

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

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34 ORCHARD

Issue 5, Spring 2022

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This issue dedicated to Nanette, who never refuses to see anything—including the ugly truth, and to Bert, who sees problems and immediately sets aside her own to help—without expectation.

Cover Photo

Darker Beach: The Five of Cups ♥ © Annie Dunn Watson, 2021

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ABOUT THE COVER ART

The 100 Day Project, Day 24, Five of Cups, Annie Dunn Watson: Here in this edge-place, on the shores of Vermont's Lake Champlain, a cloaked figure ponders, but does not see. When is it time to let go? And, what, of value, remains? The 100 Day Project provided the artist with a daily opportunity to reflect on, and interpret in drawing and collage, one tarot card, using the Rider-Waite deck as reference. The pandemic often figured into the resulting seventy-eight representations.

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

A tarot card has many meanings and interpretations; it has to do with what position it holds in the spread, its provenience to the other cards and what they are, and the reader's psychic ability and psychological insight. But there's always something the image itself has to say.

The Five of Cups—which appears on our cover—is no exception. While it's a card of loss, grieving, and maybe even regret, the dark figure is only focused on the three empty cups, not on the two which are still upright and presumably full. In other words, he's only focused on what he's lost—and because his back, indicated by its hunch, is deliberately turned, *refusing* to see what he still has.

In our own lives, there are many things we refuse to see. After vacuuming, washing windows, and scrubbing toilets, my house feels clean—until I open the utensil drawer and see it's full of crumbs and spooge, or I peer into the window transoms and see a battlefield of bug carcasses: the places I know harbor dirt, but like to pretend they don't.

The twenty-five artists in Issue 5 focus on the things we refuse to see, and what that might mean. There are skin spots foreshadowing trouble, storms that may destroy more than property, and things scarier than mice in the walls. There's the utter silence of the woods, the torture of a monotonous 9-to-5 life, and the invisible threat of nuclear radiation. These are metaphors for what we truly might be avoiding.

While it feels safer to ignore inconvenient truths in the hope they'll simply go away, or that we'll learn to assimilate them into our worlds and keep going, it's surprisingly healthier to just open our eyes and confront. The sight of such things may smart or break our hearts, but in the end, what we repair or change may leave us better off—and happier.

Welcome to the place that feels clean—until you see those dust bunnies partying on the baseboards or the greasy fingerprints on the kitchen cabinet doors.

Welcome to 34 Orchard.

“When is enough enough? When do you, as a parent, acknowledge that you have a problem?”

— Selah Janel
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MISTER SKINANDBONES

Selah Janel

Jimmy Paulson was like any other rambunctious five-year-old. He loved his family more or less, had his friends, played with his toys, and had a vivid imagination.

Jimmy also had a friend called Mister Skinandbones.

He wasn't real, of course, but Jimmy talked about that tall, lanky fellow everywhere and all the time. At dinner, it was how Mister Skinandbones could never be full, no matter how much he ate. At bath time, it was how Mister Skinandbones would slip right down the drain if he wasn't careful. At bedtime, it was how Mister Skinandbones liked to fold himself up and hide in a drawer or right under the bed, just to keep an eye out.

His parents weren't quite sure what to say. What could they say? Children told big stories.

Still.

What should parents do when their little boy insists his best friend crawled out of the wall one night to protect him from monsters and that's how Mister Skinandbones came to be? How should they act when their sweet son talks about a spindly, skeletal fellow with a big, broken smile who likes to watch every little thing that goes on within the house? Isn't it a good thing that a small child doesn't worry about closet creatures because Mister Skinandbones hides there between the shirts? It's the same story with the under the bed monsters. They can't live there because Mister Skinandbones likes to sleep there at night. He can fit anywhere, at any time.

Jimmy's parents tried to get his mind on other things. They took him to movies, got him a puppy, and set him up on playdates with lots of other kids in the neighborhood.

Mister Skinandbones tagged along in his backpack, the puppy was chased off because Mister Skinandbones didn't like dogs, and the kids didn't like playing with Mister Skinandbones always there, watching though he wouldn't show his face.

Mister Skinandbones Mister Skinandbones Mister Skinandbones.

It was a constant, unnerving refrain, but what could they do if it helped their son? His father finally shrugged and suggested they let him grow out of it, while his mother wanted to call a therapist. What should they do when the wrong choice might wreck poor Jimmy's development? He seemed happy. More than happy. He was positively delighted, always talking about his new friend.

Mister Skinandbones Mister Skinandbones Mister Skinandbones.

The house was smaller with all the talk of the imaginary friend. It was hard to feel alone when every little thing brought attention to all the spaces something could hide in. It was silly talk. Nonsense. Both his mother and father laughed about it, and yet, it was hard to feel comfortable and altogether safe. He was always there. In whispers. In stories at the dinner table. In their thoughts and worries.

Mister Skinandbones.

He watched over Jimmy, imaginary friend or not. All the time, the child insisted he was there. The little boy who had once been so anxious at night relaxed. Why not just put up with it if it helped their boy? It was sweet, in an odd way.

It was sweet enough to ignore the weird crayon drawings of a rail-thin fellow with a giant smile hiding in a garbage can or drawer. It was helpful enough to look the other way when Jimmy insisted on pilfering piles of food because Mister S was *always* hungry.

They drew the line when he tried to take a six-pack, though. It was odd that they never found a trace of the food, and Jimmy certainly wasn't gaining weight.

They grit their teeth and smiled when the stories got weirder. Mister Skinandbones hid under the floor or ceiling so he could watch them all eat. They'd better not punish him anymore, because ol' Mister S thought their walk-in closet was just the comfiest thing, and he was there to protect Jimmy from *everything*.

It was just a phase.

His mother kept the number for a therapist nearby and read parenting books in secret, keeping them in her car because it made her feel better. His father preferred to work late.

Still, just a phase. That's what they told themselves, chuckled to themselves when they told the story to family and friends and hoped people wouldn't notice how tired they looked. On top of everything else, the house creaked at night and it was enough to drive anyone to distraction.

It was just a phase until Jimmy's mommy found trails of crumbs when he was staying over at the neighbor's. Then his grandparents *also* noticed

trails of crumbs and grime at their house when Jimmy visited.

Maybe he was doing it to prove it wasn't just a story. Kids did strange things, after all.

Objects got moved around when either of them tried to punish Jimmy. Nothing too harsh—a work proposal of his father's ended up in the toilet, a kitchen knife appeared under his mother's pillow. When they asked, Jimmy just shrugged and said 'Actions have consequences,' in that way kids do when they're trying to sound out new words they don't understand.

The neighbor's dog also disappeared after it had scared Jimmy one afternoon. One of his friends had nightmares about something in his house after he'd made fun of Jimmy for having a made-up friend.

When is enough enough? When do you, as a parent, acknowledge that you have a problem?

And when do you realize that it's all because there are spaces in the walls and a hiding place behind Jimmy's closet that you didn't know about when you bought the house?

Parents need to listen to their children and believe them sometimes. Jimmy's would have figured it out much sooner if they had.

In this case, the phase ended when Daddy opened the closet to put laundry away and caught a man sliding out from behind a panel. He was a scrawny, spindly, long-limbed man that could feasibly fit all kinds of places and looked like he hadn't seen the light of day in ages.

The police came and took Mister Skinandbones, his big, broken-tooth grin stretching across his face in a way that made him look not quite human, even though the officers insisted he was a vagrant. It was all very sad. Jimmy bawled and cursed his parents using the new words he'd picked up from his friend. They took him to a doctor and a therapist after all, just in case. Who knew what had happened in all that time?

How does a child recover from something like that? What do you do to be a good parent? It isn't quite your fault, but it certainly isn't just one of those things.

And how do you feel when your child's therapist pulls you aside and says you need to know that your son isn't worried at all about what happens now? He still feels safe and loved. That's nice, isn't it?

Of course, that's because Missus Skinandbones is still there, looking after him all the time. She's very upset that Mommy and Daddy took her husband away. Still, there's no reason to worry because she's much more patient, and much, much better at hiding.

ANY LITTLE SPOT

Ali Seay

Twenty-six. That's my expiration date. Somewhere, some god of time and death stamped it on my ass so I'd remember.

At least that's how it feels sometimes.

My father died of melanoma at the ripe old age of twenty-six. I was five years old.

Now I'm a freshly minted twenty-six-year-old and waiting to die. My birthday was last week. To celebrate, I set up an appointment with a dermatologist.

And here I am.



Doctor Conner's receptionist watches me like I might jump up on the sofa or set fire to it. I guess my nervousness is palpable.

I cross my legs, uncross them. Tap my toe. Shift. It's laughable, really. My expectation that because now that I've turned twenty-six, I'll be riddled with skin cancer.

Your father's death is not a prediction of yours. That's my boyfriend.

It was a fluke. It happens. Things like this happen. That doesn't mean anything will happen to you. That's my mom.

"Any little spot. Really, it can be any of them. It's wise of you to come in." That's Doctor Conner.

She's just ushered me in and I'm sitting here buck naked as she takes her super Mr. Magoo eye piece and looks over my skin.

My nipples have puckered from the chill, and I'm watching the fine hairs on my forearms and thighs stand at attention. Of course, anxiety might have a hand in it.

She runs her fingertips over a scar, then over a mole, then over a freckle. "How would I know?"

She laughs softly. She strikes me as the person who is always laughing. Always jovial. Always finding the good in a moment.

I want to scream.

“Well, just keep an eye on things. Examine yourself on the regular. Especially, if you’re in the sun a lot. Have someone check your back, the backs of your legs, your scalp.” She straightens. “Funny story. I had a man who had two malignant moles removed. His wife was doing his post removal monthly once over and discovered he had lice!” She tilts her head back and laughs.

I find nothing funny about any of it. I find lice almost as horrifying as skin cancer.

I shiver involuntarily, and she pats my leg. “You can put your clothes on now. I’m done. You look good. I know it’s chilly as hell in here. Janie, that’s the receptionist,” she says in a loud whisper. “She’s going through the change.”

I nod. Good for her. I wonder if I’ll live long enough to feel my uterus dry up.

I shake off the dark thought, push on the mole she’s already touched, push on it again. Then again. It turns red.

“How long before I should come again?”

I want to come next week. I want her to check me over every day. I want her to watch my skin the way some people watch their sprouting plants.

“Six months should do. You can even push it to a year if you want. You’re young.”

I’m young. My father had been young, too. But she knew my history and seemed unconcerned. So, I try to be unconcerned.

I set up an appointment for six months and leave the cool dim of her office to stand in the searing bright sunlight.

The sun beats down on me, but I still felt a chill. I feel the light baking my scalp. Blaring down on the top of my head.

Is that sun, that light, those rays, creating spots? Creating death?

I clamp my hands against the top of my head and hurry to my car. I get in and lock the doors, breathing hard.

“Get it together, girl. Get it together. You just got a clean bill of health from the doctor.”

But what if she missed something?

“She didn’t.”

She could have. She’s human. People fuck up.

I hurry home to try and distract myself. I’ll wait for Barry. Barry will come home and Barry will help me put my head on right.



He finds me in front of the floor length mirror, examining a mole between my breasts. It has been there forever. It has, in fact, been there since before I *had* noticeable breasts.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing,” I mumble, poking it. Poking it.

He comes up behind me, wraps his arms around me, and squeezes. I study myself in the mirror wrapped in his arms. His handsome face peering over my shoulder. He’s studying us too.

“You look stressed.”

“Nah.”

“How was the doctor?”

“Fine.”

“Don’t tell me too much, you might hurt yourself.”

I snort. “She gave me a clean bill of health. You’re supposed to check my back and my scalp and the backs of my thighs on the regular. I go back in six months.”

He steps back from me and studies my back, running his fingertips lightly over my skin.

I shiver.

He squats down and his knees pop and I laugh. He echoes my laughter. His fingers dance down the backs of my thighs and I shiver, doing a little shimmy in place.

“You should go lay down on the bed. So I can see better.”

His fingers curl possessively around my ankle for a moment and my anxiety fades a little as my arousal flairs.

“She just looked me over,” I say.

“I know, but what if she made a mistake?”

He doesn’t know that his words make my insides curdle. Make my heart pound.

I let him lead me to the bedroom. When he makes me come, it’s almost by accident, I’m in such a mental state. Hiding it well—but still, that’s where I am.

I wonder, as my body rocks from the orgasm, if it’s fueled by the rush of self-preservation adrenaline. Whatever it is, it lets me keep my fear to myself and pleases Barry.

I can’t help myself when I step out of the shower and say, “So, did you see anything?”

He smirks. “Babe, you were just there. You’re fine. Now that you’ve seen her, do you feel better?”

“Sure,” I lie.



I start with the mole between my tits.

Right after Barry leaves for two days.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks. “I know we were making light of it yesterday, but I also know this birthday held a lot of tension for you. A lot of worry. Do you want me to cancel?”

I do not want him to cancel, because I’ve been up half the night with this mole. Sure, I’d doze off every once in a while, but mostly I’m just feeling it beat like a second heart. There’s something wrong with it. I know it. Doctor Conner missed it. It happens. People fuck up.

I want him to go so I can deal with it.

Once I have him out the door, I go to the mirror and look at it. It’s red. Of course it is. I’ve been pressing, fingering, and scratching it all night long.

It feels bigger. More raised. It feels *something*, and whether or not anyone else believes me, I know my body and I must deal with it.

“The best way? The best way ...”

I mutter this to myself as I wander the bathroom. I open and close the cabinets. Inspect the contents.

I finally settle on a razor blade. Barry has a fancy razor his father gave him that he loads refill blades into.

I take one and examine it. Straight, pristine, a glittering silver-like chrome.

I position it over the mole and sort of shave—for lack of a better word—the top layer of skin off. The wound immediately gives up a rush of blood. The sting is sobering. But it’s not good enough.

“Moles have roots, don’t they? I’ve heard that phrase used. What if this one has rotten roots?” I am muttering like a mad woman.

I take the edge of the razor blade, take a deep breath, and dig at the spot. Working the sharp edge into the skin. Nerve endings light up and blink like emergency beacons. The world grows fuzzy around the edges. The blood rushing in my ears is cacophonous.

The phone starts to ring down in the kitchen. A land line we never use. But it is a noise that brings me back into focus. The pain is somehow holy and exquisite.

I press my finger to the open wound. Then a wad of tissue. It quickly seeps through as I examine the plug of skin I’ve extracted. I can’t see anything odd about it, but I can feel its malignancy. I feel safer without it.

I find a clean washcloth and hold that over the wound. Blood quickly seeps through.

"I guess I have to do something." My voice is slight and far away.

The wound is only slightly larger than a sunflower kernel. But deep. I rummage in Barry's nightstand until I find a tube of crazy glue. I fill the wound as quickly as I can. I grit my teeth against the pain and sting. I hold the edges as close as I can without touching the glue.

My hands are shaking.

I lie back on the bed and let the gray around the edges eat up my tunneled vision.

When I wake up, my wound isn't bleeding, the sting is a little less and my fingertips are hard and crusted with glue.

I am safe.



The next morning, it's the thing on my forehead. Doctor Conner had said it was a barnacle. As horrifying as this information is, I see that it could easily be removed. The razor blade had been a bit much. I have another idea.

In the kitchen, I put the electric kettle on to boil. I put a few tea bags in a giant mug and wait. When it's ready, I pour the water into my cup, and then pour the rest into a bowl. Inside is the vegetable peeler we got a few weeks before. It's got a wicked serrated edge and a sharp tip.

Barry had said "we're not fucking around, vegetables!" when he'd wielded it the first time. I'd laughed a lot.

I love Barry. I want to stay alive for him.

I stand there with a magnifying mirror and the vegetable peeler. My tea continues to steep.

I press the serrated edge to my skin and scrape. If I can scrape the barnacle off, I will be okay. I'll be safe.

The motion of this action makes my chest wound pucker. I think the crazy glue is coming loose. Possibly the wound is too deep, too wet, or I simply fucked up.

I scrape again. More pain this time. I'm getting to live tissue.

My cell phone jingles the tune "I Think I Love You." It's Barry.

When he's away, we speak every day. If we don't, he'll worry.

I put the peeler back in the bowl of water.

"Stop stalking me," I say when I answer.

He laughs at me. "You good?"

My gaze goes longingly to the peeler. I have work to do. "I'm fine. How's stuff?"

"Good. These people are nuts. I need to get to my hotel room soon or I'm going to lose my mind."

“Got it. Well, go hunker down. Watch a bad movie. Drink a beer.”
We talk for a few more minutes, exchange I love yous, and hang up.
I go back to my bowl, my peeler, and my barnacle.
The skin is dry on the top. It curls off. Is this what shaving bunions is like?
I’ve never understood that phrase.
Blood starts to well. I pat, I peel, I wince. Repeat.
When I am done, I have a raw open wound the size of a dime. It’s hard to control the size you’re peeling with a vegetable peeler.
The blood won’t stop. Maybe there are a lot of capillaries near your eyebrows?

I’m feeling a little panicky, but so much better now that that dry chunk of skin is off my face. I open the silverware drawer and find a delicate dessert spoon. An apartment warming gift from someone who thought we’d need fancy dessert spoons. I put on an oven mitt, cranked up the burner, and hold the spoon into the mesmerizing blue flames.

Then I press the dainty spoon to my flesh and scream to my heart’s content. No one is here to hear me.



“What happened to your head?”
I tilt my phone so my wound isn’t so visible. I covered it, previous to our video call, with a bandage. Apparently, I haven’t done a bang-up job.
“Walked right into the cabinet door I’d left open. Hit the very corner with my head. Like a klutz.”
He tsks. “Baby.”
“I know.”
“I’ll be home tomorrow night. I’ll kiss it and make it better.”
I try on a smile, but knowing he’s coming home the next night is stressful. I have a thing on my inner thigh that’s throbbing with disease. I can look at it and tell it’s no good. It needs to go.

I also know that Barry will not like my version of self-help.
“I can’t wait,” I lie.
He tells me he loves me and we disconnect. I stare at the patch of sunlight on the floor. I listen to the clock on the wall tick. Finally, I get up and go through my ritual from yesterday.
Cup of tea, bathing my implement in boiling water.
I wait, letting it soak a good long while as I sip my tea.
Finally, the tea is gone, and I’m sitting there staring at the butcher’s knife.
I sit on the kitchen stool and spread my legs a bit. This spot, this little spot, is halfway up my thigh. About a finger’s length away from my crotch.

It's dark and it's deep. It's been there forever, but now it's turned. I can tell. It's gone over like spoiled milk and is slowly infecting me. If I leave it, it won't just stay as is. It will rapidly contaminate me. I'll hit my expiration date. And I'll die.

I don't want to die.

I dig into the mole with the tip of the knife. I imagine if I could dig the tip in and then pluck it out like a cork. That would be great. Not gonna work, but it would be cool.

I press down, watching the knife go deeper and widen the slit. Blood is coming out fast now. I have to be careful. I don't want to hit the femoral artery. It could be tricky.

The pain is exquisite. Daunting. I dig a bit further and tiny fairy lights appear in my peripheral vision.

My hands are streaked with blood. They're getting slick and shaky. I try to cut an X with the knife so I can excise that section of flesh.

I have to stop, put my head down, and breathe.

My legs are shaking. My hands are shaking. But if I can just get this one little spot done, I should be good. I'll be great.

I don't want to die.

This will help.

I go back to it, picking at the flap of skin that's the biggest. Hoping to see the malignancy. Darkness. Death. Lurking beneath my skin so I can pluck it out.

I'm wobbly so I slide off the seat a little and my knife slips. It opens a big slit in my thigh. And then the blood is a rush. A red river of life running down my thigh, over my knee, dripping around my feet.

I get up to find my phone. I made a mess. I should probably call someone. I find myself holding the wall, trying to walk, swaying like a drunk.

It's fine. It's totally fine. I'll be okay once I deal with this one little spot.

LESS THAN TWELVE HOURS AFTER SHE IS DEAD, WE BEGIN TO ERASE HER

Lynne Schmidt

I look through the items in industrial sized trash bags
for traces of her, for things she loved or touched.

Most of the clothes still have tags on them.
My cousin tells me to take anything I want.

The eye shadow harbors a single swipe,
like she tried every pallet

but couldn't quite find her color.
We donate thousands of dollars of clothes,

donate thousands of dollars of shampoo and conditioner.
The dresser empties.

The closet hangs no clothes.
Her belongings have new lives at homeless shelters,

her books off to a library,
her birds take flight with a family friend.

And I stand in the empty bedroom,
wondering if any of it was ever important.

“The existence of a secret rises, whether or not the secret is revealed.”

— Kimberly Moore
“Lexie”

SHOWDOWN AT DARK ROCK

Douglas Van Hollen

This story takes place in those years between the founding of our territory and its first official election, a time when the raw land had no master and neither did we. During that time I became a man, and I would bear witness to evil and madness like I have not since seen.

The heat of fear and the hard prairie sun had burnt my soul to a cinder and turned me into the world a hard and dangerous man; only such a man would have taken the job that found me crouched behind a boulder at Dark Rock Canyon. It was a gray October morning that seemed robbed of its sun, just sky like a cataract in every direction. As I looked down the line of faces next to me, I saw that despite the dim light, every eye was squinting. These were prairie men, and it had become a habit.

Old Man Charlie—God rest his soul—was at my side that day, just like every day since my father had died. Charlie was whistling to himself, low enough to be lost in the wind. It was a careless sound, but every hard line of his face was pointed squarely at the black rocks on the other side of the canyon. Charlie was a joker, but I knew his whistling did not mean he was taking our task lightly. He whistled only when silence would have somehow been worse.

On the other side of the gorge, a scree of gravel rattled down the rocks, and a couple of the younger kids jumped. But nobody's gun went off, so that was good. Down at the opposite end of the line, I saw Christian staring at me through his smoked eyeglasses, smiling around a huge chaw of tobacco. He was signaling something to me, pointing his chin at the rocks across the way.

I ducked below our little blind of scrub brush and crawled behind a dozen cowboy butts over to where Christian had set up a kind of throne for himself amidst a pile of rocks. He did not say anything, as usual, just spat and drew a line in the sandy dirt with a matchstick. He dropped eight or ten little pebbles in various clusters along one side of the line. At the end closest to

him, he plopped a ball of white quartz and tapped it with one of his delicate fingers. He smiled as he did it, which I tried to avoid seeing: too many teeth. The black lenses stared at me like a dead fish.

I sized up his little model and the arrangement of the boulders on the other side of the gorge. Two or three shooters in each of the smaller crevices, plus three or four due to pop up somewhere near the flat area on the south end. That was Christian's guess as to where the box was being kept, and that made sense to me. But that meant we needed to have some control over our lines of fire. Because what we didn't need was to put a bullet through the box and bring it back to the Italian a pile of splinters.

This was not our first job like this—the retrieval of some odd object or other, stolen by men who were little different from us: desperate cowboys who hated cows but loved money. If *their* bosses had found us first, we would be the ones on the other side of that canyon. For all of us, on both sides, up until that day it had been only about the money. But it would soon become about something else.

Charlie had heard about this job from one of the lost souls he knew from his Indian War days, a rough and forgotten cadre of veterans who now sat drinking away the Dakota winters hoping trouble would come find them. The word was some rich old loon had gotten a box stolen from him and was paying in silver to get it back. A jewelry box, we figured, belonging to some foolish merchant who had got taken by a road-agent or robbed by a whore.

But that was not the story we got from the man himself. The Italian insisted on meeting with us in his room above the saloon, and I remember thinking it seemed a different shape than the other upstairs rooms I had seen in that place. It was flooded with a red flickering light from sources I could not see and crowded to overflowing with boxes and bound-up trunks. Sitting atop those boxes—Charlie and I and the man whose whiskered face I now struggle to recall with any clarity—we toasted our contract with thick red wine. As the evening wore on, the man spoke about the job in strange and apocalyptic terms, *a battle between Heaven and Earth, the need for men such as you to stem the tide of the forces of Saturn*, is what I think he said.

Charlie and I had tried to get him to speak in concrete terms about the box itself, but he was too much in the drink—or else drunk on his own madness, which was more likely. We left shaking our heads and rolling our eyes, only really caring about what few practical details he let fall: how big of a party they were, how many guns, in what direction were they headed. But as our posse tracked north into the Badlands, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was a job that, once taken, we could not afford to botch. We had been paid, in advance, more than any two previous jobs put together, and there

was more waiting for us at the end. But what drove me on that ride was not greed, but fear. Fear of what, I was soon to know.

Like I said, men like me and Christian and old man Charlie were dangerous because that was how you stayed alive back then. But I've become convinced that the Italian was the kind of dangerous you get only from God or the Devil, with his dark maroon suit and black whiskers and tattoos of worms that seemed to slide around his wrists as his silhouette danced and flickered behind him. I had nightmares every night of that long track north, and I always woke with the taste of that wine in my mouth.

Christian was loading his huge silver pistols with the weird, bulbous shells he carried in a green felt bag. He did this without looking, his eyes on the black rocks on the other side of the gorge. I could tell he was already planning his shots, every single one. He was a thinker, in a place and time when that was a damned rare animal.

It was good to have some idea how the Mexicans might be laid out and where the box was, but it did not change our basic plan—what plan there was. I nodded at Christian and put my gloves back on. As I made my way back to Charlie, each one of the boys turned their hard squints to me, and I looked each in the eye as he nodded back. It was getting to be That Time.

When I settled next to Charlie at the other end of the line, he leaned towards me. "Think there might be a little shootin' today, boss?" Then he hissed laughter like old broken pipe as he snapped open each of his old gray cavalry pistols with expert precision. He checked the loads, worked the hammer action, and spun the chambers. Charlie kept those ancient guns so clean and oiled they barely made a sound. My guns, on the other hand, clicked and clanked like a train car. I had to wait until the wind gusted up a shriek to check my loads.

I took a breath and heaved to my feet. Charlie got up too, still smiling—he would go to his grave smiling. I leaned into the wind, which seemed to come from no particular direction and never seemed to stop; the metal plates in my coat bounced against my bones. I held onto my hat, ducked my head, and waited to be shot.

Nothing happened. I took another deep breath and shouted to the other side of the gorge. "Now listen. We are coming to get the box. You are outgunned. Walk away and everybody stays healthy."

