



THE FIELDSTONE REVIEW

ISSUE 16
ON SILENCE

FSP

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ABOUT THE FIELDSTONE REVIEW

The Fieldstone Review is an annual literary journal published digitally by graduate students in the English department at the University of Saskatchewan.

Established in 2006, the FSR has published poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, and literary reviews by authors from Canada and abroad.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN- CHIEF

It's midsummer and hard not to think about endings. The ending of one season is the beginning of another, but it can be difficult to hold this reality within us. We tend to focus—mourn or celebrate—one or the other, endings or beginnings. How do we make space for these opposing realities to coexist?

“A silence opens,” writes poet Amy Clampitt, like the way light refracts through memories captured in Savannah Smith’s poem, “Lucid.” Or the ocean of imaginative possibility left in the wake of a dead sister, as in Julie Esther Fisher’s “Death and the Maiden.” These aforementioned writers are also the recipients of our Editor’s Choice Award for Best Submission — congratulations Julie Esther Fisher and Savannah Smith!

Every poem or story selected for our 2024 issue of *The Fieldstone Review* speaks, in one way or another, to the generative quality of **silence**. We hope you’ll find among these submissions, penned by talented writers from across the globe, an opportunity to slow down, keep vigil; a quiet moment to let your mind open.

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FICTION



Death and the Maiden

Julie Esther Fisher

Now, on the day, no one can bear to hear much about Frankie. Each is too lost, their miasmas of grief too different to mesh. Even Meredith shrinks into the infinite darkness of a little black dress.

Her daughter's been dead six days. The coroner's already performed the autopsy. No one's surprised by the results. They would, in fact, have been surprised had Frankie *not* done it.

It's a miracle Meredith wangled the hall at all. Frankie's suicide coincided with a council meeting on the upgrading of traffic signals in the local borough, a fundraiser for cancer research, and a shareholders' gathering of the badminton club.

Her husband, whom she'd nicknamed Elgar, she had also wangled—into performing today. A violinist, he's wearing his new Italian suit, the one he thinks is chic, but that she thinks makes him look like a waiter. Now he's receiving dozens of clasping hands. Watching him, Meredith fears she'll not get through the day.

~

Simon, only nine, crouches at the foot of the coffin. Involved in his biscuits, a stack of which sit in his lap, he gums his way through them, his front teeth unusually delayed. His sister's last words to him were rather hilarious and occasionally his mouth opens mid-bite; he lowers his face and giggles, losing bits of precious crumb. Frankie wouldn't mind. After all, she isn't even in there. The coffin is filled with sand and shells.

She was older than him, twenty-four. Like a parent really, only a cool one. A marine biologist, she knew about poisons and toxin-fuming chimneys, was angry, skinny and funny, with arms as long as eels, the longest eel in the world, the slender giant moray, *Strophidan sathete*.

He watches his parents drift around, their faces all dribbling eyes above, smiles below, as divided as they were a few nights before when he overheard them arguing in Frankie's old room.

"We could take out a plot," his dad said. "All be together again one day."

"Because we're so happy, right?"

“If we really wanted to do right by Frankie, we’d let Simon decide. Child or not, he has the right. Frankie’s his world. He knows what she is, what she loves.”

“Knows her ocean...” Simon mouthed to himself.

“And that makes him an expert on burial?”

His father must have sunk into the rocking chair. With two curved rails of wood, he made the music of creaking despair.

~

Body or not, a funeral is something you don’t get a second chance at unless you’re a priest or an undertaker. It takes practice. And practice is his life—the pursuit of a perfect sound. Mentally, he can’t help but practice even now, as he circulates among the guests. More important even than his fiddle itself is his bow, the implement with which he tilts at this windmill of perfection. A license may prove he’s given himself to his wife, but his truest marriage is to his bow, a stunning creation of dense Pernambuco.

In circulating, he steers clear of the coffin. Its burden of sand and shells seems a shameful admission of failure. They still haven’t decided what to do with Frankie’s body. Everyone has an opinion. In his heart of hearts, he’s for cremation. Meredith believes in soil and insects. And as Frankie’s mother, the woman through whom Frankie passed into this life, has she not a certain right to dictate her passage to the next? In this, he recognizes the presence of the proverbial ax, always dull, ever in need of grinding. His wife endures the death of their daughter much as she suffers her own life—feeling owed—for what? he wonders. After all these years he still can’t put his finger on it—it’s as elusive and fickle as the sound he chases.

Wonderful of you to come.

Thank you for honoring my little girl.

She’d be touched you’re here.

His own words stick in his craw. Frankie generally disliked humankind. Aquatic creatures—these were her kin.

A man he doesn’t recognize corners him.

“Do you know, I remember one time your Francesca called me an elitist fopdoodle.”

The man has on a showy cravat.

“She did that kind of thing often,” he says proudly.

“I rather admired her for it,” the fopdoodle says, “and gave her a dose of her own medicine.

Well, I told her, better than being a commie driggle-draggle.”

“Oh no, she’d have loved that,” he says, reminded what a disappointment to Frankie his lifelong aversion to politics was. She and Meredith would go at it for hours, during which he’d tap out a tune, first on top of the table, and then, silenced with a look from either one or the other, beneath, fingers to thigh. The melody would surge through him until one woman or the other would invariably say, “One of these days, you might just *pretend* to listen.”

But he would have been! Schubert Quartet. *Death and the Maiden*.

His group, the Arne Quartet, had been rehearsing for their next tour when he’d noticed it—his bow had lost its camber, wouldn’t sink into the string, had neither bite nor bounce. He couldn’t pull any sweetness from it; the notes wouldn’t speak. He’d kept putting off the risky repair, an expert heating the bow over a flame to re-establish its curve. But he couldn’t play Frankie’s funeral on such a stick.

It had all happened in a blur, the red eye to New York, the four days he’d have to wait for the work to be done, the hotel, the kind of bender he hadn’t been on since his youth. It wasn’t his only infidelity, but it felt like his truest betrayal. He missed his plane home, woke up with scented limbs draped over his. He paid a small fortune for the bow he now holds in his hand as he steps on to the stage.

