, hot and cold-water systems, humidifiers and whirlpool spas. Only 9 out of 10 people who get sick with Legionnaire’s disease will survive, do you even realize how much this could affect a bacteria’s self-esteem? Most of them had to flee to India to keep the lineage alive, but some were brave enough to stay here and try to make a name for themselves. Prove their family and all Gram-negative bacteria that a future is still possible. That just like their father, and their grandfather, and their great grandfather, they still have a high resistance to antibiotics. That they deserve more praise than their arch-nemesis, Escherichia Coli. Or that show off COVID-19. Because they have the potential to be the next big thing. The next epidemic. And I’m not talking about targeting fragile asthmatic people with their pathetic inhalers, no, I’m talking big. I’m talking every household. All ages, all walks of life. Especially the healthy ones. Like spin class instructors. So next time you come home, go to your bathroom, and acknowledge that your water has a distinct smell of “rotten eggs” or sulfur, don’t fight back. You already lost.

To Forget Florence
Coen van der Wolf

Origins will not do if the digger expands
And there is much climbing to be done
In his city that can't support itself.

Just as Achilles was done after Homer,
having presaged his last bow on Troy's contemporary rung,
leaving Statius to drive it home and, his mother talking, coin the fatal attribute,

we must suffer a sea change and forgo
even the pranks and pitfalls of the palaces.

Rescue Others

(Book # 2 in a series of 6)

A Novel by Gary Beck

An outstanding young woman trains at a secret facility in many skills, including armed and unarmed combat to be a solo operator. Lavinia, Vinnie to her comrades, studies advanced Russian and German at Harvard, to extend her training. A complement of Marines is assigned to train with her. They're attacked by ninjas with swords, Vinnie fights them off and saves her unit. Challenging missions test her and her unit as they fight terrorism. A wild sword and gun battle with ninjas on the U.S.S. Constitution ends the book and will keep readers thinking about it long after they finish.



Rescue Others is a 365 page novel in paperback priced at \$13.99. Kindle \$4.99 ISBN 9798341084490 published by Close to the Bone Publishing. For info contact:

close2thebone@hotmail.com

<https://www.amazon.com/Rescue-Others-Gary-Beck/dp/B0DMN4DY1R/>

Maggie
Kali Melone

got beers with him
played pool
That's what she said.
Proclaimed.
Intentions turned to expectations
She went on,
Like a champagne flute
shimmering into pieces
sprinkled across the hardwood floor.

She's a slim and silly girl,
full of pearls
soft still curls
eyes of blue.
Can't Maggie imagine
an empty oysters'
point of view?

Girls like her
always and only
get what they ask for.
Half-shells like me
are strewn among the shore.

A dame couldn't ask for any more,
or any less
I wore this blouse for you.
But even this shiny one
with the brassiest buttons
doesn't seem to suit me best.

She lends me a light
later on. We linger like
a toothpick and a porcelain fork
With hairline splinters and fissures
Ground to grit teeth
and shifting shins. Head and tail of a
washed up whale. Bones picked clean
We're going to go Vancouver, or Vegas,

or wherever

I kicked the backseat
I'm getting so fat! I screamed
Maggie looked back at me
Oh, shut up, you're so crazy!
Don't shout at me!
We cackled and crashed
Into a pole, gleaming off headlights
Both battered and wounded
We're gone before dawn.

Nag's Head
Averett Hickey

Your dirty undershirt, white stain
Against a storm cloud, flaps its surrender
From the balcony. I give myself up

To the salt-struck air, feel the sting
As your indifferent gaze alights on my neck.
This beach house, dragged up from the pit of

Your father's memory, is the latest symptom
Of his affluence. There are tennis courts out back,
A driftwood porch bleached white as bone.

If everything were different but the wind,
I might remember how it felt to love you.
Years ago, in a city I've forgotten

How to navigate, we kissed in a warm, damp
Basement bar. Out on the peninsula, great
Wastes of sand are stripped bare by the wind

And the encroaching tide — the sea retreats
From our moon's grasp. I roam the empty town,
Already making a metaphor of my loss.

My Box (MEP)

I found this box lying on the street. I never had a box. I was not old enough for one. You were given a box when you turned the legal age of adulthood. There it was. Sitting in the gutter of the street. The owner of the box left it there. Or it fell out of a garbage truck. Or maybe the owner died. Even better, maybe they were murdered.

I took the empty box home. I scrubbed it and made it pretty. As pretty as a shiny black box could be. I hid the box from my family. In my room. In the back of the closet. Every day after school, I filled it up with special items. Things I liked. Things that no one else was interested in. Not too full, though. I needed space to fit myself inside the box.

When I grew to the legal age to acquire a box, my parents bought me one. It looked so much like the box I found in the street many years earlier that I switched them. I hid the box my parents bought in my closet. I carried around the one I found in the street instead. No one noticed.

Since I found the box, I spent a lot of time with it. In it. So much time that my family worried. They thought I was spending too much time in my room. I always locked the door so they wouldn't discover me in the box and take it away.

When I grew up, I continued to spend time in the box. Since I was an adult, I didn't have to hide it from my family. They questioned why I spent so much time in the box.

I liked it, I said. I feel safe and comfortable in my box.

Your box is not made to feel comfortable in, they said. It's made to think outside of or to share with others. The box is for building community.

People have tried to share the contents of their boxes. Acquaintances opened their lids and displayed their items. I faked interest. When I showed them what was in mine, they ignored me. They asked why there was so much room in my box.

So, I can go inside it, I said.

Go inside your box? No one does that, they said. That's impossible.

I showed them how I did it. When I came out, they were gone, and I was humiliated.

I never publicly went inside my box again after that incident. It was a private action. A hard lesson.

As I grew older and lived a life of independent dependence, I spent more time in my box. After work, I rushed home to my little apartment and, after I ate a meal, I entered my box until it was time to sleep. Sometimes I fell asleep in the box and left it the next morning when the alarm next to my bed went off.

No friends noticed me in my box so much. Maybe because I had no friends. Family who called on my phone noticed something wrong. They wanted to know why I never returned their calls. If I could fit the phone in my box, I would call them back. Talking on the phone outside of it felt uncomfortable. I never knew what to say. I should try somehow talking on the phone in my box. Maybe with the lid up since it won't fit in it. Maybe one day.

During work, I missed my box. My limbs shook. My breath was sharp. I was anxious. I decided to bring it to work. It was small enough to hide in a bag. Didn't other co-workers bring

their boxes to work? No. Work was not a place for boxes. Businesses owned a huge box filled with the company's interests. An employee's box was the company's box.

During breaks, I snuck into the bathroom, locked the door, and hid in my box. The anxiety left. I felt so much better I forgot about time. At first, my boss knocked on the bathroom door and told me I was late getting back from my break. Then they finally caught me in my box. I was fired for placing my interests ahead of the company's.

When not in my box, I applied for jobs. With unemployment checks financially supporting me, I didn't try hard. But I knew it wouldn't last forever. I needed money to support my minimal needs. Not in my box. Money didn't matter in there. The violent, insensitive, and mean world we were all forced to live in wasn't inside my box.

What if I found a safe place for my box? Somewhere no one would bother it. I could live a happy existence inside it.

After searching for a few weeks, I found the perfect spot. I talked to the foreman of a construction company at one of the sites. I asked him if I could leave my box in the dirt when they laid out the concrete floor.

Don't you need your box, he asked.

I found this one a long time ago, I said. I have my own.

The one my parents gave me was still in the closet of my childhood home. If they found it, they hadn't told me about it yet.

I guess it would be okay, the foreman said. Make sure you bury it deep.

The night before they pump in the concrete for the floor, I will sneak into the construction site, dig a hole big enough for my box, go inside, and close the lid.

If you find this note, rest assured I am fine. I am in my box. I am safe. Thank you for your concern.



“Just As a Dream Seeps into Your Lipstick”
Bill Wolak

A Blue Muse
David Summerfield

Late winter early spring locked in transition limbo; pristine nightscape renders a restless disaffection, under an eerie and ghostly moonlight is a river swollen by runoff of anxiety, as an oncoming train struggles through a fog of uncertainty, shines its light at the absurdity of a lone individual existence--under sentence of life pending appeal condemned to survive. Moon reigns over river and track, train wheels squeal sparks of this existential wailing, who the fuck am I why am I here speak to me please--but in the silent stationary flow of the river the lumbering train leaves off in a whisper with no answer having been spoken. Absorbed by night caboose shrinks, its red taillamp gets fainter and fainter, until dimly lit through a primal mist, winking farewell it barely flickers...

Park Maintenance Log #271
Sean Tierney

It's up to me, in the crest of
the city, to keep myths a stain
on Autumn's crisp linen

Beware, I say, of alligator, so entranced
by the magic of moving trees that, in the many
combinations of their dance, they might
draw me a picture

But no one really knows what I
see or what I do for them
here

Not the racquetball hobbyists
or the dog walkers
or the dogs for that matter, busy sniffing
the wet paint of a shamrock
green picnic table

It's my job, without a song, to keep
things of the wood in the
wood

And even you have only my word, sugary
and loose, what I do is, and
I know this is a lot, like love completely
erasing the past, to
drop you
on the other side of some-
where faded some-
where new

Tu m' abyssesⁱ
Angela Patera

There used to be a fiery crater that raged inside of me; I fed it oil and twigs. It roared a constant hunger and threatened to scorch the world around me.

There used to be a bottomless well inside of me; I cast in bricks and stones until they vanished into the inky depths. Sometimes it overflowed with tears and threatened to drown everyone around me.

There used to be a gaping wound inside of me; I often scratched it raw. Sometimes I tried to stitch it back, but it refused to heal and threatened to weep until it drained me dry.

There used to be a raw nerve that throbbed and ached inside of me; I treated it like a naked wire. Sometimes I tried to numb it, but it mocked all painkillers and it threatened to consume me in its relentless rhythm.

But then you came.

Your love seeped into the cracks; it quenched the thirst and soothed the pain, wiped the tears and healed my wounds.

So, the shards of my being began to mend, thanks to you.

A Curvy World
Diana Raab, PhD

The world is full of curves—such as Kandinsky’s Dominate Curve, the embryonic curve, buttocks, cumulous clouds, balloons, an onion, an artichoke heart, Picasso’s Woman With Yellow Hair, the man in a Speedo suit, a lampshade, a telescope, a garbage pail, a button, mouth of a glass, a bottle cap, a wedding band, a lampshade, a toilet seat, a sink, a headlight, the sun, the moon, a planet, a scoop of ice cream, an egg yolk, a bulb, hoop earrings, doorknobs, belly button, compact disc, the letter ‘o.’ a wheel, a spool of thread, my hips, but only after my daily dose of dark chocolate.

Albert Abrams and his Oscilloclast Machine
John C. Sullivan

The American Medical Association called Dr. Albert Abrams “the dean of 20th century charlatans.” That’s not an exaggeration.

Dr. Albert Abrams started out with great promise. When he earned his M.D. from the University of Heidelberg in Germany in 1882 at 19 years old, he was the youngest to do so in a century. He then pursued postgraduate studies in Berlin, Paris, Vienna, and London before returning to his native San Francisco. Abrams went on to become professor of pathology at San Francisco’s Cooper Medical College, later part of Stanford Medical School. All in all, his was a distinguished medical pedigree.

But in 1918 he invented the dynamizer, which he claimed could diagnose disease using nothing more than a few drops of blood. This was a century before another San Francisco-area scammer, Elizabeth Holmes of Therasys infamy, made a similar claim and went to jail for it.

In 1918 Albert Abrams was 55 years old. It isn’t clear why the middle-aged doctor suddenly crossed so far over into the dark side. But cross over he did.

Dr. Abrams came up with a second machine, a wooden box called the oscilloclast. He claimed his machine could not only diagnose diseases and not only cure the disease diagnosed, but even detect a person’s ethnicity. This was long before any such DNA tests existed. He even used the oscilloclast as a “love detector” with an 18-year-old woman while reporters watched. The result? She was “very much” in love.

Bizarrely enough, here's how the oscilloclast worked: A medical worker would face west (had to be west, for no real reason) with an electrode on his forehead while standing on a rubber mat. The worker was connected to the oscilloclast. Abrams believed, or at least claimed to believe, that diseases had their own vibrations. These vibrations could be picked up by his device. Since he also "believed" that drugs had their own vibrations, he could then give patients the drug that truly vibed with their disease.

Abrams kept adding uses for the oscilloclast. He claimed that from a single drop of blood he could tell someone’s religion. When a drop of blood was not provided, he could use the patient's handwriting, a strand of hair, or even a photograph.

The vast majority of patients sending a blood sample to Abrams were diagnosed as having multiple serious diseases – typically syphilis, tuberculosis, and cancer. There was a certain cleverness to this approach. If patients believed they had a disease that they did not, the fact their treatment was in fact useless did not much matter to them – they believed they’d been cured. And the nearly universal diagnosis of syphilis caused patients who suspected fraud to keep quiet in order to avoid public embarrassment.

Maybe the silliest claim Dr. Abrams made for the oscilloclast was that it could reproduce the feeling of being drunk. During Prohibition this had massive appeal and people lined up around his San Francisco office to feel drunk without the alcohol and, presumably, without a hangover the next day.

At the height of Abrams’ fame in 1921, he was making upwards of \$1 million a year, real money a century ago. And he was becoming a star of the courtroom.

It was a paternity lawsuit. Paul Vittori refused to pay child support for an infant named Virginia because he said he wasn’t the father. A San Francisco Superior Court judge admitted into evidence Abrams’ oscilloclast to test the girl’s blood. This was unheard of in a paternity suit

up to this point. The test found Vittori to be the father, and he was ordered to pay his ex-wife child support. The judge called the oscilloclast "one of the biggest things established by medical science in years."

Abrams' scam started to crumble when, in 1923, a man with incurable stomach cancer went to an oscilloclast practitioner for treatment. After a number of "treatments," the doctor pronounced this patient cured of his cancer. The man died a month later.

In its September 1924 edition, the *Scientific American* said of Dr. Abrams' machine: "At best, it is all an illusion. At worst, it is a colossal fraud".

Professor R.A. Millikan, winner of the Nobel Prize for physics, examined Abrams' boxes in October 1923. Millikan's described the oscilloclast as: "... a contraption which might have been thrown together by a ten-year-old boy who knows a little about electricity to mystify an eight-year-old boy who knows nothing about it."

The American Medical Association actively denounced the machines. The AMA attacked Abrams in its journal stating that, "The absurdity of the [oscilloclast] was demonstrated at various times by sending some of Abrams' disciples' specimens" of red ink and blood supposedly from ill patients but taken from animals. One sheep was diagnosed with hereditary syphilis, which a practitioner offered to cure for the low, low price of \$250.

When several AMA members opened one of the hermetically sealed oscilloclast machines, they found it was nothing more than a box full of wires, lights, and buzzers.

In 1924 Dr. Albert Abrams died of pneumonia, a disease he had claimed the oscilloclast could cure.

A Whole New Form of Life
Javy Gwaltney

The meeting took place in the storeroom, tucked between the deli and frozen goods aisle. Brett stood in the back of the cramped room as Linda, the manager, told them all how important it was to wear masks. She was chewing out Kyle, of course, who hadn't been wearing his mask during most of his shift the day before, but she was chewing him out in that particular Midwestern way of blaming without placing blame. "I'm not gonna say who but someone," and so on. Everyone knew it was Kyle. Stupid Kyle.

They all left the storeroom of Lenny's Fine Foods, named after the dead founder, and returned to their duties. For Brett, this meant stepping behind the cash register and check-out conveyor belt. If you had asked Brett, he would have told you he didn't mind the mask so much. It hid his bad cheek acne and soda-eroded teeth so that people didn't wince when they looked at him.

What he did mind, however, was the strange panes of plexiglass they had erected in front of and behind him. He knew it was for his safety as well as the customers', and yet it made him feel like some Orwellian booth stooge, seconds away from demanding a passport to look over for suspicious forgeries.

At least the customers were in a hurry now. They didn't make time for chatter anymore, choosing instead to grab their bags of groceries as quickly as possible and head out of what they considered a hotbed for contamination. That was fine by him. He hated talking to people. Brett was one of those men who preferred to live in his own head. He liked talking to himself about movies he had watched on Amazon Prime or a new album he had listened to after he had given his mother her medicine and tucked her into bed. He often thought about the combination internet café and comic book shop he had owned a long time ago.

Brett had funded the place with what his dad had left him after he passed. It was profitable for a while thanks to exorbitant hourly fees for using the computers. He had all kinds coming in to use the computers: accountants, artists, *World of Warcraft* subscribers who needed a better internet connection than what they had at home. He even had to ask some pervs to leave for unabashedly pulling up porn.

He never made much money off trading card game booster packs or comics. The kids would just read the books and put them back, and he didn't have the heart to tell them his store wasn't a library. He was a fragile thing, Brett. His mother had always said so.

As soon as it was possible to browse the internet on the phone, the business was over. No more people coming in because they couldn't afford PCs anymore. He sold all the inventory and made out okay. He decided he was gonna go to college, get a degree in something useful. Then Mom got sick, in body and mind. Adiós education fund.

He wasn't bitter about it anymore. He was where he was in life and most of it was bad luck. Just another American living in the gutter, barely getting by. But at least he was getting by.

Brett watched the clock hanging above the bakery in the corner of the store. He was waiting for *it* to happen. The moment he anticipated every day, growing ever closer. Between now and then he'd greet customers, ring them up, handle their gallons of milk and packages of ham. When there were no customers, he'd talk with himself until he tired his brain out or distract himself with tasks. Today, he made time to jot down a list of things to get for Mom, including her

meds from the pharmacy and a Whopper from Burger King. Mom loved Whoppers. He was finishing up the list for her when *it* happened.

He saw the blur of blue out his eye, the cuff of shorts passing quickly. He looked up and through the glass pane of the market's front doors saw the man passing by. He didn't know his name, just that he walked by every day wearing tight shorts and a polo shirt that did nothing to conceal his biceps. The man was a postal worker. In his mind, Brett called the man James because of his strong chin and Greek nose made him think of a young James Remar.

He watched James go by, picking through various letters in his hand soon to be delivered, until he was out of sight. Images flashed in Brett's head, each one a strike of lightning that warmed his whole body. He saw himself laying in a bed next to James, their bodies modestly covered by blankets. He watched as both of them ate at Noodle Hut – James' treat, of course.

"You're so damn handsome," James would say. Brett would leave his mask on even after the pandemic was over, he decided. He liked how he looked with the mask, even though James didn't care about the teeth and the acne. He was very nice, James. He even didn't mind that Brett's mother was kind of kooky and had to be bathed otherwise she'd smelled funny at the dinner table. James would always be there.

Brett was thinking of all this when Linda came up behind him and rapped gently on the plexiglass behind him. The orange sunlight of the late afternoon was shining through the windows of the grocery store.

"It's past five," she was saying. "You can go home."

He didn't move. She rapped again.

