

# déraciné

an independent literary magazine

Summer 2019

Volume IV



# Déraciné

VOLUME IV | SUMMER 2019

*Cover art, "Halcyon Days," by C.R. Smith*

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## *Editors' Letters*

Dear Reader,

I would first like to express my gratitude for everyone who has shown interest in our magazine. We were once again presented with a large volume of submissions for this issue, and I am grateful to have read so much wonderful work. We are also honored to have accepted our first translated work, originally published in Japanese, sent to us by the wonderful Toshiya Kamei.

Unique voices from all over the globe have contributed striking fiction, poetry, and art to our latest issue. They express what it means to cope with loss, to be troubled by love, to live and die.

I am eternally thankful to all our contributors, who entrust us with their precious work from first draft to editing to publication. We hope to always be a reliable, impactful outlet for you to share your voice.

A huge thank you to C.R. Smith, who has given us her beautiful artwork for the cover once again. We also thank Russell Daum for his generous donation (look out for his artwork in the upcoming Winter issue!).

Thank you for your continued support of *Déraciné*. I hope you will enjoy this latest issue full of stunning work.

Victoria Elghasen

Editor

Dear Reader,

I am thrilled to share our Summer 2019 issue with you. This marks our second summer issue and our fourth issue overall, and again I find myself reflecting on how far we have come in such a short time. We owe our success to you, dear readers, contributors, and followers on our social media accounts. Without your art, your voices, and your kind attention we would not have made the strides that we have.

Volume IV is an exciting issue. I am overjoyed to share with you a plethora of different voices on a truly international level. With contributors from across the globe, and even our first translated piece, as well as works that touch on a variety of deep and personal subjects, I believe this issue brings unique and enlightening perspectives.

The stories in this issue span a range of diverse and chilling topics, such as poverty, anxiety, grief, and childhood trauma. We also have a wealth of poetry that examines subjects such as death, familial ties, loss, and the struggle to truly communicate. I found myself connecting on a personal level with a number of these pieces, and not just among the poetry and prose. The beautiful art appearing in this issue also struck me, and I am proud to share these emotional and atmospheric pieces with you.

As the earth thaws and seasonal change comes upon us, I hope this issue will serve as a companion to you. Whether it frightens, unsettles, provokes thought, or touches your heart, I hope this issue will help you see new perspectives, look both inward and outward, and find catharsis and understanding.

Thank you for reading, thank you to our wonderful contributors, thank you to Russell Daum for his kind donation, and thank you to those who support us daily. We look forward to reading and reviewing more art for our future issues, and we hope you will join us on our next literary journey.

Michelle Baleka

Editor

COURTNEY LEBLANC

*Yellow*

I picked out the palest yellow cashmere,  
held it against my cheek, imagined  
the softness enveloping the plump  
tenderness of new skin. It was  
machine washable, a must for a new  
mom. I bought nine skeins, spent  
nearly \$100, spent the next eight months  
knitting and purling, knitting and purling,  
the blanket slowly unfurling across  
my lap. Just weeks before the baby  
was due, I finished it. Folded it perfectly,  
tied it with a silver ribbon.  
How it must have swaddled her,  
that cocoon of pale yellow,  
as the casket was lowered  
into the ground.



MICAELA WALLEY

*I have been trying to put lotion on my feet for days*

and repaint my nails too. All 20 of them. I haven't found the time yet. Most days, all I do for myself is get out of bed.  
Go to work.

I have been calling my mom crying  
in my car so often that now, when she pictures me,  
she pictures me moving forward.

I hear her explain my situation back to me  
over and over again:               *You didn't have a choice*  
But I did                               *You gave up everything*  
But I had nothing to give.

I apply for better jobs, ones that I can imagine  
actually liking. I wait for their response. I write a few poems  
that nobody wants. I keep them anyways.

I feel my car creeping slowly and slowly  
closer off the side of the road.

The trees reach out to me, and I answer. I tell them  
I will meet them where they are  
someday soon. I keep driving.

Moving forward.

I listen for hope's familiar call:  
*I am here to maybe love you. Let me.*  
And, for now, I do.

*I dream of visiting home*

swimming in my clothes  
in the backyard pool  
before it turns green  
from spring pollen. I dream  
of muffins—all composed of  
my favorite meals, easily  
transportable, to be eaten  
at a later date. I throw away  
various knives my sister  
has collected since I left.  
I try not to see the symbolism  
there. I cannot fit everything  
I want to take back with me  
in my car. It is getting dark  
and they are throwing a party  
I have not been invited to. I need  
to start the long trek back  
to where I came from. I need  
to read my finely tuned script  
of goodbyes. I think about how  
long the car ride will be, how I  
will surely return to where I came  
from in the same tangible darkness  
that I feel just thinking about it.  
My mother hands me some money.  
Her lover is waiting for me to leave.  
Everyone wants to know my next  
move: I jump back into the pool.

EMMANUEL OJEIKHODION

*A boy's life will shake you*

A friend once told me that I could sift my setbacks by drowning my eyes  
in a temple where I could see God's face.

This time, the demons in a boy are like a street walked by  
different colours of people.

It changes a boy who only tries to silence it.

Mother once told me I was a burden in her womb. And I wonder why I brought  
these demons in a mind fragile like my own shadow.

Do not ask me how I bury them. They're the setbacks I've been  
longing to sift and the scars on my skin I want to shed now.

I let my hands wander through my hair for  
the memories of these past months and years to pluck out.

A boy's body like mine only wishes to spell peace  
to the human world.

SIMON PERCHIK

*Four Poems*

\*

You feed these birds at night  
the way every feather they use  
comes from a quarry where the air

darkens with each landing –it's Tuesday  
and you still have not forgotten  
their return for seeds, endlessly

weeping for a missing child  
a brother, mother though their eyes  
are unsure how to close

when listening for a name, a flower  
a river –you fill your hand from a bag  
as if at the bottom they could hear

an emptiness that is not a night  
falling behind step by step on the ground  
–how open it was, already grass.

\*

And stubborn yet these wicks  
warm the light they need  
to blossom as stone

then cling, smell from hair  
burning inside, clawing for roots  
heated by butterflies

and the afternoons coming together  
to the light the fire, be a noon  
where there was none before.

\*

You stir this soup as if each finger  
is warmed by the breeze  
though your eyes close when salt is added

–small stones could bring it to life  
overflow with branches, berries, wings  
shimmering and far away dissolve

into a sea that has no word  
for sitting at a table, naked  
waiting for you to turn on the light

wrap your arms around a bowl  
that's empty, a night no longer sure  
it's the rim you're holding on to

that's circling a man eating alone  
who can't see, hears only the waves  
becoming lips, colder and colder.

\*

This thin sheet has no strength left  
spread out as a bed  
no longer interested in love

though the edge still folds in  
taking hold of a frayed promise  
pulling it to safety word by word

-look around, what was saved is paper  
shrinking into curls and hollows  
has a face, a mouth -all in writing

has the silence, the forever  
death listens for -what it hears  
is the unfolding face up

the way moonlight  
has never forgotten your fingers  
are constantly unpacking paper

as the frail sound oars make  
when bringing back a sea  
that was not cared for: this note

all this time forgotten, in a box  
half wood, half smoke  
as if it once lit up the world.

JASON FISK

*The Knife Block*

Part I

The dense wood-block knife holder  
we got for our wedding sits solidly  
on our countertop and we pretend  
that all the knives are there and  
that they're just somewhere  
in the household wash cycle  
but that's not true—they're not  
Some have disappeared over time  
and if I start thinking about everything  
that's disappeared over time  
I become paralyzed with sadness  
thinking about the blackhole  
that exists at the center of time  
carving away hunks of life

Part II

I read you the poem  
about the wood-block  
knife holder  
and you said you  
hated it and asked  
if that's how I felt  
about our marriage  
and I said *No*  
because I love you  
and adore being  
married to you  
but I also asked  
*Can't I just write*  
*a sad poem*  
*about a knife holder?*



ADRIAN ERNESTO CEPEDA

*En La Sombra*

*From a 1941 photograph of Frida Kahlo by Emmy Lou Packard*

*Escondido*, she tries  
to hide from the pain,  
even in the shade  
she can feel the throb  
the panicking *sudar* returning,  
as she sweats mortality  
without her paints,  
she cannot brush  
every stinging agony away  
the canvas is her  
force shield super  
*heroína* who fights  
*los dolores*, with every  
color *la pintura* dyes  
the *agonia* away  
if only a minute,  
*un momento*, she can  
*olvidar* and in her  
studio away from  
*la luz, el sol* and  
the days she has to fight—  
Thanatophobia, fearing  
*moribundo* when outside  
idle *manos*, hands, *dedos*  
fingers, with nothing to grip  
*afuera* but bruise in the shades  
*el sufrimiento* always  
overshadows, wondering  
if she will finish her opus  
masterpiece, Masonite  
for *la Ángel de la muerte*  
throbbing inside her gesture  
so graphic blot work like  
blood staining *sangre* of oils,  
mirror self-*reflejando*, a muse  
still wet and bleeding *mortalidad*—  
hoping *si ella no puede*  
*encontrarme*, if she can't find  
me in *la sombra*, gifting this  
*cuerpo* canvas offering—  
death may finally overcome.



*Summer's Remains* by C.R. Smith.

KATE GARRETT

*Fabula*

He is still repeating your name  
and you attempt one last escape:

wearing the pelt of a translucent mare,  
you slip as air through trees lining a mirror-  
image coast. Baptise your self-doubt  
with seafoam; throw your carrion  
to starving crabs pinching at the sand.

Life as a sylph is on your terms—  
when you were made of earth it was easy  
for him to reshape you like wet clay:  
a lick here, a stroke there.

As a perfect apparition you listen  
for the moment you become immortal—  
the shift is with the last breaths of others  
rewriting you as the villain of the tale.

You will outlive this: an impossible shadow  
on the wrong island, evanescing into myth.

*My mother Death teaches me patience*

She reveals herself as the tendons between dreams // the night-womb cradling me as I sleep the distance from bled-dry to wet with weeping // my umbilicus forever joined to this mother // she is the removal of pain, the panacea out of reach // she will not take me with her, but strokes my hair and kisses my cheek in the dark // with each orbit of the moon she insists on counting my breaths two at a time until the cycle starts again // one day it will end—the rosy flesh, desperate and dying, will rise up brittle, fissured, and I will understand her paradox // but these patterns repeat // over and over I wish for release, for something less Sisyphean // from underneath the bed she hears me, her bony hands withhold the promise of relief

L.B. STRINGFELLOW

*Lilith Despairing*

You are nothing to me now—  
only a ghost in my mind  
I conjure like some mad witch.

You are my image, having eaten  
my rib to the core, gnawed it  
like a rabid dog. Now, having departed,

ghost of my vision,

you leave carrying your hat and shoes  
in the rain. Don't think I don't see  
my skin unravelling against the sun

when I grow angry, or into  
the black spittoon of your mouth,  
muddy, smelling of waterless sweat.

I have to say,  
I knew I would love you for a long time.  
I wish I could be proven wrong.

Now, here I stand in the idle desert with my grief—  
the wind pummelling its spells nightly  
like heavy fists into my body.

## *Seraphim*

Today, I'm having trouble with the angels.

The angel who stands at the foot of the bed  
With its long, slender black body,  
Arms stretched and curled out like cobras  
Into the sides of Jesus, who says,

*Child, show me your suffering,  
Pour it into me that I may live.*

And dragonfly wings are wrapped  
Tightly around the sun, from which comes  
A chorus of other angels

Whose bodies are not made of white

Light, but of something human-  
Like, meaty and visceral. No,  
What makes up the wings is not  
The feathers of doves or fleece,  
But rather grackle so black  
Under the light they begin to shine...

## *A Modern Psyche in the Shades*

The sound of his steps dream  
move from the bed. I search  
for the square wooden match,  
the lamp, anything to break

the dark, make it rush back into itself.  
No light. Only the night and its vacant pupil  
staring, my hands a blue iris around it.

Then, I am standing with bare feet in the white dress  
at a crossroad which feels soft as tar  
—the center of all the directions at once, a maze  
of highways in the old country.

There is no weeping here,  
no gnashing of teeth.  
That's not what it means  
to be under the world.  
There is only the dead,  
good and bad, walking vacantly  
through the streets, their robes  
unravelling before them.

But look,  
there's no sun here,  
nothing to warm your empty hands,

not even a single star to see by,  
no moon,

no,  
not even the fire.





*Waiting for a Passerby* by Christopher Woods.



ROBERT BEVERIDGE

*Five of Cups*

The mud is deep, the water thick  
with algae, runoff, darker things.  
Left boot somewhere behind,  
claimed by the muck, left to rot.  
Still, there is one foot, then there  
is the other. The light ahead  
may be the edge of this jungle,  
or it may be a clearing, or it may  
be an indication of a bottomless  
patch of *Terra Infirma* forever  
hungry for the pith helmets  
of intrepid explorers.

Does it  
matter? No. There is one foot,  
then there is the other.

JENNIFER WILSON

*The Weather on Neptune*

deep, deep in a warm bath  
floating full of nitrous

your naked body swells,  
gives up its bones  
moonlike in one white mass  
that finds buoyancy  
beyond you, slipping  
over the edge  
of association

and the bonekeepers  
who have the sense  
at least to be surprised  
by your nudity  
chastise you for screaming,  
trying to wedge between  
your teeth something more like words  
to weight the air  
that you would hold on to  
if you could

instead sinking  
with the plumb-line of plastic  
in the bath that  
breathes out through  
your bones, making full  
planets of your parts,  
burning stars of your blood

JAKUB BERALSKI

*Claustrophilia*

Oh, but the harshness of the light;  
what if the world beyond my locked door  
doesn't wish to see me?

Your gentle encouragement is a weak anesthetic;  
please, give me a synthetic more intoxicating  
than a paper-thin blanket of comfort.  
Give me a bitter white powder I can dive into  
without a sliver of care.  
Give me assurance, a guarantee.  
Let me pre-see how I'll be received,  
for I see only acidic cynicism  
and dissonant darkness out there.

I see the silhouette of judgement  
stomping around with clunky steps,  
slithering into innocent souls turned sordid  
and grinning

It isn't on me to uncover something new  
and discover the image beyond that window.  
Here, amidst these halls,  
the walls offer no judgement.  
Every moment of silence is heavensent,  
and carries no splenetic strangers  
hellbent on infecting my simple peace  
with the threat of anything besides this.

TIFFANY BELIEU

*Natural History*

I spend my unsalvageable days  
wandering through lush landscapes.

Every minute detail recreated  
by delicate hands of student-scientists.

I'm drawn to the haunting beauty  
of taxidermy, bodies preserved exactly,

strange as infinity. I drift  
through the familiar glass-eyed

presentation of being alive.  
The doctor says it's just a side effect.

