

déraciné

an independent literary magazine

Summer 2020



Volume VI

Déraciné

VOLUME VI | Summer 2020

Cover art, "Ghost Tears," by Melissa Kojima

© Déraciné 2020

deracinemagazine.com

Contents

1 EDITORS' LETTERS

POETRY

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|--|
| 3 | Simon Perchik | <i>Four Poems</i> |
| 6 | Lindz McLeod | <i>udaviti se (to drown oneself)</i> |
| 7 | Madison Zehmer | <i>Cicada Summer</i>
<i>Shimmering</i> |
| 9 | Amy Jannotti | <i>Amathophobia</i>
<i>Abandoned Shrine Where Dolls Were Beaten</i> |
| 11 | Christina McDermott | <i>Scrying</i> |
| 13 | Katie Hogan | <i>Soft Tissue</i>
<i>Not Swallow Not Their Nests</i> |
| 15 | Danielle Solo | <i>Melancholy Were the Sounds on a Winter's Night</i> |
| 16 | Sophie Laing | <i>Outside on the Inside</i>
<i>Nighttime Demand</i> |
| 19 | Richard LeDue | <i>Late Night Poem</i> |
| 20 | Amirah Al Wassif | <i>To bury a curious girl</i> |
| 21 | M. Stone | <i>The Maiden That Myth Forgot</i> |
| 22 | Jesse Hilson | <i>Thanksgiving Mirage</i> |
| 23 | E. Samples | <i>Cusp</i> |
| 25 | Camille Rosas | <i>Dreams where I can fly</i> |
| 26 | Avleen K Mokha | <i>Work Song</i>
<i>Pulp</i> |
| 28 | Laurinda Lind | <i>Exfoliation</i> |
| 29 | Selina Whiteley | <i>Rough Stitchwork</i> |
| 30 | Gustav Parker Hibbett | <i>Lavender</i> |
| 31 | Nick Creel | <i>Manufactured</i> |

Bad Vibrations

- 33 Natasha King *drift pelagic*
- 35 Amee Nassrene Broumand *Oyster*
- 36 Erin Cisney *Punishment*
- How I Sold Myself*
- 38 Nora Gause *This Means You Really Love Me*

FICTION

- 40 Richard Cochnar *You must respect the tools that open the world to you*
- 50 Jennifer Frost *Mr. Harris*
- 56 Blake Johnson *Scarecrow*
- 63 Carly Bush *Brushfire*
- 74 John Maki *Missed Exits*
- 76 Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi *Someplace Without Washrooms*
- 86 Jay Bechtol *Kurt*
- 90 Elina Taillon *Nice Guy*
- 98 Shannon St. Hilaire *The Salmon-Colored Sofa*

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

- 5 Tucker Lieberman *Dome*
- 12 Melissa Kojima *Never Warm Enough*
- 24 Jenni Coutts *Birdcage*
- 49 Fabrice Poussin *Sinking in the garden*
- 75 Maria S. Picone *The Collapse of a Star*

- 101 CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Editors' Letters

Dear Reader,

First, it is my sincere wish that you are safe and healthy at home during these times of uncertainty.

Many of us are looking to summer as a beacon of hope, that the sunlight will help guide us out of this darkness that has shaken the world. I believe that even though we must stay apart physically, we can unite spiritually and emotionally through that hope, and that we must never let go of it.

The world may be quickly changing, but we remain steadfast in our dream of sharing with you the works that have touched and fascinated us. And it is thanks to you that we may continue to do so, and that we have grown with every volume.

I hope that you will find comfort and catharsis within the pages of Volume VI, brimming with impactful work from writers and artists all over the world. We are so grateful we have been able to publish this issue thanks to our wonderful contributors, readers, followers, and friends who have continued to support us—and one another.

Thank you for staying with us, and may you always be well.

Victoria Elghasen

Editor

Dear Reader,

Déraciné has always examined topics related to connection and isolation. In this current time, that may feel more apt than ever for a wider portion of the world. Yet, Déraciné, at its core, has always been about connection and expression, and forming ties between words and feelings, artist and audience, writer and reader.

We are able to publish our Summer 2020 issue because we have connected with so many wonderfully talented contributors. So many people, once strangers, have reached into our lives and taught us something through their words and art, and have made us experience a wide range of powerful feelings. Everyone who submits works to us, who reaches out to us, who supports us, and reads the words we share has formed a connection with us over a great distance.

Even Victoria and I live in different countries. That distance does not stop us from working together to help share these amazing voices with all of you.

All of us may be apart physically—now more than ever, perhaps—but we are all connected. Artists and writers from all around the world are featured in our Summer 2020 issue, their words transcending distance, circumstance, and even language.

And so, dear reader, I hope you feel a sense of relation, of comfort, and of connection as you venture into these pages. Perhaps you will see something of yourself in them, or feel deeply sympathetic towards a character, or feel a thrill while reading. Whatever the case may be, I hope this issue will help all of us to remember that we are all facing this difficult time together, that no one is ever truly alone, and that someone out there understands.

Now more than ever, let us all continue to write, to create, and to share what we can with each other.

I hope that you and your loved ones will remain healthy and safe. Like all dark times, this one will end. Let us find comfort, inspiration, and hope in one another's creativity and emotional vulnerability.

Thank you for supporting us and connecting with us yet again.

Michelle Baleka

Editor

SIMON PERCHIK

Four Poems

*

Before there were seeds these stones
got their start from here, each shell
shaped by snowfalls and emptiness

–you work this orchard
the way each grave stays open
for air and the sharp pebble

that feeds the Earth with silence
already beginning to slowly
in secret harden –just like that

you put into place a shadow
that is not your hand folded over
for seasons keeping track

how lush and without a leaf
waits for its darkness to surface
let go and place to place.

*

To lower this stream its rope
snaps though the Earth
is starting up again

as the small stone
you won't let cool
keep adding more

and the few sparks it needs
to heat this grave with half
–don't ask its age, the knot

has nothing to hold together now
lets you deepen this gorge
the way each footstep is sure

depends on the silence
leaching from this stone
already in a row, had to be done.

*

You weed the way these two lions
were carved, half strong box
half where the graves

are kept safe so step by step
you can count the names
taking hold place to place

the only Deed left
that will never have a home
–these cornered beasts

outnumber you –just to start
though your fingers spend their time
heated over a small stone

could calm these dead
and the tall wet grass struggling
not yet the riverbank they need.

*

A simple vest though you suspect
there's a chair nearby, its back
haunted by sleeves and lifeless

–you don't touch the wounds
undress the way rain
gives up its life for a place

the dirt might want
now that nothing else is there
except the mud-caked darkness

clinging to you and on the sly
tucks in your arms
lets them circle down –on all sides

stays empty for so many dead
spread out to dry a leather jacket
you were once in love with.



Dome by Tucker Lieberman.

LINDZ MCLEOD

udaviti se (to drown oneself)

A lunar landscape
dry-raked by lobster claws

swells in a city
burnished with fur-trimmed cloaks

in the height of October summer.
I waded into the tides,

*wishing I could reach behind
the past; reminders forgotten under the couch.*

Urchins carpeted the seabed,
a rug of dark grenades. Begging to have

their pins pulled. As I do.
When patience dribbled empty into the

curve of your hourglass,
I locked eyes with the mountains; I hardly deserve you.

I am finite. This much is true.
We can agree on that at least.

A butcher's blade without a sheath;
what time shall we shed our secondary claws,

prepare to sink our fangs into the stars?
It's different over here. I yawn at 3pm.

Shear another few seconds off
my coat, overgrown for protection

against these heathered hills and
the touch of people who

didn't mean it like that.
The world is my zoo; it pushes me out.

MADISON ZEHMER

Cicada Summer

Rot of buzzard blood smeared on surfaces
of rusting stones—gritty as a sailor's

song or smoke signal. Sinew into ash
smudged above a believer's sweating nose.

Next cicada summer she will return
to earth and I'll have forgotten how to

cry. I'll let the moss do it for me, let it seep
below rocks where buzzards cough up

their prey. Death will gift her fists of argil
and she will burn into something almost

beautiful, a lullaby scorched into
being. So sweet buzzards will make it their

swan song. So sharp earth will shift from its edge.

Shimmering

Android lullabies murmured
in curtains of dusk. Beyond
the reach of oozing tissue—

What we become when we float
instead of dream. I see us
now as the fawn cleaved from its

mother by steel. Its vein-wires
malfunctioning. Hoping the
carbon gods hear the sizzle

of our exposed arteries.
Almost as burnt as fraying
cables transmitting prayers

through clenched fists and folded knees.
Here in the blackout all is
still but the slight beating of

electric chambers. Seeping
out static. Dimming the fawn's
cries with ignited currents.

Here I can be nothing. Here
I can be as still as the
doe. Waking empty and cold.

AMY JANNOTTI

Amathophobia

I spend my nights sleep- swallowing mites
 flies, arachnids, hear the gentle crunch of thorax
that succulent exoskeleton
 if you are what you eat, I'll grow eight legs
dealate shoulders wings strewn
 about the floor, like underwear discarded
in the mating tip a jar of crickets down
 slide gastropoda through gastrointestines
perhaps I, too should grow a shell one more
 cicada down the gullet practice
softening that throat I want to hold all the things
 that will crawl through my mouth
 while I am still alive
I shudder at the thought that great black what will
 eat me in the after

Abandoned Shrine Where Dolls Were Beaten

telll me how you sspeak, girll, cellophane
(((over))) your mo uthh
bag gged like golldfisshh / res
pirating on borrowed (((ox))) ygen
there's an isslland of dollls where they
(((hang))) from the treess
& at night, an infesstation of sspiders
(((desscendss))) from the trees
you used to chirpp tilll the battery
assid corroded your voissee box
now you sspeak (((devil))) you
gr(((ow)))ll
the others ssay I should fear you,
(((possseessed))) but how
could I fear sso ssoft a c url

CHRISTINA MCDERMOTT

Scrying

Casting shadows on my mind,
I shrink flameward: down into a little candlelight
that is safe

and burning on a silent, sexless wick
late in the afternoon
next to a half-empty mug of tea
that has lipstick pressed to its porcelain side.

*How much wax has tugged down from your innards
and pooled below you?
Are you glass-cased, or back-bone based?*

I imagine that my soul
is a red and yellow painted door
leading to a modest house
whose rooms are centered around a kitchen
where the gas stove has been left on.



Never Warm Enough by Melissa Kojima.

KATIE HOGAN

Soft Tissue

This body sings to me

Bird wings unhinged

A song in charred mouth,
reclaimed like an undercremated
skeleton's throaty laughter,

A butterfly broken open.

I can no longer feel the bones I used to clutch
like a newborn's lung; a baby's breath by the stem.
White like swallowed smoke. Brittle like cinder.
Now they rest, strung

throughout body like tremble around voice.
When the bones sleep, do they rest their heads on
the pillows of my flesh? Do they rejoice?
They could, my skin more forgiving than wrought

now that I do not use them to anchor
a dead thing. Now that I am too heavy
for flight. Now that bone has time to clutter
an urn. When the bones have a moment for reverie,

we know that there is laughter even for
dead things. For a skeleton not dead enough.

This body should have burned and still, it sings —

Nerves plucked from the nailbeds, I cannot claw
my way out of anything anymore.

This body should have burned
and still, it sings —
— almost like it knows that though I might
have to borrow the bird bones,

My wings, though unhinged-
stuffed - reassembled -
Still puncture and contour the wind,
Widening it around my rib —

Softening those moments for reverie.

Not Swallow Not Their Nests

Not sunrise on a slalom plane not salt not paper
Prom dress. Not sallow breath not swallow
Not their nests. Not numerology Not this kind
Of syllogism. Not
I knew this was coming.

I didn't I couldn't Am I relieved.
Not here not. As much as I thought not.
Banded wrist where do I hide Not

here. Not milk not my Mouth not me.
Where are the windows why Not here
Not this kind of syllogism. If then if then

If then If I eat then can
If I then can you
Put me back. Promise.

I'll

Take the window seat. Please.

DANIELLE SOLO

Melancholy Were the Sounds on a Winter's Night

We drive around the bend
tag teaming a herd of ambulances
flowing up a driveway like blood cells
a driveway we've passed a hundred times
before I left, now the driveway
of that new couple I don't know.
Mom says they moved in last week

There's a stretcher and a sheet
and too many empty rooms.
Against the glassy bug-stained windshield,
I wonder if love looks like that; projections of
blue light or red or maybe both. Maybe neither.
We keep driving. The garage reveals its bicycle teeth,
winter wind whistling its familiar moan—remember,
when I was a kid? I swore it was the sound of ghosts calling out for me.

On the lawn, there's a cheap plastic street lamp from
Canadian Tire; some sad attempt to look Dickensian.

SOPHIE LAING

Outside on the Inside

I'm disintegrating into the white brick walls,
the ones that made this dorm cool.
Outside on the inside,
as a future friend calls it.
It's sophomore year, and someone
just brought a gun to dad's workplace.
Shot a coworker
because of some personal spat.
I should have known
things would only get worse.
I go that whole week without talking
to anyone, which leaves me
holding the shooting in my head
as I move through the days.
Sometimes I think it must have been made up.
I search online for news
but end up reading about shootings
in Isla Vista, Fort Hood,
a high school in Washington, and the ones
I didn't hear about from the TV in the gym:
Montgomery County, Rosemary Anderson High School,
one or two people here and there.
Sometimes I convince myself
the one in my home county was worse,
secretly hoping that it counts,
trying to do math that allows me
to be in the clear now from future carnage.
It just works out that week
I'm deep into trying to be smaller,
aggressively counting calories,
egged on by an absent friend who says
I've been looking really good.
And so I repeat her words in my head,
try to distract myself from the shaking.
Sure, it's comforting at times
when the quiet would be too much
otherwise. Still, it's a weird sensation
feeling this close to the skin

I'm renting for a high cost.
It's enough to protect me from feeling
like I take up too much space,
like maybe I can avoid a disaster
by slipping through the cracks
of the dorm room walls.
But it's not enough,
I find out in a few weeks,
to protect myself from the chills
of this newfound loneliness
and a trauma I didn't even experience.
In fact, by then I start to beg for a body
that might be permanent,
something that might show
some strength the next time
someone tries to take more bodies away.

Nighttime Demand

Sometimes I have to remind
Myself that there's nothing worse

Than an insomniac night.
I only brought one book

Of short stories — too short
For these elongated hours on

A bed of pins and needles, test
To the power of the brain

To turn it off. Go go go
Never releasing a sliver

To slide into sleep. I think
Cards, do math, dip myself in

And out of simple fantasies.
I think how could you?

You're on vacation, a million
Miles for a million things

To be thankful for. But
I feel every inch of my skin,

A million points of contact
I just want to rip right off.

Let's play something
In a room full of nothing—

Let's play simple prayer for
The sunrise, let's play terror

For the next night on repeat.
I can't go faster, but the

Slowness is always one step
Ahead and on its way

To shutting me down.

RICHARD LEDUE

Late Night Poem

Moonlight left outside to wash away wolves
we dream stalk our garbage cans,
sniff barbeques on back steps,
hunger for human flesh
that needs medicated cream in the winter
and sunscreen on those summer days
when sunlight is just another part of a headache
we smile through, secretly counting down the hours
until we can hide in our beds again.
Convinced it's not a rehearsal for death,
the darkness comforts us on those nights,
meaning so much more than closed curtains,
windows blinded, ideas turned off.

AMIRAH AL WASSIF

To bury a curious girl

When I was younger,
I stood on a mountain of pillows
with a brave decision to swallow a whole finger.
My father insulted me because I am curious.
All his life he wished to have a non-trouble baby
whatever girl or boy.
My forefathers preferred to bury baby girls rather than put them
in carriages and sing them a lullaby.
I was born with a great motivation to scratch the sky
Upon my shoulders, crazy monkeys and heavy weights,
I used to bake my grief each night
And through the daylight, while they're trying to sell me,
I spend my time calculating the distance between my gender and my awaited funeral.
When I took my first steps, my tribe circled around me like bees.
They approached figuring out that I have thighs and breasts.
They tucked me in the obedience pocket, they dwelled me in an iron cage.
They ate my wings, my ears.
When I was younger,
I crawled towards my father's shoulders, I whispered, "how far does the world extend?"
He frowned and replied "just look at the space between your legs."

M. STONE

The Maiden That Myth Forgot

Zeus never
noticed me watching
from the trees
as he morphed
into a swan. I gathered
stray feathers, brought them

to my lips:
sorry substitute
for a kiss.
I would not
have required such a disguise
from him. With a smile,

a kind word,
he could have claimed me.
Unafraid
and alone,
I wander the field, plucking
orchids while Hades

bides his time,
waiting for a face
more winsome
than mine. Earth—
undisturbed beneath my feet.
No god will burst forth

to seize me.
I will not be dragged
belowground;
no mother
will mourn my captivity.
I am left cocooned

in virtue,
but sheer need stirs me
from stupor.
My pinned wings
shudder, aching to unfurl
and cast a shadow.

JESSE HILSON

Thanksgiving Mirage

Around the dinner table at the patriarch's,
the men display their glossy pelts of wit
and hunt each other down for laughter.

One day I'll drop my depth charge in
the narrow slot between two sentences
as they barrel by, lumber down the flume.

But now their voices have mine stuck,
full of startling insights, but too late.
The impulse never makes it to the tongue.

How funny, family's an eternal thing,
but the chance to say abiding words
to them escapes forever like a V of geese.

My brother drinks his umpteenth scotch.
His comic timing is superb. He puts
my sister into wheezing trances of mirth.

I stand next to the fireplace, and watch
the light of embers crawl around, return,
and think: "Like a skipped stone I diminish.

I am as the capillary to the blush."

