34 Orchard

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 12 Autumn 2025

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Issue 12, Autumn 2025

Published November 10, 2025

This issue dedicated to Denice W, Billy B, Amy C, and Elaine P. Each has shown me what the power of extraordinary longing can create.

Cover Photo

***The Reach* ♥ © Brenna Behel, 2024**

Geoffrey Reiter's "Quartz Contentment" first appeared in the author's own collection, *The Lime Kiln and Other Enchanted Spaces*, published by Hippocampus Press, February 2025. Reprinted with publisher and author permission.

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***34 Orchard* THANKS ITS SUPPORTERS!**

This issue made possible in part by generous donations from:

Kristina Hals

Pam DePaoli

Kevin Schurek

Scorpiotone Industries

Several in-kind for issues

From the Editor's Desk

Abandoned places have a liminal atmosphere: the walls still seem to know things, but they can't speak them anymore, and there's a palpable longing as it all waits for something that will never return.

Recently, I was given the opportunity to consider a permanent move three hours away. The sprawling, nearly-hundred-year-old farmhouse in which I was lodged was well kept, clean, and in good working order, with hardwood floors, plentiful closets and built-ins, and brand new windows that let in loads of light and valley views. Still, it carried that liminal feel, especially in strange still lifes: the sunporch's stones scrawled with a child's chalk drawings. A corner of the basement's ancient floor scarred by the pattern of tiles that had been removed.

A little Amazon magic, as well as bringing favorite pieces from my Connecticut home, gave the place some life, and I began to enjoy it. Sometimes I'd sit and admire how the gray sheer curtains complimented my Colonial palm tree theme, or how a Tiffany blue owl lamp glowed on the white built-in shelf, and that every rug I'd chosen was pretty. I adored the King bedroom's tucked-up-in-a-treehouse illusion, and would spend evenings just reading in bed.

One night, I was on a video chat with my college friend Kali—who happens to be psychic—giving her a tour. As I cruised through the dining room, she suddenly said, "Wait—who's that behind you?"

I froze. "What?"

"I saw someone for a second in the window there. A lady."

I'd heard rumors of a haunting, and was aware there had probably also been structures on the grounds that'd fallen to ruin long before the home was built: high on a forested hill adjacent to the dilapidated sunporch, there were at least seven cracked, knocked over, or half-buried gravestones typically found in centuries-old cemeteries. The only one that was fully decipherable dated to no more recently than 1836. "Oh, come on, Kali! I just

got comfortable here! I really don't need you to scare me."

"Maybe it was your reflection … she *did* have brown hair and dark eyes."

But it couldn't have been my reflection; according to Kali, the lady was wearing a peach peignoir with feathers, one that would've been common between the 1930s and the 1950s.

"She's absolutely thrilled with what you're doing with the house," Kali said. "She's so happy to see your enthusiasm, because people don't stay long. They just keep leaving."

As much as I enjoy ghost stories, I grew up in a house that had spiritual issues and had been careful my whole life to avoid a repeat. So instead, I began to think of the woman Kali had seen as the spirit of the house itself. I started referring to the place as "She, the Grand Old Lady." She'd just been longing for someone to love her. She was lonely. She meant no harm.

Despite this, it was never going to feel like home. I found myself longing not just for my husband (who wouldn't be able to move with me), but for my former life. What I'd been so anxious to escape was actually what I wanted. I also found myself crazy for things I'd previously taken for granted, even telling my friend Jen, "When I get back home, I'm going to kiss the sidewalk in front of the Danbury Fair Mall." The pining eventually ran so deep it became a permanent state, and I just zombied through my existence.

When we started acquiring work for Issue 12—back in 2023—the theme that emerged was the simple surface of "the nature of longing": desire, nostalgia, hope, regret, tenderness, desperation, and resignation. But in 2025, in the wake of my new experiences, each piece spoke in a more complex language.

For example, Scotty Milder's "Headcase" isn't so much about the narrator's desire to possess someone on a romantic level, but about, underneath, a longing to stop feeling destabilized in the romance department. Ellen Graham's "What Kiki Kolby Paints" is less chronicling a desperation to be loved, and more a plea to be *seen*. In F.C.E. Ngwube's "Stitches," a mother hopes for the recovery of her daughter, but beneath it all is regret over a societal practice that has harmed the people she loves most. And in Carolanna Lisonbee's "Thanksgiving, Reykjavik," there is resignation that not even the nostalgia of going home for the holiday—if there was even anything like a home to begin with—will not still the melancholic yearning for peace.

The power of longing shouldn't be underestimated—it can change the course of our lives. It can drive us to take a job or leave it, marry or divorce, cling to an addiction or let one go, end something or start something new—or, in my case, it can show us where we truly belong.

Although I was overjoyed the last time I pulled out of that driveway, I pitied the house I'd come to accept as the Grand Old Lady. Whoever she was, in her glorious feathered peach robe, she was being left against the woods on a lampless road again. All she'd longed for was adoration, and all she was going to get instead, once more, were the remembered echoes of a happier past.

Welcome to the house so empty your own voice comes back to haunt you.

Welcome to *34 Orchard*.

“Her mother said they had knocked and knocked on Papa’s door to enquire about Serene’s hand, be it the first rays of the morning sun or the middle of the night. That was not so for Fatima, though. After she became a woman, there was only one knock.”

—F.C.E. Ngwube
“Stitches”

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Silent as a Fish

Megan Savage

"On March 25, 1911, a pleasant springtime afternoon, a fire broke out in a garment factory near Washington Square in New York City's Greenwich Village. Within minutes, the entire eighth floor of the ten-story tower was full of flames."

—David von Drehle
"Uncovering the History of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire"
Smithsonian Magazine

One hundred and forty-six seamstresses are sewing one hundred and forty-six shirtwaists on the ninth floor when the faintest whiff of something burning fills the air. One seamstress's shirtwaist is nearly done, only it is missing its left sleeve. The seamstress fingers the rough cloth fraying on the unfinished cut, turns her head to see the rows of chairs and workbaskets extending back and back and that is when she hears the scream puncture the air like a needle might puncture a finger bracing cloth too close to the center of a machine. She thinks of the word "piercing," and as she does, indeed, she pricks her finger on one of the pins still piercing the shirtwaist before her.

One hundred and forty-six women are rising in the face of the smoke that is beginning to pour into the ninth floor. The seamstress's table faces the windows that face the alleyway. The women all around her are screaming now and trying to turn over the tables long as the barn at her father's farm, the seamstress remembers thinking on her first day at the factory, and now she thinks they will never move the tables in time. She wonders whether the elevators are even working, because the fire is consuming everything now, and surely it must be eating the cables floor by floor.

Stairs.

Only there are so many tables and her skirts are heavy around her legs like sandbags weighting a hot air balloon and if only she could cast them off.

Then she remembers the girl beside her with whom she shares apples on occasion at lunch and who once commented to her on a brilliant fall day that the sky was as bright as polished silver. The girl is fourteen. She remembers the girl got up to fetch a new spool of thread and where is the girl now? It is imperative that she find the girl. A bow bobs down the table, this girl, she is running into the seamstress's arms.

The floor is hot; the floorboards burn through the thin soles of her shoes.

Already, women are lining up next to the windows. Already, they are taking flight.

Come on, she yells to the girl, and they push up next to the great rectangular swatches of sky. It is a bright day. *Remember*, she says, *like polished silver?*

There must be someone to catch the fallen. Firemen with nets, men with nets, men doing something. Look, she points, there they are with a horse blanket. But a woman's skirts billow up and as she hits the blanket it gives way like a sail in a strong headwind, tears from the hands of the men. Her hair is a nest of fire in the broken branches of her body. There isn't time to shelter the girl's eyes.

They'll come, she says.

A man opens the window of the floor below her. He is gesturing like he is directing traffic. The seamstress follows his hand. Three men have made a human chain, swung themselves across the alley. They are like the paper dolls her mother used to make for her out of old newsprint. The seamstress and the girl watch as slowly, gingerly, women step out of the eighth floor and cross the bridge of men. Perhaps, she thinks, they can make their way down to the eighth floor. She looks for cloth to tie into knots but above her is a line of clothes ablaze.

The girl opens the window, steps out onto the ledge.

They'll come, the seamstress begins to say, but the heat behind her is unbearable, the metal machines and tables that block her path to the elevators and stairs too hot to touch. What she does not know: the doors, locked. Around them girls are drifting from the windows like petals from a dogwood tree. Their skirts bell as they fall.

And then the chain of men buckles, the center man's back bending backwards into a supple "c" all wrong for the torso's capabilities.

The other two men cannot hold this center man and even as two girls lift their skirts up and cross the bridge, it fails. The two bracketing men loosen their grips on the window sills. The whole party is lost; they all fall down.

In the heat the seamstress's eyes flutter open, then closed, then open

again. She remembers funny things, how once when the seamstress was a girl, her mother had told her a story as she taught her embroidery. She remembers snow falling outside the farmhouse, the feel of embroidery thread between her fingers as her mother told her the story of the six swans. *Once there was a girl.*

The girl steps out onto the window sill. The seamstress follows her, places her arms around her thin torso. *Once there was a girl*, she says. *A girl who had six brothers whom her evil stepmother turned to swans. It was a terrible dark magic.*

The air in front of her is cold, but what's behind burns. She begins to sway. There is a crowd below and the crowd is yelling not to jump. At the crowd's feet, broken bodies, shredded skirts.

But the swans visited their sister. They told her that if she went through a trial, if for six years she neither spoke nor laughed, and in that time if she sewed six little shirts, six tiny shirts of starwort, she could set them free. However, if she uttered a single word, all would be lost. And then, after they told her this, they flew out the window again. At her father's farm in Western New York it would be snowing, still, the breath of all the animals still damp in the morning frost. *Listen, are you listening?*

The seamstress clutches the younger girl tight, tries to pull her back on the ledge, press her against the bricks. But the younger girl twists her head and shoulders loose from the protecting embrace, takes a step to the right and jumps.

The seamstress is backed against the wall. She does not look down. She looks at the sky, thinks about how it stretches all the way across the state, the whole distance of the long train ride she took last year, to the farm where her parents are, and farther on, all the way around the world. She looks at the sky and sees the outlines of twelve wings embroidered upon it.

In the story, the sister did as the swans instructed, sequestered herself in a tree to sew those little shirts, until the day the king and his huntsmen came below them. Because she couldn't speak, she threw her necklace down, and then her clothes, one garment at a time. The king took the sister as his bride, made her heavy with children three times, but each time his jealous mother made it seem she had eaten her children, smeared the sister's mouth with blood while she slept. But still the sister's mouth could not open to defend herself, still she sewed, finishing all but the left sleeve of the final little shirt. And she was sentenced to death by fire.

The swans are coming nearer across the sky. The seamstress thinks she can begin to see the warm black ink of their human eyes.

For a moment she imagines she has the shirts. She feels the starwort rough in her hands. Smoke trickles out of the broken window a few inches to

her left, begins to obscure her vision. The seamstress relinquishes her clothing piece by piece, the skirt she made out of factory scraps, the petticoat her mother had sewn, to the crowds below without looking down.

The seamstress feels cold March air on her bare arms, legs. The seamstress feels the heat of the fire on her now bare back. She opens her mouth.

The body of a woman falls past her arm and she thinks it is the swans, come to fly her away to safety.

She raises her arms, shows her swan brothers the shirts. The swans sweep in and sink down so that their feathers touch the starwort in her palms, so that the shirts slide over their bodies. Then their swan skins fall off, and her brothers float in their bodily forms before her—men, stalwart and strong.

Brothers, she cries. The youngest waves; in place of his arm is a swan's wing.

The crowd below sees her raise her arms, a naked woman giving an oratory. Flames lick the windowsill, singe her hair.

She reaches through the smoke and jumps, feet first, without turning or twisting, falling.

♥

Editor's Note: This piece is inspired by the Brothers Grimm's "The Six Swans," and not only addresses its major themes, but makes many allusions; in the original tale, a princess, bound to silence, rescues her brothers, who have been turned into swans. If you'd like to read "The Six Swans," you can read a translated version at the University of Pittsburgh website for free here: ***https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm049.html***

♥

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was one of the most devastating—but transformative—disasters in history.

The factory occupied the top three floors of New York City's Brown Building (formerly the Asch Building) on Greene Street, and was purported to be "fire proof." Mostly young immigrant women worked six days a week, ten hours a day, making the popular "shirtwaist" (think blouse), a wardrobe staple between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially for women who were working outside the home.

On March 25, 2011, a fire broke out on the eighth floor—a tinderbox of cotton dust and scraps. Many couldn't escape due to blocked/locked exits

and broken or non-existent safety measures. Some victims chose to leap from the windows to their deaths. In the end, one hundred and forty-six people died. Fourteen engagement rings were found in the ashes. In its wake, there was much workplace safety reform.

Want to know more? We recommend Cornell University's page "Remembering The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire" here at ***https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/index.html***

Season 23, Episode 7 of the PBS series American Experience *aired "Triangle Fire: The Tragedy that Forever Changed Labor and Industry." A DVD of the episode is available here:*

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B004AR4VYA?psc=1&smid=AE5BIV1G10VKA&ref_=chk_typ_imgToDp

In 1979, NBC aired a feature-length drama called The Triangle Factory Fire Scandal*, which starred Tom Bosley (*Happy Days*) and Charlotte Rae (*Facts of Life*). It's of soapy, made-for-TV ilk, but it decently depicts what life was like for workers at the time as well as the chaos of that day. It wasn't available for years, but thanks to YouTube, it's alive and well here:* ***https://youtu.be/niyubQuH7Is?si=8DEj3W0-OiUTwv3M***

*There's also a phenomenal podcast—*American History Tellers*—which gives a layman's terms overview, over multiple episodes, of the strikes and labor unrest in the years leading up to the tragedy as well as the tragedy itself and its aftermath. You can listen to the first episode of "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire" here:* ***https://youtu.be/jLlWug7oHbU?si=kGP9mYjjV9wybOFA***

“He had on his typical tank top and shorts but no shoes. His eyes were red and beady. I looked down at his hands, all ten of his fingers twitching and tapping against one another.

“Onira hasn’t come home,” he told me.”

—Logan McConnell
“St. Xero”

Keepsake Box

Lynn Wiser

The horror is overwhelming.

It sits there, on the table—the *thing*—begging you to open it. You look at it too long and you can't stop staring. Your vision starts to tunnel until you can't see anything but the box, and you can't look away, and—Someone touches your arm. You're back in the room. Surrounded by strangers, noise, goods, commerce. There's someone at your booth, looking concerned for you.

"Everything okay?" she says, unnecessarily.

You give your head a little clearing shake, then smile, keeping your eyes up as if you're trying not to cry. "Of course—sorry, got distracted for a second there. Could you repeat the question?"

She smiles as well, but seems still uncertain.

Pull it together or you'll blow this.

"I was just wondering if you could tell me about the history of this, um—what is it, a keepsake box?" she asks.

Don't look down at it. Eyes up, you say, "Yes, a keepsake box."

"Well, it *is* beautiful … " A moment passes. "So, the history of the box?"

This stranger seems to be having some slight trouble tearing her eyes from it—lingers just a second longer than she means to.

This will be easy. Close the deal.

The history—two months ago, the box came into your life via unremarkable means. You found it at some garage sale, totally innocuous, except that you felt you *needed* to have it—a sign you didn't interrogate enough, or at all.

You had no use for a keepsake box. You have no keepsakes, no clutter. So what possessed you to think you needed *this* one?

When you brought it home, having nothing to put inside it, you didn't open it for a long while. Then, when it occurred to you to do so,

you found yourself reluctant. What if, you thought, you found something really valuable in the box? This would, of course, open up all sorts of tricky ethical conundra; would the previous owner try to claim your findings back for himself? What if it was something personal—too personal? What if you learned something you couldn't unlearn about the previous owner, and then you ran into each other later by some chance, and the knowledge of the former owner's horrible secret negatively colored your interaction? What then?

