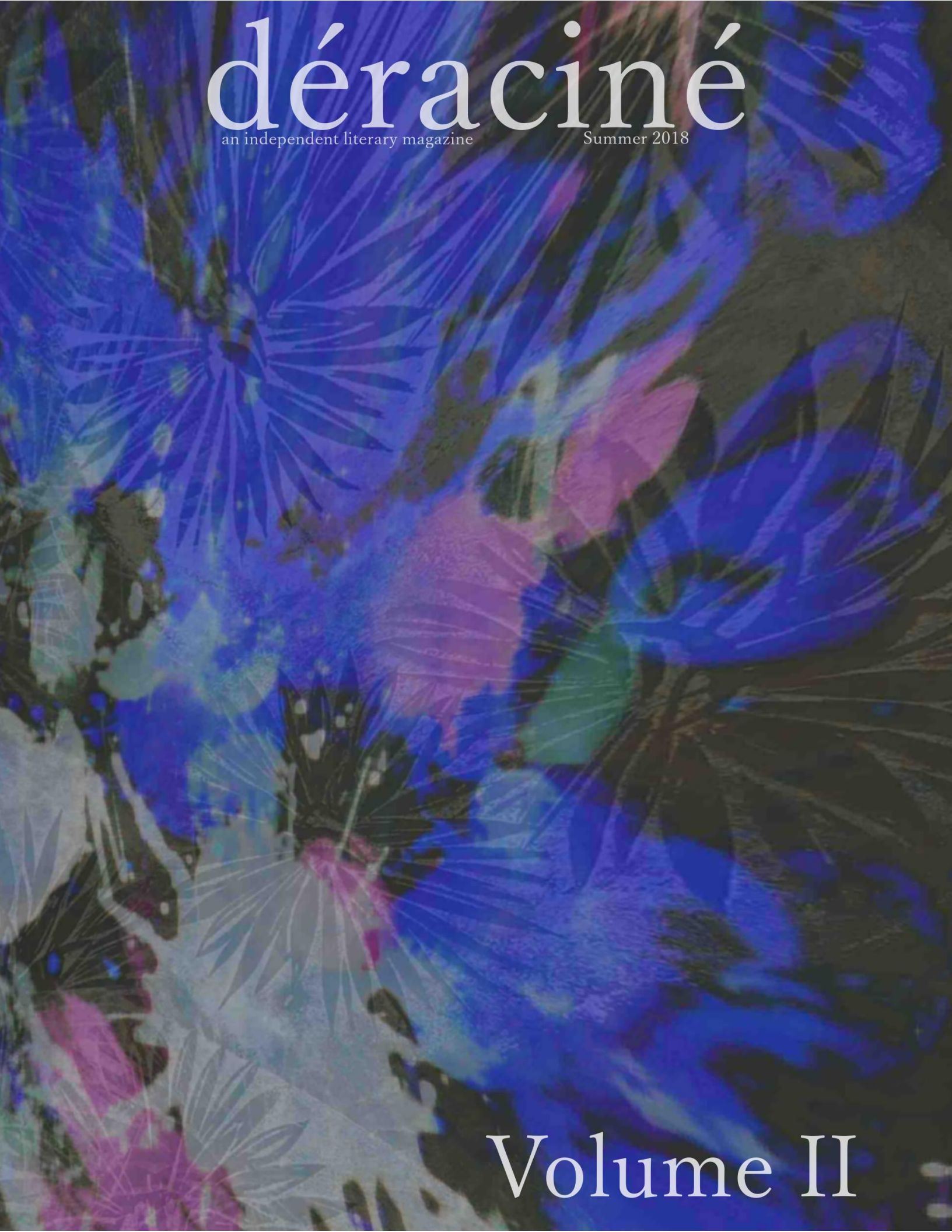


déraciné

an independent literary magazine

Summer 2018

Volume II

Déraciné

VOLUME II | SUMMER 2018

Cover art, "Fragmentation," by CR Smith

deracinemagazine.com

Contents

FICTION

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

Editors' Letters

Dear Reader,

I cannot express enough my gratitude for the wonderful feedback we had received on our debut issue last winter. Our readership and contributions have grown significantly since, and the experience has been both humbling and exciting. So, whether you are a new or returning reader, thank you so much for your interest in and support of Déraciné.

I am proud that Déraciné has continued to be a magazine created by talented contributors from all over the world—from Brazil to the United Kingdom and many places in between. We are deeply grateful for our contributors, who have generously entrusted us with publishing their powerful works of fiction and poetry. The pieces within this issue have touched, surprised, and terrified me, and I am confident you will be moved by them too.

As we move from the cold winter months into the warmth of summer, Volume II contrasts visually from our debut issue, featuring several colorful art pieces that are evocative of summer yet exemplary of our aesthetics.

Thank you again for your continued support of Déraciné. A special thank you to Yael van der Wouden and an anonymous donator for their kind generosity. Our readers and contributors are essential to our success; because of you, we have created a publication that helps writers share their unique experiences. I hope that you will enjoy this issue packed with beautiful, impactful work.

Victoria Elghasen

Editor

Dear Reader,

It truly amazes me that we have come so far in such a short period of time. This is only the second volume of Déraciné Magazine, and yet we have already hit so many milestones since we published our debut issue. From surpassing the one-thousand followers mark on our twitter to exceeding our submission cap for both poetry and fiction, the past few months have been exciting and groundbreaking. During this time, we have also had the great honour of receiving our first few donations, which allowed us to claim a custom domain name for our website. I am extremely grateful for the strides we have made and for the place we have found within the writing community.

Many wonderful works were submitted to us during this time, a staggering amount. It was a pleasure to read and view every work that entered our inbox, even the ones that will not be appearing in Déraciné Magazine.

Once again, I must thank our fantastic contributors for sharing their talent with us, for asking us to be the platform for their powerful voices, and for working alongside us as we prepared their pieces for publication. Each of you are fantastic people who make the world a little bit brighter.

I would also like to take a moment to say a special thank you to Yael van der Wouden and an anonymous donator for their kind donations.

And lastly, my deepest thanks to you, wonderful reader. Thank you for taking the time to absorb and reflect on the pieces presented in our Summer 2018 issue. I hope they will resonate with you, haunt you, and move you the way they have moved me. I am overjoyed to share each one with you.

Michelle Baleka

Editor

JENNY KETO

hearing / / loss

do you hear voices?
   shrink punctures
my pause / / dissects my
   clenched chest / / slowly
sarans pieces of my wet
   meat in plastic sheets

i hear a phrase
   shrink flicks / / *hear?*
scalpel eyes scrutinize
    razor my gaze
on guard eyes
   squeeze shards

shrink raises soft
   white flag i catch
to blot what eyes
   can't keep / / hands
pleat & pull the rag
   to find a way to speak

more like a note
   treble/triple key
someone familiar
   pleads/pleaded
something familiar
   crease/creased / / these
words—they never cease

like lips we pressed
   they punctuate my pulse
line lobes / / the home
   you left at the base of my
neck / / at the apex of legs
   & still i feel phantom limb
of what we held / / & still

i fold/unfold again/again
   along seams / / what's left
of you / / on me / / but all i can
   say leaves me like water

squeezed from a bag/my body
   through my mouth/a pin hole

 i leak what you still sing
   in me / / *his words repeat*
always the same three words
   words that he said to you?
shrink pries, leans, peers in / / *yes*
   words interned / / i returned you
 sounds like mourning

shrink offers me my pieces
   warmed by the stay in his
phantom palms / / i sigh
   release / / a smile peaks from
somewhere beneath
   the bittersweet / / i quip
where went my noon and night?
   shrink chuckles, ciphering semantics
cut clean / / a chasm between
   hearing / / / / loss.

Questions for the Ex Who Walked Off the Austonian

X
Standing on one edge
Parallel among twenty-five
Pillars steel and glass

IX
Did you remember our bodies in water naked
Asking for what we did not know Who was
The last touch And where imprinting your
Skin And when was your body last wanting

VIII
The body no longer asks
After our summer silence
Before your body silenced

VII
A question asks the sky to whisper
Man's last name only to keep his
First in the cochleae of conch shells
Left on ocean sides I walk still
Pick up slick open lips to bent ear
Listening for voices lost to hum here
In here In her & hear

VI
I remember your eyes eclipsed like dull periods:

V
What made the arc of your lips flatten to tight rope
Taut you are tension You walk on air taught
To cut a body Like a tree made into paper
You listen For your felling as a trunk falls
& lands Like a body slackened like a stone

Stays laid
to rest

IV
You mark standing at an apex
Two feet apart; a colon:
Aiming did you measure the
Distance between then and
When two points merge—

III
Did you test the matter of objects
Scale the weight of what matters

II
Paper beats rock beats scissor
Rock worn by your age smooth
Stone falls and the ripples walk
Scissors close an edge of legs that
Stride along what cuts away: blank
Paper keeps nothing but before after

I
Gravity only has one answer

[ ]
What did your last second ask?

ERIN PULSIPHER

Hide and Seek

I will hide in the root cellar
where it smells like apples
and earth, and the paint
on the door peels off in strips
if you worry it. It's damp there
and so quiet that my ears rush.
No one will find me.

I can also hide in my mouth
where it isn't so quiet—chattering
teeth clicking fogged breath
belly rising and falling.
I will hide in my cupped
hands, next to the twin M-shaped
creases: constellations predicting
that I won't find love until later
in life. It will be worth the wait.

And I will hide, hugging
my ankles in the damp of the dirt
floor, curled up near fiddleheads,
dew drop spectacles
help me see: I hid too well—
no one is looking for me now.

Period of Mourning

I hold each egg up high
and let it drop into the bowl.
I watch how it breaks.
Split on a hinge: an enamel
box, yolk expanding out.
Little golden nebulas.
I study the broken things
before I scramble them.

After breakfast I will
garden. Though it isn't
quite spring and
I am not graceful—
I am Kali Ma with
a thirty-year-old
rake: tines rusted, bent
at idiot angles.

Destroyer of worlds.
The survivors of my chore
will thrive. But before
they force their way
up through cold earth,
I will kneel and study
the broken things, and
scoop them into the trash.

Telephone of the Wind

After the Tsunami
a man moved a telephone booth
to the top of a hill
outside a coastal town in Japan.

With the ocean in sight, he made
a place, a tiny glass house to send
whispers to the dead.

Fingers feathering over numbered keys,
a phone number still comes to mind.
What is to be said?

A conch shell held up to an ear,
your first visit to the seashore.
I just need to know that you are all right.

BEN NARDOLILLI

They Call Me Decadent

At Key West, a short distance to Cuba

and bottles thrown at my head,

the people were a catamaran
and I was there to provide balance

to the shoreline and the currents
with my discontent in the sunshine.

A tiring tan and swim later,
I licked salt off my wounds and sat

under the disregard of palms
that never made me their target.

There I tried to measure the gaping sea,
and found my idea of disorder

LAUREN SUCHENSKI

Was I the little girl

Was I the little girl in the picture,
or was the picture a small prayer to the present

Was the morning ever more than the bus stop;
the frank apology to the grass

Christmas Eve we bludgeoned the side of the tree
with our family ties
and every third wish we had
was for something familiar to frame us—
Four-sided, glass-paned and coherent;
we always wanted
maybe
a marble frame—
maybe curled silver
maybe something real—a photo containing proof,
maybe evidence;
the rhythm of a family
still formed—still silly-putty-stuck together,
still youthful/gathered/standing/
Framed—nailed to the wall; firm in pixilation

Or was the picture a frank apology to the grass;
a small prayer to the present

Her World by Fabrice Poussin.

I am watching, slowly

I am watching, slowly
this little magnificence unfolding
if you could see it,
well, I'm sure you could imagine

the golden light, the sprays of green,
the splays of insect wings upon the barbed wire air
the radiance of 4 p.m. (or perhaps now it is five)
(or perhaps now it is tomorrow)

but eitherwayregardless,
I am sitting here,
and if you were sitting here
you would see, what I can see—

the sun-drenched palm of a day creasing at the edges
(folding up, for lack of a better word)
and fumbling with the clock to say
this little day is still dreaming itself into flight
(all the little insects are still flying about in golden reverie, as if this day is the only day there is)
(and perhapsmaybe, am I the one dreaming, not them?)
or is the day dreaming me,

and the bugs are still flying?
floating, knowing
something about light and something about this day
that I will never know

apparently I can't say it after all.

I can see it though.
can you?

Mumble-seed

Mumble-seed and water-growth
I am all a-plum
with something dark
stuck under my thumb

Dirt, or someone like her
wants to sit inside of my body
and grow me back to the other side
of healing

Love, or something wallowing and red
wants to vine up my spine
and curdle my brains back
to sharp-fiery-neuron-light-speed

Fire, or something hot and heavy-handed
wants to sun down on the shoulders
of all my stumbling stalks
crying this is the way—this is the way to go
to grow
upwards, outwards
and towards the
Light

CALEB LOVELACE

[this is for him, the third]

flowers will be pressed to your throat,
sweeping petals of cascading lilies, poisonous heart
drops of wisteria, droplets of violets
and wild roadside flowers peaking behind
just-throw-it-out-the-window garbage. and roses.
oh, let there be roses.

i will find cultivated stars, orange blossoms
and lemon fruits. kumquats. kudzu
threads through your veins

ripping outward, roots fractaling inside
veins and capillaries, bursting
through scratched-open wounds.

there will be dollar weeds inside your hair, sprigs of
plantain, blood sweet amaryllis thick inside
your heart. i am sorry but you made it this way.
open your mouth. milkweed interspersed
at your joints, twisting with clover
tiny leaves of three,
their pale halos the only sign from god
for you. i am sorry but he made it this way.

butterflies gather over the dead.

marigolds beneath the languid green of the
african iris, purples and bright yellows with
a shade of white that wilts beneath
the rain. i know you've forgotten their name but
they haven't forgotten you.
they grow above you,
below you, beside you, inside of you.

red hibiscus petals in the wind,
a mimic of a frantic heartbeat. yours perhaps.
elephant ears tremble, shaking their heads.
crepe myrtles are caught up, pouring white, purple, and
red, red, red.

and for you, a crown of gardenias. summer full

and heady with an expectancy of stars, tangled in with
jasmine and honeysuckles, twisting twisting
twisting — and roses. oh, let there be roses.

this (my darling) will be your death.

RAY BALL

The Valley

Light the bonfire
say the prayers
invoke the Virgin
as protection
against the screaming

witches in the night.
In the pale light
of dawn walk
the valley. Wasteland.
Abandoned
villages and lost farms

echo the emptiness
of the new forest
that has grown
instead of the grain.
No one but the gusts
of wind to ring
the bell to keep
the evil at bay.

TERESE MASON PIERRE

Dark Ecology

Arms too long to feed yourself
but you try, sweating and skin peeling
from this fire; bodies scatter
in freefall, in another kind of life
someone asked something of you
then, glimpsing your mask in
their need, you feared
a lack, a blank
space birthing into you.
How would you go on?

Now you are dead and you are
here, bodies wheezing at the bank of a black river,
water like roses and poison.
Above you, another plane of many dimensions,
too bright to conceive, too heavy to plant: nothing
grows in this dark ecology.
How could you go on?

From the corner of your eye, an arm brings food
to your face. You swat it away.

You Must Be Naked

Trips down the broken path
on the way to paradise:
not allowed to
pick up pocket stuff
that sings
to be consumed.
You must be naked

Nyctophobia

Remember it is dark underground,
and in the uterus, but unlike nyctophobia,

there is the known, no small things
to creep up on you; rather they leave a map,

which you will ignore for chemicals
and the gab of your friends.

But I suppose if something is
typed in that dark universe that

you do not understand, you will feel as if
God has spit on your face.

Just know you are the same as everyone else:
one forest, one whole population

planting seeds in the dark,
and acting surprised at what is borne.

TOM REED

fallen under the snow-blind gaze—

i am smokestack.

veiled i, vile breathe, screaming
humanity's disease out of me.
still cannot i
see.

we sit upon the gravestone of the future.

the suns turn, in greys.

J. BLAKE GORDON

cut into

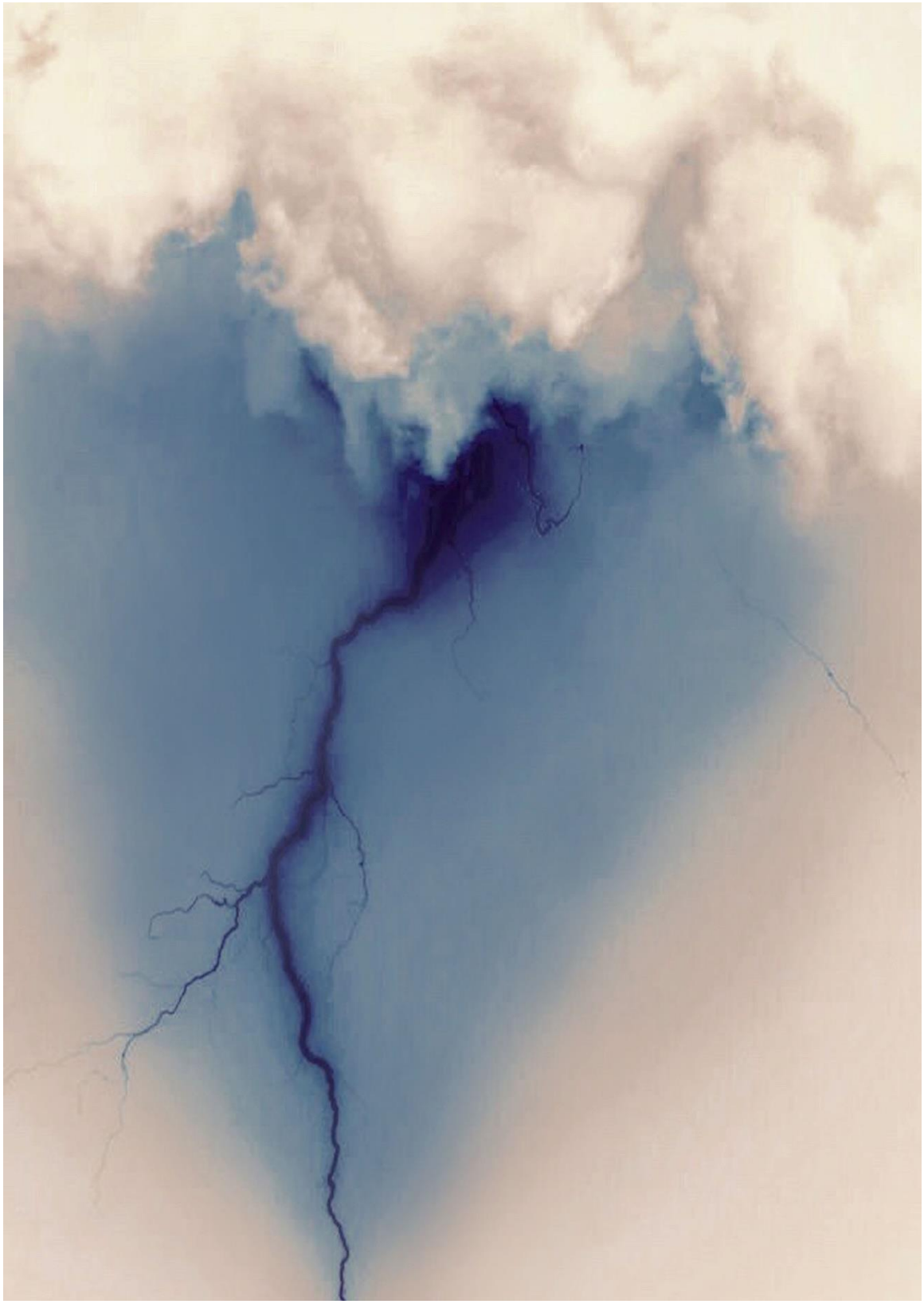
sparks in the blood
specters through the eyes

dreaming in bed
through the storm

what's fragile
    is fine

stars worried
cars stopped

in the cold
dark black



Lightning by CR Smith.

JENNIFER LOTHRIGEL

Mandorla

Somewhere between ecstasy and nothingness,
I laid in the basin of a dried fountain
next to limp colorless lotus flowers,
our bodies, an elegy to thirst.

Ancient memories of soft spinal undulation
reconciled fears of drought.

Harmony is a secret chord
made by inhaled light
as it taps the edge of each rib
on its descent into dark, physical matter.

Childhood Bones

Childhood bones
fallen from Friday's trash,
lay against the curb
for all the neighbors to see.

Play alone,
don't eat the tempting milk of poisonous leaves.

Sleep with the ghosts of
newly formed breasts and hairy legs
hovering above your bed.

You left the carcass of your unwelcomed body
at the kitchen table
and now the flies have come in
through the torn mesh of the screen door.

There are somber cream walls
longing for crayon marks all around you—

Sit still,
the dirt between the linoleum tiles is
unbearable.

Midnight Prose

Lying awake,
spinning untrue
terrors
and fantasies to mend them.

Outside my bedroom window,
a beady-eyed coyote
serenaded feathered remains,
paws side-stepping around leftovers,
picking through black feathers.

The sound of grinding bones,
and sight of disappearing flesh
bridged the gap between worlds.

Then the consumed raven,
satisfied coyote
and I
disentangled our chance karma.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Dementia Pugilistica

The last flight took off half
an hour ago, no longer a trace
of fuel on the wind. Nothing
on either side of the concrete
strip but jungle. The enemy
cannot be hurt with fists,
with guns, with prayers.
Still you shoulder your pack, look
for something that might once
have been a path, strike out
for the closest settlement.
Perhaps someone still lives there amidst
the carnage, the slaughter, the plague.

Celsus by Chris Beckitt.

TIM GOLDSTONE

Unbidden

By now all I have left to wear
are my threadbare jeans
and a Union Jack t-shirt,
a prezzie from a mate as a joke,
both of us pale and shivering

on the cold Southampton waterfront:
I laughed, called him a monster,
we saluted with a vague impression of
the stiff upper lips
we'd seen in films.
Now from my room high up
in the hostel I am standing
in front of the window
squinting over a vista
of bright white buildings
all the way to a bright blue sea
the shimmering surface sparkling
with shoals of bouncing water-diamonds
under the heavy dome of deep blue sky.
I watch the backs of my now nut-brown hands,
resting them flat, palms-down on the hot windowsill
where the breeze-block pattern shows through
a single layer of thin white paint,
and watch their warm skin become covered in
crawling tattoos while chicken wire forms
across the framed glass-less air
as unbidden the drugs from the market I ingested
twelve days ago begin to come on again
and this time I see
how far I am from home
dripping under the flares of a foreign sun
illuminating huge brown ants crawling in lines
up and down public buildings
dexterously by-passing rows
of bullet holes pockmarked into exterior walls
while down in reception a black and white TV
is showing films I recognize
dubbed into a language I don't
and as I tread unsteadily past

the khaki-clad man on the screen,
he winks at me, salutes,
and blows up a bridge
along with himself.

WANDA DEGLANE

Nothing and Everything, All at Once

There was a time before I was engulfed,
but I can no longer remember it. Before the gray,
dense cloud ate me whole and killed the sun
with its bare, murky fists.

Some days, I lie on the pitted ground,
pulling my legs up to my chest.
It's easier to breathe that way, to not
suffocate and succumb.
Other days, I feel a little braver
and I walk, aimlessly, through the fog that smells of
burning gasoline and dying too young. I call out,
Hello? Is anyone there?
as loud as my scorched lungs will allow,
and now and then I hear a muffled yell,
too far away to make out, or a hand forces its way
out of the gloom, reaching for me, but then disappears.
Most days, there is nothing but silence.

There was a time when I could see the world around me,
feel the sun that cradled me, gave me freckles,
see it all in vibrant colors. Now I see splintered,
muted pieces through fog, passing quick in front of me
before fading out of view. There is my mother, crying in her room,
trying to grasp my cold hands while I stare at her, numb
and already perished. Here is a teacher, speaking in front of
a classroom, but his words come out garbled and obscure,
more strange sounds than lecture. There is my therapist,
trying to meet my eyes while I sink deeper and deeper into her couch
and say nothing for the whole hour. And there is my room,
clothes spewed all over the floor and the furniture collecting dust,
while I lie on my bed and will myself to move. Here is my father,
trapping me in a stern, stiff gaze as he tries to disentangle
the word *depressed* from the word *lazy,* from *ungrateful.* He cannot.
There are my friends, ignoring my frantic text messages. There is
my screaming, my breaking, my hot and cold, my shaking hands

and pulse that feels like the start of a heart attack.
There are my nightmares, my sleepless nights, my lifeless days.
There is the future, my hopes, crumbling beneath my feet,
no longer visible. Here is my mind, starting
to collapse. Here is everything becoming insurmountable, impossible.
Here is everything I once loved, losing its luster. Here is feeling
in waves, feeling too much, and then not feeling at all.
Here is nothing. Here is a voice, much too far away, calling,
Where are you? We miss you so.

