

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 3

SPRING 2021



34 ORCHARD

Issue 3, Spring 2021

Published April 25, 2021

This issue is for mentor and friend the late Daniel Pearlman, who taught me everything about making smart choices in my writing career (and warned me about stupid ones everywhere else).

Cover Photo

Please Pray ♥ © Jen Connic, 2015

Editor

Kristi Petersen Schoonover

Staff Contributing Artists

Brandon Kawashima ♥ Jen Connic ♥ Page Sullivan

Publisher

34 Orchard

249 Great Plain Road

Danbury, CT 06811

34orchardjournal@gmail.com

www.34orchard.com

34 ORCHARD THANKS ITS SUPPORTERS!

This issue made possible in part by generous donations from:

Lorna Wood ♥ Carol Despeaux Fawcett ♥ Farah Habib ♥ Priscilla J Bettis ♥
Pamela DePaoli ♥ Anonymous, in memory of Alice Sheldon *aka* James Tip-
tree, Jr. *aka* Raccoona Sheldon ♥ Anonymous ♥ Helga T. Haven ♥ Several in-
kind for prior issues

ABOUT THE COVER ART

Please Pray was shot on the New York City Subway's D-train by Jen Connic in December, 2015. The D runs between 205th Street in Norwood (Bronx), and Coney Island's Stillwell Avenue (Brooklyn).

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, the villain must select the true Holy Grail from a sea of hundreds while the cup's guardian—an aging knight—and our hero observe. If the villain picks correctly, he lives forever. If he doesn't, he dies instantly. After the villain has turned to dust, the aging knight notes, "He chose ... poorly." It's one of the funniest lines in the film.

In reality, choices are no laughing matter.

Consider the people we know. Those who make poor choices and sit in the wreckage, failing to understand what happened. Those who refuse to admit they've made poor decisions and accept responsibility for them, and those who, conversely, own up to bad ones and try to fix them with a series of other choices. Those who always seem to pick the correct options, and life's easier for them and those they love. Those who say they "don't have a choice," but what's meant is that the competition's between something bad and something worse. Those who won't make choices at all, so they never move forward.

Choices, in many ways, dictate our courses, and what we sometimes don't grasp is that our current standing in the world is often a result of our own decisions. While there's a certain element of fate involved, and we may not feel like we have choices, we do—because the choice isn't in what befalls us, or in someone else's bad one that affects us. The choice is in how we *react* to what befalls us, or in how we react to the other person's terrible decision, and it is *those* choices that define who and what we are.

In our third issue, twenty artists ruminate on the sometimes devastating consequences of choice. There is infidelity and carelessness, bravery and cowardice, suicide and perseverance. There is acceptance and resistance, cruelty and kindness, confidence and desperation. Sometimes these characters are victims of their own choices; sometimes, they are the victims of others' that happened decades before they were even alive.

Whether or not we are victims or beneficiaries of our decisions, choice is in our lives every day. Immutable. Inevitable.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*. On the verandah, a selection of cocktails awaits.

Choose wisely.

There was a door stood long ajar
That one had left for me,
While I went trying other doors
To which I had no key.

And when at last I turned to seek
The refuge and the light,
A gust of wind had shut the door
And left me in the night.

— Jessie Belle Rittenhouse
“The Door”

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Jessie Belle Rittenhouse's "The Door," originally published in her 1921 collection, *The Lifted Cup*, is now in the public domain.

AM I BEAUTIFUL?

Carl Olson

Patrick had this really annoying habit of closing down whatever bar we were drinking at. It didn't matter what time, what day of the week, or how much money he had left. He always stayed until the end.

Tonight was no different.

Last call had long since passed when the bouncer told us it was time to go. We were sitting at our table, watching the women we wouldn't be going home with leave with other guys.

One in particular had caught Patrick's eye—an elegant Chinese woman, quite beautiful, her movements swan-like. The cascade of dark hair down her back looked like silk in the light. He had made his move, but it didn't go well.

She'd looked at him with hard eyes. "No drink and no dance? Not a chance."

Rejection was nothing new, but the way the girl and her friends laughed at him ... I've never seen him that angry about it before. He glared as she left on the arm of some beefy guy.

Most people were gone when we got outside, and so were the taxis. There was, however, a city bus route that ran all night only a few blocks away. Ben piped up to remind us that one of the stops was also within walking distance of where we'd be staying for the night, so we decided to walk off some of the alcohol we'd consumed, and take the bus.

While the three of us walked along the street, I realized how quiet, empty, and dark this end of town was at night. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised since it was two o'clock in the morning.

"Hey Pat." Ben tapped him on the arm. "Isn't that the bitch who shot you down earlier?"

"Looks like I'll be getting another chance." Patrick smiled. There was something behind it, and it wasn't good.

Inside the bus hut was a small girl with a cascade of black hair down her back, similar to the one from the bar—although it seemed a bit more dull, maybe because of the different light. She was wearing a weathered long coat and facing the other way, so I couldn't tell if it was the same girl or not.

Patrick quickened his pace. His whole demeanor had changed. Everything from his facial expression, which was now a scowl, to the way he was walking. In his mind, it was the same girl as before, even if it wasn't.

Something in my gut told me that things were about to spiral out of control.

Patrick ordered Ben and me to keep her from leaving as we arrived at the bus hut. Ben followed him inside while I stayed at the entrance. I really didn't like where it was going and wanted to get out of there, but I couldn't just leave her alone with those two. *Maybe, I thought, I'll be able to talk Patrick down and get him to leave this woman alone.*

Now that we were in the light, I could tell that she was wearing a surgical mask. I could see the white fabric loops around her ears peeking through her hair. She probably worked at the local hospital and was on her way home.

It wasn't the same girl.

I opened my mouth to tell Patrick, but he cut me off.

"So beefy guy wasn't all he was cracked up to be? Or'd you blow him in the parking lot and call it a night?"

I'd never heard him speak that way to a woman before. His mother and sister would have slapped him silly for being so rude.

It made me question whether I should remain his friend.

The woman didn't acknowledge that he'd spoken to her, but she did turn her head to the side and look back at us. While I couldn't see her whole face, I *could* see her eyes. She was actually Japanese.

"Bitch, I'm talking to you. Answer me!"

"C'mon Pat," I pleaded with him. "This is a different girl. Leave her alone."

"Fuck off." He shot me a hard look.

"He's right, Pat, let's ..." Ben's voice trailed off when the woman turned around.

She looked each of us in the eyes; hers were beautiful, big and dark, with curly lashes. In that moment, something came over me. I was mesmerized by her. It was hard to tell with that mask on, but from what I could see, she was gorgeous.

She had a small slim face and perfect skin. It was light, with no blemishes. Even though her long coat shrouded her body, I could tell she

was slight. Whoever she was, she was very alluring. I was unable to look away or move.

She walked over to Patrick.

He didn't budge as she approached, and if my condition was any indication, I don't know if he could have.

She looked at him for a moment before speaking. "Am I beautiful?" Her voice was sweet and with that accent I'd always found attractive.

"Yeah, you're hot as hell," he answered, his tone completely different than it had been a minute ago. He sounded calm, and confident.

The woman reached up and began to pull the mask away, revealing her face. Instead of more beautiful light skin, soft lips and a nice smile, her face was a mangled and grotesque mess. Her cheeks had been cut, or torn, from ear to ear. The mutilated flesh dripped and oozed blood. Sharp, rigid teeth pointed in all directions.

Jesus Christ! What in God's name ...

"Even now?" Her voice was now grisly and coarse.

Patrick screamed.

That's when I saw she clutched a pair of scissors, sharp enough to split hairs. She lifted them into the air and slashed Patrick across his waist. With only the one swing, she'd almost cut him in two. Blood sprayed from the wound as his insides spilled to the ground.

Securing the mask back over her face, the woman turned her attention to Ben. She asked him the same question. "Am I beautiful?"

"N—no. No, you're not."

Despite her face being half covered, I could see her expression change to rage. With one quick, blurred movement, she opened the scissors and lopped Ben's head clean off his shoulders. It bounced when it hit the ground and rolled to a stop by my feet. His eyes were open, a look of absolute terror within them.

I needed to run away, but was frozen in place. Maybe from fear, or maybe from a spell. The reason didn't really matter. My hands shook. My knees wanted to buckle.

I urinated as she turned to face me.

"Am I beautiful?"

INHERITANCE

Annie Dunn Watson

At dusk, I leave the car by the unloved lawn.

I dodge tires and slotted wooden crates to gain

the door. It leans away from me.

The entire ranch lists like a drunk

on the edge of a narrow bridge. My family was

on intimate terms with calamity.

We could mark the weeks by the number of times

the police came up to the house and asked

Who called? What happened? They never got

a reply. And nothing changed. For years,
forever, we hid under the stairs, tinder
in the dark, avoiding his scorching gaze.

Every morning, Gordon, Ben, and I
would gauge the force of the last night's gale.

We'd pray for safe harbor, for our

mother to appear, unscathed and smiling,
as though she hadn't been dragged across the rocks
or tossed into the blue-black sea.

The night Gordon was found, revolver cool
and resting by his hand, Ben vanished
into a cocktail of pills and beer.

I vanished into vodka. The house fell to me.

I bow under the weight of inheritance.

Under stars, I wait as the past becomes still.

I drop the match and walk into darkness

as the fire begins

to glow.

SALT AND PEPPER

W.T. Paterson

Here's how broken the world is: the coffin we bought to bury our baby came with free delivery. It wasn't enough that our grief paid out over eight hundred dollars for polished mahogany cut with pine that would ultimately be covered in dirt, it was that we actively opted into an option to save us money in the long run. As if such a thing existed.

Foolishly, we scheduled delivery to our house until the company called and asked if we preferred to ship the casket to a funeral home instead.

"Is that what most people do?" I asked.

"They're rather heavy," the representative said, and so we changed the delivery to McHenry's Funeral Home where the services would be held. "I'll call to let them know they'll be expecting."

My stomach shriveled at the phrase, but I kept it together so that David wouldn't lose his temper and put another hole in the wall.

He'd been subdued as of late, spending most of his time putting uncooked rice into our shaped salt and pepper shakers to occupy his hands. But in his silence was a broiling violence waiting to erupt. Originally the coroner thought our child died of SIDS, but my father demanded a second opinion and hired a private investigator. It started to look more like someone shook the child, and so I began to compile a list of David's outbursts.



The day our baby came screaming into the world, David got into a confrontation after a hospital vending machine ate his dollar. He took the unit by the sides and shook until the thing threatened to topple. Security made him stop.

"You're upsetting the other patients," they said.

"Goddamn thing is worthless," he said, and tried to put his fist through the glass. Three men wrestled him to the ground and dragged him off the

premises. He didn't meet his son until the next day after he'd eaten, and slept, and the hospital staff had turned over.

"He's perfect." David cupped the child's fragile head and pushed the few strands of silky hair in soft circles.

The child cooed until he came back to me screaming so loud that it triggered a migraine. I saw shards of glass. Still, I nursed him until he slept and trudged through the blinding pain until I, too, slept.

When I awoke, David sat in the hospital chair with his head in his hands, his phone broken on the floor.

"They let me go," he said. "Forgot to call out, and it was the last straw. Heartless pigs."

The child stirred in the rolling nursery cart. David didn't rise to soothe him, so I sat up and took the child into my arms.

"New beginnings," I said, and held the child to my bare chest so that my warmth could spread to us both. The skin on skin pulled me away from David's mood.

A doctor checked in. "How are we feeling?" the woman asked.

"Sore," I said.

"She's sore, can't you give her something?" David asked.

"I'll see what I can do," the doctor said, and she left us there alone again. David stood by the door looking out into the hall at the coming and going of hospital staff.

"Maybe this place is hiring," he said. "Cafeteria, or transport. Worth looking into."

The child found my nipple and suckled. It hurt, this alien creature pulling life from my chest with gums clamping so hard I feared it might leave a mark. But as he drank, I felt only the calm, nourishing beauty of life filling our boy until he pinched so hard that I let out a whimper.

"*Where is that goddamn doctor?*" David said.

I stayed quiet.



I know how it looks, having a baby with this man. He's not bad, but he rubs people the wrong way. Our neighbors across the street got a puppy last summer, and at a barbecue, David wrestled with the pup until it yelped in pain.

"You're hurting him!" Our neighbor took the dog into her arms and went inside.

"I think maybe you should go," another neighbor said.

"He's fine. That's how dogs play," David said, and sat at a table until I

brought him food. No one talked to us, but David didn't leave until the plate was empty.

Whenever that dog is out for a walk and sees David, it spins in circles of joy and pulls on the leash so hard that it nearly chokes itself to death. Sometimes I think he's tapped into something that I never will, a sort of primal knowledge of the world that people choose to disregard in exchange for a civil mind.

As a child, David's temper got him into trouble. His mother died young, and his father never recovered from the loss. The man ate his sadness, mainly red meat with salt and pepper, and forced David to eat with him in silence until only crumbs remained.

By sixteen, David had been suspended for fighting twice and stood to be expelled should another incident occur.

"Have you considered football? Boxing?" a guidance counselor asked, and his father signed David up for boxing lessons, thinking it would help him work through whatever it was he needed to work through.

The coaches loved him and his furious fists. He told me once that the sound of mitts hitting pads became the closest thing to Zen he'd ever experienced, and so that's why he slept the soundest on nights with heavy rain. The coaches showed him footwork, and parries, and feints, and jab-cross combinations, and told him he could go pro if he trusted them.

I've only heard the story once, because once is enough. One of the coaches followed David into the shower. He told David to trust him, and he got naked, and something happened, and when David cried out for help, nobody came.

"If you tell anyone about this, they'll call you a sissy and a liar," the coach said, and for the final week that David went to the gym, the coach made him spar with adults. A sixteen-year-old boy getting clobbered by full grown men, that still-developing brain getting knocked around, and because his father had signed a waiver, well, what could be done?

David dropped out of school at seventeen and took a roofing job with his father's longtime friend. The friend gave his crew beers at lunch and looked the other way if they were underage. Once, David was on a roof and lost his balance. The fall broke his collarbone, and the contractor told the insurance company that he suspected David had been drinking. A breathalyzer proved it to be true, and so all medical expenses came out of pocket because no one believed a seventeen-year-old kid got handed cans of Coors by a reputable contractor. His father took out a second mortgage on their small home to help ease the burden, but he passed away before everything became finalized. David found the man face down in his dinner plate, salt and pepper shakers filled with moisture, the pieces all clumped

together.

The contractor friend showed up at the funeral and David made a scene. More than a scene; he sent the man to the hospital with a broken nose and orbital, but the contractor refused to press charges despite the police itching to haul David in.

"We've got our eyes on you, tough guy," they said, and David said it brought him right back to that locker room at the boxing gym.

He found other work, odd jobs here and there, but when I met him, he was a bouncing at the bar I went to with my fake ID.

"You again." He always smiled. "One of these days I'm gonna follow you in and buy you a round. Not your friends, just you."

My then-boyfriend hated David and the way he openly flirted.

"That man needs a slap in the mouth," he said, his wavy hair and sweater and collared shirt boasting the image of an academic, and not the tough guy he thought himself to be.

"Don't be threatened," I said, but saying that made him feel threatened because on the last day of classes during spring semester, he went to the door to give David a piece of his mind. I watched him get out a sentence before David had him by the neck, upside down, and then laid out on the sidewalk.

It was the same night I let David buy me a drink and though I can't explain it, I knew he'd be the man I'd marry.



That first night home, the baby cried. He wailed with the furious thunder of hunger, and breath, and openness. Midnight found him rising awake as though he had a volume knob that kept cranking to deafening decibels.

"What does he want?" David asked.

