

# MILLENNIAL PULP

2020 VOL. 1



A JOURNAL OF  
21ST CENTURY ART

MIP

MILLENNIAL PULP  
2020  
VOL. 1

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# MILLENNIAL PULP

A Journal for 21st Century Art

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# A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

Here at MP, our goal is to share art with the world, art that may otherwise clutter desk drawers and never see the light of day. Every poem, story, and artwork within these pages was painstakingly crafted with blood, sweat, and probably a few tears; and it means a lot to our artists that you took the time to check it out.

We would also like to thank our contributors, for without you there would be no magazine. Art is about taking a part of yourself and making it tangible, putting it down on paper, and soon it takes on a life of its own. It becomes something more than alive, but less than living. It becomes art, and we are beyond grateful that you decided to share a part of yourselves with us.

And finally to our staff, who deserves the most heartfelt thank you of all. When we started this venture into the literary world at the beginning of 2020, we had no idea how strange the year would be. Yet through unprecedented and unpredictable circumstances our team persevered to ensure Millennial Pulp's first issue would be the best it could be. The world needs art more than ever, and thanks to you all we get to share a little bit of beauty with the world.

Thanks for reading, we hope you enjoy!  
Isaac Russo and the MP team

Fiction by Mac Fox

# I Picked My Wife from a Flower Bed

I picked my wife from a flower bed.

She smelled lovely beyond imagination. Like sweet wine and chrysanthemums and her hair in the morning.

I think she was a daisy, perhaps a daffodil. I don't care and I've never looked it up. I was walking in a park and I saw a bed of flowers and there she was. My wife. Laying amongst the tulips and white roses and rhubarb.

I remember when we buried my wife. I remember the sallowness of her skin, skin that was creamy and soft and lovely until it wasn't. Without breath her skin sagged to a pallid grey and it was sickening to see her like that, and I cried in the bathroom for I was too scared to cry in front of the people in black.

Which is why I was so surprised, to find my wife in a flower bed.

I was careful. Even when we made love, I treated her body like priceless pottery. So when I dug her out of the ground I was not afraid of crunching her fragile petals, for I remembered how to treat her body.

I took her home on the bus, tucked in the crook of my jacket. I was worried. The jacket was new and I was worried she wouldn't know it was me. It was silly, but people are prone to silliness when they find their wife in a flower bed.

I took her home and placed her in a vase filled with water. Teal and swirled in an hourglass shape. Before she was gray in a box, it was her favorite.

I did not sleep. We talked all night. I'm ashamed to admit that I did most of the talking but there was so much to tell her. So much had happened since that last day in the hospital, with the tubes and the needles and those horrible gowns. Horrible because they revealed enough of her skin to

make me lust for her, even with the tubes and the needles.

I didn't sleep the next night, but I did the day after. On the third day, when I woke, I saw a flower petal turn a gentle brown. "Another bruise, my love." I said it out of habit. Years of her illness made her flesh bruise like old fruit and I was used to pointing it out.

The next day, another brown petal. More the next day. And the next.

On Monday, a petal fell. And I knew how this ended, because I'd done it before.

So I did what I did before.

I pulled up a chair and spoke to her softly. And I watched my wife wither and die. For the second time.

# Poetry by Daniel Mark Patterson

## Across the Universe

So upon reflection,  
in my quest for gratitude  
I would like to thank poverty  
for consistently having my back,  
keeping my addictions in check.

Those nights when a never ending  
gutter stupor seemed preferable  
to sober nights alone.  
When Mr. Jack Daniels  
seemed like the kindest lover  
a lonely poet ever had,  
and Edgar Allan Poe's ghost  
the most soulful drinking partner.  
When I am pulled out of this need  
for indulgence by the realization  
that an alcoholic's lifestyle  
is way out of my price range.

That dear Edgar's ghost  
was far more of an aristocrat,  
a jetsetter, than poor poet I.  
This epiphany is both galling and hilarious.  
Most days I don't regret my choices.  
Freedom is a rich person's currency,  
and just ask Judas Iscariot  
pining away in Hell,  
how many bags of silver was it worth  
not to have sold my artistic soul to capitalism?  
Although then at least I could afford  
cheap beer to drown my sorrows

about an empty bed,  
and trading quips with a legendary  
gutterite's ghost is its own reward.

Usually though I would take who I am,  
insecurities and all.

Grateful for these words,  
this great spongy hug of syllables  
to wrap my existence in.

I am lucky enough to narrate my own life,  
no frills and gimmick free.

So let the cool kids have their gutter,  
their alcoholic, jetsetter, socialite free-for-all.

Just give me the language  
to chronicle this night,  
this throbbing, endless yearning,  
amidst this ocean of stars.

So thankful for the ability to write this poem,  
to tell others I was here, tiny, alone, but I loved,  
believed in beauty, in more than myself.

When the Starpeople  
come . . . my cosmic soulmate  
will recognize me by the journal  
buried in my coffin.  
Papyrus cracked and yellow,  
beside my crumpled sack of bones.  
She'll find a love poem,  
which only she can appreciate,  
pour herself a glass of wine,  
curl up to smiling dreams of DeLoreans,  
the number 88,  
and misfit lovers  
years and worlds apart.

Fiction by Ed Teja

# But the Parrot Escaped

Marla woke up to a gray, drizzly, northwestern morning.

She worked for herself, which could be a good thing, but her work was running a business that her father left to her. Although it's successful and a well-intended legacy, it felt thrust upon her – an onerous thing.

The picture on the wall encapsulated the reason. It is of her with Marty. Even now, at times she ached for him.

Marty and Marla . . . the well-matched couple with almost matching names. The loving couple, so corny in their affection that all their friends delighted in teasing them. They didn't mind. They had each other.

And they had a plan. Marty interned for her father before he enlisted. When he got out of the Army, her father would retire. They would run the company. It was a dream that would sustain them forever.

Father doted on Marty . . . nearly as much as she did, and called him the son he never had. Then a faceless person in a nameless stretch of desert ruined the dream. Marty wasn't coming home.

Reluctantly, she walked in the steps they'd planned, taking over the business, trying to keep alive the dream that ended before it began. Through endless classes, she tried to learn to be a businessperson. But it was hollow without her soldier coming home from the war.

Somehow, Marla had lost herself. Marty was to be there forever, but he wasn't. So, who was she?

A few advised her to follow her bliss, but even that seemed impossible. Anything she could imagine as bliss was far away, lost in a vast alien land.

When she dressed, putting on her business clothes

each morning, Marla found it necessary to put on a business attitude. She assumed an alter ego who was prepared to do tasks that she would rather not do. It numbed her.

Most of those ordinary Monday-through-Friday mornings began with an apparent reality fix. By this, she meant a fix on apparent reality, rather than an apparent fix on reality.

Marla did this by listening to, half watching the morning news reports as she dressed and ate breakfast. The breaking morning news focused her on what “they” see as important. She could start her business day as informed of the world’s activities as the media allowed.

She began a typical day with her head buzzing with the details of recent disasters that were natural, man-made and governmental (sub-human). Sometimes she was lucky and there was little news at all, and the liveliest thing to mull over was a traffic report and a new and irrational boom in stocks. These were informative, and happily, outside her control.

This particular morning, the most interesting item, the only interesting item, concerned the puzzling escape of a parrot from the zoo. None of the experts interviewed admitted to being able to imagine how a simple parrot, a common, green mealy parrot or, to be unnecessarily precise, a small and unspectacular example of *Amazona farinosa*, had somehow managed to slip out of its incredibly modern habitat. The use of the descriptive word “modern” apparently implied the concept of “secure,” although who it is secure for was not mentioned.

None of the interviewed experts could imagine how it escaped. Of course, these experts were known for their ability to produce instant information and offer meticulous and exact references to the physical world; they were not known for any sort of useful imagining. So, perhaps this shortfall wouldn’t be so surprising to those of us with active imaginations.

Courtesy of the media’s experts, she learned that the

design and construction of the birdhouse, itself a remarkable feat that combined the best architectural engineering with heartfelt compassion for animals, took the possibility of escape into account. “We have incorporated numerous precautionary measures to prevent just such things from happening,” the director of the bird sanctuary said.

The implication of his statement was that these measures would prevent escapes, but undoubtedly, they also meant preventing a myriad of embarrassing things from happening – such as being outsmarted by a green mealy parrot.

That meant, in breaking out and making an escape, this parrot first had to get out of a wired-in secure enclosure, then it had to get out of the building. Neither was a mean feat.

The experts immediately discounted any notion that the parrot had managed to steal and use an employee’s keycard (all were accounted for), and it seemed unlikely it had any outside help. This wasn’t like the recent jailbreak where inmates were assisted by the girlfriend of a guard.

“You could buy a parrot for a few hundred bucks,” the chief of police pointed out. “Stealing one is a felony.”

No, clearly the parrot acted alone.

The fate of the parrot was less newsworthy than the puzzle.

Despite these incredibly thorough, state-of-the-art, and completely adequate precautions, the fact remained that on this drizzly morning the zoo was suddenly short one parrot (*Amazona farinosa*); and the city had gained one homeless and undoubtedly unhappy immigrant.

The most puzzling aspect of it all, to the experts and news reporters, if not to the parrot, was the why. Why had the parrot escaped?

Everyone understood the basic desire to escape captivity, and it resonated with Marla, which was why she found herself in rapt attention. The puzzle, as ineloquently explained by the endless stream of commentators, referred to

the fact that this tropical bird, indigenous to a range of warm South American jungles, could hardly have been lured out of its nicely heated habitat by the nasty Pacific Northwest weather outside – weather which even the most optimistic and booster-oriented meteorologist refused to call simply “inclement.”

This external nastiness, in the face of the zoo’s perfectly climate-controlled tropical environment, which was specifically suited to the bird (the experts agreed on this), should have deterred any escape attempt by itself.

“This morning the experts are puzzled,” explained the smiling reporter. Needing to fill time, but clearly ill-prepared to extemporize on escaping parrots and their motives, she resorted to commenting on the bafflement of officialdom.

As Marla watched the anchor struggle to find a new way to say “puzzling escape” (having tried labeling it perplexing, befuddling, and inexplicable), Marla knew it was time to leave her own appropriately suited habitat. She needed to finish her coffee and go to work.

In the meantime, the weather experts re-emphasized their point, and would again after a lengthy commercial interruption – the point that the weather was inclement and hardly an attraction for a parrot, even a rather stupid parrot. Which, apparently, this one was not. After all, it was clever enough to escape.

A camera panned to a man who worked with the birds. “They mate for life,” he said, meaning the parrots and not the experts. “I guess he’s out looking for his mate.”

That, of course, was reductive, simplistic, and anthropomorphized parrots to an irrational level. Therefore, it didn’t solve the puzzle. And the worker simply studied and fed the birds. He wasn’t an expert.

Nonetheless, the words echoed in her heart. Without intending to, Marla leaned toward the television and whispered: “Fly bird, fly!”

In an effort to sound knowledgeable, at least as knowl-

edgeable as the animal experts, the station's meteorologist pointed out that the current (cold) wind was a katabatic, or gravity wind. After trotting out this very scientific term, katabatic, she explained that it meant only that contact with the glacial top of the nearby mountain cooled the air. As it cooled, it became increasingly dense, increasingly heavy. Ultimately, gravity, which constantly pulled at it, as gravity is known to do, dragged it, presumably unwillingly, down the slopes and across the city.

Eventually, this cool air collided with warm air that came in from the sea. During this collision the glacial air would draw the heat from the moist warm air, driving it down to its dew point. This was what produced the inescapable and interminable drizzle the area was known for.

As different as they were, the cold wind and the cold rain formed a geographic and meteorological partnership. They met over the coast and divided the empire of the Pacific Northwest between them.

For Marla, knowing why it came down incessantly, knowing the reason the rain would continue day after day, proved interesting. But it did not make it any easier to deal with.

As she rinsed her coffee cup in the sink, a roundtable of experts offered the shared lofty opinion that the north-western weather outside was not perfectly suited to the tropical bird.

“Duh,” came Marla’s involuntary response. Of course not, and the same could be said for Marla. The weather didn’t suit or please her. That, she felt, gave her a kinship, a kind of bond with the fugitive bird.

This awareness, as she left her apartment and walked to her car, made the rain that chilled her face feel even colder; the wind drove that insufferable cold rain into her bones, penetrating her clothes, her skin, and tissue as if they were not there.

She slid inside her car, damp and miserable.

“And I’m not even a parrot,” she said, unsure what that meant in the scheme of things.

The image of the white smile the news anchor had flashed as she said that the parrot’s escape was a puzzle came into her head and she laughed.

It was no puzzle to Marla. If she’d been with the panel of experts, maybe she could have said that it was because he couldn’t stand the relentlessness of his existence without his chosen mate. He needed more. He wanted to return to her, and his dream.

An unfamiliarity caught her attention. Looking at the signs that whizzed past, she saw that she wasn’t driving to her office. So, where was she going?

She’d intended to take her usual, direct route to the office. There were things to do. The accounts were a mess and taxes had to be sorted out, if not paid.

“Maybe I’m escaping,” she said.

That sounded right. But to what? Marty wasn’t waiting for her. He hadn’t deserted her, but he was gone. The grey sky overhead didn’t encourage flight and she had responsibilities. People depended on her.

She could, of course, look for the parrot. She could join the throng of volunteers reportedly looking to rescue him. But could you rescue someone, even a parrot, from freedom?

Perhaps she could, but she wouldn’t.

Reluctantly, she exited the freeway and found her way through a maze of overpasses. She managed to retrace her steps, this time taking the offramp that would take her to her office, her reserved parking spot, her waiting day planner of important things to do.

It was what people did.

With those thoughts, she blinked her blue eyes to get out the tears.

In the shelter of a large and ugly government building, up under eaves beloved only by those architects who specialize in ugly public works, a disgusted and unhappy green parrot shook icy water from his wings and tucked himself out of the chilling reach of the wind.

The sky had been a constant grey since he had gotten free. Without the sun he couldn't orient himself properly. Moving with the sun had always worked before, keeping it to the left when he went to forage for food in the morning and the same when he returned home in the evening. But something, perhaps everything, was wrong with this place.

Where had all the fruit trees gone? Why was it so cold?

Clearly, he was too far north, or perhaps too far south. Whichever it was, this wasn't home. The equator had to be a long way away from here. That meant that his tree, their tree, was a long way from wherever he was now.

Not knowing what had happened to him, she would stay by the tree, their tree, waiting for him. He knew she would, just as he would wait for her. If she had escaped the nets that had snared him and the creatures that brought him here, then she would be in the tree every evening. She would come home after raiding the fruit trees all day; she'd wait, wondering where he had gone. This was not trust in her as much as knowledge of his own kind.

It was what parrots did.

With these thoughts, he blinked his large yellow eyes. The next day, perhaps it would be warmer. Regardless, he would fly south and keep flying south until he found the fruit trees and his mate.

With that resolution, he tucked his head under his wing.

Sometimes parrots do that when they sleep. And sometimes, although it's just a story and you shouldn't put much faith in it, they do that when they don't want to be seen crying.

In the next room, her assistant was running the copier and filing papers. Things were getting done. Marla reluctantly but determinedly thrust her thoughts back on the accounts, but the numbers were blurs on the page. When she brought them into focus, they meant nothing at all.

If Marty was here, he'd be doing this, and she would help him. It would be wonderful to do together. Sometimes it seemed that she kept doing it in the vain, deluded hope that by keeping on, one day he would walk through the door. That would be her reward.

After a time, she sat back in her chair and turned away from the door, with an open book in her lap and a pencil in her hand. Tomorrow she would face up to getting the accounting work done. She'd force the numbers to come into focus. She'd keep the business going, make it strong. She'd keep doing it until the door opened and warm desert mistral wind blew him back to her.

With that resolution, she closed her eyes and let the steady hum of the copier blot out her thoughts.

Sometimes people do that to get important work done. And sometimes, although it's just a story and you shouldn't put much faith in it, they do that when they don't want to be seen crying.

# ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

# IN CEMENTO VERITAS

A COLLECTION BY  
**MARIO LOPRETE**

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mario lives in a world that he shapes to his liking, through a virtual, pictorial, and sculptural movement. This new series of works on concrete was born from an investigation into his own work, a search for the “quid” that he thought was missing.

Artwork by Mario Loprete  
**Raige & Zonta**



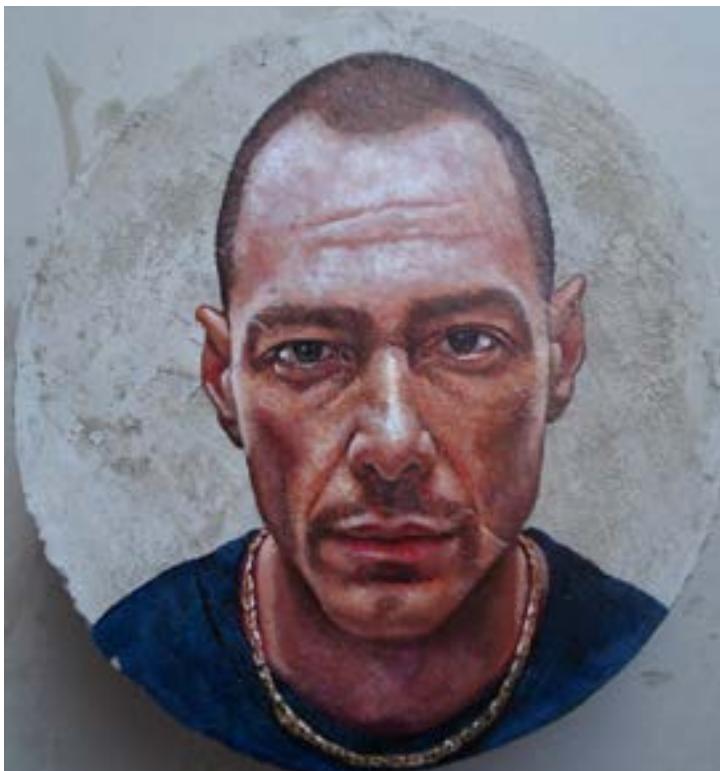
*Oil on Concrete*  
18 cm x 25 cm

Artwork by Mario Loprete  
**b-boy**



*Oil on Concrete*  
60 cm x 90 cm

Artwork by Mario Loprete  
**Fabri Fibra**



*Oil on Concrete  
25 cm diameter*

# Nonfiction by Gregory Stephens Letting Go of America

Let us imagine “America” as the boulder that Sisyphus is condemned to perpetually push up the hill. The rock comes crashing down, then Sisyphus must shoulder the stone and start over. But what I want to imagine can be described as – *how to get out from under the rock*. Let’s re-imagine this dilemma through myth and literature, especially via writers in exile.

In “The Recursive Solution to the Sisyphus Problem,” Manfred Kopfer pictures a strategy for getting out from under the rock. Every time Sisyphus reaches the top, he breaks off a stone and carries it back down. Over time, the mount is levelled; the boulder cannot roll back down. This is the “politics of refusal,” projected long-term.<sup>1</sup> I’m going to narrate my own process of “breaking off a piece of the rock,” bit by bit over the years, and how the view of “America” changes once the summit is no longer an obstruction.

Sisyphus was a notorious thief, murderer, and rapist. Sound familiar? “Them graduating thieves and murderers,” Bob Marley sang in his “Babylon System” allegory. As a writer in exile, I hear in Sisyphus, or Marley’s allusions, a description of the contemporary United States, a declining empire of professional liars and con artists. *If the cap fits, let them wear it.*

Exceedingly crafty, Sisyphus was, and he thought he could outwit the gods. He really pulled a fast one, at times. He even managed to lock Death up in his house. Disease-ridden, mangled bodies wandered the earth, begging for release. If no one dies, things get dicey for those in charge of killing, or making money off the death industry. The war god Ares, royally pissed, liberated Death and delivered Sisyphus

1). Manfred Kopfer, *The Philosophy of Recursive Thinking*. BookRix, 2018. ISBN 978-3-7438-7149-6. From a section of Chapter 6, “The Recursive Solution to the Sisyphus Problem.” Refusal: see Laurent Dubreuil (2016); Carole McGranahan (2016; 2018).

to Hades. The old King of Corinth still had a few tricks up his sleeve, but in the end, there was only one script. Put your shoulder to the boulder.