No sound but the wind pushing at me from all corners of the compass. More gravel rattled down the rocks across the way, and I saw my boys set themselves up on their knees. I heard the cock of hammers and the sandy crunch of soil. Charlie spat out his tobacco. I waited another few seconds for something to happen, then I started making my way down the rocky slope to

the dry river bed at the center of the gorge.

Charlie followed a little bit behind me. He didn't believe in holsters. He held his pistols loosely in his hands like they were bottles of beer. Despite his gray hairs, he was more sure-footed than me, but him carrying his guns like that made me very nervous.

At the edge of the river bed, we came to a stop and caught our breath. There was no activity. Then we looked at each other, knowing it was probably not a sign of surrender, but of impending doom.

"Well—" I said.

The shooting started. We flung our arms across our faces. Rocks exploded and slugs slammed into the metal plates in my glove and arm. It hurt, not as much as the big .45 shells we had practiced with, but it still smarted. *Amigo* bandits could generally only afford .22s.

After the volley died down, Charlie stepped in front of me and blasted six big chunks out of the boulders up on the opposite slope. Two men fell screaming.

As Charlie reloaded—one-handed, his other gun scanning the ridge line—I looked up to see Christian's dark eyes reflecting the gray no-light of early evening. I signaled with one hand high above my head, suddenly feeling like a big fool target.

Christian rose from his throne of stones with both silver guns raised. As Charlie and I started our lunatic run across the exposed dry river bed and as the boys let out a whoop and started firing themselves, the rocks on both sides of the gorge turned white as Christian's twelve phosphor bullets shrieked across the sky.

The hammers crashing down on those witch rounds echoed off the boulders like dynamite in a blacksmith's. When there was a break in the firing, I heard screams up ahead of me. Each phosphor round had painted a burning white-green splash along the line of boulders on the Mexicans' side, and silhouetted in that light I saw howling forms running—mainly from north to south, towards the end where, on Christian's model, he'd plopped down that white quartz ball. There were a lot more Mexican shooters than we had thought, but he was right about where the box would be.

Charlie had emptied and reloaded his guns by the time we started to climb the rocks on the other side, but I'd only fired a couple. I had been more concerned with plotting a course up the slope that would not snap our feet off at the ankles. So I led the way, keeping my eyes on the terrain and trusting in Charlie's cover as he followed in my footsteps. We were awfully exposed, but the boys kept up a good fire and I did not get shot until we were only a few yards from the path we were aiming for. The bullet slammed into my top left chest plate, which knocked my breath away. I sent three

bullets after a running bandit with burning phosphor in his braids.

Charlie bounded ahead of me to the narrow ledge their shooters were occupying. He turned toward the north end of the path, grinning wildly as he fired from both fists and dark spit ran down his chin. The muzzle flashes tore away the shadows from the boulders looming all around us.

I holstered my gun and flexed my arm to make sure the bullet hadn't broken a rib. As I struggled up the path to protect Charlie's back, a dark voice flew out of the shadows. *Ningún mono negro me atrapará!*, followed by two shots that missed. I fired in that direction as I angled around a tower of rocks. I kept firing until I heard a ricochet hit something soft. A grimacing brown face leaned out of a crevice, and I shot it through the cheekbone.

Charlie continued to fire as I reloaded. I figured between him and the rattle from the boys across the gorge, the north side of the ridge was more or less covered. I put two fingers in my mouth and whistled. I heard the boys stop firing and pour down the slope to join us, whooping like devils.

I pulled my other gun and hesitated. I had planned on making the final run with Charlie at my back, but something about Charlie's posture against the rock, his head bowed, his old knees bent, it made me think of him at my father's grave side.

Charlie was the last man standing in a troop of thirty-two uniformed desperadoes who'd traded blood with the Apache tribes across a dozen years and a thousand miles until both sides were ground into a gray and bitter powder. I had been too idealistic to follow my father into service against the Nations and had worked hard to have desperate little to do with him.

Until Charlie had brought him home draped across a spotted gray stallion and rolled up in an Indian blanket. When that unexpected gap in my heart had opened up, Charlie had the misfortune of being the next best model of a man I had to hand. I left behind my mother and sisters to follow him into the wastes, where he kept me alive long enough to learn the craft of staying alive. When the darkness of the world had arrived at our doorstep, he had been my salvation—but that salvation had led me to this gunmetal-gray day spent killing Mexicans over another man's box.

A bullet crashed into the plate on my back, and it was like getting kicked by a mule. I spun around cocking hammers. I saw the bastard kneeling on a rock high up to my left and I shot him twice in the chest.

I motioned to Charlie that we had to get moving.

"You go on, just gimme a sec." Charlie was reloading behind a boulder, smiling and winking at me like a kid playing fox-and-geese. I moved away towards the south, not looking back.

I found a clear space between boulders to the left of the path, and I

signaled with my hat to Christian, who was still standing on his throne. He let fly with another volley of phosphor to clear my way, and the first round landed close enough to burn holes in my duster. I remember seeing the plates shining through, glinting silver in the weird evening light.

I kept moving south, keeping my guns out in front of me, firing in short clusters. My pistols forgot their terrible action and rusty points as they leapt into service like war-mad horses. I heard the boys make their way up the near slope, firing and whooping all the way. I nearly wept with pride. We'd been wrong about the numbers and the terrain, but we were going to pull through. It was all coming together. We would be riding into Sioux City with every pocket stuffed with silver.

I'd emptied my guns by the time I arrived at the open place at the south end of the path. I reloaded as I made the final turn onto a narrow, boulder-less mesa that opened to the sky on both sides before sloping down to meet the desert. The path wound around a black boulder, but I failed to pause before stepping out to see what was on the other side.

A figure stood alone in the center of the mesa. He wore a sombrero as wide as he was tall, the edges of it festooned with blue and red feathers and what looked like chicken bones that twisted in the wind. Every inch of his skin—whatever was not wrapped in orange poncho—was painted a bright baby blue, a blue so bright that I winced instead of firing my guns.

That was when he shot me. He fired both sawed-off shotguns in perfect unison. The blasts hit the plates on both sides of my breast, pitching my ass back up against the black boulder. The plates held more or less, but I could feel broken ribs on both sides and the flesh was torn away under each arm. I wasn't expecting this kind of damage. We had never practiced with shotguns.

The man walked towards me, taking little bird-like steps in his bare blue feet. As he got closer, I could see both of his eye sockets were empty, something like blue paint seeming to drip out of them down his face. His mouth was stretched in a smile so wide his skin was cracking, and as he shuffled towards me I heard him making a strained eeee sound, like wind through a rocky crevice, a sound of insane anticipation. I had a fleeting thought of my father, slung over that horse's back, dead, and wondered what his final moments had been like. I struggled to rise up or crawl away or reach my guns, all of which were impossible.

But then Charlie—blessed Charlie, the god-forsaken angel of death who rode on my shoulder—started shooting from somewhere down the path behind me. I laid down flat. His first four shots clanged against metal beneath the man's poncho, so Charlie walked his shots upwards, and the blue, grinning, keening face disappeared into a pink mist. Charlie had fired

ten shots in three seconds, which is a damned hard thing to do with revolvers.

Charlie stepped over me with his guns raised, and walked over to where the painted man had fallen. He kicked the poncho and plates aside and fired his last two rounds into the heart. Only then did he look back at me, and when I signaled that I was not dead, he flashed that smile of his and gestured with his head.

On the ground, off to the right, I saw a set of saddlebags, and spilling out of one was the box. About eight inches square, with intricate patterns carved into the wood that seemed to throb in the darkening twilight. It was a thing that—even lying there struggling to breathe past splintered ribs—I wanted to hold.

I smiled back at Charlie, weakly, and watched him stoop to pick it up. The thousands of supple lines on his cheeks still looked pleased with themselves under his big brown hat, but when he worked his fingers under the lid, the box came open, and his smile vanished. By the time I thought to cry out he had already started to change.

MOLLUSK MADNESS

Priscilla Bettis

Your bedroom door is open a crack the way you like it, and I watch you sleep in the sickly rainbow glow from last year's Christmas lights that you strung across your headboard. In the warmth of the night you've kicked aside your pink-and-white quilt. You look so vulnerable there on your back with your throat exposed and legs akimbo.

I have waited for the perfect day, my daughter, the thorny blossom of my womb. Before an hour passes, you'll be off to catch the bus, the ragged strands of your hair hanging about your face in the same way the shredded bits of your childhood hang about your life. At the bus stop in the bloody light of dawn, you and your high school friends will slouch silently in a circle and grow pimples together.

I have an hour, then, to get everything ready, an hour to save you.

In early fall, the overnight temperatures are still warm in this part of Virginia. Frogs still croak and chant under the stars, and leaf beetles continue to gorge themselves at midnight. Slugs, too, are active in the dark. Their optic tentacles are too light-sensitive to function in the daytime.

There's an ugly mess on your pillow where your slimy saliva has trailed from the corner of your mouth and down your cheek. You smack your lips.

You always sleep with your window cracked open, and I can smell my gastropods gathered in the garden. There are more of them now, the last batch of eggs having hatched over the weekend, but the slug mothers won't allow the juveniles to leave the nest until they're older. It's not safe, and everyone knows a mother must protect her young.

You murmur in your sleep. Perhaps you are dreaming of a first love. Maybe you are dreaming of giggly, pizza-flavored kisses or a cruel, adolescent flirtation, provocative and empty.

Widower Bell's rooster at the end of our gravel road announces the change in the sky from a black void to a canopy the color of an eggplant.

Lately, a Civil War ghost has been haunting our neighborhood. His

torso is covered in blood, so I can't make out his uniform, but surely he's a Civil War soldier. Who else would he be? The soldier-ghost should be starting his morning rounds soon. You've never seen him stomping around in his big boots, but old man Bell and I have.

You roll to your side and pull the quilt over your legs. My mother made that quilt for you when you were little and taking ballet lessons. I remember when you took ballet. I also remember last month when you came running from the back field, tears smearing your awkwardly applied mascara.

I hold my breath and don't even blink for fear of waking you. It's not time yet. A sigh of wind pushes through the window screen and shoves your nighttime odors toward me. You smell of hormones and Pepsi and fetid pepperoni. Is that your pepperoni or some boy's?

I leave you to your youthful dreams and squashed hopes and go to the foyer to don my headlamp. The lamp is leftover from my days of research at the university. Before I got pregnant. Before you.

My headlamp has a small, red light that lets me observe nocturnal insects without disturbing them. It works for observing slugs, too.

I step outside, and beneath the violet sky I make my way onto the sidewalk that leads from our front stoop to the picket fence running parallel with the road. Years of abuse and neglect have left deep cracks in the concrete. The sidewalk hardly functions as it's supposed to anymore. It's just a tripping hazard that grabs delicate feet.

Adjacent to the damaged sidewalk is our wonderful vegetable garden. It's big enough to feed us plus a dozen colonies of insects and the occasional skunk. From the middle of the garden on a clear afternoon I can see the road and the Blue Ridge Mountains in one direction and our little house and the fields that stretch all the way to the barns in the other direction.

But it's not a clear afternoon. It's still dark, and I have work to do.

"Katrina, I didn't see you there," says the silhouette of a man on the other side of the picket fence. He's standing in the road. Is it the Civil War soldier? I move closer to the fence and squint, trying to make out the details of the man in the darkness. Ah, I see that he's way too short and skinny to be the soldier. It's just old man Bell heading out on his morning constitutional.

He says, "The mornings are quite dark now, but I still like to get my walk in early."

I don't respond. Maybe he'll get the hint.

He doesn't and continues chatting. "You know my deal with the Feed-n-Seed? It fell through. I told 'em it was a fair price for winter seed and that it was a good deal for both of us, but they weren't interested." He shrugs. "Oh well, it takes two to tango."

It certainly does.

He clears his throat and asks, "How are you all doing?"

"Fine, thank you." My mouth trembles into a curve. It's almost a smile.

"Are you sure? I only ask because yesterday I saw your husband again out back in the sorghum field. He was pacing up and down the rows, and he didn't look very happy."

I purse my lips and suck on my cheeks, skew my jaw one way then the other.

Old man Bell continues. "I haven't seen you out in public together for awhile, and I thought, uh." His voice trails off. "Well, it's none of my business." He lets out a nervous little laugh and scurries on.

Back in the garden, I kneel and aim my headlamp at the mulch. The slugs' crisscross trails of mucus glow pink in my red light. I follow the shiniest trail knowing it's the freshest slime and the slug can't be far away. The trail passes by the ripening chili peppers, past the fallow tomato vines, and disappears at the base of a three-foot-tall broccoli plant. The broad, sturdy leaves look black and rotten, but I know it's just the poor lighting in this early hour. I lift a leaf that's twice the size of my hand.

"There you are," I whisper. An eastern *Ariolimax* slug clings to the broccoli stalk. Her supple body is gray-maroon and plump with moisture. She's a big one, a good six inches at least. Hundreds of muscle contractions from head to toe propel the little she-beast. The way her ripples expand and contract her midriff remind me of a person breathing, though I know that's not how she breathes. She has a little air exchanger tucked under the lip of her thumbnail-shaped carapace. She has a penis and a vagina under there too.

How do I know, then, that she is a she? Because she's leaving behind a slippery, pheromone-laden trail rather than pursuing such a trail. The question isn't *who is male and who is female?* but *who will survive the encounter?*

Head-to-toe, head-to-toe in respiration-like regularity as she moves up the broccoli stem.

Just recently, I tried to hold my breath until I died. I fainted and woke up breathing. My body couldn't help but breathe.

Soon, another slug intersects the female's mucus trail and stops. I bite my lip as I observe the male slug. What will he decide? My slugs have taught me more about relationships than I could have ever learned on my own.

Slugs belong to Mother Nature, yes, but these particular slugs are mine because this is my garden, mine and yours, dear daughter. Remember how the two of us sowed lettuce seeds in May? Remember how we pollinated the cucumbers with fluffy makeup brushes last summer when the bee population was low?

The lower tentacles, the tactile probes, extend from the male's jaw and test the female's slime trail. Is it fresh enough? Is it oily with pheromones? Is it wide enough to indicate a large female instead of a juvenile? If the female is not big enough and he thrusts his slug penis inside her, it'll get stuck. When he goes to withdraw his spent member, it'll rip off.

I think humans ought to mimic that behavior. If she's too small, too young, rip it off.

The trail of slime up the stalk is like saliva from a long lick up a lover's leg, and the male slug turns onto the trail and pursues the female up the broccoli plant. She appears to be trapped up there.

The ghost of the Civil War soldier stomps past on the other side of the fence, his boots gnashing the gravel. My eyes have adjusted to the dark, and it's easy to discern the white pickets all evenly lined up like well-behaved military men or perfect little ballerinas at a dance recital or studious teenagers waiting for the bus, teenagers that don't smoke or cuss. Or have sex in the sorghum.

The first slug stops and waits on the corner of branch and vine like a bulbous prostitute.

The male catches up, probes the first slug with his tentacles. His foreplay is brief. He slides his head over the tip of her foot and up her midriff. They are as supple as two slices of raw liver, and their skin has a sheen as if doused in water. If I actually douse them in cold water, will that stop their sexual hunger?

If I douse you, my flowering child, in cold water?

Now the second slug is three-quarters of the way up the body of the first, and I move another giant leaf aside to watch. He's stroking the edge of her carapace, and she lets him. If he can access what's beneath the thumbnail-shaped plate, he can impregnate her. With his two lower tentacles, he latches on to the lip of her carapace and lifts, fully exposing her breathing vent and her genitalia.

Something long and black-blue like a bruise emerges from his own carapace. It slithers under his body and twists around hers and worms its way past her breathing vent and into her secret regions. If I didn't know better, I would have thought this was a third being, a parasitic worm, an intruder forcing my slugs into a sick ménage-à-trois.

The soldier stomps past again as he glares at me with eyes that burn like fireflies in the low light. I ignore him.

The female slug shivers along the length of her foot. Her tiny breathing vent opens with a faint sibilance, a gasp. She floods.

Entwined, the two slugs fall on a string of her flooded mucus. Like the picket fence, it's white, this mucus that's produced during copulation, and it's

fibrous and strong and suspends the two mollusks upside down in a perverted sex maniac's contraption.

Your father suspended me once, long ago when I still enjoyed copulation. At first I thought his interests were exhilarating. I didn't realize how pathological they were.

The two slugs hang coiled around each other in a long, twisted form. They look like one of those spiral lollipops people sell at the farmers market. You know how when a toddler pulls the lollipop out of her mouth, her messy saliva is all over the pink candy with extra cords of spit dripping on the dirt? That's what these mating slugs look like.

Waves of contractions move up (or should I say down because the slugs are hanging upside down?) the male's body from his pointy toe to his head.

Then his body goes limp and folds like an accordion. The only thing that keeps him from falling is her tight twist around his carapace. The bruise withdraws, shrinks, and starts to pull back into his body.

Not so fast, she says, and this is when the vicious battle begins. She maneuvers her circular mouth until it surrounds the tip of his penis. She sucks, pulling him into her throat as thousands of tiny, needle-like teeth close in on his member. He likewise attacks the very female organ he just penetrated, but he's too slow. She has already clamped down with her needle teeth. He can't withdraw because her teeth face backwards. The more he pulls away, the more her tiny teeth dig in. He bleeds and writhes. She drives her needles deeper.

Their post-coital tug-of-war ends when she has rasped clear through his sex organ. She uncoils herself from his limp, injured body, and he falls. In a few minutes she will regurgitate his masticated body part.

The Civil War ghost stops pacing. He's still on the road, and then suddenly he's not. He's towering over me in the garden. I look up, and his shadowed mouth is stretched wide. He's screaming at me, but his scream is coming from . . . from where—another time, another dimension? The harshness of his words, the hissing S's and shredded vocalizations and percussive T's are lost, and all I hear are smooth sounds, like a song.

Not all slugs survive the ritual mutilation and subsequent fall, but this male does. He will live to copulate again, but as a female when another male stalks her slime trail and mounts her foot and probes her carapace.

I blink. The horizon turns a stark shade of purple, and the soldier is pacing again on the other side of the fence. The sun will be up soon. I should get your breakfast started, but first I check on the rest of my slugs.

The majority are gathered on the patches of soil I keep moist with beer. They love beer. So did your father. I slip my hands into the lager-laden soil

and lift, tumbling slug and plant detritus to expose bits of human meat from the freezer.

Because eastern *Ariolimax* slugs produce a new generation every fourteen days, it's fast and easy to epigenetically manipulate their food cravings. My slugs feed on puckered skin and muscle tissue that has gone gooey after its time in the freezer. Their needle teeth are making quick work of the meal. It all smells too yeasty for me, so I push the dirt back in place.

I go inside, wash my hands, and stir up a couple eggs for your breakfast. I butter a piece of toast. Gently, the way you like it so the knife doesn't leave divots in the surface of the bread. The toast is perfectly smooth and flat like your stomach.

You enter the kitchen in your school uniform, a white blouse and a pleated tartan skirt. After your last growth spurt, I have to wonder if that hem is still within school regulations. You climb on one of the three barstools. You breathe, and your respirations make your high, firm breasts pulse with regularity.

"Mom?" you say after a swallow of coffee. Such a young one to be drinking coffee. Your father got you hooked early.

"What, baby?" My words are the rounded and soft sounds of a cooing mother.

You drop your gaze to the countertop and twirl your congealing eggs in a circle. "Is Dad ever coming back?"

"No," I say, no longer cooing.

You are very good at hiding your true emotions. Your head pops up, and your shoulders relax. "Good," you say, but I know what you really mean.

The sky peering through the kitchen window is the passionate pink of sailor's dawn. The slugs are waiting.

I am the slugs' sister creature. *Sister from another mister*, as the kids at your school would say, and I snicker. Both of us small entities, the slugs and I. I remember how your father towered over me. My siblings and I are *essential* entities, too. Eastern *Ariolimax* slugs neutralize toxic mold and make the environment safer for other forms of life, and I am a walking womb. If not for wombs, the earth wouldn't be populated with sinners. Does that make me good or evil?

I snip a stray thread from your blouse with the kitchen shears. "Don't worry," I say as I wag the silver-colored scissors with their needle tips in front of your face. "I cleaned them after dinner last night. I haven't gotten your shirt dirty at all."

You roll your eyes then sling your school bag over your shoulder. With the scissors in my fist, I follow as you head for the door, the pleats on your skirt bouncing against your bare thighs with every stride. The slugs are

waiting, and my legs quiver when I picture the human flesh they were eating earlier. The quiver climbs up my spine to my lips, and I gasp in anticipation.

We step outside together, and you pause on the front stoop. "Did you put a yogurt in my lunch?" you ask, "because I want a yogurt."

Widower Bell is loping by, heading back to his house. Now that it's brighter and I can see him better, his slim, boney figure looks like a walking skeleton, and I snicker again.

"Hi Mr. Bell," you say in a friendly voice. You are always so polite that way.

Old man Bell stops and smiles at you. He pretends to keep his eyes up. He pretends he has no wandering gaze, no leer. He can't afford to be obvious. He is a retired teacher after all. He waves at you and continues on.

"Strawberry yogurt," I reply.

"Thanks." Your pleats bounce quickly as you head for the gate in the picket fence, and I run to catch up.

"Mom, I'm not a little kid. I can walk to the bus stop myself."

"I know, just wait a minute."

You stop and turn, looking at me with the one eye that isn't covered by your sad hair. The way you thrust a petulant hip to the side accentuates the waist you have and I lost long ago. You huff. "*What, Mom?*"

Bell's rooster crows again, and the sky in the east is the color of a luscious apricot. There isn't much time.

A sticky-warm gust of wind moves through the garden, jouncing the plants. The chili peppers nod. *Now, they say*, and the broccoli leaves clap.

There, on the oversized toe of your fashionable-unfashionable, oxblood clodhopper, I spot the first slug. You follow my gaze, and your upper lip curls with disgust. You shake off my one-footed sibling while cussing under your breath.

My siblings have crept up the beer-splattered fence gate behind you, and now the gate is a big, shimmering slab of liver.

"Whatever. I'll be late for the bus." You turn to go and recoil at the sight of the gate. You yelp and back away, but there are more slugs on the ground behind you. They writhe with drunken delirium in one of the beer mud-puddles I made for them. Soon you're up to your ankles in Michelob and mollusks.

You stomp, sending slug viscera and foamy mud through the air, but there are so many slugs. They are rippling up your bare legs. You scream and drop your backpack and run toward the house. Your waist may be smaller, but mine is stronger. I pull you shrieking and flailing back to the garden, back to my slugs. You stumble and land on your dainty tush amongst my siblings. I squat before you, and your eyes grow wide when long, silver-colored teeth

pierce the divot of your throat, and you make like you're going to scream, but only wet gurgles come out. Red slime floods your neck.

The slugs quickly mount you. They will do what must be done to save you.

The soldier stomps about in the road and gestures wildly like your father used to do when he was angry. Can you hear the soldier's boots crunching on the gravel?

Rich, black soil clings to your legs and your midriff where your blouse has risen in your struggles. Why are you struggling? The slugs are saving you. There is a point, I suppose, when a mother's love and care come across as unloving and uncaring, but surely you are old enough to understand.

My siblings latch on, and the slimy, red mucus trails across your tummy and your thighs, trails just like it did when the slugs made love to your father. I remember how the mucus spread across your father's pelvis. He didn't like that particular form of copulation, but I didn't like being suspended from the ceiling, so we're even.

You curl and twist, but I hold your foot, your lovely foot.

You understand now, don't you? I have saved you! Okay, I admit the slugs actually saved you, but I helped.

The soldier abandons his post out front and makes his way to the sorghum. The brittle leaves crackle as he forces his way through from one row to another.

Yes, you understand. I can tell you do even though you aren't speaking because a mother can tell. I see it in your slowly dilating pupils as you gaze at me. For awhile your breath no longer comes with regularity, and then it doesn't come at all.

Tentacles of golden sunlight slither over the horizon, and the soldier sings.

YET ANOTHER POEM ABOUT BIRDS

Robert Bulman

Resting on an outstretched branch
of the bare-leafed almond tree
just outside the kitchen window,
the new backyard feeder
attracts a dozen hungry finches,
flocking with Hitchcockian terror—
tiny dinosaurs swarming for a meal.

One leucistic finch,
not quite albino,
catches my son's attention
amidst the charm.

The typical finches flutter
and glance away
as it fights for a spot
to feed its pale grey body,
confused to be among a world
of streaky tans, rich browns
and flashy red dashes.

The clever squirrels
launch an attack from the fence,
conquering the feeder
as the birds move on,
lockwing in conformity
to achieve another meal
several houses down.

The leucistic finch perches alone in the tree,
still searching for a charm to call its own
as I quietly prepare a meal for my family.

GONE FOR GOOD

M.C. Herrington

I'd started the tomato plants from seed shortly before Tommy drank himself out of his last job. He'd always been as addicted to drama as he was to alcohol, so he'd made a big production of getting fired, lining up a dozen miniature bottles of booze on his desk, knocking them back one by one while his co-workers cheered, and then flicking them over like little bowling pins. Of course his boss filmed the event and posted it online, or I would never have known anything about it, unlike the very first time he got fired. The first time, he called me while I was working in the garden, and when he started to cry, my heart broke. I tried to comfort him— "We'll help you out until you get the next job. *Don't worry!*" But by the sixth or seventh time, I was too angry to talk to him. When he didn't get the attention he craved, he stopped phoning, which was the way I liked it. Silent. He'd text, though, every six weeks or so to ask for money, which I always gave him, even though I knew what he spent it on.

The tomatoes were heirlooms, Brandywines and Black Kirms and Red Currants, one variety each for slicing, sauces, and salads. They shot up indoors under the grow light and leafed out quickly, and they were ready to transplant the week Tommy died. I took the usual precautions, wrapping their stems with toilet paper tubes and mulching them with straw. It did not escape me that Tommy might claim I took better care of them than I did him. But it's not as if I didn't encourage him to get help—I looked up the name of a counselor who specialized in treating addicts, and I found an AA meeting close to his apartment. I even drove him there once, though when we went inside, we discovered they were meeting out at the fairgrounds where a local band was playing. We never found the meeting, but we did drink lemon shakeups and listen to 90's music I was surprised Tommy knew. The New Radicals. TLC. I doubt that he ever did get to a meeting. He *claimed* he saw the counselor— at least he asked for money to pay for the sessions. But I knew he could sober up when he had to, since he'd done so twice, first after

a felony DUI and then a parole violation. I always slept better when he was in jail. I doubt that he did. I never asked him, though, mostly because I believed his answer would be designed to make me feel guilty, not to help him heal.

