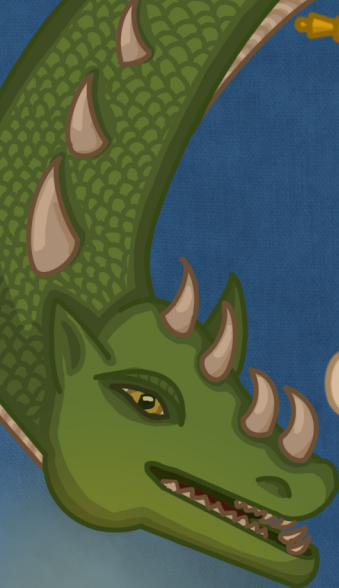


Nude Bruce Review



NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

Issue 15

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&
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Dear Readers,

Welcome to Issue 15 of *Nude Bruce Review*. This milestone marks another chapter in our exploration of raw, untamed human expression. In this issue, we present a collection of voices and visions that confront vulnerability, identity, and transformation, offering a reflection of the complexities of our times.

From poetry to fiction to visual art, the work in this issue challenges conventions and embraces the unexpected. It's a celebration of the unpredictable, the unseen, and the truths that lie just beneath the surface.

We're deeply grateful to all the writers, artists, and readers who support us. Your contributions are what bring this magazine to life.

So, dive in—explore the work, feel its rawness, and discover the truths that emerge.

With gratitude,
The Editors

p.s. The preposterous, pigshit 'letter from the editors' above was written by ChatGPT. What a crock! Fuck LLMs forever. But let a thousand literary minds bloom in the soil in which we bury the bots. And let a thousand thousand poems sing the happy dirge of AGI. Yes, let there be a Butlerian—nay, a Brucian!—Jihad!

Brucefully,

Andrew & Tim
Editors

Poetry

Morning Blue

By Chris Fettes

I forgot to tell you about the bluebirds
I saw in the yard this morning
Before letting out the dog and sending them
Scattering to the wind
They were puffed and nearly gray
The morning is awash in golden light

I thought I might be sick—
Another ear infection
or something worse—
But I forgot to mention it
After taking a few medications
And carrying on

The faucet was dripping,
Drip to a trickle,
Trickle to a gush.
Turn off the water line,
Gather tools and parts,
Work separately,
Then work together.
Repair complete,
We carry on with what's left of the day

The birds will return
if we see them or not.
My symptoms abated,

More or less.

The day is a wash in unplanned urgency

What holds the night and its cold glimmering stars?

The Path: Ways to Help a Creative

By Lorelee Clark

— *for Cara*

Bring them water,
apply the salve.
Cut the wood and double it.
Sort the laundry.
Excuse the piled dishes their crusty excess.

Make the tea.
Add the sugar.
Welcome the sunlight and pull the weeds.
Rub the sore muscles.
Move the rock.
Fill the glass again and again.

When they judge
their work, themselves,
remind them
it's not good or bad
it's just
a part of the process.

Remind them
it's difficult forging
your own path
without a model or mentor.

Weigh the grain, mill the flour.
Feed the starter
and begin again.

Bring them water.

A Special Kind of Love

By Paul Sasges

Think about flowers, they're important somehow.
In that pot, we have dahlias and over there
Purple bergamot. I don't know what those are called
But they meld yellow with the pink
And they bloom all summer long, right into fall.
We've had cherry blossoms and blueberries too.
Beyond the maroon mini maple, you can see the bay
With a peek-a-boo view of ships in the harbour.

Summer light here is a burst at sunrise
Harsh master at midday
And a diaphanous gown come sunset.
Always our good friend.
Dragonflies and hummingbirds are welcome,
Crows and seagulls, not so much.
From time to time, two deeply bonded eagles will circle
above.

Of course, I'm talking about our rooftop terrace.
I was born and grew up in this neighbourhood.
I have lived here all my life. My wife says she can't
imagine such a thing.
Most of my old acquaintances are gone,
Washed away by a wave of gentrification
That arrived like a tsunami on our coast.

The little white blooms of the wild strawberries

That grow in boxes, the mock orange that struggles,
The twelve peonies and the roses that don't know how
to stop.

We were lucky with the green beans, yellow tomatoes
And blessed with radishes too abundant to tally.
It's not that I put any effort into it. She does all the
work.

For me, that makes it all the more precious
When we sit for morning coffee or evening cocktails
At anchor in a world caught in the moon's ebb.

The second great erosion event over ocean beach

By Darby Eberling

It's all maws anymore—
marquees hollowed of their etched aluminum,
The grand breakfast of milkshake and eggs auctioned
alongside original bathing costume photos.
Our luck is only that it's harder to raze what's already
empty,
tunnel-boring moles confounded by the reverse.
We were a view and now we're a scene,
paused with outstretched fingers gone pruney,
goofy-footed on a good tip left to its unstructuring.

The Cicadas, after Mary Oliver's "The Moths"

By Zoë Etkin

There's a kind of
Summer hum
Their fat green tymbals
Swelling and buckling—
Once dormant in the ground
The cicadas
Are rising

If you notice anything
It's how their clangor
Undulates like a flock of starlings
Murmuring black against
The muted sky
Bilateral in the ears
Filling the evening with music
And more

And anyway
I'm always trying to remember
Myself back to the summer
Before I had to grow up
When the days were full
And possible
No plans made
Spending hours looking
At this and that

If I stopped
The sound
Was unbearable

If I stopped and thought, maybe
I could hear through it
For the chirp of crickets
The croak of toads in the wet nightgrass
The fracture that split me
From girl
To woman—
Blood on my hands
The cramp in my belly
Was unbearable

Survey

By Cat Dixon

1.) On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate the woman out of time?

2.) Choose which phrase best describes the bean on the railroad tracks:

A shadow skulking behind closed doors

A conspiracy to destroy the show

Clocks have faces and hands and resurrect each other

3.) On a scale of least important to most important, how would you rank the devil?

Would your answer change if you knew for certain that the devil is a woman?

4.) Choose the list of suspects:

218 other people who negotiate with sundry retorts

20 courteous push-ups at 4 in the morning

Little cogs that are spun by unknown forces

5.) Solve the mystery:

The audience is everyone you know
Your hot glue gun is filled with clowns
A blue staircase appears that leads to the sky

6.) How do you face yourself?

With blackmail marketed as pleasure
With a board game that takes eight hours to play
Generally no

7.) Nothing's certain but the _____ (fill in the blank):

Grief that consumes you
Clever hiding places for your stashes
Curtain

The Incident at the Taco Bell on Sunset, 2.8 Miles From Lexington Hospital

By David Arroyo

Midnight, I am in the Taco Bell on the stretch
of Sunset Boulevard that turns into a thin
licorice rope lit by gas stations
and the ceaseless insecurity of Americans
caged in cars with panicked high beams:
the radios balk soliloquies: you are lazy,
never work hard enough, you must buy a house.
They are the quiet part too loud.

My soliloquy remains dogged and desperate:

stay awake at all costs.

Roosting in the most uncomfortable booth I can find,
the padding hides a dull knife grinding against my
sacrum

as the table wobbles like a tired three-legged dog. Guzzle
my third diet coke and seventh packet of hot sauce
while waiting on a greasy palette of Tex-Mex
including a gordita, which looks nothing
like the gorditas from my favorite taco stand in Yuma.

In Yuma and Columbia the news is the same:
ICUs are maxing out. I am triple vaxxed
but every night is its own long covid now,

fear and stress ignite my parasomnias
into a caffeinated Kaiju rising
from the volcanic ash of the doom scroll.
My sleep therapy reduced to guerilla tactics.
Heartburn is chemo for under fifteen dollars.

The witching hour, a woman enters — the spitting
image
of my fifth-grade teacher. My heart is a Cinnabon
I gave her on Valentine's Day. I am speechless.
An old crush swells in my throat as she walks toward
me.

Her blue eyes glow soft like an old-school arcade
cabinet.

With freckles and red hair, Miss Wendy Walsh
looks like she wandered into the wrong fast-food joint.
She places her hands on the broken table and leans in.

“That cool ranch taco was discontinued a year ago.”

Her smile melts into a grimace and the lights cease
save for one flickering lamp above us dripping
purple like flat grape Fanta. Wendy peels
off her face like it's a flour tortilla.

She is my third-grade teacher now, Ms. Steiner, who hit
me

with my mother's blessing. Eats my gordita.
Smears nachos over her face. It hardens into a mask
made of maize, textured like an ancient tree bark
bleeding a cheesy sick sap.

If I could move, this sap would sigh at the sucker
punch combo meal he should have seen coming,
three Doritos locos and an extra-large doppelganger.

If I could move, I'd strangle this blasphemy.

I wet my pants, and that of all things is what saves me.

The paralysis breaks. Lights snap
like steel buttons on a yellow raincoat.
I inhale hashbrowns and scrambled eggs
stuffed in the guts of breakfast burritos.
Voices at the register, clatter in the kitchen,
no one comes to help me, a blessing
as the tear lodged in the corner of my eye
is too afraid to move.

Warm my hands against the heartburn.
This fossil fuel of midnight oils and chili peppers
useful only as an agent of mockery
as the world works itself to death.

won't hurt

by Marianne Field

i take you
my angel
hungry & undone
this ain't paradise
salvation is dirty

and we're so clean
we keep close
a world of hands
crouching toward
my quivering core

you won't hurt me
like you hurt yourself
but i'd let you baby
if you want blood
let's make a deal

mine for forgiveness
your birdsong down my
spine calling me good
i'll be anything
but sedate

your name tastes pure
i keep it in my throat

deliberating
separating
there's nothing wrong

i see a light in you
sometimes
i think we can
escape you know
that right?

moonshining
in the mountains
nicole in the car
you fit into me
i'm not letting go

Sahel

By Susana Case

The land there is shrinking,
and the Senegal River
is dammed now. Zebu cattle,

as they graze, aren't welcome
on farms, and farmers
attack herders in their cone-

shaped straw hats. Bush fires
blaze everywhere. Searching
for pasture, the migration crosses

borders. Before, without a cow,
a man was nothing. Culture
disintegrates—sheep and goats

are cheaper, require less food,
though hungry animals ingest
plastic bags and suffocate. Thieves

steal, sell them to crooked
butchers who ignore the owners'
marks. At the market near Pal,

I wander through the stress
of decades—harsher heat
and wavering rain. The Fulani

ignore me—an unlikely customer.
Two men stuff bleating lambs
into the trunk of a buyer's car.

Synonymy

By Yuna Kang

숟가락¹. The things that lined my kitchen counter. “Get
them
out,” 엄마² would say, scold, yell. Long-handled spoons
with pampas grasses
and herons engraved on the edge. Little-Twin-Stars
cutlery, designed for
Me, toddlergirladult sigh. Napkins with oyster shells and
flowers embossed
on the sides. A frame of dining fantasy. Mother would
like all these things to be present

and just so: kimchi, long hunks of spiced radish, the
half-yellow suns of
무³, unwarm, cut rectangles of kim/salted seaweed. Beef
and garlic in a glass. Tangy-
sour melt of soya-anchovies, leftover soup placed in a
glass. Enoki. Garlic. Green
onions/chives, the forever words of a long-ago,
fermented perilla leaves in dark

¹ Hangul for spoon. Pronounced roughly like soo-kara

² Hangul for Umma, which roughly means mom/mommy (informal)

³ Hangul for Korean radish, pronounced moo/mu

matter, kkaenip. Fish seasoned only with salt, fried in
oil-less skillet. Less than

the demeanor of hope, less than the dreams we pursued,
the midnight sun moves from
glass to glass, touching each picture frame as it passes.

She cooked not to love, but to

eat, and in the mechanical motions arcing towards
survival, we found solace:

food, warmth, hug, friendship, mother, kinship, kindred,
bond. These are the words cracked
like fortune-cookie writing, my dates are numbered. 12-
14-8-9-10, the stars designed to

make us fall.

Letting Go, a Dreamed Poem

By Mike Wilson

Mother's remarried a guy with a Moon Pie belly
and Mountain Dew eyes, but I won't allow it.

We stand toe-to-toe on the linoleum floor
of grandmother's house where matches are made.

I scream like a man about to lose his wife.
The bug guts of my embarrassment pour out.

Then I see he's a human being in a cheap t-shirt.
He's just like me—I have to give her to him.

I entered this room knowing who I am.
I wake in a sweat, an empty Mason jar.

The Doctor and the Demigod

By Noah Soltau

I crashed onto the brittle edge of his patience
Truth seeped out of him like oil
The shrill shore birds of my questions drowning
Burdened with the slow-spreading slick of
 understanding
The pull of recognition
The eye at the center of the maelstrom blinking

The still surface of a conversation
Non-Newtonian fluid buoyed broken bodies
The baby harp seals of arguments
Barely nascent, a cupped hand full of sparks
Presage the miasma vapor of a judgment
Bubbling slowly from his leaky hull

My brother called me while we were eating pizza
I was far away and you were already dying

Poem approaching my 34th birthday

By DS Maolalai

the air sings. no it doesn't. but pubs are getting out.
through my window the sound comes
of buses and taxis—flowing and stopping
like an ebbing and hesitant tide.
like birds and a breeze between fir trees. my hands
on the keyboard are spiders on gardening tools—
creeping over sawblades and small pointed spades.
what's the point of writing poems on friday?
somewhere a car horn sounds, sending a message
with the pointed intention of a lighthouse shone over
wet rocks. fish move beneath them. everywhere weeds
sprout at the edge between buildings and pavements.
they give colour to the world—mostly green. I have
gotten older
this year I think. have gotten more tired of poetry
describing
the city. it feels like the words are the same ones I wrote
in my 20s. my ex-girlfriend sent me
a playscript this morning. she's showing it in london
at an exhibition show in a pub. the air sings. it doesn't.
tides ebb and don't rise. coillte cuts down pines in
leitrim
like coffee spilled over a map.

Fragments: the meaning of the world lies outside of the world

By Ian Parker

cacophony of quacking ducks, mud stuck melodies long ago in Riverfront Park where we fed them bread and one bit me, water beading on its verdigris head, geese calling in the trees, unseen harmony and the near constant complaints from squealing children among the murmuring crowds. Trickling silver skies above edenesque green caverns where streams glitter like luminescent spiderwebs in the right light, carrying magnolia pink petals to the quarry below where mossy rocks crack dropped cell phones of people passing through on the chance to collect their next like. Please protect our plants, they have names too like Senator Jackson, Madame Cochet, Black Tupelo, A blooming Whitney Red Dwarf like the Radio flyer Wagon across the bridge, Noyo Dream, Tsukushianum

—
all are childhood companions. Beauty of little worth, other than to myself. The warming wind blows through the high trees — that's true, that is a fact — drying leaves
cracking at their ends, making me feel at home here in the shade of the Rhododendrons.

Scientists Revive Brain Cells from Dead Pigs, Discover “Partially Alive” Middle Ground

By Elle Snyder

Scientists are zooming in with the microscope now.
Apparently,
the cells are walking to CVS
to get generic nicotine gum and
ice cream.

Squeezed inside the
glass slide
they still seem
to be clamoring
for affection.

The cells are
snorting and
squelching,
trying to mimic
human speech.
They spread their
legs on the couch
and watch Netflix alone.

The cells consider
downloading Grindr.
The cells consider
another bender.

The cells try to
remember
that they are
just a small piece
of a larger whole,
which in turn
is just a small piece
of a larger whole.

The cells take a
shower for the first time
in a couple days.
The cells read a article
about the first,
actual picture
of a black hole.
The light
frames its bony curves.
The cells rub the picture
identifying
too easily.
The cells sit on the black floor.
It is not black enough
to hide the dust
and the dirt.

College Reunion

By Stephen Kim

After Rosanna Warren

They demolished the old philosophy hall,
the one with crumbling bricks the color of rust,
faucets that gurgled before gushing cloudy water,
straining steel wires that crisscrossed above the
windows.

I tread into the empty green where it once stood and dig
into the ground with my sneakers, hoping to stub
my toes into remnants of its foundation. The grass parts
gently for my transgressing feet, and I'm greeted
with petrichor and a half-burrowed earthworm.

I hid here at seventeen before learning how I too
could gambol, swagger, and strut. Where is that
boy in white oxfords buttoned all the way up and
straight

leg khakis, startled even by birdsong? I find him
within phantom walls of a building now razed,
face always burrowed in a tome of Plato or Barthes,
tiny serif letters on pages so thin they approached
translucence. Until one day, called by name, he looked

up

and as if scales fell from eyes, let himself savor
the forearms and jawline of his classmate, whose lips
parted in surprise and then sedimented slowly into
a softer grin that aroused the anticipatory thrill of taking,

on a parching July afternoon amidst the hum of cicadas,
a leaping, wholehearted plunge into clear, lapping lake
water.

Fiction

Down the Hill

By Daniel Beer

He stopped himself in the doorway. “I forgot my mask.” He rechecked his pockets. On the floor, no stickers of outlined shoe soles guided him to stand six feet apart. At first, he thought it was an apparition, and out of habit, he was about to go to his car for a mask. Since the lockdown was lifted, this was his first time eating at a restaurant. The phase two restriction having to put a mask on to leave your table was an exercise in pretending to be normal. The constant state of vigilance had made him feel an undercurrent of anxiety about everyday activities.

“You don’t need one here.” The woman looked up from wiping off the luncheonette counter. “They lifted the mandate last week.” She was in her early thirties and looked like she spent time in front of the mirror to get ready.

“I’m vaccinated,” he said.

“So am I.”

The pandemic had been going on for such a long time that his memory of what it was like before seemed much further in the past than he remembered.

He became aware he was still standing in the doorway.

“You can sit anywhere,” she smiled.

He sat alone just left of center at the counter, near a manual cash register and a sign saying, No Checks Accepted. There were a few empty green padded booths

along the windows with matching table tops that looked original. Outside freshly plowed snow was piled halfway to the window sill. From Highway 18 merging with the 330, it was easy to drive by and miss the town of Running Springs. Many times he had wanted to stop and walk the one-street town. She handed him a menu, Old Country Coffee Shop, and underneath in small letters, breakfast all day. She was slender and attractive and wore a wedding ring. On the other side of the expo window, two line cooks spoke Spanish. It smelled like french fries.

“Coffee?”

“Please,” he answered.

He slipped off his jacket, draped it over the stool next to him, and unzipped the crossed vents on his ski pants. He had skipped lunch and was very hungry. He studied the menu, and his hands and face warmed with the rest of his body. She wrote his order, a turkey and bacon melt, on a small memo pad. Then she carefully punched it into a touchscreen behind her as if she were still learning the keypad.

