

typenhouse

Literary Magazine



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soudre d'antier
basement, de
pavés, de
qu'il n'y
beaucoup, ni

1^{er} procédé...
à obtenir. Après...
d'épaisseur et 0,02...
deux pointes fines et longues.
Dans cette casserole...
Préparer encore un...
dans 2/3 d'eau froid...
1^{er} Temps...
2^e Temps...
3^e Temps...
d'eau mielle...
sins...

PREPARATION DE LA RUCHE

Volume 7, No. 1, Issue 19

Typehouse

LITERARY MAGAZINE

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Typehouse is a writer-run literary magazine based out of Portland, Oregon. We are always looking for well-crafted, previously unpublished writing and artwork that seeks to capture an awareness of the human condition. If you are interested in submitting, visit our website at www.typehousemagazine.com.

Cover: **Dream**, *Fabrice Poussin: A study with found objects.*

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, *the San Pedro River Review*, *Typehouse*, as well as other publications.

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Keith Moul has written poems and taken photos for more than 50 years, his work appearing in magazines widely. His chapbook, The Journal, was published by Duck Lake Books in November 2019. This is his ninth chap or book published.



Teddy's Happy Home

All I need is a foothold for viewing any interesting subject. I use Photoshop to enhance digital images, not reorganize. My photos strive for high contrast and saturation, to gift nature with greater intensity.

Martina Litty is a lesbian writer from Laurinburg, North Carolina. She is currently an undergraduate student studying creative writing at UNC Wilmington. Litty attended the International Writing Program Summer Institute of 2019, and a short story and poem of hers appeared in the IWP anthology Multitudes. More of her poems have appeared or will appear in Poets Reading the News, semicolon, High Shelf Press, and Rat's Ass Review, among others. Litty is working on her first novel.

Daddy Had a Dog Named Jesus

Martina Litty

My daddy kept hunting dogs all his life. When I was in the fifth grade, my daddy had three—Possumboy, Big Martin, and Jesus. Jesus was a Treeing Walker Coonhound and I thought he was the meanest dog on earth. All of Daddy's dogs loved to hunt, but Jesus was the only one who hunted when he wasn't supposed to. Jesus chomped down on frogs, snakes, squirrels, tree roots, tree limbs, baby feet.

Jesus chewed up Annie's foot on a Thursday morning. Momma let Annie crawl around on the floor back then. Every morning, Momma smoked by the kitchen window, I ate my cereal and waited for the school bus, and Annie crawled around the kitchen with all the silent determination of an army sergeant.

A crash down the hall made Momma and me look up at the same time. Jesus barreled down the hallway, sprinting toward the kitchen faster than light or God.

Daddy kept all the hunting dogs outside, their collars tied to trees. He gave them enough length of rope to piss far from where they slept, but not enough to get close to the front door. All the dogs wagged their tails when they saw me, but Possumboy and Big Martin didn't bark or snarl like Jesus. Possumboy, a Bluetick Coonhound, had dark fur like wet earth, and Big Martin was some sort of gorgeous Retriever mix, like the family dogs on TV.

Jesus had been gnawing on his rope for a long time. He chewed it clean through. He lunged through the screen door, smacked into the wall, and sprinted down the hallway. It wasn't winter; he wasn't cold, looking for the warmth of the indoors. He'd been fed that morning; he wasn't hungry. So I knew he was mean. Just plain old mean.

Jesus latched onto Annie's left foot before Momma and I could move. He chomped and chewed, spittle going everywhere.

Momma shrieked, dropped her cigarette in the sink, and lunged at Jesus. She hit him in the face with her open palm, over and over. I handed her

a frying pan from the cabinet, and she smacked him on the top of the head with it. He whimpered and let Annie go.

Momma scooped Annie up and climbed on top of the table, screaming for Daddy, even though Jesus wasn't doing anything but barking now. He wagged his tail, delighted by our fear, his head pain gone or forgotten.

When Daddy came running in from God knows where, he dragged Jesus by the collar into my bedroom and locked the door. I hadn't known that my bedroom door could lock from the outside.