For the last year of his life, I saw Tommy only at family gatherings. Usually he was so drunk he couldn't sit upright. His skin and eyes were yellow by then, his body lumpy, as if something was punching him from the inside, trying to get out. My husband and I didn't drink much, though we did keep the liquor cabinet stocked for friends. But we liked to have champagne on holidays, which meant we had to wait to drink it until someone in the family drove Tommy home. That's when normal life began—once he was gone.

Once he was gone for good, though, nothing was normal again.

My garden is fenced with redwood posts and slats that will never rot. I put Tommy's ashes there because I knew he'd be safe, but also because I wanted to give him a chance to do something useful. He loved my tomatoes, so it wasn't a meaningless gesture. And I liked the idea of having him nearby. I filled a vase with fresh flowers and said a prayer for him every morning. And then I'd go about my business, pulling weeds, looking for tomato hornworms, spraying copper sulfate to ward off blight. I grew a number of other vegetables, herbs, and flowers, so I attended to them, too, which meant that for three or four hours a day, we worked side by side, Tommy and me. Each time it rained, I imagined a little more of my son washing toward the plants, nourishing them all.

I first noticed the change when the tomato plants were about three feet tall. I'd caged them that morning to lift them up off the ground, but when I went to look at them that evening, the lower leaves had turned yellow. Normally this is a sign of overwatering. Yet when I stuck my fingers in the mulch, I found no evidence that the ground was overly moist, and since the plants closest to the tomatoes—basil and garlic—looked healthy, I assumed the yellowing was a fluke. Maybe someone in the neighborhood had sprayed a noxious chemical that had wafted over my six-foot-tall fence.

I'm not normally an anxious person, but I had especially high expectations for my garden that year. So I did something unprecedented: I went to the house and slipped a bottle out of the liquor cabinet. Back in the garden, I set a cup on the potting shelf and poured myself a shot—which I immediately spit on the ground. If Tommy drank as much vodka as I believe he did, it would have burned off his taste buds and melted the lining of his throat years ago. When it occurred to me he might have done this deliberately, to make it easier to drink more than he should, I rested my head on the shelf and began to cry.



My worst nightmare used to be forgetting I have a garden, only to discover it weeks later, stunted and parched, too late to be saved. So I'm not the kind of person who could ignore the tomatoes for more than a couple of days. When I did check on them, I was stunned: The lower half of every plant was brown, every leaf and stem pocked with tarry spots of blight. Only the tomatoes themselves were unmarked, the green fruits still glossy and smooth. I'd rescued plants at this stage before, so I set to it, snipping the dead bits, carting them and the straw away to the burn pile, replacing the mulch, spraying the plants with organic fungicide. But I was sick to my stomach. I'd deluded myself into believing that Tommy would help me grow perfect tomatoes that year. Instead, we'd created a disease-infested wasteland.

Of course it occurred to me we were acting out a familiar story: Try to do right by Tommy and watch him destroy it. When I calmed down, I considered that the seeds themselves might have been tampered with, although the two Red Currants I'd planted in pots on the patio were doing just fine. I thought it was more likely that the crematorium had added something to Tommy's ashes that was poisoning my soil. And then I remembered I'd also scattered some of the ashes around the pond, and none of the fish had gone belly up. But in the garden, it didn't matter what I did to resurrect the plants—test and amend the soil, spray and prune—they continued to die. No new leaves sprouted to protect them. The tomatoes began to rot from the inside, sagging loose below the stem, never progressing from green to red.

At that point, the damage had not spread to any of the other plants in the garden; one healthy volunteer tomato had even sprung up near the basil. But I couldn't take any chances. I decided to rip up every tomato plant, scoop up the mulch and six or so inches of the soil, and replace it all. Should I also dig up Tommy? When I considered all the work ahead of me, I got so angry that I threw the spade, which smashed the bottle of vodka I'd left sitting on the potting shelf. The alcohol ran down the furrow between the two rows of tomatoes.

Which, I believe now, was what he wanted all along.



What I'd buried near the bronze plaque in the garden a few weeks before was a few cups of white ash, mostly fine, nothing distinguishable

from the dozen other amendments I'd added to the soil over the years. And so what I expected to see when I turned over the first spade full of earth that night was nothing—Tommy should have been long gone, osmosed into the soil, feeding the plants as his molecules spread out in all directions. I tore the clods apart with my fingers to be sure. Nothing. I dug down another six inches, just in case. Still nothing, not even an earthworm or a pill bug. But instead of quitting while I was ahead, I stomped on the spade one more time.

The stench of rotting vegetation rolled out of the earth. The temperature dropped quickly enough to make the mulch crackle. All over the garden, leaves began to shatter and fall. Stems broke. Unripe vegetables and flower heads thudded to the ground.

A minute later, every plant I had nurtured that year was not just dead—it was gone. The garden was black and silent, except for a steady drip, drip, drip from the vodka bottle.

If that had been the end of it, I might have come to believe it was justified. But Tommy thought I owed him more than that. And so the air warmed. The ground began to tremble and then groan as new furrows were ripped open from below. Seeds no human had planted began to twist up out of the soil, already leafing, rooting, flowering, fruiting, and growing so quickly I swear I could hear their cells scream. They shot up around me, underneath my feet, pushing me toward the gate so I had to look out and see the perversion in all its glory: Tomato plants, a hundred of them, so thick and lush I couldn't walk between the rows. And there wasn't a single blemish on any of them.



I was reluctant to taste the fruit when it ripened three weeks later, but I gave in, because really, someone who'd buy pallets of supersize vodka to water her tomatoes had already bargained away her soul. I thought twice before sharing them with others, but there were too many to preserve, and I knew I couldn't bear having all those little red specimens staring back at me all winter. Everyone says they taste just like homegrown tomatoes should taste, better even, with a little something extra they can't name. I can only speculate. Is it vodka? Is it Tommy? Is it some demonic hybrid of the two?

I feel compelled to spend a great deal of time in the garden even though the season has ended, enriching the soil with compost and manure, raking it so fine that each bed looks as if someone has pulled a dark blanket over it for the winter. But my mind is often far away at the fairgrounds where Tommy and I drank those lemon shakeups. If I could have stretched those

two hours into a lifetime, I would have, even though they were only memorable because they were normal, and we had so little normal time together once he was grown. I don't know what happened to Tommy after that, whether he made a deal or crossed a line or both.

But I do know this: Something is overwintering in my garden below the frost line. I've seen the soil heave when it moves, its fine, white, fibrous fingers searching for molecules of alcohol and ash. Raising it—whatever *it* is—is the price I will pay for waiting too long to give my son another chance.

“The world she remembers is so far away now—the sunlight, the morning breeze, everything they tried to replicate down here but failed at miserably. Like taping cooking magazine pages over the walls, knowing you’d never eat again.”

— Sam Berkeley
“Day One Hundred and Sixty-Four”

BUMMIN' TO THE BEAT OF THE ROAD

Eric J. Guignard

The day I went bummin' down the road was the day Marilyn Monroe died. That really says somethin' don't it? Ms. Glamour herself, drugged out on sleeping pills. That was all the fifties, big show and forced smiles, everything's okay 'cause the picture box in your house tells you so: eat your corn flakes, drink your Ovaltine, wear tweed, the bigger your Buick is the bigger your dong. I'm not being harsh or nothing, just find it fitting; the country was still sleeping then, dreaming of General Motors and Hollywood, and their darling—that czarina of tabloids and red carpets—finally fell to the deepest sleep there is. When the Blonde Bombshell died, it was the end of that era.

And that was the day I wore tread off my shoes. It wasn't because of her I left, but it's that kind of sign you look back on, says you made the right decision. See, I'd read Kerouac, and I'd read Salinger and Steinbeck, Herbert Huncke, and even some Joseph Conrad. I knew what they meant, when they said things like, "Nothing behind me, and everything ahead of me," and, "The land is so much more than its analysis." I wanted to see things, feel 'em, not just read about 'em in the *Gallup Eagle*, or hear Carl yammer in the diner, where I used to bus dishes, about the she-wolves and bikers and rock-and-rollers tempting proper American folks to all manner of sin and damnation.

I already had sin and damnation enough, and boy, I couldn't believe there was more waitin' for me somewhere else.

I owned one of those battered suitcases with a wood frame and canvas sides, all wrapped in cracked leather and brass locks that was a real piece of work. I didn't think I'd be carrying it much, just tossin' it in the back seat of the first jalopy that came rumbling by, but the case filled pretty fast with books and shirts and a picture of me and my younger brother who died three years ago when I was in school. I sure didn't put much thought into packing; the case was heavy as hell. I'd forgotten my mother had once kept a picnic set in there, since it'd been so sturdy.

I thought about heading to San Francisco or maybe New Orleans, what Nelson Algren called, “Downtown Gomorrah.” I’d really heard the calling, can you believe? A great ruckus that charged me to leave—maybe the same voice that told Marilyn Monroe to sleep was telling me to wake. The world was changing around us, stirring, *the beat, man*, you could feel it in the air if you opened your mind, an energy sizzling, that for most would burn your hands to the bone, but I could catch it, and I took its ride.

Well, the sun was barely up when I started, just this paint drop dappled behind the thin line between earth and sky; there were no cars around, no people, no dogs barking, no birds yelling. Just me and my suitcase that was once used to picnic.

I left behind my childhood, and I left behind my three-room brick house on Hollister Drive where the hedges were trimmed weekly to exactly four feet high, and I left behind my parents lying in their bed in their old-timey night robes with knives sticking from their chests. I loved them, if you can believe it, but they were already dead to the world, so I just buried ‘em with the rest of the fifties. They always hated a mess though, and the way I left them, I know they’d be sorry about that.

I walked the main drag that leads to Route 40, my feet making a swish-clack sound as the sole hit the concrete first and then the heel came down. *Swish-clack, swish-clack*, and I was breathing hard too, carrying that big suitcase. I’m in no great shape, mind you.

But I made the crossing, and the first car I came upon was this rattletrap of loose bolts waiting, it seemed, just for me.

The driver must’ve turned a hundred years old before I was born; he had gleaming buck denture teeth and one of those derby hats you’d think an Englishman wears while playing polo. He said he was leaving town and nodded at my case. “Looks as you are, too, boyo.”

“I’m ready to see the world, sir.”

And he smiled, and it made his buck dentures look even bigger—*buckier*, if that’s a word—but I was raised not to laugh at such things, so I didn’t.

My life lay spread out before me then, like a blank sheet of paper, and I had the pen to draw in all the lines of a map, wherever I wanted them to go. So we scammed out, taking flat stretches awhile that went nowhere special, and we small-talked, he with a funny, clipped voice that sounded like each word was the beginning of a new sentence.

“The country’s changing, boyo, don’t y’know?”

“Yes, sir, and I’m gonna be a part of it.”

“Can’t be a part if you’re just watching.”

“That’s not me, sir. You won’t find me sitting forty hours on the couch

staring at the boob tube."

"That's the spirit. Only live once, and all."

Naturally, just as we were gettin' steam, the rattletrap blew a hose in front of a sign for Grants. The driver—his name was Fergie—smiled through those buck teeth and said he'd get another, if I cared to wait.

Really, I didn't want to wait for anything, but sometimes there ain't much of a choice, you do things you don't want. It was already hot as hell, and the thought of thumbing from the side of the blacktop with that suitcase in hand was dreary. I'd have told Fergie my good-byes if a cab came along, just so I could keep moving, but none did, so I ran my tongue over the gap where my tooth is missing, and I stayed.

Across the road was this diner, a real red onion of a place with no other name than *DINER*, in these big block letters twenty feet high over the roof so it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. I went inside, thinking about a coffee and pie, but the ditzy waitress said they were out of both, can you believe it? A diner with no coffee, some sort of mix-up on delivery she tells me, though her excuse doesn't mean anything to my grumbling stomach. Coffee and pie is what I wanted, and she offers milk and cake instead. Boy, ain't that all of life sometimes?

Anyway, I wasn't going to settle, and was about to tell her so, but the entrance door chimes open with one of those bells that jingles every time someone comes in or out, and there's Fergie, his derby hat cocked upon his head in a way nothing else but the word "jaunty" could describe. Says he's got the new one, and just waitin' for me.

"Ready to sally forth, boyo?"

I paused, my mind not able to make sense of that, like an algebra problem from Ms. Cranston's class you recite over and over, but everything about it seems wrong; I'd only been in the diner five minutes. "How'd you get a new hose already?"

Fergie laughed, a crazy jazz bop of clattering teeth and sputter. "Hose, boyo? I got us another car."

Maybe my face said the words I couldn't voice, since Fergie stopped laughing. "You want a ride or you'd prefer squattin' here with the dust and flies?"

And maybe it's Allen Ginsberg who nudged me forward, saying, "I wake to see the world go wild ..."

So I nodded okay, and Fergie smiled again, and we left, and in front of the diner is this Ford Thunderbird convertible that's *everything plus*. The top is down, and the silver paint shines like a blade, and it's got long fins in the back, and a trunk big enough to fit a second car.

Fergie took my picnic-suitcase and threw it behind the front seat, and

like some old butler he came around and opened the passenger door for me.

“After you, boyo.”

I’m about to sit, when I noticed a smear of blood on the seat, and I won’t lie, I kinda gawk and hesitate, though it’s something I should be used to.

But Fergie, still like a butler, just slid a kerchief from his pocket and polished it away. Real polite, this Fergie.

“Bit of a slip there,” he acknowledged.

I don’t ask what happened, and he doesn’t tell, and like that we drove away.

Now, maybe here I should stop and tell you about my brother, since I mentioned him already, but it’s probably not enough for you to know he’s the reason I went bummin’ to the road in the first place, and why I’m here and everything else.

My brother—Dennis was his name—died from cancer. Took him a year to die, the worst year of my life, I’m sure you can imagine. There wasn’t anyone like Dennis, we did everything together, and happy too, both of us, and all the time, not like now.

When it started, my parents took him to the hospital, and doctors gave him radiation, said radiation was the wave of the future, just like it killed all those Japanese, it’d kill the cells of cancer. *Radiation Bomb*: they actually used those words.

Only my brother got sicker, and doctors said that was a *good sign*, the radiation was working, killing the cancer ... but there’s Dennis, his skin turning yellow, then turning pale until it’s almost translucent, you might see inside if you tried hard enough. He had beautiful blond hair, and it fell out in patches. He had perfect white teeth and they dropped out of his bleeding gums one-by-one, and he thinned, except for his eyes, which seemed to grow larger as the rest of him shrunk away.

And all the while these doctors are thumpin’ each other on the back about how good they are, how smart and crafty they are, until Dennis died, looking like a hairless, toothless old man, at the end too weak to even stand and pee, we had to hold a bedpan for him while he lay, staring at us.

The lousy doctors wouldn’t even talk to us after that. My parents said everyone had done their best, but I railed about it and got sent to a goddamned headshrinker who told me I shouldn’t have expected my brother to survive, and I’d only “heard what I wanted to hear” all along in hoping the radiation would heal him. The doctors never *promised* he’d survive: this shrink really said that, like I was a moron for thinkin’ you go to a doctor to get healed, and I’d filled myself with false hope, and what’d I expect?

So that's a lot I'm layin' on you, and anyway Fergie was silent a long time too as if pondering his own things, when he suddenly says real corny, "A boy's eyes shine when he's thinking too hard."

I ran my tongue over the gap of my missing tooth and didn't want to talk about Dennis, so I lied. "Just kickin' around destinations, sir. Thinking of maybe going to Paris, maybe South America, I can't decide."

"There's no destination but the grave, *boyo*. Life's a journey, and when you stop movin' you're passed by. Remember that." And he smiled the smile again that made his teeth look *buckier*.

It's funny, but I noticed then, up close, none of the teeth in Fergie's dentures seemed to belong together. They're sorta uneven, each a different hue, one big, the next small, another angled to the left, like a fang knocked sideways. Fergie's teeth looked like a lamp you'd break into a million pieces and try to glue back together; the lamp still works, but you can spot the damage afterward, the gaps and chips and zigzag seams.

I almost made a crack about it too, but thought better, as like I said before, I was raised not to laugh at such things.

Fergie must have noticed my stare anyway, since his eyes flicked to mine.

"My teeth went bad long ago," he admitted, and clacked those buck dentures together for emphasis.

"Sorry," I said, though more for politeness than actually feeling remorse or anything. I just hoped that ended the subject; I felt crummy thinking about Dennis and didn't want to talk anymore.

Fergie was drivin' faster then, like we were in a rush to go nowhere, so I just strolled in my thoughts while looking out at the scenery. There were twisted chaparral trees along the highway whose identities I once learned in the Boy Scouts, and we passed a landmark telling about some Indian Reservation, one of those bronze markers that turns shale-green in the desert rain; it had buckshot dents scattered across. A jack rabbit tore by, fleet as wind, and everywhere bloomed sprays of tiny yellow flowers that looked like lemon candies melted over the gravel and grime. As soon as I saw each thing, it was whisked by, swept into the rearview mirror, as thoughts, misshapen like nightmares ...

And, boy, talk about nightmares after Dennis's death, always of me lyin' in his place, me rotting away in front of everyone, me dying slow and not able to do a thing about it. My teeth fell out in my nightmares too, but I know that's common in everyone's dreams some time or another. In my dreams, they just got worse, and I kept trying to put the teeth back into my mouth, only they won't fit no more, 'cause the rest of me is shrinking away so much ...

One morning I woke, a tooth really *had* fallen out, no reason. My parents said I thrashed around in bed at night so much, I probably struck myself. Ain't that a gas? Me punching myself, I'm so miserable, and I don't even know it?

I thought their explanation was dopey, so I noodled on it awhile, 'til I figured instead it was one of those self-fulfilling prophesies where you cause something to happen by your own fears, or what's called a sympathy pain, or whatever else; I'd obsessed so much about rotting and dying, my body just started to agree with my brain, and had surrendered to wither and fade ...

Lucky thing I was reading Joanne Kyger then, who pointed out, "What is this self I think I will lose, if I leave what I know?"

I was rotting because of the past, see, it was the old generation I was dying from, or I was dying *with*, their flat ways, their musty ghosts, pecking at my life like a filthy rat nipping at cheese; each day I did the same old stuff, and each day I inched closer to oblivion ... But I didn't want to go out like that, not like Dennis lying there, watching the world go by, not like my parents, sleepin' in front of the idiot box to escape the pain ... I had to get out and change the world, help shape a *new* generation ...

And that's when Fergie crashed my thoughts again, speaking real casually like asking a grocer about the price of plums. "Y'know, I used to sell people's teeth."

I couldn't help it, my lip curled. "Teeth for sale?"

"Aye, teeth of the dead."

Next my brow furrowed; I'm sure my expression looked ugly.

He smiled, a sigh of reminisce. "Nothing wrong with an honest livin', boyo."

"No offense, sir, taking teeth from the dead doesn't sound much honest, nor swell."

"Selling teeth was big business, once upon a time." Fergie clacked his teeth again, as if that were all the proof I needed. "Course, lads like yourself, delicate souls don't like the sound of a name, we'd call 'em Waterloo Teeth instead."

He reached over one-handed, since his other hand was gripping the wheel, and patted the side of my mouth real soft, with a little linger, a little caress. I pulled away with a grimace. The skin of Fergie's hand was a wrinkled sponge, like the underbelly of a rotting fish; it sure gave me the willies.

"Back in the days of Waterloo," he went on, "this is Napoleon, mind you—dead soldiers got to numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Young, healthy men these were, all butchered in heaps on the field, and the bodies

start to rot, the human scavengers taking their clothes, vermin scavengers taking their flesh. But what's left is teeth ... You ever seen a corpse, *boyo*, there's always the teeth left behind."

I've seen plenty of corpses, but they're always fresh enough I never thought about the teeth one way or the other.

"Teeth don't rot," Fergie said. "After death. Since the bacteria in your mouth perishes with the body. Teeth're better off after you die, in a way *transformed*, made stronger, immune to decay."

I didn't want to seem like a moron, so I agreed.

"I came to America," he added, "importing teeth by the barrel, sold to dentists and dandies alike. Rivet the teeth to animal ivory, and you've got pearly whites strong as a bear trap."

"People buy those?"

"Used to, *boyo*. Practice died in the '50s—last century that is. Folks prefer porcelain now, same as a toilet's made. Might as well be shittin' in your own mouth, you ask me."

I nodded, I couldn't think of any other response.

"But I still got the teeth." He winked a long sideways wink. "Teeth don't rot."

Fergie was gettin' corny on the subject; I wanted him to drop it. He'd worked himself into a lather blabbing about teeth, and he floored the accelerator even more. We flew like mad, and I clenched the seat tight, feeling like the wind could lift me right out.

It's a funny thing hearing wind, it gets stuck in your ears sometimes, it can sound like anything you want, like a voice or a fire alarm to get away, or maybe just applause if you're on the right path, since I was.

You ever read the poetess, Joanna McClure, she really knows her groceries; it's her advice I took in Gallup when she said, "Reach out and catch a resonance ..."

Once I'd read that, I swore to do all I could in life, feel every experience, and why the hell not? I went out to the old hotel by the depot that once was real fancy, and I found this goat-milker of a broad, Ruby Jane, and we *did it*, and she only charged half price since it was my first time, said it made her feel special, and that made me feel special too. She was a real sweetheart.

She sold me a bag of uppers, and I did those too ... I wasn't asleep then to the world, no way.

And the night after that, I slashed two tires of a highway patrol car, and night after that, I burned down a phony's church, and night after that I did more, and more, my brain turning on, *man*, I was feelin' it, this beat growing around us, and I was greedy from bein' starved so long. Each new feat was

like steps up a ladder ...

And then I'd bumped into the goddamned headshrinker, the one my parents made me visit after Dennis's death. The shrink was shopping, his arms full of packages in every shape; it impressed me very much he could balance them all while walking.

I had my Boy Scout knife in my pocket, and I followed him down the street, and when no one was looking, I slipped it across the inside of his thigh from behind. They teach you that in the Boy Scouts, about the femoral artery, how it's easy to sever in an accident, and the proper First Aid skill to bind it and apply pressure and all. They don't teach you how to cut it or anything, but I figured it wasn't that hard, and I was right. So the goddamned shrink gasped as a big spurt of blood came out, and all those packages in every shape went sailing through the air like a montage of product commercials; *Buy!* Pucci Handbags, *Look!* Almond Oil Soap, *Want!* Kotex hats that are a mile tall, and the shrink had even bought lousy furniture for his pets, I still can't get over it.

I'd wanted to tell him his psychoanalysis was crap, but instead I acted very cool and just walked away, and no one saw me.

And onward I went, until I found myself bummin' to the road in a Thunderbird convertible with this old Englishman who's crazy for teeth ...

And there Fergie pawed my cheek again, accelerating the car further. "Lend me your ear, *boyo*, and I shall confide sagacity."

I flinched, I wanted to break those fingers of his.

"You've never thrown a tooth away, have you?" he asked.

"Pardon?" I was honestly perplexed.

"No one does," he went on. "There's something instinctual in that. Teeth are bits of the spirit, y'know. When children's teeth fall out, they're saved by parents, placed on shelves, in curio boxes, taped into scrap books, until they vanish, and you don't know where. You and your kin have never discarded a tooth, yet if you ask back, those old teeth aren't around anymore. They're *missing*, and where'd they go?" He tapped his dentures. "Think on it."

I didn't want to, but I did.

"Teeth fall out in your nightmares," Fergie said. "It's the fear of losing self. Your teeth fall out, *boyo*, it's a sign of aging, of dying."

The sky winked blue at me through streaks of sunshine that glittered like a pinwheel always moving, it's mesmerizing. I shrugged. "I guess so, sir."

I hoped Fergie wouldn't get any nuttier, but of course that's when he really got to raving ...

"And I'll bet you don't believe there's some men come from teeth, do you, *boyo*? Sprouted, you might say, from the sown teeth of dragons, the way trees sprout from seeds."

I figured he was bein' a real phony then, sayin' stuff to get my goat, but even if my face showed incredulity, he kept on.

"They're special teeth, the teeth of men who can kill, murderers at heart, and if even if they hadn't killed already, they would have, given the chance. Men, women like that, *boyo*, it's ingrained in their genes, the *potential*, the *intent*, it's how we stay pure-blooded."

"You don't say ..."

"Someone's got to keep the world moving forward, *boyo*, someone's got to fill in the gaps. Someone's got to kill off the old, make way for the new." His tongue looked to be lolling around in his mouth while he spoke, like he was moving something besides words.

My mind is tuned sharp, you can bet I understand things. Dennis used to say I had X-ray eyes, I was so smart, but here I was lost as Earhart, and I was startin' to regret takin' a ride with this old loon. Sure, it was a grand new experience bummin' with a certified kook, but even me, I gotta draw the line.

"See, every tooth has a story to it, a memory ... The teeth, why, they've still got *life* in 'em. They've got the experiences we need to stay fresh. It's how you keep movin' *boyo*. You want the magic of life, it's in the teeth."

"Mister," I interrupted, "can you drop the subject?"

That long sideways wink came again, and Fergie reached into his mouth.

"Fella from Peoria," he said, pulling out this tooth I realize he'd been sucking on like a piece of hard candy. "Drove a street car, married with a lass on the side, three children, one a bastard. Once he saved a neighbor's dog from drowning. Once he raped an idiot boy. Once he raped the dog that he saved. His dreams I taste as blackberry chiffon, his failures as salted gin ... He was a dragon through and through."

Fergie flicked the tooth out the car as we bounced and flew along.

He opened up his suit jacket one-armed, and inside the lining were all these little pockets, hundreds of them, maybe more, tiny stitched flaps, like a cabinet of drawers made from cloth. His hand ran up and down each pocket, brushing them with his fingers, real erotic about it too, until selecting one to reach inside.