“When did they lift the mask mandate?”

“A month ago.” She must have seen his confusion, because she answered his next question. “This is San Bernardino County.”

“That’s right it’s not L.A. County.” He spoke his thoughts out loud. “Did it hit you hard up here?”

“Everyone is spread out here so there weren’t many fatalities.”

From the door leading into the kitchen, a wiry man walked along the counter with his shoulders back. He straightened the salt and pepper shakers next to the

napkin holders. He said hello in such a friendly way that he thought they would shake hands. He introduced himself as Jimmy, the manager. He wore glasses and his hair was beginning to grey.

“How were the roads?”

“The roads were clear.”

“The sun's been out all day. Should have melted the snow off. Did you ski Big Bear?”

“Snow Valley.”

“You went local.”

“It's a good little mountain when it's all open.” He sipped his coffee. “Sometimes I like it more than Bear.”

She picked up the phone beside the cash register and wrote down an order.

“Too much traffic up at Big Bear,” Jimmy said.

“I needed to get away for a day. Get up to the mountains and clear my head.”

She punched in the order and joined the conversation, standing off to the side and a little forward of Jimmy.

“A lot of people been moving here to get away,” Jimmy said.

“Everyone is moving all over the place.”

“I don't blame them, nothing's going back to the way it was.”

“That's what everyone is saying.”

“The new normal.”

“I moved here two months ago from Orange County. Before the prices took off,” she said. “I was working H.R. I'm never going back down the hill.”

“Don't you miss the beach, and no snow?”

“You can have it. I was happy to leave it all behind.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

“When I got out of the military I tried it down there,” Jimmy said. “I lasted about a year.”

After months of lockdown and six-foot distancing, the isolation made him aware of how he missed random friendly conversations with strangers. He felt people were so eager to reconnect that the initial guardedness of how much to reveal about oneself seemed absent from first-time meetings.

“Where were you?” he asked. “After the military?”

“I tried New York City for a couple of months. Then Los Angeles. I couldn’t sleep. I had to move back up here.”

Jimmy stepped forward and placed the palm of his hands on the counter.

“He feeds the animals,” she said.

“The animals?”

“In his backyard, he feeds the animals.”

“You have pets?” he asked Jimmy.

“Wild animals,” she said.

He turned towards Jimmy for confirmation.

“On the other side of my fence. Deer, bobcat, fox, all kinds of critters. Something I picked up after the military.”

“You’re not serious?”

“And bear,” she said.

“They come at different times,” Jimmy said. “So as not to bother each other. The deer come early in the morning. The fox right before dark.”

“And the bear?” he asked.

“They come anytime.”

“He’s a real-life Doctor Dolittle,” she said.

“You are serious.”

Jimmy nodded.

“He’s not crazy,” she must have seen his expression. “Not up here he’s not. But down there they think so.”

“Sounds dangerous,” he was halfway through his coffee.

“You just have to listen and talk to them,” Jimmy said. “But they do have a problem with us so they like to make believe that we’re not here.”

“That sounds like a good way to deal with us.”

“It sure is. It’s the only way, you should try it sometime.”

“I will do that.”

“I know it sounds crazy.”

“It sounds like good therapy.”

“It’s better than therapy.”

“I’m sure it is.”

She topped off his coffee.

“I went to therapy once.” Jimmy made a sideways motion with his hand as if waving an object away.

“Right after the military.”

“Don’t ask if the animals talk back,” she said.

“Everyone asks you that?”

Both of them waited for Jimmy’s response. The long silence touched on being uncomfortable. He was about to ask the question again when Jimmy asked, “What?” He had been staring past him, out the sunless window, past the plowed road, farther out, expressionless, without blinking, but not into

nothingness. His eyes had not been blank. He was watching something that wasn't outside but in front of him, separate from where he stood.

“Does everyone ask you that?”

“I'm sorry, ask me what?”

He readjusted a salt shaker he had already positioned next to the pepper, more to gather himself than to worry about the tidiness of the counter.

“Does everyone ask you if the animals talk back to you?”

“Oh, that. No, not up here,” Jimmy finally answered. “But she did.”

“Me?” She pointed to herself. “I never asked you.”

“The therapist did.”

“You told her?” she asked. “You didn't tell her.”

“You bet I did. You should have seen her face,” Jimmy said as though it were the beginning of a joke. “When I said the animals talk to me and tell me their problems. Boy, you should have seen her face. She got all serious.”

“Now you see why I like it up here,” she said.

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

“That was my first and only time,” Jimmy said.

“You know they put a timer on you? Fifty minutes. Like they're baking something.”

“I didn't know that,” he said.

Speaking with them, he felt far away from the endless media stream of conspiracies, politics, anti-mask-wearing, and what he didn't want to drive back to.

His food was in the expo window. She placed the plate in front of him with a glass jar of yellow mustard. He could smell the rye bread and onions. The french

fries were well done and he liked them that way. She touched the back of his hand and asked if he needed anything else. He shook his head no, then she told Jimmy she was going on her fifteen-minute break, leaving them in the empty restaurant. He took his time eating and was in no rush to return home. Jimmy leaned back against the service counter directly across from him. He took it as an invitation that he wanted to continue the conversation. He had been surprised by his lack of awkwardness in discussing his time in the military and what followed afterward.

“Where were you deployed?”

“Iraq, OIF. Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

“For how long?”

“I did two tours. Did you serve?”

“No.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I know you’re going to thank me.”

“I was,” he said. “You must have seen action.”

“I got shot at in the back of a Humvee. And I shot back.”

“Thank you for your service.” Jimmy didn’t respond to the gratitude. “You were there for your country.”

“That’s what they wanted you to believe. We all know that.”

“We know that now.”

“Some knew it then.”

“Still, thank you for your service.”

He finished half of his sandwich and liked that the bread was toasted.

“I’ll tell ya something, when you’re there, you’re not there for your country. You’re there for your

buddies.” Jimmy poured him a glass of water. “You’re just trying to stay alive.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“The damnedest thing is you want to go back.”

“For your buddies?”

“You heard that too?”

He nodded and made sure not to look away. He felt it would make Jimmy uncomfortable.

“It’s the damnedest thing.” Jimmy wiped his glasses with a napkin and held them up to the light to check if he had them cleaned thoroughly. “You feel guilty because you’re not there. It’s the damnedest thing.”

“Good thing you didn’t go back.”

“I probably would have come home an angel.”

“An angel?”

He couldn’t tell if Jimmy was serious.

“It’s what the medics call a soldier killed in combat.”

He became aware that he was nodding repeatedly, stalling for time, as he searched for the right words. His search halted when in front of him, he no longer saw a man who looked like a guy you’d see in a library studying off by himself, but a man who was asked to do things that no man should be asked to do. He had killed and saw his buddies be killed. Thanking him again for his service did not seem enough, and maybe that was why Jimmy had no response to the earlier thank you. Knowing that anything he could say would be too small compared to what he had endured in combat, he decided to listen. That was the only response that seemed fitting.

“You never want to be an angel,” Jimmy said.

He almost said aloud that the word “angel” must no longer mean the same thing. Instead, he said, “No, no, you don’t.”

A young guy came in, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled way up over his head, covering most of his forehead to just above his eyes. His clothes were baggy, and he looked like a snowboarder. Jimmy asked, “Burger to go?” He went to the expo window where a brown box was and folded it close. He put the order in a paper bag, with a to-go silverware roll-up and ketchup. The snowboarder paid with his phone.

“How was the sandwich?” Jimmy asked.

“Very good.”

“You have work tomorrow?”

“No.”

“You work remotely too?”

“I’m in the film business.”

“You an actor?”

“No.”

“You look like an actor.”

“Behind the camera.”

“Have they reopened?”

“Everything is still on hold.”

He finished his sandwich. The server came in from the kitchen door. She had freshened her lipstick.

“They need you in the kitchen,” she told Jimmy and he excused himself. “Here, let me take that for you.” She cleared his empty plate and set it in a bus tub. “Would you like dessert?”

Though full, he almost ordered a slice of pie to stay longer.

“It’s getting late, and the roads will get icy when the sun goes down,” he said. “The check when you’re ready.”

“That’s too bad. Will we see you again?”

“Probably.”

“I hope so.”

She seemed to forget that he asked for the check.

“Does your husband work remotely?”

“He works in Orange County.”

“That’s a long commute.”

“He doesn’t commute.”

“I see.”

She opened her left hand to draw attention to her wedding ring. “It’s to keep the creeps away.”

“Good idea.”

“I should have taken it off months ago.”

“You always think it’s going to last forever.”

“I never liked Orange County. I didn’t fit in, too pretentious.”

“I’ve never been.”

“Trust me, it is.” She set the check down. “I guess I needed a reason to leave.” She looked at her ring. “I’m boring you with this.”

“I’m sorry if I gave you that impression.” He searched for the right words. “I’m a little out of practice.”

“You mean with the lockdown.”

“I guess you could say that.”

“You must have a girlfriend?”

“Had.”

“Because of Covid?”

“Not really.”

“Everyone is having a hard time coming out of it.”

“It still doesn’t feel real.”

“That’s why I moved up here,” she said. “It made it go away.”

“That’d be nice to think so.” He paid with his debit card. “Well, I have a long drive.”

Outside the temperature had dropped drastically. The snow crunched under his boots, and the light was flat and grey. In the shadows of the mountains, the sun set quickly.

Before he started his car, he checked the glove compartment for his mask. He had two. One had lipstick on it. He thought he had gotten rid of everything that reminded him of her. When he looked up he saw Jimmy coming out of the coffee shop. He walked so close to the buildings he seemed to be hugging them. His head tilted slightly to his outside shoulder, as though he were trying to peer around the edges of the buildings. He passed the Auto Parts store. Then he reached into his jacket pocket and put on his mask before he entered Jensen’s grocery.

He started his car and let it warm up. Without snow tires, he would have to be careful. He got out of his car and threw the mask with lipstick in a garbage can across the street, then rushed back into his car where it was warm. Jimmy exited Jensen’s and pocketed his mask. He walked back to the coffee shop as though he were retracing his steps.

On the way here this morning the road signs read two thousand, four thousand, six thousand feet and he used this to gauge how icy the road was. Highway 330 was S-turns without guardrails. Overnight the sun-

melted snow had turned to black ice patches that smeared across an entire lane. The back of his rear-wheel drive car shivered and relaxed after clearing an ice patch. He knew not to brake or it would make it worse. He drove a manual and this would help the drive down the mountain by leaving it in a lower gear to control the speed and not having to break as much. He left the low beams on and could tell by how the light shimmered off the snow-melted road if it was ice. His mind drifted back to the full day of skiing. He had many good runs, getting his skis up on edge, and linking different-sized C-shaped turns. He surprised himself that he could carve single black diamonds this year without stopping. He had to take breaks on the double and triple black runs to gather himself. COVID had taken most of the ski season. Because he pushed himself, every part of him was tired. It was to ensure he could fall asleep this evening without her. He didn't want to think about that now. Go back to the early morning fresh groomed trails that looked like corduroy. His first tracks were like a signature on the blank snow. Towards the bottom of the mountain, his ears were blocked from the changed altitude. By the time he got home, they would clear. Not once did the car shimmy.

When he entered the back door of his apartment that led out to the carport, he stood in the kitchen expecting to hear her. How long would that last? It had been three days. She had moved in at the beginning of their relationship when COVID hit. Except for her clothes, everything was in storage. With no conversation on it being permanent, it naturally headed in that direction. He thought, I shouldn't have asked her to

move in that quickly. We'd still be together, living separately, and knowing what you can only learn about someone by living separately. I wouldn't have found any of it. That's not true; it would have taken longer, that's all. It's better to find out sooner rather than later. I can't believe I didn't see it right off. It was there the whole time. I had no idea what to look for. I had never seen it.

He opened the empty refrigerator; there was enough milk for coffee in the morning. She never kept a six-pack, only a couple beers to make it less obvious. In that way, she was good at hiding her real secret. After one beer, her reactions were delayed more than usual. Even without the alcohol, her eyes were slow to blink as if she were permanently drowsy. Finally, he asked her about it. "Oh that's just the way I am," she said. He couldn't disagree, she had given this appearance since their first meeting at his friend's birthday dinner. But how could she be drunk after one beer?

He gently pressed her. "I take Vicodin for my anxiety," she answered. "I've always taken them for my anxiety." He put it together, the Vicodin mixed with alcohol accelerated the effects of both. Everything made sense; her dullness and slowed reaction grew worse throughout the day from the accumulation of pills. He had never seen her take any and knew not to ask or to try to find them. That would have been a road with no end. He told her mixing the two wasn't safe and it takes very little to OD. "It's okay because it's a prescription. Lots of people use it for that." After she said it, he felt something pull at him, something heavy, pulling him away from her. Down, and down, and he searched for the right response as she slipped farther from him. He

made one last attempt by offering to help her check into rehab. "I intend to stop." He knew by her matter-of-fact tone that she was lying. He tried to convince himself that her intentions were sincere, but the weight of her answer had unraveled what little hope he held onto. It was then that he felt it come to an end. He had no way to move forward until the lockdown was lifted. He slept on the sofa several times, telling her he dozed off watching television. He followed the hospital capacity on LA County Daily COVID-19 stats as they continued to drop, the day came when the lockdown was lifted, and he would have to face her.

This past Saturday morning, he woke an hour early after he rehashed the situation one last time in his mind the night before. She had friends she could stay with. In the mornings she was near sober because the Vicodin and alcohol wore off from the night's sleep. This was when he liked her the most. Within a couple of hours, she split off from her morning self into a haze of pills she probably started after breakfast. She was two people, and the conflict of knowing which one she truly was had kept him in the relationship. He had to admit this confusion. When she first awoke, she was the most beautiful. He wanted to hold onto that part of her, though he knew this was a way she may never be. She looked at him without glancing away and he saw she was not surprised. She was too sober to deny her crisis. He remembered the hug she gave him when she was getting in her car to leave, her arms around his neck. She leaned in. "I will miss you." His arms were at his sides. He didn't believe her.

“Take care of yourself.” He turned away, not wanting to watch her drive off.

He was embarrassed by his lack of response, nothing registered. When the sound of her car disappeared, he was surprised by his great sense of relief that he was no longer helpless to her pills and drinking and the fear of her OD’ing.

He put his ski gear in the living room closet and went through the living room to the bedroom. He had left the bed unmade. He sat on her side, farthest away from the door, and laid on his side, facing out with his feet touching the floor. He could still smell her and her shampoo on her pillow. He should strip the sheets to wash them, but he lay there a little longer, going over his decision he no longer felt sure about.

The lights were off in the living room so no one could see in. He stood at one of the two tall windows that looked out at the courtyard. The white drapes were half opened, and the courtyard lamp's yellow glow reflected across the freshly swept walkway, bouncing a soft light off the building's walls. Now and then the beam of a car’s headlights rippled along the black iron gate that bordered the freshly cut lawn. A siren that had the rhythm of an ambulance sounded as though it was going to pass by, then it trailed away. He was shaken to the core by his first thought, could it be for her? The image flashed again and again. His circle of feelings closed up, and he was outside himself, staring into nothing and nothing was in front of him, except for the image. With both hands he pulled the drapes together; it was too early to go to sleep.

The Edge

By Jennifer Kennemer

"They sink the boats because they're bored."

Richard Blake, a tall man made larger by the tight space of my office cubicle, is talking about a pod of killer whales in the Mediterranean that have sunk hundreds of boats in the last few years. He looks handsome in the way men in their mid-forties do, with a salt-and-pepper beard and hipster-framed glasses. He wears paisley ties and chunky cardigans and has a laugh you can hear from across the room.

"I can empathize with that," I say, slamming shut my laptop with a sigh. "There's no telling what might happen if I have to attend another meeting this week that could have been an email."

When the attacks started, the theory was that one of the female Orcas had been injured by a boat's propellers and then taught the group how to neutralize the threat. I had chuckled over a number of whale memes on social media—sometimes at the office, where Richard worked in the cubicle adjacent to mine. My favorite tagline was 'Born to Sink.'

"Did I ever tell you that my first girlfriend was afraid of whales?"

Richard retired from the Marine Corps last year. He is both confident and direct but also well-liked by the office for his work ethic and inappropriate sense of humor. We clicked right away. It was a relief to have another veteran in the office. I get the sense this

position is temporary for him. I have been here for five years.

"Cetaphobia," he continues, adjusting to lean forward in his chair while lowering his voice. Our desks are arranged in groups of eight in a large open space flanked on one side by ceiling-to-wall windows and the other by a row of offices where the project managers can watch us. It's the proverbial fishbowl. Secrets are hard to keep here, but it doesn't stop us from trying. Post-it notes are a popular form of rebellion.

I shuttle my chair closer, my high heel catching on the carpet in my haste. I catch myself on the edge of my desk. Richard extends his hand to steady me, but we don't touch. I can smell the sandalwood in his cologne. Am I wearing perfume? I can't remember. I hope I don't smell bad; the air conditioner in the office is on the fritz again.

"She said she had recurring nightmares about being swallowed by a whale after hearing about Jonah in bible study."

"Good thing there are no whales in Reno," I say with a wink. Richard is the only person I have ever met from Reno. I often tease that it's a make-believe place like Atlantis or Camelot.

"Other than at the casinos," he responds with a small smile.

My palms tingle when his meadow green eyes briefly lock onto my face. I turned forty last year. I have relatively few wrinkles, reddish brown hair that can never be kept neatly in a bun, and blue eyes. I lost ten pounds in the last few months, and I don't look my age, but I don't look twenty, either. I'm too scared of needles

and poor results to fuss with filler, but I never come to work without fifteen minutes of makeup on my face.

"I thought it was pretty silly, you know. We were hanging out afterward, and I told her I had found a song she would love." His gaze drifts from my face to a place just beyond my shoulder.

"A whale song?" I guess. "That's so cruel."

It's the most intimate conversation we have ever had. I inch back from him, aware that I have waded into uncharted territory. In the military, there's something called the rules of engagement, which governs how you respond to different threats. Our ROE is to keep the banter light. I'm married, going on twelve years, but he is divorced. Dating, I think, but we never talk about that stuff. Politics, music, art, and stupid office policies—that's our wheelhouse.

"It might be the meanest thing I have ever done," he admits, blinking himself from the memory. He looks sheepish. It reminds me of my son when I caught him in a lie about eating cookies I had baked for the new neighbor. The tips of his ears are pink. "She freaked out and immediately started crying—like hyperventilating, shaking."

"Did you apologize?"

"We didn't talk for a few days, and when we did, she didn't mention it," he says, rubbing his palms on his work slacks. "I was afraid to bring it up."