E. SAMPLES

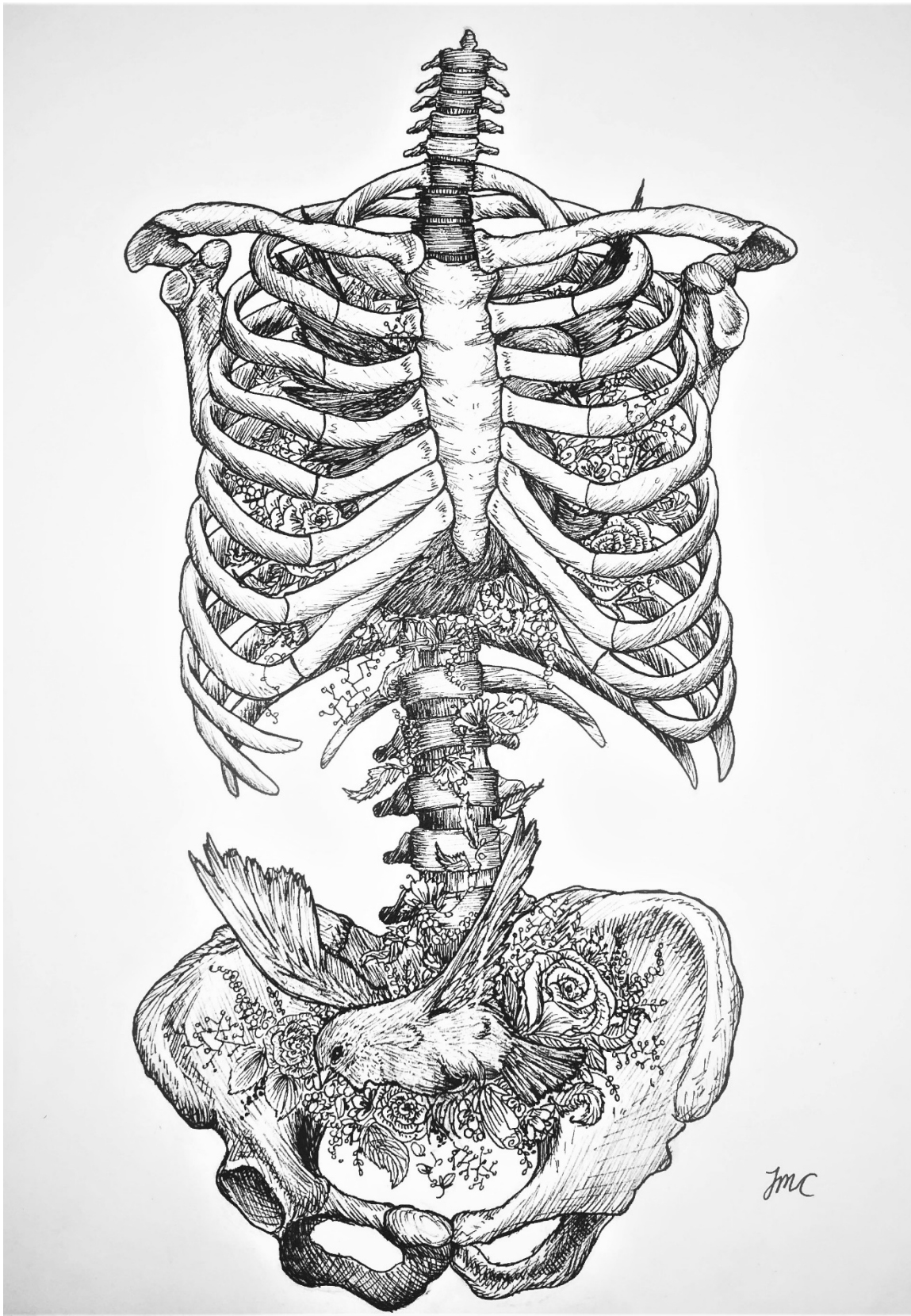
Cusp

You're looking for a simple solution
A slot in the wall for used razor blades
You're putting a sheet over my face
so the dead can't get out
Sprinkling holy water on my fence posts
to protect the animals

Maybe I'll get it right next time

It's late
The sky breathes daffodils
Skin for skin
Beyond *yes*
Beyond *there*

I look up
Sharps of crescent moon
Let go



Birdcage by Jenni Coutts.

CAMILLE ROSAS

Dreams where I can fly

are the worst. The sky in blues burnt-out
painters only wish it could be —all I do is wait
for the wind —to catch; I'm a naked parasail
tugged by an umbilical cord —to nowhere —an altitude

between a bird's and an angel's —more cloud
than ghost —out of reach from the prying
hands of kindness —nothing can touch me
—so nothing can hurt me, except —my longing
to be touched. If only —I could stop being
afraid the world is out to bruise me —it wouldn't hurt

to wake, aching —under my own gravity —the slap
colder than the dreams —where I kill myself, or the sobs
of an infant ripped —from heaven, nothing now —but gas
and dust learning slowly

—how to walk. O God,
o mother —if you'd let me choose
—I'd never land.

AVLEEN K MOKHA

Work Song

Since we had not woken up
when we had expected, since
the days of trembling
with joy that did not have
to be taken nor earned, we sang
like our voices came from
elsewhere than our plexus

and adamant, we wanted
limbs like ours — to rest
on, some solace in the end-
less days, to kiss like
our first loves had changed

their mind for the better
like our parents' ashes were
a fistful of pollen, and nothing

more insidious than a rose
grew inside your ribs, and
they were leaving their rest
places for us while inside
we went, because our work

was only the loving to do
to see barren earth and to
turn the roots up, like a sigh
of tangled hair bunches,
eager to be held by some-
thing bigger than itself.

Pulp

Always the marching band,
always the paper planes,
the demise. Nothing
works any longer, alleged
pains. If only truth and
a news report were one

and the same. Wouldn't
I just love to tear up
the whole damn thing.

Instead I write the words
I despise,

I breathe in air
and spite. All of us are hungry,
won't someone help us?
I wore the corset of winter
for one month of breath.
Now I wear the armour
of bricked wall.

I've been calling for help
my whole life. I've been writing,
it's been helping, and
you've been reading me.

What a flirt, each of us
pulp and word. It is supper
time, and nothing is all right,
again. And that is the best news
I have heard in a while.

LAURINDA LIND

Exfoliation

You go deep in your days,
sent by the ordinary things

that stab down to them. You pour
honey in the holes to stop

the sting, and after a while
the voices flood your veins

so their invisible scars
dry against the light,

then peel away to load
like leaves along the paths

where people pass.
Though their passing does

not change them, though
the sighted cannot see them.

SELINA WHITELEY

Rough Stitchwork

I still recall that weighted loom,
heavy with embroidery,
in a heated, Tunisian tannery,
where you never went.

I dreamt my neural fibres
would form this pristine needlepoint,
not a tangled, dark mess,
timbre and tragedy of desert storm,

thoughts cumbrous, elemental,
as iron and titanium in maelstrom.
I remembered seeing my MRI —
nerves diffuse, nebulous as night.

In gardens, rich with mint,
where hibiscus petals curled
like the commas of an unfinished story,
I saw women holding threads

and imagined each yarn
were a synapse, their craftwork,
a putting back together of sorts,
making rugs, remaking me

until axons and dendrites
would stream to my mouth
and sculpt my lips into perfect words.

And you'd be proud of me then.

GUSTAV PARKER HIBBETT

Lavender

Now that my roots have grown out dark
and the lavender dye has faded, my bleached hair
looks volcanic—dry shrubs in black desert soil.

The night I dyed it, you stayed up with me,
reminded me how much I'd wanted this,
how certain you were that it would work out.
You folded your laundry while the chemicals stung my scalp.

When we see stars, we only get to see them
at one point in their lives—images, not videos—
there's no chance to see them change. I'm afraid
that this is the only moment we get.

If I bleach it again, dye it back, maybe
I can savor the exclamation points
that come after my name when you say it just
a little longer, before we go our own ways again.

NICK CREEL

Manufactured

manufactured home trailer
propped up on cinder blocks
nine miles from the grocery stores
and main street shops nine miles
from the school the solitude
no neighbors and no visitors
the front lawn was desolate

my mother covered windows in tin
foil sun leaked through cracked
wrinkles particles of nicotine
danced in afternoon glow nicotine
dripped from ceiling brown
ominous never behind
the photos in the hallway

the photos concealed something
more than nicotine stains in our
manufactured home what the walls
were manufactured around
my mother always shouted after
school portraits because I failed
because my smile looked manufactured

Bad Vibrations

His text read “Why aren’t you
answering me?” so when I got home

I flung my phone into the toilet bowl.
I resolved to live the life of a luddite

from that moment on. God, the agony
of quitting cold turkey! Whenever I

pressed numbers on the microwave
my hands quivered. Even the thermostat

dial was too much, but I had to
touch it to ward off the winter chill.

But still I thought of his text message
even with my phone in the drink;

I expected him to plow through
the piles of snow, burrow below my

home, etch the message into my eyelids
so I couldn’t forget him—but he didn’t,

and sheaves of fresh snow further
censor him with each ethereal layer.

NATASHA KING

drift pelagic

when you are a worm and you eat the whale
don't you want it to love you?
when you are a child and you hunt for polished pebbles
don't you want them to love you?

when you are a naked body and you let the boy put his fingers
clumsily on your brittle bones
don't you want his mouth to love you?

i know in my bones the surf's strength and its
crushing fangs of foam. i know.

but i am ankle-deep in hungry sands, spinning hope from sunlight,
digging for some perfect seashell, polished and unbroken,
like a blessing spit from the mouth of god.

the wave that drags you under and whips you out to the horizon line,
is it the wave that loves you best? is it?

don't you want the pebbles
don't you want the boy to kiss your fingers
don't you want the sea to take you with it?
do you believe you want this?

i have felt the surf's strength and its
mercy, which is no mercy at all.
the seas of our love are
ready to pulverize the basalt of our bodies into clay.

so i have learned to breathe air and water like light and now i can never be
drowned, beloved.
when the whale falls so do you
and the rot of flesh hugs you to the shale

and the bones of you are shattered
and a hundred thousand
hungry tiny mouths of prayer
hunt you down, and is this love?

don't you want
to be beloved?

don't you *want*,
beloved?

aren't i a blessing?
aren't i clay and seawater?
aren't i spit from the mouth of god?

i will not sink for you, beloved. limbless, voiceless, bloodless.
i want to be the heart in the whalefall, devoured and devourer.
i want to be the lover. i want to be loved.
beloved, look at me, mouth and manna.

the heart's no harbor, beloved.
a hundred lifetimes i am torn from shore and

sundered. i drift pelagic and i am whole and wholly no one's.

but isn't that
the shiniest stone
isn't that
the whelk pulled whole and holy
with frigid fingers
from the kissing mouth of the deep?

AMEE NASSRENE BROUMAND

Oyster

I spat out the sand
they fed me,
swallowing instead
eye after eye after eye.

The screaming grew
incandescent, unhinged
as they tore me apart
and found my
pearl.

ERIN CISNEY

Punishment

too yellow, too bright, like a botched
lobotomy, retching into the surf.

I'm learning to be more visceral, to exist
on the same plane as my guilt,

all pain and *no*, ***please***. 36 hours
asleep, dreaming of your fist, how it felt

between my teeth, a mouth full
of broken glass. I want men

to bury me. I want to meet
the beast in the woods, dragging

his kill through wet leaves. A woman
climbs out from a crack in the concrete

wall of the basement and *Oh God*
her eyes her mouth

she's full of flames and she's screaming.

How I Sold Myself

Gently and in small pieces, small enough that their absence was of no noticeable consequence. I kept breathing. My heart still a warm conductor, blood pooling in all the right places. It took decades to understand that my chest is lined in barbed wire where soft things catch and snag, shredding to dirty pulp over time, ruined but still very much ensnared. The trick is to be more slippery, she said. The trick is *20mg a day and 20mg a day and 20mg a day*, learn to love chemistry and memorize the periodic table. So I dissected frogs and cataloged their anatomy, I held their still-beating hearts apart from their tiny corpses, we all did. We had no remorse, we were going places. Our parents were spending good money for our right to be more than amphibious. I advertised my death count in bold, capital letters. Said, see this? This is something worth paying for, I have “experience,” and all the while my body collected refuse like a ditch along the highway, littered and overgrown. A spider lived in my head and it caught fly after fly in the web it built there, cradled their worn-out carcasses lovingly in gossamer and said, you, I’m going to savor you for a long time. I’m going to devour you slowly.

NORA GAUSE

*This Means You Really Love Me**

Grandmother, our name is granite
in the South Carolina sun. Mossy growth
obscures our birth, our death, our marriages,
eating away our separations.
Perhaps we tilt in the red clay soil —
there are days when I can't walk straight,
when my mouth is dry as dirt, and I ache
with the weight of a beloved wife.

Cousins forty years removed speak of you
in silence and tears, and cry for me in the missing,
none knew you but to love you, Nora.
There's an Oedipal reckoning to be had
between us — your son, your husband, my father,
We're all tied up in J's and E's and N's
and spelt out on this stone.
Jasper, James, Elizabeth, Nora.
Grandmother, did you know you were dying?

I always thought the poverty of a slow death —
Tuberculosis — consumption, perhaps — drained you slowly,
wasted you. Or a shameful death, feminine,
like cancer, cervix in situ, uterine — a secret
no one would spill, guilt eats away your generation.
This morning, I bled in the sofa bed sheets
and whispers whisked them away,
hiding from the menfolk,
hush, now, don't let them know.

I was eighteen when we met, January. In my sensible shoes,
a woolen plaid skirt, sweating in the sun.
It's long past time we spoke again, Grandmother.
Stone angel, no warmth, long past bleeding,
my name is on your grave and I'm sinking into you,
shall I fall prostrate on your manicured lap,
my blood for yours?

Hush, cover my ears, it was them —
them that did it — a winter cold,
perhaps a night without a scarf,
our ears did you in. An infection.
Quick, encephalitic, brutal, you were twenty-eight.

Worms in your brain like the curls in your hair.
Grandmother, did you know you were dying?

I've decades more at forty-eight,
decades more than you.
Your son is dead, and
I'm living out fatherless years,
but I've deep scars — I hear cries
in the night, for you, for me —
our ears have always given me trouble.

Grandmother, the weight of our name,
it pulls me down. I could call you up,
raise your slim cold arms, and everyone
would see your bones in mine.

Written in the spidery hands of a fountain pen,
Daddy's Brownie Box camera
caught you once, named you tight on the black
and white paper, fading out now.
I can catch you again. I've a sharpie,
stick and poke, I'll tattoo our name with flying hearts
I'll amend this monument, dig down my flesh
to yours, make us true with time,
but not too deep, Grandmother,
don't let me carve too deep,
we don't want to stay here long.

**The Smiths. "Rusholme Ruffians." Meat is Murder, Rough Trade Records, 1985. Lyrics, Steven Patrick Morrissey*

You must respect the tools that open the world to you

He spotted her near Granddad's property, taking pictures of the rusted-over irrigation rig on the Whitener's old lot. Hair-dye-red locks spilled over her slender shoulders and tangled with her camera strap. He shoved his toy combine off the porch steps and made an effort to remove Buggo's grill-brush-bristle hair from his hand-me-down sweatshirt, which bore the insignia of a college sports team he didn't care for. Jeremiah didn't want to talk about the Blackshirts. He didn't want to talk about Buggo or his Case IH combine toy. He wanted to be the center of her attention.

He put himself in front of her lens, became her new subject.

"Great, kid," she said. "Thanks."

She'd been kneeling and aiming her camera at the old sky-blue Chevy that sat on uneven wheels before a crumbling barn.

He was surprised by the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes, the creases in her forehead, and the laugh lines that bore the weight of her forced smile. He wasn't used to seeing older women in sleeveless white shirts and tight jeans. Grandma Munroe certainly could never fit into anything so flattering. And his mother only wore such outfits when she was dating—which invariably meant that he'd end up on Granddad's farm for a few months while mommy recovered.

"You like the Huskers?" she asked.

"No."

"Me neither. Wouldn't have known how to follow that up if you'd said yes."

He stared up at her, marveling at the intensity of her green eyes, the freckles that peppered her arms, and the whiteness of her teeth.

"Well, it's been great getting to know you," she said, "but I've got work to do. So if you could, you know," she cocked her thumb toward Granddad's house, "skedaddle, that would be amazing."

Jeremiah didn't budge. He wanted something from her—something that he didn't have the language for, something he only understood conceptually. He stepped aside as she knelt and realigned her camera. His eyes were magnets to her lips as they peeled and stretched across her teeth, gleaming with moisture as she tensed and snapped her photos.



He'd been waiting for weeks to see her again. Every morning after Granddad put their cereal bowls in the sink, Jeremiah would retrace the path of the pretty stranger, starting at the western edge of the Whitener's abandoned property and ending past the dirt road that bordered the Camacho fields—where Jeremiah had done a brief stint as a detasseler last summer. Mom had been grateful for the extra money. She'd called him her little man.

On that particular October morning, he tripped over a stone that knocked out the last of his baby teeth. He sucked at the blood and dirt in his mouth and relished the pain. He was a man now. No more baby teeth, no more baby.

Jeremiah reached for the rock. Mom had taught him to treasure such objects. She still had her first lighter and a pair of tweezers and a tiny spoon. You must respect the tools that open the world to you. Without them, you're nothing. The difference between us and the apes, she said, is that we respect the implements of our enlightenment. We are how we augment, and don't you forget it.

The rock that had claimed his tooth was no rock at all. It was a hunk of wood—rounded with age and the bite of sand in the prairie winds. Even better. He could drill a hole and make a necklace out of it.

He rushed home for his shovel.



Jeremiah dug for months until the cold weather forced him to spread a tarp over the excavation site.

When it snowed, he spent days clearing it—not just from Granddad's driveway, but from the neighbors' property too. While he hefted the densely packed snow, he dreamt about the hole at the southern edge of the abandoned field.

The pretty photographer had been so impressed by the rust-eaten '57 Chevy. Wait until she saw what Jeremiah was digging up.



From Granddad, Jeremiah gleaned that the horse carriage had likely been part of a convoy heading to California along the Oregon Trail. Families would band together to make the trip but it wasn't uncommon for there to be casualties and feuding along the way. People got sick, died, were buried if there was time. Kids fell under wagon wheels or the hooves of horses or were shot through by weapons accidentally discharging. Families were expelled from the group and left to fend for themselves.

"It's tough country out here," Granddad said. "Always has been."



When he was on a hot streak, Jeremiah would skip school in order to keep digging. No one seemed concerned by his absence. Teachers were used to him vanishing from their classrooms once his mother got done recovering.

By the middle of March, he'd quit school entirely.



Parts of the carriage he had to dig out with a small trowel: the space beneath the arch of the driver's seat, the area between each wheel spoke, and the interior of the enclosed cab.

That morning found Jeremiah working on such a space, lying on his side, several feet below ground, trying to force his spade into a stubborn chunk of dirt above the rear axle. He planted the trowel and hammered it with the flat of his palm. The tip of it split the dirt but refused to go any deeper.

By that evening, he'd discovered the cause of his earlier frustration—a long wooden box had been crudely nailed to the underside of the passenger's cab.

The box seemed hastily constructed, having no built-in means by which to be opened. And it was heavy, too. So heavy that the middle sagged with the weight of its contents.

Jeremiah's daily regimen of digging had made him strong, but he could barely haul the box out of the crater. He had to utilize his little red wagon to transport his mysterious discovery home.

With considerable effort, he hefted it into the jaws of Granddad's table vice and began to saw. When Jeremiah beheld its contents, his legs failed.



It took several trips to transfer all of the silver bars upstairs to his room. He hid them in a laundry bin, in his backpack, and in his toy chest. If Granddad saw the silver, he might take the silver. And even if he didn't, he'd question where the boy found such things. Jeremiah didn't want to explain. The buried carriage was his gift to the pretty photographer. It belonged to him until he gave it to her.

The pinwheel Jeremiah set on his desk delicately, atop his pile of untouched homework. The paper spinner was so brittle that he didn't dare blow into it—fearful that too strong a gust would obliterate the toy.

The clouded glass ball he set on his nightstand, next to the flattened note he'd found between two of the ingots, which read:

MR. KAPLAN

THE KICKSHAW WILL ACKNOWLEDGE A CONTRACT FULFILLED.

—M

The orb was a little smaller than his fist and had a pleasant weight to it. He found himself transfixed when staring into the glass. He rotated and rolled it, convinced that the proper viewing angle would allow him a glimpse past the veil of cotton candy fog to the wonder beneath.

The evening slipped away.



It might have been the slight breeze produced by the twirling pinwheel that made him stir from his sleep, or it might have been the sound of the crinkly parchment paper scraping against the stick. Or it might have been the unmistakable anxiety of being observed—that hair-tingling sureness, the displacement of air, the purposefulness of silence. He was not alone.

Jeremiah opened his eyes to see a young girl made of candle smoke blowing into the pinwheel. Her cheeks were full and freckled and her smile was only interrupted by the pursing of her lips before she set the toy spinning. So serene was her expression that Jeremiah felt almost no apprehension about seeing a ghost—though he was perturbed when he realized that her visage did not extend down past her shoulders.

“Hello,” he whispered.

The girl took no notice of him, instead remaining fixated on her toy.

“Are you dead?”

The pinwheel spun and the girl smiled.

He watched her watch the toy.

And then her eyes widened, her mouth dropped, and she turned to confront whatever she’d heard behind her.

Jeremiah followed her eyes to his open closet.

“Is something there?” he asked the ghost.

Her lips slowly curled and he watched the top of her chest heave as she took in air for a scream. And then, in the next instant, she was facing the pinwheel again, grinning. She pursed her lips and blew and set the toy spinning. He watched her elated face as the pinwheel spun, watched her pupils dilate and dread take hold, watched her neck twitch as she turned, and watched her reset to her original position once more.