Come back to me.

MATEO LARA

The Loss

Papa left grief in our guts.
We stand upright, hold gazes, wait for the cut
Each eye will stare too long & too often
Which way was the way our tongues would fly
To find his language again when he was gone.

I grew up with Spanish laced between my ribs & Tagalog
Forever purring in my veins
Every day without Papa here was another day
It crept out & slowly we would rise again
Bleached out without our notes which formed love
Always love.

There is a hungering, carnivorous split in the chest
Está demasiado lejos. No puedo alcanzarlo
It swims deeply in words I cling to
Deep pain Papa left as his passing was in vain
In our veins he sleeps, so does his language
Keep hold & lose all shame
In this wicked sense I will stand, bleed out
Rip flowers from their roots
To stick them in the garden
That has been in drought for months
& if you came to see any beauty you would be disappointed
Only home I know, is the home.
Esta Pérdida.

THOMAS ZIMMERMAN

Naïve and Sentimental Sonnet #6

Such pain, you say, and I agree. But what
are we to do? Ice scabs choke daffodils.
Carved pumpkins leer. The heat's a rash that rubs
us raw. The equinox knock-kneed. The solstice
soul-less. *Live outside of time*, philosophers
pontificate. I know a clock that's stuck
at midnight, some old maid's gray noon. Gone fathers
roll like fog through fields, like waves on starless
beaches. *Listen, listen . . . .* We don't understand,
so turn the music up, a minuet or Totentanz
to help us grind our hips. That harpsicord?
Two skeletons that copulate in moonlight,
dent your uncle's corrugated roof
that keeps the meat-shop cool. I still love *you*.

VALENTINA CANO

De-Composition

Selling the dead comes naturally.
There's no trick to chiseling out
congealed blood
from veins that bend like licorice
or to scrape the marrow with a fingernail,
bones tinkling together with the voice of porcelain.
The dismantling of the mantel.
The taking of what's already sold.

Promise to Not-Quite-There Friends

I will carry you,
all of you,
into the new year.
I will tie every syllable to my waist,
roll-call for safety,
consonants like twine to keep you close,
square-knotted into a yoke.
Hooves of stories squelching
into the mud, I will
mar the landscape with you all.

RACHAEL GAY

Ode to My Lack of Eye Contact

You are shielding me from something I cannot name,
a spark shot out from the center of one hollow
pupil towards another
hurtling at immeasurable speeds.
You force me to blink
the static does not rest on my glossy cornea.

They told me that what I say has little meaning
without the meeting of eyes, but you know differently.
You know that the strongest conversations happen in the car
with both eyes fixed on the road.

It has been four months so far, and I still can't remember
the color of my girlfriend's eyes
(for which I blame you)
but instead, I know the contents of her soul.

I used to scold myself for never bringing my eyes
up to meet another's
but now that's fallen by the wayside
you've turned my gaze inward,
the ground carries just as much importance as a face.

You are not the act of hiding but the practice of perseverance.
You do not have the power to alter my personality
but you have awakened a desire to preserve.

My optic nerve was stretched beyond repair
before you birthed yourself fully formed.
May it shrink back to a comfortable length,
no longer tired and aching, but whole.

RAHUL SHIRKE

Ink

He was drowning in a black sea of words. The words were forcing their way into his nose and mouth, filling his lungs and occluding his vision. Every word was its own drop, blending with the others, its meaning transmuted and deformed by the currents and waves.

When he woke up from his nightmare, he felt for his dream diary on the bedside table. A pink hardcover with a blue satin bookmark, it had served him well for years. He opened it and stared. None of the words made any sense to him. There were strokes, a very particular arrangement of ink, but he couldn't be sure if there were any letters.

Page after page, all he could focus on was the paper underneath. It had been defaced, made ugly, gutted by the black ink. Just as it should be. And yet, there was so much empty space left, in the little gaps between the loops and hooks and lines.

When he peered close, the space between the strokes expanded; it expanded until he had to wonder if there was really a word there. He found that if he got really close to a word, the word disappeared.

What do you call a person who can't read? The word flashed in his mind briefly, before it was replaced by another word. *Prefecture.* And then another, *Brazier*. And another, *Orion*. *Igneous. Halberd.*

Muscle memory helped him dial his friend's phone number, his shaking finger spinning round and round on the rotary telephone. The sound of the receiver being picked up on the other end brought him some relief.

"Hello?" his friend asked.

He closed his eyes. What did she just say? What was he supposed to say? There was a definite order of words he had to use, he remembered that much. They had to be strung together grammatically.

Word after word flew into his mind, sat on a branch, and then flew away, never to be seen again. He couldn't decide which of the words to use. They all seemed so right. They all seemed so appealing. He wondered why there can't be a language in which every word is spoken purely for how wonderful it sounds at that moment in time.

He poured monosyllables into the phone receiver, until there was a click on the other side and no more sounds after that.

Even as he placed the receiver down in its cradle, he felt something transform inside him, like his insides were being liquefied into ink.

The more everything fell apart, the more he realized that words were keeping him together.

He was made of words, he decided. He was Paragraph.

His evening walk was like exploring an alien planet. Judging eyes stared at him and his awkward, stumbling gait. Words flew out of every mouth, they burst out of speakers, they appeared on screens, they scrolled and they blinked. Neon signs blared. Street names shouted. Number plates growled. Pill bottle instructions whispered.

Back home, he picked up the diary, the one that was hardbound in a colour he could not recognize. The pen in his hand shook, drawing violent seismic activity on the paper. He pressed it to the paper and forced himself to write a word, any word. He couldn't finish half a word before it morphed into something else. Nevertheless, he wrote it, and then another, and so on: a shapeless ode to words that did not exist.

cuvessence. altissian. policrave. controllierest. xenosphent. caspulture. magnitriage. alagne. kenticher. werthuster. zorian. shesnei. arazpurie. dahoqual. remeotill. whozzion. yuchabeine. jahadon. ishvique. naronaisal. portasbann. strenchplait. gavmerosh. oklaraffe. masokerune.

The paper was wet with ink and tears, but he didn't stop writing, and after the page was filled with words, he wrote in the empty space between them. They tumbled out, a discharge that emptied itself into every visible white space on the paper. By the time he stopped, there was a single stray speck of white on a page soaked in black ink. There was a word that could be written there, too. So he wrote it.

This is me, he thought as he wiped his tears, giddy with pride. *This is a paragraph*. *And like me, it makes no sense whatsoever*. It was a dark mirror that he just had to lift and kiss. He turned the page and began writing more and more words. Paper was the only thing that mattered to him—the only thing worth existing for.

Half-submerged in the bathtub, his naked body unraveled before him. His eyes pierced the skin and gazed at the words running in the arteries underneath, words pumped by a black heart that throbbed under his paper-skin.

He had to get them out.

In the dream, he was in a rainforest, where he heard the sounds of insects he did not recognize and the howls of creatures he could not name. He wasn't there as an intruder. On the contrary, he was a native creature. The leaves brushed against him, but he didn't bother pushing them away. He dug his fingers into the earth and raised a clump to his nostrils.

In the distance, a creeping darkness was swallowing up the trees. He knew he had to get rid of it. What he didn't know was what he had to give up to do so.

Gasping, he got up from the carpet he had been sleeping on. With some struggle, he made it to the bathroom, and splashed his face with water a few times. When he looked in the mirror, all he could see was words.

His body made the bed, it brushed its teeth, it made eggs sunny-side-up, it drank orange juice, it watered the plants, it cleaned the bathroom, and it did the laundry.

His mind sorted through the words, an endless supply of gemstones, each one prettier than the last. He excavated the words, stripped them of meaning, and turned them into jewelry.

He cracked a smile, the first smile he could remember in a long time.

His friend came to visit. She said she was worried about him, that he hadn't been seen or heard from by anyone for so long now. He could sense the worry and the fear in her as he let her in and made coffee for her.

"Why aren't you talking? What's wrong?" she asked, her eyes scanning the ink-soaked books scattered across the apartment. "What the hell *is* all this?"

"No," was the only word he could manage.

She got up and flipped through the blackened pages. "*What's going on here*?"

"I. Am. A. Language." An eroding part of his brain managed to string the words together.

"You're going *crazy*."

"No," he said, louder. It was a cannonball, aimed at her.

She picked up her handbag and made for the door. "I'm sorry, I don't feel comfortable. I don't know what's happening to you, but I have to go. I'm sorry."

The coffee sat on the table untouched. Her words had already disappeared into the maelstrom inside him.

That evening, he stopped at the bridge and leaned over to look at the river passing below. He stood on his toes.

Paper was running out. Every single page in his apartment was filled with ink, every white speck had been eliminated. And yet, there was space that he couldn't see, he just had to zoom in close enough. He wanted to write on the atoms, and on the protons and neutrons and electrons.

There was enough paper on the planet that he would die millions of times over before he could fill it all. The thought excited him immensely. This was what every language aspired towards: absorbing every possible space available.

"Listen," he said to his friend, his fists clenched above his knees, his face a reddened mess of tears. It caused him physical pain to place one word after another. "It is hard. Very."

She placed a hand on his balled fist, and he moved his other hand to rest on hers. She blinked a lot, and her eyes were pointed at the ink-stained carpet.

Every word felt like a tooth pulled. Having to settle on the right word, the word that made 'sense,' made him feel like his skin was being ripped apart. The words mocked him. They taunted him from afar. An amateur actor on a stage, watched by an audience of words. He tried desperately to remember the words. The words that made sense. The words in the script. The words. What words?

"What can I do?" she asked. "Is there any way I can help? I know a good therapist."

He shook his head. "Don't. Know. No." Each word took a second.

"I don't know how this happened, everything was so...so normal before," she said. "No one understands. Everyone is so confused."

"No. One. Understands."

She sighed and wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry about the other day. I just want you to know that I'm there for you if you need me."

"Sorry. Thanks," he said.

"And what you said before? That you're a language?" she smiled.

"Yeah."

"I believe you."

"Thanks."

She patted his relaxed fist and got up from the carpet. The door closed behind her. A stack of paper lay next to where she had been sitting.

The words applauded from the darkness. He didn't bow before leaving the stage.

AMY FREEMAN

Lucy

There are so many winged brown bugs in the house. Even though Lucy only finds five or six each day, they are everywhere, creeping buzzing flying. Many more, armies more, lurk in the shadows outside her home. She can't see them all, but they must come in through the cracks where the windows don't fit right, through the dryer vent, the exhaust fans, the recessed porch lights.

She looked them up. They are called stinkbugs because if you crush them they leave a terrible smell in their wake, which a website says attracts other stinkbugs as a biological survival tool.

Each bug is the size of a nickel with a taupe-colored carapace. They make a loud buzzing sound when they fly, their paths erratic, their landing sites unpredictable. Lucy is terrified they will land on her face while she sleeps, the light caresses of their feathery antennae on her cheek.

She finds them on her toothbrush and on James' window shade. Her son now hates them too.

Another website says they look for ways to creep into warm homes as the weather turns colder, and that it is crucial to inspect the outside of your house to ensure they have no way in. You must take steps to seal your house completely; they can wriggle into the narrowest of cracks.

They are insidious. They make her itch. Her walls are alive; writhing swarms of bugs breed behind her drywall, under her floorboards. They will skulk from their hidey-holes at night. She will be powerless to stop them. They will land on her, brand her with their stink, mark her as prey for other stinkbugs.

The stinkbugs won't just invade the house. They will invade her. They will slip into her orifices when she is in her deepest sleep. Summoned by the Monster, they will enter her body through her mouth, her ears, her private parts. She will awaken to the Monster, deep within her, crunching through their hard shells, devouring their soft bodies with a slurping sound that's almost sensual. They will become part of the Monster. They will make it stronger.

She tries to tell her husband, Lewis, about the stinkbugs, but he doesn't care about them. He tells Lucy to just grab them with a tissue and flush them down the toilet. Lucy puts weather stripping on the edges of all the screens. She asks Lewis to caulk outside the windows, she begs him, but it's been weeks and he hasn't done it. Now he looks annoyed when she brings it up, so she did the windows on the ground floor herself. But she can't go up on a ladder to get the second floor without someone keeping her steady. She can't hire a workman; no one would do as meticulous a job as she would. She isn't even sure Lewis would be as thorough as she would. Her lack of confidence in him makes her feel even more alone.

Standing by her pool, its shimmering surface unbroken by even the smallest breeze, Lucy's breath comes so fast she is nearly panting. She stares at her neighbors' homes. Why is no one outside, trying to seal up the cracks before colder weather comes? Why isn't anyone talking about the stinkbugs?

Maybe they don't even have stinkbugs. Maybe she is the only one besieged.

Of course she is.

She's the only one besieged, because she's the only one with a Monster. She is alone.

The Monster scoffs at her pain. *How are you alone? You'll always have me. You and me. Me and you. Together, forever.*

Fleeing the pool, Lucy crouches in her pantry, forcing chocolate pudding down her throat. She chokes, cries, pleas for someone to help her.

But Lucy screams her words inside her head, so only the Monster can hear her.

ABI HYNES

The Something

The house is very dark. Andrea has locked the doors and windows. She has closed the curtains and the blinds. She has unplugged the landline and the TV, and her laptop and her mobile are tucked away in the boot of the car, switched off. The sounds from the street outside have faded with the light, and the house is free to make its own noises.

She remembers this kind of darkness from when she was small, spending her summer holidays in the Scottish countryside. She used to wake, and the bedroom she shared with Lois would be hot and unfamiliar. The dark would press in at her eyes like unseen fingertips. Then she would cry out, and her big sister would come, and the dark was never so dense with monsters when they were cuddled up together.

Now, she sits alone at her kitchen table. Before her is the long shadow of the empty hall, split by the spine of the staircase, the pale bannisters like bones. She has done everything properly, so now she waits. She is a model of patience. Her excitement (can that be the word?) spins out from her in threads like cobwebs, stretching from her body to all the corners of the house, attaching her to it. If someone were to pluck just one thread, she would feel it.

It's hard for Andrea to pinpoint the exact moment she became aware of the Something in her house. It had always had a sort of personality, squat little new-build that it is. Its roots spread deeper than is immediately obvious from outside. Its kitchen delves into the ground in a bizarrely old-fashioned design that leaves its little windows peeping just above the front lawn, offering an ankle-only view of passers-by to whoever does the washing up.

Other aspects of its layout seem to defy logic and good sense. The two first floor bedrooms connect with each other, corridor-style. You have to pass through the en suite to reach either of them, rendering the guest room, well, bloody inappropriate for guests.

The house asserted its own character with a pleasing confidence. It was one of the reasons Andrea had bought it (an impulsive purchase, a *Fuck it, why shouldn't I? I am master of my own destiny!*). Quickly, the house felt like a companion. It was co-conspirator in her emancipation from sharing unsatisfying flats with unsatisfying friends. She liked the Something, especially when coming home on quiet, dark nights. The house's confidence was catching.

The Something started small. It was the towel she noticed first (though there might have been other things before). Clean and dry and folded neatly on a now-closed toilet lid. It was an unambiguous gesture, as there was no question of Andrea having put it there herself. Her towels were never folded, never carried in preparation to the bathroom. Her journey, dripping and shivering, to the airing cupboard in the guest bedroom, and then back, was part of her morning routine.

As a gesture, it didn't frighten her. Her house wasn't like old houses. It didn't groan and whistle and scrape when the wind got up. It only sat there, resolutely silent, its burglar alarm and double-glazing primed against intruders, all its corners clean and cheerful. The Something was not a grisly intruder, Andrea was sure. It was just the house itself.

And it was a helpful Something. The kitchen bulb blew one evening, leaving the almost-cellar too dark for chopping onions. It turned out well; Andrea called a friend, they had too much wine with dinner, she found herself staring at his hands. And when she scrunched her way downstairs next morning, the bulb burned bright and good as new.

The Something, she began to realise, had its preferences. It liked it when they watched telly together (batteries in the remote—changed by the time she got home from work) and when she ate at home (salad—fresh— it had definitely been on the turn). It liked it less when she brought her spreadsheets back with her (a sudden leak from the en suite, targeting her laptop bag), or when she sat up late trawling Facebook, her thoughts emptying into that little blue screen (three iPhone chargers, so far—fried themselves in power sockets that were harmless when it came to bedside lamps). She felt, in some irrational part of herself, that it rewarded her for good behaviour, and punished her when she pissed it off.

When a week of miserable weather and a bad Friday meeting sent her crashing headfirst into an early night with her kindle, a mug of tea stood waiting for her, still steaming, on the bedside table. Utterly unapologetic about its own existence. When Umar called her on a Sunday morning, stayed for lunch, *stayed*, there wasn't a single fucking fork to be found in her kitchen, or anywhere at all, for forty-eight hours.

She told her sister about that one little exasperating chapter. She didn't quite spell out her suspicions. How would she phrase that: *I think my house is jealous*? Lois laughed with her, enjoying the hand-me-down annoyance.

"You've got a poltergeist."

When the Something left its first message, Andrea could hardly say she was surprised. She had been late for work. Her alarm hadn't gone off, and when she'd scrabbled about for her phone to check the time, it wasn't by her bed. Five minutes of searching didn't reveal it; not down behind her bedside table, not somehow underneath the mattress, not forgotten in her coat pocket when she crept down to check. The clock in the kitchen read quarter past nine.

She flung herself back up the stairs and tugged on her least-creased suit, un-showered and already clammy with panic. Without her phone, she couldn't check her meetings, but this would be her third late appearance this month. Mornings had been a struggle lately, though she had always been an early riser. She was delighting in sleep in a way she never had before, not even as a teenager, and in her freshly painted bedroom she was sleeping longer, better, deeper. She gave up on her phone and pelted back into the kitchen for her car keys.

Her mobile was there. It was sitting exactly in the middle of the kitchen table where she couldn't have left it, where it couldn't have been five minutes ago. On top of it, covering most of the screen, was one of Andrea's own pink post-it notes. It read:

Sick Day.

X

It seemed so casual. It was written in biro and the handwriting was unfamiliar but ordinary; a little childish, perhaps, with the way the letters neatly joined together. It was the sort of note a partner leaves to remind you that it's Bin Day. The shape of the 'X' (a kiss? *Really?*) was relaxed, but definite. It was absolutely impossible to find the note alarming.

Andrea called in sick, and sat down at her kitchen table in her work clothes. Her meetings didn't seem to matter now. All her anxiety about the office faded as soon as she hung up the phone. Her late-waking grogginess cleared, and the day was hers. The anticipation of it was blissful.

She made herself a huge, extravagant breakfast: spicy eggs and toast with jam and coffee and orange juice. She ate it slowly with sunshine pouring in through the kitchen window and pooling at her feet. She thought of walking up to buy a paper, a real one, just for the aesthetic, but she was too content, really, to brave the outside world, and the idea didn't linger. It seemed like a gift to her, this day. She felt as though the house had given it to her.

That evening, she ignored the emails from work and the texts from friends, and she slept naked for the first time in years. She spread out her limbs and let the heat of her body spill into the cool sheets. The house embraced her until she fell asleep.

In the days that followed, Andrea's grogginess returned. It was as if someone had dressed her in particularly heavy clothes; she felt slow, and bulky, and tired. Work was a strain. She was surrounded by loud, insensitive people, their mouths always moving. Didn't they realise they were talking too loud, and too close? She cringed away from them. She'd started grinding her teeth, which gave her headaches in the afternoons, to the point where the shrill jangling of her phone or a fire alarm test would send her, shaking, to the toilets, head between her knees for a while as she pulled in slow, deep breaths.

"You're not yourself at the moment," Dani scolded her, when Andrea had refused another invitation for a post-work drink. "We never see you. What's happened?"

Andrea buttoned her coat up to her chin, wishing she could go on buttoning, up and up over the top of her head and right down to the toes of her boots.

"I'm a bit worn out this week," she said. "I just really want to get home."

The Something was angry when she was late. After a train cancellation and two replacement buses, Andrea longing for her front door the whole way, she crossed the threshold with a gasp like a drowning creature surfacing, to find the house was freezing cold. It was almost spring, and the air inside was icier than it had been in the street, a nasty, immovable sort of cold that seeped up through the soles of her feet and stung her fingers. It made no sense. Except she knew the game by now.

The boiler was in the bathroom. Andrea went to investigate, praying for a pilot light, hopeful that the Something might forgive her and set things straight now that she was home. But she didn't get that far. The door to the bathroom was jammed tight shut. Frozen? Did doors do that? No amount of teasing the door handle or slamming against it with her shoulder or kicking it would persuade it to budge. Andrea felt weak and tearful and pathetic.

"Please," she murmured to the bathroom door, too upset to feel ridiculous. "I'm sorry."

The house was silent. She wanted to go to bed, to draw the covers up over her head and sleep this away, but her bedroom, both bedrooms, lay beyond the sealed bathroom, at the end of the strange upstairs corridor that was now completely inaccessible.

She stood on the landing, her breath misting out in front of her, and for a moment she considered knocking on her neighbour's door. What would the house do, confronted with a stranger? Would it be brazen enough to defy logic and sense like this in the presence of a witness? But she didn't know her neighbours. She had never made the effort to introduce herself; she had been happy as she was. And how angry would the Something be with her afterwards, when they were left alone again?

She went back downstairs. She was desperate for a wee after her long journey home, and there was nothing for it but to squat in the garden, trousers around her ankles, eyes watchful for cars returning to nearby driveways. She slept on the sofa in her suit under several layers of coats, and dreamed that someone was crouching beside her in the darkness, their breath on her cheek a welcome source of warmth.

When Andrea woke the next morning, she was very ill. She was sweating and sore, but at least when she threw off her makeshift covers, the house was warm again. Her head swam as she made her way, trembling, up the stairs, where the bathroom door stood innocently ajar. She bent to run herself a bath and stripped to reveal skin that was pale and puffy. She sat on the toilet, knees hugged to her chest like a little girl, and saw the second pink note, stuck to the mirror opposite, already bubbling with the steam.

Curfew. 7pm.

X

It was the same careful handwriting, the 'X' precise and unhurried. It served as both a symbol of affection and a signature; it asserted itself as a message from someone who knew Andrea intimately enough not to sign their name. She coughed, and the sides of her throat sawed at each other. She lowered her aching body into the hot water and let it soothe her.

She was miserable and feverish all weekend. Umar had been calling, but she felt lazy and revolting, and wanted to be left alone. He left three messages, each less hopeful than the last. The final one asked her to meet him after work on Tuesday, and she might have accepted (she'd be feeling better by then, wouldn't she?), but by the time she crossed the city it would be 6:30, at least. She turned her phone on silent, and he didn't call again.

Things went along peacefully for several weeks. Andrea forced herself to get up earlier so that she could be in the office by 8 a.m. and catch the 5:16 train home.

She just couldn't seem to fully recover from her bout of flu; her headaches were back with a residual, sinister sort of force that made everything feel a bit too far away. She dropped out of her own social life in favour of rest and quiet. The thought of being energetic and interesting exhausted her, and she felt a shiver of relief every time she crossed the threshold of her own home, back into its welcoming arms, back amongst its familiar, musty smell that she breathed in with a sigh, like a lover's scent. The Something was always pleased to see her. She put off her sister, who was always threatening to come and stay, partly out of fear that they might be discovered.

She lay back on the sofa, and masturbated to nothing in particular, her own smell mingling with the smell of the house, her toes stretching upwards into emptiness. She imagined she felt someone brush them lightly, the offhand gesture of someone who loves you passing by.

She started to wish for the next note. The Something was teasing her. It took to hovering outside her bedroom, its figure almost visible through the crack in the door, but always gone when she opened it. She burned with restlessness when she went days without hearing its whisper beneath the whooshing of the dishwasher, or the gentle bumping of its fingertips against her calves when she climbed the stairs.