I didn't go to school that day. Daddy took me into town, and we bought three sets of chains from Lowe's. I helped him replace Big Martin's and Possumboy's ropes with chains. When I petted them, my hands shook, but I petted them anyway to remind myself there were good dogs in the world. They licked my hands with gentle tongues. I didn't go near Jesus—Daddy himself chained Jesus to the tree.

I thought Daddy was going to shoot Jesus, especially after he and Momma brought Annie home from the hospital, but he never did. Momma stopped letting Annie crawl around on the floor. Every morning, I ate my cereal and watched Annie kick in her high chair, my eyes drawn to the bandaged—and then healed but mangled—left foot.

One night, maybe two months later, I couldn't sleep. Daddy had taken Jesus and me on a hunt earlier, my first hunt with Jesus since That Day. I couldn't stop thinking about Jesus thrashing a squirrel during a long spell when Daddy didn't shoot anything. Jesus had seemed so happy sinking his teeth into the little creature and shaking it until its neck snapped.

I got out of bed and took one of Daddy's hunting rifles off the wall in the TV room. I walked outside and passed Big Martin and Possumboy, who lifted their heads and raised their soulful eyes at me as I went. I walked until I reached Jesus's tree. Jesus trotted over to me with a toy I'd never seen before in his mouth.

Jesus's chain stopped just short of me. He lay down on the ground and thrashed the toy. His ears flapped, and the toy squeaked and squealed.

I almost dropped my gun at the noise; Daddy never bought the dogs squeaky toys before.

I watched Jesus thrash his squeaky toy for what felt like hours. He shredded the fabric, pulled at the stuffing, and then gnawed on the plastic squeaker itself until his teeth punctured it.

Jesus chomped on it a few more times before he realized that he broke it. His wagging tail flagged and then drooped. I could see the joy leave him. He turned in a circle and settled down, as if to sleep.

I stepped closer, gun at the ready, and picked up the broken squeaker. It was covered in slobber, so I held it between my pointer finger and my thumb.

Annie's screams and squeals had sounded kind of like Jesus's

squeaky toy.

I made like I was going to pocket the squeaker, but my nightgown didn't have pockets. I put the squeaker back on the ground with the grace of someone laying flowers on a grave.

I eyeballed Jesus, who still curled silently on the dead leaves. He could've been sleeping. But he looked like somebody who stays up at night and can't sleep, no matter how hard they try.

My gun-wielding arm lowered. I went back to bed.

The next morning, I kept an eye on Annie while Momma smoked at the window. The landline rang, so Momma left the kitchen to answer it. I waited a beat before abandoning my cereal. I lifted Annie out of her high chair, smoothed the baby hairs on her head, and then deposited her on the linoleum floor. Annie crawled without hesitation.

Rita Rouvalis Chapman's poetry has appeared most recently in Antiphon, Laurel Review, The Connecticut River Review, and the anthology 56 Days of August. She teaches high school English.

Gratitude Journal

Rita Rouvalis Chapman

What I meant to say was *thank you*
because I really was grateful

like the pelican with a live snake in its throat
or the streetlamp suddenly lit by fog

Sometimes a tree collapses
under the richness of the rain

In other words I saw myself wrapped up
like a paper window like candy
like a beautiful leaf dangling by an inchworm's thread
An incandescent red
doing its best to make up for the retreating sun

That is to say the sun couldn't stop moving away
as the flowers gazed and gazed
until it tilted and I tumbled into winter

Denise Coville is from a small town outside of Seattle and currently lives in a big town that is Seattle. She received her MFA in Creative Writing and Poetics from the University of Washington's Bothell campus. Her fiction has been published in Delay Fiction.

I Got Stung by a Wasp - an

Interlude

(a novel excerpt)

Denise Coville

I got stung by a wasp or, I don't know, maybe a yellow jacket. I'm no expert in the shitty mean bees, no matter how many times I watched my Uncle Brian cover their nests and hives with spray glue as a child, quickly killing those who suffered direct contact and slowly suffocating those trapped inside. My Uncle Brian got stung by a wasp, or maybe a yellow jacket, often.