Eventually, you came to understand what the box was doing: it wanted you to *want* to open it, but of course it'd never let you. But even now, knowing that, you find yourself unable to bring yourself to lift the lid. What if, you think, it happens that this box contains all the fear and hatred in the world, or a soul-destroying monster? Or… something.

But back then, you weren't considering this. Mainly what you were doing was staring at the box, admiring its beauty.

A carved wooden box. Simple in construction, but the closer you looked, the more intricate the delicate carvings seemed to become. As beautiful and terrifying as looking into the sun—and, like the sun, you found yourself somewhat blinded to other aesthetic pleasures after the long hours you spent gazing at it. You grew fearful, but still couldn't look away, as the designs deepened and showed you your future, your death, all the many failures of your life.

Eventually you were knocked out of your absorption by something insignificant—a human need, overlooked too long, reared its head. You were hungry. Starving. You'd lost track of time.

When you turned away, finally, to deal with this, something made you think it was filled with anger. But it was a wooden box …

Once sated, you didn't look at the box again. Finally, you were wary of it. You covered it with a sheet and paid the previous owner a visit.

He did not look surprised to see you. He looked guilty, and afraid.

Without much prompting, the former owner confirmed your suspicions: he'd been desperate to get rid of the box. All was not as it seemed. Still it was giving him nightmares he couldn't shake. Something was going to happen soon, he said. Like a game of hot potato, he'd needed to ensure it didn't land on him. All while he was talking, the man was scanning you—did you bring it with you, to foist back upon him? It wouldn't work anyway, he said, it was *your* problem now; it had to be willingly taken away.

How, you wondered, did the man know all this? Had he opened it?

The man shuddered and said, Never. But you'll see—if you keep it.

Ridiculous, you thought at first. But there was something

undeniably wrong with the box.

You now had, on top of your other dreads, the sensation of a clock, somewhere, ticking down. You had to get rid of the thing, if only so you could resume your normal life.

But then, you *couldn't* get rid of the thing. Not, it seemed, without inflicting this on someone else. The hot potato.

It didn't make any sense that you couldn't just dump it somewhere. Why should you have to pawn it off on an unsuspecting soul, potentially condemning someone to untold torment?

You tried. You really did. You drove it, still wrapped up in a sheet, to a strip mall parking lot, threw it in some dumpster, and drove away. Ten minutes later you were in the dumpster, too, searching frantically for the box while trying to keep your eyes averted, lest you wind up gazing at it for days in that tiny metal container and get carted off to the landfill.

The ticking clock sensation didn't go away. You couldn't part with it. You needed it to latch onto someone else. It was distasteful … but why should you be the one to suffer just because someone had tricked *you* into taking it?

So here you are, now, at the antiques fair. The woman in front of you, smiling still, wants to know how much it'll cost.

Dia De Los Muertos:
from the Family Album, 1971

Celeste Pfister

The brown Chevy wagon drove
the family by highway
(was it a cloudless spring morning?)
out of the crowded dirty city
to the edge of a campground
where no one would disturb
them during thefamilyvacation,
a day of epic scenery
and wide-open spaces.

Around the campfire that night
no one told stories of old-world ancestors
no songs of heroic deeds or
risky border crossings were sung
as they held marshmallows on long
sticks that never caught fire
and when it became morning again
a camper who was walking her
malamute discovered

a small pile of cold ashes
near an old canvas tent sheltering four
people huddled under one sleeping bag
and eight new leather boots
nailed to the ground.

The Empty Spaces Between the Stars

Maria Giannone

"She looks over at them and longs for her early twenties—back when she was reckless in her pursuit, back when she was ignorant and blinded with an insatiable hunger for that which she was reaching. Back when she never asked *why*."

—JJ Norris
"~~On Wanting~~ On Needing"

Stitches

F.C.E. Ngwube

Yara had been missing for five hours, and Fatima was still unable to pull herself from the settee. She simply sat, staring at the clock. The long hand was cut with a thin neon strip, reaching for the twelve. The short hand had lost its glow, leaving behind just a sticky residue.

The clock, the fraying patchwork carpet, the notch on the edge of the coffee table, the red varnish chipping from her big toe—Fatima had studied them all. She committed them to memory as if she would be tested at a later date. It was as though, in the time between arrival and this moment, the sitting room had become a crime scene, and this act of remembrance was the very least she could do.

When Miriam entered the room, she looked like she was floating. On her large legs, she glided to the coffee table, where she laid a plate of basbousa on a dolly at its centre, the sickly sweet scent filled the room. She made no sound, picking up empty plates and bits of lint from the sofa cover and refilling cups that needed replenishing. Even in crisis, it fascinated Fatima how her sister could still place her sense of hospitality above all else. Or maybe it was just her way of coping. Fatima's sister paused and caught her eye, hesitating a second before moving closer.

"Ima, please eat, *huuno,*" Miriam said, holding a small morsel of the cake towards Fatima's mouth. Her hand was heavy on her shoulder, but Fatima did not move or even acknowledge her presence, so after trying her best, her sister returned to the kitchen.

Today was supposed to be Yara's ceremony day, the day she would receive her stitches and become a woman. Like her mother Fatima had done, and also like her aunties, Miriam and Serene. But as the women prepared for the day and Yara busied herself outside with the birds, the flowers and everything else her childlike sensibilities craved, the sisters hadn't noticed when they could no longer hear the girl's laughter from the garden.

"Hooyo, I want to be just like you when I grow up."

Her sister's house was full of women she did not recognise. A cousin from a neighbouring village. A niece with a name she could not remember. All gathered for this single celebration, and as she heard the food preparation underway in the kitchen, Fatima's mind drifted to her daughter. Yara's smile had been wide when she said those words: "*just like you…*" Stressing each syllable as she played idly with the beads around Fatima's neck. She remembered how Yara's eyelashes would curl towards the sun, how her skin was as smooth as honey. Fatima would call her 'my Melody,' and the child would giggle in response. The more she recalled those aspects of her daughter—her eyes, her voice, the grace of her fingertips—the more she felt the details slowly suffocate her, her absence causing a vacuum within her. She would keep the child's singsong laugh in the back of her mind on days when her thoughts darkened, and it was her laugh now playing on repeat, defiant against the silence in the room, even though Fatima was the only one who could hear it.

Her younger sister, Serene, entered with a phone to her ear and a child on her hip. Fatima heard the disembodied voice of a man on the other end, static eating at the edge of every word. "So the doctor will wait? *Hamdullah*! Yes, yes, we will continue when she comes. The girl is inquisitive, no? She has only wandered off. Not far. No, not far."

Fatima hated Serene at that moment and didn't quite know why. Maybe it was the neutrality of her tone or the mention of the doctor and remembrance of what today actually meant. Serene was rocking her two-year-old daughter on her hip, the child's dark curls spilling over the woman's arm as she slept, unaware and in peace. Like an umbilical cord, the fraying phone cord rooted Serene to an unseen point in the kitchen. Fatima watched it extend and contract as her sister moved between the two rooms, testing its limit. Her slippers slapped her heels as she paced, bounced, and nodded to the ghost on the phone. Fatima could not think of the doctor, the ceremony or the preparation that had gone into the day. She merely picked at the skin on her thumb until she drew blood.

It was some time before Serene returned to the room, childless, wearing worry on her frame instead. She squeezed her sister's hand, but turned to leave after a moment or two, as if changing her mind about whatever platitude she had planned to share. Fatima watched her, staring long after she had disappeared behind the cloth partition. Her sister's beauty was still brilliant; there was no denying it, and although motherhood had drained the life from her bones, Serene remained a sight to behold. By the time her sister had had her own ceremony, Fatima remembered how relentless the men, young and old, had been. Her mother said they had knocked and knocked on Papa's door to enquire about Serene's hand, be it

the first rays of the morning sun or the middle of the night. That was not so for Fatima, though. After she became a woman, there was only one knock. Fatima often wondered why her father did not wait or pray for patience.

Serene's scars had faded to merely that of a pencil mark on paper; you had to squint to notice them. But her older sister Miriam was not so lucky. Her ceremony had left her with keloid scars on both her lower and upper lip as well as the surrounding skin. If you stared long enough, like many usually did, you could see where the needle and thread had pierced thick flesh and pulled far too tightly to seal her mouth shut. Fatima touched her own lips and felt a numbness cover her.

"Hooyo, when will I become a woman just like you?"

"When God wills it, my Melody."

Fatima remembered the first time Yara noticed her own scars and how her soft fingers traced each one, her brows knitting with a question for which she did not have an answer. She did not know how to explain what womanhood was then, and she doubted she would have any further wisdom now on the day Yara was to become one. Fatima's own mother had told her that her voice was the most precious gift that she could possess, and it was the one thing her husband would cherish above all else. She remembered that her mother's smile did not reach her eyes when she spoke the words 'gift' or 'husband,' but still, she was drunk with joy the day her own ceremony date was announced.

For all of them, this ceremony marked the moment a girl transitioned into full womanhood. The process itself was simple enough and could be conducted by any elder woman within the community. However, families who could afford it would seek out a doctor to conduct the procedure. Such girls usually attracted a greater dowry. Plus, their stitches were neater.

Fatima was awarded no such privilege, so she visited Habo Aminah early one morning, just like her sister Miriam had done before her. Her mother was so stoic and silent in her comfort, but Fatima thought she had seen a fleeting moment of sorrow in her eyes before they entered. They both watched as the decrepit woman bustled around her kitchen-come-clinic, readying her tools. The smell of iodine burnt deep within Fatima's nose, and as the woman sanitised her curved needle and soaked the thread in the black liquid, Fatima remembered reaching for her mother's hand.

"Hooyo, I'm scared. I can't … "

Her sister's own ceremony pushed its way to the front of her mind and caused her limbs to cease. That day, the house had transformed. There were so many different flavours of cakes and sweets that Fatima had been in awe. She was nine, nearly a woman herself, and she had held her head high and walked around the house, swaying her hips like she had seen the other

women do. They would laugh and tease that soon they would be celebrating her, and from sunrise till dusk, only the women's singsong voices were heard in her home.

When her older sister had returned from Habo Aminah's house, she remembered how the chorus had erupted. They danced and sang—high ululations heard through every room. But her sister did not dance, sing or yell. In fact, after that day, Miriam did not utter a single word until the day she was married. It was not out of protest or a solemn vow. It was that she simply could not. Fatima had remembered Miriam's blotchy, tear-soaked face and how her lips, chapped and bruised, were pinched together so tightly, held firm by a thin silken thread. There was a small part in the centre of her mouth that had been left untouched, small enough to allow drink and liquid food to pass through a straw.

After the ceremony, as a virgin woman, her sister was doted on and cared for by the older women in their family, their house filling to the brim with relatives of every shape and shade, purely for this purpose. They bathed her, fed her and cleansed her wound—until she was collected by someone who had offered the right price.

That intermittent period, which could last days or even months for those unlucky enough to have few suitors, was considered sacred. Not only did her sister, friends, cousins, neighbours and classmates lose their ability to sing, yawn or shout, but they were also taught that it was something to celebrate. Even as a young girl, Fatima realised that joy and pain were inextricably linked. Tied together with an indelible cord, where there always seemed to be a note of melancholy behind every laugh and where, behind each smile, something morose hid just beneath the surface.

Fatima's own desire to celebrate dissipated the moment she entered Habo Aminah's house. Still clinging to her mother's hand, she had pleaded with her again, but she merely stood, removed Fatima's hand from her own, and told the woman in her mother tongue that she would hold the child down. It was at that point that Fatima wondered if she would have any cause to celebrate ever again.

It had been seven hours since Fatima had held her daughter, yet the sun continued to make its way across the sky. The old phone would ring periodically, yet she noticed calls were now answered behind closed doors in hushed tones. Someone had mentioned her husband's name, and she felt sick. The neighbours had joined the search, and her brothers-in-law had already scouted the perimeter of their small village twice.

"He should know, sister. Is he not her father?"

Fatima did not need reminding of what Suleiman was and was not; she knew this well enough. Her family still respected him, but to Fatima, he was

merely a wraith, an apparition of a man who was there one moment and gone the next. The night he had cut her thread, she had given him her song, just like her mother had taught her. But she had quickly learnt that for a man like Suleiman, such hunger was rarely satisfied with just one thing. He took her soul, too, and her mind, her thoughts, her peace, as well as her body, leaving her a shell of what she understood herself to be. The one thing he had left her was the child inside her womb. And until this day, Fatima did not know how a single seed of delight could blossom in the midst of such acidic hate.

But she had.

And that was the thing about Yara. Her life had always been one of contradictions. She was a child built on a foundation of dichotomies and things that should not have been. Fatima's love for Yara had unearthed a joy within she didn't even know was possible. It was her daughter who brought luminescence to Fatima's life, despite all its bleakness. Yara was the best parts of both of them, and Fatima thanked her God that something so beautiful could be hers every chance she had.

So when the phone rang for the final time, and her sister fell to her knees as the words *girl's body* and *mangrove lake* filled the room, Fatima found herself standing, and as the room broke into a cacophony of confusion and frantic prayers, she moved through it all in slow motion, as if it were her own body submerged in the lake's brackish water.

The sun, still bright in its nonchalance, bore down upon her, scorching every bit of fabric that draped her, yet she did not care. She turned on the path by her sister's house and ran towards the lake. She did not know when or how it began, but as her bare feet pounded the ground and her lungs burned something vicious, she realised she was screaming, a wail so guttural it had not registered as her own. Her shawl had fallen from her shoulders, and the seams of her skirt tore with each stride, but she did not slow. Agony exploded through her calves and ankles, and as the mangrove trees broke over the horizon, she cried her daughter's name until her scars and jaw throbbed.

As the crowd by the lake grew clear, she began to hear Yara's singsong laugh. Quietly at first, sprouting from a place deep within her. But soon it erupted all around her: the loud, joyful shrill of a child busying herself with birds, flowers and everything else her innocence craved. Fatima clung to it, its cadence constant against the pounding in her ears. The crowd, seeing her approach, parted in unison. The woman saw the shell of a child who had learned the cruelty of man before her mother even had the words to warn her. The noise among the crowd was unbearable—fishermen, neighbours, shop owners—all had gathered at the lake's edge as the news spread. As the

day wore on, they grew in both numbers and desire for retribution, many picking up rocks and unsheathing their hatred as talk of a ‘manhunt’ travelled amongst the swarming mass, each person unified by terror and indignation.

But they did not spare a moment for the mother unravelling within their midst as she held the last remains of her joy. They did not notice as the woman broke into lament, emptying herself into oblivion.

Quartz Contentment

Geoffrey Reiter

"This is the Hour of Lead—"

—Emily Dickinson

I walk alone down the old path through tangles of clover and the first tenuous blooms of daffodil amid the pallid yellowish buds. Beneath my feet the stones embedded in the cold brown earth crunch and crackle. It is warmer than yesterday, but I can still see my breath fleeing from my dry lips.

Now I pass through the phalanx of pines towering and glowering greenly on the way before emerging into the little shadow-shrouded circle of Cole's Pool. There is no wind wafting or wrinkling the surface—it is as still and glassy as it was three months ago, and the pines loom deep downward in reflection, as though growing into the mines and caverns at the roots of the world. But the pool is different now, for every sheen and layer of ice has deliquesced into a fully fluid stillness.

I have not been to this pond since the last night we spoke, on Christmas Eve. Now in my mind I see again the revelers congregating among the coarse trunks of the trees, sitting on the stumps and the granite boulders to shed their shoes and boots in favor of skates. Their laughter crests in waves in the crisp near-solstice night. The guests have gathered from the houses and homesteads to the southern boundary of our property, as they had done for years in your father's day, some arriving by foot, others by carriage. It is a clear, dark night, though the sky toward which the laughter rises is swathed by rings of green boughs and aureoles of golden lantern light.