Sisyphus was punished for his self-aggrandizing craftiness and deceitfulness. In my re-imagining, the American "Sisyphus" is condemned for confusing patriotism with monotheism: The "Chosen Nation" of democracy, "the city set on a hill," a light to all mankind, etc. A colossal hubris fit for an oversized punishment, to be sure.

Albert Camus said that we must imagine Sisyphus as happy.<sup>2</sup> Counter-intuitive at first, but a man eternally shoving boulders is going to be ripped. We know Sisyphus as a defiant sort, so he lifts those massive jugs skyward and bellows to Zeus:

“So you thought you could destroy me!? I’m still here.”

What doesn’t kill me makes me stronger – a proverb as a repeating cliché on the radio can become a punishment to be endured. If America is the boulder, then those pushing that myth up the mount, are they getting stronger? Happier? And who is doing the pushing? Those who have swallowed the delusion that “America” is something that can be taken back, I would say.

Camus, a French citizen reared in Algeria, used myth to acquire critical distance from France as a shrinking empire. My exile has a different trajectory: four years in Jamaica, a year in Saudi Arabia, and six in Puerto Rico. “America” has become an international embarrassment, from the outside looking in. Few are happy about this state of affairs. I think of emotional states like bewilderment, contempt, and flat out weariness. The dramas of the North Americans are tiring. Can we change the channel? Get out from under that burden?

\*\*\*

The image in the Society of the Spectacle mirror is brutally dystopian, yet we cannot avert our eyes. Somehow

2). Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1942) *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom and Selected Essays* (1975): 489-605.

we creep closer to a realization long in coming: the notion of “taking back America” has always been delusional. The American empire has gone off the rails. There are sequels waiting to be written, but what new language could call this spectacle by its true name?

Having lived outside the United States for eleven years now, I’ve learned not to get swept away in one of the nation’s “periods of historical madness,” in John Le Carré’s words.<sup>3</sup> Now the tenor of our madness runs through several stages in every 24-hour cycle. We play changes on the rages, and sing or speak in chorus. It’s part of the script. “We’ve got to fulfill the book,” it seems. But what would happen if we turned away?

The American Sisyphus may seem unmoving, when one feels compelled to push back. But there are other options. I’ve been taking notes over four decades. As with an archeological dig, I want to look in the rear-view mirror; seeing the pattern in a few moments when I carried down a stone from the heights, refused to push the boulder of national mainstream politics, and began to get a clearer picture of alternative forms of citizenship, and political identity.

### (December 2017)

When did you first realize that national politics was a dead end? When did you begin to withdraw support, to tune out political rhetoric, and to tune in to alternatives that can nourish what you hold dear? When did you begin to root against America, in the sense of the bloated, bullying, bragging empire in decline, and to throw your support elsewhere?

The American rock keeps tumbling down. Stay clear! J.M. Coetzee provides a comparative vantage when he observes that “the crudity of life in South Africa” produces a “stuntedness and deformity.” He imagines “shaking the dust of the country off your feet.”<sup>4</sup> Thinking allegorically, then

3). John le Carré, “The United States of America Has Gone Mad,” *The London Times* (January 15, 2003).

4). J.M. Coetzee, “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech (1987),” in J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews* (Harvard UP, 1992): 96-99.

“letting go” while in physical exile has been my similar trajectory. Contemplating the deformity of U.S. political culture, I also sought to shake off a national dust that seemed to invade every pore, and to stunt one’s imagination.

I’ve turned to voices from the borderlands to gain perspective on letting go of America. In “The Writer in Exile,” José Luis González, born to a Dominican mother and a Puerto Rican father, reflects on how he attained critical distance from stale rehashings of the U.S.-Puerto Rico relationship. González is one of many writers in exile who have attempted to articulate and live out an alternative to the North American model, in what José Martí called “our America.”

Ramón Soto-Crespo, part of the Puerto Rican diaspora, has argued that Puerto Rico is an “anomalous borderland” which is non-national by design. It offers reference points for what it might mean to live outside the belly of the beast, without either being assimilated into the fading empire, nor engaging in a quixotic quest for anti-American independence.

While in Mexico, Puerto Rican students asked González about their identity and political destiny. Answering such questions would require “the re-examination of the national condition from the foundations up,” he responded (131). One might aspire to undertake such a project with an island non-nation of 3 million (plus 5.5 million sons and daughters living in the U.S.). But one can hardly undertake a foundational re-examination of an empire of 330+ million people, which in political and cultural terms is in precipitous decline. However, from a sufficient distance one can connect the dots enough for a picture to emerge.

About seeing things whole from a distance, González wrote:

... the writer who from exile and favored by distance learns to contemplate the forest of such a national condition stumbles inevitably [once back “home”] over the concern with individual trees that preoccupies so many of his contemporaries. (131)

Is it really possible to see “the United States of America” whole, other than perhaps through major spectacles such as the Super Bowl, or invasions of other nations who have become our public enemies, or “the dream life of the culture” in advertising?

Why invest in resisting a bloated imperial governance which cannot be changed? The Puerto Rican ambiguity towards the U.S. gives me space within which to analyze my impulse to let go of America. During the 2017 upheavals (loss of fiscal sovereignty, a two-month student strike, Hurricane Maria), Juan Antonio Ramos wrote allegorically about “sacrificing the homeland” as the “lesser of two evils,” by means of cutting off a limb (such as in the film *127 hours*). What might Americans have to cut off to survive? For my part, I have shed some of the armor required to deflect the noise of the bloody circus which issues from an empire in terminal decline.

**(December 2016)**

During the 2016 elections, my aging parents, conservative Christian Republicans, told me that for the first time, they would not vote for a presidential candidate. Dismayed by what the United States had become, they were practicing a politics of refusal. I heard outgoing politicians declare: “I still believe in America!” What else is a politician supposed to say? But you and I, do we still believe in *that* America? Do we still pledge allegiance, and pretend that we have not seen and heard what our eyes and ears have conveyed to us, repeatedly?

Is the American political system such a sacred cow that we cannot see the downward spiral of its pathology? If and when we do see, and seek to avoid those maddening repetitions, then what? Do we act like Plato’s escaped prisoner, who returns to “enlighten” those in the cave who still think that the shadow play is reality, and will do violence to anyone who suggests there is a better way?

My mother, who turns 90 during the 2020 election, has become a self-declared independent. Imagine an army of her demographic breaking off stones from the mountain. Repub-

licans and Christians thinking historically, acting ethically – that would be an earthquake producing another version of “faith has the power to move mountains.”

### (Remembering November 1980)

I remember one pivot point when I walked away from the American political system. As a twenty five year old on election night in 1980, I posted flyers for Citizens Party candidates Barry Commoner and LaDonna Harris in Albuquerque. I recall standing at the door of a cafe on Central Avenue, across from the University of New Mexico, with a fistful of flyers in one hand, cellophane tape in the other. I had been participating in Citizens Party rallies, and hanging out with Harris, a citizen of the Comanche Nation who then lived in Albuquerque. An environmentalist scholar and a Native American at the top of the ticket! They got all of 200,000 votes . . .

My isolation was not fully visible then, but I knew what the election of Reagan meant. Months out of undergraduate days in Tucson, I was refusing to go along with the tide. I was not exactly trying to break a stone off the monolith, but I was refusing to support two-party dysfunction. Proportional representation was the only way in which I could imagine meaningful participation in national politics.

Voting for my conscience led to a life on the margins of the American empire, or at least the spectacle to which Ang Lee holds up a mirror in *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. The “Reagan Revolution” led me to a declaration of independence. National political rhetoric became an anti-model. Eventually I found cultural expressions of “true democracy” in the “redeemable ideals” of Frederick Douglass, or Bob Marley’s Bible-based *Song of Freedom*. After the Gulf War, I put in words my conviction, incipient since 1980, that the best way to be a good American was to “let go of America.”

The America I had determined to release was not the one I lived in. The communities in which I lived and worked from the mid-1970s on were multi-ethnic, and rich in different

cultural expressions. I came to call that imagined community “the communicative culture of multiracial audiences.” To paraphrase Nelson Mandela, I am a “disciplined member” of the people-in-the-middle, those who live between languages, nations, cultures, and faiths. But we who have outgrown blind patriotism have little purchase in American politics. Who speaks for us?

## Rooting Against the Home Team

I came of age in the desert Southwest. I felt a kinship with Native Americans, and the Spanish-speaking south. This sense of coming from a multi-ethnic and multilingual borderland shaped my worldview long before academic life. It also gave me a sense of distance from the spectacles of Washington, D.C. Inspired by books like *Diet for a Small Planet* and *Small is Beautiful*, I researched size limits to actual democracy. Plato put it at about 5,000 citizens.<sup>5</sup> This notion that scale mattered, and that bigger was seldom better, shaped my preferences in music, literature, diet, transport, and political engagement.

The Reagan era spurred me to dissent in writing and music. I was out of the mainstream, yet this stream was a counter-current with worldwide reach. When I won the Austin Music Umbrella’s songwriter competition in 1984, with “USASA (U.S.A. South Africa),” I was part of an international movement – songs like “Free Nelson Mandela” that shaped the attitudes of a generation. These sort of affinities were at the core of my “political consciousness,” more than whatever political rhetoric was coming out of the capital.

Traveling to Jamaica in 1987 and 1988 reshaped the way I thought about the relationship between culture and politics. I heard Bunny Wailer describe the Rastafarian attitude towards politics as a “revolution by rejection.” I had long begun letting go of the notion that meaningful change

5). Robert Dahl and Edward Tufte, *Size and Democracy* (Stanford UP, 1973): 2-5. “Aristotle... maintained that all the citizens should be able to assemble at one place and still hear a speaker. Thus the range of the unamplified voice set a limit” (5). Dennis Mueller, *Constitutional Democracy* (Oxford UP, 1996): 97-98; Victor Ehrenberg, “Origins of Democracy,” *Historia I* (1950): 515-48; *The Greek State* (London: Methuen, 1969), 32, 53.

could occur in national politics. I cut my teeth reading “outsider” commentary such as the Native American newspaper *Akwesasne Notes*. The voices to which I was attuned pitched their rhetoric toward tribes, or de-centered cultural communities, rather than abstract political publics.

In September 1978, what impressed me most at the University of Arizona was my class with Vine Deloria Jr., author of *Custer Died for your Sins*. “He’s somewhat of a spokesman for Indians – has written a number of books which I really respect,” I wrote to my mother, as a 23-year-old. Blunt criticism of “white attitudes” that I heard from Deloria and Malcolm X never offended me. In 1984 I interviewed Mutabaruka, when “It no good to live in the white-man country too long” was something of an anthem. The pronouncements of Malcolm, Deloria and Muta rang true, but they did not describe the community I lived in, or my structure of feeling. They spoke to the *other* America.

Moving to the San Francisco Bay area, I studied multiracial audiences. After a Master’s on interracial dialogue in rap music, I sought historical grounding. Analyzing Frederick Douglass’ abolitionist rhetoric, I defined “Antagonistic Cooperation” and “Redeemable Ideals” as the cornerstones of effective interracial communication. That may have been a mainstream of how millions of people lived, but it also led me further towards the political margins.

I remember watching the “Dream Team” practice at the University of California, San Diego in 1992. How could one root for a team that beat its opponents by an average of 44 points? A tendency to root against the Americans in the Olympics, begun during the Reagan regime, became second nature. I gained a comparative view from a Welsh woman in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, who was rooting for the Irish against the British in the Olympics. “The British came here and they never went away,” she told me. “We don’t like them very much.” That was similar to how I felt, as a Southwesterner, about the “official,” Washington, D.C. version of America.

But the binaries of American rhetoric fell apart, on

closer inspection. Northern California has voted to secede from Southern California several times. Texas has the right to split into five different states. Living in Oregon in 1978, I read *Ecotopia*, wherein Northern California, Oregon and Washington secede from the U.S. to form a sustainable “steady state.” These things all made sense. The Pacific Northwest really was a different country. Both Texas and the rest of the U.S. would be happier if the Lone Star State would go its own way. Such a splintering, from my perspective as a Southwesterner, was both inevitable, and desirable. “The center will not hold.”

I carried some stones back from the Pacific Northwest, added them to the pile I had gathered in the desert Southwest. I increasingly realized that the structure I was trying to assemble was located in the Americas, a continent and a hemisphere in which a majority spoke Spanish. Just knowing that language opened up other vistas. The American Sisyphus retreated to a corner of my horizon.

### **Shaking the Dust Off my Feet**

In 2000 I moved from California to my birth state, Oklahoma. I went through a divorce, gained custody of my children, and bought a house in a Mexican neighborhood of Oklahoma City, where I worked as a bilingual teacher. From this vantage, I got an earful of the worst of American political rhetoric, during the build-up to and aftermath of the invasion of Iraq.

In “Heartland Morality, American Politics,” I described a visit to my parents’ house in Texas for Thanksgiving 2001. “My childhood friend Mac joined us at the table. He offered a prayer thanking God for giving us strong leaders like Donald Rumsfeld during this crisis.” This led to the following realization about some incommensurable differences:

My brother-in-law David, chair of a Texas Communication department, was talking with me about the state of public education. I said if people were given the choice, they would spend billions on educat-

ing their children, rather than invading Iraq. “That depends on whether they listen to Rush Limbaugh or Tom Brokaw,” David said. As a Christian fundamentalist, he saw ABC and NBC as examples of “liberal bias.” In the midst of the competitive flag waving on the networks, I asked David who he viewed as a reliable source of information. “Sometimes more communication is not better,” he responded.

I walked amongst these heartland folks, my people.

I cut my hair in the local barbershop, listened to the red state talk, saw the bake sales for troops, the burning of Dixie Chicks CDs. I had known in my bones, since election day in 1980, that this was coming.

In May 2004, I published a column titled “Letting Go of America.” Three months later, I relocated with my children to Kingston, Jamaica. I spent the second Bush term teaching film and literature at the University of the West Indies. My Jamaican colleagues watched CNN, but I tuned out political news for four years. More stones carried down the south side of the mount.

When I re-entered the U.S. in 2008, it was with a Caribbean bride. It was an education to explain American politics to a newcomer, as Obama moved towards election, and then became an object of an “eight-year hate” on the American right. What I heard in Florida from 2010 to 2014 was much like what I had heard in Oklahoma.

Unable to secure a job in that America, I taught English in Saudi Arabia from 2013 to 2014. Seeing “freedom” through the eyes of Middle Eastern students, or administrators who tried to shield them from Western ideas, made me feel patriotic in previously unsuspected ways.<sup>6</sup> But it was the hemispheric America, not the continental United States, which offered me a foothold.

I relocated from Riyadh to Puerto Rico, where I accepted an English professor position, and was reunited with

6). Gregory Stephens, “Split-Screen Freedom,” *Writing on the Edge* (Fall 2017); “Digital Liminality and Cross-Cultural Re-integration in the Middle East,” *CEA Forum* (Spring 2016).

my Caribbean bride and daughter. From this perch, I was close enough to listen keenly, but far enough to not get swept away.

I would never describe myself as anti-American. Having an affiliation with the Americas makes it impossible to be anti-American. Moreover, my classes are full of strands from the North American experience in which I take pride. So letting go of America is the rejection of a narrow version of American identity, balanced by an embrace of strands of the American experience which one feels have value, or are redeemable.

I like Jason Brennan's witty arguments in *Against Democracy*. Caleb Crain's summary of research about why American politics is dysfunctional in "The Case Against Democracy" is a good read. However, Americans only seem to imagine solutions within politics – such as turning politics over to the experts. It's "take back America" redux. No one seems to be grappling with the issue of scale: 330 million is not a nation, but an empire.<sup>7</sup>

Let's widen the lens. In *The Refusal of Politics*, Laurent Dubreuil writes that a "disdain for official politics" is "widely shared throughout the world." That is true of all my students. Yet even so, "how difficult it is to see clearly the amplitude of this refusal." Rather than "clinging to the vain belief that all the ills of politics could have a political solution," we should begin imagining "a non-political elsewhere."<sup>8</sup> How might we imagine where that elsewhere is, and how could we recognize it, while perpetually pushing ideological boulders up the mountain?

I'm all for direct democracy, shorn of political romanticism.<sup>9</sup> For those who want to imagine an alternative to the Sisyphean labor of "taking back America," proportional representation would be a necessary starting point to creating a level playing field (carrying more stones down from the peak). Seeing something new, including a shared refusal of politics,

7). Ilya Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter* (Stanford UP, 2013).

8). Laurent Dubreuil, *Refusal of Politics* (Edinburgh UP, 2016): 1-4.

9). Richard Pildes, "Romanticizing Democracy, Political Fragmentation, and the Decline of American Government," *The Yale Law Journal* 124:804 (2014).

may require us to walk by faith, not by sight. Like citizens in China Miéville's allegory *The City & The City*, we may have to learn to unsee our political others, in order to reclaim decency, dignity, and local or regional autonomy.

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When I visit family in West Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, I see that ordinary people are united by their loathing of politics. Like my students in Puerto Rico, they are in the midst of an exodus, largely refusing to contemplate political solutions to their problems or challenges. Most folk I encounter avoid discussing politics like the plague. People feel it in their bones: politricks is a scam. This is a healthy response, which should be pursued "more rapidly and systematically," as Thoreau advocated. Because when it comes to American governance, "government is best which governs not at all."

Getting out from under the rock may be difficult to imagine, but it is not that hard to practice. It starts with withdrawal, and becomes a new habit through acquiring new sources of information. We may be "irrevocably born into such relationships" as national citizenship or religious affiliation.<sup>10</sup> But there is no natural or written law that requires us to act like lemmings. We can tune out scripts that lead to illness or madness. Speaking personally, it has been liberating to live without American political news for the past two decades. If I want to get a TV glimpse of what's going on in the world, I can always tune in to Al Jazeera.

Pieces of the rest of the planet have long been carried into America, and America re-assembles these pieces and ships them back out. The notion of America as a grail that can be saved is a psycho-historical impediment. If we let go of the delusion that America can be "taken back," or that it even constitutes a unity, then we can begin to get out from underneath that enormous weight.

10). Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford UP, 2010): 114.

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# Poetry by Kayla Floyd

## A Second Meaning

An arbor of Wisteria on a sacred day  
A Daffodil handed to a lover  
Bouquets of Dahlias at a jilted lover's door  
Hydrangea bushes a convenient cover for an illicit dalliance  
Monkshood crushed into a morning coffee  
A Rose dripping with dew  
Chrysanthemum petals crushed under foot  
Sunflowers shaded against a blue sky  
Bells of Ireland found amongst weeds  
An Iris beckoning strangers to pluck her  
The scent of Lilac soured among ashes  
The Amaryllis laid before a tomb  
A Poppy seed ground and inhaled  
Shackles of Hellebore upon a maiden's wrist

Artwork by Oksana Reznik  
**Buddha's Dream**



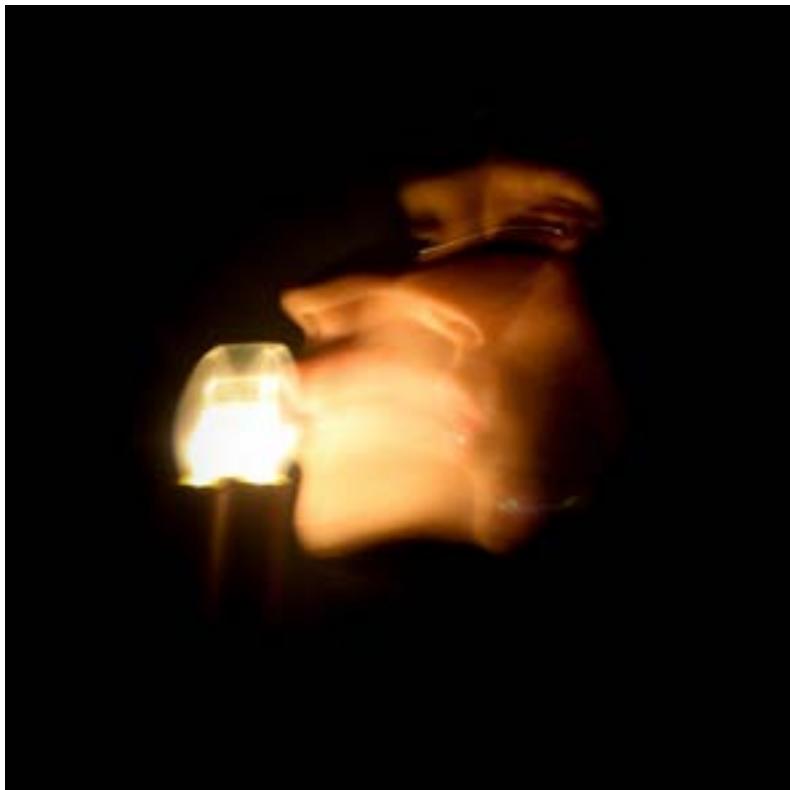
*Oil on Canvas*  
80 cm x 50 cm

Artwork by Carter Shimp  
**Boy, Inside**



*Photography*

Artwork by John Sexton  
**A Poet's Precipice**



*Photography*  
18 in x 18 in

Artwork by Britnie Walston  
**The Power of Vision**



*Oil on Canvas  
24 in x 30 in*

Fiction by Alex Clark-McGlenn

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Poetry by Suzanne Verrall  
**The Finger**

last night's fire in the shrike's  
nest took out two whole limbs  
of the peppercorn tree  
and was well on its way  
to the tool shed roof  
when the rain  
put it out

this morning there is  
no sign of the shrikes  
with no enemies  
that anyone knew of  
perhaps it was an electrical fault  
smoking in bed  
or an act of god

a forgotten god sitting  
on his throne in Valhalla  
looking down at the earth  
and pointing a lightning bolt finger  
at the little winged mortals  
crying *look at me*  
*look at me*

# Fiction by Angus McLinn

## Run, Hide, Fight

The muffled pops were more subdued than the distant gunshots I'd heard up in the land of birch and pine as a kid back home with the old man, but they had the same kinetic intention as they reverberated up from the floor below us through the halls of the humanities building. I set down the squeaky dry erase marker on the lip of the white board and walked over to lock the classroom door as the students' cell phones collectively howled out the syncopated klaxon of the campus alert system. The first few shots hadn't jolted my students out of our discussion of criminogenic conditions, but the alarms and then the strange and terrifying noises that started to echo through the halls shortly after did.