"He's hungry, I suppose," I said, and rose to feed him. David sat up in bed watching as the child poked at me with small, stubby fingers and shrieked until his bald head turned red under the moonlight. Swaddled in a knitted blanket that my mother had swaddled me in, he calmed enough to latch onto my breast and drink.

David looked undone. It was in his shoulders when he breathed, the slow rise and fall, a calculated cadence that this child commanded my attention and robbed us of sleep. Sitting in our bed as the night moved through, I imagined him swallowed, a void, a human-shaped hole where a man could have been.

"Careful," he said, and it felt threatening. I wasn't ready for his voice

and it startled me.

The child's pudgy arms flailed like antennae and I found that I'd been pushing him too close against me. Protective measures, I suppose.

Our child unlatched and coughed. I tapped his tiny back until he smacked his tongue and sang the inane melodic syllables of pre-speech. David held out his arms like he wanted to hold our baby, and though I hesitated, I floated to the side of the bed.

"Cradle the head," I said, and David took the child into his strong arms. I should have felt love, but I watched in fear that the midnight feeding had triggered something deep and dormant.

My father didn't like David at first, found him lowly and brash, uneducated and *of the streets*. Once, after leaving a family gathering, my father, in his sweater vest and pleated pants, had cornered David to have a word.

"That's my baby girl," my father said.

"She's full grown," David answered.

I couldn't tell if he was standing up for me or implying something more sexual.

"Have I shown you my trophies from the boxing club at Yale?" Dad pointed to a large glass case with small awards inside.

David had fainted with his shoulders and my father stumbled, tripped over an ottoman, and landed face down with his legs kicked out in a perfect V. I scrambled to his aid, but my father rolled to his side, then to his knees, then stood up laughing like the whole thing had been a well-executed comedy routine. On the way down, he must have bitten his lip, because it puffed and bled.

"Papa, your shirt." I pinched a small spot of blood that had dripped from his lip to his collar.

"Never mind the shirt," he hissed, then went back to smiling. He put his arm around David and walked us to our car. "You're a good man. Get home safe, son, you hear?" he said, and waved us off.

Not halfway home, David pulled over on a suburban side-street.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Your father, he ..." and David stopped. I watched his eyes wrestle with a certain heaviness, a longing in the wake of loss. It had rained, and the black street sparkled.

"It's a good thing," I said.

A car pulled up behind us and flashed its high beams. I saw we were blocking a driveway. The car behind us tapped twice on the horn. David gripped the steering wheel so hard that his arms shook. The car behind us laid on the horn and David went into a fit. He swore and cussed and fought

with his seatbelt to get it off until he escaped the car.

"What is your problem?" he shouted. He kicked the car's wheel and spit on the windshield. The car backed up and peeled away. David got back into the driver's seat and drove us home cool and collected like nothing had ever happened.

Watching him hold our baby that night, I knew how fast his joy could turn to blinding violence, and how releasing it reset him to neutral. It scared me.

Our baby gurgled and spit up onto his shirt.

"It's ok, I'll clean it," I said.

David just laughed. "Guess he doesn't like your cookin'."

I wanted to slap him for saying such a thing, to knock his head into the bedpost. Didn't he know what I'd gone through to have this child? I grabbed our son and tried to lull him into safety, but he screamed and wailed and only reached for David. Even when I put him in the crib, all he did he stare through the dark at my husband's silhouette.

Rejected, I took the soiled shirt to the laundry after the baby went down and closed myself into the bathroom. I ran my hand under scalding water until my skin burned and I no longer felt the urge to cry.



A week into our new life, I awoke to silence. The baby wasn't in his crib and David had left the bed. I tore off the flat sheet and, in a panic, called to David. My ears rang like a banshee choir. All night the baby cried and cried and no matter what I did to soothe him, it only ever made it worse. I feared David had done something—he hadn't been handling the midnight feedings well.

"What if I get called in for an interview? I won't be rested," he liked to say, and I found myself playing the sudden role of mother, nurse, counselor, and confidant when all I wanted was a restful night to gather my wits. The lack of sleep made it especially hard to keep up appearances, let alone any semblance of mental health. Such nerve to bring his needs at a time like this.

My mother's knitted blanket splayed on the floor like a puddle and when I reached down to touch it, I could still smell the sweet innocence of our child.

"David!" I called again and blew into the kitchen where I found him holding our child in his lap, the two of them looking at a picture book of dogs.

"That's a funny guy, look at his nose!" David laughed, and when David laughed, the baby laughed. What should have been joyous relief turned into

horrendous resentment. Why should *he* get to laugh and look at picture books?

I attempted to pick up the baby. The second I scooped him up, his fire-engine wail sounded. David waved me off and offered to take the child again. Once in his arms, the baby stopped.

"Take a nap," he said. "I got this."

He turned the page and pointed to a new dog. The baby gurgled and flapped his pudgy arms. I didn't know how to tell my husband that I'd been panicked and god-awful scared. Would he think me weak?

I sat at the opposite end of the small table and watched them together. The salt shaker caught my eye, so I took it into my palm and unscrewed the top. I poured a small mound into my hand. The granules parted around the uncooked rice.

"Already did that one," David said.

I picked the rice from the mound, then poured more salt into my palm and picked the rice out of that. Soon, my hand had a small mountain of just salt. I poured it back into the shaker, then swept the pile of rice off the table and got up to dump it in the trash.

David eyed me from his chair. His face turned red and his eyes went to that distant place away from humanity.

The baby began to cry.



There's a memory of my mother holding my hand at the edge of a lake. It's one of my earliest. I remember looking at her and feeling overwhelmed by safety, and love, and awe. Every time I think about our child, I always come back to that memory of my mother's dark curls bouncing as we waded ankle deep. There's a distant mountain, and pine needles between the sand. That's all that life really is: a child and its mother.

When she passed, David got me through it. It wasn't easy, of course, but no matter what awful, vulgar things I said, David forgave me. I called him orphan, and broken, and stupid, but he took me back when I asked him to, despite the holes he put in the wall. He put them there instead of in me. We forgave each other for our trespasses and faults.

But this.

This is unforgivable.



At the funeral, people whispered. The private investigator suspected

an unnatural end and he told me to be ready to move back in with my father, that I just needed to say the word and he'd turn the evidence over to the authorities. David would go away forever.

In the room springing with flowers to cover the scent of weeping, and tragedy, and death, I stood by the head of a tiny, polished coffin.

Here's how broken the world is: I just needed to say it was David, and every single person would believe me. Isn't that a thing? The crying of our baby rattled something loose until I rattled back and all sound ceased. In the wake of silence was a sea of crying mourners like the head of a hydra.

David sat in an unsturdy chair looking at the floor. He didn't talk to anyone. His hands trembled. He looked hollow.

The private investigator milled. My father came and stood beside me. We surveyed the room. He watched David.

"He's all alone, you know," he said.

Outside, the bell from a nearby church rang, the thrums heavenly and holy, vibrating through my bones like a secret whispered from the mouth of God.

Mourners came in and shook our hands, and shook, and shook, and shook until my scalded, burnt skin split open, and I asked to go home.

“I could see the aviary’s giant mesh dome and I stopped, straining to hear the birds, but there were only sirens on the wind.”

– Charlotte Wyatt
“Ark”

THE DAYS BEFORE

Stephanie Lennon

THE NIGHT BEFORE

The bottle cap rests on the edge of your nightstand. Its counterpart has your thin fingers wrapped around it.

You do the math in your head. If you are not supposed to “exceed six tablets in 24 hours,” then how many would it take? Would seven be enough? Or do they lowball it? To prevent accidents. To save their own asses.

You give the bottle a good shake. Listen as the pills jump around, taking pride in their purpose.

“Must heal the humans. Must take the pain away,” they chant.

Of course, you know that some pain is just too strong to heal with traditional methods. Occasionally, you have to get a little creative. Think outside the box—or in this case, the pill bottle.

You set it down and let your head find your pillow. It’s not the right time; still, having the pills on your nightstand is comforting.

You turn off the light but don’t sleep.

FIVE DAYS BEFORE

You decide to walk to school today. The bus is overwhelming with its repetitive music and smiling faces. You much prefer feeling the damp air on the back of your neck.

No sun today.

No sun any day the way you see it.

You are two blocks from school when you hear it. A boy a year older than you is laughing with a couple of friends. Tony Meyers. A toolbag like no other. Your paths have crossed more often than you want to think about.

Thankfully, the kid’s pretty short, so the abuse is more verbal than violent. But he knows your story, and he jumps on every opportunity to hurt you with it.

As you get closer, you realize the laughter is directed at a pigeon with a

damaged wing. It attempts to fly but can't seem to stay up for more than a few seconds at a time. One of Tony's henchmen kicks it after a failed attempt to flee.

You have seen this group harass other kids before, but this was new. Did they hurt the bird, or did they just find it that way?

You don't want to know.

FOUR DAYS BEFORE

Birthdays mean nothing to you. Just another reminder of failure.

Wait ... you're still here?

Haven't offed yourself yet?

Better get on that, you stupid waste of space.

Your mom goes all out this year, which only makes you feel worse. A marbled cake with chocolate frosting and fourteen candles sits on the table between you.

"Make a wish, sweetie." Her eyes tell you that it's been one of *those* days. Her pained smile reminds you she's a fighter.

You blow out the candles and wish for your mother to stop hurting.

"This looks delicious, Mom. Thank you."

Three wrapped presents surround the cake. You are not sure if you will even be around long enough to enjoy the things she spent her hard-earned money on. Money that would be better spent on food or rent. Or maybe a new pair of heels.

It has been a while since she's gone on a date.

THREE DAYS BEFORE

The dishes are piling up. Your mom has been working late at the diner again. You like to do what you can to help, but you're afraid you may slip. Crack a plate. Take advantage of the shards.

Maybe you can find a nice gift for her instead. You know you can't afford anything worthwhile. You know she deserves something great. Most importantly, you know that when your dad left, he left behind more than a couple of broken smiles.

You find it faster than you expected. It cowers in the back of the hallway closet, nestled between the winter hats and old shoes. It is still in its black box. Covering the holes left behind by someone who didn't love himself enough to love you.

It brings you back to when you were ten years old, sitting at the kitchen table with your mother. It's a Sunday morning, and the coffee pot is dripping. You like the sound but hate the smell.

She smiles at you from across the table. Her eyes are red and puffy.

Three doughnuts sit on a small ceramic plate that reads “#1 Dad.” Chocolate glazed is your favorite. It’s his favorite too.

Next to the plate sits a small black box. A special Father’s Day present that you and your mom picked out together. Special because it’s the result of extra shifts at the diner for your mom and extra neighborhood leaves raked for you. He hasn’t seen it yet. You want to be there when he does.

“Honey, maybe you should go to your room,” your mom says, still smiling.

By now, you know that this is code for “Dad is in one of his moods.” She doesn’t want you to see him upset. She worries you won’t understand.

You want to say, “No, Mom. I’m not gonna go to my room. I don’t want Dad to be sad anymore. It’s his special day, and I should spend it *with* him. Not alone in my room.”

Instead, you squeeze her hand and tell her you love her, hoping it gives her a little extra strength for what’s to come.

TWO DAYS BEFORE

You coast through the school day. Your teachers don’t notice your disinterest because they are too busy trying to control the herd around you.

It sits in your jacket pocket. You slide your hand in and wrap your fingers around it. If all goes well, it should help you get enough money to get something nice for your mom. The pawn shop you found online is a little out of your way, but it will be worth it.

Tony is watching your every move, but the item in your pocket has your full attention.

The end-of-day bell arrives quickly. You grab your bag and head to your locker. You click it open. Someone bumps your shoulder and doesn’t apologize. You hope it’s just some idiot in a hurry to get home. At first, you don’t turn around. You don’t want to deal with the bullshit exchange that comes with it. Apparently, you don’t have a choice.

“Hey, asshat. Whatcha got in that pocket? I saw you fondling something all through English.”

Tony’s buddies offer their raised hands for a round of high fives.

You have no response. Tony does not approve.

First, a swift kick to the shin. Next, “I’m talking to you. Didn’t your daddy teach you to respect others?” A chorus of snorts. “Oh, right. He probably never got the chance.” To conclude, a not-so-playful punch on the arm.

You take a step back from your locker and slam it shut. You don’t have much in mind for a game plan, but you know you have to do something. Unfortunately, his eyes find yours before you can escape.

“Fuck off, Tony,” sneaks out before you can trap it in your throat. You have never spoken to him—or anyone—this way, and you aren’t sure how he’s going to respond.

He shakes his head as a smile spreads across his face. He does nothing when you turn toward the exit.

The cool air does wonders for your mood as you push through the front doors. It’s funny when you consider the things that have kept you here for this long. One reason is obvious: your mother. Other reasons are more obscure and silly: a chilly morning, the smell of gasoline, the rustling of a restless squirrel.

Somehow, the bad stuff always finds a way to trump the good.

You turn down an unfamiliar street—a supposed shortcut to the shop. It’s also empty. A dangerous path for someone with two predators just a few hundred feet behind.

You ignore the sound of a glass bottle shattering on the street behind you.

You pay no attention to the heavy feet on the pavement as they steadily approach you, two steps at a time.

It is impossible to ignore the irritating voice that follows those footsteps.

“Where are you going? Meeting your butt buddy downtown for a quick rendezvous?” It makes you wonder why Tony is the leader. Clearly Goon One is at least slightly more creative. You decide to try a different approach this time.

“Yes, actually. Tony didn’t tell you that we’re secretly lovers? I think that’s why he’s always torturing me at school. He’s got a big gay crush on me. I’m surprised you two haven’t caught on yet.”

Goon Two laughs and Goon One shoots him a look. “I mean, it *is* a little gay to use the word ‘fondle’ in everyday conversation,” Goon Two adds. “The kid might actually have a point.”

Goon One considers this briefly, and then shakes it off. They have a purpose here, and you are not going to like it. Suddenly, you notice what Goon One is holding in his right hand: a broken glass bottle.

“Tony wants to know what’s in your pocket.” He hits the palm of his left hand with the jagged bottle. Not only is he wittier than Tony, he also seems to be a bit more intimidating.

“Dude, come on. It’s not even that exciting. Not sure why Tony cares so much.” You quickly begin to brainstorm what could possibly be in your pocket that would be of no use to Tony and his minions. A tattered baseball card? A lucky rabbit’s foot? An old Matchbox car?

It doesn’t really matter, because none of those things are actually in

your pocket. Whatever you say, they will still expect to see it. And if they find out what it really is, they will take it.

Goon One shakes his head. "Yeah, I'm not buying it. If it really didn't matter, you would have showed us by now." He takes a step closer, bottle still in hand.

You hope that it is simply a fear tactic and not an actual threat. You may not want to be here anymore, but you want to go by your own hand. Not someone else's.

"Where is Tony, anyway? Too chickenshit to deal with me himself?" You're not convinced acting tough will get you anywhere, but at least it's a way to buy yourself some time.

Goon One whispers something to Goon Two. Goon Two snickers.

You consider running away. This idea gets immediately shot down by the last thing your father said to you: "If you have a choice between fight and flight, choose fight. You have got to be stronger than your old man. I failed your mother. You have to be strong for her, especially now." Technically, he didn't even say it out loud. It was scribbled on a napkin and left on your nightstand for you to find the next morning.

Goon Two decides to grow a pair and reaches for your jacket pocket as Goon One pushes the bottle against your neck. The rush of adrenaline you feel from the broken bottle against your throbbing vein gives you the strength you need to defend yourself.

First, you kick Goon One in the crotch. He drops the bottle and it shatters itself useless. Next, your right hand finds Goon Two's right index finger and bends it back. Not enough to break it, but enough to give yourself a chance to flee.