I got stung by a wasp after getting a pedicure, the first of my life at the age of twenty-eight, while walking home in subdued magenta sweatpants and an oversized cream "cashmere" sweater. The leaves crunched under my feet as I walked the six blocks home in the crisp afternoon air of an October Wednesday, and what was left of the champagne I'd poured into my Yeti cup sloshed with each step. As I felt the stinger pierce through the fabric of my subdued magenta sweatpants it felt as though the twisted blade of a wine key had been clumsily thrust into my calf. I turned quickly and watched the offending creature fly away, having achieved the trivial chaos that was its purpose.

I got stung by a wasp and whatever bacteria had collected on my leg as it soaked in the warm, filmy footbath of the pedicure chair was rammed deep into my body, where within hours it had bloomed into an ambitious skin infection, my entire calf turning the bright pink-purple of the autumn sunrise I may have seen that morning had I not been hungover on my couch until noon, alternating between pages of *Mother Night* and minutes of fitful sleep. Were it not for the sting I would have found the decadence of such a Wednesday absolutely ideal—slowly sipping away the hangover that follows a late night of post-work drinks with coworkers before heading out that afternoon to do it again.

I got stung by a wasp and went to work, as-yet unaware of the severity of my condition, having wrenched black skinny jeans over both the bad leg and the good. I put waves in my hair, liner on my lids and pink gloss on my lips and I looked completely well. I had thought at the time that the unabating itchiness was just what happened when you got stung, and that it was probably being irritated further by the skin-tight jeans. The shift passed, as many did in those years, with the help of frequent beer “samples” throughout the night, from my 5pm start-time to my 11pm clockout. It worked, as we’d all learned, like a charm—a steady amount of alcohol throughout the entire day to keep the hangover away, and I would emerge on the other side of my shift with an apron full of cash, a slight-to-medium buzz and the rest of the night ahead of me. The others—Ron, Joel, Tyler, Katrina and Bianca—had done the same thing, and before we knew it we were each sitting at the back table with a pint of beer. The idea was always to drink just enough to fight off the hangover and to stop there, to go home and get a good night’s sleep and wake up ready for the new day. However, when all your friends are sitting around the table, the work is done and the beer is free, good intentions are easily forgotten.

I got stung by a wasp and saw a doctor the next day, visiting the discount clinic of a downtown drug store because I didn’t have health insurance. In my subdued magenta sweatpants and oversized cream "cashmere" sweater, with the remnants of yesterday’s eyeliner smeared on my temples and the last traces of yesterday’s alcohol slowly leaving my bloodstream, I sat for hours awaiting my turn. My right calf, the entirety of which was now swollen and hot to the touch, was examined. A large circle was drawn around the affected area, to monitor for expansion. I received a shot in the arm, 20 pills and the instructions to take two each day for ten days. The pills, a strong combination of multiple antibiotics, would likely upset my stomach, I was told, and alcohol was to be avoided lest I risk making the nausea even worse. I resisted the urge to buy a bottle of wine as I left the drugstore, begrudgingly accepting that the hangover must sometimes just be endured.

And when you’ve been postponing a hangover for three entire days you get three days’ worth at once. When you’ve borrowed happiness from three tomorrows you must eventually pay it back. Before finally making it back to my couch, where I would spend the rest of the day and most of the night, I picked up a large cheese and mushroom pizza and parmesan bread bites from the Domino’s on the ground floor of my apartment building, an establishment whose employees saw me only occasionally, but always with yesterday’s eyeliner smeared across my temples.

A hangover is an unpleasant affair, but a compound hangover leaves

you sitting on the couch, slowly forcing another slice of pizza into your mouth even when you feel you can't possibly eat any more, your flabby midsection protruding even more than normal over your waistband, telling yourself this is all there is for you. It leaves you aware that your parents will die. It leaves you expecting the phone to ring. The darkness surrounding your field of vision seems to overtake the light and everything feels about to fall apart. You make deals with yourself on days like these—tomorrow, when you've emerged on the other side of this, you will clean up your apartment. You will dedicate regular time to working on your portfolio. You will eat more vegetables and drink less alcohol. You will ride your bike.