Jeremiah came to understand that this spirit was something akin to a video recording. When she reached the end of her tape, she rewound in an instant, and then played again. He supposed that would make her pinwheel like a VCR.

He gingerly lifted it from the nightstand and paced across his room. The ghost came with the pinwheel, blowing and marveling at it, periodically falling under the sway of terror as she turned.

He walked throughout the house with the pinwheel—the blades of which remained in perpetual motion as the ghost huffed and puffed. He walked outside with the toy and the girl.

The two were inseparable.

As he reseated it on his desk, he couldn’t help but feel jealous.



“What’s the most important thing in your life?”

Granddad grunted.

"Welp." He shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. "I suppose that'd be you and your mom there, Bucko."

"No, not like people. Like things. Like a tool or something. Objects."

He frowned and scratched at his sandpaper stubble.

"Ah," he said. "Of course." From his breast pocket he withdrew a small, leather-bound book and placed it on the Christmas tablecloth that neither of them had bothered to update. "Your Grandma Munroe got this prayer book for me on one of our first dates. Lost plenty of wallets over the years, but I never once misplaced this."

Jeremiah touched it with shaking hands. As he did, he saw his grandfather's face quavering in ghost smoke, splitting the book and smiling in the kind of unguarded way that Jeremiah hadn't seen since before Grandma Munroe passed. The book would be his VCR.

How wonderful it must be to be attached. Not to a person—who could leave—but to a thing, which never would.



Jeremiah scoured his toys for one that held some kind of sentimental value, but he came up short. They'd made for euphoric Christmas mornings, but their magic had faded with their craftsmanship, leaving him with a plastic tote full of decapitated plastic heads and abdomens destroyed by snapped rubber bands.

If his clothes had ever been special, their significance had been diluted by school and CCD and Thanksgivings.

He sat cross-legged and pulled his backpack leaden with silver bars toward him. Maybe he could use these to buy something of emotional value. Or perhaps the bars themselves mattered.

But no.

They were only the promise of excitement. Jeremiah could never be eternally bound to a bar of silver. They were a tool, worthy of respect, but not much more than that.



The pawn shopkeeper was ten minutes late opening the store. Jeremiah left the bauble with the shopkeeper as he searched the shelves, scouring other people's refuse as he had his own, longing for something worthy of his everlasting devotion.

He found nothing and when he returned to the counter, the shop owner offered him three dollars for the glass ball.

Three dollars was what?—a dozen cans of pop?

"So you're saying it's worthless?"

"I'm saying I'll give you three dollars for it," the shopkeeper said.

"I rode my bike here from Hay Springs."

"Got an air pump round back if your tires are hurtin.' That'll take your trade-in value down to two seventy-five, though."

Jeremiah grunted and cleared his throat like Granddad did when the silence became uncomfortable.

"Three dollars, huh?"

"If you don't want the air," the shopkeeper said. "Two seventy-five if you do."

Jeremiah couldn't imagine that the ghost's pinwheel or Granddad's prayer book would even fetch that much.

"Think I'll hang on to it."



Jeremiah dumped the screws and washers out of the rawhide drawstring satchel. Granddad barely spent any time in the garage anymore. He didn't need it. The orb, however, was in desperate need of a home. He laced the strings through his belt and stood with elbows outturned and fists planted on his hips, standing how a man was supposed to stand when he was proud.

He loved the way that it felt—having the heavy bauble at his side, pulling him down. Jeremiah even suspected he'd grow to appreciate the bruises on his leg where the ball would continually hammer as he walked.

So he had his object and he was proud of it, but to really infuse the thing with meaning—to forever bind it to his soul—he needed to make some memories with it. And when Jeremiah gave some thought as to where a man of his age might make some memories, his mind invariably wandered to school.

He decided to return to Hay Springs Junior High the following day, and as he drifted off to sleep with the candle-smoke ghost fueling her pinwheel by his head, he felt the same nervous agitation that he'd come to associate with his mother's return.



Wade Pendelton welcomed Jeremiah back to school with an arm slung over the shoulder and the foulest string of cusses that he'd ever heard. He then asked if he'd left his underwear with Jeremiah's mother last night.

Wade went down without much effort, his head colliding with a locker as he tumbled.

Jeremiah knelt beside him and pulled the orb from his satchel. The clouds had parted and the ball pulsed—now full of a sediment-rich, roiling purple water. He placed it against Wade's kneecap before swinging his straightened arm out wide and bringing the ball crashing into the boy's bones.

The sound reminded him of when Grandma Munroe would crush peppercorns in her mortar.



Buggo wouldn't shut up.

All that mutt did was bark and bark and bark.

And he wouldn't stop until Jeremiah took him outside and threw sticks for the dumb dog to chase. After ten minutes of fetch and several mouthfuls of blowing dust, Jeremiah's patience had run out.

He unsheathed the orb and stared into Buggo's expectant eyes.

Jeremiah started breathing faster. He could almost see the clouded, purple ball arcing through the air, could almost see Buggo open his mouth to catch it, could almost hear the confused yelp accompanying the crunch of the dog's pulverized teeth.

He didn't throw it.

Buggo was just a stupid animal. He didn't deserve the orb's honor.



There were at least two hundred people downtown for the Harvest Festival. He'd peeked out from his cover on the rooftop of Franny Jacobsen's abandoned bakery as many times as he dared. He didn't need an accurate count. He needed to remain unseen.

He put his back against the decorative rooftop façade and watched the sky darken.

It would soon be time, in the moments between sunset and streetlights kicking on. He passed the minutes by watching the ethereal video loop of the little girl blowing into her pinwheel. That would be his someday soon. That connection.



Jeremiah stood and hurled the orb into the crowd. In the second before the glowing, throbbing ball left his hand, he zeroed in on his target—an old woman with a confetti-colored babushka wrapped around her head. She wore a huge, warm smile and she held her arms open, waiting for her nearby friend to enter her embrace.

She stood out. She was memorable. Worthy.

As it flew, for a brief moment Jeremiah thought he saw a flash of lightning in the orb's clouds.

He'd thrown hard and fast, but with no degree of accuracy.

The glass clanged on the street a few feet shy of its intended target. It bounced once and then rolled into a storm drain.



The pretty photographer sat on the edge of the hole and scooted forward, bracing herself with her bare arms as she slid down the incline. "This is incredible," she said, running her hand over the wooden frame. "Who else knows about this?"

"No one. Just you and me."

She turned and glanced up at him, her mouth slightly open, her brow furrowed. He could feel the purple effluvium pulsing within the orb hanging from his belt.

"Do you think I should tell someone about it?" he asked. He'd practiced this conversation a thousand times, but when the pretty photographer strode back into his life, all of his careful planning went out the window. His rehearsed dialogue felt clumsy in his mouth. And she wasn't sticking to the script.

"Maybe," she said, squatting down and examining the underside of the carriage. She ran her fingers over the space from which he'd extracted the box full of silver, the pinwheel, the orb, and the note. "Did you take anything from this?"

"No," he lied, hearing the judgement in her voice.

"Good," she said, refocusing on the vehicle. "This thing was buried for a reason. Might have been used in some kind of crime. Or might have been storing something dangerous that wasn't meant to be found."

"You think a person did this?" Jeremiah asked, dangling his legs over the edge of the hole. "I figured it must have been the wind. Like, with erosion."

She shook her head as she squeezed the wheel spokes. "Unlikely. This thing is a hundred and fifty years old tops. Would take longer than that for this to be buried the natural way. Besides, the wood is in too good of shape. Prairie winds and all the sand flying around out here would have sanded this thing down to a stack of toothpicks after a couple decades. No, someone did this the old-fashioned way. Someone was hiding something."

"Granddad thinks it might have been settlers heading out West." Jeremiah loosened the strings on the satchel and pulled the throbbing purple orb from its bag.

"They wouldn't have used horse carriages. You need them big old covered wagons for a journey like that. This thing was never California-bound." She circled the carriage and clapped her hands together. "We got ourselves a mystery here," she said with a grin. "I'll give you a hundred bucks if you don't tell anyone else about this." She didn't wait for Jeremiah to reply before she began muttering to herself about researching titles and how there just might be an honest-to-God book here.

"What about me?" Jeremiah asked, sitting on the rim of the hole he'd dug, alternating his hands so that the orb would roll from one to the other, smacking his palms with all of its weight every time it landed.

"What about you?" the pretty photographer asked. She didn't mean to be spiteful, he thought. But it was clear that she barely thought of him at all. "I'll dedicate the book to you. Or maybe give you a very special thanks in the acknowledgements. Why don't you lower my camera bag down here?"

Jeremiah set the orb in the dirt and reached for her tool.

"Are you married?" he asked.

She forced a smile as she accepted the bag.

"Used to be."

"Did you love your camera more than your husband?"

She favored him with a squinting glare, letting him know that she thought he was a weird kid.

"That's a silly question," she said as she knelt down and began unpacking. "For a few reasons." She withdrew a few black nylon bags. "Never had a husband. And things can't replace people." She fitted the proper lens onto her camera and stared at nothing for a brief, contemplative moment before saying, "neither can people."

Jeremiah retrieved his orb and stood, glancing down at the woman lining up her shot before setting off back home. On the way, he pitched his treasure into the Andersons' manure lagoon.

Jeremiah rocked Granddad's recliner until the old man awoke from his midday nap. He asked if his mother had called, or if Granddad knew when she might be coming back.



Sinking in the garden by Fabrice Poussin.

Mr. Harris

I close all the windows. The wind is picking up and the dust will blow in. In the streaming sunshine, a man walks alone on the dirt road.

From the kitchen, Mother calls, "Opal, have you got those windows closed up?"

"Yes, Ma," I call back.

"Go tell the boys to get washed for dinner," she says, coming in and drawing the curtain aside. Seeing the stranger in the road, Mother leans forward for a closer look. *Could it be?* she's thinking. *But no*, she realizes. *It isn't him*. Her eyes are gentle when she says, "Another one blowing in hopeless and hungry. Set an extra place before you fetch the boys."

Everybody jostles around the long kitchen table, getting seated, keeping their hands in their laps with Mother's pork stew and dumplings before them. Father is on the back porch with the stranger who holds his cap in his hands. Mother and my oldest sister, Nessa, bring the food. I sit on a bench between the little girls, Martha and Clara. Our brothers, George and Merle, are across the table ribbing each other. There's Baby sitting up in his cradle. He holds his hands out and cries as Nessa goes by with a bowl of potatoes, but he's okay.

I try to hear what Father is saying to the stranger, but there's too much noise. I see their mouths moving. *Hate to ask you*, the man says. *Welcome, Stranger*, say Father's lips.

Father leads us in prayer. *Come, Lord Jesus, be thou our guest. Let these, thy gifts to us, be blest.*

"Amen," replies the table.

We wait until Father has taken a ladleful and served the stranger before we move. As the plates go around, I help the little girls. Baby is on Mother's lap while Nessa spoons out their stew.

Mother speaks first: "Tell us your name, Stranger," she says with a smile.

"Name's Harris, Ma'am," he says, "And I'm pleased to meet you all. Thank you for the meal. Been a long time since I've seen a spread like this."

"You're welcome, Mr. Harris," says Mother. "Where do you hail from?"

"I guess you'd say I come and go as I please."

As the stranger heaps his plate with seconds and then thirds, George and Merle throw him resentful gazes. Nessa never looks his way at all. She helps Mother with Baby, brings more bread, and fills our glasses with creamy fresh milk.



Harris sleeps in the hayloft on a sprung mattress under an old quilt. It's clean even if worn. Mother gives him a towel to wash his face and a pillow for his head. Father gives him an oil lamp and a Bible to read.

"Hayloft's near empty this time of the year or I couldn't let you take a light up there. Even so, you'll be careful with this."

The boys scowl after Harris as he disappears into the dark.



I am nestled in bed between Martha and Clara, both asleep, when Nessa looks in.

"Time to put out your light," she says, and I obey. She crosses the room to close our window which faces the barn, lamplight glowing in the hayloft.

"Leave the curtains," I say. "I like to watch the moon go by."

"There's no moon tonight," says Nessa, leaving a gap in the curtains anyway. "Good night, Opal," she says.

"Good night."



In the barnyard the next morning, collecting eggs, I know right away that something is wrong. The dogs are nowhere in sight. Approaching the chicken coop, I find blood and feathers around the little doorway.

"Get in here with those eggs, Opal," Mother shouts from the kitchen window, but I don't move.

Father passes with a pail of fresh milk. "What is it, Opal?"

"There's a dead chicken," I say, pointing to the mess.

Father looks stricken. "Where are the dogs?"

"Nowhere."

He groans. "Don't touch it," he says. "Get the eggs; the boys and I will clean up after breakfast."

I nod and make my way in. My stomach heaves as I step around the gore. I swallow hard, hearing Mother's voice in my head. *Don't be a ninny, Opal. You'll cut the heads off dozens of chickens when you're a farmer's wife.* I get the eggs fast and go back to the house.

Harris sits beside Father at the head of the table.

Come, Lord Jesus, be thou our guest. Let these, thy gifts to us, be blest.

"Amen."

We pass platters of eggs, bread, and sausage.

When they come his way, Harris says, "Not so much for me this morning."

George and Merle exchange satisfied glances, hearing that the newcomer is learning his

place. Meanwhile, they heap their plates until Mother says, "Leave some for the rest of us."

"Well, Harris," says Father, wiping his chin. "We got a fence needs mending down by the creek. Could use an extra hand if you'll be around a while. Can't pay you, of course, but you're welcome to stay and board with us, if you like."

"Thank you," says Harris. "I believe I will."

At night, I lie in bed between the girls and watch the moon. Night by night, it grows from a sliver rising over the barn until it reaches full bloom, a great yellow circle glowing behind the corn silo, lighting up the barnyard. In the black, dark barn, the oil lamp flickers in the hayloft. It's late when I hear something in the yard. I get up to close the window. In the bright moonlight, nothing moves. The animals are restless in the barn. The dogs are whining, penned up to keep them out of the henhouse. I hurry back to bed. For a long time, nothing happens. It's a struggle to stay awake but I keep watch, shadows changing shape as the moon drifts overhead. The flame flickers in the hayloft.



In the morning, there's another dead chicken.

"Why do you let him stay?" I ask Mother as we're kneading bread dough at the floured worktable. We've rolled up our sleeves, our dresses covered by long aprons.

"Why shouldn't he stay?" Mother asks. "Father says he's a good hand. He does the chores Bill used to do. Before he went away."

Yes.

We put the bread dough in loaf pans and cover them with flour sacks to rise. I fetch a pail of water. Mother is feeding Baby when I return. Nessa is knitting new sweaters for winter while eavesdropping on the party-line phone out in the hall.

"You shouldn't listen in," I exclaim.

She shushes me and waves me away. I wander out to the barn and give a dish of cream to the cats. I visit the dairy cows whose milk Father sells to the grocer in town. I look up to the hayloft and wonder.

From the top of the ladder, I can see Mother's quilt folded on the mattress, the oil lamp on an upturned milk crate under the window. I note the Bible with a red satin marker tucked into its pages. His knapsack lies in the corner near an old pitchfork. I wonder if I'm brave enough to open it.

I step forward, looking around, searching for signs. There's nothing. I pick up the Bible and read from the marked page. *...a generation that curseth their father, and doth not bless their mother. There is a generation, O how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up. There is a generation, whose teeth are as swords, and their jaw teeth as knives, to devour...*

"Opal, I'm surprised to find you here," says Harris. My heart leaps as I turn to find him standing at the top of the ladder, his face obscure in the dim light.

"Mr. Harris," I say, stammering. "I'm sorry to intrude. I don't know why I came up here."

"In search of something to read?" he suggests, motioning to the Bible in my hands.

"No, no," I say and put the book down. "I'm so sorry."

"Please don't apologize," says Harris. "Will you be going?"

"Yes, yes," I say, aware now that I'm frozen in place. I'm clumsy getting to the ladder.

"Careful now," says Harris. He watches me all the way down, sees me disappear around the cow stalls. His eyes are on me from the hayloft as I cross the yard, but when I reach the kitchen door and turn to face him, there's only an empty window.



Baby has come down with a fever, and Nessa is tending to him when it's time to put the light out.

"The Baumbach twins are down, too," she says when she comes in to check on us. "I heard Lyddie call the doctor this afternoon."

"Mother says it's wrong to use the party-line to snoop on people."

"It's not snooping," says Nessa before going back to Baby.

A breeze comes through the open window. There's no moon. The lamp lights the hayloft as always, but tonight Harris is there too, reading beside the window with his back to me. His eyeglasses glint in the light from the lamp. He never stretches, never turns, never moves at all. *What are you?* I think to myself.



Baby cries out from his fever and I'm startled awake. The window in the hayloft is light but empty. Harris is gone. The animals stir and a wind picks up in the yard. I rush to close the window and see Harris there in the dark, disappearing around the back of the chicken coop. He turns and looks up at me as I slam down the sash.



At breakfast, Nessa does all the cooking. Mother is upstairs with Baby, swabbing his brow as he sweats and fusses. I steal glances at Harris sitting next to Father. Each time I do, he turns to meet my gaze. I look away. Still, I notice that his plate is full, and at the next glimpse, empty, though he seems to have eaten nothing. Then Clara spills her milk, and before we finish mopping up, Father, Harris, and the boys have all left for morning chores.

"What do you think of Mr. Harris?" I ask Nessa as we clear the table.

"Why should I think anything about him? He's nobody to me."

"Nobody."

"I don't care for the way he looks at me," Nessa says. "As if he would eat me up."

"He seems to know my thoughts."

"Men always act that way," says Nessa.



Mother is watching over Baby while he tries to sleep, mending a pair of Harris's work pants. "Men never mind their clothes," she says.

I'm putting a button back on Father's Sunday shirt. Nessa is working the foot pedal on the Singer sewing machine, taking in one of my old dresses for Martha.

"Maybe some of Bill's old work clothes would fit Mr. Harris," says Mother reflectively. "Bill wouldn't mind. He'd be glad to help. Of course, he would."

I finish the button and pick up a sock to darn.

"Maybe Mr. Harris will stay through haymaking this fall," says Mother. "Of course, he can't sleep out in the barn when winter sets in. By then, he'll have to go." Through with her mending, she looks up and says, "Do you suppose some family is looking after Bill like we take care of Mr. Harris? I hope so. Wherever he is, I pray someone is feeding him and giving him work. Do you think so, girls? I think so."

Yes.



By the end of the summer, we've lost Baby. His fever never breaks. Mother neither sleeps nor eats, keeping watch night after night. After weeks of nursing him, Baby slips away in her arms. Nessa stands in the doorway, her eyes soaked with tears.

There's a graveyard outside the country church. We lay Baby in the ground next to an infant brother and the stillborn who came between me and Martha. We mourn with solemn faces while the pastor says the words. Wind sweeps over the ripe fields. Harris comes down from the hayloft as we rumble into the yard in Father's pickup truck.

"My condolences," he says, joining us in the kitchen where we find that our neighbors have been round to drop off casseroles and stews, salads and desserts. We collapse onto the benches. Baby's cradle is empty by the window.



After a day of quiet mourning, Father and Harris take their axes out to the back acreage to clear tree stumps. George and Merle go along, planning mischief and hoping for a chance to sneak away. Mother is resting in bed with the door closed. Nessa won't come away from the party-line phone. I climb up to the hayloft and thumb the pages of the old Bible to mark the page which begins: *We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.* When the men come in, I'm at the worktable under the window, cleaning the oil lamp.

"Opal, that's Mr. Harris's lamp," says Father.