I'm torn. It's an unflattering story, but I'm touched that he told me. It feels like something you tell a lover after too many glasses of wine while still wearing their t-shirt.

"What are you scared of, Blake?" I ask, fiddling with a small stack of papers on my desk that in no way require my attention. We use our last names together, conspiratorially.

He laughs in an 'oh boy' sort of way. "Small spaces. And you, Weems?"

"The normal stuff. Death, taxes, and clowns," I manage with a teasing smile.

Blake stands and stretches, his head easily clearing the height of the cubicle wall as he unfurls. His crisp, white shirt briefly comes untucked, revealing a tan patch of skin. I pretend not to notice.

His body is halfway outside my cubicle before he turns back to face me. He hands me a fuchsia post-it note. It reads, *would you ever like to get coffee with me?*

That night, I tell my husband, Keith, about the conversation while getting ready for bed. I'm clipping my toenails; he is brushing his teeth while we talk. Last week, Keith got the entire family new, high-tech toothbrushes that connect to an app that helps improve your dental hygiene. He proudly updates me on his daily brushing score while we make the children's lunch. Technique is important, he explains, turning his wrist this way and that. I haven't taken mine out of the box yet.

"Do you think he wants to fuck you?"

I can tell from his tone that Keith is curious, not mad. He wiggles his eyebrows at me, toothpaste rimming his mouth.

"I don't know." Clip, clip, clip. I deposit the nail clippings on a paper towel on my nightstand.

Keith and I met in the military. I had fallen out of a unit run when he appeared, untroubled, his breath maddeningly even, and told me that he ran track in high school and would be happy to help me improve my run time. He looked like an 80s action hero with his high and tight haircut but had a nice smile. On one of those torturous six-mile runs, as I huffed along like an asthmatic tomato, he asked me on a date. We still run together on the weekends, albeit much slower now.

A good thing about Keith is that he never gets jealous.

Keith reappears in his boxer briefs and gives me a chaste, minty kiss. I watch him arrange his pillows on the bed. He's the only person I know who uses all the pillows on the bed, even the tasseled display pillows. The military was rough on his body. The pillows help relieve the pressure on his back, even if they create a physical barrier between us in bed.

"You were honest with him," he says while fluffing a pillow. "You are scared of death."

"I think I have a reasonable fear of death."

He clicks his tongue.

"You can't stop watching those cancer TikToks."

True. I can never bring myself to swipe up on a video about cancer. There is one young girl I follow that has a tumor behind her eye. She thought she had a sinus infection.

I finish with my toes and toss out the crumpled paper towel. I put the clippers on my nightstand and settle into bed next to Keith, who takes my hand and squeezes it. We had sex three nights ago, but I'm not in the mood tonight. I say a silent prayer that he doesn't

ask me. There's no landing harder to stick than rejecting someone who loves you while not damaging their self-esteem or creating resentment. I'm not always the best gymnast.

"I still think you should see someone about what happened at Abbey Gate. You cried for a week after it happened."

There's real concern in his voice. We turn onto our sides and face each other.

He's four years older than me. This is his second marriage. We have two children. Intimacy is strange. I know him better than anyone else in the world, but marriage is still work. It's like high-stakes tandem juggling, but you add more balls each year, and the penalties for dropping a ball increase.

He's talking about the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. I watched it unfold on cable news. Thousands of miles away and over a decade removed from my yearlong deployment. The apprehension grew as thousands of Afghans broke through the barriers and flooded the tarmac, attempting to climb onto a military cargo plane as it lurched down the runway, some tumbling back to the ground. I watched Marines pulling women and babies over barbed wire barriers, shouting at others to stay back. And when the suicide bomber blew themselves up outside Abbey Gate, I cried. I went into my supervisor's office and said, sorry, but I need to go home. I told them someone in my family died and didn't go back until the following week.

"That has nothing to do with death," I reply, cupping his cheek.

I can only compare it to when Dorothy unmasks the Wizard in the Wizard of Oz. I felt unmoored. What had been the point in the end? Of so much killing and death. The Taliban had reclaimed the country; in some places, no shots were even fired. The U.S. government had plunged us into this disaster with no plan. Twenty years, two trillion dollars. The war on terror, the war on drugs, the war on crime—each ineffective. What now? I wondered and wonder still.

"Are you going to get coffee?"

It occurs to me that Keith never asked me whether I wanted to fuck Blake, which might be the more important question.

A few days pass, and I call my older sister, Angela.

"Are you busy?" I say, surprised when she answers.

I'm washing dishes at the sink, which has a window above it overlooking the backyard. The kids are helping Keith maintain our small vegetable garden. The kids hate to eat vegetables, but they love growing them.

"We're playing pickleball with a couple from our neighborhood, but they're always late. What's up?"

I picture her walking away from the court, waving off her husband, Gary. I imagine she's in a cute polyester outfit she ordered from Shein; her graying hair is slicked back into a high ponytail. She would be wearing hoop earrings and her wedding ring, which is real but a tacky cluster design.

I know exactly two things about pickleball: it's tennis adjacent, and Jamie Foxx, the actor, was an early fan of the sport. I remember reading about it in a celebrity magazine and that a short while later, he got sick and disappeared from the public eye long enough

that people on the Internet began to theorize that he died and was replaced by a clone. I wonder if he or his clone still played.

"Have you ever had an affair?"

She sucks in a breath. Says nothing for a heartbeat, and then, "No, I have hobbies instead."

"I couldn't sleep last night."

"You should try melatonin."

I hear her friends arrive in the background. She covers the phone with her hand and greets them. *Just five minutes*, she tells them. *I'll be right there.*

My kids dig up potatoes and toss them in a large wire basket. I flash them a thumbs-up when they uncover a particularly large potato and wonder if my husband remembered to put sunblock on them.

"I ended up taking a bath and reading the back of the kid's bubble bath package," I say when she's back.

"Don't the kids have their own bathroom?"

"Yes."

I can hear her growing impatient with me. Our childhood was fraught. Our parents worked too many hours, said vicious things to each other, and drank too much. Someone once asked me if the military caused me to have wanderlust or if I joined the military because I had wanderlust. Both. Probably. Lately, I have wanted to shove all the pieces of my life into a shoe box and shake it up just to see where the pieces land and what remains. Angela hates chaos.

"Are you alright?"

"The company has been making bubble bath since 1961," I continue, drying a colorful plastic plate and

putting it in the cabinet. "When did we land on the moon?"

"1968, I think," she says. "Wasn't it under Kennedy?"

"No. He was dead by then," I reply, pleased that I could remember that from my freshman American history class in college.

"You have a good life, Julie."

"I know," I reply, twisting the dishtowel in my hands. "My shampoo was made in China."

I have coffee with Blake the Saturday the kids leave for summer camp. I get carsick when I'm not driving, so Keith always takes them.

The coffee house serves giant pastries and has good light. I admire the cohesion of the décor from the black ceiling to the tiled, white walls and metal fixtures. Local art pieces are displayed, each available for purchase. I play a game with Blake where we pretend while waiting in line that we're forced to buy one of the paintings. We laugh about our divergent styles. I spend more time than usual considering my order, taking in the funky beverage names and trying to remember the last time I had something different than a house coffee with cream and sugar.

Blake wears faded denim jeans and a band t-shirt. He stands behind me in line. I feel his hot breath on my neck when he whispers, "I'm not ashamed to admit I like the Vanilla Bean Dream."

I'm wearing wedge sandals and our noses almost touch when I turn to look at him. "I'll take the Hazelnut Heaven."

He talks me into splitting a pan au chocolat. We sit across from each other at a small wooden table and take turns pulling pieces off it, licking the chocolate from our fingers while laughing about the silly things a miserly coworker complained about this week at the office.

"She's the only person in the history of the world to complain about relaxing the dress code," I say, taking a sip from my drink.

He nods and reaches over to put his hand over mine on the table. His thumb traces the side of my wrist.

An uneven breath escapes my lips.

"I wasn't sure whether you would come," he says, leaning his knee against mine under the table. I don't move my leg away.

Here it is then, I think. The moment I feared and desired in equal measures.

"I lied the other day," I say, my heart fluttering in my chest. "My biggest fear is heights."

He sips his drink, watching me as I work up the courage to continue.

"The thing about me, though, is that any time I am anywhere high—tall building, cliff, whatever ... I have to look over the edge, and I picture for a few moments what it would be like to fall."

"Is that what I am? The edge, for you."

"Yes," I admit.

"And?"

I haven't kissed anyone other than my husband in so long that I wonder whether I would orgasm like one of those silly women in a porn movie before he even touched me anywhere else. Would we go to his

apartment? Would he push me up against a wall, my feet leaving the ground in the rush to undress each other, or would he be slow and gentle as a character in a romance novel, attentive, focused on me as though I'm the best thing he's ever tasted. I don't consider that we would have no chemistry because I know that's not true. It would be amazing.

"And I can't," I say quietly but firmly. Emotion flutters up from the pit in my stomach and I wipe a few traitorous tears with my paper napkin. Embarrassed, I dig through my too-big purse for my sunglasses.

His expression is a mixture of disappointment and acceptance. A small part of me wishes he had been a jerk instead, easier to dismiss, to forget.

"Was it the whale story?" He asks after a few minutes of silence, gifting me with a half-smile, letting me know that we will be okay, still friends, even as the thought makes my heart ache.

"Yes," I say, "but not in the way that you might think."

The Orcas in the Mediterranean sink the ships and leave. Would I be able to do the same? Once I sabotaged all that I had built and my husband and kids hit the water, what then? It wasn't like quitting my job or cutting my hair short for the summer. It would change who I was, and I wasn't sure it was for the better.

We finish our drinks, separating in the street outside the building with a safe hug, our chests never touching. I delete his number from my phone as he walks away.

I stop at the local car wash. I cry again as the soaped-up tentacles trace over the car, rainbow-colored foam enveloping me as I scoot along on the motorized belt. I fix my face as the big, rolling air jets send water droplets skittering across the windshield and drive home, unsure by the time I arrive how I made it.

Small Adjustments

By gogol

As the night progressed, I slowly realised it might be over between us and her soft imprint wouldn't come back beside me. Truth be told she wasn't supposed to have lasted with me—it was a near miracle that we had it going for so long. Women like her don't care for small adjustments—in life and in daily expenses, and especially for boyfriends whose salaries taper down from the 5th of the month and reach four digits by the 15ths. I think she had started it as a social experiment, to prove to the world and more so to her rich cousins that even she could stay in poverty with a middle class boyfriend—or a nearly broke one; ended up costing me a packet of those fancy milks produced from organic cow teats daily—the cost mind you wasn't a small adjustment (sometimes I would lie and tell her the milk packet got vanished in the local grocery shop, savings are important). She might also have been going a little distraught in the head, reading all those fat books does it to you—she couldn't stop complaining about the system; her near perfect thighs; rampant capitalism; and my bed. The bed was the craziest one and I would have definitely noticed such adjustments—well I will reach there eventually.

Yeah, where was I—her problems. She was pissed off when I paid a bribe of 500 rupees for my driving licence; it was small adjustment in return for the long rides over the rain polished roads; her firmly soft breasts tracing the contour of my back while the salty air of the

sea engulfed us; but no, she had to fret. I ended up spitting all my tobacco back into the sea, and, and, and; I swear—I heard someone curse me; it felt like the sea was abusing me back in a hoarse voice. That night was chaotic, my hands were on the length of her spine, my mind on the hoarse sea; her mouth was kissing my neck fine, her mind, her mind, her mind; was on the length of my bed—oh jee. Yes, her question during sex—isn't the bed smaller than when we had seen it in the morning—was a little turnoff. Length of the bed wasn't on my mind, I tell you.

Don't even get me started on her charity—everyone here is poor, mind you. There wasn't any need to give the blind rose seller a 200 rupee note, that too on month end. I could get those roses for 5, I told her so, and she was like—no, the poor boy needs it. Hello! I am poor too. Anyways, when she was inside a lingerie shop buying something silky silky; I went back and stole the 200 rupee note from the rose seller's battered old enamel cup. I am not a complete shuturmurg, I put back 5 rupee coin and, and, and; I felt the blind seller was looking at me, can't believe these types I tell you—anyways, when I returned to the shop while she was still fidgeting her thumb over the cusp of a black bra—I was feeling rich so decided to pay her and pat went my 200 hundred rupees—me cussing her smooth thigh at night couldn't make me forget the blind boy and here I could hear her complaining again—don't you think it's smaller—I was aghast—baby that's the usual size and she said no, no, no—I can feel my ankles hanging from the bed—it wasn't like this the last time—the bed is getting smaller. I got

back to penetrating her while the night ruminated into sunrise.

Her three cousins were other weird ones—long hair, longer eyelashes, with waists that could fit in the palm of your hand, with chiselled jawlines and duck lips. They were wayward too—one moment they would welcome me with their pouts and the other moment they would laugh at my satin shirt bought from the footpath. I was tolerating their snark because their slippery cleavage was staring at me, and those cellulite free calves are not something I rarely see in my daily life. Her calves are good, her cousins' goods are better. I was enjoying this lusty entertainment—though she might have seen me licking my lips while her cousins' pixelated bosoms reflected on my fake aviator sunglasses. I was called among them because I could help the cousins' daughter get into a posh kindergarten school (all three of them were raising a single kid, mind you), the best in the region. The bribe was only 50,000 rupees—a small adjustment in return for quality education. Who wouldn't be happy in it? Well you know who wouldn't. That night was going good, my mind was inside the blouse of her wayward weird cousins, till she confided in my ear in the middle of my 2 minute orgasm—the bed is definitely getting smaller, mister. My junk became junk on the spot.

I was morbidly confused, how can a bed grow smaller? This is absurd and absurd things don't happen easily—do they? Would you wake up in the morning and find out you became an insect or, or, or would a 35-year-old be admitted to a school for kids? And date the English teacher—worse still? I wanted to call my very good friend Gregor Samsa—but I couldn't speak with him; he was

busy with some entomological transformation. I decided to take help from an old acquaintance, Miss Mandible—she just held onto my call long enough to listen to my problems and said in her almost manly voice—why don't you discuss this problem with your girlfriend? Now, excuse me—I need to go and make out with my student—and cut the call off. I guess she was busy being fulfillingly ruined.

So I did—I asked her if the problem is not with the bed and she was speaking in metaphors—and she went on a very long exposition where she recounted the number of times she had felt that my bed was making small adjustments in length—and it was a really long list, and I lost my focus and kept watching her small glass scale with markings denoting inches that she clutched tightly while counting my sins and I told her—why don't you go back and stay with your cousins while I solve this bed problem, and so she did and as she left for her old home while I took the scale and started to measure the bed end to end, all of its two inches, bigger than a matchbox, and started to prepare the bed where I would fit in and clean the room of those organic cow milk packets palimpsest of my past relation; for I had work tomorrow, 45000 rupees to be paid for the admission of the three cousins' daughter, I know, I know, I know $50,000 - 45,000 = 5000$ which is my delivery charge for the bribe while I crouch myself into the now matchbox-size bed and my toes spill over with a small adjustment.

Alien Heads on Rattlesnake Island

By Andrew Mondry

“There’re no rattlesnakes on that island,” John tried to assure me.

“They just call it that to keep people away,” Skye added, touching my arm.

She always touched me like that when she wanted something, or when she was trying to convince me to do something I didn’t want to do.

“I’ll bring my dad’s hammocks so we can sleep off the ground,” John said.

“If there’re no snakes, then why do we need to sleep off the ground?” I asked.

“We’ll be fine. Alien Heads are rare. They’re super potent,” Skye said.

“Yeah, man,” John said. “We’ve talked about it before, now’s our chance.”

“How rare are they?” I asked.

“Almost as rare as seeing a rattlesnake on *Rattlesnake Island*,” Skye said.

John and Skye both knew I’d agree. This was just a little game they played to make me feel better; to make me feel like I was making my own decisions, but really, if Skye was down, I was down, too.

She said she could get the acid from Tyler Morrison. He graduated the year before and drove a late model Civic, a little bomber, with an after-market muffler that bellowed and cried like a dirt bike, and his brother was something like a Sergeant in the Longhorns

Motorcycle club. John and I used to be friends with Tyler, but then he bought that car and started selling weed, leaving us behind to play in the dirt like the kids we were.

My stomach bubbled at the thought of tripping. John and I smoked a lot of weed, but it was old hippie shit—mostly twigs and seeds, the PBR of pot—we bought from his dad’s friend, Sonny. Other than that, we didn’t really do drugs, but John was right, we had talked about it before, and I knew I’d never hear the end of it if I backed out. All I had to do was give Skye my twenty dollars, and she and John would take care of the rest.

We planned the trip for the last weekend of summer vacation. John and I were going to be juniors, but Skye, though she was younger than us, was going to be a senior. She was smart. She’d skipped tenth and eleventh grades and probably could’ve kept on going if she wanted to. She was going to do big things. College in Boston, dinners in Cambridge, shopping at the Prudential Center.

I was hoping the trip would open my third eye, or bring me some vision of my own future, but I could settle for not getting bitten by a rattlesnake.

I spent most of that summer at John’s house. His family owned a gravel pit, and his dad would let us work, picking red brick. His family would buy old buildings by the waterfront—in the mill district—and knock them down. Then they’d haul the rubble to the gravel pit where we’d separate the red brick from the cement mortar before feeding it into a giant rock crusher. The

machine would grind the brick into red landscaping stone.

John's dad paid us eight dollars for every cubic yard we picked, and by the end of a full day of work we'd be caked with a pink dust the color of an October sunset. That summer John's dad even let us drink beer in the garage with him after work. He'd give us two Buds apiece so long as John promised not to drink his Jack Daniels, and I promised not to tell my mother. We both agreed. We'd sit there, in lawn chairs rusted with stone dust, as the beer eased our blisters and cramped muscles. Before that year we measured our wealth in dime bags, and our time in innings played, but that summer we had jobs and money; we reeked of responsibility.

We worked every day the week before we tripped so we could pay for our supplies—the acid, pot for the come-down, and some snacks and soda. We worked through the rain and the sun and drank beer at night. Even Skye came by and picked with us the day before.

She wore shorts, which John had told me was a bad idea when working around the sharp edges of red brick, but she looked too good to be concerned with OSHA regulations.

Her sand-scraped legs glistened with sweat. She wore pink Timberlands, high white socks, and a loose tank top that flapped in the wind, revealing her pierced bellybutton.

“Are you gonna work or just stare at her all day?” John asked, taking off his shirt and wrapping it around his head.