Dust on the unmoving. I expect  
small amounts of degradation, parts slowly

replaced until something new  
is birthed by sleight of hand. I've grown

accustomed to lying, undisturbed.

JAMES KNIGHT

*Amnesia*

Amnesia refers to forms of invisible crystals that precipitate from the eyes and undergo changes on flat surfaces (such as kitchen worktops, tables, and windowsills). It pertains to frozen crystalline anguish throughout its lifecycle, starting when, under suitable conditions, glitchy words form in the basement, increase in size, precipitate and accumulate on surfaces, then metamorphose in place, and ultimately contort, swell, or whisper. Severe memory loss organises and develops by feeding on sources of subliminal advertising and cold living rooms. Amnesia nucleates around particles in newspaper stories by attracting supercooled neurones, which freeze in hexagonal-shaped agonies. These take on a variety of shapes; basic among these are pyramids, blank sheets of paper, and dolls. As amnesia accumulates into a blackout, it may blow into drifts. Over time, accumulated memory loss erases light sources and can, in rare cases, rupture the sky.

## *Remember*

remember light at anchor  
children drawing blood  
sometimes the equations turn pages

remember numbers in open petals  
music heard from beneath your mouth  
sometimes our voices blanch the sun

remember words under cloudless drugs  
sorry open doorways  
sometimes the drowning fills our kisses

*Shackle*

- I. We were too high. We saw the river red and polluted. I ran to the love shack. The night was young. The music said it all. I couldn't love you more. I thought of eating dandelion salad from the sidewalk. I couldn't find the papers. The document that allowed me to smoke you into my lungs. I looked at the sky and didn't wish I was tripping. I looked. I looked. I heard the guitar and took it into my fingers. I placed the drum beats exactly where they were meant to fall on your chest. I slept without you in the place we made love. My soul smelled of wood.
- II. I wished I could write this under good influence. A pope's pardon or mother's touch. I wished we could be better kids, not these old devils. Meet in our own desert beneath a hotter star. Wish for each other before we did water. Hungry for sustenance. Bored of arousal. Respect like anything green for the sun. Like anything far away for not knowing. Like a trembling lip for the extinct word. This poem isn't for you. The sidewalk weeds are not for my nourishment. Hands are not to hold the heart as it explodes. This is true. The color of love is not red but white. Not hollering like island rain but loud as scrub jays. Like whiskey ignites the chest and poisons the stomach. Like I miss you and fall becomes winter.
- III. You slept. The whole thing came apart in snow. Like I slept inside death to keep warm. I'm breaking through the frozen carcass of day. I'm capturing natural light. Meeting people further down the river. Opening to the violent spring. Who could wait for the sun like I did? Hold the desert wind in their body. Like breathing. I couldn't cough the thing out of me, but I hacked. I howled across the *rio*. The coyote is a black dog beside me. I cannot look. I cannot look. I only know because of the bloody snow.
- IV. I move the car after the storm. A patch of bare ground is there. The scrub jays come. Hundreds hurry and peck at it. I look. I look. I see you at the end of the drive. The jays fly together and you are gone too. I snatch at the dirt. Dig like an avalanche to the sea and find nothing but a lopsided body. Your own. Breathing a little more on one side. Catching the sun at different times of day. Like a stick in the mud. Brown liquor in a small bottle. One fell sip. Briefly, life. The morning sun touching the forehead first. The sweet smell of the love shack calling. Wood drying in the sun. It will be cold again soon. You are almost gone, and I still long for you. I drive by when I am awake. I do not dream of you. I sleep alone. I walk to the edge of the low tide. That place you told me you once screamed for another. I walk for miles to the rim of the cup and when I get there...I don't scream. I leave you.

NOELLE SCHMIDT

*lovers*

her lover's body is a shovel,  
the illusion of soft flesh giving way  
to splintering wood  
that slides venomously under her skin  
stinging in pleasure and pain

her lover's body is a shovel  
and they clash together in the dirt  
digging deeper  
kissing lips that taste of cherries  
and earthworms  
hands burrowing in hair like  
grass, overgrown, under-watered

her lover's body is a shovel,  
each touch carving earth from earth

her lover's body is a shovel  
and she digs her own grave



ANNE BAZARNIC

*Dig*

Nails dig like shovels in snow  
Steady hands, she's pulling skin again  
Fistfuls of fatty flesh on her back remind  
Pain is pain only until it is forgotten,  
Until the wounds of trauma scar up,  
To become recollections of injuries past.  
Sans sensation.

This sensation is not enough.  
It is cowardice and lack of conviction.  
It could be a fingernail carved cutlet and maybe  
That would be surgery enough to remove a cancerous conscious  
To be placed on a shelf, catalogued, and moved past.

This is clumsy, embarrassing, ineffectual.  
This is her fingers turned to paper with pressure,  
Too small a discomfort to unseat any sliver of skin,  
Too weak to draw blood in passionate catharsis,  
Too late to stop this terminal tumor of a malignant memory.

*-Phoria*

A hive of angry bees lives in my body.  
With every tentative breath they buzz into my teeth  
and sting into my bones and the walls of my veins.  
They pump poison to my farthest extremities  
and I'm left numb and trembling with the anxious  
confusion of a thousand simultaneous suicides.

My skin, pocked with bubbles,  
secretes the yellow pus of the current dread.  
Burning holes  
through which my acrid insides drift lazily out  
in a miasma-cloud of sickened air.

As my body liquefacts,  
I ooze out of my clothes into the dirt.  
The last bits of my brain in an act of infinite benevolence  
mingle in decomposition with the ants and flies,  
  
and the bees are gone

LENORA COLE

*sun rose*

i walked the garden  
like an orphan  
skinned kumquats  
picked a sun rose  
kept it in a spice jar from  
your warmless kitchen

diaphanous veins tracing  
new green skin  
lungs transmuted  
become lamina  
spat bitter mucus  
sheaths  
favoured stem  
sinking hair-thick roots  
(pale as your eyelashes)  
drinking  
rainwater you collected  
last summer

EMMA CROKER

*Cemetery, England*

Can I write one more on graveyards? Wood pigeons  
hatching in them, ringlets scattering eggs in the grass?  
Cinnabar babies in ragwort, blackbirds at home in the dirt?

I will. I like how this one's grown long;  
teasel stems so tall I can hardly read the stones. Lichens  
doing well in the *Here Lies* and *Loving Memories*.

The numbers 'seventeen-hundred-something-something'  
bring up floating jails off Portsmouth; boats bloated past  
the ballast line with humans, underwater. An island,

so close to being stolen when some people in this graveyard  
passed away. They never had to know. These stories  
are not mine to tell. My job is to listen. A cuckoo calls.

A sign nailed to a tree in the carpark of the churchyard says:  
'Watch Out! Thieves About!' and 'Take Your Valuables with You!'  
Is there a Patron Saint of Apologies? Somebody who will mean it,

*really* mean it when they say: 'I'm sorry for your loss' and  
'how can we do better?' A mistle thrush lands on a headstone,  
whistles at our failings, and sings to keep on trying.

KRISTIN GARTH

*They Will Say That You Have Died*

exsanguinated, white of eye, a stiff  
distinctiveness, posture tense, amidst  
assembled sibling dissonance. If  
they pose you between your sister twins, wrists

discretely folded under chins, will they  
see a post-mortem neck, impossible,  
to keep erect? Steel head brace, they will say,  
macabre device for corpse display, holds still

dead, living while they wait for mercury  
on silver plate. Deciphering absent smiles  
modernity, remove of empathy,  
century, RIP Facebook profile

and bumperstickered memorials instead—  
every body daguerreotyped is dead.

*Death Scarification*

I love my burial, especially when they'd say  
this is the empty nest wherein the bird flew  
at first sunset, its wings dripping of the orange  
sun. I love my cadaver shrouded in silk cotton,  
bought with a price above my feeding costs  
while alive. I love my soul tinted in glass and  
mirrors, its depth pinned to its body by a hard  
weight of transparent shadow, overhanging  
my breath. I love the mourning of women who  
hold their breasts, grieving faces dumped  
into the sky's womb, who soon would forget me  
when the victuals serve and the wine passes round  
from lip-to-lip. I love my body beneath the earth  
surface, deeper than the roots of trees, deeper  
than the bracken and heather. They would wail  
over it, unrealising that this is not me, that this is  
only a chest, treasures inside are removed.

ANNABEL MAHONEY

*Grave of a Suicide Victim*

it won't be here for long,  
the red little blip of mine  
the microcosm in a vessel-break;  
it only looks a lot because  
it shouldn't be outside

some of me will sit and turn  
dry and friable and be carried  
further than i had ever gone  
some of me will go down  
and will feed me and make me  
whole again;  
feed the life above me and

feed into what comes next.



*Grave of a Suicide Victim*, Wilhelm Kotarbinski, c. 1900.



*Lye*

*I lean against the sink basin—survey the snowy landforms; gray straw projects from grassy hummocks, a partially entombed combine reel, fractured cutter bar; the circular cistern ledge rising like some antediluvian teepee ring from the white earth.*

*I gingerly sip my coffee, then spin about the tragically dim kitchen, landing at the dinette; my thoughts drift onto something other than you as I flip through the County Leader. Middle-school baseball stats, advertisements showcasing western wear for toddlers, general services provided. At the bottom righthand corner: Grave Digger.*



Setting her coffee aside, Alva rises and retrieves the last of the hothouse tomatoes from the hanging wire basket. She unlatches the leather sheath that holds her husband's hunting knife and grips it in front of her. Her eyes fixate on its honed edge. It's hardly been three weeks since the incident, and time is still stuck in what seems like an eternal drift state. Outside, snow covers what needs hiding. Now dropping into a vinyl dinette chair, she presses the blade into the taut flesh, slitting the fruit in half. Seeds and pulp spill lethargically across the slab of bookend hickory and ash. She hasn't prayed in years, decades.

It's as if all the energy has been released from every cell within her.

*"Just like us," you, would've said. And me, I would've said, "Like two disparate species now forever divided."*

*My head lowers, and except for the wintery wind in the trees, the dissonant scratch of an errant branch against glass, there's nothing.*

Alva stabs the knife into the hardwood cutting board—the one he'd made with his own earth-calloused hands; the hands of a bricklayer, a farmhand, an alcoholic, a no-good cheating sonofabitch.

*"For our first an-ni-ver-sa-ry," the words spit from my mouth one syllable at a time.*

Staring at her crimped knuckles, Alva's reminded of his coagulating blood. Her hands tremble, and she clenches them into tight, round fists. They're covered in Cuor di Bue tomato juice, which is Italian for Oxheart.



*You'd've acted pissed, laughed with your horse teeth, and just shrugged it away. I might've laughed because you weren't mad at poor me. You were angry at the fucking world.*

*The first attempt, I'd just come home from an unhurried afternoon of duck hunting, a clutch of ring-necked birds slung across my shoulder, their wilted, distinctive white bills slapping against my backside as I trod merrily but exhausted through the mudroom door—my 12-gauge shotgun, clutched in my gloved hand, dangled benignly at my side.*

Alva's gun palm sweated as she stared down at her husband balled up in a suicidal red pool, panting, his forehead the color of rain-soaked newsprint. He wasn't dead yet. Sadly, she'd have to wait him out.

Overhead, horrid kitchen light flickered. A stack of unpaid medical bills rifled across a dinette they'd purchased together at a local farm estate sale. Before the disease was little more than some chance flaw—before his alcoholism had consumed what was left.

Alva gazed at the overdue notices, now ashen cinders in the old Franklin stove. Kneeling, she began wrapping her husband's bloodied wrists with her bandana.

"You sonofabitch, you've survived this try!"

"I did," he said coarsely. "But you watch, one day I'll do it right..."



*Four months later, I drift into the living room, collapsing onto the pullout sofa opposite our pawnshop flat screen. Cops is on, your favorite. Sound muted. Beer cans scattered like bowling pins across our carpeted floor; half-smoked cigarette butts litter the brick hearth. I imagine you sulking, trying to muster up the courage. What you took for courage.*

*On the TV, two burly cops manhandle some random tattooed man in a soiled wife-beater, dark jeans, no shoes—a crazed woman is screaming and flailing her arms. Neighbors spectate from the curbside, driveways, hands on their hips, arms folded. Multi-colored lights flash, illuminating the pavement, reminiscent of reedy shallows at mottled early light, but not a duck in sight.*

*I refocus my vision, my turbid inclinations, and turn the sound all the way up and head into the kitchen.*

Flipping the light switch, Alva retrieves a bottle of Clorox from under the basin, green scrub pads, a large sponge, the orange deuce pail she uses for general cleaning, like his corn-infested feet when she still gave a shit.

But this one dim snowy night, a night not unlike many others, Alva clips her hair back, stoops on one knee, and rolls her husband onto his side.

*Your goddamn eyes are closed, thank god!*

His mouth, slightly parted, is coalesced in some final drool-inducing sleep.

Before she mops up, although she's not sure why, Alva checks for a pulse. The radial if he's conscious, carotid if he's not.

*Hot tears well up and spill away unstoppably, mixing with the dirt, grime, and blood to form a thick rust-colored paste.*

Alva moves the sponge over the floor. “Scrub, scrub, scrub—motherfucker!” she shouts in an empty house.



*I finish wrapping you in a repurposed plastic-lined drop, and sitting with my back perched against the cupboard, I watch angel-wing snowflakes glide past the moonlit windowpane. One by one, they pile up around the outside of our house. If they're perfect, untarnished souls, do they need forgiveness? I want to believe this can be true, but what I see is the knife in your greedy hand. The burnished steel caressing the pallid sunlight as it slices through frosted air, while I wait patiently in our duck blind for my chance—the right moment.*

From her husband's handwritten note, Alva reads, “We've run out of propane, all the firewood we'd scavenged off the roadside, the nearby green ash coulee—it's all gone!” Then she sees one wrist slit, then the other.

*Like a hunter cutting a winged buck's throat.*

Alva kicks open the mudroom door, dragging her husband out. A lonesome boot heel slides off the drop cloth, carving a dispassionate trough through deepening snow.

*One moment you're yapping your jaw and the next I'm carting you over the old chipped-away concrete stoop—the one you've been promising to fix. My mind waltzing through the past, catches fleeting glimpses of the once possible, and wonders if I could've done more.*



At the cistern, Alva hefts her husband's corpse onto the crumbling brick ledge. Grievous clouds part and cast a moonlight X-ray upon the snow-trodden field. Alva, leaning in, thrusts her whole being into her husband and releases him.

*It's like tossing a bucket of table scraps into a hog trough, I nearly say, as you tumble into the mottled darkness. I watch as you fold lifelessly into the dried-up cistern; the hoarfrost night receives your hollowed-out bones and flesh, your favorite Pendleton catching on a rusted rung.*

*There's no heroic splash. Only the dull echo of you thudding against the frozen, unforgiving earth.*

Back in the farmhouse, Alva takes her husband's cluster of keys from the cupboard door, trudges back out into the slow-drifting snow.