"Yes," I say, my voice level, my eyes on Harris. "And it was kind of you to bring it down, Mr. Harris, with all your things, now that you've decided to leave."

"Are you leaving, Harris?" Father asks, surprised.

I take Father's arm, saying, "He's brought all his things here to the kitchen and the hayloft is swept clean."

"Hope it's nothing we've done," says Father.

Harris's dark eyes follow me.

"Don't worry, Father," I say. "I'm sure Mr. Harris knows how we're missing Baby and feels it's time to move on."

Harris's gaze hardens. I lift his knapsack from the table and offer it up. Harris takes the bag with Father looking on.

"Hate to see you go," says Father, reaching out to shake his hand.

"Perhaps Mr. Harris will find his way back sometime," I say. "Isn't that so, Mr. Harris?"

"I come and go as I please," says Harris.

Yes.

"You'll be wanting to take this with you, too, won't you?" I say, handing him the old Bible with the newly placed page marker. As he takes it, his eyes grow wide and he shrinks from me.

"Yes, yes," he says hurriedly. "I wouldn't like to go without it."

"Wise words," says Father.

In a moment, Harris is gone. Father and the boys are settling down around the table. I serve them cold meats and brown bread. I pour out glasses of our own good milk cool from the icebox. Nessa comes in listlessly and sits in her place beside Mother's empty chair. She is pale, but she eats. I help the little girls with their meals and bring out more food to fill my brothers' plates. I clear the table and wash the dishes while Nessa dries.

"Are you glad he's gone?" I ask.

"Opal," cries Nessa, "How could I be glad? Baby's dead. How can you even ask me?"

"Not Baby," I say. "Harris."

"Oh, him," says Nessa with disdain. "Well, if he wouldn't take me with him, he may just as well be gone." She sighs and looks disgusted.

With the dishes done, I go around and close all the windows. When the wind picks up, the dust blows in.

Scarecrow

It's the gunfire that keeps me awake. I don't notice it much during the day, when my headphones are in or the TV is going, but at night those distant, whispered cracks keep my eyes pried open. There's no rhythm to it—sometimes there'll be a flurry of noise, like someone tossing a match into a crate of firecrackers. Other times, there's a single shot, the metallic ring of metal meeting metal, then nothing, not for a long time. I keep expecting that lone bullet to shatter my bedroom window and find my skull. I don't think I'm allowed to rest until it does.

Ash isn't bothered by noise. Not anymore. She usually drinks until she passes out.



I'm up before Ash so I can take my pills without her watching. There's a veil of disdain that films over her eyes whenever she catches me at it. I didn't understand where it came from until a friend of an acquaintance told me about a conversation he and Ash had. According to him, Ash had said the drugs castrated me—not the drugs we used to do, the ones we did in our teens when we had mistaken our first high for love, but the prescriptions, the very things that were supposed to make me more human.

I don't know why he told me this. It was clear he wanted to sleep with her. Maybe he already had.

Should I have raged? I wanted to. I kept opening and closing my fists, trying to get the blood moving in the right direction, and the more I tried to resurrect an old part of me, the more I knew he was right. All I could do was stand up and limp away and pretend my impotence was still hidden. Waking up before Ash was part of that.

Ash joins me in the kitchen. She kisses me, a quick peck on the lips. Then she pours herself coffee and stares into the mug.

"Did you sleep?"

"Not enough."

Ash takes a sip of coffee, shudders.

"I heard it's a firing range for cops," she says. "That's why they're shooting all night."

"Where did you hear that?"

"I don't know. People."

"People are wrong."

"How can you be so sure?"

Ash looks up from her drink. The corners of her mouth flick upward. I don't have a reason to doubt her, but I also don't want her to be right.

"We've been here, what—a month? I've barely seen any patrol cars go by. If it was a place for cops, there'd be a parade of them."

"I guess you would know," Ash says. "You're around here more than me."

"I guess."

She sighs and takes out her phone and scrolls. From here I can tell she's reading messages, but I can't tell from whom.

"If it's not cops," Ash says, "then someone should say something."

"What would I say? And who would I say it to?"

"Let the leasing office know."

"Sure. They'll smile and they won't do shit."

"Well we can't just sit around and let things happen to us."

I say nothing. Neither does Ash. We spend the rest of the morning in silence. When she leaves for work, I get hit with a strange feeling that makes me dizzy, one I can only define as equal parts relief and dread.



I spend the next hour pretending to look for work. After that, I debate canceling an upcoming doctor's appointment, one I've been waiting the past three months for. It almost happens, I almost stoke up enough dismal courage to dial up the office and tell the doctor to go fuck himself, but just as I'm about to, the phone gets hot. Magma hot. I hurl it across the room. It hits the wall with a dull thud.

I check my hand for burns. I check my phone. Everything is the same as it was a moment before.

Gunfire cannons in the distance. I put on my shoes and go outside.

The complex is small, well kept, quiet. People keep to themselves. The community is gated. I never imagined living in a place like this, a place I could walk freely without looking over my shoulder. The sense of security was supposed to help me relax, to heal. But I'm not sure if that's possible. I haven't been alive long, not in any sort of objective sense, but the weight of who I am and what I have done seems larger than my lived years. By the time I realized what had happened it was too late. And here I am.

I do laps around the community. I pretend it's my job—no, a sacred duty—to walk the infinite circle, to put one foot in front of the other and to never stop, lest a calamity befall us all. Silent hero, unknown savior, orbiting round and round and round these brick buildings to keep their occupants safe. It feels good, to do something productive, even in fantasy.

But my new calling is short lived. I feel a set of eyes on me, narrowed and curious. It's one of the maintenance staff, taking a smoke break, and when I meet his gaze, he looks away as if he has caught me in an intimate, private act. It's there, the truth, so clear my stomach rolls on its side—if there's a guardian of this place, it's not me.

And on the heels of this thought, another, this one an image: my mouth filled with pills, cheeks stuffed to bursting, an animal preparing for the brutality of winter.

It's not the first time I've entertained this sort of end. But what keeps me from wrapping my lips around an Rx bottle is the thought of Ash, the look she would give me if I copped out—which I would—and called an ambulance. She'd walk through the hospital doors, find me on a bed with a freshly pumped stomach, and sigh as if she had expected as much. Or—and this was worse, this was hell—she wouldn't show up at all.



We still go out on weekends. I hate these outings, these silent dinners and blockbuster films, but it's Ash's way of trying. So I go and try not to complain.

Tonight we're in a bar, and there's this guy, younger than me and better looking, and he keeps flirting with Ash, and she's letting him, she's letting him graze her knee with his fingertips and she's laughing at everything he says. In the past, when hurting people seemed natural to me, even enjoyable, I would have known what to do. Now I don't remember. Ash keeps looking at me out of the corner of her eye, as if that might jog my memory. It doesn't.

"Take it easy," I say to the guy.

"We're just talking, man."

I slump in my seat. I even try to take part in the conversation, but it makes no sense to me, so I give up. Ash stops looking at me.

The drive home is bizarre. It's as if we're strangers who stumbled into the same car, and we both need to go in opposite directions, but we're too tired to care. So we split the difference and go someplace neither of us is supposed to be.

We say nothing to each other the rest of the night, not until we're in bed, side by side and far apart. There's the gunfire, but that's not what sends an icy jolt down my spine. It's a different noise, closer in proximity. The rattle of a doorknob being tested. A soft scraping, like fingernails clawing the inside of a coffin.

Had I locked up? Or had Ash?

"Hey," she whispers. "Do you hear that?"

I thought she was asleep. The cold cascading down my spine blooms, spreads to my arms and legs. I feel her hand on my shoulder. Squeezing. Shaking. But I can't move. I can't speak. I don't even try.

"Wake up," Ash says. "*Please.*"

She must know I'm already awake, that I'm always awake, and that there's nothing I can do. She must know that by now.

The blankets rustle, shift. I open my eyes a slit—Ash is a darkened silhouette, a shade lighter than total black. She seems to glide out of the bedroom like a wraith. I hold my breath. Wait for a scream, the shattering of glass. The grunts and shrieks of struggle. And as soon as I hear them, I will act. I will, I promise. But only then.

The wraith returns. But it's different than it was—it's holding something, something menacing, like a bludgeon. That's not Ash, I think. Ash has been done away with and all that is left is demise at the hands of this creature. I lurch upward. Put my hands in front of my face and prepare for whatever happens next.

My death shifts and moves and crawls into bed beside me and only then do I realize it is Ash, that it was always Ash. The bludgeon is not a bludgeon at all—she brings the bottle to her lips, takes a long drink, then sets it between us, the cool glass resting against my thigh. Soon, I hear the soft rhythm of her breathing. I want to take her hand, but I'm afraid I'll wake her.



"I think we should buy a gun."

It's the first thing Ash says to me this morning. I blink at her. My eyes swivel to my stack of prescriptions, then back to Ash. It feels like there's an elastic around my brain, and it keeps getting tighter and tighter, and if it snaps, it's over. All of it.

"I want to buy a gun," she says again.

"Having a gun around isn't a good idea."

She shrugs. Stares at her coffee.

"Why?"

The band tightens. Capillaries burst. Fireworks go off behind my eyes.

"I'm not comfortable with it."

"I'd feel safer. There were noises last night." Now she does look at me. Eyes rimmed red, devoid of everything else. "I tried to wake you."

I try to hold her gaze. I really do. I turn around and start loading the dishwasher and hope she'll drop the subject. I hear the sound of the shower, and when Ash comes out, I go in. The water is scalding. It turns my body red. I wash my eyeballs in the molten jet.

I take a long shower. Long enough that when I get out, Ash is gone. But there's a sticky note on the fridge. On it is a crude drawing of a pistol surrounded by dollar signs. It's like she thinks I can't read, that I've regressed so much that cartoons are the only thing I'm capable of understanding. Or maybe we no longer speak the same language, and this was the best she could do.



I go to a pawn shop, one I used to frequent in my teens, when I needed a place to sell the things I found, the things I stole. The owner, an elderly man with a toothless grin, hasn't changed. But I must have, because he doesn't recognize me.

I take my time working my way around the shop, beginning at the scuffed and dented guitars, drifting slowly toward sets of mismatched furniture, rows of fishing rods erect and out of place. I pick up a porcelain figurine—it's a cartoonish-looking boy in overalls, about six inches

tall, with big dumb eyes and a curly mop of auburn hair. I run my thumb over a crack in the center of his forehead. I almost didn't notice it, the crack. The fracture was so slight most people wouldn't see it.

I head toward the guns. I take the boy with me.

The owner is waiting for me, as if he had known that's where I was headed all along. He grins and smacks his gums.

"You know what you're looking for, boss?" the owner says.

I look at the row of weapons—the pistols and rifles and shotguns all coalesce and blur, and their defining trait is that I see my self-inflicted death in each of them.

"I don't know. Something for home defense."

The owner spins around, grabs a shotgun off the rack. He holds it out to me. What choice do I have? I take it. It's heavier than I thought it'd be.

"Everyone creams themselves over handguns these days. What they don't realize is that they're hard to use."

I nod.

He continues. "But listen—there's a reason shotties never go out of style. It's real fucking hard to miss with this thing. Half of home defense is utility, that I'll grant you. The other half is intimidation."

I heft the shotgun to my shoulder. I turn it around and stare down its double barrels. And I can almost taste it, the metallic tang of the gun in my mouth.

I hand it back to the owner. He clicks his tongue.

"I get it," he says. "I do. It seems like a bit much. But you won't regret it. Trust me."

"What about that one?"

I point to a small revolver, one that could fit in the palm of my hand. Something that could easily be lost and forgotten.

"That?" The owner snorted. "You don't want that. That's a girl's piece."

I left without buying a gun. But I did take home the porcelain boy. I don't know why.



I spend the rest of the day staring at the front door, waiting for Ash to get home, mulling over what I'm going to tell her about the cracked porcelain boy. It cost seventy-five dollars because it supposedly was rare, coveted by collectors. Maybe I'll hide it. Or better yet, set it up somewhere obvious, like on the bedside table, and hope she doesn't notice. But there's no masking the charge on the card—she scowls when I splurge on name-brand cereal. And who can blame her?

Make a gag of it, a joke. It's the only way, I realize, to justify such an asinine purchase. I set the figure on my lap, wiggle my eyebrows, practice my crescent smile. This might work. More

than that, it might even be a good thing. She'll see that there's still a spark of humor left in me, as soon as she comes home.

But Ash doesn't come home.

Her cell goes straight to voicemail. Her office tells me she's already left, and they refuse to tell me more, even when I raise my voice, even when I level threats. They're defensive, all of them, deflective, like they're willing to die to keep her secrets. Tell me what you know! I scream over and over again, but they've already hung up. I don't know how long I'd been yelling into the dead void.

It's late. I look out the window; pools of orange light cast by streetlights, mingled with patches of dark, no stars. I crawl into bed and cradle the porcelain boy and close my eyes.

The gunfire begins. It does not stop. It's louder than ever.

I take the porcelain boy, put on my shoes, and leave the apartment. I follow the distant explosions, leave the complex and its artificial light through the cast iron gate, and the sound is rhythmic now, pulsating whip cracks, a sonar, leading me further toward the source of my insomnia.

The sonar leads me to a gravel road. Besides the gunshots all I can hear is the ground crunch beneath my feet, like a giant gnawing on bones. A sudden gust of wind stings my eyes and the hair on my arms bristles, stiffens. I clutch the porcelain boy, as if we might warm each other, but it doesn't help.

There's light ahead. Phosphorescent. And when I reach the light, the path opens up onto a clearing, some kind of quarry, rimmed with floodlights shining on tin cans and metal barrels and a loose group of people standing still, so still they can't be alive. They must have died standing.

But then my eyes adjust. They're not people, at least not the flesh and blood kind. They're scarecrows, all of them riddled with bullet holes and bleeding straw. There's an explosion, a fire-flash out of the corner of my eye. One of the scarecrows shudders; a wisp of smoke drifts from a fresh wound in its chest.

I turn toward the noise.

There he is, the shooter. The gunman who keeps me awake. He wears jeans, a flannel shirt, gun glinting silver. He's familiar to me in a way I'm afraid to understand.

"Are you here to try?" the gunman says.

"No." The word comes out dry. Forced. "I just wanted to meet you."

The gunman tilts his head to the side, regards me. He seems to be calculating something.

"Do you know William Tell?" he finally says.

"I know the story."

He points to the porcelain boy.

"Just hold it in your palm away from you," the gunman says. "Even better if you can balance it on your head."

I turn toward the scarecrows. But I don't move. I don't do anything at all.

"Are you afraid?" the gunman says.

"Yes."

"This is nothing to be afraid of. There was never anything to be afraid of."

I can smell it, drifting on the wind, smoke and brimstone and something else, something I've always wanted and could never define. I look at the gunman and try to see whatever it is he is seeing. I look in the direction of home and wonder if Ash has returned, if she'll hear the noise our game is about to make. I look at the scarecrows, erect and fearless, and go to join them.

Brushfire

When Eva thought of Miles, it was only with fondness. He was essentially unemployable, a black mark in hapless doctor-scrrawl branding him, and his rage manifested in destructive ways. His knuckles were often bruised, his lips bloody. Eva thought of him as wayward, a bohemian wanderer, some future idol found dead in a hotel room.

Mostly, she saw him as a sort of constellation of small and familiar details: dark eyes, autumn woods, worn flannel, the smell of woodsmoke. At night in her childhood bed she thought stupidly of the crooked way he smiled, the way he swung an axe to chop wood.

Bored during the day, her mind's eye saw, through a golden ray of nostalgia, the way he shot pheasants and ducks in the blue autumn dawn, fed scraps of meat to the stray dogs. Once he had earned a black eye defending a boy wearing eyeshadow.

Eva knew that Miles thought he still had secrets, and she allowed him the dignity of this belief, no matter how untrue it was. After all, how could she not? Everything from his calloused hands to his shivering spine told the story of his life.



Miles had come into the world in early October, like her, but the moon had hung differently on the evening of his birth, and as such he felt fatalistically condemned. There was blood in his mouth before he could talk, he told her once. His teeth fell out frequently in his dreams. She was the lucky one, he said; he was lucky just to know her.

They met in first grade, when he saw her scrapping with a hotheaded tall boy, the son of a marine. They were in the hallway outside the cloakroom. Her long ginger hair was tangled. He broke it up, and she sulked for the rest of the day.

"I could have taken him," she remembered saying. She would say the same thing, many years later, the night of their high school prom.

Miles' family name was Kettering. Several generations ago they had bought a large farm on which they quietly bred cattle and made moonshine. Eva liked the sound of that, both the living on a farm part and the moonshine part, and as such she felt drawn to Miles.

They were friends instantly. They grew up like typical mountain kids, with bad teeth and scars and dirt smeared on their knees. They attended an old brick school that couldn't afford heating and crowded middle schoolers into the same building as nineteen-year-old seniors on their second lap.

On the surface, Miles and Eva probably resembled their peers, but they learned to stealthily pass notes under their desks and saw themselves as diamonds in the rough, temporarily impoverished socialites who would someday leave this world behind and step in with their real people.

When they were thirteen, they made a blood pact. At some point around this time, Eva had developed a terrible crush on him, due to a hormonal surge and the comfort of domestic familiarity, and later he returned her feelings, for a time—but in middle school he only had eyes for a blonde, scruffy boy from church. He liked girls, too, but by the time he learned to see her as a woman she had already decided he was a brother.

In eighth grade, Miles' parents were getting a divorce, and as such he decided that marriage was a corrupt institution that doomed women just as much as it trapped them. Eva's own father was teaching her to build a rabbit box in the yard, and she murmured quiet sounds of acknowledgement as her best friend rambled on about his mother's black eyes and the evils of alcohol.

Finally, he snapped his head up. Eva watched him carefully, his white aura swelling like smoke and heat around his vibrating body. She jolted when he pulled a pen knife from his back pocket.

"No," he assured her, touching her shoulder gently with his other hand. He seemed close to tears at the thought that he had frightened her. "No, you got it wrong. You got the wrong idea, and I'm sorry. I want to..."

He made a slick, fast gesture with his wrist, pulling the knife dramatically over his hand, and then mimed putting it up towards hers.

Eva nodded brightly, immediately understanding. "You want to make it official."

"Yeah."

"It's better than a marriage license," Miles said, biting his lip hard against the pain as he carved the knife into his palm. He gasped as his blood pooled and then spilled into the dirt, dripping warm and sticky. "It's better than a piece of paper," he went on, still carving, fascinated by the sight of the bright red against the milk white of his skin. "Or vows, or hymns, or whatever."

He handed the knife to Eva, eyes glinting. "Ready?"

She took it without hesitation, sliced her own hand with the cool and sterile elegance of a trained surgeon. She had read her father's books, already knew which blue lines were lethal and should be avoided. When her blood was let loose and freely flowing down the sides of her hand, she gazed into Miles' radiant dark eyes, green against brown, and swallowed hard.

"What God has brought together," Miles said as he placed his huge hand against her tiny one, mashing their hot and sticky blood together into one, "let no man separate."

He smiled wickedly and Eva felt a curious thrill, a low heat in her stomach.

"You didn't even wince," Miles said, impressed.

She sat back laughing in the dirt, glowing from his praise.



Miles learned to play guitar first, and Eva was angry that he was allowed to write music that howled and stirred, while their Sunday school teacher stroked her long red hair and told her how pretty she was, how sweet and lyrical her voice was as she sang “Amazing Grace.”

Miles’ father had hunted in his younger days, and still displayed a deer head above the fireplace in the living room. Miles had a nervous habit of spinning the globe on the desk, of lighting matches too close to his face, of pacing around the room as he spoke. He didn’t like the way the deer’s eyes followed him wherever he went.