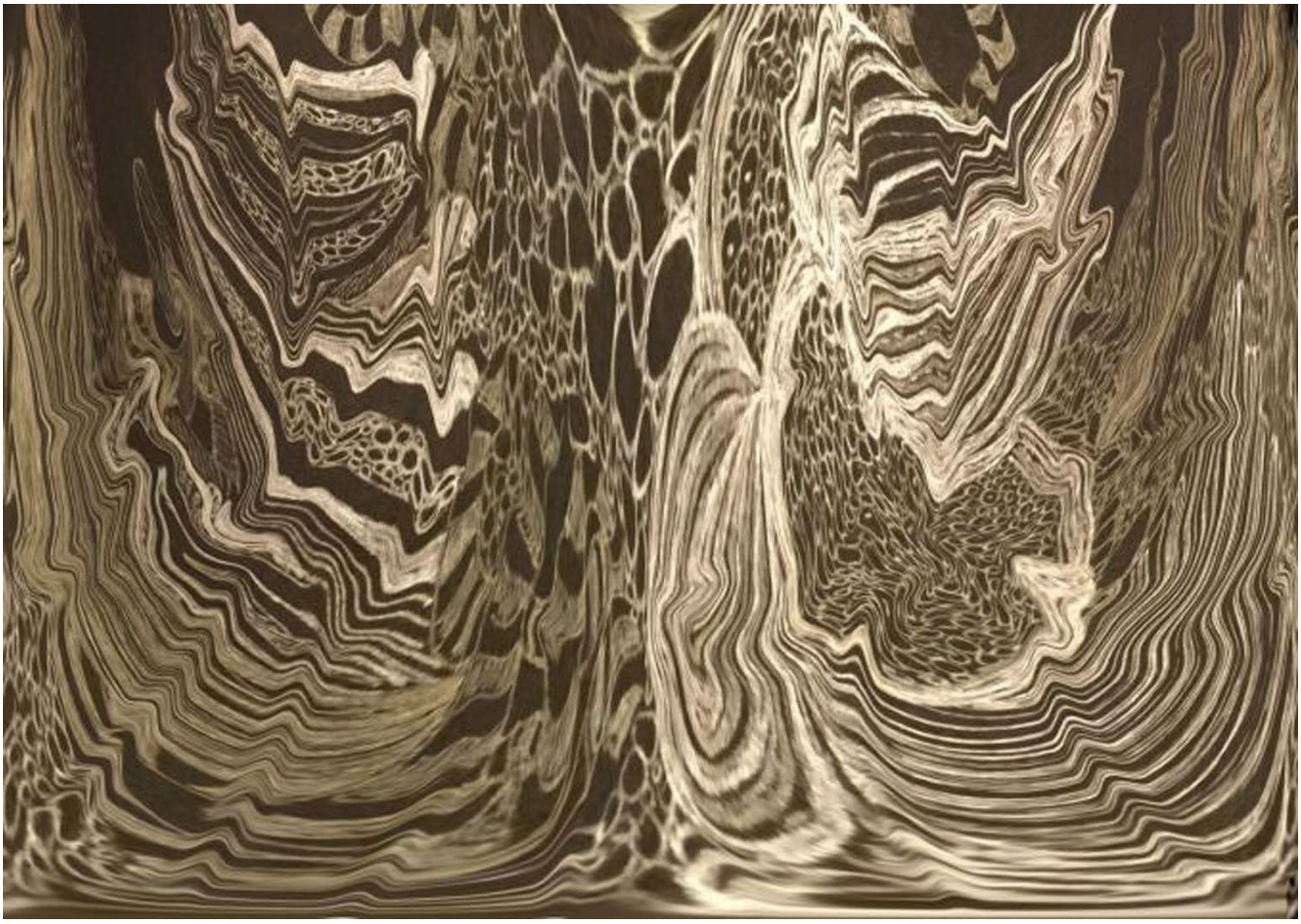
But when the final note came, the wait was worth it. Lying on her pillow, in the imprint of her head still warm with sleep, it gave her just one word:

Tonight.

X

At the kitchen table, cradled by the dark, Andrea keeps her breathing quiet and shallow. A few moments ago, she thought she had heard footsteps behind her, imagined the feet of strangers passing level with her head where the street met the kitchen window, completely unaware of the tension they were interrupting in the squat little house. Probably, they thought it was like their own ordinary new-builds, housing-by-numbers, all standard measurements. Whoever had built Andrea's house had been an architect of a different kind.

Her spider threads hum with expectation. Far away, in some upstairs corner of the house, she is certain she hears something take a breath.



Golden by CR Smith.

DAVID HARTLEY

The Woodcutter and the Wolf

The woodcutter pulled bits of girl from the stomach of the wolf. *What the hell am I doing, what the hell am I doing, what the hell am I doing*.

Half a head with clumps of sodden hair smeared across the flap of scalp and an eye still in its socket. He put the head-half on the bed. Six fingers intact and some lengths of the spinal cord still held in place with vertebra. Some of the fragments of bone fitted back together. He reconstructed both fibulas, the sternum, and a few ribs. Most of her dress was still in one piece. He even found her socks. He almost laughed.

A few of the organs had been swallowed whole. The kidneys looked nearly fresh, one lung had escaped without puncture, and most of her intestine could be salvaged. No sign of her heart. He took the wolf's heart instead. *Will that work?* He laid it all out like a jigsaw.

A deep breath brought the stench to the roof of his throat. He staggered to the corner of the room and vomited. Outside, he heard howls. Lots of howls. He did not dare to open the curtains.

He looked at his hands. He was a man. He could do this. He could save the girl. That's what he was here for. That's why he had run towards the screams. That's why he had swung the axe. He stuck two fingers down his throat and got the last of the bile up. He tied his neckerchief around his nose to fight off the smell. He prayed to all the gods. *I am a man. I am in control.*

He calmed himself. The wolf was dead, the girl was going nowhere, the night was young. *Take your time*.

He took Granny's bedroom chairs and put them in the living room, then pushed the wardrobe into the corner. He pulled the bed away from the middle of the room, away from the wolf corpse. Streams of blood followed the grooves left by the bed's feet and soaked into the carpet.

He lifted the pieces of the girl off the bed and laid them gently on the floor, and then stripped the bed and stuffed the linens through the window. Piece by piece, he returned the girl to the mattress.

He dragged the wolf corpse towards the door by the scruff of its neck. More guts tumbled out of its torso as he pulled. Snagged beneath the intestines, he spied the girl's overcoat with its sodden fur hood. He plucked it out and hung it on Granny's hat stand. He tore Granny's bonnet off the wolf's head and grabbed his axe. He cut off the head, opened the door, and threw it outside. It tumbled across the neat lawn of the front garden, came to a rest, and grinned back at him.

Other pairs of eyes glinted from the depths of the forest beyond the fence. Whispers of movement. Glimpsed silhouettes. Groups of things weaving between the trees. The breeze pushed at the soaked shirt that clung to him like ghost hands. He closed his eyes, took a deep

breath, and slammed the door shut.

The blood dripped from the girl's coat and beat a rhythm against the skirting board.

By the time the night was past its best, he had as much of the girl together as he could manage. She was missing half a foot, her lower jaw, parts of her spine, and there was not enough skin left to cover her insides, but he reckoned most of her was there. Above her head he'd laid out all the pieces that he hadn't managed to fit in. Some of it could be wolf. He would throw it all away, he decided.

He knelt on the bed and stroked her hair.

"Sorry," he said. Then he said it again, but quieter: "Sorry."

He looked at her lips. He looked at the heart.

He took the heart in his hand and squeezed. He put his mouth to her lips and blew.

He went at it for an hour, pumping and blowing, but she didn't revive. He flopped down and crushed his hands into his eyes. Tears welled. He pushed them away, swallowed them down. *No use in crying*.

Peeking through his fingers, he took one last look at the mess of girl and let his muscles settle in the pit of failure. He rose from the bed, took his axe and his jacket, and clicked off the light.

Outside, at the end of Granny's path, a pack of wolves waited. They all watched him. One was considerably larger than the others, fur pure white, with piercing green eyes. The woodcutter held his axe up. The wolves didn't react. Deep in the forest there were more of them. Moonlit eyes, the flash of teeth, spiked fur. In the far distance one of them howled. It sounded like a joke.

They were mocking him. He had failed, and they had won. Any one of them could run out of the forest now, find a child and eat it right up. There were no rules anymore, not now that the wolves had triumphed. He could walk right through the lot of them and make his way home. They weren't going to touch him. They were here to gloat.

In each face he saw the flicker of grins, the hints of giggles. He stalked across the lawn and stuck the axe into the decapitated head of the Granny wolf. Split it straight down the middle. He spat, turned, and marched back to the door.

He re-entered the cottage and closed the night out. *I can do this*. He cracked his knuckles and set to it.

None of the organs were connected and all the bits of bones were still bits. This was a mosaic of a girl. How did he ever think he could bring this neatly-placed mess back to life? He'd always left the clever stuff to his wife. He needed her now, needed her knowledge.

Granny had lots of books. A bookcase in the bedroom, another in the living room, and a stack of cookery and gardening books in the kitchen. He grabbed anything that looked like it might help and made a reading pile. She had some basic tools too: a hammer, screws, nails, that kind of thing. And he found superglue for the bones.

He brought one of the bedroom chairs back to its place and got comfy. He picked up the first book, *Biology for Beginners*, and began to read.

Night became day and became night again. The woodcutter barely moved. He worked his way through book after book. *Secrets of Crystal Healing*. *The Vegetable and Herb Expert*. *50 Healing Spells for Girls*. *Essential First Aid*. *Your Mind, Your Life*. He scribbled down a few ideas and folded down the corners of many pages. In the corner of his eye, the fragmented girl lay waiting. He could almost convince himself she was just asleep.

As dawn glimmered into life again, he got up and peeked through the curtains. The wolves were still there. The white wolf had advanced a short way along the path towards the door. It turned its head and locked eyes with him.

He superglued the bits of bone back together. It took him the whole day to finish. He curled himself around the modelled girl and slept for ten hours.

When he woke, his thoughts were a lot clearer, but his belly growled for food. He raided Granny's cupboards and fashioned together a hearty stew that would last for days. He found potatoes, onions, celery, and plenty of stock, but no meat.

He took the wolf corpse from the bedroom, skinned it, diced it, and threw it in the pot. It was the best stew he had ever eaten.

He stitched patches of the wolf's skin together and glued it to the bones. He shaved off the fur and wove it into the remains of her hair. He realigned Granny's healing crystals and burned her dreamcatcher, except for the sunrise feather, which he doused in vinegar and placed inside the girl's mouth. He padded her flesh out with mashed garlic, a few nuts of hemp root, and seven strips of clorweed.

On the dawn of the fifth day, he drank a phial of his own blood mixed with dragurmilk, ratgut, and light brown sugar. It gave him the deep sight he needed to fuse her veins and arteries together and wrap her nervous system back into place. Wherever she was missing vessels he

substituted with thin tubes of wax strengthened by a bonding spell.

He shot her through with electricity. He massaged the core of her brain. He read her fairy tales and epic poetry. He acted them out. He bribed her with untold riches. He begged her. Nothing worked. She stayed fast asleep and did not stir, not even to breathe.

Day by day, the white wolf advanced a little further up the pathway.

A knock at the door. It was dusk. The woodcutter was on his 329th press up. *A fit body is a fit mind*. He put some clothes on and approached the door, then hesitated and ran back to the girl. He found fresh linen stashed beneath the bed and billowed it over her. The knock sounded again.

He returned to the door and opened it a crack. A pale man stood at the threshold. He wore simple fur clothes and his eyes were the bright green of Granny's lawn at noon.

"Yes?" said the woodcutter.

"Let me in," said the man. His voice was deep.

"You are?"

"I will explain."

"Go on." The woodcutter made the gap narrower.

"I can fix her."

The woodcutter's flesh prickled, and his knees grew weak. "Don't need no help."

"Is she alive?"

"No."

"Then you need help."

The woodcutter looked behind the visitor. The white wolf was no longer on the path and the other wolves had retreated to the treeline. The woodcutter looked again at the man's eyes, at the slits of his pupils.

The woodcutter's hand dropped from the door. He pressed himself against the wall. "Better come in," he managed.

The man lifted away the sheet and looked at the girl. A red vine twisted along one arm, a green vine along the other. Her eyes were sealed shut with caramel and there was a chrysalis in both ears; one new, the other just about to hatch. The wolf skin had not been treated and was starting to tighten and crinkle. There was rosemary growing from her groin and a chalk mandala drawn on the mattress around her.

“What in Hell is all this?” said the man.

The woodcutter stared at the stains on the floor and said nothing.

“We’ll fix it.”

“You can do it?”

“Of course.”

“Do it then.”

“Not yet. We’ll take our time. It is the half-moon. You have me for one night.” He walked to the woodcutter and stood close. “We will eat, we will drink, we will talk. And then we will fix this.”

The woodcutter avoided the green eyes. He nodded.

“Choose a name for me.”

“What?”

“Choose a name.”

“...Jack.”

“I shall be Jack. Pleased to meet you. I look forward to our night together.”

Jack harvested various roots and berries from Granny’s garden and threw together a salad garnished with herbs. There was enough for them both and they ate together at the kitchen table in silence. Jack found Granny’s sherry and poured himself a large glass. The woodcutter stuck to tap water.

Jack waited until every scrap of the salad was finished, and then led the woodcutter back into the bedroom. He faced two chairs together by the bay window and waited for the woodcutter to join him. Jack’s skin looked translucent in the moonlight.

“Let’s begin with questions. You may start.”

“You’re the white wolf?”

“Of course. I am a wereman. I am cursed into this form at the light of every half-moon. It is my life. It leads, and I follow.”

“Who cursed you?”

“Granny. But I bear no grudge. It was entirely my fault; I took too many of her chickens.”

“She don’t have chickens.”

“Exactly.”

The woodcutter nodded at the bed. “Can you save her?”

"Of course. I need just one ingredient. You will not have seen it in your books because it has never been written down."

"What?"

Jack sipped the sherry. "We'll get to that. My turn. Where is the body of the wolf you killed?"

"The 'ead's outside."

"Yes."

"His skin is her skin."

"Yes."

"Ate the rest."

Jack rolled his eyes and the ghost of a grin flickered across his face.

The woodcutter went cold. "Was that it? The ingredient?"

"No, no. He wasn't a wolf."

"What?"

"He was a man. Mr. Hobson, the blacksmith. A werewolf."

The world titled. The woodcutter gripped his chair. "Mr. Hobson?"

"A real wolf would never stoop to such drama. We stay well away for full moons. Not worth our hassle."

The woodcutter gulped air and sipped at his water. *You weren't to know. Not your fault*.

"He was still wolf-flesh when you ate him. The transformations stop at the point of death, whatever form you're in."

The woodcutter tried to nod. He lifted his head and focussed very carefully on a damp patch on the wall. He waited until the world centred itself again and sat upright. His balance held, and his stomach settled. He closed his eyes for a few moments and talked to the voice in his mind. They soothed each other to calmness. Jack waited.

He opened his eyes and stared at his fingers. "What do I do?" he said.

"Soon."

"Now."

"No. We've a while yet, let's talk."

"Now," said the woodcutter and shot to his feet.

He towered over Jack, but the pale wereman didn't flinch.

"Sit down," Jack said.

The woodcutter balled his fists and gritted his teeth.

"Sit. Down."

The voice made his knees buckle and his guts flip. He sat. He was shaking. "Want to go home."

"You've been here for days; you could've gone home at any time. What was stopping you?"

"You."

"Not at all."

"Couldn't leave her," he said, with another nod to the mess on the bed.

"You very nearly did, once."

The woodcutter shook his head and stared out at the half-moon. It was high but far from its end.

"Are you afraid to go home?" said Jack.

The woodcutter snorted.

"Is that a yes?"

"'Course not."

"Won't your wife be worried about you?"

"Dead."

"Yes, she is. Three years, I believe."

"And more."

"Your children must be hungry."

"No kids."

"Indeed."

"You know all this?"

"Of course. How did she die?"

"The sickness."

"Which one?"

"Don't know. *A* sickness. One of the sicknesses. Ask the doctor."

"He could do nothing?"

"Useless." The woodcutter spat. "So much pain."

Jack put his glass down and leaned forward. "Good," he said, as soothing as the air after a storm.

"What in Hell is good about it?"

“It is good to talk.”

“What good does talk do?”

“It keeps the night outside.”

The woodcutter rolled his eyes and slumped in the chair.

Jack leaned forward. “Why no children?”

“My turn. Do you kill people when you’re a wereman?”

“No.”

“Do you when you’re a wolf?”

“Certainly not.”

“What do you do then, when you’re this?”

“I write music.”

The woodcutter met his eyes. They were as patient and still as the body which held them.

“Do you have a wife?”

“I had a preferred mate. She was shot three moons ago. They took her pelt. What reason is that?”

“Did you write music about her?”

Jack sat back and picked up his glass. He swirled the liquid. “Not yet.”

“Children? Cubs?”

“Yes. Some are out there watching us.”

The woodcutter did not look.

“Would you have liked children?” said Jack.

The woodcutter gave a tiny nod then took a deep breath and looked at the ceiling.

“Your wife did not?”

“Very much. She wanted two, boy and girl. We tried. Failed.”

“Did you try again?”

“Many times.”

The woodcutter’s chest heaved up and down, up and down. His breath gusted from his nose, his eyes roved around in their sockets. His hands gripped the chair, his knuckles white.

Jack drained the last of his sherry. He wiped out the glass with his finger. “She was barren?”

The woodcutter shook his head.

“It was you. Didn’t want to? Or couldn’t?”

“Both. I…I loved her.”

“Yes.”

“I loved her so much. But...” The last cut landed and the tree within him fell. Tears ripped from his eyes and dashed down his face. Jack darted from his seat and held the glass beneath the woodcutter’s jaw.

“Hold steady,” he said, a gentle hand on the woodcutter’s chest. He caught the tears in the glass and stopped the woodcutter from wiping the fresh ones away.

“What is this?”

“Keep them flowing. You had no passion for her?”

“Get off me.” The woodcutter pushed Jack away.

He leapt back but kept the glass steady. He held up a hand and raised the glass to the light. He nodded.

“I think we’ve got enough,” he said.

They stood over the girl.

“Should we say anything? A spell? A prayer?”

Jack shook his head. “Human words are the gutter water of the gods. Stay quiet and very still.”

Jack cracked away the caramel from her lids and prised the eyes open. He let a tear fall into the left eye, then the right eye, and then opened the mouth and poured in another drop. He let go of the chin and poured the rest across the heart.

“What now—?”

“Shhhh.” Jack held a finger to his lips then pointed to the girl.

The woodcutter watched. His eyes squinted as if they were trying to hide.

For long moments nothing happened. The cottage was poised in thickened air. The smell of decay clung and glistened on every surface. Flies leapt from walls and flitted against windows, but they were nothing to the woodcutter now.

The stillness stretched on and on, and then, just as the woodcutter was about to give up, a finger twitched, and the lips pulled up into a sneer. She shuddered. The rosemary dislodged and slumped to the floor. Her chest arched, her hands slammed deep into the mattress. Her eyes opened, her mouth opened, she sucked in the stale air and collapsed back down. She was still for a moment, except for the rise and fall of her breathing. Then her eyes flickered open and she began to sit up.

The woodcutter looked up at Jack, but he was gone, as if he had never been. The door was open but the path outside was bare.

“What do I do?” whispered the woodcutter to the night, but the night did not reply.

The girl whimpered. She scrunched her elbows and flung herself off the bed. She crumpled to the floor like an oversized insect. Her foliage rustled, bits of her skin flapped loose, and three teeth abandoned her mouth. Her fingers wriggled, and her limbs twisted around like dying snakes. Her lips hunted along the bloodstains; she sucked at the fibres of the carpet.

The woodcutter rushed over and picked her up. She squealed and clawed at him, then kicked him sharply in the gut. He held on and shushed her. He put her head on his shoulder and stroked her hair. She calmed.

He stood her upright and gestured for her to stay still. Spittle oozed from her lips, welts on her thighs seeped pus. One eye pointed up, the other pointed to the left. A dark yellow fluid streamed from her nose. In her left ear, the chrysalis split open and the bright blue wing of a butterfly emerged. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Shaking, he took her coat from the hat stand and arranged it around her shoulders. He lifted the hood over her head. She cowered but didn’t push it off.

“We’ll be ok,” he said, and the sound of his own voice brought the tears again. He let them flow.

The girl watched the teardrops streak down his cheek until her head drooped against her chest. She raised her arms to him. He picked her up and held her close.

They left the cottage together just as dawn broke. The wolves were gone.

CAROLINA VONKAMPEN

Full

I hold the world in my stomach. I must contain it; I must have it in me. I consume wholly, unrelentingly. I must be full, or I will cease to exist.

I want to live, and so to live, I eat cats and rats and candles. I eat all the things I should not, and too much of them; but it is all I can do to survive. It brings me no pleasure to be like this, but I must eat.

My brothers were like me—consumers. Our family was poor, and although my father worked all day and my mother did what she could, we were always starving, empty, so empty. We nearly drove our mother insane eating grass and the bark off trees and the mice that the cats dragged back to our door. It was all we could do not to eat the cats, but mother loved them so.

When my mother could not feed me anymore, I joined the army. It was too late when I realized the army could not feed me, either. I had to fill myself. Last year, I ate 174 cats, just the meat—neither the skin nor the bones—but I did not want to. I do not want to destroy them, but I do, I must; sometimes, I eat them without first killing them. Often, I chase them down with grass, handfuls and mouthfuls of grass, to fill myself.

My fellow soldiers, they are amused by my appetite. Some seem to think I do it for show, but many know that I cannot help it. It is necessary for me. I have learned what is acceptable to them and what is not. Melons—rind and all—are acceptable. Raw liver is acceptable. Grass is acceptable. Cats, even, are acceptable. But the leg blasted off a fellow soldier by a cannon ball is not acceptable, even in wartime, even aboard a ship that has no spare cats or grass on it, even as we are being taken captive by the enemy.

Once again, I find myself a prisoner, but this time the captor is not within me. I starve. I beg for double rations, which *they* give me. Then triple, quadruple, until I am eating the same as ten men every day. *They* notice how much I have in me, and *they* try to fill me up with more. I know what I am to *them*, but I cannot help it. I eat the cow's udder, then its beef; I eat a pound of candles, wick and all. I drink bottles of dark beer. Still my stomach contains it. I do not sweat or tire; I persist. Again in the afternoon, I eat five pounds of beef and more candles and drink even more beer. *They* are amazed at me, how I can hold it all in myself, in my vast body. It is physically impossible, *they* say.

It is like one of those cartoons where a snake has swallowed a whole cat, and it is still visibly a cat even though it is now inside the snake. I am that snake, although you cannot see what I contain inside me. *They* would not even know, had *they* not watched it disappear into my gaping maw. But *they* did watch, and *they* see how I do not urinate or defecate or even vomit; my heart continues to beat, and somehow in spite of everything, I continue to hunger. I see this pleases *them*. I do not know why.

I drink another bottle of beer and let the smoke from my pipe drift out of me.

ANDREA SALVADOR

The Soul Sucker

The citizens of the town didn't like dead things.

They absconded from rooms that contained lifeless moths on the windowsill. Hugged themselves tight as they watched a cougar maul a puny cat. Tiptoed out of homes that contained corpses. Once the breath of life escaped those bodies, marking them as sacks of blood uncirculated and memories stitched tight, they called the boy.

He was eternal with the air of youth. He didn't breathe; one citizen came close to his immobile chest before being swatted away. The boy came to houses clad in a knit cap, a button-up vest, a shirt, and socks that covered his shins, emphasizing his lanky build.

No one watched him work. He didn't have any toolbox, like professionals did. All citizens had to do was go to his telephone booth by the playground and recite their addresses into the chipped, plastic receiver.

Then the wait—a grueling, harsh wait. If there was a murdered body pinned to the hallway floor, there was no way to enter the house. Instead, the residents sat on their porches and shivered to the slaps of rain on the planks of wood. Neighbors carted cups of coffee and leftovers in paper bags while they waited. Sleep came like a bullet grazing skin.

As days ticked by, everyone became dismal. Just as the family got sick of being locked out of their own house, he'd emerge, loafers clacking on the gravel road.

The boy would stare the citizens down, his pink lips forming a miniscule 'o.' He didn't breathe any word out. Once he reached a certain street, no one dared speak. He'd clomp up the stairs to the front door of the house.

Pale, thin fingers reached out to the doorknob and twisted it. Air rushed out of the residents' lungs. They retched at the scent of willful death and agonizing murder. The boy would close the door behind him, and when he came out, the house would be exactly as they'd left it. No stains on the rug. Dishes still unwashed, now rotting with three days' worth of spoiled food. Throw pillows on the sofa in a haphazard system, with the remote control tucked in between two.

There was no formal payment of the service rendered. Men and women saluted him sheepishly. They watched him walk off to nowhere. Some said he was the cause of the deaths in the first place, coming to collect the bodies as trophies. To tuck where, though? Others said he was a gift from the skies. How did he come down, though?

The bodies vanished after that. Everyone felt it in their bones, like rust scraped off a bolt. Fresh and clean. No one ever saw the corpses again, much less remembered the identities they were temples of. The town natives moved on, living life in the same safe cycles before another death was revealed.