*Plowing towards the ranch gate, I pull onto the salted, ice-free interstate. I turn your pickup, which is as run-down as it was when we first met, towards the state line.*



For the first fifty or so miles, Alva can't get her husband's sun-streaked auburn hair, his L.L. Bean smile, his glacial-blue eyes out of her head. Except when the bitter memory of his leathery handhold around her neck snaps her back.

*Your pitiful weakness when you said, "Just like Romeo and Juliet, we'll die together."*

*The fuck we will!*

Shaking it off, Alva plunges the gas pedal.

By first light, she's crossing into North Dakota.

*It won't be far now. When we get there, I'll pull around back, load up the lye and be on my way. The same brand of bagged lye we used when we buried our last, starved horse—with the cash you stole away in the barn. Same cash you would've used to self-medicate. Painkillers, your best friend. You'd said this, not me. I'm just here to bear witness.*



Done hefting the dusty bags into the truck bed, Alva takes one of her husband's frayed bungee cords and cinches a blue tarp in place, then follows the slumped woman with dirt-colored hair through the rear door. At the cash register, she hands her the crumbled bills. The woman smiles flatly in return. A timid, pained smile that conveys penance for some crime or personal transgression. The constant strife to be normal and good.

*An uneasy sense of pride fills my chest, and I'm reminded of the time you and I delivered our first calf. It wasn't my first; I'd grown up a ranch girl. But for you it was different. You got all worked up over bringing new life into this world. Too worked up. Maybe that was it. Maybe that's where your magic came from; the lonesome twinkle in your downward aw-shucks. Your brokenness the lure that set the hook. And we did have our moment with that calf. It was a bit of a struggle, poor thing was breached, and we had to take hold of his legs—together—and pull him out. But we did it, and it had felt good and honest, uncorrupted by expectation or misdirected want. Or even loss. Everyone had survived that night.*

Disrupting Alva's thought, the store woman gestures towards the door.

"You best get goin'," she says dryly, "it appears another storm's on its way."

*Under the dismal, humming fluorescent, her round, woody eyes the polished hewn of chokecherry bark have become hard, focused beads. It's as if she's assessing my very soul. Guilty as charged.*

"Well," she adds, "it ain't like whatever cow or horse you're gonna bury is going anywhere in this weather."

*Frigid air gusts from a knothole in the floorboards and rustles my trousers. I turn from the woman's gaze and walk over to the ice-laced windows. She's right, dark clouds have gathered along the hills, enshrouding that too-bright moon. "A change is brewin'," is what you would've said, and this time I wouldn't have laughed or cursed or anything.*

"I think I'll wait this one out," Alva tells the woman. She steps back from the storefront, remembering his camping gear. It's like one door closes and another opens.

"I've got a bedroll tucked behind the crew cab—in case."

*I take a seat beside the small stove. There's a pot of cowboy coffee simmering on its black iron top.*

"Do you mind?" Alva asks.

"Nope," the woman answers. "There's plenty more where that came from."

*"Thank you," I say as the first heavy flakes begin to fall.*

K went to Harajuku after work. Clueless about money, she was up to her neck in loans and credit card debt. She went down to an audition for an X-rated video and nailed it. That same day she had some promo photos taken, striking a series of raunchy poses under bright lights. Shooting was scheduled for the following weekend, and she received a 30,000-yen sign-up bonus. That was chump change, not enough to even put a dent in her debt. Then K went to Shibuya and entered a random bar. She drank like a sailor. There was a man who was a regular customer. Alcohol seemed to have permanently addled his brain. Even though he was grinning like an idiot, his face was sharply sculpted and his whole body exuded charm.

K told him she worked for a construction company. The man laughed and said he was unemployed, couldn't even pay his rent, and owed his ex-wife child support. K paid for his drinks. The man told her he couldn't go home because his creditors would come looking for him. K took him home.

K wanted to have sex with the man, a dozen years older than her. She propositioned him, but he had trouble getting hard because he was drunk. After saying he was sorry, seemingly not even remotely remorseful, he fell fast asleep on K's bed and began snoring. She lay next to him. The windows had fogged up against the freezing winter air outside, reflecting the ultramarine of the early morning sky. K thought the man's Adam's apple was so beautiful.

Shooting began on the weekend. The crew changed the set, adjusted the camera angles, and shot the same scenes several times. K stirred mechanically while sitting astride the actor. The director scolded her for her stiff performance and told her to just act natural. K didn't know how, so she moved awkwardly again. The director got angry again. Even so, the shooting wrapped up. K said she would do it again next week because she hadn't yet earned enough to pay off her debt.

It was Christmas. A large quantity of Christmas cakes on clearance was displayed before the cash register in the convenience store. Along with cigarettes and liquor, K bought a cake, which she planned to eat with the man.

When she got home, she found the man dead drunk, curled up asleep on her bed with name-brand bags she never used and dirty clothing strewn in untidy heaps upon it. She gently rocked him, but he didn't stir. So K dumped the cake straight into the garbage can. Then she drank until she got drunk and lay curled up next to the man. The windows had fogged up against the freezing winter air outside, reflecting the ultramarine of the early morning sky. K thought the man's Adam's apple was so beautiful.

The next morning, when she went to work, her boss called her aside. K asked, "What is it?" The boss opened a promotional page of an adult entertainment company on the computer and asked her if she was the one in the photos. K denied it. Her boss told her she could go now. K returned to her desk. She was swamped with work, but everything flew from her mind in an instant. Her company cell phone in the inner pocket of her ash-gray suit kept ringing endlessly and documents were piling up in front of her. She had no idea what she was doing. K locked herself in

a stall in the restroom and decided to call the talent agency to tell them she was quitting porn. But once she had them on the line, she told them she was free that night and asked them if there was any work available. Then they told her about a photo shoot for a nudie mag, and she answered she would come right after work.

Only small images were needed for a limited space in the magazine, so the photo shoot soon came to an end. K bought cigarettes and liquor on her way home. When she got home, the man wasn't there. K sat in one spot wondering whether he had gone for good. She didn't move, as if frozen, for about three hours. The windows had fogged up against the freezing winter air outside, reflecting the ultramarine of the early morning sky. K heard the key turning in the lock. She looked back at the entrance. The man stood with a stupid grin, and he was so drunk that his eyes were shaky. The next moment the man fell to his knees. Surprised, K stood up and ran toward him. The man mumbled some unintelligible words, and then wondered aloud why he was there, his eyes drowsy and his teeth bared. Hearing those words made her heart sink. Despite this, K handed him all the money she had made that day and told him to use it to pay child support.

"Hehehe, thanks," he grinned and fell asleep in the hallway.

K thought the man's Adam's apple was so beautiful. It was too beautiful, she thought. She was even seized with the urge to slash it with a sharp knife. She wanted to tell him he was there, and she wanted him to be there, because he had such a beautiful Adam's apple. K then lay next to him. The windows had fogged up against the freezing winter air outside, reflecting the ultramarine of the early morning sky. K thought she wouldn't go to work the next day. Instead, she would call the talent agency and have a lot of work scheduled from morning. She would keep selling her cracked soul in order to help the man pay child support and pay off her debt.

*Avoiding Kevin*

I couldn't stop obsessing about the argument I had with my older brother Kevin. I lay face down on the table. The moist, hot towels on my back and the heated table melted my insides, chilled by the snow that swirled outside, where the temperature hovered in the teens. New Age music leaked from invisible speakers, the flute soothing in my ears. I inhaled deep breaths, hoping to release some of the tightness created by the detritus of my personal life.

"Is that eucalyptus, coming from the diffuser?"

"Mm-hmm." Sadie had worked on me for years. She knew every aching joint and strained muscle of my forty-year-old body.

I tried to channel a woodsy California eucalyptus grove, leaves rustling in the breeze.

"Firm pressure, please."

She started as usual on my back, kneading with the palms of her hands and fingers, beginning down near my waist, working her way up toward my neck. Although her hands were magical, she switched to using her elbows. It hurt.

"Try to relax, Vivienne. Your whole body is tense," Sadie observed.

Oftentimes when I came in, she pointed out where I was carrying the tension, which I was barely aware of. But today I could feel the muscle tightness. Everywhere.

"Your elbows could be lethal weapons."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

I couldn't stop thinking about what a bully Kevin was, just like when he was a kid. My elderly parents were getting to the point where they needed help, and he was being a total obstructionist. I hated dealing with him. It pissed me off, messed up my strategy of avoiding him.

Sadie was at my neck now, a rat's nest of knots. It hurt like hell, all that kneading, despite the hot towels. I'd be sore tomorrow.

At the moment, the lid wasn't on. I kept trying to shut down the obsessing, to focus instead on what Sadie's hands were doing. But my mind kept returning to what a jerk Kevin was being about the plan the other five of us had put together. To help out our parents. He wouldn't contribute or even cooperate.

I focused on the quiet guitar strumming in the background.

Then Sadie started on my lower body, lifting the blanket to expose my right leg. She began with my calves, as tight as guitar strings. I'd been working out at the gym and forced myself to walk outside, despite the frigid temperatures. When Sadie got to my hamstrings, and especially my glutes, my whole body tensed up.

Sadie brought her face down near mine. "Vivi, what's going on? Are you okay?"



"I am." But I wasn't.

After she finished my legs, she told me to flip over so she could start on the front side. She pulled the blanket off, exposing my right leg. I worked at taking deep, cleansing breaths, still struggling to relax. After she finished my shins she started to work on my quads. As her hands moved close to the inside of my thighs I flinched, and she backed off.

"Vivienne, what's the matter?"

I couldn't talk. I'd gotten a sudden sensation of Kevin on top of me. In seventh grade, he started to sneak into my bedroom when my sisters were staying with friends. How had I forgotten this? I'd be sound asleep and would wake up with my nightgown scrunched up over my chest, Kevin humping me. When he left for college it mostly stopped. But still, when he came home, he did it a couple more times. Once, I threatened to tell my barely-keeping-it-together parents. He said, "Don't be ridiculous. I'm a jock and an A student. They'll never believe you."

He was probably right. He only stopped when I left for college, when I moved away for good.

I rolled to my side and curled into a fetal position on the massage table as the memories crashed in on me. The shame the next morning. Getting drunk afterward when I was fourteen. Worrying I'd get pregnant. One time when I had a boyfriend, I asked my mother if I could go on the pill. I wasn't actually sleeping with Jack, but I was worried about Kevin. I had this irrational fear that if I had sex with Jack, he'd magically know what Kevin was doing to me.

Mom scoffed. "Only sluts go on the pill, Vivienne."

"Vivi, can you tell me what's wrong?" Sadie brought me back.

I whimpered softly.

She placed her hand on my back. "You're safe here."

Was I? Was I safe from myself?

"Do you want to talk?"

I shook my head.

"Shall I leave you alone for a few minutes?"

I whispered, "Thank you," and Sadie silently slipped out.

I lay on the table, inert, as the disturbing images I'd so assiduously avoided kept flooding my brain. I felt actual, physical pain between my legs.

A soft knock. Sadie needed to use the room for another client. I unfurled myself, still feeling off-kilter, and invited her back in.

"I'm okay now. A horrible memory. Anyhow, thanks for giving me the space."

"I'm glad you're all right."

Was I all right? As I dressed, I examined the space between my legs in the dim light. No evidence of damage despite the pain. Not there, anyhow.



*Sharp Edge* by Christopher Woods.



*Dálvebiepmut*

My ancestors experienced famine that would make my hunger seem like a thimble. The tip of a thimble. They were Arctic Finns caught in the beak of February, the cold so cold that they couldn't even say the word *cold* before it would freeze in front of their mouths and drop to the ground, shattering. And it is a horror to hear a word shatter.

Our hunger was miniscule in comparison, but I still need to tell you about it. To get it off my chest. Off my lips and heart and pancreas. Stories seem to eat away at the insides of me until I give them the grace of being read by strangers. Which is you. So I hope you are hungry enough to eat words.

We were really only devastatingly poor for one winter. My mother lost her job. Or, she didn't lose it. The job was right there in full view, but they gave the job to someone else, so my mother had to see the job and wave at the job every single day from our house with its necklace of icicles around its roof.

My father was a painter. And not a rich-person painter where you get thousands of dollars for hours of work painting fake houses next to fake trees on fake lawns. He was a poor-person painter who got tens of dollars for days of work painting real houses next to real trees on real lawns. But in the winter in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, no one wants their houses painted. Winter already paints everything in ghost-white.

And that's where our story begins. We had no food. We *had* food, I suppose. I mean, at one time. But it was eaten. We even ate groceries with expiration dates that implied the food was deceased. We opened the graveyards of tomato soup and the cemeteries of baked beans and we ate those. My mother told me expiration dates don't matter and it made me curious to go to the Negaunee City Cemetery and start digging everybody up, inviting all the corpses back home for suppers and beds and card games since they were not expired.

There was no food.

And we lived *rural*. We were—and this is actually true—living in the township *of* a township. We were on the outskirts of the outskirts. To the point that there was no skirt anywhere near us. No grocery stores either. But if there had been one, we had no money anyway.

Food was difficult. But water was easy. We ate snow. We drank snow. My mother gave us icicles straight from the house and told us they were popsicles from Mother Nature. You could taste a hint of soot that we pretended was chocolate. We would try to press the snow into pastries. We'd make snow hamburgers and put ice on the insides for the meat. Until we started to go mad. Angry mad. Fighting about chair placement mad. Slamming doors simply because they had the ability to be slammed mad.

My mother pulled us all together and told us—with a very dramatic gesture—that we were all going to, for the very first time, “eat ghost.”

What?

“We're all going to eat ghost.”

"Who?"

"How?"

My mother looked like a shadow made of steel. She hovered above us, the light blocked behind her. My mother was vast. She was two mothers. She said that the greatest thing a person could ever be is present. I still sometimes wonder if I have fully figured out the koans of her mind.

She sat us at the table. She said she'd captured a ghost and cooked it and we were all going to eat it.

"Where was the ghost?"

"Where all ghosts are."

"Where?"

"In the attic."

"We don't have an attic."

"Yes, we do," she said, "But you just can't see it. It's a ghost attic. Above the house."

"You mean the roof?"

She banged around pots and pans in the kitchen, all of them empty. She turned the oven on, pretending it had already been on.

"Ghost, ghost, ghost," she sang. She popped in her head to look at us. "There's fried ghost and baked ghost and braised ghost and poached ghost and sautéed ghost and, one of my personal favorites, grilled ghost. But I'm making you the very, very best type of ghost of them all. Do you know what that is?"

"No."

"What?"

"Guess."

"We don't know!"

"Guess!"

"Blueberry ghost," my sister said.

My mother laughed. She banged empty pots and empty forks and empty flames and empty air around and then she popped into the room.

We waited.