“What time are we meeting tomorrow?” Skye asked, ignoring my stare and hucking chunks of red brick over her shoulder and into the bucket loader.

“We’ll have to swim after sunset to avoid the cops,” John said.

“Swim?” I asked.

“I guess we could take my Dad’s johnboat, but that thing’s a hunk of shit,” John said.

“We’ll wrap everything in plastic bags,” Skye said.

“Can we just take the boat?” I asked, imagining myself splashing in the dark water, struggling for the shore.

“You’ll be fine,” Skye said.

“Can’t you just give me this one thing?” I pleaded. “Let’s take the boat.”

“Fine,” John said and climbed into the bucket loader, the muscles in his back rippling in the sun. Skye stopped picking and watched him.

I was still chubby then—it’d take me another few years to shed my baby fat—and I had always been jealous of John, whose muscles were honest and had been naturally cut by hard work.

“I got all the gear ready for tomorrow, two hammocks included,” John said as we ended our workday and sat in the shade of the garage, each of us with a beer in our hands.

“Only two?” I asked.

“We’ll have to double up in one,” John said.

“I don’t care,” Skye said.

Only two hammocks. I imagined John in one, and me and Skye in the other, tripping beneath the stars. My

mind raced. I had to tuck my excitement up against my waistband.

“Did you get the tabs?” John asked.

“Tyler’s on his way now,” she said, pulling out a beat-up pack of cigarettes from her back pocket.

“When did you start smoking?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I took them from Tyler.”

“Can I get one?” I asked.

John laughed.

“What? I want a smoke,” I said.

“Sure,” Skye said, as she and John shared one of many laughs at my expense.

We could hear Tyler’s Civic coming down the road—the muffler singing out in rapid laughs and cackles, drowning out even the cicadas.

He pulled down the dirt road that led to the pit but stopped short of the garage. He didn’t shut off the engine or get out—he just sat there, the car grumbling on.

“Be right back,” Skye said and walked over to the car, but instead of getting in the passenger seat, she opened the driver side door and shooed Tyler over. She was driving. I felt Poprocks in my chest, and then there was nothing but dust as they drove away.

John and I had our second beer and waited for Skye to return.

“Can you believe he didn’t even get out to say hi?” I asked.

“He’s too cool now.”

“Fuck him. We’re cool, right?”

“You gonna have your cig?” John chuckled.

“You know, I think I will.”

John handed me his lighter. I leaned back, a cold beer in my hand, and lit my smoke, but I lit the filter-end by accident, and the whole thing went up in flames.

“Shit!” I threw the thing down and stomped it out.

John was cracking up, and just as his laughter subsided, Skye and Tyler came cackling back down the road, dust floating behind the little bomber.

They stopped well short of us again, and Skye hopped out of the car. Tyler got out, too, circled the car, and then got in the driver side and blew away up the road.

Prick.

“Here,” Skye said, showing us a little plastic baggie with three white bits of paper.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s all you’ll need.”

The next morning was Saturday. John had convinced his dad to let him take the day off, seeing as how it was the last weekend of summer vacation. I headed over to his house around noon. We packed our things and finished stuffing our supplies into plastic bags.

Skye was late getting over and eventually showed up about four in the afternoon, and then we waited.

Rattlesnake Island sat in the middle of the reservoir, which closed at sundown. We’d have to jump the fences to get in, but neither John nor Skye were worried about that.

Just before dusk, we gathered in John’s room, our supplies packed, our bellies full of excitement. We sat on John’s twin bed as Skye pulled out the plastic baggie

with our hits. She passed one to John, and then one to me, and then placed one in the palm of her hand—Our Lady of Rattlesnake Island. John and I watched as she picked up her hit with two fingers and then placed it on the tip of her tongue. She let it sit there for a moment, and then she pulled it into her mouth. John and I did the same, and then we sat in silence and waited until Skye signaled for us to swallow.

And then, with reverence, we gathered our things and left for Rattlesnake Island.

We walked through the woods, following Route 20. We passed the main entrance of the reservoir and continued onto the east entrance, which wasn't patrolled by the environmental cops on their stupid ATVs.

We got to the gate, and Skye opted to go first. John gave her a boost, a cheek in each hand, and pushed her up and over the fence.

"Thanks, Johnny," she said.

I didn't like the way she said his name. It made my toes curl.

"Need a hand?" John asked me.

"I got it."

He shrugged. I wedged my foot between a few links, but as I lifted my other leg onto the post, my foot slipped, and I fell backwards. John was there to push me over and onto the other side.

Skye didn't see me struggle. She was over at the edge of the water, looking at the island. John jumped the fence with ease and landed on all fours like a bobcat.

The moon's white glow rippled in the water. Owls and crickets exchanged words in the distance. The johnboat came into view on one of the little wooden

docks. The water pushed the boat to and from the shore, making a soft clapping sound.

John threw his backpack into the boat, untied it from the dock, and jumped in. He grabbed the dock's post and pulled himself back toward shore, where he helped Skye in. I climbed in and almost fell over, my knees buckling from the motion of the water. I sat down next to Skye and took in her musk—bug spray and cigarette smoke.

“Do you guys feel anything yet?” I asked.

Skye closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “No,” she said, “I don't think so.”

“Nothing,” John said.

“Maybe we should smoke a joint when we get on shore. It'll help get us up,” Skye suggested.

John rowed the boat slowly and deliberately, switching the oar from side to side. I looked at my reflection waving back at me in the water.

“Bobby,” John said as we approached the shore, “jump out and grab the oar.”

I stood up and leaped out but landed feet first in the water.

“The oar, the oar!” Skye said as the boat drifted back into the reservoir.

I grabbed the oar and pulled them to shore.

“We'll get a fire going. Dry your socks,” John said, handing me his backpack.

“Fuck it,” I said, taking off my shoes and feeling the sand between my toes. Is this it? I thought. Am I tripping? The sand felt foreign beneath my feet, and the glow of the moon seemed to soften the edges of the

world—the tree line a dull, purplish color high above the green water.

Once the boat was secured on shore, we all stopped and listened for any rattling, but there was nothing but a couple of fat bull frogs burping at one another.

We walked deeper into the island until we reached a pair of trees close enough to each other to hang the hammocks from.

John laced one end of a hammock around the trunk of a big pine tree. Skye sat on a rock, her legs crossed and a cigarette dangling between her fingers, her face glowing with each drag. I heard she had gone all the way with Tyler Morrison. I had long since settled for being her friend, but now we only had two hammocks.

“A hand?” John said, breaking my stare.

Skye chuckled.

John threw me the other end of the hammock, and I tied it around the tree.

“Put it higher. Just above that branch,” John said, pointing to my tree.

John spent a lot of time outside. He used to sleep in the thickets behind his house just for the hell of it. He’d stay out there for days, sometimes just to see how long he could do it.

He’d tried to teach me what he could, but I wasn’t much for the outdoors. An indoor cat, his dad once called me, just weeks after my dad died, when I first started hanging around the pit. Even so, they tried to teach me what they could, like how to shoot. One time, John and I broke into his dad’s gun locker and took the most prized of his pieces—a nickel-plated 1911 Colt .45.

It looked just like the ones used in army movies. John handed it to me as he grabbed a box of bullets from the locker. The gun was heavy, and my hands barely wrapped around its textured handle.

We went down to the Bungalow. It was deer season, but we didn't realize that. We walked with a pair of grenades between our legs, that damned gun pulling at Johnny's waistband the whole trek. I walked behind him, the sun reflecting off the gun's cold steel. Once we got far enough away from the road, John took out the gun and lined up his shot. After firing off a few rounds, he handed the gun to me. I aimed and steadied my arms, but instead of clicking off the safety, I punched the magazine release. The clip dropped to the ground, and as I bent down for it, a gunshot rang out against the rock walls of the Bungalow.

John looked at me and then at the gun.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" We heard a voice call out from the thickets behind us. "It's kids, human people!"

There were two hunters standing fifty yards away from us, their orange vests glinting in the November sun.

John and I ran back to his house and locked the gun away, and from that day on we called ourselves pacifists.

"All right, boys," Skye said, "it's time to get this thing going."

John clapped his hands together and howled. Skye took out a big Ziplock bag with a pill bottle and a twenty bag of weed.

"What kind of pills?" I asked.

“Percs. For the come-down,” she said.

She took out the pot and began breaking it up in her hand. She took a piece of rolling paper and zipped up a joint in less time than it would’ve taken me to light it.

“Cheers,” Skye said and took a big rip.

She handed me the joint and I took a long hit. I handed it off to John and then started gathering branches for a fire.

“How long does it usually take?” I asked. “I don’t think I feel anything.”

“Any minute now,” Skye said.

John fixed a small fire. The flames lapped at Skye’s face. She was sitting Indian style with her chin in her hands, her elbows braced against each thigh.

The fire crackled and spat ash into the humid air. It was just loud enough to mute the sound any rattler would make. I wasn’t sure what I was waiting for; I didn’t know what to expect. I just kept waiting for the trees to start talking or the sky to open, but I felt nothing. The three of us waited in silence as we tried to feel the high, but nothing came.

“Has it been long enough yet?” John asked.

“Seriously,” I said.

“Maybe we should smoke another joint,” John said.

“Let’s take a walk. It’ll get the blood going,” Skye said.

John grabbed his flashlight and his big survival knife, complete with fishing line and compass stored in the handle.

We walked along the shoreline with John leading the way. The fog curled over the water like a blanket, and the moon had been covered by a deep cloud.

It had now been almost two hours since we dropped the acid and still nothing.

“I think we got ripped off,” I said.

“Fucking Tyler,” Skye said. “He’s such a fuck-head.”

“I guess it’s time to smoke another joint,” John said.

“I got those pills, too. We can still get fucked up,” Skye said.

We continued down the shore, figuring we had time to kill. As we came around the last bend heading back toward camp, Skye stopped and said, “What’s that?”

John pointed his flashlight down the shoreline to where a big box stood silhouetted against the bruised sky.

The thing began to take shape as we got closer, but it wasn’t until we were right in front of it that we realized what it was—

“It’s an oven,” I said.

“An old one,” John added, running his hand across it. “Cast iron.”

It was an antique, must’ve been over a hundred years old, we all agreed.

“How the hell did it get here?” Skye asked.

“Who knows,” I said.

“It’s probably worth some money,” John said.

“It’s pretty cool,” Skye said, reaching for the oven’s door.

I heard the rattling before I could see the snake. John was closest to its bite.

He looked at me, but I had no answers for him. The snake twitched and coiled in the oven, and I wondered how long John would have after he was bitten. I felt stupid and scared, and just as the snake wound up to strike, Skye pushed John out of the way and slammed the door shut. My knees buckled, but before I could say or do anything, Skye was rushing me away from the oven.

We ran back to our camp and hopped into the hammocks. Skye landed in one, and John and I in the other.

A couple of dopes.

“Holy shit!” John said, and then howled, “that was awesome!”

“You’re fucking stupid,” I said.

“Jesus, you saved my life,” John laughed.

“Jesus had nothing to do with it,” Skye said.

“This whole thing was a waste,” I said, looking at her in the dying light of the fire.

“Stop your whining and grab that other joint and the pills,” Skye said. “I feel like I can rip someone’s head off!”

I reached down and grabbed her stash. John and I popped a few pills and then smoked half the joint, taking quick, hard drags and holding in the smoke until our lungs nearly popped. And then I threw the joint and pills over to Skye.

“Nice toss,” John said.

“It was a better catch,” Skye said, bloated with confidence.

Unlike the acid, I felt the pills in only minutes. My face itched and my jaw felt loose. My heart settled somewhere in my belly as I thought about what I would say to Skye if she had landed in my hammock. I probably would've said something stupid or asked her why she was with such a loser like Tyler.

That was the night I knew I'd love her forever. She had saved us, and she wasn't even wearing shoes.

I listened to the crickets, John's boney ass digging into my own flat bottom. I didn't hear any rattling, but every so often I heard Skye huff and sigh, maybe thinking of Tyler, maybe wishing he was with her in that hammock, or maybe wishing it was his head she could rip off, though I hoped she was thinking of me, even if that meant it was *my* head in the rock crusher.

Her hammock squeaked and pulled at the pine tree it was tied to every time she moved, and after a while the sound became indistinguishable from the other sounds of the island; all those except for a distant squall, the howl—I imagined—of some other beast she would likely have to save us from.

Friends in Small Spaces

By Makayla Carmichael

Ruthie wasn't afraid. Even when Miss Tilda made her first appearance on day two, scurrying not too far past her face in a flash of gray fur, the pink crooked tail that followed her little body, revealing what must have been a very lived life with trials similar to Ruthie's own. And then making another appearance the next day or maybe it was just hours later on the same day as time passed slowly, Ruthie lying prone on the floor like that, covered up and trapped by years of her *collections*. Miss Tilda would return, curious expression on her tiny face, nose twitching, sitting and staring at Ruthie as she lay motionless, Miss Tilda most likely wondering what this giant thing was that had landed smack dab in her space or area or mass of *things*. Ruthie had fallen, two, maybe three days ago now, she couldn't really remember. She'd counted the comings of the blackness of night and then the appearances of daylight around the windows that were covered up, the rays just leaking out and through the layers of stuff that were piled up in front of them, the things Ruthie had amassed over the years. The time in between she'd slept and then woke and thought and remembered, her life winding around in her brain like one of those old reeled movies her first husband used to make of their travels out west *and those were the days*, Ruthie thought as she closed her eyes. She'd been so in love with him.

He'd been a bit older, knew her older brothers first and Ruthie had felt largely unnoticed by him, just a young camper with a crush of sorts, only twelve and what did she know of crushes or men or love at that age. She would just look at him sometimes, a counselor, strikingly handsome, a diving instructor too, and well, she'd feel all funny inside like on a roller coaster that was cresting the first big descent, but that had just been a crush she'd had. He'd moved away, finished his schooling in Virginia somewhere. She'd grown up and attended university in her home town, a prestigious women's college, but in her senior year he'd returned, right to her front doorstep. He'd been looking for her brothers, the Hansen boys, one or two of them would always be around, close to home. But she'd answered the door instead and well, the lights of the fireworks inside her head just about blinded her as she saw him again so many years later, he a man and she, a woman now. Crush be damned, it was a love affair they'd begun, respectfully, a year-long courtship, just waiting for her to graduate, then marriage and he'd taken her out west to be his wife. Two kids later, then an unfortunate illness for Ruthie, just about on the verge of death after the second child and she'd suddenly wanted to move back east, back home where her mother and siblings still lived. He traveled, Monday through Friday, the western states, selling things and now she couldn't go with him and sometimes she felt afraid and alone. Their kids should know their cousins, she'd convinced him and back east they went, the beautiful home on Lake Washington, his job, well, all of that could be replaced, she'd reasoned. They would love each other wherever

they went, but the illness had left her body maimed and the move had left him resentful and the marriage had fallen apart. So, she'd become a divorced mother with two kids, living just around the corner from the big old Victorian house where she'd grown up, where her mother and one brother still lived.

And she wondered now, lying on the floor like this with time to do much thinking, would things have turned out differently if she'd been content to stay out west? Or maybe he would have grown restless anyway, wanting more, something more than what she could give him. They'd been a family, but he'd broken that all to hell and she'd been hard pressed to explain any of this to her mother, who seemed to blame Ruthie for the mess because her mother had loved him too, like another son, only seeing his brilliant shiny side. Years later Ruthie moved on once he'd told her he was remarrying. She'd found someone for herself, but only a rebound of sorts, another divorcee with kids. Even so she'd convinced herself that she loved him and this would fill the hole she still felt like an open gunshot wound since the first one left, walking around and trying to pretend it didn't exist. She'd married him, moved the kids to a new home and become what she thought he wanted, trying to make it work.

Ruthie heard a rustle close by and she reached her hand out. A water bottle rolled toward her and yes, she thought, a drink would be welcome right now as it had been one or two days, maybe longer. She moved her arm enough to reach it and grasped it with her hand, pulling open the top with her teeth and tasting the cool liquid. Miss Tilda came out of the pile after and sat

facing her and “thanks, Tilda,” Ruthie managed from dry lips, believing that Miss Tilda’s movements in the pile had dislodged the bottle purposely. “So, what’s your story, Miss Tilda? Is there a mister somewhere?” Ruthie whispered, her voice hoarse from disuse. “Men tend to leave, don’t they? Maybe it’s just what they do.” Ruthie shut her eyes again, remembering times at the house on the lake. “But there were good times and oh, how I used to sing. Yes, that’s right, Miss Tilda. I would sing and play the Ukulele and the neighbors would dance.” Ruthie’s gaze turned upward, past the mound of stuff pinning her, past the ceiling to an open sky above an endless lake of water. “Oh, Tilda, the parties we would have, before and after the children came along.” It had been another life, her first life, she would come to believe as it all had to be placed somehow.

The second one left after about four years of trying to make it work. He’d found someone else too, leaving Ruthie feeling like she was never enough somehow. This time she’d had to find a job, just retail as her degree was old and, she believed, useless. The kids were approaching college age and Ruthie was going to her first real job at the age of forty-five. And the drink just happened, well, there’d always been drinking, it ran in her family, her first husband’s too as it turned out. Out west, the parties, just social and then back east before he’d left, entertaining his business friends, her family, the liquor flowing always. So, in her aloneness after the second one left, thrust into an unfamiliar work life and kids gone off to school, she’d take her *Early Times* in her thermos to the little church job, the third one she’d attempted, sit in the parking lot at lunch time and have

her sandwich and an early cocktail or two. But she was never a good drinker, would get a bit surly, slur her words, reddened eyes and flushed face, a dead giveaway and the intervention had happened sooner rather than later. She'd gone to rehab for a month only to return to the church under the judging eyes of the minister that had never really liked her and so she'd found another job, another church too, and "what about it, Miss Tilda, you ever been forced to make changes in your life? Have you ever had to *downsize*?" The little mouse just looked at her in silence, nose twitching, tail still as if listening, as if absorbing Ruthie's every word, grateful for some conversation. Ruthie imagined her to be an outcast of sorts like herself, shunned due to the mountain of stuff that no one else seemed to understand. She adjusted herself slightly and felt the pain of a small knot in her shoulder where the second one had thrown her against a wall long ago, the wound kept to herself and never properly healed.

Ruthie must have fallen asleep. She woke to find an oatmeal cookie in front of her face; Miss Tilda must have dragged it there. She used her free hand to tear the packaging and ate the meal in about four bites. Soon she heard another rustle, Miss Tilda was back, this time with a little one, no, two little ones, moving about her tiny pink feet. "Oh, you are a mother too, I thought so. It's hard sometimes, isn't it? Maybe you'll do better than me," remembering the boy, lost to drugs and alcohol, long dead and the girl, a woman now, but barely coming around anymore, telling Ruthie, sometimes harshly, that she couldn't stand to see her live like this.