"There're all sorts of teeth, *boyo*."

He flashed a lonesome yellow molar between thumb and forefinger, then popped it into his mouth, normal as anything. "This one—an aged widow, Donia's her name—hails from Portugal, though came to Brooklyn as a babe. She loved to dance, did Donia. Danced with death in fact, killed herself once she killed five spouses, all with arsenic. A dragon, if ever there was one."

Honest, Fergie was givin' me the creeps.

"It's a new era, *boyo*, either you move with it, or you flounder and you die."

"Mister, why don't you let me out here, and we'll call it square."

"You said you were ready to see the world, be a part of her experiences ... you'd rather sit on the couch, brainwashed by the boob tube, 'til you're droolin' like a babe, the cancer eatin' your brain from its inside out?"

"What's that got to do with this business about teeth?"

"Perhaps this'll help you catch on," Fergie said, reaching over to again snatch a stroke of my cheek. "I've got just the tooth for you. Comes from your brother, young Dennis, was it?"

And right there, I went cold. I hadn't told him a word about my brother, not a word about what he suffered.

"You don't look too enthused," Fergie added after a moment's silence.

"What the hell you trying to pull, mister? My dead brother? You don't know what I'm capable of, someone tries pushin' me."

"Oh, I know plenty, *boyo*." Fergie's eye sort of twinkled like some old star that's dyin' out in the sky. "It's why you're comin' along, 'less you'd be sleepin' the grand sleep like your kin."

I didn't think I could get any colder, but I did, even how hot it was that I felt my forehead turnin' redder than roses in that convertible.

"Open up," Fergie ordered, his voice flat as roadkill, a new tooth in his hand ... Dennis's tooth.

My subconscious screamed at me, *don't do it*, but the rest of me was clay, unmoving but for how Fergie chose to mold me, like my nightmares, me dyin' slow and not able to do a thing about it.

Fergie's hand went into my mouth, pushing Dennis's tooth root-first into the empty socket where my own tooth had gone lost, and it fit fine, though it hurt like hell, him ramming this tooth into my gum that had healed over some time ago.

"Goddamn you, mister," I spat out, once I could.

"Your brother's a part of you again," Fergie said, "He'll live on, share your experiences."

Only Fergie's words seemed to drift away, if that makes sense, and other thoughts, feelings and emotions that didn't seem to belong, warmed my head like takin' a deep whiff of gasoline fumes ...

KILLFUCKKILLFUCKFILLFUCKKILL

Fergie just smiled as if reading my mind. "Your brother wasn't who you thought he was, eh, *boyo*?"

Dennis's life flashed before me, highlights, like those abridged books by Reader's Digest: There Dennis was pointing a finger gun at the back of my

head when I wasn't looking; then taking a whiz in my Coca-Cola bottle; poisoning the neighbor's cats, one after the other; putting glass shards in trick-or-treat candy. There he was, only thirteen, and doin' it with the goat-milker, Ruby Jane, already, atop a grave ...

KILLFUCKKILLFUCKFILLFUCKKILL ...

The warm gasoline fumes cleared away, and boy, did I steam. "My brother never did anything like that his whole life!"

"It's who he *would* have become. People change, the lucky ones to dragons. You and him were a lot alike, both seekers, *eh*? It's new experiences, what keeps the mind sharp. It's how we know we're not sleepin' like the rest of the country ... He just discovered it earlier, which was still too late for *him* ... but not for his *teeth* ..."

And Fergie started laughing like a damned maniac.

So you can guess, I started planning to kill him; I've got my Boy Scout knife, only it's wrapped in a pair of socks in my suitcase that's behind his seat. I think, *Hell with that*, I'll just take the entire big, heavy picnic basket and smash Fergie over the head with it, again and again and again.

But Christ though, he was driving so fast, I couldn't figure how that wouldn't end bad, and I knew I'd have to get him to slow or stop ...

Meanwhile, Fergie just kept laughing, and in some dentile sleight-of-hand, he suddenly held more teeth, which he tossed into the air, out the car like throwing confetti at a Macy's Parade.

It made me think of school, hearing about the missionary, Johnny Appleseed, tossing seeds along his journey to grow fruit trees across the land.

And there's Fergie growing his own warriors from the teeth of dragons. "We're sowin' a new generation, *boyo*."

And still we're drivin' faster and faster, I couldn't imagine a racecar going this speed, and my heart's beating faster and faster too, it coulda busted from my ribcage, and I started thinkin' of myself as a tooth inside Fergie's mouth, as much a part of him as he's of me, until he tosses me to the side of the road, the seed of a dragon to be reborn, a warrior charged to shape this new generation ...

And as I thought of that, and I thought of Johnny Appleseed, and I thought of my brother, and I thought of that goddamned shrink, I saw something sprouting in the rearview mirror, real distant as we zoom along, but—no kidding—the sprouts, they look human, even from far away, tall with arms and legs, blurry too, but they're people for sure, forming wherever Fergie's teeth had landed, forming to cleanse this country, to push it forward ...



Now here's what's funny about it all: This bright chime sounds, one of those bells that jingles every time someone comes in or out of a door, and I blink, and I'm still standing in that red onion of a diner with the big block letters over the roof.

Pretty wild, huh?

See, the ditzy waitress had just told me how there's no coffee and pie, so I really did give her a piece of my mind. She won't ever run out of coffee and pie again, since my Boy Scout knife is jammed down her fucking throat ...

I turned to the chiming door and there's old Fergie standing there, only he doesn't say anything. He's just staring at me with this look that says clear as day he's never seen anything so horrible in his life; his jaw's hanging wide open, I could peer down his throat to his stomach, if I wanted. But it's his teeth I'm eyeballin' ... Those buck dentures are all perfectly white and flush and normal as hell. They ain't dragon teeth!

So I pulled the knife from that ditzy waitress's throat, and she bled all over the floor that's checkered like a game board, and I pointed at Fergie. "What the hell you tryin' to pull on me, mister?"

"Wh-what's this, boyo?" he asked, real phony.

I took a step at him. "Where're the dragons, mister? The teeth from the car?"

"C-car?" he stuttered, his dentures clattering like there's a cold wind only he can feel. "The blown hose ... I just came to join you for some c-coffee ..."

I ran my tongue over the gap in my teeth, only there's no gap anymore since a tooth was there, and my brother's voice was part of me, like I'm a part of Fergie's voice, the *real* Fergie. "Is this what the road does to you? Is this how we become warriors? Is this how the country changes?"

He took a step back, and his ass bumped against the glass door, real comical too.

"Tell me!" I demanded, though by then I knew he couldn't tell me the name of his mother, he'd gotten so flustered.

"Just take it easy," is what he might have said, only another voice overpowered him, that great hipster, the murdering hedonist, Lucien Carr, who reminded me, "To be reborn, you have to first die ..."

I nodded that I got it, and even a grin came to my face that had forgotten how to grin. Fergie turned and went running out the diner, and I chased after him, since that's now my charge and all. No kidding, it felt good.

CELL

Victoria Nordlund

My Dad is wearing his tan windbreaker,
lightly-salted mustache, and aviator glasses.
We are seaside in a villa in Mykonos.
He is putting on his New Balance shoes in the living
room. Wants to see the last monk, or an ancient
fisherman, or maybe anything sacred and miraculous.

I remind him we don't have much time here
and that there are better sites to visit.
And besides, we have an infinity
pool. The weather is to die for from what I can see
out an opaque window that is now an off-kilter frame
missing its picture. The only one left

on these walls that have turned to stone. I breathe
thick incense: Their holders
adorned with little silver dragons— red eggs
nestled in their mouths. I question the design
choices of this Airbnb,
try to remember how we got to Greece,

why my Dad isn't dead,
why the floor is wet sand,
why I am wading in water
with blue birds biting my toes.
(Aren't they supposed to be fish?)
And why he's lighting white candles for me

with his old television remote.

why waves are breaking on the pews,
why a Virgin Mary is floating in the wake,
why I can't read the numbers on the clock
on the altar, why he is silent, why I have a life
vest, why I never ask the right questions.

LITTLE RED

Paula Weiman

You didn't come here alone, did you? It's dangerous to set foot in a place like this with provincial dirt still stuck to your soles. Come sit with us. We saved you a seat. We were all new to the city once, too.

You need to learn the rules, Little Red. The world is run by wolves in expensive shoes. We're not trying to scare you. We heard you faced down a wolf and survived. Heard he swallowed you whole before a bystander stepped up and carved you out. We pictured it: the wound, the gaping stomach, your hair slicked down with blood.

We don't take the time to explain the rules to everyone, Little Red. We can't save every girl who thinks she's bulletproof. But we could see the survivor in the way you sidled up to the bar. We think you have what it takes.

You already know some of the easy ones. Take the well-lit street, wear shoes you can run in, that kind of thing. Those rules, they're not worth telling. They never make a difference.

The rules are, walk with your keys in your fist. Bet you've heard it a million times, right? But you probably heard wrong. Don't thread your keys through your fist like brass knuckles unless you want them to slice the soft meat between your fingers on impact. No, you gotta pick one and anchor it out the bottom of your fist so when he grabs you from behind you can straighten your elbow and jab his thigh, nice and easy, without even twisting your wrist around.

Some of us hold a file, too, in the nondominant hand. They're real cheap. Real innocent. You can pull it out of your coat pocket when you've got time to kill, smooth out your nails. Five bucks at the Duane Reade around the corner, and you'll be surprised how quick reaching for it becomes reflex.

The rules are to keep one ear open on the subway at all times. Pick your battles, though, for sure. When a man wraps his whole sweaty hand around your hand on the pole, it may not be worth making a scene. Sometimes you just scoot your hand down. But only put one headphone in,

no matter how much you love the song, because you're trapped in that car until you reach the next stop and it's a long ride back to the zip codes you can afford. In the empty hours after midnight, though, crank the volume. Can't have the train rocking you to sleep.

Lose the hood? Now, there's the age-old question. No hard rule about that one, unfortunately. Is it better to keep your peripherals clear so you know when the shadow detaches from the crowd to follow you up the street? Is it better to tuck all that shiny hair into your sweatshirt so there's nothing to glint and swish and remind them you're a woman-shaped morsel? Wisdom differs, but we hear it's your signature. Maybe it's best to change things up before you build a reputation.

We're not trying to scare you, Red. We're not the type to shame you for your lipstick. Any war paint you need to step out the door, that's fine by us. We don't care if you look sexy or dangerous or soft. That's the point we're getting at. None of that matters.

Wear whatever you want, whatever makes you comfortable, but the rules are that whenever you wear that dress—you know the one: lacy, virginal; the one you used to unpack at the first blush of spring—every time you wear it, you'll think of the man who stopped his motorcycle when he rode past you. How you didn't even think to speed up until you heard his footsteps running up behind you. How he wrenched the skirt up and all your self-defense lessons failed because you were too startled even to scream. How you considered yourself lucky that's all he did.

The rules are that you'll stop wearing a skirt to work. It's a retail job, right? No shame in that. Tale as old as time—young girl, big city, hourly gig until you hunt down your big break. Sure, we all started that way, and some even stuck with it. No shame at all, but you gotta stock shelves, right? Gotta grab something from the top shelf on the sales floor? It's an older man, usually. Hell, maybe he's there with his daughter, but you'll recognize the wolf's hot breath on your neck when he stands at the base of the ladder, blocking your exit. Maybe he'll couch it in chivalry—let me help you down. Maybe it's a compliment—that blue dress looks great against your skin. Your *skin*. Your manager will walk by without noticing a thing and you'll hem and haw until he steps back. It only has to happen once before you learn.

Hey, it's not all bad. The rules are you can cry in public. It can get to you, walking around feeling like everyone has a jawful of fangs and you're the only sucker stuck with a mouthful of piano keys, but the upshot is anonymity. Things were different in your hometown where the neighbors grapevined your every step back to your mother, but it doesn't work like that here. The subway tunnels are a cathedral and your sadness is the choir. Tell anyone who asks what's wrong to fuck right off because they should know

better. Prayer is something private.

The rules aren't fair, Little Red. Of course it's not fair. They won't even protect you, not if the wrong wolf catches your scent. But you're one of us now, kid. Wolves aren't the only ones who travel in packs. You watch our backs and we'll watch yours, and in a few years when a wide-eyed ingénue walks into the bar, you'll pull up an extra chair and wave her over. Show her there's more than one way to skin a wolf.

DAY ONE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FOUR

Sam Berkeley

There isn't much point in keeping count anymore.

Tropical-themed climate today. The humidity licks at her nape like the devil's hot tongue, and as she finishes plating breakfast, she wonders how much water the hydration assembly uses, and how long they have before more seawater needs to be purified.

Out of the corner of her eye, Wren appears. Pink, sweat-soaked, or maybe shower-soaked. Wasted water regardless. Wren doesn't seem to care, though. Maybe she doesn't notice. She just walks straight up and presses a warm, damp cheek against hers. "G'morning, Vivi."

Vivi's fingers are slick and tingling beneath the porcelain plates. She pulls away, sets breakfast on the table.

"Vivi?"

She turns and wipes hair from her face. It's so warm in here, she feels a headache coming on. "Yes?"

"I said good morning."

Vivienne nods and wipes her face again. "Breakfast."

Wren's eyes shift from Vivienne's face to her restless hands to the table. Her face twists. "There's stuff besides fruit to eat, you know? You don't have to ration so much."

"I must've forgotten." Vivienne sits and picks up an apple slice. The flesh crumples and flakes like a leaf on a hot stove. "No—I just wanted fruit today."

Wren throws a hand up, then seems to decide it's not worth it. "All right. Okay. God knows we have enough to last. But I'm going to get some bread. And some tea, too. Maybe that'll help you relax a bit."

Vivienne is perfectly calm, but she doesn't argue. She hears Wren rummage in the cabinets, then bites into the apple slice. It crumbles to dust between her teeth. Most foods did these days. If liquids could crumble, they'd do it too.

She picks up another slice, brings it to her mouth—freezes. There's something on the wall. A scratch—barely the length and width of one of her hairs—but still a scratch. That hadn't been there before, and it shouldn't have been there now. Human structures were built to last, but nature would always be stronger, especially reclaimed nature. Already she can hear moisture and gas coiling into the structure, winding around the concrete, rendering metal into scrap and introducing ceiling to floor.

The shelter is collapsing.

Then Wren is back with two slices of bread in one hand and two mugs held precariously in the other. She places it all down and sits. There's margarine already on the table, and she slathers half a knifeful on one of the slices before crunching into it. She gestures to it, speaking around her own half-chewed mush. "Try it. It's good."

The slab of grain and seeds looks the least appetizing thing in the world. Vivienne shakes her head. "Not right now." She rubs the back of her aching head and pulls a mug toward her. Steam rises from the brackish fluid inside, like the room wasn't humid enough already. The daily changing climate cycles are awful: beaches and rainforests one week, then tundras and mountains the next. It's too kind to call it "increased mental enrichment" like Wren had claimed the shelter manual boasted—in reality, it's mental torture. Vivienne had complained months ago, and all she had to show for it was Wren's insistence that she saw no way to change the system. Just like she saw no cracks in the wall. Cracks to let gas or water in or lead them to being crushed like roaches.

"That's going to burn you."

Vivienne looks down and finds that her finger is dragging circles in her tea. She pulls it out, shakes the droplets off. "It's fine. Barely warm."

Wren shifts her jaw. She washes down the last of her bread with the tea, smacks her lips, then purses them. "So what do you want to do today?"

"Like what?"

"Like ... I don't know. You could go into the yard, spend some time in the light. Read a book, or cook something." She picks up a fragment of dried fruit, then drops it with a clink. "*Talk*."

Vivienne doesn't talk.

Wren presses on. "All you do is wake up, stare into space, then go back to sleep. It's really depressing to see you like that. I think it's even starting to rub off on me." She smiles, and a second later it trembles and wanes. "You have to ... you know. Try and be happy. For your own good. For *our* own good. It's the only way forward."

Vivienne touches her tea-damp finger to her lips. It's bitter. The crack on the wall is taunting her. The ceiling lights flicker, casting dark shadows

across it. She flutters her eyelids in sync with them. “It would be so easy.”

“Easy to do what, Viv?”

“We could go to the hatch and open it. It’d be so easy. We’d never have to worry about this place or anything else anymore.”

Wren says nothing.

Vivienne stops fluttering her eyelids and stares at her. “Wouldn’t it?”

Wren picks up the other piece of bread, nibbles a corner off, swallows. “We can go to the library today. There have to be a few books you haven’t read yet.”

“There are no new books. We finished them all a hundred days ago.”

“Then we’ll find one we haven’t read in a while. You can read it to me. You always liked doing that. Remember?”

Vivienne stands, takes both their plates to the sink, and dumps the contents of both into the garbage disposal. It gurgles and pops as it’s all swallowed, a wet and gory mess. How many months or weeks or days worth of food had she just flushed down? One, five, ten? All the organic waste is meant to be siphoned to the garden, but that patch of dust and dirt is useless and they both know it.

She stares at the wall and at the weakness within it. “I want to go to the hatch today.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t want to go there.”

“I’ll come back. You can stay here if you want.” Vivienne watches Wren relax slightly, then rubs a sleeve over her eyes. The heat and humidity is oppressive. Too oppressive to wait for an answer. She leaves the room.



The exit hatch is in the exact same state as how they’d left it: dusty, oddly dry, and oddly cool, with the fine taste of metal hanging in the air. It coats the roof of Vivienne’s mouth like foam. If she stands on her tiptoes, the ceiling brushes her head. It’s not a pleasant place. But it’s a quiet place, a place far away from everything else, and that’s what matters.

The door stares back at her. She imagines it unlocking, opening, letting whatever hell was outside in. The world she remembers is so far away now—the sunlight, the morning breeze, everything they tried to replicate down here but failed at miserably. Like taping cooking magazine pages over the walls, knowing you’d never eat again.

She also remembers what had happened here, in this very spot. Or at least the most important parts of what happened. The blood, the screams, the thuds. Not the faces, though. Just the blood and screams and a burgeoning headache, much like the one she was nursing now. They’d done

what they had to in order to survive. That was what Wren always said. It had been a miracle to find this shelter when they had, even more so that they'd even gotten in.

It hadn't been a miracle for its former tenants. The bunker had little space, littler resources. With the air outside growing more volatile by the minute, what other choice had they had? But Vivienne's stomach still churns thinking of it all; her mind can't fully accept what she knows is true. Was everything they had done worth it?

Despite the cool dryness, her head still hurts. She uses her sweaty fingers to massage the base of her throat, then her left eyeball. The blood had been wiped away so long ago. There's nothing much to look at now—the walls are as gray and as icy as the air feels. Which is good. It's better than walls covered in red. Or cracks. If she listens hard enough, she can almost hear the ocean crashing against the shelter. It's difficult to listen hard enough, though. Especially with those echoing footsteps, tandem with her heartbeat.

“What are you doing?”

She opens her eyes and Wren is there, the light behind her hailing her as some sort of angel.

Vivienne looks away and licks her lower lip. It tastes like tea, still. “I told you I wanted to come here.”

“You didn't try opening it, did you?”

Vivienne shakes her head.

More footsteps, then Wren's hand on her shoulder. If her touch is sunlight, her voice is a brook against morning-cooled stones. “You can't keep torturing yourself like this. There's nothing out there for us anymore. You need to make the most of what you have down here, morale most of all. Morale is the most important thing we have.”

Vivienne pulls away. “I know.” She hesitates. “But ... I can't stop thinking about it.”

“About what?”

The crack in the wall. The hatch. The food and the water. The air, the ocean. Her headache. “Everything.” She pauses. “So much has been sacrificed so we can stay here. So we can *be* here. But ... how long will it last?”

“It will last for as long as we need it to. Longer than that, even.” Wren's grip tightens ever so slightly. “We'll cope. This won't last forever. Soon we can leave.”

Vivienne closes her eyes. She's certain she can hear the ocean now, crashing above and around her. The crack in the kitchen might be large enough at this point for gas or water to get in, slowly, very slowly. It would be so much faster just to pull the hatch. They'd never have to worry about

anything anymore.

"Come on," Wren whispers. "I found that one adventure novel you like to read. You haven't gotten tired of that one yet."



It's cooler today, much cooler than yesterday, though still a bit humid. Wren had been in charge of breakfast and lunch this time, and the meals sit warm and heavy in Vivienne's stomach. She's almost uncomfortably full; she can't remember the last time that's happened. Her appetite must have shrunk eating only one or two larger meals a week. How many days' worth had those two meals been? When would they run out of food? Tomorrow, ten years from now?

She folds her hands, unfolds them, turns them upward then downward. They're spindly, veins zagging through them like crevasses in stone. She uses them to rub the back of her neck, then she wiggles her toes. The green, plasticine grass between them almost feels pleasant. If she focuses on it hard enough, she can almost pretend the sun and breeze are real.

Wren hasn't been back in a while. Maybe she's preparing dinner. Hopefully it'll be smaller than breakfast and lunch, and cooler too, though Vivienne may regret that desire later on. The yard she's in is nearly brisk enough already. The room is barely ten paces on any one side, but it's still nice as it can be. If only she could have brought her book along, just so she could have something to look at besides her hands and feet and the walls painted to look like the sky, but she's meant to be reading it out loud to Wren. She doesn't want to have to read through a section twice—never mind that she's finished the entire novel three times over already.

She stands. The ceiling light dizzies her and she grasps at the air to steady herself. She scans the walls, the grass ... and sees a gap, an anomaly in the fronds.

Has that always been there? It couldn't have been. She crouches to the ground, knees digging into the floor. The fake dirt is visible down here, though it's more like sand, or dust. Vivienne crawls to the gap and brushes the debris away. There's a slit in the metal—a cut, a wound. An injury to the structure, something that shouldn't be there. Another breach in the security, one hair closer to suffocation. How long will this take?

When Vivienne presses her hand against the slit, she swears it tries to suck her into the abyss. Dust scatters around her feet as she flees through the cloud-painted door and to the kitchen, where Wren is working. She seizes her arm and drags her all the way to the yard, points at the crevice in

the floor.

Wren had been silent, but now a noticeable crease has etched itself between her eyebrows. She runs her fingers along the crack. "It's just a little dent, barely a chip in the paint. Don't worry. I'll fix it."

"Right now?"

Wren hesitates. "I'm telling you, it's not nearly enough to damage anything at all ... but if it'll make you feel better, I'll do it now."

Vivienne watches her leave. Her lungs whistle and strain against the thin air. It must be the oxygen getting sucked out, inhale after exhale. Or maybe it's water that's doing it? The entire bunker is surrounded by it, and not even the type they need to live. Choking on salt water sounds horrible, and so does choking on toxic gas. All so horrible, and all so *long* compared to the hatch. Vivienne can hardly breathe at all as it is. What is she supposed to do?

She flees a second time, sucking in deeply once she's free. She nearly bowls Wren over in the hallway, and even though Wren offers a placating smile, she can't smile back. She just squeezes herself into bed and buries herself under the blankets, hissing monoxide and dripping toxins following her all the way.



Shaking. Rumbling. She shifts and tries to breathe and finds that she can't. Panic sears through her, burning away all exhaustion. She thrashes under the heavy weight, gasping and grasping at nothing. Then she opens her eyes and Wren is staring down at her, and suddenly she can breathe again. The top of her pillow is damp and sticky, and so is her face.

"You didn't eat dinner."

It takes a moment to find words. "I ... I wasn't hungry." She sits up. Her clothes are soaked too. She starts breathing faster. "Did you fix it? The crack?"

"Of course I did. I said I would."

She wipes the back of her hand over her lips. It comes away streaked with saliva. Somehow she relaxes. "And it's fixed now? You're sure?"

"It's all patched up. Don't worry about it anymore."

Vivienne forces herself still as Wren brushes a hand through her hair, though it doesn't cooperate very well as tangled and damp as it is. "Patched?" she asks. "Permanently?"

"Well—maybe not permanently. I'll go back to it later, if that'll make you feel better."

Not permanently. It'll just open up again. And there was still the one in

the kitchen to worry about, too. Vivienne slips out of bed. “I’m going to the hatch.”

Wren grabs her by the waist and squeezes her, hard. “No.” Her voice breaks into a feeble murmur. “No. I hate seeing you like this so *much*, Vivi. You’re so ... you’re so *neurotic* now. We promised we’d stick together and keep each other happy.” She pulls Vivienne closer to her and though Vivienne dwarfs her by a good six inches, she fits into her arms so easily. “And remember when we first came here? What I promised you?”

“After ... after you ...”

“After we settled in.” After she had dispatched this place’s former inhabitants for her and Vivienne. After the screaming and the red on the floor. “I said that I’d keep you safe no matter what. Remember?”

Vivienne rubs her aching skull. “Through the war? The—disaster?”

“Yes.”

She lets Wren pull her hand from her head, but stays quiet. There’s no helping her envy for the people who were no longer here, the people who should have been here instead of them. They didn’t have to deal with holes and cracks. They didn’t have to deal with anything. At least their suffering had ended quickly. “Will we have to stay here forever? There’s nothing up there for us anymore?”

Wren is still hugging tight and doesn’t seem ready to let go. “Maybe things will get better eventually. We’ll be able to leave and find a good place, and live there instead of here.”

It’s been so long. A part of Vivienne desires Wren’s optimism, but mostly, she just finds it stupid: A solution sits half a minute’s walk from them, and yet they don’t take it. Still, she sits and lets Wren detangle her hair. For once there is no hissing of gas, no crashing of water. Just silence.

Before she knows it, Wren has finished. “Are you going back to sleep?”

“I’m not hungry.” She peels her shirt away from her back, and lies down. She closes her eyes. “I ... I feel better now. Thank you.”

Wren pulls the covers over Vivienne, lingers just a moment, then is gone.

Vivienne opens her eyes. She scans the wall. It doesn’t take long to find what she is looking for. It sits in the top left corner, just an inch from the ceiling. It’s smaller than the other two, but it’s begun to hiss nonetheless.

She can’t let herself go through this anymore. She can’t let Wren. This must end, now.



Dinner. Vivienne volunteered to cook and the meal she’s prepared is

the best she's ever made. She pulls a bottle of wine from the cabinet, then another one to be sure. Wren isn't here yet, which is a good thing. There's so much to double check, triple check, and so little time to do it.