The coffin lies some ten feet away. He smiles at Simon, who sits beside it. This is most often how he feels closest to the boy, at a distance, tenderly, with dubious ownership.

~

Simon is plump as a bun. Two current eyes twinkle behind wire-rimmed glasses he shoves beneath his school desktop along with hidden comics, sweets, top secret correspondence from Frankie.

Anglerfish,

Don't let Eddy or Mother get their hands on this. Take it to school or bury it in the garden. You do know they search your room, right? Well, Mother does. When I was a teenager, she found my diaphragm. She pitched a fit and threw it out! I should be grateful to her. She taught me to be cunning.

This is a crazy thing to say to a nine-year-old, but I feel you understand immortality, no dictionary necessary. I think that's why Mother fears you. Remember though, she's just doing her job. Living out her purpose as I'm doing mine and you must yours. To be headless in panic and fear is her destiny. So do forgive her even as you—we—continue to keep our secrets. As for Eddy, he's at least listening. So say things. There's a chance he may hear.

Remember, the course of love is never straight. It's curved or crooked, just like nature is. And as Eddy will never fail to tell anyone who'll listen, you can't make music with a straight stick. Annoying as he is, try to love him. When it comes your turn, bury him with his precious bow.

God, it's late. I'm still at the lab and Sadie calls. She's a Vampire squid. When she's pursued, she releases a cloud of glowing fluid that distracts the predator while she darts away. Rather like Mum, she is. Shit! I called her Mum! Well, we all have our moments of weakness.

After some debate, his parents had permitted Simon to see her. She didn't look what he considered dead. The place where she was now had done something to her, paled her. She existed in another, not at all frightening medium.

His mother chose for her one of the long flowing dresses she always wore. He went to lift it up, but she slapped his hand.

"I just want to see it," he said.

"See *what*?"

He saw it in his mother's eyes: panic and fear.

~

He used to rock Frankie on his knee while listening to Haydn's *Sunrise Quartet* and watching the sunrise out the window. Frankie often woke before dawn, and mostly out of guilt, he would snatch her from her crib to give his poor, exhausted Meredith a break. He'd dandle her before the window,

explaining in murmuring tones what she would see, thinking how new the sunrise would be to her.

How unfair it seemed that she would never remember it or them! She'd squirm. He'd chuck her up in the air. For seconds she'd leave his hands altogether. This seemed the closest they'd been, were, could be to one another. An accident waiting to happen. Something averted just in time.

He always ended up in the rocking chair. But he didn't quite fit the bundle he held any more than he fit his given name, Edgar, retro-fitted by the woman sleeping in the room next door. ...*how could she possibly sleep through her child's wails?*... His re-christening by the sparkling beauty who improbably consented to be his wife flattered him at first, made him laugh. That laughter often morphed into their physical pleasure, the sublimeness of which seemed a fair trade for a really rather diminishing tease.

...*sparkling she may once have been, yet how quickly she changed*... He remembers now the way she looked when he returned from those pre-dawn rescues of their daughter. ...*so curled that her body created a bony question mark*...

It's an auspicious day for a funeral. The *real* Elgar's birthday.

George tells him this. George, like most cellists, knows far too much. He loves George, but for twelve years, the life of the Arnes, longed for a stupider version of him.

Frankie would have hated this, he thinks, as he lifts the fiddle to his chin.

He'd told Meredith he didn't want to play.

~

Meredith watches the four begin the painstaking ritual of tuning. Twelve long years of it—her mind wanders.

For ages now Frankie had seemed better to her, absorbed, entranced. Her daughter had become an expert in bioluminescence—or, as Elgar put it, *her internal darkness lit by the colors of the sea*.

One night she stuck glow-in-the-dark stars on Simon's ceiling to calm his night terrors. He couldn't have been more than three.

Meredith knew because she'd stood outside his room, listening, smoking a secret cigarette. The door was ajar.

Frankie explained how in the ocean, there were also lights.

“Stars?” Simon asked.

“No. Animals.”

She explained to him all about the creatures that spurt and squirt, like farts in color.

Simon said, “Mum won’t like that. Stuff stuck on the ceiling.”

“Listen, there’s a way to handle Mother.”

“Why don’t you call her Mum like I do?”

“You may stop calling her that one day, yourself.”

Meredith puffed on her cigarette. She caught ash in her hand just in time. It burned, though not quite as much as her ears.

Now, some six years later, while up on stage the quartet chases that perfect equal temperament, she shrinks to think of the sea, where nothing is in its place, where chaos reigns, where the water is the medium of terror, mixed with the stress hormones of the hunted. No wonder Frankie was at home there, in the cocktail of death with death’s light show, death’s teeth.

~

The group had argued about the piece, as they argued about everything, but in the end, the Sunrise had prevailed, he prevailed, and the sun rose on another day, another rehearsal in which arguments over interpretation would not take a back seat to grief. Julia, violist, with her withering gazes, her superhuman technique. Cellist George, critical, opinionated, annoyingly brilliant. Tan, second fiddle, with a quiet humble nature to bear it... He’d been grateful to them all for the push and pull of ideas.

He has confided his secrets to Julia, who also happens to be his best friend. He envies the simplicity of her life, her lack of attachments, the suitcase always packed and ready to go. In the early days, he played cupid, setting up dates for her. He and Meredith would host, hoping the chemistry would take. He mixed drinks, the sofas got sat on. By the time the meal came around, they were all exhausted from the awkward talk. He was also a cook. The odd Sunday roast aside, Meredith doesn’t touch the stuff. Food. Never to prepare, and scarcely to eat. He would retreat into the kitchen and absorb himself in food, trying, as he did with music, to pull from it moods and flavors. Invariably,

Julia would join him for a mutual groan.

He's so bloody "nice"...

Don't you like his nose?

It's his upper lip...

No no no! I especially chose one that wasn't stiff. He's not like us Brits, Jul. He's half Italian. He'll love the hell out of you, and show it.

~

Every time she sees them together, especially like this, up on stage, Meredith imagines what the two might have become—he, rakishly handsome, Julia, a stunner. Thick as thieves from day one of music school, gigging around, rooming together. But, if her husband's to be believed, neither risked ruining what they had for an even brief sojourn of the flesh. The fact that they never made love—for certainly she sees that there *is* love there—seems to her a kind of perversity which she secretly begrudges him.