Eva didn’t care about the deer, but she did care about Miles, and, in particular, listening to Miles. On certain black nights he would talk and talk and talk, conspiracy-minded and terrified, as the sky turned from fire to ash outside the window.



Every few months, he discarded his medication. Sometimes he did it quietly, but usually he made a production out of it. When he was nineteen, he drove the truck up into Morgantown and threw his bottle of antipsychotics onto the overpass. A few months later he tossed two months’ worth of pills in front of an oncoming train and screamed his throat raw.

The day after his twenty-first birthday, he chose to throw his hateful bottle of blue pills into the Elk River, and then came knocking at Eva’s back door.

“It’s real,” he told her confidently, eyes and spirit like fire. “It’s real. I can see them.”

He reached out to touch the opaque white light around her body.

“There’s no light source,” he said in amazement. “It’s coming from nowhere.”

After three days without sleep, Miles saw birds in the ceiling fan light. He rushed to Eva’s bedroom window, a madman on the lawn, shouting that he had seen angels.

Eva saw angels all the time, so she didn’t doubt this, but Miles resented her, because he had to work at it, whereas she had an easy ride, and the curious ability to see death the way some people saw cars passing down the road.



She had seen the macabre too closely to be unnerved by it. In some ways it felt almost charming.

As a child she had gutted the books that disappointed her, ripping them apart like the frail bones of a bird, amazed at how easily the white leaves came undone in her hands.

When Eva was young, she had gone to visit her uncle across the state line. He was a stubborn man, a hunter—that fall he made it his sole mission to turn her into a scrappy, hotheaded warrior, taunting her whenever she showed weakness, betrayed herself as a young member of the inferior sex. Eva showed no fear in the face of gore, so he was delighted.

He took her out into the woods and together they took down a buck. All the while Eva had watched with a clinical and objective curiosity as the shadow of death fell over the animal’s face.

She had not dared to breathe as its almond-shaped head bowed, its velvet antlers caught in a thicket, and it crumpled to its spindly knees. It was a quiet process, beautiful—and shocking, for the sole reason that she saw the animal leave its body as casually and swiftly as day turned to night.

In the faint early morning light, a soft, translucent white smoke rose with casual elegance from the centre of the buck's chest. It drifted steadily on and upwards with a clear purpose, and when it reached the top of the pines, it vanished.

That had been the first time.

There were countless other experiences throughout the years, incidents that even in her youth she knew she should never speak of. She buried them with her other secrets, bound up half with thrill and half with terror, a curiosity that belonged with the erotic and the sadistic, something she accepted she would take to her grave.

She saw soft white lights around people: strangers, family, friends. Even animals possessed an aura too intimate to look at for too long. Occasionally they appeared separate from living bodies, entities that followed her through the dusty hallway and into her bedroom. They stood behind her in the mirror or flickered in her peripheral vision as she got ready for school in the mornings.

In the attic, once, she found a King James Bible that had belonged to her grandmother. Once she coughed her way through the dust, she discovered something chilling: notes in the margins, scrawled in shaky blue penmanship. Words she didn't understand and passages about witchcraft and sage, angels and demons, the blood moons that prefaced the end of the world.

This was no spiritual gift, this thing that she had possessed. The devil, surely, was working through her. And so she bent by her sad little bed and cried, pleading with God to turn out the lights, to quiet the ghosts.



She lay on her childhood mattress in her childhood room in the same sad town, thinking that if a quarter century of her life passed, she should be better equipped to handle the world, at least without the pills. But now was not the time. Now was not the time.

In the grey dawn hours before the world came alive, she had learned that Miles had overdosed. A message through the grapevine, from his former boss at the music store. An unlikely source. Why not his parents?

She hadn't cried yet. She wasn't sure why. She didn't cry often, but this seemed as good a time as any. Her brain was full of static. Her body was numb. The ghosts crowded in the room, shimmering.

She threw the blankets off herself and slipped into her father's old jacket. In her black moods she usually preferred to be outside.

She didn't want to go as far as the train tracks, and anyway, there was no need. Her own property was curiously new to her every time she explored it. The yard was overgrown with weeds her mother had stopped tending to after the torn ligament had placed her in a semi-permanent opiate fog, and now it crawled with wildlife, attracted corvids with gasoline wings. They pecked at the ground and glared accusatorily at Eva.

Close to the house, a path had been worn down by dozens of footsteps, and the trail was easy to follow. Eva passed the half-rotted wooden cages where, for years, they had kept hares. Her father had taught her how to calmly strangle and skin them the fall she turned twelve.

None of that mattered now, Eva thought. Death had never been a mystery to her, as it was to other people, but it meant something different now that it had come for Miles. She knew she would see him either way, but she wanted him the way he had come into this world, solid blood and bone and sinew. She wanted to be able to hug him.

The ground sloped neatly downward at the edge of the Cross family's property line. The bracken was muddy. Eva picked her way through the field and set her eyes on the horizon. The barren trees reached for the winter-cold sky. At least the seasons continued, as cyclical and routine as always.

With all their order, they made sense, even as Miles lay in a hospital bed twenty miles away, breathing through tubes.



She had never known such sharp, intrepid grief, not even when her father had died. Even then, he had come to her a week later, smiling by her bedside in his old jacket.

He had put off going to the doctor for months, insisting the pain in his chest would go away on its own. He had not wanted to ask the church for a handout. He had collapsed in the woodshed with his buzz saw still running, and no one had been surprised.

Miles was different, somehow. As such, Eva refused to accept that this could be his fate. He was too young, too belligerent, too cancerous—she could not imagine life without his constant presence.



In their young adult years, the games of violence grew steadily deeper and more complex, with elaborate storylines that Miles invented with all the oratorical skill of a professional raconteur. Eva laughed hard at everything he said, believing without a doubt that he was the most brilliant person alive. They fell asleep to the sound of the trains rolling past the fields.

They liked to sit in the reedy grass by the tracks, fighting off gnats and spiders, throwing pennies they would collect later on once the trains had crushed them.

On his twenty-third birthday, Miles began talking about moving to Los Angeles.

It was his plan to make it big, even if it took years. He would busk if he had to, he said confidently, and live in an apartment with no heating, and do everything he could.

"You can't," Eva said.

"Why not?"

She crossed her arms, shivering in the October cold. "You'd get famous and forget about me."

"What? No, you'll be with me." Miles said it with utter certainty, as though he was stating that the sky was blue or that the earth revolved around the sun. "You'll be with me the whole time."

"California is going to fall into the ocean someday," Eva remarked. "And Los Angeles is the most evil city in the world. Its name is a complete paradox. There are no angels there. Weren't you listening to Chris all those years?"

Their old youth pastor, a recovering alcoholic. He had dabbled with drugs, too, if the stories were to be believed. He had toured with his secular band for most of his twenties. He had spoken a lot about Hollywood, the way all converts do.

"Yeah," Miles agreed. "It is. Going to collapse into the Pacific. But before that, it will be destroyed by fire, just like in the Gospel of John. In order to sanctify and purify the evil, corrupt Hollywood elite, and they'll see the light and be redeemed."

"By *fire*?" Eva said, unconvinced.

"A huge brushfire," Miles said confidently. "All through the redwoods, down into San Francisco, and finally the beaches of Malibu. Everything will be gone."

"How do you know?"

"I keep having this dream," Miles said, shrugging, as though saying it aloud had made him embarrassed. He wouldn't meet Eva's eyes.

He picked at weeds in the track, as the ground shook slightly, like an earthquake—another train, passing through the no-man's land that was their West Virginia home.



As Eva sat by his bedside in the wretched hospital, she held his hand and prayed to her parents' Protestant God, the god of the rust and the dirt and the night shift at the factory her father had worked until death came for him, too. She spit her prayers out at him like blood and begged him to stay, because she owed far too much to him.

Eventually, because middle school blood pact marriages weren't legally binding, she was told to leave.

Back at home, she swallowed a few pills and waited, sank beneath the covers until the spitting and hacking of the radiator sounded like comforting white noise and the freezing wind a choir of singing birds.

Eventually, she dozed. It was a heavy and somewhat nauseating sleep, but the opiates always made the world calmer. The spirits swarmed her like flies, but their light was whiter and their messages stranger.

She lay in that contented state for hours until the shrill landline downstairs rattled the hinges on her door, and her mother's muffled voice drifted up through the floorboards:

"... tell her to come... how long until... Alright. Thank you. I'll let her know."

Eva closed her eyes and lay against her tattered pillow. The room felt very warm, the bed very soft. She didn't want to move, even when she heard her mother's indignant knock at her bedroom door.

"Eva, he's woken up. He's stable."

Eva rolled over in a haze, blinking at the wall. "What?"

"Miles is in stable condition. He'll be home tomorrow, they're saying."

"Oh," Eva said. "Okay."

"They had him on that—what do you call it?—involuntary hold, for something like thirty-six hours, to make sure he wouldn't do it again."

It felt surreal, to be discussing such matters through a wooden door, and later, Eva would realize that, but under the influence, nodding out, she could barely keep her fluttering eyelashes still.

She hummed a grateful response and promptly fell asleep.



Miles came back bright-eyed, with colour in his cheeks. He had ugly green bruises on his arm and an abscess from an injection, and his tattered green-and-blue flannel was big on his skeletal frame, but he was alive.

"I didn't really want to," he reassured her. "You know. Do it. I didn't want to. I still have to go to California."

He smiled boyishly, tossing his messy hair off his face. He smelled clean and antiseptic, like the hospital. The white light around him was radiant.

Eva frowned, uncertain.

"Look, don't worry," Miles promised, gripping Eva's shoulder with a surprising intensity. "I'm fine. I promise. I'm really, really fine this time."



Winter faded into spring, and Miles got his old job back teaching guitar. He became so creatively persistent that they stopped seeing each other for a while.

Eva realized, within a day or two, that without Miles' shadow trailing her, her own became all too apparent. She lay awake, irritated at the ghosts in the corner of her room, went out into the yard to smoke cigarettes in her father's old shirts just for something to do.

The boredom was like a rotten tooth she couldn't stop pulling at, and eventually she acknowledged that if she didn't keep moving, she would fall into despair. At the end of May she left a note by her mother's pillow, while she was taking a midday Xanax nap, and headed out for a rare solitary excursion.

The night was huge and endless, the constellations visible against a sky as black as ink. The fireflies glittered like fallen stars in the wildflowers along Bethlehem Creek Road, and Eva was enraptured.

She let out a sharp gasp of alarm when she realized she had veered dangerously to the side of the road, where an old woman was standing, pure light and energy.

Eva went into reverse and pulled back, back, back, until the light had dimmed. She felt it before her brain registered—a collision with another vehicle. The shouts of an infuriated driver. The car door opening and a man in a worn camo jacket jumping out, eyes blazing. A cell phone was in his hands. Eva's heart sank.

An eternity passed. In the rearview mirror, Eva saw a blur of blue and red lights, the crunch of gravel as a police cruiser approached.

She groaned audibly and raked her hands through her hair, bowing her head against the wheel. She accepted her fate as an officer approached, shining a flashlight in her face.



"They took away your license?" Miles repeated, aghast. He wasn't pacing, for once, but the nervous energy was coming off him in waves.

"Suspended," Eva corrected.

"Assholes! What right do they have to do that for? You have a clean driving record. Can't you appeal it?"

Eva shrugged. They had been drinking and smoking steadily all afternoon, and her body felt sluggish, tired. That was the last thing she wanted to talk about.

"It's not like I can tell them why it happened. The real reason."

"What are you going to do?" Miles asked.

Eva thought for a moment. "I guess I'm just going to write."



There was a contest, with a reward of twenty thousand dollars, for the best piece of short fiction written by a young adult from the Appalachia region. Eva had seen the poster in the coffee shop a few weeks ago, a crude charcoal rendition of a folksy beat poet with a typewriter.

She must have stared at it for a second too long while she waited for her drink, because the barista, a wisp of blonde hair escaping from her ponytail, leaned across the table and said, "Worth a shot. I remember your essay on *The Grapes of Wrath*."

Eva blinked, momentarily caught off guard. Then a vague memory surfaced, and the features of a stranger, as they sometimes do after many years, hurried together to create the image of a long-forgotten acquaintance.

“Shiloh,” Eva pronounced with confidence.

“Eleventh grade English,” Shiloh confirmed, grinning and leaning forward casually on the counter. “Did you and Miles Kettering ever end up getting together?”

Eva gnawed at the inside of her mouth, uncomfortable with the way his name sounded in another person’s mouth. She hadn’t realized how long she had gone without thinking about Miles until someone brought him up.

“Sorry,” Shiloh apologized. “I get the feeling that’s an old wound. You’re better off without him, anyway. I heard he tried to kill himself a few months back, or something. Crazy motherfucker.”

Eva forced a smile, grabbed her drink off the bar. She snapped a photo of the poster and its tempting promise, trying not to allow herself to feel the flood of excitement in the pit of her stomach, the mixture of thrill and apprehension. She hadn’t felt it since the last time her fingers pulled a trigger.

She sat down on a bench outside, scrounged in her wallet for a crumpled twenty-dollar bill. Across from the library, in what she could only assume was an attempt at irony, there was a new bookstore open.

She jaywalked across the road, ignoring an approaching car, and pushed open the door of the shop.

Leaving with no money left to her name and the journal in her hands, she felt radiant and afraid and guilty. All she could think in that moment, standing on the corner of the street in the town that had raised her, the town with dead fathers and trucks and crumbling brick, was how Shiloh had lost her accent in college.



Eva’s mother’s tooth was rotting, had been for months, but she refused to acknowledge it, only prayed and bore the pain stubbornly. She could sell plasma, or pawn off her wedding ring, but neither seemed like very reasonable responses to a circumstantial crisis that wouldn’t matter once the rapture came.

One morning she stormed into Eva’s room, face drawn and pale, shaking and swollen from the pain.

“I know you have some of my pills,” she said breathlessly, a shot of uncharacteristic fire in her hazel eyes. “I know you’ve been using, and hell if I care—I’m not about to tell you what you can and cannot do with your life. We’re both adults here. Where are they?”

Her small body radiated such tense and terrified energy that Eva leapt from her bed, loose sheets of paper cascading onto the hardwood almost cinematically. She yanked open the uppermost drawer, reached beneath her tattered and frayed lace bras until her fingers wrapped around the cold contours of the pillbox.

She held it in her upturned palm as an offering—and her mother’s eyes, daring her to question or put up a fight, softened.

“Thank you, baby,” she murmured, dry-swallowing two at once. The roar of thunder filled the room with the curious sound of white noise. Eva realized that it had grown dark and cold outside her window.

Eva’s mother sank onto the edge of her daughter’s bed, massaging her cheekbone, somewhere close to where the tooth must have been, blackened and sore. She was wincing visibly against the pain even as it faded, opioid receptors alighting to settle the score. For a moment she looked about to cry, and Eva panicked, but then her mother gestured to the pages on the floor.

“What’s all this?”

Suddenly, in the small room where she had grown up, with her too-thin mother shaking on the bed next to her, what Eva was doing seemed idiotic. She felt such white-hot shame that she may as well have been caught doing something illicit. It might have been easier to explain, even.

“It’s nothing,” she said, and in that moment, she almost meant it. It *was* nothing, nothing more than a stupid dream, an attempt to fight her fate. She hung her head with shame and the tears came suddenly, an onslaught of emotion she was not prepared for.

Her mother wrapped her in an awkward, sickly-sweet perfumed embrace.

“They’re hiring down at the butcher shop,” she said kindly. “I thought you might want to put in an application this week.”

Eva nodded sullenly.

“I think it would be good for you.”

Eva ripped herself away from her mother, recognizing her love for what it was: a tepid, unfriendly marshland in which she could allow herself to sink. She bent to pick up the scattered pages on the hardwood, brushed her long, tangled hair out of her face. The woman on her bed was now a stranger.

“Baby,” the stranger crooned, sadly. “Is it something I said?”



The creek flooded over and Miles’ dad did a stint in rehab and the cicadas came out. Spring collapsed steadily into summer, and suddenly, to Eva’s bemusement, it was June. The days were longer, the evenings smelled like tall grass and campfire smoke, and the summer appeared to stretch on endlessly, a bright star in a black sky.

The coffee shop had strung up Edison lights and now served a lavender lemonade. It tasted expensive. Her body tingled when she drank it.

She slid into her usual seat by the window one afternoon, and nearly dropped her drink when she saw Miles’ father on the other side of the road, pacing the sidewalk outside of the pawn shop. He was staggering around in all black, despite the heat, his posture like that of a street preacher and a pauper all in one.

The coffeehouse had begun to attract rich kids from further out, charmed by the ambience. They were noticeable by their clothes and their shoes and their hair. Most days, they didn't bother Eva. That day, they saw Miles' father, a local curiosity, and made a show of their laughter.

Eva looked away.



All those years, and Miles had never once tried to kiss her. During the first week of August, he rushed her in the quietest corner of the library next to the dusty stacks. She cried his name aloud, aghast, but he hushed her, laughing like a little kid, as the printer on the desk churned out the pages of Eva's manuscript.

"I realize now," he said dramatically, pressing her against the rows of alphabetized encyclopedias. "It took me a while, and I'm sorry about that. But I see now. You're the love of my life, Eva Cross, and you are too goddamn talented and good for me, but this is my last chance."

Eva was very uncomfortably aware of how taut the muscles in Miles' upper arms were. She almost laughed aloud. Who was this person? His bravado was fake, like something from an old movie.

"Either marry me," Miles said seriously, "or let me go now, because I can't do this without you. On God, I will kill myself if I don't get an answer."

There were moments when the abyss between two people became too great to fully comprehend, when the realization that physical or even emotional intimacy could not account for everything that existed in the bleak psychological world of another, when the momentary joys experienced in their company came under question.

Eva allowed Miles to kiss her. It was not chaste. It was demanding and desperate. His hands wrapped around her waist as though he wanted to bruise her. The ache of loneliness was so profound that she didn't realize she was crying until Miles pulled away and she saw her mascara on his ratty shirt.

Missed Exits

Manzanita Oregon is not a big town and rarely has big-town problems. It is a loose federation of Seattle and Portland vacation homeowners and coastal locals with carefree lifestyles. Tourists get to Manzanita by driving south on Highway 101 past Cannon Beach over Mount Neahkahnie, and turning west toward the ocean at the 76 station flanked by a windswept tree that resembles a twisted hand.

If you miss the twisted hand because you're gorged on Oregon's beauty and forgot to Rain-Ex your windshield, you continue to Nehalem where your spouse checks her phone and reminds you that overconfident driving will lead to a messy divorce and crushing child support, so you turn around.

Ten minutes later, as the rain lifts, you pull into Manzanita and see flashing lights and a flaming pizza parlor and detouring cars and calmly suggest that you return to Seaside and its Family Fun Center where the bumper cars are still open. Your spouse disagrees and questions your timing, and a chorus of backseat voices begin to chant *pizza pizza pizza*.

You stop the car and smell smoke and your children shriek and your spouse balks and dimly recalls how a hot pizza oven can render human flesh into gooey Pepto Bismol and that your brother Bruce has been dead to her ever since he lit live gasoline at the family reunion. Then she whispers, *you, get out. Get out. Go help. Children are dying. Go.*

You sit very still as Manzanita memories flood your mind, memories of the twisted hand and sand-coated pop bottles and DC comic books and pepperoni pizza and summer parades and first kisses and hermit crabs, and you remind your spouse that you were once young too with deep fears and notions of death and may not want to *go help*. Maybe she should *go help*. She doesn't.

You invite your children to try wood-fired pizza and are accused of insanity and exit the car and walk by a home blazing with shame. You continue to walk and nod at strangers and bat at cinders and quicken your pace and head toward the dunes and the tall grass as you feel the twisted hand tighten its grip. Your children want pizza, your spouse wants someone who is not you, and you want the Manzanita sand and the roar of the ocean. It may be the only thing you have ever wanted your entire life.