Vivienne is into her sixth rechecking when Wren arrives. She stops and looks around. Her nose wrinkles. "Yesterday, we had more than enough to eat. You shouldn't be having more than you need all the time, you know?"

"I know. But you made me feel better yesterday, so I wanted to return the favor."

Wren's frown breaks, and she smiles instead. "Well, I'm glad about that."

Vivienne ushers Wren to the table, and watches her as she eats and drinks and smiles big. Vivienne takes a sip of her own wine, too. The crack on the wall mocks her, but she dulls her headache and heartache with the edge of her glass as much as she dares. The hissing is in her ears.

Wren polishes off her dinner and the first bottle of wine, so Vivienne goes for the other one. By the time they're finished, Wren can barely stand.

Vivienne pushes her plate away. "Don't worry about washing up. I'll do it."

"Okay, Vivi. Thank you."

Vivienne almost smiles. She watches Wren leave for the bedroom, then stacks the dishes and puts them in the sink, buying time. The slit in the wall hisses for her attention, but she refuses to give in—there's not much point in doing so, now. She follows Wren into the bedroom.

Wren is already asleep. She looks so peaceful, lying there with her chest shallowly rising and falling. She doesn't stir, but it looks like there's a small smile on her face.

Vivienne's eyes sting. It must be the gas. She picks up her pillow from her side of the bed and presses it over Wren's face.

There is, of course, a struggle, but it's not too difficult of one, with the alcohol in Wren's veins and Vivienne's weight on her abdomen. It's over almost as soon as it starts.

Vivienne sits there longer than she has to, crying. What other option had she had, besides saving her own skin and abandoning Wren? There'd have been no way she could have convinced her to go to the hatch. She couldn't have left her here to worry and perish alone, suffocated by her own exhales or drowned by the waves that had once guarded them.

But it still hurts.

It hurts so bad.

Vivienne squeezes Wren's hand. It's still warm and soft. She looks at the pillow covering her face and decides to keep it there. She wouldn't want to see what Vivienne is about to do. She had tried so hard to prevent this,

and now look at what's happening. Plus, if Vivienne had to see what Wren looks like now, she may just lie here and rot on the bed herself. She has to see sunlight again, feel moving water again, maybe even smell the breeze again—even if that breeze will kill her.

The hatch is how it was when Vivienne left it last time. No cracks to be seen, unlike everywhere else. She stares at the heavy metal door, then, with shaking fingers, pulls a ring of keys from her pocket. It hadn't been hard to find where Wren had hidden them. Vivienne's heart pounds. She puts key after key to the lock, until one, at last, fits.

Nothing at first, then the door slightly gives. Vivienne pulls. More and more it opens. No water yet. Vivienne takes a deep breath because it might be the last she ever takes, closes her eyes, and pulls hard.

When she opens her eyes, there is no water, no tropical sand even. The gasp she takes in doesn't kill her. It's just normal air. Standing before her, the inside of a normal house. And visible from the other side of the normal window, there's movement.

Vivienne looks back into the bunker. Something like poison is rising in her throat. She peels herself away from the metal entrance, and steps into the sunlight, normal, warm, agonizing sunlight.

A normal yard. A normal street. Normal people, except when they see her they stop and gesture, sharing looks. Some of them take a faltering step toward her. Others hurry away.

It's not until strong hands wrap around her shoulders that she realizes the world had been twisting, tilting underneath her. "Steady!" a voice booms into her ears. "Steady. You're—you're pale as a ghost, ma'am. Are you okay? Should I call someone for you?"

Wren. No. Vivienne wishes for the toxic gas but there's none here; there's none anywhere. Her head hurts so badly. "The—the war. The poison. What happened?"

The hands lower her to the ground and a young man enters her line of vision. "I—I'm not sure what you're talking about, ma'am. There is no war. Did you hit your head? How many fingers am I holding up?"

He says other things, but Vivienne's not listening. All she'd wanted was a quick end ... but there is no end for her. Just like there is no war. No gas, no ocean, no bunker, no people in the bunker who'd had to be killed for her own survival. No screaming or blood on the floor besides her own. She remembers now. She'd put up a struggle and hit her head and bled blood and memories everywhere, but now they're all coming back. They're all coming back now that she's past the hatch where she lost them all.

No wonder the water had never run out. No wonder they had never suffocated. No wonder there had been nothing to worry about over the

cracks. There had always been fresh air, ready to be heated or chilled or pumped with precious aerosolized water. There had always been food, ready to be withheld and then doled out on one indulgent day a week. The other six days had been for ailing and idling. Unpredictable days, unpredictable air. Keeping Vivi on edge. Keeping Vivi exhausted. Tired complacent Vivi. Cold metal on the face, bleeding, screaming. She hadn't remembered anything, and that was why she'd been treated so nicely, why there had been wine and storybooks and a shiny fake yard to roam freely in, and why the world above had so easily turned to post-apocalyptic wasteland. Don't go to the hatch you don't want to go up there. Come read me a story, you always liked doing that. Right Vivi? Right?

A crowd surrounds her now, whispering, wincing. A mother ushers her child away. The man has backed away, and he has something to his ear and he's yelling, screaming for help, but Vivienne doesn't hear him, because by then she's screaming herself.

MOMMY MONSTER

Elizabeth Falcon

My mother is a monster. A sad monster with long, reaching tentacles and a wide, slobbering mouth. No matter what or who she puts into that mouth, she is always hungry, always sad. Poor Mommy. Poor, poor Mommy monster.

She keeps trying to pull me in but for years I have been pulling away, incrementally reaching the end of her tendrils but not being able to break free. I think it would destroy her big, deformed heart if I completely detached. I don't want her to suffer any more than she already does. When I was small, she used to keep me close to her mouth and when she felt particularly sad or lonely or scared she would suck on my head. She isn't a vicious monster—she didn't actually try to eat me—but I guess sucking on me gave her some sort of comfort. It was messy business and I had to go to school with Mommy-saliva in my hair and smelling of cold spit. Other kids didn't like me much; I was always trying to get close to their mouths.

My father was around but not really around. He was there but couldn't do much because Mommy usually kept him buried in the folds of her, tucked under the joints of her tentacles where she could feel his every move. Once in a while when he shifted position to get more comfortable it would pinch Mommy in her tender spots. She would explode with tears and rage, flailing her tentacles in the air, roaring with her huge, red maw. Then she and her mass and her tentacles would go away for a little while. This is when I saw Daddy the most—he would look so small in the place where her body had been. He would be pale and thin and weak but he would get up and make me grilled cheese sandwiches or macaroni and tomatoes. He always knew Mommy would come back, but I didn't; I thought she had left us forever and this scared me and made me sad. Daddy would try to act like nothing bad was happening and he would let me watch television extra late with him until I fell asleep with my head on his chest, my eyes crusted with dried tears.

Mommy always did come back. She would come back and sit at a distance from us and then we would go to her; Daddy tucking himself under her folds, me sidling up to her mouth. Soon enough she would settle down and we would all fall asleep like that, Mommy's warm saliva on my head. Then things would be okay for a while. Mommy and Daddy were usually extra snuggly after one of these episodes. This meant less head-sucking for me for a few days, always a happy relief.

As I grew older, the head sucking got to be more of a problem. It was embarrassing and made me feel funny, like I couldn't get enough air into my lungs. I eventually made some friends at school—Jill and Ronnie, siblings who had a monster daddy, and Stef, who was a monster herself. I started staying away from the house more and more. These friends might not have been my first choice but they were good enough. They at least understood why I sometimes had slicked-back hair and smelled like cold spit. Not all monster mommies suck on the heads of their children but it wasn't completely uncommon. Other symptoms that a kid has a monster parent include: giant teeth marks (Mommy only bit me once, by accident); claw marks (thankfully, Mommy doesn't have claws); bruises (mine were tentacle-shaped, usually around the wrist or ankle); torn clothing; superior running and/or hiding skills; and the tendency to avoid home during the full moon.

As teenagers, my friends and I spent most of our time wandering around our sleepy suburb like a pack of mangy dogs, talking about the future like it would be different for us than it was for our parents. When we were together, we were like caged animals set free. We prided ourselves on our rambunctiousness and bad manners. Elderly people and normal mommies with small children would cross the street to avoid us. But we weren't dangerous, not really. Stef could get a bit aggressive sometimes, but she never physically hurt anyone. She was pretty high-strung and would scream obscenities at people who looked at her the wrong way, which was frequent since she was a monster. There were a couple of times she sabotaged peoples' lives by writing anonymous letters (one to the young wife of a man who had tried to sleep with her, another to an ex-boyfriend's very conservative parents), but I don't think she meant to hurt anyone. That's the thing with monsters, they tend to act on impulse in the moment. Mommy was the same. She didn't intend to hurt Daddy or me with her tentacle gripping and her head sucking and her occasional outbursts of rage that broke things. But it happened anyway.

Shortly after puberty, my finger and toenails started changing and I took it as a warning. Some monsters (like Stef) are born the way they are but other monsters grow into their monstrosity. Mommy wasn't always a

monster. She was actually a really cute little kid until about the age of nine or ten. Then some bad things happened and she started growing little tentacles and her mouth started getting bigger. She was good at hiding the changes for a long time. When she graduated high school the monster signs were noticeable but not overwhelming. In Mommy and Daddy's wedding photo, she has two very large tentacles peeking out from under her dress and a very, very big smile. But by the time I was two she was almost unrecognizable. So, when I noticed that my nails were starting to look more like claws, I knew I had to get some distance between me and Mommy. That's the way it works—monsters make monsters.

I managed to hold it at bay through my teen years and into my twenties. I trimmed and filed my claws down to dull nubs and I would gnaw on walnut shells to keep my teeth from becoming too sharp. After high school, I started working as a waitress, moved out and saw less and less of Mommy and Daddy. I'd call Daddy sometimes when I knew Mommy was sleeping (she was a really deep sleeper) and he would answer the phone secretly, underneath the blanket of her flesh and tentacles. I knew he wouldn't wake her up—that would be catastrophic for both of us—but I think he felt guilty about our little conversations because he always cut them short and told me to call back when Mommy was awake. I missed both Mommy and Daddy but I couldn't be around Mommy anymore except once in a while. When I did visit, I got close enough that she could wind the very tip of a tendril around my thumb or, if I was feeling affectionate, my wrist. But she hadn't managed to suck on my head for years.

Not for lack of trying, mind you. The more I pulled away the more she reached. If she had been younger and smaller maybe she might have been able to move quicker and wrap herself around me when my guard was down, but she had grown slow and heavy with age. She still had her fits of rage but they were less frequent and less potent. It was as if she was getting tired and didn't have the energy anymore. Daddy took care of her, fed her and helped her move about here and there. He built her pretty little bird houses on poles and placed them outside the front window and soon enough the entire front yard was cluttered with them. She would look out the window and sigh, and sometimes a tear or two would roll down her massive cheeks and into her slack open mouth. She would press her wet eyes against the glass and then her entire body, her tentacles groping for a crack in the wall she could pry into, force an opening. Daddy had to drill some holes through the wall so she could reach the birdhouses. One time I showed up for a visit and six of her tentacles were protruding from the house, each one wrapped around a different birdhouse on the lawn and Mommy's wet face was pressed against the window, partially obscured by

the condensation of her crying. It broke my heart to see her so sad and I sat on the lawn, tenderly stroking the end of one of Mommy's tentacles while being careful to stay clear of the others.

Then the unimaginable happened: Daddy died. My parents' neighbour called me in a panic one morning because Mommy had found Daddy laying half out of the bathtub, his unblinking eyes staring at the ceiling. I rushed over, arriving just as the ambulance was pulling up, and ran interference with Mommy while they did what they could do (which wasn't much). I barricaded Mommy into the living room so that her tentacles, which kept reaching for Daddy, couldn't get in the way. It was awful. Poor Daddy laying there naked while strangers fussed and prodded and then, eventually, took him away. Mommy was so hysterical I couldn't even process that Daddy was dead—I had to contain the situation so that Mommy didn't destroy the entire house. As it was, she pulled down part of the drywall in the ceiling, smashed the picture window and spewed vomit all over the living room furniture. The ambulance workers, too afraid to approach her, called in the Monster Emergency Special Unit and they arrived and shot Mommy with a tranquilizer gun. Once she was out, I tried to arrange her as comfortably as possible and then hurried off to the hospital to deal with the Daddy situation.

There was paperwork to fill out and phone calls to make. The hospital let me see Daddy's body so I could say goodbye. He was so small and frail and had a terrible expression on his face. I laid my head on his chest and wept for a while, wanting to just stay there and fall asleep like I used to when we watched late night television together, waiting for Mommy to come home. But I was an adult now and had to do adult things that Mommy couldn't do. I had to take care of everything. And I needed to get back to Mommy before she woke up from the tranquilizer shot.

The Monster Emergency Special Unit people had given me six big, pink tablets to give Mommy to make her calm, and the name of a doctor who did house visits and could prescribe more. These got us through the funeral, keeping her docile enough to be loaded in and out of the cargo van, to and from the church and the house. The day after the funeral Mommy said she didn't want any more pills; she just wanted to sit by the window (which I had boarded up) and look at her bird houses. I removed the plywood and the shards of broken glass and Mommy sat and looked out the window-hole and cried quietly. Out of curiosity and a desire to not have to think or feel anything for a while, I took a quarter of Mommy's last pink pill. I sat on the floor a few meters away, resting my back against the wall. Her tentacles reached for me and I let her wrap one of them around my wrist. We stayed like that for a long time and I eventually fell asleep.



I woke up to the familiar feeling and sound of Mommy sucking on the top of my head. It took me a minute to figure out what was going on, but then the fog of Mommy's pink pill started to clear and I remembered that I had been sitting on the living room floor. Mommy must have gently and carefully pulled me in to her as I slept. My arms and legs felt tingly and numb. Mommy had her tentacles wrapped firmly around me, hugging me close to her body. One side of my face was squished against her and I could only open my eye on the other side. It was night and she had moved us to the kitchen, probably to get us away from the cool air coming through the broken window but maybe also because she was hungry. I wondered if she had eaten or if she would want me to cook for her. And then I felt very, very sad. Daddy always cooked for Mommy. Daddy was gone. I cried as silently as I could against Mommy's body but she felt my convulsions and squeezed me tighter.

Mommy kept me close like that for days. I don't actually know how many days it was but long enough that my fingernails and toenails needed work and my teeth started to cut my bottom lip. She would unroll her tentacles enough for me to use the bathroom and do things around the house but never enough for me to pry them off so that I could return to my life. I phoned the restaurant where I worked and told them I wouldn't be in for a while. My boss knew about my father and was sympathetic, but made a point of explaining how he would have no choice but to hire someone to replace me if I wasn't back by the following Wednesday. I didn't know what day that was. Time was disorienting. When I wasn't cleaning up the living room or taking care of Mommy (she needed help to bathe and someone had to brush her long, white hair which got tangled in everything), I would doze against the warmth of her body while she watched her birdhouses through the broken window. Sometimes I would look at the clock and the numbers would make no sense and gave me a panicky feeling, like I was losing some vital sense of reality. I couldn't even watch television because Mommy broke it the day Daddy died.

One day, in the shower, I thought that maybe if I lathered my wrist and ankle with soap they would be slippery enough that I could escape. But as soon as I started working the soap in between the rings of Mommy's tentacles, she wound them tighter, her tendrils coiling up my leg to my knee. She wasn't stupid. I stood in the tub and looked at her tentacles snaking in from under the curtain and I started to cry. Why was this my life? Why was she my mother? I brought my hands to my face to muffle my sobs and one of my fingernails cut my forehead, making it bleed into my eye. I wiped away the watery blood and stared at my hands: my nails looked like long, curved claws. They were sharp. My feet were no better. It occurred to me that being

close to Mommy was speeding up the monster traits I had worked so hard to suppress.

I tried prying Mommy's tendril off my wrist. She squeezed. Some kind of instinct took over, flooding my body with adrenaline. I screamed in frustration. She tried pulling me out of the shower. I resisted, bracing myself against the rim of the tub. Her grip was so tight my hand and foot were turning purple. With my free hand I slashed at first one tentacle, then the other, causing both to retract and cutting them deeply. Mommy roared from the other room and I could feel the house shake as she rose up to her full height. Something smashed in the kitchen. Two more tentacles emerged from the other side of the curtain and I slashed at those too. Mommy's blood was spilling into the tub and onto the bathroom floor. She roared again. I shut off the water, jumped over the writhing mass of tentacles on the floor and climbed onto the counter. I hurriedly pulled on my underwear and t-shirt before pushing the window open, breaking one of my claws in the process. When my head and shoulders were through the window, a tentacle reached up and whipped around my forearm. I brought my teeth to it and Mommy shrieked from the bathroom doorway. She thrashed wildly, knocking the mirror off the wall, its broken shards cutting her even more. I wriggled through the window and fell into the flowerbed several feet below. Mommy's tentacles followed, groping above my head. I rolled to a safe distance and stood up, dirt and leaves sticking to my wet body. Mommy's eye was at the window, squished between three tentacles that were waving in the air, reaching for me. I turned and ran.



These days I see Mommy once a week, on Sunday afternoons. My therapist thinks it's important to maintain a connection but to focus on the future. I'm building a new relationship with Mommy, one with healthy boundaries. The life-insurance payout from Daddy was enough for me to find someone with specialized training to go to the house and take care of Mommy every day, making her meals and washing her and brushing her hair. I was also able to pay someone to fix the living room and the bathroom and the picture window. I lucked out with the handyman—his dad was a monster, too, so he is super understanding and patient with Mommy. He even put rubber seals on the tentacle holes in the wall so that when Mommy isn't using them, the cold air doesn't come into the house. I don't go in the house. I see Mommy from the front yard, through the window, which now opens partway so Mommy can hear and smell the outside. I had a bench installed so that I can sit at the edge of the birdhouses and read to her and

gently hold and stroke the very tip of her longest tentacle, one of the only ones that isn't scarred or partly amputated. I always make sure my nails are ground down to stubs before I go to Mommy's, just so she knows I trust her and so I don't accidentally scratch her.

Mommy still cries a lot and I reassure her from my bench that I love her, that Daddy loved her. I tell her that things are much better this way, that it will all be okay in time. I chew on my walnut shells and try not to wonder if this is true.

REREADING AUDEN

David Donna

The reindeer will have died. The birds
haven't been heard in a while.
It's easier to watch the mighty fall
when you aren't watching from inside.

I'm still trying—to commit it all to memory.
Verse by verse. Each swell of feeling
breaks and sinks away,
resounding eerily.

Something is tangled in the lines.
The ironies have grown wilder
and worse—the knots of thorn-cursed vines'
far-flung roots tap pigshit aquifers.

The packages accumulate outside;
I find a way to tip the guy
when food arrives; the kettle's almost boiled; so, too,
the sky; deliverance comes

only to the eye, for all I do
is reread Auden's "Fall of Rome," and cry,
and hope whatever takes us down at last
does silently and very fast.



"Rereading Auden" pays homage to W.H. Auden's 1947 poem, "The Fall of Rome," which uses the last days of the Roman Republic to reflect on something broader: the social disintegration that would give rise to the Caesars, and to fascism in Auden's day. You can read the full text of Auden's short poem for free at <https://poets.org/poem/fall-rome>.

FLOOR FIVE

Die Booth

“There’s someone in there,” says Martin. He stares out of the window. He is always staring, staring in the same direction.

Andy makes a sort of laugh noise, blowing a pinch of air down his nostrils. He doesn’t take his eyes from his computer screen.

There are two fish tanks in their office. They are a novelty design, with miniature pieces of polychromic plastic furniture that the little fish can swim around. They are made to look like submerged offices, with tiny plastic picture-frames moulded to the desks, each featuring identical cartoon representations of an anthropomorphic goldfish family. It was Lisa’s idea. Lisa thinks they are cute. Her submerged furniture is red and yellow, Anna’s is green and blue. Martin feels secretly sorry for the fish, swimming in endless loops in and out of the garish, hollow filing cabinets. The fish in their tanks crowd to one side and stare across the aisle at the fish in the opposite tank. Sometimes Martin is sure that they are all staring at him. It’s the way it’s always been.

The office building is built on a square, four stories high with a central courtyard. Martin’s office is on the third floor. From his desk by the window, Martin stares at the opposite window across the yard, at the people working there. The people look back at him. It’s the way it’s always been. The company commissions useless little crepe paper kites as a promotional gimmick to advertise ‘flying high.’ Martin hangs his out of the window, knowing that it will dissolve in the first fall of rain. The people in the office opposite turn away and pretend not to see the brave little twist of red hanging becalmed beneath Martin’s window against stonework the colour and texture of digestive biscuit. “There’s someone in there. They’re watching me.”

Andy looks up, the briefest flick of his eyes, focuses again on the spreadsheet on his screen. “Of course they’re watching you; you’ve spent the last ten minutes kneeling on your desk trying to fly a toy kite out of your

window. I'm surprised they've not reported you."

"Not them. Up there. The Tank."

Andy looks first at the fish bowl on the desk next to his, then up to where Martin is looking. There is one room on the fifth floor, a little concrete block of a room that juts out higher than the rest, so that it isn't really a proper fifth floor at all. It has floor to ceiling windows on the quadrant side that has earned it the nickname 'The Fish Tank,' although the rest of the building would deserve the label more. It is at this room Martin stares. Andy shrugs. He notices a ring of spilt coffee on the plasti-wood surface of his desk and starts to scrub at it with a torn corner of lined paper.

The building is a labyrinth. The floors are colour coded. Martin's floor has paintwork the same rubbery shade of pink that they use in psychiatric hospitals. He runs down one set of staircases, around to the opposite side of the building and up another, as many times a day as he can get away with. He hopes this will counteract the muscle-stiffening inertia that sitting all day at the same desk causes.

This building used to be a prison. Down below, cellar-height, are half moon windows with latticed iron bars still on them, and predictable rumours of haunting. Downstairs is low, subterranean corridors and the smell of damp. There are cast-iron ceiling vents shaped like roses in the chapel where prisoners were once given last rites. That's the oldest part of the building, now filled top to bottom with grey-painted Meccano-metal shelves heaped with rotting cloth-bound ledgers that nobody is preserving for posterity. A ghost gaoler called Edward paces the tunnels in spirit, with a jangling chatelaine of phantom keys. In cell 3A, the phantom of a prisoner called Jim beats habitually on the unlocked door which is scored with graffiti from its last use as a Court holding cell, sometime in the 1980s. If you hold a glass against the far wall at ear height, you can still eavesdrop on the trials taking place in the courts next door. This is what people say about downstairs.

Downstairs doesn't scare Martin. Downstairs is filled with history; upstairs is filled with progress, and history doesn't leave you behind. He writes short stories full of grim wish-fulfillment in cramped rows of capitals on company logo Post-it notes. He sticks them, overlapping like scales, to the back of his corporate diary. He is fifty-four years old and unmarried. He adds a new horror to his catalogue of fears; that when his parents die, he will be completely alone.

On Tuesday there are men on the roof. They're climbing the access ladders to nudge black slurry from the clogged gutters with broom handles. They cut through the pigeon netting to make holes for their arms to fit through and close it later, clumsily, with cable ties. The dislodged muck falls

heavy and silent to slop on the quad paving below. Martin wishes he could see it land. They notice him watching and he looks quickly away as they turf out a trailing plume of weeds, the only greenery within Martin's range of vision; gone, plummeting after the rest.

When Martin next runs around the stairs to stretch his legs, he doesn't go down three flights, he goes up one. He carries on around the corridor. The walls are decorated with watercolour paintings done by residents of a local day-care centre. A stiff field mouse clinging to an ear of wheat—it looks stuffed, stapled to the grain. The frames are bolted to the walls, in case anyone is scheming to steal them. He has done a full circuit by the time he realises that there are no more stairs leading up from the fourth floor.

"Who do you think works in there?" asks Martin to the office at large. Nobody answers. Through the glass side of the Fish Tank he can see a plain wooden desk with a computer monitor on it, side on, and a grey plastic chair in front of the desk. It is quite mundane. He has never seen anyone in the room, the window is never open, and from this vantage point you can't see a door either.

Andy says, "Sorry mate, you talking to me?" When Martin doesn't reply, he continues, "Pensions, probably." He picks up his phone and starts dialing.

From the street side of the building, Martin can't even see the floor the room is on. It's as if it doesn't exist. He counts the windows, but there are so many mezzanines and staircases he can't even be sure which floor is which and where each ends. You can't access the room from inside the building; he's tried. When you stand on the road and look at the outside of the façade, counting the windows never gives the same number twice. He circles the fourth floor daily, and even goes down to the basement to look at building plans. Floor five doesn't appear on any of them. Gary the janitor says that it's probably because the whole building was built in stages, and the very latest additions won't be marked on every set of plans. He asks with brief suspicion why Martin is so interested, and nods when he mentions history.

Beneath the Fish Tank is a flat beige concrete roof, covering part of the third floor. It's edged with a curved barrier of tubular steel, like the kind used to cordon off crowds at rock concerts, the upward arching tips of the poles stopped with nuggets of black rubber. Martin hooks his leg over the steel barrier and feels the grate of damp, gritty concrete under the glassy sole of his shoe. He's slipped out of one of the off-limits fire exits into the central quad, disused by everyone but the caretakers and builders. An aluminium ladder leads right up the side of the building to the roof of the third floor. From there, you're on your own. He climbs the rickety access ladder he saw the workmen use.

A little handrail hems the edge of the flat roof of the fourth floor, an odd, circular reception aerial at its crux. Martin looks up at the Fish Tank. The bricks of the side wall are white and shiny, with sharp black lines separating them, like toy bricks or swimming pool tiles. The walls are perfectly flat and oblique, the paint-work around the window a storm-sky teal that makes Martin think of drowning. The overhead crosshatch of pigeon netting against the blank, white sky follows seamlessly from the white bricks and merges with the chain-link handrails, giving the impression of the whole building being caught in a giant net. Every so often a bird will get trapped and die, failing wing-flaps like a wind-up toy winding down. People in the nearest office will point out of the window in outrage and poke at it with the hook-ended poles used for opening the high windows, exclaiming 'poor thing!' in voices of wounded fascination.