YAEL VAN DER WOUDEN

A Family of Girls

Daya found the body in a shallow ditch between the fields. The smells that had defined her childhood until that day were a handful of common things: wet mud, yeast rising in a hot kitchen, mildew in stockings left to soak. Now this one, too, would be added to the list, carried with her for years and remembered on occasion like a cold coin found in an old jacket.

It was a terrible smell too, one that started like most dead things, like the bird the cat caught and left in a mess of feathers under a garden bush, or the rat bloating on its back by the side of the road. It ended on the warm note of skin, like the hot back of a neck in deep sleep.

The dead girl's socks were bleached, and her shoes seemed new. She looked clean but for the fact she lay face-down on the ground, her hair matted on her neck. Flies hovered over her body, pulled by strings. Daya gathered her skirts and bent, one knee to the ground. Touched the girl's blue little fingers. The sun was beating down hard on the day and the hay hissed like water in a hot pan. Daya got back to her feet and the corn quieted for a moment, then picked up the chatter again. Urgent, this time, bending to a sudden wind.

One of her mother's stories started like this: the first family of girls left ten years ago. It had been an exceptionally cold spring, with mornings not quite bright and mists so low they lapped at the hems of your skirts—overstayed their welcome and lingered past noon. *Now*, her mother would say, letting a pause fall between them, smoothing her skirts over her lap. *Now*, the way it was with the Novomiskis, the father—a man of faith, G-d love him, but not bright in any other sense—would not leave his bed before the sun had warmed the room and his wife warmed the milk. *It's his back*, his wife would say; *it's keeping him up at night, he cannot help it! Now,* every morning, the wife would get the daughter—and, G-d love them, they had four of those—to milk the cow, to get the milk, to get the father, G-d love him, out of bed.

Now: it all started one morning after the night had been reluctant to leave. The sky was a shade too dark to the west, and a few of the stars were still out—drunkards at a closed alehouse door, having forgotten which way home was. *Do you know the feeling,* mother would say, a grate and a whisper, *when an odd dream follows you into the morning? Of course you do*, she'd continue before an answer was offered. *Now:* on this morning, Dvoyre Novomiski was feeling precisely that as she prodded the house into life. She sent the eldest to go milk the cow, to get the milk, that should, G-d helping, persuade the father to come down and grace the good people with his presence. What was the dream, she couldn't remember, something either underground or frightfully above it—something that was either dead when it should have been alive, or alive when it should have been dead. Something with a chicken.

This, her mother said, *I've been told by your auntie, Geyteleh, who has received a letter from Dvoyreleh asking about a shawl she'd thought she'd accidentally left behind. Now, things don't accidentally get left behind, I would say, because then why call it leaving?*

Now: Dvoyre Novomiski's morning unravelled as it ordinarily would, letting the youngest escape with half a plait done, shouting at the other to not leave the house with just the one shoe. Coercing the fire into a sleepy flame. Accepting, with a small word of thanks, the jug of milk the eldest carried in. Outside the village was pushing off the sheets and planting its feet on the cool floor; doors were opened wide to let the dust out and the fog in. Chickens clucked busily at a handful of seeds and an old carpet was dragged out of a house by its corner—heaved, with some effort, over a hedge, to be dusted later in the day. Dvoyre had hung the milk over the fire, still trying to remember. Not a chicken, she thought. Perhaps a fox? No. Not a fox. The mist drifted in, the mist drifted out. The sun warmed the house, the heat warmed the milk, and the fourth daughter—most like her father, stubborn in both falling asleep and waking up—stood on the bottom stair, eyes wide. Dvoyreleh noticed and meant to ask, *What?* Wanted to say, *So, now you fall asleep standing, too?*

Now: Dvoyreleh did neither. Instead she said nothing. She looked at her daughter and saw, in that knowing and unknowing way, a dream remembered and unremembered, that change, in all its terror, had come upon them.

(A mole, perhaps? Or—no, a rabbit?)

Mother, said the fourth daughter. The mist had melted into a thin sheet and revealed: footprints, a mess of them across the house, up the stairs from door to door. Red, blood red, but—no. Not blood red, just blood. And red. Above the hearth, the milk rose in a quick froth, dripping with a hiss into the fire. First the house smelled sweet, then burnt, and then, as father yelled out a yawn in the other room, it smelled of fear, sudden and strong. The fourth daughter's tread was careful coming off the stairs, careful as she tiptoed to her mother's side, careful, still, with one hand bunched into the fabric of mother's back, as they followed the tracks to where the blood pooled at the door leading to the garden.

Now, Daya's mother liked to pause here. *What do you think it was, my bubbaleh? Not a chicken, no. Not a rabbit, nor a mole, nor a fox.* But close, close—an animal close of kin but different, perhaps, in nature.

A hare, my dear heart. Three hares, in a circle, dead and clean and cut, right down the middle. Left, quite neatly, for the Novomiskis—G-d love them—to find. The eldest daughter must've stepped right over them in the morning mist, on her way to milk the cow, must've dragged the hems of her skirts through the puddle of it, must've trekked it across the house with her strong stride—heels heavy on the wood, a tread her father scolded her for often enough.

A cloud of flies that had been twitching around the cow's ears were drawn to the death at the door. A few gardens over, on the dusty street, a group of young girls began talking quickly to and over one another, deciding on the rules of a game. That was when there were still girls to play games and to decide on rules, dusty skirts and knobby knees as they thought and considered and said, *no, but if you be the wolf and you be the hunter then Hannah and I can be the people.*

The Novomiskis were good people. The husband, G-d love him, a man of faith, a kind man—perhaps he should have enjoyed his sleep a little less, his waking hours a little more. But what is a man with no vice? A man I have yet to meet, I would say. *Now*, where did the hares come from? Why were they dead? Do you know?

A wolf? No, bubbaleh. A wolf eats. A wolf hunts, and bites, and chews—it does not slice. Or place its prey prettily, for that matter, in order to frighten the good people of the town. So who was it then? An intruder, an outsider? An insider? But who, and why, and to what end? See, now. You do not know. Well, neither do I. Sometimes, my bubbaleh, HaShem gives us power in the form of knowledge. At other times, my sweet, the power lies in knowing nothing at all.

So, the Novomiskis left. The first family of girls—four of them, G-d love them—to leave the good town and not return. *Now*, how Dvoyre turned the writings, this way or that, begging her husband to read them as she might. *Three hares!* she cried. *Signs of fertility, our daughters, marrying into wealth and family!*

The hares were dead, *Dvoyreleh*, he reminded her. *But three!* she insisted. *A holy number, the three sons of Noah, the three souls of—*

A heathen number! He interrupted, *A demon, Dvoyre! A demon that has spit your mother and my mother and their mothers into this hole of a town, and a demon, now, that will spit us back out!*

Now, that was a bit much, if you ask me. Even the greatest cities were once a hole in the sand for the donkey to shit. I'm sorry, but there it is, if you ask me. So, that was the first family of girls that left. On a hot summer's day, a cart so full the peak of the heap would graze by the treetops. Dvoyreleh, G-d bless her, left with as much venom as any woman made to leave her home. Who can blame her? When they went, they went, wheels groaning. They did not look back. Once, I told you—I did tell you?—your Aunt Geyteleh got a letter from old Dvoyre. *Did I leave my shawl with you*? Dvoyre asked. *Send word*, signed, from a town a two-day's ride north.

Another story went like this: the first family that was spat into the hole that was not yet their village stayed because the mother had tripped on a root. They had waited a day or two, her husband and their newborn girl, for the ankle to heal. And when it healed, the good wife stood with her baby in her arms. She cast a shadow over her husband and said, *Shall we go?*

The husband shrugged and said, as certain as anyone laying in the grass with the sun on his face, *Tomorrow, maybe?*

And so it was done. Or perhaps undone, tomorrow. Maybe.

Daya told Uncle Moyshe about the body and Moyshe told the men and the men called for a town meeting. It was a miserable day, still hot with the season but grey, the sun distant and burning a hole in the sky. It had started to drizzle, and so the gathering was moved from the square to Teyve's shed, just big enough to house most of everyone who showed up. The straw was wet and smelled like animals and the people smelled like straw. Moyshe, tall and put-together—and a learned man, too; he'd be quick to remind anyone at risk of forgetting—stood before the good people and answered their concerns. Daya, a witness, was made to stand at his feet, a representative of the cause. His hands weighed heavy on her shoulders.

The crowd spoke as though through one mouth, though a mouth with sixteen tongues that were often confused, and got muddled in their speech. *Where did she come from,* one voice asked,

and the other tongues repeated the question in several degrees of distress. *A goysche!* Another voice replied, and some agreed, some did not: *how could we know?* And, *What would it matter?* And, *A warning! A curse!* Then, *Why would the goys?* Overlapping with, *Why would they not?*

Moyshe's hands tightened on Daya's shoulders. She worried the skin of her thumb with a nail.

"It does not matter," Moyshe began, voice carrying, "why the dead girl is dead. She was, and now she is not. She was elsewhere, and now she is here, and that is all that can be said. With the help of *HaShem*, what we do now is decide: how do we move on from here?"

Move on! The tongues cried, *Move, why should I move!* And, *Move where?* And, *She should move!* And, *A goysche!*

Moyshe waited for the din to die down. Then he spoke: "The girl must be buried."

The mouth of the crowd agreed all at once. *Not here*, paralleled with, *Next to my mother!* Underlined by a strong, *A curse upon this village!* shouted from the back of the shed.

"There is something to be said," Moyshe tried, for he was a good man, a learned man, "for an honourable burial, for strangers and friends alike."

No, said the people. *No*, and *no*, and *no*.

"Very well," Moyshe said. Daya's clothes felt damp against her skin, an afternoon sweat on the back of her neck. "Very well."

That evening, her mother took the seat opposite her at the table, stared as Daya ate her soup—dipped her bread, sucked the salt off her fingers.

"Are you sure," mother asked after some time, "that you didn't see anything else in the fields, my Dayaleh?"

Daya didn't look up. "Like what?"

"A fox, maybe," came the suggestion. "A wolf. A boar."

"No," Daya said, and loudly slurped the soup from her spoon.

The girl was buried the next day. Moyshe and a few of the older men had gone out into the woods, carrying the dead girl between them like a log dressed in white. They dug a shallow grave with the same shovels they used to dig holes for the fence. Moyshe's wife—Chava, who he'd found in the city and who spoke like most words frightened her—had wrapped the dead girl in an old sheet. Chava was heavy with child during those days, her small frame disappearing behind the width of her belly.

Daya and Feishel, son of the butcher and a menace unless in small company, huddled low in the wheat to see the procession disappear in and then out of the shade of the woods.

“What did she look like?” Feishel wanted to know, digging at the dry ground with a broken stalk.

In the distance, Moyshe and his men pushed their way through the field. Sweat marked dark circles on their backs.

“I don’t know,” Daya said, then thought about it. “Clean. I don’t know.”

Feishel hummed some agreement. He fell back into the wheat, looking up at the sky. at the clouds stretching thin over the blue. The trees shook and swung at a strong wind, ladies making way for a passing man. Voices carried over from the village, a rising argument, and Daya and Feishel slowly rose to their feet, meandering back home. In the middle of the field, the stalks reached as high as their shoulders, and all they could see were the tops of roofs, the swarms of mosquitos dancing above.

Now, depending on who you ask, the second family of girls to leave did so on a more joyous note: a marriage. The Morrises, who had always been a forward-thinking people, had arranged for their two daughters to cross paths with two sons—cousins of a cousin—during a visit after one relative’s passing. The daughters were twins who looked nothing alike, and the two sons were not twins but seemed identical all the same. A few honeyed treats on the table, short stroll with their mothers following five strides behind, a stuttered compliment and the deed was done: the union had been settled. The Morrises left with kisses and cries of mazal tovs, two daughters in their best dresses, knocking shoulders in the back of a carriage.

The third family, the Penzigs, had one daughter of fifteen years and two little babes. The father, a private man, had taken a young wife after his first one died during labour. The five of them left in the quiet of the night, not telling anyone.

The fourth family, no one remembers why, just that they had been sweet people, and their names always on the tip of one’s tongue—the memory of their faces always blurred, always behind frosted glass. The fifth had left to care for a sick aunt. The sixth for the promise of wealth. The seventh did not leave, but the daughter ran away: *do not weep for me, mother,* said the letter she’d left behind, *for I am happy, and I love him very much.*

And what shall be the story of us, Daya’s mother would say, untangling the mess of her daughter’s hair. Daya would be half asleep, resting back against her mother’s chest. *The last family of girls?*

And Daya would answer, *The story would be that we didn’t leave and then Chava had a daughter and I won’t be the only girl and I’ll have someone to play with and she’ll do whatever I tell her to.*

Her mother would hum a response, not agreeing or disagreeing. Would scratch her nails to the skin of Daya’s head, combing a handful of hair into a plait.

It was hard to say, in retrospect, how long it took. In Daya's memory the days blended together in different configurations depending on the weather, on her mood, on the dinner she'd had the day before. But no matter how much her mind shifted and repainted the scenery of it all, the memory of how the dead girl came back forever stayed the same. It was late in the day on a Sabbath, and the dusk was blushing across the sky, made shy by the night closing in on its embrace.

Daya was under strict orders to keep away from the edge of the fields, an order that she did not obey. She had taken to swinging from a low branch of a prune tree that stood, solitary, amidst the corn. Feishel said it was his grandfather's tree, for he—when he was a young man—had stolen a prune and in a panic eaten it whole, pit and all, and shat it back out in the field. That pit, Feishel said, grew into a tree. Daya did not believe a word of it, but the story had been told with such conviction and wit that she could not help but think of it each time she clambered up the trunk and scooted down the good, low branch.

It was there that she sat, her feet swinging in their dusty shoes, when the dead girl appeared. A silhouette blooming from the horizon. She had a particular tread, slow as though bored, as though waiting for her mother's conversation with the neighbour to end. First, Daya did not recognise her. And then, with a wild heartbeat, she did. In some versions of the memory, a murmur of starlings weaved themselves in and out of shapes in the distance, spelling out the fate of days to come. A circle. A rabbit. A wave.

The corn whispered excitedly. Daya held on to the branch with one hand and lifted the other. A small gesture of salute. It is bad luck, her mother's voice reminded, to let the dead go unnoticed.

A moment passed, sweaty-palmed and cold. The dead girl lifted a hand, mirroring Daya. They stayed like that, the two of them, frozen each in their own, and then the dead girl turned—slinked down the slope of the hill. The sun followed her, putting itself to rest, and Daya tried to climb back down. Her legs felt ungainly, her elbows bruised. She walked home through rusted limbs and thought, madly, she smelled something on the wind. Old sheets. A stew left out overnight.

She woke up before the sun was out. The room was cast in lines of grey: an apron over the back of a chair, an open closet door. Daya tugged the blankets over her head and pulled her knees close to her chest, huddling in tightly until she could hear her own heartbeat louder than her breath. A fly had made its way into the room through a hole in the rotten wood of the window and was now stuck behind the curtains, bumping against the glass.

Daya pushed off and out of bed. She got dressed in the dim room, shoving arms through sleeves and tying laces with fingers that were shaky in the cold. The day would warm soon, but for now the chill sat heavy in the walls. She went and sat by the single step leading to the garden, watching the hills beyond come back into colour as the morning rose. It took her a while to notice the still little mouse by the foot of the stair. It was left on its back, beady eyes open. A cat must've gotten to it, she thought, chewing on dry bread.

She shook a cloth from a pocket and picked the rodent up by its tail. Placed it on the cloth, over the cradle of her palm, and folded the thing back up—neat as could be. Corner in, corner in. A loop, a tie.

Noon was making itself known to a choir of insects singing high praise to the heat. Daya found the grave without too much difficulty, a minute's walk from the forests' edge, a shallow hole in the ground with a dirty sheet at its bed. It was dug in the shade of two grand oaks. Sunlight was dappling in through the canopy, and the grave was empty, the dirt upturned.

Daya lingered for a while, walking quiet circles around the trees, listening for footsteps, the snapping of branches, but—nothing. Just a pair of birds digging in the leaves, crowing at one another. She called out, once. Her voice echoed past the trees, then disappeared into silence.

Before leaving she put down the packet, still tied in its cloth, by the roots of one of the oak trees. Sunlight blinded her as she stepped out of the woods.

The cloth was returned the next day. under a garden bush, a spot where the hedge had never grown fully, a hole in the green that led onto the fields beyond.

A small bird, headless. A starling. Black wings studded with gold.

On her knees in the wet mud, Daya unpacked the neatly retied package. She hid the starling under the bush and added the soiled cloth to a pail of soiled smalls. It dirtied the water quickly, and so she got to scrubbing. Sweat beaded on her upper lip, down the line of her back. The day quieted, right then, and there was only sound of sloshing water, of Daya's laboured breathing.

"You shouldn't be here," was the first thing Daya said to the dead girl.

She'd spent a long morning on the edge of the woods, deciding. She played a game with pebbles, throwing them against the trunk of a tree and giving those who didn't bounce back a name. She then had the pebbles argue over the rules of the game, then got bored of herself altogether, threw dust over the whole thing. Ducked under a low branch, shuffled past thorny berry bushes, and marched into the woods.

She found the dead girl in the clearing beyond the grave, sitting slumped on a boulder. She was drawing patterns in the dirt with the toes of her shoes and startled when Daya spoke. Stood. Her hair was matted, her dress turned grey.

"You shouldn't go into the village like that," Daya continued.

The dead girl stared at her, blank. Her eyes were a murky white; soap water, aniseed. The tips of her seemed blushed, and the rest was a blotted purple, blue, brown.

"Can you understand me?" Daya took a step and the dead girl walked the same step backwards.

The dead girl said nothing.

"You shouldn't be scared. I should be scared of you." Daya waited a moment, then reached into her pocket, pulled out the cloth, clean now, folded in a square. She held it out at arm's length, an offering.

"There's nothing in it now," she said. "But you can have it, if you want."

The dead girl looked.

"Here," Daya said, moving to tie the thing around the dead girl's wrist. "This will look nice on you."

The dead girl watched, a blank emotion that could've been want as much as it could've been objection.

"Lovely," said Daya, pulling the loops, admiring. It was white with red thread woven through, stark against her midnight skin.

Moyshe's wife, Chava, was told by the midwife that she will have a girl. Daya's mother explained this, explained it was the hours counted between kicks, the fact Chava craved milk and not meat, the bulbous shape to the right of her belly. The way the rabbit's bones fell from the old woman's hands.

"See now," her mother said, braiding the bread. "You will have a friend!"

"It's a babe," said Daya. "It can't even talk."

That night a storm raced over the hills. The roof of Teyve's shed was half off, straw everywhere. The wind had kicked up the sands in the street and so the windows were murky in the morning, an off shade of yellow. The prune tree in the field was found broken, as though it had tried to lean sideways and had reached over too far—had broken its own body in half, had slumped down to the ground in disappointment. There was rot inside the trunk, which was probably why—Moyshe said—it hadn't given fruit this year. Why it couldn't survive a storm.

She found the dress at the bottom of the cupboard. There isn't much from before the fevers that her mother hasn't thrown out, but the few precious items—a dress, a doll, a ring—were kept safely in a wooden trunk, hidden under a heap of sheets kept for rags. The dress was yellowed at its hems, but clean enough, the right size. Daya shook out the dust and quickly wrapped it into a ball, stuffed it into a bag she'd once made for carrying chicken feed.

The dead girl let Daya redress her with a quiet solemnity. Let her brush her hair, tutting at the tangled mess of it, holding the thick of it in hand. “What have you been up to?” she said, mimicking her mother’s speech. The coarse brush scratched her palm.

The dead girl rocked to Daya’s tugs, moving as daughters do to their mother’s pull, patient on kitchen stools. She held a piece of cheese Daya had given her in hand, as though keeping it for someone else.

“Eat it. That’s for you,” Daya explained once she was done with the hair, once she had surveyed her handiwork and proclaimed it beautiful.

Daya was lying on the kitchen floor, face full in the sun. Her mother’s bread was rising under a towel and the smell of yeast pushed itself into every corner of the house. The neighbours’ oven was puffing smoke, and plumes would pass through the door, throwing shadows over the light.

“One of the bushes is dying,” her mother said, sounding distracted, scrubbing the flour and dough from her hands. She was looking out the window onto the garden.

Daya hummed, closing her eyes. Satisfaction sat hot and low in her chest.

“They’re mine,” Daya said after she’d helped the dead girl into the stockings. “But they’re still good.”

She stuffed the dead girl’s old pair into her bag. “Not as fine as your old pair, but those are too dirty now. I’ll clean them. Where do you go at night? Do you sleep in that hole? You shouldn’t. Are you cold? Here this is for you.” Daya took the old doll from her bag and handed it to the dead girl, who accepted it, slowly, as she did most everything else. It was a raggedy thing, yarn for hair, a sewn-on smile.

“You can play with her when I’m not here. You can have her walk or dance like so,” Daya shook the dead girl’s hand, who was still holding on to the doll, and the girl’s wrist came undone. Just a little: a sinew torn, a peek of white bone.

“Oh,” Daya said, and the game fell still. She left with the quiet promise of fixing it, and the dead girl didn’t seem to mind much either way.

That evening, a town’s meeting was called in. A sickness was spreading through the crops. It had started with the corn along the woodland’s edge and was now spreading to the wheat. They had cut down the sickness, the men said, and *G-d willing* they had got to it on time.

What to do, Moyshe had said, shrugged, and the question was the answer: *nothing*. Chava sat beside him, nodding. Her hand rested on top of her bauble belly.

The dead girl was patient as Daya sewed her wrist back in place. The thread she pulled from the fraying edge of a bedspread, the needle she borrowed from her mother under the guise of having socks to darn. She cut the ends with a pocketknife and painted over the thread with a bit of dirt, a bit of spit, blending it into the skin.

"Good as new," she said, on her knees by the dead girl's side. The blue little fingers moved, testing. Curled around Daya's thumb, cold and soft and holding on. Daya smiled up at her, squeezed back. The dead girl tried to smile in response, baring her blackened teeth.

Daya set to packing up her instruments, piercing the needle in and out the fabric of her pocket.

Feishel fell ill. His appetite was the first to go, and his mother worried only faintly until the fever hit. The boy was bedbound, sweating through the shakes. On the second day, it was Teyve's youngest who followed suit, waking with bloodshot eyes, hallucinating in his smallclothes. Two other boys had begun to show signs of the illness before the town had determined it was something in the water. The well was quickly boarded up until a solution would be found. *From now on, we will only drink rainwater, milk and distillations*, Moyshe told the good people who stood before him, one father half in tears, one mother with her face in her hands.

We've been here before, Moyshe, said Feishel's mother. Her anger was the frightened kind, words trembling.

This is nothing like before, said Moyshe, a world of calm, and that was that.

Daya was braiding the dead girl's hair as she retold the tale, spending a good while talking about Feishel and his lies, and how a proper scare might do him some good. Through the braid she tucked flowers, marigolds, and dandelions, and wrapped a ribbon around the end.

It all changed when Chava, days away from labour, fell ill as well. She collapsed as all the town's women came to visit, to pass on old clothes, knitted gifts, a small crib that Teyve once built for his own son. She had been feeling lightheaded all day and had no appetite. The midwife was called and Chava was put to bed. The same fever, it was pronounced, though she had not been drinking the water; it was milk, after all, that she had been craving. Daya watched as the women fussed, chewing on the skin of her thumb from the doorway.

And though it had been whispered for days behind closed doors, over late-night cups of wine and by the skew shadows of the fire, the first one to say it out loud was Daya's mother herself. Standing by Chava's door, she and the women of the town, Daya's mother said in a breath: "A curse."

Once spoken, the words could not be put back into their whispers, into the bottoms of cups and the ashes of fire. They were repeated, nodded to, repeated again, and by the end of the day Moyshe stood at Daya's mother's doorstep, face dark in the shadow of the evening, of his wide-brimmed hat.

"Go to the bedroom," Daya was told by her mother as Moyshe took a seat at their table.

Daya sulked and lingered out of sight, an ear to the wall.

Are you sure, was Moyshe's first question, and her mother's reply was a quick, *yes*. *The signs are the same, the fever the same*.

We mustn't act too quickly, Moyshe answered, *we mustn't do what—*

Moyshele, her mother cut him off, and there was the scraping of a chair on the floor. Perhaps she'd moved closer. Perhaps she reached to grasp his hand in hers. *My brother. If it is not the water, and it is not the milk. If it is not the corn, or the tree, or, G-d help us, the air, then what else could it be?*

A pause, and her mother's words halted before they could be spoken—then trying again: *For your wife. For your unborn daughter's life, my Moyshele.*

The house creaked in the long silence that followed. The sighing of the wood before it settles for the night.