The Collapse of a Star by Maria S. Picone.

Someplace Without Washrooms

It was clear to Cynth that the cute girl and handsome boy didn't want to kiss. Not with her sitting three benches away. Not with their pushy friend egging them on, camera phone poised and ready.

The typical scene was written and directed by genetics. The girl was indeed cute, petite, armed with perfected feminine mannerisms, all packaged in a fall outfit that teased of summer treats; in a word, she was desirable. The boy was indeed handsome, a model without a magazine cover, the world ready for the taking, but waiting for testosterone to fill his head with the notion; in a word, he was desirable. Their pushy friend? In several words: fat, ugly, awkward, desperate, undesirable.

She was Cynth.

Which was why the urge to walk over to them, and tell the pushy friend to leave the possible couple alone, propelled her to stand up.

But a thought weighed her back down: *Who the hell am I to say anything?*

And one resounding, troublesome question cemented her to the bench: *What if they recognize me?*

There had been a terrible snippet of her sorry life filled with judging stares and words of condemnation. Three years later, the eyes gradually passed blindly over her constantly changing appearance without a second glance, but she still felt the permanent pressures of temporary infamy.

Nobody recognizes me, Cynth tried to assure herself in that soothing, albeit unsteady, therapeutic voice she had worked so long and hard to construct, desperately trying to sound anything other than her trademark vocal fry. Of the three kids before her, no more than thirteen years old apiece, she guessed, she reasoned: *they're too young to recognize me. Too young to know what I've done.*

She smiled inwardly. *Nobody recognizes me.*

The thought used to haunt her, sprinting alongside morbid worries of living and dying alone and unknown, inside of a pathetic body people couldn't *help* but recognize, both for the comic relief and disgust it provided.

Selfishly, she was grateful for the events of three years prior, for it had supplied her with ample motivation to lop off and straighten a lifetime's growth of untamed auburn curls, add bleach, pierce parts of her body she had grown up to believe were virginal, and, along with the cocktail of depression, anxiety, and guilt that felt intravenously fed to her via every available vein, dissolved nearly two hundred of her three hundred and twenty pounds. Her skin, however, remained an open canvas, and on the days when the cocktail's alcohol content was too unbearable, she strongly considered decorating some part of herself with a memorial.

And what would the tattooist say when I show the portrait I'd want? she challenged herself. *Wouldn't they recognize me, then? Nobody recognizes—*

A child's laugh.

Cynth looked at the boy and two girls. The pushy friend lowered her camera phone, laughing at something the photogenic pair's faces declared to be unfunny.

Just go over there, and tell her to leave them alone, Cynth coached herself. *Just go, and—*

And what do I say?

Tell them about Jaley.

They don't know Jaley.

Neither do you.

The truth splintered that familiar place within her that had never fully healed.

Having visited the park on a near-religious basis for the last three years, listening to the radio program her obsessive memory played, Cynth rarely had any suitable players to perform the voices in her head. Some visits, she allowed the voices to speak through unaware mothers and their playing children. Other visits, she allowed the voices to speak through passing squirrels, pigeons, and dogs. Most visits, the park was empty, forcing her to replay the conversation solely in her mind.

Today, however, there was the cute girl, the handsome boy, and the pushy friend.

How perfect, she thought, and let the eager memory roll:

"We've got Jaley on the air," the pushy friend said. Her mouth was moving, but her lips were issuing different words, like a poorly dubbed film. Still, Cynth made do, hearing her own voice—the trademark vocal fry—inside her head, leaving the pushy friend's mouth. "You there, Jaley?"

A gust of wind passed through the park.

Static crackled over the radio in her head.

"Hellooo? Jaley?" Cynth/the pushy friend coaxed.

Jaley? Typical. Sounds skinny, Cynth, three years away from chiseling at her own skeleton, had thought then. As if the conversation wasn't punishing enough to remember verbatim, she painstakingly recalled nearly every thought she had conjured during the exchange.

The wind settled.

The static cleared.

"—ere, here, here, I'm here," the cheery, instantly loveable voice in her head said. The cute girl on the bench opened her mouth to respond to the pushy friend.

"Thought I lost you there," Cynth/the pushy friend said.

"No, it's my stupid phone," Jaley/the cute girl said. "Hi."

Probably don't even know how to use it, except for a shit-ton of selfies.

"Hi, back," was Cynth's/the pushy friend's equally cheery response. "So, Jaley, how old are you?"

"Just turned twenty-one last week."

That's a lot of math for you, isn't it?

"Awww, Happy Birthday."

Cynth could still hear the annoyingly loud noisemaker she had activated at the touch of a studio console button.

"Thank you," Jaley/the cute girl giggled.

"Now...you called 'cause you had a pretty weird date last week."

"Yeah."

Good.

"Care to share with everyone?"

"K, so, like...I went out with this guy, and—"

"What's his name?"

"Guy."

"Guy?"

"Yeah."

"Creative."

Parents probably would've named his sister 'Girl.'

"Yeah, I know, right?" Jaley/the cute girl agreed.

"Okay," Cynth/the pushy friend said, "so...Actually, before you get to the date, tell everyone where you met."

"Online." The undertone reeked of *Duh!* "We messaged for, like, a couple hours, and I guess we decided to meet."

Oh, a couple of hours is way more than enough time for him to see you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"So, then what happened?" Cynth/the pushy friend probed.

"K, so, we met at a café downtown, 'cause, you know, I'm not stupid."

Just twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"I just *met* this guy," Jaley/the cute girl continued, "I don't know if he's crazy, or if he's gonna look all weird, you know?" A slight chuckle.

"A girl can't be too careful, totally," Cynth/the pushy friend agreed.

Idiot.

"So, yeah, we met at the café," Jaley/the cute girl continued, "and he looked just like his pictures, so bonus."

"He cute?"

"Uh, yeah." Another dose of *Duh!*

What was I thinking? Someone named Jaley, twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable doesn't do ugly.

"So, you're at the café," Cynth/the pushy friend reviewed, "he looks like his pics—so he's who he says he is, which is cute. But there's nothing too cute about what he did next."

Glad he did it.

"I know, right?" Jaley/the cute girl proceeded: "So, he says he needs to use the washroom. So he leaves. And I'm sitting there, waiting and waiting, and I'm like, 'Don't guys just go in, do their thing, and come back out?'"

"You heard it here, guys," Cynth/the pushy friend broke in. "It's that simple. Unless you got long lines like us femme fatales, all you guys need to do is 'go in, do your thing, and come back out' to your date." Cynth/the pushy friend laughed, and then abruptly stopped for dramatic effect. "But what did *he* do?"

"He didn't come back out." Jaley/the cute girl sounded shocked.

Awww, poor skinny, fuckable you.

"You mean he ditched you?" Cynth/the pushy friend enforced.

Hope it hurts.

"He totally did," Jaley/the cute girl said, pouting cutely.

Good.

"And you called 'cause you wanna know why," Cynth/the pushy friend seethed, getting down to exciting business.

"Yeah, like, we were having a good time and all, and he seemed to like me."

'Cause you're twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable.

"You tried calling him?"

"Yeah." More *Duh!* "For, like, three days."

"Girl, that's three days too many."

Fuckin' moron.

"Yeah."

"Well, let's see if he picks up when your gal-pal Cynth calls."

You would never be my gal-pal. Nobody who looks like you would ever want to be seen with someone who looks like me. And I wouldn't want to, either.

The simple hip-hop beat looping quietly in the background was punctuated by dialed digits, followed by a ringtone.

"Least his phone works," Cynth/the pushy friend quipped, the latter lifting her phone, readying another attempt to snap a photo or capture a video of the cute girl and handsome boy.

A second ring.

A third.

"Maybe he's in the washroom," Cynth/the pushy friend jested.

Jaley/the cute girl issued a brittle laugh, cut short by: "Hi, you've reached Guy..."

"Guess you've heard this part before," Cynth/the pushy friend said over the standard voicemail greeting. With barely contained enthusiasm: "Let's leave a message."

"No," Jaley/the cute girl blurted, the former worried Cynth might keep her word, the latter swatting the pushy friend's camera phone away.

Cynth cut the call before the tone Guy had promised ended. "Wow," she/the pushy friend said. "This what you been dealing with?"

Poor skinny, fuckable you.

"It's okay," Jaley/the cute girl said with playful disappointment.

Wasn't like it was love. There'll be plenty more, anyway.

"Let's try one more time," Cynth/the pushy friend urged.

A rapid succession of dial tones made Jaley's decision.

One ring.

"What if he doesn't like me?" Jaley/the cute girl offered weakly.

Two rings.

"Well, we're gonna find out," Cynth/the pushy friend said.

You don't sound so fuckable now, do you?

Three— "Hello?"

He's sounds fuckin' hot, was Cynth's immediate thought.

"Hi. Is this Guy?" Cynth/the pushy friend inquired.

"Speaking." Caution coated his otherwise sultry voice.

If the handsome boy sitting on the bench with the cute girl and their pushy friend had been contributing to their private back-and-forth all along, Cynth hadn't noticed; she had been transfixed on the girls, the live mimes representing the female voices in her head. With the

introduction of Guy in this familiar script, Cynth now fixed upon the handsome boy, and saw that he was speaking Guy's words.

"You're a hard guy to reach," Cynth/the pushy friend said. "Do you listen to the Cynthetic Cynth Morning Show?"

"Um...not really," Guy/the handsome boy said.

Didn't think so.

"Awww...that's too bad."

"Wait..." His voice peaked, hinting his forgotten pubescent years. "Is this...Am I on the show?"

"Smart cookie," Cynth/the pushy friend beamed, thinking Jaley's *Duh!* "You're speaking with Cynth, *on-air*."

"Okay, cool. Did I, like, win something?" Guy sounded more excited than the increasingly frustrated handsome boy appeared.

"In a way," Cynth/the pushy friend said. "I'm calling 'cause I heard you went on a date last week."

"Oookay." A dip back into caution.

"You *do* remember being on a date last week, don't you, Guy?"

"I do, yeah."

"You remember the *name* of your date, Guy?"

The looped background track filled his end of the conversation.

"Uh-oh. You're looking worse and worse here, Guy. Don't tell me you don't remember the name—"

"Are you there, Jaley?"

Cynth hadn't heard it then, during the live recording, but when she had listened back to the segment, she could tell his uncanny inquiry, spoken in that sexy voice of his, had taken her breath away. Even the looped background track seemed to break at the precise moment of his question.

Nobody's ever said my name that way.

Jaley was silent. For a moment, Cynth thought she had lost her caller, and, therefore, the entire gimmick—and Jaley's punishment for being twenty-one, skinny, and fuckable—but she could see the line was still live.

"What makes you think Jaley's here?" Cynth/the pushy friend teased.

"Ah, she is, isn't she?" Guy chuckled, while the handsome boy scowled at the pushy friend. "I've heard shows like this before. Ah, man." More chuckling.

"So, you know what's up?" Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do." He exhaled. "I'm an ass. Wait—can I say 'ass' on the radio?"

"I'll make an exception in your case."

More of that appetizing laugh.

I'm not twenty-one, skinny, or fuckable, but if I was, I'd be all over you. Even if you didn't look like your pictures.

"Why do you think you're an ass, Guy?"

"Cause I ditched." His breath rustled the phone, as if his sheepishness had rapidly produced an abundance of scraping wool.

"So, what's going on, Guy? Why'd you ditch Jaley?" Before he could respond: "And ignore her calls for the last *three* days?"

"I'm an ass," he maintained, matter-of-factly. "I'm an ass, Jaley."

She was live, but remained silent, as did the cute girl on the bench.

"Jaley, you still with me?" Cynth/the pushy friend asked.

"Yeah," a mouse on the other line said.

"Wanna ask Guy here what his deal is?"

A silence too long for radio.

"Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is," Cynth/the pushy friend intervened. "Everyone wants to kn—"

The handsome boy abruptly stood, disrupting Cynth's mental program. She could hear his voice—a fight between current boy and eventual man—but not specific words. His reddening face clearly had more to do with the pushy friend than the cold air. Cynth watched as he turned to grab the cute girl's hand, pulled her to attention, and flashed a middle finger in the pushy friend's face. The cute girl looked back at the pushy friend as she was whisked away, but said nothing. They were heading for Cynth, who busied herself with bird-less birdwatching. As they breezed by, she thought she heard the handsome boy say something reminiscent of "...none of her fuckin' business what we..." With that, they penetrated the woods, where Cynth dared not go.

Maybe one day, she told herself. Maybe today.

Maybe.

Cynth ignored an actual bird that had deserted the forest beyond, turning her attention to the pushy friend. The sulking mass sat on the bench, a forest of one, abandoned by lovebirds. She fiddled with her phone for a while, then stood, and walked without purpose to the still swings, giving each a heartless push before leaving.

Cynth waited until the swings settled before reevaluating her surroundings. Confirming her solitude, she moved to the bench recently occupied by the trio. The worn, paint-chipped wood was cold, though she believed she could feel their warm ghosts wafting through the seat of her pants. She looked at each of the benches she had sat upon—*experienced*, she liked to think of it—prior to the kids' appearance. There was the one with the loose plank, the one with the

missing plank, the one half-sunk into the loose earth, the graffiti's masterpiece, and the pigeon's toilet.

There was also the one closest to the forest.

Which one are you? she mused, as always.

They hadn't sat on the swings, toes and heels gently digging shallow grooves into the sand in romantic synchronicity. They hadn't roosted on the top or bottom of the slide.

"We were sitting on a bench." Guy's words in print and on screen, unimportant, almost trivial, but paramount to Cynth.

But which one? she willed to Guy.

As part of the ritual, she closed her eyes, and tried to visualize a day she had never lived.

The entire scene unfolded in choppy edits: in one instance, she could see Jaley and Guy, sitting together on a bench comprised of sampled details of all seven benches, their faces pixelated, the way she remembered them on screen and in print; in another instance, she could see Guy *as* Jaley; she could hear his tantalizing voice—*never* Jaley's—not in the park's open, clean air, but as she had heard him on her morning radio show, filtered, human-like:

"We sat on a bench," Guy said, his acorn eyes piercing whatever colour Jaley's had been.

"I need to know which one," Cynth said, the trademark vocal fry some critics and listeners alike complained about and mocked, substituting Jaley's cutesy cadence.

"We talked about how we were on that old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch's show," Guy said, ignoring her. He took her hands into his own. So strong. So masculine. So desirable.

"And then everyone recognized me," Cynth said, letting his thumbs massage the tender meat between her thumbs and index fingers. "Everybody wanted to skewer and roast the old..."

"But thirty's not old," Guy teased, caressing her hair.

"...fat..." Cynth said.

"You're not fat anymore."

"...ugly..."

"You're not ugly anymore."

"...unfuckable..."

"Mmm, I'd definitely fuck you."

"...meddling bitch," Cynth ended.

"Don't feel so bad," Guy cooed. "Jaley and I talked about how we should thank you for bringing us together."

Cynth tried to break his hold. "It's not my fault."

He held on, his luscious, kissable lips formed a seductive smile. "Thank you."

"It was just a show," Cynth rebelled, tugging harder, but not succeeding. "It was entertainment. Stupid entertainment for stupid people."

"Thank you." His lips drew closer to her.

"It's not my fault."

Closer. "Thank you."

"It's not my fault."

"Thank you."

She felt his breathy syllables as his lips pressed against her own.

"It's not my fault," she heard herself scream, the words devoured by his exploring mouth.

"Thank you," she heard him say in spite of their entangled tongues.

She closed her eyes, and received everything she wanted. And when she had had her fill, she opened her eyes, and saw what she had come to expect:

The six other benches, each with their own personality and history.

No kids.

No Guy.

No Jaley.

Just her.

And the bench she always saved for last.

She dreaded her self-imposed regimen, but knew her daily diet needed feeding.

Is that where they sat? Cynth pondered, inwardly cringing at the oddly pristine bench partially enveloped by the treeline.

Maybe.

Maybe it's the one I'm sitting on.

Maybe it's the one with all the bird shit on it.

Maybe it's none of them at all.

Maybe Guy was lying.

Guy had lied about a lot of things.

Guy had lied on my stupid show for stupid people.

She recalled the latter portion of the segment:

"Trust me, Jaley wants to know what your deal is," Cynth had said. "Everyone wants to know."

After a brief hesitation—staged, she knew now—Guy gave in: “Basically, I didn't think I was good enough for Jaley, so I said I needed to use the washroom. I saw myself in the mirror, which didn't help, and I guess I decided to just leave.”

You chickened out, she mended. But not the next time.

Cynth fast-forwarded through the remaining garb, skipping her relentless teasing of both parties, Jaley's shock and relief, and ending where she had spoken the words that had set her upon an endless string of park therapy sessions. “Just one recommendation, okay, you guys? When you guys go on your second first date, make sure you go someplace without washrooms, okay?”

“Someplace without washrooms,” Cynth whispered to the park, where Jaley and Guy allegedly met.

The park was someplace without washrooms.

The forest hugging the park was someplace without washrooms.

Deep within the forest, the hidden clearing at the foot of a hill, lined with a pitiful stream, where Jaley's white, nibbled, lifeless fingers dabbled, was someplace without washrooms.

The other places, where other “Jaleys” had been found, were places without washrooms.

It could've been this bench, Cynth ruminated.

Feeling she had paid enough homage—for now—to the current bench for one sitting, she confirmed her isolation, stood, and proceeded to the final bench. As always, a pang of guilt, lighter than the heavier ambience, resonated throughout her body as her bottom covered the names of lovers come and gone, their etched initials smothered under what others, herself included, had used to call her “fat ass.” She looked for “J+A,” “A+J,” their full names—*anything*—but knew they weren't there.

It doesn't mean they didn't sit here before he led her into the woods, she reminded herself.

Without a cast to play the roles of the enduring voices in her overcrowded head, she heard a vocal-fried, old, fat, ugly, unfuckable, meddling bitch say: “We've got Jaley on the air.”

A gust of wind passed through the park.

“You there, Jaley?”

Static crackled over the radio in her head.

Kurt

Kurt Cobain was dead. It was probably the CIA. Or the FBI. They pretended it was a suicide or some kind of death where a shotgun discharges into someone's head at close range. His daughter's name was Bean. It still is, I think

why would they kill him what possible reason could they have for taking his life and leaving that hole in mine? I still buy flannel shirts in an effort to deny their horrible horrible horrible horrible people.

really fucking horrible

I'm going to be lucky to graduate from high school. Math is stupid. Science is stupid. History is boring with a big fat capital BORING. English is no good either except for the writing part. My teacher sez that my writing is very good but he thinks I need to work on my spelling and grammer and punctuation. I bet Kurt would have spelled it punKtuation. When I grow up I can be a punKtuationalist. I can read all of the stories the ninth graders are writing and tell them to put a comma here and a period there.

I'll write the word period in red ink on all of the girls' stories and see if they even get it.

My teacher told me to write a story about something that means alot to me. But that's all I got. Kurt Cobain is dead and they killed him.

When I wrote the last story about graduation he had me stay after class and he asked me hundreds of questions about my story and wanted to know where I came up with all of the ideas and everything in it I told him I just have one of those imaginations that thinks of things like that. There was no way I was going to tell him that it was all real. He'd probably have to tell someone about it then then the FBI would come after me just like they did with Kurt.

He died during spring break. Mine not his. It was more than a year ago and I wonder what Dave and Krist are going to do now? We'll probably never know, they will have to fade into the darkness because I'm sure that the CIA isn't going to be happy with just killing one of them they won't be happy until they are all dead. I could write them a letter let them know that they could live in my basement where it's pretty safe. It would have to be a letter because they can listen to the phones and know who is talking to who and why and when. They can live in my basement until all of this blows over. I don't know how long it takes for stuff like this to blow over.