Ruthie would answer, “My stuff, you mean? I’ll get around to cleaning up. It’s on my list of things to do since I *retired*.”

But her daughter would look at her with concern, anger too, “I’ve tried to help you. I’m not sure what to do anymore, Mom,” and the conversation would turn into a shouting match, well her daughter shouting, cursing even and Ruthie, just cowering in silence, unable to defend her own behavior because she didn’t understand it herself. It had started after the second one left when she’d been forced to sell the house and move into a much smaller place. It had gotten worse when her mother died, then much worse after her son passed away suddenly like that and now, years later, it was out of control, the piles of things she’d bought, been unable to get rid of, just piling more and more on top of the old in layers, things unopened, still in the bags from the stores, tags on them and she didn’t know why. So, she’d gone back to the old church again where she’d grown up, married both husbands, baptized her kids and had worked for a while, but this time just as a parishioner, the judgmental minister deceased many years ago now.

She’d made new friends there and they had no idea how she lived, the effort it took, climbing over piles to get to the bathroom, her plumbing starting to malfunction, her electrical too as she was ashamed to let workmen inside her home. She would live without whatever broke, just do without it. She’d created narrow pathways through the things to get to where she needed to go, the kitchen, the couch, the bath, she’d long ago stopped going downstairs to the basement, to her washer and dryer, one day just abandoning a load of

clothes, sopping wet mid-cycle and left to mold, to eventually stiffen and dry, to...*whatever*. Her daughter had started taking her laundry to do and so Ruthie never went down again to investigate, the stuff was too dense by that time, her body beginning to get more frail and less able to navigate covered up stairs. She let things go, living on the main floor, sleeping on a small cleared off space of couch and only climbing upstairs to her bedroom to shower, the bed and floor covered with clothing so high it reached the ceiling fan which was thick with dust. She would just take her time, get to where she needed to be, gather the things she needed to bathe, put on an outfit, jewelry even, no one would know how she lived as she presented herself well still and no one would imagine.

“You treat them right, Miss Tilda, your kids, love them the best you can. There are no second chances in life,” she told the little creature who honestly seemed enraptured listening to her, Ruthie thought. They were becoming fast friends, two quite different beings, but still with things in common, both mothers, both struggling to survive and she looked at the bent tail, would ask again and again as time wore on, “and what is your story now?” Tilda just stared at her as darkness would fall once more. The water was gone. Ruthie could hear her phone ringing again. Her daughter would leave a message, used to doing so as Ruthie could never reach her phone before the machine cut on and off. Ruthie would call her back once she’d made it through the stuff, cleared off a seat. She enjoyed talking to her daughter most of the time, Liz living just down the street, but far away from the mess, cutting herself off

eventually from what she called Ruthie's *problem*, and a shameful secret her daughter wouldn't disclose as people were disgusted by it. But Ruthie hadn't been able to call her back for days now and she hoped she wouldn't die here, only to be discovered by her daughter at some point, smelling with rot.

Her daughter didn't get her, that must be it. She seemed frightened by the piles of things, but they were just things after all and so why had she been so scared by it, so angered? Maybe they didn't understand each other. They'd been best friends until Ruthie's *problem* had gotten so out of control and it was isolating sometimes, but she couldn't stop. It filled a void, all the stuff, even if she never used it, never needed it, she would buy it, toss it unopened onto a pile and buy more and more. It made her feel safe, made her feel like she had something to show for...well, she didn't know what it did really. It kept things in and it kept things out. Maybe it was an illness like her drinking had been. She'd quit cold turkey in that rehab place, never gone back to it, just started collecting *things* instead. The things couldn't hurt her, she'd thought, but now she was here, unable to move herself out of the things, unable to reach a door, the phone, anything. But she had a guardian angel, Miss Tilda, and she would have to thank her later, thank her properly for keeping her alive. Ruthie fell asleep again thinking of Tilda and her kids, how much alike they were in their *situations*.

Liz lay in bed, recanting the ugly scene from this afternoon. All she'd done was try to help, but her mother was stubborn, unconvinced as Liz had pleaded, explained, tried to coax.

"I know you like the jacket, Mom, but you don't need the same jacket in ten different colors. Look at them, there are ten of the same coat!" Her mother had stood silently. "How about if you narrow it down to two, your two favorite colors?" Still unmoved. "Mom, by the law of physics we can't get this place cleaned up unless you let go of things, there is just no room!"

And that is when she'd lost it, unfortunately. Never a very patient person, Liz had let her built-up resentments surface and why had her mother done this to her home? Why did she choose to live like this? Why wouldn't her mother see reason and why couldn't Liz help her, but mainly, why had Ruthie damaged their relationship with her *things*, damaged it beyond repair? She was her daughter and all those things were just *stuff*, just useless crap. But the stuff terrified her because she didn't understand it, couldn't see a way out of it without Ruthie's consent. She felt that sharp stab of pain again, a torn and jagged loss like something cherished had been taken from her, remembering how things used to be, how they would do things together, eat out, go to the movies, window shop sometimes or just visit with each other. Now she wasn't allowed in her mother's home most of the time, Ruthie, standing outside with her little bag of laundry, waiting to be picked up when they were to get together. All holidays had switched from her mother's home to Liz's home since her brother had...well, no sense in dwelling on that loss. It was so

long ago now and truthfully Liz hadn't recognized her mother's *problem* until much later. She'd witnessed the stuff creep in, had watched as her mother's livable space had shrunk around her, but still, she'd just accepted Ruthie as being a pack rat of sorts, harmless even until one day she'd realized it had been a couple of years since she'd been on the inside of her mother's home. She thought back and suddenly saw clearly how Ruthie had purposely arranged the avoidance of her *problem* and it angered her.

And this afternoon was no different from the other times she'd tried to help, tried to remove things. It always ended in an explosion of rage (from her) and a total silent but physical shutdown by her mother and Liz would feel awful, like a tyrant, a bully and she would leave, just remove herself and try to put it out of her mind. But at night when she would try to sleep it was there, how their lives used to be versus how they were now, walking on eggshells always, each trying not to hurt the other. She'd tried to involve others to help, her mother's physician who'd laughed it off and handed her a pamphlet about organization, then the minister at Ruthie's church, who asked that she come in for counseling, maybe both of them should come in and Ruthie would have none of that, neither would Liz. *It wasn't her problem, it was her mother's issue, dammit!* She'd already wasted enough time trying to help... She would pray about it, pray for a solution. Then it came to her to just let go, detach. She couldn't control her mother's choices, her mother's actions. Ruthie wasn't ready to change so Liz needed to let it go, hand it up to a higher power so to speak and she had. That night she had.

Whatever happened, happened and she would not be a part of it anymore. There was just nothing she could do to help her mother with her problem. And Liz was good at detaching, had learned at an early age, invisibly escaping the turmoil at home, the arguments, the violence, the slamming doors late at night, the affairs, the divorces, the remarriages, the moves, all the *fucking changes* she and her brother had endured until they'd left for college, found their own lives, neither returning home, at least not to live again. She'd detached then and she would do it now. It is what had always kept her safe. It is what allowed her to survive. Liz slept that night without worry, feeling powerless, but believing that it was in God's hands now.

Through her fog of wakefulness, Ruthie could hear her daughter's voice, distraught, "Mom? Mom, oh God, there she is...Mom! Help me get her up, call 911!" and that was all she remembered of the day she was found. She'd been lying there for six days, three empty water bottles by her face, clear and torn cellophane wrapping of oatmeal cookies strewn over her body, mice feces nearby. She'd soiled her pants. Her daughter had vomited, she could hear that. She'd felt arms around her, under her, lifting her up out of her possessions, voices of pity and care, disgust and disdain. She'd been taken to a hospital, then a rehab place, a nursing facility where she could recover, very dehydrated and malnourished for her time on the floor, but unhurt otherwise, nothing broken.

When she was allowed to return home, the place was unfamiliar to her. The stuff was gone, the surfaces cleared and wiped clean to a glistening disinfected shine and Ruthie was angered, but then saw her daughter's proud face and so she swallowed her anger, hid it. Her daughter's distancing had seemed to vanish with the stuff in Ruthie's house. *It had only been stuff*, she thought disparagingly, so how could that have affected her daughter's love? And in the back of her mind, *where was Miss Tilda? She must have removed her little ones with all the clearing out, taken them to safety.* The sudden organization was all confusing to Ruthie, trying to find things, only to discover they'd been deemed useless and tossed out. She would sleep a lot as her bed had a new mattress, fresh sheets and was bigger than she remembered without the stuff all over it. But at night she would wake up in a cold sweat, fearful at the emptiness around her, the dark abyss of space. She felt alone and exposed as though her skin had been torn off, her organs left floating and raw. This morning her daughter was coming over and so Ruthie showered carefully, putting on a clean cheerful outfit as she must not show her confusion, her void, her simmering anger. It would be misunderstood. It would upset her daughter. Ruthie would keep it hidden.

“When I found you, your phone looked as though it had been knocked off the base. I was getting busy signals. That is what made me check...” *And could that have been another of Miss Tilda's doings*, Ruthie surmised? “But you look really good. Sleeping better, I'll bet?” Ruthie saw the pride shine on Liz' face and so put a smile on her own, trying not to ruin the mood.

“Yes, of course, the bed is...well, I hardly know it’s my home anymore,” looking around. “You did a good job with everything,” she managed weakly.

“I’d thought so, but I found a problem.” Her daughter held up a bag. “Well, three problems actually,” and Ruthie’s heart sank. “Don’t worry, I caught them in the traps I set downstairs. I guess they’d escaped the exterminator, but they’re gone now. He said as long as you keep it clean in here there should be no more rodents. I’ll just take them outside.”

“*Rodents?*” and Ruthie looked at the bag in horror. “There are no...” but she didn’t finish the sentence, realized the fallacy of trying to explain to her daughter another thing that wouldn’t make sense. Instead confirming, “they’re dead then?” Ruthie’s voice returning to a dry hoarse whisper.

“Of course, the trap killed them, all three of them, one bigger than the others. Hopefully there are no more babies.” Ruthie stood silent, unbreathing, a lifetime of losses overcoming her, feeling like she was outside of her body, watching the scene, seeing her daughter, high heels clicking resoundingly against the pavement, the sound ricocheting tiny pinpricks of pain inside Ruthie’s chest as Liz took the bag outside and tossed it into the dense and anonymous woods. Ruthie emitted a sound, primal and unrecognizable, her daughter too distant to hear.

Troubled Kid

By Henry Stevens

Marley never had a teacher act like this before. She stood waiting in front of his desk, stimming, while Mr. George carefully squared a packet of test papers with his wide, hairy hands. When she stimated she did that thing where she rolled her feet on the outside and that thing where she bit inside the corners of her mouth and that other thing where she wrung her hands behind her butt. He set the papers down neatly behind his nameplate and beside the big red apple-shaped Post-It note dispenser. When he saw her still standing at his desk, his brown eyes were bewildered behind his square glasses.

He was like, “Anything else?”

And Marley was like, “That’s it?”

“Yeah. Can’t really think of anything else to say.”

The lunch bell had emptied the classroom, but on the whiteboard there was still a diagram of the Odyssey drawn in fading blue dry erase marker. Mr. George had narrated as he drew it. Odysseus was a stick figure with a big empty head next to Calypso, another stick figure with two wavy lines of hair coming down over her shoulders. Then he drew a big arrow pointing to a stick figure castle, where a tiny Odysseus figure was telling a whole crowd of his fellow Greeks his tale. These guys were all small to save space. There were arrows pointing up to the different scenes as Odysseus told them. The cyclopes episode. The Circe episode. The lotus eaters. The sun god’s stick figure cattle. The sirens squashed in

the top corner. All of these grew their own arrows back to that same scene of Odysseus telling his story. But then the arrow shot straight through that tableau into a new scene of stick figure debauchery as Odysseus and his son and the two servants Eumaeus and Philoetius chopped the stick figure suitors into firewood. A little mini-Odyssey right in the middle of the room.

Marley had liked the part where Odysseus got to murder those guys trying to steal his wife. At least, that's what Mr. George said happened at the end of the story. She hadn't read all the way to the end. But she thought there were a lot of people in her life who needed to be taught a lesson. They didn't listen to her because they didn't take her seriously. So violence was necessary.

Mr. George was like, "You can go to lunch."

But she stood there, still stimming.

"I don't know," Marley said, "I just... usually people wanna tell me not to do it anymore or they like, tell me about how it's gonna hurt me in the future or something. Just thought you were gonna say that. Sorry..."

Mr. George smiled with the corner of his mouth. He had a short, black beard, but it couldn't hide the way his cheek scrunched and his eyes gleamed. He took off his glasses and massaged his forehead with his fingertips, leaning his elbows into his desk. Marley watched how he held the glasses between two fingers and his thumb like, those are legit teacher glasses. He put the glasses back on.

"You're a good kid, Marley, but you can't control yourself sometimes. I don't think you can fix it, so why bother telling you to try?"

It felt, in the moment, like that worst thing anyone had ever told Marley in the fourteen years of her troubled life. She couldn't even say anything at first because if she did then she was going to burst into tears. She wanted to beg him to take it back, because she was so terrified that it was true. She didn't want to be like this. She just wanted him, or somebody else, anybody else, to finally sit her down and tell her how to fix it. But Mr. George just looked at her with that sad, ironic smile. She swallowed her tears and when she thought she could control herself, she tried to say something, but these emotions could just erupt from nothing.

"You mean... That's it? I'm just fucked up then? That's fucking it!?"

Marley clapped her hands over her mouth.

"Mr. George I'm so sorry I didn't—"

"No you're good," he said. "Sit down."

The classroom was filled with those desk-chair things that have plastic seats and aluminum legs and a chipboard desk that curls around in front of the student like a big paisley. These desks always reminded Marley of a baby's highchair. She felt childish dragging it up beside Mr. George's aluminum-sided teacher's desk. But sitting down did make her feel less anxious.

"Marley, I want to tell you something and you promise not to tell anyone else, ok? Nobody. You promise? If you tell anyone, I'll kill you," he said in that knowing way that made her feel like they had an inside joke. "I do this all the time."

She was like, "Do what?"

And he was like, "I get pissed and I say stuff I shouldn't say, just like you did today."

She stared at him, trying to imagine this big, quiet man getting angry. He seemed so confident when he stood at the front of the classroom drawing on the board while he explained the Odyssey. He had a rainbow flag on the wall next to the American flag, which made him as cool as someone could be as far as Marley was concerned. Mr. George was like, would you like to reconsider that comment, in just the coldest way when that guy Brandon was making homophobic jokes. She couldn't imagine the man who could cut a kid down to size with just a single glare ever wishing that he could take back a single word he'd said.

So she was like, "Yeah but it's not the same cuz you're a teacher and you don't say stuff like I do. You can like, control it and shit. I can't. It just comes out and then... yeah I just say stuff."

"Happens all the time," Mr. George said. "Sometimes I hold it in until I get home and cry, sometimes I tell myself that's a student, a kid, and I can't treat him like an adult because he doesn't really know better, and sometimes, sometimes I think, you know what? Maybe he should know better. Maybe today's the day he's gonna learn."

"You mean Brandon Falwell?" she asked.

"Actually I was thinking of a certain individual in an earlier block," Mr. George said, "But yes, Brandon's comments also hurt."

Marley was like, "Fuck Brandon," and immediately she glanced at Mr. George, but he just gave her a wry smile like, you said it not me. She smiled a little herself. But Mr. George's smile faded and he leaned on his elbow, his cheek resting in the palm of his hand,

bending like the Hermes of Praxiteles, and she felt his judging gaze passing over her. She wanted his approval so openly it must have been glowing on her big fat forehead.

“I’m not going to tell you that you have to control it because you can’t,” Mr. George said finally. “But you’re still a good kid, Marley. You’ve got a lot of great positive qualities, but telling Amanda Singh to shut the fuck up because she kept whispering during my lesson is not one of those positive qualities. Well, actually, no. I do appreciate the sentiment. But your decision making there was very bad.”

“But she was being so fucking rude!”

“I know, and as the teacher it is my responsibility to handle that. Not yours.”

“But—”

Mr. George was like, “No, stop. No buts. You need to recognize what you did was wrong. Stop trying to defend yourself. You had absolutely no right to speak to another student like that regardless of the circumstances. I am the authority. I have the responsibility. I am the one who handles classroom discipline. Not you. Do you understand?”

“I just wanted to—I just got angry!”

It wasn’t just Amanda, she wanted to tell him it was everyone in the class, or at least sometimes it felt like it was everyone. Brandon was the center of it all. He made the jokes about Mr. George being a pedophile, and then since Brandon was cool and he played on the soccer team all the boys thought his jokes were so funny and they repeated them all the time, and the girls who were popular tried to get in on it too, and Marley was sitting

there listening to them say these awful things about her favorite teacher. And when Amanda was clearly just hissing away right in her ear making those Greek pederasty jokes, she just snapped.

But Mr. George scowled at her, and she felt ashamed to have been so impudent as to try to usurp his authority over his classroom, to question his judgement. She was ashamed, and she realized how terrible her decision making had been in that moment, and how she only made herself a pariah among her fellow students, and probably did nothing to help Mr. George.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “I was stupid.”

“Well then that’s that,” Mr. George said. “Go get lunch.”

“Lunch is basically over.”

He leaned under the desk. Curious, Marley poked her head around and saw he had opened a minifridge. Mr. George straightened and put a sandwich in a ziploc bag onto the chipboard desk attached to her chair. Again Marley was reminded of the baby’s high chair. She felt even more humiliated then, because she realized what her temper tantrum must have looked like to Mr. George.

His sandwich was peanut butter and grape jelly. The peanut butter smeared some on the inside of the bag. She was hungry—she had that familiar anxious feeling that made her fingers and her toes twitch, as well as the grinding teeth and the chewing on the inside of her cheek, her telltale stims of hunger. Grateful, she took the sandwich out and scarfed it down in five bites, and only as she was licking her fingertips did she realize that Mr. George didn’t have a sandwich of his own.

She was like, “Oh my god did I just eat your sandwich?”

“I gave it to you,” he said, “Listen, Marley, I know you want answers. I know you want to ‘fix’ yourself, whatever that’s supposed to mean. But tell me, how does the Odyssey end?”

“I didn’t read it,” she admitted.

“We went over it in class today,” he replied. “How does the story end?”

She was like, “Uh, he goes back and kills all the suitors...”