She knows Julia. Julia is no mystery. If she, Meredith, had leanings in this direction, she herself might choose someone like Julia. Or Julia herself. The devil you know, Meredith thinks now, looking up at the two of them on stage as, tuning complete, they ready themselves to share the secret language of horsehair on string. What kind of woman thinks of such things during her child's funeral? I must be terribly cold, she says to herself. As cold as my child is now.

~

"Sime. Mate, is there anything you want to say about Frankie?"

Sitting by the coffin, Simon re-arranges the biscuits on his plate. He doesn't answer his dad. He's thinking about something else.

Each in their different way, they were both mistakes. Frankie told him this the last time they were together in the lab. He never knew if that was just how she felt, or whether she'd been told this by their mother in a moment of exasperation. He knew the clobber of their relationship, Frankie and their mother's, heard it often enough from his bedroom at night. Verbal bricks. He'd pillow his head against their hurling.

So much, Frankie told him not long ago, might be achieved by unbirthing. Pushing a stuck baby

back up the birth canal to help it be born another, a better way.

~

It's a sticky day. He rubs his thumb across the string where the rosined bow crosses to prevent him losing his grip. He tucks the fiddle back under his chin and his bow finds a string. His arm can't help the elegance of the crossing. The right sound is something in his ear, as if from a shell.

He plays the opening three measures...*the sun's ascent*...the newly cambered bow glides flawlessly...*the rays of the rising sun promise to warm the earth, a great smiling sun such as Frankie draws when she verges on too big to be tossed into the air and come back to me*...he plays the high note once; twice; three times...*they must all think it's a mistake*...and keeps at it...*but I'm lost*...what they always do when someone falls behind...*just keep going till we find our way*...

Julia's looking at him intently, the way she does when she's about to do something surprising.

He waits...*this must be it, doing nothing*...

George tilts his cello on his endpin and leans forward. He waits for him to say it: Not *that* way, *this*.

...*if only people would be now who they are the rest of the time*...

Meredith steps up, takes the bow out of his hand, gently, a coaxing really—hardly necessary—for how easily he gives it up.

“Edgar...” she manages.

~

“What would happen if you got bitten by that fish?” Simon asked Frankie when they were in the lab that last day. “Look at its teeth.”

Crouching before the tank, he saw his glasses reflected. It looked like the fish was wearing them. She came around to his side of the tank, put her arm around him.

“You’re amazing.”

His boy heart and head squeezed against the sides of something that confined him. Not quite tall enough, he struggled to see over the top of the tank.

“Dad’s worried about you,” he said. “I hear him talking to Mum. He blubs.”

Frankie brushed some hair from his forehead.

“Well, the world can always use more water.”

Together they looked at the fish.

“You know we put them back, right?” she said.

There was always music playing in the lab. He knew her favorites: The Police. Pink Floyd.

The fish was a deep-sea angler. Before a curtain of ghoulish-looking teeth, it dangled a fleshy lure growing out of its forehead. The lure glowed at the tip, mimicking live bait, Frankie told him.

He wondered if fish ever did anything to entertain themselves. Did the angler like music?

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Julia says to Simon. They’re outside the side door of the hall.

“You don’t want to stay for the service?”

When he shakes his head, she sits down beside him, risking her black dress on the stoop. Other grownups prefer face-to-face talk, although they rarely say anything interesting. Mostly, when grownups talk, he studies what he can make of their teeth. Julia’s are pretty.

She’s the one he likes best. She’s thin, and never, as far as he’s seen, eats biscuits. She calls them phantoms, his missing teeth. If only he grew up fast enough and she stopped growing altogether...

“Frankie told me something,” he says to her now.

Beneath her lab coat that day, Frankie wore one of her long dresses. It swirled around her legs, legs that were really a tail beneath, which he knew she was about to finally reveal. He’d suspected it for some time now, waited for it. But you couldn’t rush a secret. This he knew.

He eyed the full skirt of the dress.

“When I was fifteen,” Frankie said, “I made a mistake. At the time, I was half girl, half, I dunno, something else. I wanted to become that something else too quickly, so I—” her fingers twisted and twined like a mound of lugworms “—so I slipped out one night to the waterside. I met someone. We went swimming together, and well... Do you understand? You and I—we’re not connected the way you think.” She nudged him. “Anglerfish, are you listening?”

Only half-heartedly. He was trying to figure out the engineering of it, of walking on a tail, whether it hurt.

Julia’s looking at him narrowly.

“*What* did she tell you?” she says.

He suddenly regrets saying anything at all.

“She said weird things,” he hedges.

“Well, she *was* weird.” Julia picks at a loose thread on her hem. “What things?”

He’s never been leery of Julia before.

“Like what she had under her dress...”

Lightly Julia boxed his ear. “Now *you’re* being weird.”

He holds a digestive biscuit up to the light, squints, tries to see through the tiny holes.

“Mummy’s made her roast,” he says. “Are you coming back?”

~

“When *I* die,” Frankie said later that same night, the last time they were together, “I want to be buried at sea. Water from the left, the right, the bottom and top of me, making it absolutely fucking impossible for me to be washed up and haunt you.”

He wouldn’t mind, he told Frankie. He liked being scared.

“Think of it,” she went on. “All those sharks—hundreds of different species with dentiles all over their bodies, coming for me. There’s nothing that’d make me happier.”

Like a couple of sardines, they were lying on his bed, looking at the glow-in-the-dark stars, as bright today as the day she’d stuck them up.

Her hand crept close to his.

She said, “You’re mine, Mister.”

He elbowed her.

“I know I’m different. God knows, no one would ever refer to me as the motherly type...”

She put her arms around him.

“Stop being soppy,” he said, squirming free. “That’s for boyfriends. Don’t you want one?”

Frankie propped herself up. Her breath flooded his ear. “I’m trying to tell you something, Sime. That mistake I made...”

She never called him by his actual name. He put his hands over his ears, so hard he could hear the sea pounding.

“Answer my question about the fish,” he demanded.

She peeled his hands away and looked at him.