I'll put it before the good people, Moyshe said. *Tomorrow morning, first sun. Perhaps they will find a kinder heart this time.*

Mother's response was a laugh, short and sad. Moyshe bid his goodnight and left, and when the door opened the heat of the house left, and the chill crept in. Not much later, Daya's mother sat by her bedside, warming her daughter's feet between her hands.

"But what do they want to do?" Daya asked, muffled, sheets up over her mouth. "Haven't they already buried her?"

"I don't think it is good for you to hear," her mother said, not looking up.

"Please," Daya pushed down the sheets enough to say the word clearly. Her mother breathed deeply, put Daya's foot down. Tucked it under the blanket. Picked up her other foot.

"The good people will decide," she said. "They can welcome her to sacred ground, or banish her." Then, more to herself than to Daya, "Her spirit must be restless."

Daya said nothing, lifted the sheets back over her mouth, her nose, and screwed her eyes tightly shut.

She did not sleep. She counted her mother's breaths, the ticking of the wood, the footsteps of a mouse in the walls. She could not warm herself, shook in bed and tried to stop—did not want her mother to wake up, to think she was feverish herself, too.

In the last valley of the night, the darkest nook before the skies inched toward a brighter grey, Daya left the bed and laced her shoes in silence. She wrapped herself in a warm shawl. In the daylight, it was purple, wool painted with union skins, but in the dark it had no colour and just itched at her throat and the back of her neck.

Outside, the moon hung brightly in a bed of stars. It was waning, a sliver of light like the bed of a fingernail, and Daya felt comforted by it as she ran across the fields; a presence, it was, disinterested but not unkind. There was only her hard breathing, the crickets. The wet of the ground quickly soaked through her shoes, through her socks. The woods were more solid in the dark, the branches harder in their bend, and it took her a while to find the hole of the grave, the clearing. The dead girl was not there. Daya whispered a call, dancing on the tips of her shoes—teeth chattering.

No sound of response. No footsteps, slow on the soft undergrowth. No branches breaking, sending birds into a busy flutter. Daya called out again, louder this time. She waited, started walking, this way and that. Her shawl got stuck on a bush and frightened her, and she wept for a short moment, tired and cold. Then she was angry again, marching back toward the fields, the paling horizon blinking in and out of view in between the trees.

She found the dead girl sitting in the shallow ditch between the corn and the wheat. She had dug a small hole in the dirt, had made the doll sit in it beside her. Daya was relieved and scared all at once, set in a quick pace, and the dead girl looked up at her.

"We're not playing," Daya explained quickly, tugging at her to get up—pulling at the fabric of the dress. "Up, up, we need to be fast, you need to—"

The dead girl did as bid but would not go without the doll, which she could not bend down to pick up. And so Daya had to do it for her, pushed it into her hands, held her by a pinch of dress at her elbow, and pulled her along, urging her to walk faster. The sky was getting brighter, a light shining through cheesecloth, and the birds were starting up their morning choir. A warble, an owl. A blackbird.

Between the oak trees, Daya tried to get the dead girl to lie in her grave. "No," she said, fingers so cold it was hard to move them, hard to pry the girl's hands from her sleeve. "No, you have to go, you—"

The dead girl's milk-moon eyes were all confusion. Daya tried to push her off, to shout, to pull her down with her. The moment Daya climbed out of the grave the dead girl followed suit, and for the little power she had she managed surprisingly well, fingers clawing at the dirt, pulling herself up.

"Please," Daya was sobbing, knees in the wet mud. "Please."

The dead girl stood by her, her new dress covered in dirt now. A hole in her stocking had torn into a ladder, down to her ankle. The sun peeked over the fields, threw long rays through the trees.

A breeze carried the voices of a nearing crowd of people. They were all speaking at once, to and over one another. Sixteen tongues, it seemed, speaking through one mouth. Walking as one, the wheat stalks bending at their feet.

The cries of the good people could be heard in the distance when they found the grave upturned, empty. Daya and the dead girl were running hand in hand through the high corn, toward the village. Daya had wiped her dirty hand over her face to get her hair out of the way and now she looked a mess, her ruddy socks fallen to her ankles, the hem of her nightgown muddy. The stitches at the dead girl's wrist were beginning to unravel.

At the edge of the village the two of them stood, hesitant. The dusty street was empty, quiet. A few doors stood ajar, a testament to the haste with which the good people left. From an open window the voice of a woman carried—calling someone, Daya thought at first, but then realised the sound was that of pain. A groan, followed by tired pleading, and another groan. Another voice, softer, comforting. Chava had gone into labour.

Daya took a deep breath. "Come," she said, and with her hand in the dead girl's, she started down the street, a determined pace.

Daya did not look up, did not slow as they passed her house, passed the well. A few windows shut quickly, doors as well. Locks were turned. They passed the vegetable patch. The last house. Teyve's shed. The narrow stone path up to the sacred ground.

The cemetery was hedged by a low wall of wreathed willow branches, meant to keep small animals at bay. *Small animals and bad spirits*, her mother used to say. The tombstones were laid out at odd angles in the ground, most of them covered in pebbles. To show the dead they were remembered. A few birch trees grew along the back of the lot, their thin white trunks coming out of the ground like bones.

Their hold on one another was broken when the dead girl held still at the cemetery wall. Daya let the dead girl stand as she was, mulling by the low hedge, and quickly got to work, fell to her knees by her sisters' graves and began digging. Handfuls of dirt, armfuls, her nails aching as she reached as far as she could, buried her fingers as deep as they'd go.

"Come help me," Daya asked. Her knuckles had begun bleeding.

The dead girl did not move, but stood watching, eyes pale and unthinking.

Daya cast a quick look behind them, down the decline of the village. Moyshe and his good people had returned, converging and dispersing along the street like a family of ants marching on a sugar hill. From there, Daya could even see her mother with her hands fisted in Moyshe's lapels, pleading.

The hole was not nearly deep enough. Big enough. Daya dug faster, crying, calling at the dead girl who did nothing, who reached into the pocket of her gifted dress, offered a few pebbles she'd won during a game. An open and blue palm.

Daya's muddy hands were shaking as she wiped at her wet face, her mouth. "We're not playing," she told the dead girl. The good people were marching down the street, up the hill. She looked back at the small muddle of a grave, it would have to do, she told herself. *It would have to do.*

She was unsteady on her feet as she tried to get the dead girl to move, to go with her,

to pass the hedge onto the holy ground. And the dead girl, her limbs weak but her feet strong, refused to move.

"They will kill you!" Daya said, weeping, desperate. Her arms were around the dead girl's waist, and the dead girl pushed at her shoulders, pulling away. "Please! They will not understand, you—please, you must—"

The good people gasped, a wave of reactions that cascaded down the crowd as they passed Teyve's shed and, halfway up the stone path, saw the scene before them. All fell silent for a moment. A breathless moment, a missed heartbeat, and then the mouth took air. Began speaking. *The curse!* it cried, sixteen tongues as one. *The dybbuk!* said one, agreed by another, confirmed with, *Evil upon us*, and, *we must—!* and, *We will—!*

Daya stood between the good people and the dead girl, arms spread. The dead girl slumped into her back, crouched, frightened.

Daya's mother wrestled her way out from the crowd, took a stumbling step forward and said only, "Daya." And again, with gravel deep in her throat, "My Daya."

Moyshe had a heavy piece of wood in his hand, wielded like a weapon. His other hand was outstretched. "Daya," he said, as though she was a wild dog. As though it was a warning.

Daya took a step back. The dead girl stumbled with her, broken fingers clutching onto her dress. Daya's jaw was clenched, her vision blurred, wet. When Moyshe took another step forward the good people joined him, and when Moyshe's arm went up the good people charged, and all that happened next was lost to the mire of history, lost to the memory of most everyone present.

Perhaps it was Daya who pushed the dead girl onto sacred ground. Perhaps it was Moyshe with his bat, or Feishel's mother with her blood-shot eyes, or Daya's mother, who tried to pull her daughter from harm. Or maybe it was none of them, or all of them. Perhaps it was the dead girl herself who, with a handful of pebbles, stepped over the demarcation line. Left the world of things alive when they should be dead, came into a world of things dead when they should, against all good faith, be alive.

But when the uproar died down, when the arms were lowered and the claws were withdrawn, when the dust of the commotion still lingered in the air—they found the body like this: unmoving. Dead. Between three old graves and a new one. Her black hair had been braided, studded with flowers that had now wilted, and someone, surely, someone must've spent a good afternoon threading those into place.

It was a madness, so the story goes, that drove out the last family of girls. All who were there on the day it happened swear it was the middle of night, even though it was a clear summer's day. Their recollection of it is blurry, unsure, edited and discussed too often. Like an odd dream, some said, that had followed them into the morning.

The family had been one of three daughters, once, but a fever had taken the two eldest years ago, taken the father, too. And so it was just the mother left. The mother and her youngest, Daya. Driven by sorrow and loneliness—for she was, after all, the last girl in the village—young

Daya had fallen to madness. Had dug up the body of a dead girl buried in the woods, had kept her as a friend. Had dressed her up in her sisters' clothes. The good people of the village had found her by their graves; she had dragged the dead girl from the woods to the cemetery. She had dug a new grave.

The last family of girls left at dusk. They had no carriage and no horse and so they walked, two suitcases between them. Daya's nails were still caked with mud. Her mother's hair was pulled messily into a kerchief. She held her daughter's hand tightly in her own.

"*A groyse oylem*," were her parting words to the village, gathered by the dusty road to see them leave, "*un nito eyn mentsch*."

A crowd of people, so the saying goes, *and not a person among them*.

Now. A bit much for dead shiksha, a patch of dirt, Chaya's mother would say, retelling the story over a bowl of soup. *If you ask me*. She would shrug at this, as though she didn't know herself. Then, tucking her daughter's hair behind her ear, she'd add, *And what shall be the story of us, Chayaleh? The last family of girls?*

And Chaya would be upset, would answer, *The story would be that we won't leave, so no story at all.*

Her mother would hum a response, not agreeing, not disagreeing. A summer's breeze would come in through the curtains, carrying with it the smell of dry earth. Of cut weeds and something else—something familiar. Sheets left out to dry, perhaps. A hot back of a neck in deep sleep, in a patch of a noon sun.

DAN NIELSEN

Tim & Tom

Tim heard a sound coming from under the bed. He got down on all fours and pressed a cheek against the floorboards. In the dim light, he saw a brown leather suitcase. That sound again. Like a muffled voice.

"Hey!"

Like a voice inside a suitcase.

Tim grabbed the handle and pulled it out.

"It's locked."

"Look in your wallet."

The same muffled voice.

"What?"

"The key, dummy. That's where you keep it."

"Who are you calling a dummy?"

The wallet was on the nightstand. The key was in the secret compartment. Tim opened the suitcase. A face turned toward him. Eyes opened.

"Tom?" Tim said.

"You were expecting Mortimer Snerd?"

Then Tom was back on Tim's knee.

"Where are we, Tom?"

"It's called Ridgewood. A retirement community slash nursing home."

"We're retired?"

"Semi-retired."

"So it's a semi-retirement community slash nursing home."

"Tim, did you forget we have a show tonight?" Tom swiveled his head to look up at Tim.

"We do? My memory isn't what it used to be."

"What did your memory used to be?"

"I don't remember."

"Good one."

"Thanks."

Tim looked around the room. “Where are we, anyway?”

“I just told you.”

“Oh, right.” Tim looked out the window. “Remind me again.”

“It’s not important where we are.” Tom rolled his eyes. “What’s important is we have a show tonight.”

“We do?” Tim stared at the ceiling. The stains reminded him of something. “I hope it’s not some cheap dive. I hate those places.”

“Actually, it’s a pretty nice room.” Tom put his hand over his face. He shook with laughter. “It’s…the All-Purpose Room.”

“I’m confused, Tom.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Tom blinked and almost smiled. “Let’s go for a stroll.”

In the corridor, there were hurrying nurses, people in wheelchairs, people pushing walkers.

A woman carrying a clipboard touched Tim’s arm. “We’re all so looking forward to your performance tonight.” She patted Tom’s head. He gave her a wink. “It’s such an honor to have actual showbusiness legends such as yourselves living with us.”

“What is she talking about?” Tim asked.

The woman laughed like this was the funniest thing she’d ever heard.

“Is everyone crazy here?” Tim said.

The woman laughed even harder.

Tom noticed a poster on the activities board. “Look, Tim.”

Tim stared at it awhile. “I’m younger,” he said, “but you seem the same.”

“What can I say?” Tom displayed his profile. “Some age better than others.”

“We’re appearing here tonight.”

“That’s right, partner.”

“You should have told me.”

Tom closed his eyes and shook his head. “I guess I forgot to mention it.”

“We were on Ed Sullivan?”

“The Rolling Stones opened for us.”

“And Johnny Carson?”

“You got high in the green room with Doc Severinsen.”

“We must be pretty good.”

“Good? We’re hilarious.”

PHILIP BERRY

Paths of Least Resistance

The first absence came upon Max Vesey when he was learning law at university. Two days before a series of three-hour examinations, he curled up under the eiderdown in the tiny room of his shared house and wished he wasn't there. Max didn't want to escape life. He wanted a different life, unencumbered by expectation.

In the darkness that grew warmer with each exhaled breath, he kept his eyes open and fell towards the neon lines that his cortex insisted on writing across the sensory vacuum. The stress, the need to 'keep up,' fell away from him like spent fuel tanks from a soaring rocket.

When he awoke and pushed the heavy covers off his sweaty hair, the nature of the light coming through the grimed window was different: the ice-blue of early morning. A whole day must have passed. The magnitude of his folly hit him. He had thrown away three years of study.

Downstairs, in the communal kitchen, he found three unfamiliar people; a young man and two young women, clearly students, but not the friends he had moved in with. They looked at him with interest rather than anger.

"Hello, and you are?" said the man, who wore a poorly developed beard.

Max had no words.

"Are you the landlord's son?" asked the woman who was leaning into a bowl of cereal.

"No. I live here. In the top room."

"Not yet you don't," said the man. "If you want the fourth room, you need to apply like the others. Interviews aren't until next week."

"Sorry. I…I…"

"How the hell did you get in anyway?" asked the second woman, staring over the top of yesterday's newspaper.

"I didn't. I just...excuse me, what day is it?"

She told him the day, then the month, then the year. Max was four years older than he thought he was.

He travelled by train to his parents' house. They seemed to be expecting him. How's the job, his father asked. 'Fine.' And Lucy, Alexander? 'Oh, great.' He knew to whom they referred but could not summon images to flesh out the names.

Their dinner together passed easily enough. Max learned, by close attention to inadvertent clues given, that he had obtained a university degree, though not in law, and now worked as an

administrator for an international charity that built schools for disabled children in poor countries.

In the bed that his parents kept made for him, he remembered. A face settled onto the pale oval that symbolised Lucy. The air accompanying the memory was fresh; an autumn morning, a country walk. They climbed a hill together. They were on their third date. At the hill's crest the ground dipped into a gentle crater, undermined, some said, by the graves of Celts. Max and Lucy sat on the crater's edge and reached an understanding. They committed to one another. That was how it started.

Max smiled into the darkness, and slept well.

Lucy hugged Max where he found her, in the kitchen of their second floor flat. He felt something tugging on his trousers. Looking down, he saw a child. A toddler.

"Hey, Alexander, look, Daddy's back," said Lucy, her voice all smile.

"Dadda," said Alexander. "You said you'd play hide and seek when you got back. You hide first, you the best, you the hidey-man." Alexander began to pull him away, towards the small living room.

"How were your parents, by the way?" asked Lucy.

"Good. Good."

"Why did you stay the extra night? I expected a call."

"Oh, sorry. Mum's been a bit ill, that's all. I just thought I'd, you know...spend some time."

Alexander needed help. He had grown into what Max called a 'distant' child, but whom Lucy, and the professionals they admitted into their house, regarded as lying on a spectrum of behavioural and emotional maladjustment. When Max took Alexander out, played with him, forced him into prolonged conversation, he sensed a lack of history between them, as though all the games that had been played, all the laughs they had shared, all the stories Max had read aloud, were wasted. The relationship was thin and fragile as a rusty wire. Max felt sure that his late entry into Alexander's life was to blame.

A child was hurt in the park. One of the parents, suppressing her anger in view of Alexander's well-known 'problems,' showed Max a photo on her phone. Max winced at the sight of a raw red triangle on the girl's pale upper arm. Alexander had lacerated the skin with a sharp stone in anger.

Having been born in June, Alexander's birthday parties were generally held outside, in the block of flats' communal garden. Max remembered the mood, the temperature, and the light. For Alexander's eighth, they invited ten children from his class, but five did not come, their parents sending last-minute excuses by email or text. Max compensated, injecting energy and joy into the back-garden games. Lucy smiled as she brought out the cake, its candles lit, the flames almost invisible under the bright sun. She placed the cake carefully on the table, but another child blew all the candles out. Alexander looked bewildered, turned scarlet, then exploded into a whirling mess of arms, spittle, and tears.

Max grabbed him, pinioned his arms and compressed him into submission. Then, once calm had been regained and the other children had been taken away by their polite but muted parents, Max went upstairs and sat on the toilet, just to get away. He pushed his forehead into his own cupped hands and wished that he could move sideways into a different path, away from this sadness that seemed to have no end.

It was summer again. The garden—a different garden, back of a terraced house— looked good. Someone, probably Max himself, had kept it tidy. He approached Lucy from behind, and hesitated inches from the firm curve of her neck. The years—he did not know how many yet—had pencilled scant lines of grey into the hair of her nape.

Calmly, Max said, "I'm so sorry."

Lucy turned with a whip-like motion of her head and smiled.

"Max! Where were you?" The shock was minimal, trivial.

"I... can't explain."

"You went off to make the tea and disappeared! What have you been up to?"

"I…I…" Then he smiled, as though to floor the gap with humour. "And when was that, Lucy?"

"Forty minutes ago! Come on, I'm thirsty. And this party's not going to prepare itself."

Max walked across the garden to the kitchen. The tea, coffee, and other containers had been rearranged, but the cupboards and their contents were unchanged. Walking back, with two cups steaming into his face, he asked, "You didn't miss me?"

"I hope you were doing something useful on that computer. Like finding out where Alexander's present has got to."

Max smiled, enigmatically, he hoped. He had no idea what she was talking about.

"How many are coming?"

"Coming?"

"To the party."

This time Lucy's face spasmed with confusion.

"For Alexander? What? None, of course. He hates having people round. Are you actually part of this family, Max?"

As he composed his answer, a girl of five with dark brown hair ran out. Her bright eyes made contact with his, and she beamed.

"Daddy! Do you think he'll like it?" She held up a home-made card covered in sequins and patterns drawn with fluorescent markers. Max's eyes teared up. He did not know her name.

"Jess, leave it in the sun for a bit. It'll help the glue dry," suggested Lucy.

"Jess," mumbled Max.

"Yes, Daddy?" she answered.

"Nothing. Nothing."

The doorbell rang. There were two shapes behind the frosted glass. Alexander and one of his several carers. Max opened the door. He did not know whether to shake his son's hand or hug him. Alexander had the light moustache and mild acne of a typical fifteen-year-old. Max held him briefly, and Alexander seemed to accept this. Max held his eye. There was warmth there, but no deeper connection.

The modest party passed without crisis. Alexander stayed the night but returned to the residential school next day. Max was accepted back into their shared life. The mathematics of birthdays told him that he had been gone for seven years.

In his own absence, Max had risen to a senior level at the charity. It took months to bed into his responsibilities, and to smooth over the areas of ignorance that threatened to reveal the truth.

One morning, he took a phone call from an investigative journalist. A rumour was circulating that charitable funds, from both the general public and the government, had been diverted into the accounts of influential military leaders in a certain Southeast Asian country. Accounts had been hacked, evidence gathered. The documents covered a three-year period; Max had been running the relevant department throughout.

Max met with the journalist, a twenty-eight-year-old called Vivienne Madden, who had already won two awards. She pulled a notebook from her satchel and nudged her glasses up the bridge of her nose as she sat down opposite him in the coffee shop.

"So, what happened, Mr. Vesey?"

"I took my eye off the ball. I got distracted."

"For three years in a row?"

"For three years. As I told the fraud office, there was no personal gain. I am innocent."

"In both senses of the word, perhaps."

The rest of the interview was no more enlightening. As Vivienne progressed through her questions, despairing at the lack of material, Max asked himself supplementary questions in silence. Where was I? Is the fault mine? And statements: I have destroyed my son's future, I have betrayed the trust of my colleagues, my wife. I am here now, but I don't deserve to be.

As they parted, Max touched her upper arm.

"I have a story to tell, Ms. Madden. I don't yet know how it ends, but when I'm ready to tell it, will you listen?"

She agreed, and gave him a card.

Max kept his job, there being sufficient evidence of wrongdoing on the part of a particular corrupt general, and performed well. He travelled widely, developed new relationships, and regained trust within the charity. But everyone knew a reckoning approached. Inevitably, the scandal came before the Public Accounts Select Committee, and two years later he was commanded to attend before a famously tenacious and forensic member of parliament. Shallow enquiries revealed that he had no choice, in law. If he refused, he could be arrested for contempt.

Max sweated into his suit, although the air was cold. In the small panes that faced the dark river Thames, he saw his own green complexion. Seated now, he looked up to take the pressure off his tight throat, where the nausea of a guilty schoolchild surged and fell, a meniscus of bile. He followed the sand-coloured stonework to the high ceiling, its columns, stout frames, the work of masons long-dead. He thought about leaving, in abstract only. He had no intention. But as he studied the ceiling, the wood of the bench beneath him softened, and the wall pressed against his shoulder blades parted.

He was forty-eight when he saw Lucy again. She was at home with Jess, who was now in her twenties. Jess had come to visit their home with her only child. This child, a four-year-old boy called Jake, heard Max's feet on the parquet of the hallway and ran towards him. Max found himself returning from a chore in the village. He and Lucy lived in the countryside now. The car was cooling in the driveway. Jake paused two metres away and looked up at Max carefully. Jake seemed inhibited, the childish instinct to greet diluted by reservation.

"Hello, Jake," said Max. "Come for tea?"

"You won't play. You go hide upstairs not come back." It was not a speculation.

Today, Max would try harder.

"How is it between us, Lucy?"

They were preparing for bed.

"As it ever was, Max. We rub along. Good lives, I think, but separate in many ways. I accept that."

Max looked over at a picture of Alexander on a bedside table.

"I wonder what he's up to?" said Max, trying to establish a route to recent history.

Lucy snorted.

"Are you being spiritual right now?"

"Eh?"

"You never believed in heaven, or anything like that. You must be getting sentimental."

Max's vision blurred. He would have to wait to find out how it had happened. It would emerge, in the avalanche of new information that always roared towards him after an absence.

"So where do you go, actually?" This was Vivienne Madden.

Max sat in another café down the street from the paper at which she now worked as deputy editor. The details on the card were out of date, but an email with her name and the newspaper's common stem eventually prompted a response. She remembered him. Her memory was part of the reason she had done so well.

He had explained himself in a quiet corner. Vivienne held a cup of Earl Grey. The notebook was gone, but the spectacles remained, now thick-rimmed and rectangular.

"So, it's a form of amnesia?"

"Nothing so prosaic. I don't think it's a medical problem."

"Or some kind of automacity, like on the motorway, when you drive somewhere but have no idea how you got there."

"Perhaps. Autopilot. That describes it pretty well. But I am elsewhere, I know I am."

"Do you meet anyone when you're away?"

"If I do, I don't bring them back with me. I feel as though I've lived a rich life, but I have no stories to tell on my return."

"Aren't you just disowning the chunks of your life you're not proud of? Surely you are." There was impatience in her voice. He had given her *nothing*; no real story.

"It must be something like that."

"I am not a therapist, I'm a reporter. Why did you want to meet, really?"

"I need help—an amanuensis, perhaps—to interpret what has happened to me. I can't see it myself. You watched me during the hearing in Westminster. You saw how I answered, grasping

for memories, for truth. They were in me; I *had* lived them, but they did not truly belong to me, as I was removed. You saw it."

Vivienne looked past him, into the heart of the coffee shop. Her phone pinged a notification. She snapped her attention back to the sphere that contained the two of them. A decision had been made.

"I know what you want, Max, but I can't help you. Sorry. Perhaps your wife? She has watched you, lived with you, during these times."

"You are helping already, by listening. I know that sounds trite. I'll contact you when I have something more, if you will allow me. Will you?"

"You know where I am."

"Congratulations, by the way, on your career."

After an uninterrupted decade, Lucy came up behind him in the bedroom, as he had done to her in the garden on his return, and touched his shoulder.

"Max, I have something to tell you."