That was more than enough fighting for you. You run in the direction of the pawn shop. You think that you are in the clear as the adrenaline pumps through your veins. All you can do is run. Of course, you somehow manage to run directly into Tony's outstretched foot. You do your best to turn your body mid-fall so you at least land on your back instead of your face. You are mostly successful, but your elbow isn't doing so hot.

Tony approaches your sprawled and exposed body. All of that adrenaline you were feeling moments before has evaporated. You can't move; you're not sure if you are paralyzed from fear or the fall. Tony reaches his hand into your jacket pocket. He pulls out the stainless steel watch, and his eyes light up.

"Wow, this is pretty impressive," he says. "No wonder you were hiding it." He slides the watch into his back pocket and leaves you there on the ground.

THE MORNING OF

You open your eyes to three gentle knocks on your bedroom door.

"Honey? I got us some breakfast if you're hungry. I know you're probably still a little sore, but you should eat." Your mom's voice is soft, but sturdy.

You so badly want to pull yourself out of bed, but you are upset that you don't have something for her. She needs you today. You need each other.

You excuse yourself for a moment. You go into the bathroom. You pull the bottle from your pocket and untwist the cap. The pills shriek and beg for mercy as you drop them into the toilet, one by one. You close your eyes and flush.

The pills are silent, at last.

RIBBONS

Crystal Sidell

some truths bear
too much weight for reason
to carry on its shoulders

rather than navigate our arms
through the sleeves
we fold reality into a neat square
and pack it inside a box
(velvet lined, secured
with satin ribbon)

now it is an abstract idea:
a tragedy that might
happen elsewhere;
an affliction that others suffer
in other corners of the world—
Not here ...
Not to us ...

but last night while I slept
my pale-faced sister
spoke to me: *the doctor*
didn't check my pulse properly
it was a mistake?
this stake to my heart?

and when I woke her death
occurred a second time—
satin ribbon untied

ARK

Charlotte Wyatt

The ship above the New York City skyline wasn't visible from Queens on that final morning in December. Not at first. My last minutes of ignorance were spent hauling a bucket of bloody fish from the commissary to the fur seal exhibit. The zoo's empty guest path was still swept clean from the night before and I savored the walk despite the frigid breeze, because the hour before we opened was the best hour of any day. The air was as fresh as it was going to be, sweet with the grassy scent of Flushing Meadows Park, and birdsong could be heard above the expressway. Soon, the zoo would flood with tired parents and noisy children, with teenagers who stuck fingers through chain link, with people who felt it was within their rights to throw rocks to get an animal's attention. But while the front gates were still locked, I could close my eyes and imagine a version of the world without the city's sprawl, where trees outnumbered cars and people, and the species around me were the rule instead of the dwindling exception.

The clank of the breakfast bucket was usually enough to summon the seals to perch on molded concrete rocks at the edge of their pool. But the display was still and empty when I arrived, its concrete beaches rimmed with frost. I called to them. No heads emerged from their artificial "caves" or broke the surface of the water. I moved closer, and aimed a reflexive glance at the pool's moat to confirm its drains were clear. There, below me, the seals lay contorted and dry, crushed by their own weight in the narrow concrete crevice. The bull, Boris, stared in my direction. His eyes were fixed and lifeless.

I dropped the bucket and fumbled for the radio on my belt. I dialed every channel, shouting for my boss, then his boss, for my coworkers. No one answered. I tried maintenance, security, admissions. Every frequency was silent until the curator, Dr. Davenport, responded.

"Amanda?"

We never used first names. Only titles—"Keeper Three," "Maintenance

Two.” Hearing my name was strange, but I was relieved. Davenport was the zoo’s moral compass. He set our budgets and work assignments, our conservation initiatives and educational campaigns. I hoped to imitate his career, a years-long metamorphosis from keeper to manager to curator. I remember him now as approachable but serious.

“The seals are hurt,” I said. “I think they fell from the edge of the pool. All of them. I don’t know if—”

“Come back to Admin. Right now.” His words were measured, calm, as if he couldn’t hear the terror in my voice.

“Admin” was the stuffy little building where we took our lunch breaks and typed reports at the end of the day. It housed Davenport’s office and the commissary. Nothing there could help the seals.

“You don’t understand,” I pleaded. “I think they’re gone.” I couldn’t bring myself to say anything more final.

Davenport paused, long enough that I thought the radio’s battery might have died. Then, in the same flat tone, he said, “Come back.”

I ran, struggling to make sense of his order. It was possible he already knew about the seals, but I was sure he would have warned me. Then again, I was still new enough at the zoo that I thought maybe I was missing something. I had already come to understand death hung above the job. What else could it do, when the species we kept had all but disappeared from the wild? When we received daily deliveries of frozen fish and gassed rabbits to feed the carnivores? When the animals we cared for lived so long in captivity, they developed cancers and arthritis? When it was up to us to euthanize them, with no natural predators to cull their numbers?

The rest of the zoo’s staff was huddled in the breakroom. They stared at their phones or fought for a view of Davenport’s laptop. Someone let me in beneath their arm so I could stare into the newsfeed on his screen. It was my first glimpse of the ugly ships, pulsing and bulbous, nothing like the sleek metal discs in movies. They had appeared that morning all over the world, over deserts and cities, forests and oceans. Cell phones chirped distress as familiar voices wailed around me, distorted by fear and grief: What will we do? Is it a hoax? Will they hurt us? What about my family?

A fellow keeper backed away toward the hall, a man so devoted to the zoo’s grizzlies we called him Papa Bear. He shook his head at the rest of us. “My girls!” he said. “They’re at school. I have to go get them.” We turned as a group to see what Davenport would say, but even I could tell it wouldn’t matter. Papa Bear fled and a dozen others followed.

An anchor on the news announced a city-wide emergency had been declared. The zoo wouldn’t open at all for the day. My remaining coworkers apologized to Davenport and left, and then it was only the two of us.

I couldn't go. Not to my studio apartment, where I would sit and fret alone. I was still new in the city, and had no relationships beyond acquaintances and coworkers. My parents were across the country, and my brother was hours and hours north by car. I didn't own one. The opportunity to work with endangered animals had been important enough to me to make these sacrifices. I had moved to the city without a single doubt, inspired by the famous mural painted on a wall that hides the Admin building from the public. It is an earth made up of plant and animal shapes brought together in a circle, a representation of the interdependence of life on the planet. In the center, negative space makes a human form where guests could have their picture made. I used to see it online, the subject posed beside the mural's caption, inscribed in a wide looping script: *We will save only what we love, love only what we understand, and understand only what we are taught.* The line is attributed to a famous conservationist, and I believed his words were my calling. To save, and love, and teach.

Davenport seemed grim, but not distressed. I helped load what remained of the morning diets in an electric cart used to haul supplies around the zoo. I squeezed myself between rows of pans and buckets, and he drove us in silence along the narrow service road to the Reptile House, the closest animal installation.

As we slowed, I heard a kind of static. Like a low buzz or whisper. My mind could not make sense of it. I began to worry it was the back-up generator, that the things in the sky had interfered with the power grid. In a New York winter, the heat lamps could not be allowed to fail or the entire cold-blooded collection would be at risk. As we hurried in the back door, the sound magnified into an unbroken rustle of scales on mesh. Rare desert lizards and endangered snakes slithered and grasped to escape their tanks. A few were silent, their crumpled faces wetly mashed where they had fallen or hurt themselves.

We stood together, paralyzed and gaping, until Davenport instructed me to take as many diets as I could carry and go on without him. He would keep the cart and head the other way so we would meet in the middle.

"I'll catch up," he promised. "I want to stay a minute. See what I can figure out about all this." He waved his hand vaguely at the eerie behavior around us.

I was happy for permission to go, but his voice was wrong. It was too filled with wonder, almost childlike.

I pushed the thought from my mind and rushed to the red wolves next door. The dogs ignored the pans I slid through trapdoors in their holding area. Instead, they paced their hillside field, pausing only to look upward or dig where their fencing met the ground. I followed their gazes, beyond the

wooded field between the park and the expressway. There, one of those things I had seen on Davenport's computer hung in the sky like a storm front. It was much worse seen through the naked eye, enormous and undeniable. Lights shifted across its broad mass the way glare catches on a school of fish. It flashed one way, then another, flaring as it hovered above the trees. I froze as the addax do when they catch an unfamiliar scent or sound, muscles taut, waiting for the moment of flight.

Where could I go, but forward?

In the addax field, there was no sign of the antelope. I took hay from their supply shed anyway, and shoved flake after flake through the wire fencing. From there, I could see the aviary's giant mesh dome and I stopped, straining to hear the birds, but there were only sirens on the wind. All was still as I approached, even after I unlocked the door and let it slam behind me.

The aviary was my favorite place in the zoo, and the city. Its soaring walkway rose into the canopy of native trees, then down again beside a wide, clean pond. It was the closest thing we had to a complete ecosystem within the zoo, a pale imitation that could not function without the interventions I carried—trays of seeds and pellets, fish and fruit. I often volunteered for cleaning duties there so I could be among the birds as they fluttered and sang.

I thought they must have retreated to their heated shelter, hidden from views offered by the guest path, until I scanned the uppermost branches above me. Past those were the parrots and wood ducks, conures and buntings, their bodies limp where they were caught in the dome's mesh. They had strangled, I assumed, in their efforts to escape the terror in the sky.

Unwilling to believe there were no survivors, I jumped the walkway's rail to search between the foliage and rocks. There was nothing, not an insect or grub in the dirt, not the tiny wrens who sometimes squeezed through the mesh to steal seeds. I dove to the ground when I found the broken-winged flicker, struggling where her tiny foot had caught in the seam between the dome and its foundation.

I had found her maybe a week before the ships arrived, wild and flightless in the parking lot. I should have delivered her to our vet, but I knew the little bird would likely be put down, so I hid her in the aviary. She could get by there, unnoticed because her condition forced her to stay grounded. There were plenty of places she could hide or hunt for scraps. I'll never know if the other keepers kept my secret out of kindness or because they hadn't noticed her, just as I'll never know if the zoo and its mission would have made a difference in my lifetime.

The flicker panicked at my approach, but let me gently free her. I

pulled my knit cap off my head and wrapped her little body in it, then stuffed the bundle in my coat. I'm not sure where I thought I'd take her, only that if I left her alone, she might harm herself as the others had done. And though I hated to do it, I took the both of us up the public walkway where it rose into the trees, closer to those lifeless, dangling bodies. I wanted to see the ship more clearly, as if I might get a better sense of what it was and what it wanted. As I reached the path's apex, the ship's surface looked iridescent and soft as flesh. What I had thought were pulsing lights seemed more like respiration, gentle contractions every few seconds as if the thing could breathe.

The rescued bird wriggled in terror, or so I thought. For both our sakes, I hurried down and out the aviary door to put the ship at our backs. Almost immediately, she shrieked a head-splitting trill and thrashed free of my jacket. She fell to the ground, but instead of running away, the flicker made her lop-sided hop toward the looming, irrational thing in the sky.

She was easy to overtake but rebelled anyway, louder and more forcefully. I held her tight, then took an experimental step toward the monstrous horizon. In an instant, she was quiet and content.

I am embarrassed now by how selfish I was, how slow to understand.

I was out of diets to feed, and thought I should find Davenport to help with whatever work was left. I took us in the direction the flicker preferred, toward the Florida panthers. The cats leapt for the net above their enclosure as if they could claw it down. I worried they would hurt themselves. In that moment, I felt the weight of my responsibility to the animals more deeply than I ever had. I was convinced Davenport and I were the last line of defense in the slow toppling of life on the planet, even if the most we could do was try to protect the zoo's living collection for another day.

As I came closer to the cats' display, I saw Davenport at the service door. We used it only for cleaning and maintenance, and only when the cats were securely in holding. His keys were in the lock.

"Dr. Davenport?" I called. "What are you doing?"

He didn't react, only opened the door and stood, unmoving. The male, Felix, slunk to the opening slowly at first, then in a single, fluid motion, leapt forward and pinned his paws on Davenport's shoulders. The man fell backward under the cat's weight.

Again, I ran. I thought I would find the emergency supply of nets and guns locked in Davenport's office, though I wasn't sure there was anything I could do for him now. We raced by the other exhibits, the flicker still nestled in my coat. The bears leaned over their moat as if they might leap to freedom and join us. Spider monkeys swung and howled, pounding their small fists on the walls of their enclosure. The elephants rumbled from one end of their

paddock to the other, as if their fence might be startled into falling away.

By the time we reached the zoo's entrance, I was out of breath. My side ached. I wasn't sure I could make it to Admin before Felix caught up. The flicker strained toward the parking lot and beyond it, where the ship waited. I unlocked the gate and slipped out, thinking I would secure it behind me to keep the cats and other animals safely inside. But I froze, hypnotized by the throb of the ship's surface.

The next thing I remember is a low growl behind me. Felix stood on the other side of the narrow opening I had left. Instinct bent my knees, a useless reflex; the panther outweighed me by at least seventy pounds, his legs stronger and faster than mine, his jaws designed by eons of careful revision to snap the bones in my neck. I held the flicker close, as if I could protect her.

"Felix," I said, and took a slow backward step. I tried to find the tone I used with the seals in our training sessions, something to command him, to introduce doubt in his mind about who was in control. His whiskers brushed my hip. I closed my eyes, afraid of how he would hurt me. Then he slid past, toward the wooded lot and the ship above it, and lurched into a loping run.

What else could I do but follow?

The flicker was still and silent as I dodged tall brush and low branches. Cold air scraped my lungs above the painful throb of terror in my chest. When we were almost directly beneath the ship, I was forced to stop by a sudden squall of animal life. Insects writhed like a living carpet made of beetles and roaches and spiders and worms, trampled by rats, parted by snakes. Squirrels and raccoons crowded the trees, startled by escaped addax who lunged upward as if they might fly. Felix launched himself at a tree, and I thought he would end one of those antelope, but like the others, he was only intent on getting further from the ground. Birds spiraled upward overhead as the ship rocked gently on the winter wind.

The flicker beat her wings to emerge from the warmth of my coat. Not knowing how else to help her, I turned my hands into a platform so her crooked wing splayed across one palm. As I watched, the wing seemed to snap, then straighten, at once as miraculous and mundane as a dog stretching in sunshine, its wide mouth yawning at the day.

Light burst overhead. I knew I should be terribly afraid, but fear couldn't overcome the wave of warmth and calm the brightness brought.

The flicker flapped once, twice, then took off to join the birds above her. I watched them until the ground shook. All four elephants came crashing through the brush, then the bears, then Felix's mate. I felt weighed down by exhaustion, like a physical burden had been laid on my back and shoulders. I could not resist collapsing against a tree.

I awoke alone.

Some of every species were taken. There was no rule of two by two, no strict taxonomy. They took anything they could, from common insects to what remained of the whales. Never once did we see who collected them, and reports suggest they did not invite a single human soul. And now, as the whole falls apart, as the forests crumble and the oceans die and our crops fail, we watch the skies, hopeful someone will come for us.

BECAUSE YOU'RE MINE

Meghan Arcuri

“Did you have a good night?”

You answer me with a smile, the smile I love so much. Brilliant and beautiful.

You take a sip from my water bottle.

That water bottle. It reminds me of the day we first met.

You grabbed it by accident at the gym. I tried to stop you, but I was too late. Your saliva, your germs, all over the mouth of my bottle. You looked at me. Your face turned crimson, but you laughed, your smile brilliant. Beautiful.

“Sorry,” you said, wiping the spout with your shirt. “Looks just like mine.”

It was the same brand, in fact.

I almost told you to keep it, but the mix of confidence and vulnerability on your face, in your posture, gave me pause.

That and your body.