"Amber Alert," Front Row Zahira reassured herself and the students next to her. I let it slide. They'd read it soon enough, either out of morbid curiosity or because it was interrupting whatever the hell it was they all liked to do on their phones instead of listen to me. I didn't bother to check mine. I already knew the instructions.

I'd never put much stock in plan A, where we all just ran out of here and everything turned out fine. Not since that kid who wrote the alarming short stories padlocked the doors shut before committing that butchery at Virginia Tech back in '07. I pressed my face against the wire glass window embedded in the door and looked out into the hallway. Humanities had a sort of 1970s housing project aesthetic going on – long, red brick corridors that were evocative of the backdrop for a standup comic or a firing squad in a documentary about POW camps. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary outside up until a waveform ripple of panic shot from my neck bones up into the back of my skull as I caught sight of some movement coming from the stairwells. I had just enough time to think how stupid I had to be to peek out the window in a situation

like this, given that we all knew how the library scene played out in Colorado back in '99, before I recognized one of my callow-faced colleagues speed walking towards the satellite English offices administration had set up for adjuncts down the hall.

The kid's name was tacked on the wall of the three-quarter cube we shared over there, but I couldn't remember what it was. John, or Stephen, or something with a C. Our schedules didn't overlap, but I'd seen him before at a couple of faculty meetings, and once we talked about hunting pheasants when I found out he was from Minnesota too. I tapped on the glass and hoped he could hear it over the arrhythmic horror-show racket downstairs.

We stared at each other for a moment, sizing up the odds. I didn't know if I should let him in here, and he didn't even know if here was where he wanted to go. Before I could wave him over through the window, he abruptly broke my gaze and carried on quietly down the hallway. I hoped he'd live to see a bunch of assholes call him a crisis actor on the internet or argue about whether it was appropriate to call the gun an assault weapon or not. I liked to imagine that somewhere in his own panicked thoughts he extended me the same midwestern courtesy.

My mouth was dry, and my body felt like it was held together by static electricity instead of bones. Behind me, a boy started crying, which kicked off a more general and increasingly alarmed murmur among my students. I took a sharp breath in and held it, letting the reassuring sea anchor of my oxygen-laden lungs sit soft and low where the two halves of my rib cage met before I turned to face them. They must have read the instructions by now, if they didn't know them already.

Everybody was looking at each other like somebody else would know the exact thing to say or do for this to not be happening to us anymore, but nobody had gotten out of their seats yet. The murmur continued on, but whenever some-

body started to speak loud enough to transcend the muddy-mouthed threnody filling the room, it would be pierced by a harsh shush from another student. Then there was Front Row Zahira, looking the same as any other day, back straight with anticipation and her hand held high, waiting to be called on before she spoke. I cleared my throat, struggling to banish the absurd hope from my mind that one of my kids had decided to bring a gun to class today too.

“Zahira,” I hissed, pointing her way and trying to keep my voice quiet yet classroom confident as I crossed back upstage center to my desk and gripped my thermos of black tar coffee. I always found it was easier to address the students with a prop.

“Professor Schicksal, I think we should go,” she stage-whispered back, indicating her phone. I was an adjunct and only taught a couple of intro sections, so the age difference between me and these kids made me feel more like I was their older stepbrother than the surehanded, pipe-smoking mentor the honorifics of academe evoked. The flannel I had on – the one the old man had sent me last Christmas – didn’t help much either. Downstairs the gunfire, which I had at some point subconsciously placed as the truncated, full-toned reports of a pistol, continued on, steadily irregular like the nagging feeling of forgetting something important. There was now significantly less screaming than there had been initially.

I shook my head and stared off at the back wall above the students’ heads like I usually did when I was organizing my thoughts after Zahira gave us all something to think about. The crying kid, who I now recognized as Kevin Casey – a particularly argumentative student who hiked out from Staten Island just to call me a communist three days a week – was still at it, but otherwise the murmuring had hit a lull. I found myself counting the seconds between shots, scraping my memory for some type of North Woods heuristic to determine how far away the gunman was, like we were waiting out a thunderstorm.

I attempted a sip of my thermos to buy a second to think, but the coffee hit my mouth acrid and bilious and I reflexively spit as much as I could back through the mouth-piece while the remainder dribbled down my chin to stain the scuffed linoleum floor.

“I don’t think that’s going to go so well,” I told her, calm as I could, “I think we ought to hole up in here.” It wasn’t exactly a novel idea, and the muted proclamation came out less self-assured than I’d hoped. Sweat was starting to prickle out of my pores and dampen my undershirt.

Zahira looked at me the same way she did the first time she saw me smoking a cigarette out by the front gate after class, and just like then she didn’t say a thing, but I knew what she meant. I was losing them fast, and she wasn’t wrong. We had some time left, we ought to do something with it.

Our classroom had two doors, the one I had already locked up by the front closer to the stairwell, and then another tucked in the back corner, flanked by a couple of oak-patterned particle board shelving units lined with disused Norton Anthologies. Willy Cierzo, a brutish but sympathetic kid who saw me use a vending machine near the gym once and smiled at me, was at the desk closest to the unlocked rear entrance.

“Willy, lock that door and slide that shelf in front of it,” I told him, beelining towards the light switch panel and swatting them into the off position with an outstretched palm, grasping for a sense of purpose. It was early in the afternoon, but without the overheads on the room was plunged into a sort of sepia-toned, twilight dim, like we were already living in the memories of our loved ones.

“Everybody gather in the middle of the room there, up against the wall, and keep out of sight of the windows,” I told the rest of them. Nobody moved until Willy got up, but the scrape of his desk broke the spell and I winced as fourteen bodies slid out of their seats and piled in against the bricks.

My desk was more like a sturdy card table than an ac-

tual piece of furniture, so it wasn't that hard for me to throw it in front of the main door on my own. I knew it wouldn't hold for long if whoever was doing this decided they wanted to get in here, so I grabbed a few wire and plastic desks out of the front row and tossed them over there too for good measure. Willy and I were making a hell of a racket, but so was whoever it was that was shooting up the place. I hoped it was enough that they couldn't hear us.

I wondered if it was a student, and if they had come here to kill me, and this entire thing was my fault for failing some kid or calling in sick for office hours when somebody really needed someone to talk to. The pistol fired again. The sound of this shot was different, nearby and distinct and followed by the percussive whine between my ears and the hollowed-out sense of primal panic in my chest I remembered from the first time I shot a .22 in a gravel pit with the old man.

In the massacres of my youthful daydreams there had been much more to work with: ground level windows and numerous points of emergency egress, a respectable but unexceptional reputation that made me unlikely to be on anybody's hit list, the non-linear layout of sprawling Mid-western school compounds, and paper cutters with make-shift machetes bolted to them resting on every countertop. All I really had to run with now that it was actually happening was the distant hope that it would occur to this kid what he was actually doing and he would stop, or he would decide that he was done and off himself before he got to us.

I was up against the wall with the kids now too. Some were whimpering while the rest were texting out elegies to their parents. All that was left to do was to try to make ourselves smaller, congealing into a slick-skinned, huddled mass, a trick I'd learned from the secret forest life up in the swamp I still stalked most Octobers with the old man. The smell was overwhelming, a sour blend of sweat and the ammonic sting of someone among the pile either almost or completely pissing

themselves blended with the nostalgic scent of cordite wafting in from the hall.

A shudder ran through the rat king we'd twisted ourselves into at the sound of footsteps in the hall. I thought about texting my mom, but I didn't want to upset her. I thought about the things I would never get to do if I died, like get married, or try Iraqi food, or read *Finnegan's Wake*.

The boots out in the hall plodded on, sounding impossibly heavy in the unreality of our circumstance. We waited, hoping that they wouldn't stop. That they would fade on down the hall or back towards whatever atrocity they came from, and that would be how we wound up among those that lived. And they did. The thunderous advance continued past our darkened barricades and down the hall, towards Charlie, which was the name of the kid from Minnesota now that I thought about it. I hoped he'd had the good sense to crawl out a window over there or found a sturdy closet like the kids that made it out of that mess in Connecticut a week shy of the end of the world in 2012.

We breathed. Two more shots pealed out. The ringing in my ears was loud enough to knock the wind out of me. Now I knew one of the victim's names. The doom march started getting louder again, and the rat king shivered. I thought about the things I would never get to do again if I didn't make it out of here, like see a movie in the theater or argue with the old man about going out in the swamp on his own because it was too dangerous. I felt a profound sense of anger. The anger you feel when your alcoholic friend dies in a drunk driving accident – the righteous anger of a tragedy that everybody saw coming, but it happened anyway, and nobody did a goddamn thing to stop it.

The footsteps halted outside of our door, and soon after the thunderous pounding of a boot striking the latch mechanism began. Copies of *Norton* began raining down onto the floor near the rear entrance. Nobody mentioned it, but we all knew the score. Step three. Front Row Zahira stood up,

then Willy, and then the rest of us. We waited.

The cacophony of the boot against the door continued on, and I thought of the old man and the last time I saw him when he came out to visit me in Brooklyn. We walked around the botanical gardens because he wanted to see what we could see. His eyes didn't work so well by then, but he'd asked me to read the inscriptions on the side of the Central Library to him. We stood out on Flatbush and I worked my way through them like an incantation, breathing in the fecund musk of the swamp that clung to his clothes, even here – peat and cold and dying leaves all wrapped up in gun oil and stale Marlboro Reds.

When the door gave way and the violence began, a fragmented line chiseled in limestone that had stuck in my mind since then began to overtake me. It grew bigger and bigger, and soon there was nothing else left. Nothing but my final, recurring thought: *History rolls before me. I breathe the morning air of the world while the scent of Eden's roses yet linger on it. I see the pyramids building. I hear the shouts of the armies of Alexander.*

Poetry by Tessa Ekstrom

# Extraterrestrial Mental Illness

It comes briefly and it comes in waves and it comes from a star

More so than we are all made of stardust and blind luck.

It comes when the seltzer flattens and it comes when the sugar settles

And it comes with a chorus of sunrise Fanta Orange birds.

It comes when we need it the least and it comes again and again,

And when it comes it says things like your floor is littered with wine corks

And you're out of vodka.

It comes quietly at night and takes up so much space

That we break our noses bumping it as we fumble in the dark.

It comes from a love song my mother sang to herself

When she thought no one could hear,

Biting lyrics that built steel plates in my ribs

And tattooed PTSD on my brother's lower lip.

Sometimes when it comes it's quick and sharp and leaves immediately

And other times we have long conversations in the shower,

It seduces us with the numb of the burn, tells us that we can't feel the heat

Calls us its lover calls our tears our joint climax.

It comes from the things no one told us about growing up,

Like the grotesque cost of existing in this world

And how hard everything is all the time and how everyone  
does drugs  
To cope with the weight of it all and how it never stops.

It comes from the lovers of all things that matter  
But more so from the lovers of antimatter,  
The pursuers of maps of the sky and maps of our dreams.

It comes from the ways that dreams suddenly and mournfully  
Become like incubo leave like fulmine become like Galileo's  
tongue.

When it comes it never asks permission,  
I don't think it knows what sunshine and time taste like  
Or which colors feel the least selfish in April and which in  
May.  
I don't think it knows its name.

I don't think it knows it's here.  
But here it is and here it will stay until the FDA approves  
Something stronger than fentanyl to take these last few years  
away.

Poetry by Sebastian Santiago  
**Notes from the Metro.**  
-Prague, Czech Republic 2019

1.

*All around me, they're frozen in their own exhaustion.*

*For whom do they make this  
daily trek?*

2.

The couple across from me, woven into each other and lost within her shawl. He traces the figure eight in her palm as it rests in his lap.

3.

The old man trembles his way to the seat beside me, his bodily functions becoming a public affair. I think of W. H. Auden, *hell is neither here nor there.*

4.

I fear the child who stares at me relentlessly can see my sadness.

With my glare I say:

*I'm just tired.*

The child, not buying it, looks on.

5.

The pair parting ways;  
their looks linger on one another as the  
train doors close.

he, is Painfully handsome.  
she, is Dreadfully gorgeous.

Strange how quickly we forget about beauty.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE  
JODIE  
FILAN  
COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jodie Filan is a self-taught artist and permanent resident of Canada. She started in portraiture realism and through trials with opiate use has evolved to abstract surrealism. Find her at [jodiefilanart.com](http://jodiefilanart.com)

Artwork by Jodie Filan  
**Jodie**



Artwork by Jodie Filan  
**Untitled**



Artwork by Jodie Filan  
**Untitled**



# Fiction by Liza Sofia

## The Great Unknown

If the city has taught me one thing, it's that there is a Great Unknown force at work.

It exists only beyond the limits of human consciousness, absent of materiality. Yet, it reveals itself all around – through accidental subway stops and coincidental coffee shop encounters.

I always thought that maybe when the stars perfectly align, and when the moon cycle is just right, and if you're very very careful, you'd be able to see those invisible cosmic strings. I've never been so fortunate. But still, I know, without a doubt, it's there because I feel it – tugging at my arms and legs like a marionette puppet. And it pulls me back to the bank of the Charles River every night, hours after the sun falls beneath the cityscape.

I come here to write – not because I have a particular affinity for the water or because it reminds me of home. Rather, it's the only place I can find inspiration – even though I look for it in books and poetry and music and paintings and everything else so romantic and lovely.

Instead, I find it here – on this little rusted bridge by the water, where the wintry air cracks my skin and stains my cheeks pink. It's not just the melodic silence, or the way the lights reflect onto the glossy black water, or the triangular outline of the Hyatt Hotel from across the river – with its pyramidion reaching high in the air like the Great Pyramid overlooking Boston. There's a celestial lure greater than the sum of its parts.

If the city has taught me two things, it's that there is a Great Unknown force at work and that it's impossible to make sense out of – no matter how perfectly stars align, or how just right the moon cycle is, or how very *very* careful you

are.

So I weather through the cold, night after frigid night – hoping that one day I'll find the words to describe it – and knowing I never will.

Poetry by Andrew Greissman  
**Kintsukoroi**

Blue bowl forest sky  
With lacquered cracks,  
All upside down over embers.

She is a glowing engine  
When fingers burn,  
Then turn red and numb,  
Craving the scent of hot metal.

Drunk on smoke, she tosses  
Marshmallows into the fire,  
Watching sugar boil into more flame.

# Fiction by Emma Irving

## Overlooking Mount Bromo

2:57 a.m.: Promptly after tumbling out the rear hatch of the mountaineering Jeep, she rushed to the mushola at the far end of the lookout station. I balled up my arms inside my coat and turned towards the inky volcano as she untied her shoes to wash her feet. Fucking freezing.

“Do you think our gods know each other?” I asked after her prayer, head on her shoulder as we cuddled chunky powdered hot chocolates.

Hazy cinnamon sun pawed at the distant crater.  
Breathless.

She smiled her cheeky response as she opened VSCO and pointed her phone towards the light.

# Fiction by Emma Irving **Voladores**

“I think she only loves the me I’ve translated into English!” He cried down before leaning back and, belly up, falling bone by bone from the top of the pole. Held more by faith than the ancient rope around his waist, I watched him revolve counterclockwise as an illusory sun, eight minutes delayed in distance.

Halfway down he wound feathered arms around his body and flung them out, making his own orbit of maple-seed motion.

Upon reaching the ground he flipped his legs beneath him and laughed at me as he made his final turn.

“But we’re all translations anyway!”

Poetry by E. Martin Pedersen

# Two Strangers Meet in a Bar

two strangers meet in a bar

- and get married the next day, grow old and die holding hands
- and never speak or look at one another except in the mirror behind the bottles
- and leave for boring sex they instantly regret (what, you thought otherwise?)
- and plan to kill one another for kicks, for jollies, just because
- and make a business deal involving millions, billions of styrofoam peanuts
- and tell one another lies, looking squarely into their locked eyes
- and tell one another the brutal truth that, alcohol notwithstanding, life sucks
- and one tells a bad bar joke about a skeleton asking for a beer and a mop
- and both become salamanders and slink off surreptitiously on the smooth damp floor.

# Poetry by Frank William Finney

## Winter: A Flashback

We chugged can after can  
of half-frozen beer  
and waited under a streetlight  
for the blizzard they promised  
on the six o'clock news.

Once in a while a car slid by.  
A cop in a cruiser crossed  
the turnpike bridge.

Half a mile down the road  
in a box on the hill,  
my father's widow crossed  
herself thrice when the clock  
struck one and the snowstorm whirled  
the world around.

# Fiction by Alex Mumm

## A House on Knollside

I remember the days when a red stain on a white rug was nothing but a liquid ingrained in a solid. But there is a stain on my rug, and it no longer feels like chemical science. Embrace the fact that everything in this world was created to disgust. Then, seek cleanliness not as a practice, but as an ideology. Some may see no difference between the two mindsets, but I implore you to seek out the semantics.

“Practice” implies an end goal capable of conquer. You practice baseball to win a baseball game. You practice violin to play on a bigger stage. The end is a clear and vibrant line.

“Ideology” implies a constant following to an endless abyss. It is a belief system. You believe in good, but you also know that complete morality will forever leave itself at the front door. Just like total cleanliness, total goodness is impossible. There is no line at the end, just more work, and the work will never end, but that is why you work in the first place.

I could scrub the stain out of the rug in two days, and maybe after it is done, I will sigh in relief or even lie down. But as I lie on the couch, staring at a spotless ceiling, the only thing that will come to mind is the dirt in my fingernails.

Perhaps one day I will wake up and see the sun shining through my window, and not notice the dust scattered in the corner of the glass. But there’s a stain on the rug; a red stain on a white rug that no longer feels like chemical science.

A stain wasn’t on the top of my agenda today. I originally planned on vacuuming the house, which I expected to take up the entire day. If there was time remaining, I would figure out a better system for the pantry. The original organization is fine, but I don’t like how close the fettuccine is to the evaporated milk. There is no technical health risk with their

neighborly relationship, but it does give me an uncertain feeling that I'm not fond of. All of that is rubbish now.

For any usual red spot, I would use carpet stain remover. However, given the complexity of the situation, I am fairly certain that such simple cleaning fluid would inevitably fail. My mother would probably recommend hydrogen peroxide, which does a pretty good job at removing problems like the one on my rug. I don't really care for the smell of hydrogen peroxide; it's sharp and pungent and hard to get out of the mind. The whole house would reek of chemicals for days. I'd have to crack open windows in every room which would drive up the heating bill, and let more dust in. But it would get the stain out, and the costs seem fair for the effect.