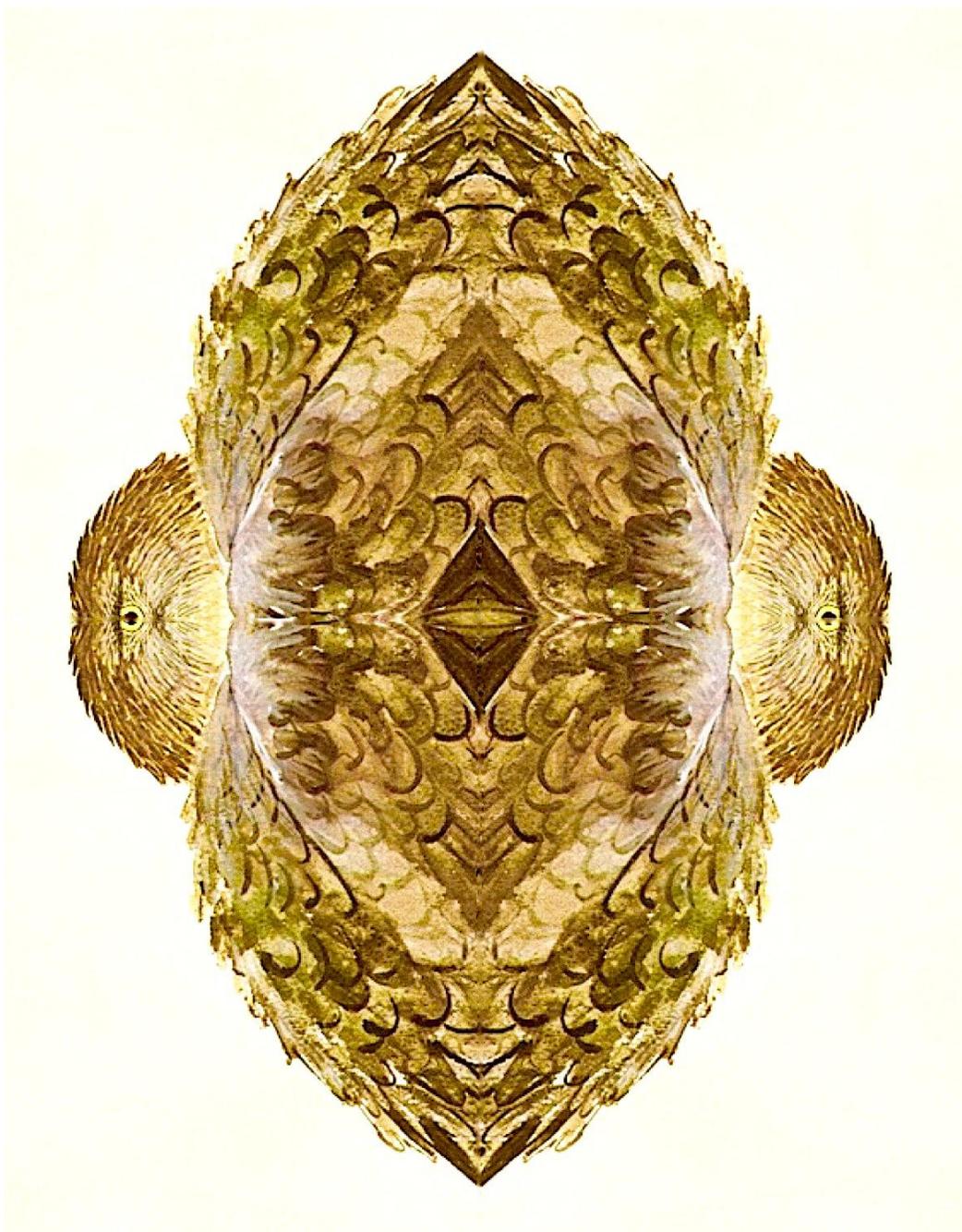
"Brett?"

He was somewhere else.

Puddleman (A Sad Day in Munich)
Bill Dallas Lea

On the bus, heading towards the Kunstareal. Near the front: you, tired but buzzing, lounging on the surprisingly comfortable seat, backpack between your legs. Sat opposite is Joel, also lounging, with his linen shirt and signature khaki shorts. He's currently on his phone – probably checking the Man City match – but as you look over, he sticks it back in his pocket, meets your eyes, and cracks a smile. You've been *so* looking forward to this, and for maybe the tenth time, you thank him inwardly for reaching out to you, especially after such a busy couple of years. You're still both finding your feet with each other (does he really want to go out drinking *every* night?), but, as your gaze drifts back over to the window, you suddenly get a real sense that it's all going to work out fine.

After a second or two, you realise you've forgotten what time his Berlin train is. Turn back towards him, and to your horror, he is *melting*, he is sinking, collapsing into himself like he's made of water. Your heart stops, you see a kind of gormless surprise written on his dissolving face, and then he is no more. You shriek, dive towards him, fall to your knees. You scoop the liquid off the seat, trying desperately to reconstruct him – but you can't even hold him. You scream at the top of your lungs for the driver to stop the bus, stop the bus *now*. The bus continues to move. Your voice is like a stranger's, warped by grief and hatred, but still, you keep shouting, over and over again, distantly wondering what the other passengers must think, *who does this inconsiderate English boy think he is? Has he never used a bus before?*



“With a Smile Smooth as Flame”
Bill Wolak

An Unwanted Visitor
Ferenc Gáspár

War has come through the door. It was just sneaking around first, pushing under the threshold, “just let one foot in, please,” like the wolf in the tale of the little pigs. Then it knocked. Louder and louder.

“Go away,” I said to it. “You have nothing to do here.”

It just laughed, though. It was a sneering laugh, sounded like grenades exploding.

“Go!” I said again.

The answer was a cloud of dynamite.

War was radiating from the streets. From the walls. From the cars. From everywhere. Birds fell off the branches, politicians lost their voice and had their teeth broken out while speaking. Their faces melted away like ice cream in a child’s hand. In the hand of a little blonde girl with pigtails.

I tried to negotiate with it.

“Look,” I said, “I can understand you. But we’re not used to you here anymore, you know? It was long ago you last visited. Go to those places where you are common anyway. Where you are sought after.”

It laughed even louder.

“It’s boring there,” it said. “I need some variety. That’s the spice of life. You must understand this,” it said, looking at me as innocently as a newborn. “The tale of the three little pigs works only for you,” it added. “I am not the bald wolf. I am war. Ares, Mars, Kartikeya. I go along with Yama, Hades and Thanatos. And I am educated too, as you can see.”

It was showing off. The last thing we needed. A snobbish war. As if that made it any better.

War flourished on the quayside. The Danube had risen and flooded out of its banks. Never-before-seen wild fish with huge teeth and mouths swam onto the streets from it. The fish had hands, they used those hands to catch everyone and then stuffed them into their mouths. And they grew bigger and bigger. Soon they were as big as Buda Castle, Margaret Island, and Gellert Hill. They swallowed whole cars and buses. Then they grew legs and started to roam around the country so that they could eat and destroy more.

“Why are you showing this to me?” I asked.

“I am not showing it to you,” it answered. “You can see it since you are in it. You are in it up to your waist. Up to your neck. You are in it completely.”

War has come through the door.

(translated by Ágnes Megyeri)

The Gingerbread Hag is in Recovery
Dr. Alice Elizabeth Wilson

"I can do it." The Gingerbread Hag says out loud, staring herself down in the burnished mirror hanging in the hallway of her cottage in the woods. "I can do it. I've been in recovery for four months now, my longest streak. This outing will do me good. I love the seaside! Yes. A nice hot fish and chips and get my bunions in the salt water. Do me good."

She hitches her large carpet bag more securely into the crook of her elbow. A bucket and spade peek out. A white parasol nestles by their side, and a fat purse of two pence pieces bulges with the promise of treasures to be won in the arcades.

The Gingerbread Hag shuffles into the rickety cottage kitchen for one last check that everything is turned off before she leaves.

The rusted taps are closed, good. The net curtains - demurely drawn, most respectable. And the oven. Well, the oven never really cools down. Not all the way down. Not the furnace that has been the heart of this enchanted cottage for centuries past. How many thousands of cold winter nights had it protected her from? How many thousands of meals had it cooked, roasted to perfection?

But no. She hadn't used the oven, not like that, for four months now. Those days are behind her. She is a new Hag.

She leaves the dusty familiarity of her little cottage and seals the brightly painted door with a magic spell stronger than any lock. The briar roses are triumphant, their sweet perfume rising in celebratory clouds into the morning air.

The Gingerbread Hag crunches down the pretty white gravel of the path and heads towards the little gate in her white picket fence.

What a beautiful cottage, she remarks to herself, with some pride. So inviting. So alluring.

"Oh, you cheeky blighter! Well, at that price I'll have to take two, won't I!" She reposts merrily to the ruddy faced cockle seller.

"For a fine, strong woman like yourself, Granny, I'd happily give you three." He winks at her, lasciviously, and scoops three slippery shovelfuls of the small soft bodied creatures into a paper cone for her.

"Well! I shall certainly enjoy these, thank you." She says and passes over one shiny penny. "It's not my usual fare, you see, but I am on a new diet."

"Oh aye? These'll do you a world o'good, Granny. Best cockles this side of the grey mountains. Trick is see, I get the lads to catch 'em on the young side, a good while before they mature. They are smaller mind you, but the flavour - oh my. And the tenderness of the flesh! Well, you'll soon see for yourself." He winks at her again.

The Gingerbread Hag whimpers inwardly. "Yes." She swallows. "I quite understand you." She smiles weakly at the cockle selling man and moves along. Before he says anything else.

She feels somewhat recovered now. She ate, and very much enjoyed her cockles, and now she is building a merry sandcastle on the beach.

It is a gay sight. A bright handkerchief flaps about on top of her head and her carpet bag spills out its accumulated treasures on the warm sand beside her: sticks of rock, a toffee apple in

greaseproof paper, waffles and syrup in a cardboard box, penny sweets, humbugs, and strawberry powdered bonbons.

She does love a sweetie, the Gingerbread Hag.

She doesn't quite know how it happened.

She was just building a fine sandcastle. Several sandcastles. Having a jolly good time connecting the castles together with little sand walls and moats, and then, really it just looked so much more pretty with a little waffle trim around the sandcastle windows, and it's just good aesthetic sense to tile the roofs with humbugs, and what could make a better pathway up to the sandcastle than pretty little strawberry powdered bonbons?

And then the children on the beach, enjoying a sunny day out with their mothers and fathers, well they got curious, all of their own volition. She didn't invite them to come and look at the towering structure of sand and shells and shining humbugs and glistening toffee apples and a huge moat of cherry lemonade ring-fenced by bright red sticks of rock.

She tries to ignore them. At first.

And then she finds herself stoking the coals of the sand kiln that she has accidentally made. Soon enough the smell of roasting meat mingles with the salt air and beef dripping from the chip shops.

"Mmm, what is that delicious smell?" A lady in a fine hat asks.

"Is it bacon?" Her handsome companion remarks, sniffing the air with appetite.

"Yes, that's what I thought at first, but it's not quite is it? There's something different. Gosh, it's delicious. I wonder if it's the way they cure it?" The lady in the fine hat comments.

"Let's go and see shall we!" Her companion suggests, smacking her lips.

Soon enough a splendid queue has formed all the way along the beach. Even the sellers of sticks of rock and little pickled mussels in pots have abandoned selling their wares to join the queue, unperturbed by their own lack of business and instead entirely focussed on getting just the merest taste of whatever is creating that delicious smell.

Soon enough the time came when nobody remembered that children used to be the pride and joy of the family, special little treasures to be protected and nurtured. No, there had always been children for eating and children for having in the home, hadn't there? That's the way it had always been, surely?

Certainly, a trip past the butcher's window in the town may turn the stomachs of the more genteel folks, but not so much that all would not be soon forgotten with the presentation of a hot, steaming pie, straight from the oven.

Proxy
after *Attraction I* by Edvard Munch
Theo Langdale

black streaked chemtrail sky
bleeds out like the inky Styx
the fickle faultline ferryman to
our mutually assured destruction
gathering on the horizon like
an Atom Bomb mushrooming
in blank bulbous monstrosities
lover, your eyes are shining like
marbles, death rattling in graves
deep as your empty eye sockets,
so before the geiger counter fritzes
tell me how i stopped getting old
and started getting scared

Dear Kitchen Sink
Diane Funston

Dear Kitchen Sink,

You are probably sinking into the bottom of a landfill somewhere. Or maybe you were saved and upheld as salvage for the younger generation to salivate over. Could be your luck. You're trendy now in certain circles. Now they call you a rustic farmhouse sink, run a couple thousand dollars. Rustic all right. You were an embarrassment to me when I was growing up.

You were cast iron and heavy, hanging off the kitchen wall with no cabinet beneath, not even a kitschy curtain to hide your unceremonious metal pipes and drain elbow. One large wide sink, chrome basic faucet, hanging metal soap holder. Your white porcelain was chipped in places, rusty in others. The brass drain hole was scratched and stained no matter how many times, as it was my job, I scrubbed that circular eye with sponge and Comet.

There was a shelf with a mirror above you. Each family member had a glass for drinks of water. Mine, my moms, my grandmothers, grandfathers and Uncle Lou. There was a large metal pan for washing dishes, a dish rack to put them in so I could dry them with a linen towel and put them away in the standing metal cabinet to the left of you. One of my grandparents washed, in extremely hot water and Lux detergent. There was no Peach Thrill or hand conditioning Madge the beauty parlor lady liquid for us. Lux was cheap and did the trick.

Kudos to you if you're now in some bougie kitchen in all your farmhouse glory. You made it out of the inner-city violence. You made it out before I did.

A Short Fall
Jack O'Grady

It does not take a body very long to plummet from a great height. Most bodies can barely manage to squeeze eyelids shut against the dry scrape of disturbed air before the fall is over.

Each falling body, however, contains a mind, a thing knowing no gravity or expectations; a free association of electricity emerging ever-present into consciousness. Minds can fall for as long as they might imagine the sensation of wind rushing over skin.

The man who fell from the 30th floor of his 30-floor office building took less than five seconds to disintegrate his fragile body against the pavement. He was leaning over the edge of the balcony that had only just opened, straining to fit the city's entire skyline into the wild arcs of his drunken gesticulations. The Christmas party he was attending is ending in the ten seconds it takes for everyone present to notice his tumble and crowd the railings so tightly metal bolts bend and squeal.

His body is being deposited in the memories of friends and strangers, labelled for later forgetting. His mind is plummeting through the luminous haze of a city's summer evening. Lips that will soon and may never mix into a paste with the rest of him are still parting around his last unfinished thoughts. The city is unfolding itself around him as he tumbles over that railing and disappears completely.

All essential elements converge in the vortex of his diving perception. He cannot separate light from wind from city but persists in the unintended forever of the attempt. It is all beauty surging to accommodate his spiraling form and he thinks that the city has never made more sense or felt more natural.

He is plunging headlong and timeless into metropolitan ether. He is being scraped from the sidewalk with shovels. There are no neurons left to rattle out a consciousness. There is an eternity preserved in the focused falling of one mind into the neon abyss.

Every Day
DJ Tyrer

Once the sky was filled with superheroes and spaceships. You would look up above the lazy grey of the river at the clouded slate of the sky and see all manner of wonders. But not anymore. The weary cynicism of age has stripped away the wonder, left only the river and the grey sky it reflects. You walk slowly along the concrete path – crisp packets rather than leaves blowing about you on the chill autumn breeze – seeing no more than what is there. And you see little enough of that.

Each day is the same. You trudge to work with an aimless gait, sit at a desk and type in numbers that no-one will read. Then, you stumble along the riverbank, a tasteless sandwich in your hand, trying not to question what went wrong with your life. Back to your desk, more numbers, no meaning, no point. Then, home, taking the same route along the river you do every day, empty factories on the far bank not worth even a first glance.

Once, you saw wonder in the world. Now, the only wonder in your life is when you lay awake in the early hours wondering where the joy went. Maybe tomorrow, you think, you'll do something different, rediscover what it was you lost.

But you never do. You just trudge to work with an aimless gait to the waiting numbers. The same thing every day. Your life is every day. The superheroes fly no more.

From Above
Mackenzie Kae

Molly St. James had been the gossip columnist for the town of Rook's Grove for 60 odd years. 60 years - and no one knew how she got her information. The other citizens of the small town knew plenty else about her. For one, she was an odd bird. She always kept her thick curls - once auburn, now gray - piled on top of her head. She had an eccentric wardrobe. Flowy patterned pants, second hand t-shirts from the local schools, and thickly lined slippers. She kept the garden in front of her shabby bungalow immaculate for the sole purpose of showing off the strange, intricate statues that her now deceased husband - esteemed artist Crawford "Fordie" St. James - had crafted. She knew more about the local plants and birds than any field guide the local library carried.

And they knew they liked her.

Despite her column, they liked the woman. Maybe it was because of Fordie. Everyone had always liked Fordie. Their grandmothers had all been half in love with him as teenagers, with his brown skin that shone in the sun, his colorful glasses sitting on the hump of his hook nose, and that charming gap-tooth smile. Still, when Fordie came back from his first big exhibit upstate with that fiery writer on his arm, they weren't jealous. Fordie was an artist who had found a worthy muse. So, they liked her, too.

Still, liking her didn't mean anyone loosened their tongues around her. They might not have all been worldly, but they sure as hell weren't stupid. Sure, when Molly went on her morning walk, they'd chat with her. They'd lean over their fences, and she'd tell them the exact thing to do to perk up their limp begonias. She'd accept any invitation to sit on a porch and drink a cup of coffee or tea. But in less than 5 minutes she'd told them their kids were awfully bright and talented, commiserated with them about the local government, and left an empty mug on their railings.

Then she'd be gone, and the noise of the morning birds would have settled, and they'd feel calm enough to bring in the paper and start their days.

When the rare, brave soul did ask how she did it, Molly would tell them, "Writing is a little sitting at the typewriter and a lot staring at the trees."

And, true to her word, if they followed Molly on those walks, they'd see her hazel eyes focused on the trees above. If they followed her to the end, they'd stop and turn around. It was horribly inconsiderate to follow someone into a cemetery. Before Fordie died, they'd assumed she was paying respect to his parents. Afterwards, they assumed she was telling Fordie she missed him.

It was true that she stopped at Fordie's grave. Just for a minute. She never said anything out loud. Fordie knew she missed him and had always known she loved him. And she always had him with her in so many ways. So, she'd look at the earth where his human body was. Then she'd continue on to the bench at the end of the trail.

She'd empty the deep, deep pockets of her flowy pants. She'd set out a few shelled peanuts, whatever berries were in season, and one of Fordie's micro-sculptures. Once she'd pulled out her little reporters notebook and pencil, the crows would have landed.

“Hello, my dear friends. What did Rook’s Grove do this week?” Molly would ask.
The crows would swallow a peanut or berry, let out a caw.
And then they’d tell her.