Clearly you’d spent time at that gym. I’d seen you there before, working as a trainer. Laughing, happy, full of life. I’d always wanted to talk to you, but I was too shy.

The water bottle fixed that problem.

I was glad.

You seemed glad, too. All the attention you paid me that morning. Then asking if I wanted a personal session.

I was feeling bolder than usual. Something about you did that to me. Maybe I was feeding off your confidence.

So I said, “Are you looking for extra money, or just trying to get in my pants?”

You blushed again, but without missing a beat, you said, “Both.”

“Okay,” I said. “When do we start?”

“Tonight. At my place.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

You took a step closer to me. Heat poured off your body. I smelled the perfect mix of sweat and deodorant. Spicy. Masculine.

I was tempted to change my mind, but I didn't want to give in quickly. You seemed the type to like a challenge.

“We'll meet here tomorrow. What time?”

You took another step closer, your chest rising and falling, pulse thrumming at your neck.

You definitely liked the challenge.

“Ten.”

“Sounds good.” I patted your taut chest. “Maybe you should bring a different water bottle.”

“Maybe you should.”

“Seeing as this one has all of your germs on it, I think I may have to.” I winked and left.



That was the beginning. A beautiful beginning.

I wasn't sure I was ready for another relationship. The last one had ended poorly. He'd been unfaithful. He'd broken my heart. So I decided to be alone for a while. And I was happy.

But you made me happier.

I hadn't expected that. You, with your unending charm, broad shoulders, and easy smile. The other ladies loved you. I thought I'd fallen into the same trap as I had with Andrew.

But you fooled me. Yes, you brought me flowers and took me to dinner, things any guy can do. Especially in the first blush of a relationship. But you also listened, you comforted, you made me laugh.

Like the time we ran into my ex and his new lover, waiting in line for a movie you'd wanted to see.

I tensed.

“What's wrong?” you said.

“Nothing.”

“This.” You tapped the bridge of my nose. “This crinkle right here tells me you're lying.”

When had you learned that about me?

You kissed the spot.

“What's the matter?”

I looked at Andrew.

You followed my gaze.

"Is that the guy?"

I'd told you about his infidelities. I nodded, unsure of what you might do. Andrew gave us an awkward smile.

You slid your fingers down my bare arm and intertwined them with mine. You looked at me and only me. You leaned in, your other hand soft and low on my hip.

Your lips brushed my neck, my ear.

"You're mine," you said. "You know that, right?"

You pulled away, your eyes serious but sensual.

"Yes."

"Good."

You gave me a chaste peck on my lips.

"Plus, he's a douche."

I laughed.

You made me fall in love with you.

And I thought I'd made you fall in love with me.



Six months after that beautiful beginning, something went wrong.

You came home late one night. You'd been celebrating someone's twenty-first birthday. Tom's, I think. The newbie trainer at the gym.

But you stumbled in later than you'd said you would.

You woke up smelling like beer and cigarettes and vanilla.

You do not smoke. And I do not use vanilla skin products.

I sat next to you on the bed.

"Did you have a good night?"

You rolled over, ignoring me. Maybe you were hung over.

I trailed my finger from your thick bicep to the sensitive skin of your inner elbow. I spent a few minutes there.

Goosebumps rose on your skin.

"My love," I whispered in your ear, my lips grazing its outer rim.

You rolled toward me and opened your eyes.

I handed you the water bottle that sat on the nightstand. You took a few long pulls, then sat up.

"Hey, baby," you said. The words came out scratchy, your voice deeper than usual.

"Sounds like you had a really good time."

You blew out a sigh. "Honestly? I don't remember. I was sticking to beer when one of the guys dared Tom to do twenty-one shots. He dared us back."

"And you said yes?"

"Uh-huh."

"Boys are so stupid."

"Uhhh ... yup."

You took another sip of the water.

"What did you put in that, baby? My headache's already gone."

"Just a little of my magic."

"That herbal shit?"

I slapped your arm. "It's not shit."

"I know, I know. I've had six months of your amazing cooking. And your home remedies work. It's definitely not shit."

You kissed me.

"Were you smoking?" I said.

"Nah. But I'm pretty sure someone was. The place was packed, body-to-body. It was hard to tell who was doing what."

You ran your hand through my hair. It felt nice.

You seemed sincere, too. You didn't act nervous or anxious or like you were trying to cover up something. So I let you keep touching me.

Then I straddled your lap and kissed you. Your body reacted immediately. Every part. I giggled into your mouth. You slapped my rear.

"Hey!" I said.

You squeezed my hips, kneaded my thighs, and moved your thumbs to my center.

My body reacted immediately. Every part.

My nipples strained against the gauzy white tank top you love so much. You tasted each one.

I pushed you down, hands on your shoulders, lips at your neck.

"We can have a really good time too ..." I said.

I kissed your neck, your shoulders, your chest. I worked my way down. Within minutes you were sated.

Then you rolled me on my back and returned the favor. Multiple times.

I was more than sated.

"You're my girl," you said.

"And you're my love."

Our silly thing we say to each other.

"Forever," you said.

I stopped worrying.

I should have known better.



A few weeks later, when you woke up in much the same state—wildly hung over, smelling of booze and smoke and sex—I began to worry again.

“Did you have a good night?”

You rolled over, ignoring me.

I trailed my finger from your thick bicep to the sensitive skin of your inner elbow. I spent a few minutes there.

Goosebumps did not rise on your skin.

“My love,” I whispered in your ear.

You grunted, rolled farther away, and began snoring. You were definitely hung over.

When you finally woke, you said little, answering few of my questions, claiming you had a headache. You asked for my hangover water, but I’d run out of the ingredients.

When I met you at the gym that night, your friends gave me awkward smiles, unable to look me in the eye.

My heart sank.

I’d seen those smiles before. In my last relationship.

You fooled me again. Fooled me into falling for you. Fooled me into thinking you loved me. Fooled around on me. Made me look like a fool.

I knew that night.

I’d known before that night.

But it didn’t make it any easier when you told me of your infidelities at dinner.

Knowing didn’t remove the hurt, the pain, the anger.

I couldn’t take it.

Not from you. Not from my love.

I could not—would not—go through this again.



“Did you have a good night?”

You answer me with a smile, the smile I love so much. Brilliant and beautiful.

You take a sip from my water bottle.

That water bottle. It still has my magic. But it’s changed, more potent this time.

I smile.

I love you. I love you too much to let you go.

So you’re back with me.

You’re mine. And you always will be, regardless of how you feel.

You’re mine, until I’m done. Until I’m finished with us.

Until I break the spell.

“Life is a crapshoot. I didn’t know if my life would be happier. I didn’t know if your life would have been. I would have loved you no matter what. Unlike some other people, many people, I know the meaning of unconditional love.”

– William Kitcher
“Apology”

WHAT THE HANDS SAY OF LOVE

David Holper

The lessons of love are tied to our hands. If you place a single finger on the heart,

you can point to its source, even if that source is slippery.

I learned this driving cab in Ketchikan. The man who taught me this lesson

arrived just before dark one summer evening: he came striding up the float plane docks

just as the sun buried its red fingers in the narrows between Revillagigedo and Gravina.

I reached out to shake his hand, but he only smiled at me—and I noticed

he held something close to his chest. We both piled in the Checker Marathon.

Hospital, he said. *What happened?* I asked, glancing up in the rearview. I was expecting

chainsaw or misery whip, fire or fishing, but it was none of that. Years before he'd married

a Tlingit woman. He described her the way someone might describe some unexpected treasure of greatest value: her raven-black eyes and hair, the way she smelled of pine, wildflowers, spring water—her breasts as luscious as a full moon hanging over Metlakatla.

He even described the mythical bliss of making love to such a woman. *But the hand?*

I asked. *What happened to your hand?* He looked shy: *We fight sometimes, you see.*

He described how they got drunk that morning, fought all day, and come afternoon, she'd had enough.

So what did she do? I asked. He lifted a baggie out of his shirt. Inside there was half a finger packed in ice. *She bit it off*, he said. Words failed us both. Later that night, I picked him up, his hand heavily bandaged. Somehow I didn't even need to ask

if he still loved her: it was written in the way he tenderly cradled his hand against his chest.

I imagined that when he got home she would hold his broken hand to her breast—and all either of them would need to hear would be spoken through the beat of her heart through his fingertips.

APOLOGY

William Kitcher

Alex, I want to apologize to you. I want to apologize to you so much. I'm so sorry for the potential in your life that I took away from you. There are reasons for it, as I hope you know, but I'm still so sorry that you weren't able to take your place in life and achieve everything you could have done, and strive for even more. I'm sorry for what I've done to your brothers and sisters, but I'm most sorry because of what I did to you. You were the most tangible, the most obvious, the one I would have been watching most closely from the beginning, the one I would have doted on to see where your life would have gone. You were the one with the name "Alex," the family name that would have continued, the one who would have confounded the "family curse" that gave your name a bad connotation, because Granddad's Uncle Alex was killed in World War One, and Granddad's brother Alex died of meningitis at the age of twelve, leaving my dad an only child who took Alex's middle name as his own since he wasn't given one.

I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to do anything that would hurt you. There are circumstances in this world, and there are choices we make, sometimes for the wrong reasons. I think this was the right reason. I know this was the right reason. It would have affected my life too greatly, the life I had, the life I knew. I know you could have given me great joy, but I didn't know if that was forever, so that was why I had to do to you what I did to you.

Life is a crapshoot. I didn't know if my life would be happier. I didn't know if your life would have been. I would have loved you no matter what. Unlike some other people, many people, I know the meaning of unconditional love. But I don't know how I would have reacted if you hadn't been the perfect child, the smartest, the most creative, the most loving, the most gifted. Of course I would have loved you; you were mine and nothing would have been too good for you. But if you hadn't been better than I, smarter, more creative, more tolerant, better than I am in all the things that I

don't do so well, I don't know what I would have thought. Would you have expected me, the way I am now, to settle for less than incredible in the way you lived your life? Ultimately, my own selfishness, my self-interest was most important. (But please look at it like it gave me the opportunity to do with my life what I wouldn't have necessarily been able to do if you had been around.) This life I lead was something I could comprehend immediately. I didn't have to sacrifice anything to get what I wanted. That's what I chose. And I'm content with that decision despite this apology I'm writing to you. I had to eliminate you. I didn't know what would happen if you'd been around for a long time, either for you or for me. The desire to be with you was outweighed by what I wanted for myself.

Your mother and I are now separated, and I don't know if things would be different if you were alive. Would we have stayed together because of you? That would have been wrong. Would we have become closer if you were here? I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think children bring parents closer together.

For some reason, Alex, I see you as a little girl. I don't see you as a boy, even though the name would have been the same. I just think you would have been a girl, and it's strange that your mother and I both loved that name, regardless of my family history. You would have been Alex, and I can't imagine ever giving that name to a cat or a dog. I picture you as a combination of the best elements of Kate and Caroline and Sinead and Elaine and my mum and Grandma and the other female genetic connections to your life, as well as all the great attributes of all the boys and men. I see you with my musical talent and my social values—and being better—and with your mother's scientific mind and her compassion—and being better. I see you as a kid who could change the world in one way or another, or perhaps in many ways. You would have had the genetic makeup, the opportunity, the encouragement. There's no telling what you could have done. This is how I like to think of you, and this is why it hurts so much, because I think of the possibilities of you.

You may have been average, and that would have been okay. I would have loved you like nothing else. But I don't think you would have been, and that's why I'm sorry. And I realize that my feeling sorry is for another selfish reason: I would have had you only for curiosity's sake.

The decision to never have children is possibly a tougher decision than to abort a child as there is no immediate decision that has to be made. It is a decision that takes years to make, and in middle age, is a choice that is taken away, and in old age, is a decision I hope I won't regret.

I hope you understand. I hope you forgive me. I'm sorry.

I think about you a lot.

Although we've never met, I miss you.

INTERSECTION

Heather Sullivan

She stands at the stop light
in the snow, holding a sign:
I'm hungry. Please help.

This child, with dark brown eyes.
This child with no socks, no boots,
bare feet in flimsy shoes.

The light is red. I put my car in park,
jump out, don't care if I hold up traffic.
I give her what I have and wish

I didn't use my debit card so much,
had more cash to place in her un-gloved palm.
The way she says, *Thank you*, the way

her eyes are so grateful and hollow,
the way snowflakes land on her
thin sweater, the way she shivers:

there are no words, just tears
as I drive home. My daughter,
age 8, in the back seat:

Mama why are you crying?
My daughter, warm in her
pom-pom hat, pink boots,

her dark brown eyes
full of questions
I cannot answer.

A LIVELY PLACE

Nadine Rodriguez

Things were not supposed to die in Rosa's home. Rosa's house, a comfortable enough one floor home with faded yellow paint that clung to its cement walls and black railings attached to nearly opaque windows, was not a place to die. Not to say that things *couldn't* die on the property. They, in fact, did.

Rosa's first and only pet, a small black chihuahua mix who they promptly named Ceniza, had bitten a fat, morbid creature of a toad and had been found hours later, lifeless underneath an avocado tree in the backyard. Rosa's grandmother had placed her hands over their shoulders gently but sternly, keeping them from rushing to the scene. Their mother had been the one to walk past them and across the yard to see. She kneeled by Ceniza, and after placing a hand over her unmoving chest, had turned her head to look at Rosa somberly.

"*Estas cosas pasan, hija,*" their grandmother said. Back then, many things in Rosa's life didn't make sense. Rosa was turning thirteen, and their hips were starting to swell and the chunkiness that clung to their bones from a slowly waning childhood was beginning to evaporate, revealing breasts and delicate, slim fingers. Their grandmother and mother had always called them their little girl, their *hijita*, but it was dawning on Rosa that they couldn't exist within that word. The night Rosa decided to tell their grandmother and mother that they were not a boy or a girl, that their reality existed outside of that realm of possibility, they heard Ceniza barking outside, the sound muffled within their kitchen, where they sat.

Rosa had frozen in their seat, and their grandmother was the one to stand and peer out the kitchen window above the sink, pushing aside the thin mango curtains. The only light was from the garden, its bulbs cascading the corners of their backyard in orange shadows.

"*Sucedió de nuevo,*" their grandmother whispered.

"What's happening?" Rosa asked, frantic. "Is that Ceniza?"

Their mother pushed herself away from the dining table where Rosa was still seated and rushed outside, without a word. Rosa did not dare to move. Within minutes, their mother had returned, her hunched over back facing the kitchen.

"Rosa, come here."

Rosa's breath, thick and unmoving like the crystallized honey they'd see their grandmother warm on the stove, was caught in their throat. They stood up and moved toward their mother slowly, the beige ceramic tile cold against the soles of their feet. When they were directly behind their mother, she turned, revealing what she held so tenderly in her arms.

Ceniza was sleeping, head nuzzled into the crook of their mother's arm. Gone was the brilliant black coat they remembered her having, replaced with dry, frayed-out gray and white strands, dots of black speckled all over her frame.

Rosa began to cry, and their mother shushed them.

"She's back, Rosa. Isn't that great?"

"She died," Rosa sobbed, shaking their head. "That's not her!"

Their mother sighed and motioned for their grandmother to come, and Rosa saw the reluctant way the older woman stretched out her arms to hold the dog.

Ceniza barely reacted.

"The land our home is on is special, mi amor. When things die here, we don't have to say goodbye. They stay with us."

It wasn't right, Rosa knew it, but when Ceniza woke them up the next morning, jumping on the mattress and scratching to be let under the blankets like she'd always done before she'd died, Rosa didn't fight against it.

Everything in their home was enveloped by a new light.

The photographs of the father they could barely remember, the lines that formed his eyes and face blurry and hazy in their memory, seemed too lively, as if he would reach out to them from within the auburn and beige frames. Rosa wondered about his early death.