So, I get the hydrogen peroxide from the cleaning closet. The bottle is tall and girthy, carrying the same weight when it was bought two years ago. The liquid inside slugs back and forth against the walls of the bottle. I drop the bottle inches away from the rug and open the cap. The smell, once diluted by the Febreze in the living room, eventually seeps into my nostrils like a warm pie in a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, though this smell did not make me fly. I pour the liquid into a simple white washcloth. Only a little at a time. Don't wake the fibers. Not yet. Blot, never scrub.

It's all about applying pressure. Never scrub. Scrubbing spreads the stain. Put the washcloth on the spot, push down, and let go. Repeat the process. Over and over again. My washcloth gets pretty red after about five minutes, but the stain looks the same. I stand up, hearing a pop in my right knee, and walk to the kitchen to get another washcloth. I walk back, sit next to the rug, push down and let go, repeating over and over again. The stain does not fade. The washcloth gets red. I walk to the kitchen, hearing a pop in my right knee, get a washcloth, walk back, sit next to the rug, apply pressure and let go, repeating over and over again. The stain stays the same. I go to the kitchen, pop, washcloth, sit, pressure, over and over. Same. Walk. Washcloth. Pressure.

## Over and over.

An hour passes. I've used twelve washcloths, all of them worn to threads and shreds. The stain on the rug is still there.

I resort to towels, the finest of the bunch. I pour the hydrogen peroxide on the rug like it's gin in a glass. I put two pearl white towels down on the rug and place Webster's Dictionaries on top to keep weight. I sit on the floor next to the couch and put my head on the cushion, waiting for the towels to soak.

Spills and crumbs used to just hide under the couch and keep serenity beneath the darkness of the leather. When mother found them in the light, she killed the peace and burned her child. All spills and messes were her daughter's fault, even if the cause came from the mother's glass.

Eating cereal was always a risk in the morning. A spoon of milk and Froot Loops is hard to keep steady when your hands shake from fear, especially when that fear is warranted. I spilled every morning, and every morning, my mother would take the cigarette from her mouth and gently press it against my arm, not letting go until I screamed. She made me wear long sleeve t-shirts to school so the other kids wouldn't notice the circular burns running parallel down my arms. I wanted to eat anything other than Froot Loops, but it was all mother would give me.

When I was seven, my mother noticed I had a loose tooth. Every morning, she would stare at me as I shakily moved my spoon to my mouth, not focusing on the spill, but on what teeth were chewing the Fruit Loops. The thought of the tooth dangling in my mouth made her jaw clench. I would wake up to her standing in the corner of my room, watching me sleep, wondering how a tooth so loose wouldn't just leave my mouth. She would wait for me to get home from school, sitting in a kitchen chair with a cigarette in her hand, not letting off eye contact until I went into my room and locked the door.

The panic lasted for weeks until mother finally snapped. I woke up to her standing over the foot of my bed, with pliers in her hands. She forced the metal into my mouth while I screamed for her to stop. She told me to shut up and stop moving, or she would yank out every tooth I owned. I did as I was told and let her scrape the metal against my tooth. She twisted and pulled and hit me in the eye when I started screaming again. The tooth came out after a couple of minutes. A pool of blood shot from the place where the tooth once rooted and did not stop until morning.

The tooth was never loose, just crooked. Maybe mother knew that. Maybe she didn't care, or maybe she knew that it would hurt more to pull it out, and the guarantee of my pain gave her some solace.

It is not my fault that she is dead. I truly did not kill her, though her suicide sure made it look like murder. I came home a few days ago to find blood pooling around her body. She had sliced her own throat, and moments before doing so, she stabbed herself in the stomach and back. Worst of all, she had done it on the living room rug, which I had just gotten from Ikea.

I feared if I called the police, they would suspect me of the crime. The stab wounds all across her body made my story hard to believe. Hell, only a crazy person would stab herself in the back. Why wouldn't they think the abused daughter simply snapped? It fits the memo.

It was a moment of irrational panic, I attest, but her body needed to go somewhere. The space between the basement ceiling and the living room floorboards was the first idea that came to mind, and therefore, was the only idea that came to mind. It wasn't hard getting the floorboards open; a crowbar does a surprisingly good job prying them loose. And the space was just perfect for her to fit. Nailing the boards back in place only took minutes. The rug was the real mess. I could've gotten rid of the damn thing, but I really liked the way it tied the room together. Plus, it covered the floorboards. Luckily,

her death was fresh, so the blood had not yet soaked to the other side. Except for one spot.

The towels get red reasonably fast. I walk over to take them off the rug. To my surprise, I see the stain almost completely faded into the beige. I walk over to the kitchen, put a washcloth under hot water, walk back to the rug, and apply pressure, but I don't scrub. Never scrub. Only a couple of minutes pass before the stain is completely gone. And although the other side of the rug holds its own secrets, this side regains its beauty.

I put the hydrogen peroxide back into its closet, place all the dirty washcloths and towels in the washing machine, press start, and walk back to the couch, where I lie down and look up at the twirling fan. But as I stare at the ceiling, I notice some dust gathered around one of the light fixtures. Not a lot. But enough where the light bounces off the tiny little specks and illuminates the mess like a halo around a demon.

My mind flutters the consequences, then seeks vengeance, forcing my body to get up from the couch and get the foot ladder in the closet. I place the ladder down on the rug and step on it, raising my hands to the light. But the ladder is too short, and I cannot grasp at the ceiling. So I begin to rock the ladder back and forth, hoping it will lift me up long enough to swipe at the dust. And for one split second, it does, and I swipe, and the dust is gone. But after the split second, the ladder falls under its own legs, and I plummet to the ground with my head leading the way towards the edge of the coffee table. It connects with the firm hardwood. Blood begins to pool around me and yet I feel no pain, only the slow leak of my own mortality.

I lie on the floor, face pointed towards the ground. I feel dizzy and woozy, or whatever you say when you are about to die. Cold. I feel cold. That's what they always say in the movies. But it's true, I feel cold. I'm shivering. I am not afraid. I don't care where I go. I will go knowing that I got the dust from the light fixture, and that gives me solace.

But then I remember. I remember when I was younger, and when a spill of milk on the kitchen table didn't mean an arm full of cigarettes. I remember an unmade bed. I remember my dirty father, and how he used to eat chips on the couch and get crumbs under the cushions. I remember him going. I remember mother looking at me and only seeing father. I remember when Earth was free of God's dirty fingers, and he let the top spin on its own. I remember when God wasn't perfect. I remember when I would look at a stain on the rug and only see a liquid ingrained in a solid.

I turn over on the rug so my face points to the sky. And as the blood runs cold across my back, and as my eyes eagerly await their final blink, I stare into the spotless ceiling and wonder what it would look like with a red spot in the middle.

# Poetry by M.J. Scott

## Sex With New York

My attraction to her began moments before the wheels of my plane touched.

*/suck my heroin high from cobalt sky*

I had a long look at her lying still and powerful in the shade of spotty overcast.

*/into chrome and stone glazed in sleepy sun*

She had so many eyes to get lost into and I felt there may be a new beginning in each of them.

*/through flashes of shiny coins in a reaper's milky way*

Straight edge shadows veiled the parts of her that she wasn't ready to reveal.

*/where both ends of a burning rainbow melt into a lust cocktail*

Yet, I sensed there isn't a modest formulation in her structure.

*/and rays of light erupt from the mouth of dusk into the fringes of a thousand erections*

“Come from your silver wings and see me for what I really am,” she said.

*/half swallowed and dressed in a million echoes*

So I journeyed through grit, tunnels, and layers of her aged outer rim.

*/it is a new world bleeding smile with Roman aspirations*

It all led me to the beat of her heart.

*/igniting a pulse that strikes from limb to limb with infinite chaos*

I wanted to walk along her streets with bare feet so she could feel me there.

*/and bound to roaring veins through quivered lining*

I had only intended to stay the night, but I knew she would keep me for the weekend.

*/a fervent dream transforming into words for the diary of tomorrow*

# Poetry by Kate Taylor (no subject)

You must forgive me, I will not finish this poem. I could hardly begin. Was that a gripping introduction? Here, let me start again.

You must forgive me, I am not a poet.

Or a creative, or whatever  
you like to call it.

My words do not flow

They  
spill  
like an infant grasping for fingers.  
Like a creature limps.  
You don't know what a creature is, do you?

You must forgive me, I am not inspired and my thinking is not free.

I have no haunting ambitions. I don't care who writes my name.

I do not want to see the Taj Mahal or The Himalayas or the Great Wall or the Pyramids or Machu Picchu or Hea  
I do not want to jump from planes or sail the Pacific.

You must forgive me, I don't have much time to create.  
It's 4 a.m. and I have to work.

One day I will work for more than my body.  
One day, we will bury each other's bodies and we will weep.

How do you make sense of yourself  
When you are jealous of your friends who live in boxes?

You must forgive me, this poem may have disturbed your  
peace  
Or your silent retreat, or whatever  
escape you're paying for to escape the life you're paying for.

You must forgive me, this poem has no subject. Make one for  
me.  
Please.  
I cannot think of one on my own.

Poetry by Rachel Anne Parsons  
**Little Red**

Left Momma's house with a basket  
full of dreams as fragile as eggshells.  
Eggs are meant to hatch, break  
open to the truth of this life.

In the belly of the wolf, I remembered  
the sharp knife I was born with.  
I cut him open from the inside.  
It was his fault for thinking I was palatable.

I'm a poisonous frog, flashing red  
to warn off predators.  
A brilliant-winged butterfly  
to make raptors fragile as eggshells.

Go ahead and swallow me up  
if you think you can stomach me.  
I will rise again and cast your shell  
behind me.

# Fiction by Ali Wildberger

## Biography of a Parisian Beauty

Every morning at 7 a.m. she was seen walking down Avenue de L'Opera at the centre of Paris. Not one man or woman had the faintest clue where she lived, or where she was heading every day. She was a quiet one, never much spoke except when spoken to. But she was, in every sense, beautiful. Her eyes were blue as diamonds, yet her gaze was soft. She walked with confidence and style but not with arrogance, and when she made her way down the avenue every morning, people could not help but spare a glance.

Even the busiest men of the city would smile when they saw her. The women would stare at her too, some of them even tried to befriend her. Some would come up to her slowly, careful not to startle her (for she was very easily startled), and start small talk, which rarely ever went anywhere. She was careful not to reveal too much of herself, or rather, any of herself at all. The lass would move through the city quickly, efficiently. She would do whatever it was she set out to do every morning, and then she would return.

Although no one knew where she travelled on her day to day business, almost any man or woman on Avenue de L'Opera could have told you about her. She was what most people would call 'popular', though she never once made an appearance at a party or club. More of an introvert, she was. However, it was said that she had been sighted at Buckingham Bar more than once. This would only occur after 7 p.m. For during the twelve long hours between morning and night, she was gone from Avenue de L'Opera altogether.

Some had tried to follow her, as curiosity got the better of them. But to follow someone such as herself through the busy streets was tough work. A young boy around the age of fifteen made a bet one autumn that he would find out the

destination of this quiet maiden. His friends laughed, for they knew better, and agreed to the bet before he had a chance to change his mind. The boy's name was Arthur, and he was fairly successful at first. He hid behind his own house's front gate and waited until she passed, as she regularly did. As soon as he saw her, he called out to her. That was his first mistake, as she hated being yelled at, and therefore moved past quicker than before.

Simultaneously, Arthur swung open his gate and made his way after her, trying to keep himself from running through the moderate crowd of people, whilst keeping his eyes on the one he was after.

But she was used to these actions, for both men and women had tried it on her before, and she always evaded them. She turned her head and gave him a wide-eyed, yet fierce look and then, before he knew it, she had slid around the corner of the street. The boy ran after her, but it was no use. As soon as he rounded the corner, she was gone. He could still hear his friends laughing from halfway down the street (oh, how loud they were sometimes!). He sighed as he pushed his hands into his pockets, feeling the last of the crumpled notes he had with him; the ones he would be forced to hand over.

No person could ever win a bet that way. Not by following her. She was far too quick for anyone on Avenue de L'Opera. She held all their attentions when she walked past, and people would look at her and wonder how she survived out there on the streets. For as far as they knew, she had no real home.

Perhaps they were right.

She made her way away from Avenue de L'Opera and up towards Rue de Rivoli. Her heart was beating quicker than usual, as it always did when someone tried to follow her. But despite her brief panic, she knew deep down that no man or woman in Paris had the quickness or strategy to catch her. She belonged completely to herself; it was all she had ever

known and all she ever would know. Sure, there were some kind people on the street, who would take her in and give her food, water and a bed to lie on, but that was all temporary. She sat down on the pavement next to the street, and her ears twitched as a massive truck drove past, roaring as it did. There were some sounds in the city that she would never get used to.

“Kitty!” A little girl was reaching a hand down toward her head and she let it happen. The little ones were harmless, she knew. They held no threat.

She rubbed her furry head into the child’s hand, and for a moment a deep, calm state entered her body. A purr rose up in her throat almost immediately, for it had been a long time since she had felt safe in the embrace of a human.

“Come on, Charlotte, leave the poor kitty alone.” Her mother tugged on the little girl’s arm, and then the hand was gone, and with it the warmth and peace it had brought her.

The white cat sat for a moment on the side of the street and watched the little girl walk away with her mother. The cat blinked a silent farewell, and then she turned her small head back to the huge, bustling city that was her own, with the old buildings that had been there before she was born and would remain there far after she left this world.

She stood up again, arching her body in a long stretch. Then, one paw at a time, she made her way down the road and back into the wild, free life of Paris.

Artwork by Bren Lawler  
**Firefly**



*Digital Painting*  
8.5 in x 11 in

Artwork by Jeremiah Gilbert  
**Pike Place Market, Seattle**



*50mm Photography*  
12 in x 18 in

Artwork by Jeremiah Gilbert  
**Pike Place Market Musician,  
Seattle**



*50mm Photography  
12 in x 18 in*

Artwork by Britnie Walston  
**Northern Lights**



*Acrylic on Canvas*  
16 in x 20 in

# Fiction by E. Alexandra

## Unrequited

My friend Cora's in love with a guy that doesn't love her. Or maybe, she says, maybe he does love her, but not as much as she loves him. We're walking through the Bosque in late March. The wind is washing winter away, blowing us into spring. A canopy of cottonwoods dissects the sky above, leaving it fractured and fragmented. We're looking for porcupines hiding in the frames of that fractured sky, but it's only me, Cora's staring at her feet.

"Is that one?" I ask, squinting upwards. A ray of sun penetrates the trees, washing us in a wave of blinding white light.

"Yeah," she says to her feet, "maybe even a pregnant one."

"How do they get up there?"

A girl around five rides past us on a pink bike, blue and silver streamers wave from her handlebars. My dog lunges towards her, snarls, but he won't look up either. He refuses to look at the things that really terrify him. Cora freezes, kicks at the cotton on the path, like it's some stain she can simply wash away. The cotton floats a few feet in front of her before the wind returns it to her heart. She kicks it again and picks strands from her shirt. In the air it dances like spiders, crawling back to her face. She is caught in a web she can't find her way out of.

It would be funny, but I see the way she shudders each time the cotton lands on her. She holds herself like a burn victim, like everything she touches hurts. Cora's been in love with this guy a year. She had that glow to her, like she was carrying a spool of golden thread in her heart, that wove through her veins. She thought the spool was never ending, but yesterday he told her he wanted to see other people, and

it's like that spool has turned to stone. It's nothing but a burden she doesn't have a clue how to rid herself of.

"Has that ever happened to you?" She says, looking up at me for the first time.

"Has what ever happened to me?" My eyes are still on the pregnant porcupine in the sky.

"You know, someone that doesn't love you back," she holds a patch of cotton in front of her, trying to release it delicately into the wind. I scrunch my face towards her and laugh. "Yeah, of course. A third of my life, maybe half of it even."

The pregnant porcupine is crawling now, slowly and delicately towards the open sky, like she is making her way back home.

"You think they ever fall?" I ask her.

"Nah," Cora looks back down. "They've got claws."

We walk in silence for a while, Cora kicking at the earth, and me staring up at the big-bellied porcupines, like beavers swimming in the sky.

"They're so exposed up there," I tell her.

"Yeah," she tells me, "I guess so."

She's distracted, trying to figure out how to rid herself of that heavy spool inside her before it drowns her. I know that feeling. I've only just figured out how to get rid of it and I really don't want to talk about Lee. I tell her falling in love with someone who doesn't love you back is kind of a good thing. She digs her hands deeper into her pockets and looks out towards the river. I tell her it cracks you open, cracks you outside of yourself. She bites her lower lip and inches her sneakers towards the river. If she walks in, she won't even have to put stones in her pockets. She's carrying enough weight as it is.

I gnaw on the inside of my cheek for a while. I don't want to stare down at my feet like Cora, saying his name under my breath like he's some mantra that'll bring me closer to God. But Cora's eyes are muddied over like the bottom of the

river. I worry she'll never look up at the trees again, so I tell her as much as I can remember.

I don't remember ever not knowing Lee. We grew up in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. We lived two houses down from each other on Mark Lane. Our grandparents lived next to each other up the hill on Spruce. Both our grandfathers were named Buddy. They ate breakfast together every morning at Brame's Drug Store on Main Street. Our lives unfolded on top of, beneath, and within each other.

My sister and I were the same age as Lee and his brother. Hank was my age, Lee three years older like my sister. It's nothing now, but back then it was an eternity. I'd hear stories about kids in love with their older cousins. How their mom would tickle their chin, tell them softly, oh honey, you love him but not in that kind of way. You'll learn one day. No one tickled my chin when I said I wanted to marry Lee. My mom just looked at me with heavy eyes, told me, oh honey, but no one ever told me I couldn't. No one ever told me that's not the way I loved him.

Lee's always been handsome. He's got deep-set, almond-shaped eyes. He's big-headed and strong like a pit-bull with a shock of teeth as bright as the moon, and a smile that floods his whole body with joy. It'll flood yours too. He's a wild thing, always has been. When we were little, he used to lead us through the woods and down to the creek behind our houses. We'd wade into it barefoot as he crawled around in the sediment, searching for buried treasure, crawdaddies hidden beneath stones, and pieces of mica lodged in the sediment that glittered in the sun.

At dusk, we had to go home, back to the safety of our beds. Everyone but Lee. They let Lee sleep out there by the creek, underneath the pine trees, and Big Dipper. His mom said when he was a baby he'd scream and cry, and the only way he'd get to sleep was if she'd take him outside, let him listen to the wind tickle the trees.

"Let him be," she'd say, "no use trying to tame a wild

thing like him.” I tried it, the yelling and screaming and crying. My mom put me in a hot bath, read Good Night Moon, sang Michael Row Your Boat, and my eyelids went heavy as a crescent moon rose above a canopy of pine trees that Lee was buried somewhere beneath. I’ve never been wild like Lee.

“Don’t you get cold?” I asked him.

“No! Calico lets me sleep on her.”

“Nuh-uh,” I told him. He shrugged, broke off a stick and planted it into the earth like a king claiming his castle. “See for yourself.”

Calico was the neighborhood stray dog. She had matted white hair with patches of tan and black on her belly, and bright blue eyes. She hung around the edges of the neighborhood pack of dogs. I’d been trying to touch her for years, but each time I stuck my hand out, she’d sink down real low, bury her tail between her legs, and hide behind the other dogs.

I couldn’t believe Lee slept on her belly, so I snuck out of the screened porch one night when the moon was high in the sky and cast the trees in a yellow glow. I was too busy searching for Lee’s silhouette by the creek to notice my feet. I tumbled over a twig, rolled down through the leaves, and crashed at the bank of the creek where Lee’s head was rested in the soft pink of Calico’s belly. She raised her head from her paws, ears pointed upwards in alert, her blue eyes wide and wild. Lee slept like a baby, cradled inside her. I stood, stepped forward, she snarled like a mother guarding her cub. I backed away. I didn’t belong there. Like I said, I’ve never been wild like Lee.

When I was six and Lee was nine, Lee and his dad knelt in the grass on a summer day at dusk. Lee had his hand on the soft pink of Calico’s belly, her legs splayed upwards to the sky. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. His dad stood over him, patted him on the back, and as the sky turned pink above the blue mountains, he turned to go inside, but Lee stayed. His shoulders hunched, his hand on the soft pink part of her belly. That boy never left her side, and as the

day turned night, fireflies circled his head, twinkling, like a crown of fallen stars.