“Listen,” she said, sounding aggravated, “if you’re an angler you don’t think twice about your bloody teeth. You just sink those fuckers in and take life by the goolies.”

It wasn’t an answer to the question he’d actually asked, but her last words made him laugh.

He says to Julia, “She said we’re mistakes.”

“Frankie?”

“Each in our different way, she said.”

“She told you that? Do you know what she meant?”

“That they canoodled without caring?”

Julia clears her throat. “Possibly. But if that *was* the case, look what they got from it. A mistake isn’t always something you regret.”

Sounding suddenly irritated, Julia says, “Meredith. Do stop lurking.”

His mother lurks better than anyone he knows. How long has she been standing on the other side of the cracked side door? Has he said anything he shouldn’t have?

His dad soon follows. He puts an arm around Simon.

“I’m sorry, mate. The sun. It just got stuck...”

After a moment, Julia says, “Well, don’t worry, El. You know how funerals are. If no one goes off their hinges, people feel cheated.”

When Julia opens the door to fetch tea, Simon overhears a snippet of the service, someone talking about Frankie as though they belonged to her too.

After a while he hears the crowd filing out, their feet scuffing the front walkway.

His mother says, “Well, that’s that then. Would you like to come to dinner, Julia, now the beastly thing is over? I made a roast. Of all days.... A Sunday roast. On a Tuesday.”

~

That night, he’s sitting up with the letter from Frankie. He rolls over, crinkling it beneath him as, suddenly thirsty, he reaches for his water glass, upsetting the full carafe his mother insists on placing

on his bedside table. He can hear the water trickling down onto the floor as the carafe rocks back and forth.

“It’s only water, Mum,” he says when his mother finds the spill in the morning, and lunges at the small damp spot on the floor like it’s an ocean.

Later, his dad makes flapjacks. While she’s pretending to eat, her teeth straight and polished, his mother says quietly, “There’s something you should know, Simon.”

His father pushes his plate away. He rests his elbow on the table, fork in the air. He looks like Neptune raising his trident. They’ve just learned about Neptune in school.

“For God’s sake, Meredith, no.”

If only Frankie could hear Eddy now!

“It’s all right, Mum. I already know. She told me.”

“*Told* you?” his mother says. “When? Why didn’t you say something?”

“You wouldn’t have believed me.”

“You don’t believe or not believe something you already know, no matter how unfortunate or regretful it is.”

Whenever she’s upset, his mother’s nose changes color. She looks just like the red nose mudsucker, a type of African minnow Frankie once showed him in a book.

“Go on. Tell me. Apparently, there’s nothing she *didn’t* tell you.”

Suddenly he can remember only laughter, lively talk. Should he make something up?

“She said ...”

He hesitates, coughs.

“What? Tell me already.”

His grief catches a fin of hers and wiggles away. He sniggers.

“And this is funny?” his mother says.

He sees Frankie’s face staring up at him from a syrupy flapjack and makes the mistake of popping it whole into his mouth before he thinks better of it. Now he feels the face hide in the peaks and valleys of his teeth, sink into cavities he never knew he had until they begin to ache. He feels it slide down his

throat and land in his stomach. The face rides the raft as long as it can, until the flapjack dissolves, worn away by his tummy acids. All else churns to pulp, but not the face. It's now a voice, and he hears it talking to him.

Clenched, his mother says, "Well? Are you going to tell me?"

He lets his jaw hang open, risking correction. His mother doesn't like an unfinished mouth.

He's scared to say. He thinks of the cold fridge drawer where Frankie's lain, and now of her somewhere in his belly, warm and safe. But she can't stay here forever. He feels her pricking him to courage. It'd be better if he lied, but lying takes up room inside you and he has less of that now that she's here.

"She didn't exactly tell me, but..."

He hears the voice that comes from inside him, not quite his own.

"...but I know it's true. I know what she is."

Across the table, his dad's face is like that one flapjack that's always left when they finish breakfast, sad and flat.

Suddenly his mother gets up and comes at him from behind. He wonders if she has any idea of the breath-stopping strength of her hug. He doesn't know if she's giving him something or taking it away. Her cheek touches his. Her tears fall into his lap, exactly where the biscuit crumbs always do.

He can't go to school like this! It's just a little spot so far, but if she keeps going at this rate, who knows how the sharks at school will interpret it and tear into him this time?

"Poor mite," his mother whimpers. "All alone."

She draws his face around to hers. Tears ride the gullies on either side of her mouth and fall into her sudden smile.

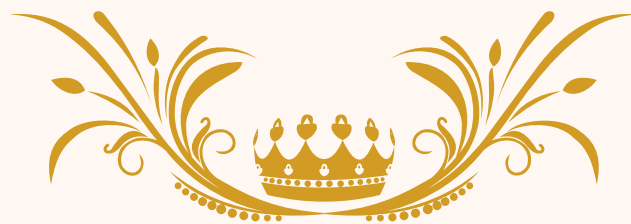
"But who knows? We're not too old... We might still... I mean it's not too late..."

His mother composes herself and returns to her seat. "We've decided to bury her at sea," she says. "It's where she belongs. I hope that won't upset you. The idea of it..."

She hides her teeth while she carves her flapjacks into small triangles.

“You do see why we didn’t bring it up before? We thought it might trouble you, you see, not having somewhere—a place you could visit, you know, when you get older and understand these things better.”

Beneath the table his father taps his tune. *Death and the Maiden*. The *Mermaiden*.



Editor’s Choice
Best Submission



In a Crowd

Angelica Whitehorne

Laura walks in and they all stand up. They are clapping fiercely, it sounds like a hard rain pelting against a metal roof. From their mouths, Happy Anniversaries echo.

“We are so excited to see you!” one steps forward to say, distinguishing itself from the mass. It looks female, has ginger curls framing its head, and velvety brown eyes. If it was a human, it would have been considered gorgeous. In fact, they all would have. Each of them so youthful and extravagant with their chiseled, almost-real bodies and their chandelier smiles.