They didn't think to ask their grandmother, not until they had the dream. The world that occupied Rosa's dream was blanketed in darkness, the only beacon of light a small red car on fire, in the middle of it all. When they stepped toward it, they saw an uninjured hand flatten against the window from the driver's side, and woke up.

When Rosa barged into their grandmother's colorful room on an early weekday morning, they sat on the edge of her bed and asked about their father. Rosa's grandmother looked toward the doorway before lifting a finger up to her lips and shushing her. Rosa hadn't noticed the skin on her grandmother's limbs growing thin, bruises, and discolored veins blossoming

on her arms and legs. These were all signs of a storm that they were not prepared to weather.

"Not when your mami is home," she whispered.

A few days later, when their mother left to run Saturday errands, their grandmother sat beside them in the living room, placing a hand over their knee. Mosquito bites dotted the skin of their exposed thigh.

"Your father died in a car accident; you were too little to really remember."

Rosa thought of flames. "If he had died here, would he still ... be here?"

Their grandmother shook her head, "That's not something to think about."

Rosa covered her grandmother's hand with their own and squeezed.

"Did mami want him to die here?"

"She doesn't understand. What this land has is a curse, and it's become ours, and she treats it like some type of blessing."

"How long has our family lived here?"

Their grandmother pulled her hand away and fidgeted with the gold bracelet that adorned her other wrist.

"When my mother died, I had to beg my father to let me drive her to the hospital. He wanted her to stay here, and I couldn't bear the thought," her voice caught, but she began again after a deep breath. "We've lived here for too long, *mi alma*."

When their grandmother began to eat less, Rosa wasn't too concerned. Age was a difficult thing, and sometimes the food that Rosa's mother offered at the dinner table was revolting to their grandmother. When she began to fall, tumbling from the slightest misstep or forgetting Rosa and their mother's names, Rosa began to panic. One afternoon, as their grandmother stared out into nothing, with Ceniza resting by her feet, Rosa ushered their mother into the kitchen.

"I think we should take Abuelita into a hospice."

Rosa was in their last year of high school, and their mother had to keep requesting days off work. It seemed like the most logical choice.

Their mother's eyes widened. "Don't you dare say that again. This is *our* home—she stays here."

Rosa felt uneasy, but chose not to say anything.

Instead, they spent time with their grandmother. One night, as Rosa was struggling to focus on their textbook as they sat beside their grandmother on the burnt orange couch, she reached out and grabbed one of Rosa's wrists.

"I don't have much time."

"*De qué estás hablando?*" Rosa said.

Their grandmother squeezed, and Rosa looked down to see her brittle, yellowed fingernails dig into their skin.

"Your mother," their grandmother rasped. "You can't let me die here, promise me."

Rosa didn't know what to say, but suddenly Ceniza began to growl at their grandmother, and the skin their grandmother was digging their nails into was beginning to burn.

"Abuelita, you're hurting me," they whined. They looked toward their grandmother and saw her bloodshot eyes, tears dripping down her cheeks.

"Rosa, prometeme, *por favor*."

"I promise," they blurted.

After, their grandmother let go, but continued to cry.

Two weeks later, as Rosa returned home from school, their mother was sitting on the front porch. Her face was cradled in her hands, and Ceniza sat by her.

"Mami?"

She looked up at Rosa, and Rosa only saw a ghost that resembled their mother. They knew what she was going to say before she did.

"Where is she?" Rosa asked.

A soft, sad smile warped their mother's lips.

"In her room. She passed in her sleep."

Sobs tore through them, but they pushed past their mother regardless. The first thing they saw as they shut the door behind them was their grandmother, standing in the entryway to the living room with her back turned toward Rosa. The sunlight that filtered through the curtains in the kitchen illuminated only her tense legs and bare feet.

"Abuelita?"

Their grandmother collapsed into the floor and disappeared.

Grief was a quiet and private thing for them, but it was a spirited affair for their mother. She grew jittery and anxious, seeking out professional help only to abuse the pills given to her. She drank more, and Rosa would find her asleep past the time they knew she was expected at work. Ceniza was attached to her like a parasite, trailing along behind her like a shadow.

One evening, while they ate tepid, cheap takeout from the Cuban-Chinese restaurant a few blocks down, their mother abruptly dropped her fork after twirling it in the cold chow mein noodles for ten minutes.

"Have you seen her, Rosa? I feel like something is wrong."

"Seen who?"

Their mother picked up her fork again and used it to pierce a spongy piece of orange chicken.

"Your abuelita, Rosa. I just haven't seen her, I thought I would have by now."

Rosa blinked.

"Why would you want to see her?"

Their mother laughed in disbelief.

"She's my mother, Rosa. She died here, so she's *supposed* to be with me."

All at once, Rosa smelled gasoline. They remembered their dream from long ago, and their grandmother's words.

"What did you do?"

Their mother pushed her chair away from the table but did not stand up.

"I didn't do anything," she responded.

Ceniza howled, and despite both of them trying to quiet the dog down, she didn't stop. The sound disoriented Rosa, and the food was beginning to smell like chemicals and rotten eggs, so Rosa wandered away from the kitchen and to the front door. They tripped over their own feet on the porch, and landed on their knees, skidding across the cement. When they sat back and stretched out their legs, they saw bright red beads emerge on their knees.

They missed their mother. They wanted her back. They wanted to exchange her for whoever had replaced her underneath the avocado tree years ago, before Ceniza had died. They smeared the blood on their skin in the dying evening light and cried.

Rosa's mother was still in the kitchen when they told her that they were planning on leaving their town to go to college a few states away. Rosa wasn't sure that she had heard their words, but their mother's face broke out into a grin, and she congratulated them with a tight embrace that lasted a minute too long. When she let go, she placed a hand over Rosa's chest, where their heart was.

"We'll miss you."

Ceniza barked wildly from further in the house, and their mother left to go tend to her. Rosa stared at the vacant space their mother had just occupied in confusion when they felt the wispy, curly hairs on the nape of their neck.

They turned to see their grandmother, standing by the front door. The apparition stood by the outskirts of the yellow light that illuminated the kitchen, the kind features Rosa had actively tried to remember since she had passed enveloped by the darkness of night, morphed and distorted into eyes that were nearly black, and a mouth that Rosa could only place on her face from memory, but not see a few feet away from them.

Rosa didn't scream. They knew that the sound would summon their mother. The specter raised an arm and uncurled her gaunt hand to point in the direction their mother had gone, and opened her mouth. There was nothing but black, and when she tried to speak, Rosa only heard the wind, a soundless voice beckoning them to run.

Rosa understood. They would not fall to the same fate their grandmother had.

Their mother began to cook more, hunched over the stove as the steam from pots with bubbling meaty stews and her rice cooker thickened the air. Paranoia and caution guided Rosa's tongue and hands away from such meals, and nightmares of rat poison and arsenic plagued them nightly. They'd wake up to silhouettes hovering over their bed until their dreary, half-asleep vision focused, and they'd be alone.

The days passed, and a month before the Friday morning Rosa was supposed to drive away into sanctuary, there was a knock on their bedroom door. Rosa was splayed on their bed, browsing through their phone. The edge of a hurricane that had nearly made landfall was washing over their town. The sound of rain pelting their bedroom window had nearly deafened the knock.

"Come in."

No sound followed, and Rosa felt a familiar uneasiness resurface. They had learned not to procrastinate on such affairs, and stood up to see who or what had knocked. When they stepped out into the hallway and reached out apprehensively to flip the light switch, there was a quiet *click*, but the light remained off.

"Mami?" they called out.

"Mami?" their own voice responded.

They froze and considered running back to their room, but the idea was cut short when the door slammed shut. Rosa yelped and sprinted down the hallway, to the main junction of the home that split up the living room and kitchen. The television in the living room was on somehow, but the storm outside must have been weakening the signal, because the people on the screen were glitched, lagging completely for a moment before only a portion of their faces or arms pixelated and moved across the screen, their words broken and robotic.

"Rosa."

They looked over toward where their name had come from and looked into the hallway to see their grandmother.

"Por favor," Rosa whimpered. "Por favor no más."

With her mouth closed and unmoving, their grandmother screamed. Rosa jumped back, hyperventilating, and their grandmother followed,

moving toward them as if her body were hanging on a line. Rosa screamed and dropped to the floor, putting her arms in front of her.

"What's going on?"

Their grandmother disappeared, and Rosa looked up to see their mother rushing toward them. She gripped their shoulders tightly, and Rosa scrunched their nose at the scent of cheap liquor.

"What happened? Did you see her?"

Rosa tried to steady their breathing.

"Was she here?" their mother insisted.

"Mom, stop it. Please."

Their mother began to shake them, and Rosa felt sobs clamber up her throat.

"I know you can see her. I know you're lying to me. Is that why you're leaving me?"

Rosa didn't answer, *couldn't* answer with the way sobs rattled their malnourished frame and tears blurred their vision.

Their mother shoved them away and stood up, pacing around them. "You're leaving me, just like she did. Just like your father did!"

"You don't mean that, stop it," they pleaded.

Their mother began to cry, and Rosa stood up shakily before inching toward her. They reached out with a hand to comfort her, but it was smacked away.

"I don't need you. You've never understood."

She left without another word, and Rosa didn't follow. They couldn't follow their mother where she chose to tread.

They weren't surprised when a week after they arrived at their college, an unfamiliar number called them, and they answered to hear an aunt's voice explaining how they'd found their mother. Lifeless in the bathroom that Rosa had used only weeks before. Rosa imagined the color of the crimson bathwater and wondered if her mother bled the same way they did.

They didn't cry after they hung up. Their mouth opened and closed, and their body arched as if it were weeping, but no sound tumbled out. Rosa felt the grief. They felt it bend and warp their bones, their body crumpling to the floor of their dorm.

When they were asked years later by a lover brushing her lips against their cheek, *Why don't you talk about your family?*, Rosa would remember the shadows the avocado tree in their backyard cast over Ceniza's unmoving body, watching their mother's back drift farther and farther away as she walked toward ruin.

JIM'S WORLD

Ken MacGregor

I have no idea what year it is. Calendar on the wall is from 2019. I keep it on September because I like the picture. It's a three-toed sloth with sunglasses and a beer. The smile makes it look drunk. Also, September doesn't have any holidays that are important to me, or my birthday, so it's less ... disturbing than some other months.

For a moment, I try to figure out what month it might *actually* be. What day. What year. It's an exercise I engage in somewhat regularly despite its utter futility.

"It's Blursday, naturally," I remind myself. "Every day is Blursday, Jim!"

Way back, when there were still seven days in the week, and they marched along in logical progression, everything was peachy keen and hunky dory. I had a cushy job and a nice house, and, frankly, more money than I was ever going to need. I was still a young man with plenty of time to settle down and start a family some future day. Living the dream.

Then things got really tense in the Middle East and everyone was certain we were on the verge of World War 3. I cashed in my stock portfolio and 401K and built an underground shelter in my backyard. I stocked it with enough food and multivitamins to last a century, a water recycling and purification system, and UV lights to simulate the sun's beneficial rays. Honestly, I never thought I was going to need it.

World War 3 never got the chance to get off the ground. Probably, if it had, there would have been fewer casualties. That's an alarming thought, huh? Three years and change after I had the shelter built, the first cases of the virus showed up in the news. The outbreak started in Norway, which seemed so absurd. Nothing horrible had come out of Norway since the Vikings.

It spread insanely fast, transmitted by contact and airborne, it would live on surfaces for up to a week. Pretty soon, it was all over Europe. People who were pre-symptomatic flew to other countries and spread it there. It

became a global pandemic in no time. When I heard it was in the U.S., I started working from home and avoiding people. Pretty soon, as I watched the news, it became clear that no one was going to be safe from this thing. Major cities, especially those with international airports, were quickly overcome with infection. Hospitals couldn't keep up. Supplies ran out. There were no beds. Medical personnel succumbed to it and joined the thousands of others dying. By the time governments realized that we had to avoid any human contact to stop the spread, it was already too late.

My family, my neighbors, coworkers, and pretty much everyone was already sick, taking care of someone sick (which meant their turn was coming soon) or was already dead.

I sent a mass email to everyone on my contact list: "I'm sorry. I'm terrified. Good luck. I love you. Goodbye."

I locked myself in the shelter and monitored the news. It grew much worse far too quickly.

Email responses came back. Most were positive: *take care; hope you're okay; I'm not feeling so great, to be honest; I'm scared too*. They stopped after a couple weeks. A month later, the news channels stopped broadcasting. Then the internet went dark. As far as I knew, I was the only one left.

I get up every 'morning,' exercise, bathe in recycled water, eat, and check to see if the internet is back up. It never is. I've read all seventeen books I brought in here four times each and am on the fifth time through of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. I have completely lost track of time.

"Right. That's why every day is Blursday, folks!" I shout it game-show-host style, and my voice echoes off the walls, sounding suspiciously like madness. Doesn't matter much though. If I'm the last person on Earth, who's gonna judge me for being nuts? Me, I guess. I can be my own therapist. It's fine. I take my insurance. Copay is a can of mixed vegetables.

"Hey, Doc."

"How you feeling today, Jim?"

"Honestly, Doc, pretty lonely."

"That can be tough, Jim. Do you think maybe you should go out more, see people?"

I laugh so hard it hurts my face. *Go out. See people*. My shrink cracks me up.

"Shit, Doc." I draw a shaky breath and slowly release it. "I sure would like that. I'd very much like to see some people. I honestly can't remember the last time I went out."

"Maybe you should, Jim."

"Go *outside*, Doc?" I shake my head. "I don't know, man. I don't know if

it's safe out there. I don't know if there's even a *world* out there anymore."

"Now, Jim. Let's not overreact. If the world ceased to exist, so would your shelter, right? Since that's still here, the world outside *must* be as well. It's only logical."

I shake my head. "I don't like this kind of talk, Doc. Don't give me false hope."

"But, Jim ..." My counselor voice is kind, reasonable. "What if it's not false? What if there really is a world out there? Other people? Someone to talk to. Someone real?"

"You're real enough for me, Doc."

He hangs his head sadly. "No, Jim. I'm not."

Kind of hard to argue that point, since I am, in fact, talking to myself. "Okay, Doc. What the hell, right? Might as well open the door. What's the worst that could happen?"

My imagination provides plenty of answers to that question: nuclear devastation with lethal radiation levels; large, carnivorous animals running unchecked, hungry for fresh meat; crazed demi-humans who want to sacrifice me to their Blood God. Naturally, I don't share any of this with my therapist. He'd think I'd really lost it.

"Of course, on the flip side, what if I open the door to discover that everything's fine? What if I've been hiding in here for—however many years it's been—for nothing? Man, would I look like an idiot then!"

The Doc doesn't respond. This is a technique therapists use: stay silent and let the patient work things out for themselves. Fine. I can do that.

"So ... I guess what it comes down to is: the only way I'm going to find out, the only way I'm ever gonna know the truth, is to open that door."

Nothing. No response.

"Doc, I'm scared." I'm whispering, barely more than a breath.

"I know."

"But I have to do it, anyway, don't I?"

"Yes, Jim. You do."

Bracing myself for the worst, while simultaneously hoping for the best, I go through the complex procedure to unseal the door. Finally, all the safeguards are disabled, and all that's left is to turn the handle and pull.

With one backward glance at the drunk sloth, I do it.

I open the door.

UNFOLDING

Elisa Subin

Don't expect a paper crane
Floating along the river
For your wishes have been eaten
By a ravenous snake

Nor a paper plane
Soaring beyond the clouds
For your dreams have been lost
To the sharpest eye

And if you live in an origami house
Sitting atop the hill
Don't expect to stay dry
For the blood waters rise

Bend and fold and
Fold and bend and
Yet there is nothing
In the end

Rain drops come
And tears we cry
Then we all
Fold up and die

THE NAMES OF BIRDS.