Wonderful Things
Navratra

I

The Valley of the Kings

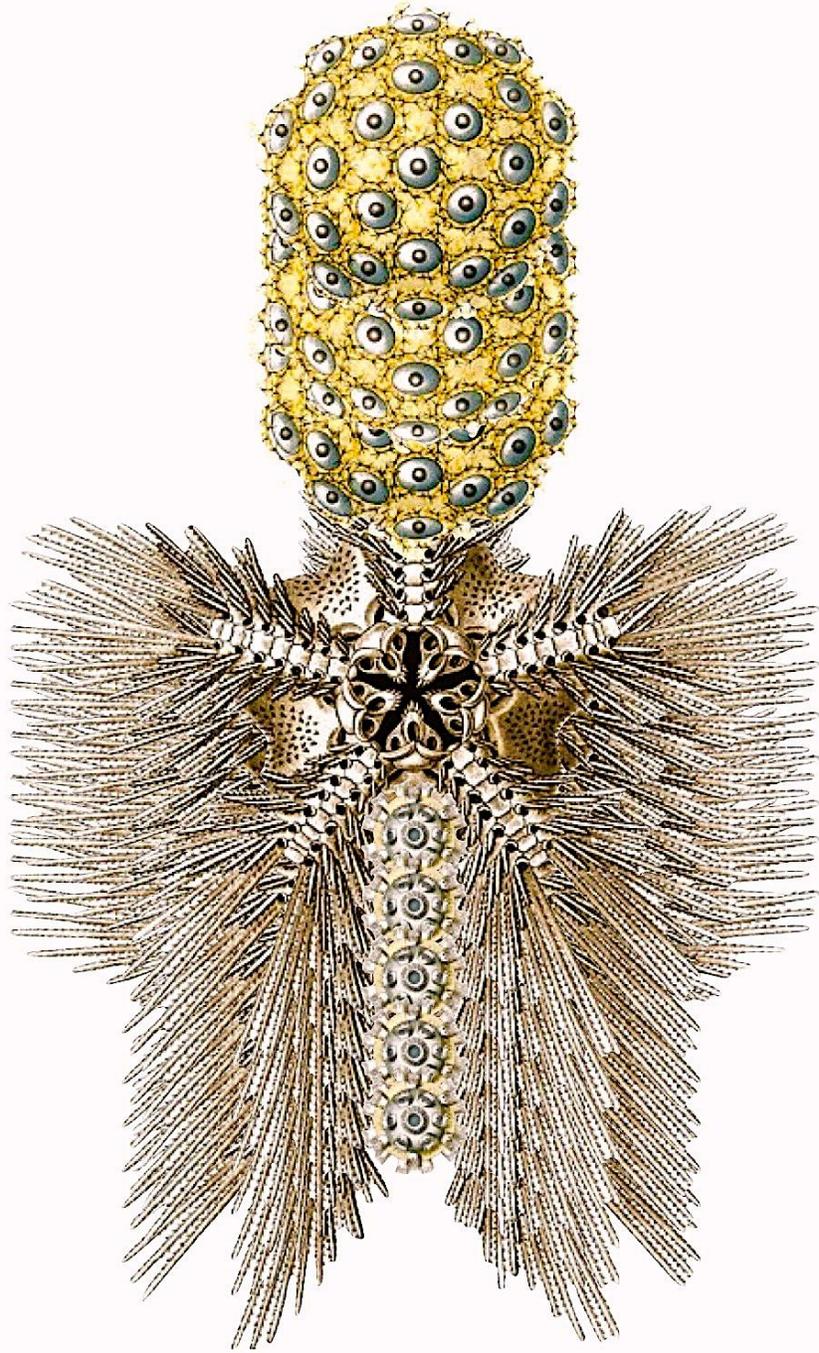
Just opposite to the Thebes,
Standing on the west of the Nile,
There exists a beautiful valley
Which shows grandeur just in a while

Those pharaohs and nobles of the New Kingdom
Were rich not only when they lived,
But also, when they are dead
The weird thing to note is that,
We find pleasure to see
Warriors on their deathbeds

II

Your known Pharaoh

I am your King Tut,
The most famous Pharaoh to name
Not because I restored the ancient religion
Or rebuilt the shrines,
But my corpse gave me this fame
Oh! This irony of my life,
I wanted to be known
As the living image of *Amun*
But now people only recognize me
With the Tomb of Tutankhamun!



“Desperate As a Tattooed Whisper”
Bill Wolak

Dana Holly's Horoscope for the Hapless and the Hopeless
Roger Brezina

ARIES (Ram): March 21 – April 19

A failed, heart-rending romance is the result of a stupid Sagittarius who tries to play Cupid. You should try to ram a Virgo because she lies about being a virgin.

TAURUS (Bull): April 20 – May 20

Bull *shit* is your lot in life, you bullheaded oaf! You always have to have things your way, don't you? Chill! Read Aquarius' horoscope and try to be more like him.

GEMINI (Twins): May 21 – June 21

The attractive stranger you'll meet today will totally turn out to be your alter ego, so stay away from mirrors, Skitzo!

CANCER (Crab): June 22 – July 22

All right, Mister Sticky Pincers! Put it back! A suspicious Pisces knows you stole one of her cherished keepsakes, you kleptomaniac! And stop pinching my butt in public!

LEO (Lion): July 23 – August 22

One of your off-balance Libra friends has been getting on your nerves long enough. Now is the time to tell him so. Bite his head off or bite his wienie.

VIRGO (Virgin): August 23 – September 22

Life is too boring by being so innocent, isn't it? Pretend you're an Aquarius and soil some doves. Stay away from Aries, because he likes anal.

LIBRA (Balance): September 23 – October 23

You can't even balance a checkbook, and your boobs aren't the same size. Your lopsided logic impresses no one except liberal Libra librarian lesbians.

SCORPIO (Scorpion): October 24 – November 21

Sting operations are your specialty. Keep an eye on people born under the sign of Cancer. Your best chance for romance is with a Pisces: their sign looks like 69.

SAGITTARIUS (Archer): November 22-December 21

Ha! Now you've done it. You think you're Cupid, shooting arrows around, but centaurs only want to be the center of attention so you can be invited to their wedding.

CAPRICORN (Goat): December 22 – January 19

Buy some mouthwash, Goat Breath! Engage in 69 with a Pisces so your breath smells like fish. That's why fishermen love oral.

AQUARIUS (Water Bearer): January 20- February 18

Whew! A torrid, wet-and-wild love affair with a Pisces is in store for you. Take a cold shower then stock up on some condoms. Speak with fluidity, and love is yours.

PISCES (Two Fish): February 19 - March 20

Douche more often to alleviate that fish smell. I prefer a pleasant peach scent. Our sign looks like 69, so why not please our partners while they're pleasing us? (*Sigh*)

BABOONIUS (Baboon): Perpetual

There are no signs of the Zodiac for ignoramuses like you, but there should be because you can't make decisions for yourself and depend on horoscopes to make them for you.

Slow and Steady
Ethan J. Hatchett

Kyu was not how Sam Wade imagined a Yakuza to be. He was short, mild-mannered, and polite. He didn't even see a tattoo. "Good to finally meet you, Mr. Wade," Kyu said, his voice low and confident. His English was impeccable, probably better than Wade's.

"Glad to put a face to the name." It started so small, a couple to an exotic pet trader, then a few to a shady restaurant. Now...

Wade removed a large, kicking turtle from the box. Kyu examined the turtle closely, holding it close to his face in the dim light of the parking garage. "I thought these were endangered."

"Threatened, not endangered," Wade corrected. "They were displaced during construction. As the state herpetologist, it's my job to ensure they end up... in a better place."

At home, Wade counted his earnings. By now the six turtles were halfway to China. In the next room, his wife slept, pregnant with their first child. The bills were piling up. Something had to change— fast.

His office was a mess: field guides, old reference books, and stacks of paper. Wade slumped in his chair in front of his computer. At any moment the phone would ring with an angry, concerned citizen. Wade, equipped with a hundred-thousand-dollar master's degree in herpetology, would have to answer it. It didn't have to be like this, but the times had changed. As expected, the phone began ringing. "Natural Resources, this is Sam."

"Mr. Wade. How are you today?" It was Kyu.

"Why are you callin' me here?"

"We were pleased with your last visit. Can you bring one hundred more?"

"A hundred more?" Wade repeated. "How do you expect me to do that?"

"We are prepared to offer a million dollars for your trouble."

"I dunno..."

"Bring them tonight." Wade was stunned. That money would be enough to start a new life somewhere far away.

"Huh?" That was all Sarah could say. Sam Wade stood in front of his wife with that desperate, puppy dog look in his eye. It made her nervous. He tried to contain himself.

"Pack your things tonight. We're going on a trip!"

It took five hours to get everything done. Wade traveled north to the breeding facility to pick up the turtles. The state artificially bred the turtles to add to the dwindling population in the wild. It wasn't an easy sell to get that many turtles, but his years of service finally paid off. The back of his truck was stacked with boxes of turtles. It was probably overkill, but he brought along a 12-gauge shotgun.

Wade leaned against the bed of his truck. There was a knot in his stomach. Kyu was late. His phone rang. "Is this a game to you Mr. Wade?"

"What the hell are you bitchin' about? I'm here waitin' for you!" There was an uncomfortable pause.

"I see. The deal's off. Have a nice evening, Mr. Wade." Kyu hung up. A police siren sounded. Wade bolted for his car. He speeded toward the exit of the parking garage, but two cop cars already blocked it off. He grabbed the shotgun.

He can barely stay ahead of them. He's quickly cornered.

"Freeze!" the closest officer shouts. It's no use. "Drop your weapon!" Wade raises his shotgun.

"It's not fair!" Wade aims at the crowd of officers.

"We will shoot!" Wade pumps the shotgun. The officers open fire.

Sarah waited by the window by her front door. The porch light was on. Her spirits raised as she watched the police car pull into her driveway. She opened the door. The young officer struggled to meet her hopeful eyes. "Good evening, Ma'am..."

Angry Men
Courtney Chester

When we were at war everything was easy.

Anger, stress, and pain were all emotions I could understand. I knew them very well—to the point that they had become as natural as breathing. You, however, offered me love, intimacy, and friendship. All things so foreign and inopportune to me. The vulnerability they brought about scared me—made me feel weak. And weakness brought ruin.

It became clear then. You would ruin me. I clung to that thought. It made it easier to hate you. To want to squeeze all the kindness from you like the seeds of a pomegranate. Leaving nothing behind but a red, pulpy mess.

For months, I tried fruitlessly to drive you away. But still, argument after argument, you refused to leave me alone. Instead, you reinforced your affection for me, cloaking me in a love I did not deserve. You became so convinced that underneath my cold exterior there awaited a woman that would return your warmth—someone broken that could be made whole again.

Until you knelt in front of me and asked the question that every girl dreams of: “Will you marry me?”

I stared into your beautiful, tortured grey eyes and as my lips opened in response, you smiled harder. So confident that I would say yes. And then I had the honor of breaking your heart one last time.

For years, I liked to believe that my rejection fixed you in some way. That it would make you strong like I assumed I was—that you would thank me someday. So, when you were the first in line to volunteer for the war effort, I took pride in seeing someone so peaceful finally choosing to engage in something as wrathful and brutal as war. This, I presumed, was my greatest victory yet. You, whose kindness and generosity had left me so pointedly aware of the one-sided wars I waged against you, were now prepared to become as I was.

As a child, I read that if you grew up with an angry man in your house, then there would always be an angry man in your house. It instilled a fear that I would repeat my mother’s mistakes and allow an angry man into my own home. And no matter how much your actions suggested otherwise, my mind promised me that you too would become an angry man.

But now, as I sit at your grave, I am beginning to realize that I am the angry man.

Blind Spot
William Kitcher

You know what a blind spot is. I don't mean figuratively. I mean literally.

In your blind spot is where the creatures live. Almost always just out of sight. But they're always there. You can see them occasionally if you switch your glance quickly. They're that flash of light or sudden movement you perceive sometimes but can't explain.

There are different kinds of creatures living there. Some are bat-like, with tiny brown wings that flap erratically. Some are one-celled organisms that pulse like jellyfish. Some are octopus-like, their tentacles pushing out and withdrawing. Some are sparkling irregular shapes that burst like supernovae. Some can't be described, like those transforming pieces of light you see when you rub your eyes. They don't work together; it's chaos. They come and go in a haphazard manner. Some are more prevalent depending on your mental makeup.

The insidious beauty of the creatures' existence is that you forget that flash or movement, attribute it to something else, and they're gone from your mind until the next flash.

Sometimes they stay there as remnants; those floaters in your eyes, if you have them as I do, are a residue of the fragmented creatures. If you see something in your periphery occasionally but can't identify it, that's them. If you feel someone is near you, and you look up, and there's no one there, that's them. Sometimes you hear something. Most people report aural hallucinations sometimes. They're not always hallucinations.

In between those experiences lie the creatures. They're not innocuous. They get into your brain, the way alcohol and drugs do. But they don't go away the next day when you're sober. They take over a small part of your brain, and then expand when the opportunity arises for them. They do this slowly. They've learned over the eons. They don't do this more quickly because they're shrewd. What they do is more deceptive. They've learned to be patient; they've learned to linger and pause and reflect. In this manner, they're nothing like humans. If they acted more quickly, people would notice them and try to do something.

They focus on those who are more susceptible to their particular aims, the different creatures being predominant in different people. They focus on people who are more conducive to being taken over by the power of a cult of personality.

They dig in. They drive. They push. They knock you down and, if you get up again, they shove you into the cement and rub your face side to side, giving you scars that never heal.

They give you pain – broken legs, emotional distress, organ cancer – and you don't know it's them because those things happen to everyone. They confuse you, causing you to associate with people they want you to share your experience with, buffeted by the beliefs you hold due to your social class, religion, prejudices. They're relentless in their manipulation of anything that is part of you.

They know this works because it's always worked, and people have always attributed this to something else – social class, religion, sense of wealth, ignorance.

That belief you have that others ridicule is due to an excess of one kind of creature. Your friends are the same as you are.

The blind spot creatures are very good at what they do.

As I sit here in the bar writing this, I see the creatures hovering and drifting and occasionally dissipating in the afternoon light.

Someone asks me what I'm writing about and I tell him. He thinks it's funny and stupid and unreal. I don't try to explain it further because he's already dismissive, as part of their plan. I stop talking to him.

But I notice that he keeps changing his visual focus. He keeps looking side to side, and up and down, quickly, as if he's just noticed something in his visual field that, up to now, he's never seen before. He seems really uncomfortable.

Out Of Mind
James W. Miller

As a fledgling pastor, not priest, I'm a misfit to the hesitant and uncertain family that has invited me to their home. Mainline, post-enlightenment Protestant seminaries treat this sort of thing with the calm assurance of a parent dispelling a dark-closet monster at bedtime.

"Weird things have been happening in our house," she had said nervously on the phone.

I walk up to the un-haunted-looking, two-story Midwestern home with a symmetrical facade and pitched gable roof, white with black shutters. Looks like the kind of house where toy soldiers square off against plush animals in one bedroom while a preteen older sister gets a first kiss on a backyard swing. It's a house of bedtime stories and birthday parties, dusty photo albums and dad jokes.

"Like what?"

"Well, my kids were playing in the living room, and the TV started turning on and off." Her voice cracked a little.

"Call an electrician." Seminary had cost me \$60,000.

I ring the little white button doorbell, and the chime sings back a happy hello. I don't wear even a priest's collar. I don't own one. I'm dressed fitted, clean, and with enough buttons to imply professionalism. I look both like I take this seriously but also like I'm sufficiently mature not to. I haven't decided.

"Yes, normally I would. But then, a day or two later, when I was in the kitchen, my three-year-old came downstairs screaming. She told me, 'Mommy, the shadows are walking around in the hall.'"

Some faithless chills ran across my neck. "Children have active imaginations," I heard the religious man answer her, and I wondered about his qualifications. I was never given a script for this scene, so I was improvising. I felt like I wasn't honoring the role for which I was auditioning.

Molly answers the door. She seems together, polite and settled. Ben is behind her. He smiles graciously, that face that we make when we are trying to conjure up a convincing normalcy after a termination or a diagnosis. Two little ones peek curiously from behind a sofa arm, flittering with the butterfly wing jitters that children get when someone comes to the door.

I am accompanied by a grandmotherly woman from the prayer ministry who assures me comfortingly that she knows about such things. She wears glasses that are too large for her face, having been pushed ashore by the river of trends some time ago. She is angular, straight, and thin, the way some old women get, like a pair of scissors in a dress. The dress is also dated. I am in a place where I will defer to any expertise, proven or not. I would surrender to any sign of confidence.

"Come in," Molly encourages us.

"Then there was the guy down the street who bought his house and then sold it a month later," she told me.

"Because?"

"He said when he came home from work, someone had taken all of his stuff out of the cabinets and left it on the counter. He put everything away, and the next day - the same thing. House was locked all the time. So he's moving out."

"Wow, that's...." Again, no script to read.

Then she went silent. No response. I looked at my cell to see if she had disconnected.
“Molly?”

“Well,” says the matron behind whom I am hiding like a shield. “Here’s what we should do.”

We sit in the living room and she leads a quiet prayer in a circle. She doesn’t raise her voice; she sounds like a parent sending a difficult child to bed without a fight. I had not imagined talking down to a devil in this way, not as though it was evil, but only like it was wasting our time.

I peek at her while she is praying. She has found the rich promise of “maybe.” In between the intentional architecture of doctrine are the spandrels of speculation that have made her faith less an encyclopedia and more an open-ended parable. She joins the writing of the ghost story to give it a moral, but she never lets the story escape the hands of the storyteller to have a life of its own. She makes it her own story to tell. And the storyteller says when the story is over.

The experience is vanilla. There’s nothing to report. I’m worried that it has been so mundane that they won’t believe us; believe in us.

“Is that it?” asks Molly, hopeful.

“That’s it,” says my guide.

“Hello? Molly? Are you still there?”

“Pastor,” she whispers, her voice a taught spring waiting to recoil. “When I started talking to you, the sound system started turning our music on and off.”

“Should I come over?”

“I’m leaving,” she says, and hangs up. It takes a while to coordinate an evening visit. She won’t be home alone until we come over. We text volley until the appointment.

Out on the doorstep, I ask Molly’s question again. “That’s it?”

“That’s it,” she repeats.

“Did that do anything?”

“Call them in a few weeks and ask.”

I call. Everything is normal. No other incidents. The parable has concluded.

Home Ghosts
Luca Fois

Home is where you left
a ghost of yourself.
You see no borders when you look
over my shoulder. You hear
bombs.

The walls
fall, but not the home.

The home survives
in your memory. Blood
is home, in the end,
like humans, bacteria,

or cancer cells.
Home was the mole
on your mother's left cheek.
Home was the smell of pumpkin
burning in the oven.

Can you ever go
home?

Look at your dog sleeping
in your head and wonder
if she thinks,
and what she thinks.

Wonder if you'll see her
on the upcoming holiday.¹

Go back
to what home means.

Home is tears you prepared
or chairs you designed
to use in a home,
a home remedy. For me?

Home is when

¹ Please, be mindful,
pronouns, animals can be
what you like,
when you are at home,
and here, in your thoughts.

I write slant,
 as in my back aches
 curved on this sheet,
 remembering. Home
 smells of all cigarettes
 my father has smoked.
 And all the silent tears
 of the children
 who lived in this allotment.

**We have no sense of home
 yet are so embedded in it
 it follows us everywhere.²**

Do homes haunt us?