In the morning Calico was gone. I cried, figuring she was dead, but he reached his arm out towards me, wrapped me inside his chest.

“She’s fine,” he whispered to the top of my head. “She’s fine, really, we took her out to the ostrich farm on 116. I promise you, she’s fine.”

He kissed the top of my head. He smelled soft and clean, like dryer sheets, like my mother’s dryer, like something I could crawl inside of and have it all made better. I don’t really know what you can do with a love like that. Can’t do anything is my guess. It’s like an artificial joint that’s been planted inside you so young, you can’t imagine ever walking without it.

The four of us carpooled together from as early as I can remember. My mom taught piano. She loved Lee because out of all of us, he was the only one who didn’t roll their eyes with her on the bench. Piano was just about the only thing that could keep him inside. He’d sit in the front of the car with her, talking quietly, asking about notes and composers. He’d look almost as peaceful, almost, as that time I saw him sleeping beneath the trees.

Lee was like that with his mom and my mom. But when his dad took us in his black Durango, he’d just sit in the backseat, rigid and stiff, with his hands folded in his lap. Those days none of us talked. To this day I can’t really tell you what Lee’s dad looked like. He was like a gargoyle in the driver’s seat, a version of Lee turned to stone.

Lee was twelve and I was nine when his dad moved out, really moved out. The day it happened, Lee threw a milk carton through the sunroof, and when it splattered across my mother’s leather seats, he laughed so hard he cried. When we pulled up at his house, he couldn’t stop, just sat back there, some crazed mixture of laughter and tear. My mom put her hands in her lap, turned piano music on softly, and waited

silently until the laughter stopped, and all that was left were big, heavy sobs.

Lee was scared to go in. He thought his dad had taken everything. He said he didn't care about most of it. He just didn't want him to take the piano. He said he left a note on it and everything, begging him, telling him he could take everything, just not the piano.

"Oh honey, honey, of course he won't. He won't take it. Not if you asked like that," she said, her eyes spilling over with something like hope.

Of course, his dad took the piano. I don't know why she had to go on like that, like it was some cardinal sin for him to take it after the note, because after that Lee got wilder. I think he blamed her for all of it. He did whatever he could to drive her crazy. We'd be driving down the highway and he'd roll his window down, stick his big head out, and bark at the cars zooming past us. He'd climb out the sunroof, crawl onto the roof while she was going sixty down the freeway, and he'd scream to the trees.

Like I said, my mom loved Lee. She didn't yell at him or kick him out of the car. She'd just slow down to a crawl, pull to the side of the road, turn that piano music on real low, take her knitting out from the backseat, and let him scream until he wore himself out. I think we all thought if we just waited long enough, he'd scream that rage out of him. I think we all hoped that rage was just a phase, that it was still malleable, that it hadn't yet fused to his bones.

Everybody said Lee's dad was sleeping with the Hoffmans' mom. I don't know if it's true. Mr. Hoffman hung himself that Christmas and no one talked about it again, but something meaner started brewing in Lee around that time. There was a home-schooled girl named Mary Alice who used to walk her three-legged terrier to the mailbox each day when we were driving home from school. Mary Alice was pale and chubby. Lee said she looked like milk.

"Hey milk girl! Milk girl!" he used to scream out the

window. She never looked up at him, but one day he threw a carton of two-percent at her, screaming, “there you go milk girl! Drink it up!” It busted all over her and the three-legged dog. Lee howled with laughter.

My mom slammed on the brakes, looked back at him, her finger pointed sharply, “No! You are not going to do that!”

It was the first time she’d raised her voice at him. Lee’s faced turned red, then hardened to stone, and I got a glimpse of what his dad must have looked like.

“Fuck you!” He shouted, slammed the door, and started storming home. My mom rubbed her temples, choked back tears, and slowed to a crawl. We followed him home, a couple feet behind, as he held his middle finger towards the air, and he didn’t once seem to notice the music playing softly from the windows.

Lee stopped carpooling after that. The high school boys he played soccer with started taking him. He started smoking weed and for years I got nothing but glimpses of him, times we’d pass those boys flying down the road, rap music blaring, and he’d stick his head out the window, blow a cloud of smoke towards us, and bark like a rabid dog.

It wasn’t until I was sixteen that I really saw him again. We were at a party at Katherine Bell’s on 115.

“Well, Julie, Julie,” he said, holding a blender full of strawberry daiquiris in his hand. “What are you doing here?” He dipped and swayed, the daquiri spilled onto his hands like blood. He was nineteen, going to college up the mountain in Boone. He was drunk and slurring his words, but he still smelled like my mother’s dryer. He dated a girl a grade older than me, a junior, named Casey. She came up to him, her eyes droopy like tear drops running down her face, fumbled at the buttons of his flannel, and took a cigarette from the pack in his shirt. He puckered his lips out real big towards her and I looked away in pain.

“You’re drunk,” she said. Casey didn’t drink. Casey liked pills. Later in the night, Alan Springman showed up

with his roosters, and everyone went down to the fire for a cockfight. Lee bet forty bucks on a rooster with a limp.

“You fuckin’ idiot!” They shouted at him, but Lee just laughed and slurped from the blender, daquiri running down his face like tears of blood.

Lee’s rooster got killed. He slammed his money onto the ground, shouted fuck, and stormed off looking for Casey. She was fucking Alan in the back of Lee’s black Durango, the one that belonged to his dad. Lee pulled Alan out by the collar, slamming the blender over his head. I didn’t see it. Everyone tells me I’d see him differently if I did. They said the blood spurted from Alan’s head like a geyser, that Lee’s eyes went big and black like saucers, his face so white you could see the blue in his veins.

“What the fuck did you do?!” An angry mob screamed at him. They said he just stood there, frozen, looking around dazed, muttering under his breath while his hands dripped with blood. Someone punched him and he must have snapped out of it because he ran up to the cars.

“Can you drive?” He asked me. His voice was shaky like that time when he was sobbing in the backseat of my mom’s car. He was jumpy all the way home. He leaned forward like he was searching for something in the night. The blood and daquiri stuck to his hands and as much as he wiped them, he couldn’t seem to get himself clean.

“I did something bad. I did something real bad.” He brought his hands to his face and sobbed. We parked by the ditch behind our houses. He grabbed my hand, led me to the creek I’d seen him at with Calico. We stayed down there all night, him rocking and shaking, repeating over and over, “I did something bad. I did something real bad.”

I wrapped my arms around him. He fell into my lap and sobbed red-tinted tears. I thought about Calico and rubbed his head with the blood he’d put in my hands. In the morning, he stayed in the woods until I found out Alan was in the hospital, alive. Lee was so relieved he grabbed my face

with both hands and kissed me hard on the lips. I stared at myself in the mirror back home, caressing my fingers along the two red streaks that ran down my cheeks like war paint.

He went back to college that fall. I'd visit him in the A-frame cabin with green trim he lived in on the edge of town. When it was warm enough, we'd sleep by the cliff overlooking the valley. It's always windy on that cliff, so windy snow falls upwards in winter. I was seventeen, and to me it felt like the edge of the world. I stood with my arms open in the wind, not knowing which way I wanted it to blow.

Lee and I had sex for the first time in the backseat of his dad's Durango on that cliff. Afterwards he climbed to the front, smoked a joint, and told me he was moving to a cabin by Foscoe. His face was hidden beneath a fog of smoke. I thought about two young lovers who'd stood on the edge of that same cliff, the man had leapt, and the woman had cried. She cried so hard the winds caught him, blew him upwards, and brought him back home.

The cabin in Foscoe was in a valley by the river. He didn't have running water or electricity. He bathed in the river. Shat in the woods. He was painting a lot then. The walls were covered in canvases of smiling aliens floating above crumbling cities. Lee stayed out there alone and I wouldn't see or hear from him for weeks at a time. He told me he was taking acid almost every day and had started smoking DMT. I asked him what it was like. He told me it was like getting sucked into the sky by the stars. He said up there, everything was good, up there he met white light beings that felt like home. He said when the trip ended and he had to leave that home, it was so painful, a pain he'd never felt, pain like a mother having her baby ripped from her arms.

It was summer and we were lying by the river, staring up towards the night sky. There was something lost and floaty about him. His eyes were glazed and outwards, an emptiness like there was no one home.

“You remember Calico?” I asked, wanting to bring

him back. He took a long, slow inhale off a joint. “Of course.” He watched the smoke longingly as it floated upwards and evaporated into the sky. When it disappeared, he looked at the joint intently. It was canoeing at the sides.

“Yeah of course, wild thing, didn’t belong to nobody.” He took a blue Bic from his pocket, burnt the yellowing paper slowly. “Man, that was kind of tough when she died.” He sucked on the joint.

“She didn’t die!” I pushed myself to my elbows and stared at him hard.

“Come on now.” He smiled big and broad. His teeth shining bright like moons that had been covered by fog for years.

“What?” I asked. I couldn’t help but smile back.

“She got hit by that car. Remember, she was laid out, bleeding on your lawn.”

“You told me she went to a farm.”

A laugh burst forth from him. A grounded, deep-bellied kind of laugh and I thought maybe he wouldn’t float away.

“Come on now, you know that dog didn’t go to no farm. You damn near saw the whole thing.”

“I mean, yeah of course. I remember her lying there in the front yard, you and your dad standing over her.”

“Yeah . . .” he said real slow, his eyes big and twinkling, “and then you know, I had to . . .” He turned away from me, spit on the grass, hard like something was wedged in his throat. “That dog was in misery.”

“You?” I tried to see his face, but he kept his head turned.

“Yeah, me. Even then, damn thing wouldn’t let nobody touch it. My dad got close, but she just snarled and snapped so he put the knife in my hand, said I was the only one that could do it.”

A firefly circled his head, then landed on his forehead. He smacked it with his palm, and as he smeared the guts on

his pants, I thought about the blood from the night he hit Alan, about all the parts of him I hadn't seen.

I didn't hear from Lee for the first six months of my senior year. Not until he came home at Christmas and told me he had gotten a girlfriend, some girl with dreads and long armpit hair in the sculpture department. She'd moved out to Foscoe with him and started growing arugula, said she wanted to buy some goats and live off the land.

"Why are you telling me this?" My throat felt like it was closing. I couldn't feel below my chest. I prayed for paralysis, not wanting to feel the pain of my heart.

"What?" he asked. He was sitting in a green chair on my back porch, smoking a joint. "Aren't you leaving anyways?" He hit the joint, closed his eyes. "City girl, huh?" He held the smoke in his lungs. "Suits you I guess." He opened his eyes, released the smoke from his lungs, and watched it float outwards to me as if he were breathing some vision of me, sending it on top of my skin.

"Yeah, Cara though," he said, "she's a real down-home kind of girl."

I had gotten into school in New York, but it was just a backup. I wanted to stay. I would have stayed if he'd asked me to, but I let his vision of me seep into my skin and I didn't talk to him for a year. When I came home again, he and Cara had broken up, but by then he already looked at me with that mix of awe and suspicion. A look reserved for the people who left and stayed gone.

"New York . . . hm. I ain't got no interest in ever going there," he said. When I first left it was like I was an astronaut to Lee, someone who'd broken free of the atmosphere. He wondered what it was like up there, what the people ate, what they breathed. Mostly though, he wanted to know what home looked like from all the way out there. The trick was not staying gone too long. Awe fermented to suspicion and he looked at me like he no longer knew the air that I breathed.

I stayed in New York for eight years, but that vi-

sion of me never seeped below my skin, never seeped into my bones. Each summer I hoped he'd asked me to stay. I needed a reason to come home. He never did. Looking back, I suppose it was a good thing he didn't. I held onto an image of him, one that couldn't seem to be tarnished as his sanity ebbed and flowed. He'd have good years, times when his art hung from the galleries in Boone. One summer he even moved into an apartment right on King Street, but that didn't last past the summer. When the leaves started falling, he got drunk, pulled a knife on a parking attendant, and got cut with his own blade. He ran back to the woods to nurse his wounds with acid and DMT, always chasing those beings that felt like home.

We'd go months without talking. I don't know if he had girlfriends. I never wanted to hear about them. Sometimes he'd call, ask me in a shaky voice, the one I'd heard as a kid and that night in the woods, when I was coming home. I'd tell him summer, Christmas, the usual, but there was something in the silence that lingered that made me suspect that wasn't what he meant.

I missed him. I missed home. I told him I loved him. His voice got small and distant in a way that made me think of how Calico would shrink each time I held out my hand.

“Well,” he said, “you’ve certainly been around longer than anyone.”

I moved to New Mexico after New York. He wound up in Colorado and I thought it was because of me, but then he told me about Krisha, some hippie chick from Boulder he'd met at a Toubab Krewe show in Asheville. Krisha was wild like him, a Kundalini yoga teacher who made customized wrapped crystals, and I hate to say it, she had a glow about her. She was bright-eyed, had thick, black hair that hung down her back like vines, and a smile bright like the moon, bright like his.

They toured the country together in the black Durango. He painted live at festivals and shows. She taught yoga

and sold her jewelry. They lived free, slept where they felt, left as they pleased. In all their Facebook pictures, he had his arms wrapped tightly around her, a smile bigger than I'd ever seen. I thought about that pain he'd described, leaving that place in the stars that felt like home, and I knew it had never been me.

I know the weight of the stone Cora feels in her heart. I know it doesn't leave. When he called two years later, asking to see me, I was with someone else. But that stone I thought I'd buried was like a magnet, it was like home. I met him at the Great Sand Dunes. He was living out there, nothing but a tent, a sleeping bag, a couple of cans of beans, and his dad's old Durango. His beard had turned grey. His hair long and matted. He was thinner, scrawnier, and jumpier than I'd ever seen him.

He wanted to sleep underneath the stars with nothing but a balled-up jacket underneath his head. I was cold and ended up sleeping in the old Durango. I can't say I wanted him near. I can't say I'd ever felt more far away from home. In the morning he smoked a joint and it made him start talking about Krisha. He said it all went to shit in California. She had wanted sunshine, she wanted to see the ocean. He got her there, he said it proudly, just didn't have anything left to give once they got there.

“I threw a sign. I’m not proud of it, but I’m not above it.” He dug a stick into the earth like he had as a kid. “Yeah, I threw a sign and this rich fuckin’ asshole in a pinstriped suit rams his beamer into this old Tacoma.” Lee’s face turned angry, like stone, and he looked like a king without a castle.

“Yeah, so this rich asshole tries to start driving away so I run up to him, knock on the windshield, and say ‘Hey you just gonna leave like that?’ He tells me to mind my own fuckin’ business, but he gets out, leaves his card on the windshield, and I say, ‘Hey you gonna give me some money or what?’ He calls me a fuckin’ bum so I grab the guy by the

wrist and throw him up on the side of his fuckin' beamer. Krisha's in the back cryin' and yellin', beggin' me to stop." He combed his beard with his hand. "I mean I stopped, didn't I? She still called her fuckin' mom, was on a flight back to Boulder the next day."

I held back tears as I remembered him that night in the woods, remembered him screaming from the roof of my mother's car. How he never really stopped screaming, he just wore himself out. And how even in sleep, that rage we thought was malleable was fusing to his bones.

In the morning we drove to Crestone to hike to Willow Lake. We passed through a field of daffodils, he leapt across the stumps of the trees, smiling big like he had those summer days in the creek. I thought maybe he wasn't gone for good. We had sex in the field, he howled like a wolf when he came. I held him close to me and sniffed his skin, trying to find that smell, any way back in.

On the way down the mountain, we passed a man with a buzz cut and a woman in a T-shirt: My hero wears blue.

"Excuse us," they said, pausing to let us pass down the narrow trail. Lee stepped to the side, froze, his eyes wide and wild like Calico's had been that time I found him sleeping by the creek.

"You see the way he looked at me?" He asked after they passed. His fists were clenched by his sides.

"No. I didn't notice anything." He ripped a branch from a tree, threw it down the mountain. "Fuckin' cop."

I kept walking, hoping he would calm down, but he started telling me about a Rainbow Gathering he'd gone to in Oregon a couple months back. How some cops had shown up and harassed all the hippies. How all the hippies had gathered around the cops, shouting "Pigs! Pigs! Pigs!", and the cops had taken out their bayonets, swinging into the crowd blindly.

"Didn't someone get killed at one of those?" I asked.

“Yeah, I mean there are some bad seeds.” His steps felt giant behind me.

“Well, if you approach anyone with aggression, I mean them yelling like that, people just naturally respond aggressively back.”

We came to a clearing and I looked down the mountain. You could see everything from up there. You could see exactly how far away from home we were. I didn’t hear his footsteps. I turned, he was standing several feet behind me, frozen again, his eyes black and big like saucers. His left hand was clenched by his side. In his right, he clutched a knife, the blade out, pointed down towards the earth. I watched him, confused, like I was seeing him for the first time.

“Let’s sit for a second,” I told him. I felt him watching me as I moved slowly to the edge of the trail. I thought about my mom, knitting in the car, the piano music playing while he screamed at the sky. He took a step backwards, squinting his eyes like I was something familiar coming into view.

“Why don’t you lead the way? I don’t want us to get lost.” His face softened, he put the knife back in his pocket and bounced down the trail. I don’t know if we were always wrong about him. I don’t know if his rage was ever malleable, or if it had always been bone. Before we left, he started asking me probing-type questions like, “How big a space you got down in Albuquerque?”

“Not too big,” I told him.

“I bet it’s big enough,” he said, smiling, his teeth still as bright as the moon.

He called me a week later. The first time at 4:30 a.m. like he’d woken up with a thought in his head that wouldn’t leave. He just kept calling and calling, and all I could think about was his hand clenched around that knife. I thought about all the versions of him I’d missed, believing the only real him was that nine-year-old boy with a crown of fallen stars. I think he needed someone to remember that version

of him, someone who would carry that image in their heart and let that boy keep on living. I think he always thought it would be me. He was used to me loving him like that. But I don't know, it was like he'd jumped from that cliff, and no matter how hard I'd cried, the wind hadn't sent him all back.

Cora looks at me, kind of confused. "So what happened to him?"

"You know, I don't know. I think he's somewhere up in Colorado still, maybe a hemp farm or something." A crane passes through the trees, scoops into the water. "Oh whoa! Look! What a beautiful bird!"

Cora shuffles her bangs in front of her face. Love's cracked her open, maybe for the first time, and she doesn't know what to do with it all, thinking the only place it can go is back to the person that helped create it.

The crane perches on the edge of the water. He balances on his thin leg and ducks his long, grey beak beneath his wingspan. I tell her it's the most beautiful bird I've ever seen. She looks at me like I'm crazy but when it flies off, she follows it. She's finally looking towards the sky.

"Yeah, it's kind of pretty," she says.

I want to tell Cora it's true, the weight of all that love will drown you. I wish I could tell her you could just rip it out of your chest, throw it in the river, and move on with your life. The problem is when it gets too deep, when it gets woven into your bones, and there's no way you can cut it out and go on living. At least as far as I know. The only thing you can hope to do is let it out in little threads, spill it out here and there. A little on the porcupines, a little more on the cranes, some for the river at sunset, and some for your friend hurting beside you.

ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

THE  
MARCELA  
MERELLES  
COLLECTION

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Marcela began her artistic career in 2016, at the age of 41, and has since held exhibitions in places such as Bagé, Porto Alegre, and Rio de Janeiro. As a self taught artist, Marcela uses social themes with an emphasis on feminist inflection.

# Artwork by Marcela Meirelles

## Queen Papillon



*Acrylic on Aged Canvas  
with Natural Pigments and Hot Iron  
100 cm x 100 cm*

Artwork by Marcela Meirelles  
**Copacabana**



*Acrylic and Charcoal on Canvas*  
110 cm x 60 cm

Artwork by Marcela Meirelles  
**Mourner 2**



*Acrylic on Aged Canvas  
with Natural Pigments and Hot Iron  
80 cm x 100 cm*

Fiction by Evie Kay

# Somewhere in America

Somewhere in America, Archangel Michael turns his back on God. It is freedom, the breaking of chains. He tears off his wings, and he makes his mother cry. It's not the first time she's cried over him. It will be the last.

His exit is deceptively quiet. Entirely silent. There are no clanging gates, no thunder, no screams. His mother's tears are soundless on the gravel. He walks. His body is light without the weight of his wings. Black leather boots meet asphalt, slow and steadily. He turns away from the light, and he goes downtown.