Laura undoes her scarf from her neck and hangs it on its designated hook. I will not entertain them, she thinks to herself. She is also young, but stands half a foot shorter than her companions and fails to radiate their same jeunesse. A shadow of darkness blooms where exhaustion has flirted with her under eyes, and the plum-colored lipstick she applies daily does little to distract from her pallid skin and ashy blonde hair. And while the beings who are occupying her house float from room to room lightly, Laura’s demeanor is heavier and more hesitant.

The mass continues to hum their congratulations. She takes off her plaid, knitted coat and hangs it on its designated hook. I will not entertain them! she thinks louder.

They could hear her thoughts, this crowd, so one flings open the cabinet and pops open a glimmering bottle, as if to say, “We are perfectly able to entertain ourselves.”

The bystanders cheer as glasses are passed around; the xylophone rims clinking against each other in glee. Laura sits on her futon sans glass and pushes her index fingers onto her temple.

Another day, another celebration, she thinks with a grimace.

“It has been a long one—” she speaks out loud in an attempt to get their attention and perhaps their sympathy, if they have any. But by now they are already rolling and raving. One is dancing on her dining room table with slow, deliberate hip swivels. Another two are swinging each other around to some fast, imaginary tune: a spin, a spin, a sloppy dip. One of the male-resembling beings sits close to her, slides even closer, and hums confidently into her ear, “Lighten up Laura, we’ve waited all day for

you to return home!”

She turns to him, his breath throwing her off-kilter. She will never get used to them being so—close. He, himself, is not the right consistency for human, too pale, almost translucent, but he is attractive and he can breathe, good qualifiers. A kiss of a beard lines his face and he looks at her with a falsely compassionate expression.

You do that so well, she thinks, and because he is probably both from and in her mind he responds, “What?”

“Play real, you play real so well,” she vocalizes, getting up from the futon and creating space between herself and the thing of her imagination.

She stops mid-step, becomes curious, “So what day is it today?” she asks, like she always does in spite of herself.

“A beautiful twenty-three days that we’ve lived with you—the most wonderful host that you are.”

She nods curtly and shuffles toward her bathroom. All the questions she could think to ask about their composition, purpose, and origin have already been giggled off rather patronizingly by the beings, who shake their gorgeous heads and exclaim, “Oh Laura, what funny things you ask!” And so tonight, she opts not to make a fool of herself by asking, just to get on with the routine.

She goes to brush her teeth, and the beings halt their merry-making so they can follow and brush theirs. She puts her toothpaste on the bristles and they put their toothpaste on their bristles. The first night a chorus of “How curious, how curious,” followed all of her actions. Now they were well-learned and followed her routine with ease.

They line up nude and single file to enter her shower, while she tries not to look too long at their naked bodies—shaped like the portraits of gods in art galleries. She’s taken to undressing as fast as possible and pulling the shower curtain tight behind her, signifying for them to wait their turns. Afterward, they produce towels from the same place dreams are conjured, wrapping the blended cotton around their illusory bodies.

They remind Laura of a line of lost baby ducklings, or perhaps a group of very ill-informed scientists. But they were neither and they gave no indication of their true identification.

The most she's pried from them is, "We are everything from everywhere!" or even more irritating, "We are you—so ask yourself what you are and we are that too."

She heads to bed, where they all lie down around her, procuring their pillows from the breeze and packing themselves like sardines along her carpet; creating the scene of a slumber party, one that has lasted twenty-three nights and seems not yet to be over.

In the morning, they dress smartly for a bleak business job they never have to work, as Laura sadly does. Their unemployment does not stop them from getting ready with the dedication of a day-one intern, arranging themselves around her, twenty or thirty trying to get a glimpse of themselves in the vanity mirror. Each tries to blot their lipstick or grease down their baby hairs just as she does.

What may be the strangest part is that these creatures are constrained to the household. After Laura takes her scarf and jacket from their hooks, grabs her briefcase, and heads out the door, each tries to follow suit and then immediately slams into the open trespass like it is a barrier. They continue one by one, boomeranging, until painstakingly Laura is forced to shut the door, knowing she will be doomed to see them again in the evening.

The same routine happens today after Laura brushes her teeth and combs her baby hairs in a crowd. She goes to close the door on the odd creatures, but before she does, she watches them hopefully. Fully dressed in work apparel they take turns bumping themselves against the door boundary and blubbing out a "Bye. Bye Laura. See you!"

Laura bounds down her steps with a sigh, "They still can not leave; will be there upon my return like rowdy knick knacks in a curio cabinet."

She steps onto the bus and heads towards her only escape, the workplace, another tragedy in and of itself.

Frank, the heavy-set manager a level above her heaves over her desk, takes short, rapid breaths and stares at her with his frog-like eyes. His tobacco-colored hair is slicked back and his pale face is home to many beauty marks that can't quite fulfill their namesake and make him beautiful.

She studies him as he talks over her—it is the crook of his nose and the way he always stands with his fists shoved into his hips, like an angry Nonna, that makes him particularly unattractive to her. Also he smells like hot sauce and mothballs.

He is currently asking her, “Why have you been staying at the office so late every night?” as if it is any of his business.

Instead of admitting a possible psychotic break, she announces with enthusiasm that it is her, “Pure dedication to the corporation.”

His eyes widen like he is watching her steal his position under that crooked nose of his, so she places a small hand on his forearm, trying not to flinch as she does it, and tells him, “Don’t worry, the glass ceiling will protect you.”

He looks at her confused and overwhelmed, obviously regretting that he started the conversation at all. Then he slides away to the break room, to take his feet out of his shoes and eat his leftovers.

When he leaves, Laura continues to click-clack on her computer and calculate numbers that mean nothing to her. She sells investments, mostly to elderly people who live in places like the Carolinas or Florida, and who have clicked-clacked with enough vigor themselves to secure a condo and a hefty pile of stocks in sustainable soap, solar panel, and crude oil companies—really anything to stuff their dying dollar bills into. The job itself is lifeless, but it gives her a roof over her head, so she clicks on.

These days her work is only backdrop to her thoughts. The thoughts that race on about the possible Martians holed up in her apartment complex. The translucent one with hair the color of a bonfire, the one that resembled Leonardo DiCaprio and took to whispering in her ear, and the others who stood out less but still took up her space with rambunctious ease.