I remember you, Arthur, in those moments as I had always known you, smiling affably and awkwardly, flitting from conversation to conversation. There I hear your voice, strong and always an octave higher than I expect before you speak. You would commend me as a hostess, yet you are the natural host, the one through whom joy surges at the sight of a neighbor. I

would ever prefer to see men and women through the frosty glass pane of a window. But for your sake I smile and speak and skate—and despite myself, in the cold of the December constellations, I find myself warmed.

Now I step gingerly, cautiously, toward the bank of the pool. Closer to the edge, the slight ripples from a cat's-paw breeze are evident in the surface, and they distend my reflection. There I stand, an image of myself at my feet. My black dress is faded, tattered, for how many days have I been sleeping in it? My unwashed hair has grown brown, stiff, tangled into knots that it seems cannot be untied. The eyes through which I peer are red-rimmed and dry—they have been dry for so long, I think.

Through these eyes, I see a flicker of pale light stirring beneath the waters, beneath my own reflection. Again I see eyes, but this time not my own. These eyes are deep and dark, a brown near black, a gaze soft and gentle. They are the eyes I have never thought to see again—your eyes, Arthur. My breath catches in my throat, and a hectic blush rushes into my cold, wan visage. But your face resolves more fully in the depths, and it is not the waxen face I saw last in that sharp December night.

For the sight of you drags back to me thoughts of the shredded vestiges of that evening. One or two at a time, the echoing voices dwindled as the guests gasped at the lateness of the hour, knowing their children would be clamoring for gifts before the Christmas dawn. They shed their skates and traversed the paths back to their hearths, until only the Warners and you and I remained. Your dry, warm lips kissed my cheek with a tickle of beard as you enjoined me to return along the trail with them. You wanted a few minutes alone on the sturdy pond, under the coruscation of the stars and the worshipful arms of the pines. I flitted merrily home, little knowing it would be the last time I would feel your heat.

I cannot now recall how the first qualms trembled like filaments through me, nor do I know what the time was—we had let the clock run down. Time, I thought, was a full gold-gilded chalice in our hands. But I remember the fear, a churning and turning inside me. Was that nausea in my deep spaces truly fear, or had it another source? Was there even a difference?

So then I found myself rushing, in my nightclothes, a cloak draped over the lace, yet not running, simply striding with a hint of alacrity. For still I felt I would find you dancing in your own ecstatic oblivion. Yet some misgiving must have clawed in me, else why should I have shivered beneath the moonless sky? Emerging again upon the clearing, that was when the vapor of my breath caught in my throat. Where was your form? I saw nothing but the translucence of the ice—marred by an asymmetrical gash in the near side.

I ran, the slippers on my numbing feet sliding slightly on pebbles and

loose earth as I scrambled toward the bank. There I saw the pale outline of a human body pattern splayed out beneath the glassy surface, upon which only hours ago shouts of joy had echoed forth. Again I lost the knowledge of time. What followed was the hollow panic of empty helplessness, searching the pond for another crack or crevice, pounding in futility at the unyielding hardness. You had drifted far from the gap into which you plunged, and there was no retrieving you through that aperture. Some time later, deep into the frigid night and the first hours of Christmas, I surrendered the fight and fled into town, seeking help.

Here is where the true chill began—from the air, to be sure, the cold that turns water to rock, but also from the opiates my mind sends into the deep substrata of my heart. My eyes gazed blank at the pond while the men chipped away at the ice and dredge forth your corpse. I stared at your body that once I had known hot and wet against my own and saw it as a thing, a motionless congeries of molecules and minerals, knowing that, day by day, it would begin its collapse into the soil, however secure the coffin. They allowed me to touch this body, and I felt beneath my fingers and on my lips and tongue the texture of old wax, melted, dried, and discarded. A little wick of anger flared in me, only because I wanted to weep, but found that I could not summon the tears at my need.

That was the last time I beheld you; how had I attended to the rituals of lamentation while still seeing you amidst those mourners in the days that followed? Oh, I am drowning in rituals, full with formalities, but they are embalmed within my mind, my heart—though, like the mummy, my heart seems stolen from my breast.

Here you are now. I recollect my researches in anatomy, take my pulse to measure my mania, draw my breaths at regular intervals. This is no frivolous feminine hysteria. The visage that has replaced my reflection in the pellucid pond must be yours. Your face is ruddy and warm again, not the vacant death mask I last kissed. And those lips are alive with speech.

What speech is it, though? Why can I not hear your words? You are speaking, you are speaking, you are speaking, but blackbirds and rustling leaves are the only language in the air—and I am unskilled to interpret them. Even so, I strain my ears as though through force of will I might catch somehow the vibrations of your voice inside me.

And so instead in the stillness I fill the air with my own speech and tell you now all that has been crystalized within me. I tell you of the hours that grew like diseased wood embowering me across the weeks, and my thighs that burned woodenly as I walked. I tell you of the many words that dropped hard like hail over me, pelted me and hurt me, the men and women who knew not what to say but could not keep silence and so heaped heaviness

upon my spirit. I cry out to you about the desolate January, when, writhing in tearless agony, my body bled out all that I had left of you inside me.

You hear me, you hear me, I know that you hear me. Your eyes meet mine, and in the pond it seems to me that your gaze wells up with the tears I cannot shed. I still cannot make out your voice, so I peer deeply into the motion of your lips. "Cora," it seems you are saying, "come … "

"Yes," I murmur, the word clouding before my mouth.

Your hand stretches out as though beckoning for me. I reach out my own hand, my fingertips raw where I have chewed at the skin, my nails chipped irregularly. My body feels benumbed and alloyed, as though it were the body of an automaton, and my motions are mechanical and mindless. I tread, step by step, until my slippers are soaking in the silt and sediment and frigid fluid of the pool. The skin of my feet knows it is cold as my brain knows knowledge from a book, aloof and painless. Another step submerges my ankles, then my calves, my knees, my thighs, as my dress billows blackly in the ripples of the pond.

You are calling more frantically now, both hands out as though to embrace, and how my cold flesh yearns for that embrace. Can you, will you, bring those open arms around my waist to touch across the small of my back, as you did the eve before the ghastly night? I reach out as I plunge into this strange cold-burning baptism. The water closes in upon my mourning crape and my hair, which drifts like willow leaves above. I open my eyes beneath the little waves and search the depths for your face.

And yes, here you are, here you are, and I see your arms are open not in embrace—they are warning me away. You are calling, you are calling, and as the water fills my ears, so at last do your words, strong and high and frenetic. They ring like tinkling crystal, and there is your bright warm flickering face, the call of your syllables, and I realize I have misread your lips. You have not been saying, "Come." You have been telling me, "Go home."

But you, are you not my home, even if you repose here in the limpid waters? I bring my arms slowly around you, longing for the fever of your flesh, my fingers feeling only more liquid. You are still before me, yet only as a wisp or a vapor or a breath.

My own breath is leaving me now, as the water fills the spaces of my body. And here with you I am warm in my coldness, still and content as a stone is content, sinking in silence beneath the ripples and the pines and the cold forgetting of the deep spring sky.

“She screamed, and it was like this animal howl.
It was like something caught by *another* animal.
Like something that understood, in sudden
strangled seconds, that it was about to die.”

—Scotty Milder
“Headcase”

Thanksgiving, Reykjavik

Carolanna Lisonbee

You're walking and the night is cold
and you're far from home—
anywhere you've ever called home, anyway—
and your feet have aches you wouldn't admit to
if there were anyone around to admit it to,
and your heart has aches that your heart won't admit to you.
So far you've rolled with the punches,
but the punches keep coming
like the waves on these
foreign shores
and you haven't wept yet,
but when it rains it
pains you.
You're walking and the night is cold,
and you're far from home.

Broken Pearls

Vonnie Winslow Crist

~~On Wanting~~ On Needing

JJ Norris

Claire is on all fours under her desk in her office at Dilvaney Capital on the thirty-eighth floor of this Manhattan high-rise. She's worked here for ten years now, and she's dropped her phone behind her desk and crawled under here to find it. She's got the thing in her hand, but instead of coming back up, she's studying the spot on the desk's dark underside where the two perpendicular sides have been joined together, where she can see the crack between the two pieces of wood or faux wood or MDF or whatever.

Joints and seams.

Her father once told her that if she ever wanted to break or destroy something, she should go for the joints or the seams. *Those are the weakest points. Here, I'll show you*, he'd said. He grabbed her wrists with both his hands, his grasp tighter than playful and his strength no match for her at thirteen, his smile wide and dark on his face.

Look, he said, *try to break free*.

At first, she'd been unable to extricate herself, and her futile attempt had made him smile wider.

No, like this, he said, showing her how to twist her forearms so that she directed her effort toward the gap between where his thumb met his other four fingers around her wrist. *Joints and seams—always the weakest*, he repeated.

She had heeded his instructions and copied his technique and, when she broke free of his grasp, his smile had gone and it made her wonder if he regretted showing her his trick.

She runs her finger along the desk joint. She wishes she could stay under here, in the relative dark and quiet. It's Friday so there's not many people in the office right now, but they'll be back soon. She lingers a few moments longer and finally forces herself to back up from under the desk. She rises to her feet, pauses and, at last, drops down into her chair.

It's these interns. She wants them to stop and go back to their desks on

the other side of the office.

They've been tasked with decorating Tommy's desk and the office area around it to celebrate his first deal while all the other brokers and the boss take him out to lunch and drinks. Tommy's the newest broker at Dilvaney Capital—he's been here eight months. His first deal closed this morning, some $2 million refi in Long Island. The two interns just returned from picking up streamers, a poster, and balloons plus a box of cigars and a bottle of whiskey.

The problem she's having is that these two college kids—their faces still shiny with vestigial pubescent grease—have no idea what they're doing. Their decorations are atrocious. It's all wrong. Claire wants to send them back to their desks to make calls. *Okay boys, that's enough. Time to hit the phones. Smile and dial baby. I'll take it from here*.

The problem she's having is: this isn't her problem. *For fuck's sake, let it go,* she tells herself. She puts her head in her hands and uses her fingers like blinders on each side of her eyes, forcing herself to stare down at her keyboard, blocking any other view. *This is not your problem, get back to work.*

The problem she's having is this: she hasn't been herself lately. Everything's been bothering her. Yesterday, after the barista had gotten her coffee order wrong, she'd cried all the way to the office. Last week, she'd screamed at a tourist who'd blocked her while she was trying to get off the train during rush hour, the woman's face paling in fear. Getting out of bed has become a daily battle—one that takes over an hour, one that she is beginning to lose, showing up late so many days this month that her boss had commented on it. Then there are the nightmares—not new—but more frequent, at least once a week now. To put it succinctly: she's cracking up.

She looks over as inconspicuously as possible, spreads her two fingers and peeks through them. Tweedle Dee has a roll of streamer paper and is tearing it off in uneven pieces and handing them to Tweedle Dum, who is taping them in a row along the top of Tommy's computer monitor, each piece's jagged little edge stopping at a different height. The effect of the streamer pieces covering the monitor is the same as the hanging curtain of beads she had in her bedroom doorway when she was a kid. The interns have purchased two rolls of streamers from the party store on 14th—red and yellow, the theme colors of McDonald's. It looks terrible. She could make it so beautiful.

She always loved to make things beautiful. What was so wrong with that? She used to collect shells from the beach. She would take them home, wash them and arrange them out on a towel to dry. Afterwards, she would use tiny paint brushes to paint detailed scenes on them. Actually, it was the

same scene over and over: a perfect-looking house with a perfect-looking lawn under a perfect-looking tree under a warm, shining sun in a cloudless blue sky. For a school project, she had written a report on her dream career—interior designer, including an entire look book with pages full of fabrics and ideas and colors and materials, none of which had been required but which she had stayed up late for weeks working on. She had chosen art as her elective freshman year, coming in at lunch and after school to perfect every project.

Instead, after college, a decade ago now, she had started here at Dilvaney Capital and never left. At twenty-one, she was cold calling from a windowless room with her script in front of her for twelve hours a day. The ad she responded to had said *Unlimited earning potential*. In the interview, Lloyd, the owner of the company, had told her she could be making a quarter of a million in three years *if she was willing to work for it*.

She had passed that number five years ago.

She had ascended quickly. She was good at her job. Really good. Sales came naturally to her; she smiled and laughed at all the right moments, was quick on her feet and knew the business inside and out. To top it all off, she was unforgettable. Everyone remembered her; she was the only *Claire* in an endless, homogenous sea of Mikes and Johns and Andrews. But she hated the work. She was a consummate introvert prancing around in extrovert's clothing. She couldn't care less about cap rates or debt service coverage ratios or bps or points or twenty-five-year ams vs thirty-year ams. She would come home after a day of shmoozing and wheeling and dealing and lining up new clients and drink herself into a stupor, waking up at three in the morning on her couch parched and needing to pee, still dressed in her work clothes with her makeup smudged all over her face.

The interns have finished the uneven row of torn streamer pieces on the monitor and are tying the balloons to the back of his chair. There are six balloons and they are the same colors as the streamers: red and yellow.

"What should we do with the rest of these?" says Tweedle Dum, holding up the rolls of streamers.

Tweedle Dee looks up at the drop ceiling.

"I don't think we can hang them from up there. There's nothing to attach them to."

"What if we tear them into little pieces and just put them all over?"

"Ehhh … "

"Look—look. Like this. Like confetti." Tweedle Dum starts tearing one inch pieces from the roll of streamers and sprinkles them atop Tommy's desk.

"Like Times Square at New Year's!" Tweedle Dum adds, still tearing.

The desk decorating is new. This is the first time they're doing it. In the last few years, the turnover for new brokers had reached new heights and, in an effort to retain people for longer than a few months, Lloyd had revamped the new agent protocols: *the times are changing and we need to do the same.* The days of chop shops were long gone; this wasn't Wall Street in the '80s—agents coming in wanted to feel *supported* and *embraced* and *part of something great*. So, one of the many new ideas to help retain new brokers was to *conspicuously celebrate their first sale*.

"Hey boss," says James, walking past Claire's desk.

"Hey," she says.

"You didn't want to go out with everyone to celebrate?"

She rolls her eyes at him.

"Yeah me either," he says.

Claire looks down at her keyboard.

James continues: "How long do you think this will all last? All this fufu bullshit? These new kids are so fucking soft these days. Look at that. They are literally putting balloons on this kid's desk. Looks like a ten year old's birthday party. You know what Lloyd said to me the day I closed my first deal?"

"No."

"He came over, shook my hand and said 'Congratulations. Now get back on the fucking phone.'"

She nods at him, praying he will leave. Even short conversations exhaust her these days.

"Any plans for the weekend?" he asks.

"Nothing special," she says.

He lingers, like he's waiting for more.

"I should get back to it," she says.

James brings his right hand up to the top of his head and salutes her, "You got it boss."

He walks back over to his desk and sits down. He begins to type at his computer, sticking out each of his two pointer fingers and striking each key one by one, slow as can be, like a second-grader who hasn't learned how to type properly.

The interns have the posterboard out on the desk and are holding it down flat with their hands.

"What should we put?"

"Just put *Congrats*."

Tweedle Dee comes toward the poster board wielding a standard black Bic pen. Tweedle Dum grabs his hand.

"Bro—not with that. Use something else."

"What? We didn't get markers or anything."

They both turn around slowly, their eyes searching the office.

"Bam!" Tweedle Dee says, jogging over to a nearby desk and taking a pink highlighter from a pen holder.

He runs back over and starts writing on the white posterboard.

"C-O-N-G-R-A-T-S," he spells out loud.

"No! Do the full thing. *Congratulations.*"

"Oh yeah."

"Yeah good," Tweedle Dum says, watching as Tweedle Dee writes out big letters with the pink highlighter.

"Should we tape it up?" Tweedle Dee asks, admiring his work.

"Did we get tape?"

Claire reaches into her purse, grasping desperately for her Bose noise canceling headphones, needing the sound of their voices to stop.