Jared Lynch

Outside the window bars, the night is purple like a bruise. The trees hold this inorganic stillness between their branches, like someone cupping her hands around a firefly so tight you can't see the light. I long to hear something natural break the silence, like those frogs from the pond behind your mother's house, where we sat and watched the field blink on and off. I'd settle for a single cicada, although I'm not even sure that it's a cicada year. Instead, the silence is broken by the audible *clunk* as someone throws the switch for the floodlights, just outside and above my window. They slowly warm up, illuminating the lawn. Nothing moves beyond the fence. The trees cling to their stillness for another breath. Then Cybil fires off a few rounds from the north watchtower, short cracks from her .22.

The evening has begun.

I'm on day shift, so I'm in my bunk, trying to read, trying not to think about bullets piercing soft skulls. The bullet from a .22 is small, smaller than my fingernail. When it enters the skull, it won't necessarily exit. At least that's what I saw on some crime show when I was a kid. It's more likely to ricochet around in a spiderweb pattern, eradicating all of the old neural trails, mangling everything together, shredding memories to ribbons, which expedites a process that our brains already do. When we think of a memory we're actually recalling the last time that we thought about it. Every time that we recall a memory it damages the original information.

I'm thinking about you again. Rather, I'm recalling the memories I've collected of you. They're the only memories of you—of us—that exist anymore, and I don't know if I want them. They're too distracting, and that's dangerous in this world. Maybe if I think about them enough I can damage them so completely that there is nothing left of you in my head. Corroding my thoughts is the closest I can come to changing the past, the only way to make it malleable.

Part of me still wants to believe that we're only separated by distance. You're holed up in the top of a warehouse, or in an apartment above a

small-town grocery store, reading by the light of a candle stub. The door is locked. You have ballpoint pens and a notebook stashed away in a pocket of the bugout bag you made after falling down that rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, and you thought the apocalypse was right around the corner. You were right, but you were a few years too early. Nothing happened in the way that you imagined.

Years and years you carried that bag around, from apartment to apartment, slowly picking it apart. You took the rice out because you were out of rice and didn't want to walk down to the grocery store. You took all the clothes out when you didn't have enough quarters for laundry. The notebook got delegated to school. When you needed the bag, you didn't have it anymore. You weren't ready, but no one was ready. We found ourselves miles away, walking through the woods after abandoning the car. The highways and interstates were choked and overrun.

We didn't know where to go, but we had each other. Then I found myself alone. I know you didn't want to leave, but you were gone just the same. I collected miles that we were supposed to travel together. I collected the names of towns, the ways to survive, the ways to compartmentalize everyday horror. I lived where I could. The foreman's office in a warehouse. An apartment above a small grocery store. I brought you with me to those places. I left you behind in those places. By the time that I found this community, I thought I had left enough of you behind to let go of the past, to start over again.

But I saw you on the fence that day, right before Marcel picked you out from the other watchtower. You were wearing the plaid button down that you bought on our first trip together. We'd gone up north. It was colder than you were expecting, and you didn't pack properly, even though I told you it was going to be cold. You bought the shirt at a farm supply store. After that, it became something like a symbol for us. A shorthand for the memory. I shed that thought somewhere in the miles, but that goddamned shirt brought it back, a revenant covered in dark blood stains. That tear in your sleeve. Your jeans were urine soaked, and there was mud and shit caked on them. Your boots were worn through from walking on autopilot across broken glass and nails and whatever gutter objects encountered on the travels. I hoped you were shrouded in a cloud, like an obfuscating nebula.

When the bullet entered your brain, it scrambled everything into an un-navigable heap of grey stuff. Advertisements. Movies. Piano scales. Books. Vegan restaurants. Photographs. The monotony of brushing your teeth, which were gore stained and rotting. That critical analysis you wrote about the duality of nihilism and hope in Cormac McCarthy's canon.

Arguments. Making love. Talking late into the night about the patterns we saw behind the everydayness of our existence.

I'm thinking about you again, rereading your copy of *The Road*. There's an underlined passage:

He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds.

All that I have to fill your silence are birds that I can't name. All of the things I've collected, and I can't name a single one.

After an hour, they turn off the floodlights. They already drew in most of the moths. Cybil stays up in the watchtower with a pair of night vision goggles. I count her shots.

Eventually, there will be nothing left to count.

LAST STONE ON THE LEFT

David H. West

Nineteenth and early twentieth century fashion depended on beautiful feathers, and the stunning plumage of the Carolina Parakeet was highly prized. As a result, these social birds were widely hunted, and their loyal nature was used against them. When one was shot, the pandemonium would descend to comfort and protect its fallen member, allowing its pursuers to pick off the entire flock in a hail of bullets.

The last time this exquisite creature was seen in the wild was in 1910, and the last one in captivity passed in 1918. Rumors floated around in the 1930s, until the bird was officially declared extinct in 1939.

Photograph taken at the Bronx Zoo, New York City, October, 2017



EVERYTHING LEFT IN THE BAG

Keltie Zubko

Arm stuck almost to her armpit, deep in the store's garbage can, she reached, trying to find where the bag was caught and then pull it loose. Must be a design quirk that they often caught like that, and this was the second one today. She was glad she wore protective gloves, even if they were too big for her hands and slipped just enough to make her grip uncertain. If only they'd cushion against the textures of whatever was down there: squishy, still warm or sometimes unexpectedly cold and sharp. When she pressed her way along the seam between the trash can and the bag, she dreaded that she'd tear the plastic and let loose the contents into the can so she'd have to empty it piece by slimy piece.

She glanced up at the watching street people, come to shelter in the store from the capricious El Niño rains, planting themselves in seats at tables meant for paying customers of the Safeway deli and adjoining Starbucks. They knew which to take, camping at the edges, not where UCSC students came to study, staff ate their quick lunches or tourists sipped lattes while using the free Wi-fi. Unlike the students or tourists, they usually had nothing to do except scrutinize the store staff for signs they'd stayed too long.

While some drank only water, or drinks banked for them by kind strangers, others slept. They had a time table, just like she did for her job, and an instinct for just how long was long enough. She had to clock in, getting there on time and staying the full shift, dictated by the demands of her duties with defined hours, breaks, and tasks that had to fit the time allotted. Of course, at her age, she'd rather be home by her television on a day like this, with warm tea, her feet up, instead of wearing special shoes to carry her through another day of ferrying garbage, cleaning the cans and mopping up the slug trail the seeping bags sometimes left on the floors.

Just beyond the automatic doors that led out into the cold Santa Cruz streets of winter, a group of drenched transient men with bikes hay-wired to laden carts congregated in the shelter of the store's overhanging roof.

Restless and primed by drugs or alcohol, the unusual damp and chill, having nowhere else to go, or gnawing hunger amid the exhaust fumes from the store's rotisserie ovens, they jostled and yelled at each other.

This part of the store was her least favorite and even worse than the public washrooms in her endless circuit of emptying the garbage and trundling it away to the dumpster. Just like they did, she thought, going from trash can to trash can. Survival, but in a different way.

She caught the sly smirks sliding out of blandness and back again. She had never summoned Security to escort any of them outside. In this stormy weather, all staff were on edge and bent the rules, lengthening their stay. She wished her supervisor would cut her the same slack. Being a cleaner, and almost in her seventies was hard, too, spending her days pushing the cart, hauling the bags out, the heavy garbage stretching into folds and corners of the industrial sized clear bags. She wished they weren't see-through, but it wasn't up to her, and she'd never complain, she thought, her hand still trying to free the bag without breaking it.

She always started her shift with a spotless, ironed white uniform, almost as white as her short fluffy hair. Only the sushi chefs, presiding behind their pristine counters, were cleaner. The homeless, on the other hand, underneath the dirt of the day, wore a certain dark patina accumulated from living outside, camping in alcoves of the streets or on the fringes of the beaches, the industrial areas, in the hidden corners of parks and makeshift shelters. She shivered as the door glided open again and a draft from outside swooped over them, the food staff, the oblivious paying customers and the watchful squatters, all. No, she wouldn't complain about her job that gave her a small room in the shared house with other aging boomers, each one of them financially gutted by the last crash. At least she had a roof, and heat, and water, and some privacy.

At last the bag came free, so she tied it off, lifted it up and into the cart, heading on to the next. She pushed her load past an old, but not quite derelict woman she recognized from behind. The woman always sat at the end of the eating area, apart, head down and busy sorting through her own bags, just a few laid out on the table, the others layered and nestled in her own little shopping cart that she pulled along behind when she left.

She hadn't noticed this one's face before, but knew her from the hair: long, dark grey, the style still caught in another era, with beads and a myriad of thin braids. A grubby Tilley hat, frayed at the edges, rested on the table for now, like she was a tourist in the rain forests of South America, instead of California, in winter. Spread out before her was a collection of small things, hidden in plastic bags that were opaque from repeated handling.

Better work faster, she thought, approaching the next can, stacked

with oozing food containers, ready to topple. She dismantled the pile like it was a puzzle, then began once more to extricate the bag from the can. Meanwhile, the elderly hippie woman poked through whatever she'd laid out on the table, her scraggly hair hanging down around her shoulders to the widow's hump of her back, masked in draping clothes. Her plastic rain poncho was thrown back, and still dripping rain water in a semicircle on the floor around her. Someone would have to mop that up when she left.

This bag stuck, too. The weather made her arthritis shoot pain into her thumb joint, weakening her grip. The gloves didn't help. She tugged the bag up, but it was overfull and her arms weren't long enough to lift it completely out at one go. She tried again. The combination of smells wafted up at her, a mixture of warm sushi, squished Chinese food, the deli's signature salad dressing's parmesan-like baby vomit, the burnt coffee. Foul and sour, but perhaps just the flavoring of her imagination after finding too many surprises. Thankfully there were no sodden diapers, bloody hand wipes or rotten sandwiches.

She worked slowly, step by step, always wiping down the lid. Some stores didn't do that, but she would have, even if it wasn't in her job description.

Every once in a while, the woman looked up and scanned her. It was hard to tell just how old that one was.

The storm battered the big windows as it had battered the entire city and coastline, so that every place in Santa Cruz, she knew, would have its share of homeless sheltering where they could. One aging boomer woman talked to another, both drinking fragrant Chai. There weren't many tourists today, but a lot of students, studying, flipping through Facebook, Skyping home or noisily collaborating. She'd been one of the first generation of students in the early days of the university.

Lines of poetry she'd once taught floated up from memory and habit, as they often did while she worked. The kids today grabbed proverbs and called them memes. How about this one, she thought: "Where all stink, one is not smelt." She was lucky to have this job and wouldn't complain about any aspect of it, at her age and in her circumstances. She was lucky to have it, even if the work was too heavy and her back ached by mid-afternoon. It could be worse. She glanced at the woman sorting her own garbage at the table by the door.

The hippie woman reminded her of someone else who had also worn too much eye makeup. Imagine doing that in this rain, so that it smudged and etched black tracks down her wrinkled cheeks.

Cleaning the floor around the can, wiping down the lid, her mind retrieved a memory from decades ago, when she was young. Was it the

same person? Aging made it so hard to tell. She recalled that one's impatience: *Why can't you loosen up? Try some makeup. Try some sexy clothes. Try some beer. Try some weed.* Only they'd called it dope back then, and the next thing was acid.

Now the woman rose and started clearing the table, gathering her tattered indecipherable belongings, stacking them in the little wheeled shopping carrier before she covered it and herself to head back out into the rain. Looked like her. They'd not met face to face since that evening at the beach, when they were students together. And the last sight she'd had of her friend was years ago, the flamboyant hippie girl with a mass of long dark hair, mesmerizing hair, and she pulling him into the bushes, into the dusk that waited beyond the purview of the bonfire. That girl, the one who always got what she wanted, had never looked back to where she sat, watching, on a log amid the crowd of students fading into the shadows, in couples. Yes, it was her.

Curvaceous then, but now under the tent-like poncho that rustled and still shed water, she looked dumpy. Well, she herself had shriveled. And who knew what the professor was like, if he was even alive. A vision of that night, when the other had danced around the fire in the sunset, to music, sitar music and drums, of course. She shivered again. Yes, the night the other shredded the paper into a thousand pieces, and threw it up into the air to rain down on them all, both glad their classes were done. She remembered the other vowing to spend the summer there on the beach, getting high in the sun with whoever else showed up.

That their prof had appeared that night was a bonus, and in her stoned celebration her friend had ripped up the work they'd struggled over and threw the pieces into the sky to rain on their heads, some dropping into the fire, immolated. It was her work, really, she thought, remembering how it fell, some pieces alighting upon bewildered strangers and some upon the intoxicated professor's head. He didn't see her. He saw only her friend, dancing. The billowy, transparent peasant dress let the firelight shine through to outline her body. Of course, that's all he'd seen, and didn't care about their work like she did. She never could decide which was worse: the destruction of the paper or the captivity of the man.

Maybe it was the fact that her friend had the bravery to do it and carry off the prize, while she sat bound in silent yearning that she never put out into the world. She never tried edging over to him, across the table. Her friend, with that wild long hair and colorful draped clothing, exploding with energy, always grabbed what she wanted. She had the daring to taunt him, shred the paper, catch his attention, throw it high into the sky to fall down on their heads like confetti. Then she pulled him off the main beach, into the

obscure reaches of place and time, her throaty voice like Janis Joplin's "come on, come on, come on and take it, take another little piece of my heart now baby." She could never bear that song that blared on the radio as the sun stopped shining on the party and the bonfire crackled and twisted their features and positions as much as the drugs distorted perception, and she sat alone amid the pieces of her destroyed paper, one sacrifice seated amid another.

She didn't wait around for them to emerge in the dawn, reversing the out-fanning movement into the shelter of the scrubby, wind-beaten trees, to come back, blinking in the revealing light at the burned-out fire, in couples, or threesomes or more. Unlike her, alone, clear-eyed, sober and relentless, blaming herself for not seizing the moment.

She left the paper sodden and disintegrating on the beach and never went back. She did eventually return to Santa Cruz, for these, her old years, to work out her destroyed retirement at Safeway as a cleaner, a garbage collector, really.

She never returned to that beach.

This bag was stuck, too, and she ripped it loose, without caution, but mercifully, not tearing it. She looked again at the homeless woman, shuffling toward her as the sticky bag rested in her hands. The woman's pull-along shopping cart followed her, stuffed with her own variety of bags, tented by a clear blue plastic sheet to protect it from the rain that had abated but would likely beat down on her several times before she reached her home, wherever that might be. She saw the woman pause, looking at her, till she stopped and their eyes met.



She was tied to that beach. So much for grabbing the moment and propelling forward into life. And that smell accompanied her wherever she went these days. She couldn't tell if it was part of her, or embedded in her skin, her nose, or just her memory.

It wasn't the beach of their younger days anymore, of beach fires, beer, the incense and music, wind-stunted trees, abandoned pieces of clothing, the wafting, overhanging weed smoke, with bursts of sweat and heat and lust and living for the moment.

Nowadays there were needles, and everything was clammy from sleeping outside and trying to stay warm, imbued with that stale, briny smell of layer upon layer of dried sweat, dirt, and sometimes urine, too. And there was always the kelp, the dead and decaying things from the deep cold ocean that threw up on the beach with the tide, crawling ever closer, it

seemed, to where she now camped.