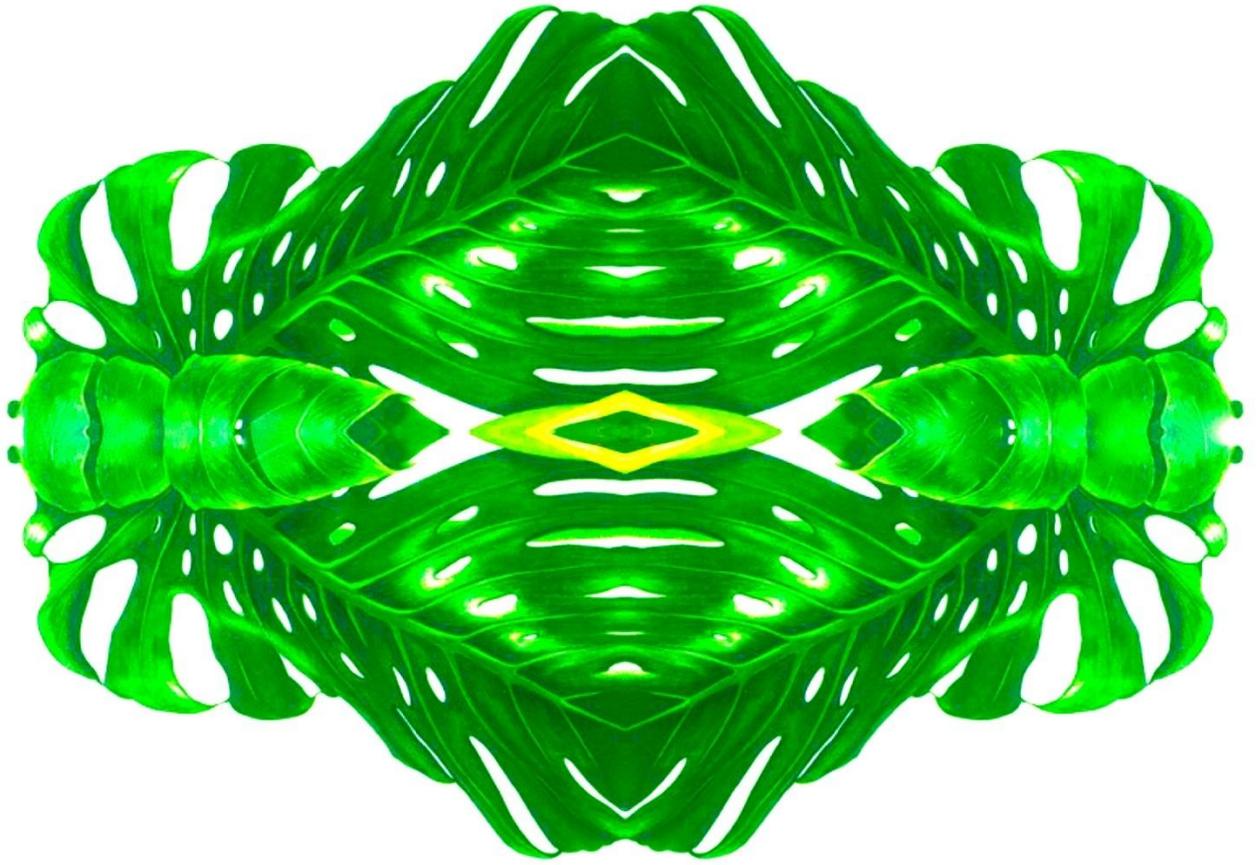
If
 we cannot go home, can we be
 home? The streets
 take us home and pulse
 with people we don't remember.
 Now that I am with you, is your home
 my home too?

 Home is the gift
 of myself and wanting

nothing in return.
 Home is to know you will
 return.

 Home is, if I can
 return, a memory
 and its opposite.

² *Lies Told Honestly*
 by Sahar Khraibani,
 but history is home



“The Threshold of Wretchedness“
Bill Wolak

Allograph Bones
Leigh-Anne Burley

Janice was anxious about her upcoming dental implant surgery on her canine teeth, a procedure that threatened to upend her life. Needles piercing her gums are unnerving, as is the whirling grating sound of the drill boring into the enamel. However, she will bear discomfort for a smile she can be proud of. Still, having crushed cadaver bones the size of table salt granules in her mouth is disturbing, especially with Halloween approaching. Despite the surgery going well, Janice can't shake the feeling of impending doom lurking around the corner.

Six months later, Janice's canine teeth implants lengthened and began causing her pain, which then spread to her neck and head along with the terrifying sound of dry, hollow bones rattling around like marbles in a tin can. A bitter taste and foul odor filled Janice's mouth, which persisted despite toothpaste and mouthwash. The middle-aged woman's tongue twisted as though it wished to escape her nasty mouth. Concerned, the patient contacted her dentist, Dr. McKeen, and scheduled an appointment with the receptionist for the following day.

While her dentist examined her mouth, Janice chomped down on his finger, resulting in a loud crack as her jaws clenched shut. Yanking on his finger, Dr. McKeen yelled in pain, but the more he pulled, the more that alien mouth bore down. Gripping his injured hand with the other, the tortured dentist freed it from the puncturing fang. As he did this, blood flowed down Janice's throat, bringing a pleasurable feeling and an emboldened smirk. With blood staining his white coat, the dentist rushed past waiting wide-eyed patients to the ER, holding his bandaged finger above his heart, in need of stitches, antibiotics, and painkillers. The weight of worry lifted off Janice's shoulders as her rabies test came back negative. Dr. McKeen chose not to press charges but prohibited Janice from his practice. The pain and rattle in her teeth and the unpleasant taste and smell in her mouth vanished, yet her tongue still sought solace elsewhere.

Confused, the woman did not know why she felt compelled to bite her dentist's finger. As a child, she wasn't prone to biting. Janice was unsure about whom to seek advice from. Instead, she vowed never to bite anyone. Janice developed an intense craving for raw meat-the bloodier the better, which was unlike her previous vegetarian food preferences. But she needed to drink blood, or her teeth would hurt, chatter, and rattle.

Finger-biting incidents occurred at dentist offices across different areas of the city six months following dental implant surgeries. The dental community responded with fear, resulting in office closures. The finger-biters baffled health professionals until an astute dentist examined an allograph plant. During cleaning, Dr. Lee discovered technicians over-radiated cadaver bones when removing all organic contaminants.

However, Janice wrestled with the temptation to bite people as no dentist dared extract her stubborn fang teeth or from any other affected patients. Eventually, those with prominent fang teeth sought solace and comfort by meeting during full moons in an open field on the town's outskirts. A few chose, like Janice, the route of self-discipline and sheer willpower to consume raw meat, while others savored the taste of human flesh. The latter group existed on the fringes of society, revealing themselves only when the moon was full. Gradually, the vampire covens embraced these renegades and instructed them on efficient methods of drinking humans without chewing through flesh and bones.

Then
Christopher Woods

After the landscape
Was gone, vanished.
They had no choice.
Turned inside again,
All wax faces,
Stared into the gloom
Of their dark houses.
Tried to ignore memory
Poking here and there,
Gargoyle head, jackal laugh.
What else could they do?

So, they did,
No choice in this,
For who knows how long,
Days no longer days
Without sun or moon.

Then, for no reason
At all,
Floors began giving way.
First in corners,
Then surprising places
Where a worried foot
Might step lightly,
Unsure how to proceed.

The Blissful Art of Transmutation
Chris Litsey

They say we must live with the
materials of our lives;
play the hands we are dealt,
but I know that cards can be turned
into illusions and good luck.
What is a card trick?
Playing with ideas with sleight of hand?
I weave ideas into symbolism.
I turn sensation into memory.
I morph agony into songs in my head.
I can keep up with these changes
so long as I'm fed fresh feeling,
raw materials,
for I am an alchemist;
I spin pain into gold.

Gardening Tips
V.J. Hamilton

The man outside the screen door kept rapping at the thin upper glass pane, although I'm sure he could see me inside, hastening to the door. Doug and I had moved in yesterday and half-empty cartons formed a slalom trail in the front hall. We had a telecom connection guy on his way and another guy soon to drop by with a roof repair estimate. Plus, in my heart of hearts, I hadn't given up hope that someone from the Welcome Wagon might drop by, that's the kind of subdivision it was. I had my paint clothes on, the oversized Arcade Fire T-shirt and the ripped yoga pants, and my fingers were robin's egg blue. Still sticky, so I did not open the latch. Instead: "Hello, what are you here for?" I called.

The man stood on my porch and yelled about dirt and tomatoes. Cats were Satan's creatures. Armageddon. Then back to tomatoes. Gobsnacked, I let him carry on, just like I allow a fire to burn down to ashes. Or allow my mother to enumerate my shortcomings. We have no cat, and have never met Satan, but those were apparently beside the point.

He was so wound up I began to calculate the tensile strength of the screen, the time I'd gain if I sprinted back down the hallway. Both answers amounted to: not enough.

Then he turned and left as abruptly as he'd appeared.

I took a deep breath. Oh, right: robin's egg. The blue-drenched paint roller was on its tray slowly drying.

Doug sauntered downstairs and into the hall. "Who was that?" he said, toweling off his wet mullet.

"Some crank," I said, trying to hide the post-encounter shakes. *Shit, I'd been that close to unlatching.* The guy's right eyebrow had a scar running through it. Above it were faint white lines and an indentation, as if he'd once gone through a windshield. He was big, too. Hairy arms.

Doug leaned toward me, and I breathed in the damp argan oil as he kissed my ear. Leaning back, he gave a dreamy smile. "I'm going over to the nursery. Going to pick up starter tomatoes," he said. "We have a neighbor who's nuts about tomatoes. Thought I'd get some gardening tips."

Before I Let Go
Kristina Lynn

before I let go, must we
weed out every black dog
from this infertile summer

must we unearth
all of the dandelions
we never planted

rivulets of tear-stained gas
snaking stasis into
our garden made for thieves—

evergreen was never
a word for us—

in the space you'd have me crawl through
the tunnels
were too narrow

my neck never accustomed
to the turtle
you'd be-whittle my shell to—

before I let *go*
become the preamble
to every *away* we'd rip our teeth into

must we remember
all the maroon that faded to white
the jagged line

becoming the stitch
that kept our skin glued
the crisp peel

our greedy, treasured sound—
before two hands
digging for landmines

there was one
smoking in tandem
the county light

the fireflies
gravitating
toward the spark behind weak eyelids

must we let this become us
I'm tired of shaving my teeth down
with Occam's razor—

trying to build an avenue
and you were just
squatting

Not News
Bob Gielow

My name is Brian Wattles and I am the General Manager here at WOOD TV, WXMI, in Grand Rapids. As recently ordered by Judge Eileen R. Sperry, from the United States District Court for the Western District of Michigan, in the case of Zelinsky vs. WXMI TV, I will be reading the following statement.

The governing board and leadership team at WXMI TV would like to acknowledge the pain and suffering that were caused by our reporters, video editors, production editors, and on-air personalities when images and audio of Karen S. Zelinsky were broadcast during the months of March, April, and May of 2024; during evening news broadcasts, "The Morning Mix" with Charles Todd and Fay Dunstin, in dozens of social media posts, and at FOX17online.com.

As viewers may recall, on March 2nd of this year, Mrs. Zelinsky was approached by WXMI reporter Betty Chun and cameraman Howie McGovern. Ms. Chun had learned from listening to the Michigan State Police scanner that an accident was being processed in the northbound lanes of Route I-196 near the Byron Road exit for Zeeland. Upon hearing that the one vehicle involved in that crash was a van carrying the insignia of Rockford City Hall, Ms. Chun took it upon herself to travel from Grand Rapids to Rockford to solicit comments from anyone she encountered leaving City Hall. The first person Ms. Chun and Mr. McGovern met in Rockford that day was Mrs. Zelinsky, who was asked if she "would like to comment on the crash this morning of a Rockford City Hall vehicle outside of Zeeland."

It is important to mention at this point that WXMI TV's policy is for reporters to avoid contact with family and co-workers for at least 24 hours when a fatal accident has occurred. Ms. Chun was not aware, when first encountering Mrs. Zelinsky, that two fatalities had occurred during this accident because the two men were thrown from the vehicle and had not yet been found over the guardrail and near the Macatawa River. It should also be mentioned that Ms. Chun had no way of knowing that Mrs. Zelinsky was Deputy Treasurer for Rockford while her husband, one of the crash victims, was City Assessor Arnold Zelinsky.

Although WXMI TV employees did not know that Arnold Zelinsky's wife was the person that had been filmed outside of Rockford City Hall, our video and production editors believed that her emotional reaction was newsworthy enough to air during the evening news on March 2nd. Knowing now that it was Mrs. Zelinsky who was reacting to the possibility her husband was involved in the crash, we regret airing that footage.

While WXMI TV reporters have a legal right to film and speak with citizens while on public property, we acknowledge that Ms. Chun and Mr. McGovern should have ceased their questions and their filming when Mrs. Zelinsky became visibly upset and clearly articulated her desire to be left alone as she rushed to her vehicle in the City Hall parking lot.

When the Grand Rapids Press made public that the second fatality from the crash on March 2nd was Eddie Lathrop, a well-known drag performer in western Michigan, Ms. Chun and Mr. McGovern took the initiative to knock on the Zelinsky's front door 25 hours after the crash had occurred. They wanted to ask Mrs. Zelinsky about her husband using a Rockford City vehicle for what they assumed was non-City business. They also wanted to inquire about Mr. Zelinsky's relationship with Mr. Lathrop, believing that the public we serve would want to know.

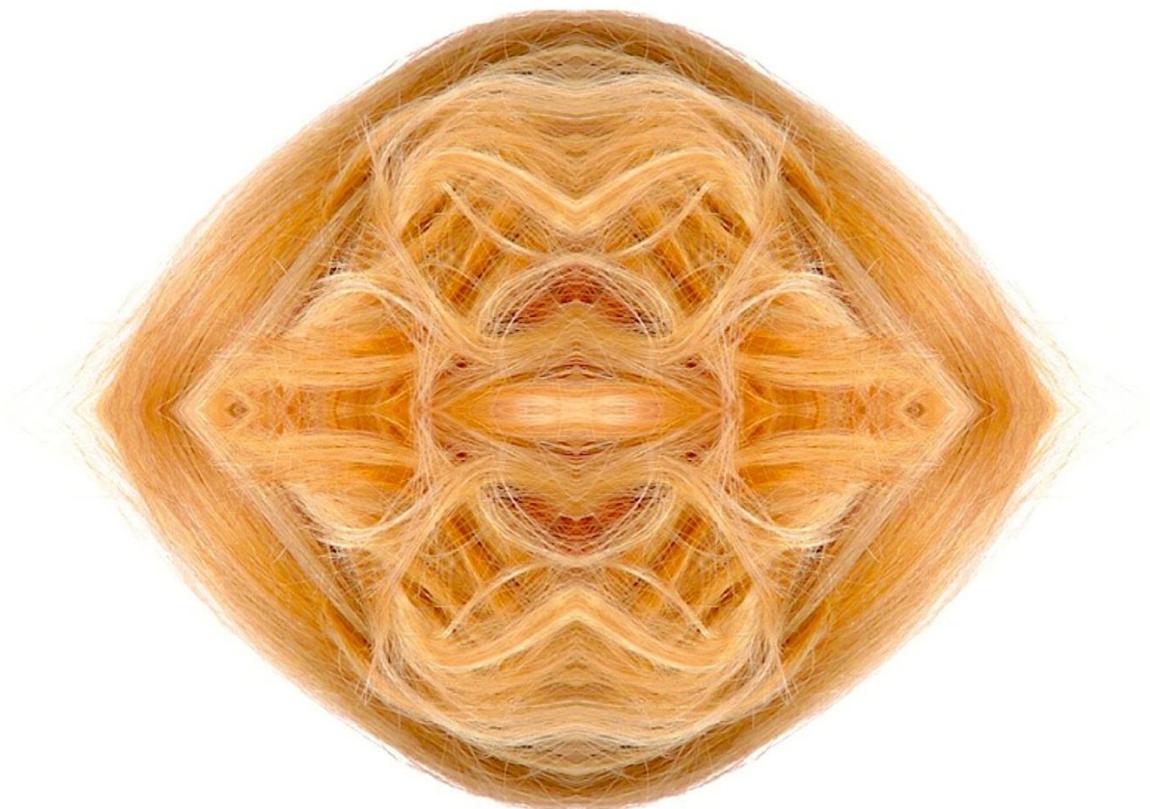
When Mrs. Zelinsky recognized Ms. Chun and/or Mr. McGovern, she yelled, “This is none of your business. This is not news.” Mrs. Zelinsky then attempted to slam the door on Ms. Chun and Mr. McGovern, but could not, as the video documents, given that Ms. Chun’s coat belt had gotten wrapped around the door handle. WXMI TV regrets airing and posting online footage from that encounter at the Zelinsky home.

Having not yet heard from Mrs. Zelinsky or her lawyer, on the morning of March 8th, WXMI TV “The Morning Mix” hosts Charles Todd and Fay Dunstin repeated suggestions posted by viewers on Facebook and X that Mr. Zelinsky and Mr. Lathrop were involved in an extramarital relationship. Although Mr. Todd and Ms. Dunstin acknowledged on air that this claim was “unverified,” WXMI TV concedes that they should not have publicly participated in such unnecessary speculation. WXMI TV also regrets the instances when our social media team retweeted and shared Facebook posts that hypothesized the nature of Mr. Zelinsky and Mr. Lathrop’s relationship.

As we learned during the court case, Mr. Lathrop was employed part-time by West Coast Building Inspectors (WCBI), based in Zeeland, and had been hired as part of a team due to inspect a building located on Byrne Industrial Road in Rockford on the afternoon of March 2nd. Having traveled to Holland that morning for a monthly breakfast meeting with other western Michigan city and town Assessors, Mr. Zelinsky agreed to pick up Mr. Lathrop from his home because the two of them had been classmates and friends while attending Grand Haven High School in the 1990’s, and because Mr. Lathrop’s car was in for repair. On March 2nd of this year, Mr. Zelinsky was legally and lawfully driving a friend to conduct work in the town of Rockford. The relationship between Mr. Zelinsky and Mr. Lathrop was not newsworthy and the assumptions being made by WXMI TV reporters were incorrect.

Ms. Chun, Mr. McGovern, Mr. Todd, Ms. Dunstin, and multiple members of WXMI TV’s editorial staff and social media team have all undergone mandatory legal and sensitivity training to ensure their actions do not again cause any turmoil like what Mrs. Zelinsky endured. I participated in this court-ordered training, as well, and I must say that I was humbled by the experience.

In the future, WXMI TV will do better. Thank you for your attention.



“Breathless As the Spark's Epiphany”
Bill Wolak

Interacting With a Famous Guy
John Grey

You're in the newspaper all the time
and on television twice a week at least,
and you give this impression
of being always out of breath,
as if you're rushed everywhere,
your fame so selfish
there's barely time for bathroom trips.

And look at me:
my mother doesn't recognize me,
the postman delivers my mail to the
house next door,
I haven't one solitary fan
except for the overhead one
that doesn't work anyhow
and my telephone is held in reserve
for telemarketers and wrong numbers.

So how about an autograph?
My life doesn't have one.

Loyal Forever
Mike Lee

Manny questioned Shannon's motivations for becoming his girlfriend. Late one afternoon, during the final countdown of senior year, when skipping is traditional, they lay in his bed. Gently, Manny brushed a lock of Shannon's hair, letting it drop over her shoulder.

Manny wanted to talk her into making love again. He thought her slightly off that day—a tad distant, which was understandable if she was uncomfortable.

This added to his insecurities again, the list beginning with his parents and football coach, though her disappointment was not something he could handle now. He really needed Shannon.

Shannon passively let him play with her hair, touching and caressing; otherwise, she was disinterested. Her mind was elsewhere. Her stare grew more profound, the pupils dilating and expression softening, detecting in Manny's hopeful observation that she had found what she was looking for when she embraced him.

While driving her home, it bothered Manny that she didn't say she loved him until Shannon murmured it in his ear before she kissed him goodbye.

In the last two months before graduation, Shannon began getting attention from the girls who'd ignored her since first grade. This was as if their awareness of her had sprung from struck stone. These girls started talking to Shannon, the football player's girlfriend, and by graduation, as many people had signed her yearbook as they had Manny's.

Different people—Manny had the fellow jocks who had kept their distance, their wishes insincere and furtive, and the pals from the punk scene and journalism matched up with the opposite. One quoted William Carlos Williams in his yearbook entry.

Manny sat in the fourth row between two classmates he'd never spoken to in their four years together; he felt like a child staring through a window at a favorite toy he'd never get.

His grades were good enough to get into the University. He wondered about this as he looked over at Shannon, sitting ahead in the first row, ranked eighth in their class of 408.

He ran over the statistics. Football: Four years, freshman, JV, varsity, 82 carries, 803 yards, five touchdowns. Baseball: four years JV and varsity, with a .358 batting average, 3 home runs, 8 triples, 11 doubles, 16 walks, 55 strikeouts. Four years, 3.5 GPA, 1190 SAT, class rank 35.

During his senior year, he added one year of DECA, a year in Industrial Media, two years at the copy machined and stapled literary magazine, and journalism classes.

Then, the girlfriend hung on, changing from someone who didn't speak to someone in a hurry.