And she announced, "*Roast ghost!*" Then disappeared.

"Roast ghost," my brother said, as if the words were holy. And they were.

We heard the pans and pots and metal all leading up to a massive crescendo where I assumed my mother basically just took every piece of equipment in the kitchen, held them all in her hands, and then let them go at once so that lightning and thunder struck the floor, and she

emerged carrying three plates. She put one down before my brother, one in front of my sister, and one in front of me.

They were empty.

Brutally empty.

Closed-mine empty.

Abandoned warehouse empty.

We looked at our mother.

"Ghost," she said softly.

"Ghost," she said strongly.

"Ghost!" she said to the moon somewhere above us.

"See it," she said. "Smell it," she said. "Clean out the farts of your imagination, for God's sake, and appreciate that you have honest to goodness *real ghost* right there in front of you."

She handed us spoons.

"No knife?" I asked.

"Not for ghost!" she barked. "No one would use a knife on a roast ghost!"

We took our spoons.

"Eat," she said. "Ladle," she said.

We looked at our plates and—Heaven will verify that this is true—there was, low and even lower and behold—a precisely properly roasted ghost right there on my plate. This was no ordinary roast ghost either. Not the type of roast ghost you might find in a diner where the waitresses all hate each other, and the head chef is known for lighting nightgowns on fire as a hobby. No, this was thirteen-star Michelin perfection. The phantasmagoric butter melted our mouths. Not *in* our mouths, but actually melted us. We ate and ate and ate and laughed and ate and melted into our chairs and ate until our stomachs were so full of ghost that we wondered if there were any more ghosts left in the entire world and our mother assured us that, yes, there were.

A day or two later, a neighbor brought us groceries. We thanked him and told him we'd eaten ghost. He looked at us as if we were mad. Hunger turns you inside-out. There is an insanity to not having food. Our mother kept us fed through that insanity.

Now I know why I have never seen a ghost the entire rest of my life. They see the cookbooks in my kitchen and know what could happen to them. My house is free of ghosts and the refrigerator is packed with memories and real food with expiration dates that never really matter to me. I'll eat anything. Even you.

*White Church*

A few low clouds lulled from one end of Nostalgia, Ohio to the other, but I remember not a drop of rain fell the summer of 1965. Mama divided her time between soaking up rays in what I'm sure she thought of as a risqué bikini, and the household chores most of the mothers along Pond Creek Road articulated as their holy burdens. In our case, most of those chores involved keeping the house spotless and allergen free. Ever since Dr. Jefferson had performed his famous scratch test on my back a year earlier, mama made sure not one speck of dust or dirt felt comfortable in our home. I slept with a dehumidifier running throughout the night, just as I awakened to the sound of mama singing to herself as she rubbed linen dishcloths along the tops of the bookshelves, television, desks, and tables. The bed linens she washed every day. Whenever papa mowed our acreage, mama tucked me into the backseat of our Pontiac Catalina and cranked up the air conditioner to purify the oxygen. All this concern with my respiration instilled me with a paranoia that lingers to this day, but which erupted in my youth with voiceless ululations and apoplectic trembles which embarrassed me to no small degree. Like our Dear Lord Jesus, mama would say, I was an only child, which also meant I was all of her children rolled into one—a fate which carried with it a responsibility divided among herself, my father, and Saint Agnes, the patron saint of babysitters.

Mid-July of that dry summer found me two months into my ninth year. From time to time, since my birthday at the end of May, I had overheard mama and papa expressing concern that their actions might be converting me into something of a weakling, or to quote my father in his own vernacular, “Martha, your goddamned molly-coddling gonna turn that boy into a caramel-colored sissy!” Mama winced whenever papa took the Lord’s name in vain, and I could picture her face going all prune, even as I listened from behind my bedroom door. I could also picture my papa’s hands hanging at his sides. Those hands, even when laid upon me in tenderness and affection, always scratched my skin like sandpaper.

Another chore mama took upon herself was canning. Mama said that she stored beets, carrots, and green beans in Mason jars just in case something tragic should befall us and we would be cut off from the rest of society. It kind of surprised me the way mama took to canning, what with her being a city girl by birth. But papa, having been born and raised less than half a mile from where our house stood—well, he had certain expectations, as he called them, and one of those expectations was that my mama be as much like his own, or at least as much as a big city girl from Columbus could be in a one-time sundown town but now racially integrated Podunk village such as Nostalgia.

“William,” mama addressed me as I stood before her, awaiting instructions. “I want you to fetch me half a dozen Mason jars from that old church down the road. You know the one I mean?”

I knew but wished I didn’t.

“If the church is locked, don’t worry about it. Just come on back home. It should be open, though. I put a box of jars on a shelf just to the right of that piano in the back. All I need is six or seven for these beets.”

I had about as much use for beets as a bulldog has for pajamas. All the same, I understood mama's predicament. She needed to balance out her overprotection of my lungs by sending me into the darkest, dustiest, most Godforsaken vessel of evil it has ever been my misfortune to set foot inside. I sighed, forced a smile, shrugged, and trotted out the front door, making my way down the gravel road towards the Birch Township Evangelical Church of Christ.

It was not unusual for people to use the church as a kind of unofficial storage shed, although people tended to give the place a wide berth after dark. Papa always called that house of worship "the White Church." He'd told me more than once that, if mama ever instructed me to go to that place, to do as she asked just so long as it was daytime and the sun was out. Otherwise, he'd said, just pretend to go and tell mama the place was locked.

"Now I don't want you making a habit of lying to your mother, boy. For all her highfalutin ways, acting like she knows everything, she's still your mama and you owe her that respect. Between you and me, we also got respect, except it's different. For instance, you know what sanctuary is, boy?"

I had been seven at the time and had no earthly idea.

"Course not. How could you? Sanctuary is what we called it when I was younger than you are now. See, back in my daddy's time, the good old boys would catch strangers passing through after sundown. If them strangers happened to look like you and me, the good boys would nail them to the wooden struts of some old army tent, then set that tent on fire."

Papa had pulled his hands out of the pockets of his coveralls. He paced around in a circle, looking at everything except me, pausing to rub his sleeve over his forehead.

"Guys passing through in those days were usually looking for river work. Before you ask, river work was loading, unloading boats ported on the Ohio." He stopped pacing a moment, wiped his head, looked up at the sky and continued pacing. "Honest work it was. Everybody said so. Course, honest work meant the kind of work nobody else wanted to dirty their hands on. Let me tell you, William, when any color of man tells you he's got an honest day's work for you, you run in the other direction, because what he has for you is either slopping pigs or tickling his privates. You understand?"

I didn't understand but nodded that I did. Papa looked at me, lowered himself so we were eye to eye. He said, "Naw, you don't understand. Not yet. But that day'll come."

Papa stretched back up and resumed his pacing. The sweat lay heavy on him now, as if every word crushed him like a concrete block.

"Well, down the road where your grandpa used to live, some nights you'd hear a hammer hitting nails and the most awful screaming." Papa trembled just a bit. "Worst screaming any of us had heard, until a few seconds later when we could smell the Sulphur burning. We would hear a band of peckerwood redneck cracker ofays hooting it up while a man they didn't even know burned alive right in front of them."

I could almost feel the chill rolling off papa. He cupped his elbows in his hands to ward off the bite of frost inside him. "That poor man, he would let out a scream that put a freeze on the night. We'd run outside, your grandpa and me and your grandma, and we'd listen, and we would

see the night sky roll over like a snake's eyes as it swallows a rat. It was like a message God sent out saying we were on our own.

"The night got real quiet then. The crickets wouldn't natter, and the frogs wouldn't croak, and even your own heart didn't have the nerve to thump. The blood in your arms and legs just sort of lay still. After a few minutes, three or four of them white trash good old boys would come strolling down the road right in front of our house. They'd tip their hats to us all standing together on the porch. One of them would always wish us a good evening. Your grandpa would always nod and wish them the same. Then they and their gunny sacks would disappear into the woods behind my daddy's house. The next morning, daddy and me, we'd walk up to the church and we could see the burn patch where what they'd done had been done."

I asked papa why these men had done all this in the churchyard.

Papa didn't pace after that. It was as if my question had brought him back out from whatever overdose of memories had shackled him to the past. His hands released his elbows. He smiled the smile of someone old as Moses and wise as Solomon.

"They done it at the church because they wanted to turn the church bad. See, that old place, back when my daddy was a boy, back when the new free men headed north on their way to Chicago or thereabouts, it was a safe place. A sanctuary. A place where no bullwhips snapped and no ropes got tied and no horses pulled you off in four directions.

"Thing was that the old church was so goddamned sacred that it even scared most of the white men. Some men, William, a very few men full of power and hate, be they white, black, or in between like you, they just don't get scared. A few of these don't-get-scared men set out to make the church a bad place. Nobody'd gone to services there in years, so nobody was there to stop them. After a while the old church, that for so many years had been a safe spot for us colored folk, turned into a place where the devil liked to put his feet up and rest."

I replayed this story in my mind on my way there. I passed a big old yellow and black sign that looked as if it had been standing there for years. The sign said, "Get us out of the United Nations." I didn't know what that meant, but around the next corner would be the big old White Church with a rusty chain across the front door.

There would be no padlock, but the place was nonetheless guarded. Four wooden steps led from the mouth of the weedy sidewalk up to the door. Beneath those steps swarmed snakes all knotted together like strands of a fisherman's net. Papa always said we only had two types of snakes out our way: good ones and bad ones, and the good ones were always dead. The truth was that we had a population of poison snakes—timber rattlers and copperheads—and the safe snakes, like rat snakes, garter snakes, red-bellies, and worm snakes. I had no interest in getting close enough to tell the venomous variety from the ones that only digested rodents. My interest was to get in and out of the White Church as fast as possible without incident.

As I entered the groping shadow that stretched out onto the gravel road from the Birch Township Evangelical Church of Christ, I saw two white men standing alongside the church on either side of a wheelbarrow, cigarettes hanging off their lower lips and their eyes trained on me. Walking up that sidewalk with the weeds tickling my ankles and the eyes of the two men burning into my skin, and the fangs of whatever kind of snakes were untangling themselves underneath



the wooden steps, I begged my feet to stop moving even though I was being pulled as if against my strength of will ever closer to that tall white church door.

I recognized the two men. The taller was Robie Shepherd and the other was Smoke Campbell, which he and everyone who knew him pronounced “Camel,” like the cigarette. Robie owned a bit of forestry between Pond Creek Road and the Ohio River. Smoke was his hired hand. Neither man was known to favor black folks all that much. One of them said something to me which I didn’t catch or care to. I floated up those steps, subconsciously aware of a twitchy rattling beneath my feet. My hand tucked itself beneath the length of chain, gripped the ice-cold door handle, and in seconds my shoulder pushed through the barricade of splendor.

Crackles of sunlight through the uneven roof provided the only illumination, as there were no windows and only the one set of doors. Webs thick as towing chains draped patterns across the shelves where people had been storing their disposables and unwanted sundries for years. Long dusty beams stretched between the battered ceiling and crusty wooden floor. Fallen crosses leaned against an enormous grand piano resting in grandiose solitude at the far end of the church’s interior. While I knew nothing about musical instruments, I found myself standing before the Hobart M Cable Cabinet Grand in a state of blind obedience.

The rotting felt on the key hammers smelled like wet wool that had dried and been drenched again. My hands reached out, hovered a moment over the yellowed keys, and played the first few bars of Chopin’s “Prelude No. 4,” a song I had never heard before in my life. No sheet music was provided, nor would it have mattered had it been. The keys pulled my fingertips, moving them across the black and white. I knew the name of the piece, could see the composer working through the repetitious pattern while turning over his shoulder to grin at me, just as a rat scurried across the face of one of the fallen crosses and brought me back to a semblance of awareness.

Those long dusty beams lifted me to what I can only in retrospect consider a weird level of consciousness. Hanging high overhead, a trio of snakes swayed, their eyes rolling over. In the same way I found myself knowing Chopin, I knew these snakes to be timber rattlers, or I recognized them as such until they bowed into empty nooses, blowing in no breeze at all.

The Mason jars to my right trembled on their shelf as if to remind me of my purpose. The sides of the glass containers clinked together like a child’s attempt at music until I seized them, brought them to my chest, and continued to feel them vibrate.

I bolted for the door.

“What you got there, little boy?” Robie Shepherd said as I sailed down the four wooden steps to the weedy sidewalk. “You stealing jars from a church there, boy?”

I didn’t slow down. I didn’t turn to answer, and yet I didn’t feel myself making any progress down the walkway. In those moments I knew fear. Being scared made me feel the way I imagined my papa would feel in just that kind of situation. In other words, being scared made me angry.

“Man asked you a question, boy,” said Smoke Campbell. “What you got there?”

I stopped running. I set down all but one of the Mason jars. I turned to face the two men. I held out the remaining jar and pointed it at them. I said, “What I got is this gun. I will blow your

white asses to hell with it.”

What I had between my hands was a Mason jar, clear as day. But I told them it was a gun and that must have been what they saw because they pulled their arms out to their sides, they shut up with the stupid questions and they started walking backwards. “We don’t want no trouble, boy,” Smoke assured me.

“Then why you still here? Run, you bastards. Run!”

I fired a round off over their cracker heads and they fell over each other, clawing and tugging to get ahead of the other.

Once they were out of sight, I gathered up the other jars and took my time walking back to my house.

“That didn’t take long,” mama observed as she liberated the jars from my arms and sat them on the kitchen counter next to a pan of boiling water. “Maybe later you wouldn’t mind running a couple of these down to your grandma. She likes beets. Personally, I can’t stand the taste and your daddy says he would rather suck flies out a frog’s backside than get near the blessed things.”

“I don’t like them either,” I said, crinkling my nose in disgust.

“It’s settled then,” mama said as she turned her back. “Why don’t you go outside and play? I’ll call you in once I get this all put together.”

“You want me to go outside and play?”

My mama turned and filled the room with a beautiful smile. “You expected me to send you to your room, I suppose. William, do you think that I try too hard to save you from the bad things in the world?”

“Too hard?”

“Your daddy thinks maybe I—we—I am making you fragile by protecting you from pollen and ragweed and spinach and all the things Dr. Jefferson said bothered you. What do you think?”

I shifted from one foot to the other. “I like playing outside. I mean, there’s no other kids around here. I’m happy in my own company.”

“Listen to you. Happy in your own company. You sound just like one of those books you always have your nose buried in. Well, go outside, if that’s your liking. But if you get out of breath, you get back inside here fast as you can, okay?”

“Yes, mama.”

I ran for the swing set and fell asleep.



The sun had dropped to the horizon when I woke to the sound of mama screaming. Kids remember their dreams better than grown-ups do, something of a small advantage to being a

youngster. The downside is that, from time to time, children awaking from a dream are less able to tell the difference between the interrupted dream and the reality into which they have returned. So when mama screamed, I just sort of rolled my head on my shoulders and dismissed the idea that three timber rattler heads were snapping inside jars sitting on the kitchen counter.