He could tell it was bad news.

"What, love?"

"I went to the doctor. I didn't tell you. She sent me to the hospital. I've got…I've got a tumour. In my lung."

Max's legs folded, and he sat heavily on the bed. For a moment he feared that the bed would sink beneath him, that the floor would divide under the weight of his fear. But they held. He held.

They talked for half an hour, and he discovered that Lucy's tumour was inoperable, that the chemotherapy would cause unpleasant symptoms but would give her, them, more time. But in the end the cancer would win.

The treatment began ten days later, and its side-effects were as expected. After two months, and a repeat scan, the doctor told them that the tumour was not responding as well as they had hoped. There were options. One of them was to stay at home and let it grow. No more appointments. No more hours spent in corridors, watching others—the gaunt, the defeated, the hopeful. Lucy chose this option. She was fifty-nine.

They attended the hospital one last time to speak with the oncologist and start planning for her final weeks, or months, if she was lucky. It was twenty minutes until they were due to be called. Max knew the clinic would run at least thirty minutes late, so he walked out of the waiting room to buy a coffee at the kiosk down the corridor. It was something to do, to defer the darkness, the removal of all hope.

On the way back, a paper cup in each hand, he passed a small office. Through the open door he could see that it was barely fit for purpose. A desk occupied two thirds of the space, a chair the remaining third. There were no papers, no personal effects, no name on the door. A forgotten space perhaps. A gap in the organization. A hole in the world. But it was quiet. Max slipped in, placed the cups on the fake wooden grain, and sat down. With a foot he nudged the door closed and rested his eyes on a laminated fire-plan notice.

He just needed a moment.

Max couldn't tell how much later it was when he walked through the oblique rays of sun early one morning. The ground gave a little under his shoes. The hillside was green and lush after a very mild October. He hoped that the crest, with its views of the town, would be as deserted as the approach. His limbs moved easily, for a seventy-something-year-old. He could see the lines of his face reflected on the surface of his watch.

Lucy. He could not remember her death.

His hips moved smoothly up the incline. His lungs filled without strain. Perhaps his absences had arrested the aging process. Perhaps he could prove to Vivienne, if she showed any interest, that he had indeed exited life, floated in the bardo, a different dimension, while a version of himself carried on, a functional simulacrum.

Approaching the crest, he saw that there were two people sitting in the depression. Max tutted. How come, so early in the day? This was *his* spot. Their spot. The heads moved in conversation, facing each other one moment, then looking at the view in the next. As he drew closer, Max recognized them. Lucy. Alexander.

"Hey! You two!" He grinned.

Both turned to look at him and met his gaze. They watched him for five, ten seconds. But they did not smile. Lucy. Alexander.

"Hey, when did you get here?" he called.

They did not seem to recognize him, and turned away, chatting still, back to the view.

Max began to walk down the hill, re-treading boot-sized holes in the sodden turf. An elderly couple approached him, coming up the slope. They wore hooded, rainproof coats. With unthinking politeness, Max muttered, "Morning."

The couple glanced at him but did not respond. Under the hoods Max discerned the shadowed features of his parents: his father's prominent nose, his mother's quick eyes. Max paused, but such was the absence of connection, he did not bother to shout after them.

He could not remember how or when they had died.

"Hi, Dad," said Jess, now in attractive middle age.

Jake, her son, nudging twenty, fiddled with the television's remote control to turn the volume down. Max broke away from the moving images and looked at the young man with a pleasant expression, as though youth were a tonic drunk through the eyes.

Max said nothing; he rarely spoke. One of the carers (they visited three times a day) reported the odd, brief conversation.

A more substantial exchange had occurred when the famous writer with the straight grey hair and fashionable blue glasses had come to visit. The old man seemed to find his voice for her. Jess obtained the writer's details and rang.

Vivienne Madden was very frank and spoke with the certainty of age.

"Your father…he has always lived in two worlds. I'm sure your mother told you, how he seemed to be elsewhere for long stretches of time."

"He was always there. Always."

"But was he really *there*? For you?"

Jess had spent much of her adult life wondering if her upbringing was 'normal.' All mothers and fathers are normal to their children, even if later experience of the world confirms that they are, or were, eccentric. To her, the way Max had floated through life, especially the hard times, such as Alexander's suicide, was normal. That's how men reacted. He was a normal man. Her own husband was not much different. He had walked out of their shared life, had barely fought to see Jake, and was thus absent not only in spirit, but in body too. Perhaps Dad's approach, disengagement, was preferable.

"And you think he's somewhere else now? Whatever that means," asked Jess, an edge to her voice. Who was this writer woman, to presume such knowledge of her father?

"I do. He's in the place he always went to when he needed to escape. He lives there now. The door he opened as a student, and again when your brother was at his most challenging, cannot be closed. Perhaps he is lost and wants to come back. Or perhaps he's hiding from your mother's absence…or from his own illness. I can't prove it, of course. I don't need to."

At this stage of Vivienne's life and career, any subject she turned her mind to became interesting purely by virtue of her reputation for seeking truth. She came to see Max in his fuggy, unappetizing home because she thought there was a mystery to solve.

With her chair pulled close to the older man's armchair, she leaned in and asked, "Max. Be honest now, where did you go? What were you doing?"

Max looked at her directly but did not snap out of his cognitively vague state. His breath was sweet, or stale.

“Vivienne.”

“Yes, Max?”

“Why did you come?”

“You always wanted me to show an interest, didn’t you? What is this, this illness, this dementia? Is it real, or is this another escape?”

“There is no escape. You commit to life.”

“Did you?” Vivienne pressed his hand. “Did you commit?”

He closed his eyes. She had lost him.

After the visit she started an article, but quickly concluded that there was nothing to write, no facets of truth to rotate in the light of her talent. Only the ups and downs of a man who had chosen the easy path. An unremarkable life, with all its associated regrets.

Where was the hook in that?

CRISTINA BRESSER

Tia Gloria

I need to sleep tonight. I am so worn out. I am going to turn off my phone. I need to sleep. Pass out. Thirst. The gun does not shoot. It disassembles in my hands, face to face with the assassin. He is going to kill us. A car driving fast. Car chase, darkness, adrenaline. I must save my sister. Loud music, he cuts me off. Hey, look at the water channel, we won't make it. The sociopath stays side-by-side with us, pulls down the window; it is the end. His face is Tio Roberto's. Why uncle, who is actually taking care of auntie at the hospital? He is wearing a mask to trick us. Thirst. I turn on the light, drink some water and on my way back from the bathroom, I switch my phone on. Lost call. Lost forever. I knew it. Nobody expected it, but I knew she was going to die. She would not bear being dressed, washed, cleaned, ordered dos and don'ts. "No. I can do it. Ok, I'll handle it. I want to drink water in a real glass, not in a plastic one with this damn straw. Damn it. Diapers? You must be out of your mind. I can walk to the toilet, absurd." She is exactly like this now. No diapers. No bras, either. No makeup. She would never, ever leave home with no bra, no makeup, and no jewelry. And this bloody funk inside my head. I came here ready to attack; I'm going to throw it at your face. Funeral home sweepstakes. Bizarre. Central Mourning Sweepstakes. Bizarre. Pick up the corpse, choose a coffin. Very bizarre. She wanted to be cremated. The necessary arrangements. There will be no vigil, but she is going to be dressed in this brand new, white linen tailleur with tiny black stripes intersecting each other. The black Chanel shopping bag is still on the table, messing up the room. Coco would be proud of her. I am going to cry. Golden necklace. Where are the matching earrings? Oh, they are hanging from the tailleur's collar. I thought they were brooches. Tell them to make her look decent, with sophisticated and bright makeup. She is dead already, she does not need to look like a defunct Madame Tussauds's model. Do not let them put white flowers, for God's sake. She was colorful, tacky, beautiful, light and loose, ready to kiss somebody on the mouth. She will never, ever, kiss somebody again. Not on the mouth, nor on the cheeks, not even those ladies' kisses in the air. Order some red and pink, vibrant, fragrant flowers, nothing like pale, deceased-looking flowers—being dead is enough for her. Dead. Tia Gloria is dead. I need to cry.

Freezing Our Hopes by Fabrice Poussin.

KAT MONNIN

Driving Home

The bus was bearable. Difficult, yes, but bearable. Ryan perched on the hard, plastic seat with his eyes closed and hands clenched, wondering how he would manage to get behind a wheel if being inside a vehicle someone else was driving was this hard. But when he thought of simply staying on the bus until it circled back around and brought him home, his mother's disappointed face appeared in his mind as clearly as if she were standing before him. She had wanted him to do this for months. *Another step toward moving on*, she called it.

Nico disagreed.

Nico had spent the entire ride—all one-and-a-half hours of it—Googling every way a person had ever perished in an automobile-related-manner, and (oh-so-considerately) reading his findings aloud. Brakes quitting. Airbags failing to deploy or deploying for no reason. Carbon monoxide poisoning.

"A man in Wales," Nico began as the bus took a zealous right turn that left Ryan's stomach feeling like someone had taken a lemon juicer to it, lemon and all, "Was decapitated while he was changing his oil. The jack slipped out and when the car dropped, a metal bit was right where his neck happened to be." Nico drew his finger quickly across his throat, making a chocking noise. "Bye-bye head."

Ryan ignored him. That sometimes worked, but not today. Nico was still talking as they got off the bus and into the mass of light fog that whispered over the sidewalks. Ryan walked swiftly, wishing he had brought a heavier jacket. Nico was wearing a red short-sleeved shirt. He didn't get cold.

Billie's Used Automotives loomed out of the fog like some medieval castle, the junkyard beside it a sea of pointed metal and sharp edges, war machines laid out for siege. Ryan pushed open the door, half-expecting the tiny bell that heralded his entrance to bring forth an armed legion. Instead, it brought forth…nothing. The man behind the counter didn't even look up.

The counter was separated from the door by a seating area that was little more than six uninviting chairs arranged around a table barely visible under piles of tabloids. There were two people seated: one, an old man Ryan didn't know, the other, to Ryan's deep dismay, was Mrs. Jacobs, Ryan's notoriously inquisitive neighbor. She looked up as the door opened, a quick glance before her eyes returned to her magazine. Then her gaze shot back up as she registered who she had seen. Ryan avoided eye contact and hurried to the counter, which was manned by an apathetic-looking man of around forty. *Andy* was scrawled on his nametag.

"I'm here to pick up a car," Ryan said, as quietly as he could.

Andy blinked twice, slowly, his expression showing nothing but boredom. He resembled a frog, and when he spoke, his voice sounded like it could belong to one.

"What?"

Ryan resisted the urge to glance behind himself. “A car,” he said, louder, leaning across the counter. “I'm here to pick one up.”

Andy didn't react for several moments, until Ryan feared he would have to repeat himself again. He was sweating already, in painful awareness of Mrs. Jacobs behind him and Nico beside him.

Andy swiveled his chair to face a computer. “Name.”

“Ryan Tora. But my mom put in the order online.” He hesitated, realizing how childish that must have sounded. “It'll be under Tessa Tora.”

Andy tapped on his keyboard, carefully selecting each key. It took ages. Ryan glanced at the clock.

“Yeah, it's in the back,” Andy finally said. “I'll get someone to take you to it.”

Ryan nodded and continued to stand at the counter.

Andy looked up again. “It'll take a few minutes.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry.” Ryan stepped back, which took him right into the waiting area. He loitered a moment, then sat in the chair furthest away from Mrs. Jacobs, which put him next to the old man.

The man smiled warmly, the lines in his face like cracked glass. “Your first car?”

“No,” Ryan said. He smiled through closed lips and hoped the man would be satisfied. Of course, he wasn't. Ryan couldn't blame him for wanting to chat, really; the waiting room was about as lively as a mortuary at midnight.

“You look like a good driver,” the man said. He held up a hand as if Ryan had started to protest, which Ryan hadn't (he had only begun to feel distinctly ill). “I can always tell. You have any siblings?”

Ryan opened his mouth to give the automatic response, then a circuit in his mind connected for the thousandth time. He almost choked on the word he had nearly said, as he swallowed it down and coughed out a brittle “No.” He could hear Nico breathing.

Ryan's face must have shown some small portion of the panic that was enveloping his insides, because the man's brow crinkled even more. “You alright, son?”

“Fine,” Ryan managed. He yanked his fingers through his hair before he remembered that he was supposed to stop doing that (“You’ll get a bald spot again,” his mom had said), so he gripped his hands in his lap instead. “Fine,” he repeated, directing the word at his pale knuckles.

“Hey, kid.” Andy was leaning against the counter, a weedy twenty-something-year-old standing beside him. “Ethan's gonna take you back to your car.”

Ryan stood, the feet of his chair emitting a short scream as they dragged against the grubby tile. He followed Ethan, each lifting of his legs a concerted effort. Nico trailed behind, as always.

The car was waiting in the bay behind the shop. Ryan didn't know what model it was, only that it was one of the safest on the market. His mother had picked it out, after hours of pouring over Consumer Reports and the Internet, collecting facts and figures like she could mold them into armor to protect him.

The paint job was red. Red as rage. Ryan wondered what his mother's reasoning had been, whether there was some study proving that red cars were statistically safer.

“She's all yours,” Ethan said, tossing Ryan a key ring that Ryan barely had the presence of mind to catch.

He forced himself to take one step toward the car, then another. The headlights seemed to watch him, like the glinting eyes of a wild animal in the dark, and the car's body seemed to breathe, to heave, ready to charge. *It's not going to attack you,* he reassured himself. *It's nothing but a hunk of metal.*

Ryan slid the key into the lock and turned it. He wrapped his fingers around the door handle. It burned. He wanted to jump back, to run.

It's fine. You're fine.

He pulled the door open.

The interior was red: furious, shrieking red. A mouth. A blood-filled mouth. Blood pooled on the seats and streaked across the cracks that webbed the windshield. Ryan couldn't move, couldn't speak, could only feel the familiar cold stop his pulse as he fell down, down, without leaving the ground.

“Did you know that traffic accidents are one of the most common causes of death in the United States?" Nico said. "I didn't. Never even thought about it, until—”

Ryan tore his eyes from the crimson cavern and wheeled around, gagging on the sick metallic taste that filled his mouth.

“*Please.*” His voice was half scream, half sob. "Stop it. Be quiet. Please, be quiet.”

Ethan's eyes widened and flickered over to where Nico was standing and back to Ryan, confused. “Dude. I didn’t say anything.”

Ryan took a deep breath. *Get a hold of yourself. You're fine. Everything is fine. There is no blood in that car.*

He turned, feeling Ethan and Nico's eyes on him, and looked.

He was right. The interior of the car was spotless. No blood.

Ryan produced a smile. “Sorry about that. I'm fine.”

Ethan didn't seem convinced, but he said nothing as Ryan forced himself into the driver's seat. Ryan stopped thinking, because if he let himself think, he'd jump out of the car and run and run and run. So he didn't think about how the car was now surrounding him on all four sides, like he was in its belly, like he had been eaten by that bloody mouth. He started the engine and didn't think of how the car was coming to life around him, and how he was trapped in its metal mouth.

He drove as if on auto-pilot. He was so busy not thinking that he almost—*almost*—didn't hear Nico speak.

“When I was five,” Nico began. “I wanted to be an astronaut. Do you remember that?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. *Stop responding.*

“I wanted to be a lot of things,” Nico continued. “But now I can't.”

Ryan's mouth was dry. His knuckles were white as pearls on the steering wheel. The cars around him pressed in and in and in.

“That makes me sad, Ryan,” Nico said. His voice had taken on that pleading, childish lilt that had been common when Nico was in elementary school and was denied something he wanted. “It makes me really sad.”

“No, it doesn't,” Ryan said. “You don't feel anything, because you're not—you’re not real.”

Nico's gaze burned into Ryan, and Ryan thought he could feel his cells disintegrating in the glare.

“You can see me, can't you?” Nico demanded.

“Yes. But no one else can. You're not real.”

“I was.”

“Please stop.” Ryan was falling again, though the seat remained solid beneath him.

“I was real until you *killed me*.”

It's dark out. So dark that he almost doesn't see Nico standing by the bleachers, a darker shadow among shadows. His brother walks toward the car slowly, arms folded. He opens the door and slides into the passenger seat, bringing with him the sour scent of anger.

“*You were supposed to pick me up two hours ago.*”

“I'm sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“I lost track of time.”

“Were you drinking again?”

“How did you—?”

“It's obvious.”

“Okay, it was just a couple.”

“You can’t drive like this.”

“I'm not drunk, I can drive.”

“It's not safe.”

“It's fine. I'd know if it weren't.”

“Let me out.”

“No, if I don't drive you mom will be mad. Stop worrying. I’ll make sure we get home.”

The car starts moving and they fall silent. For a few minutes, it's fine.

Then it's not.

He swears, he swears the car wasn't in front of them a moment ago, but now it is, and it's close, too close. The collision tears through his body, like the horns of two bulls crashing together. Shattering. Black, then red. Then silence. Then reaching out to the form beside him and whispering, “Please, please, oh God…”

Then the falling, falling, for the first time of many.

Ryan was crying so hard he couldn't see. They had stopped, pulled over at the side of the road.

When Nico spoke again, his voice was tender. “Ryan, you can't drive like this. Let me.”

“You can't,” Ryan sobbed. “You're only fifteen. It's not safe.”

“I've almost got my permit. I would have got it, by now. It's fine. I'd know if it weren't.”

“No, no...” Ryan mopped his eyes on his sleeve. “I'm okay.” He started the car and eased it back onto the road. He was shaking, shivering.

The road was rural and unfamiliar; Ryan had no idea how they had gotten there. He drove, gulping air, trying to focus on his surroundings. He thought he saw a bridge ahead, but he couldn't be sure because he was crying again.

So much water blurred his vision that he could have been drowning.

Nico's hands slipped over Ryan's, cool and smooth, and he began, gently, to pry Ryan's fingers from the wheel.

“Let me,” Nico said. “I'll make sure we get home.”

Ryan let go.

ERIK BERGSTROM

Monster from Long Ago

Throughout our lives you've taken on many forms, beginning with that muggy summer night when you arrived as a haze of buzzing mosquitoes. My brother and I were sitting out on the steps of our mobile home to cool our sweaty faces in the breeze. My head was cocked to the side, half-listening to Dad talking with the cops in our driveway, half-looking out at the cornfield behind the trailer park. That's where I first saw you, outlined like a scarecrow in a field of young corn stalks, radiating that sickening smell that fought against the sweetness of new growth, your eyes still just open holes in your head I could see through.

Dad had just been shaking us on his broad shoulders to our favorite Eddie Money record. Blaring saxophone and synthesizer rocked our two-bedroom trailer out on the edge of town. Walls of aluminum and fiberglass rattled against the lumber. It didn't take long for the neighbors to crash the party with a phone call to the police. Dad, shirtless and sweaty, his beard smelling like Old Milwaukee, stood out in the driveway chatting with the officers. His musk must've fanned out twelve feet on all sides.

Looking past the corners of trailer homes patched with Styrofoam, past the dilapidated swing set where we'd cut our fingers (and where our Mom, a nurse, would scream about tetanus), I watched your formless essence grow thicker and blacker as you fought with the bugs' instinct to take flight. My brother hit me to get my attention, squaring his knuckles on the bony part of my upper arm.

"What are you staring at?" he asked, like it was the thousandth time.

"You don't see it?" I said. He looked out but didn't answer. "There's someone out in the corn, just standing there."

One of the cops approached us then. He knelt next to the steps to put himself at eye level. He looked older—maybe it was the mustache—but his voice was clean and bright, almost pure. "You boys got somewhere we can take you 'til your mom comes home?"

"Where's our dad going?" my brother asked.

"He's got to come with us for the night."

"What for?" My brother's face twisted with confusion. I didn't like when he got that look; it always meant something didn't sit right with him, which meant I couldn't let it sit right with me, either.

"We got some people around here complaining about the noise again. Your dad has to come in for the night so everyone can be happy."

The cold breeze we'd been looking for came out of the field then, but our faces had already dried and so all I could do was shiver. My brother looked back out to the field, staring for a long time, squinting in the dark. The mosquitoes had broken apart and were all around us then.

That was the first year I saw you. This one, I determined, would be the last.

It's the twenty-fifth summer since you first appeared to us, and sixth since Mom died. We'd been coming to this cabin ever since, trying to put our planets back into some kind of manageable orbit, our quiet place to go to while we waited for the dust to settle.

Two nights ago, I was out at the edge of the peninsula watching the waves slap against the mud and rock and taking more of it back down each time, eroding the land we'd committed to a little more each year. Dad was back by the fire, stirring it with a piece of driftwood he'd carried in his truck for years. My brother was inside the cabin somewhere, getting an early start on his drinking.

The cabin itself was an odd thing; in the daytime it was a sad, lopsided hut, likely built in haste on sodden ground that couldn't quite withstand it. Foam sealant bubbled out of the seams near the eaves and along the trim, and it was painted over as though it could be hidden. The cedar siding was weathered and tired, curling in on itself like some wicked witch's feet.

But at night it was a different thing entirely. When the wind picked up, it rattled the loose windows and shook dust from the cracks in the plaster so that it felt like the end of the world had arrived. The branches outside scratched and skittered along the unfinished tar paper roof, sounding like mischievous elf or leprechaun footsteps, or the fingernail of something more monstrous. If rain came down, the entire place would fill with the choking smell of mildew and mothballs, and the carpet and bedspreads would soak in the dampness like a sponge.

At night the cabin became a tomb where we'd be buried alive and, little by little, the angry earth swallowed us whole.

The first sign of it came as an argument by the fire later that first night. The two of them were passing around Dad's bottle of brandy and going around the same old things they always said to each other.

"What about abandoning us!" my brother said. Dad reminded him how he was an over-the-road trucker and had no choice but to abandon us sometimes. "What about the nights in the drunk tank? That was abandonment!" he continued, just before taking down some more of Dad's brandy. He offered the bottle to me, but I refused—I'd watched my dad suck from that same bottle while pulling out another one of his blackened teeth that very morning.

"Go in," I said. "Get some sleep."

But instead of anyone moving, we all sat there quiet in our camping chairs, the radio playing bands that might've toured with Eddie Money when we were six and eight and living in the trailer park. Loons sang along out on the lake, their mournful *hootie-hoo* sounding, in that moment, more like encouragement. I smelled the wind coming off their water while they likely caught the smoke from our fire, and for a moment it felt as if we were together as one in nature, until my brother finished off the bottle and smashed it on the tire rim holding in the fire.

"What in the hell'd you do that for?" said Dad, suddenly awake.

"It was empty," said my brother, standing to stumble his way back to the cabin.

Minutes later, the music started going out. The radio seemed to be looking for frequencies that existed ages ago, or that had yet to exist. The wind had picked up, overcoming for a short while the squealing and screeching from the radio's speakers, and the waves were coming in hard. That's when I got up to investigate the shoreline and make sure it was still there.

Out by the coolness of the water, I thought about the emptying of Mom's life from her body, and how you started filling Dad up in return, turning his body rotten. First it was the teeth that fell out of his head like dominoes shaken from a table. After that, his hair, coming out in soft, tangled tufts. Then it was his hip joints, which caused him to hunch over a walking stick that wobbled under his weight and worked its way into the earth. I think that's why he liked going out in his boat. He felt more like his old self out in the boat.

I returned to the fire and watched Dad stir it around with that old piece of wood he refused to let go of. Like the half-smoked cigarettes he always had on him, he liked holding on to things and making everything last. You must know something about that? You must know he was holding on to more rage, more of that older part of himself, once Mom's lung cancer came along and ate her from the inside-out, leaving her an empty husk like the fallen trees that were scattered around us.

I tossed on another log. A cloud of red-hot sparks buzzed like angry insects into the dark.

I'm sure that's the night you filled Dad up for good. I'm sure that's when you told him to kill my brother.

It was nearing noon and my brother still hadn't woken up. I went to the bedroom door to check on him while Dad was out fishing. The sheets were pulled up over his head and his dirty toes poked out the other end. When I came back a half hour later, he was in that same position.

I said his name from the doorway. Then I walked into the room and shouted it. After no movement, I pulled the sheet down from his face. It was gray and lifeless, contorted with that confusion that always unsettled me. His eyeballs were yellow and lidded halfway. His mouth was open wide in a suspended scream.

I made it to the toilet before I hurled. Then I panicked, asking myself the hundreds of questions about what to do next, about what had already been done. The answer to that last one came rolling over me like the sound of a boat motor from across the lake. I left the cabin, walked out to the edge of the peninsula, and saw Dad's boat trolling back to the cabin. By then I didn't have to wonder what form you'd taken.