You sit in your apartment with all the lights on and the windows closed and the TV off, doing nothing but slowly eating the pizza and watching the clock. You glance at *Mother Night* on the coffee table and are suddenly compelled to check your library account for fines, which compels you to check your bank account, which compels you to check your student loan balance, and you sit, waiting for the phone to ring, and consider the amount that is \$84,162. You feel an urgent need to have a plan to pay that off, while also having no way of doing so. You look once again at *Mother Night* and consider picking it up but you need to keep your hands free for the pizza and the phone. And so you sit there, eating bread bite after bread bite, until it's close enough to bedtime to turn off your lights and lie down on your couch, in your subdued magenta sweatpants and oversized cream "cashmere" sweater, having turned your TV on so the voices make the room feel a little less empty.

I got stung by a wasp and then I got just a little drunk, six days later. I had made it halfway through my medication regimen without drinking, and then on a Tuesday night after work, when everyone else was already on their second beer, I sat down and considered my situation. I didn't even want a drink, but I convinced myself to call it quits *intentionally* before the time came when I did want one and discovered that I couldn't stop myself. As if I was protecting myself from discovering I was a failure by simply failing. I had a beer, and another, and two more down the street at Billy's Ballroom with Katrina and Tyler before heading home. At the time I didn't think this was so bad—four beers was half what I commonly consumed after work. I washed my face. I went to bed.

I got stung by a wasp and threw up outside the Goodwill on Dearborn, where I'd gone the next morning to shop for a Halloween costume. The feeling had come on suddenly, while I was waiting in line to purchase a blue nightgown and a bag of mice. I feigned as if I had forgotten something, stepped quickly out of the line, set the nightgown and the mice on a display of cookbooks and ran to the door, where I threw up just feet outside. I threw up on the basket of an Uber Bike. I felt someone approaching and rushed toward

a large bush, hoping to be able to hide until anyone who had seen me vomit had left. However, I was followed, and while cowering behind a bush three feet from the vomit and the bike, I heard a voice ask if I was okay.

“Yes,” I said, turning to partially face the man who had followed me behind the bush. “I’m fine.” I lifted my wrist toward my face but stopped, having realized that if there was any remaining vomit on my face, I didn’t want to transfer it to my shirt.

“You know, those things get vandalized all the time,” the man said, pointing to the Uber bike. “Really, you’ve probably prevented it from being thrown from a ferry, or, I don’t know—”

“Yes,” I said, deciding I wasn’t actually obligated to listen to this person saying things to make himself feel good disguised as things to make me feel good, when I just wanted to wipe the vomit off my face, buy a nightgown and a bag of mice and leave. “I’ve done a real service here,” and I walked past the man and back into the store.

I washed my face, purchased my items and left.

I got stung by a wasp and finished my course of antibiotics with neither alcohol nor incident. And then it was the Saturday before Halloween and I stood in Katrina’s living room wearing the blue nightgown, with clear plastic heels on my feet and my hands full of mice. I remember that nobody knew what my costume was. I remember that I kept leaving the mice lying around, setting them down to get a drink and never picking them back up. I remember following Joel outside when he went to vape, because I needed a break from Bianca continuously pausing the actual music and yelling “*Alexa, play Downtown,*” each time forgetting that there was no Alexa in Katrina’s apartment. Katrina was, of course, convinced that an Alexa would lead to her eventual arrest.

(Her arrest would be for breaking and entering, but to this day I believe it was justified.)

I remember, too, standing out on the sidewalk near the corner of 16th Avenue East and East Mercer, while Joel vaped. I was watching everyone walk by in costume when I heard someone say “excuse me” on the sidewalk behind me. I moved out of the way and a man pushed a bicycle past. He turned and nodded thanks, and then he stopped.

“I know you from somewhere,” he said to me.

I did not believe this to be true.

“Nothing comes to mind,” I said. He was cute. He was tan, and I liked the idea of dating a cyclist. I understood these things to mean he enjoyed the outdoors. I also enjoyed the outdoors, but had had the misfortune of exclusively dating men who—through no intent on my part—only seemed to enjoy the indoors. I remember that, too, the feeling that I was possibly face-to-face with a man who would alter my life, someone who was the kind of

person I wanted in my life, rather than settling for whoever who was willing to be in it.