“What the hell is the matter with you, William?” my papa demanded as he shook me with those big hands of his. I didn’t know what time it was, if it was morning or evening, if I was still dreaming or sitting awake in my swing being manhandled by my father, or if Misters Shepherd and Campbell were leading a pack of Night Riders through our backyard, looking for little colored boys to eat, which was how my dream had started out before it switched to mama and the snake heads in the jars.

“I asked you what is the matter with you!”

“I—I fell asleep. I—”

Papa let go of my shoulders and used one hand to slap me out of my swing. I hit the ground hard enough to want to cry. But that would just make matters worse, so I pulled myself up and stood beside the swing waiting for the pain to catch up with the smacking.

“I been working all day, William. I ain’t even got myself out of the car before I hear your mama cursing a blue streak about snakes and jars and Ba’al Zebul and God knows what else. She’s pointing at some goddamned empty jars on the counter, saying snakeheads, snakeheads gonna kill us all. Then she points out the window and there you sit, rocking back ‘n forth in this goddamned swing set of yours like all was right with the world. I picked up one of those jars and shook it at your ma. I told her wasn’t nothing in that jar, plain as day. She swoons and I tell her to shut up and then I tore the lid off that jar. Not a goddamned thing in there, William. You know what? I felt something poke at my hand, something like a little tongue and I couldn’t see it, but I knew it was there.”

Papa’s face froze so close to my own that I thought he would blot out the sky.

“I slammed that lid back down and your ma went down, too. Fainted dead away. She comes to and all she can say is for me to ask you about them jars. So now I am not asking you, boy. I am demanding you tell me what the bald-headed asshole shit is going on. Don’t you lie to me, son. You just speak the truth.”

I told papa what I had seen at the White Church. By the time I finished, darkness had pushed the daylight on down the road apiece.

Papa looked me hard in the eyes and told me he was gonna burn that whorehouse church to the ground. “They done turned that place against us, boy. Like when they take a wild stray and hire some Negro to beat at it. ‘Fore long that dog hates all black folk. Same thing with that church. Same goddamned thing.”

I might have thought papa was crazy, except I knew he wasn’t. I may have been just a kid, but that didn’t mean I’d forgotten the times when we would be coming home in our Catalina, with mama and papa in the front seats, rolling their windows up without thinking just as we got near the church. You could still feel the heat pouring out of that place, rushing as it did across our car, then gone just as fast once we rounded the bend.

More than once, when lightning would split one of the trees in the back of the churchyard—the sound like an airplane crashing onto the porch—we’d all run out to see that tree axed down the middle, and the next day that same tree suffered no damage at all and people would scratch their heads and walk off mumbling about just how wrong a person could be.

Every now and again somebody would disappear after getting too close to that church, like the time Smoke Campbell’s teenage girl, Becky, went missing after she had banged on our front door, asking mama if she could please use our bathroom and mama said she figured Mr. Campbell wouldn’t approve of that. Becky—I was maybe six or seven when she disappeared—she told my mama that she would just lift her skirt out behind the old church if that was the way we felt about it. No one saw Becky again after that, until somebody—I think it was Robie Shepherd, but I’m not sure—suggested the police check out the chimney at the old church on account of you know how kids are, they’re just curious like animals sneaking around places where they shouldn’t. Sure enough, her charred body was stuck halfway up that chimney, and when the police finally got her body to fall, they said that both her arms had been gnawed off at the shoulders.

Nobody ever got around to asking Robie or whoever it had been how come he’d thought to suggest Becky was stuck in the chimney, what with that being among the luckier guesses wandering around. I suppose the authorities might have been too sick and put off by the condition that girl was in to think about asking any kind of useful questions. That or they figured one teenage white trash city goat wasn’t worth any more bother than she’d been already.

While I’d been woolgathering, papa had been raving as if all of mama’s subtleties had at last gotten through to him. The abolition of sin, the purification of fire, crossroads where blues hounds came in ignorant and came out hypnotized—papa’s face glowed stronger with the mention of each of these. As for myself, I could think of no reason to argue about any of it. I felt the flames of justice welling inside me. I felt the shatter as the church collapsed. I knew the roar of Satan’s frustration at the destruction of his palace.

Papa’s big hands opened our back door. He and I walked inside together. We saw mama pressed back against a far wall, refusing to take her eyes off those empty Mason jars. Papa scooped them up and jammed them into his oversized pockets.

Time sped and slowed like a racehorse somebody drugged. While papa gathered things we would need for a proper burning, I sat mama down and explained what we intended to do. Had this been a normal time, mama would have locked me in my bedroom with the dehumidifier on full blast. Instead, she stared into my eyes, looking for something. I was about to say something when I felt papa’s hand fall on my shoulder. He said, “Martha, I think you should come with me and the boy.”



I was careful not to shine the light on the four steps leading up to the church door. The only thing worse than a snake bite would be seeing the snake look at you before it sank its fangs in deep. The three of us placed each of our five-gallon cans of kerosene in three corners of the church.

After they were in place, I trained the light on that ceiling beam. Those snakes or ropes or whatever they were still hung there swinging in the nonexistent breeze.

The church being surrounded by dried trees and a drier forest behind it, papa went outside to lay up some metal poles against all the sides of the church to keep the fire from spreading and maybe burning down most of Pond Creek Road.

Papa popped his head back in to tell us to wait inside, and when he came back, he was toting an axe that he used to bash away at the chimney. He told us the smoke needed to be able to escape or else the “goddamned place” might blow off the roof and settle down on somebody’s house and the fire would wipe them out. After he threw the axe at the base of the fireplace, he motioned mama and me to get ready. Papa pulled the three Mason jars out of his front pockets and tossed them onto the keys. He pulled a can of lighter fluid out the back pocket, spraying it on the piano, right next to where the jars had landed. All kinds of little things scattered out as if they knew what was about to happen. I thought mama might pass out, but instead she just held onto me. We watched as papa threw the empty can across the room and lit a match on the sole of his shoe.

Orange and black and blue flames shot up from inside the old piano. A scream like one hundred cows at slaughter roared out of that thing. I dropped the flashlight by accident. It didn’t matter because I could see mama from the blaze and I could see papa backing away from it, signaling mama and me to get on out of there. We stepped back and back and back yet didn’t seem to make progress getting closer to the front door. Long strands of webbing fell from above us as the flames took hold of the walls, on their way to the cans of kerosene.

Papa turned to us and told us to run, goddammit, and just as we were turning towards the front door, a bolt of fire leapt out of the center of that old piano, arched itself up high, then shot like a beam of lightning right through papa’s back and out the front of his chest.

The last thing mama and I saw was papa’s eyes pleading with us to go on, get away, get out of that evil place.

By the time we reached Pond Creek Road, the howling from the church bored into our ears like electric wires. Without turning to look, I could feel the walls of the church splintering apart, inhaling the night air, gathering up whatever dormant demons had found refuge there. Mama tried to say something to me, but I couldn’t make out a word. I grabbed her hand and we both stopped running. She pulled me to her and said, “God must be drunk tonight.”

We turned around and the White Church glowed in what I can only describe as an arrogant majesty, proud of its own behavior.

We didn’t sleep at all that night, as you might expect. Mama and I just sat together on the kitchen floor, staring at our front door as if somehow papa would come walking through with an angry grin, wanting to know when the hell we were going to eat dinner.

Papa wasn’t coming back.



Mama fell asleep a little after sunrise. I slipped out from under her arms, careful not to wake her as I crept out our front door and on down our driveway with the Catalina parked in it. I walked out onto Pond Creek Road, and in a few minutes, I passed the sign about getting out of the United Nations, except the sign said, "Don't let the sun catch you going down," before it changed back to its original message.

A few feet later I could see the shadow of the White Church, and I knew before I got there—I knew from the shadow the church would stand there unharmed.

No smoke, no soot, no sounds of cattle roaring. Nothing was there except the Birch Township Evangelical Church of Christ, "Prelude No. 4" tapping itself out from behind those white walls; Smoke Campbell and Robie Shepherd stood outside just as they had the day before.

"What you doing back here, boy?" Shepherd said. "You ain't looking for nobody, is you?"

Campbell said, "See you ain't got no gun today, boy. That right?"

Smoke Campbell laughed and his laughter joined with that of Robie Shepherd as I turned and ran back to mama, who was still asleep on the floor. I crawled beneath the safety of her white arms.



*Beam* by Chris Beckitt.



*Luke*

I am standing by the window in the hope that he will not come if I refuse to sleep. The white street lights call to the darkness in vain. The sky is rich with clouds, a dull ocean gray bruised with empty blue, and the moon sheds cold light on the cherry tree in the front yard. It is not the season for blossoms; instead, the spindly branches clutch at the air, trembling against the bitter wind. The sound of it rushes in on the breeze, swelling around me and filling up my lungs and then—

I have my back to him, but I know he is here. I thought perhaps he could only visit in my dreams. But I can see the shadows on the wall shifting with his every breath, hear him shuddering in the winter air, blue-skinned and cold-eyed and drowning in shadow. The cold gnaws at the back of my neck, and I can feel the trails of water running down his face, hear them dripping onto the floor and pooling at his feet.

I close my eyes. *Breathe. I need to breathe.* I must take in air, must brace myself for the voices. They are only murmurs, now: whispered fragments grasping at something they cannot quite reach. But they will grow louder, as they always do when he visits me, bubbling up in my mind and hammering into my spine. They grow and weave, washing over one another like coursing waves, but I can never figure out what they are trying to say.

I suppose ghosts have the right to haunt those who have wronged them, but his presence still unnerves me. I do not want him here. *Go away, Luke. Please.*

Nothing; I can still hear his breathing. Must I turn and face him? I cannot bear to see what he has become—

*Please, I try again. Please. I'm not ready.*

A moment, and then he listens. I can hear his breath wilt into the air as he fades. It's a soft sound, gentle, like the breath of air that kills a flame.

Silence follows, and then the raw cry of the wind. I open my eyes. The shadows are still; the street lights pour in through the windows. I sigh and rest my head against the windowsill. The painted wood is cool against my cheek, and I feel an urge to sink into it and never wake up.

I know he will not return tonight, so after a few moments, I drag myself to bed and close my eyes.



When I wake up, the voices are silent for once. Today is pleasant as far as mornings go, and I can almost convince myself that last night was nothing but a dream. Until I look into the mirror and see his eyes staring back at me from my own face, wide and accusing. They disappear as soon as I blink, and I shudder.



As I step out of my room, I hear voices murmuring: low tones, quiet tones. I know that they are not *the* voices, that they belong to my parents, who are scraping together breakfast downstairs. But I look around for him all the same.

The voices are at the center of it all. They are tied to him and to my parents and to everything that happened on the bridge. They have always been with me, for as long as I can remember, but they were loud on the night he died, and they have only grown louder since.

It's only been a week since his body washed up on the riverbank, it feels like an eternity has passed. We have settled into a new rhythm, my parents and I: Sleep. Eat. Sleep some more. Do. Not. Think. About. Him.

I reach the kitchen door and hesitate. I can hear my mother's hushed voice through the wood.

*...talks about him like she's glad he's...no, look, Jack, all I'm saying is that she doesn't seem to care!*

I swallow. Is she talking about me?

*Amanda, for God's sake, don't take it out on her!*

A pause.

*Look, honey, people react to grief in strange—no, don't cry—we'll get her a therapist, okay?*

I don't want to hear anymore, so I step into the kitchen. A flash of guilt shoots across my mother's face, but she says nothing. I look away, my cheeks burning, and pretend not to notice. The worst part is that she's right. I should miss him, but all I want is to do is forget that he ever lived at all.

If the roles had been reversed, if I had been the child who died, what would have happened then? Would she have hated him the way she hates me?

I want to run up to my room and hide. Instead, I force a smile. *Hey, Mom. What's for breakfast?*

I know what we'll eat, of course: stale toast and peanut butter. No one has been able to go grocery shopping since he died. My chair screeches against the tiles as I pull it back. I slide into my seat before I get a response.

The rest of the meal passes in silence. Luke should be here, laughing, talking about the soccer team or the school play. My parents should be making jokes and nagging me about my grades. We shouldn't be avoiding each other's eyes.

The voices have started up again, maybe to fill the space that Luke has left at the table. They begin as whispers, peaking, flowing, and ebbing like a tide. But soon, they roar in my ears: harsh, scraping sounds, like tires on gravel, like screaming waves beating at a helpless shore.

He is near. I cannot bear to see him.

As I stare across the room, the floor beneath me darkens, and it is no longer a floor, but a river, a sea of dark, frothing waves crashing and clashing and biting. I look around for Luke, but he is nowhere to be found.

And finally, scouring the flood below me, I see him. Unblinking, wide, blue eyes, peering at me from the depths. Pale skin slick with water, dark hair plastered against forehead, spark not quite gone but going. Going. Going. White limbs, thrashing against the waves and gasping for air and—

This is not Luke, the blue-skinned, dripping demon. This is *Luke*. My brother.

I need to grab him, I need to get to him, I need to save him. But I am too far above, and no matter how much I try, I cannot reach him. I am on that bridge again, watching him drown.

He is under the surface, beneath the waves. And then he appears before me. His eyes are hollow, his smile empty.

I turn away, but I can't clear him from my vision. No matter where I look, he is there: standing next to the refrigerator, hanging from the ceiling, sitting on my mother's lap. And I know that he will never leave.

I scream.

I am vaguely aware of my father running over, of his panicked shouts: *Emma. Emma? Talk to me! Emma! God, stop it! Stop!*

But I can't. Can't stop crying, can't stop screaming, because Luke is still there, feet planted on the kitchen tiles, staring at me with blue skin and hollow eyes and a single lock of hair plastered to his slick face. And I know now, with utter certainty, that he will not leave until I am dead, too. I turn to my mother desperately—she must see him now, must understand what he is doing to me. But she says nothing, only stares at me. She looks scared. What have I done to scare her? Doesn't she understand that it's all his fault? I look back at him to find that a soft smile has broken out across his face.

For a moment the voices all speak in unison, as if someone has turned the dial on a radio and cleared away the static.

And I am screaming so much that I have forgotten how to breathe, and my heart has grown three sizes and is threatening to burst out of my chest. I am falling, and then my mother's arms are around me, smoothing my hair back from my forehead. As I squint at the kitchen, shadows swell and stretch and morph, and triangles hover and flit in my vision.

And then there is only darkness.

*Omega's Pond*

Meredith fell, hard. She hadn't realized that she'd left the running path until she was on her hands and knees. The woman in the pond had distracted her.

It was the geese that had first got her attention—honking and running across the water. As she came down the hill, she could see a woman wading into the dank pond, her skirt floating behind her. The sodium arc light near the water gave the woman an odd glow; her skin seemed to soak all the light up while her dress held an orange, creamsicle pallor, making her look sickly and unnatural.