I met you at the shore after you finished pulling the boat in and asked you about my brother. You could've said he drank too much and poisoned himself with alcohol, or that he laid down in bed and ended things alone. Instead, you treated me like a ghost. Not even a ghost. You made my dad call for ghosts from his bed at night. With me, it was like I didn't exist at all. You would've walked right through me if you could've, if my dad's mass wasn't in your way. Instead you brushed past, carrying his fishing pole and tackle box with that guiltless expression you'd etched into his face. You went back into the cabin where the energy of my brother's violent death still hummed, and you laid my father down to sleep only one door over from his son's still-cooling body.

I knew decisions had to be made. It was my turn to counter. I stole those few hours you left up for grabs out in Dad's boat, sitting on the bench seat nearest to the bow. I'd armed myself with his old cast iron mallet, a chisel, and ambitions for wrecking the vessel. There was a row of bolts with rounded heads running along the bottom, sealing together two plates of aluminum. All I'd needed to do was bust three or four of them and wedge open a small fissure to let the water seep in, unannounced.

Isn't that how you do it? I know not everyone's soul is sealed up tight. I'm sure those are the ones you look for. Sometimes I imagine it's like slipping in through the back door for you, like some adulterous neighbor. Or maybe like a disease-carrying tick crawling through the hole in the screen door, only a centimeter wide but able to wipe out an entire family.

For close to an hour I sat in that boat, hammering away at the chisel as quietly as I could while Dad slept just up the hill. Sometimes I'd slip and catch my finger, knocking it hard enough to turn it purple but not make it bleed. Working at that rate, I realized I wasn't about to get much more than a few charming divots in the metal and throbbing pain between my shoulder blades.

You've been around long enough to know that some people bend, while others break easier. You wouldn't waste your time with a bolt that wouldn't crack, or a dull chisel that couldn't dig. You'd speed things up by putting fear into a man, the way a storm hurries devastation. But fear works in two ways, I figure. It either paralyzes people, or it puts them into action. That's when I started blasting away at the chisel, huffing and spitting and swearing the entire time. The clanging of metal echoed off the lake and bounced between the pines. Finally, a bolt head busted loose. Then, another.

It was between a couple muffled grunts of success that I heard the screen door slam. I looked up and there was Dad, standing in front of the cabin, looking down the rolling green hill at me.

I held the hammer and chisel in my sweat-greased hands, recalling some time before when, instead of his tools, they might've been his "garage magazines" and I'd cowered in his shadow. But there, up by the cabin, he only hunched loosely, like he was hiding a pile of his own mischief-making children beneath his flannel.

I stood from the boat and walked up the hill. Nearing him, I saw that his face looked stretched and his old skin sagged. His mouth hung open beneath his matted, limp beard and a string of drool seeped from where a tooth used to be. There was something inhuman about the way he looked at me then, like each eye was peering off in two different directions, searching for something he'd lost long ago.

Keeping my voice low, I sidestepped my incident of being caught in the boat and instead broached the topic of my brother again. I told Dad he had no other option but to sink the body.

"You have to take him to the middle of the lake in a weighted sack and drop it in," I explained, like I was talking to a kid.

His eyes dropped to my hands and he asked me where I'd found his tools. I hid them behind my back momentarily, just like with the garage magazines, before realizing the jig was up.

"They were in the boat," I said.

Instead of responding, a slow, wheezing noise—a sound like he was giving something up—escaped his throat.

"You have to get rid of the body before anyone finds out," I repeated.

He asked me again where I'd found his tools. Asked quieter, as though to himself.

"I already told you. They were in the boat," I said. I made up something about how I found them underneath the anchor and that's why he'd heard all that clanging around.

In that moment, a shadow dropped over us. Angry wind rushed in and hit the wall of trees, rattling the leaves and cracking the old wood. Dad turned his back to me and reentered the cabin. The smell he left behind reminded me of that night outside our mobile home after dancing to Eddie Money. New sweat mixed with old. An ageless and stomach-churning smell.

I was lying in bed, looking out the window as a brutal storm came rolling in with whipping, whirling winds and hard-driving rain that spat at the windows. From the other room I could hear Dad's mournful voice calling for Mom. Most sons don't have to hear their fathers like that. But with you a part of him, I had to endure it.

After a while of lying there, I stood and went into the living room and turned on the old tube TV to drown out the noise. The foil-wrapped antenna had a hard time reaching a good station, though I finally landed on a local channel playing the old thirty-minute version of *Frankenweenie*; the one where the dog stars in his own home movie, "The Monster from Long Ago."

I fell into a dangerous pit of nostalgia, watching the boy with his dog, dressed as a dinosaur, creating their own grand adventures. They had all the time in the world with each other, it seemed, and they were using it to create, rather than destroy. After watching it for a few minutes, I came out of the trance and realized Dad's voice had stopped competing with the storm at some point. I heard mattress springs groaning beneath his heavy frame. Then came the floorboards creaking. I turned the volume down on the TV and the wind and spattering rain took over the room again.

Light from his bedroom poured out into the hallway. His silhouette—or was it your silhouette by then?—walked into the door frame and loomed like some gothic horror monster. It wasn't long before you were at the entrance of the living room. Even in the dim light of the cabin I could see his face and swollen, toothless jaw, but it was *your* eyes that burned cold inside his head. I thought you'd come for me, but you only stood for a moment to look at the TV. Then you turned away and walked back down the hallway for my brother's room.

I kept the volume low on the TV to listen. The storm had turned into a deep, distant rumbling, moving further off to the east. I still can't resolve what I'd heard—those sobbing grunts and creaky, rattling bed-springs—with what I'd later see.

When you reappeared in the hallway, I saw Dad's arms and bare chest smeared with blood. You were holding something covered by bed linen. You crossed between me and the TV, carrying your load that contained pieces of my brother like you'd pulled him out of the lake. I

tried to refocus on the movie. I couldn't unsee what I saw, though. I likely never will. Like the morning I found him—face turned gray, his body bruised where the weapon hit him—the image will always be the closing of an eyelid away.

Using Dad's arms, you carried my brother through the front screen door. It slammed back against the frame and jarred me from my trance. A moment later, I stood and followed you out.

In the crisp, electric air, I watched you walk beneath the yellow light of a high pole lamp. Your movement was measured and determined, a stark contrast to Dad on his hobbled legs and cane. I followed you to the beach where his figure became a shadow again. I saw you drop the rolled-up bedsheets into Dad's boat and pull it free from the wet sand. Then you got inside and pushed off into the water.

You might have made it to the island, but you weren't going to make it back. Rowing in the dark like you were, eyes ahead in one direction, you would've never noticed the leak coming through the hair-thin fissures I put there. You were likely over ankle-deep in water when you finally realized something was wrong. I knew I couldn't exorcise you, so instead I tried to lock you away somewhere deep inside and down below, a place where you couldn't appear in summer cornfields for another family again. And then I watched you row my dad's boat towards your island in the driving rain, becoming a black dot on the gray water, pushing forward like Charon over Styx with your nose pointed towards Hell.

There's ghosts up in this part of the country, all of them as old as you, and all content to wait for the world to turn beneath a new constellation. I felt as patient as them while I waited at the edge of the peninsula for you to return.

I was out early, looking up at the waning stars, and I thought about the second time I saw you. We were at camp, the four of us together. I was sitting at the picnic table alone, sniffing a citronella candle, in an uproar over something. Mom came over to whisper with me while Dad and my brother stayed behind to cook out at the fire. The stars looked the same way they did this morning, and Mom asked if I could spot the Big Dipper. She didn't know that I knew at least ten more constellations by then.

"No," I lied, looking up.

"One day, all those stars will be gone," she said. "They could be gone right now. We might just be looking at their ghosts."

Mom always liked telling us ghost stories, but I'd never really been frightened until that one. I could name most of the stars and say where they were located, but I never considered they might go out. Afraid of losing them all in that moment, I told her I could see the Big Dipper, and then told her I could see Polaris leaping out of it like popcorn from a hot pan. I told her I could see Leo and Virgo, too, and the faded distant dot of Saturn. I found Orion across the sky, his belt pointing to Sirius. And in the black void between Betelgeuse and Canis Minor is where I spotted you.

You were invisible like dark matter, pulling and stretching everything around you in a

begging effort for someone to notice. You made Betelgeuse and Rigel and all the dots in Orion's belt your playthings. You knocked them around like billiard balls and messed up my general mode of direction. Then you pulled open your black cape and blotted out all the twinkling dots around you. You moved quickly, starting at one corner and darkening everything over our heads. The sky shivered and rippled as you flew.

That was me at eleven. Sitting around today at thirty-one, waiting for you to trudge up the hill like the first beast to crawl out of the ocean, I can't say how much has changed. A lot, I suppose, considering what I've lost. But maybe in exchange, I've gained quite a bit more. I've shaken you off entirely for the first time since that night, twenty-five years ago, when I saw you outside our mobile home. I sat all day next to the row of evergreens I'd been planting, one for each year since Mom left. Today I started a new row. This is the new Year One, I thought. Then I packed up my camping chair and moved back to the cabin once the cool lake air pressed in against the day's lingering heat.

I sat alone near the fire tonight imagining, somewhere, a father was dancing with his two sons to their favorite record, riling up their neighbors. I sat there a long time in that state of daydreaming, long enough for the sky to turn full dark, eventually thinking I could see the stars going out, one by one, like a great, black shroud was moving over them. I picked up my dad's piece of driftwood to stir the coals once they'd turned red, their heat drying out my eyes, and only made the decision to move indoors once the mosquitoes came in, ready to feast until they were filled up.

Obscure Amber by Harshal Desai.

RB KELLY

Perceptual Bias

The way George sees it, he has two problems. The first is that his best friend's girlfriend is a vampire. The second is that nobody can see this but George.

It's a question of perceptual bias. George can hardly blame the rest of the world for resisting the logical conclusion, given that it took him long enough to work it out himself, and even when suspicion started creeping in around the edges, he pushed it back for many weeks on exactly the same grounds. Vampires do not exist. Chloe exists. Therefore, Chloe cannot be a vampire. It's a perfectly reasonable argument that allows everyone around him to ignore all the available evidence in favour of assuming that, because it's impossible, it can't be true. And that is, essentially, and more or less verbatim, what Ted said when George tried to talk to him about it. After he'd finished laughing, of course.

"Mate," he'd said, clapping a hand to George's shoulder with enough force to send George staggering a half-step forward, "you're completely fucked in the head, you know that?"

Any other day, George would have agreed with Ted. George's sense of humour tends towards the black; it used to be a coping mechanism, but it turned out to be exactly what it took to get his peers to stop flushing his head down the toilets in high school, and so he'd grown it like a second skin, a bulletproof vest of purest night to shield him from a world that has always felt like it was half a key out of tune. Fucked in the head has worked for him: it's not impossible to grind someone's face against a red-brick wall while you're laughing at their jokes, but it's a bit more difficult, and it makes it harder to hear the punchline.

Ted is not like George: Ted is strong, square shoulders forged into an immovable wall by years of rugby; easy smile like melted butter that warms the firm line of his jaw when he's happy, which is often; and charm enough to blanket them both, and he wears it like a cloud, his own personal weather system that draws people into his orbit to share in his private sunshine.

George has never really understood what it is about him that keeps someone like Ted around, but they have been friends since they were seven and Ted has never gone away. If George knew why that was, he'd be a happier man.

So, yes, George is a little bit fucked in the head, though he'd dispute the *completely* part. The problem is, George has apparently become so adept at compensating for his size and relative weirdness with humour that it's become his defining characteristic, and now, it seems, nobody takes him seriously anymore. Not even his best friend, and not even when his life is in danger.

He doesn't know what else to do.

Ted met Chloe in a pub. It was Alicia's birthday and their friend, Simon, had been trying to get off with Alicia for as long as George had known either of them, so the pints were flowing, and the more they drank, the more attractive they became, until their circle of six had become a crowd of fifteen, drawn like iron filings to the magnet of Ted's irrepressible social allure. They flowed into

the circle of sunshine in twos and threes: women, mostly; the kind that Matt always seems to have on one arm, and that tend to fall over themselves trying to impress Ted while he watches politely, occasionally with faint amusement brightening his gaze. Maybe that's why Chloe caught his eye that night: she was on her own. Other women giggled at Ted under hooded eyes from the safety of their circle of friends, whispering behind their hands and looking away when he noticed them, but Chloe came in alone and stayed that way for the hour it took Ted to get her to meet his smile. Tiny, dark-haired and pale-skinned, she must be seven stone soaking wet, and yet she stood at the bar, cradling her drink in one hand, and watched the world as though it belonged to her. When Phil got up to get a round in, Ted nodded Chloe towards his friend's recently vacated seat, and she made her way over to the table and sat down like she was assuming her throne in the Hall of Perfect Entitlement. The smile she flashed was easy, even, and very, very white.

George has no idea how it took him so long to work out what she was.

Ted wanted to go home with her that night, but Chloe said no. He asked for her number, and she grinned and told him that if he could find her online, he could give her a call some time. If she'd spent six months researching George's best friend, she could not have managed him with greater skill, and this is how George knows that she's playing the long game. She could have had him that night, but Chloe's not thinking of a one-night thing.

Chloe wants Ted forever.

"She runs her own jewellery-making business," said Ted, two days later. Google had given up the goods after barely ten minutes' searching, and Ted was now buying himself a little Dutch courage before hitting dial on the number he had programmed into his phone for the past hour and a half. Ted has always had a thing for the artsy types. George thinks it's because he'd have been a graphic designer if he hadn't dropped out of college; he makes a good living now in kitchen furnishings, but it's not where his heart is. "She does all right too: look at the price of those earrings."

"It's platinum," said George, and shouldn't *that* have flashed a few warning lights right there? No silver to be had anywhere on the site. "Platinum's expensive."

"Too bloody right," said Ted, and whistled softly under his breath. "She wanted me to call, right? I mean—she wouldn't have told me to look her up if she didn't want me to call?"

George cannot understand how someone who looks like Ted can have absolutely no idea that he looks like Ted. "Yeah," he said. "She looked like she wanted you to call."

"Like you'd know," snorted Phil from across the room, and playfully threw a pillow. It bounced off the arm of George's chair and collapsed on the ground, leaving George free to ignore it.

Phil has the third bedroom in their little Victorian terrace, and he's only there because they can't afford the rent without him. Phil is some kind of distant cousin of Ted's, and Ted spends half his life apologising for him and the other half laughing at the stupid stuff he does.

Ted ended up going into the hallway to make his call, and George did his best not to listen, but the walls are thin and there's a gap beneath the door and it was hard not to hear the low, warm tones that Ted slips into when he's trying to be suave.

He disappeared into the bedroom when Phil went out, half an hour later, ostensibly en route to the loo, but not before he'd made arrangements to take Chloe to the cinema that night. The earthy, spice-rich scent of his aftershave lingered in the bathroom, trailed him down the stairs and out the front door for hours after he left. George knew better than to wait up for his friend's return, so he was surprised to hear the front door open before midnight, and the heavy, careless thump of Ted's boots on the stairs. George has the attic bedroom: directly over Ted's room and part of Phil's. When the house is silent, he can hear echoes of them beneath him, muffled by ceiling, pipes, and floorboards; sometimes, in the small hours, he can hear the creak of shifting mattresses as they sleep.

Ted was alone when he came in that night. If he weren't, George would have known. But he came in solo, kicked off his shoes, splashed water onto his face from the little sink in the corner of his room, and dropped heavily, and in solitude, onto his bed. It was almost an hour before he slept, soft snores drifting up through a latticework of wood and plaster. It was another hour before George slept, and that was only because he gave in and took a pill when the shadows started to close in.

When he came down to breakfast the next morning, the sun was up and Ted was late for work, and the skin beneath his eyes was a delicate purple-grey, like brushed silk and cobwebs. Phil made some comment about the morning after the night before, but Ted only smiled faintly and punched him on the arm as he swallowed a cup of milky coffee and headed for the door. They didn't see him again that day.

At first, George put it down to overworking. They hardly caught sight of him during those first couple of weeks, though his towel was damp in the morning and the bathroom smelled of his shampoo. He was coming home to sleep, and occasionally to snatch brief meals before disappearing into the night, and that usually meant some kind of cabinet-related crisis—the world of kitchen fittings is a cutthroat business, as it turns out, and Ted's immediate superior is prone to catastrophising. But Ted's standard wind-down procedure after an eleven-hour shift had always involved a couple of pints snatched here and there in the bits where he wasn't eating or sleeping or showering, and this time, George wasn't even sure when those bits were happening. For more than a fortnight, the only indication that Ted still lived in the house was a plate and a novelty coffee cup—*Rugby players do it with funny-shaped balls*—neatly rinsed and left to dry on the draining board each morning. If he slept, he slept after George did; the room below was always silent.

Saturday morning, two weeks and four days after Ted's first date with Chloe. George had stayed up reading until two in the morning and fallen asleep with the light on and his book splayed across his chest, and woken to find it crushed underneath him, cover bent back on itself in a vicious crease that will never heal. There had been no sound from the room below him as his eyelids had slowly filled with lead, and so he was not expecting, as he sat at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee and his brutalised novel propped open beneath a plate of toast in a clear and unambiguous signal to Phil that, as far as George was concerned, he did not exist, to hear a second set of footsteps on the stairs: heavy, careless, and booted.

"Hey hey hey," crowed Phil, as the door swung open. "Looks like love's young dream has finally come up for air."

Ted was dressed for work, hair still damp from the shower and spiking up from his scalp in unruly spears and whorls. His skin was off-white, shading to grey, and the shadows beneath

his eyes had darkened and stretched to colour his sockets in shades of pale indigo. He offered Phil a tired smile and his middle finger, and ruffled George's hair on his way to the percolator.

"You're working today?" said George as he passed. "I thought you worked last Saturday?"

"Yeah, had to make up my hours," said Ted, and the last word stretched around a poorly concealed yawn. "Bloody Derek"—another yawn—"wouldn't let me take Wednesday as leave."

It hadn't occurred to George to think that Ted's disappearance had found him anywhere but at the showroom, nose to the backsides of potential clients, working hard to shift some kind of granite-topped work-surface overstock. "I didn't know you took last Wednesday off," he said.

"Yeah." A warm grin, like sunshine bursting through clouds. "It was Chloe's birthday."

"She's got you doing birthdays already?" Phil shook his head into his coffee, all solemn affliction. "You've got no chance. She's got your balls in a velvet pouch."

George was getting the impression that he was the only person in the kitchen who didn't know where Ted had been for the past fortnight. "Huh," he said, as Phil ducked the inevitable poorly thrown punch from a thick-muscled arm that didn't have to miss. "You guys go anywhere nice?"

"Nah, not really." But there was a glow to Ted's words that undercut the studied nonchalance in his tone. "Just hung around the house, mostly."

"I'll bet you did, mate," said Phil, and ducked again. "I'll just bet you did."

And that was it. Ted spent his nights at Chloe's house, returning before dawn to wash up and head out to work, and with every passing day his skin seemed to hang a little slacker, his eyes to sink a little further into exhaustion, his spine to slope a little lower. If he came out with them to the pub, he would leave before ten to meet Chloe, whose work patterns followed unsociable hours; if he had a day off, it was spent at Chloe's house, doing Chloe stuff. His clothes smelled of her perfume, his bedroom smelled of disuse. The bottle of cologne in the bathroom stopped depleting, and then disappeared altogether, along with his razor and his toothbrush. His coffee cup stopped appearing on the draining board.

Even Phil began to notice, and Phil rarely noticed anything that didn't involve personal monetary gain. "Mate," he said one morning, when Ted stumbled into the living room, half-awake and unshaven, "you want to watch yourself. That girl is going to suck you dry."

George glanced up from the morning news to check the reaction, but Ted just shrugged and dropped into an armchair, slurping deeply at his coffee as he threw a cushion, with pinpoint accuracy, directly at Phil's head. But, though the words were quickly written out of that morning's history in the ensuing barrage of soft furnishings and insults, they stayed with George. It was just that it was a long time before he worked out why.

Phil was made redundant at the end of the month, and Chloe made her first appearance at Ted's side when they went out for consolation drinks that night. Ted was grey-faced and subdued, leaning heavily against the faux-leather seat backs, arm stretched lazily along the shelf behind him, and, for the first time, George was struck by how much older he'd begun to look. Crow's feet worried shallow grooves into the creases of his eyelids, and the thick cords of muscle that had tightened his skin were beginning to soften, narrowing his arms and rounding out his

belly. He would be thirty in a couple of months, and he was starting to look like it. George had never noticed this before.

"We should do something for my last day at work," Phil was saying. "Something really insane. Something, I don't know, actually *dangerous*. Something that lets you know you're alive."

"Sounds like fun," said a voice behind George, an unfamiliar voice, but he knew it immediately, if only for the way that Ted's head snapped upright on his neck, the way Ted's eyes suddenly sparked to life, the way Ted's face seemed to light from within.

"Hey, gorgeous," said Ted, and George craned his head to get his first look at Chloe since the night she'd met his best friend.

She was slight, smaller than he remembered, with opal skin and dark brown eyes that danced with unspoken amusement. Her hair was the colour of bitter chocolate, and she wore it piled on top of her head in an untidy bun, strands spilling around her fine-boned face, framing the delicate line of her jaw, her high cheekbones, her deep red lips. She wore a simple black dress and black boots that circled her knees and drew the eye towards her slender thighs, and she was, by any reasonable definition of the term, staggeringly beautiful.

George thinks this is the moment it all started to become clear.

She slid into place beside Ted, nestling into the protective circle of his arm and planting a scarlet kiss on his cheek that she rubbed away with a laugh. Her hand rested lightly on his chest, bright crimson nails stark against the white of his shirt, and George was struck by the sudden, startling thought that they looked like talons—or claws.

The beer was warm, sedative, soothing. George made some joke that had Ted rolling his eyes and laughing, Chloe barking an appalled giggle, Matt punting a packet of peanuts at him across the table, and pushed the thought to the back of his head. But it needled at him as the group adjusted to their newest member the way the group always did: inappropriate questions asked too loudly, moderate physical violence, shouted insults, love thrown around like bullets. Chloe smiled her beautiful smile, bit back with the big words and intelligence that his best friend loved, and wove her way into their fabric as though she had always been there. And, through it all, her hand remained, pressed lightly against Ted's ribcage. Red on white: a spreading, blood-coloured smear, like a bandaged wound. Like a stain that wouldn't scrub off.

George lay awake that night, long after the soft sounds of drunken stumbling from the rooms below had drifted into silence, watching the play of occasional headlights scattering the shadows on the gabled ceiling. Ted was at Chloe's, because Ted was always at Chloe's, spirited away after the hours of darkness and returned before dawn. He remembered the mark of her kiss on Ted's cheek, two scarlet crescents bowed like angel's wings, and blurred through with a stroke of her thumb, the proprietary way that her head rested on his shoulder, the scent of her perfume woven through his hair, as though she were marking him as hers. He remembered all of these things as he watched the darkness and waited for sleep, and he wondered how it was that he could be so completely certain that Ted was almost lost.

The next morning, he saw the mark on Ted's neck, and he knew.

"Sweet Jesus," said Ted by way of greeting as he staggered into the kitchen, shoulders sloped, face drained almost completely of colour. "Please tell me there's coffee. Tell me there's

coffee or else just kill me now."

"You're supposed to be working, mate," said Phil, who was either still drunk from the night before or in possession of a liver that defied the limits of human endurance. George suspected the former, though there was room for doubt.

Ted treated him to the glare that his good cheer deserved. "Phoned in sick," he said, and slumped into a chair with sufficient force to skid it four inches backwards against the floor. A shriek of wood on lino pierced the air, and Ted visibly flinched and buried his head in his hands. A moment later, he dropped forward to rest his face against the cool Formica of the kitchen table, and the collar of his t-shirt, rumpled at his throat, dropped with him. And there it was: the answer, the evidence George had been waiting for, the thing he didn't know he knew, staring at him in a patchwork of bruised indigo from the tendon that ran between Ted's jaw and his shoulder.

Phil saw it too, and burst out laughing. "Jesus, mate," he said, swallowing a mouthful of tea before it could find its way back out of his mouth in a high-velocity spray. "Are you not feeding that woman properly or what?"

Ted's face did not move from its plastic pillow, but his right hand came up to slap at the offending spot on his neck, tugging up the fabric of his collar to cover it before extending his middle finger in a generalised gesture of invective towards the contents of the kitchen. "Grow up, dickhead," he muttered into the furniture.

"I'm serious," said Phil, who was not looking at George, who could not see the colour drain from George's face. "Could you not have bought her a burger on the way home?"

But George was closer to Ted than Phil, seated beside him and to his right, and George could see what Phil could not. A second's glance, no more, but that moment was enough. Because at the base of Ted's throat, buried by an alibi of angry skin, he'd seen the truth: the faintest trace of red, pinpricking the skin that pulsed softly above the carotid artery.