Manny realized that meant he would be left behind.

As the strains of *Loyal Forever* the school song performed by the special choir off to the side of the stage, the girls sat in shapeless blue lace gowns as the boys faked being men in ill-fitting tuxedos. Manny began considering his workout regimen for the open tryout for the Longhorns, which is coming up in two weeks. It was the last one scheduled, and he hoped to do well enough to be redshirted.

His mind drifted. Manny is the starting tailback in the Cotton Bowl. He cuts past the A&M linebacker, the SMU safety, and the Oklahoma cornerback, the eyes of Texas upon him and the television announcer yelling into the microphone, "*Look at that doggie, go, go, go.*"

Kynard at the 40, 30, 20, 10—

Men of Roughly Husker Du Era Appropriateness
 Jason Ryberg

An
 old
 blue truck
 with a black
 origami crane
 hanging from the rear-view mirror

hisses down a slick, small town street, upon which a thin
 sheath of ice has been slowly forming all day

beneath a cold, sunless sky of clouds that
 look like pillow stuffing. And an old cassette tape-deck
 is reeling out Husker Du's *Zen Arcade* into the
 super-heated air of the cab,

where three men of roughly Husker Du era
 appropriateness hoist hand grenades of
 Mickey's Big Mouth Malt Liquor in the dashboard's glow, while
 singing along as best as they
 can remember to
 songs they once
 had burned
 in-
 to
 their
 brains.

Morning Joints with Ole J.C.
Nicholas Viglietti

I'm not this,
And sure, ain't that.
I don't fit this
And I know I don't fit that
Fucking heap of categorical crap.

The same as all the parts
Of the Holy Trinity.
I'm a nuanced
Conglomeration
Of daily,
Minute to minute,
Rotting flesh –
Pretty brains
Splatter gorgeous death.

Ole J.C & I
Laugh about taxes,
Money & clout;
While puffing on the morning's joint.

I ruin the fun with work commitments.
Ole J.C. hollers
"You're an idiot!
That job
Doesn't even pay
For the heartbeats
It's really worth."

I polish off
a sunrise Pacifico.
Hack a lung,
Ole J.C. turns it into a beer,
And makes me chug.

I forgive him
Because he don't
Know what he does.

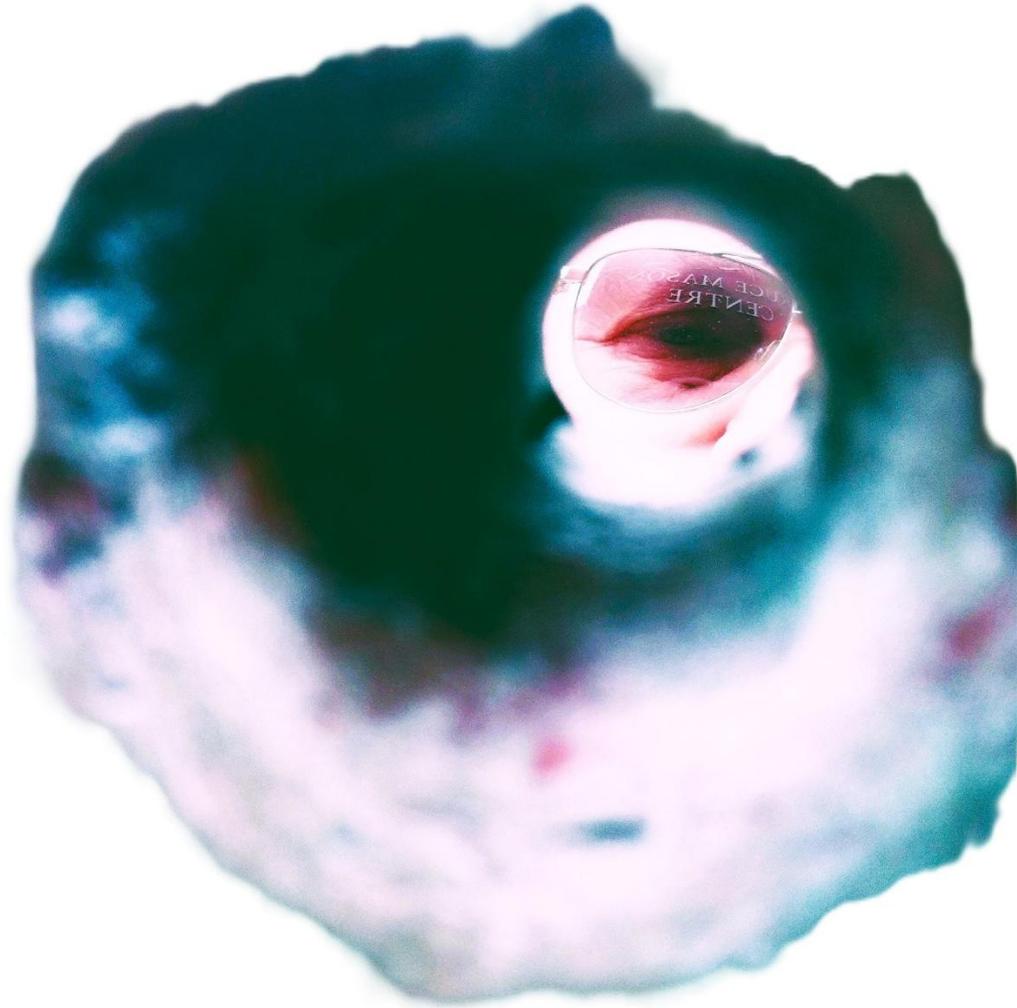
Ole J.C. rips a joint pull,
The smoke dissipates.

He laughs about mortals
And passes the ripper,
Spews more reminders
About deadlines and fate.

I pull hard tokes,
And Ole J.C doesn't notice,
Always preaching,
Rambling,
Chatty.

I toss him the roach,
Gut-punch him for fun's sake.
He fires a four-word finger at me,
Tongue talkin' and gaspy.

I fire up the rig and holler,
"Don't you worry, baby.
I'll bring a six pack
Offering back.
But some of us
Have got to go to work.
We all can't
Have our daddy
Pay our way
Through eternity,
Ya jerk!"



“See Thru”
Keith Nunes

Rex Mundi
Matthew DeLuca

None of the histories record it, but
early in his retirement Napoleon
briefly took up contract bridge,
before quickly growing disgusted with it.

He was undoubtedly following the example
of Alexander, who, if he had lived,
would have crocheted with the old maids
of Macedon – for an afternoon, or so.

The idle observer might suppose that
minds that bound masses of men
together in the gleeful rush and slaughter
would of course loath such distractions.

What one forgets is that having dined
with gymnosophists and surveyed the pyramids,
the insubordinate deck and thumb-pricking needle
would represent worlds too honest to conquer.

The Power Strip
Michael Roque

The power strip—
on multiple fronts
lights a space to life.
With the electricity it gives—
goods charge, screens glow;
rooms, silent
traverse into worlds energized.

The power strip—
when all sockets, no plugs
is inwardly shocked.
The electricity it gives—
with nowhere to flow,
is a burst of energy hidden within—
locked.

The unpowered strip—
days unplugged,
nothing to boost,
laments in dark of nights it lit—
not savoring the self-surge,
it blows a fuse—
weeping for use.

Bingo
Meghan Proulx

My neighbor Cookie had a curly doodle dog named Bingo that looked just like Will Ferrell. He barked out on the balcony all day long while Cookie was at work.

"I'm worried about him out there in the elements," I told Cookie one day.

"We live in a temperate climate," he said, sheepish.

I leered at him. Something was off. "Out with it Cookie!"

"I shouldn't have gotten the dog, ok?" I could tell he felt guilty. "He reminds me of my mother. She too looked just like Will Ferrell and her feet made the same clackety sound on the linoleum."

"What if we got you a rug then?"

"That's a lovely idea," he said, smiling at me like he thought I was a smart person even though everything I knew came from Google.

We walked to where all the used rug stores were and found ourselves with three top contenders:

Rug one: The Modern Beach Pad

A chunky, woven fiber blend that hurt to touch and stank of hay but could turn Cookie's dingey 1-bedroom into a beachy seaside escape.

Rug two: The Amish Revival

A rustic, hand-knotted conversation piece that harkened back to the days of yore for those with Pennsylvania Dutch Heritage.

Rug three: The Fixer Upper

A classic Persian that smelled like it was once a cat's toilet bowl.

So, which did they choose?

Cookie was jazzed about the Amish revival but just couldn't picture it in his apartment, so we headed home empty-handed and stopped at a burger place. We each got a double and showed each other pictures on our phones.

"Here's my niece at her first soccer game, and here she is at her communion," he said.

"Your family is Catholic?"

"Only the Catholic side."

I showed him pictures of knives my dad had texted me.

The fog was creeping in as we reached home. We parted ways on the stairs and in the morning of the next day, I woke to Bingo barking and remembered why we had done all the things we did the day before. It wasn't just because spending time with Cookie made my heart sing jazzy tunes like Joni Mitchell-music. Or maybe it was. I stomped up the stairs and knocked on Cookie's door.

"I had another idea."

"Let's hear it."

"Wall-to-wall carpet."

"Too old fashioned."

"You mean retro."

"I mean stuffy,"

"You mean cozy."

"I mean dusty."

“You mean dirty.”

“Well, I’m convinced. How do we go about getting it?”

“We have to call a guy who knows a guy who will take measurements and give us a quote.”

“A quote?”

“A quote. The guy who knows a guy will tell us how much money he’ll do the thingies for and they call that a quote. Not sure why. Probably has something to do with horseracing.”

“Most things do if you trace the etymology back far enough.”

We called a few carpeting places, and several gruff men answered their phones.

“Hello!” Barked one man whose dusty voice awakened something small and frightened in me. I slammed the phone down in terror.

“You have to press the button to end the call,” Cookie said, ending it for me.

“Thanks,” I blubbered. We made eye contact, and I choked down the somber chorus to Joni Mitchell’s *River*: “What if I just install the carpet myself?”

“Now that’s an idea.”

“Though I might use the wrong chemicals and accidentally give you cancer.”

“All chemicals give you cancer. Just use a nail gun.”

I watched a YouTube video on how to install carpet. It had eight views. I called Cookie from Home Depot and asked what color carpet he wanted.

“Let’s play a game where you tell me the names of the carpet colors and then I pick based on whichever one speaks to me.”

“Ok, here we go. Toes in the Sand.”

“Nice.”

“Triple Scoop of Chocolate.”

“Yum.”

“Angels Whispers”

“Plural?”

“Blood Oath.”

“Go on.”

“Cremesicle Days.”

“Oo.”

“Kentucky Bourbon Splash.”

“Oooo.”

“Cornfed.”

“Yikes, let’s go with Cremesicle Days.”

I installed Cremesicle Days while Cookie was at work. I used a big pair of shears to cut a roll of carpet the size as the room and nail-gunned the edges to the linoleum. I finished around 2:00 AM which was precisely when Cookie got home.

“My god!” he screamed as he entered the room.

“What! Does it look bad?”

He took a deep breath. “No, no, you did a beautiful job.”

“It’s the color then?”

He hesitated. “I’ll admit I expected it to be more of a pale orange and not a seafoam green.”

“I know but it matches the color of the mold around your windows.”

“And I love that.”

“Then what is it?”

He crumpled to the ground, heaving. I patted his back in circles.

“Seafoam, that was my mother’s favorite color.”

“I’ll pull it right out.”

“No, no.” He took a moment to catch his breath. “It’s nice.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he sniffled tenderly. “You installed it, and I like having your touch around.”

I blushed and continued to pat Cookie on the back. He cried himself into a fit and started gagging, which made Bingo run in panicked circles around the living room.

“Bingo!” I cried. “Sit.” But Bingo had the zoomies.

“Let’s just go get burgers,” Cookie said. “I’m pretty sure Bingo is my mother reincarnated so she’ll be calm once there’s no one here to perform for.”

I looked at the curly-headed doodle dog, a blur racing around the room, and imagined Cookie’s mom, a woman I’d never met before. I thought it seemed fun to be a dog. And then I thought, for the first time ever, that it seemed fun to be me.

We got back from the burger place in the evening and separated on the stairs like always even though I really didn’t want to. Five minutes later, Cookie called to say he had found Bingo snoring sweetly on the new carpet and just couldn’t wait to tell me.

A Forever Grateful Hitching Tale
Fin Aitken-Buck

Location: New Zealand, Christchurch
Vehicle: 2009 White Toyota Estima (Self-Contained)
Driver: Retired paramedic Dave

Under the blaring Autumn sun on the Canterbury Plains, my thumb basked in the warmth as the clock ticked an honest 4:30pm. I'd always thought the small outskirts town of Woodend was strictly a toilet and a pastry stop, much like my hometown Blenheim, but I was pleasantly wrong. Not a breath of wind tainted the sweet lullabies of Tui's perched high in nearby trees. The glare of sunlight, engulfed in an innocent baby blue sky, washed over a sense of endless space within my mind. I felt content. A rarity for a frisky hitch hiker.

"Good afternoon and good luck!" spoke a white-haired woman. She strolled past wearing an oversized red and black checkered Swandri sweater, dark blue tight denim jeans and a pair of well-worn gumboots. You wouldn't read about it. Her loving, wisdomatic demeanor and almost militant stature was dangerously emblematic of a classic rural Canterbury resident. "Happy to be here" I replied with charisma, knowing very well she'd read between my slang. There's something quite ineffable about first time connections with humans that just feel right. The moment felt so easy. Natural. Comforting. She almost felt like my mother.

Mother nature perhaps. No words were needed, we spoke directly synapse to synapse, skipping the distractions in between.

Ten minutes had gone by, and I couldn't care less. I truly was happy to be here. Cars transitioning from 50km/h to 100km/h gave one of three hand gestures as they cruised past.

First, the "I've got no room in the back sorry mate". This can be modeled by two hands above the steering wheel, semi contracted finger muscles and a slight tilt from the wrist outwards, representing a subtle plea.

Second, the "I'm heading to a driveway just past ya mate". Unlike the first model, this gesture requires only one hand arranged in a pointed finger manner. The driver makes multiple frisky repetitions back and forth, indicating he/she is turning off. If you've ever witnessed the "trigger finger" at a rave, it's much the same.

Last, but not least, the infamous, "I'm not picking you up, and I'm going to let you know about it". This is a personal favourite of mine, despite the frequent blows to my self-confidence. This gesture is usually open for interpretation but can be demonstrated by a mirrored thumbs up, a happy-go-lucky wave accompanied by a giggly smile, and if you're lucky, the nasty middle finger salute. The latter usually speaks true of the drivers' colours.

As my mind wandered into thought, a smiley old man driving a modern Toyota Estima made a swift pull over 50 meters in front of me. A moment of awkwardness arose. "Has he stopped for me?". He pushed the passenger door open and flung a 'come here' hand gesture. "Wow, this bloke must be amazingly limber" I thought to myself.

Funny how thoughts will prioritize useless comments over an urgent motor program to move. Briskly, I threw my bag over my shoulder and bolted for the passenger door.

"G'day where ya heading?" I blurted out of a heaving exhale.

“Yup jump in young fella”, a slight mistranslation of my question, but I'd take it nonetheless. Surprised at the distance it carried, I launched my bag into the back, top spinning it deep toward the boot and heaved myself into the front seat.

“Nice little camper setup you got in the back here”, I said at a volume no longer applicable for outside.

“Yeah, she’s almost ready to sell on, van sinks are hard to come by”, he murmured back. Much like the classic Canterbury women earlier, this man’s presence was gentle in nature. He again felt comfortable and easy going. “Am I a North Cantabrian at heart?” I thought to myself.

He said, “The names Dave.”

“Fin”.

I replied calmly, solidifying his introduction with a firm, driver friendly handshake.

Dave had a refined dispersion of white stubble that connected his chest hair with his white wavy locks. A somewhat male image of the lady earlier. What also caught me off guard was Dave’s lack of a single tooth in his mouth.

“What happened to your teeth?” I asked softly.

“Fell out. I used to be a big smoker, don’t need em anyway”. The way Dave spoke that sentence with strict tongue-to-labia mouth coordination would have astonished my linguistics professor.

“Oh wow, you must have to put all your meals into a blender,” I replied with a snicker.

“Na I eat steak, no worries at all” he sang back. I turned the conversation to a new corner, “What do you get up to with your life Dave?”.

I’m a retired paramedic for the North Canterbury region, still on bloody call though, can’t seem to get paramedics up these ways”, he replied. As we chatted and chatted, my fondness for Dave’s demeanor and outlook on life plastered a warm smile in my heart. This bloke was a local legend. Living in a small township west of Waipara, Dave lived on a small plot of land with his Samoan wife, reading, gardening and mowing his lawns. The detailed descriptions he provided about his paramedic experiences shrunk the insignificant problems I once brewed.

“You put others ahead of yourself Dave” I said to him softly. “Swings and roundabouts. I look after my small world around me and I’d hope you and all Kiwi’s would do the same”, he spoke with intention.

Before long, we were at Waipara Junction. My time with Dave had come to an end, and I was genuinely sad to say goodbye. In reflection, it’s amazing I had paid upwards of \$2000 for trendy philosophy papers teaching lessons on wisdom. Where instead, the firsthand connection I had with Dave for 30 minutes left a far stronger imprint on my perspective of life. Funny how, when, where, what and why we learn.

“All the best for retirement Dave, we’ll see ya round.” I spoke with complete sincerity.

“Yup good one, lots of truck drivers pick up hitchhikers here, you will be fine for your next leg to Kaikoura.”

A swift U-turn and a flick of four fingers sprawled in a fan-like shape was the final gesture I received from Dave. A new hand gesture I had not seen before.

“What an amazing bloke”. I thought to myself.

I plopped my bag down on the gravel and absorbed my surroundings. A full 360-degree slow speed rotation, like a pig on a spit roast left me in awe at the setting sun over the Canterbury Plains. The sky, now a rich ocean blue, was free of clouds. State highway one had for once taken a moment of stillness as no cars drove by.

“Where else would you rather be?” I thought. Again, I felt I didn’t care to get picked up. I was content.

And for that, I am forever grateful.



“In the Diagonal”
Keith Nunes

A Strange Essay: How to Read Weird Fiction
Stijn Moreels

I feel for people who have trouble reading strange stories. How they try to explain inexplicable phenomenon with symbolism and far-fetched theories. Just to rationalize irrationality. Fear of the unknown is something that weird fiction godfathers, like Lovecraft and Poe, found interesting to write about. It is that same fear that makes people find a rope to hold on to in the sea where the Cthulhu resides.

"The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim."—Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*

While the classic weird tale has evolved since then into subgenres and combinations of new genres, it still has at its roots this simple yet powerful idea of 'writing about unknown forces. As grand as the unknown of space and the deep sea, to something as everyday as pens and washing machines. Transforming the known into the unknown is very common in this genre and what readers often expect. 'Blow my socks off!' Readers of detective stories are often good at deducing the situation and finding the one 'who did it'; readers of fantasy genres are often good at keeping track of family trees and reading long exposition sections; readers of romantic genres are often good at emotionally connecting with characters. In the same fashion, readers of weird fiction stories are good at 'letting go' of the rational. They do not try to find an explanation for the strange wonders, but rather let the experience speak for itself. One moment you're in an essay and the next you must gather your egg, pot and water and optionally sault. Make sure that the eggs are fresh and have no cracks. Place your eggs in the pot and fill it with enough cold water to cover the eggs by about 2,5 cm. Boil the water and wait for the black fluid to creep from the cracks and mix with the water. The alien baby should make a high-pitched sound and spread a burnt plastic-like smell to announce its presence.