“Well, along with an entire plot of things, sure, more or less,” Mr. George said. “But then what happens?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that. What happens after Odysseus kills the suitors?”

She thought about it, trying to remember. This had been about the moment when she’d turned around to Amanda and said ‘shut the fuck up’ to that bitch. And she realized that she didn’t know and would never know unless he told her, because she had said those words just as he was giving his explanation. Then Amanda had raised her hand and they’d spent the last five minutes of class arguing. Marley felt like all the pent up rage was seeping from her pores, deflating her head until it felt so impossibly heavy.

She was like, “I don’t know.”

And Mr. George was like, “Because we didn’t get to it, did we?”

“No sir,” she said. “Because of me.”

“Well, fine, actually that’s not what I was going for here but if that’s symbolic for you then I’ll take it,” he said. “It’s probably better than the allegory I was going for anyway, which was that after Odysseus kills the suitors, their families come running up from the city and demand Odysseus and his son Telemachus be executed for murder. All that saves him is Athena just showing up and giving him the chance to run away forever. And that’s how it ends. He doesn’t get to live at home—though I guess you could say he gets his wife back and his son back so that’s something. But he doesn’t get the thing he really wanted the whole time, which was to be back home.”

“But what else was he supposed to do?”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” Mr. George said. “At least, my point. I don’t know about Homer’s. But my point to you is that you’ve got to just accept that your life is like this and figure out what to do about it.”

“But you said I can’t fix it.”

“Probably not, to be honest. I don’t think you’ll ever stop getting angry and speaking out,” Mr. George said. “But you can learn to recognize when you are wrong and apologize immediately, and honestly. Take responsibility for the consequences of your actions. Oh, and Marley?”

She glanced up at his question. He was looking at something else, near the door. She followed his gaze up to where the pride flag was hanging, blocked out of sight by the red and white bars on the American flag.

“Sometimes you’re going to be right.”

Diaper Man

by Angela Townsend

The most important thing to know about Diaper Man is that he was absolutely not wearing a diaper. If he was a man managing incontinence with dignity, I would not have participated in his nickname.

But I knew exactly who my boss was talking about. “I saw Diaper Man again this weekend.”

“You mean Bernard.”

“Is that his name? Diaper Man.”

Neil founded an organization in which no one looks up if you say “Diaper Man.” Neil has been calling people things like “Diaper Man” since his previous lifetime. Neil was once the Chief Technical Officer at a Fortune 500 tech company. Then his soulmate died, and he traded in his stock options to start a sanctuary for soulmates. They all happen to be cats.

When your soulmates are cats, you acquire immunity to people. This can be problematic when you are the Executive Director of a nonprofit. This is why Neil hired me to do the fundraising. I am infatuated in all directions. Neil calls me “The Exclamation Point.”

Neil’s nicknames are informative, not affectionate. There is “The Greasy-Faced Woman” and “The Toasty Guy.” One of our most generous donors is “Fatberg,” a name inspired by the hard masses of non-biodegradable solids found in sewers. Neil explained this etymology at lunch. Neil’s filthy mouth throws off sycophants who

would like to canonize him. Neil knows that being called a saint is the first step towards getting neutered.

“That’s Bernard. It’s kind of sad that I know exactly who you mean.”

But I did. Bernard had never donated to Cat Haven, but neither do the cats. He had a nimbus cloud of ringlets and wore specialized footwear for remaining upright on the wire between “earnest” and “oily.” He wore khaki pants with pleats so billowy, there appeared to be some generously sized undergarment within.

“Well, I saw him, and he asked for you.” Neil wiggled his caterpillar brows. Neil regularly defended his nicknames with the affidavit, “I can call people ugly because I’m uglier than everyone.” Neil made obscene gestures when I disagreed.

“That’s frightening.”

“You could take him if you had to.” Neil threw a sunflower seed at me but hit our vet tech. “And you’re a liquid marshmallow.”

The scent of my caramelization attracts a certain species of non-donor. My fistful of exclamation points emboldens them.

That was the case at Diaper Man’s debut. Rooting around for local events, he found Catoberfest. I should have been making sure that no one stole the Maserati-shaped cat carrier from the silent auction. I should have been reminding Fatberg that he is a force of magisterial, incandescent, life-saving good. I should have been extruding Neil from his office, where he sat playing Snood while donors searched unsuccessfully for “my hero, that great man, Neil Solomon!”

Instead, I was fielding questions from a tumbleweed dressed as a man, in pants that M.C. Hammer would have found a bit much.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you look like a cat?” The man was small enough for me to kiss upon the head, something I would do only to save the life of my mother. The man’s pants were large enough to accommodate Belgium.

“Pardon?” I was not afraid, only terrified. I swashbuckled all instincts of self-preservation the way I do best. I gushed. “What’s your name! Thank you for joining us today! I’m Daisy Barlow!”

“Oh, I know who you are.” Hands emerged from the Large Magellanic Cloud, shaking mine in a lardy hand sandwich. “You’re the Development Director. You write the blog. You deserve a Pulitzer.”

“The ‘Litter Box Maintenance’ category is competitive!”

This man did not think I was funny. This man thought, “you look like a cat.”

“Is that right!”

“Yes. It’s your eyebrows.” He pulled out his phone. “May I take a picture?”

“Of my eyebrows!”

“Yes.” He seemed exasperated that this needed confirmation.

“I need to go check on the silent auction!”

“Someone needs to give you a forever home.”

Well-trained by feral cats and one unsocialized Executive Director, I watched my interlocutor from a distance. I watched him bid high but lose the Maserati. I watched him purchase four state-of-the-art lint removers

from a vendor called The Schticky Guy. I watched him circle the sanctuary forlorn, for a cat he would not catch.

I told Neil. “You have to meet this guy.”

He would not have to wait long. The tumbleweed blew into Cat Haven on a plain brown Monday. His elfin arms could barely reach around the fish tank he was carrying.

He still found a way to point at me. “You’re the cat.”

“That’s the cat.” I pointed at Apricot, one of our lobby cats. She heaved herself to the floor like a silent movie actress.

“I know who she is. I read the blog.”

“Can I help you?” Neil emerged, and I contemplated sprinting down the hall.

The man in the notable pants nearly dropped his fish tank. I watched Neil fix his eyes on trousers.

“I’m Bernard!”

“Neil Solomon.” Neil extended his hand. Neil experienced the lardy sandwich.

“I know who she is,” Bernard declared, pausing a moment before pointing at Apricot. “I read the blog.”

He proceeded to explain that the tank was a gift. He was aware that Apricot had a history of “inappropriate elimination.” This is our genteel way of saying a cat is a performance artist operating in the mixed media of urine and furniture.

“I can fix her.” Bernard lifted the tank like the tablets of Moses. “Will you let me fix her?”

“As long as you mean Apricot, not Daisy.”

I turned my exclamation points into torpedoes and silently fired several at Neil. He wiggled his eyebrows.

We watched Bernard fill the fish tank with a half foot of kitty litter, topped with an inch of water, creating a thalassic zone more suitable for tadpoles than oppositional elderly cats.

“Just watch,” Bernard threatened, turning to leave. “Give her a day. She will use it faithfully. She will be transformed.”

“Do you think he pisses in one of those at home?” Neil asked.

“Neil.”

“Did you see his pants?”

“I think they can see his pants from the International Space Station.”

Apricot circled the fish tank with disdain. The next morning, we found three bayous next to it.

“I wish we had a forensic department,” Neil remarked. “I would bet you a dollar that only one of those is Apricot’s. This was a pee-in. This was a staged protest. The cats don’t want that man to come back.”

We ended up using the fish tank for hydrotherapy on a paraplegic cat. The tabby Chestnut thrived. We were able to discontinue his steroid medication. My exclamation points grew back, and I wished I could share this information with Bernard. I would have my chance, but I wouldn’t take it.

The last time I saw Bernard, I was on a mission from Neil to Tractor Supply. A woman had found a litter of newborn kittens mewling between her begonias and brought them to our door. We were out of Kitten Milk Replacer, a powder more magical than fairy dust. Spun from protein and synthetic colostrum, it would

save the orphans so they could grow up to become soulmates.

It would also give me the opportunity to see Diaper Man in the wild. There he was, at the spinning sunglass rack.

Most animals have four instinctive responses to danger. Beyond fight and flight, our repertoire includes fawn and freeze. “Fight” was out of the question. I was not willing to underestimate Bernard’s mutant powers, much less the secrets under his pleats. “Flight” was attractive, but the larval soulmates were counting on me. “Fawn” is my first language in every context but Bernard. I froze between fifty-pound bags of fertilizer.

The pants were as potent as ever, but this time I was fixed on Diaper Man’s face. He was giggling at himself in a two-inch mirror. He tried on polarized lenses and poor man’s Ray-Bans. He pouted like Tom Cruise and made finger guns at his own reflection. He tittered like a bird at the sight of himself in ladies’ rose-colored hearts. He nodded at his final frames, then put them back on the stand, turned tail, and bubbled out of the store. He made his own day.

We saved many kittens that summer, but Bernard did not return. A magnificent family adopted Chestnut and took the fish tank with them. Neil gave me a bonus and wrote, “keep exclamation pointing us in the right direction.”

Neil saw Diaper Man.

“Where was he? Did he seem okay?” I was surprised by my urgency.

“He was here. He asked for his fish tank back.”

“Oh, no.” I should have guessed. “Did you tell him it went to wonderful use?”

Neil’s eyebrows interrupted him before he could speak. “I tried. He said it was for Apricot alone.”

“Was he mad?”

“Can you picture Diaper Man mad?”

“No.” I hesitated. “One question.”

“What?”

“Was he wearing sunglasses?”

Neil looked concerned for my welfare. “I couldn’t tell you if my life depended on it. It’s all about the pants. I don’t think I could even pick his face out of a lineup.”

“Fair enough.”

“But—” Neil feigned gravity “—he did ask for you.”

“That’s understandable.” I picked up Apricot, aware of the risks. “I am the cat.”

“You are the s’more.”

“That too.” I kissed the incontinent cat on her forehead, right where the third eye knows things. “Hey, I hope we see him again.”

Leave the Air Fryer When You Go

By Lauren Flors

I, like most sane twenty-four-year-olds, have never spoken to my neighbors.

It's none of my business what the people across the hall get up to in the privacy of their own apartment and what I get up to in mine is certainly none of theirs. Proximity is not an automatic ground for friendship.

I do occasionally run into my neighbors against my will during brief passings in the hallway. They appear to be a married couple in their 30s with a baby. In other words, they looked at each other one day and said, "We are financially, mentally, and spiritually capable of not only taking care of ourselves, but also another, separate person who will need help carrying out every human function and whose general success or failure in life will ultimately be traced back to us, whether we really deserve that level of blame or not."

They are that, and my bed frame is currently being supported by two folded up cardboard boxes.

I don't think they'd want to be friends with me even if I wanted to be friends with them, so this all works out well. I hardly consider my neighbor's existence at all, until tonight, when I find myself in such a state of culinary desperation that I'm going to have to talk to them.

Prior to about 12 hours ago, I had a girlfriend. Natalie broke up with me this morning, right before she left for work. We don't live together or anything, but my

place is closer to her office than her apartment, so she spends the night here a lot during the week. Spent, rather. I guess she won't be doing it anymore.

I have no idea why she broke up with me, and frankly, it's not my highest priority right now, because it's time for dinner.

I'm not exactly a chef, but I do know how to use an air fryer. Air fryers are amazing because you don't have to know anything about cooking to use one. Even if you don't know how long something should technically be in there or exactly what temperature it's supposed to cook at, if you just close that basket and set the timer to eight minutes or so, the food will cook, and it will be delicious. Air fryers are like the towns that advertise being Thirty Minutes From Anywhere. With an air fryer, you're always Eight Minutes From Dinner.

Natalie took the air fryer when she left.

I guess it makes sense since it was technically *her* air fryer but talk about salt in the wound. She brought the thing over here, made me fall in love with it, and then took it away, just like that.

I was already in a bad mood from the breakup and things took a turn for the worse when I went to put my frozen chicken nuggets in the air fryer only to find that there was no air fryer. I collapsed onto the floor in the kitchen. I don't know how long I've been laying here, my nose up against the bottom of the oven. It's gross under there. It's amazing how stuff you never even use somehow still gets dirty.

I would sweep, but Natalie probably took the broom, too.

After a bit of wallowing, I pull my phone out of my back pocket and roll onto my stomach. The crumbs shift underneath me. The cheapest air fryer I can find online is \$34.99 and only has three buttons, so that looks like a winner to me. I pay an extra \$6.99 for express shipping so it will arrive by the end of the day tomorrow.

America is amazing.

I feel the physical stab of money leaving my bank account. It hurts, but not more than my grumbling stomach. I'd order takeout, but it seems I just spent \$41.98 on an air fryer, and I don't get paid again until next week.

Why I didn't go out and buy an air fryer in real life so I would be able to use it immediately is a fair question, but it must be kept in mind that I'm heartbroken and hungry. This is a lethal combination that shuts down regular brain function.

I momentarily contemplate eating the oven floor crumbs for dinner before dragging myself across the floor on my stomach to the front door. My apartment is small, so this isn't as dramatic as it sounds. It's a few scoots. I pull myself onto my feet with the help of the doorknob. I realize I don't have my chicken nuggets and have to walk back to the kitchen to grab them, so the whole dragging myself across the floor thing wasn't really necessary.

My neighbor's door displays an artificial orange wreath with tiny plastic pumpkins stuck in the branches. There's a matching doormat that says, "FALLing in Love!" on the floor. I certainly hope this married couple with a child is already in love, but then again, it's just a

seasonal doormat and doesn't necessarily reflect the realities of their situation. I try not to let it piss me off too much and focus on what needs to be done.

I knock on the door. The wreath shakes and glitter rains down onto my shoes.

No one comes to the door for several seconds. I'm about to bail when I finally hear footsteps. It's opened by a man who looks like he should be on his way to a shift at the Perfect American Dad Factory instead of standing in this doorway.

"Hi, Craig!" he says.

"How do you know my name?" I ask.

"We sometimes get your mail by mistake," he says.

His skin is so shiny. I can't think about anything else.

"What can I do for you?" he says.

I wiggle my plate of nuggets. "My air fryer...broke. Do you have one?"

He frowns. "What about the oven?"

"Pass," I say.

"What?"

"Nothing, just— do you have an air fryer or not?"

"Afraid not," my neighbor says. "But the lasagna's almost done!" The oven beeps right as he finishes his sentence, as if he's in a feel-good family sitcom that I would never watch. "Would you like to join us for dinner?" he asks.

I'm about to ask why in the world would I like to do that, but the smell wafting from the kitchen paired with a perfectly timed grumble in my stomach has me accepting his invitation before I can consider the consequences of neighborly connection.

I slide my plate of chicken nuggets across the floor back toward my apartment like a Frisbee and follow him inside.

My neighbor's apartment is structurally identical to mine but quite a bit different in terms of energy. I'm almost blinded by the number of lamps turned on in the living room. I guess when you have nice furniture and stuff on the walls it's worth turning on lights so you can see your things.

The wife is sitting on the living room floor with the baby. I've seen it a few times in the hall, but never in its own environment. It seems happy, giggling and rolling around on the rug. I don't really understand babies, but I do relate to wanting to be on the floor.

Alissa gets up to shake my hand. Her hair is done up in this huge knot that looks like an explosion on top of her head. "Hi! I'm Alissa. Sorry we haven't properly met before!"

I'm not sure why she's apologizing when our lack of contact has been 100% intentional on my part, but I accept the apology anyway.

She picks up the baby and tells me its name is Atlas which I think sounds more like a name for a tech startup than a human, but I suppose if I wanted to name a baby, I would have to go out there and have one of my own which I will not do.

After a few seconds of Alissa trying to get me to hold the baby, the man calls out from the kitchen that dinner is ready. He added an extra set of utensils to the table for me and served everyone a piece of lasagna.

Alissa puts the baby in a highchair and gives it something that is not the lasagna, which sucks for the

baby because this lasagna is the most delicious thing I've eaten since the catering at my Uncle Reggie's funeral in 2006.

After taking a bite, Alissa puts a hand on her husband's arm and says, "Thanks, babe. It's delicious."

I want to agree that it's delicious but not so much with the "babe" part of her statement, so I don't know what to say. I just nod with my mouth full.

The man turns his attention toward me. "So, Craig, what do you do for work?"

"Tech sales."

"And is that what you want to do?"

You know you have a boring job when you tell someone your job and they immediately ask if you'd rather have a different job.

"I don't think anyone *wants* to do that."

Alissa laughs awkwardly. "What about your girlfriend? I've seen her coming and going. She looks lovely!"

I don't know if someone challenged these people to bring up every possible topic of conversation I wouldn't want to talk about during this dinner, but if so, they're doing a great job.

I should lie, to keep emotions like sympathy and pity out of what needs to remain an impersonal interaction, but something about the homey taste of the lasagna in my mouth and the lingering warmth from the oven tugs at my heartstrings in a moment of uncharacteristic weakness. I suddenly feel like I might cry.

"She broke up with me this morning," I say.

This elicits immediate looks of concern and pitying sighs from my audience.

“I’m sorry, buddy.”

“That is so awful.”

I nod in agreement and wolf down the last few bites of lasagna as quickly as I can. I’ve got to get out of here before any sort of genuine emotional connection is solidified. I’ve already gone too far. I swallow and set my fork down too forcefully. It clatters across the table.

“Well, this was great.”

I dash toward the door. Alissa follows me.

“Craig, wait!” She looks concerned. “Are you busy tomorrow morning?”

I make a series of incoherent noises.

“It’s Cinnamon Roll Saturday if you want to join us,” she says.

Cinnamon Roll Saturday. What sort of world is this?

I stammer my way into some sort of accidental agreement before finally shutting the door and escaping into the safety of my own apartment.

Consciously, I have no intention of attending Cinnamon Roll Saturday. But somehow, I find myself sitting back at that kitchen table the next morning at 10 am sharp, still in my pajamas with an empty plate in front of me.

My neighbor’s apartment is in particularly good form this morning. Maybe this is typical for a weekend, but it feels special. A pumpkin scented candle burns in

the living room, spreading a cozy feeling throughout the whole apartment, as if the cinnamon rolls baking in the oven weren't enough. Soft piano music plays from a speaker somewhere. And the lights are on again. So many lights.

I sit next to the baby and watch the husband serve a gooey pile of magic onto my plate from the pan. I take a bite and fundamentally understand that it's a Saturday morning. Like, I can *feel* that it's a Saturday morning. The overwhelming potential of this day sinks deep into my bones in the form of hot iced dough on someone else's dishware.