After the twilight comes and goes, the old Janitor comes in and politely asks her to step out because he has to vacuum the mod carpet under her, “Nice, little working feet.”

He is a sweet man, benevolent and ordinary, but she takes great pains in his arrival each day, knowing it means she must leave the silence of the office. Besides, her little working feet are actually pretty large, as well as honorably hardy, and she is offended that he hasn’t taken the time to notice.

Upon arriving home, she enters to another joyous round of *Happy Anniversaries!* She still cannot glean why every day she returns is a new, celebratory date to them.

One with a square head and bulging jaw slaps her on the shoulder jollily while the rest sing praises around her. She doesn't remember seeing the shoulder slapper before, *God don't say they're multiplying*, she thinks, putting her scarf and coat on their proper hooks.

It is Thursday, and it is cold, and it has been another hard week. So, she uncorks a bottle of real red wine and takes a long, healing sip.

The crowd howls in excitement. All she can make out is the word party bouncing between the creatures like a mating call.

"Haven't I told you all it's not an anniversary if you aren't celebrating anything?" she pronounces out loud, grabbing the bottle and heading to the sofa.

"We are having a party to celebrate the anniversary of another day together," the one she has begun calling Leonardo informs her.

"Well, I am not celebrating anything," she says, "I am only drinking a glass of red wine and resting my nice, large working feet."

He takes on the look of a disappointed child, his eyebrows swooping down towards his lids. A quick laugh escapes Laura and she covers her mouth with three fingers as if her own sounds of pleasure had surprised her.

"Here," she says, "make a glass appear and have a little."

Leonardo looks unsure but does as she tells him. However, as she pours the wine from her bottle into his glass, it falls straight through and onto the couch, making a large, blood-colored spot over the upholstery. Normally, she would have sighed and put her fingertips to her temple, but tonight she gives another quick laugh and says, "Well, I should have seen that one coming."

"How curious," Leonardo cocks his head at the stain, and she laughs again, lightly throwing her head back, the winemaking for a glamorous mood. "Make a towel appear and clean it up, Leonardo," she directs him.

She expects him to protest or question her, but he simply blots at the scene of the crime, obviously making no progress on the stain. Soon she pours her second glass and suddenly she is aware there is an attractive man or man-like thing beside her. She tries to shake off the thought and instead scans the room, which contains the usual imaginary chaos of dancing, jumping, and piñata-hitting.

Leonardo has abandoned his mess and is now limboing on her kitchen counter with the ginger-haired girl. A sudden feeling of loneliness and envy grasps Laura and the appeal of the party fades. She thinks about going to brush her teeth. Instead, she sprawls herself around the wine stain and gives it another go, bellowing out, “One of you, any one of you, tell me a story, could you? Tell me something about yourselves, tell me something real.”

But the party roars on and not one of them acknowledges her request, and she realizes, as she has at every prior party, that no one is really here for her and probably never will be. She is the excuse of this celebration, but not the center of it.

She sits alone, without entertainment as the strange mix of shouts and whispers carry between the crammed bodies. Perhaps they have no stories to tell, or none they can tell her; perhaps they don’t even know what a story is. She runs her finger around the rim of her glass, longs deeply for a bonfire and a dedicated lover; warmth and closeness.

She walks to the bathroom slowly, almost limping in defeat; it is time to start the nightly routine. The noise dies down and the ducklings begin to follow. As she brushes her teeth, she cries real, plump tears. The crowd follows suit, unaware of the pain associated.

“How curious,” one chimes in, crying its own small, gossamer tears. Laura closes her eyes and splashes cold tap water over her face. When she looks up, everyone else’s face is also sparkling and washed. How is it that she can be in such abundant company and still be utterly alone? She changes into her pajamas, turns out the bedroom light, and slips into uneasy dreams.

The next morning, after waking with heavy lids, Laura leaves her boomerang shadows in the doorway and plays number counter another afternoon. Her eyes burn from the bright computer light and the trace of yesterday’s tears. She spends most of the day keeping her head propped up on her

hands and staring at the blank pages she should be filling in.

In the break room, Frank and a few others are speaking about football statistics and the average lifespan of a termite. It seems Frank has an outbreak and exterminators are currently wreaking havoc on the insect refugees in his household.

If only it were that simple, she thinks. She looks around and wonders what she has often wondered, *Is this it? An employee fridge that smells like rancid leftovers, a stale, lemony office floor, her own fingers typing away seemingly detached from her main circuit board?*

She feels nauseous. She throws out her uneaten lunch and goes to stand in the overtly fluorescent bathroom lights, sighing with the knowledge that the only people who sort of seek out her company are figments of her imagination, or living dreams, or in the best case scenario: alien life forms studying her sorry existence like an unidentified bacterium in a test tube.

Washing her hands in the sink, she lathers and scrubs two or three times with cheap lavender foaming soap. *Maybe, I can wash them off me like they're the germs*, she thinks. Then she pats her hands dry and melts back into her desk.

After the sun sets and the janitor comes to sweep the floor, she arrives home and opens the door to find that her home is quiet.

She stands in her doorway waiting for the clapping, the congratulations, but it doesn't come. For a moment she stares at her hands in disbelief; then she sees the note on the coffee table. She drops her scarf and coat to the ground, walking over to retrieve it.

Sitting down on the couch next to the wine stain, her eyes scan the message repeatedly.

You were a wonderful, truly beautiful host. We have learned all we can from you.

We will be leaving now.

She can't help wondering how they learned to write. She also can't fight the feeling of being snubbed. *A month-long occupancy and this is all she gets?* She stares at the paper; it's as translucent and unreal as her disembarked guests.

Her apartment is a ghost's whisper, a dead man's symphony, a party venue cleared of the party. She gets up, closes her front door, puts her outerwear on its hooks, and tries to appreciate the recovered silence.

Despite her own wishes these last weeks, she paradoxically feels how she did when they arrived—that this apartment cannot be her own.

On that first day she entered what seemed a benevolent stranger's surprise party and she immediately walked out, thinking she'd mistakenly opened the wrong dwelling. It wasn't until after she triple-checked her apartment number and they ushered her in, surrounded her in loud, confirming murmurs that they were, in fact, her own guests, that she knew she'd gone mad. Now she is alone again. They had come and gone away like the winter eventually would. The universe had spun them down the drain into the sewer's muck, or the ocean's bottom, or into some other silly spinster's mind.