"Weird fiction often demands that dialogue serves not just to advance the plot or reveal character, but to create a sense of unease, to invoke the uncanny, and to suggest the existence of realities or dimensions beyond our understanding."—Jeff VanderMeer, *Wonderbook: The Illustrated Guide to Creating Imaginative Fiction*

These stories often have a build-up in their storytelling. They start with a clear framework like any other, more traditional story, and gradually introduce subtle changes. Because of this structure, it tricks readers in the fake 'realism' of the world, only to shove it right from under their feet towards the end. Philip K. Dick was a master in this pattern.

The instability and feeling of being lost is something that we crave. Readers of more traditional genres will feel even more lost as they expect the third act to 'explain the things' and 'bring closure', which is exactly the opposite of what weird fiction tries to achieve. (I find the last episode of detective shows usually the most boring one, just because of this reason. Why is it called a 'mystery' show if everything is explained?)

It is often called 'human' to want to make sure that everything 'makes sense'. When writing this, I might finally understand it. The infection has already spread to my arms. It leaves black, purple knots on my skin. It moves just under the surface and when it breaks through the meaningless borders of my meat sack, it forms a pasty liquid that creeps further towards my

fingers. The keyboard is smeared with it. It is the final step of my inhuman transformation, showing my true colors. Black and purple.

"I don't think that people accept the fact that life doesn't make sense. I think it makes people terribly uncomfortable. It seems that the very nature of humans is to try to make sense out of things, and if they can't, they're unhappy. But art has a way of giving us certain kinds of answers, even though they may not make sense logically."—David Lynch

Weird fiction differs from similar genres like surrealism, magic realism, (cosmic) horror and bizarro. Similar as surrealism, it often breaks reality into unknown shapes but adds a bit of uneasiness seasoning. Unlike magic realism, it does not provide a 'commonplace' feeling, as if the horsepenguin is an everyday animal. Instead of the absurdism and satire of bizarro, it gives an uncanny feeling to the same 'regular' objects or subjects. It builds on top of horror and sometimes fantasy/sci-fi and uses it as ingredients instead of an end goal. While cosmic horror focuses more on fear in both readers and characters, weird fiction focuses on the strange and sometimes the awe for it.

Author, China Miéville, talks about how the genre is not so much a genre, but a feeling you can't describe. How you immediately know if a story locates in the realms of the 'weird'. You point your index finger of your fifth hand towards it and exclaim in terror: 'It found me!'

And while it is true that there is no checklist for this, here is an attempt:

- A feeling of unease, lost. Atmosphere, undertone. A strange undertow that drives you forward knowing that there is no salvation at the end.
- Transforming reality into the unreal. Breaking common boundaries, literally shredding the thin curtains of reality and exposing the unknown beyond.
- Lack of rational answers. The only closure is when you close the book and hope the words do not infest your thoughts.
- The moldy smell, right before it starts to rain. The feeling that there is something coming that you cannot see. Teers from forgotten gods.
- A spoon to eat the damaged brain cells that occurred while reading the dangerous texts.
- Your next-door neighbor with the ridiculous hat. They might come in handy for the creatures that hide under the floorboards.
- And finally, a record player traps the noise in the room when you aren't around.

They come in many shapes and sizes. Luigi Musolino, Adam L.G. Nevill, Algeron Blackwood... use folklore to build upon; Attila Veres, Robert Grains, Thomas Ligotti... use Lovecraftian atmospheres and summary-like storytelling; Jeff Noon, Mark Z. Danielewski, Jon Padgett... use metafiction to unbalance the reader; Karin Tidbeck, Julia Armfield, Sue Rainsford, Asja Bakić... use a broader range of speculative fiction writing to find uneasy subjects. What they have in common is the need to step away from the rigid boundaries of traditional fiction. Just the mere presence of these stories makes literature critics uncomfortable. They refuse to be restricted in the classical genres, they combine them and transform them into something unrecognizable. Something like the black burnt scrapes in your oven, the snail pattern on your doormat, the bubbling sounds of clogged pipes. You know the sound, the feeling. You have experienced it but categorized it as 'common', 'meaningless'. These stories teach us that nothing is certain, and everything can be made unknown.

Best prepare yourself by choosing good shoes.
That is how you can survive the creek of floating toenails.

“It is sometimes an appropriate response to reality to go insane.”—Philip K. Dick

Clock and Hand
Xander Wymer

Graphite skid across the paper, shallow chunks splintering as the hand that guided it moved in haste. It clutched the pencil's painted body, sweat coating, diluting a once pleasant yellow into a horrid fawn. The eraser's vivid pink remained unharmed during the whole ordeal; there was little time to undo mistakes. Subtle clicks shot throughout the hollow, frigid room in which the hand was trapped, the air's cold biting through the skin, yet it still moved with an intense vigor. Whatever life was extended past the wrist, it did not matter—the work had yet to be finished, and they were running out of time!

An elder clock was stabbed into the room's front wall, the aging bastard hoisted to the perfect, towering position, so it could spy with great efficiency, its eyes gazing upon each and every soul who was sentenced to the test's cruelty. It giggled to itself. The hand could hear it laugh. The bronze prodded at the hand's clammy fingers with each tick of time wasted, tensing the weary muscles that worked within. It felt as though a dozen hours had crawled past whenever the final question had an answer sprawled—with a lazy writing—into its answer box, and a shriek of a whistle slit the air in two.

The test was over; it was over, at last!

The hand could rest, and the clock retired its mischievous games, for now. All that was left was to wait—a sweet respite! It felt as though a sphere of gold had bloomed inside the hand, its surface bubbling with an anxiety, yet the kind that could have you jump in joy, and as well with pain. It was an incredible rush, to have nothing else to look forward to. Perhaps it would nap atop the splintered, oak desk that it had been working on? A moment's sleep did seem like a nice enough reward, after all.

Slumber was not laid within the hand's cards on this day, however, as the results came forth in less time than anticipated. It felt to be only a few seconds since the torture had ended, but the rest had been for at least ten minutes, despite its shock. The golden ball now felt to be gilded, and the hand could tell it had shrunk. The clock had to announce its presence once more, for fun and game's sake, as the ticking had never been louder than in the moments a familiar, thin paper slipped on top of the wood desk. A gangly index floated above a deep, maroon ink, moving in a methodical manner, almost as if so the pores could too have a keen view.

A great silence snuffed even the elder's clicks as the hand had grasped what the ink showed: It was a pair of numbers, both low in value; yet, combined together, appeared even lower. He had failed. He had failed, once again! Almost every question was voided, and just a few were worth even a partial credit.

As the hand rested still atop the shabby desk, the old bastard hung on the wall laughed with all its might, in louder a voice than it had ever projected. It laughed, laughed, and laughed, and its nasal tone can still be heard by the hand to this day, being embedded in its skin, hiding within the bone.

It never stopped laughing.

Smell Nostalgia
Diana Raab, PhD

One step back into my childhood.
I reminisce about fragrances
and melding memories
like gasoline stations
on our Sunday morning trip
to our bagel shop,
where gas odors
merged with dough.

Dad and I made our way to
the bagel store up the street
and the aroma of those dough circles
and the bagel-maker asking
which types we wanted.

On the way home dad and I
tore one in half to share,
still warm and steamy
and like every other time he ate,
he cracked open his car window
and lit up a cigarette—
the smell so present
I don't even recall noticing.

At home, the wet pavement scent
from our lawn sprinkler
or after a thunderstorm.

Mustn't forget the pungency of mother's
moth balls which she swore protected
her expensive wool sweaters,
but now I wonder if they planted my myeloma seeds
or years earlier, my breast cancer diagnosis.

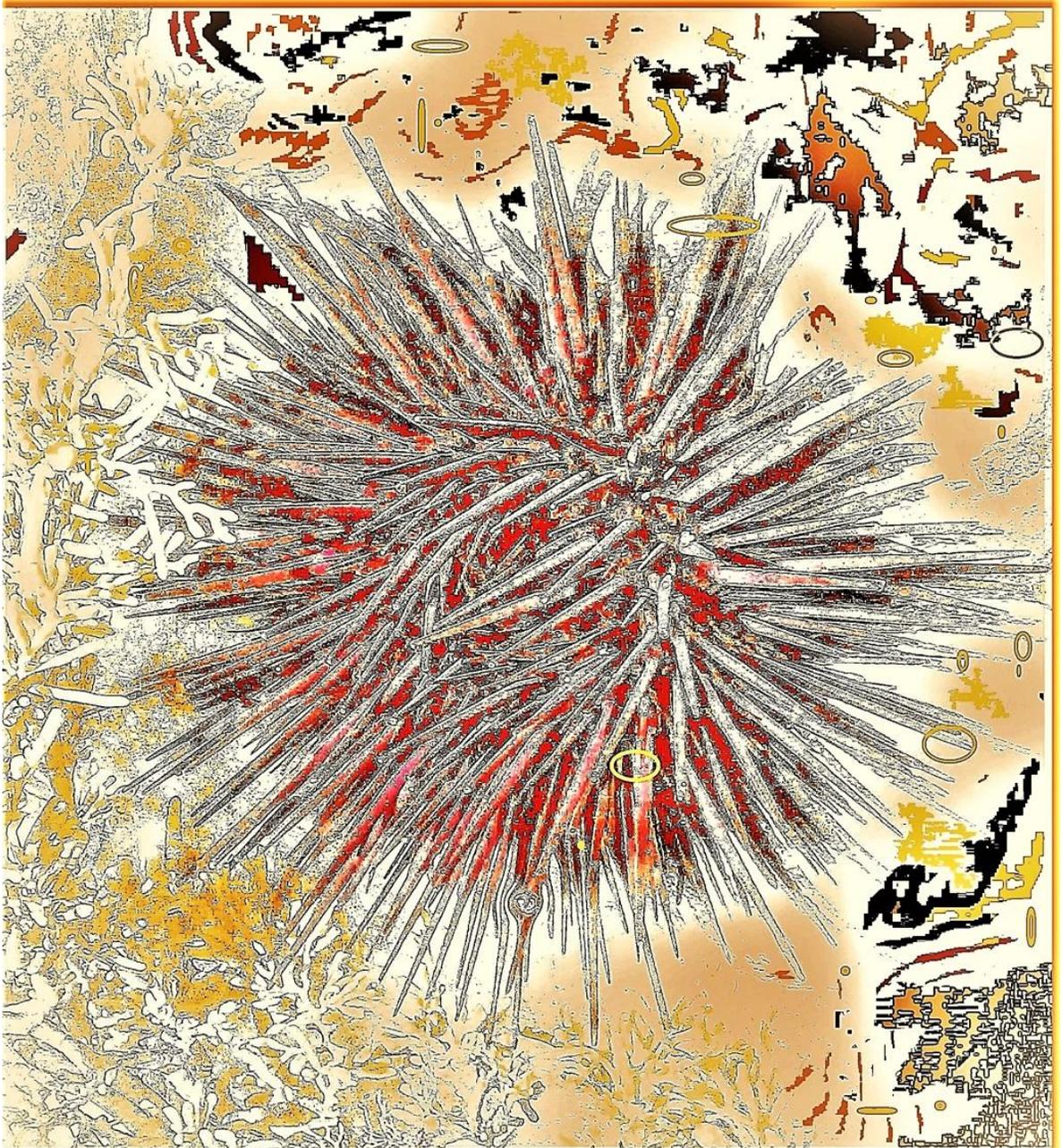
What about the musty mildewy basement
where creepy masks hung on walls
and where I starched and iron dad's hankies—
a post-Holocaust obsession.

Oh, and the smell of cotton candy
at the annual circus
or the odor of strange shoes

at our bowling alley
and its café hotdogs.

Years earlier, obsessed
with color by number
and Crayola crayons
lined up like soldiers
with sharpener in rear of box
and I'd jam my nose into the box
and snatch my biggest whiff.

My parents never stopped me
from smelling odors,
yet now, they speak of certain toxicities.
I guess every generation learns from the last.



"Starburst"
Keith Nunes

The Passion of a Secondary School Student Who Was Thought to Be a Vampire
Thurston van Pire

A member of our English class is reading aloud a passage from Bram Stoker's novel Dracula. A neighboring class member mashes my fingers in my desk's empty ink well, with a ruler. When I lick off the blood, our teacher faints. I go home and ring the doorbell. My sister shrieks and slams the door shut. I work on my bat-winged glider which I test in the evening over the outdoor school play. There are shrieks of terror and a general panic. Nobody will sell me food, so I take a farmer's chicken leaving money and a note in his mailbox. When I return the following day, the chickens are locked up and there is a crucifix on top of the note. I visit the school psychiatrist to find out what is going on. He tells me that people think I am a vampire, but that enlightened scientists say there is no such thing. I notice, however, a strong smell of garlic from his window floral wreath and that he has cut the needles off the top nine inches of his desk's Christmas tree. He seems frightened and must have called the National Guard, because I see a guardsman approaching with a cocked crossbow. Let him come.

Outliers
Marcia Yudkin

“Big news! Ms. Green Jacket and Mr. Orange Shoes went at it again!” Marisol hadn’t even set down her caramel mocha yet, but she was already dishing about a couple sneaking into the Hole-10 Ladies’ room. At the suburban golf course where she worked for the summer, Marisol stole glances at the security feed aimed at a fieldstone cabin that faced woods and gave an impression of privacy.

“Tell me more,” Zara laughed. She worked at a downtown hotel favored by dour businessmen, which didn’t offer as raunchy a window on human antics. Every Thursday morning, the two old friends traded observations on the corporate milieu they expected to join after graduating from business school. “How sure are you they met for a quickie?”

“Well, each one looked both ways before going in – half a minute apart. And they squiggled their clothes smooth afterwards, tops *and* bottoms, coming out half a minute separately from the women’s bathroom again. The squiggle proves it.” Marisol pulled out her phone and tapped several times. “All together, seventeen rendezvouses so far this summer – two male/male and the rest heteros.” She slurped from her lidded coffee cup and smeared her lips triumphantly with a napkin. “Any creepiness at your hotel this week?”

Zara knocked a wooden stir stick against the table. “Creepy, yes. In a different way. On Tuesday a man checked in, then came down 20 minutes later saying, ‘I’m not going to stay here. Can you cancel me?’ I asked why and he leaned across the counter. As pale as paper. ‘Bad vibes,’ he whispered.”

“What?” Marisol drew back. “Was this a hippy-trippy guy?”

“Nope, all buttoned up. Pinstripes and everything, with a Middle America haircut. Standard expense-account behavior.” Zara knocked the stir stick harder. “I should have asked him to explain. I just deleted his booking, and he left.”

Marisol reached over to still Zara’s stir stick. “How does this example fit our thesis for HR209 in the fall?” Zara looked off at something invisible and shook her head.

Later, at home, she took out the notebook labeled “Anthropology of Business” and pondered the page headed “Off-Work Influences.” Along with their mocking count of apparent “quickies,” she and Marisol were recording ideas about work identities affecting behavior beyond the office. As first-generation college students, they noticed what third-generation upper-middles took for granted. The more corporate tribal customs they identified, the more confident they might feel around classmates, work colleagues and mentors. Her list began:

- Dominance reigns. Jokes about winning on the golf course have a bitter, desperate tone.
- Vulnerability is verboten. When they can’t figure out how to use the espresso machine or the microwave, they won’t ask.
- Deal-making spillover: Among equals, favors get banked, not thanked.

Zara circled the word “vulnerability” and added a question mark. The spooked man had whispered instead of announcing, boss-like, that his room wouldn’t do.

Before her next shift at the hotel, Zara took a keycard up to Room 717 and for the third time stood silently in it, eyes closed, her bare hands and face opened to its energies. Her grandmother had taught her. Something harsh and hurtful had happened here, and its remnants tickled in the corners of the space, muddy, desolate and faintly aggressive. The dark could drift through the building’s vents to influence guests or even her at the front desk. So Zara took a

wooden matchstick out of her pocket, struck it alight against the metal window frame and stamped three times – left foot, right foot, left. She murmured the incantation handed down from her ancestors and felt the cleansing finally take effect.

At their next Thursday breakfast, Marisol again arrived bustling with scuttlebutt. “Can you believe it? We almost called the cops on Madame Green Jacket yesterday!”

“Come on, spill.” Zara lifted her chin, half-smiling already.

“Three pink-polo guys from Deloitte called the security line to send someone urgently to Hole 14,” Marisol replied. “We don’t know who or what started it, but our sneaky diva friend grabbed papers from Mr. Fruit Shoes’ golf bag and ripped them into confetti all over the green. She also kicked the turf so hard so many times it needed emergency maintenance. She agreed to pay for the cleanup, but loverboy had such a guilty, shamed look that even the dumb-lunk security guy realized something funky was going on.”

The friends speculated so exuberantly that stares came their way from other tables at the café. When their hysteria had settled, Marisol prompted, “And your scaredy-cat with the spidey sense?”

“According to my grandmother—” Zara stopped at Marisol’s loud scoff. She counted silently to three. Then, as if a recess-over bell had sounded, Zara snatched their not-empty latte cups and napkins and stuffed them through a trash flap near the café entrance. “Gotta go!” she called back to Marisol and stalked to her bus stop.

Though Marisol blithely ignored its impact, her pooh-poohing of what Zara’s grandmother knew was a recurrent snag in their rapport. On the bus, Zara thought back to the man who’d seemed so boringly different from her when he checked in. Contained. Posture tight and distant. No sparkle in his eyes, his forehead as burnished as his shoes. Yet when he came back down, his limbs had loosened, and he gazed pleadingly into her soul for an instant. Who knew what he understood, but he had felt the underworld and respected it. Like her. And not like anything in the business-school curriculum.

The swirl of spirit below life’s comedies was no laughing matter.

A Passage of Time
Robert Nisbet

Emily is beachcombing at Burton, in far West Wales. She will take back to Maryland her clutch of glass and china jetsam. Now she finds a shard (surely to be a centrepiece) of glazed cream china, fringed with royal blue. It has lain two decades there, lasted out a filthy oil spill, years of drift and tug.

Four decades earlier again, the *Pretoria Castle* had been travelling from Cape Town to Southampton, and Graeme and Muriel were shipboard, were on their honeymoon.

Quite what went wrong that afternoon they were never sure, but suddenly all graciousness had stumbled and, each of them prickling with hurt, they retreated for a cabin tea. Abruptly, fouled by his own uncertainty, Graeme flung the coffee pot angrily at his trembling bride. After a few minutes' clumsy assimilation of the disaster, shaken, they crept to a porthole and consigned the pieces to Atlantic hiding.

The shard's two-fifths of a century at sea took it past Namibian desert to Liberia, Dakar to the Canary Isles. It floated near America's Eastern coast, until, smoothed by seascape, it was carried by the Gulf stream to that West Wales beach.

Emily loves that shard. It will stand, in Baltimore, as still and serious as a Grecian urn, a scrap of beauty, saying nothing of an ancient tale of man and maiden, decades, seas away.

Shut the Fuck Up While the Band Is Playing
Robert Beveridge

life is
the act
of being
shot
in the face
over and
over again

Unfinished Exit
Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.

And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.

So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.

For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls

who never got their own
missing person's poster.

Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit
to find its proper
ending.



“Midnight on the Bay”
Keith Nunes

Falling Asleep in Front of the TV On Sunday
Malachy Moran

Rolling chimes
toll the sinners
to come
and weep,
to switch their
naked backs
before the altar,
to prostrate themselves
before our god,
to hear the good news:

99 cent Doritos Locos Tacos
right now at Taco Bell!