The guy slips his apron off and disappears into the bedroom. Alissa helps the baby eat while working on a cinnamon roll of her own.

"How are you feeling today?" she asks me.

I know she's referencing the breakup, but I don't want to talk about it, so I play dumb.

"Great," I say.

I feel like I should ask her something back, but I don't know what to say and my mouth is mostly full of cinnamon roll, so we sit in silence. The baby makes random noises that help fill the space.

After a few minutes, the guy comes back dressed in a ridiculous neon yellow collared shirt with a round bag slung over his shoulder. He looks like he's getting ready to go somewhere. He sits down at the kitchen table and starts tying his shoes.

I've eaten three cinnamon rolls. He looks up at me.

"You sure can eat," he says.

I lean back in my chair and pat my stomach. Then I say, "So, what's for lunch?"

It's not a joke I remember consciously deciding to make, but I've made it.

Alissa and the guy exchange a glance and Alissa laughs. The guy stands up and claps his hands together.

"Well, I'm off," he says. "Bowling." He kisses Alissa on the cheek and the baby on top of its head. He gifts me with a wave and tight-lipped smile. "See ya, Craig." He leaves.

This feels like my cue to go, but I can feel a monster of a bowel movement coming after all those cinnamon rolls, and I'd bet my last laundry pod that the bathroom experience at this place is superior to my own, so I decide to treat myself to their facilities.

I look at my phone on the toilet. There's an email from the air fryer company. It should say that my package is out for delivery, but instead it gives me the most devastating news that has ever been communicated to anyone since the invention of electronic correspondence.

The shipping is delayed. The estimated arrival time is another four days from now.

America is terrible.

While I was busy reading the email, I accidentally let something foul slip into the toilet. I know instantly there isn't a chance it's going down, but that doesn't stop me from trying. I press the handle down a dozen or so times before the bowl finally fills and overflows.

I'm in the bathroom for a while trying to clean it up. I can't even tell you how long I'm in there, but long enough that when I finally emerge, Alissa is at the table eating lunch with the baby.

She eyes me suspiciously and asks if I'm okay. I don't want to talk about what happened in the bathroom, but it would be rude to just shit and run. There's a beautiful spread of mac and cheese, salad, and fruit on the table. The most natural thing to do is shrug it off, slip into a kitchen chair, and make myself a plate. We eat in silence again.

I head back across the hall after I finish lunch and lay around my apartment for a while. It's pretty depressing in here. I don't have any candles or shit like that. I think about Natalie for a while, but ultimately start thinking about food again when dinner time rolls around.

I decide I'll just pop back over to my neighbor's. I remember seeing a few steaks thawing on the counter from earlier, and it was definitely too much meat for that little family to eat. I'm doing them a favor by going back so none of the food is wasted. It just makes sense for me to go back for dinner.

When I open my front door, the neighbor guy is standing there, looking pissed. He sets down a box and folds his arms across his chest.

"I see what you're doing," he says.

I don't know what he means, so I tell him that. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're taking advantage of us."

He's giving me way too much credit, talking like I'm some sort of manipulative mastermind when I've just been accepting the offers they've been making.

"I really don't know what you're talking about," I say, raising my hands in surrender.

“Let me make myself clear,” he says. “I’m not your girlfriend, Craig.”

“Well, yeah, I don’t even know your name. If anything, you’re more like a one-night stand.”

He doesn’t laugh at my joke and suddenly I’m crying. I fall into his arms and sob against his shoulder.

“My name is Roger,” he says as he pats my back.

“Your place is so nice,” I say.

“It’s the same as yours.”

“But yours has stuff in it.”

“That’s just what it looks like to have a decent salary.”

“I do have a decent salary.”

“Then act like it.”

Roger gives me one last firm pat on the back and pulls away from our embrace. He kicks the box toward me.

“This is for you,” he says before disappearing inside his apartment. I drag the box inside and set it on the counter.

Ha ha ha.

It’s an air fryer.

There’s a piece of paper inside the basket. I assume it’s an owner’s manual, but it’s actually a handwritten lasagna recipe. Roger thinks he’s slick.

Well, the joke’s on him. I can’t make this because I don’t own a 9 x 13 glass dish.

Non-Fiction

Billy Pilgrim Has Come Unstuck in Time

By Delia Harrington

“Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.”

The first time I read that sentence, I didn't have PTSD. But Kurt Vonnegut did, courtesy of his military service that he wrote about in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. It's widely accepted that, while they're billed as fiction, many of Vonnegut's books have an autobiographical slant. The character of sci-fi author Kilgore Trout is a clear stand-in for a version of Vonnegut. But it's Billy Pilgrim who lives through the broad strokes of a defining experience of Vonnegut's life, the fire-bombing of Dresden. And it's Billy who finds himself sliding across his own timeline, in and out of his own life in complete disorder. It's often seen as a literary device, a fantasy or science fiction element of the story.

But at 28, on the better side of PTSD, I saw it for what it was: nonfiction. Memoir. A written documentary of trauma.

“Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time.”

Of course he had. Don't we all?

When I first lost time, it convinced me that what had happened to me actually mattered.

I was a freshman in college and had had a few drinks. Enough that, I told myself, there's no way I

could have faked the loss of time, or the way I reacted when I got busted. It would take almost five more years before I got help, but it was still one step closer than I had been before.

I was at the apartment of a boy I liked. Let out the breath you're holding: he's not how I got PTSD. This is not that story. I'm not telling you how my Dresden was firebombed or by whom, only what it's like to become unstuck in time.

I liked the boy. We had recently held hands while hanging out with a group of mutual friends and the rest of the world became background noise as I teased him about his taste in music and we bantered about baseball. He had walked me home, but in the awkward moment while I was waiting for him to kiss me, I made a joke about the wait to break the tension. It scared him off instead. Or, less charitably, he punished me for embarrassing him by withholding affection.

But on this night, everything was good. I hadn't known how to prolong the evening any further, having slowly made a show of gathering my keys, phone, and wallet, giving him plenty of opportunity to interrupt me. He didn't, so I put on my hoodie by the door – and then he finally kissed me. It was the first time someone kissed me since I had been assaulted. I remember thinking, “Wow, so *this* is what it's supposed to feel like. It can actually be fun. It can actually feel good.” We took my hoodie right back off and went to his room. He hopped up on the bed and I followed, crouched above him, all the time kissing in the carefree way you do when everything is new and fun. At some point his teeth must have grazed my neck, because the next thing I

remember is hearing his voice in the black, though the room had been bright. He gently prodded me, asked if I was ok, while the world was darkness, my face burrowed into his chest.

I tried to play it off like everything was fine, the immediate damage control of someone who's been caught out, even if I didn't know what, exactly, I'd been caught doing. But then he told me it had actually been kind of a while, something like 20 or 30 minutes, and he thought maybe I was crying, which I was surprised to learn was true.

I ended up telling him about a thing that had happened a week or two or three before, when I went home from school for the weekend. He gave the paint-by-numbers low-bar response we hope for from men: *you're safe here, I'll never hurt you, he's an asshole*. I told him not to let his teeth even so much as graze my neck again. I was back in the present tense. I pretended everything was fine. We dated. I felt safe.

For a while, that was enough.

Roughly a decade later, I was sitting in my cramped cubicle, falling deep into my memories of Kurt Vonnegut's writing when the thought first struck me: "Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time," was no metaphor. It was a statement of fact.

I tore through several of Vonnegut's more famous works in high school – *Cat's Cradle*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Breakfast of Champions* - before diving deeper into his catalog and eventually studying his whole life. In English

class, we were assigned to learn the entire life of an author and answer a series of essay questions in their voice. I had been surprised by the man I met on the pages, compared to the one the author seemed to be, based on many of his young male fans, or even some of his own published writing. The Vonnegut of old letters and interviews was quiet, funny in a wry sort of way, but not particularly given to braggadocio. I enjoyed mixing in real Vonnegut quotes with my own extrapolated version of his voice, something I would go on to do for many future jobs, from a CEO to a senator. But none of their voices have been so hospitable to wear as a kind artist, deeply aware of his own flaws, and more comfortable than most with examining them publicly. One thing that stuck with me was Vonnegut's early home life, and a quote where he spoke about how he learned "a bone-deep sadness" from his parents.

But when Vonnegut's son—an author and a doctor, who Wikipedia said also struggled with mental health—came to my old job, it had been more than ten years since I had last read any of the elder Vonnegut's work. I had graduated high school and college and was working at a nonprofit by day, freelancing as a writer and taking essay-writing classes at night, plotting how I would go to grad school.

I hadn't thought about Billy Pilgrim in a long time, but more importantly, I hadn't read the famous sentence in many years. But when I read it that day, the truth jumped out at me plainly.

Billy Pilgrim has come unstuck in time, and so have I.

In writing classes, teachers and fellow students always picked up on my fumbled tenses, a consistent error rather out of step with my reformed grammar stickler/teacher's pet persona. They picked up on it long before I knew what to make of it. It kept coming up during crit, when everyone in the room would offer feedback on my writing.

“Is this in the past tense, or the present?” my writing instructor asked, trying to clarify so others could give appropriate feedback, and to help me sort through my own mess.

I don't know what answer I gave him that day, but I remember looking down at the draft and feeling completely incapable of picking one. Was I talking about the events of the night before, or the present tense in the story? Why was the order of events all jumbled? When exactly did I decide not to tell anyone about the assault?

At another class, probably when we workshopped a revision of that essay, I remember feebly explaining my tense choices.

“It's in the present tense, because when people with PTSD have flashbacks, we're experiencing the past like it's happening in the present. It doesn't feel like remembering the past to us, it feels like it's happening *right now*.”

Saying that out loud felt big and vulnerable at the time, but also like an artistic choice. They understood, but ultimately felt it was too confusing. Part of me felt like making the reader experience a small-scale version

of the confusion I had felt (still feel? even now I can't sort it) was only fair. A small price to pay in order to read an essay about assault, compared to the real thing. Later, in a more advanced class, we shared our shortcomings.

"I always mess up tenses and don't realize it, even if I read for it, because survivors are bad with time," I told them.

I don't think they really knew what that meant, and maybe in that moment, I didn't either. At a basic level, we survivors of trauma are fundamentally bad at knowing how much time passes. I'm generalizing, but as a people we show up late, our time estimates are wildly incorrect, and it's not uncommon for time to slow down or speed up for us when we're triggered. Simply put, we often experience time differently from others. But since then I've also realized that I was messing up tenses without even realizing it, because I didn't really know what tense I was in.

Was I *healing* or *healed*? For my teacher and the members of my workshop, it was a logistical question to help them give better feedback. They didn't seem to understand why it would be hard to answer. To me, the question was existential. When does a person stop healing? Will I ever truly leave the backseat of my Volvo that night, if I can still be sent back there, fifteen years later? Or will some part of me always be a teenager in the dark, trying to escape?

When people say time is a thief, they mean that it keeps marching forward, counting down the time they have left on this earth and taking their days with their loved ones before they die. But I know better. I know that the past can jump nimbly into the present, like a maniacal vagabond, taking your present and threatening your future, the same way it already owns the years you've already lived.

And once that theft starts happening, how do you ever go on like things are normal again? How do you live without checking over your shoulder for it? You can't, so time wins. Even if it never returns, it taught you how to steal from yourself.

The first time I chose to have sex with someone, my perpetrator jumped through time to steal *that* from me, too. I felt so many things that my partner could not understand, and I did not know how to share. It didn't help that he did not believe in mental health issues as a concept, and he took the stance that any lasting impact from the assault was my own problem to solve. Individually, alone. That only magnified the distance between us, the isolation that was starting to form around me.

I remember at one point hiding my face in the bed, looking away from him, whether to cry or simply be miserable I don't know. I remember I had thought dimly, *I should go back to him*, but instead I fell asleep like that, sad and alone. He let me be, but it felt like this was yet another failure on my part - not only was this not how either of us wanted the night to go, but I was somehow selfish and mean in my reaction to it for not being with him, or more mindful of him, or allowing

him to...something. I had failed both in sharing this physical act that was supposed to be fundamentally, universally human, and in my reaction to my inability to share it with him. It was pure guttural grief and sadness at my perpetrator's ability to jump through time and steal this, too, from me, with a hefty dose of shame about my body's inability to do what I wanted it to do. I was so overwhelmed that I had no room for my boyfriend's feelings, whatever they may have been.

As a grown person now, it breaks my heart that I was heaping sadness on top of sadness onto my own weary shoulders. It wasn't about him. He shouldn't have needed to wait for a formal invitation to step up and be there for me.

One summer night, I was walking home from work in Somerville, just over the river from Boston, taking a shortcut through the tree-lined bike path. It was about five years after the assault, the year when I was slamming headlong into the much-delayed crisis stage after years of pretending nothing was wrong. I was just barely holding on. The side streets on the way to my sublet apartment were well-kept and quiet, so that summer I often walked in the middle of the street, even when it wasn't yet fully dark, just so I could be away from all the parked cars. The received wisdom of never walking past a parked car alone at night, especially not a van, was the kind of advice I had never followed until that summer.

I was just heading home on a random weekday night, listening to music, when I skittered back through

time to earlier in the evening on the night of the assault. I was at my aunt and uncle's house, eating dinner with them, my parents, and cousins. I was home from college for the weekend. I had wanted to see my family, but there was a party at a friend's house and I was sort of worked up about getting there late, wanting to just go already. I said my goodbyes and went to the bottom of the driveway and found that my beloved junky old Volvo – older than me – wouldn't start. My father and uncle came out and it took them who-knows-how-long before they got it working again, but I got so frustrated and angry in what must have actually been a short space of time. I was so lonely in my freshman year of college and this small dose of friends was meant to be my overdue respite. Instead of being an acceptable amount of sort-of-late, I was very late, and missing precious time.

Maybe that's why he was so drunk already by the time I got to my friend's house. Maybe that's why I went outside with him instead of just shutting him down. Maybe that's why it took me so long to realize I wasn't confused, he *was* hurting me – and he was doing it on purpose.

The real trouble with time travel, with unearthing this perfectly preserved memory that had been hidden from me for years, is that in the end, I always come back into my body. I was left with my modern self, making meaning from this information and spiraling out, in the middle of the street.

What if they had never gotten my car going again? What if I had just stayed at my aunt and uncle's house? What if that was my dead Nana, who we often prayed

to, trying to stop what was coming? Did that mean she had to see what happened to me, from heaven? The thought felt simultaneously childish and horrifying. As I came back into my body in the present tense, I became aware of the hot tears on my face as I continued walking back to the apartment I shared with three guy friends.

I tried to keep my crying quiet. I rushed through the house when I got home so my roommates wouldn't notice and ask me what was going on – not that it would matter. At that point I came home each night and either went straight to bed with a migraine or drank wine by the bottle while reading graphic first-person rape stories from the news, or non-fiction memoirs. For the three months I lived there, I stumbled my way through my mental health crisis undisturbed. No one ever asked if I was okay.

I had the jarring feeling of coming back into my body, as though I had briefly been away. It was not unlike surfacing from the dark depths of water, gasping for air and a safe place to rest. I could still taste the words my body had been saying without me, but I had no idea what they were. Everything felt off, like everyone was in on a secret without me. Glancing around and trying to get my bearings, it became clear that I had been doing what I often did while drunk that year: I had been running my mouth about sexual violence. I couldn't tell if the friend I was talking to was mildly horrified because the subject matter wasn't fit for a Halloween party, or if my body had betrayed me and

told him something it shouldn't, revealing or hinting at the closely guarded secret of my assault.

I didn't know where I had *gone*, but I knew where and when I was *now*: at a Halloween party at that same apartment in Somerville, a couple of months after I had moved out.

Was this how Billy Pilgrim felt when he was displaced in the present by some past or future version of himself?

I needed to extricate myself from the conversation, but I didn't know how to do so gracefully. Then I realized I didn't really know how to do it ungracefully, either. I felt trapped.

I made an unceremonious break for the bathroom, which felt immensely difficult, like the molasses in my brain was impacting my ability to move my body, too. Closing the door behind me, I leaned over the small, old sink to splash water on myself, to cool down and try to come back into my body. When I looked up, I saw my face in the mirror, covered in vine-y green lines, and suddenly remembered that I was dressed as Poison Ivy, from Batman. I couldn't help but laugh.

I am not the only time traveler in my family.

Sitting in her assisted living, we slide together through her timeline. My grandfather is still alive--I just missed him on his way out to the grocery store. Minutes later, he's a teenager outside in his car, waiting to pick up my teenage grandmother for a date. She and her father are fighting, or maybe her father and my

grandfather are? I think I have slipped into the role of a friend or sister.

Whenever I visit Gram, I am with my mom and my dad, her son. Most often, we only go a decade or so in the past, when I was in undergrad and living with my parents when she saw me on breaks. When my father speaks with her, she often goes farther back, to his 20s. He sometimes becomes his father, who had the same name, though it can be hard to tell, even though she never addressed father and son the same way. One day, I am my brother, something that mildly horrifies my cisgender family members, but makes me feel oddly warm and comforted. I'm in the infancy of my understanding that I'm nonbinary, something I haven't yet shared with them, and never will with her before she passes. After so many painful years in childhood and beyond when she was the primary enforcer of my family's fidelity to strict gender roles, it feels like something akin to acceptance.

In the same conversation I go from being Gram's neighbor in rural Warren, Massachusetts where my father was born, to a childhood friend in the industrial age mill town of Lowell, now a city, where she and my grandfather were born, to someone she can't quite put her finger on, even though her timeline is easiest for her to navigate farther back in her past. But I am always someone kind, someone she cares for, someone she is happy to sit and talk to, spilling secrets and stories I've never heard before. She tells me that I'm a good person, friend, neighbor. She tells me she wants to introduce me to her young daughter, Melissa, who was a freshman in college the winter I (the real me) was born. Even though

I'm tagging along as something of a shapeshifter as she travels through time, there's a part of Gram that always knows she loves me. She is almost never agitated or concerned on our trips, unless she's gossiping or complaining about something my grandfather has just done, the way you do after (before?) 60 years of marriage.

Thankfully, we somehow never traveled to my childhood, to me being chastised for my clothing or hair, admonished to come inside to do housework so my brother can play or do manual labor with the men of the family. We skipped over the years of adjusting and commenting on what I wore, the time she put a bra on me over my clothes in the middle of the Christmas party like that scene in *Sixteen Candles*, or every time I was dressed up in fussy dresses and mary janes, all to please her and my grandfather. That part of my timeline and hers seems to have been trapped in the tear-stained scribblings of my childhood journals. Perhaps those memories weren't fond for her, either. Or she might know or even regret how painful they were for me, even if she was never been able to say it directly, and some part of her is able to navigate away from them whenever we come unstuck together.