“I saw you outside Goodwill last week,” he said.

I’ve since learned that a person who appears to be tan, indicating a love of the outdoors, may actually just be mixed-race.

I’ve since learned that a person who wheels a bicycle down the sidewalk may never actually *ride* that bike, but may instead just push it from bar to bar, always too drunk to ride it, leaving it each night at whichever bar he was at last and picking it up there again the next day.

I will admit that I was not amused when he made a **thing** of moving his bike slightly away from me and asking if I was feeling better today. But I did still give him my phone number. Because, quite frankly, anything can seem like a good story when you’re looking for one. *Oh, how did we meet? Funny you should ask.* Etc., Etc.

I got stung by a wasp and wasted eight months of my life. It is not the point of an interlude to be suspenseful. An interlude is a pause between the acts. Ideally, an interlude leaves members of the audience better prepared to begin the next act than they would be had there not been an interlude, but an interlude is still just an interruption.

An intelligent woman is capable of a lot, and here are some of those things:

She’s capable of saying “you’re right, this is a small neighborhood and it’s hard to take things slowly when everyone sees us together everywhere, so I agree that we should be discreet.”

She’s capable of imagining plausible excuses for why he doesn’t want her to meet his friends. Maybe he’s embarrassed by his friends, she can tell herself. Maybe because she has a graduate degree and they didn’t go to college, or maybe because none of them are interested in photography or literature, or maybe because he’s afraid they’ll tell her embarrassing stories about things he’s done while drunk.

She’s capable of drinking more when she wanted to drink less.

She’s capable of setting alarms for midnight every night, so she can wake up to see if he’s sent a “want to get a drink?” text. And when he has, which is most nights, she can pretend he isn’t texting her just because the friends she can’t meet are all heading home. She can pretend he isn’t just texting her so they he can have “one last drink”—while actually she takes shots every time he uses the restroom so she can try to get drunk enough to not be bothered by how drunk he is—and then maybe have sex with her but probably just pass out, and wake up the next morning not knowing which. She’s capable of making him sandwiches before heading out to meet him at midnight, at whichever bar, because she knows he hasn’t eaten since breakfast.

She's capable of creating elaborate stories about why she's sitting by herself at a bar at 1am, because people always ask. When he's forty-five minutes late and she knows he's actually still sitting at a bar two blocks away with the friends she isn't allowed to meet, she can tell the bartender that she's waiting for her boyfriend who went home to blow out the candle they realized they'd left burning on the kitchen counter. She can tell the creep who sits next to her, who seems to think she's as good as his if she isn't visibly someone else's, that her boyfriend had been there fifteen minutes before but that his sister had had a flat tire just six blocks away and he'd gone to help her put on the spare. She's capable of ignoring that nobody believes these stories. She's capable of believing anything's a good story when she's desperate for one.

She can pretend he's actually "just friends" with that ex.

She's capable of throwing the last of her birthday cake at him when he shows up drunk outside her apartment at the end of her party, the party he said he didn't want to come to because hanging out with her friends felt too *serious*. She's capable of telling him to fuck off when he tells her their *friendship* is so important to him. She can tell him that after eight months all she knows for sure is that he's never been her friend, and then she can turn and let him walk away, having achieved the trivial chaos that was his purpose.

She's capable of texting him three days later to tell him she must've lost an earring at his apartment, knowing he would search night and day until it was recovered, in order to keep that ex from ever finding it.

I got stung by a wasp and it looked a lot like slowly letting the air out of both tires of a bike I recognized chained outside a bar—discreetly, as I was very capable of discretion. And then I went home and rode my bike.

Pat Daneman lives in Lenexa, KS. She has published poems widely in print and online magazines, most recently the American Journal of Poetry, the I-70 Review and the Atlanta Review. After All (FutureCycle Press 2018), her full-length poetry collection, was first runner up for the 2019 Thorpe-Menn Award as well as a finalist for the Hefner Heitz Kansas Book Award. She is the author of a chapbook, Where the World Begins, and co-librettist of the oratorio, We, the Unknown, premiered by the Heartland Men's Chorus in 2018. For more, visit patdaneman.com.