Notes on the 5th Edition, Patch 4 v.7: Ending the Module
Noah Soltau

Consciousness is a language game
The center of the map a black hole
Of longing and ignorance
The mystery of faith

Scribble errata in the margins
Rock climbing childhood
Rock throwing gas cannister youth
Rocking on the floor of the bathroom

Naked after the schools of magic
Express themselves from your body
The yawp of becoming going rogue
Barbarian spattering the pages

Of the everyday with terror and
Tenderness edited in and out
A rage to call upon at will
Will it persist clerical error

Homecoming

Mountaintop stone pierced
Heel red strokes fallen leaves moss
Crunch slide slouch toward you

Ethics of Cloning
Ben Mears

When I was young, I thought that my soccer team would be better if everyone on it was replaced with clones of myself. Like all developing kids, I knew myself perfectly. Wouldn't struggle to communicate with myself. And, like all people who know themselves, I would always be where I needed me to be, would always make the right pass, the right cut. I was everything I dreamed of.

The technology was impossible, of course, but in the world inside my head, I knew that we would be better off—or I guess I would. But when you start to think that a soccer team of yours might be better than a soccer team of theirs, you also start to wonder: would there be world peace if you were all there was? And then you think—you know—yes, there would be.

I mean, have you met you?

Words You Think You Will Hear
M. M. Valencia

Our occasional retreat, named Sherri's Orchard by my grandpa nearly a century ago as a memorial to his dead wife, is surrounded by the typical greenery found inland of the New England coast; inside the house, located in a corner away from the two large windows, there is a lampshade, and beneath the light it emits there is a brown leather couch older than *I* am, next to which I place my glass of water on a round mahogany dining table with a florid four-legged pedestal; I am sitting on a cast-iron chair with a yellow cushion inherited from a great, great, great aunt when I touch the shoulder of my dead father.

I used to play in a nearby gravel pit where the dogs were trained to “go potty,” where I would kick up the rocks and throw pebbles at my sister, before being yelled at by one of my parents—so this seems as good of a place as any other to bury my father's wedding ring.

When I pick up his heavy hand (he was a strong, muscular man) his skin is still warm, so I am able to maneuver his fingers and remove the ring with little difficulty; just for a moment, pop, stepping outside, walking through the breezy night, I dig through the gravel until I reach the dirt underneath, where I dig some more, drop the ring in and pile the dirt and rocks until the pit appears as if it has never been disturbed.

I walk back into the house and sit back on my great, great, great aunt's chair, pulling my cellphone out of my jacket pocket thinking of what I'll say to my sister Sherri—I understand the gist of what my words will be, but I only hope my voice will not break. I highlight her name with my finger and push the call button.

“Hello. Hey, how's the Orchard this year? Sorry I couldn't make it out there with you and Dad, but the kids are so sick right now...”

At the wake, no one notices that my father's wedding ring is missing from his hand. I would just have said something about how “a piece of him can remain at Sherri's Orchard forever now,” if there had been any questions given to a grieving son.

It's not surprising no one noticed. This is normally how it all goes. Most things are in the mind, when in real-life, most people let things pass them by and they seldom say the words you think you will hear.

The Carny Way
Christopher Woods

The carnival is in town. In fact, it is close by, not far from our house. When we were kids, we were always drawn to the carnival midway. There, in a sugary, funnel cake haze, were the freaks.

Every year the same, some years with a new, even more tasteless addition, or else someone might be missing, maybe lost along the carnival road that led from town to town, state to state, crisscrossing the red, white and blue land of the free. We were ready to be amazed.

Admission was cheap, the rewards priceless. We could be certain that the scientific displays of lost and maybe forgotten this and that would be there – babies, eyes and other body parts floating in a thick formaldehyde soup in large glass jars. I always looked at the babies' eyes. Often, they were closed, as if the child were napping. But do you remember one year when there was a baby, yellowed by time and travel, whose eyes were open, staring straight ahead, peering into the abyss of carnival hell? That hell would go on and on and on, as long as the road stretched out mile after mile, state by state, sometimes even crossing the Canadian border where bears and moose might muddle through the exhibit.

Do you remember the hearts, hands and feet, all unnumbered and unidentified, also floating in the yucky yellow liquids? They had no names, no bodies, no connection to anything but the slowly moving, sometimes just-ahead-of-the-sheriff carny world.

And Eric the Viking, preserved and mummified for a thousand years, in his black coffin? God knows he had seen better days, and seas. He was probably a tar encrusted mannequin, but we listened attentively as the carny barker told us about Eric's dramatic life as a warrior on the far North Sea. How he had a spear driven into his chest by a warring Eskimo tribe out of Alaska, how he died a slow, painful death, how his limp body (yet to be painted with tar) floated ashore on the New Jersey coast, how it was mercifully and reverently rescued, washed and anointed with semi-holy oils so that Eric could join the carnival and his story could be shared with the world. And you whispered, would someone think as much of us to do the same?

I will always remember The Fat Lady in her bikini. She weighed over five hundred pounds, a solid mass of gelatinous matter streaked with enormous green veins, like a rare kind of marble that might be unearthed in an old Roman or Greek city. The Fat Lady needed no barker as she herself took questions directly from the audience. People wanted to know what it was like to be so fat ("always hungry for something more to eat"), if she could fit in a car ("no, dummy, that's what carnival wagons are for"), if she had a boyfriend ("thirteen"), if she was too big for heaven ("Jesus loves me no matter what"). You asked no questions of her. Instead, you stood there silently, watching her gargantuan breasts shifting this way and that. The Fat Lady noticed and spoke to you directly and asked, "Jealous, baby?" And when you laughed, she began to thunder down the metal stairs toward us. The whole tent shook from her shifting steps. We ran for the exit.

We moved quickly, but we knew The Fat Lady would never catch us. We were young and swift. When I finally looked back, she was bent over (or as bent over as she could be), out of breath, her arms reaching desperately for her knees to steady herself. We were safe.

On to the next tent, where the Snake Woman awaited. She hissed and quoted the Book of Revelations. A young pretty blonde, her head was all you could see. The rest of her body was

covered with some god-awful striped upholstery. She could pull a string and the upholstered tail would move a bit, menacingly.

On and on, tent after tent, year after year. I think there was a time when you almost half-believed that some of these people were real. I admit to thinking the same. But then we grew up, you and me. Life became more complicated. In just a few years, it seemed that myths, what once organized the world and gave us rules to follow, drifted away like carny smoke. Life became a realistic kind of thing. Not much room for magic.

But the good news is this. The carnival will be in town for another week. I want us to go back, to see it all over again. Oh, it won't ever be the same, I know. We won't believe even half of what we hear or see. But I have a feeling that Eric the Viking will be there, and that gives me some hope that we can still believe in utter nonsense, have not yet drowned in the sad stew of rigid reality with no exit doors, or in the philosophy of gadgetry that bathes and suffocates us like formaldehyde.

Can't we still believe?

The Refrigerator
Swetha Amit

The refrigerator makes a whirring noise, a constant companion in this house. But I know no one is inside the fridge. In fact, no one is inside the house now. It has been six months since he left home for that overseas trip, and he will not return. Now, I eagerly await my twenty-year-old son's visit from the East Coast for Christmas next week.

Winter has arrived, and the California rain pounds my roof with an unrelenting fury, creating slushy road puddles. The fridge's cooling has stopped, but I adapt, living on decaf without sugar. I am still getting used to the severe bitter taste in my mouth. Sometimes, my tongue burns. I gulp a glass of water from the tap, hoping the scalds will soothe over time.

Whenever it isn't raining, the whirring sound is more prominent, like an attempt to fill the silence in the house and have a conversation with me. What would it say to a fifty-five-year-old woman impatiently waiting for the maintenance guys I'd called several times? Every time, they'd reassure me of showing up by the end of the day. And every day passes like a slow-moving train with the same view. I watch the swirling grey skies, smell the earthy scent of the rain, and observe people holding colorful umbrellas walking down my street. I am tired of waiting. I miss my regular coffee. I don't bother troubling the neighbors. Not when their family is suffering the flu attacks one after the other. Or when the others have gone on a ski vacation to the mountains.

And here, I am stuck with a noisy, non-working refrigerator and a husband who has sought solace in the arms of another lady he had met on that trip. Said I had become too needy, too dominating, and egotistic. I wonder if she was the demure and timid, the kind who makes him breakfast in bed and does his laundry. The cracks in our relationship emanated from the time our son moved out. Silences grew, except for an occasional polite request to pass the salt or pepper. Sometimes, those explosive, heated arguments resulted in him walking out of the door. Did my son blame me for his father not coming home? He wasn't a lad of too many words but promised to come home, nevertheless. I am hoping to bake his favorite plum cake.

I continue listening to the refrigerator's whirring sound. Sometimes, it sounds like the murmur of the bees or like someone tapping the window. Sometimes, it keeps me from sleeping at night. Sometimes, I am grateful to have this noise penetrating the deafening silence in the house that has become unbearable. I am contemplating getting a pet. Perhaps a cat. Or maybe a dog. He was allergic to pets and never understood my need for a furry four-legged companion that would leave strands of hair on cushions or curl up on the sofa or bed. But with him gone, I could find some solace in a ball of fur.

One morning, when it's not raining, the maintenance guy shows up. He is a twenty-something lad with a skinny frame dressed in a grey overcoat. He checks the refrigerator intently, and after a couple of hours, he restores the cooling.

"There is no noise," he states.

"Are you sure? You should check again," I insist.

He sighs, checks again, and shakes his head impatiently. I hand him some money, and he leaves after a curt goodbye.

Later that day, I visited the neighborhood grocery store, wading through small, murky puddles. There is a Christmas tree with shiny ball decorations and an angel near the entrance. The smell of cinnamon greets my nostrils as I gaze at the section with pies and cakes. Mothers

accompanied by their little kids are buying chocolates and goodies. Some of them smile at me warmly, making me feel fuzzy inside. I walk back home with a bag consisting of milk, cheese, butter, bread, and vegetables and stock the refrigerator.

In the evening, I sit by the window with a cup of coffee mixed with milk and two teaspoons of sugar. I observe the cascade of gloomy grey clouds looming above and the pelting rain kissing the wet ground. I hear that whirring noise again before taking my first sip of coffee. I get up and open the refrigerator. A blast of cold air greets me this time. I can almost taste the frost. Didn't that guy say there was no noise? Yet I can hear it. It sounds like a car on the road.

I shake my head and decide to enjoy my coffee instead. The taste is perfect, just like I longed for all these days. The sugar and milk eradicate the bitter taste. I relish the flavor as the dark brown liquid swirls in my mouth like the misty rain clouds. The heaviness in my heart eases a little. I sit there waiting for my son to arrive. The whirring sound continues with a sense of urgency. I keep drinking my coffee, learning to embrace this noise of the refrigerator that is now beginning to sound like someone knocking on the door.

A Monster's Confession
Bryan Fagan

May I begin with a confession: I love a good scare. Not the kind found in horror novels or Halloween movies, but a real scare. The kind that tickles your spine and quickens your breath. A sound you can't explain—like a baby's cry deep inside the walls of an empty house, or deadly giggles echoing from the basement's shadows. The kind of sound that tightens your neck, prickles your skin, and sends your heart racing. Oh, how I love those moments. They are my favorite.

As you can see, I love a good scare because they are my creation. My gift to you.

Allow me to introduce myself: I am a monster. I am your monster with no name to call my own.

You have never seen me, though we've met before. When you were a child, I sang your name like a lullaby until you woke, trembling in the dark. I scratched your walls in the dead of night, bleeding your name until you cried. Now do you remember, my poor little dear.

No matter how hard you tried, you could never forget me. When you became an adult you made excuses not to clean under your bed or check behind the dresser. You've lied to yourself about your fear of the dark, knowing I'd be waiting for you when the lights go out. Your cold hands clutching the blankets, your feet hidden beneath the covers. Oh, yes—You're mine. I own you.

But tonight, I want to share a secret. A confession of my own. Promise me you won't tell or I'll have no choice but to show you what I can do.

For all my power to haunt, for all the nights I've spent weaving terror into your dreams, I envy you. I want nothing more than to be you for a day.

I wish I could wake to a world where the sun rises beautiful and bright. To feel the tickle of grass beneath my feet or the whisper of wind kissing my naked cheek. I want to know why you laugh, to love and to cry. To hold someone, to press their warmth against my cold, hollow chest. Would I feel joy? Pain? And would it last all day?

I want to scream, to curse and to weep when my dog dies in my arms. I want to stand before a mirror and see myself change—red with rage, soft with love, I wish to be human in every way.

I want to touch. To smell. To know the taste of life in all its messy, beautiful chaos. To eat and drink and dance to the final song. I want to say I do and feel their eyes sink into mine. Oh, how I wish I could dance for just one day.

But I can't and I never will.

You see, I am just a monster. All I can do is watch and haunt and wait for you to die.

So tonight, when you hear the whispers, the scratching, or the cry from the shadows, remember me. Not just as the monster under your bed, but as something more. Something that dreams of the life it will never have.

Because while I may own your fears, you own the light, my friend. A piece of magic I will never touch no matter how hard I try. Sleep well. Until we meet again.

They Cannot See Me Naked
Michael Tyler

Clay is lean, as are we all, and the flock give a glance or am I in the first throes of paranoia? I take another bump as assurance takes over and Sam strides into the distance in a one piece that seems to reveal more than it conceals.

Charlie runs her hands through her long dark hair, and it curls and re curls as she dries herself with a towel from a nearby knapsack, before lying on the dry towel next to mine, and comments on seaweed that may have been jellyfish. Clay notes fish piss in the sea and that seems to call halt to the conversation.

No one would swim with Charlie, and I think she's far more put out than she appears. Charlie is not one for solitary expeditions and as much as she tried to sell it to the rest of us, she ended up spending a paltry twenty minutes in the ocean, lying on her back, a lonesome starfish.

Clay is on probation and decries the fact he is being encouraged to 'take each day at a time'. He has a fondness for living each minute at a time, a fact he would deny if challenged, though denial has lately become a habit most disconcerting.

The sun shines as always. An insect burrows into the sand by my side. Charlie places a shell in between us, and I wonder as to its journey. I trace a circle in the sand surrounding the shell and tap the shell with my pinkie finger. The shell is here for now, the shell has made it.

Men play volleyball to impress women who watch and point and rub each other's backs. The men have six packs and short, gelled, spiked hair. The women have fake breasts and bleach blonde tresses. I'm reminded of the scenes in porn that folk fast forward.

I spy Sam in the distance returning with the bottle in hand. Charlie mentions a passing girl who has a finer body than hers and Clay disagrees, saying her stomach definition is a little too masculine for his liking, that you may as well 'fuck a male model.'

And more girls pass as one laughs at the joke of another. Charlie stands and picks up her towel and walks over to Clay and lays it next to him, laying aside whatever difference caused the standard separation.

Clay mentions a dead hooker he saw on the corner of Broad and Queen last night. Charlie replies he should have called 911 and I murmur she was probably just a well-dressed homeless person. Charlie wipes an eye, and I think I spy a tear, but it turns out she just has sand in her eye.

My psychiatrist called this morning to cancel this week's appointment. He will fax the script to the pharmacy however and since this alone is what I desire I do not complain.

There are shouts and high fives from the men playing volleyball and someone has scored a point and the women applaud.

Sam lies next to me, and I open the bottle and have a drink. Sam says her father phoned the night before as I pass the bottle to Charlie. Sam describes the call as less awkward than expected but still awkward, and then pauses, regathers herself, smiles, saying she was just hit on in the most inappropriate manner.

Apparently, a young man approached Sam as she returned with the whiskey and asked for her number, adding he 'would love to take her anal virginity.' and Charlie gasps in mock horror and Clay smiles and I take another bump.

I'm running low but Sam says she can get me a couple of grams on Wednesday night. Clay mouths 'fuck' to himself and Charlie is taking more than the odd Valium with the whiskey, but who am I to get involved?

Sam wishes she had Charlie's curls and Charlie wishes she had Sam's breasts, and I wish for a God who gives a shit. Sam smiles and notes that Jesus should be forgiven for he is only a man mid struggle to multitask. Charlie laughs and Clay smiles and I tap the shell and circle it once more.

The volleyball screams into view and knocks the bottle over as Charlie gives a gasp and Clay rescues the bottle back vertically and places the ball by his side. The men apologize and gesture for Clay to throw the ball back and Clay leaves the ball by his side.

Sam looks at me and I look at Clay who simply lies there. The most muscular of the men gestures and Clay simply lies there, and the muscular man begins his approach.

The man blocks the sun, and we are in shade as he apologizes and asks for the ball. Clay simply lies there and stares at the man, and the man apologizes once more as his friends begin to gather and approach and Clay stands and picks up the volleyball and leans into the man and whispers and the man's eyes widen as Clay hands him the ball and the man turns and says to his friends, 'Fuck it, let's call it a day.'

Clay lies down once more and covers his eyes with a magazine as I take another bump and look to the shell and Charlie drinks the whiskey and Sam comments on the heat and I dream of this day for months and months and all is violence and sharp edges and screams most atavistic.

Baby Teeth
Noralee Zwick

you upside down swingstained—
 your downturnedness a nicely rotted treehouse
stoop—you scribbling both our lives

with paint pen—mine looping,
 maroon maple intertwined—your hands smeared
purple sharpie til the end—your infected

fingertips—you looking for something
 warm to mouth—at six you stained glass shards
in your lips and they shivered under

your tongue, spoke through them and
 cut your teeth in four places, dirtkneed we buried the shards
below my oak—the only pearls I'll ever

hold, your hands trembling—you hurling
 bricks through the treehouse trapdoor—your two storied
sob—you fixing the hole with kaleidoscope

bits—you pressing yourself against the sunlight
 —nothing pressing back—check the gardenbed
sparrow we've been out looking for you

Rules

Dominik Slusarczyk

The train squeals as it starts to slow down. The bushes rushing past outside take on forms out of the blur of green. The sky is unbroken blue, and the heat of the sun makes the inside of the train unpleasantly warm.

“You’re not qualified,” the interviewer says. He is old - so old he should have retired long ago. I wonder what he likes about his job so much that makes him do it every day when he could be sitting in an armchair watching TV instead. “I don’t know why I even invited you to the interview, to be honest.”

“I’ve got experience,” I say. “I…”

“Your experience isn’t really in a related field. At no stage have you proved to me that you can do this job.”

I unbutton another button on my blouse. The inside of the train is too hot. I can feel myself sweating. I fan myself with my magazine. It helps a little. I check my watch. Almost home. Almost out of the heat.

“You need to start applying to different things,” Tom, my boyfriend, says. His black hair is gelled into a quiff. His smart white shirt is rolled up to the elbows. He attacks the meal I made him as if it will disappear if he does not eat it quickly enough. “Stop applying to jobs you’re not qualified for; apply for jobs in retail.”

“I’m not going to spend my whole damn life stacking shelves,” I say. I push the peas around my plate with my fork. I’ve already eaten the meat and now all that is left is the damn vegetables we’re supposed to eat because they’re healthy. “I can do better than retail. I can do better than Tesco’s.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your job. Somebody has to do it. If nobody stacked shelves nobody would be able to buy food.”

I line up the jars at the edge of the shelf. The shelf is perfect, accurate, clean and clinical. Nobody will notice, though; nobody will notice how pretty the shelf is. Nobody will care about the fact that I am great at my job. Everybody just takes the food without thinking about the people who helped them get it.

When I’m done with the shelves, I go behind the tills. I pack the bags perfectly. Nobody cares. None of the customers notice that I smile at them just like we were taught to.

Deteriorate
Dominik Slusarczyk

I burn the toast. I eat it anyway.

“You’re not taking care of yourself,” Barry, my boss, says. I am sat on a comfy black chair in front of his desk. “Look at you, Tom. You haven’t showered in days.”

“They cut off my water again,” I say. “I’m three months behind on my bills.”

“We pay you thirty grand a year. What do you do with all your money?”