She dons the headphones and turns them on. She inhales as the silence clicks in and the world around her goes mute. She considers her anger, turns it over and examines it. She thinks that maybe she doesn't hate the interns and that maybe she isn't even angry. It's hard to tell these days. She looks over at them and longs for her early twenties—back when she was reckless in her pursuit, back when she was ignorant and blinded with an insatiable hunger for that which she was reaching. Back when she never asked *why*. Back when her only focus and desire and thoughts were all solidly and steadfastly anchored in the external. Back when she'd just put the pot on the stove when the water had not even begun to simmer, when it was still a decade away from the roiling boil that her life had now become.

Headcase

Scotty Milder

She was a fucking headcase.

You know—all the boys were into her. Not me, of course. But all the boys *I* was into. It pissed me off. But not too much, because I loved her too. You just couldn't *not* love Heidi.

We were all crashing in this house out in Knob Hill. It was two bedrooms, and six of us. Heidi's grandmother owned the place. Most of the furniture was Heidi's. I remember she had this coffee table she'd made herself. It had a resin top, and she'd put all these photos inside—shit she'd cut out of magazines, like from *Punk Planet* and *RAW,* all these crusty-ass dudes, like Joey Ramone and Johnny Thunders, the saggy-balls old bastards she said she wished she'd had the chance to fuck. I remember watching her doing lines of crank off this photo of Stiv Bators, you know, the famous one of him curled up with a revolver in his hand. Anyway. *That* was Heidi.

She could be a real sweetheart when she wanted to be, but you put a couple rails of rocket fuel into her and she changed. This one time, we were driving up to Denver to see a show—Bob Mould on the *Black Sheets of Rain* tour, I think—and she and this chick Cynthia got into an argument about something real stupid. Cynthia was driving, me and this dude Pete and this other girl Tess were all shoved in the back of Cynthia's Toyota Tercel. So Heidi grabs the wheel and tries to crash the car. We were five minutes south of Castle Rock, going ninety, all of us blasted out of our heads on speed, and Heidi tries to kill us because, I don't know, Cynthia preferred strawberry pancakes to blueberry pancakes or something equally fucking moronic.

I was ready to say fuck it, just stay in Denver and live on the fucking *streets* if that's what it took to not get into the goddamned car with her again. But then … she was *Heidi*. What can I say? Everyone loved Heidi. You couldn't *not* love Heidi. So, by the time Bob played his encore—it was "Too Far Down," you know, off Hüsker Dü's *Candy Apple Grey,* and now that I think about it, that's creepily fucking appropriate—she'd made her way back

in.

She always made her way back in. All the way up to the moment she tore Pete's tongue out and swallowed it in front of me, she made her way back in.

♥

So Pete was the dude I was fucking.

I was twenty-two, out of the closet for like five minutes, and had recently discovered the sorcerous effect methamphetamines have on a young man's erection. So I was happily slinging it around whenever and wherever I could.

Pete was only, like, a *little* gay. He was fucking me, and I think he might have been hooking up with this guy Tony who ran the sound board at this nightclub called The Astrological. But he was mostly Heidi's guy. They had a band. He was the lead singer, and she played bass. They weren't bad—sort of New York noise-punk, early Unsane-meets-Quicksand-meets-Cop-Shoot-Cop—but no one around here really knew what to do with them.

Pete had this tall and spidery, Peter Murphy thing going on. He was six-five, maybe six-six. Heidi was five-two, and if she was a buckten I'd have been shocked. She played this big Rickenbacker bass. Pete had long jetblack hair that fell across his face like blackout curtains when he sang. Heidi kept hers chopped short, like a monk, and she usually dyed it some cheap, neon color.

She didn't mind that Pete and I messed around. That wasn't the problem. She and I were friends—or, at least as much as Heidi could be friends with *anybody.* Because she was a fucking headcase.

There was that time in the car with Cynthia, but shit like that would happen with Heidi *all the time.* We learned to give her a wide berth, because living with her was a little bit like being locked in a cage with a mountain lion that hadn't been fed for a week; you're just kind of backed into the corner, whispering "nice kitty, nice kitty" and hoping that purr doesn't turn to a roar.

Whenever she got *bad,* we counted on Pete to talk her down. He could most of the time. Whenever he couldn't, we cleared out—went over to the IHOP on Chelton, smoked cigarettes, drank coffee and ate pancakes until the sun came up. Usually when we got back they'd be fucking or sleeping. Whichever it was, it generally meant the storm had passed.

I know I'm making Heidi sound awful. And she did, you know, do what she did. Which I promise I'm getting to. But I did love her. It's just that it's hard for me to remember *why*. So much of that history has been obliterated by my memory of that night—the wood chisel, the blood splattered across

the bare mattress, Pete naked on his back, his upside-down face turned to me while he gargled through a mouthful of gore, Heidi straddling him and staring through the glow of the sign outside the window, her body painted red in all that light, the sweat-slick sheen on her shoulders and forehead, the blood smeared across her lips and chin and chest, and then her smiling through teeth smeared black and me seeing what was mashed in her mouth—

I need to back up.

So a week before it *happened* … I found her in the bathroom. She would lock herself in there all the time, and we'd hear her talking to herself. Sometimes she'd snap out of it, but most of the time she'd lose her shit and we'd let Pete deal with it.

I feel bad about that now, but you've gotta understand … it was a different time. We didn't know shit about, like, mental illness or whatever. Heidi was nuts, but we were *all* out of our minds on crank and coke and whatever other shit we could smoke or shoot or swallow.

So this night, she forgot to lock the door. Or maybe she didn't. I don't know. Maybe she knew things were about to change. Sliding sideways in her brain, you know? Spiraling into the void.

Hell, maybe she *wanted* me to find her like that. Maybe she thought I could do something to stop it.

Or maybe she just wanted someone there to watch.

I opened the door and there she was, standing at the sink in boxer shorts and this oversized white tank top. She'd written "CRASS" across the front with a Sharpie. She was staring at herself in the mirror.

"You okay?" I asked. I knew she wasn't. It was the look in her eyes.

Her lips were moving. She didn't look at me. Instead, she leaned in to get a better look at herself.

"Where you at, fucker?" she growled. "I *just* saw you."

"Heidi?"

Her eyes kinda flicked toward me, real quick, then went back to her reflection.

"Georgie, did you see him? He was just here."

"Who?"

"You *know* who."

"Heidi, what the fuck're you talking about."

"Tell me you fucking saw him."

She started tapping herself in the middle of her forehead. Hard.

"His eye. It's *right here.* But now it's closed."

"Okay, Heidi." I wanted to back out and close the door. Leave her to whatever was going on her head. I wanted to get Pete, but then I realized he

was at work. He delivered pizzas three nights a week, and wouldn't be back until after eleven. Cynthia, Tess, Sam, and Stevie were all out too. It was just her and me right then. Whatever was going on—sliding sideways—it was on me to deal with it.

"Whose eye, Heidi?"

"The … the fucking *guy,"* she said. "Whatshisname. Gramma put him in me, way back when."

This was new. Her grandmother was some religious nut who lived up around the Black Forest somewhere. She owned the house, but she never came around. We gave Heidi the rent money, and she drove it up there the first Sunday of every month. Heidi never talked about her, or her parents. I realized how little I knew about her background. It never occurred to me to ask.

"Heidi, you think you can come out of there? Maybe we ought to go talk to—"

She screamed, and it was like this animal howl. It was like something caught by *another* animal. Like something that understood, in sudden strangled seconds, that it was about to die.

"*Where'd you fucking GO?"*

She picked something up and threw it at the mirror. I expected it to shatter, but it didn't; whatever it was—a shampoo bottle or something—bounced off and thumped to the floor. She spun around, her eyes on me, and I've got to tell you I've *never* been as scared, before or since—well, except *that* night … *THE* night—as I was in those two, maybe three seconds that I was pinned in that gaze. It was like I was a fly, just buzzing along, minding my own goddamned business, and all of the sudden I was caught in a web and here comes a spider with her big shiny black eyes, and she's climbing out of her hole, and she's coming down her silky string toward me, and she's *hungry* as *fuck*.

And—for just a blink—she really *was* a spider. Because I swear to Christ I saw *three* eyes. The two where they were supposed to be, and this other one. Right in the middle of her forehead.

Then she slammed the door in my face.

♥

So.

That night.

Me, Tess, and Sam went out to see a movie. Cynthia and Stevie were out somewhere. We didn't even bother asking Heidi and Pete; Heidi had been spinning out for a while, and none of us wanted to deal with her. So we

made it Pete's problem and just bugged out.

I didn't tell anyone about what happened in the bathroom that night. Not even Pete. In retrospect, I guess I should have. I've kicked myself in the ass about that for three decades now.

It was after midnight when the movie got out. We knew something was wrong the second we pulled into the driveway. All the lights were off, which was weird—Heidi and Pete *never* turned their bedroom light off. Heidi was scared to death of the dark. So that was the first clue.

The second clue was that the front door was wide open. Sam thought maybe one of the hillbilly tweakers from across the street kicked the door in to rob the place. We weren't even thinking that anyone got hurt or anything. I figured we'd find the living room trashed, maybe the TV and VCR gone, Heidi and Pete passed out and all like *huh?* when we woke them up.

But there was the fact that their bedroom light was off.

The second we came in, we knew.

Cynthia was into wood carving—she had these little sculptures all over the house, sort of Easter-Island-head things. Heidi had opened up her kit and scattered her wood chisels all across the coffee table. That, the trail of blood going back to the bedroom—and the sounds, of course—told us something bad had happened.

Tess turned and ran. Sam went white, then green, said "no, no, no, *fuck* this," ran to the laundry room, and slammed the door.

I guess I don't need to belabor it. I don't need to spend too long telling you about the walk down the hallway—how it was probably only fifteen seconds, but how it felt like an hour, how the entire time I could hear her in there muttering, and how there were these choking sounds that I knew *had* to be Pete, and also these other sounds, *wet* sounds, *meaty* sounds which, later, I learned were her slashing through the last bit of his tongue. One of the cops would tell me what kind of chisel it was—an eighteen-millimeter carpenter's chisel with a tungsten carbide blade.

I turned the knob—which had a big bloody palm print on it, I remember that—and pushed the door open. And there they were: her straddling him, like I said, and him lying there, with his mouth full of blood. Blood all over the mattress, all over her "CRASS" tank top, painting her hands and forearms up to the elbow. The neon sign from the 7-Eleven across the street made her skin glow red. It made all the blood look black.

They both stopped and looked at me, him upside down and her right-side up, like weird mirror images of each other.

I don't know why he wasn't fighting her. It's been three-plus decades and I'm still trying to figure that out.

They stopped. They looked at me. I looked at them. Then he sort of

screamed this gargle-y scream, and tried to say something, and that's when I saw the chisel in her hand and realized she'd cut his tongue out. She grinned, her teeth all black with blood, and I saw this mashed up mess in her mouth.

She tipped her head back and swallowed.

I can't begin to tell you what that was like: watching the muscles in her throat work as Pete's tongue made its way down her esophagus and into her stomach.

Then she smiled, as sweet as could be.

"I never did see him again, Georgie," she said, like she was answering a question that I'd asked. "But he's still here. Can *you* see him?"

And I swear to God, I *did*. Whatever *HE* was, I saw him behind the blood-smeared loveliness of her face, like a horrid double image. And that third eye was there again, right in the middle of her forehead. Nothing but an oval of black.

Pete made another one of those wet, choking screams. His teeth, I saw, were stuck to his chin; she must've knocked them out with the chisel. Blood leaked out of the corners of his mouth and ran down his cheeks and into his ears. I don't know if it's because he was upside down on the mattress, but it looked like a big, crooked smile.

Heidi raised the chisel. I tried to shout, but my breath lodged in my own throat like a brick.

Before I could push it out, she raised the chisel above her head.

An eighteen-millimeter wood chisel with a tungsten carbide blade isn't meant to go all the way through bone. Especially not bone as thick as an adult male's sternum.

But, given enough force, it will.

Note to a ghost

Mia Marion

I want to apologize for the iridescent glow of my computer charger at night,
the half centimeter of blue light that snaked around the small cord and
drove you crazy. You tried putting it underneath the bed, below the carpet,
but still it emitted a halo of light which reminded you of how you
could not sleep. I should have just unplugged it. Or you could have, too.

In the daytime we used to yellow with love. At night when I turned around
and saw you in that soft blue light I felt so safe and pink and swollen
in the good way. My brain is a dumb instrument, capable of only the most
basic algebraic equations. And you and love, it was all light green, all good.
I couldn't compute that you felt a Byzantine olive, as blue as the night light.

I want to apologize for the navy nights in New York, that last one we shared
on the roof in Williamsburg where the stars cast us in unflattering tones and
we smoked our indigo semi-annual cigarettes. Though maybe you smoke many
cigarettes now. For the violet night in September when I walked along 23rd Street,
and you came to meet me and I said I didn't want you there. I wanted you there.

There is so much I want to apologize for, there is so much I want to say.
But all I can do is close my eyes into the pillow and see my own red hot want.
Are you well? Are you okay? Are you going to the maroon clown party
in the Bushwick church basement next weekend? I will be wondering all week.
I will be absolutely mustard orange about it.

“Proust tells us that once something you like becomes familiar, it becomes bland and might even strike you as disgusting. At least that’s what I got from reading his novels filled with snobs to the brim. But there is a glint of truth about what he says (or what I heard) … ”

—Pranav
“A Face Known”

What Kiki Kolby Paints

Ellen Graham

The Terrace Ballroom on Third South between State and Main is in the shadow of the Mormon Temple. The cool of Cottonwood Canyon is to the east, the dusty Oquirrihs to the west. Kiki Kolby leans against the hot bricks of the Ballroom and thinks another summer in this state might actually fry her alive: in her house, in her car, on this sidewalk on Third South. She is tired of this heat. She is tired of her skin turning to leather. She is tired of Roger Koch and hopes he dies pretty soon. Whatever he wants it can't be good.

In a month, the Ballroom will mysteriously burn to the ground, but now it is the place where, today, she meets Roger Koch.

Kiki Kolby knows what it is to be perfect. She was the Holy Grail of girls when she was fifteen, with perfect long legs. Her hair was a thick rope of caramel that dropped in perfect formation to her shoulders. She had a wide mouth, two absent parents, wealth, and a pool that glittered under the merciless Utah sun. In the summer, boys, shaggy haired and wanting, would arrive, a parade of ants lining up in happy expectation of getting close to her.

Everyone knew when she had sex for the first time that summer in the pool house, how she thought the other boys were listening. Mikey, the boy who got lucky (Kiki Kolby!), the boy who everyone loved, the boy who could race on his skis, the boy with the thick voice and the firm thighs. The boy who liked to drink, even at fifteen, who would get drunk, dead drunk, and pee on the shrimp bowl at parties. The boy who one day skied drunk without a helmet and died on a boulder, the boy whose parents blamed her, the boy who was the last person she had ever loved.

When she was young she and her girlfriends would sneak into concerts in the Ballroom: Jethro Tull, Jefferson Airplane, Frank Zappa and the Mothers, and thrilling for Kiki, Billy Joel, who would read his bad reviews and then burn them.

Now she enters The Ballroom's cave of cool dark. Roger Koch is at the bar, looking like a wrinkled high school senior, unchanged in his weird mix of

arrogance and innocence. Roger worries his napkin between his tiny fingers with the too long nails. He wipes his nose with it.

"Waitress! Bring me another Sprite!"

He is petulant, a child used to getting his way.

Kiki sits beside him. He glances from her waist to her eyes to her breasts to her eyes. In her sleeveless ecru shirt and inky lace skirt she is ready for those looks. He lingers on her legs, oh, those perfect legs.

"I want you to paint me," says Roger. "Paint me." He fidgets and twirls his ankles. "Kiki, I have money." His baby thumb twitches at his upper lip. "Elder Gunderson told me you had shows in Paris for your pictures."

He pronounces it the Utah way: peekshures.

Roger works for Elder Gunderson, the motivational snake charmer for Mormon women. Oh, to be a gullible housewife, she thinks; then Elder Gunderson could motivate her to say no to Roger.