The woman was standing in the middle of the fetid water, geese screaming in the background, her hands held high. Her face looked into the early morning sky. Meredith was going to keep running, but when the woman started yelling, Meredith had pulled up short and slipped down the small hill.

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. I have sinned greatly from the womb to this very moment. I ask you to wash this sin off me." Then the woman threw herself back into the water. When she came up, she shook the water from her face and started speaking in words that Meredith didn't understand. Algae and dark water dripped from her, and she began to jump up and down.

Meredith tried to get up, sending a jolt of pain from her left wrist up to her shoulder. She rubbed her wrist, which was starting to swell. She was a few blocks from her house, but the pain was quickly becoming intense. Then the woman yelled, "You. You there!"

The woman was statue-like with her right hand stretched out. Meredith looked behind her; there was no one there. The woman started marching toward her, swirling the pond scum around her. Meredith lifted herself up, trying to push down with her throbbing hand, and immediately fell again. The woman was still coming toward her; the orange glow had moved to her eyes and her arm was still extended, pointing at Meredith.

"You! You! You!" the woman yelled, followed by what Meredith could only describe as gibberish. Meredith turned and started scrambling up the small hill, clawing the ground with her good hand until she could get upright.

The woman's voice became louder, and Meredith swung around to find that she was only five feet away. Her muddy dress now sparkled under the street light, clinging to her in ways that would have made Meredith blush if she weren't terrified. With her arm still extended, she opened her mouth again. Adrenaline hit Meredith's bloodstream and she took off back up the hill. When she reached the top, she turned, sure that the woman would be right there. But she was where Meredith left her, still watching and pointing. Beyond the woman, standing on the other side of the pond, was a group of people all dressed in white garments with red sashes. The fear and shock Meredith felt at seeing the unhinged woman had so captivated her attention that she had missed the group—people who had done nothing to help her. Meredith turned and raced home.

In her apartment, she sat down, holding her wrist, waiting for the pain to go away. She could still see the woman as though she were in front of her. She'd been so close. The woman

could have been on her before Meredith could get away. Her seething eyes, her glowing dress with the bits of leaves and muck. And that outstretched arm. Was it her finger pointing at her or was it a knife? It all happened so fast.

After an hour, she decided to go to the hospital. She hated hospitals, feared them. It wasn't just the stale air of antiseptic mixed with decay; it was how they felt like prisons. Doors that looked like exits only led deeper in until you finally went through a door that required a key to get out. The pain in her wrist now outweighed the hazards of going to the hospital. She called an Uber, grabbed her wallet, and took the risk.

The busy ER only increased Meredith's feeling of being at someone else's mercy. She entered the hospital in the mid-morning and left in the dark of the evening—drugs administered, wrist re-aligned and splintered, and sent on her way with painkillers and a prescription for more.

For the next week, she stayed in her apartment—a situation she usually avoided. When Meredith wasn't working, she was out with friends, at a yoga class, or running. She traveled for vacation, thinking that she'd "staycation" someday in the future, when she had a husband and kids.

She called her mom and posted a photo of the splint on Instagram. Friends texted support and offers for take-out or drinks. Everyone asked what had happened, but all Meredith said was that she fell while running. She told no one about the woman. Telling her mother would make her worry and possibly even make her come to town. She couldn't think of anyone else to tell. Her friends were more the Facebook, Instagram, and cocktail variety.

As the week wore on, Meredith couldn't manage to make herself presentable. Though she was off from work, she tried keeping up with email and phone calls. Those tapered off after the first couple of days as word spread that she was out. She ignored friends' texts for coffee or drinks. Cleaning anchored her, but now her effort petered out as she moved from room to room. Spotless kitchen, tidy living room, disastrous bedroom. Her phone sat idle; notifications were ignored. Her bed developed a Meredith-shaped rut, a warm hug that she found difficult to break.



The pain of slamming her hand against her face woke Meredith up. The woman had been there, glowing, pointing at her and screaming. Her screams had turned into a large swarm of black flies, reaching Meredith, instantly covering her. Meredith kicked and waved her arms trying to get the flies off. Pain exploded, and she was awake. Breathing hard and shaking, Meredith kept her eyes closed, sure the woman was standing at the foot of the bed. She could hear the pond water from her dress dripping on the carpet. It smelled rank and musty. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she squeezed her eyes shut.

She told herself that she was being foolish; it was just a dream, a remnant of feeling helpless. There was no one there and she should get up. Her wrist throbbed, and she couldn't will her good hand to pull the covers back. Her legs felt locked—the only thing that seemed to be working was her diaphragm. She could hear herself panting.

And she could almost hear the snickering voice of Ashley, calling her a pussy. Ashley, whose judgment and scorn was always there. Ashley, the voice of Meredith's past.

Contempt overpowered her fear; she could see herself lying there, crying, almost drowning in her bed. Meredith opened her eyes and kicked off the covers. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she fought herself. She wanted to check if the carpet was wet, but that would be giving in and Meredith wanted to be fearless. Around other people, she was, but alone she checked under her car for assailants, changed the channel when there was anything scary on TV, and slept with a white-noise app running so she wouldn't hear every little sound.

The minutes ticked by.

"Screw it." Meredith walked into the bathroom, not allowing herself to even look at the carpet. When she turned on the light, she was surprised to see how sick she looked. Puffy skin, flat eyes, and unwashed hair. She looked like both a younger and older version of herself. Younger because she'd seen this Meredith years before—depressed, fearful—but now aged with stress. Her shoulders slumped. Picking up her toothbrush was like lifting a car.

"God, you smell!" Ashley snarled from behind her.

Meredith slammed her good hand on the vanity. "Fuck!"

She turned on the shower. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of moisture, trying to dismiss the image of the dripping woman. She showered, pulled her wet hair back in a messy bun, and put on jeans and shoes for the first time in a week. The jeans slipped on easily without unbuttoning them; she smiled at the weight loss. She put on her sling.

Her wrist throbbed from all her efforts, but she resisted taking a pill. The Oxy made everything more vibrant, more real and yet not real at all. She saw flashes of colors while sitting on the couch or something out of the corner of her eye. It was alluring, like her bed, but too reminiscent of who she'd been before.

In getting ready, she'd gained momentum, but to keep it she needed to leave the apartment. The coffee shop seemed a good place to go—the smell of coffee, the coziness of the leather chairs by the fireplace, and the comfort of public anonymity seemed healthier than staying in the apartment, ruminating on whether the carpet was wet.

The coffee shop was less than a mile away she decided to walk. Pausing at the entrance to her apartment building, Meredith looked around. It was an early summer morning, and no one was out.

She walked to the corner. To the south was the park and the pond; the coffee shop was north. She turned north without allowing herself to glance in the park's direction. Meredith kept her head high, telling herself that the sound of the breeze in the trees was lovely, but really, she was listening for footsteps or the screaming of gibberish. A car rolled by. She bent down to see who was behind the wheel. It was a man on the phone. He didn't even glance at her.

She felt like a prairie dog, jumping at the slightest whiff of danger. Anger started to well up in her and she let it. Anger was better than anxiety; it was motivating, powerful, and beautiful. Ashley had taught her that.

As roommates in college, they had little in common. Ashley, who looked like she played nonstop sand volleyball, a Phys Ed major; Meredith, with her generic looks and geek vibe was studying finance. There was no overlap in musical taste or friends. But they struck a deal when they first moved in together—loud music, late nights, and the occasional overnight guest were fine, but under no circumstances was their room to be dirty.

In the winter of that year, Meredith suddenly found that she couldn't bring herself to do laundry. Then, it was too much to clean the room. Clothes and dishes started to pile up. Ashley made some snide comments but let it slide for a couple of weeks. Meredith stopped going out at night, then she stopped leaving her room except to go to class, and then she just stopped. In March, Ashley went home for spring break and Meredith stayed in bed, sleeping and staring at the wall.

"Meredith! Meredith, wake up!"

She opened her eyes to Ashley standing over her. "Get up! Get up right now and help me clean this place!" Meredith looked at her. "I just saw a bug in the sink," Ashley continued. When Meredith started to rollover, Ashley pulled her out of the bed.

"God, you smell." Ashley was staring at her like she was the bug. For a moment, Meredith thought she was about to be squashed. She felt relief.

"Go take a shower." She made her way to her feet, swaying slightly. "Go on!"

Meredith did what she was told.

When she came out of the bathroom, her bed was bare except for a pair of jeans, a top and underwear. There was also a note from Ashley that said she'd gone to the laundromat and Meredith needed to do the dishes by the time she got back. Meredith sat on the bed staring at the note for twenty minutes. She got dressed and sat there another twenty minutes, gathering strength to do the dishes.

Meredith had just started the dishes when Ashley came in.

"You owe me \$20," Ashley said as she set the laundry basket down. "Put these away." She grabbed the cleaning supplies from under the sink, pushing Meredith out of her way. Meredith could feel her tears and Ashley's contempt and did as she was told. By the time Meredith finished, Ashley had cleaned the entire room, bathroom and kitchenette included.

Ashley grabbed a backpack and her laptop and started toward the door. She turned back to look at Meredith. "This room better look like this when I get back. I don't have time for this bullshit." The door slammed.

Meredith turned off all the lights and went to bed.

The phone woke Meredith up. She looked at it and saw that she had three missed calls and a slew of unanswered texts. It was 11:15 a.m. and her mom was calling.

"Hi, Mom."

"Merry, are you okay?" Her mother's voice on the other side, a silken and practiced whine. "I got a Facebook message from your roommate that said you were in trouble. What's going on? Are you alright?"

"Everything's fine Mom."

"She told me that you haven't gone to class or even gotten out of bed for weeks, that you don't shower, you don't go out. Your dad and I are worried. This isn't like the last time is it, honey?"

Meredith felt the anxiety recede as the rage rolled in. She didn't want to go home and she sure as shit didn't want her mother on campus. So she lied.

"No, Mom. Ashley completely overreacted. I had the flu and didn't feel up to doing anything. I can't believe that she'd send you a message. You know she's always trying to stir up shit, Mom. You should hear all the stuff she's done to her boyfriend."

"I don't know, honey. Why don't you come home this weekend?"

"No, Mom, really, I'm okay. We'll FaceTime this weekend. I promise. I've got to go. Love you." And she hung up.

Meredith started breathing harder, her joints tightened down to her curled toes. She could envision Ashley with her smug face typing her condescending note of faux concern. And then Meredith imagined herself slapping Ashley so hard that she fell off her chair—and she smiled for the first time in weeks. The flush of anger warmed her, like seeing envy in the eyes of a powerful friend. Meredith got out of bed and went back to work. She taped a \$20 bill on the refrigerator with a note that said "Fuck You." If Ashley was offended, she didn't show it. They barely spoke after that. But the dorm room was clean, and Meredith ended the semester with a B average.

Working all summer and saving every penny, Meredith could afford to live without a roommate. She sacrificed nights out, ate only in the cafeteria, and studied her ass off. She downloaded Ashley's Facebook picture and kept it by her desk. When she had trouble finishing a paper or wanted to retreat to her bed, she looked at Ashley's face, felt the rush of anger, and got back to work.



Now, standing on the street, she could feel Ashley next to her, contempt in her eyes. Meredith started walking at a marathon walker's pace toward the coffee shop. It felt good to move quickly after a week of lethargy. And, more importantly, it felt powerful.

The coffee shop wasn't crowded at this time of morning, but there were a few people ahead of her. She got in line behind two cops. She relaxed her shoulders and let out a loud sigh enough for the larger cop to turn around and look at her. She blushed and gave a coy smile.

"What a bunch of fucking freaks," the smaller cop said. "Dressed in white and roaming the streets, pushing people out of their way. One of these days, they're going to tangle with the wrong people and it's going to be game on. I'd like to run them off before that happens."

"Yeah, but you need to watch who's around while you're doing it. The last thing you need is some ACLU asshole suing the city because of you. Just make sure you catch them doing something on your body cam," the other one said.

The line moved up.

"I'll wait until they give me a reason. Trust me, it won't take long," the smaller cop said and then looked at Meredith. Embarrassed to have been discovered eavesdropping, she straightened up, dropped her eyes, and took her phone out of her pocket.

Meredith got her coffee and felt lucky to grab a comfortable chair near the fireplace. She settled in, put in her earbuds, and started reading a book on her phone. She'd look up and see the tide of strangers—business people, kids on their way to school—and felt at ease. There was a peaceful, bright energy of people moving on their way to somewhere else. Those that planted themselves at a table, shielded behind laptops, gave off a healthy intensity; they were busy, creating something—even if it was only the appearance of working. Occasionally, the homeless would come, looking for shelter and generally uninterested in anyone else. It was one of the things she loved about the city, feeling as if she were part of something and yet unentangled by connections.

When she looked up again, the line was out the door. She ordered another coffee on her app and waited. The sun was fully up, and the room's pleasant energy had started to become aggressive. A man, trying to leave, could find no clear path to the door. He moved to the left and got pinned to a row of tables by an oncoming teenager. He bumped into a table, spilling a couple of drinks. Meredith watched his face, seeing the flush; his brows lowered, and his smile devolved into a snarl. He made it out of the cluster of tables, pushed past a woman waiting in line, and was finally out the door.

Meredith hesitated; she wanted her coffee, but she also wanted her seat. She gambled that if she left her purse on the chair, she could reclaim her spot. She grabbed her wallet and phone and planned her approach to the counter. It went smoothly, only having to say excuse me to a couple of people. She supposed the sling helped; once people saw that she was injured, they gave her some room. Meredith made it back to her chair only to find a man in her seat. For a moment, she couldn't do anything more than stare.

He looked up at her. Through his teeth, he said, "What do you want?" Her shoulder muscles clenched. "I said, what do you want, bitch?"

"Wh-where's my purse?" she said.

"I threw it over there," he replied. The other patrons didn't look up as she walked between them to the windows. Her purse and its contents were on the floor. She stooped down, setting her coffee on the floor, and began to put everything back in her purse.

"Bitch thinks she owns this chair. I got a right to be here. I'm a person too, you ugly bitch," he muttered. Meredith stood again, and felt tears running down her cheeks. She looked out the window, hoping the cops were still there, but they had gone. At the door, she looked over her shoulder at the man. "That's right, I got your seat and I'm keeping it. It's mine now," he said, and turned to the man across from him. "What the fuck you looking at? Just read your paper, you..." and Meredith was out the door.

The peace of the coffee shop had evaporated. The morning sun didn't make it better. She walked down the stairs and back onto the street. There were people everywhere, rushing to get their caffeine, but at this time of the morning, the stores were closed. It was quiet. She headed toward her apartment. She walked slowly, looking at items on display in store windows along the



way, imagining what these possessions could do to her life. Admiring a dress, she was trying to decide if it would look good on her long waist, when she saw a moving, white reflection in the window. She watched it pass for a moment and turned around.