His reunion with Lucifer is sweet, and warm. It is gentle. It is lips and hands and soft, spread thighs. They make love on the lawn of a local church. Michael feels closer to heaven than he ever has.

Somewhere in America, Eve smears her lipstick on the upholstery of her boyfriend's car. Her limbs are buzzing with intoxication, with the drinks he bought her, one after another until she could no longer keep up. He tells her to be quiet. He tells her that this is natural, this is supposed to happen, this is what they were created to do. And she is powerless to stop him. It is not her place, he says. So she leaves tracks of lipstick across his backseat, a silent rebellion. If she's not found tomorrow, this lipstick will remain. I am here, it says. I am here. I AM HERE.

Adam drops her off at home. He will be back again to pick her up tomorrow. He drives away before she can tell him no.

Somewhere in America, a light goes out in a gas station bathroom. Come sunrise, Gabriel will be found. And,

just after eleven in the morning, the news will be brought to his roommates. He is no longer the messenger, no longer the busboy. In the morning, he will be wiped from existence. Tonight, however, he is ethereal, slumped on the floor of a public restroom, decorated in copper streaks and black fabric. His delicate hands clench around plastic as death sets in. Come morning, syringes will crunch under heavy boots. He will be ruled a tragedy by some, a statistic by others, a good for nothing who deserved it by a tragically vocal few. But tonight, he is peaceful.

Under florescent lights, he sleeps.

Somewhere in America, Raphael's shoes stick to dirty tile floors. He pays no mind to the surroundings. Alcohol is sweet on his lips, fire in his veins, tearing through him. Hands on bodies, chests to chests, he dances. He is here for joy. Strangers hold his hair back as he kneels in the bathroom, emptying his stomach and filling his nose. He will never see these people again.

He tells each and every one that he loves them.

He walks home that night with his underwear in his back pocket. The next morning, he stands at his father's elbow in church. He is able to recite every line. They drip from his mouth like poison. In time, he will be choked out. For now, he is young, and he is damaged, and he is free.

Somewhere in America, Myriam sits alone in the window seat of a bus. She is young; too young to be so afraid, too young to be abandoned, too young. All she carries is a backpack and a wallet. She didn't have time to collect her belongings before she was chased from her home in a blaze of angry words and flying fists. Her nose has yet to stop bleeding.

Protecting him was all she could think to do. Created in a moment of divinity, in the unholiest connection, making art of her and Joseph. She crosses her arms over her stomach. In the morning, she will reach her destination. She does not

know exactly where that is. But tonight, she finds comfort in the heartbeats within her.

Somewhere in America, Mary Magdalene lies broken in a motel room. Her head meets her shoulder at the most unnatural of angles. Her clothing is ripped and dirty. The police who discover her will scoff amongst themselves, saying it was only a matter of time. There will be no sympathy. Her purse, upturned on the bed, will spill the secrets she never wished to have. There is no money, and her latest clientele didn't leave any.

In three weeks, she would've paid off her student loans. In three weeks, she would be able to quit this gig and do what she loved; she'd be free and clear. Now she is eternally preserved in time, in the bloodstains on a hotel carpet, in the fingerprints on her neck. When the police tell her mother, she will be buried in a pauper's grave. She was promising. She is gone.

Somewhere in America, Nazareth sinks into the sea.

Somewhere in America, Eden burns.

## Poetry by Jessica Mehta

# Baila Morena

It wasn't all bad. I remember the good, and it wasn't in the big moments (it never is). The year *en Moravia* whipped me raw with the scaling Tico Spanish, the dirty buses and whistles trailing from scooter saddles. But that quiet day the rain twisted my locks into a frenzy and pressed the cotton closer to your heart than I ever got – that

is our Costa Rica. Tucking into *casadas* while the *queso* vendor across the street shouted *palmito* specials to the downpour. *¡Aqui solo calidad le vendemos!* The flies hugged us close in the tiny soda shop while *Baila Morena* lulled us all into a stupor deeper than Imperial could ever muster. We knew the *palmito* in the city would never compare to the fresh wonder balls sold in huts papered with banana leaves along the winding rainforest back roads. You knew I was already half gone by the urgency of my swallows. And I knew it would take years shrouded

in a different love,  
a different life,  
to ever listen to that song again.

# Fiction by Linda McMullen

## Millennial Gothic

Four years of high school doing my homework and refusing joints, four years of college writing my papers and refusing boxed wine and hooch, and here I am.

Seven years into our marriage, Greg and I have checked every box but one:

- Not divorced
- Still like one another
- Still having sex (weekly, mostly missionary, occasional variations)
- Fidelity (both)
- Successful career (mine, as a fundraiser at a nonprofit)
- Successful career (his, as an auditor)
- Hobby (I sing with a women's group)
- Hobby (he plays in a recreational football league in the winter, and softball in the summer)
- Monthly date night at non-chain restaurant
- Twice monthly drinks or dinner with friends
- Church participation (better than Christmas and Easter)
- Ability to humble-brag about being "busy" on Facebook or otherwise
- Home ownership/mortgage
- Picket fence (white)
- Dog (border collie: Shadow)
- Baby

I have no desire to upend our yuppies-in-the-Washington-suburbs idyll, and Greg says the same. I'm only twenty-eight, he is thirty-one – and to their credit, our parents raise

the subject only once annually (mine, in Grand Rapids, immediately after the Lions blow their lead during the Thanksgiving game; his, in Cleveland, after day drinking through Christmas).

I'm concentrating on the other boxes. At work, Esther is finally thinking of handing in her Rolodex (at which point I will enter her extensive contacts into the CuteName contact management database). I'm thinking of taking up running. I'm auditioning for a solo –

No, it's not "Memory" from Cats.

Yes, it *does* involve Andrew Lloyd Webber.

So sue me.

I accidentally close the refrigerator door on my hand when Greg says, "What would you think about going somewhere new?"

He might have asked if I'd like to go bungee jumping or skydiving. I understand, intellectually, that people do such things. "Why?"

"Well . . . Chris and Melanie are moving to Denver."

Chris suffered through eight undergraduate accounting courses with Greg, who now works for a rival firm. "Chris and Melanie enjoy skiing and recreational marijuana use." (Not simultaneously.) "I'm sure they'll love it."

"Chris says Melanie's mom isn't doing well. They're going home."

"I'm sorry. But what . . . I mean, why does that suggest us moving?"

"Well . . . our parents won't be around forever."

"Well . . . no. But . . . is there something specific?"

"No . . . just –"

"There's a reason we only spend Christmas with them." *Not unrelated to the day drinking.*

"I know."

"If you want to see your parents, we could visit. Veteran's Day weekend is coming up."

"I've got a game."

I raise my eyebrow.

He draws an invisible tally mark in the air.

At work, six months of discussions with Mrs. Annabel Douglass crystallize; I secure a legacy donation. When she takes her last leave, our organization will be able to provide emergency medical care to the tune of two million dollars. This negotiation – though not on par with the Peace of Westphalia or the sale of an NBA team – involved an equal amount of delicacy, as it's essentially “Can we have your money when you die?”

Warm congratulations from my boss, Anne. A discreetly poisonous look from Esther (who ran afoul of Mrs. Douglass three decades ago at a cocktail/key party gone awry) so I know I've succeeded.

I feel very tired, somehow.

I post a self-effacing/humble-braggy vignette on Facebook anyway.

When I get home, Greg dutifully says “Hey, that's great!” When it is no longer rude to change the subject, he says, “What if I got a tattoo?”

“Hard pass.”

Tonight we're going for Vietnamese.

“What about Bobby Van's instead?”

There are some fine lines sprouting under his eyes, I suddenly notice. “Sure.” It is a chain restaurant, but a limited one.

The steaks have vermillion centers and the vegetables were smothered in European cheeses, so I'm enjoying it more than I anticipated. Then I hear, “Laura?”

I turn. I register nothing when I see her, a blonde, round-faced woman about my age, with bright green eyes. Her enthusiasm is uncurbed. “Emily. Emily Anderson. We were in a marketing class together. We did a group project on —”

“— on crisis communications,” I finish. “Right.”

Frank was hapless, Harry useless, and Elena perpetually arrived late, wearing a mink coat . . . Emily and I used to imagine backstories for her that would have shamed hardened soap-opera writers. Emily and I carried the group to an A minus.

We launch into a rote catch-up tango: I share my list. She's unmarried, working in HR, living in Adams Morgan, and is here with her uncle John, who is leaving for the airport. "You're not going to believe this," she says, "but Elena's here too. She's an actress —"

"Obviously —"

Emily nods. "She's doing a show at the Warner next week. She's Lola in *Damn Yankees*."

*Of course she is.* "I'd like to see that."

Emily shrugs. "Do you want to go together?"

I didn't mean it literally. But here we are. "Sure."

"You've got an eyelash on your cheek," she says; her fingertip brushes me, a fatal butterfly's wing.

When I return to the conversation at hand, Greg says, "Old friend, huh?"

Emily and I meet at the theatre, a week later. The show is exactly what I hoped for, Elena is vampy and luminous. Emily and I go for overpriced drinks at a bar with a Washington insider-y name. To my surprise, amidst the babble of young congressional staffers three hundred minutes deep into happy hour, I say, "I should be happier."

"Why?" Emily asks, dunking her drink umbrella.

"I don't know. I . . . everything is wonderful, really. On paper." *On Facebook.* I sip my margarita. "I'm an ingrate."

"I don't think so."

She holds my gaze. Her eyes have waxed emerald as she presses her lips to mine.

A thousand contradictions rush through my mind: her lips are soft, and this is not what I meant, and she tastes

of strawberries and cream, and . . . I am married. Banal thought: I don't even know if I like girls.

I break the kiss.

“What was that?” I ask, more acerbically than intended.

She reddens, instantly. “I’m . . . so sorry.” She looks down. “I shouldn’t . . .”

*That.*

I try again; *this isn’t what I meant but her lips are wonderful* and then one of the bright young staffers wolf-whistles and we break apart.

“I’m not a lesbian,” I say.

Emily gives me a weary look.

“But –”

“But what?”

*It’s a sugar high.*

“Let’s get out of here,” says Emily. She pays the bill, hails a cab. I am nearer when it pulls up.

And she waits.

I slip in, and she follows. The red taxi glides through the alternating dark and neon patches as our hands find each other.

I see nothing of Emily’s apartment. It’s a well-appointed blur, but mostly I am enjoying the succulent pleasures of her mouth, and wondering once, impersonally, what Greg would think. She pulls closer, kisses down my neck, and every nerve in my body clatters toward her.

Emily unzips my dress partway. I am not ready but her hand is cupping my breast, and in spite of my awkward dishabille I feel, I *know* I am oh-so-desirable. She kisses down my chest and looks up. My ragged-edge breaths are all the permission she needs. I stare at her, attached to my breast, and wonder . . .

I weigh and explore her breasts as I might a honey-ripe cantaloupe. Her hand slides up along my pantyhose-clad

thigh, and somehow a yes drips from my lips.

Within five minutes I am lying on her floor, stark naked, knees splayed, as her tongue slides *there . . . THERE!*

Her neighbor bangs a mop handle above us to announce her displeasure.

I am not yet brash enough to return Emily's favor in full, but I tentatively slide my fingers into her panties, her violin-shaped figure cradled in my arms. Her symphony swells from *flautando* to *tremolo* . . .

In the weeks that follow, I reciprocate. Not every time. But I do – during long lunches, during Greg's baseball games . . . It's not for me . . . but it's worth it, for an effervescent seven-second arc . . .

Greg is enthusiastic to note that our conjugal average increases to twice a week. And he's delighted that I let him skip my performance of "Love Changes Everything". But his eyes narrow when he suggests a last hurrah with Chris and Melanie, and I say I've got plans.

"*They're leaving, Laura.*"

"I know."

And I do want to see them. I just find myself enchanted by Emily's cunning little miracles.

"You can see her another time," he huffs.

I duly put Emily off. We say farewell to Chris and Melanie at Applebee's. In the bathroom I scroll through my phone: photos of Emily tackling a climbing wall, her resplendent plate of *nasi goreng*, and a hazy sunset (#nofilter).

So I respond enthusiastically when she suggests a spa getaway over Veteran's Day weekend.

"*Laura,*" says Greg. "We're going to go see my parents."

"We talked about it. We didn't look for tickets."

"I did."

The furrow between his brows is deeper than I remember. "What's with you?"

“What’s with you, more like?” I don’t answer. “I’m going to bed.”

“Could you take Shadow out before you go?” I ask.

The vertical muscles in the back of Greg’s neck are stripper poles. Or prison bars.

He sleeps so close to his edge of the bed that he tumbles out. My phone reads 2:32 a.m.

Over Veteran’s Day weekend, we go nowhere. A thunderstorm packing sixty-five-mile-per-hour winds rips through the greater Washington, D.C. metro area, unpicketing our fence and transforming our basement into a suburban terrarium. After unlaying the carpet, Greg and I engage in paint-by-numbers sex surpassed by the mediocre Chinese takeout we get for dinner. Meanwhile, Emily went for the spa weekend. Alone.

On Tuesday, I bail on rehearsal and head to her place. She greets me in the lobby, and I am screaming her name before the elevator reaches her fifth-floor apartment.

“Esther’s retiring,” I announce, when I catch my breath. “I’ll interview.”

Emily nods, sagely. “You’d better start thinking about your greatest strengths and weaknesses.”

“They’re right here,” I say, kissing her.

“Damn it, Laura!” Greg says. “What do you mean, ‘I forgot’?”

“I meant to mail it,” I say. “I thought I put it in my purse, and then *somebody* set the new mail on top . . . and . . . here it is.”

[Cue repeat argument about switching to automatic payments.]

“The mortgage company called me at work. Via reception. And you know Connie – she whispered to Lorna before she transferred the call. I had to explain to Mike that we are *not* in financial trouble –”

“I said I was sorry. I forgot.” I use a corner of the stamped-but-unmailed envelope to scrape the dirt out from beneath my fingernail. I wish I felt happier. Or . . . felt something.

“Where the hell is your head?” He sounds more sad than angry.

“I don’t know. I miss Melanie. I’ve got that interview coming up. I didn’t get a solo this time.” *I didn’t practice.* “I just . . . did you ever think, *This isn’t what I meant at all?*”

Shadow barks.

“Why don’t you go ahead and mail that when you take him out,” Greg says, and pointedly gets a beer out of the fridge.

I swear, I meant to. But when I get home, the envelope is still in my hand.

On a Friday we send Esther off with a sheet cake and balloons, but no one thought to ask for her Rolodex. I imagine it tucked into her departure box, nestled between a half-empty box of Kleenex and a Nescafé-crusted mug.

On Monday, at work, Anne invites me into the conference room. She patiently asks me the same questions she has asked the other candidates. Maybe she listens.

“Laura, we’re going another way.” She readjusts her glasses on the bridge of her nose. “When you got Mrs. Douglass, I thought, *maybe . . .* but there’ve been a lot of afternoons lately when you’ve been hard to find.”

Have they developed an emoji for *passed over for promotion* yet?

The gas tank is just above E.

On the chilly second Sunday of December, Greg goes into the grey to tailgate ahead of his game. I text Emily. In twenty-five minutes she’s there, in my house, in wine-stain lipstick.

“I’ve met someone,” she says.

“Wh – what?” I falter, an ingénue in an unimaginatively written Gothic novel.

“Laura . . . I like you, but a jaded straight girl is not a long-term prospect. And Jordan is –”

I can’t. I simply cannot. I’m sure that Jordan is tall and lean, with a perfect pixie cut and startling eyes and over two thousand people following her edgy blog, and she can have Emily, but not yet.

I try kissing her. Her skin is warm beneath the patina of cold. I unwrap her scarf and start kissing up and down her neck . . . she shudders, and resignedly cups my breasts. It has begun to snow, I notice, as we form two piles of clothes on the floor. It’s not snowing so much as sleet. I have burgundy cupid’s-bows on my cheeks, neck, and chest. And stomach. My fingers are straining the elastic of Emily’s panties. And then we are on the floor of the living room, in that strange numerical dance of mutual pleasure . . .

... when the front door opens.

My orderly days are done.

I can’t cry.

Football was cancelled. The prematurely greying daddies in the rec league were unwilling to risk sprained ankles amidst the sleet. Also, Greg has his own list. Apparently.

- “What the hell.”
- “How could you?”
- “So are you a lesbian, now?”
- “I’ve had chances too, you know – I never –”
- “So that’s why you didn’t get the job.”
- “Or the solo.”
- “And why you didn’t come to my games.”
- “And . . .”

It doesn’t require much imagination to fill in the rest.

Suffice it to say that we found a mediator who works weekends.

We sign the papers at Starbucks.

Greg's put on a few pounds, but he says he'll work them off jogging with Shadow. He's selling the house, but he was able to buy me out.

No more lists. Just . . . strands:

*... a one-bedroom in Clarendon, two blocks from a hipster grocery and a tapas restaurant*

*... an interview for a fundraising gig with the Democratic Party next week, and –*

*... a date tomorrow, with Chris's brother Ted.*

Emily has let Jordan move in, it seems. She posted pictures of the two of them at a midnight showing of Rocky Horror. And I thought, you know, good for them. I'm surprisingly okay these days. Maybe not the hills are alive . . . good, but still . . .

...

I sprint to the CVS, fumble with my credit card, and scramble back to the bathroom in my apartment. Pry open the packaging. Place the stick beneath.

The first blue line forms.

And the second.

Oh, f –

# Artwork by Alexx Mayes

## Facets



*Photography*  
27.4 in x 17.1 in

Artwork by Jacob Kobina Ayiah Mensah  
**72**



*Acrylic and Oil on Canvas*  
225 cm x 375 cm

Artwork by Jaina Cipriano  
**Finding Bright**



*Digital Photograph printed on Aluminum  
11 in x 17 in*

Artwork by Kayla Soto  
**Audiophile**



*Acrylic on Canvas*  
10 in x 8 in

# Fiction by Robin Jeffrey Deals

Nick sat in a rocking chair by the frost-wreathed window, his shotgun across his lap. The house up in the forest, nestled above Neirhart in the Little Belt Mountains, was remote in summer. But on freezing winter nights like this one, when the road crews gave up and scurried back into their houses to keep themselves warm, the house was cut off from everything and everyone.

That had, after all, been the point.

Nick's family had lived above Neirhart for seventy years. They had watched the population decline until it settled right around sixty people. Once the original settlers had taken everything they could from the mountains, the town just dried up and the people blew away, like the tufts of a dandelion.

The rocking chair creaked under Nick as he rocked back and forth. He beat out a waltz on the stock of his gun, keeping time by the tapping of his feet. His eyes never left the window, even though the sun had set several hours ago and not a single ray of moonlight cut through the thick clouds to help illuminate the forest that surrounded the house.

“Sure do wish I knew what you was looking for, Grampa.” Liv stood just outside the living room by the front door, a large bowl held in the crook of her arm.

Nick smiled back at her, ceasing his rocking. “Maybe if you tell me what you put in those dumplings of yours, I’ll tell you what I’m looking for.”

Liv rolled her eyes, giving the milky dough another stir as she turned back towards the kitchen, her bare feet slapping against the cold wood. “And just what is the good of having a secret recipe if I go around telling everyone about it?”

Nick leaned back in his chair, his hands slapping the armrests as he laughed. "I ain't everyone, I'm your grampa!"

Liv gave a sharp tut, which echoed through all the rooms of the small, rundown house. Nick continued chortling to himself, one hand running down the worn cherry wood chair, the other firm on the butt of his gun. Shaking his head from side to side, his good humor fading with every chuckle, he considered the problem of his granddaughter. It wasn't right for someone like Liv to stay tucked away in a place like this all by herself. She was young and beautiful; she deserved a future beyond this blasted mountain. But he couldn't send her away. Not when it was all his fault to begin with. Not when this was the best way he knew to keep her safe.

Peering out into the woods, Nick waited, his eyesight still as clean as a sniper's scope. Nothing moved out in the black. The snow fell in large fluffy chunks, and showed no sign of stopping. It had been snowing for days. Nick didn't mind it though. The snow laid out a thick blanket around the yard, crisp and untouched, and it would help warn him if anything or anyone came.