To the right, leading on, is a flat glass roof that Martin edges along; greenhouse-like, slanting gently upwards to a shallow apex. More of these roofs of glass bisect and meet at angles. It is an alien landscape. A chunky loop of steel is riveted to the wall beneath the Fish Tank, above a blue and white laminate sign declaring '! Anchor point for safety harness.' Martin places his hands flat against the shiny white tiles, willing some kind of purchase, and wedges his foot against the top of the metal ring. He pushes up, a smooth movement from his thigh muscle, and he can reach the water-coloured window ledge above with the tips of his fingers.

The office windows tip up; they swing open on a central pin. The type of windows you could crawl out of and slide to your death. The top half of the Fish Tank window is like this. Martin flails one leg up towards the lower ledge, feels it slip straight off. He cocks first one leg and then the other up behind him, tugging off his shoes and socks one-handed and throwing them back onto the roof below. The paintwork is flaky underfoot. He clings as close as possible to the glass whilst trying not to put too much weight onto it, as he carefully stands up and prepares to test the top window. He hardly registers that he's looking right into floor five until he turns his head and stares straight in through the smudgy glass. The room is empty, apart from the desk, chair and computer. There is no door. Nobody is watching him. There isn't even any dust to disturb.

Then, a slight movement catches his eye, a tiny shift in front of the desk, and for a jolting moment Martin sees himself there, sees himself from the outside, seated alone at that workstation in that room with no door and no escape save the sheer drop from the only window. It moves again and he catches his own eye and then realises that he's seeing, obliquely somehow, merely his reflection in the computer monitor's screen. He's not trapped in there at all.

Martin feels a sensation of weightlessness that he takes for relief, then he recognises with a soothing lack of drama that he's dropping away from the wall, turning in the air like a circus accident—Live from the Big Top! Without a Safety Harness! As he climbed, he could see behind him, reflected in the glass, his window—the one with the tiny red and yellow kite suspended from the catch—the only window that stands out in the entire façade of the building. As he falls, it's the last thing he sees; the pennant of fluttering red that is his kite in full flight.



It's funny, but when someone is okay, you can go months without seeing them. You'll never give them a second thought. But as soon as they're ill in hospital, you're there every night, as if you're stocking up on time with them; getting some in before they die. As if sitting by a hospital bed watching someone sleep stuffed full of tubes is somehow nobler than stopping by their house to moan about the weather when they're well enough to politely nod along. It's all a form of guilt then, to make you feel better, not the person you're visiting.

Anna visits Martin in the hospital and reads to him aloud from books, because she saw on television that people in comas can still hear and sense everything that is going on around them. She remembers that he once expressed a liking for Kafka, so she reads 'Metamorphosis' to him, even though it is terribly unhappy and surely not the stuff of sweet dreams. Her voice is hushed, because unlike on television, Martin has a curtained partition and not a chic private room with a single carnation in a minimalist glass vase. He doesn't even have a window, not that it would make much difference to him in his current state. She hopes that he can still hear her through his unconsciousness, even when she's trying to keep her words from the family across the aisle.

Martin can't hear her at all. He's too busy dreaming of the moment when he will wake up. He is eager to regain consciousness; it's like waiting to be granted access to a room with no door. The first thing he will do is quit his job. He will meet a woman and fall in love. He will spend his savings on day-to-day things. He will stop spending his life waiting and invent what it is he's been waiting for.

THE MASCOT

B.C.G. Jones

For a long time I belonged to a very special club at school. Granted, you couldn't get any class credits for being a member. Then again, we were beyond caring about credits. No one would be putting us on their college applications, either. Not that we were too dumb for college—not all of us—but it wasn't in the cards and we didn't need it. In fact, most of the kids at King High never even knew we existed.

We called ourselves the Wasted Youth. But before I tell you anything more, I'd appreciate if you got this girl who's helping me talk to you something to wet her whistle. Something strong. Yeah, a Bloody Mary would hit the spot. It means she'd be getting some vitamins A and C in her system as well, just in case you think I was one of those burnout cases who never went to class.

What do you want to know about the Wasted Youth? Let's get to the obvious lead-off question of who the club was for. The first requirement was very simple: you had to have died in your teens. If your death was violent or at least dramatic, that would help your case a lot.

Take me for example. Me and a buddy ... I'm sorry, a friend—and I were out for a high ride one night. This was during Christmas break, the year of the Bicentennial. He was behind the wheel, eyes red as a stop sign. I stuck my head out the window to howl at the moon, that's how good I felt. But why stop at head and neck? I stood on the passenger bucket seat of his '63 Falcon and jammed the whole upper half of my body out into the open air, still howling. Richie—that was my buddy's name—laughed so hard it wasn't until the last second he saw he was in the wrong lane and a florist's delivery van was coming the other way. He swerved just in time. Just in time to save himself and the car, that is. I got thrown headfirst into a big rock planted in the dirt on the side of the road. Broke my neck, cracked my skull wide open, by the time the paramedics got there they had nothing to do but shake their heads.

Like I said, violent and dramatic is better. We were there to haunt the high school, and I make no bones about that. I'm proud of it. And if that's your goal, it's good to have a head of steam built up, and maybe to have gotten people talking already.

Our meeting place was backstage at the school theatre, so we shared it with the drama club, although of course they didn't know that. Over the years that I was in the club, the actual theatre—the stage and the house—got overhauled a bunch of times. The backstage stayed pretty much the same. Yellow walls, shiny black floors, fluorescent tube lights, Old Glory hanging from over the door. It was home to us. As for the kids putting on plays and musicals, we could give them a scare at any time, put a little "Scottish" in any play. I like to think it kept them on their feet, made them better.

It all started to come apart on what seemed to us like a normal day. Three boys and a tomboy were tossing a basketball around, loud enough to hear if any living soul was out in the hall. Two other girls sat on the floor under the electric clock and traded what you might have thought was gossip. If you listened closely it was more like battle plans. Other kids buzzed around doing this or that. As for me, I just stood with my arms folded at the far wall, looking tough. Because I'm big, I was sort of a sergeant-at-arms for the Wasted Youth. My size and my forbidding stare suited me for it, and no one could question my loyalty to Matthew.

I was there in case anyone challenged Matthew, although not many did. He was our leader, or as he liked to call himself, "the auteur of reality" for the dead kids at King High. He'd been sort of a beatnik, and he still was. The auteur lingo was from a magazine he collected called *Cahiers du Cinéma*. Unlike me, he looked like a short, skinny little puke with horn-rimmed glasses and oily hair. But he had power, and when you were in his presence you knew it. So he never had to raise his voice. Anytime he might have been tempted to, he had me to lay down the law, but that was only on special occasions.

So where was Matthew this day? He paced in this tight little corner away from the rest of us, reading this little white sheet of paper. It was a bulletin meant for his eyes only, and where it came from was a mystery to me. He happened on one line and furrowed his brow, then looked up at me.

"Attention, Amos," he said. "We've got a new arrival at the school."

"She a prospect?" I asked.

"If you're asking whether she's dead, of course she is. Of course we still need to assess whether she's compatible and all that. Anyway, her name is Piper. I'd like you to do the meet-and-greet, show her to us."

"Your wish is my command, boss."

I didn't have to ask where to go. They always go to the front entrance,

trying to convince themselves that they're starting a day like any other, that nothing has changed for them. Looking back, even I was like that way back when. So I skedaddled, walking mostly, floating a little, unseen by the regular students and teachers because with most of them they only see you if you want them to. If you don't make an effort to be seen and someone living can see you anyway, it's bad news. Knowledge is power.

By the time I got to those three glass doors at the front of the building, the bell had rung and the masses were going to their classes, or at least homeroom. There was one figure not moving, calling out to the others, trying to get their attention, but it wasn't as easy as it had been before. When I looked at her, I first got an impression of the Grim Reaper, dropping in for old time's sake. But that was just because of the hood on her black sweat jacket, hanging over her fair face and casting a shadow. Once she pulled that down, she didn't look very deathlike at all. She was what my grandpa would have called "pleasingly plump," and she had a lost and confused look in her eyes.

None of her old friends would look at her. None *could* look at her. Hence the confusion. She wasn't on the same plane as them anymore, as she'd learn. And she didn't have physical presence. She had what we all had: psychic presence. Given time, she might learn to use it.

Still a few feet away, I called her name. She turned her head with a quick motion and ran fingers through her short black hair. She stared at me as if relieved to have someone talking to her, but was still aware there was something off. If you must know, I was in Levi's and a plaid shirt open to the chest, hair down to the collar. Might have been a dated look, that's not a concern of mine.

"You can trust me," I said. "But what I say might shock you. You're dead. You're a ghost."

She shook her head, green eyes wide. "That can't be," she said, all innocence.

"It sounds like it can't be, but it is. Follow me."

I waited until she closed the distance between us and then started walking in the direction of the theatre. She followed, but stopped and tilted her head.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Feels too quiet. Something's missing."

"The sound of your boots on the floor. You, the clothes you're wearing, none of it's made up of what it used to be made of. And you're not really touching anything. You can learn to change that. Anyway, let's keep going. There's someone wants to meet you."

We came to the double door leading to the theatre. Heavy wood painted bright yellow, the handles chained together.

“It’s locked,” she said.

“Ha, that doesn’t matter,” I said.

Then I walked a little to the left and put my hand through the wall. Her eyebrows went up so high they seemed to brush her bangs.

“Come on, you can do it, too. Don’t think of it as a wall. Think of it as a door that’s open just enough for you.”

I crossed to the other side and waited. She went through partway and just stayed there for a few seconds in shock. But she joined me in the theatre. It was easy, and we had enough light to walk by.

“This way,” I said. “My club, our headquarters are right near here.”

Past the bound red velvet curtain and walking on the slightly scuffed boards of the stage, we came to a door they’d painted black so it would match the walls and not stand out too much. I reached and opened it to show off that I could do that too.

“Ladies first,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said, but the way she said it sounded more like a question.

At the end of a short, narrow corridor, we saw a light from headquarters. We went in and Matthew rose from his folding chair. He closed his eyes, deep in thought, and suddenly a huge shadow sprouted from his back, covering the whole wall. Finger on chin, he looked at me, then Piper.

“I see my friend Amos brought you to us safe and sound,” he said to her.

“The others aren’t here,” I said. “You kick them out for privacy’s sake?”

“I tried to, anyway.” He turned right and went to another door, leading to a long hallway with shiny floors. When he pulled it open, we saw a head tilt into the room, ear out. One of the kids who’d been horsing around with the basketball earlier. This was Kevin, a tall and gangly redhead half blotted with freckles.

“Kevin!” Matthew said with a beaming smile that disappeared right away. “I told you that you didn’t need to be here, and I meant it.”

The door opening had thrown Kevin off-balance. He steadied himself with the doorframe and said, “Hey M., I was just checking to see if ...”

Matthew interrupted him with a raised finger. “You were just leaving.”

Like I said, Matthew never raised his voice and didn’t need to. Kevin straightened up and walked backwards, never looking back in the direction he was going. He reached a stairwell and his feet took him up—all this wasn’t under his own will, but you’ve probably guessed that.

Shutting the door behind him, Matthew turned back to Piper and me.

“Down to brass tacks,” he said. “As I’m sure Amos here has explained,

your circumstances have changed, your status. I'm sure that suddenly dying wasn't something you had prepared for, but it's given you the opportunity to join our group."

He gave her the rundown on the Wasted Youth, nothing important that I haven't already told you, but he liked to be thorough. Through it all she looked clearer in her head and calmer than I would have expected, steady expression, not much blinking.

In the end, she looked him straight in the face and said, "That's all good, but you haven't asked me anything."

"Such as."

"Well, like do I even want to join your club? Is there any reason I should?"

"We're responsible for haunting the students and faculty of this institution. We take pride in it. We're good at it. But that's not the only reason."

He strolled to one of the trunks the theatre kids use to store props and lifted the lid. Something hopped out, gnarled and only vaguely human. It was naked, but that's a strange word to use because it was so close to beast. Or bird, since long, matted body hair looked like black feathers. It lurched forward in pain and Piper screamed, grabbing my arm.

"This is a ghost," Matthew said. "It's not a member of our club, and hasn't been for a very long time. Some naïve children such as yourself have tried to face death on their own in the halls of this school, tried to haunt under their own authority. It never goes well for them, and most end up something like this. Membership buys you privileges, which you will need."

He guided the wretch back into the box. It didn't look to have much resistance in it. The lid closed with a soft echo.

"Okay," she said, hesitating. "How do I pledge. What do you want me to do?"

Matthew wore a fixed smile. "I'm glad you asked. There's a home football game in a little over a week, next Friday night. King will be playing Career & Tech."

"Uh-huh. And?"

"I need you to steal the King team mascot's costume. You don't know how to handle solid matter, but you can learn. Amos will help you as well. What comes next is all up to you. Take the role of the mascot. Play to the crowd. When you've warmed them up, give them a good fright. By which I mean, full-blown panic. I want to see some damage."

She considered this for a second and raised a hand to her breasts.

"What about these?" she asked.

"I gotta say, nice tits." I told her.

Matthew glared at me and I stopped grinning.

“What I mean is, I know the mascot,” she said. “The only boy on the pep squad. He’s little, like you. Lean and tough, though. Anyway, won’t the crowd notice?”

He shook his head. “People aren’t that observant. And when they are made to see things, only a few details make an impression on them. If the mascot’s gender is what they come away with, you’ve done something wrong.”

Striding over to her side, he stood on tiptoes and spoke directly in her ear. “You don’t want to get this wrong.”

She gasped and her knees buckled.

Fear and excitement both, I guessed.



Game night, we stood under a tree on the school’s front lawn as the last of the sunlight died. We waited for the mascot to show up. They didn’t keep the costume on school grounds. The kid kept it at home, brought it in when he needed it. It was his responsibility, and he seemed to shoulder it pretty well. So we couldn’t just breeze into an unguarded room and swipe it. No, we had to wait on him.

Half in streetlight, half in shadow, Piper crouched into a pile of dead leaves. She curled her fingers around a dried-out stick. The first few times she’d tried something like this, her hand had gone right through. Now she could take a firm grasp of it and hold it above her head as she rose and stood tall.

“Ta-da!” She turned to face me, beaming.

“Good for you,” I said, leaning on the tree’s thick trunk.

“Well, I had a good teacher.” She tucked a tuft of hair back behind her ear and her expression got serious. “Amos, I’ve been wondering about something.”

I parted from the tree and stood straighter. “Go on.”

“It’s about Matthew. Why is he the leader?”

“Because he is. We don’t need to question it, just mind our own business.” I stopped and gave my answer a little more thought. “Anyway, he can do things none of the rest of us can do. You’ve seen a little of that. There’s more, lots more.”

“Yeah, but how much of that is anything special about him, or any work he’s done, and how much is just luck? I’ve been asking around, talking to other kids in the club ...”

“You *what*?” My hands are big. They cover a lot of ground. I only had to

put one hand to the base of Piper's neck before I could wrap a good way around it, holding it tight. Not tight enough to hurt her, but enough to let her know I could. And I could hurt her a lot, even though I didn't want to. And even though our bodies weren't solid matter. "I'll tell you something 'cuz I like you. You don't go around asking questions like that, trying to stir any shit up."

She whispered, "I wasn't trying to ..."

"Not to me, and definitely not to those other losers. It's not a good survival strategy. *Capisce?*"

She gave me a quick nod. "I understand. I'm sorry."

Headlights shone on the road in front of the school, and the car made a turn into the parking lot, bits of gravel popping under its wheels. Red, maybe a Hyundai Elantra, although I can't be sure. New cars bore me. When the engine stopped, this little squirt in a grey tracksuit popped out.

"That's him," Piper said.

I nodded at her, saying nothing. The first thing I noticed about him was he had ambitions of growing a goatee, but it wasn't working out—it was just this sad ring of light brown hairs. The second thing I noticed was the way he kept his head down while grabbing his duffel bag from the passenger seat. I could guess what was in it. He was aware of what he was doing, but not where he was, and was, therefore, unprepared for any attack. That's just stupid. Yeah, sure—he didn't know about Piper and me. But even if there weren't ghosts, there's almost always someone around who can jump you.

He shut the door and headed toward the school, finally taking a good look around him. After he'd pounded on the side door a few times, a janitor let him in. Piper and I didn't need any kind of help like that.

"Let's go," I said.

We followed him to a boys' room in the basement, hidden behind a blond wood door with the word MEN printed at eye level. It was all bright lights and cool colored tiles when we went in. The King team is called the Grizzlies. The mascot is a bear, black with some white on the chest, big googly plastic eyes glued on above the slits where the real eyes look out. The whole furry bundle hung over the door of one of the stalls.

"You ..." I started to say, but Piper already had her hands on it.

The kid stood at one of the urinals, taking a piss. White briefs were all he had on. This guy was little, but Piper was right. He had sinew. It wouldn't help. I walked up behind him, real casual, and pushed him hard. Kept pressing, so that his face hugged the wall and his chest touched cold porcelain.

I turned my head halfway and said to Piper, "You got it? Then let's go!"

I saw the short skirt she wore over her leggings disappear through the closed door. The mascot kid's stream splattering on his leg, I let him go.

Stunned as he was, he wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.



The moon shone bright on the field when we got there. The LED stadium lights were even brighter, revealing the verdant green of the turf that they took such pride in. Same for the uniforms: vivid red and brown for the home team, deep blue and purple for the visitors. The wind stirred football pennants and the hair of everyone in the stands not wearing a hat, but you couldn't hear it. Too much competing noise.

Lots of people had shown up for the big game, but we found a cluster of empty seats. That way if we had to talk, there'd be less to drown us out.

The King High cheerleaders stood in loose queue on the sidelines, looking around anxiously. No doubt they were wondering what happened to the little guy, the one who was supposed to be playing mascot. At center stage, you had the marching band standing at attention, horns blaring over the bass drums, snares, and cymbals powering the school fight song. But the air had started to go out of the brass, with the trumpets trailing off as they prepared to cede the spotlight. As the saxes hushed, prerecorded music blasted over the PA system. Staccato keyboards and some lady wailing "everybody dance now." I'd heard it before, but it still sounded new and alien to me. I also knew it'd been a hit before Piper was born. Time's funny.

I turned to her and said, "Looks like you're up."

She wore the costume now, and even though it had been made for a short young man instead of a tall young woman, it fit fine. She still held the head in her hands. She nodded and swallowed, her eyes wide. "Wish me luck."

As she was putting the head on, I told her, "Not about luck. Just do it right."

She stepped forward, slow and hesitating, like a just-birthed fawn. Then she grabbed the safety rail with both hands and vaulted onto the field. *Presto!* Her shyness disappeared as she launched herself at the goalpost and swung around it three times, finally letting go and landing on her feet. The crowd went berserk, on their feet and shouting slogans.

Who was this person? And where had the meek girl I'd been dealing with gone?

Moonwalking to a pyramid of mini-qballs, she grabbed half a dozen and threw them into the stands, pumping the other arm to keep the fans cheering. Her body became lavalike, fluid and destructive as she performed a crazed dance routine. Finally she spread her arms, leading a call/response chant.

“King High!” she bellowed.

“We fly!” the crowd answered.

This exchange happened a handful of times. Bears don’t fly. No one cared.

By now, the home team had lined up at the gate, the quarterback in front, the big defense guys growling right behind him. Once the mascot left the field, it should have been their turn to put on their own show before the game proper started. But the mascot—our mascot—was leaving the spotlight, and not in the direction they expected. Instead of joining the pep squad on the sidelines, Piper went right up to the audience, climbing the wall and the iron railing.

She strolled right up to a couple of red-and-brown painted guys in varsity jackets and let out a real bloodcurdling shriek. She moved on to a Thermos-clutching football mom in a puffy coat and growled like a grizzly as she ran hands over the lady’s face and bleached yellow hair.

This kind of up-close intimidation went on for maybe two minutes, Piper jumping from fan to fan. Finally, she stood back from all of them and raised her hands to her neck, lifting the mascot bear head off her shoulders. Underneath was ... nothing.

The fans looked at each other, uncertain. But when Piper leaned back—head still invisible—and laughed, they froze. The laugh transformed, became a sound like no human or animal makes, the sound of lighting striking steel.

Not everyone made for the exits. Maybe not even most. Enough to notice, though. Panicked shouts sounded as they stepped on each other’s feet and elbowed their neighbors in the ribs. Some threw punches.

Piper came back my way, her face showing again, grinning with wide-open eyes.



We strolled back from the stadium to the school building in the moonlight, crickets leaping out of our path. Piper stripped off the bear costume, street clothes still on underneath, and slung it over her shoulder.

“Matthew will be in our HQ,” I said. “I can fill him in when we get there.”

“Ah, Matthew. What will you be telling him?”

“That you did good. It looked like they’d have to postpone the game. Matthew plays it cool and distant, but I think he’ll be pleased.”

When we got to the school’s front steps, she stopped and laid a hand on my arm.

“Amos, do you know how I got here? How I died?”

I shook my head. “We’ll have plenty of time to talk about that later.”

"Oh, but I want to tell you now. You see the reason I died was that ..." and here she put her lips to my ear and whispered, "I decided to."

"What do you mean? Suicide?"

"Not pills or razors. Nothing like that. I knew there was another world that no one else could see. In dreams and daydreams I saw it. I could be somebody here. Come into my full power. So when the time was right, I just stopped breathing."

"Oh," I said, nausea gripping my gut. "That's not very dramatic."

"Tell that to the driving instructor beside me," she said with a giggle. It loudened into a roar.

A black bird flew down from the roof. Like a raven or a crow, but huge, bigger than my torso and head combined.

"You know that misshapen ghost Matthew showed us?" Piper said. "Well, they just needed to reach their potential too. I helped a little."

Another bird flew in a crooked arc before alighting next to the other and spitting a pile of fresh wet bones on the grass.

Piper snorted and said, "And here's Matthew now. In case you haven't worked it out, he's not the boss anymore."



I pleaded with her. I wanted to keep my life—afterlife, I mean—at the school. Anything she wanted done, anything I could give her, I was willing. It was no good, though. She wanted to start fresh, build her own team.

She drove me out. I still existed, but I had to move on. And I can only interact with the living like this, in the body of a blood relative.

This girl in front of you, for instance, with her red dress and onyx jewelry, gussied up for this little devil party of yours. No, she's not my granddaughter. I never knocked anyone up, which is as much of a miracle as I can testify to. She's a grandniece from my goody-two-shoes brother.

King High has been off-limits to me since that night. I've heard things, though. It will be quiet for months, maybe even a couple of years, and then turn into a charnel house. We're not just talking the occasional scare now. People—teachers and kids—are being driven to madness, maybe never to return.

God, I miss being where the action is.

NOT ALL THERE

Ken Craft

Probably we shouldn't have let Denny Not-All-There into the tree fort. Quiet at first, he gets excited when we share nightmares & dreams: the usual flying, falling, freezing from fear.

As he listens, his mouth begins to twist between dried parentheses of jam, & he wipes his snot across the bony knob of his wrist. Suddenly he's talking about sticking to bedroom walls: up close, all eyeball, his loud breathing & scratching making no sound at all.

His eyebrows arch beneath spiked slicks of hair. He's inside the room of the young couple that moved into Old Mrs. Miller's house next door, he tells us, & they're bare (his word) on a King-sized bed without blankets or pillows, just sheets slippery and red.

It's a kind of amnesia he's in, Denny Not-All-There who wants to be there. It's as if he's talking to himself in the padded room of recall, forgetting the three of us sitting spellbound

on scratchy plywood, nails like mushrooms
sprouting from the floor of secrets.

Later in the bedrooms of our 50s ranches,
after kissing our mothers good night,
after putting on PJs, brushing teeth,
& turning off lamps with cowboy shades,
we take special care
to blind our windows from the night
that might be all there. Up close, all eyeball.
Breathing & scratching,
making no sound at all.

LEXIE

Kimberly Moore

When people tell me I'm living in the past, I want to correct them. The past is living with me. Well ... not exactly living.

Lexie died twenty years ago, yet she leaped onto my back this morning as I occupied a stair on the escalator of the Reynolds building. Yes, I fell. Yes, it was embarrassing. I can only imagine what witnesses were thinking—a grown man in a suit checking his phone, suddenly thrust forward, barely managing to regain his upright posture before the escalator leveled onto the floor.

I was a dancer long ago, like my parents, and their parents. Lexie inherited dancing from her Caucasian father's side. Because her mother was Polynesian, Lexie had endured a life of people asking her the unanswerable question of "what are you?", to which she'd always chosen to respond "Russian." It wasn't a lie. Her paternal lineage was seasoned with Russian ballerinas whose antique photos were adorned in ornate frames on the grand piano in her family's estate. She owned a pony and decorated her life in glitter until she was fifteen.

Lexie and I were paired for ballroom competitions at an age when all we wanted to do in the studio was play tag and call each other stupid. The transformation to miniature adults who could waltz, tango, cha-cha, salsa, samba, and mambo in formalwear was, no doubt, more difficult than it appeared. Only our coaches would know for sure, and our coaches, who had met in a salsa club in the fifties and rhumbaed their way down the aisle and to a lifetime of sickening devotion, spent their time with us preaching and screaming. In hindsight, I used that behavior as a measure of difficulty in creating us as a competitive team.

Fabian and Griselda, our coaches, are the people I blame the most for Lexie's post-mortem existence in my life. "There is no relationship that requires your complete commitment like this one," Fabian told us when I was eight and Lexie was six. Fabian held Griselda's hand and stared at us until we

also joined hands. "You have to know where the other is at all times. You need to sense when they are ahead or behind, and you have to accept their superiorities and inferiorities with love. You cannot compete against each other. You are one. United forever. When one reaches out a hand, the other must be there to take that hand. Every decision you make, you must make for the best of your partner."

That rhetoric appealed to us at an age when we formed super-inclusive clubs and took the opportunity of anyone having a skinned knee to become blood brothers. It wasn't just figurative language, though. The dance partner relationship was a topic of their coaching as much as poise and the actual dancing. Our ritual, heads and noses together before any rehearsal or competition, consisted of maintaining eye contact, relaxing into calm breathing, and saying in unison, "I'm always here for you."