A crowd of people, dressed in white, walked quietly past her. They moved in unison. They did not look at each other or speak. Not one of them made eye contact with her; to them she was no more consequential than the mannequins in the store windows. Each one of them wore something red on their clothes. Meredith guessed there were twelve or thirteen people in the group. And at the back of the group was the woman. She was walking away from her, without noticing or acknowledging her. She reminded Meredith of the woman from an old movie she had watched with her parents—the Omega Man.

Meredith took a couple of steps backwards, knocking into the store window. Her chest heaving, hot coffee spilled on her hand. She felt flushed, raw. And she was back there again, standing on the grass while this wet, rank, Omega Man lunatic screamed at her, “You! You! You!” as if she was the cause of all the world’s problems and all the woman’s sins.

Not one of the people passing her moved an inch to help her. They watched and did nothing.

She noticed that she was moving, but part of her could still feel the window against her back. She was pushing through them. One of them fell but she didn’t stop until she was face to face with the woman from the pond.

“Look what you did to me! I broke my fucking wrist because of you! You crazy fucking bitch!”

The woman looked at Meredith, recognition in her hard eyes, and whispered, “You.”

Everything hung there. The group stopped, no one moved, no one spoke. The woman she had pushed to the ground lay there and no one reached to help her up. The world had frozen hard enough to skate on—until Meredith screamed and threw her coffee; it hit Omega in the forehead. Meredith stared into her loathing eyes.

Meredith was moving again, her good hand in a claw, rushing toward Omega’s face. Just before her fingers made contact, a strong hand grabbed her wrist and spun Meredith around.

“Whoa, whoa, what’s going on here?” the large cop said.

“Let go!”

“Lady, calm down!” the cop said as he moved her away from the group, his hand still holding her good wrist. The smaller cop stood near the group, asking them what had happened. No one answered him. The woman who’d fallen stood up and took her place within the group. They all started walking away, except for Omega.

Meredith stumbled over the story of the pond and her broken wrist. The larger cop listened. He held up his hand to silence her. He turned to the woman and asked, “Do you want to press charges, ma’am?”

The woman, dressed in a coffee-stained white dress and red sash, looked toward the officer and said nothing. She looked again at Meredith, raised her right hand, and said, “You. You. You!” Meredith lunged at her, but the cop held her back.

"Knock it off!" The cop turned to Omega. "Do. You. Want. To. Press. Charges?"

Omega lowered her arm, but kept her eyes locked on Meredith.

"I guess that's a no." He turned back to Meredith. "Since she won't press charges and she doesn't appear to be hurt, I'm going to let you go. But if I see you interact with her again, I'll arrest you. Got it?"

Meredith nodded.

"Ma'am, please look at me."

Meredith raised her eyes to his face.

"Look, these people seem to wander around this area. I've never seen any of them talk to anyone else before today. They might be harmless; they might not. If you see these people again, keep on walking. Stay away. I'd hate to arrest you instead of them. Do you understand me?"

Meredith nodded.

"Have a good day," said the officer.

When Meredith looked back, she saw the group swallow up Omega. She walked in the opposite direction. All Meredith could think of was getting back to her apartment. Her Uber app said that there was no one closer than five minutes away, so she kept walking.

She stood on a corner, waiting for the light to change. To her left, a little more than a block down the street, she saw them. They were moving toward her. Meredith ran across the street, against the light, and barely missed being hit. She kept walking, hearing nothing but her breathing and the quick fire of her flats clicking on the pavement.

Her wrist throbbed, and she found herself almost salivating at the thought of taking a pain pill. Fuck the side effects. She turned a corner and her apartment came into view. Behind her, she heard a car horn, a long "fuck you" blast. Meredith turned to see the mass of people crossing the street against the light. They moved as a unit, like a flock of birds, sensing the movement of those around them without sound. Each part moved in direct intimacy with every other part. The car horn did nothing to move them faster.

*Jesus, they're following me*, she thought. She kicked off her shoes and ran down the street to her apartment. She managed to get her keys out of her bag on the first try but couldn't get the key in the door. A man, leaving the building, opened the door for her.

"Hey, are you okay? Where are your shoes?" the man asked, but Meredith ran up the stairs without answering. She got into her apartment and locked it. She went to each window, looking for Omega and closing the blinds. They weren't there.

She sat down in her living room. She felt dizzy; the pain in her wrist was bad and she noticed that she had cut her right foot. Meredith took a pain pill and then two. She didn't care if it made her see things, it would help her sleep. She crawled into bed without cleaning up.

It was dark when she woke up. She sniffed the air, trying to smell Omega, but she was alone. Her body hurt, but she had to go to the bathroom. Besides, that's where the pain pills were.

She turned on the light and saw herself. Flat hair, mascara down around her eyes, rumpled

clothes. She looked worse than she had this morning. She tried to summon the familiar warmth and motivation of anger, but her friend was gone. Ashley's ugly, contemptuous voice was silent, and she couldn't think of anyone else to call.

She poured herself a glass of water and swallowed the Oxy. Meredith opened a drawer and found something to make her feel safe. And then she retreated to the warm, Meredith-shaped rut.

The pounding noise made Meredith's head hurt. She put a pillow over her face and tried to go back to sleep. Meredith heard her bedroom door open and she felt Omega come in the room. Every nerve fired, sending information to her foggy brain. She felt Omega's hand touch her right arm through the blanket.

"You bitch!" screamed Meredith as she spun around in the bed, swinging a butcher knife in her left hand. She saw a little blood fly and swung the knife again. This time she missed.

"Merry! Stop it! It's Mom, stop it!"

"You fucking come near me again, and I will fucking kill you and all the motherfuckers with you! Do you hear me?" She held the knife, pointing it at her mother.

With her hand over the cut in her arm, her mother backed out of the room and left the apartment. She called 911 and told them to hurry.



Meredith's room looked out over the pond, with its lovely, large trees and gravel walking path. She had asked to be moved, but no one listened to her. So she sat by the window, watching, knowing that Omega would show up. She was often encouraged to walk around the paths, but she refused to go out there.

She ate only enough to keep them from hooking her up to a feeding tube, but that was the single concession she made. And that was just so she could sit by her window. Meredith tried to understand what Omega had been trying to tell her all those months ago. The world was a terrifying place. It stank of fetid water and hurt like a broken wrist. Maybe she was the cause of all Omega's sins and had to do penance like Charlton Heston.

All that mattered to her now was watching and waiting for her behind the safety of barred windows.



*With Eyes Waiting for More* by Bill Wolak.

When blood began spurting from the top of his head, Dave's first instinct was to scream. It erupted suddenly and forcefully as a geyser, spraying up into the air and splattering against the mirror. Some of it spotted the walls red, while the rest drained into the sink in front of him, looking like a thick soup. Dave met his own gaze in the bloodied mirror and managed with a tremendous effort to suppress the scream into a small, pitiful yelp.

He had ducked into the house's small bathroom under the pretence of freshening up before going out. They were going out. It wasn't something he was used to. They had sat around the table drinking—he and the three other young men with whom he shared a house—for an hour or so. The plan was to have a few beers and then go out and have a few beers. Dave began to feel uneasy at the table with his friends whom he did not know very well. He excused himself and went to the bathroom. He stood in front of the mirror and breathed in and out. After a minute blood started coming out of his head.

His second instinct was to make as little mess as possible. He grabbed several sheets of toilet paper, pressing them to his head. The blood was not surging upwards as it had initially, but it was still coming, soaking the paper and leaking out from under it. A rivulet crept down Dave's forehead, and he wiped it away with his free hand, leaving an ugly smear. He registered that he was not in very much pain; there was only a sort of dull throb, a feeling of dizziness, and a violent sensation of disgust.

Dave guessed he had been in the bathroom for about four minutes now. Not yet long enough to raise concerns.

Being in the habit of planning everything he did far in advance, he had felt uneasy about this outing since agreeing to it earlier that day. Spontaneity always made his guts squirm as if he were seasick. But caught by surprise, he said yes, and tried to own the decision.

He binned the bloodied toilet paper and got more. The blood seemed to be oozing rather than spurting now, so that he didn't feel the need to keep constant pressure on it. He set about minimising the evidence of his situation, washing the blood off his hands in the sink, then off the tap where he had bloodied it turning it on. He tore off more toilet paper to wipe the mirror. The stuff coming out of him was of an unnervingly viscous consistency, not just blood but gore, bits of flesh. He felt nauseous. After getting the mirror pretty clean, he cautiously peeled back the paper to examine his head. His hair was matted all over with blood. Dave realised that even if the flow stopped, there was no question of going out like this, and no time to wash his hair. He thought of putting on a hat.

Dave had been engaged for some time now in a project of self-improvement. It was how he thought he would get out of what he called the hole. His life so far had been, so he thought, thoroughly unsatisfactory. He felt himself alone in the world, and decided that to continue being the kind of person he was would be to continue being alone. So he took a vow to work on himself, day by day.

He started by reading self-help books, the ones full of kindly platitudes. He learned that what he ought to do was to actualise his potential, dream big, and take things one step at a time, focus on the future while living in the present, dream big, be the you you want to be, actualise your potential, let go of the you that others expect, and, above all, take things one step at a time, and never let go of your big dreams of actualising your future-you potential. Dave found this advice difficult to follow. He tried to speak to women with greater self-assurance, and to treat conversation as a valuable experience in its own right rather than a means to an end. He tried to be open-minded about new situations rather than dismissing everything outside his sphere as 'not for me.' He tried to work on his small talk, keep himself busy, say yes to every opportunity.

All this was going very poorly, but there was now a voice in Dave's mind which tormented him if he did not say yes whenever presented with an opportunity to be less alone. He was quietly cursing that voice, his hair full of blood—as if it were to blame for this in some inscrutable sense—when someone knocked on the door.

"Dave?" a voice said. "David?"

Dave had tried to get people to start calling him David. He thought he would be taken more seriously as a David.

"Yeah?"

"You alright? We were thinking of going soon."

Dave struggled to steady his voice, pressing another sheet of paper to his head.

"I'll be out in a minute."

"No worries, mate," said the voice.

Dave breathed out.

He got the impression these nights out were a semi-regular thing with the others, from which he had so far been excluded as a result of keeping to himself too much. But they had not made any fuss about asking him. They were normal people, comfortable in their skin. He didn't like them.

Pacing back and forth before the mirror, Dave considered what he ought to do. He was still set on going out. He had contained to a corner of his mind a voice that always agitated for isolation, seizing upon any excuse to stay in bed. Yet his head continued to ooze, and he felt it would reflect poorly on him to confess the problem to anyone, let alone to go out in public in this state. He decided he would wear a hat. Once he was quite sure there was no one in the corridor, he flushed the toilet for good measure and stepped out and across the hall to his room, still clutching a wad of toilet paper to his wound. He heard the amicable babble at the table downstairs and felt dizzy again. Then he was in his room. He shut the door and leaned against it and breathed in and out.

After a moment, he went to the open wardrobe. He had a thick woollen beanie for winter and a trendy black cap which he had never worn and did not think would suit him. Seeing as it was not winter, he took the cap. He put it on over the toilet paper covering the wound, which had not stopped bleeding. He even thought the flow of blood might be accelerating. He looked in the tall mirror set into the wardrobe door.

His skin didn't fit properly over his body. It was like someone had thrown a sack over a pile of bones and meat. The hat did not suit him.

At a certain point in his journey of self-improvement, Dave had abandoned all attempts to improve his character, having become convinced they would never bear fruit, worse, that they were orthogonal to the problem he was attempting to address. Instead, he devoted himself to increasingly outlandish methods of changing his body, which he believed was the true site of the problem. He had always received conflicting advice in matters of self-improvement. Some loud voices on one side of him insisted on the soul, or at least the personality, as the important locus of interpersonal connection; others argued with equal vigour that that was a scam, the real thing to get in order was your physical being, this was all they really cared about, revealed preferences. The alternative had begun to feel like self-deception. And so he began devoting his energy to abortive schemes like the construction of a stretching rack with which he hoped to gain a foot in height; the synthesis of a special skin treatment formula designed to eliminate ugly blemishes while retaining a semblance of masculine ruggedness; and an obscure method through which he became convinced he could strengthen his jawline by sheer force of will. The strange remnants of his experiments littered the room, which he took the utmost care ensuring nobody could enter. His approach was rigidly independent; if products and treatments and regimens already existed to address these issues, he did not want to know about them. He threw out all the self-help books. He insisted on being a self-made man. It was an objective he took quite literally.

Dave looked at himself. The hat, much as he disliked it, was a tight fit and prevented more blood leaking out of his hair. His shirt appeared miraculously unbloodied. He had designed his outfit, a white T-shirt and jeans, according to the crowdsourced wisdom of lonely men online regarding how to leverage fashion to one's advantage. His shoes were sort of sporty, though he did not play any sports. His head felt unpleasantly warm. He was as ready as he would ever be.

The stairs took more out of him than he had expected. He began to feel dizzy halfway down and stopped to take a breath, clutching the banister. His skin prickled with the awareness that he was visible to the others where he was. It was this that stopped him retreating and made him advance. Keep it together, he said to himself, without actually verbalising it, for he had learned that was weird.

As Dave approached the table where they were all still sitting, Chris said, "Here he is!"

"Here I am."

It was Chris who had come to the door earlier.

Dave sat down.

"You about ready, Dave?" said Matt. "We're going in a minute."

"I've still got my beer."

"Best down it then," said Chris.

The other lad, Will, said nothing but smirked in a way he could only read as vicious. Dave picked up his beer, now warm and still mostly full, and drank as fast as he could. The others made a show of banging on the table for a moment, then groaned and went back to their conversation when it became clear he was not downing it in one. The subject of his prolonged absence, which

must have been about twenty minutes in the end, went undiscussed. They were evidently as keen as he was to proceed without incident.

Dave finished his drink and stood, wondering how to join the conversation. Words floated back and forth in front of him in clouds. He could not find anything to latch onto. His head felt hot, and his vision blurred. He blinked and regained some clarity. He reasoned that he had surely lost a lot of blood by now.

He said, "We off then?"

The group assented. Will slapped him on the back and said, "Good lad."

Dave went to get his jacket. The others were already wearing theirs. They congregated around the front door and went outside when Dave was about finished clambering into his jacket. He was careful not to dislodge his hat, under which a tidal wave was building. He joined them outside and locked the door.

Chris and Will were smoking. Matt was lighting up his own cigarette, and offered one to Dave. He hesitated, then accepted. He hoped someone would light the thing for him; his hands were shaking. Nobody did. Matt threw him the lighter, which he failed to catch. He picked it up off the ground, lit his cigarette on the third attempt, and handed the lighter back. It did nothing to calm his nerves. He had never liked smoking.