He had been waiting at that window for twenty winters now. Waiting, watching, but never catching sight of his prey. Every so often, a hare would wander out of the trees, digging through the snow in search of dried roots. When the house was quiet and dark, Nick could hear coyotes moving around the edges of the tree line. He would catch glimpses of their yellow eyes, glowing against the black. They howled at the uncaring stars, ribs poking through their skin.

Nick's stomach growled. He scratched it through his heavy flannel shirt, frowning. He rolled his shoulders back against the chair; the bones cracked, and his muscles ached. He rubbed his eyes and wrestled himself up from the chair. His worn frame demanded sustenance, and if the succulent smells drifting in from the kitchen were any indication, there would be some fine cooking tonight.

Nick propped his shotgun across the arms of the rock-

ing chair and, massaging his lower back, shuffled through the living room towards the kitchen. He was about to call out to Liv, refuse to eat until she told him what was in those dump-lings, when there was a knock on the door.

Nick stared at the front door beside him. His eyes widened. He put a hand to his chest. He knew his imagination must be playing tricks on him again, as it often did during the wintertime. He had been watching out the front window for a solid two hours now, ever since the sun had set. There had been no one coming to the door; no car, no animals about in the forest, not in this weather.

It was impossible.

There was a second knock on the door.

Liv poked her head around the kitchen doorway and looked from him to the door, her brow furrowing as she sliced through the skinned baby potato in her hand with ease. “Who could that be?”

There was a third knock on the door, this one just as polite as the last.

Liv stared at Nick, her brows lifting over her pale blue eyes. “Well? Are you gonna answer it?”

Nick shook his head, his lips firming into a thin, straight line. “Can’t be no one good. Not at this hour. Not in this weather.”

“Oh, Grampa!” Liv stepped back into the kitchen to throw the potato cubes into the pot of boiling water on the stove, taking up a worn checkered tea towel to wipe her hands with as she moved back out into the entryway. “It’s probably just somebody who was trying to make it up the mountain and got stuck in the snow or something.”

Nick stepped into her path, his hands hovering over her shoulders. “What are you doing?”

Liv fixed him with a tired glare, throwing the towel over her shoulder and placing her hands akimbo. “I’m going to answer the door, of course.”

She stepped to one side to move around him. His

hands curled around her arms and held her back, a surprising amount of strength left in the flabby appendages. “Don’t. Leave it.”

“Grampa!” Liv stepped back, serious worry now beginning to crease the lines of her youthful face.

Nick released her, his gaze falling to the floor in shame. Liv crossed her arms over her stomach, glancing between her grandfather and the door again, mouth open, lips turned up into a grimace. She shook her head, soft black locks bouncing around her cheeks. “We can’t. We can’t just leave someone out there in this weather. What if they need help?”

Nick took in a deep breath and cast a glance over his shoulder at the locked portal, his eyes flickering shut. “Get back to the kitchen. I’ll deal with this.” Liv began to protest, her voice moving up into the shrill higher registers, which always reminded him of his late wife. He cut her off with a slice of his hand, taking a few careful steps towards the door. “Please, Liv! Just . . . let me handle this.” There was no movement from behind him. Nick looked back at her, his round brown eyes pleading. “Please.”

Liv stared him down for a moment, running her tongue along her front teeth. She gave a sharp shrug and strode back into the kitchen, where the angry banging of pot lids and plates assured Nick of her relative safety and her unmistakable fury.

Nick waited an extra beat to make sure that Liv wasn’t going to sneak back out of the kitchen. He hurried back into the living room, snatching his gun from its resting place before returning to the door. He cracked open the barrel, pushing both cartridges as far into the chamber as they would go, and snapped it shut again, cocking back both hammers and releasing the safety. His hands were shaking. He curled them into fists and closed his eyes. With one hand, he released the deadbolt on the front door, twisted the doorknob, and pulled back.

It was a cold gust of wind that forced Nick’s eyes

open, the chill of winter seeping into his bones like death. Standing at the bottom of the front porch's steps was a young man, around Liv's age, with thick blonde hair and a wide bright smile. He looked as if he had just been on the verge of giving up and moving on, and shuffled a few steps back towards the house, hands dropping from where they had been rubbing warmth into his arms.

“Greetings and salutations!” He gave a cheery wave, his tan skin glowing under the glare of the houselights. “I’m terribly sorry to bother you, but I seem to be lost.” The man gestured back down the drive with a wave. “My car got stuck in a drift up the way and I was wondering if I might impose upon your hospitality long enough to use your phone.”

“Phone lines are dead.” Nick took a step out onto the porch, hefting his shotgun onto his shoulder. “Have been since yesterday.”

The young man seemed to take no notice of the gun, his high voice continuing in a clipped southern drawl. “Oh, how unfortunate. Well . . .” he turned in a full circle where he stood, pulling his overcoat tight around his lean frame. “My vehicle is quite immovable, and it would take me well over an hour to walk back to town in this inclement weather.”

The man smiled up at Nick, shivering. Nick said nothing, sliding his hand into his pants pocket and staring back at him. The man’s smile shrank slightly, his brows lifting over his eyes as he let out a mirthless laugh, leaning back on his heels. “I’m afraid that I underestimated the reports of your harsh Montana winters and dressed rather foolishly tonight. I would hate to freeze to death during the walk back to civilization, you understand.” He shifted where he stood, stomping his feet against the ground, already buried in at least eight inches of snow. “Would it be at all possible for me to take temporary shelter in your lovely home?”

“Of course you could.”

Nick jumped at the sound of the screen door thudding shut behind him. His gun came down off his shoulder as he

turned to stare at his granddaughter, who had come out next to him on the porch, towel still hanging over one shoulder. "It'd be our pleasure. Wouldn't it, Grampa?"

The sideways glare Liv shot him broached no argument. Nick's jaw tightened, his lips beginning to tremble under the strain. But he said nothing, hung his head in a nod and stepped back from the door.

The young man jogged forward, the thick snow clinging to the bottom of his brown trousers as he ran. He mounted the steps two at a time, his smile so wide it practically took over his face until it was nothing more than a smooth brown plane with teeth. "Why thank you, miss!" He slid in between them, drawing the screen door back and shivering even more violently at the promise of heat. "I am eternally obliged to the both of you."

Liv followed him in, Nick shuffling behind as he clicked the safety back onto the shotgun. Nick moved towards the living room, his eyes sharp and watchful. The visitor was even handsomer in this light, his skin smooth and sepia colored, his blonde hair turning dark in places where the snow was melting into it. His eyes were a cool mossy green and sat above his aquiline nose and plump lips like candied icing on a gingerbread man.

When the man turned to look at her, Nick saw a blush rise up into Liv's cheeks. She smiled back at him, gesturing into the house. "We have a fire going in the living room if you'd like to warm up a bit."

The man nodded, shrugging out of his snow-caked jacket and fumbling with the knot of his thin cotton scarf.

Liv tutted at him, waving her hands. "Here, let me take those."

He passed her his coat and other winter wear with a soft thank you, his eyes intent on her face. She rolled the coat over her arm and smiled again, and Nick realized it might have been the first time he'd really seen her smile in the past nine months, since her husband had died in the war.

“Dinner will be on in a little while,” Liv said. “You’re more than welcome to join us.”

“Such a generous offer!” The man took a deep breath in through his nose and gave a pleased sigh, shaking his head. “And it smells wonderful, truly.”

Liv waved a hand at him, leaning back and grinning. “It’s not much, really, just a chicken and dumpling stew I make.”

The man’s smile widened a tick as his eyes flickered down her frame. “I am eagerly looking forward to it.” He leaned forward in a bow, his hand extended. “Adam Kane is the name.”

“Liv, Liv Acker,” she said, shaking the man’s hand with an eagerness that made Nick’s teeth grind. “This is my grandpa, Nick Cartwright.”

Adam turned on his heel and straightened, his hand still outstretched. “Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Nick looked at the hand with severe misgivings. He scowled, refusing to meet the other man’s eyes as he gestured into the doorway at his left with the barrel of his gun. “Living room’s through there.”

Adam cleared his throat and withdrew his hand, glancing over his shoulder to give one final nod to Liv before passing through the doorway, where the fire could still be heard crackling in the grate.

When their guest had disappeared into the living room, Liv turned on her grandfather, taking the towel off her shoulder and swiping at him with it. “What are you doing, waving that shotgun around like that? Do you want to make him feel unwelcome?”

Nick clutched the gun tightly in both hands, holding it up to his chest as if it was a beloved pet. “He ain’t welcome.”

Liv took in a deep breath, closing her eyes as she moved her free hand across her forehead and squeezed. “Grampa,” she threw the towel back over her shoulder and

started towards the kitchen. “I know you like your privacy, and I know I haven’t been the most social person since I moved in here. But we aren’t hermits, you know.” Liv paused in the doorway, looking around the minuscule kitchen she had come to know very well. “Some company will do us both good.”

“We don’t know anything about him, Liv,” said Nick, casting a wary glare into the dark room behind him. Nick closed the distance between himself and Liv with a few hurried shuffles. He lowered his voice to an emphatic whisper. “He could be anyone.”

Liv threw her hands up in the air, spinning around and hissing at him through clenched teeth. “Well, why don’t you go in there and find out?”

Nick seesawed backward, his hands clenching and relaxing around his gun. Liv threw a handout at him, tossing her hair back out of her eyes, a deep frown making her look about ten years older than it should. “Go on, get! I’ll call you when supper’s ready.”

She disappeared back into the kitchen with a huff, mumbling under her breath. Nick hovered around the entryway, fear clouding his judgment, dulling his senses like a sedative. A small part of him was hoping that maybe Liv was right: Adam was just a traveler, someone who’d been stuck in the snow. But the larger part of him, the gut instinct that ran down into his bones, told him that this is what he had been waiting for all these years.

Nick stepped towards the living room doorway, the darkness sucking at him like quicksand. He paused on the threshold of the dim room, allowing his eyes to adjust to the black rather than flip on a light. It seemed wrong to do such business under clear white bulbs. The dancing orange tongues of light from the fireplace were much more fitting, even as the sound of them made him shiver.

Adam had pulled the wooden and leather chair away from the far wall. He was perched on the edge of the crudely

patched cushion, his body curled towards the fireplace, slim hands extended towards the flames. He had his feet propped up on the thick brick shelf upon which the grate sat and was humming to himself a high, grating sound.

“Better?”

Adam turned at the sound of Nick’s voice, straightening in his seat and fixing a wide grin on his face. The stranger seemed unable to commit to any expression in between blank and riotously amused. “Quite revived, thank you, sir! Or shall I call you Nick? Short for Nicholas, is it?”

Nick gave a grunt, moving through the room with his shotgun held down in one hand. He began to drag the rocking chair away from the window and towards the fire to join his guest, who was chattering on, his hands pulling back from the fire’s warmth for a moment to undo the buttons at his cuffs. “Well, Nicholas, I must admit I am not acclimated to this kind of weather. Where I come from things are much, much warmer; almost perpetually so.”

Nick nodded and lowered himself into the rocking chair, his joints cracking and groaning with more resistance than usual. “And just where are you from, Mister Kane?”

“Please, Nicholas, Adam is fine.”

Nick shifted in his seat, his jaw clenched so tight his gums began to ache from the pressure. He took in a deep breath through his nose and tried again. “Where are you from, Adam?”

“The very deep south.”

Nick could hear the smug smirk in the response. His hands seized around one another when he met Adam’s cool green eyes, cool even in the flickering light of the fire. Adam gave a silent chuckle, his body shaking with suppressed mirth. He drew a hand back through his hair as he relaxed fully into his seat, like a cat preparing for a long overdue nap. “I don’t often get up to this side of the world, it’s a rare pleasure. Even in the cold.”

Nick swallowed again, rocking back and forth in his

chair, trying to draw strength from the simple, comforting motion. The room grew very quiet. A log, burnt through in the middle, cracked and split in the fireplace, falling down into the ashes below with a shudder. Nick brought a hand up to his face and rubbed his forehead, his eyes screwing shut as if they could block out the very fabric of reality itself. He let out a sharp breath and leaned forward, grabbing at the ash coated poker with one hand and jabbing it into the fireplace.

“Just how long are you gonna keep this up, son?”

Nick waited to see how Adam would respond before turning to look at him. But Adam did not respond, which only sent Nick’s heart plummeting down out of his throat and into his stomach. Nick leaned back from the fireplace and resumed his seat with a tired air, not wholly manufactured, and then turned his eyes onto the young man next to him.

Adam stared at him, brows held high over his eyes, his elbows resting on his knees as he leaned into the heat. He licked his lips, blinking slowly, and rolled his shoulders back. He scratched at his jaw. “Well, I was planning on carrying the charade at least through dinner, keep you at ease as long as I could.” He yawned, stretching his arms high up over his head before dropping them down between his legs once more. “But if you’d prefer we dispense with the pleasantries, Nicholas, I’d be only too happy to comply.”

Nick could feel his heart racing, could feel terror threatening to close his windpipe and leave him wheezing. But he had faced down grizzlies in the mountains and charging antelopes on the plains, and he was well versed in controlling his fear. He tamped down on the instinct to cry out, stopped himself from standing up from the chair and running out of the room, even managed to keep the tremor out of his voice when he spoke. “So, it is you.”

Adam rolled his eyes and dropped his feet to the floor with a thud, standing. “Well, who else would it be?”

Nick stared into the fireplace for a long time. Adam stood on top of the shelf, turning his back to the fire and

shaking out the bottom of his pant legs, intent on getting them dry.

“I ain’t done nothing wrong.”

Adam’s lips twisted into a smirk. His chin dropped to his chest and he shook his head. “Nothing?” He bit down on his bottom lip, rolling up his shirtsleeves before continuing. “I find that very hard to believe. It’s in your kind’s nature to do so, isn’t it?”

“I meant –”

Adam stepped down from the brick, loosening the knot of his tie with a frown. “I know what you meant, Nicholas. My little joke, you’ll have to forgive me. The clean air is going to my head.”

Nick’s head fell into his hands. He began to shake. He could feel wetness around the edges of his eyes. He rolled his head from side to side, fingers pushing against the thin skin at his temples. “This isn’t fair. I didn’t make any damn deal with you.”

Adam watched him for a moment before crossing to the broad windows at the far side of the room. He leaned his forearm up against the window frame and peered out into the dark forest, words clicking off his tongue like keystrokes on a typewriter. “The Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and truth; who keeps kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.” Adam turned from the window, a broad smile leaving his gleaming white teeth bared, catching the light of the fire in a hideous way, “yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”

Adam held his hand flat against his chest and shook his head. “We don’t make the rules, Nicholas. We merely see them through to their conclusions.”

Tilting his head to one side, Adam’s sharp eyes sliced across the room from Nick to the doorway, where the sounds

of dishes being set on a table began to echo. His smile softened, and there came a breathiness to his tone that made Nick's hair stand on end. "Does your lovely granddaughter know anything about this yet?"

Nick surged to his feet, unashamed of the tear tracks that wound down his cheeks. With two clicks, both barrels of the shotgun were primed, and Nick's aim was steady on the center of Adam's chest. "You stay away from her. She doesn't have anything to do with this."

Adam strolled towards the older man; his eyes fixed on the doorway. "That won't kill me, you know." He drew his dexterous fingers up the barrel as he passed, pausing just next to Nick. "And you're hardly in a position to give me orders."

"You've come to collect, ain't you?" Nick dropped the barrel down to the floor, anger and adrenaline surging through him in a potent combination. "Well then let's go, let's get it over with! Why hang around here?"

Adam began to laugh, slipping his hands into his trouser pockets as he turned back from the living room door. "Oh Nicholas, Nicholas, your enthusiasm is heartwarming, it really is. But there are procedures to be followed, rights and rituals to be observed. I don't want to bore you with all the red tape." He shrugged, letting out a breath through his nose as he turned back to the door, staring through it with all the eager anticipation of a child. "Besides, I'm quite looking forward to dinner. Damned souls make meager fare indeed. I can't remember the last time I had a decent meal."

Nick glanced around himself. He dropped his shotgun against the rocking chair and drew his hands down his front, his lips beginning to tremble again. He took in several quick, shallow breaths, feeling like he was drowning in heat already. "Please. Please, there has to be something, anything I can do or say to make —"

"She recently lost her husband, didn't she?"

Nick looked up to see Adam standing in the doorway. Nick moved to join him, not wanting to let the creature out of

his sight for an instant if he could help it.

Liv strode back and forth across the open kitchen doorway on the other side of the house, moving things from one counter to the next, getting out silverware, putting out pitchers of cold water and some beers. Adam was watching her, one hand rubbing at his chest and neck as if he was seeking to comfort himself with caresses. He shook his head from side to side, taking in a deep breath. “Loss. You can smell it coming off of her like perfume: the sweet scent of barrenness and longing. It’s . . .” His fingertips stilled at his throat, his eyes flickering shut. He took in another deep breath and shivered.

“. . . oh, it is indescribable.”

“I told you to —”

“And I told you not to give me orders, Nicholas.”

There was anger in the young man’s voice, real anger for the very first time. It licked at Nick like a lash and forced him back against the doorframe with a jolt.

Adam’s stare bored into him, the contempt in his grimace momentarily cracking the suave, sweet façade he had invented for himself. He regained control soon enough, the grimace softening into a bored frown as he strode back into the living room towards the fireplace, his hands jammed into his pockets. “You have no power over the likes of me. It’s that kind of thinking that got your family into this mess in the first place.”

Adam stared into the fire, allowing himself to get lost in the all too familiar glow. “You humans, you go through your lives wanting so much so badly. It’s as if you’re born starving, and everything you consume just makes you emptier, hollower. Hunger pains so intense they make you writhe.” His shoulders rose and fell, and he turned, growling in exasperation. “It makes things so terribly simple! Don’t you see? I don’t enjoy this. It’s like winning at darts against a blind man. The outcome was decided before the game even began, there’s no sport in it.”

Nick opened his mouth to respond when Liv's voice cut through the air.

"Come on in, dinner's ready!" Her voice brimmed with anticipation and joy. It made Nick's heart ache.

"Such a lovely girl." Adam smiled, but did not turn away from the fireplace. "She really does deserve someone who can make her happy, don't you think?"

The words hung in the air like frosted breath, like an icicle dangling on the edge of a drainpipe. Like a threat. Nick stared at his shotgun. He only had Adam's word that it wouldn't kill him. Maybe . . .

With inhuman swiftness, Adam was at his side, his arm slung around Nick's slumped shoulders. "Come now, Nicholas!" Adam laid a hand flat against Nick's chest and Nick's heart quite literally skipped a beat. It was agony. "If it's going to be your last meal you might as well enjoy it, that's my motto."

With no strength left to resist, Nick let himself be led from the living room and into his own dining room. As they entered, Liv was placing a large ladle into the enormous pot of chicken and dumpling stew that sat in the middle of the small table. Nick noted that she had pulled in an extra chair from the kitchen and sat it at the opposite end of the table, and Adam gravitated toward the odd chair out without pausing.

He stood behind the seat, sniffing like a bloodhound and examining the table as if a feast lay spread before him.

"Ah, you can tell that everything was made with so much love."

Liv untucked her black curls from behind her ears as she bounced into her seat, preening. "Oh, well, thank you, Adam! But you might change your mind when you taste it."

Adam folded himself into his rickety chair with serpentine grace. "How could anything that smells that good, taste like anything less than manna from heaven?"

Nick ate in silence, though Adam, he thought, talked

enough to count for a whole army of people. He and Liv got on splendidly throughout the whole meal, which was as delicious as it had smelled, with Liv talking a little about her life as a military wife and Adam able to speak intelligently about all the places she and her husband had lived in their many deployments and relocations.

Nick focused on every bite of food and every sip of beer. The sound of ice cubes clinking in his glass. The way steam wafted over the stew pot. Had he never noticed that the pot was that particular shade of blue?

After dinner, Adam helped Liv clear the table. Nick retreated to the living room. He put his gun away in its usual corner and sat again in the rocking chair, staring at the dying fire as he listened to Adam and Liv cluck and joke with each other. Adam attempted to help Liv with the washing up, but she ushered him out of the kitchen with her protestations that it just wasn't right for a guest to do such a thing. Soon, he stood in the doorway of the living room, smiling his toothy smile.

"Well, Nicholas," said Adam, rolling down his shirt-sleeves as he walked into the room. "I can certainly understand why you're reluctant to leave. Fine cooking, cozy fireplace," he tossed his head back towards the kitchen, his smile widening. "Sweet little woman wandering around the house, making it a home . . ." With a contented sigh, Adam retook his chair by the fire. "Yes, you've certainly carved out a paradise here on earth."