Cleaning Up After the Last Supper

Pat Daneman

One of them pared his fingernails onto a plate. Another one
blew his nose in the tablecloth. I was their waiter, chosen
because I am precise in my profession—service
without subservience. I took care of their every request,

and now I'm here alone to clear away their mess.
I told my wife I might be late, told her I had a special group
today, prophets of some kind or priests,
but they trashed the Upper Room like a gang of centurions.

Dirty towels by the door as if they'd stopped to wash their feet.
They were rowdy, loud. They smelled of dirty hair
and dusty flax—not one of them had bothered
to change his robe. Honey spills, pistachio shells,

the stems of figs spit into napkins. Soggy crusts
of bread, blood-red. I waited on them through the afternoon
into the night. They were ravenous, calling for more
and more of everything—more stew, more oil, more dates.

I had to tell them twice that pomegranates are out of season.
A goblet rolled across the floor ringing like a bell.
They argued and they sobbed, at one point
I thought there might be a fight. Then suddenly they all fell quiet,

as if a wind had hurried in to hush the flames in the wall sconces.
The one in the middle talked for a very long time, maybe a toast.
Then a holler out to me for yet another jug of wine, more bread.
Three trips back and forth so far tonight with stacks of plates

and platters balanced in my arms, oil dripping on my sandals.
Breadcrumbs everywhere, wine stains. Here—
is this my tip? The one called Judas had said something
about pieces of silver, but, Jesus! this is a plate of olive pits.

Jenna Heller was born in the US, spent summers in Canada, and now lives in New Zealand. More of her writing can be found in The Wax Paper, North & South, Ghost Parachute, and Meniscus. She has a soft spot for blue herons, kingfishers and wood pigeons.

Follow the Birds

Jenna Heller

1

My mother was a seer. She could interpret the gentle fluttering of leaves, decipher small wrinkles in the sand, know that a string of knotted clouds foretold of torrential rain.

Before the endless wind arrived, she nailed plywood over the windows at the entrance to our semi-basement apartment. Covered all but a sliver of light. Then she went out and bought all the scarves and bandanas she could find. Spent the afternoon pushing them into the hands of as many of our friends and neighbours who'd take them. She wrapped one around my face so tightly that the bridge of my nose hurt from the straining cotton.

Pull it down so it covers your mouth, she said.

Breathing was uncomfortable and I complained. She bent down, her eyes wide and wild, and said, This is not a choice, Tineke. The world is changing.

The next day the gales arrived and everything else came to a standstill. Shops closed and schools shut. No mail was delivered and the buses stopped running. The wind raced between brick buildings, coursed through the streets like a raging current, swirled down the steps to our small apartment, and pounded against the door. It sent street signs clattering and crashing through storefront windows while car alarms sounded night and day until their batteries finally died.

By the third night, we'd learned to sleep to the groaning of our building as it resisted the vicious gusts. We eyed the silt as it climbed up the windows until our one sliver of natural light turned brown.

On day six, we huddled around the TV and watched the last news update. The reporter was young and pale. He said, The winds are stronger than any of our instruments can measure. And then he ran his hand through his dark wavy hair, looked nervously away from the camera, and disappeared.

What will happen to us? I asked.

We'll be okay, Mother said. And she was right.

Months earlier, she'd moved me out of my room and in to share with my sister. At eighteen, Bia complained louder and more eloquently than I

could but no amount of attempted negotiations or crying from either of us made any difference. Mother stood her ground. We sulked and didn't speak to her or even each other for days, maybe even weeks. During all that time and every day until the day she boarded up the windows and wrapped scarves around our faces, she filled my old bedroom with bottled water and palette upon palette of canned vegetables, tinned fruit, vacuum packed ham and fish. We began to think that maybe Mother was just as daft as everyone used to say. Crazy Grace. That's what people called her. Maybe they were right.