I am. I am still always here for Lexie. There is no clause, like in marriage, in which death dissolves the contract.



Lexie was supposed to call me the night she died. It was her senior prom and I had my eyes on one of her friends. I studied in my concrete-walled dorm, alone for the weekend, waiting for Lexie to return from her hair appointment. She was going to tell me if her friend would be interested in a college sophomore with a good body and an okay face, as Lexie had always apologetically described me.

The call never came. I assumed it meant the friend was not interested, or else, Lexie had forgotten. For all the dangers of prom night that are taught, getting hit by a truck returning from a hair appointment is never discussed.



Lately, Lexie's visits seem darker. Like today's assault on the escalator, which could have been achieved in ways that weren't injurious. I know the reason—and also, I can't believe the reason.

"People say things like that, Lexie," I told her the last time she was able to solidify and speak. "It's not serious."

"It was a deal." She sulked and glared. "You said if you weren't married when you were forty, it was you and me, getting old together."

"I think I said *by* the time I was forty. I was married, if you remember." She huffed. "Barely."

"You didn't help."

"Did you expect me to help? You were ignoring me!"

“You have forgotten what marriage is supposed to be, Lex. My wife was supposed to be my priority. Not my dead dance partner.”

“You promised me first. I’ve kept my promise.”

Tomorrow is my fortieth birthday.



The existence of a secret rises, whether or not the secret is revealed. My wife, and every serious girlfriend I was with, felt Lexie’s presence. They didn’t know what they were feeling, but it was Lexie. There was always something I wasn’t saying. There was always something I was glancing at they couldn’t see. I was distracted. My face registered a series of expressions in a conversation, but there was no audible conversation. I never tried to explain. How could I?

I lost count of the times I was asked if I was listening. I was listening, but to two people at once. Lexie’s voice blended into the conversations, leading my mind elsewhere. Lexie overlaid my lovers’ bodies, mocking their passion or lack of it, depending on the situation. Of all her intrusions, that seemed the most horrendous at first. I would open my eyes to see Lexie superimposed, distorting faces, and when Lexie could not align perfectly with the body, I was making love to a Picasso-esque lady with four breasts and gripped by four arms and four legs.

“I need another body to feel it,” was Lexie’s defense. “Dead people do it all the time. If you couldn’t see me, you wouldn’t know.”

Lexie had attempted to seduce me alone on another solo weekend in my college dorm soon after she died. Maintaining a fully-manifested physical body became impossible with arousal, causing her to blink in and out of existence like a strobe light until she disappeared to voice-only. “Torture. Eternal edging. But still better than the two times I did it in real life.”

“Do I have any say in this?”

“What are you complaining about? I’m not even real.”

There were times I could convince myself she wasn’t real, mostly when I needed to believe that my relationships with others were normal. The truth was, she was always the center of my world and because of her, my life was always a lie.



“We were ahead of our time,” Lexie said the last time I visited my parents’ house and admired our wall of photos from the earliest ballroom competitions to the end of our career when we were free to innovate. “If we

competed on dance shows now, we'd win."

"If I were younger," I added. I had to admit, however, to watching these popular dance contests and feeling my muscles tighten for a turn, shift for a lift, or brace to catch my partner. "And if you weren't dead."

I danced with her then, with my parents hidden away cooking outdoors. Our tango down the hall, flawless since we perfected it in middle school, felt empty once we finished, her body bent backward from my waist and her leg extended straight to the ceiling. I craved judges to comment on our performance. The usual comments would have sufficed—perfect synchronicity, Argentine passion, classic hooks and lines. We only had each other for appreciation.

"All that time I wasted krumping." She giggled when I released her from our final pose. "We were getting good at hip-hop."

"It was never my thing." Days before her death, we made our best effort at hip-hop. We had watched the video together, laughing at my ghostlike pallor next to her healthy Polynesian glow. Lexie's boyfriend had coaxed her away before our rehearsal ended, no doubt for the second disappointing sexual encounter I would hear about for the rest of my life. "We'd have to learn to twerk nowadays."

Lexie wasn't looking at me. I turned to see my mother with profound concern on her face.

"You still miss her, don't you?" Mom said, tilting her head. "It's a shame you never danced again. Another partner may have brought you some closure."

I heard Lexie scoff at the idea, jealous as always. "Mom, it's hard to not think about her when the wall is covered in our pictures. I'm okay."

Mom waited, a spatula in her hand. "Food's ready when you are."

"In a minute."

Lexie was fading, our photos visible through her body. Her expression was hurt.

I approached and leaned my face against hers, feeling only a cool breeze where her skin would be. "You are my only dance partner," I whispered.

"I know I've ruined your life." Her body solidified again for a moment. "I can't escape the promises. You are the only one I trust. My life was short, but you are all that remains of it. Think of all the vows you've made in your life. Of all of them, ours are the most tested and validated. We know each other in confusion and darkness. I may not know how close I am to the ceiling or the floor, or what danger I'm in without you, but I don't care. I know your hand will be there. Together, we are safe and beautiful. We moved together as one entity for so long and so deliberately, we have fused souls. Do you

understand that I'm not free to leave you?"

She faded again, but I felt her words as if they had originated with me. If my parents were right, the words *did* originate with me and my delusion was my inability to let her go. I stood with my hands open and my head bent forward, missing her the second she'd dissipated. For a moment, I regretted not accepting my father's suggestion of therapy.

"You promised." She said again from behind.

That was months ago, but I knew what she meant. I had some time before my fortieth birthday, but Lexie had circled that date on her calendar and made it her personal flag.



Today is my fortieth birthday.

At first, all I felt of Lexie was a sore knee from her attack on the escalator yesterday. My morning was eerie, knowing she was watching me in silence. I told her, mentally, not to be angry. I was angry, however, that I had lived years and learned, while Lexie remained eighteen with its obstinance and language of literality.

Tonight, my party was small. Work friends and a few personal friends gathered at the usual restaurant. Lexie was there, but not herself. I recalled her most active days—darting around tables to give me the winning edge in poker, lap-dancing an unsuspecting customer across the room for my entertainment, squeezing my date's ass. On my honeymoon, it was Lexie who'd executed perfect *grands jetés* naked down the center of Rue de Rivoli. Even dead, she could make me laugh from the deepest depressions I had known, and because of her, I had never cried alone in my adult life.

When the check arrived and I thanked my friends for treating me to dinner, I felt my debt to Lexie with new clarity. It was only then that I heard her voice. "I'm still here."

After I failed to walk straight from the table to the door of the restaurant, Amanda from work drove me home.

"Didn't you just have two drinks?" she asked once my seatbelt was fastened.

"Yes, but I haven't been drinking much lately. I've never been a heavy drinker. I appreciate the lift."

"You're not bothered by turning forty, are you? It was a tough birthday for me. Maybe it's just women that feel that way."

I remembered Amanda's fortieth birthday. She'd been in the middle of a divorce and the drama was the height of work gossip that year. "I feel old, but it's okay."

"You don't look forty if that helps. Looks like you'll be lucky and get to keep your hair." She looked at me long enough to appreciate my hair and smile. "You'd tell me if something is wrong, right? You seem so distant."

"Nothing's wrong. It's just the alcohol." I smiled to convince her.

"Do you need help getting to your place? I can park if you want."

I didn't need help. I heard Lexie dancing around me as I walked, and I expected to see her. In the elevator, I opened my hands before me. I smelled her for an instant, but she was refusing to manifest. "Lexie, there's no need for the silent treatment."

Again, I heard, "I'm here."

After my parents' birthday wishes by phone and a few minutes of television that failed to bring Lexie to the sofa with me, my eyes were heavy. I knew Lexie's anger had subsided, so I felt at peace in my bed. "Lexie, everything's going to be alright."

"Happy birthday." She lit an evergreen-scented candle I received last Christmas that has since sat unused on my dresser.

It was immediately soothing. "That's nice. Thank you."



We dance. It may be fog that clouds my vision of our surroundings, but Lexie's face is clear. Her expression has the serious rigidity of competition.

"Keep your eyes on me," she says.

When I exhale, I taste smoke. My body repels for a moment and I reach for Lexie, whose strength surprises me. Again, I am against her, and she is leading. It is a waltz performed too quickly.

"Pain is optional. Don't feel the pain," she says.

I try to look to the side, where a sudden heat begs for my attention.

Lexie holds my face. "Eyes on me." Her eyes are wild with determined love.

For a moment, her eyes and mine are the same.

I see it now. This is my apartment, and our feet travel the brick wall to the skylight. Below us, flames rise. On the bed in a thick blanket of smoke, my body dies, still dressed from my birthday dinner. I attempt to cough.

"Never leave a burning candle unattended." Lexie is smiling, and when I give up breathing, which I realize I don't need to do anymore, I mirror her smile.

Melding, we rise.

“That same week, I read in the newspaper that Germans shouldn’t drink milk, but the army kept on serving it just the same, without a word of warning.”

— David Holper
“Chernobyl Spring”

THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL

X. Culletto

They say only five percent of the ocean has been explored, but since the accident, I'd say it's now six. The surface at least—life rafts aren't designed for submersion. Thank goodness; I had my fill of seawater as *The Chatham* sank. But, hazarding swells and currents on my dutiful orange-and-gray steed, I've surely journeyed into uncharted areas—a brave pioneer forging new paths.

Or, perhaps, I've been bobbing uselessly over the same battered bit of sea. A stagnant X on a far-too-big map depicting a far-too-away shore.

How long I've been adrift eludes me. The sun comes, scorches my skin, then passes. Repeated until past and future have lost any meaning; there is only now.

And now, I'm hungry.

I watch jealously as a confetti of seabirds whirl and dip into the water like balletic torpedoes. A moment passes, and they surge upward again, fishy prizes clamped in pointy beaks. My fishing line remains pitifully drooped and fruitless.

My food rations were lost two nights ago, when a vicious wave nearly capsized the raft. I threw my body against the flooring and saved myself, but not my treasured companion. Weary as I was of the dense biscuits—a “pleasant lemon flavor”? ha!—it wasn't until I watched their silver packages bump off the raft and slip indifferently into the dark water that I felt entirely abandoned.

Day and night, memories of luscious meals churn in my mind. Stacks of bronzed pancakes cascading with thick syrup, buttery potatoes blanketed with cheese, sugar glistening atop cherry pies. My stomach growls.

And a fish drops from above. Thrashing wildly on the floor of the boat in a silver blur, the fish nearly flops overboard before I scramble to seize it. I just manage to grasp it by the gills and, clambering for the flashlight, club its head. The wriggling subsides.

I look upward, toward the origin of my blessed meal. A seabird circles just above me. The fish must've squirmed its way free from the bird's beak.

"Thank you!" I yell, elated by my fortune, as the bird reunites with its flock.

Accident or not, I'm obliged to show gratitude for the supper. Before *The Chatham* sank, eating was merely a social pastime, something added to the daily schedule. But now, food is life—in the most literal way. And I want to live.



The boat is tipping—tipping more! Seawater laps greedily at my boots. I search the cacophony for a rescuer, someone to help me. But there is only running, yelling, sobbing, more tipping.

A spray of saltwater splashes my face and I wake with a start. The ocean is choppy and the eastern sky is grey with thunderclouds. I pray the threat will blow away. Standing, I survey the horizon. Nothing. Not land, not a boat—even the seabirds are gone.

All but one, gliding toward me. She draws near, a fish clasped in her beak. Lucky bird; the ocean is one big buffet for her. The fishing tackle that came with the boat supplies has yet to justify its existence. I may as well be stranded in the desert for all the good it does.

The bird dips lower and releases the fish. I watch, slack-jawed, as it drops straight into the raft. Hastening to seize the meal, I smack it between the eyes with the flashlight until it stills.

The bird circles away, and this time, in my bewilderment, I forget to voice my appreciation. Once could be an accident, but twice? So far from the flock?

Sliding the knife along the fish's belly, I'm soon dining on the sea's finest sushi. Really, at this point in starvation, anything tastes sublime. The meal is smaller than the last, and even after licking every drop of fishy oil from my fingers, I wish for more. But at least my stomach has something to chew on other than itself.

The bird has vanished from sight. Did she really come just to feed me? Perhaps I resemble a giant baby bird trapped in a floating nest. Regardless of the reason, intense gratitude washes through me.

I have always had a fondness for birds. One Christmas I was gifted a pair of doves, and they never failed to amuse me. So much that whenever pheasant or quail was served at dinner, I would pass it over out of respect for my pets.

This bird, she gave me life. Even if only for another day, I am utterly

thankful. A day may make all the difference. After clambering aboard the life raft that ill-fated night, and watching the final moments of *The Chatham*, I heard, through wind and waves, the captain calling “mayday.” Over and over, the distress call was sent. Hoping—*knowing*—someone is on the way keeps me going.

I won’t die out here.



I am starving to death. Water rations abound, but without food, they’re meaningless. My hair is falling out; my fingers are the size of pencils.

I see it over and over—a walloping, prize-winning fish dropping into my lap. Trapped in a semi-conscious state, the manufactured hopes of a distressed mind, I find my hands empty every time. There is nothing. My benefactor has forgotten me.

Until it’s not an illusion.

She appears in reality. My white, life-bringing angel.

But instead of dropping fish, she spirals downward, landing on the raft with a soft thump.

I’m horrified to see orange fishing line ensnared around her beak—she can’t open it.

She’s beautiful in the purest way, with snowy-white wings, head crowned with the color of candlelight. Sky blue rims her eyes, which plead with me for help. All I need to do is untangle the line and she’ll be free. As simple as that.

But ... food is life.

And I want to live.

I reach out and grasp her head and her neck between my feeble fingers, and twist.

CHERNOBYL SPRING

David Holper

That April in Hoechst, the earth whispered warning. Our sergeant said nothing about the meltdown or the fire. After I asked about the fallout, he said that we would be training just same as always: six a.m. sharp in the city park across the street from our company office. I didn't bother mentioning to him how the German papers had warned people to stay out of the wet grass in the morning. I didn't mention there was no particle too small that was safe. We did pushups in that wet grass; we did sit-ups; we ran our two-mile training runs every morning (our breath chuffing in the humid air) while the fireman climbed up on the roof (human robots they called themselves) and soaked in enough radiation that not one of them would live—and every single one would be buried in lead-lined coffins in a cemetery no one would be allowed to visit. That same week, I read in the newspaper that Germans shouldn't drink milk, but the army kept on serving it just the same, without a word of warning. It was as if the army held some mighty shield that could hold off wind or ash or harm. So I drank the milk with my coffee. I did my sit-ups and pushups in the wet grass and ran my two miles every morning, every breath scorching my lungs, knowing full well I was out of my mind for keeping silent, knowing that the sense that my silence made was the logic that all soldiers must follow in blind obedience to death.

A CRACKED SCREEN

Alice Avoy

You're running through the woods. Distant chirping of birds can't drown out the heavy footfall, regular like a metronome, against the dew-stained blades of grass. Blood rushes through your veins as you dive deeper into the thicket, ducking under stray branches and avoiding clumps of overgrown nettles that want to burn your calves. You've never been here before, but the instructions you found online were clear enough. You know the way; you've memorized it in case there was no reception and GPS couldn't help you. It's the first time you went on a proper jog since moving to the countryside, and you want to experience the best route there is in your new homeland.

You rush forward, battling a sense of familiarity, the subtlest *déjà vu*. You decide not to read too much into it. All woods are largely the same.

Soon your step begins to falter. You lose the perfect rhythm. Fatigue overwhelms you. Your lungs, pushed to their limits, can't keep up. You need a break.

There. A big gnarly oak older than your country reigns absolute in the middle of a small clearing. The protruding roots twist and tangle like a braid of a fae's courtier, forming an irregular throne-like bench. However, you're wary of sitting on it. Somehow it wouldn't be appropriate to inflict your presence on this ancient entity, so stubbornly permanent against the relentless stream of time.

You can't explain it, but this forest seems alive. Not alive, as in all intertwined parts of the ecosystem are doing their job, no. In a different way. Breathing. Watching. The sensation eludes your understanding. All you know is that you've never run as fast as you did just now. Your legs carried you forward, sweat dripping along your back despite goosebumps erupting on your skin. Chased by an unseen predator, you are prey who knows instinctively that movement is the key, and being stationary is the true danger that spells doom.

The eerie sensation overwhelms you. Since stepping into this verdant

realm, you've never felt welcome, but now you're no longer even tolerated. A pause to catch your breath has been terminated. Time to run, even faster than before.

Your muscles tense. You're about to leap forward, chasing the wind, but you freeze as your eyes zero in on an item lying right next to the trunk of the ageless tree. A thin, black rectangle, so easy to identify. A mobile phone with a cracked screen, the net of destruction crisscrossing the entire surface. You feel a coarse tendril of dread creep up and down your spine like a dry tongue.

A broken phone in the middle of the woods. Suspicious. And worrying. A furious thought booms in your head: *'How dare someone trespass through my forest?'* Is the thought even yours? You push the doubt away as concern elbows its way to the forefront of your mind.

Does the cracked phone signify an equally cracked body nearby? You look left and right, but you can't find any signs of a struggle. You see no blood, and the air doesn't carry the metallic tang of gore. Perhaps the mobile simply slipped out of the pocket of some careless runner? Things like that happen all the time.

Your gaze returns to the phone. Should you, shouldn't you?

The first option wins. You try to convince yourself that you're doing it only because you're such a Good Samaritan—you will heroically find the owner and return the lost property—but the truth is that you're simply intrigued. Someone's phone is like a window into their world and you want to take a peek.

The forest seems to hold its breath, observing you. It's a crouching predator ready to pounce and tear at your jugular if you show any sign of weakness.

You swallow hard, but you bend down and pick up the phone. You recognize the model. It's the same as yours, so you know that you need to press a button on the right side to awake the screen. Hopefully, the battery hasn't flatlined yet. Worst case scenario, you'll charge it back home.

You press the button. The phone comes alive. You are greeted by the lock screen with an idyllic vista of a mountain against the backdrop of a setting sun.

A tiny gasp escapes your parted lips. Your body is taut, riding a wave of shock. You know that photo. You stare at it every day when you need to use your *own* phone. It's not one of the defaults preinstalled on the hard drive. If it were, you probably wouldn't even blink.

But that photo, that one particular photo ...

You took it yourself while on vacation almost exactly a year ago. You showed it to a couple of friends, but never shared it online—at least, you

don't remember doing it. Did you post it on social media after all? Or perhaps the owner of the phone simply picked the same holiday destination? How many virtually identical snapshots of monuments or nature float inertly in the endless, chaotic oceans of the internet?

Still, you feel somewhat unsettled. Driven by instinct, you pat the pocket of your tracksuit. Yes, the familiar shape and weight of your phone is still safely stored there. The phone you're holding in your hand definitely doesn't belong to you.

The forest keeps its scrutiny on you. Is it amused or annoyed? You can't really tell.

You know that you should leave, sprint back home while you still can. The ambience keeps getting more and more oppressive with each passing second. The leaves on the ancient oak are blocking the sunrays. The temperature has dropped a few degrees.

Yet your thumb moves on its own, muscle memory overriding the urge to flee. The unblocking screen welcomes you, urging you to connect the dots and form a particular shape to gain access. A pin code is much safer, you think, but you too could never remember numbers.

The phone is not yours—the very thought is simply ridiculous—but there's something you simply have to try. You slide the fingertip against the cracked screen, forming an inverted house.

The correct answer. The phone unlocks. Not-your-phone has accepted your password and stands wide open in front of you.

This ... could still be a coincidence, couldn't it? The same model, the same lock screen, the same security measures. The owner could be your mental soulmate across time and space. *How likely is that?*, you ask yourself.

Not very.

The wind carries the forest's dark chuckle as you're standing there paralyzed, trying to find an explanation, a sliver of rationale to what you're seeing before you.

Your efforts crumble to dust when you see that a photograph has been set as the wallpaper.

It's you. Not so much a photo but a reflection frozen in amber, mirroring your widened eyes and mouth hanging open. Almost a comical look of befuddlement, but you're far from laughing now.

In a frenzy, you whip out the phone from your pocket. The uncracked surface, the mountain on the lock screen, the drawing of the inverted house to gain access. The background here is different. Your phone doesn't have your own picture as a wallpaper. You're not that narcissistic—not outwardly, at least. Instead, you're greeted by the photograph of your cat curled up on the windowsill and sleeping peacefully. You want to be with her back at

home. You want to leave and run, run as fast as you can. Something here is wrong, terrifying. You don't understand, but you know you're in danger.

The siren's song of curiosity lulls your worries. You can't resist. For now, you slip your phone back into your pocket and focus on the one you have found.

Strangely emboldened, you decide to break the self-imposed taboo and perch on the roots of the old oak, not sure how long your quivering legs can hold you. The cracked phone upsets you and fascinates you in equal measure. The photograph of you keeps staring unblinkingly, but was the curve of your lip tilted upwards in an echo of a sneer before? Your mind must be playing tricks on you.

However, it somehow *is* your phone. Last vestiges of doubt evaporate from your mind as you flick your thumb left and right. The setting of icons is exactly the same, just as the array of the apps you have downloaded and installed.

Could the content of your personal files be the same as well?

With trepidation, you click on the messenger app. A painfully shrill beep and a wave of vibrations conveys an error message. The app can't be opened. The fall probably damaged something inside, corrupting the data. You want to check how badly everything got distorted, so you click on the game you like to play to unwind—your stress always ebbs away as you match shiny gems in threes.

Beep. Error. That app can't be accessed either.

More damage, more mangled storage space. Could it really be just the fault of hitting the ground? Or was it something else, something more serious?

The hair on your neck stands up as you move your thumb over the photo gallery. Nothing more personal on a person's phone than the photographs. You dread to know what could be there. You're nearly counting on it being inaccessible so you don't exacerbate your anxiety.

You take a deep breath and tap the screen with a trembling finger. You brace yourself for another beep and buzzing. Nothing as dramatic happens, not this time.

The folder opens, unveiling the well-documented story of the past few years of your life. You feel too many emotions to name as you see on the cracked screen the smiling faces of your friends from your birthday party, so incongruous in this forest of yore.

You keep swiping right, the images moving in front of your eyes like still frames of your biopic. Your cat stupidly squished in a far-too-small card box. Your sister and her wife smiling on a beach during their honeymoon. A dark, disfigured humanoid shape with its back turned to you, hiding behind

an old oak tree. An amazing pasta you ordered in an Italian joint near your workplace.

Wait.

You pause, your brain finally catching up to what you have seen. That picture of the forest, the forest you're in ... it shouldn't be here. You never took it. Frantically, you flick back, but the photo's not there anymore. Your eyes must have played a trick on you; that's the explanation you hope to be true.

You dig deeper into the gallery. There, again, hidden behind the snapshots of your mundane existence, the dark figure slowly turns around. You only get a glimpse of half of its face, but the image burns itself onto your retina, branding you. The eye casts an ominous red glow. Sharp teeth drip saliva. And it smiles a smile that seems to reach deep inside you and claw at your soul.

It's not real, it's not real, you mumble as your finger dances across the screen, running away from that face. But you can't. Your photos melt away, replaced by that face, always the same face, staring at you, turning towards you ever so slightly with each frame.

In panic, you shut down the gallery.

No escape. The face is already there on the wallpaper, having morphed from your own photo. *Your face*. You see it fully now: distorted features you behold in the mirror, twisted by dark magic of the forest. The changeling's vine-like hair moves, caressed by the wind. The red eyes flash with cruel delight.

Your heart skips a beat. You nearly drop the phone when an error message cuts through the silence. All the icons disappear from the screen, replaced by a single video in the middle, the only thing shielding you from the monster that once was you.

You don't want to open it. You need to run, but your body doesn't obey you any longer. You tap the screen and play the video.

You're running through the woods. Distant chirping of birds can't draw out the heavy footfall, regular like a metronome, against the dew-stained blades of grass. Blood rushes through your veins as you dive deeper into the thicket, ducking under stray branches and avoiding clumps of overgrown nettles that want to burn your calves.

Soon your step begins to falter. You lose the perfect rhythm. Fatigue overwhelms you. Your lungs, pushed to their limits, can't keep up. You need a break.

There. A big gnarly oak older than your country reigns absolute in the middle of a small clearing.

You watch yourself notice the phone and pick it up after a moment of

hesitation. You watch yourself unlock the screen and go through the gallery. You watch yourself as a dark silhouette approaches you in the video from behind. The changeling lifts its hands, fingers curled like claws.

You want to scream and warn the you in the video, but no sound can leave your clenched throat as the realization slowly sinks in.

You feel bony fingers clasp your shoulders. They yank you back violently.

You are only half-aware of your phone slipping from your pocket and hitting the ground. The screen cracks into a net of destruction that crisscrosses the entire surface.

The loop begins anew.

EXCERPTS FROM *KINESIOPHOBIA*

Meghan Guidry

*For Louis Allen Guidry
and everyone else
who carries the wires.*

His Throat Became a Coastline

My father noticed the storm before it was named. An image on the news. White spiral like a spider curling in the Gulf. He called his brother to check. My uncle teased him for being up north too long. So many of these things spin out over the ocean. Nothing to do but watch and wait.

We watched the storm spin heavy. Draw something deep from the water off the coast. My father clenched his jaw. Sat silent while the newscasts blared. During commercials, he repeated what he knew about the levees. A network of palms to press the ocean back. A thousand traps to catch the waves. To save the living and the dead from being swallowed by the brine.

When we visited New Orleans, my father always brought me to the cemeteries. Stone tombs atop the earth. If the city flooded, the ground would soften and push the coffins back. So we engineered a way to bury the dead above ground while underwater, as if we'd never left the ark.

We watched the news for days. The name of the storm started spilling from every anchor's mouth. *Katrina* scratching their throats. My father fixated on the screen. Storm models overlaid his city. Memories shaped like hurricanes. Arms spiraling to familiar streets. Cathedrals and feasts. Saints' days and canals. Lakeshores where he and his brother kicked crawfish mounds until crimson claws dragged their bodies from the mud.

My father called his brother the night they named the storm. The night

they tracked its path straight toward the city. I listened from the kitchen as they talked. Their conversation halved by the phone. Questions about evacuations and how many days they had. My father tensing at answers I couldn't hear. He muted the news and disappeared upstairs.