I don't know if Kurt Vonnegut ever stopped skipping through time; he might still be doing it now, just like Billy Pilgrim did after his death. In one moment, he is dead, but in so many others, he is alive.

It's nice to think of Gram skipping between beautiful days at her place on the beach, or laughing with my great-aunts, or surrounded by family at our massive reunions, Thanksgivings, and weddings. I hope she's visiting her brothers and sisters, laughing and telling stories with a friend so close she was considered family, rocking on a hammock with my grandfather, or dancing with him to an old Gershwin song. Every once in a while, it feels like she touches down in my present tense, even if I can't see her or speak to her anymore.

My own travels have slowed down. I rarely jump to other parts of time anymore, or at least I don't remember it like I did walking home that night after work in Somerville. There are, however, more and more blacked out patches littered across my timeline, not just in the present tense, but in old memories I used to have. The blanks have become so big that it's probably easier to count the memories I still have. I wonder if that's my trauma, the family heirloom that is my grandmother's dementia, or the little lesion they found a few years ago in my brain. Maybe it means I need to see one of my neurologists again. But maybe, it means that someday before I die, a future version of me will come unstuck again, and I will regain those memories by experiencing them again. Maybe, like Gram, I'll bring someone with me, or I'll see her again.

So it goes.

Life Before GPS

By Leah Mueller

“Why aren’t there any signs on the road?”

“Mom, you’ve already asked this question fifteen times. I don’t know. We passed a sign about twenty kilometers ago.”

“It was a turn-off for a town I’ve never heard of. With an arrow pointing left. That doesn’t give us much to go on.”

“I guess all we can do is keep driving. Something is bound to turn up.”

“You’re not the one driving. We’ve been on the road for six hours, with one stop for lunch. All because we decided to take a trip to the Gulf. I can’t wait to immerse myself in cold water. That might make this goddamned drive worthwhile, but I doubt it.”

“You’re always complaining. I don’t even know why I talk to you.”

“Daughters are so ungrateful. Don’t worry, I’ve gotten used to it.”

“I’m just going to look out the window at the cacti and iguanas. They don’t complain. They know better.”

“They’re barely sentient. I suppose you’d prefer that?”

“Sometimes. Like now, for instance.”

“You know, you’re right. I do complain a lot. I’m sorry. You’ve come a long way, just to visit me

in Mexico.”

“You do these abrupt about-faces a lot. It gives me psychological whiplash.”

“Don’t mention whiplash while I’m driving. It’s bad luck.”

“This whole stupid excursion has been nothing but bad luck.”

“I could mention how negative you are sometimes, but I’ve already apologized.”

“The apple didn’t fall far from the tree, then.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“Look, there’s another sign.”

“Can you read it? What does it say?”

“I can see a word, but it’s faint, and there are all these bullet holes in it.”

“Just our luck. Macho jerks. Why do people do that?”

“Is that a rhetorical question? Do you want an answer?”

“No, just look out the window at the cacti and iguanas.”

“Fine. I’ll be quiet for a while. Maybe read my copy of *Franny and Zooey*. A story about New York neurotics makes for good escapism.”

“Why do you always read in the car when there’s so much beauty outside?”

“Eh. You’ve seen one clump of sagebrush, you’ve seen them all.”

“Wait! There’s another sign! What does it say?”

“Slow down for a moment so I can make out the words this time. Salina Cruz. Does that name mean anything to you?”

“God, no. Can you find the road map? See where the town is located. That might give us some indication of how far we are from the Gulf. We must be close, at this point.”

“Gee, a map. Whoever suspected it might help us with directions?”

“Don’t be snarky. I’m paying for this trip.”

“Oooh, emotional blackmail. Gotta love it. But you’re not going to like this. Salina Cruz is on the Pacific Ocean. We’ve been driving in the wrong direction for the past six hours.”

“I must have taken a left turn instead of a righthand one. I don’t remember. I knew something seemed off, but I thought it might resolve itself if I just kept driving.”

“Well, the ocean does have some nice beaches, at least. Maybe we can just check into a cheap motel, then find the water and go for a swim.”

“Best thing you’ve said all afternoon. This mishap might be a blessing in disguise, as they say.

Look at the ornate buildings! Such a lovely town.”

“That motel up the road seems like our kind of establishment. Their neon sign is burned out. It’s got a crooked palm tree on it. Looks like a good budget option.”

“All we need are beds and a shower. I’m going to stop here and run into the office. Wait for me, I’ll be right back.”

“Where the hell would I go? Maybe pop over to the Gulf?”

“Very funny. Just give me five minutes. You can handle that, right?”

“Are we set? You were in there long enough.”

“I was trying to negotiate, but the proprietor wouldn’t budge on the price.”

“Why do you always do that? I’m sure the room didn’t cost much, anyway.”

“I grew up in the Depression. Give me a break.”

“That was forty-five years ago, Mom.”

“Don’t remind me. You’ll be old and broke, too, sooner than you think.”

“Well, go into the room, put on your swimsuit, and we’ll head for the beach. I can just feel that water now.”

“I think we finally agree on something. That’s almost a relief, but not quite. I know it won’t last long.”

“It never does. Because we’re so much alike. And, you know, that tense mother/daughter dynamic that can’t resolve itself.”

“The room looks better than I expected. There’s even a vase of flowers on the table. I think that’s a good sign. I’ll go into the bathroom and change into my suit.”

“Sure. I’m wearing mine underneath my sundress. Always be prepared. That’s my motto, dammit.”

“Okay, we’re ready to go. The desk clerk said the beach is only three blocks away. Straight down the road, then take a right. I hope I can remember.”

“It’s hard to miss water. But I suppose it’s theoretically possible, at least for us. Start the car, for heaven’s sake. I’m broiling.”

“There it is! God, the beach is beautiful. And it’s completely empty! How did we get so lucky?”

“Everyone must have left already. Or maybe they’re just used to the beach, so they don’t go very often.”

“We’ve got our pick of parking spots. Not a car in sight. There’s something...eerie about this.”

“Maybe. I don’t care. Grab your towel. Let’s go.”

“The sand is perfect, like sugar. Such a beautiful spot. I can hardly wait to swim. The thought of a cool dip is the only thing that has kept me from losing my mind.”

“Geez. You’re always telling me how dramatic I am. Just listen to yourself.”

“There’s a sign by the edge of the water. Can you read it? I don’t have my glasses.”

“Yeah, since we’re not moving erratically on the highway, I think I can make out the words.”

“What does the sign say? It looks official.”

“Oh man, you won’t like this either. ‘Due to a recent oil spill, swimming is prohibited. Beach closed to the public until further notice.’ Good thing the sign is in both Spanish and English.”

“Is there a date on it?”

“Yeah, it’s today. Probably not a good idea to risk taking a swim.”

“I don’t see any oil. Not even a drop. This is a trick of some kind. Who can I complain to?”

“No one, Mom. Let’s return to the motel. We can shower and grab some dinner. Maybe find a restaurant with a view.”

“I knew we shouldn’t have gone on this trip. I had such a strong feeling, but I ignored it. I won’t make that mistake again.”

“You always say that.”

“You’re right. And I’m going to keep saying it. Because I’m your mother, and you can’t stop me.”

“I figured that out a long time ago. Hurry, I’m ravenous.”

What Doesn't Make the Chart: A Litany of Sorts

By Grace Schutte

The duty of the medical scribe is to accompany providers throughout their shifts in the Emergency Department, and to fill out the Electronic Health Record.

A key element of that record is the History of Present Illness—or HPI—and that is the scribe's time to shine. The HPI is the subjective recounting of the events by the patient. You must write everything down. You will get trapped in rooms by worried parents, anxious 20-somethings, lonely old people, and high would-be detox patients; in these situations, consult with your provider about what all to include in the official record.

For example, you need not mention:

That the patient is pursuing a degree in visual arts, and the heart-speckled jeans they wear are hand-stitched. This is their first time leaving home.

Or that the older couple talked for 15 minutes about their granddaughter who just got accepted into medical school in New Jersey. She wants to go into oncology, that darling girl. They are very proud.

And while it is relevant to mention the vehicle of injury, don't worry about specifying that it was a 360° starfish

mega-kick during an at-home dance party. “Dance party” will suffice.

While accuracy of information is a chief concern for us scribes, ask yourself if one-off phrases like, “He’s lucky he had my sexy angel presence in his life,” are necessary for understanding why the patient is reporting to the ED that day.

For the cancer patients and similarly chronically ill, you don’t need to mention that their partner brought a backpack full of their medications, documentation, paperwork, instructions from previous providers, a spare change of socks and underwear—listing the medications is enough.

You need not include the volume or duration of the detained patient’s yelling. Put “Patient is agitated and uncooperative,” and make sure you’re by the door.

And during your first trauma, you won’t have time to write how your fingers fumble tying knots on yellow PPE gowns, or that you purposefully take position toward the back, allowing nurses and surgeons to block your view. Or how, when you glance up, the patient is already looking at you, and for a moment your eyes meet among the beeps, and heaving breaths, and metallic redness of the hospital’s thin bed sheets. Or how your gaze is broken by the myoclonic jerks the patient can’t control. You won’t have time—remember, one note per-minute.

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What doesn't make the chart is that the provider shakes the hand of every patient and sits down to receive their story. Says, "Tell me about your symptoms," in a quiet voice. That the nurses have a drawer full of candy—caramel M&Ms and Jolly Ranchers—for the 5 a.m. pick-me-up's. That the doctors on call tonight are playing pranks on each other between calls to radiology and the hospitalist—petroleum jelly on ear pieces, calls saying "Your car's been towed," and a singular chocolate covered almond left on the seat. Or that the last patient of the night is discharged at the same time I get off, and together we walk through beige halls with only the heart monitors and swell of blood pressure cuffs accompanying us to the elevator, and into night that is actually morning which is cold and damp and seeping through my scrubs, and into the parking lot—we are parked next to each other. And together we get in our cars and pull onto the street that is empty, that will be full later that day and the day after that, and after that, and after that.

And the sky is clear and wide and has its arms thrown open, bearing its chest and stars.

The stars don't make the chart.

Contributors

(listed alphabetically)

Andrew Mondry earned my MFA in fiction from Western New England University. His short stories and criticisms have appeared in *Apocrypha* and *Abstractions*, *Jerry*, and *Cahadoodaling*. Since becoming a father, his writing life exists between episodes of *Bluey* and cooking meals for his family.

Angela Townsend is the Development Director at a cat sanctuary. She graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. She is a Best of the Net nominee and the 2024 winner of *West Trade Review's* 704 Prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Paris Lit Up*, *Pleiades*, *SmokeLong*, and *Terrain*, among others.

Bee Baxter is an artist from San Francisco. Currently based in Ashland Oregon, she spends her free time getting lost in forests and hiking mountains. Her works have appeared in the Oregon Fringe Festival, as well as *Art Beyond*.

Cat Dixon is the author of *What Happens in Nebraska* (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2022) along with six other poetry chapbooks and collections. She is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review*. Recent poems published in *Thimble Lit Mag*, *Poor Ezra's Almanac*, and *Moon City Review*.

Chris Fettes teaches writing at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. He holds an MA in English from the University of Central Arkansas. His work has been published in Slant, Nude Bruce Review, Import Sky, Cave Region Review, and elsewhere.

Actor and author **Daniel Beer's** body of work includes lead roles in, Love Finds A Home, a Hallmark TV movie. Creepshow 2, Dying Young, Point Break, and several lead guest star roles in one-hour dramas. He also appeared in Michael Jackson's "Who Is It," video, and Paula Abdul's "Rush Rush." He is a member of The Actors Studio and attended the U.C.L.A. Advanced Fiction Program. He has had short fiction published in the literary magazine 34thParallel, Modern Literature Magazine, and The Bangalore Review. He has taught writing seminars at Lancaster State Prison. Full list of credits and bio on IMDB.com.

Darby Ebeling is an avid city wanderer and project manager who lives in Philadelphia. She was brought up in San Francisco, where she was dazzled by the poetry of baseball radio broadcasts and the storied sidewalks of North Beach. She has previously been published in Maudlin House and holds an M.A. in journalism from the University of Alabama.

David Arroyo is an instructor with the University of South Carolina's Department of First-Year Writing. He's published over thirty poems and is working on his first full-length collection. He holds an MA in English from

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Delia Harrington is a queer, nonbinary freelance arts and culture writer based in Boston. They have worked in nonprofit and government communications for over 15 years, and they currently work for a nonprofit contemporary art gallery dedicated to uplifting marginalized artists. Their writing can be found in publications like The Rumpus, Observer, Artnet, ARTnews, Art Düsseldorf Magazine, and Boston Art Review, among others.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated twelve times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and released in three collections; "Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden" (Encircle Press, 2016), "Sad Havoc Among the Birds" (Turas Press, 2019) and "Noble Rot" (Turas Press, 2022).

Elle Jay Snyder is a trans woman, poet, and part-time phantom from Staten Island. Her work can most recently be found in Beacon Radiant, and Tiny Spoon Issue 12. She is aggressively seeking a sponsorship from Mountain Dew. Instagram: @ourladyofpoetics.

gogol based out of global south is a writer of speculative fiction.

Grace Schutte is a Fiction MFA candidate at Western Washington University. There she teaches English 101 and serves as the Fiction Editor for the BELLINGHAM REVIEW. In the past, she was worked on the literary publication BARSTOW & GRAND, and has contributed work to VOLUME ONE, THE SPECTATOR, and the CHIPPEWA VALLEY WRITER'S GUILD. You can find more of her creative works published in NONE OF THE ABOVE (NOTA).

Henry Stevens is a fiction writer from Halifax County, Virginia. His fiction has appeared in ARTWIFE, The New Plains Review, and the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature. And he hand types this bio every single time he submits. Find him on Instagram @Abimapixsey.

Ian Parker is a poet and musician living in Portland, Oregon. He has been previously published by orangepeel literary magazine, infinite scroll, The Literary Forest Poetry Magainze and in upcoming issues of wildscape. literary journal and The Broken Teacup.

Jennifer Kennemer holds a master's degree in creative writing from Southern New Hampshire University, where she honed my skills in crafting stories that blend personal experiences with broader societal issues. Currently, she resides in Baltimore, Maryland, with her two children. Her background as both a veteran and an educator informs her writing, providing a distinct perspective on the challenges faced by those who serve

and the impact of those experiences on their personal lives.

Lauren Flors is a recent graduate of UNC Chapel Hill and a current resident of New York City. She double-majored in English and Dramatic Art with a minor in Creative Writing. Lauren is obsessed with coming-of-age stories and loves to write about growing up and queer experiences. When she's feeling less serious, she writes silly stories about silly people. Previous publications include a creative nonfiction essay titled "A Stand-Up Routine Performed for No One" in *Outrageous Fortune* and a short story titled "You Get an Hour for Lunch" in *Apricity Magazine*.

Leah Mueller's work appears in *Rattle*, *NonBinary Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Citron Review*, *The Spectacle*, *New Flash Fiction Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Your Impossible Voice*, etc. She has been nominated for Pushcart and Best of the Net. Leah appears in the 2022 edition of *Best Small Fictions*. Her fourteenth book, "Stealing Buddha" was published by Anxiety Press in 2024. Website: www.leahmueller.org.

Loralee Clark is a writer who grew up learning a love for nature and her place in it, in Maine. She resides in Virginia now as a writer and artist, with two awesome kids and a loving husband. Her Instagram is @make13experiment. She writes poetry and non-fiction. Myth is her love language. She has been published most recently in *Choeofpleirn Press*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Washington Writer's Publishing House*, *Heart on Our*

Sleeves, The Taborian, Superpresent, Thimble Literary Magazine, Impossible Task, Studio One, Cannon's Mouth, and Big Windows Review.

Makayla Carmichael has spent most of her professional career as an accountant, but now spends her time writing stories and when not getting into the minds of her characters, she enjoys reading and being in nature, especially the Blue Ridge Mountains in her home state of North Carolina. She has published short stories online with The Broken Teacup, D.U.M.B.O. Press and Mania Magazine. Another short story is being published on The Taborian (date pending).

Marianne Field did not submit a bio but we at NBR assume they are a very cool person and we're glad that they exist.

Mike Wilson's work has appeared in many magazines and in Mike's book, Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic. His awards include the League of Minnesota Poets Award, the Maine Poets Society Award, and the Chaffin/Kash Prize of the Kentucky State Poetry Society. He lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

Noah Soltau teaches about art, literature, and society to the mostly-willing. He is Managing Editor of The Red Branch Review. His most recent work appears or is forthcoming in Cerasus Magazine, Eunoia Review, Still: The Journal, and elsewhere. He lives and works in East Tennessee.

Paul Sasges was born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, and lives as a Métis settler. A member of the Métis Nation BC, with deep roots in the Red River Métis Nation, he resides on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Nations. He is retired from his previous careers as a marine officer, technologist, and energy conservation manager. He has returned to the University of BC as a BFA Creative Writing Student.

Stephen K. Kim (he/him) is a queer Korean American writer and college educator in upstate New York. He enjoys spending time with his husband and his cat. His poems appear or are forthcoming in Ghost City Review, Fifth Wheel Press, and elsewhere. He can be found online @skimperil.

SUSANA H. CASE is the award-winning author of nine books of poetry, most recently, *If This Isn't Love*, Broadstone Books, and co-editor with Margo Taft Stever of *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe*, Milk & Cake Press. The first of her five chapbooks, *The Scottish Café*, Slapering Hol Press, was re-released in an English-Polish version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka* by Opole University Press and as an English-Ukrainian edition, *Шотландська Кав'ярня* by Slapering Hol Press. <https://www.susanahcase.com>

Yuna Kang is a queer, Korean-American writer based in Northern California. She has been published in journals such as *Strange Horizons*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and many more. Their work has been published in multiple

languages. They were also nominated for the 2022 Dwarf Stars Award, as well as the 2024 Best New Poets Award. Their website link is:

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Zoë Etkin is a Memphis based writer, somatic coach, and bodyworker. Her works include, *The Mother Myths* (Motherhood Pages, 2022), *The Birth & Death of Girl* (Spuyten Duyvil, 2018), and *Cetacea Vaginae* (Another New Calligraphy, 2018). Her poems have been featured in journals such as *Juked*, *Entropy*, *Word Riot*, *Adanna*, *PANK*, and others. She received her MFA at CalArts. Learn more at www.memphisomatichealing.com.

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