But after watching the TV station implode, we hugged her and thanked her for being able to see what we couldn't and for keeping us safe, and that night Bia and I slept together in the same bed, hugging each other until sleep came.

We kept track of the days with little marks on the storeroom wall and on the hundred-and-first, we woke to the sound of birds: the cawing of seagulls and honking of geese, the high-pitched twitter from petrels and the noisy cackle of flamingos. We sat inside all day listening to the birds sing and chatter and we begged to go out. Mother shook her head.

The rain will come next, she said.

So we sulked again until the first drops struck.

Will it rain for long? Like the wind? I asked.

Not this time. But it will one day soon.

We were restless as the rain tapped against the door and turned the streets into muddy rivers. And over all this time, we told stories. Stories of real stuff that had happened to us or people we knew, stories of questionable truth that we'd overheard or seen somewhere when we had newspapers and magazines to read, TV and YouTube to watch. Mother shared tales from when we were little, the ones that explained where things came from or warned of danger. Like the one about a coyote that tricked two monsters who guarded the flames on Fire Mountain, lit a bundle of sticks and tied it to his tail to bring fire to the people.

Where's Fire Mountain? I asked.

In the centre of the dry land.

That is so not a real thing, Bia scoffed.

Some say it is, Mother said.

Don't pay any attention, Tin.

Mother shrugged. We will go to Fire Mountain when the rain stops.

We're leaving? Bia asked.

The rain will stop and then we must go before it starts again because when it does the second time, it will rain for a year or longer and our home and all the homes of our neighbours and all the homes of our neighbours' neighbours will fill with water. The whole city will flood and it will be like nothing we've seen before and this small apartment will then be at the bottom of the sea.

It rained for three weeks, turned our entranceway into a reservoir. When it stopped we had to wait a whole week for the water to recede before opening the door. Then Bia and I ran up the stairs and into the middle of the street. We stretched our arms, turned our faces to the sun, spun around and soaked in the feeling of being in a wide-open space again. When we stopped and looked around, we were startled to see that we were the only ones outside. No kids laughing, no people racing to catch a bus, no cars driving or planes overhead. The sidewalks were a muddy sludge of paper and plastic. Dead cats and dogs lay bloated and wedged in the gutters. Broken windows and cars strewn about, some stacked haphazardly atop one another. Down the middle of the road ran a trickle of water, steady and flowing like someone had left a garden hose on.

I grabbed Bia's hand. Where is everyone?

Mother called out to us. Go to the beach, she said. Take your clothes off and cover yourselves in saltwater. A quick dip in the sea one last time. I'll pack and we'll leave when you return.

Bia dropped my hand. Go swimming? Today?

Just do as I say, Bia. Now go quickly. We have to leave soon. Mother shooed us off and walked back inside.

I'll go with you, Bia said. But I'm not going in.

We walked down the middle of the street counting the dead animals, looking for people and seeing no-one, watching the cormorants drying their wings on empty porches, amused by the pelicans congregating along the roadside, surprised to see spoonbills wading in what used to be our neighbourhood park. Seagulls swarmed the sky and as we neared the sea, egrets and herons stalked the grubby water swirling with food wrappers and paper coffee cups, disintegrating diapers and ballooning rubbish bags tied tight from months ago.

We rounded the corner and stopped in our tracks. The sea had swallowed the beach, advanced well-past the sea wall, drowned the playground and consumed the ablution block. The road now dumped straight into the ocean and the water was dark and thick with station wagons and sedans, mini-vans and sport utility vehicles, all partially submerged and bobbing amidst a sea of plastic water bottles. Big black rubbish bins gently tapped against one another and the water congealed around uprooted lavender plants and thorny rose bushes, collections of shoes and splintered wood. It stunk like our uncle's house the previous summer when we helped clean out a lifetime of collected filth: too-old meat and black mould, rotten eggs and long drops. We covered our mouths and noses with both hands and gasped when we saw the water's surface slick with silvery fish and the rotting flesh of human limbs floating as one massive circle of flotsam.

Bia dry-wretched. No way am I getting in that water.

I stripped down.
You're going in?
I nodded.

You're just as crazy as Mother.