Probably at least three years.

The only bad part of living in the basement would be the smell. It's not so overwhelming it's just bad at first then it goes away after being down there for an hour or so.

Maybe if I write a good enough story about Kurt the newspapers will notice and do an investigation and prove to everyone what really happened.

The man that shows up at my house a few times a week agrees with me. He and I talk about the way the gun was positioned the way the suicide note was positioned the way that he was found

All that stuff. The man is really smart he's convinced me that we have to be very quiet and careful when we talk about this stuff because if it gets out then we are both as good as dead.

I worry about being dead.



I have to stop buying flannels. Everyone laughs at me and points and sez things like the 90s are over dude. They think I don't know but I do I just really miss them. I miss Kurt and my parents.

Dave's band is pretty good the way that Bob Seger was pretty good. It ain't no Nirvana though. Poor Krist.

work is hard but not nearly as hard as school was. School made you do all different things all day long. Work is usually just one thing all day long the days are longer than in school but they also give me money. I hated math in school but I got enough of it to make sure that I can pay my bills and pay my rent and pay for the food.

A man I go see every month or sometimes every other month if I forget taught me that buying fast food is not a good idea because I can buy more food for less money at the grocery store and take it home and eat it and then still have leftovers for later in the week and besides that fast food isn't as good for you as home cooked food.

I still go to Taco Bell and get a mexican pizza and a dr pepper once a week because it is so good.

I'm not sure if I should be thankful or angry at that teacher I had in high school that told me my writing is very good. After I wrote about graduation I wrote another story about Kurt Cobain and he really really really liked it and wanted to put it in a magazine. I said NO WAY. If they find out about this there's going to be some big trouble. But now I can't stop writing. Every day I write things down. I think he would be disappointed because my punKtuation is getting worse.

My spelling is getting better sometimes because one of the guys I work with plays a really fun word game where you spell words on a board with little letter squares and my old high school teacher gave me a dictionary so at night I read the dictionary and then I can spell really crazy words that makes the guy at work PISSSED. I spelled the words detritus and cwm and okapi. He thought I was making them up and then he asks me what they mean. He tells me I can't play those words if I can't use them in a sentence. I always point to the underside of the lid of the box and ask him to tell me where it says in the rules that I have to use the words in a sentence.

I write letters to Courtney Love and tell her how sorry I am that her husband is still dead I still worry a little bit that the CIA might come after her but I think enough time has passed and if they had really wanted to get her they would have gotten her already. I told her that my birthday was two days after his but ten years later. I haven't heard back from her or any of the other people I write letters to.

Sometimes I think writing is a curse that I have to bare I think that is how that saying goes anyway.



I had to stop working today. I was one of the last ones left. The guy that played the word game with me I found out it was called scrabble he left about a year ago and then people have been leaving slowly ever since. The guy that hired me there eight years ago said that the place is CLOSING FOREVER.

When I got home with my very last paycheck a man knocked on my door and wanted to ask me questions about how my parents died. I tried to slam the door on him and yelled at him to go away but he stuck his foot in the door and it looked like it hurt him a little bit but he still kept asking me questions. I covered my ears and told him that if he really wanted to know about my parents he could go talk to the CIA or the FBI and he could leave me the HELL alone.



They hired a black man as president today. I think most people think that is pretty amazing. I'll probably write him a letter congratulating him. He looks like a nice man. I will ask him to tell the FBI and the CIA to stop coming by my house and asking about my parents and my teachers and Kurt Cobain. But they probably have people that read his letters for him and then they will know I'm worried about them. I'm going to have to think about that very carefully.

It's been a few years since I've gone to see that man that used to help me with things. when I told him that the people that killed Kurt Cobain were still out there, he wanted me to come see him more often. I wonder if they got to him too. They get people when they get mad.

I hope no one in the CIA or FBI get mad at the new president. It has been a long time since a president was shot.



The second job I've ever had lasted a pretty good time just not quite as long as the first one and it wasn't nearly as fun. No one there played any games or liked to talk to me. my boss said I need to leave this job and I was making it hard for everyone else to do there jobs the way they are supposed to and that he spends WAY too much time putting out my fires. It wasn't like leaving my first job where people were crying and hugging and saying goodbye and everyone was sad. I was the only one that was sad.

I tried to warn him that everything is only getting more dangerous. They are always watching us and they know what we are doing and just because I take time in the break room to write it all down and let everyone know that they could possibly be in danger he thought I was the one making it dangerous.

I accidentally yelled at him on the way out the door that they would probably be along to ask him questions about my parents and Kurt and the black president.

The last time I stopped working I had to go to the hospital for a while and then I couldn't live in my apartment anymore and then it took me a while to get another place to live and get another job.

I really don't want to go back to a hospital or to jail or anywhere but home.

I hope the CIA and the FBI don't come over today. I hope they don't ask me about killing my parents or killing my teacher or killing the nice black president or killing Kurt Cobain. I hope I didn't kill Kurt Cobain I hope the CIA and FBI didn't make me do it I don't know how I'd apologize to Courtney and Bean about that.

I'm really really really scared

I do not want to end up like Kurt.

Nice Guy

It was just another shit Friday after a shit four-hour shift at Burger Guys when the message came. I'd checked my phone out of habit in case the mother wanted me to get something from the store, not expecting this, not expecting a human woman to have seen my dating profile at some point as I flipped patties and squashed them down onto the hot grill. This was no accident. I stood in the cloak room staring at the screen.

Then Claire was at my shoulder on her tiptoes, her sweet lilac and cookie smell pulling me back to the present. "Whatcha got there?"

I tilted the screen to show her. A human woman. A message. Reaching out to me, the acne-ridden pudgy fuck in a fedora, badly-lit in all my profile pics, mostly just on there as a joke. She wore makeup only in a few of her pictures and wasn't a genetic miracle herself—still pretty, though—and in her bio she listed video games, movies, and science as her interests. Claire waited for me to flip through the pictures a few times.

"She lives close, too," said Claire. "She seems really sweet."

We looked at each other and grinned. She rubbed my back in little circles. When she smiled like this she was radiant, her warm brown curls spilling over each other as she tilted her head.

"You alright, Craig?" someone asked, struggling to fit a coat onto an overstuffed rack.

"I'm great," I replied.

Claire followed me out the back door. I let her excited chatter wash over me. The phone felt heavy in my pocket. Somewhere nearby, a woman waited for a word from me. But which word? I reached into my pocket but Claire touched my wrist gently mid-stride.

"Wait until you're on the bus," she said. "Give yourself some time to think."

The weather wasn't so bad, just a little chilly, but I jittered and jumped at the bus stop like it was minus ten. Just nerves. The passing drivers probably figured I was off somehow, and well, they weren't fucking wrong about that. It had been fifteen years since I'd aged out of high school, but even back then my behaviours had repelled people quite effectively.

All the way at the back of the bus there were two empty seats for Claire and me. It felt good to put my feet up. Claire leaned her head on my shoulder and watched me type and re-type a reply, keeping my clumsy fingers away from the send button. The bus lurched and blasted heated air right onto us, and I had to close my eyes and breathe deeply.

"Motion sickness?" Claire asked.

I nodded.

"Don't overthink it, dewdrop. Just say something casual. 'Hi, nice to meet you. I'm Craig. What are your favourite movies?'"

"It's not like that anymore. You have to open with a clever pick-up line or they walk."

"Come on. She looks like the genuine type who'd rather have a frank discussion."

So I sent: *Hey, what are you up to? :)*

Not the finest work. But if we got married and she was telling the story of how we met, surely our 'first words' would be what we actually said out loud to each other when we met face-to-face, not some dumb text conversation.

"Hey." Claire tapped my forehead with a finger. "I know that hamster wheel mind of yours is turning fast. Stop looking at the phone. She'll reply when she replies."

"I can't blow this."

"Like this?" She blew into my ear and laughed. "You'll be fine, Craig. I'm here to help."

She would have said more, but a tall grey-bearded man in a hat was homing in on Claire's seat. His eyes gave away his intent. She stood just in time for him to fall into the seat beside me heavily and yawn.



On our walk home, I stopped at the sight of a bicycle locked to a chain-link fence. Something about that mundane scene struck me. The weeds pushing through sidewalk cracks, the wash of dirt on the bicycle's frame. I slipped off my backpack and retrieved my camera, but the angle was off. I stood beside the bike and started backing up, centering it. Not far enough. I stepped back further until I reached the end of the sidewalk and the side of a parked car. I bent back, leaning as far as I could, and managed to snap a good shot. Then my back touched the car and it started blaring like all hell.

As quick as I could, I stepped away from it. But a pack of teenagers had already come running to the sedan's aid. They were yelling and hollering to outdo each other.

"Ew, he touched it!" a girl shrieked. "The slime gremlin touched my fucking car. Look at my window. Is that a grease smear?"

Her friend smacked her. "You're such a bitch."

I turned to confront them, teeth gritted, but Claire got there first. She flipped them off with both hands, screaming her indignation. I put my head down and walked around the teenagers, hurrying away. She caught up a minute later, panting, still swearing.

"It's okay, Claire."

"No, it's not."

"People are like that sometimes. High school is stressful. If anyone knows that, it's me."

She shook her head. "I wish I could get my hands on them."

I looked down at my camera and said nothing.

Entering the little house on a parched stamp of land that I called home, I stepped as quietly as possible. Eased open the door. Still, the mother detected my entrance and came around the corner with a book in hand.

"Why are you back early?" she asked.

"I told you. It was a short shift today."

"You need to ask for longer shifts. Stand up for yourself, Craig. Don't just let them walk all over you."

"Whatever," I yelled, already halfway up the stairs to my room.

Inside, I let out a deep breath. Claire squeezed my hand.

"She's trying to look out for you."

"Yeah, I know." I kicked off my shoes and leaned my backpack against the night table. "I just wish she'd find a less infuriating way."

I checked my phone out of the corner of my eye. What do you know: a new message from the dating app. Claire grinned and leapt onto the foot of my bed, crossing her long legs neatly under her. Her strong freckled arms rested against the footboard, downy body hair peeking through her sundress glowing golden in the dim overhead light. I admired her for a moment. Her scars where mine were. Her moles a mirror of mine. Whenever I saw these imperfections on other women, it drove me wild. Maybe this girl...

"Let me see," said Claire.

I showed her the new message: *Just at work. Someone brought in donuts! Wish I could send you one. What about you?*

"They're getting longer," I said. "She sent this three minutes ago. Should I...?"

"Yes."

Claire helped me craft a perfect, nonchalant reply. The girl answered a minute later. We high-fived. With Claire looking over my shoulder, lying next to me, or standing and pacing to think, we carried out a normal-sounding conversation with the girl. While waiting for replies, we either held our breaths or analysed what could be analysed of her personality. She seemed shy, a little happy-go-lucky, and had some good jokes. A few hours passed in this way, with gaps of a couple minutes between messages, until she said she had to go have dinner at her parents' and bade me goodnight.

"She's perfect," I said.

Claire clicked her tongue. "Don't be too hasty. I don't want you to settle, dewdrop. You've gotta know your worth."

I opened a drawer and grabbed a t-shirt and some boxers to sleep in. "Do you think there's something off about her? Or...what?"

"No. Nothing like that."

As I changed, I glanced at her over my shoulder. She blushed and looked away.

"Hey, I hope this isn't making you jealous."

She didn't reply. I sprayed on some deodorant in lieu of a shower, hit the lights, and got into bed. After a few moments, she slipped under the covers next to me. Her stray curls caught the orange of the streetlight and haloed her sweet face.

"Are you jealous?" I whispered.

She stroked my cheek. "Silly boy. You know imaginary friends don't get jealous."

"I suppose not."

Under the sheets, her legs brushed against mine. She held me close to her thin chest so that I could feel her heartbeat. Facing the window with my eyes half-closed, I imagined that the lights of passing planes and the radio tower and the suburbs rolling endlessly uphill were the lights of Paris, and we were curled up together in a clean white attic apartment, free and young and sated by the mildness of the night.



The next day, I didn't have work, so I waited to see if she would send a new message. With the phone perched between piles of stuff on my desk, I checked my usual forums online. There was news of a deadly attack. Crunching on leftover chips, I read that some dude had shot some women on the street, shouting misogynist slurs.

"He said in custody that dating is rigged against ugly men. Well, maybe he has a point."

Claire read the article from her perch on a pile of dirty clothes. "Enough of a point to justify what he did?"

I swiveled my chair around. "Obviously not. The guy's abhorrent."

"I was getting worried there," she said, smiling.

"I'm not like him. Of course not. But it would have been very, very easy for me to slip into that mindset. Sometimes I wonder why I didn't."

She levelled her hazel eyes at me. "Would you hurt me? Grope me? Kill me?"

"Claire. I'd rather die."

"That's because you empathize with me. You see me as a whole person, worthy of consideration and respect, and you can put yourself in my place. And because you can do that with me, it extends to a basic empathy for other women."

I frowned. "But you're not real. I mean, you don't act like real women do."

"Nice." She turned her head. "Thanks for reminding me."

My heart clenched. "Sorry, love. Hey, listen. We all have something. You're my best friend. I didn't mean to downplay that."

She gave a small, forgiving smile.



Still no messages from the new girl. To keep myself from bothering her, I went to take the shower I'd needed since yesterday. I didn't like to be in the bathroom with the mirror for too long. But today I decided I'd better give the old face a shave and wash, and by the time I'd finished everything and washed my hair, my reflection seemed halfway human. Like someone with a decent job and a decent life. Someone I'd meet on the street. Just a guy. *Hello*.

When the mother saw, she said, "Oh, decided to take a shower for once, did you?"

I ignored this and walked to the nearby park. It was spacious and green for the area. Stripped of their surrounding forest, the trees shivered in the spring wind, a few tiny jeweled leaves catching the scattered rays of sun. I took out my camera and strolled around, searching for a good angle.

A beautiful woman with dark eyebrows and lashes jogged by. Her muscles moved deftly under their covering of stretchy yoga pants. I looked away quickly. When I first picked up photography as a hobby, still upset that the camera had been a useless purchase and my dream of becoming a famous director was straight-up dumb, I'd done some bad things with it. Taken pictures of people. Women, that is. I told myself it was just a spot of fun, an artistic endeavour to capture beauty or uniqueness where I saw it. Then I told myself it was scientific, sociological—that I was categorizing them into consistent types. The yoga enthusiast. The soccer mom. The nymphet. While *Lolita* was still my favourite book, I realized how messed up it was at roughly the same time that I realized how messed up I'd become. One day, I'd hidden my face as I walked by a news channel filming around Burger Guys. I'd grumbled to Claire that they shouldn't be invading passerby privacy like that. Then she asked if I thought the women I'd photographed would feel the same way. Just lightly, casually, not in a condemning way. The guilt that followed was all my own. Just last month, I'd deleted the remainder of those pictures for good.

Now, I just took pictures of the trees, the birds, the sun coming through the clouds. It was all in the angle. The angle tells the viewer what a scene means to the photographer, what's important to notice, what is meant to be big and what is meant to be small. It had been a while since I'd been so happy. Claire followed, not saying much, just enjoying the day in her own right. She jumped into a puddle without disturbing it. I copied her and grabbed a picture of the water splashing up around my running shoes.

When I checked my phone after a few hours, I had a message waiting. We went home.



The girl and I talked for a long time that night and then throughout the next week. Somehow, dropping baskets of fries into hot oil didn't seem so monotonous and cheap when I was reflecting on her personality, a certain line or word she'd said. She even told me her real name, which I'd known from the start wasn't 'Celestia,' like her profile showed. Louise.

I even worked up the courage on Wednesday to tell her that I had wanted to be a director. She was thrilled and told me that she worked as a set design intern and knew some people in the industry that she could connect me with. I felt lighter with each passing day. Things seemed to fit into place much better: doors in their frames, cars in their spots. The running commentary in my head whenever someone passed—*he probably gets laid three times a week; wonder if she's a virgin*—dimmed, then ceased. My mind was too busy spinning around Louise.

At home, I opened the frightening folder of old scripts and footage on my desktop. I read through my writing with Claire, both of us open-mouthed stunned at how good it had been.

"Maybe I should bring one with me when we meet up," I said.

"Maybe you should arrange this meeting," said Claire.

I was quiet for a moment. "What if this isn't real? What if she sees me and runs?"

"Why is it so hard to believe, dewdrop?" She ruffled my hair. "You deserve to be happy."

Louise accepted with enthusiasm and we set a meeting for my next day off, Saturday, at a nearby coffee shop.



The day of, Claire held my hand on the walk over. When my heartbeat sped up so fast I could feel it in my throat, she squeezed my fingers. When I hesitated in my stride, she got in front of me and locked eyes. The sight of her and the faint smell of lavender were enough to keep me going.

We entered and looked around. There were a few people sitting at tables, chatting or working, but no one matching Louise's picture. Not even a woman on her own. Claire and I grabbed a table with a view of the entrance and I ordered a coffee, black. We waited. I checked my messages: nothing new. A man stared from the other side of the café, then turned back around quickly when he saw me looking. He played on his phone. I watched the entrance again. After thirty minutes, the mug was empty and the coffee raced through my blood. I pulled out my phone and began to draft a message: *I'm here whenever you're ready.*

A shadow fell over the screen and I glanced up at the man from earlier. Filming me on his phone, he said, "Are you waiting for Louise?"

I gripped the edge of the table. "Has something happened? Is she okay?"

In a quiet and serious voice, he began, "Well, I don't know how to say this, but Louise said to tell you that, um..." then he burst out laughing and yelled, "You're a dumb fucker!"

My whole body went cold as he taunted and chanted. A vague impression that he was performing for an audience. I couldn't react. I stood and made my way to the door, eyes and lungs burning.

"I'm Louise, bitch!" he hurled at my back.



It was only after I locked the door to my room that I allowed myself to fall apart. The mother hadn't seen past the fragile stone, nor had anyone on the bus, on the street. But now I ripped the sheets off my bed, kicked my clothes. Snapped pencil after pencil in half. Threw myself face-first into bed and kicked and punched the mattress until the pillow under my face was wet.

Somewhere above, the thoughts floated in the form of words: *I am a fucking subhuman embarrassment. I should erase myself. I am stupid and ugly and gullible.* The usual mantras, back in

full force. But they floated in a detached, mechanical way. The pit inside me had no words, just weight and fire and somewhere very deep inside, an unending, merciless laugh.

When I pulled myself back up a few hours later, it didn't take long to find the video. It had already racked up a few thousand hits. The guy who ran the channel did this often, along with other "pranks," and he knew his trade. I watched him read some of mine and 'Louise's' messages. *Oh, this fine gentleman wants to be a director when he grows up.* Laughter. An animation of a film reel spinning and getting tangled. The planning, the lead-up, then my pale and blotchy face looking scared, shocked, on the verge of tears. Though I hadn't thought I could feel any more pain, it did send a needle into my gut. I went back to bed.

On waking to the smoke detector going off and smell of burnt food (not unusual for the mother), my first cruel instinct was to message Louise. I rolled over to look out the window. It was then, breathing poorly through my swollen nose and the fumes of a dinner I wouldn't have eaten anyway, that I wondered where Claire had gone.

There wasn't enough effort left in me to summon her. No, that wasn't quite true. This was too serious, too cataclysmic of a reality to include her. But that wasn't right either. I didn't want her to see me.

The mother called something upstairs, but I buried myself in the sheets.

I woke from a dream in which I'd ripped people apart with my bare hands: the prank man, the mother, Louise, my coworkers, even...

The tears flowed and I didn't bother to stop them. What a good feeling, the water leaving my body. The life leaving it. Only when I dried to a husk of skin and brittle muscle and sticky fat would I be as pathetic as I really was. Inhuman, inhuman, a waste and a danger, because Claire had been there, I had hurt Claire, I had dug my fingers into her chest and torn it apart.