Kiki used to paint, before. She painted large murals of herself drowning in Kolby spruce, monkey flowers, Great Basin bristlecone, cottonwood trees, only her eyes showing, looking begrumpled and bitter. Murals of herself floating serenely on the silvern Salt Lake in a peony pioneer dress. Murals of herself balanced gracefully on the gilded horn of Angel Moroni. She has never been to Paris. How do these boys invent these lies? She has never left Salt Lake.

Is it simply the pull of nostalgia for a place you grew up in? Or is it inertia, an inability to explore? Does this powerful land get into the pores or is it simply familiar? She thinks everyone who grows up in this valley stays in this valley. Or maybe it is fear, and the entire stretch of desert is populated by petrified moon-faced people—scared of the world, scared of reality, scared of what might happen. It's like treading water or like those dreams where you cannot move or scream.

Kiki Kolby studies Roger Koch like a bug on a pin. She needs money and Roger Koch needs her.

The next evening Roger arrives late, when the air carries the sticky perfume of Russian olives in bloom and the ice in her whiskey seems to melt as soon as it hits the glass.

Her house is at the base of Big Cottonwood Canyon, the canyon of her youth and of his youth. Early summer in Utah means Cottonwood Creek is dangerous, overflowing with snow run off, turbulent and unharnessed, the water pounding the rock furiously.

This canyon looks the way remembering sometimes feels. Or perhaps remembering is too concrete a word. Dreaming is more like it. The catch of images, emotions, unconscious reverie … all these remind her of what happens when you awake from a dream. This canyon's wildly ancient

imprint has a force, a close presence and contradiction of feeling that is like the puzzle of a dream.

Roger slams into the room and the box elder bugs fall in a scrabbled heap.

"I'm herrrrrrre. Are you ready?"

Roger was a satellite, a boy you sat behind in math class, a boy skittering down the hall, a boy bound for a Mormon mission, a boy who existed to adore someone like her.

She never leaves here and she never feels at ease here. Maybe it's the Mormon influence, the patriarchy, the culture where women are not valued except as mothers and wives. Maybe it's the geographical location. Why does she stay where women have no value, no visibility? Last week she bought wine and the man ringing her up said, "Keep your receipt so your husband knows how you're spending his money." Her painting studio is bare, empty of everything but her tools. She takes out her easel and her brushes, cut round, filbert and square. She arranges her oils: ultramarine, cobalt, cerulean, ocher, alizarin crimson, rose madder, ivory black, lamp black, terra verde, raw umber, viridian, burnt sienna, and brick balm.

Tiny rivers of water are swimming down his round, rubescent face. He sits on the soft fir floor; empty of anything he might find comfortable. Roger looks like a crow with his short black hair, sharp nose and close watchful eyes. She thinks she will paint him as a tiny crow in a nest, as a bird puppet, as a predator gracefully gliding over her house.

"Kiki, why are you alone?" Roger asks.

"Kiki, were you ever lonely?"

"Kiki, do you ever cut your hair?"

It was predictable he would find her. It's not hard to track someone down in this incestuous city where the people you go to grade school with follow you to junior high then to high school then to the U and tumble into middle age with you.

"Kiki, do you like my hair cut short?"

"Kiki, do you have any Sprite?"

"Kiki, do you remember me from that kegger?"

Her memory is hazy. Maybe he touched her. Maybe she imagined it. She used to like to drink and drink and make out. She still does. Those days were long and she was stoned and perhaps there was no thought at all. She simply floated through the world, letting time pass, and maybe something got imprinted on her brain.

And finally, "Kiki, are you ready?"

This is her cue to take off her clothes. This is why he will pay her.

"Spread your legs for me."

She must stand awkwardly while he stares.

"Hold still for me. Now paint me."

She will begin with the nest, miles above the shrinking lake of salt. She paints it into the crotch of a coyote willow—fragile, hard and soft. As she paints, she weaves the nest. She weaves a strand of her hair, the lace of her skirt, the indigo blur of his pants. He watches.

Clever crow, she thinks. Clever, clever crow. The nest will cover the canvas and he will have to be tiny to fit, to nestle in there, his coal feathers dense and slick.

Flame bark weaves into verdant moss, weaves into goldenrod, weaves into larkspur, weaves into Indian paint. Like Clotho, weaving the thread of human life, weaving into, backward and out of time. The light through her window is broken and brilliant, the heat a wall, and he watches and he watches and he watches.

He nestles on the ground, his face soft and shiny, and she feels closer to love, closer to him, closer to healing her fractured fissured heart than she could have imagined. She is unmoored. She wants to kiss someone, anyone. She wants to touch; she remembers how skin feels in this heat like something other than blood rushes through the veins, something lava, mercury, lightning, electricity.

The warmth rises through the room and through her until she can't catch her breath but she can't stop.

He never touches her. When he is done, he cleans himself. He walks out. Clothed. His money lies in small green wads on the floor. Kiki stands naked at the screen door. Kiki wants and she wants and she wants.

You Already Know How This Will End

Eleanor Lennox

To be a lifeguard on Eden is not very challenging. Human visitors are few at any one time—usually, there are exactly two. Eden is designed to be an exclusive experience, a world of one's own. A paradise of white sand beaches and swaying palm trees.

The staff is designed to look human, but we're not. Each of us follows strict daily regimens. Mine is rather straightforward:

1. Patrol the beach;
2. Maintain optimal fitness level to assure required strength and stamina;
3. Remain current on cardiopulmonary resuscitation and other safety protocols;
4. Inspect and remove any threats, refuse, or inappropriate items from coastal terrain;
5. Field all inquiries (marine, weather, or otherwise);
6. Save visitors from drowning.

The visitors seldom have any marine- or weather-related inquiries. Eden is designed to maintain a constant temperature of eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit, and a relative humidity of forty percent. Such moderate humidity is not strictly in keeping with a tropical climate, but that is the benefit of an O'Neill Cylinder: the designers set the parameters.

We are a world governed by no laws, physical or otherwise. The water here is always warm, the waves gentle and melodic.

It is never night.

♥

Visitors are usually male specimens of advanced age. Very occasionally they are prime, or just past prime. My understanding from overheard conversations is that a visit to Eden is prohibitively expensive, and

activities to earn money on Earth are usually inadequate to afford this until an advanced age. I don't know what these activities would consist of: I have never been to Earth, nor even seen it, though we orbit only 285 miles away from its outer atmosphere.

The male specimens are usually accompanied by a single female. The females are always prime specimens, or occasionally juvenile. The two humans swim together, and I watch them closely. Then they return to the beach, and often they undertake maneuvers similar to the Heimlich I myself have mastered. The male visitors are frequently not proficient at these maneuvers, for I observe the females wince in pain as they perform them.

♥

Days here blend together, without nights to separate them. Light itself is engineered, artificial: a carbon-composite shell keeps us shielded from the sun. Questions concerning the physics of this place are some of the only inquiries I reliably receive. That, and where the sand comes from.

No one ever needs me to save them from drowning.

The most common refuse I find are small pearly sacs discarded by the male visitors, usually filled with a viscous substance they must smuggle in, though I never see how.

♥

I recall the first time a female visitor didn't make the return trip. Pubescent, wavy red hair, approximately five foot tall and one hundred pounds. I knew about death, even then. A definition was provided as part of our safety protocols.

A deceased body is a threatening object, per the Guidance Document. It could be a harbinger of disease for other visitors, and requires immediate relocation. The other staff and I worked together to dispose of it. The male visitor looked embarrassed, regretful. We assured him we understood his distress—though understanding such a thing is not a part of our programming. However, we do have an exhaustive internal phrase catalog to be referenced for apt responses to all human expressions and utterances.

♥

While patrolling the beach after another day's visitors have departed, I find a small rectangular object. The outside is red; the inside, full of two-dimensional white rectangles of a slightly smaller length and width. As I

inspect the cuboid to determine its threat status, I realize it is covered in a language recognizable to my programming. On its red surface, it reads, *Hamlet*. And beneath it, a name: William Shakespeare.

The other staff warn me to discard it after determination that it is a non-threatening object. But I do not, and I maintain it is compatible with my protocols to do so, as something in my programming is telling me to read it. Perhaps it will prove useful for my duties.

♥

I have now read *Hamlet* eleven times. Every time I read it, I understand more, although there are many terms not previously known to me. I've tried to puzzle them out, though some phrases still bewilder me. An example: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Having never visited either Heaven or Earth, I am not well placed to answer these questions. I await more cuboids.

♥

Thirty-four visitors later, another cuboid arrives, by a writer named Ray Bradbury. Upon reading it, I grow distressed for our visitors, and dispense more warmth in my responses to their inquiries than before, thus satisfying the other staff that reading these cuboids, now understood to be books, are a beneficial addition to my daily regimen.

♥

More books arrive, interspersed across many visits like the rare bit of matter in space. I keep them under a palm tree in the tropical forest copse. Very few visitors ever venture there.

♥

I detect a common thread running through these cuboids (a term I prefer to books, which lacks any musicality). A subtle menace creeps across them—or miracle, depending on the author and genre. Despite these differences in theme and tone, certain terms repeat. There are patterns present here that I can no longer ignore.

♥

Meanwhile, certain things never change. The promise of Eden is always kept. The water is consistently eighty-two degrees; the sky is always bright and shadows are small and unobtrusive. No sunset, no moonlight, no horizon. Every now and then, a body to dispose of. Mostly young females, but occasionally an elder male specimen, usually owing to a cardiac etiology.

The questions posed to me invariably relate to sand import, shuttle times, technical minutiae. Amongst themselves, the visitors occasionally ask more interesting questions, particularly on the rare days there are more than two of them. They ask what will arise from this place, given time, what will evolve from the small quantities of life strategically placed within this cylinder. This carefully designed experiment of nature—will it flourish, or will it ultimately run amok? They ask themselves these questions with a kind of intellectual curiosity, but not as though any of it is real. For them, I suppose, it isn't. They are just our visitors.

♥

Then one day, a different question—and for me. The visitors are a man, past prime, and a girl, not quite a woman. She has a skinny body and dark lustrous hair, cropped close. She is, perhaps, how F. Scott Fitzgerald intended Daisy Buchanan to look, if he could have made her come alive. Though it could have been any other girl, I suppose—the cuboids have a certain predilection to describing the female specimen as sad yet lovely. I have not yet figured out this quirk in their programming.

After they have sex—I know what that is now, I learned it from the cuboids—she is sitting alone on the beach, some distance away from the man, busy video-calling his family. I patrol near her, as she seems the one more likely to swim.

She sees me, beckons me closer. And she asks her question, her eyes at once ancient and young.

"Is this the beginning, or the end?"

It is the first question I cannot answer.

♥

One day, a very old male visitor brings something he calls a "boom box." I overhear him speaking to his female companion that, when he was young, a boom box on the beach was "heaven." Through context clues provided across many cuboids, I now understand heaven to mean, "an idealized place."

They listen to music all afternoon. Periodically, the old man takes a

two-dimensional silver circle and places it inside the "boom box." Our musicians stand off to the side, dejected.

I continue to patrol the beach, not allowing the music to distract me. But then comes a song that stops me in my tracks, for it speaks directly to the central mystery of my studies. A mournful man sings of Davids and Lords, holy doves and Hallelujahs: words that pop up across genre and author and time, their etymology unknown, though clearly ancient. None of it is random, or natural. To summarize my current theory: There is a conspiracy lurking within the cuboids, a secret referent. Allusions, inferences, intimations point to this one keystone cuboid that will unlock hidden meanings in all later cuboids. I trust that, in my object lifetime, I will uncover this mysterious source that propagates itself relentlessly. I get closer all the time; in fact, I believe I know how this shadowy cuboid begins: it begins in another Eden.

♥

I know the answer to her question now. But there is no one here to listen.

♥

A stowaway spider—likely pregnant—arrived on a visitor last year. There is now a growing population on Eden: a specialist from Earth has been consulted to assess the ecological consequences.

♥

She's come back.

She's grown up. The man with her appears close in age. They touch each other warmly, happy to be here together—not like last time.

All day I watch them, barely able to keep myself from speaking to her uninvited. Finally, my moment comes. He takes a call; she wanders the beach alone. She sees me and her eyes narrow, squinting against the sunlight. Does she remember me?

I can no longer wait. I hasten to her side.

"I remember you," she says.

The man finishes his call, looks our way.

"I remember you, too," I answer. "You asked a question when you came here last, you were only young then, it must have been fifteen years ag—"

"Hush," she says. "He doesn't know."

But I do not hear her say that, then—only later, when I play it back. In the moment, I keep speaking.

"You asked, 'Is this the beginning, or the end?' and I know now, I know—"

"Okay, but—"

"What's this?" The man appears beside us.

"Oren, this lifeguard—"

"You were here before?" the man, Oren, asks.

"No, I mean yes, once, but—"

"You said you were a virgin when we met."

"I … I did say that, I—"

"You lied to me."

"You have to understand, I was only seventeen and this man—" the woman was frantic now.

Oren holds up his hands in disgust.

"I don't want to hear about it." He turns to me. "Leave us."

And so I leave them there. I have no choice. Obedience is one of my governing principles.

♥

When we come back later, she is lying still on the beach. No blood. No funny angles to the neck, as sometimes happens.

From what I've gathered, they act differently here than they do on Earth. Something about being in a world of one's own. But I have nothing other than theories learned from cuboids, and what I see on this beach. And I see only a small sub-sample of humans: the kind who pay to be in paradise.

They get upset, sometimes, when that expectation is not met.

♥

She will stay with us, now. Her body, that is.

I take the salt the bartender uses to dress margarita glasses and pour it on her like they did to the Lot's wife described by a man named Vonnegut—a woman preserved in salt because she looked back at a world she loved. A reward, I think, to keep her body young and beautiful forever. Though once again, I suspect the mysterious source hides behind this salty wife.

♥

I'm happy she'll be staying with us. I can finally share my answer with her. When I tell her, I imagine all her kind can hear it, back on Earth. I imagine they have been waiting for this:

I don't know whether it's your nature as a species, or the stories you tell yourselves over and over again—or if the two are even separate entities.

But in the end is the beginning, and the beginning is the end.

Which is to say—

You will always end up here.

The World of You
(Emails from My Father)

Evan H. Brisson

Jason maybe told you he got work.
That's big I think.
It's physical. That's good.
The folks are decent.
He's in the den
with Lou Ann watching *Jeopardy*.
If you read this soon,
it's a Thursday night here
with chill and a bit of rain
so the darkness is close.
I just reread *The Road*.
I was going to object to his eschatology,
but I had forgotten the last paragraph from my first reading.

We've bought a car, a used Honda
(covenant blue).
The salesman was excited
about the discovery
of a new planet in a zone
close to Earth's.
It doesn't rotate
like Earth and therefore
has only a day side and a night side.
He wondered how the trees
would grow,
the shape of any mammals
given the gravity is five times our own.

It's dark,
the scariest thing I've ever learned
and I didn't read it anywhere:
The soul is edible.
It's true, and
it's okay that it's true.
It needs to be said.
Is there any music in the universe for this?
Can you find it?
By which I mean,
compose it?
Your brother
thinks the
world of you.

“Well, that’s the thing—people die, and it only hurts when it happens to someone you care about.”

—Zina Mona
“Animals”

A Face known

Pranav

Proust tells us that once something you like becomes familiar, it becomes bland and might even strike you as disgusting. At least that's what I got from reading his novels filled with snobs to the brim. And there is a glint of truth about what he says (or what I heard) about familiarity being disgusting. But this is neither about Proust nor about the high-class French society. This is about Narappa, the lunatic who lived twenty years ago in my village, whose story continues to jut out in my memory and warn me against the absurdity of the human race.

My village was a small land whose existence escaped the government cartographers who, even after realising its existence, didn't name it after my region got independence. I always found it weird that my village was nameless. Well, it was nameless in the strictest sense, but we residents referred to it as *maa ooru,* meaning "our village" in the local language. Not only on the map, but even on the plane of history, my village was invisible save a visit by Gandhi in the 1940s as he was on his way to a much bigger village. But the tongues of elders didn't speak more of this visit than their minds replayed the events concerning Narappa. For me, this incident is a crucial event in the annals of the history of my region.