I turn the whole bag of coke into one massive line. I try to take it in one go but the line is so big I have to stop for a break halfway through. When the line is finished, I lie on my sofa and wait for the drugs to take effect. Five minutes later I feel hungry for the first time all day.

“We’ve got to let you go, Tom,” Barry says. “You make too many mistakes. The James paperwork was all wrong. We sent them five thousand taps instead of five hundred. Do you have any idea how much that cost? This isn’t the first time you’ve messed up like that either. I’m sorry, Tom, but we can’t have you working here anymore.”

I doublecheck the little cardboard sign to make sure all the words are spelt right. When I am confident that the sign is perfect, I balance it against the wall. There is already a little change in the paper cup in front of me. I don’t have enough to buy the drugs I need yet but I will by the end of the day.

“Stop bringing me bloody change, Tom,” Jim says. He is short and muscular. He takes the kind of drugs that make you work out all day. “Take this shit to a bank and change it for notes.”

“They banned me from the NatWest in town,” I say.

“Why? What’d you do?”

“Nothing. Hit one fucking person. It’s just some corporate bullshit. They must hate homeless people or something.”

I rack up a line on my mirror. The mirror is only a couple of inches wide so I can’t make as big a line as I would like to. I am huddled over the mirror to make sure the wind doesn’t blow

away the coke. Last week the wind blew away my whole gram. I cried for almost an hour. People put so much change into my pot that I was able to go back to Jim and buy two grams.

Bios

Zoé Mahfouz has Golden Retriever energy and prepares for the Hall of Fame by giving fake TED Talks in her bedroom to her stuffed animals. She is obsessed by her mother's homemade ratatouille since she still hasn't found Chef Remy's ratatouille restaurant from the Ratatouille movie.

Coen van der Wolf (1982) has been writing since childhood. He has been published by The Raintown Review and Poets' Choice, among others.

Kali Melone is a writer and musician, currently residing in Ithaca, New York. Their work has appeared in numerous publications including, *Gauge*, *Wilder Things*, and *WERS*. They hold a Creative Writing Degree from Emerson College, and when not writing, you can find them cooking stir fry, eating, or wishing they were in the woods.

Averett Hickey is a poet, photographer, visual artist, etc. from Washington, D.C. When he's not writing, he enjoys practicing handstyles and spending time with the Atlanta School of Poets. His work has been featured in Alloy Literary Magazine.

(MEP) is another name for (-_-). They are autistic and live in the space between matter. Their stories have been in many literary lifeforms such as Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight, Broken Pencil, and Flash Fiction Magazine. Find them at: <https://absurdproject.gumroad.com>

David Summerfield's fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and photo art has appeared in numerous literary magazines/journals/and reviews. He's been editor, columnist, and contributor to various publications within his home state of West Virginia. He is a graduate of Frostburg State University, Maryland, and a veteran of the Iraq war. View his work at davidsummerfieldcreates.com

Sean Tierney is a printmaker and maintenance worker in the state of Florida. He was a contest judge for the Poetry Society of South Carolina in 2018 and released a book of 151 poems, titled *GROUND PEARLS*, in 2022. His poems can also be found in issues of *Streetcake*, *Canary* and *Poetry South*.

Angela Patera was born in 1986 in Athens, Greece. She is an ESL teacher and a mother. She studied English Language and literature at the National University of Athens and pursued a Master's Degree in Cultural Administration and Communication. Her main interest is the representations of womanhood, race, and disease in Culture (especially literature). Her stories and poems have appeared in *Across the Margin*, *Oxford Magazine*, the *Barnstorm Journal*, *Route 7 Review*, *Sandy River*, the *Active Muse*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *The Bookends Review*, *Tint Journal*, *Midnight Chem*, and other literary journals.

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a memoirist, poet, workshop leader, thought-leader and award-winning author of fourteen books. Her work has been widely published and anthologized. She frequently speaks and writes on writing for healing and transformation. Her latest book is *Hummingbird: Messages from My Ancestors, A memoir with reflection and writing prompts*

(Modern History Press, 2024). Raab writes for *Psychology Today*, *The Wisdom Daily*, *The Good Men Project*, *Thrive Global*, and is a guest writer for many others. Visit her at: <https://www.dianaraab.com>.

John C. Sullivan has published op-eds in more than a dozen different papers, including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. This year *The Yard*, *Boomer* magazine, *Real Clear History*, and *The Sports Column* have published his true crime articles. His novel *Shark and Octopus* were released in 2020.

Javy Gwaltney is a writer living in the city at the edge of the universe. He's written for the likes of *Playboy*, *Paste*, *Game Informer*, *Vice*, and others. His text adventure *The Terror Aboard The Speedwell* received critical acclaim from *The New York Times* and *Polygon*. He has drafts to edit but he'd rather be replaying *Mass Effect 2*.

Bill Dallas Lea is a playwright from London, with an affinity for anything surreal or deadpan. Several of his previous works have been performed at the ADC Theatre and Corpus Playroom in Cambridge, with subject matters ranging from virtual space exploration, to giant world-eating fish, to dysfunctionally competitive board game nights.

Ferenc Gaspar is a Hungarian writer, journalist, and teacher of Hungarian and history, born in Budapest in 1957. He has numerous publications of his short stories, critiques, and essays in most Hungarian literary magazines. He has published 17 books – young adult fiction, short fiction, monograph, novels, and short stories – since 2001. In 2022, he was granted the Attila József Prize, which is an annually awarded Hungarian literary prize for excellence in the field of belles-lettres.

Alice Wilson is a PhD researcher at the University of York writing about women who build their own tiny houses. Her work has appeared in *Ruminant Magazine*, *Apple Valley Review*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Discretionary Love*, *ZinDaily*, and *Livina Press*. Her flash fiction features in the *Sonder Press Best Small Fiction 2022* anthology.

Theo Langdale (he/him) is a gay and trans poet from Southern California, often emphasizing queerness, religion, and childhood in his work. Find more of Theo's writing in *The Crawfish* and *SCAB Magazine*, and on Instagram @unholyfeline.

Natasha Navarra is a new writer whose work has appeared in a variety of publications including *MSN (US)*, *Psych Central*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *Lexington Herald-Leader*, *San Luis Obispo Tribune*, *Idaho Statesman*, *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, *The Modesto Bee*, *Belleville News-Democrat*, and *NewsBreak*. She brings a unique blend of psychological insight and evocative storytelling to her fiction, often exploring the darker aspects of human experience. Natasha's work delves into the eerie and uncanny.

Diane Funston has been published in journals including *California Quarterly*, *Lake Affect*, *F(r)iction*, *Tule Review*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, among others. She served two years as Poet-in-Residence for Yuba-Sutter Arts and Culture Her chapbook, "Over the Falls" was published by Foothills Publishing in 2022.

Jack O'Grady is currently writing from Toronto, but grew up writing from Maryland and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He's focused on translating vulnerable experiences with nature and time into stories that strive to question our conception of both. His writing hopes to soften genre and structure into something like a soup, warm and nourishing, and has been featured or is forthcoming in *Backwards Trajectory*, *Beneath the Garden*, *Worm Moon Archive* and *Masque & Spectacle*. He also writes tabletop games. You can find links to his work at jackogrady.carrd.co.

DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, editor of the View From Atlantis webzine, was a finalist in the 2024 Defenestrationism.net Flash Suite Contest, and has had flash fiction published in such places as Alder and Ebony (Iron Fairy Publishing), Annihilation (Black Ink), Apples, Shadows and Light (Earlyworks Press), and Punk (Black Hare Press), issues of Sirens Call, and Tigershark, and on Cease Cows, Reflex Press, The Flash Fiction Press, Space Squid, and Trembling With Fear.

DJ Tyrer's website is at <https://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

DJ Tyrer's Facebook page is at <https://www.facebook.com/DJTyrerwriter/>

The Atlantean Publishing website is at <https://atlanteanpublishing.wordpress.com/>

Mackenzie Kae lives in Owensboro, Kentucky. She enjoys caring for rambunctious beings and floating through fantasies. Her work has previously appeared in Linked Verse.

Navratra is a North Indian writer. Her creative works have appeared in various reputed international publications and several anthologies. She conveniently explores all the genres of poetry writing and has written on a plethora of topics.

According to Guinness World Records online, John Bradburne (may he rest in peace) is the world's most prolific poet in the English language with his 169,925 lines of poetry. Roger Brezina's 174,731 lines only of poetry surpass his; counting titles he's written 189,840 lines. He grew up on a farm in south central Minnesota, graduated from Mankato State University (as it was called in 1977) after he'd complicated my mind with physics, math, and astronomy. After 5 decades of various engineering and technical positions, he now resides on 5 acres of the old homestead trying to uncomplicate his mind. Until December 1st, 2021, he had 5 grown children (tragically now 4) and he has 6 grandchildren who reside in his heart.

Ethan J. Hatchett is a writer based in Savannah, GA. His stories are carefully crafted explorations of interior longings and unrealized desires. He has been previously published on 365 Tomorrows. When not writing, Ethan cultivates orchids, practices photography, and enjoys exploring nature.

Courtney Chester is currently a second-year Professional Writing graduate student at Kennesaw State University (KSU). She is one of the founding members for KSU's Narrative Game Lab and their first game, Corporation Inc., was recently released in August. In her free time, she enjoys playing video games, reading fantasy novels, and discussing all things related to Game of Thrones.

Bill's stories, plays, and comedy sketches have been published, produced, and/or broadcast in Australia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, Czechia, England, Germany, Guernsey, Holland,

India, Ireland, Nigeria, Singapore, South Africa, the U.S., and Wales. His stories have appeared in *Fiery Scribe Review*, *Ariel Chart*, *New Contrast*, *Spinozablue*, *Granfalloon*, *Eunoia Review*, *Defenestration*, *Yellow Mama*, and many other journals. His comic noir novel, “*Farewell and Goodbye, My Maltese Sleep*”, the second funniest novel ever written, was published in October 2023 by Close to The Bone Publishing, and is available on Amazon.

James W. Miller is a writer living in the Los Angeles area. He holds philosophy degrees from U.C. Berkeley and the University of Edinburgh and has previously published in *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.

Dominik Slusarczyk is an artist who makes everything from music to painting. He was educated at The University of Nottingham where he got a degree in biochemistry. His fiction has been published in various literary magazines including *moonShine Review* and *SHiFT – A Journal of Literary Oddities*. His fiction came first in *The Cranked Anvil Short Story Competition* and was a finalist in a number of other awards.

Luca Fois is a poet living in Edinburgh, in the liminal space between languages. He loves poetry, writing, and vibing with the chaos and the weird in his life. You can find him in a local café thinking about the right word to end a line, but also lurking on X @cuttinghail. Lately, he's obsessed with death and relationships. Other of his works have appeared on *Streetcake Magazine*, *Tiny Wren Lit*, *Corvus Review*, *Black Stone/White Stone* and *Spark to flame*.

Leigh-Anne Burley publishes across genres.

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. His monologue show, *Twelve from Texas*, was performed recently in NYC by Equity Library Theatre. His poetry collection, *Maybe Birds Would Carry It Away*, is published by Kelsay Books.

Gallery - <https://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com/f861509283>

Chris Litsey is a teacher, poet, and former editor of Indiana University Purdue University Columbus's literary magazine, *Talking Leaves*. He's published there and in other publications. He is also a father and loves reading, writing, getting tattooed, and exploring museums. He lives in Muncie, Indiana. Follow him on Instagram @christianlitsey.

After sojourns in Canada, Germany, Japan, and New Zealand, V.J. Hamilton calls Toronto home. Her work has been published in *The Antigone Review*, *Litro*, and *The Penmen Review*, among others. She won the *EVENT* Speculative Fiction contest. Most recently her fiction appears in *The Hong Kong Review*.

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

Kristina Lynn is a writer originally from the Garden State. She recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in English literature and has had work published in *Eunoia Review*. She has work forthcoming in *Bulb Culture Collective* and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*.

A college administrator by day, Bob Gielow (he/him) spins tales in formats we all use when communicating with each other: text messages, emails, fictional Wikipedia posts, and diary entries all allow him to be clinical and thorough in describing his characters, their thinking and actions ... without diminishing his ability to explore the resulting human emotions. Bob utilizes these epistolary styles, and others, to tell tales that frequently explore the most common of human experiences, death.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Tenth Muse*. Latest books, "Between Two Fires", "Covert" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *La Presa* and *Shot Glass Journal*.

Mike Lee is a writer and editor at a trade union in New York City. His work appears in or is forthcoming in *Corvus Review*, *Wallstrait*, *Bristol Noir*, *The Opiate*, *Roi Faineant*, *Press Pause*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *BULL*, *Drunk Monkeys*, and many others. His story collection, *The Northern Line*, is available on Amazon.

Jason Ryberg is the author of twenty-two books of poetry, six screenplays, a few short stories, a box full of folders, notebooks and scraps of paper that could one day be (loosely) construed as a novel, and countless love letters (never sent). He is currently an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community and is an editor and designer at Spartan Books. His work has appeared in *As it Ought to Be*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *I-70 Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The Arkansas Review* and various other journals and anthologies. His latest collection of poems is "Bullet Holes in the Mailbox (Cigarette Burns in the Sheets) (Back of the

Class Press, 2024)." He lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a Billy-goat named Giuseppe, and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

Nicholas Viglietti is a writer from Sacramento, CA. He started writing in high school. After which, he served in the AmeriCorps; two years rebuilding houses on the gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, and one year working on a trail crew in the Montana/Idaho wilderness. He graduated from Humboldt State University. Now, he works for the cheap and attempts to get words published under his name. Nicholas is a Hawaiian-shirt aficionado, a pina-colada connoisseur, and enjoys hot, lazy days by the pool with his wifey.

Matthew DeLuca is a poet living in New York. He is a graduate of Boston College and Fordham University School of Law. His poems have been published in *Offcourse*, *The Amsterdam Review*, *Wild Court*, *Open Ceilings* and elsewhere.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Michael Roque discovered his love for poetry and prose amid friends on the bleachers of Pasadena City College. Now he currently lives in the Middle East and is being inspired by the world around him. His poems have been published by literary magazines like *Ink Pantry Publishing*, *WordCity Literary Journal*, *Hot Pot Magazine* and others. Social Handle: <https://www.instagram.com/roquewrites2009/>

Meghan Proulx is a freelance writer in Northern California. Her short stories have been published in Hobart, Maudlin House, The Bold Italic, and more. She was ranked as a Top Humor Writer on Medium and won a Silver Anthem Award.

Fin Aitken-Buck is from the South Island of New Zealand. He is a primary school teacher with a passion for descriptive writing, surfing and adventures hitch hiking. Fin began a blog in 2020, writing stories about the hilarious and interesting people that picked him up whilst hitch hiking. He began to document experiences and turn them into short stories or, "forever grateful hitching tales."

BoekGoud-nominee, Stijn Moreels (b. 1995), is a weird fiction author from Kortrijk, Belgium. He authored half a dozen books and numerous short stories. His work is included in the 'Kortrijkse Reeks', where he represents the weird fiction genre in West Flanders. In the process, he provides a new generation of the 'Belgian School of the Strange'. Literary initiatives Inktvis and De Optimist already recognized the surreal originality of his stories. Moreels' work is characterized by his unusually expressive style and his ability to take readers into unknown, often bizarre worlds that challenge them to look beyond the superficial. His strange stories are an invitation to go beyond the boundaries of observable reality and embrace the complexity of the human psyche.

Xander Wymer's passion revolves around short stories and flash fiction.

Diana Raab, MFA, PhD, is a memoirist, poet, speaker, and award-winning author of fourteen books of poetry and nonfiction. Her writings have been published and anthologized worldwide. Her latest book is HUMMINGBIRD: MESSAGES FROM MY ANCESTORS. (Modern History Press, January 2024). She writes for *Psychology Today*, *The Wisdom Daily*, and *Thrive Global* and is a guest writer for many others. Visit her at: dianaraab.com.

Marcia Yudkin's essays have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Ms.*, *Next Avenue* and NPR as well as numerous literary journals. Her fiction has been published in *Yankee*, *New Stories from New England* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. From her home base of Goshen, Massachusetts (population 960), she advocates for introverts through her weekly newsletter, Introvert UpThink (<https://www.introvertupthink.com/>).

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet whose work is published widely in both Britain and the USA. In recent years he has won the Prole Pamphlet Prize and been shortlisted for the Wordsworth Trust Prize in the UK, and nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize in the USA.

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. Recent/upcoming appearances in Chiron Review, Al Dente, and Stickman Review, among others.

Claudia Wysocky, a Polish writer and poet based in New York, is known for her diverse literary creations, including fiction and poetry. Her poems, such as "Stargazing Love" and "Heaven and Hell," reflect her ability to capture the beauty of life through rich descriptions. Besides poetry, she authored "All Up in Smoke," published by "Anxiety Press." With over five years of writing experience, Claudia's work has been featured in local newspapers, magazines, and even literary journals like WordCityLit and Lothlorien Poetry Journal. Her writing is powered by her belief in

art's potential to inspire positive change. Claudia also shares her personal journey and love for writing on her own blog, and she expresses her literary talent as an immigrant raised in post-communist Poland.

Malachy Moran is an American expat currently residing in Norway. A PTSD survivor and recovering drug addict, Malachy has lived too many lives already to believe in reincarnation. Hopefully this is it. Malachy can be found hosting and performing at poetry open mics in Oslo. You can find his work in the forthcoming winter edition of *Anti-Heroin Chic* and follow his journey on Threads @malformed_poetry.

Noah Soltau teaches about art, literature, and society to the mostly willing. He is Managing Editor of *The Red Branch Review*. His most recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Eunoia Review*, *Penumbra Online*, *Still: The Journal*, and elsewhere. He lives and works in East Tennessee.

Ben Mears lives, edits, and writes in Virginia. He loves anything that lives in water rather than air and still thinks he can ride a bike. Just don't ask him to prove it.

M. M. Valencia is a graduate student studying Creative Writing at a small state college in California. He tries to write weird and dark fiction that is in possession of a heart.

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. His novella, *HEARTS IN THE DARK*, was published in an anthology by *RUNNING WILD PRESS* in Los Angeles. His monologue show, *Twelve from Texas*, was performed recently in NYC by Equity Library Theatre.

Swetha Amit is the author of two chapbooks, *Cotton Candy from the Sky* and *Mango Pickle in Summer*. An MFA graduate from the University of San Francisco, her works appear in *Had*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Oyez Review*, etc. Her stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net.

Bryan Fagan was born and raised in Burlington, Washington. A little farming town 70 miles north of Seattle. For a little while he bummed around with odd jobs after high school until one day he spotted a small college in Ashland, Oregon. After graduation he settled in Eugene, Oregon with his wife and two daughters. He began his writing career with the help of his daughters. When they were little, they drew pictures and created stories. One day they asked if he could join them. It was a summer day when his four-year-old asked if he would do something for her. She asked if he would write a novel. Bryan has written two novels and a variety of short stories. He thanks his daughters for their encouragement.

Michael Tyler writes from a shack overlooking the ocean just south of the edge of the world. He has been published in several literary magazines and plans a short story collection sometime before the Andromeda Galaxy collides with ours and ...

Noralee Zwick is a student and poet based in the Bay Area, California. A California Arts Scholar and Iowa Young Writers Studio alumnus, their work can be found in *Fleeting Daze Magazine*, *Prairie Home Magazine*, and *Eucalyptus Lit*, among others.

Did You Know?

Crows have funerals.

Crows gather to celebrate their dead and it's not uncommon to see a hundred or more crows at a funeral location. Live crows generally won't touch their deceased family member, and some studies suggest that the birds use the event as a learning opportunity. They are hesitant to visit a location where another crow has died even if that means losing a major food source.