That night, when she goes to brush her teeth, she does so solitary. She showers with no assembly line behind her and sleeps in a room filled only with her breath. And in the morning, when she dresses in her usual conservative outfit, she does so alone, with the mixed feeling of being cured of a disease and of losing something quaint, something that she had mistakenly started to count on like water flowing from a tap or a pack of old family dogs barking at the fence.



POETRY



The Last Night of Mother

Allan Lake

I was nowhere near my mother when
Death came knocking during an
evening of any old thing on TV. I was
15,000 km away so she phoned her
brother who phoned an ambulance not
any passing ships. No point an SOS
when you were born, lived and would
die on the prairie in a small town that
had briefly seen better days, plenty of
dust and snow storms but never any
emergencies at sea. Mom hated to
trouble anyone, especially after dark,
so she must have known what was
calling. Not pesky Jehovah's Witnesses
at such an hour, unfortunately.

I was informed the morning after. The
paramedics had just maneuvered her into
the ambulance when my mother and
busy no-body, Death, consummated. I
say 'consummated' because she would
have got a kick out of my word choice if
she was still kicking. Loved wordplay
which I inherited. That and a sweet
tooth. I never went back there, saw no
point with Death unable to prevent her
taking occasional holidays within me and
perhaps a few others that knew her,
prairie included.

Lucid

Savannah Smith

Did you know as an embryo
That light is an ebbing menagerie
Of the hues in your grandmother's quilt
She knits for you with amethyst needles
In a canary varnished rocking chair
Focused crimson, fervent, bloodshot eyes
Dementia arrives incognito
At a christening turned catastrophe
Much like the pleats in your father's kilt
He embellishes with opal beetles
In the tangerine tint lofted upstairs
Blurred cyanotype of you on his thighs



**Editor's Choice
Best Submission**



When I close one eye,

Frederick Pollack

two blocks' worth of branches – trees and those things which, a gardener said, aren't trees but ambitious weeds – flatten. Sky flattens, presents more frontally its more ceramic than metallic grey. The crowded leafless twigs and branches share a grey-brown so homogeneous it should have one name.

Later, when I go out, the day fulfills its promise. Brown and grey prevail; a pink and turquoise ad on a bus, a blue car, a gay flag are as if swept up in a movement: its song the bus, its program a cold peace.

At a Loss

Jerl Surratt

I haven't been able to think out loud too well the last few weeks. I'm Silent Sam, a listener to nothing more than the birds in the backyard at this shadowy hour of my first glass of wine, sitting where we always sat, watching them go about the business of feeding and bathing. Once in a while one lands nearby as if stopping for breath, then speaks in the way long misconstrued as song. It's *Sprechgesang*.

I wish I'd thought of that and tried it out on you to see you knit your brow and disagree or hum, if I was lucky, your singular two-toned note of cognitive acceptance. But now I'm in that zone where many parts of everything are in the realm of *Oh, I wish*.

To watch and listen to the birds and to our neighbor next door, so pleased with it today she's talking to her garden -- this occasion without you here to maybe ignore it all and make me listen instead to something I might not necessarily want to hear about somebody I might not even know -- well, I'll just have to get used to it, that's all, and settle for not being spoken to.

Lives stall awhile after sudden absences, but I've forgotten what routines I fell into last time this happened. Then, again, I had you around. Maybe like maneuvering into the least painful way to get out of bed after days in bed, then learning all over again how to stand, how to walk and take one step, not two, for every stair it will simply come back almost before I know it -- how to, you know, just *be*, without being in mourning.

Driving Home from the Memorial

Ceridwen Hall

I've got hours to go still—and miles. The dark's swallowed the woods already, and the wind's swiped the bright leaves. I'm going 80 just to keep up with traffic. I'm trying to be careful, but the whole world feels dangerous now— full of digital abysses and roadside crosses. So I'm driving fast through Indiana, the way I've learned to walk at the void's edge; when every stillness harbors momentum, every sentence voyages out of silence or home to it. *It*, we say to block off unsafe roads in the mind. *It's been a year*. It's been a year or three of final breaths and last texts. It's been hours of lowering my hands and waiting. I've needed everything you taught me about suffering and making use of it, about flinching and weaving a line through it. And yes, I'm talking to ghosts now— it's my grief season, I guess. I sigh between fences so my brain doesn't bolt; I ring fallow bells and listen to the wind's rip, to the world's reeling. I'm haunted by things I haven't said yet, and weary, ready to be winnowed again down to one lane. But don't worry; I've got the wheel in both hands and someone is singing over the stereo— something warm and mournful. And I'm singing along to stay alive. I'm studying the road for brake flares or any landmark I recognize.

Near Hunts Point

JC Alfier

Tangent to constellations now
surfacing in the dusk there's a
square of mottled light from a
gateshack along the Bronx River,
a candle lit by a widow, and the
runaway girl, missing all these
summers, searching with a lighter
for an unlocked door down a road
that leads away from the city.

The Silent Type

Michael Brosnan

Another Sunday in another November.
Freezing rain turning to snow then rain again. I
stand on the banks of the Swampscott in the
near dark, watching a great blue heron watch
for small movements in the shallow water
ebbing now between its thin legs, drawn back
toward Great Bay and the cold gray Atlantic.

I'm struck not by the heron's elegance, its exquisite
feathery grace, but by its silence. Here in the
storm's febrile gusts and the fading light, it stands
solitary, songless, waiting with a patience that runs
on like water. It watches in silence. It feeds in
silence. It flies in silence. It settles among the reeds
and channel muck and closes its eyes in the soft grip
of silent hope.

I know it can and has and will speak out with
guttural longing — as the living do. But for now,
I admire how it just stands there amid the vast
voiceless will of the sentient world, holding
steady against the cold, against the rain, against
the tide, against the wind, against the dark that
comes from great distances to bend all.