The others were talking, but Dave had zoned out of the conversation so that only a low buzz came through to him. The figures in front of him started to lose focus, dissolving into a mist. For a moment they returned as sharks, smelling blood, leering at him. Then they became hazy outlines, empty of menace. He felt very heavy, almost rooted to the spot. He was losing confidence that he would be able to go anywhere after all. He dropped his cigarette before it was half done, barely realising he was doing it. It seemed it was darker than it should be at that time of day. He tried to tune back in to the conversation but had trouble. Everything came to him as through a fog.

"Dave? Hello?"

"Mm," Dave said.

"Are you alright? You look a bit..."

"He can't be pissed already, he only had one."

"Are you—is that blood?"

"What? Shit."

"Dave, what the hell?"

"Mm," Dave said.

"Sit him down."

Dave felt hands guiding him downward. Blood poured down his cheeks, down his forehead, down his neck. The flow increased. Regaining some sense of his situation, he realised someone had taken off his hat. He imagined himself a grisly fountain.



“Jesus,” someone said. “Call an ambulance or something. Fuck.”

“What happened to him?”

“How should I know?”

“I mean, was he...?”

Dave thought he heard an exasperated sigh, and he knew he was a burden again. He felt himself sinking once more into the hole. A great drum pounded behind his eyes. His guts felt like they ought not to be inside him. Someone’s face came up close to his.

“Dave, what happened?”

He tried to shake his head.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Catch up with you.”

He didn’t want to make a fuss.

“You’re not fine, mate.”

“Be good soon. Just need a breather.”

Dave felt the figure move away from the hole. Everything dimmed. He thought about his white shirt, now surely stained with gore. He would have to go back inside and change before going out. Nothing for it. A small distance away he could hear someone on the phone, asking to be connected to the ambulance service. He breathed in and out. He wondered who it was for.

## Contributor Biographies

### POETRY

AREMU ADAMS ADEBISI is an African poet + economist + religionist. He authors works inspired by natural vastness, published in *Rockvale Review*, *Brittlepaper*, *Barren Magazine*, *Terse Journal*, *Turnpikezine*, *POETICA*, and elsewhere. He seeks to find depth, peace, and tranquility in poetry, exploring the concepts of liberation, empowerment, and existentialism. He appears in *Best New African Poets Anthology* and *20.35 Africa's Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. He tweets @aremudamsbisi.

ANNE BAZARNIC is a new writer with preoccupations in body horror, detachment, the absurd, and the persistence of lethargy. She is a member of the Cannibal Collective, a DIY arts group located in Phoenix, Arizona. Deeply uncomfortable with the impositions of inhabiting a body, she attempts to translate the tingle of her distaste to poetry with a focus on feeling—even when that feeling is one of profound discomfort. She is currently finishing her undergraduate degree in creative writing at Arizona State University.

TIFFANY BELIEU is a poetry late bloomer. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Meow Meow Pow Pow*, *Collective Unrest*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, and *Okay Donkey*, among others. She loves tea and cats and can be found @tiffobot on Twitter.

JAKUB BERALSKI hails from Poland, but has spent the majority of his life in the US. Following lengthy stays in the conurbation of New York City, the bucolic escape of Bethel, the suburban desert of Corpus Christi, and the summertime paradise of San Diego, he now lives in Colorado. His path takes him through the campus of CU Boulder, where the expansive artistry of poetry continues to push its way into a schedule dominated by the precision of an applied engineering curriculum.

ROBERT BEVERIDGE makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Pink Litter*, *Triadæ*, and *Welter*, among others.

ADRIAN ERNESTO CEPEDA is the author of the full-length poetry collection *Flashes & Verses... Becoming Attractions* from Unsolicited Press, and the poetry chapbook *So Many Flowers, So Little Time* from Red Mare Press. *Between the Spine* is a collection of erotic love poems published with Picture Show Press, and *La Belle Ajar*, a collection of cento poems inspired by Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel, will be published in 2020 by CLASH Books. His poetry has been featured in *Cultural Weekly*, *Frontier Poetry*, *Yes, Poetry*, *24Hr Neon Magazine*, *Red Wolf Editions*, and more. Adrian has a BA from the University of Texas at San Antonio and an MFA from Antioch University in Los

Angeles, where he lives with his wife and their cat, Woody Gold. You can connect with Adrian on his website: [adrianernestocepeda.com](http://adrianernestocepeda.com).

lenora cole is an emerging Australian poet, with publications in the online journals *Umbel & Panicle* and *several hundred fools*, as well as in print journals *Jacaranda* and *Australian Poetry Anthology*. She has a particular love of arthropods and the natural world. She can be followed on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/lenoracolepoet](http://www.facebook.com/lenoracolepoet).

EMMA CROKER lives among mountains in New South Wales, Australia. Her poems have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*, *The Indianapolis Review*, and *Drunk Monkeys*. She reads your work and posts (sometimes blurry) pictures of birds and insects on Twitter at @EmmaCCroker. She feels better about her species when she reads poetry.

JASON FISK is a husband to one, a father to three, and a teacher to many. He lives and writes in the suburbs of Chicago. His long list of employment before becoming a teacher includes working in a psychiatric unit, laboring in a cabinet factory, and mixing cement for a bricklayer. He was born in Ohio, raised in Minnesota, and has spent the last 25 years in the Chicago area. [www.jasonfisk.com](http://www.jasonfisk.com).

KATE GARRETT is the founding editor of *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *Picaron Poetry*, and *Bonnie's Crew*, and her own writing is widely published—most recently or forthcoming in *8 Poems*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *After the Pause*, and *Tiny Flames Press*, among others. She is the author of six chapbooks, and her first full-length collection, *The saint of milk and flames*, was published by Rhythm & Bones Press in April 2019. A seventh chapbook, *To Feed My Woodland Bones*, is forthcoming from Animal Heart Press in September 2019. Born in rural southern Ohio, Kate moved to the UK in 1999, where she still lives in Sheffield with her husband, five children, and a sleepy cat. [www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk](http://www.kategarrettwrites.co.uk).

KRISTIN GARTH is a Pushcart- and Best of the Net-nominated sonnet stalker. Her poetry has stalked magazines like *Glass*, *Yes*, *Five:2: One*, *Former Cactus*, *Occulum*, and many more. She has four chapbooks including *Shakespeare for Sociopaths* (Hedgehog Poetry Press) and *Pink Plastic House* (Maverick Duck Press). She has two forthcoming, *Puritan U* (Rhythm & Bones Press, March 2019) and *The Legend of the Were Mer* (Thirty West Publishing House, March 2019). Her full-length, *Candy Cigarette*, is forthcoming April 2019 (The Hedgehog Poetry Press), and she has a fantasy collaborative full-length, *A Victorian Dollhousing Ceremony*, forthcoming in June (Rhythm & Bones). Follow her on Twitter @lolaandjolie, and her website [kristingarth.com](http://kristingarth.com).

KATERI lives in the Land of Enchantment. Her short stories (*the plane ride* and *Warm Body*) have been published in the *Trinity Review*. Her chapbook is *Birds Sing to Get Laid*. Her mind is a prison/prism. She tweets @scarykateri.

JAMES KNIGHT is an experimental poet and digital artist. *Void Voices*, a reimagining of Dante's *Inferno*, was published by Hesterglock Press in 2018. Website: thebirdking.com. Twitter: @badbadpoet.

COURTNEY LEBLANC is the author of the chapbooks *All in the Family* (Bottlecap Press) and *The Violence Within* (Flutter Press), and a Pushcart Prize nominee. She is the Poetry Editor at *Crack the Spine*, and has her MBA from University of Baltimore and MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. She loves nail polish, wine, and tattoos. Read her publications on her blog: [www.wordperv.com](http://www.wordperv.com). Follow her on twitter: @wordperv and IG: @wordperv79.

ANNABEL MAHONEY is a writer and essayist based in the UK. Her debut collection, *Wyf-King*, is scheduled for release in Spring 2019 by Lapwing Publications. She has been published most recently in *RECLAIM/RESIST Anthology*, *SOFTCARTEL*, *the Honest Ulsterman*, *VampCat*, *Riggwelter Press*, and *Occulum*. She has won numerous prizes from bodies such as the Human Rights Watch, The Literary Association, and Forward Poetry. Annabel is the editor-in-chief of *The Wellington Street Review* and creative director of *Royal Rose Magazine*. You can find her tweeting into the abyss at @Annabel\_Mahoney.

EMMANUEL OJEIKHODION is an emerging writer from Nigeria. He writes poetry as a loud voice to reach a broken soul. Often, he uses poetry to silence the demons in his milieu. He is a student at the University of Benin, where he studies English and Literature. When he is not writing, he is surfing the internet meeting new poets, and dreams of becoming a basketballer. His work appears in *Praxis* online, *Peeking Cat Poetry*, *Pangolin Review*, and is forthcoming in *Kalahari Review*.

SIMON PERCHIK is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Forge*, *Poetry*, *Osiris*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His most recent collection is *The Osiris Poems* published by *boxofchalk*, 2017. For more information including free e-books and his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities," please visit his website at [www.simonperchik.com](http://www.simonperchik.com). You can view one of his interviews [here](#).

NOELLE SCHMIDT is made of skin, bones, and unwritten poetry. She is an unapologetic introvert, an ardent proponent of the Oxford comma, and has been previously published in *Déraciné* Volumes I and III, Wordsfest's *Frankenzine*, and *Symposium*.

L.B. STRINGFELLOW has an intimate, lifelong relationship with the Southern Gothic and with Dark Romanticism and holds an MFA in Creative Writing. She writes both verse and prose poetry, often exploring themes of death, transformation, woundedness, and general angst in her poetry. She hails from the muggy strangelands of the Southern US.

MICAELA WALLEY is a recent graduate from the University of South Alabama. Her work can be found in *Oracle Fine Arts Review*, *Occulum*, and *ENTROPY*. She currently lives in Hanover, Maryland with her best friend, Chunky the cat.

JENNIFER WILSON lives in Somerset, England, with her newborn baby and full-grown husband. Her work has appeared in various online journals including *Vamp Cat*, *Mojave Heart*, *Molotov Cocktail*, and *Awkward Mermaid*. A full list of her published work can be found at [jenniferwilsonlit.wordpress.com](http://jenniferwilsonlit.wordpress.com), and she may be found on Twitter@\_dead\_swans.

## FICTION

BONNIE E. CARLSON is a retired professor of social work and lives in Scottsdale, AZ with her husband, dog, and too many cats. Her work has been published in *Foliate Oak*, *Down in the Dirt*, *Across the Margin*, and *Blue Lake Review*. Her novel *Radical Acceptance* is forthcoming.

JACK CAULFIELD is a British writer currently based in Amsterdam, where he works as a translator and editor. In his spare time, he writes strange, unhappy stories. You can find some of his previous work at [medium.com/@sparks.falling](http://medium.com/@sparks.falling).

BILL COOK is a writer, commercial building inspector, and sometimes avid home brewer residing in a small community within the Sierra Pelona Mountain Range. His fiction has appeared in *Monarch Review*, *Juked*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Dzanc's Best of the Web 2009*, *SmokeLong*, *The Nottingham Review*, *Mojave River Review*, *Five on the Fifth*, *The Summerset Review*, *Gravel Literary Magazine*, and elsewhere.

TOSHIYA KAMEI holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of Latin American literature include books by Claudia Apablaza, Liliana Blum, Carlos Bortoni, Selfa Chew, Ana García Bergua, and Leticia Luna.

Born in 1993, KUZUHA MAKINO graduated from Ritsumeikan University in 2016. A regular contributor to *Hametuha*, she was awarded the Noveljam 2018 Yushu-sho for her novel *Yuki to Nagi no boken*.

PRISHA MEHTA is a student at Millburn High School in New Jersey, and she is very passionate about her writing. She aspires to be a successful author one day, and she has won a number of writing awards, including a Scholastic National Gold Medal. Her work has been published in *Spaceports and Spidersilk*, *Asymmetry*, *Ginosko*, *Blue Marble Review*, *Stinkwaves*, *Riggwelter*, *Drabble*, *Body Without Organs*, *Gravel*, *Spelk*, and *Five on the Fifth*. When she isn't writing, she can

often be found scrolling through psychology articles, sketching in her notebook, or, of course, reading. You can find out more about her at [prishamehta.com](http://prishamehta.com).

PHIL MERSHON is a graduate of Marshall University, where he earned an MA in English. Upon graduation he sought to visit each state in the USA in alphabetical order, and has made it as far as Arizona. His writings have appeared in *Perfect Sound Forever*, *Playtime*, *Rock's Backpages*, and elsewhere. He is a fun guy but do not let him run amok.

RON RIEKKI'S upcoming books in 2019 include *Posttraumatic: A Memoir* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), *Undocumented: Great Lakes Poets Laureate on Social Justice* (Michigan State University Press, with Andrea Scarpino), and *The Many Lives of The Evil Dead: Essays on the Cult Film Franchise* (McFarland, with Jeff Sartain).

HOLLY ANN SHAW has lived most of her life in Kansas City except for a brief hiatus in Portland, Oregon. She once served a life sentence in Minot, North Dakota (okay, it was really just two years, but felt like a lifetime). So, the facts are: wife, mother, former marketer, decorator, mixed-media tinkerer, and writer. Her work has appeared *Soft Cartel*, *The Raw Art Review*, and *CafeLit*.

## 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](https://Behance.net/ChrisBeckitt) and [Instagram.com/ToBleachTheirOwn](https://Instagram.com/ToBleachTheirOwn).

C.R. SMITH is an artist and writer living in the UK. Her artwork has appeared in *Hypnopomp Magazine*, *Flash Frontier*, and *Formercactus*. Her poetry has been published by *Mojave Heart Review*, *Peeking Cat Poetry*, *Eye Flash Poetry*, and *The Hedgehog Poetry Press*. Drabbles and longer pieces can be found at Horror Tree's *Trembling With Fear*. Instagram: [instagram.com/smith.cr](https://instagram.com/smith.cr). Twitter: @carolrosalind.

BILL WOLAK has just published his fifteenth book of poetry entitled *The Nakedness Defense* with Ekstasis Editions. His collages have appeared recently in "Naked in New Hope" 2018; the 2017 Seattle Erotic Art Festival; Poetic Illusion; The Riverside Gallery, Hackensack, NJ; the 2018 Dirty Show in Detroit; the 2018 Rochester Erotic Arts Festival, and the 2018 Montreal Erotic Art Festival.

CHRISTOPHER WOODS lives in Texas. He has published a novel, *THE DREAM PATCH*, a prose

collection, *UNDER A RIVERBED SKY*, and a book of stage monologues for actors, *HEART SPEAK*. His book of prompts for writers, *FROM IMAGE TO TEXT*, is forthcoming from Propertius Press. Gallery: [christopherwoods.zenfolio.com](http://christopherwoods.zenfolio.com).

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