Nick just stared at him, board straight in the rocking chair, his jaw set. "When do we go?"

The bored expression crossed Adam's face again and he propped his feet up on the grate. "Well, midnight is strictly traditional – the witching hour and all that."

"You gonna hang around all that time?" Nick snarled. Anger was the only respite he could find from fear and he was relishing it. "Ain't you got anything better to do?"

"Absolutely nothing." Adam leaned forward, hands

clasped over his chest and said, “Don’t you want to try and bargain with me? Make a deal?”

“Way I understand it, that’s why I’m in this mess in the first place.”

“Hmm, yes. The first Mr. Cartwright was a somewhat foolish man, it must be said.” Adam collapsed back in his seat. “But he had a keen eye for deals.”

“Deals? All that gold and silver he –” Nick jabbed his finger at the young man sitting beside him, scowling. “– you plucked out of these hills, and he still died poorer than a church mouse!”

“Not those kinds of deals.”

It was the flatness of Adam’s words that cut through Nick’s righteous indignation. He stopped and glared sidelong at him for a long moment before he leaned back in his chair, setting it rocking. “What you driving at, son?”

Adam made no answer. Nick sucked at his teeth and waved his hand. “Say it – I’m a hell-bound man, don’t have much patience for pussyfooting around things.”

“What . . . exactly did your daddy tell you about your family legacy?” Adam held his hands out to the dim embers of the fire, which seemed, to Nick’s eyes, to glow in response to his proximity. “I mean, what details did he impart to you on his death bed?”

“Told me how old Zebadiah Cartwright was a greedy, vainglorious man. Made a deal with a passing traveler for all the gold in this here mountain. Ever since then, any Cartwright wants to live past sixty-six, they have to outfox you.” The bile rose in the back of his throat, and Nick resisted the primal urge to spit. “Seeing as how you come for us. Hunt us down like dogs.”

“So, he lied to you.” Adam rolled his eyes and then muttered. “They always lie.” Clearing his throat, he scooted to the edge of his seat and clasped his hands between his knees. “Your father left out one crucial detail from his story, Nicholas, one your kin have always seemed to leave out, which

is this: I always come during the sixty-sixth year. Always.”

Nick was a simple man. But he was not a stupid one. The wheels in his head were whirring as he listened to the stranger, and he finally managed to croak out, “But . . . but my daddy lived to be seventy-eight.”

“Yes, he did.” Adam stood and walked over to the window where Nick had held his yearly vigils, looking out passively over the snow-covered wilderness, though what he could see of it in the pitch-black night Nick couldn’t fathom. “I believe you were living in a place called Cheyenne the first time I met your father. With a wife and some kids, I recall him telling me.” He chuckled. Nick shuddered. It was as if someone had dropped a handful of snow down the back of his shirt. “Do you really think there’s any way to outrun me, Nicholas? I come for you when I want to, and nothing can keep me at bay. Except . . .”

Nick let out a moan. His head dropped into his hands. “A deal.”

Adam turned away from the window, smiling. “Correct. And every Cartwright since the second Cartwright has made that deal.” He walked and stood next to Nick. He rested a smooth, warm hand on the older man’s shoulder. “You could live out the rest of your natural life, Nicholas. No need to come with me tonight. Eventually,” Adam wagged a finger, “eventually you will come with me, but that could be in another twenty, thirty years! Think about that.”

Shoulders shaking with suppressed emotion, Nick couldn’t bring himself to move. He mumbled into his hands, “What’s it going to cost me?”

“You? Nothing.” Adam patted Nick’s shoulder and moved past him in the dying light. “Your granddaughter on the other hand . . .”

Nick jerked to attention, his jaw slack and his brown eyes wide with horror. For a moment he couldn’t speak.

“You . . . you want me to trade her for me?”

“Well ideally it would be your son or daughter, but you

haven't got any of those left, so yes." Adam pulled at his collar, rolling his eyes at Nick's incredulous expression. "Come, come; your father did it. There was moaning and weeping but he did it, Nicholas. It's why I'm here." Adam shrugged. "She'll have the same chance that you have now, you know. Provided she has children, which of course, I'll arrange. I can arrange an awful lot, Nicholas. What do you say?"

Nick stared into the remains of the fire. He had been dreading the arrival of this day, of this night, of this moment, for a good portion of his life; and now, without warning, a reprieve was being offered. A reprieve and the knowledge, burning through him like acid, that he had been offered up by a man who should've protected him, given over to this fate in exchange for a few extra years of living. Why shouldn't he do the same?

There was a clatter and sloshing from the kitchen. Nick closed his eyes.

"I've been waiting for you for years," said Nick quietly. "And all I could do was wait. Living my whole life sitting by that window. Afraid to talk to people because they might be you. Years of my life, knowing that you were coming for me."

A wide smile spread across Adam's face until there was almost no face left. "I come for everyone, Nicholas."

"No." Nick stood. He closed his hands into fists and felt strong for the first time in years, for the first time since his own father had passed all those years ago. "Not Liv. You don't get to come for her."

Brushing past a dumbstruck Adam, Nick stepped out into the entryway, retrieving the man's jacket and scarf from the peg where it was hanging while grabbing hold of his own heavier winter gear with his other hand. He stood on the threshold between the two rooms and thrust Adam's things at him, staring him down.

"Let's go. Now. I'm ready."

"First man to turn me down in three hundred years."

Adam's voice was hushed, his accent muted in his near whisper. With a full body shiver, he strode across the room, hand outstretched. "I'd like to shake your hand, sir."

Caught off guard, Nick shoved his own coat up into the crook of his arm and took Adam's outstretched hand. He was surprised by the firmness of the other's handshake and the grimness he saw in his face.

After a moment, they broke apart and Adam took a step back, sliding his hands into his pockets and looking at the toes of his leather shoes. "We don't have to go now. As I said, midnight is —"

"I reckon I'm done with waiting." Nick shook the coat and scarf out to him again.

With a heavy sigh, the younger man took his things, shoulders falling. Nick got the distinct impression that he was disappointed and took some solace in that.

Without waiting to see if his traveling companion would follow, Nick turned and walked to the kitchen, throwing his coat on as he moved. There he found Liv much as she had been at the beginning of their evening, the worn dishtowel slung over her shoulder, a sink of foamy dishwater behind her as she knelt to replace the stew pot in a lower cupboard.

"Liv, honey," said Nick as he buttoned the final snap of his winter coat, silently memorizing every inch of his granddaughter's face. "We're going out to get some things from Adam's car."

"Things?" Liv straightened up and wiped her hands down the front of her thighs, worry crossing her heart shaped face like a cloud across a blue sky. "Grampa, in this? It's pitch black out there."

"We'll be careful." He pulled her in for a tight hug but quickly let her go, pulling back to place a weathered, worn hand on her cheek and stare into her dark eyes. "Now, you know I love you, don't you sweetheart?"

She gave a strangled laugh and placed her own hand over his, shaking her head a little as she said, "Course I do."

“Good. Then it wasn’t for nothing.”

He looked over his shoulder and there was Adam, coat buttoned and scarf tied in an immaculate knot at his smooth, white throat. Adam smiled and gestured to the front door as if to say, ‘you first’. Nick swallowed and with a nod, he started forward and opened the door. The cold air seeped in like a fog, and with it came the silence of the snow-covered wood, and the darkness of the moonless night as it pooled around his feet like black water.

But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t resist one last thing. Nick looked over his shoulder at his granddaughter, his last living relative, and smiled. “Don’t you stay up here forever, alright?”

Liv stared at him a moment before answering, slowly and uncomprehendingly, “. . . alright?”

His smile shook at the edges, but he hoped she couldn’t see. Couldn’t see the tears beginning to prick at the edges of his vision. Couldn’t see the way the color was draining from his face.

“We’ll be back soon.”

Adam’s hand clamped down on his shoulder and pushed him that first step out the door. It was the first of many steps into the night for old Nick Cartwright, but at least he was traveling alone.

# Poetry by S. Michael Shrawder

## Memory (as a Caricature Artist)

I do not remember the light I saw  
on the day I was born.  
It must have been brilliant. There,  
in me, for the first time.  
From sheer black to ubiquitous white,  
it may have been the only time I understood  
the ephemeral line between nothing  
and everything.  
And so I wonder where memories begin.

I can remember my mother's face  
eyes swelling, in joy, in pain,  
how they both looked the same to me.  
And somehow, when I close my eyes  
and focus, it's never really there.  
Just a crooked face and a wild guess.

I can remember pushing stones  
out of my kidneys. Wide eyed,  
looking up at my ceiling.  
Two words: urethral dilation.  
Droplets of sweat formed on my face  
like unsympathetic constellations.  
I remember thinking:  
*God is real, and he hates me.*

And for what it's worth, I close my eyes  
now and cannot recreate even the slightest  
pinprick.  
I remember the first time I was bit,  
fucking with the neighborhood cats.

Running home crying, I hid in my room  
and knew something new  
about what creatures do  
when they're cornered.

And that's not even how it happened,  
because I've forgotten every detail  
but somehow kept the lesson.

# Fiction by Wm. Brett Hill

## Monochrome

“Mommy! Mommy! Help!” Zoe screamed. She sat in the middle of her bed, crumpled covers thrown to the floor, and stared, wide-eyed, around her room. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing, or more importantly, what she wasn’t seeing: colors. Gone were the reds, the greens, and the blues, every shade, every variation. The yellows, purples, and oranges were missing as well. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at her drawing of a rainbow, each stripe now a dull white.

The door to her room burst open and her mother was on her bed with her instantly, pulling her into a hug.

“I know, petal, I know. It’s the same for me. It’s the same for everyone,” her mother explained.

“But how? How is it all gone? What’s wrong with my eyes?” Cried the girl.

“I don’t know, Zoe. No one knows,” answered her mother as she cradled her head to her chest and stroked her hair. “I’ve been listening to the radio and watching the news, and everyone thinks they know but no one does.”

Zoe rubbed her eyes hard, hoping for the multi-colored sparkles that usually came to show on the black background, but she only got white, like static on a late-night screen. She looked up at her mother’s face and flinched, confused by the whiteness of her mother’s hair, and her eyes. The usual bright blue of her mother’s eyes was gone, replaced by white. It was hard to look at her, and she almost looked away when she saw the tear tracks.

“Oh, Mommy, what are we going to do?” she asked, hugging her tightly.

“They’ll work it out,” her mother answered, her voice quavering. “Someone will figure it out and then they’ll tell us what to do. In the meantime, it’s your birthday, little one.”

The usual elation Zoe felt on her birthday was as absent as all the shades of violet. How could she enjoy the streamers and balloons, the wrapped presents with their bows tied perfectly on top, the birthday cake with its kaleidoscope of candles, when there was no color? Would the cake even taste the same?

Her mother forced a smile. “No matter what is happening, whatever this is, it’s still my little petal’s tenth birthday and I’m going to celebrate. Now get up and come to breakfast. I’ve made pancakes. I think.”

Zoe slid off the bed and stared around the room. All of her friends, even Mr. Hippolufagus, stared back at her with colorless eyes. It was jarring, and she felt a little dizzy trying to take it all in.

“It’s best to keep your hand on something steady until you get more used to it,” said her mother.

Zoe trailed her finger along the wall down the hall to the bathroom, feeling all the while like she had wandered into a drawing. She desperately wanted to grab her crayons and begin coloring in everything, but she knew that they, like everything else she had seen, would be blank and white.

She looked up into the mirror as she entered the bathroom and flinched again, seeing herself with nothing to define her, nothing to make her . . . her. Sure, her hair was there, but it was pale white instead of red. Her green eyes were just as bleached as her mother’s, and she stared hard at herself wondering if, when it all came back, if it all came back, if she would return to being herself or if she would be another set of colors.

“Blue skin could be fun,” she mused, sticking her white tongue out to lick her pale lips. “And red eyes. Definitely red eyes.”

#

She found her mother sitting at the kitchen table,

a cup of steaming water in front of her and a tray of milk-white pancakes on a platter in the middle of the table.

“I tried one, just to make sure I got the ingredients right,” said her mother through a gentle smile. “I guess being a creature of habit pays off.”

Zoe took a stack and poured the milky syrup over them, wishing it to turn brown as it hit the pancakes but knowing it would not. She stared at the plate and remembered a time last year when a friend had brought some blue catsup to school, the product of a failed marketing campaign by some company, and she had tried it. Even though it had tasted exactly the same as regular catsup, she hadn’t been able to enjoy it. It just seemed off. And now she stared down at the colorless breakfast and began to cry.

“Oh, petal,” said her mother, coming over to put a comforting arm around her, but before she could say anything else the two were startled by a loud crash coming from the street outside.

Her mother looked out the front window. “They said on the radio that everyone should stay home, that driving would be dangerous because of how disorienting all of this is. But apparently some people can’t be told.”

The crash was up the street, and as Zoe opened and walked out the front door, she saw the two vehicles that had collided across the alabaster lawn. The drivers, looking like caricatures of people from this distance, argued with each other over whose fault it was, neither realizing how ridiculous they looked.

“Damn fools, if you ask me,” said a voice nearby, and Zoe saw her neighbor, Mr. Biely, leaning up against the fence that separated their well-kept lawn from his overgrown plot of land. The differences were less obvious to her now, with everything looking so pale, but even more striking was the fact that Mr. Biely, with his pale skin and already white hair, didn’t look very different at all. Only his brown eyes stood out, washed of their color.

“Language, please,” said her mother as she came out of the house.

“Shit. Sorry,” he said. The cigarette that always dangled out of the corner of his mouth was unlit, and Zoe wondered if it was because he couldn’t find a match or if they didn’t work, needing the fiery reds and oranges to make the heat.

“Mr. Biely, please,” said her mother.

“Oops, sorry again, Gail.” The man shrugged and stared down at the cars. The drivers, their argument bearing no real fruit, had returned to their vehicles and were now slowly trying to drive around each other. “Ha! I guess they don’t want to wait for the police since they’ll get a ticket for even being out in this mess,” said Mr. Biely.

“Well, I just hope they get home without getting hurt, or worse, hurting someone else,” answered Gail. She stood behind Zoe, her hands on her daughter’s shoulders, as if holding them both up.

“Mr. Biely, do you know what’s going on?” Zoe asked.

“Hell if I know, kid. I woke up this morning to all of this,” he gestured around the street. “The imbeciles on the radio don’t know anything, or at least they all think they know something. Some say it’s a gas leak messing with all of our brains. Some think it’s aliens. Some think it’s the end of days. None of them really know anything, but they all want to act like they do.”

“What do you think it is?” Asked the girl.

“I think,” started the man. He tapped his chin, looking around the yard, and the street, then up at the sky, then back at the girl. “I think it’s a mistake. I think something went wrong, and this is the result, and any moment now the universe will realize it started the day off wrong and it will reset itself and we’ll see those lovely shades of cerulean again.”

“And chartreuse,” added Zoe.

“And magenta,” offered Gail.

“That’s the spirit. Any second now we’ll hear a loud

‘Pop!’ and it will all come flooding back. All except puce. I can’t hold with puce. Ugly color. Never should have existed in the first place,” he said.

Zoe laughed and looked up at her mother, who laughed with her. For all of his roughness and casual swearing, Mr. Biely wasn’t all that bad.

They stood in silence for a good five minutes before the man straightened up and let out a loud “*harumph!*”

“Guess it might take a lot longer than a few minutes,” he said. “I’m going to see if I can’t manage to make a damn cup of coffee.”

#

They made their way, after managing to get clean and dressed for the day in what they hoped were matching clothes, downtown so that Zoe could get her traditional banana split lunch at the ice cream shop. It was tough going by foot, with perspective being thrown off so that every step held uncertainty, but they held hands as they walked and tried to talk as if it was just another day, albeit a birthday.

“I wonder if they’ll know which ones are the rainbow sprinkles and which are the chocolate,” pondered Zoe.

“I don’t know, petal, does it matter?”

Zoe nodded vehemently. “Of course it matters. It changes the whole flavor profile of the sundae if you put chocolate instead of rainbow sprinkles. And what about the syrups? What if instead of chocolate syrup they put that gross butterscotch? Bleah!”

Gail glanced at her free hand then looked away quickly. The action did not go unnoticed by her daughter.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“Nothing, Zoe. It’s nothing,” said the woman as she slid the hand into her pocket.

They began to encounter people then, all pale albino versions of their former selves. Zoe saw Mrs. Beverly, her

beehive hairdo standing straight up on her head like a pile of whipped cream. She waved but couldn't tell if the woman saw her or not, expressions being hard to read. She turned her hand around and waved it in front of her own face when she saw it, and her breath caught in her throat.

A dot, small as a sequin, stood out in the palm of her hand, dark green and lovely. She stared at it, looked away, and stared back again, willing it to stay. It did.

She wanted to shout, to race around and show everyone. She wanted to touch things and see if the color bled into them. She wanted to show the world. But then a thought occurred to her.

What if she was the only one. What if all the color in the world was gone except for the dot on her hand? Would people be jealous or angry? Would they blame her somehow, or expect her to fix everything? She didn't know what to do. She was only ten, for crying out loud.

She looked up at her mother and stopped walking, pulling Gail to a stop with her.

"Mommy, look," she said, uncurling her hand to reveal the dot.

Gail gasped, then pulled her hand out of her pocket, holding it out on top of Zoe's. A bright blue dot sat in the middle of her palm.

Zoe looked around at the wandering people and noticed that each of them, furtively, like shoplifters in the back of a store, hid their left hands from view.

She looked at her palm and then at the nearby bush and smiled, reaching out to stroke its leaves. She and her mother laughed with glee as every place she touched returned to its beautiful green state.

"We have some coloring to do," grinned Gail.

"It's like the best birthday present ever," said Zoe softly. She looked at the rose bush by the side of the path and nodded her head, her mouth set in determination.

"Alright, everyone," she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Who has red?"

## Poetry by Alex Aldred Box

How's this for a relaxation technique:  
clamp your hands over your ears  
until the blood's buzzing, bite your cheeks  
hard enough to raise ulcers,  
and shrink the world to a box.

Wherever you are – stifled sobs  
in a single bed post-panic attack,  
locked in a public cubicle  
too anxious to piss, shivering  
in the foyer of the doctor's office –

visualize all beyond these walls  
dissolving to nothing, vanishing  
into some sightless abyss.  
Render reality empty  
so only here and now exists.

It's quiet, see? Whole cities  
have been wiped out, continents  
set adrift in darkness, everything  
past your field of view obliterated.  
No more problems. Just you.

Poetry by Julieth Lara

# Maggots of the Stars

You said, mouth full of maggots  
And shards of glass, from when  
Your mother shattered a wine bottle  
Against your headache head.

That we must be more than this.  
More than our waking selves, more  
Than flesh  
And fluid  
Bathing beneath stars.

Playing the part of something that takes  
Up room. You spoke into my ear,  
There must be more than the  
Veil-thin blue of the sky, that only provides  
Glimpses of heaven, on days  
Where there is not a cloud  
Covering the sun's bright eyes

And when you see it,  
It looks exactly like everything else.  
Hallowed  
And hollowed  
And Waiting to be swallowed  
By God.

Poetry by Kegan Swyers  
**The Last Supper**

one man asked for an olive with the pit  
still inside. somewhere a child has to eat

everything off the plate before being  
excused from the table. I recall sitting

for hours, with a dull fork I mulled  
over the dreamless fruits and vegetables.

eat the earth and it eats you back. the apple  
slices. the carrot sticks. the potato skins. a mouthful

can't ask but only feels. the soil  
is the color of a closed mouth.

one man asked for a pint of a favorite childhood  
dessert – mint chocolate chip ice cream. he said

the sleepless night before being  
executed is meal enough to think

only of that cold dessert. everything is  
from the earth. eat it

and it eats you back. the banana  
splits. the lemon bars. the apple crumbles. a mouthful

can't ask but only tastes. the soil  
is the color of a closed mouth.

so one man asked for everything

with everything.

the pizza slices. the donut holes. the pork  
chops. the bacon strips. the sweet

teas. the soda cans. the beer  
bottles. the egg melts. the ribs.

I can't remember what an olive is. they told me  
as a child fruit only grew on trees

vegetables in the ground. I now  
know food by the food it surrounds.

but a single olive with the pit  
still inside just before death is

just another meal.