Brown Dad Can't Give His Brother's Eulogy and I Won't Give His

Christian Hanz Lozada

As the poet in the family, I'm afraid
you will ask me to speak. I'm afraid
you think that there are artful ways to
describe passing and that I can
somehow pluck them out of the absence
we know is coming, but thankfully
organizers will see my body first and
ask me to carry the coffin because it
wears weight well— always the bearer
never the buried— until it, too, will
give out.

But I was born with my father's mouth,
the one that holds hurt hidden and well
under the tongue or inside the cheeks
like wrapped razors waiting for
necessity. I'm afraid you will ask me to
speak, and all that will come out are
words that color life in darker shades like
the sorrows and the sacrifices
reciprocated on others like blood debts
and tallies of unaddressed traumas.

Just let me carry the body because
I do not want the weight on my
tongue to be lighter and some
blades are better hidden.

Noisy on the Inside

Joan Mazza

Please no TV playing in the background while we talk over coffee, no music I know or never heard of. No talk radio at all or I'll have to leave. Understand how raucous my head is without adding to my dissonant sounds. I pay attention to our conversation, track what you say, while a part of my consciousness catches words and phrases for tomorrow's poem.

Another part of me is still bagging linens and clothing from a dead man's overstuffed house, while my inner artist plans new designs in my art studio. Don't tell me I'm too busy. Don't tell me I'm not present. I've slowed to listen to the bursts of radio waves from somewhere light years distant. Inside, I'm a multiverse of ideas and plans. So are you.

View from the Bank of the Nile

Ivan de Monbrison

هناك تكاسر بعيداً قطعة من السماء عن الفراغ. الظل مليء بالصمت. يتدفق النهر
ببطء، الأشجار، أشجار النخيل، على حدود ضفافها الجافة. هناك شيء ثقيل جداً بداخلك. قارب
صيد ينجرّف ببطء. يزور بعض السياح معبداً مدمراً، وينظر مع دليلهم، وهي كتابة قديمة
مصنوعة من الرسومات. أنت، تجلس على حافة الماء الجاري، وتتنظر انعكاسك الذي يحمله
الماء بعيداً.

There is a piece of sky breaking away from the void.

The shadow is filled with silence. The

river flows slowly, trees, palm trees,

border its dry banks.

There is something very heavy inside you.

A fishing boat is drifting away slowly.

Some tourists visit a ruined temple and see, with their guide, an ancient writing made of
drawings.

As you sit on the edge of the running water, looking at your reflection in there, as it is being
carried away.

CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

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Julie Esther Fisher's poetry and stories appear or are forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *New World Writing*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, *Bridge Eight*, *William and Mary Review*, *Other Voices*, *On the Seawall*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Radar Poetry*, *The Citron Review*, and other places. Winner of several awards, including Grand Prize Recipient of the 2022 Stories That Need to be Told Anthology, and Sunspot Lit's Rigel Award, she has twice been nominated for the Pushcart. "Death and the Maiden" was named as a finalist in the New Millennium Writing Awards. Her novella in stories, *Love is a Crooked Stick*, is about to go out on submission. A grateful recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council grant, she grew up in London and today lives amidst several hundred acres of wild conserved land in Massachusetts, where she indulges her passion for nature and gardening.

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Angelica Whitehorne is a writer living in Durham, NC with published / forthcoming work in *Fourteen Hills*, *Meetinghouse Magazine*, *JMWW*, and *Poetry South*, among others. She is the author of the chapbook, *The World Is Ending, Say Something That Will Last* (Bottle Cap Press, 2022). Besides being a devastated poet, Angelica is a Marketing Content Writer for a clean energy loan company. You can find more of her work on Instagram at a.w.ords and on her website: angelicawhitehorne.com.

POETRY

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Michael Brosnan is a poet and writer based in Exeter, New Hampshire. His most recent collection of poetry, *Emu Blis, Bums Lie, Blue-ism*, a finalist for the Wandering Aengus Book Award, was published in early 2024 by Broadstone Books. He is the author of two previous collections — *The Sovereignty of the Accidental* (2018) and *Adrift* (2023). His poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals and has won awards from various arts organizations. In 2023, he was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. He is also the author of *Against the Current*, a book on inner-city education, and writes often on issues related to education. More at www.michaelabrosnan.com.

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Joan Mazza has worked as a medical microbiologist, psychotherapist, seminar leader, and she is the author of six self-help psychology books, including *Dreaming Your Real Self* (Penguin/Putnam). Her poetry has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Slant*, *Poet Lore*, and *The Nation*. She lives in rural central Virginia.

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Frederick Pollack is the author of two book-length narrative poems, *The Adventure* (Story Line Press, 1986; reissued April 2022 by Red Hen Press) and *Happiness* (Story Line Press, 1998), and three collections, *A Poverty of Words* (Prolific Press, 2015), *Landscape with Mutant* (Smokestack Books, UK, 2018), and *The Beautiful Losses* (Better Than Starbucks Books, 2023). In print, Pollack's work has appeared in *Hudson Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Manhattan Review*, *Skidrow Penthouse*, *Main Street Rag*, *Miramar*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The Fish Anthology* (Ireland), *Poetry Quarterly Review*, *Magma* (UK), *Neon* (UK), *Orbis* (UK), *Armarolla*, *December*, and elsewhere. Online, his poems have appeared in *Big Bridge*, *Diagram*, *BlazeVox*, *Mudlark*, *Occupoetry*, *Faircloth Review*, *Triggerfish*, *Big Pond Rumours* (Canada), *Misfit*, *OffCourse*, and elsewhere. Website: www.frederickpollack.com

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Ivan de Monbrison

Ivan de Monbrison is a poet and artist born in Paris in 1969 to an Egyptian mother and a French father. He studied classical Arabic, Bengali, and Hindi at The Institute of Oriental Civilizations and Languages in Paris. He has attempted to translate part of the Diwan of the great poet Al Mutanabbi. He has published some poems in various literary venues.

Allan Lake

Allan Lake, originally from Saskatoon, Canada, has lived in Vancouver, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania, Sicily and Melbourne. His latest chapbook of poems, "My Photos of Sicily," was published by Ginninderra Press. Such journals as *The Hong Kong Review*, *The American Writers Rev*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, *The Antigoniish Review*, *New Philosopher*, and *The Fabians Review* have published his poems.