She smelled the beach wherever she hid. Her memories of when she went there as a student, or of all the intervening years, couldn't expunge it. She laid her head down on the sand, in the damp, her long braids thinning and stringy compared to the lush hair of her youth. Where was that grand and perfect big life? Broken now into moments, moments of survival, moments of relief, heat and respite. When she was young, she would live for the day, the weekend, the summer, the tanned surfers and the mysterious musicians. She thought she was grabbing the moment then, yes, living in the moment. Now was the moment, a moment in the Safeway, out of the rain. Try grabbing the moment with arthritis, the chill of living rough, that made her hands thickened, joints aching, bones that stuck or wouldn't move past each other. No longer hers, the nimble fingers that could do what the prof had wanted.

Now, she grabbed that moment to stay in the sheltering store without buying anything. A moment pretending to be a customer, when everyone knew she wasn't. A last calculated moment to use the warm washroom, before her long trek back. A moment to avoid looking at her own face in the mirror of that public washroom. A moment when the cleaner came in and discovered her, washing in the sink. A moment, calling for *all Security to the front of the store*, and the moment of her escape.

What was she doing, that stupid cleaner, wearing white if all she did was empty trash cans throughout the store, all day long? Her arm plunged into the mess before she tied the bag and heaved it up and out. The contents could dump themselves onto her, or the freshly mopped tiles in front of the sushi counter. She almost hoped it would happen. That woman looked so familiar, a victim if ever she saw one, something about her eyes. She remembered those eyes.

The scene at the beach came back to her, rushing like the flash flood of waters running down the mountains after the storms: all their yearnings and her acting for the moment to get what they both wanted. They had been friends and classmates, but so different. Who could blame her, taking it for granted her friend realized all was fair. She'd thought her friend knew you've got to grab what you can, when you can. It wasn't her fault that his eyes settled on her that night around the fire. Ripping up the paper was just a final provocative embellishment. Meaningless, but it worked.

And now they were back on that beach, that evening in summer, other students around them, the prof like a guru in those days. The casual couples melted away from the beach fire and into the sparse cover and desert plants, crawling along the rockery, to the outskirts of the beach. They had to go further afield to get driftwood for the fire. A pretext to go in pairs, and

sometimes they never came back till the dawn spread its gentle luminescent fingers on the cold grey beach and they'd rise from where they'd spent the night, making impressions with their bodies in the sand.

She remembered how she'd emerged with him, stiff, cold, hungover or drug-starving, sex-sated, and her friend, gone. The irony was that she now lived there, on the edge of that same beach.

She seldom thought about that night anymore. She was too busy just getting through the moments of each day. There was no attraction settling with any man into the sand, now, getting it in her hair and wrinkled clothes and flesh.

She'd made that grand gesture of throwing her life up in the air to let it land in pieces on the unforgiving beach, never able to put it back together again. Could she tell that to the woman staring across the garbage can from her as she trundled her own cart of plastic bags toward the door where the cold rain waited for her just beyond? What was it, carelessness or chance or choice? The answer certainly wouldn't put a roof over her head. She shrugged.

It had poured for days now, and they needed the rain. No one wanted the wildfires, but all she had to wear were long flowing things as if it were still summer at the beach. They got heavy and wet and crusted with sand.

Her old friend, now a cleaner of all things, (*why not a brilliant and famous writer?*) did not have to look at her like that. She knew. She knew what she'd done to be here and now, in this particular moment, scrambling with her bags and tarps, from place to warm place during the day to retreat, usually, to that same beach where she'd grasped him all right, seizing the moment.

Where the hell was he now? She had no idea, nor any desire to know. She watched the cleaner struggling with one then another trash can and bag, waited for her to notice, until finally, the eyes. Still the same: blinking, pallid, uncertain.

Her eyes were never particularly striking. How she'd tried to get her to use more makeup then, to make them look bigger. They looked very big now, as she stood at the garbage can.

El Niño brought the rains they needed to stave off the drought and the fires. Others she knew did not care about the fire threat. "So what if their houses burn? Do you have a roof to burn over your head?" She heard these bitter words and couldn't agree, for karma was listening and watching her. Karma was waiting for one more false move, she knew. She had a long account with karma, and didn't dare add anything more to it.

Maybe that's why she froze, didn't know what to say or do when their eyes met. The other woman had those long protective gloves on and she

was so tiny, tugging the oversized bag, too long for her.

Her lank grey hair hung around her head, tiny braids festooned with little clattering beads like knots to give it body, no longer a dark, smooth curtain to flirt from, and retreat behind. The braids swung as she trembled, seeing recognition fire up in the other woman's eyes. She didn't know what to do, but kept shuffling toward the other, hauling her entire world behind her, to the door beyond, where for a change, the sunshine glimmered.

She couldn't resist, and looked deep into the other's eyes.

They both saw it, saw the paper flying above the fire, and him, making his choice, under the influence, of course, but not so much of drugs or booze, but one small lie. Just a small one, but she felt karma's icy hand on the back of her neck, remembering now.

Karma? No. It was the strands of hair, bound up in tiny braids with little beads in them, as if she were still in her twenties not her sixties.



Their eyes caught on each other, and with that, the whole universe stopped. El Niño took a breath or maybe the heavy drops of water simply waited, suspended and glittering in the clarity of sunshine. Outside, the homeless old men and the aggressive young men hesitated between screams and punches. The baristas stood, hands outstretched for payment, hands on the steamer, cloth poised to wipe, while even the steam and froth held its shape, paused in clouds or shadows, waiting.

The sushi chef in her spotless whites held her pose, knife sharp and gleaming, a sliver away from its slicing.

The pixels on the students' tablets froze. Voices smoothed to wordless sounds, like *Ommmmm* deeper and deeper and over again.

The glimmer of sunlight slid across the floor, reached out to them both.

Then the trash shifted, and as something melted into the extended bag and let loose its wafting poisonous breath, the smell crept upward to their noses; a trickle of something fell. *Plop*. They both gasped to hold their breath not to smell it. The cleaner looked down, recouped her grip on the trash bag.

The hippie woman dropped the hold on her own cart, lurched forward to catch the falling bag before it hit the floor to split and spew its contents. She caught it.

"There," she said, shoving it at the cleaner and retreating to grab the handle of her own cart as karma placed his gentle hand on her shoulder, pressing her onward, dragging her bags along with her, away and out into the chilly California afternoon. Karma pressed her onward, saying the account was cleared.

ONE FLESH

Jon P. Shank

As soon as I come, my stomach starts hurting.

The room gone cold, the film of sweat on my body feels like a chrysalis. Everly tucks herself under my arm, doing her best to make this an intimate moment. Her skin radiates heat, though it doesn't warm me at all. We lie on top of the made bed, naked, Everly traces the white snake tattooed on my chest with a long fingernail painted a glittering dark blue. She told me the shade was called Broken Souls.

Because the blackout blinds aren't quite shut the whole way, a sharp white light from the parking lot spills onto the bed. The bedside lamps are out; bile-yellow light spills in from the open bathroom door, mixing with the darkness to give the room a pale green tint. The vent fan wheezes asthmatically. I realize I've been holding my breath.

"I wish we could stay here all night," Everly sighs into my chest, raising goosebumps like a necromancer. "I want to wake up with you, kiss you with my morning breath kisses."

Cramps seize my abdomen; I imagine a nail-studded corset cinched tight.

Everly twines her legs with mine, and her hot slickness on my thigh makes me shiver. I've grown soft and small and limp, a dead baby bird in a tangled nest.

She kisses my right nipple, grazing it with her teeth and laughing into my chest hair.

I can barely stomach the thought of spending another minute in this room, let alone staying until morning. I just want to slink away into the night, into the darkness. A part of me feels like I'll never leave this motel room. This room feels like forever.

"We should get back," I say. She's trying to revive me, but the passion that had overtaken me just thirty minutes before has completely left my body, exorcised with my guilt-ridden orgasm. "Milo will be waiting."

She weaves her fingers through my pubic hair, twirling brittle strands around her small fingers.

"Let him wait," she says, her voice hard.

I thumb my wedding ring. Nora and I chose the inscription together almost four years ago now; *one flesh*. I said I'd call before going to bed, but she told me to just enjoy the evening and tell her all about it tomorrow. I didn't want to come to the reunion, but she insisted. Said it was important to stay connected to the past. To whom I used to be.

Thinking her name makes me more nauseous.

To distract myself I stare hard at the picture on the wall across from the bed. It hangs right in my line of vision. I looked at it when we first came in, before Everly surprised me by emerging naked from the bathroom. At that moment, my better angels flew away, leaving me to my devils.

Now I can only see the outline of the frame. It's one of those Monet knockoffs you find in almost every motel room, as ubiquitous as the Gideon Bible. A blur of cornflower blue, moss greens, and clouds the pink of blood-soaked gauze. It's like looking through a rain-streaked window while wearing someone else's glasses. In the lower left-hand corner, a smudge of lacy white and burnt carmine that could be a woman. She's alone. Alive or dead is anyone's guess.

"Does that painting remind you of anything?" I ask.

Everly rolls onto her back and props herself on her elbows.

"Can't see it," she says. She crawls over me for the bedside lamp. One of her breasts presses into my face. I close my eyes. Her nipple prods my eyelid. Something clicks and clicks again, then she rolls away.

"Must be burnt out," Everly says. "What should it remind me of?"

I open my eyes. Though still just as dim as it had been a moment ago, I think I can see the painting better. The splotch looks more like a woman now. More clearly a woman, I mean.

"I don't know," I say, not sure why I even asked. "Something. Nothing, I guess."

Everly swings a leg over my waist and pulls herself on top of me, sitting up. She moves her hips slowly, smiling down on me.

"Does this bring back any memories?" Her voice slick and ravening.

She closes her eyes. I realize that I have no idea what color they are. I don't think I ever have. Her rocking runs like a current through her entire body, which is thick and soft and rounded. My stomach makes the sound somewhere between boiling water and a whistling teapot. Closing my eyes makes my stomach worse, like being drunk and feeling the rotation of the earth in the pit of your gut. I open them again; afraid I might be sick. Something moves behind Everly, a figure stepping back into darkness.

"Again?" she asks. She lifts my left hand and sucks on my ring finger. She's so hungry. I don't think she came.

Where I know the picture is, the darkness feels darker, more solid. Like someone or something is standing there, in front of the picture. I want to get up, to go look, but Everly anchors me to the bed.

"Jace," Everly says. I get the sense she's been saying my name, trying to get my attention for a little bit now.

"Yeah."

"I asked you what you're looking at."

"Nothing." Then, "Do you remember Preacher?"

As I'm asking, I don't know why.

"The bible thumper that used to rant and rave on campus?"

"Yeah, her. On the far side of the river. Did you ever see her preach?"

"Once or twice, I guess. Always talked about brimstone and Hellfire. The gnashing of teeth." Everly bares her teeth and moves her jaw side to side.

"I saw her one night," I go on. It's a memory I'm remembering as I tell it. "That night after you and I—I saw her that night. Preacher, I mean. She was wading in the water, up to her stomach, naked, despite how cold it was."

I remember the cold. After a week or so of unseasonably high temperatures I had gone out without a jacket, but that night, winter came back and it dropped below freezing. The spring-like weather had cajoled flowers into bloom, and I saw common boneset, bloodroot, and crocuses in the field and along the riverbank lit up by a full moon and stars that looked like salt scattered on a black tablecloth. I could smell frost in the air and knew those flowers would be dead by morning.

"The water around her seemed alive, or like it was boiling. I stopped about ten or twenty yards away and just watched."

"What was she doing?"

"Just standing there." In my mind I can see the moonlight glittering like ice crystals on her breasts "She was beautiful."

"Preacher? Beautiful?" I get Everly's skepticism. Preacher lived in the dark wood across the river and always wore the same clothes. She looked gritty, like a Depression era tramp. But that night, she radiated, the light of the moon dousing her.

"Beautiful," I say. "And I was transfixed, you know, but I felt too like I was invading her privacy. Not just because she was naked. It went beyond that. Like when you catch your father crying. But still, I couldn't move, couldn't look away."

"What happened?"

"She dunked herself into the roiling water. I remember counting. To thirty. To sixty. To a hundred. I thought about running back to my dorm room

and forgetting what I'd seen. Didn't think about helping her." Something about that water had terrified me. "But I kept counting. At around two hundred, she surfaced, glistening. She started to open her mouth and water poured out. I thought she might start singing a hymn or preaching a sermon. But her mouth just kept opening and water just kept gushing. I moved closer. Her mouth opened wider and wider. Too wide."

Everly leans forward, bending at the waist the way women can, and starts mapping the contours of the coiled snake tattoo with her tongue. It's too wet.

"Then she lifted up her left hand and she reached it into her mouth, deep. It disappeared up to her elbow. She rooted around inside herself."

"Impressive trick," Everly's laugh makes my body go tight and my stomach complains again. She pats my paunch and laughs again. I feel like I might shit.

"Maybe," I say. "Just the light or the angle. But she starts bringing out her arm nice and slow. I swear I saw her throat bulge, her neck get thick. As she brought her hand out, the moonlight glinted off something silver. She was obviously in pain, but she kept pulling that thing out of her mouth."

"What was it? A sword? A long string of scarves?"

"No. I don't know exactly," I pause. "An eel, maybe. A snake?"

This stops Everly's attempts to restart things for a moment and she sits up straight. "How drunk were you?"

"A little," I admit. I stop talking, stop telling. Everly grinds her hips against me again. Her breasts sway in front of her. She squeezes her thighs.

But I don't stop remembering. And I know what I saw. When whatever it was had come about halfway out, I could see how the light shivered across its slick body. It had onyx black eyes and an elongated snout. It opened and closed its jaws, snapping at the air with sharp teeth. It hung there, half out of her mouth, and writhed and snapped. That's when she saw me. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. Her stare anchored me where I stood. She grabbed the eel or whatever it was with two hands and wrenched it out the rest of the way. Three feet in length, at least.

She held it there for a moment, looking right at me, blood dripping from her gaping lips. Then she closed her mouth, smiled, and dropped the thing into the still churning water. Only then did I understand that the water was full of those things, thrashing all around her.

After, Preacher just turned around and walked out of the river and into the woods. She never even glanced back. The water went calm and still, as if nothing had ever disturbed its surface.

"This doesn't seem to be working," Everly pushes herself back up. "You done?"

“Huh?”

“No seconds?”

“Oh, no. Sorry.”

“Well, I guess I should shower.” Everly slides down my body, kissing the tip of my penis. “Want to join me?”

I shake my head. She scowls and walks to the bathroom, slamming the door. A moment later I hear the sound of the water, like conspiratorial whispers. Despite the weak corona of light from the door, the room sinks into darkness. Somehow, though I still can't see the painting, I know that the woman in it is no longer alone.

Clouds of steam bleed from under the bathroom door, but by the time they reach me, they have gone cold. I play with my ring, spinning it around and around. Without meaning to, I think of Nora. I picture her as the woman in the painting; picture her making love to a silvery eel. A bloody smudge, a lustrous flash. There's a burning just under my sternum. I can't see how she won't smell this room on me when I get home in two days. I can only hope to swallow what I've done down so deep it will never come up again.

I want nothing more than to get out, but I feel too sleepy and heavy. So when something falls to the floor with a sound of rotten fruit landing on a hard surface, I don't even stir. I hold my breath and listen. Movement across the stained carpet sounds like one long inhalation of breath. Closer. When will it breathe out?

“Nora,” I call, though I mean to say Everly and really I'm not sure I say anything at all. I roll over on my side and try the bedside lamp, but it still won't turn on.

“Preacher,” I say, though I mean Nora.

The moving thing on the carpet goes quiet. I sit up and strain to see, to hear into the darkness. Nothing. I think I call out to Everly again, but I'm not sure. The bed creaks with its bulk.

I lie back, close my eyes, open my mouth, and wait.