He had no idea what to say. He was supposed to make a joke, he realised, something dark and distasteful enough to make Ted screw up his face and Phil spit his tea back into his cup, but his mouth had gone dry. "Are you okay?" he asked at last.

"No," grunted Ted, "I am not okay. I'm dying here."

And that, thought George with a thrill of panic, might be truer than he knew. "Your neck…" he said.

"Oh, for Christ's sake." Ted shifted his head slightly so that one eye was free to focus a withering glare in George's direction. "Yes, I have a hickey. No, I'm not thirteen years old. Okay? We were both really drunk last night."

Well, Ted certainly had been. Ted had been as drunk as George had ever seen him; there was even a spirited rendition of *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*, and George hadn't seen his best friend channel *Top Gun* since that time they broke into Ted's dad's liquor cabinet the summer after their GCSEs. But Chloe walked out of the pub on steady legs, Ted leaning heavily against her narrow shoulder and smiling the loose-jawed smile of a man well in his cups; if she was drunk, she was hiding it well. And now, thinking back, George was forced to wonder: had he seen her drink anything at all? They'd been there for nearly seven hours, all told, Chloe for four of those.

And, though he remembered seeing a series of glasses in her hand, he could not remember seeing one of them at her lips.

The rest of the day was spent trying to find a way to deny this. By nightfall, hangover driven back under a wave of fear and denial, he had taken to Google in the hopes of convincing himself that he was wrong, because George was not stupid, and he was not deranged, and he knew there was no way he could be right. Vampires did not exist. Chloe existed. Therefore, Chloe could not be a vampire.

So why was it that, after five hours of searching, all he had was a long list of reasons to be afraid? Why was it that, for every website that thought the idea was crazy, there were four more that thought it was perfectly sane? Why was it that, no matter how hard he tried to be wrong about this, all he could find was evidence that he was right?

He didn't sleep that night. His eyes closed from time to time, and his brain greyed out and sank into twilight, but wakefulness was never far away. He heard Ted's return in the soft click of the front door against its hinges, the quiet tread on the stairs, the creak of the loose floorboard on the first-floor landing, and he rolled carefully onto his side, mattress springs sighing beneath him, to check his alarm clock. 5:17. The sky was paling on the far eastern horizon, late stars fading as day crept in around the edges: it was about thirty minutes before sunrise. And Ted was home from Chloe's.

That was when George knew for sure. And now he has no idea what to do.

Because Ted is fading. Ted no longer plays rugby on a Sunday afternoon; George knows this because his kit gets mud all over the inside of the wash basket, and the inside of the wash basket has been clean now for more than a month. Ted's chest, once broad and firm, has spread downwards, sliding from his ribs to pool at his belly. Ted's shoulders have sagged, as though the muscles of his neck have lost their tone, and he wears his tie pulled tight at his throat, pinning the collar of his shirt firmly against his skin. Ted doesn't come out with them in the evenings and he's gone all weekend long, and when he appears again on Monday morning, red-eyed and grey-skinned, he looks as though he's made of paper and shadows. He looks old and tired, like a man who's been ill for far too long.

George adds this to the list he keeps in a password-protected file on his computer. There's the intolerance to silver, because she'll make jewellery from platinum and white gold and copper, but she won't work with the one metal that everyone wants to buy. Ted says she's allergic, but George has looked it up, and hardly anybody's allergic to silver; they're usually allergic to the nickel that it's mixed with, and there's nickel in white gold. There's the hours she keeps: she sleeps the day away and works long into the night; it's why Ted disappears in the evening and only comes home when it's time to get changed for work. There's the fact that he's never seen her eat or drink. He's seen plates and glasses in her hand, piled high with food or wine, and he's seen them again when they're empty, but he's never seen their contents disappear. There's that weekend at Alicia's parents' place in the mountains that she wouldn't come along for, the weekend where they spent two days drinking home-made sangria in the sun or splashing about in the river, and Ted didn't go because Chloe said she had to work. There's the fact that George has never seen her step foot inside another person's home; the only time she spends with any of them is with Ted at her place, or in public spaces by night. She's never been to Ted and George's place. George has never seen her in the sunlight.

And Ted looks like he's dying, little by little, day by day.

Phil is not his first choice of confidante. Phil would not be anybody's first choice of confidante, and George wouldn't even consider the possibility if he weren't desperate. But last night, Ted's phone buzzed while he was out of the room and the message that flashed up on the screen was from Matt, whose girlfriend works for a high-end goldsmith's in the town. And, though only the first two lines were visible against the background photo of Ted and Chloe grinning into the camera, they told George more than he needed to know: *hey dickhead Em says maybe diamond better than ruby but they have selection of rings in ur range if u wanna…*

George doesn't need to read the rest of the message to be certain. He isn't stupid. There's only one reason you talk to a jeweller that isn't your girlfriend about the possibility of diamond rings. There's only one thing this can mean.

It means that Chloe has won.

It's not hard to get time alone to talk to Phil. They're basically the only two full-time occupants of this house anymore; the trick is finding a moment where they're not both doing their best to pretend each other out of existence. Their normal routine is to wait until they hear the absence of movement in any room they want to enter, then swoop in, do what they need to do, and get out again before they're forced to interact, but that's easy enough to subvert, especially when he's dealing with a man of Phil's spatial awareness and adaptability to change. George just rattles about in the cupboard for a minute or two when he hears the adverts come on in the living room next door, then shuts up and stands still for the two minutes it takes Phil to think that he's disappeared back upstairs again. It'd be worth it alone for the look on Phil's face, if the whole thing weren't the polar opposite of funny.

"Hey," says George calmly, while Phil's still frozen in indecision in the doorway and manifestly trying to work out his options. "Just shut up and sit down a minute, would you? I need to talk to you about something."

It goes about as well as he's expecting.

"Are you kidding me?" says Phil at last, and he doesn't look angry yet, and he doesn't look worried. What he looks is confused, but confused is Phil's usual expression. "Mate…I swear to God, as long as I live, I will never understand why he keeps you around. You are a complete psychopath, and I'm not joking."

George is not sure whether he should be flattered or annoyed that it hasn't even occurred to Phil to think that George is winding him up. He says, "Phil, he's going to buy her a ring. You know what that means…"

"It means he loves her." Phil doesn't even raise his voice. He's leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded across his chest. "And maybe if you'd ever had an actual conversation with a human woman in your whole entire life you might find that easier to understand. Jesus."

It's not as though George wasn't expecting the rebuttal to be situated somewhere along this thematic framework. And it's not as though Phil is exactly beating the ladies away with a stick himself, though it doesn't seem like a good moment to mention their joint brotherhood of involuntary celibacy. "Tell me I'm wrong," he says quietly.

"Tell you you're wrong?" Phil snorts. "No problem: you're not only wrong, I actually think you've genuinely lost it this time. I'm serious, mate. Are you off your meds or what?"

George ignores the question. "She never sets foot outside in the sunlight…"

"Are you even listening to yourself? Of course she does!"

"Name one time you've seen her during daylight."

"Mike and Carol's party."

"That was after dark!"

"No, *you* got there after dark. Ted and Chloe were there all afternoon, out in the back garden drinking beer and eating Carol's stupid tofu burgers."

He's lying. George knows he's lying; Chloe doesn't drink beer and she doesn't eat burgers. His mind races. If Phil is lying for Chloe, then that can only mean that she's got to him too and that she wants Ted badly enough to take down anyone who might stand in her way. George is unassuming, unthreatening—background colour, nothing more—but Phil can't even spell *inconspicuous*. He's exactly the sort of problem that Chloe can do without.

So she's taken care of Phil. Nothing is safe. George holds up his hands in capitulation even as the last thread of hope frays and snaps.

"I'm sorry," he says, and he keeps his voice neutral. "Forget I said anything."

"Psycho," mutters Phil.

"You're right." George just wants him to shut up and leave now so that he can have space to think without Phil's stupidity lowering their collective IQ. "Seriously, forget it."

"You want my advice, mate?" says Phil, and, though George knows the question's rhetorical, he considers answering anyway, just to see what happens. But Phil doesn't give him the chance: "Keep your mouth shut around Ted and just be happy for him for once. Chloe's good for him—she's the best thing that's ever happened to him, if you ask me. So you just keep your psycho mouth shut, all right?"

Which would be fine, George thinks, except that he knows even before Phil levers himself out of the kitchen doorway and stomps back to the match, fresh beer forgotten, that Phil's going to tell Ted himself anyway. It's written into the dismissive shake of his head, the glower, the contemptuous snort—and the way that Phil has never in his life held onto a piece of information that's not his to share. In the end, it takes him less than three days to shoot his mouth off. And it's not that this is a bad thing, really—telling Ted was always going to be necessary, somewhere down the line—it's just that George would have preferred it to have come from him, where his claims could be backed up by the pages upon pages of evidence he's amassed over the past weeks and months, and delivered in something slightly more convincing than an arrogant sneer.

"Mate," says Ted the day after Phil talks to him, and, though he's smiling, he looks hollowed out, stoop-shouldered with exhaustion, "you're completely fucked in the head, you know that?"

They're sitting at the kitchen table, George hunched over a cooling cup of tea, Ted stretched out with his feet on an adjacent chair, sipping from a mug of coffee. His robe has fallen open at his hips, and George can see that he's wearing a new pair of boxers—navy, with a grey paisley print; a far cry from the cartoon animals and sports-themed patterns that Ted used to favour before he met Chloe. His legs are thick and blanketed by a thick curtain of wiry black hair, but the lines of muscle have faded into doughy flesh; the definition is gone.

He makes himself laugh, and says, "That's why you love me."

A tired grin. "You wish."

"Hey," says George. "*I'm* not the one marrying a vampire, mate."

Ted grins, sips at his coffee. "That's 'cause nobody'd marry you, you ugly bastard."

"She's bad for you," says George, and drops his eyes so he doesn't have to see the flash of anger ghost across Ted's.

"No," says his friend. "She isn't."

"Mate," says George quietly. "I'm worried about you."

"Why? Because I'm happy?"

"Because I think she's sucking the life out of you."

"Fuck you." The mug of coffee strikes Formica with force enough to send liquid slopping up and over the rim. Ted swings his legs off the chair, leans forward across the damp table. "You know what, mate? I know you don't like her. I know you never have, and that's fine, but you know what's not fine? *Chloe* knows you don't like her. The woman I love. The woman I'm going to marry, and I can't even bring her into my own home because I know you'll be shooting daggers at her across the living room floor, and I won't do that to her. Because, you know what? She is the opposite of bad for me. She is so good for me that, I swear to God, I have no idea how I managed to win this jackpot, and I'm not going to have that ruined by some sex-starved little weirdo with a conspiracy complex. You do not get to talk like this about Chloe, do you understand me? Mess about with me all you want, but you cross a line when you talk shit about her."

It's a moment before George can speak. He can feel the tremor in his hands, but as long as they're wrapped tightly around his mug, so tightly that his knuckles are white, his fingertips bloodless, he knows that Ted can't see. He says, "She's the one who won the jackpot. Mate."

Cold silence. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means"—George lets his eyes swing upwards, and his glare is made of ice and glass—"that she knew a sucker when she saw one. And she reeled you in."

"You know what?" The chair scrapes backwards against the floor with enough violence that, for a moment, George actually thinks that Ted will hit him. "Phil's right, mate. You are a psycho." Another shove and the chair skitters away, collapsing on its side in a clatter of wood and

lino as Ted strides past George and out of the kitchen. “Stay the hell away from me and Chloe.”

That was two days ago. Ted hasn’t been back to the house since he packed a bag and stormed out, and nobody needed to ask where he was going. George has phoned in sick to work and spent his days endlessly circling Chloe’s block, hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and the driver’s side visor, pulled down and across to the side window. Ted’s car is parked on the pavement outside, but the curtains are drawn on Chloe’s ground floor flat, and there’s no movement from inside. There wouldn’t be, of course. The sun is high in the sky, and it doesn’t matter what Phil says, George has never seen her in daylight.

Monday morning, Ted leaves for work. George is parked a little way up the street, but his car is silver, generic, unassuming, and Ted’s not looking for it in any case. Chloe doesn’t see him to the door, but she wouldn’t, of course. Dawn was hours ago.

Silence. Stillness. The world around them is waking up, engines firing, children yelling, bus stops filling, but Chloe’s flat remains bathed in darkness, motionless and dead. The way George sees it, he has two problems. The first is that his best friend’s girlfriend is a vampire, and she’s slowly draining the life from the man George loves more than anyone else in the world. The second is that Ted won’t believe him, and that’s going to get him killed.

George knows now what he has to do.

He’ll go to the door, ring the bell for apartment 1A, the one with no name above the buzzer because she’s never quite got around to writing it in. The intercom is broken, he knows, so she’ll have to come out to the main entrance to let him in, and she won’t know that it’s George. It’s a late winter morning, but the sun is up, pooling watery yellow sunlight onto the little stoop out front, and it will spill into the hallway as the door opens. A person could only avoid it by crouching in the shadows, hiding behind the door as George makes his way in, and that will be enough to let him know that he’s not wrong. Ted and Phil can protest all they want, but George knows he’s not wrong. Chloe is killing his friend, but only George can see this. Only George can save him. And he’d do anything to keep Ted safe.

He pats the reassuring weight of his backpack, the sharp lines and angles, the unfamiliar shape of the rearranged contents. George ignores it, focuses on crossing the street. The bag is heavy, and it stabs uncomfortably against his back with every footstep: one long, straight, sharpened pillar of wood knocking against paper, knocking against his spine.

He knows what he has to do.

Contributor Biographies

POETRY

RAY BALL, Ph.D., is a writer and history professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage. When not in the classroom or the archives of Europe and Latin America, she enjoys running marathons, reading, and spending time with her spouse, Mark, and beagle, Bailey. Her poems have appeared in such journals as *Cirque, Foliate Oak, Occulum,* and *Moonchild Magazine.* She tweets @ProfessorBall.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. His writing has made appearances or is forthcoming in *The Literary Yard*, *Big Windows*, and *Locust*, among others.

VALENTINA CANO is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time she has either reading or writing. Her works have appeared in numerous publications and her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Web. Her debut novel, *The Rose Master*, was published in 2014 and was called a "strong and satisfying effort" by *Publishers Weekly*.

WANDA DEGLANE is a psychology/family & human development student at Arizona State University. Her poetry has been published in *Dodging the Rain*, *r.kv.r.y*, *Porridge Magazine*, and elsewhere. She writes to survive. Wanda is the daughter of Peruvian immigrants, and lives with her giant family and beloved dog, Princess Leia, in Glendale, Arizona.

RACHAEL GAY is a poet and artist living in Fargo, North Dakota. Her work has appeared in *fēlan*, *Eunoia Review*, *Daily Gramma*, *Errata Magazine*, *Literary Orphans*, *FreezeRay Poetry*, *Bitterzoet Magazine*, and *The Bookends Review*. More of her work can be found at witchinghourpoetry.tumblr.com.

TIM GOLDSTONE now lives in Wales and has travelled and worked throughout the UK, Western and Eastern Europe, and North Africa. His material has appeared in print, online, and in anthologies, including *The New Welsh Review*, *Stand*, *Crannóg*, *Red Poets, Cambrensis, Zero Flash*, *Ad Hoc Fiction*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Ellipsis*, *Cadaverous*, *Ghost City Review*, *Altered States*, *The Speculative Book*, and forthcoming in *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Veil: Journal of Darker Musings*, *Trade*, *Idle Ink*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*. His prose sequence was read on stage by Leslie Norris at The Hay Festival, and he was the recipient of a Welsh Arts Council scholarship. Twitter: @muddygold.

J. BLAKE GORDON lives in darkness despairing and forlorn, near historic Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago. He sleeps, writes, broods, eats, cleans, reads magazines, collects records, works in QA, holds it together.

JENNY KETO is a poet-actress, born and raised in Austin, Texas. Currently studying to become a psychiatric nurse, Ms. Keto looks forward to the prospect of helping people for a living with both hands held out. Many of her poems grapple with the space between the heart and the intractable psyche. Some have found homes online at *Francis House, The Conglomerate, wards, Broken City*, and *Visitant*. Others are forthcoming in a print anthology by Host Publications. Jenny thinks quite a lot about anything and nothing at all.

MATEO LARA is a 24-year-old latinx poet, working toward a BA in English Literature from California State University, Bakersfield. His collections of poetry, *La Futura Tuga* and *X, Marks the Spot*, are available on Amazon, and his poems have been featured in *The New Engagement, EOAGH, Empty Mirror*, and *Orpheus*. He lives in Bakersfield, California.

JENNIFER LOTHRIGEL is a poet and artist residing in the San Francisco Bay area. She has just published her first chapbook through Liquid Light Press, titled *Pneuma*. Her work has also been published in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *The Haight Ashbury Journal*, *NILVX*, and elsewhere.

CALEB LOVELACE is a writer who lives somewhere near a river in Florida. His poetry has been published in *Bombus Press*, *Horn & Ivory Zine*, and *Déraciné Magazine*. You can find him on twitter at @caleblovelace and on Tumblr at caleblovelace.tumblr.com.

BEN NARDOLILLI currently lives in New York City. His work has appeared in *Perigee Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Danse Macabre*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *fwriction*, *Inwood Indiana*, *Pear Noir*, *The Minetta Review*, and *Yes Poetry*. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish a novel.

TERESE MASON PIERRE has had work published in: *The Claremont Review*, *Acta Victoriana*, *Occulum,* and *The Spectatorial*, among others. She is the poetry editor of *Augur Magazine,* and an associate editor for *Lady Lazarus Journal*. Pierre attends school and lives in Toronto. You can follow her on Instagram and Twitter: @teresempierre or visit her website: teresemason.webs.com.

ERIN PULSIPHER grew up in New Mexico and has since lived all over the American west. Her work has appeared in the *Santa Fe Literary Review* and *Punch Drunk*. She is an alumna of

Creighton University's MFA program where she served as managing editor for the 2016 & 2017 issues of *Blue River*. She now lives with her husband and their dog in Fairplay, CO.

TOM REED has self-published two books, *writing night book* and *the skeleton girl – a collection*, as well as several public domain pieces at cruxymox.tumblr.com, and amarthis.com. His dark science fiction piece, "pink foam," appeared in issue #33 of the *Suisun Valley Review*. His poetry is also available at *Figroot Press*, *RoguePoetry Review*, and Ishani Jasmin's *Passionfruit*.

LAUREN SUCHENSKI has a difficult relationship with punctuation and currently lives in Yardley, PA. She has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize and twice for The Best of the Net. Her chapbook, *Full of Ears and Eyes Am I*, is available from Finishing Line Press. You can find more of her writing on Instagram @lauren_suchenski or on Twitter @laurensuchenski.

THOMAS ZIMMERMAN teaches English, directs the Writing Center, and edits *The Big Windows Review* at Washtenaw Community College, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. His poems have appeared recently in *The Pangolin Review* and *Dirty Paws Poetry Review.* Visit his website at thomaszimmerman.wordpress.com.

FICTION

ERIK BERGSTROM lives in the "Bold North" of Minneapolis, where he enjoys hiking, star-gazing, and feeding his backyard crows. His latest story was published in *Chantwood Magazine*, and he was also a finalist for the *STORGY*: Exit Earth Anthology competition.

PHILIP BERRY'S short fiction and poetry has appeared in *Headstuff, Ellipsiszine, Hypnopomp, Liars' League, Easy Street, Bunbury Magazine, Spelk,* and the *Occulum*, among others.

CRISTINA BRESSER is a writer from Brazil who has published a novel in Portuguese, *Quase tudo é risível*, and is part of the short story anthology, *Torre de Papel.* She studied Creative Writing at the University of Edinburgh in 2016. Her work has previously been published in *Northern Light*, *121 Words*, *Ariel Chart*, *The University of Edinburgh Journal*, *82 Review*, and more recently in *The Muse and the Flame Anthology*, *The Runt Zine*, *Wildflower Muse*, *Thrice Publishing*, and *Nous Magazine*.

AMY FREEMAN'S work has recently appeared on GoodHousekeeping.com and *The Washington Post*, among other publications. It's all—or at least, most of it—collected on her website, AmyLFreeman.com.

DAVID HARTLEY writes strange stories about strange things for strange people. His unsettling flash fiction collection, *Spiderseed*, was published by Sleepy House Press in 2016 and very nearly won a Saboteur Award, but not quite. He lives in Manchester, UK where he can often be found haunting the open mics of various spoken word events. His fiction has appeared in *Ambit, Structo, Black Static,* and *The Alarmist*. He tweets, occasionally, at @DHartleyWriter.

ABI HYNES is a drama and fiction writer based in Manchester, UK. Her fiction has been published in print and online in journals and magazines such as *Litro, Interzone* (forthcoming), and *minor literature[s]*, and she was shortlisted for the inaugural Bath Novella-in-Flash Award in 2017. Her plays have been performed across the UK, and she is currently taking part in the 4Screenwriting 2018 course with Channel 4. You can follow her on Twitter @AbiFaro.

RB KELLY'S first novel, *The Edge of Heaven*, was a winner of the Irish Writers' Centre Novel Fair Competition and was published in 2016. Her short fiction and nonfiction has appeared in magazines and journals around the world, and her short story, "Blumelena," was shortlisted for the Bridport Prize. She lives and works in Northern Ireland and is currently completing her second novel.

KAT MONNIN is a writer, procrastinator, and unashamed emo from somewhere along the east coast. Their aim is to write stories and poetry that are like open heart surgery: harrowing and gory, but just might save your life. You can find them online on Twitter: @katdoesnotexist. You can find them offline near the back of a Hot Topic somewhere, hovering next to the My Chemical Romance shirts and weeping softly.

DAN NIELSEN is a fulltime open-mic standup comic. His flash manuscript, *Flavored Water*, was a semi-finalist in the Rose Metal Press 2017 Short Short Chapbook Contest. Recent flash fiction in: *Cheap Pop*, *The Collapsar*, *Ellipsis Zine*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *OCCULUM*. Dan has a website: Preponderous.wordpress.com. You can follow him @DanNielsenFIVES. He and Georgia Bellas are the post-minimalist art/folk band, Sugar Whiskey.

ANDREA SALVADOR lives somewhere in Asia, specifically a country with thousands of islands and constantly humid weather. She is a self-proclaimed writer who likes creating lists, watching sci-fi movies, and rearranging her bookshelf.

RAHUL SHIRKE is a twenty-six-year-old freelance writer based in Mumbai. He has been writing fiction on and off for the past twenty years. He runs a daily writing blog called Sulfurous Dreamscapes.

YAEL VAN DER WOUDEN is a writer, editor, and mixed-bag-diaspora child situated in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The idea for her story came to her when she was working in retail and thought she saw a zombie walk by, but it turned out to just be some girl who was walking real slow. Her words can be found all over the place, though most recently over at *Cheap Pop Literature, Split Lip Magazine,* and *Grimoire Magazine*. Her story is part of her collection-in-progress about women as monsters. Find her at yaelvanderwouden.com or on Twitter @yaelwouden.

CAROLINA VONKAMPEN graduated with a BA in English and history from Concordia University, Nebraska. She is currently an editor by day and an editor, reader, and writer by night. Her work has been published in *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*, *Cold Creek Review's The Shallows, FIVE:2:ONE's #thesideshow, Moonchild Magazine*, and *Déraciné Magazine*. She writes book reviews and blog posts at carolinavonkampen.com and tweets about editing at @carolinamarie_v.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

CHRIS BECKITT is a Product Photographer, Freelance Art Photographer, husband, and father of three living in Greensboro, North Carolina. He loves to pull inspiration from his everyday life, finding beauty in the ordinary. His work can be found at Behance.net/ChrisBeckitt and Instagram.com/ToBleachTheirOwn.

HARSHAL DESAI is an artist, entrepreneur, and writer that loathes the typical 9-5 existence. He documents his thoughts through writing and photography as he takes on society's norms, armed with nothing more than his cheeky wit and undeniable charm. His work is published in *Verbal Art, Phenomenal Literature, National Geographic, FineFlu, The Type Image, 805Lit, Door is a Jar*, and more. He is a co-founder of *Parentheses Journal*. Email him at hersheydesai@gmail.com.

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CR SMITH is a student of Fine Art at the University of Kent, UK. Her artwork has appeared in *Calamus Journal, Hypnopomp Magazine,* and *Green Light Literary Journal* with upcoming pieces for *Flash Frontier* and *Moonchild Magazine*. You can find examples of her work at crsmith2016.wordpress.com and instagram.com/smith.cr. Twitter: @carolrosalind.

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