Unable to just sit there in the pain, I pried the window open and climbed out. With my foot on the ledge and another on the eave next to the window, I managed to haul myself onto the roof. Just like old times. Except now, I didn't worry about my foot punching through the thin shingles. I walked to the edge above the driveway and looked down.

In the end, I just sat there on the edge of the roof, my legs dangling in the air. Like a tide rushing out, all the anguish and fury left me.

"It's not high enough, dewdrop," said a voice behind me.

I didn't turn. "You betrayed me. You said I deserved it. That I should believe it was really happening."

She sat beside me. "You do deserve it. Guess I forgot that no one really gets what they deserve. I'm sorry."

I glanced over at her. Such sadness on such a gorgeous face. My breath caught in my throat.

"I'm sorry you don't get to be real and you're stuck in my disgusting imagination."

"Even if I were real, I'd still be your friend." She sighed. "It's fine. We're both stuck. Both exiles. But at least we'll always have each other."

The resignation in her voice mixed with the tenderness until neither of us could tell one from the other. She leaned on my shoulder and I kissed the top of her head. So much the better if a neighbour was watching. We looked out over the street from the rooftop of the house we couldn't leave, watching the lights, each window a new and different prison for the soul behind it. I should have brought my camera. But in that moment, we just sat there, the strong leaning on the weak. And it wasn't so bad.

The Salmon-Colored Sofa

On Tuesday morning, Henry was reading the paper as he always did, in his favorite seat: a sofa that had once been the color of salmon. Henry was about to fold the paper along its creases and put it in the recycling bin when his eye caught an article he'd missed. It was about a scientist and his latest invention, next to a half-page ad with a starry background that simply said: "Escape yourself."

The scientist, whom the paper declared one of the best minds of the generation, had discovered a solution to a great and human desire. It was a machine, spectacular, which provided the ability to be no one, in which the user would exist outside of themselves for moments that would feel endless.

The sky, the scientist said in his interview, was the best portal for escape. To capture the infinite intangibility of the night sky was to bring the human soul outside of itself.

Henry flopped the paper onto the coffee table and despaired of society. Who would disrespect themselves enough to abandon their own bodies? Their one constant, God-given companion? He braced his hands and pushed himself out of the sofa, which had long ago conformed to his shape. It was time to go to work.

On this Tuesday, as with all other days, Henry was tired when he left for work, less tired while he was at work, positively giddy while at lunch with his favorite coworkers, and exhausted when he came home.

At 7:15 p.m., he sank into the same sofa in which he had read the paper that morning. He read more, a psychology journal this time, because it was *Psychology Today* Tuesday, although he wished it were *National Geographic* Sunday. He was fond of *National Geographic* Sunday. He got up once to make a cup of peppermint tea. He was fond of tea. It was what he drank when he wanted to add flavor to his evening.

In *Psychology Today*, he read about the dangers of inoculating oneself from negative emotions. For some reason, his high school girlfriend popped into his head. He allowed thoughts of her every now and then. It was good to look back on the moments that had defined him because he wanted them to keep defining him.

And since he had started there, he may as well continue thinking on through late-night study sessions in college, and the time he backpacked through South America to try to find himself, and his father's death, and the friends he once had and now had.

He felt he had been sitting on his sofa forever and the feeling became intolerable. He had sat everywhere in the apartment so many times and he could never forget the shape of her cheek when she smiled and the sound of his father's final breaths and the lacquered piney pew of his childhood church.

He began to think about the machine, the modern marvel. It could be the next human experience: to experience not being human. The article in the paper had assured him that everything was perfectly safe. No more dangerous than the chiropractor.

Henry was comfortable financially and everyone knew he didn't spend his money on haircuts. So his only concerns were ethical, and those went away too when he thought about the salmon-colored sofa, which usually only bothered him intolerably on occasion.

He climbed into bed, which was pushed against the far wall, with his customary cup of chamomile at 11:45 p.m. He counted how many times he had moved the bed in the hopes that the next day he would wake up feeling different. Three times in the past four months. He did not read his assigned chapter in the Book of Timothy before falling asleep on his side.



Henry made it one whole week before he called for an appointment with the brilliant scientist. He was surprised to get an appointment for the following evening.

"So soon?" he asked. "I thought you'd be booked out for months."

The administrative assistant chuckled and replied with something noncommittal about providing quick, quality service. He shifted on the sofa and said he appreciated her fitting him in.

He used the twenty-four hours before the appointment to justify himself. Henry knew that his life was just fine, and he had never wanted anything more than what he could and should have. And this was one of those things.

He arrived at the scientist's office, not thinking much of anything for once. He found himself in a small waiting room with a front desk too large for the space and a single leather chair. He was greeted by the administrative assistant, dressed in beige and brown, who ushered him to the leather chair.

After a short wait, he was presented to the scientist, who had dark-rimmed, trustworthy-looking glasses. Henry followed him into a room filled with objects and instruments he'd never seen before. He underwent a physical and psychological evaluation, not understanding what his urine sample had to do with anything.

Henry learned that he was one of many to sign up for the out-of-body experience.

"Most of my clients are in search of something stronger than psychedelics, but without the stigma," the scientist explained while entering Henry's sexual history into the computer.

Henry nodded, for there was nothing to say to that. He had never considered taking psychedelics.

"Have you used the machine yourself?" Henry asked.

"Oh—no," the scientist said with a chuckle. Henry wondered what was funny.

The scientist strapped Henry into the reclining chair from which it looked suspiciously difficult to escape. Henry tried to not be nervous. He could trust this scientist; he'd been featured in the paper, after all. He surrendered his will the same way he had for his colonoscopy last year.

The scientist tinkered with the whirring instruments, knobs, and smoke-emitting mirrors while his client watched skeptically. The scientist turned off the lights and pressed a black button that rolled back the ceiling to reveal the stars. The scientist said, "Here we go," and gave the biggest knob of all a mighty twirl.

Weightless, consumed by nothing, part of everything. They drifted upwards and away from the office, gladly soaring into the atmosphere. Free of all things. Swirling around, drawn like magnets to the stars and away by the wind. All-knowing nothing. Laughter without sound or smiling. Running with no legs. The only impossibility was to think of something impossible.

They fall back into the office, suctioned back into the body of a bespectacled man named Henry, who loved his bad haircut.

"Well?" the scientist's buggy eyes peered into Henry's. "Didya like it?" He was one of those people who thought good customer service was treating clients like children. "That was our extremely popular two-hour session."

"Nonsense. It was no more than five minutes," said Henry.

"You are most welcome to schedule another session if you'd like more time."

Henry left the office, aware that his feet were directing him, that his hands were opening doors. He despised the necessity of his useful body.

Had he only been allowed a few more moments away, he would have gone all the way away, for good. And because anything in those moments had been possible, maybe someday he would have been someone else, or everyone, and then no one again.

He arrived home, and when he opened the door, he stopped in the doorway and had a staring contest with the salmon-colored sofa. Eventually he went in, made tea, and, even though it was Wednesday, he read from a collection of short stories that he normally read on Fridays. He skimmed the first pages several times, unable to focus on one thing.

He couldn't bear this skin anymore. What was once uncomfortable was now unbearable. Before, wanting to leave himself had been an itch at moments of growth and stagnancy. Now it was something else; the stars were calling.

He blamed the scientist for this trap. That was the problem with technology; people want to make money for money's sake and progress for progress's sake without thinking of the consequences to humanity, or even the consequences to humans.

And the problem with being Henry was that he was critical of everything.

He was tired of wanting to always and never be alone. Of thinking his own thoughts all the time. Of not being able to take off his own skin with his hands when he felt powerless or bored, which now seemed to be always.

The lacquered pew. Her cheek. The late nights in the library. The buses of Peru. His father's death rattle.

All he could think of was going back to the scientist. Just one more session would do it. A longer one this time.

Contributor Biographies

POETRY

AMIRAH AL WASSIF is a published poet. Her poetry collection, *for those who don't know chocolate*, was published in February 2019 by Poetic Justice Books and Art, and her children's book, *The Cocoa Boy and Other Stories*, was published in February 2020. Her poems have appeared in several print and online publications, including *South Florida Poetry*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Hawaii Review*, *the Meniscus*, *the Chiron Review*, *the Hunger*, *Writers Resist*, *Right Now*, and several others.

ERIN CISNEY is a poet from Lancaster, Pennsylvania whose work has appeared in such places as *Spry Literary Journal*, *Literary Orphans*, and *Rust + Moth*, among others. Her poetry collection, *Anatomy Museum*, is available from Unsolicited Press.

AMEE NASSRENE BROUMAND is an Iranian-American poet from the Pacific Northwest. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her work has appeared in numerous journals including *Glass: A Journal of Poetry (Poets Resist)*, *Rust + Moth*, *Barren Magazine*, *Sundog Lit*, and *Empty Mirror*.

Originally from Mississippi, NICK CREEL is an emerging poet and web developer. Their work is forthcoming and appears in *Petrichor*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, and *the TWANG Anthology*. Their hypertext micro-chapbook *Evidence* (2020, self-published) is available online at ncreel.itich.io. After finishing a BA in Interactive Literature and New Media at Marlboro College, they plan to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at UMass Boston.

NORA GAUSE is a chef, poet, and corvid-lover in Seattle, WA. They wrangle a household and a cat, plant herbs, talk to crows, and are a writing mentor to homeless youth in Seattle. Previous works can be found at coffinbell.com and in the Seattle Erotic Art Festival's 2020 Literary Anthology. They can be found on Twitter as @gaussianwords.

GUSTAV PARKER HIBBETT is a black poet and fiction writer currently pursuing his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. He holds a BA in English from Stanford University, and is originally from New Mexico. His work is also forthcoming in *phoebe*, where his poem "Oil Painting of a Hand Holding a Taxidermied Bluebird" is a finalist for the 2020 Greg Grummer Poetry Prize.

JESSE HILSON is a freelance reporter, photographer, and artist living in the western Catskills in New York State. He has been published in *AZURE*, *Maudlin House*, the Bright Hill Press Anthology *Like Light*, and elsewhere. His Instagram handle is @platelet60.

KATIE HOGAN is a twenty-year-old emerging poet from Richmond, Virginia, writing and living in Denver, Colorado. Her work appears in *Isacoustic*, *Mineral Lit Mag*, and *Certain Circuits*, and is forthcoming in *The Chiron Review*, *Dreich Magazine*, and *Ember Chasm Review*. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree in creative writing from the University of Denver.

AMY JANNOTTI (she/her) is a pile of dust in a trench coat living and writing in Philadelphia, where she received her BFA in Creative Writing from the University of the Arts. Her work has been featured in *Burning House Press*, *Charge Magazine*, and elsewhere. She tweets @cursetheground.

NATASHA KING's poetry has appeared in *Constellate Magazine*, *Oyster River Pages*, *Okay Donkey*, *Ghost City Review*, and others. She lives in North Carolina, where she spends her spare time writing, prowling, and thinking about the ocean. She can be found on Twitter as @pelagic_natasha.

SOPHIE LAING is from Red Hook, New York. Her poems have also appeared in *Metonym Journal*, *Red Flag Poetry*, *Kissing Dynamite*, and *Shards*.

RICHARD LEDUE was born in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, but currently lives in Norway House, Manitoba with his wife and son. His poems have appeared in various publications throughout 2019, and more work is forthcoming throughout 2020, including a chapbook from Kelsay Books.

LAURINDA LIND lives in New York's North Country. Some publications appear in *Black Poppy Review*, *Bloodroot*, *Ghost City Review*, *Killjoy*, and *Timeless Tales*, as well as in anthologies: *Visiting Bob: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Bob Dylan* (New Rivers Press) and *AFTERMATH: Explorations of Loss and Grief* (Radix Media).

CHRISTINA MCDERMOTT is a writer and linguist who enjoys exploring the connection between speech sounds and verse. Her work has appeared in *Levee Magazine* and *October Hill Press*. She runs a poetry blog: pocketmappoetry.wordpress.com.

LINDZ MCLEOD lives in Edinburgh, Scotland. Her short stories have been published by the Scotsman newspaper, the Scottish Book Trust, the Dundee Victoria & Albert Museum, and more. She has published poetry with *Allegory Ridge*, *Passaic/Völuspá*, *For Women Who Roar*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Impossible Archetype*, and more. She was shortlisted for the Fish Publishing Poetry Prize

in 2019. Lindz is the competition secretary of the Edinburgh Writer's Club and holds a Master's in Creative Writing.

AVLEEN K MOKHA holds a B.A. in English Literature and Linguistics from McGill University. Currently a journalist based in Montreal, Avleen edits poetry and prose for *Persephone's Daughters*. Her poems can be found in places like *Yolk Literary*, *Canvas*, *Siblini*, and *RADIX*.

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 Rosenblum Poems* published by Cholla Needles Arts & Literary Library, 2020. For more information, including free e-books and his essay *Magic, Illusion and Other Realities*, please visit his website at www.simonperchik.com. To view one of his interviews, please follow this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSK774rtfx8>

CAMILLE ROSAS is an activist, witch, and aspiring soap maker. She is a member of various writing collectives, a women's rights organization, and a coven. Her work has been previously published in *Inklette Magazine*.

E. SAMPLES is from Appalachia and currently lives in Southern Indiana. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Vamp Cat Mag*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Black Bough Poetry*, *fws: a journal of literature & art*, *The Stillwater Review*, and *Twist in Time Magazine*. She is on twitter @emilysamples.

DANIELLE SOLO is a poet based in London, Ontario. Her work focuses on spirituality and personal experiences of a traumatic nature, unearthing the hauntings that result from these events. Her poetry has been published in *Polemical Zine*, *Jawbreaker Collective*, and is forthcoming in *Mineral Lit Mag*. It's not hard to spot her in the wild: she's the most eccentric person in your grocery store, often found swathed in velvet and discussing mortality with the tanked lobsters.

M. STONE is a bookworm, birdwatcher, and stargazer living in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Her poems have appeared in *San Pedro River Review*, *UCity Review*, and numerous other journals. Find her on Twitter @writermstone and at writermstone.wordpress.com.

SELINA WHITELEY is a neurodivergent poet with anxiety, depression, and trauma. She had an IEP/statement throughout school. Having speech defects and problems with verbalisation, she started writing poetry as an alternative mode of expression. Despite her challenges, she has been published in two books, *Up to Our Necks in It* and *The Kaleidoscope Chronicles*. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *Literary Veganism*, *The Lake*, *Literary Yard*, *Neon Mariposa*,

Spillwords, *Thimble*, and *Prismatica*. Her poetry can be accessed on her personal website, “The Music of Our Phrases.”

MADISON ZEHMER is an emerging poet and wannabe historian from North Carolina, with work published and forthcoming in *Gone Lawn*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Kanstellation Magazine*, *LandLocked Magazine*, and more. She is editor in chief of *Mineral Lit Mag*, and her first chapbook, *Unhaunting*, will be released by Kelsay Books in 2021.

FICTION

ALFREDO SALVATORE ARCILESI has spent a decade penning award-winning short- and feature-length screenplays, while working as a full-time artisan baker. His prose work explores the trials and tribulations of ordinary people, slice-of-life examinations anchored in real and surreal settings. His short stories have appeared in over twenty literary journals, including *Raconteur Literary Magazine*, *Scrittura Magazine*, and *The Helix Magazine*. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

For the last thirty years, JAY BECHTOL has been a social worker helping children, adults, and families navigate the world of mental illness, substance misuse, and trauma. He has learned that everyone has a story, and more often than not, several stories. That experience has influenced many of the things he writes. Some more than others. Jay can be found online at JayBechtol.com and on Twitter @BechtolJay. He can be found in person in Homer, Alaska.

CARLY BUSH is a content strategist, social media coordinator, and fiction writer from southern Ontario. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tiny Molecules* and *Gone Lawn*.

RICHARD COCHNAR’s short fiction has appeared in *Coffin Bell* and *Déraciné*. He lives in Lincoln, Nebraska with his beloved cats. He is currently working on a young adult folk horror novel.

JENNIFER FROST lives in Woodland Hills, CA with her husband and four-year-old son. With an undergraduate degree in English Literature from the University of Iowa, Jennifer has spent her life as a devoted reader and ‘closeted’ writer. Look for her stories in the Spring 2020 issues of *The Valley Scribe* and *Backchannels*.

SHANNON ST. HILAIRE is a content writer at Airbnb. She serves on the board of directors for an arts organization, The People’s Colloquium, and is an editor of their anthology. Her work has been published in *Entropy*, *X-R-A-Y*, *VoiceCatcher*, *The Fig Tree*, and *Reflection*. She lives in Portland, Oregon and is online at www.shannonsthilaire.com.

BLAKE JOHNSON writes a lot of fiction. Sometimes he eats and sleeps, too. He's beyond excited that his novella, *Prodigal: An American Parable*, will be released on November 10th of this year by Trouble Department. You can often find him hanging out in the Twitterverse under the handle @bjohnsonauthor, and you can check out more of his stories at bjohnsonauthor.wordpress.com.

JOHN MAKI writes short stories and flash fiction. He hails from Seattle and studies at Hugo House. A Google search will confirm that he is of Finnish descent and lead you to some of his published work, both online and in small literary magazines. Or you can cut to the chase and visit www.makihome.us.

ELINA TAILLON is an MFA candidate in UBC's Creative Writing program and editor-in-training at *PRISM Magazine*. She also holds a Master's degree in French literature from the University of Toronto. She has published book reviews in *PRISM* and *Young Adulting*.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART

JENNI COUTTS is an illustrator, speculative fiction writer, and junior doctor based in Glasgow, Scotland. In her artwork she enjoys exploring themes of darkness, femininity, strong emotions, and the fantastical. For more of her artwork, find her on Instagram @jennicouttsart or Twitter @jenni_coutts.

MELISSA KOJIMA was born in southern California and grew up in several small towns in Oregon, where she sang to her black cats, spied on bats, and created all kinds of strange art. She's always felt awkward in her large, conservative family and in the small, traditional towns where she grew up, never quite fitting in because of her gothic tendencies, macabre humor, and artistic eccentricities. Through her spooky and mysterious storybook-like artwork, filled with darkly beautiful creatures, she expresses her feelings of being awkward, invisible, strange, and lonely. Ghosts, witches, Victorian gothic lolitas, and bats are all characters like herself who cannot resist haunted mansions, creepy forests, and spooky wonderlands because they send thrilling chills down her spine. Currently, she lives and works in Portland, Oregon, one of the strangest and spookiest places she's ever called home. And, of course, this makes her very happy. Right now, she is working on a series of large-scale drawings with Haunted Mansions as the theme. Soon, she'll be searching for a cat to be her new art assistant, even though she knows the new one will never replace her precious Katarina Kitty. Still, she misses the purrs, pets, and cuddling of a cat whenever she is in her art studio. Discover more of her gothic art at www.melissakojima.net.

TUCKER LIEBERMAN is the author of nonfiction books: the literary criticism *Painting Dragons*, the memoir *Bad Fire*, and the biography *Ten Past Noon*. His short fiction is in the anthologies *I Didn't Break the Lamp* and *Trans-Galactic Bike Ride*. He has walked on fire. Twitter: @tuckerlieberman, www.tuckerlieberman.com.

MARIA S. PICONE has an MFA in fiction from Goddard College. She is a self-taught oil painter whose work has appeared in magazines like the *New England Review*, *the Beechwood Review*, and *Mosaic Art and Literary*. She often paints abstract, space-inspired themes with dark, dramatic colors and gemstones. She owes allegiance to the fan brush and the color Prussian Blue. Her Twitter is @mspicone, and her website is mariaspicone.com.

FABRICE POUSSIN teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review*, and other publications.