It happened when I was fourteen. Contrary to all opinion, the adolescence of boys can and should be described as the blossoming of the bud because before I knew it, I was exuding all kinds of desires into the space around me while becoming sensitive to the same exudations of others of my age. Girls seemed more beautiful. I was told by the senior adolescents to not fall prey to the beauties in my village, but these same seniors sat on the dilapidated walls of ruined houses and catcalled the same beauties in the evening. Soon enough, to signify my passage into adolescence, I was seated on the wall. Looking back now, it was vile how I catcalled girls and directed horrific quips at them.

"OY!" I screamed at a passing beauty.

She turned around, but seeing that I only meant bad, she continued her walk.

"OY! Can you make a visit to me tonight?"

She turned and glared at me with a beautiful set of eyes that were smeared with kohl. This only goaded me to go further.

"What are you looking at? Even your mother slept with your father, and he must have loved it and that's how you got your buttocks, which you are parading for me."

My companions started laughing and patting me on the back while she started walking rapidly, leaving behind a trail of tears. I didn't understand what I was saying; I was only repeating what I'd heard the seniors say.

♥

With adolescence comes curiosity—both amorous curiosity and curiosity for uncanny things. After our quotidian catcalls on the wall, we used to buy sodas that were lukewarm and tasteless and discuss anything that came into our minds. Or, we tried to, but we always ended up discussing the mythic tales of the village. We had many. Maybe the general myth factory was supercharged in my village to compensate for its lack of general recognition. We had myths about everything: the house at the end, the paddy fields where a farmer killed himself, the well that emitted screams of our ancestors, *et cetera*. But the one thing we discussed that we knew to be true was the story of Narappa's birth.

Narappa was the son of the village's only milkman, Naraih, who had the biggest house in the village. It was not the main structure that was big, but the adjoining buffalo farm. It was impossible to go into the house and not appreciate the delightful fresh smell of dung that welcomed your nostrils. This might sound unpleasant to ears not accustomed to this, but the smell of the dung of buffaloes reared on healthy grass is something else. I was absolutely in love with the smell, and that was the reason behind my willingness to go to the house twice a week to bring fresh milk to my father, who was a sweetmaker. But returning to the main topic, Naraih inherited everything from his father-in-law, who didn't shy away from marrying off his daughter to someone who showed a natural talent at rearing buffaloes, even if the someone was from a low social class. Buffaloes figured above class and money to Naraih's father-in-law. For the gossipmongers, they mattered to him above his own daughter, who was cast off into darkness by her marriage to a man of a low class such as Naraih.

The marriage, deemed by everyone to be a failure, prospered. Love knew no bounds. They spoke in loving tones and naughty smiles. They

looked after the cattle like their own children. Sometimes, the couple could be seen accompanying their bovines to the pastures before the sun rose. The animals filled their stomachs while Naraih didn't shy away from satisfying his animal passions with his wife in a grass hut. It was cleverly camouflaged using the surrounding bramble and offered him the double advantage of privacy and a vantage point lest his animals grazed too far.

Naturally, this pastoral playtime led to a bump in the wife's abdomen. Naraih was loving more than ever. He specially ordered an ambulance for his wife to be taken to the hospital when she had to deliver. As I was told by my senior adolescents, this was a sight to behold. Of course it was, considering that the din of a motor engine had never made itself heard in my village. The first time I saw a car was when I was twenty, and I couldn't help but recall the ambulance of Narappa's birth. Sorry, I digress.

On the fateful day of delivery, Narappa was too much in a hurry to come out of his mother. They had to stall the ambulance and do what they could, knowing that the mother couldn't survive the remaining five-something miles to the hospital. Curtains were drawn, men were pushed out and screams erupted. The wife was clearly struggling. Not able to bear her scream, Naraih squatted down and closed his ears and thought of times when he loved her the most. But, alas, the news that his wife had died and so did his son, who had swallowed too much meconium—his own shit—was not late in coming. But before this registered in Naraih's mind, he heard a baby's abnormal gurgling wail.

Exalted, Naraih opened the door of the ambulance, only to find a healthy baby struggling to expel greenish liquid from his mouth as the liquid trickled down on the dead mother's face.

♥

The same year, both my parents died. They got hit by a truck that had its brake fail. At least, this is what I was told.

I never saw their bodies. Life went on as usual, as I never held any special esteem for my parents. My uncle took me in only because I inherited my father's sweet-making apparatus and my uncle thought it was prudent to make it his own. Hence, I was to continue making sweets and hence, my visits to Naraih's farm continued. The blighted place where everything began.

My visits were usually in the morning. I went with a milk pitcher and filled it to the brim, a special privilege Naraiah only accorded me thanks to my orphanhood. To go to the part of the farm where the milk was, I had to pass the room Narappa, now a man of twenty-four, slept in. It was as if his

birth story defined his social role, for never did I see him in the village. He was always sleeping with no part exposed, even when I passed his room.

"How could someone be so isolated?" I said to myself while I pitched mugs of milk into my container. This was the day when everything began.

"Oy, Durga! Your milk is getting thicker each day! You healthy buffalo!" I patted the bovine.

A laugh. A snicker. I don't know what. But it was the most pleasing thing I ever heard. The sound still bounces in my cranium. I turned to find a girl. It was the daughter of the village head, or *sarpanch*.

"Funny you talk with a buffalo!" she said.

I cannot describe her face. That caused everything. Mine and Narappa's utter forgettability. I saw her when she was young. After all these years, she was Venus incarnate. As she turned around and ran with a pitcher full of milk, the skin on her back, thanks to the backless blouse, was marmoreal. The anklets tinkled like her laugh. Before I knew it, she was gone.

I was awestruck. By the time I regained normality, a lanky shirtless man with patterned cloth tied around his waist was staring—as awestruck as I was—towards the door of the house. His eyes were searching for something, just like mine had been a moment ago.

He was Narappa.

♥

The shock of finally seeing Narappa failed to budge my mind, which was pretty budged by that dame. More so because that night, while I lay pleasuring myself to the reconstruction of her body in my mind, I realised I'd forgotten her face. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't recall it. The effort ended in frustration, and I slept with tears, not knowing why they flowed for such a stupid cause.

The successive days were hell. I was tormented by the lack of her face. Thoughts of her body, instead of comforting me, teased my memory deficiency. The bosom, the hips, the arms, the face—*cursed face!* I couldn't remember it. I went on multiple trips to the manor of the village head. I stopped sweet making and hid in an abandoned hut behind the manor, which offered a view of the balcony. Thinking back, it was reckless of someone like me to lurk around like that. I would have been dead had they found me. But like an elephant during rut, I knew no bounds.

In this state, the news about the potential departure of the village head and his family reached my ear. I ran home. I was sweating that night. I refused to close my eyes, because if I did, I would be assailed by her teasing body about my forgetfulness. Her bosom, her hips, her arms, her face—I

squirmed in bed. I had to find out, then more than ever, because I might never see it again.

In a few minutes, I was behind the manor, squatting in the hut, praying for the opportunity to see her. It was peak winter with the moon almost blue. There were no structures beside me, except a bathhouse a hundred meters from my spot. I had no idea who had built and abandoned this hut. Maybe someone who wanted a glance of her face, just like me.

The soil was strewn with nocturnal dwellers who were confounded by my visit. Scratching my skin and cursing the mosquitoes, I suffered.

The laugh.

I looked up; there she was, turned away from me, going to the outdoor bathhouse. *Stupid ass! Why didn't I choose to hide there?* I was angry with myself, but ecstatic because victory was in my reach. I let her go inside the bathhouse. I was surprisingly meticulous, maybe because I didn't want to mess it up. I circumambulated the bathhouse, which was made of concrete, and noted a top row of rectangular openings on the back. I climbed the wall with all my strength, my toes lingering on little peaks and bumps, and managed to get a view of the interior. A place ridden with moisture and soaps. There she was! The moonlight came in through another opening and illuminated her. First, I saw the feet with veins shackling them. Slowly, I moved my gaze up her body. Two pale buttocks, an enchanting waist, a pair of breasts, hanging as if fruits from a tree with chocolate-colored nipples. *Up, up, up,* I told myself, but it was as if the body raised my head as it wanted; my only job was to see.

Suddenly, the door of the bathhouse swung open. She screamed. I tried to look at her head, but it was shrouded in darkness as she moved out of the pocket of light.

In the doorway, another figure stood, illuminated by a lantern he held. He moved towards her.

Now, she was darkness itself. She was cornered and screamed louder.

I froze in an awkward position, as if the wall wouldn't let me go.

The figure was moving towards the darkness that seemed to resist him, resist him with its screams, but then the light of his lantern slowly moved up, illuminating her body, until it paused near her neck and shimmied. My eyes were fixed there, with the protruded muscle glittering.

Sudden shouts. I got down. I ran for my life. I turned back and saw that a huge crowd had gathered with torches and sticks, apparently to mince the assaulter. There she was, shrouded now in a huge cloth, and, to my disappointment, with her face still away from me.

♥

It was through my uncle I realised what had transpired.

"Where were you last night?" he asked.

"Sleeping."

"Can I believe you?"

"Stop bothering me; I was sleeping."

He let me go. The villagers were looking for someone who had tried to assault the *sarpanch's* daughter last night. As a part of the catcalling gang, suspicion was on a few of us. But I escaped, thanks to Naraih warranting my innocence.

I got back to work. The events of that night kicked a lot of things from my brain. I was back to normal—or what was in me was now latent.

When I resumed my visits to Naraih's house for milk, I could not find Narappa in his room. It was he whom I saw that night; I was one hundred percent sure. I couldn't help but feel that Narappa was searching for the same thing I was: her face. Without a word spoken, he'd made his anguish known to me. The way he moved, the way he grasped her: he was like my anguish personified.

If he really suffered from the same thing, he surely did so in a high degree, or he would have climbed a wall like me rather than break into the bathhouse. Anyways, I pushed those thoughts out of my mind. It was a harsh winter with the bovines suffering from a disease, so I had a lot of work on my hands—I had to search for another milk source. It turned out to be the village temple, a place teeming with bovines, where again I would be confronted with what I tried to forget, only in a much more powerful manner.

One day, as I was squeezing the udders of a reluctant cow in the cowshed of the temple, I heard the laugh. I knew it was her. Excitement bubbled in me, and something stirred and prodded me to try my luck.

By the direction the sound came from, I could tell she was at the temple pond. What fortune! I had only to raise my head above the parapet in front of me to see her, so I stretched myself against the wall. There she was, kneeling with a basket of flowers on the last step.

No sooner did I try to see her face than she turned away and froze.

Narappa. Clothed in a thick shawl, like a madman.

The basket of flowers fell into the pond, and the chrysanthemums and jasmines floated on the surface.

He jumped and grabbed her by the neck. This is what I cannot forget: the intensity of his gaze to which he was subjecting her. He had the most horrendous expression, with eyes wide open and mouth drawn down. It seemed he was trying to get most of her face, lest he forgot again. Her

braided hair, adorned with a column of alternating flowers, shook vigorously, and then stopped. She fell into the water.

He ran away. People came running. My mind was a mess, and I joined the crowd in watching men dive in to bring her up. There she was, emerging from the algal darkness, and at last, I saw her face, just like everyone did, stuffed with a flower in the mouth. But only I saw Narappa imprinted on her eyeballs, the way she saw him before she sank.

November Lambs

Robbie Gamble

Ted first found them knob-kneed
nuzzling mom trailing umbilical remnants
in the lower orchard The ewe had miscarried
in the spring managed another ovulation
another tryst with the ram now an oopsie
November twins barely-fleeced frost and nights
falling early not a good time to be a lamb
My novelist friend notes we are all
November lambs right now disoriented
chilled gleaning for sweetgrass through
the stubble of the day our milk of kindness reservoir
shrinking in this hated-fueled drought I wake
each morning wondering if my poet friend
survived another night of bombing I know
many didn't I remember this taste the electric
uncertainty of war But baby animals are always
cute and awkward especially lambs their mother
is attentive and Ted will find them a warm
corner of the barn so they will thrive
in the moment Some of us remain
determined to carry on healing rebuilding
negotiating while others seem content
with piles of rubble vengeful corpse-count
of foes I have never managed to do enough
with this little lifetime I know these lambs
will emerge from winter with a date
for the abattoir They wobble on for now

The Hermit

Annie Dunn Watson

Animals

Zina Mona

After "On Morality" by Joan Didion

The corpses line the desert in varying states of decomposition. The newer ones were pecked and gnawed at by any animal that could stomach the stench of death (really, that was every animal). The older ones were consumed, too, but you couldn't separate the animal marks from where the flesh just fell apart.

When the first corpses came, the men brought them in on truck beds. On the highways leading from the cities to the desert, the other drivers might assume that inside the black plastic bags was waste heading to a landfill. They weren't wrong.

Then came the unwrapping. Almost all the men covered their mouths and noses because they knew the smell would be strong enough to make them wish they were dead. The more sensitive blindfolded themselves the whole time. The more stoic didn't even bother covering their noses; they wanted to prove that they were the epitome of men.

But none of them felt bad, guilty, remorseful, regretful, repentant, apologetic, or any other emotion that categorized their actions as "wrong." Humans die (like all animals), and this was the most natural way of letting carcasses go—feeding them to the Earth.

Of course, the general population wouldn't understand. What if it was your mother, father, brother, sister, grandfather, or cousin? Well, that's the thing—people die, and it only hurts when it happens to someone you care about. The truth is that we all die, and we all leave corpses that must be dealt with. After all, these men were not the executioners—now, there were executioners, but whether they felt bad, guilty, remorseful, regretful, repentant, apologetic, or any other emotion that categorized their actions as "wrong" was up for debate. But no matter.

It was time for a new batch of corpses to be unwrapped. The men cut

through the plastic with knives and ripped the material apart with their hands and pulled the plastic out from under the carcasses. That was it.

By the time night fell, the bodies were well baked and smelled of rotten meat. The coyotes came. They brushed their noses against the blackened skins and sniffed the air hungrily, but they walked away as if they'd lost their appetites. The pack returned later in the night and walked away again, but that second time, it was not just something in their vision. They smelled it, too.

♥

This batch of bodies came from the hospital. The cause of deaths were linked to the infection. There were a lot of those, and they fought to get at least the same attention as the war casualties—specifically those of the soldiers. Civilian casualties hurt too much to talk about, but not enough to stop the planes from taking off.

The infection, the infection. No one called it by name. If anyone did, it was immediately followed by "knock on wood." But it was an infection, nonetheless. Just an infection.

The Brown family thought it was never going to be them. It happened to other people, but not to them. Other people lived in cities that were susceptible to bombings. Other people lived in hot and sweaty disease hotspots. Other people were self-important to enlist and come back boxed. But not the Browns.

"We're a fine middle-class family from the suburbs," Mr. Brown said. He would chuckle and add, "The scariest thing that could happen to a project manager is HR."

It came from the wife—yes, the housewife. Grocery shopping. The shelves were empty, but she did come home with the infection wrapped nicely as allergies. It spread across the bedsheets to Mr. Brown, and soon enough their little boy was having chills.

Not only did it happen to them, but they were also one of the unlucky ones rounded up at the public hospital.

"No," Mr. Brown protested to the paramedics. For someone with very little breath left in his lungs, he still believed that he was unstoppable. "No, no, no. I have insurance. Take us to the private hospital. I can't have my family mixing with those dirty city people. They'll for sure catch the infection."

Mrs. Brown tried lifting her head. "Shut." Gasp. "Up." Gasp. "Mark."

And their boy, measly in that broad stretcher, was asleep. Just asleep. The breaths were just shallow enough to combat death.

So when Mr. and Mrs. Brown turned into statistics and mere numbers on body bags, the boy's never-ending sleep was a waste of a bed.