“We all laugh when we’re told not to push ourselves, to follow the rules, to stay cautious and stay safe.

All that fear is funny until someone slips up.”

– Nicola Kapron
“The Bodies We Should Forget”

BATHTUB MARY

Trisha J. Wooldridge

They find murder victims in bathtubs.
Usually women.
Blood stains drain
not chocolate syrup
but blood, real blood
and all the other fluids bodies make—
but blood from women is
the most disturbing.
Don't speak of bleeding women.
Women's blood is taboo.

If the Virgin Mary had been approached
today
in the United States,
at fifteen,
they'd say God
statutorily raped her
even though she gave consent.
But it'd be all right for Joseph to marry her
in a number of states.

Outside of Good Catholic Homes ®,
she lives inside
bathtubs
stood on end,
a mimicry of *The Birth of Venus*
but not Pagan—
certainly not Pagan!
In the poorer neighborhoods, rust stains

like blood
where perfect porcelain meets
fertile, unvirgin earth.

She greets
 Avon ladies,
 Jehovah's witnesses,
 survey-takers,
 snake oil sellers

with the same
placid,
nonjudgmental
smile.

Like a whore,
like a mother,
welcoming all
to kneel and pay
or pray.

Elements fade her clothes
until she is naked plaster;
 vandals and rebellious children
will paint her slutty bright;
and time will spiderweb cracks
 over all her body
 with no care to her
Immaculate Conception.

Like a dead hooker
 in a motel bathtub,
 she gives her love,
 is denied her pay;
the Divine Feminine,
 is broken

into
 a million pieces,
spiraling down
 a drain of
recycled,
 rusty,
 blood
and prayers.

THE BODIES WE SHOULD FORGET

Nicola Kapron

People disappear in Antarctica. They let go of the ropes that stretch between buildings during swirling blizzards, head off in what they think is the direction of the nearest research outpost, and vanish, never to return. They slip and fall into crevices or holes in the ice and tumble down until they kiss the permafrost. They get so cold their skin burns and they strip off their coats to try and let out the heat. We all laugh when we're told not to push ourselves, to follow the rules, to stay cautious and stay safe. All that fear is funny until someone slips up. The absence of a living thing sits there, heavy, as the rest of the team huddles indoors, still wearing our cold-weather gear, wondering if the bodies will be found come spring. Most of them won't be. Antarctica never truly thaws, but snow and ice can bury a corpse deeper than any dirt. And if it gets out into the ocean—

Well, suffice to say, we'll probably never dig up those sunken bones until well after they've fossilized. If they fossilize. They probably won't.

There are countless fossils in the world, but they represent only a fraction of the beings that once roamed the earth. Strange, frilled creatures that were not quite bugs. Animals that straddled the line between mammal and reptile. Titans of the sky that no human ever saw in flight. We find them buried in rock, under the huge, grinding sheets of ice, and celebrate the expansion to our understanding of the world. Nobody seems to consider that these are bodies, too. Perhaps we shouldn't be digging them up. Some things are better left, claimed by waters too cold to freeze.

This morning, one whole face of the tundra gave way and went crashing into the sea. We found something under the ice: a huge, dark shape, almost a kilometer long, lying still and twisted like a frozen snake. At first, we thought it was a fault line or a flaw beneath the surface. Then someone got close enough to make out the faint outline of a head. Things got very busy after that.

We need ice core samples, the supervisor argues. X-rays. More scans,

more scans.

Our supervisor is not a paleontologist. His expertise lies in microorganisms that can withstand the world's most extreme environments. But it's easier to listen to him than the people who want to just start throwing explosives around. We can't set off dynamite in Antarctica. This whole continent might as well be a wildlife preserve. Excavation by way of explosives is a good way to kill animals we don't have permits for and destroy all the fossil evidence, besides. But as we chip away at the ice, we understand the temptation to just blow it all up and let god sort it out.

The thing in the ice is ancient. Millions of years dead. It should not have a face. Why does it have a face? Eyespots, either two large ones or six small ones lined up on either side of the head. The shadow of a flattened nose. A long, thin mouth. It feels like it's looking at us, little specks wrapped from head to toe in cold-weather gear, scampering over its carcass like ants or lice—destructive but impossibly small.

Stop anthropomorphizing it, the supervisor says. For all we know, it could be a fossilized tree.

It could. But somehow, we doubt that. No tree ever slithered its way into our dreams, tasting our thoughts with a long, dripping tongue. The thing in the ice may be dead, but it lives behind our eyes, a vast expanse of rippling grey flesh and a mass of seething tendrils for hair. It's too big to fit inside the base—so big we can't fully comprehend its size, even in our heads—but it presses its cheek to the ice and watches us through the windows with a leering anglerfish grin. Teeth upon teeth upon teeth. The chasm behind has no visible tongue, but we know it's tasting us. We wake up shuddering, soaked in sweat, no matter how low the thermometer drops.

Days pass. Work continues. Nobody sleeps well. Whenever we begin to nod off, we snap awake with strangled screams. Those terrible eyes are laughing at us.

Excavation is a tricky matter, but humans are good at tricky. Too good. For all that we as a species have done to shape this planet, humanity is still terribly young. Children with no predators to show them how to be careful. To remind them that there are things which are not safe to touch. As the ice gives way, we begin to pick up strange readings. A slow, steady thumping rises up through our boots. The beating of a heart that should be frozen through. In our dreams, the creature draws closer. Its teeth blot out the sun. When we wake, the sky is dark for far longer than it should be.

It's fine, says the supervisor. Nothing to worry about. We just need to get this thing out of the ice.

He has developed a twitch in the last few days. His eyes are bruised, the tiny arteries burst and leaking red into the sclera. Yesterday, he gathered

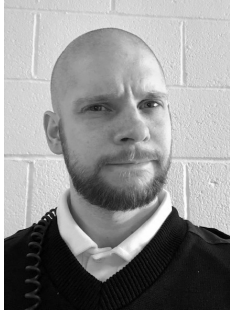
up every communications device in the building and smashed them until they broke. We all stood by and watched him do it. The loss felt good. Final.

We're getting closer to the body. The heartbeat is getting louder. In the space between blinks, the thing in the ice licks its thin lips.

Please, let us be enough for it. Let it sleep a little longer, curled up in the ruins of our research labs and dormitories. A million years is nothing to it. Let it wake when humanity is no more, stretch its countless limbs, and slide back into the ocean. Let those who come looking for our bones find nothing but broken ice and fresh powder snow.

People disappear in Antarctica. Let that be the end of it.

CONTRIBUTORS



Carl Olson (“Am I Beautiful?”) is a dark fiction writer with a strong interest in psychological horror and Japanese folklore. His work has appeared in various publications, including the *Sirens Call eZine*. He currently resides in Truro, Nova Scotia, Canada.



Annie Dunn Watson (“Inheritance”) hails originally from Salem, Massachusetts, where she spent a lot of time writing, climbing trees, and delving into esoteric studies. When her curiosities led her to Northern Vermont to pursue degrees in Transpersonal and Archetypal Psychology, her quiet love of writing took a backseat (as did climbing trees, but that is, perhaps, another story). Now, as a retired counselor and educator in her “Second Act” years, Annie’s answering the call of all those formerly-quiet loves. The door is open; they are roaring in.

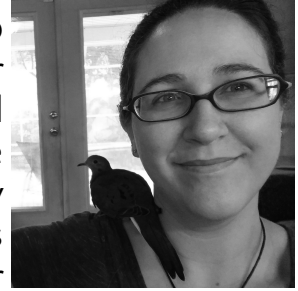


W. T. Paterson (“Salt and Pepper”) is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of New Hampshire, and is a graduate of Second City Chicago. His work has appeared in over 80 publications worldwide including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *The Delhousie Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Fresh Ink*. A semi-finalist in the *Aura Extra* short story contest, his work has also received notable accolades from Lycan Valley, North 2 South Press, and Lumberloft. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to “Get down from there!”



Stephanie Lennon (“The Days Before”) is a teacher and writer in Brooklyn, NY. She has had her work published online at *BioStories*, Ubiquitous Books, and *Blind Corner Literary Magazine*. She is currently working on a middle-grade fantasy novel about a school for fairy tale narrators. You can find her on Twitter at [@lennon_writes](https://twitter.com/lennon_writes).

A native Floridian, **C. L. Sidell** (“ribbons”) grew up playing with toads in the rain and indulging in horror stories. She holds a master of arts in both English and library & information science, moderates two creative writing groups, and reviews books for the Florida Library Youth Program. When she’s not busy working, she’s usually looking for ways to spoil her house full of pets or stopping traffic to rescue animals. She dreams of traveling the world and hopes to someday revisit New Zealand. Her work has appeared in *50 Haikus*, *Horror Magazine*, *Quarantine Quanta*, *Scribe*, and *Triangle Writers*.



Charlotte Wyatt (“Ark”) is a former zookeeper who earned an MFA in fiction from the University of Houston in 2019. She is a recipient of the Inprint Donald Barthelme Prize for fiction, and was the 2017-18 Inprint/Creative Writing Program Fellow. She has served as a Fiction Editor for *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts* and teaches fiction in Houston with Inprint and WriteSpace. Her fiction can be found in *Joyland* and *Sunspot Lit*, and other work can be found in *Gulf Coast* and *Electric Literature*.



Meghan Arcuri (“Because You’re Mine”) writes fiction. Her short stories can be found in various anthologies, including *Borderlands 7* (Borderlands Press), *Madhouse* (Dark Regions Press), *Chiral Mad*, and *Chiral Mad 3* (Written Backwards). She is currently the Vice President of the Horror Writers Association. She lives with her family in New York’s Hudson Valley. Please visit her at meghanarcuri.com, facebook.com/meg.arcuri, or on Twitter [@MeghanArcuri](https://twitter.com/MeghanArcuri).



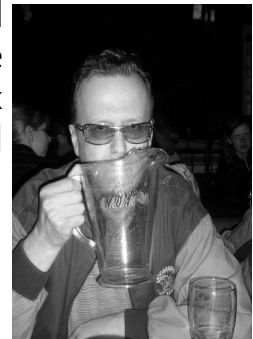
David Holper (“What the Hands Say of Love”) has done a little bit of everything: taxi driver, fisherman, dishwasher, bus driver, soldier, house painter, bike mechanic, bike courier, and teacher. He has published a number of stories and poems, including two collections of poetry, *The Bridge* (Sequoia Song Publications) and *64 Questions* (March



Street Press). His poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, and he has recently won several poetry competitions, in spite of his contention that he never wins anything. He teaches English at College of the Redwoods and lives in Eureka, California, where he is the city's first Poet Laureate. He thinks Eureka is far enough from the madness of civilization that he can still see the stars at night and hear the Canada geese calling.



William Kitcher ("Apology") has had stories, plays, and comedy sketches published and/or produced in Canada, the U.S., Holland, Ireland, India, and the U.K. His great-niece Alex was born long after this piece was written, and wasn't named after it.



Heather Sullivan ("Intersection") is a founding member of Ocean State Poets, a nonprofit whose mission is to give voice to Rhode Islanders by conducting workshops and readings across the state. Her chapbook, *These Onyx Hours*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2014. Sullivan is the editor of two poetry collections, *Butterfly Wings* and *Poems on Branches*, published by Salve Regina University, featuring the works of 75 individuals. From 2016–2017, she served on the editorial board for *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*. In 2007, Heather was appointed Assistant Creative Director of The Writers' Circle, Inc., where she worked for three years. In 2007, Sullivan was a panel judge for Barnes and Noble's state-wide *Maya Angelou High School Poetry Contest*. She holds an M.A. in English and won First Place in *Writer's Digest's 1999 Competition* in memoir. Her work has appeared in several magazines and anthologies, and her essay *Compassion* aired on Rhode Island National Public Radio's *This I Believe* series. She lives in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, with her daughter, Page Sonnet, and can be reached at www.poetheathersullivan.com.



Nadine Rodriguez (“A Lively Place”) (they/them) is a queer, non-binary Cuban-American writer and photographer born and raised in Miami, Florida, currently based in Marquette, Michigan. They are an MFA candidate for Fiction and a Graduate Assistant at Northern Michigan University, an Associate Fiction Reader for *Passages North*, and a co-editor for Sinister Wisdom, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal.



Ken MacGregor (“Jim’s World”) writes stuff. He has two story collections and is a member of the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers (GLAHW). He has also written TV commercials, sketch comedy, a music video, and a zombie movie. His debut novel is due out August, 2020, and they are working on the sequel. His first middle-grade novella is now available. He is the Managing Editor of Collections and Anthologies for LVP Publications, and curated an anthology for Blood Bound Books. When not writing, Ken drives the bookmobile for his local library. He lives with his kids, two cats, and the ashes of his wife.



Elisa Subin (“Unfolding”) is a poet whose work has appeared in *Scryptic*, *Not One of Us*, *Little Rose*, *La Scrittrice*, *Former People*, *The Cabinet of Heed*, *Jam & Sand* and *Nebo: A Literary Journal*, among others. She won an Honorable Mention in the 2019 Reuben Rose Poetry Competition.



Jared Lynch (“The names of birds.”) is a storyteller, noise maker, and horror enthusiast. His work has appeared in *The Broken Plate*, *365 Tomorrows* and *Angry Old Man Magazine*. He often writes about ephemera, spiders, and birds.

Keltie Zubko (“Everything in the Bag”) is a Western Canadian writer who has an extensive background writing about freedom of speech legal cases, but now prefers to explore our human relationships with each other and with technology in her short stories and novels. Her work has appeared in literary publications in Canada, the U.S. and internationally.



Jon P. Shank (“One Flesh”) teaches and writes in Raleigh, NC. A graduate of NC State’s MFA program, Jon’s stories have appeared in *The First Line*, *Tales from the Grave*, and other venues.



Trisha J. Wooldridge (“Bathtub Mary”) writes novels, short fiction, non-fiction articles, and poetry that occasionally win awards—child-friendly ones are penned under T.J. Wooldridge. She’s edited over a hundred novels for both publishers and independent authors and seven anthologies, including the latest New England Horror Writers anthology, *Wicked Women*. Find her in all the prior NEHW anthologies, the Shirley Jackson Award-winning *The Twisted Book of Shadows*, *HWA Poetry Showcase 5* and *6*, and *Don’t Turn Out the Lights: A Tribute to Alvin Schwartz’s Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. She spends rare moments of mystical “free time” with a very patient Husband-of-Awesome and playing with mooch-faced, coyote-stomping murder ponies and chickens. Join her adventures at www.anovelfriend.com.



Nicola Kapron (“The Bodies We Should Forget”) has previously been published by *Portal Magazine*, *Neo-opsis Science Fiction Magazine*, and in anthologies from Nocturnal Sirens Publishing, Rebel Mountain Press, Soteira Press, All Worlds Wayfarer, and Mannison Press. Nicola lives in Nanaimo, British Columbia, with a hoard of books—mostly fantasy and horror—and an extremely fluffy cat.

Arriving November 10, 2021 ...

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 4

AUTUMN 2021



Cover Art, *The Ghost of the Fair*, Walter Von Egidy

In this issue, twenty artists consider the consequences of choice.

Carl Olson ♥ Annie Dunn Watson
W.T. Paterson ♥ Stephanie Lennon
Crystal Sidell ♥ Charlotte Wyatt
Meghan Arcuri ♥ David Holper
William Kitcher ♥ Heather Sullivan
Nadine Rodriguez ♥ Ken MacGregor
Elisa Subin ♥ Jared Lynch
David H. West ♥ Keltie Zubko
Jon P. Shank ♥ Trisha J. Wooldridge
Nicola Kapron

Staff Contributing Artist: Jen Connic

**Welcome to *34 Orchard*.
Choose wisely.**