I went into the living room. Watched the anchors mouth Katrina. And thought I saw the blades in their throats. Thought I saw something darken in a shadow on the screen. Thought the map of the ocean was turning deeper blue. Like every broadcast was binding us to drowning.

I felt something flare in my hips. The television flashed live footage of the coast. Gray waves clawing the coastline toward the screen as if they could break the glass.

My father came back downstairs. Put the phone on its cradle. Unmuted the news. The picture clicked back to a map. The storm over the gulf. The living room flooded blue. White spirals climbed the walls. My father said the levees would protect them. But clenched his jaw as Katrina spilled from anchors' mouths. From models. From the ocean's design on our family hundreds of impossible miles away.

The Wolf in the Wheel Wells

We kept the news on constantly. Blue light on white walls. The storm suffusing the house. We watched the updates like the diagnosis would change. As if we could shift the track. As if the Atlantic wasn't on the other side of that screen.

My father called his brother with every development. FEMA miming preparations. Evacuations. He asked my uncle about their plans. His voice refracting through endless questions. A thousand words to avoid saying one. *Run.*

I sat beside him on the couch as they talked. Muted the television. The newscast cut to scenes of people flooding stores for supplies. Nailing pressboard to windows. Packing artifacts into cars, cargo tight. Dark gridwork to salvage something of home.

My father told my uncle to come stay with us. Every car on the screen blazed under sunlight. Under the weight of what they could save. Shadows wrung the wheels. Darker than what seemed possible. I stared at the screen. At the blackness in the wheel wells and the shadow deep inside. At something beading at the corner of the television. Seeping into the room.

Something began to burn in my hips. Two thin lines. Sacrum to knees. The news cut from cars to storm maps. The television light climbing the walls. Something pooling in the corner of the screen.

My father was still pleading his case. I twisted my legs to try and quiet the lines. To try and forget the conversation. The evacuations. Forget that there was something in those cars. In those boxes stacked like graves. In those sections of shadow darker than the rest.

Did they know something was tracking their escape as they drove away from the ocean? As the storm drummed beneath their shoulder blades? As if this can stop the erasure? As if the Atlantic wouldn't find a way? As if there aren't wires strung between our bodies and the drowning we inherited?

My legs burned. I pressed my back into the sofa. Tried to focus on the screen. The storm like a spider spinning over the sea. The water fading teal to blue to black. There was something in the shadows of those cars. Tracking us through another exodus. Another ocean to swallow us whole. I stared at the ceiling and mouthed the word run.

The pain broke and my legs went cold. Like they were submerged. Like the ocean was always an injury away.

My father walked into the kitchen, still on the phone. Paced as he made coffee to the sound of a decision to shelter in place. I stared at the screen. At the places that once contained car shadows. At the edge where something was bleeding through. I walked to the television and traced my fingers down to the corner. I looked at my hand. Water on my fingertips. The smell of brine. I wiped it off with my sleeve and saw another bead forming in the corner. Tracking the wires north.

My father came back in. Coffee in hand. Hung up the phone. Unmuted the television. It flashed to an image of the dome. Blinding bronze. An announcement that they would open its doors the next day so people could ride out the storm.

My hips throbbed again. Numbers for city hotlines slashed the screen. Blurred where I'd tried to wipe off the water below the image of the new ark where the survivors would be packed. Trapped with something already waiting in the dark gridwork of the rafters.

The Starving Ark

I watched my father watch the storm. Models of its devastation. Thousands of people streaming into the dome. He coughed and checked his watch. Glanced at the phone. Aligned the forecasts with New Orleans, an hour behind. As if an hour was enough to ensure everyone survived.

He called my uncle earlier that day. They talked for an hour. First about the storm, the latest predictions and paths. Then shifted to shared memories.

The neighbors they played with. The bike they shared. Their grandmother's stories. Superstitions whispered like she was giving them something on fire.

I could hear my uncle's voice through the line. *It's getting dark. I better go. Love you bro.* The phone placed back on its cradle. Heavy as stone boxes that kept the ocean from the dead.

My father sank into the couch. Cleared his throat. Relayed the final preparations. Boarded windows and batteries. Branches shorn. Bathtubs filled. Our family wrapped in their house like a hymn. He stared at the ceiling and asked if he'd ever told me his grandmother's stories. The ones about the Wolf that stalked the shadows for broken Lent. The beast that would tear seven years of sacrilege from your throat.

I stared at the television. Aerial views of the exodus into the ark. The ocean pooling at the corner of the screen. The ocean dripping into our house. The ocean evaporating on the floor. Rising to meet our throats.

The crowds streamed into the dome. Bags strung across their backs like wires. Supplies like surnames combined. Half-moon bruises under their eyes. New bodies to rewrite the map.

My father coughed. Struggled to dislodge something from his throat. I rubbed his back and told him no. I hadn't heard the stories. He smiled. Swallowed. Shook his head. Said she was always eccentric and leaned back into the couch as water dripped from the screen and something burned in my hips.

He took the remote and raised the volume on the news. Returned to mouthing the names of every memory he recognized. A vigil modeled on maps of storm paths and ark wrecks and rosaries on the ocean floor. The beginning of his childhood, erased.

I wanted to say something that would stop the storm. Stop the water beading into our house. Hadn't we gone too far north for the undertow? Hadn't we found the loophole that made the Atlantic lose our scents?

But there was miasma pooling at our feet, worlds away from the wreckage.

My father started coughing again. Asked for more coffee. I went to the kitchen and pressed my hands into the counter. Something solid. Like the levees around the city. Like cemeteries and iron gates. All the names we saved from the jaws of the ocean. This doesn't have to be a massacre. The dome doesn't have to become an ark. Doesn't have to be bronze walls holding hymnals underwater. Doesn't have to be a story our family never tells but always knows.

I brought coffee back to the living room. My father didn't look away from the screen. I placed his mug on the table and sipped my own. Bitter and astringent. Copper in my mouth. The ocean dripping from the screen.

Suffusing our lungs. He never told me, but I knew these stories by memory and wires. Hurricane-shaped and spiraling into a thousand arms the levees would either save or lead to slaughter.



"His Throat Became a Coastline," "The Wolf in the Wheel Wells," and "The Starving Ark" are excerpts from Meghan Guidry's new book Kinesiophobia, a speculative memoir forthcoming from Thera Books (September 2022). These excerpts printed here with the generous permission of the publisher. If you enjoyed this selection and are interested in more like it, support the indie press and see what else they have to offer at <https://thetherabooks.com/>.

SCRAPBOOK

Kevin Grandfield

Linda never wanted to be photographed.
An au pair friend
of a friend,
we sightsaw my city together.
Her easygoing manner and sense of humor
("That girl'd scare the dates off calendars," she said)
won me over.

She was camera shy so
I'm lucky I have her
loose hair and Husky-blue eyes
on paper.

Maybe I did
catch her soul
in that tiny
black
box.

God knows where else it is,
snatched from her sleep
at age twenty-six.

"That just doesn't happen,"
friends incant,
hoping to ward off
the same fate.
But people do die
suddenly

young
for no reason.
I have a picture to prove it.

And as I paste beside her image
mine
that she took,
I am just another corpse
waiting
for the thin sheet
to cover my face
and smooth out all the air.

“Since he is guilty of everything in his past, why burden himself with facts? To his way of thinking, it is a potential blessing that he may lose the written record of his existence.”

— Jeff Adams
“Around Here Somewhere”



WHAT IF HE REMEMBERS?

Judi Calhoun

AROUND HERE SOMEWHERE

Jeff Adams

He knows exactly where it is. It is sitting in a metal lockbox that he tucked into the back of a desk drawer at the wine country cabin he has been renting for the past year. Will it survive the firestorm? Miracles like that have happened. The opposite of what one would hope to happen could be the story of his life. And what if the manuscript were to survive but fall into a stranger's hands? Reading it would expose that person to the darkest secrets of a supremely flawed individual. But he is already out the door. He cannot save it.

His eyes burn. His throat itches. His voice rasps. He is twenty seconds into an escape from a wildfire that ignited somewhere around here and according to the authorities has quickly grown to be the size of a small city. It is zero contained and seems to be spreading faster than his Jeep can race down the side of the mountain. He had zero time to pack. Thank goodness he got the alert. He has no possessions, just a folding bicycle in the back of the Jeep.

He also has no regrets about what he leaves behind. Nor does he regret the self-incriminating thoughts, as is his tendency, about how the fire started. Since he is guilty of everything in his past, why burden himself with facts? To his way of thinking, it is a potential blessing that he may lose the written record of his existence. *Good riddance*, he thinks. Do you know anyone else who has lived a lifetime less than a quarter of its actuarial span, but plump with at least two lifetimes of conflicted behavior? It was the counselor's idea to memorialize it in writing as a check on that behavior. He cannot believe that he went along with her craziness.

“You need to bear witness to your true self John, not an imagined one.”

“For me or for you?”

“You are not responsible for everyone in the world doing what you do.”

“What if I want to be?”

“What if you stop and then they continue? What then?”

“I have considered that.”

“And?”

“There is no stopping.”

“This exercise will help.”

“Your kind of help? You are not me.”

“Resistance is normal.”

“Nobody does this.”

“Nobody who is a nobody, John. You are a somebody.”

He barrels through raging tunnels of orange flame. Black clouds of soot pummel the windshield. Monster winds batter the Jeep. He descends down a dirt road whose twists and turns he prays he can faithfully recall from a year of memorizing its back and forth rhythms, its gullies and dips, as he labored on his daily two-wheeled journeys from top to bottom and back again.

He finally reaches the base of the mountain where the bumpy dirt road merges onto a smooth two-lane ribbon of blacktop. Under normal conditions, this is a pleasant sensation for the attentive driver. But the only sensation inside this car is his tension. He feels the counselor’s accusing stare.

“Do you think I deliberately left it behind?”

“Not now, John, just drive.”

“You do think that don’t you? I can see it in your eyes.”

“Not now John.”

“Not only that, you think that I set the fire.”

“I did not say that.”

“What if I told you that I set the fire?”

“I would hope that you hadn’t.”

“You could lose your license if you report that to the authorities.”

“Not necessarily. Things are never that clear.”

“If you report it without my proper admission?”

“Easy John, you are speculating.”

“You would love for me to admit it wouldn’t you?”

“I cannot answer that question.”

“Isn’t that what you really want counselor, an admission?”

“You know I can’t comment on your statements.”

“But I can comment on one of my statements. And the answer is yes.”

He drives until he is deep into the cooling darkness of an unlit roadway going nowhere important. The reflection of a burning hell continues to erupt in his rearview mirror. He pulls the Jeep onto the shoulder. He sees the counselor again.

“Your prescription did not cure my disease.”

“Will you remember the details if what is in the lockbox is destroyed?”
“How can I forget them?”
“Are you finished with it?”
“I am still alive, aren’t I?”
“Do you know how it will end?”
“I know how it begins.”

On the very first day of his simpler life, the placement of a match against the rough surface at the bottom of a matchbook beguiles him. Then a quick stroke of his hand, the sound of a scratch followed by a whoosh of heat against his fingertips. It is as plain as that. And then there comes this bright hot glow, fierce on the smallest scale and when it is held at arm’s length it transforms into a shimmering gem of intense but ephemeral beauty, and it is his alone to admire. He feels a sense of power, much like that of a deity who can create life from nothing. Then the little flame dies. So he lights another one. But soon enough he must up his game. He ignites two matches at a time; and then three matches at a time; and then an entire book of matches at once. He repeats this again and again, until one whole box of safety matches (as they are inexplicably called) is consumed and he must replace its contents before anyone else in the household notices that a whole box of matchbooks is missing.

Is it inevitable for his parents to notice that something is different about him? Yes, and if they are also good parents they will want to investigate smartly and without accusing him directly. No one wants to look foolish. At first they go to the cabinet and count the number of matchbooks in the box. They monitor it hourly over a few days, a simple but effective sleuthing that produces immediate results. The matchbooks are indeed disappearing. What next? They have a gentle conversation with the boy, which elicits from him an insincere laugh, which leaves the parents suspecting that he has a true obsession.

And what of the child himself? He is smart too. He realizes that his game is no longer a game, and that one does not—one cannot—wish away such an impulse. There is no obvious path to deconditioning since he was not conditioned to acquire the impulse in the first place. It just is.

The caring parents consult privately with a certified counselor who gains their confidence and a grudging respect from her new subject. The counselor resolves to get to the bottom of her subject’s psychosis.

At first he accepts the counselor’s directive that the matchbook routine must end. But he covertly pursues another way to fulfill his impulse. He invents what he calls the spool launcher. It is not difficult to make and all of the parts can be found in the average household. All one needs is a spool of thread (with or without the thread itself), a strong rubber band, and a

wooden match. Ideally the spool is made of wood, although plastic will do, and an inch or two long.

He creates an instruction. Remove any material that may cover the holes at both ends of the spool. One is left with a little tunnel that one can peek through, and through which the wooden match will eventually pass. Drape the rubber band lengthwise against the sides of the spool and hold it down at the far end with forefinger and thumb. Be careful not to block the hole at the far end. Maneuver the rubber band so that it loops over the hole at the near end, folding and shortening it against the length of the spool to make it fit snugly, but not too snugly, against the hole.

While aiming the spool away from oneself, with one's free hand stick the bare end of the wooden match into the snug loop of the rubber band, just like it is written that David placed a stone in the pocket of his slingshot. Pinch the end of the match between forefinger and thumb. Slowly pull it back far enough to fit the red tip of the match just inside the tunnel. Feel the tension in the rubber band. Focus on the pinch. Hold it as still as possible. Make sure the match head does not accidentally rub against the inside of the tunnel. Extend the unit away from oneself. Select the target. Set the trajectory. Release the pinch. Liftoff. Ignition. Pleasure.

He decides that the spool launcher is preferable, for example, to holding a magnifying glass over a pile of dead leaves. For one, with the spool one does not require a sunny day. Granted, the use of a magnifying glass provides a certain measure of natural elegance, considering that it is the clever intensification of a harmless solar beam intentionally corrupted to destroy combustible vegetation via the artificiality of a man-made contrivance. Is this not a fitting metaphor for our relationship with the planet? What follows, the sudden blackening of a colorless leaf under a point of focused light, is a magical thing to behold. The emergence of smoke from no discernable origin boggles the imagination. The crackle of a nascent blaze fills the heart with love and fear and wonder at the power one holds in one's hands, and also with anticipation for what disaster may lay ahead if that power is used irresponsibly. For another, with the magnifying glass people will always see what one is doing and therefore know who started the fire.

Furthermore, with respect to the advantages of the spool launcher, consider for a moment the white hot violence that occurs on the surface of a heat shield as a space capsule re-enters the earth's atmosphere. Now imagine the cool red tip of a wooden match as it reacts to a high speed scrape against the side of a narrow tunnel inside an inch long spool. It so wants to burst into flame. But the column of air pressing against it won't allow for that. The suppressed chemical reaction that usually produces a flame is reduced to a white hot glow, like the heat shield of a re-entering

space capsule but without the shooting sparks, and in this case it is an object that is at the beginning of its journey and not at the end of it.

The little missile exits the spool at a high rate of speed, at an angle of ascent determined by the tilt of the forward hand. Its tip gives off a hiss in the air at too low a volume to be detected by the casual sweep of the human ear. Note that there are potential complications. Beware the dog or cat that perceives this missile as prey worthy of chase and make sure to shoo them away. Cast one's eyes on the target ten or twenty feet or, once one is really good at it, thirty yards into the distance.

Finally, look for the burst of orange on impact as the tip of the match achieves its ultimate desire by virtue of a rush of oxygenated molecules that feed the white hot glow until it becomes a tiny and short-lived conflagration. If one is lucky, watch the grape-sized imitation of the real sun introduce itself to adjacent flammable material. Witness the dark smoke rise and columnize, and marvel at the frantic shouts of bystanders yelling, "Where did that come from? Go get a hose or grab a pail of water and for goodness sake call someone!" And if one is a moral person be sure to pray to God for His forgiveness.

There are, unfortunately, some painful learnings to memorialize in the written saga of this life, as accidents can happen at rookie practice sessions. For example, one day the launch goes smoothly but the aim is poor. Instead of traversing via a high arc into an open field to land harmlessly in the wet grass, the projectile goes low and embeds itself in a bordering thorn bush a mere ten feet away from the spool. The thorn bush is robust and green with life and would otherwise not be susceptible to ignition except for the high levels of oil running throughout its system, oil that seemingly could catch fire if someone were to hold a warm light bulb next to a branch.

In the case of this rookie at practice, a particularly thorny branch catches fire, which ignites other branches nearby. He is alone, but nonetheless embarrassed by his mistake. He had never considered this thorn bush to be anything other than a landscape ornament. Now it is a looming disaster, a danger to the surrounding neighborhood. He rushes over to the bush and with bare hands reaches in and claps and claps and claps at the burning thorny branches until he is certain to have snuffed out all of the flames. He steps back to be sure it is completely out and that is when the pain sets in. His palms and fingers are a dense forest of thorns mostly half-sunken into his flesh like cloves in an Easter ham.

And worse, there are two thorns that have completely disappeared into the chunky muscle next to his right thumb. He can see their dark grey shadows lurking like prowling sharks somewhere beneath the two bleeding entry slits in the surface of his skin. He curses the electric shocks delivered

by the nerves in his hand each time he moves his right thumb, or when he attempts with his other hand to pinch the flesh around those two sunken thorns in a maneuver he hopes will bring them up to the oozing slits and through the surface. But all it does is make the pain worse and his squeezing may have driven the thorns even deeper. He spends the rest of the afternoon plucking thorns out of his hands and fingers, and the rest of his life so far adjusting to the constant discomfort in the flesh next to his right thumb, where the dark grey ghosts of two dead thorns that will never dissolve remind him of how practice always makes perfect. And that he should never ever have shot the spool launcher into a dark night at the top of a mountain after an evening of self-pity for a ream of confession in a metal lockbox because you know what awful harm it can do.

“You can let it go now, John.”

“It does not go away. You should know that.”

“Writing about it was a form of ablution, John.”

“It was also a form of torture. Are you not supposed to do no harm?”

“It permitted you to forgive yourself.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t know what I have done.”

“Where are you, John. May I call you?”

“Not where you can ever reach me.”

He doesn’t know exactly where he is. The Jeep is almost out of gas. He steps out of the vehicle. The sweet smell of burning wood, the perfume of self-indulgence, enters his nostrils. An unnaturally warm wind caresses his face. It is a beckoning. To a normal person it is a warning. He climbs back into the Jeep, performs a U-turn and heads back to the mountain until he reaches the transition from blacktop to dirt road. He pulls over and turns off the engine. He removes the bicycle and unfolds it. He removes the spool from his pocket and flings it into the darkness. He removes the rubber band from his other pocket and wraps it around his right wrist. He snaps it hard against the inside of the wrist, hops on the bicycle, and starts making his way up the dirt road.

He will never know how far he gets, but several switchbacks into his ascent, the handlebar is too hot to hold. He feels screaming pain from the embedded thorns in the flesh near his right thumb. He abandons the bicycle and continues on foot. He follows the familiar gullies and dips of the road when it occurs to him that he is a person in a rut and he has no one with whom to share the pathos. And then the question is, in which order will things occur? What comes first, the singe of the eyelash? Or is it the deep sear to the lining of the esophagus after a sudden intake of air? And next, will it be the curling of the ear as it crisps into bite size morsel? The melt of a ligament from collagen into gelatin? And does it really matter? For him, what

matters is the serenity of certainty. They will find the confession in a metal lockbox, and the apology in a deep depression somewhere along a dirt road on the side of a mountain.

CONTRIBUTORS



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Sam Berkeley (“Day One Hundred and Sixty-Four”) is an author who specializes in stories that disquiet your mind one minute and tear your heart out the next. She was born in New York, and currently resides in the state of Florida. A prolific writer, Sam intends to enter the world of law by day, and weave her tales by night. When not writing, Sam can be found studying, baking concerning amounts of pastries, spending time with her two cats, or staying up till midnight, painting artworks that worm into your head quite like her stories do.



Elizabeth Falcon (“Mommy Monster”) is a writer based in Northern Alberta, Canada. Her stories have appeared in *The Dalhousie Review*, *New Forum*, and are forthcoming in *FreeFall* and, hopefully, other places. She is currently working on a collection of stories that explore the weird and blurry boundaries between things.

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Die Booth (“Floor Five”) likes wild beaches and exploring dark places. When not writing, he DJs at Last Rites—Chester’s best (and only) goth club. You can read his prize-winning stories in places like *LampLight Magazine*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, and anthologies from Flame Tree Press and Neon Hemlock, amongst many others. His collections *My Glass is Runn*, *365 Lies* (profits go to the MND) and *Making Friends (and other fictions)* and novel *Spirit Houses* are available online. You can find out more about his writing at <http://diebooth.wordpress.com/> or say hi on Twitter [@diebooth](https://twitter.com/diebooth).



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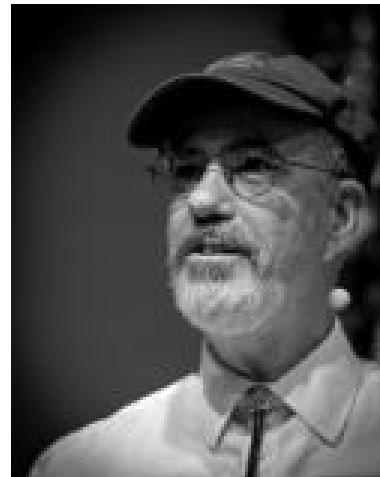
Kimberly Moore (“Lexie”) is a writer and educator. Her short works are published in *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *MacroMicroCosm*, *Fleas on the Dog*, and *Sequoia Speaks*. She lives in a haunted house where she indulges the whims of cats while writing her third novel. For more information, visit kimberlymooreblog.com or follow on Twitter [@Kimberlynwriter](https://twitter.com/Kimberlynwriter).



X. Culletto (“The Price of Survival”) lives in Utah with her three kids, two dogs, and one cat. She loves teaching Creative Writing at the local high school and getting caught up in a good story. “The Price of Survival” was created in a moment of reflection on humanity’s relationship with nature.



David Helper (“Chernobyl Spring”) has been 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), as well as a recently accepted chapbook, *Tuluwat Island & Other Poems* (Finishing Line 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 is a retired English teacher from College of the Redwoods and lives in Eureka, California, far enough the madness of civilization that he can still see the stars at night and hear the Canada geese calling. He served as the City of Eureka’s first poet laureate from August 2019–August 2021.





Alice Avoy (“A Cracked Screen”) graduated from the Institute of English Studies and worked as a journalist, reviewer, editor, and translator. Her short stories appeared in local magazines and one of her works is currently waiting to be published internationally in the *Beneath the Yellow Lights* anthology. She's mainly interested in horror, high fantasy, and urban fantasy, but she follows where her muse leads her. She loves to travel, play *D&D*, and get lost for hours in the land of video games. You can find her on Twitter [@AliceAvoy](#).



Boston-based author **Meghan Guidry** (“Excerpts from *Kinesiophobia*”) works across genres, fusing poetry, memoir, and speculative fiction. Central to her writing is the exploration of grief, particularly how it manifests in memory, ritual, and the mythologies we create to live alongside loss. Her new book *Kinesiophobia*, from which these excerpts are from, is forthcoming from Thera Books in September, 2022. Her work has also appeared in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, *Applied Sentience*, and *The Grey Alley*. When she's not writing, you can find her swimming, playing video games, and on her quest to find the best chocolate. Learn more, stay in touch, and send chocolate recs: www.meghansguidry.com or [@nonewmythology](#) on Instagram.



Kevin Grandfield (“Scrapbook”)’s poems have appeared in the anthology *The Thing about Hope is...* (Polyphony Press, Chicago), *Alpha Beat Soup*, *Artisan*, *Cokefish*, and *St. Andrew’s Magazine*. Other writing of his can be found at hopnerguy.com, including the book *Hunting Nighthawks: On the Road with Edward Hopper* at <http://hopnerguy.com/creativewriting/HuntingNighthawks/>.

Judi Calhoun (*What if he remembers?*) is a longtime member of Berlin Writers' Group and the New England Horror Writers Association. Her work appears in numerous fiction anthologies and national magazines, including Flame Tree's *Urban Crime*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Blue Moon Literary and Art Review*, *Crimson Street*, and the *Murder Ink* newsroom crime series, as well as releases by the New Hampshire Pulp Fiction series, Great Jones Street's collection of award-winning stories, and fiction anthologies by the John Greenleaf Whittier museum, *Snowbound With Zombies*, *Murder Among Friends*, and *Whittier Than Thou*. Follow her artistic adventures at <https://judiartist2.wixsite.com/judisartwork>.



Jeff Adams ("Around Here Somewhere") lives in California's Napa Valley with his wife Jane and their pet hummingbird Hoover (he is an outside bird). Jeff's short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Hive Avenue Literary Journal*, *McNeese Review*, *VOICES 2020* from Cold River Press, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, *Otoliths*, and others—and he has just completed a novel.

Annie Dunn Watson (Cover Art/*Darker Beach: The Five of Cups*) 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.



Next issue: masquerading missing persons, bijou boxcar boogeymen, macabre memory foam ... and the mysterious true tale behind Robert Cedergren's cover art.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*, Issue 6.

34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 6

AUTUMN 2022



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ISSUE 3

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ISSUE 4

AUTUMN 2021





In this issue, twenty-five artists focus on the things we refuse to see—and what that might mean.

Selah Janel ♥ Ali Seay

Lynne Schmidt ♥ Douglas Van Hollen

Priscilla Bettis ♥ Robert Bulman

M.C. Herrington ♥ Eric J. Guignard

Victoria Nordlund ♥ Paula Weiman

Sam Berkeley ♥ Elizabeth Falcon

David Donna ♥ Die Booth

B.C.G. Jones ♥ Ken Craft

Kimberly Moore ♥ X. Culletto

David Holper ♥ Alice Avoy

Meghan Guidry ♥ Kevin Grandfield

Judi Calhoun ♥ Jeff Adams

Annie Dunn Watson

Welcome to the home that feels clean—until you spot the
dust bunnies.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.