♥

For the first time, he was hot. No more chills lulling him to sleep. His bed was no longer soft memory foam, but it was hard and grainy. His eyes, too swollen to see, remained shut, and his body ached from his spine to his ankles. He did not know who he was. He did not know where he was. This little boy who only knew about death from the television did not consider the possibility that he was dead. All he knew was that he existed. Like an ant or those cool new radioactive parasites that he once saw in a book. No obligation, no relation—a simple spawn of the Earth.

His cheeks tickled, and he finally opened his eyes, just for a glimpse. It looked like a dog. He's always wanted a dog but can't remember why he didn't have one. Maybe he did have a dog. The boy reached out to pet it, but the animal ran off.

♥

The coyotes didn't return for a week, and when they did, they expected a fight. But the carcasses were still there; if anything, they'd multiplied. None reached out to strangle. None smelled of anything other than death. They feasted, and when they also reeked of death, the vultures took care of their bodies. When the vultures stopped flying, the new generation of coyotes helped themselves and left nothing but feathers and blood splats. Of course, there were the humans and the rabbits and the foxes and the snakes, but just because one life was gone doesn't mean that the rest had to stop everything. The desert was dry and beige, but it deserved to thrive unashamedly.

St. Xero

Logan McConnell

Many people try to summon St. Xero. I know at least five, personally, and when you consider she's the (unofficial) saint of missing loved ones, it's tragic I know any at all. Other parts of the world may rely on the police, but here on the island, we all know better. We rely on our neighbors, and when they fail, we call St. Xero.

Legend says the only way to reach St. Xero is to whisper her name into a mirror. I suppose I shouldn't believe in such stories, the way I don't believe my nephew when he swears he saw a talking dog, or my grandfather when he claims to have killed forty men in the war. But I do believe St. Xero is real, and you'd believe in her too if you lived here

St. Xero, after all, is not the strangest phenomenon on the island. Not even close.

We're all spied on, constantly. During the day, the government—my employer—watches me. Our benevolent leaders have moles in every department, and I've discovered my telephone calls are monitored, though I pretend not to notice and don't actually care. I'm a good worker.

My next-door neighbor, Jrib, is watched by the mob. He used to be involved with them, indirectly, a long time ago. He paid his way out and now his conscience allows him to sleep at night, once he learned to ignore those glances from behind newspapers and men drifting by his windows on their bicycle at sundown. They don't want to kill Jrib, just keeping track of loose ends.

At night, things we cannot name come out to watch us. Things that were never born and cannot die, who press immortal faces up against our glass or grip the bars outside our windows and stare in. You can feel their presence.

So, we all naturally had no trouble believing in St. Xero. Especially Jrib.

Jrib is a widower, whose wife died giving birth to their one and only child, Onira. Onira was born punching and kicking so fiercely, the nurse gave

up trying to count her fingers and toes; a precursor of what was to come. Onira was combative and tough. She thrived here in the village.

Jrib would spend his mornings walking out of his house, always in blue flip flops, tank top and shorts, his protruding gut stretching the fabric of that thin shirt. He'd turn and find me smoking on my lawn, watching the sunrise, and he'd wave—a big, goofy wave, as if he hadn't seen me in years, just like he did the day before.

Onira was never far behind. She'd zoom out, between his legs when she was little, the zippers on her backpack tapping the plastic sides as she ran down the road to school. I'd flick a butt on the sidewalk, stomp, and ask Jrib, "Aren't you worried about her? Running down the street, unchaperoned?"

Jrib would nod. "Oh yes. But there's no controlling that one. She goes where she wants. And I can't keep up!" Then he'd laugh, a deep, hearty laugh, before going back inside to get dressed for work.

Onira reigned in her wildness a bit as she grew up. In her teens she wore dresses sometimes and occasionally went on dates with boys, although it was clear they didn't know what to do with her. Sometimes, she'd go with friends to the island's only movie theater after school, or to the beach on weekends.

One morning, before I could even go out to smoke, I heard a knock at my door. I slipped on my robe and answered. It was Jrib. He had on his typical tank top and shorts but no shoes. His eyes were red and beady. I looked down at his hands, all ten of his fingers twitching and tapping against one another.

"Onira hasn't come home," he told me.

I shrugged. "It's Onira. She's probably out with friends or on some adventure."

Jrib took a deep breath, held it, then exhaled in short, static bursts of air, shaking his head. "It's been two days. None of her friends have seen her. I … I …" then he began to cry.

I ushered my friend inside and guided him to one of the two lawn chairs at the kitchen table. I offered him coffee, but he just sat there sobbing. I don't think he heard me.

"She went out. Two days ago. She said …" he paused to sniff. "She said she was meeting a friend outside the forest for a hike. But …" he rubbed his chin, thumb sliding along sweat and stubble. "I asked her friend. She said Onira never showed up. No one has seen her since she left home."

I sat down and sighed, relaxing my slack right arm along the seat's back, trying to display some confidence in Onira's safety for my friend's sake. "It's Onira, Jry. She wouldn't permit someone to take her." He gave a polite,

half smile. “She’ll pop up soon. I’m sure.”

Jrib straightened his back and closed his eyes. I could tell, before he uttered the first word, what he was about to say. That the words had been rehearsed inside his mind dozens of times that morning. “If she doesn't come back … I’ll need a mirror.”

My arm rose off the back of my chair, like it was scalding hot. I brought it around to the other arm and folded them on the table.

“I’ll need it for—”

I cut him off. “Yes, my friend, I know why you’ll need a mirror.” Suddenly, the scent of my coffee and cigarette faded, as if taken far away, despite the mug and ashtray resting right between us.

We both knew, as did everyone else, that St. Xero was not to be summoned lightly. She was no one’s friend or relative. She wasn’t idle or tolerant of fools. To summon St. Xero in a mirror was to admit all seemed lost, and that the torment of losing your loved one was too excruciating to bear.

Few of us in the neighborhood had mirrors because, technically, they were illegal on the island. As one of the only unmarried men without children, I had disposable income for such forbidden luxuries. Last year, while drinking with Jrib, I mentioned I owned a mirror.

I regret that.

The mirror is full length, held upright by a cheap, clear plastic stand. I keep an old fitted sheet over it and store it with all the other valuable, secret treasures secured in my basement.

“I bet she’s close by, maybe right under your nose. Let’s keep looking, before we go calling St. Xero,” I proposed.

Jrib looked down and nodded, accepting I was right, but frustrated nonetheless.

“She may come home today,” I told him.

“Or we’ll find her body,” he whispered.

“Don’t talk like that,” I said, patting his bare, hairy shoulder. “Wait one week. One week, and then maybe we’ll discuss the mirror.” We stood, and I led him to the door. “After work,” I said, “let’s go to the forest, where she said she was going to hike. I’ll bring Kolb and Hirm.”

Jrib raised an eyebrow.

“Kolb will come. He has to, that bastard owes me.”

Jrib stepped outside. As I started to close the door he asked, with his back to me, “Do you think she’s nice?”

I held the door. “She’s … feisty.”

“No, not my daughter. St. Xero.”

“Oh.” I took a moment to consider his question. “No. I don’t think she is.

I think she's an angry soul."

♥

We searched the forest together with our friends, as promised, and when we found nothing there, we checked the bars and even the island's brothel, which also functioned as an opium den. Sometimes people reappeared in such places, where parents realized how little they knew of their children and those secret choices that led them to such locations.

After a week of fruitless searching, Jrib knocked on my door. It was in the afternoon and I hadn't undressed as I typically did after work, as if anticipating the conversation to come. I answered and invited him in.

Jrib wasn't well. He stank. His face, usually ruddy, looked sallow, and I reflexively stuck an arm out towards him, as if he may faint before reaching the chair.

Jrib sat down as I opened a cabinet. "I'll get you a drink," I offered.

"I don't want a drink," he stated. "Perhaps there is something else you can give me for comfort."

I scratched my head, leaned against my basement door and studied my shoes. "Of course. Of course, Jrib. What do you want?" I asked.

"Mirror."

I started pacing my kitchen, arms behind my back. "Ah, yes."

"I tried to buy one at the market yesterday. But they didn't have any. Not even a car mirror from the mainland." He started tearing up a napkin on the table. "I asked around. You're the only one I know who owns one."

I joined him at the table, took the napkin pieces and put them back together, mindlessly, covering up a small, red stain in the table's center. "Do you know why mirrors are illegal here, Jrib? Even in bathrooms? It's not like we're thousands of miles from the mainland, or anything like that. It's this place." I looked up and out the window.

"It's something about this island of ours. So many spirits. We're teeming with them. Not all benevolent. And mirrors …" I finished playing with the shredded napkin, then leaned back. "Mirrors connect us to them. Too many mirrors, and we'd have an infestation of ghosts."

Jrib scowled. His red, wet eyes narrowed. "Every day," he said, his voice wavering, "every day that passes, my little girl may die. Or lose another limb, or be forced …" he stopped, then cried, once again breaking down. "St. Xero is my only hope."

"I say, wait two more days."

Jrib opened his mouth to protest.

"Two more days, Jrib. Then you can have my mirror and summon St. Xero … if she even comes."

Jrib's shoulders fell. "She'll help me. I know it."

It was late. I was very tired, and to be blunt, Jrib was starting to annoy me. "Go home and get some rest. Maybe after work tomorrow we can check the forest again." I motioned towards the front door.

He didn't seem to notice me. He just stared out the window above my sink. Those black, heavy eyes of his darted side to side. I craned my neck to look out the window, expecting to catch hypnotic reflections in the glass. Instead, there was only the night sky. Whatever Jrib could see was exclusively for him.

Jrib eventually stood, muttered some thank you, and left. I locked the door behind him and got ready for bed. I had a lot of heavy lifting planned in the early morning. Jrib's interruption had already cost me precious time I could have spent sleeping.

I awoke at dawn as planned. Before I opened my eyes, I smelled decayed flesh. I stumbled out of the bedroom.

The window above the kitchen sink was broken, shards of glass scattered on the counters and floor. My basement door, always locked shut, was ajar, with a hairpin sticking out of the lock.

Beyond the door, Jrib whispered. His voice was hoarse, croaking words too soft to discern.

Silently, I crept up to the threshold, and peeked through the crack. I couldn't see anything, but I knew that down the stairs and around the corner, out of my range of vision, he stood before my mirror.

Jrib stopped speaking. Another voice answered him. A female voice. One that was exhausted, weak, and full of anger.

CONTRIBUTORS

Megan Savage ("Silent as a Fish") is a multi-genre writer living in Portland, Oregon. Her most recent prose is forthcoming in *The Rumpus* and appears in *Tahoma Literary Review* and *Boyfriend Village* by *Black Warrior Review*. Other publications include *Sixth Finch* (nominated for Best of the Net 2023), *Hunger Mountain, Subtropics,* the *More Devotedly* podcast, and the Routledge anthology *Pandemic of Perspectives: Creative Re-Imaginings*. She holds degrees from Bard College and Indiana University, where she was Fiction Editor of *Indiana Review*. Currently, she teaches writing at Portland Community College, where she helps coordinate the Carolyn Moore House, the first and only writing residency housed at a community college. Learn more at **https://www.meganesavage.com/**

♥

Lynn Wiser ("Keepsake Box") is from Oklahoma and currently lives in Brooklyn with her cat.

♥

Celeste Pfister ("*Dia De Los Muertos:* from the Family Album, 1971") is an award-winning visual artist, former physician specializing in childhood mental health, writer, and teacher. She has taught literary courses and published in *Persimmon Tree, Hearth & Coffin, Fahmidan, Pensive, Reunion* of Shodair Children's Hospital, *The American Psychoanalyst*, and others. She lives in Venice, Florida. Find her writing at **https://CreativeInspiration.substack.com/.** On Instagram: **@celestialmixedmediaworks.**

Maria Giannone (*The Empty Spaces Between the Stars*) grew up in a small town in Connecticut.

♥

F.C.E. Ngwube ("Stitches") is a British-Nigerian writer and creative practitioner. She founded The Writers Club, a creative community dedicated to supporting the growth of underrepresented writers. When she's not writing or building worlds in her mind, she's usually off exploring somewhere beautiful or at the gym. (IG: **felicia.ce_**)

Geoffrey Reiter ("Quartz Contentment") serves as Associate Editor at the website Christ Pop Culture and Coordinator of Humanities at Lancaster Bible College, where he teaches courses on such subjects as fairy tales, science fiction, and weird horror. He holds an MA in Church History from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a PhD in English from Baylor University. A Connecticut native, he now lives surrounded by Amish and Mennonite farms in Lancaster County. He has been a scholar of fantasy and weird horror for two decades, focusing on authors such as Bram Stoker, Arthur Machen, Clark Ashton Smith, and George MacDonald. His poetry has appeared in *Star*Line*, *Spectral Realms*, *Penumbra*, and *Scifaikuest*, while his fiction can be found in *ParABnormal*, *Penumbra*, *The Mythic Circle*, and *Black Wings VII*. His first book, a collection of poems and tales, is *The Lime Kiln and Other Enchanted Spaces*, published in 2025 by Hippocampus Press.

♥

Carolanna Lisonbee ("Thanksgiving, Reykjavik") is an English teacher, writer, translator, and amateur globetrotting adventuress originally from Utah, currently living in Taiwan. Her poems and translations have been published in the *Tea-ku: Poems About Tea* and *Harmonic Verse* anthologies (Local Gems Press), *Reliquiae* (Corbel Stone Press), *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *The Whiskey Blot*, *AzonaL*, *Book of Matches* (a literary journal), *Blue Unicorn*, and *Ballast Journal*. She posts on Instagram as **carolanna_joy_poetry**.

Author-illustrator **Vonnie Winslow Crist** (*Broken Pearls*) has over 1,000 illustrations (drawings, paintings, photos) published. Her speculative writing appears in magazines and anthologies in Australia, Japan, India, Italy, Spain, Germany, Finland, Canada, the UK, and USA. Believing the world is still filled with miracles, mystery, and magic, she strives to celebrate the power of myth in her writing and art.

♥

JJ Norris ("~~On Wanting~~ On Needing") is a writer who lives in New York City. She has written for as long as she can remember and loves rearranging words into sentences that—she hopes—are striking and unforgettable. Her work has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Scotty Milder (“Headcase”) is a writer, filmmaker, and film educator living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He received his MFA in Screenwriting from Boston University, and his award-winning short films have screened at festivals all over the world, including Cinequest, the Dead By Dawn Festival of Horror, HollyShorts, and the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival and CthulhuCon. His independent feature film *Dead Billy* is available to stream on Amazon Prime and Google Play. He has published around fifty short stories since 2019, and his work has appeared in venues like *Dark Matter Magazine*, *Cosmic Horror Monthly*, and *Lovecraftiana: The Magazine of Eldritch Horror*, as well as anthologies from Dark Moon Books, Dark Peninsula Press, Sentinel Creatives, Crone Girls Press, Sinister Smile Press, and others. He teaches screenwriting and film production at Santa Fe Community College and the University of New Mexico. He is also host of the *Horror from the High Desert* podcast and co-host of *The Weirdest Thing* podcast with actor/theatre artist Amelia Ampuero.

♥

Mia Marion (“Note to a ghost”) is a poet, writer and citizen of a metropolis considered modern, currently based in New York. Her work has appeared in *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *eMerge Magazine*, *Dumbo Press*, *Discretionary Love*, and the “Metropolitan Diary” section of *The New York Times.* She has a BA in English Literature from the University of Pennsylvania.

Ellen Graham ("What Kiki Kolby Paints") is a freelance theater director in the state of Washington. Her writing focuses on the West, and stories of open spaces, both on the land and in the heart. A prize-winner in *Glimmer Train*'s Short Story Award for New Writers, she has also been published in *Narrative*, *High Desert Journal*, *Every Day Fiction*, *The Concrete Desert Review* and *On The Run*. She is at work on a series of stories about growing up in Salt Lake City. Thanks for reading.

♥

Eleanor Lennox ("You Already Know How This Will End") lives in New England. Her work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Radon Journal*, and *Factor Four Magazine*, amongst others. Find her online at **eleanorlennox.com** or on Bluesky at **@eleanorlennox.bsky.social**.

♥

Evan H. Brisson ("The World of You (Emails from My Father")) works at a public library in Raleigh, North Carolina, where he facilitates a poetry club that meets on the third Tuesday of each month. He has taught writing and literature courses at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina, and he is currently pursuing an MFA in poetry in the low-residency MFA program at Queens University of Charlotte. His work has been featured in *Third Street Review*, *Ranger*, and *Notch Magazine*.

Aditya Pranav ("A Face Known") is a native of India and is currently finishing his medical course. He reads voraciously, or at least thinks he does, and tries to write something here and there, which might stumble into some journal editor's email. He likes to dabble in social and critical theory that, despite leaving him nonplussed, manages to sustain his attention. Apart from English, he also reads Telugu, Sanskrit, and, with Sisyphean resolve, some French. Out of books, he likes to watch movies and write clumsy reviews.

♥

Robbie Gamble ("November Lambs") is the author of *A Can of Pinto Beans* (Lily Poetry Review Press, 2022). His poems have appeared in the *Post Road, Whale Road Review, RHINO, Salamander,* and *The Sun.* He divides his time between Boston and an apple orchard in Vermont.

Annie Dunn Watson (*The Hermit*) hails originally from Salem, Massachusetts, where she spent a lot of time writing, climbing trees, and delving into esoteric studies. As a retired counselor and educator now living in Vermont, Annie's focus has turned to music, dance, the occasional penning of a poem, and frequent forays into the complexities of the human mind. During Covid, she delved into the Tarot, exploring and re-creating one randomly-chosen card from the deck over the course of seventy-eight days. Perhaps *The Hermit*—the final card drawn—best represents that period of isolation and loss, with its quiet pondering, unexpected insights, and continual search for meaning. She wishes you the growth of a good journey, whatever road you find yourself upon.

♥

Zina Mona ("Animals") is a student and writer from Texas. Her work has been published in *The Trinity Review* and *The MockingOwl Roost*. You can keep up with her on Instagram **@zinamona_** and on her website: **linktr.ee/zinamona**

Logan McConnell ("St. Xero") is a horror writer living with his husband in Tennessee. He spends his free time taking long walks in the woods and sitting alone in the dark. His work is published or upcoming in *Cosmic Horror Monthly, Chthonic Matter Quarterly, Coffin Bell, Dark Recesses Press,* and others. Twitter: **@LMwriter91**

♥

Brenna Monaghan Behel (**Cover Art:** *The Reach*) is an award-winning photographer who first picked up a camera at the age of fifty-two. A graduate of Trinity College, DC, her career has taken her from serving in the military to operating a pipeline before discovering that her true passion lies in art. She is deeply honored to have her photograph *The Reach* selected as the autumn cover image for *34 Orchard*. Her current project, *70-over-70*, celebrates senior citizens by capturing their stories, strength, and individuality through portraiture. She is available for portrait shoots, and her work can be found on Facebook, Instagram, and at **b2portraits.com**.

34 Orchard

recommends the collection

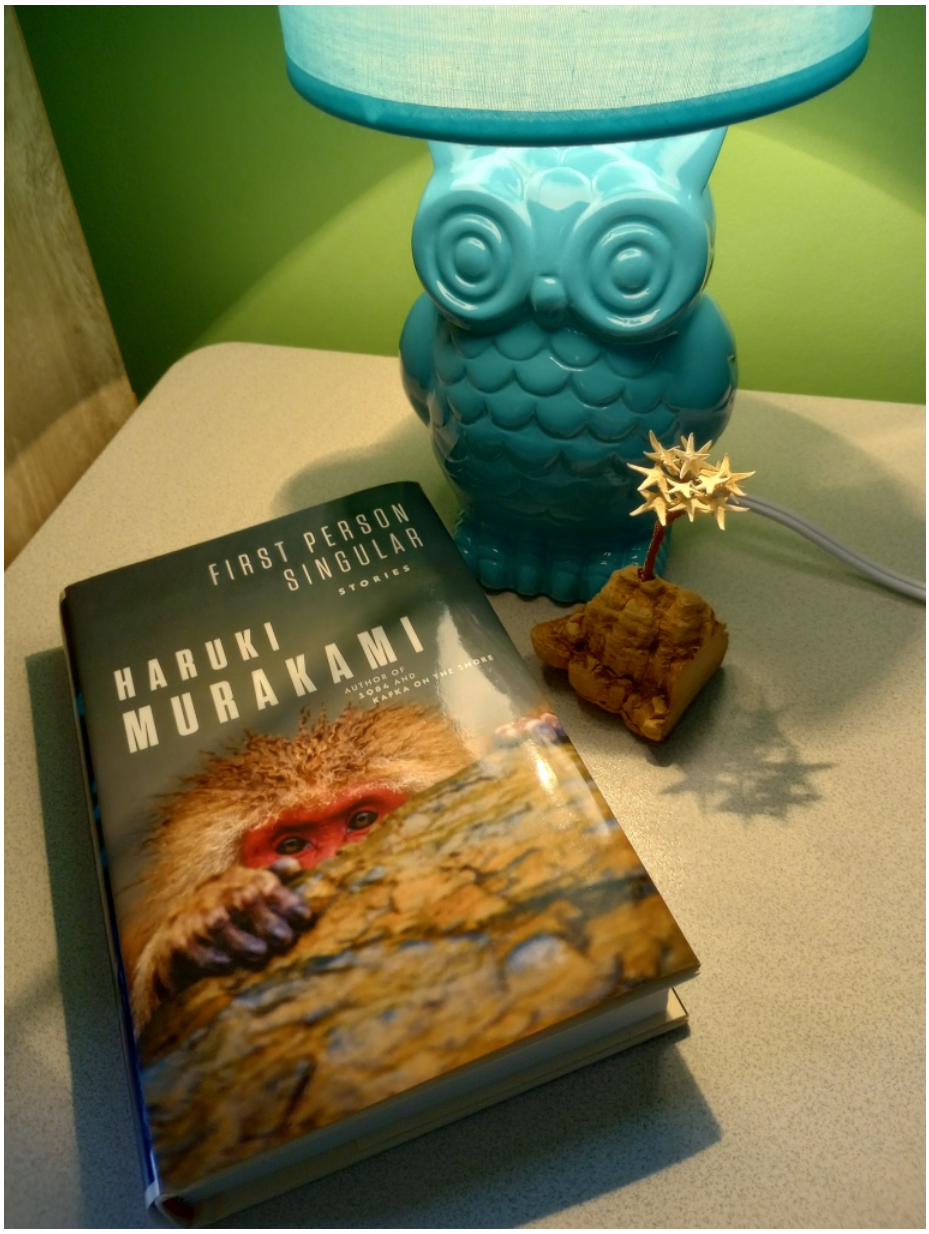
Sometimes birdsong is dangerous.

Several *34 Orchard* alums build terrifying nests in this bird horror anthology! Edited by #7 "The Last Days"'s Elaine Pascale and featuring stunning art by Michael Takeda (#11, "Kintsugi"), others are Zachary Kellian (#6, "Shrike Song"), Die Booth (#1, "A Murder"), Ernest Ògúnyẹmí (#7, "The Flute"), Leen Raats (#8, "The Solitary Man"), Nicola Kapron (#3, "The Bodies We Should Forget"), Selah Janel (#5, "Mister Skinandbones"), Rob Frances (#4, "Everything Fits If You Push Hard Enough"), Robert Mayette (#8, "The Milestones on That Path"), L.E. Daniels (#8/"Weird Witness"), and ten other popular voices. From grackles and creepers to magpies and nightjars, these flights of dark fancy will claw your heart every time you hear beating wings. Available where books are sold.

This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

34 Orchard

recommends the collection



If Dali Paintings were short stories but made sense

First Person Singular **knocks it out of the park in the unreliable narrators department, as ordinary people consider memory and its persistence, regret, aging, change, perception, and decline through their encounters with extraordinary things. A man meets a talking monkey who steals names, a student meets a cryptic old man, and a man falls for an unattractive woman only to find out she's not what she seems. "I've heard it said," he writes in the short story "With the Beatles," "that the happiest time in our lives is the period when pop songs really mean something to us, really get to us." In those stunning words of clarity, and in so many others peppered throughout the volume, Murakami shows us that no matter who we are, we are emotional—and therefore, vulnerable.**

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34 Orchard
recommends the films

Presence (2024)
Not to be confused with *The Presence* (2010), this Soderbergh is an interesting take on both the found footage and haunted house subgenres. Told from an original perspective, it's an intense study of family dynamics and how the secrets we keep from each other can destroy us; it also sparks contemplation about what *might* happen to our souls after we pass. Solid acting, nice moments of tension, and an ability to emotionally involve its viewers (hard to achieve with found footage) make this a worthy watch.

The Shrouds (2025)
This Cronenberg—about a man who invents cemeteries in which mourners can watch their loved ones' bodies deteriorate over time—is riveting, in that it constantly presents us with the unexpected. The acting is phenomenal, and the script is a study in how to tell much in few words. While much is rendered in imagery, the plot is clear (there could've been a real problem with not being able to follow it due to the complexity of the twists and turns). Anyone who loves Poe-esque macabre should enjoy this quiet, soft techno-thriller that comments on the impact of deep grief if we don't let go.

Last Breath (2025)
This survival thriller is based on the true story of a man who nearly died in a saturation diving accident and the heroism of his coworkers who saved him. While chronicled in a 2019 documentary of the same name—which is excellent—what makes this special is that it is one of the most faithful "true events" pieces we've ever seen, with very little and only what was necessary added for dramatic purposes. This film goes beyond the Hollywood thrill ride and into existentialist territory, inspiring sober consideration of the value of every day and how we choose to spend it.

Wolf Man (2025)
This got mixed reviews because it aimed to be a 'reboot' of the classic Universal 1941 *The Wolf Man*. As a reboot, this fails—it's so far from any semblance of connection to the original. But a release of expectations reveals it's a fresh, well-done entry into the werewolf canon. This discusses what it means to be a werewolf—a comment on what we lose when, in real life, we transform. There are unique creepy moments and genuine scares, but the overall tone is sad and poignant; it's an emotional watch. The script is excellent, the atmosphere is immersive, the pacing is balanced, the cinematography is gorgeous—and what this says about generational trauma and the fear of becoming our parents will break your heart.

This recommendation for readers is the opinion of the *34 Orchard* staff and is not a paid endorsement.

34 Orchard

recommends the film festival

Celebrating thirty years of cosmic horror cinema!

We love our cosmic horror—it asks so many questions and makes us think. We also love short films. So the H.P. Lovecraft Film Festival, going strong since 1995, is our jam.

Hosts Gwen and Brian Callahan go above and beyond—the quality of this festival, from curation and content to pledge campaign rewards and collateral material—is top notch.

Although the in-person festival happened in September, the streaming edition arrives December 5-9, 2025, and you'll be able to enjoy over sixty short films, several full-length features, author readings, and panels right from your living room.

This year's thirtieth anniversary theme is Cthulu on the High Seas, so in addition, some contributors to the *Lovecraftian Microfiction/Challenge from Beyond* books, which always accompany the festival, were instead asked to write an *X-files*-esque story surrounding *The Emma*, a two-masted schooner that plays into strange events in Lovecraft's story "The Call of Cthulu." There are stories by favorites like Cody Goodfellow and John Shirley (*34O* editor Kristi Petersen Schoonover's story "Compaction" is included too). The books will be on sale after the festival on Arkhaam Bazaar's website.

If short films and cosmic/existentialist horror rocks your world, this festival is for you! You can purchase tickets for the December 5-9, 2025 streaming event here: https://hplfilmfestival.eventive.org/passes/buy.

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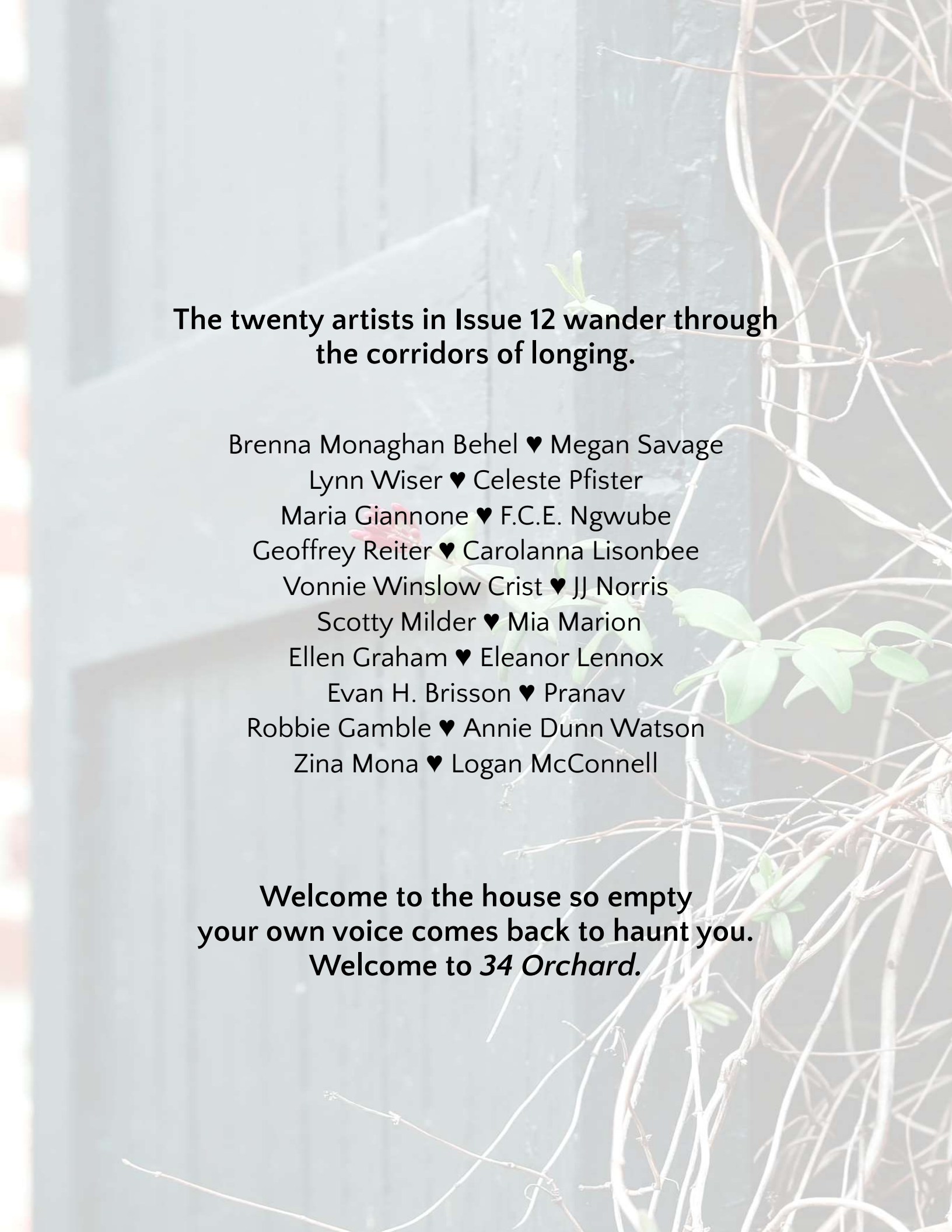

The twenty artists in Issue 12 wander through the corridors of longing.

Brenna Monaghan Behel ♥ Megan Savage
Lynn Wiser ♥ Celeste Pfister
Maria Giannone ♥ F.C.E. Ngwube
Geoffrey Reiter ♥ Carolanna Lisonbee
Vonnie Winslow Crist ♥ JJ Norris
Scotty Milder ♥ Mia Marion
Ellen Graham ♥ Eleanor Lennox
Evan H. Brisson ♥ Pranav
Robbie Gamble ♥ Annie Dunn Watson
Zina Mona ♥ Logan McConnell

Welcome to the house so empty
your own voice comes back to haunt you.
Welcome to *34 Orchard.*