I pinched my nose and dove in. Fish bodies slid past my shoulders while long hair brushed the length of my torso and wrapped around my legs like seaweed. As I pushed off the bottom back toward the surface, something squished between my toes. Gasping and gagging from the rancid stench, I did my best to avoid touching the stray arms and legs, quickly swept the slime and unknown bits of organic and manmade debris from my face, and raced back to dry land.

When mother saw me with my hair dripping wet, she smiled and nodded. Thank you, Tineke. You will be safe.

And so will I, Bia said.

Mother frowned. I love you both so much, she said. No matter what happens. But I need you to listen to me. It's time for us to leave.

Bia grabbed a juice box from the storeroom and sucked at the straw. I'm not going anywhere, she said. We have a room full of food and water to last months. We'd be dumb to leave now.

Mother placed her hands on Bia's cheeks and said, If we don't leave now, sweetheart, we'll die here. All of us.

Bia laughed. You think we'll die in here? Have you been outside? There's nothing there – no shops with food, no clean water, no other people. We have everything we need right here. You can go if you want, but I'm staying.

Mother looked into Bia's eyes and said, The rain will start again. Very soon. And it will not let up until this apartment fills to the ceiling with water. And it will keep raining and raining until the whole building is completely submerged.

Bia laughed again. You don't know what you're talking about.

Mother picked up a backpack and handed it to me. Put this on. She picked up another pack and placed it on the floor beside Bia. You, too.

I'm not going.

Mother hoisted the third and heaviest pack onto her own shoulders, clipped the waist and chest straps into place. A tear escaped from the corner of her eye and she wiped it away quickly. You're old enough to do what you want but if you don't come with us right now, it will be the last time we see each other.

Come on, Bia, I said. She was right about the wind. And the first rain.

Bia finished the juice box and then reluctantly lifted the pack onto her shoulders. So we're just going to go out there where there's nothing and no one?

I've packed everything we need.

You know that people say you're crazy?

Mother nodded.

They're right.

3

It was hot and humid and soon we were drenched in sweat and breathing hard. Bia complained the whole first day and again for most of the second but when Mother didn't respond, Bia joined our silence.

We walked for days and never saw another person but there were always birds. Some were familiar like the gulls and skimmers, others we'd never seen before and couldn't name. They mixed and squabbled and flocked around us, filled the trees, lined the rooftops, and waddled through the still-flooded streets. The grumble of thunder punctuated our afternoons and although the skies grew dark, they never surrendered a drop.

At night, we broke into houses where we tended to blisters on our feet and slept heavy in the beds of strangers, and every morning, we woke to the raucous chatter of the bird menagerie. I kept quiet and observant, looking where Mother looked. I saw the storm clouds growing bigger every day, spotted a ring around the moon, admired the wind rippling through a cluster of willows near a swollen stream. I listened to our footsteps until I no longer heard them, felt the sun on my shoulders and the soft wings of mosquitos at my neck.

We walked inland, trudging through ankle deep water, alert for snakes and on the lookout for other people. The night before we found the car, Bia became hysterical. She shouted at Mother, yelling words jumbled into nonsense and then she listed every friend, every neighbour, every teacher and coach she could remember and eventually the names turned into incomprehensible vowel sounds slurred together until she cried herself to sleep. Mother climbed into bed with her, wrapped her body around Bia's and stayed with her like that all night. In the morning, Bia woke with a migraine so Mother gave her a couple of pills and draped a blanket over the window to make the room extra dark.

Tineke and I will go find a car, she said.

Bia gripped Mother's hand and fear stretched her eyes wide even as the pain in her head slashed across her face.

We won't be long. Just sleep, Mother said. And then she kissed Bia on the forehead, pulled the covers up under her chin, and smiled.

Outside, the sky was restless with birds. Mother pointed to the horizon where a murmuring of thrushes twisted and turned in elegant choreography. Thunder rumbled behind us. She rubbed at her neck and said, The storm will be here soon. Then she held her hand out for mine and led us quickly to a petrol station with a workshop.

The windows were shattered and the floor brown and slick from the flood. Mother picked up two petrol containers and handed them to me then

found a clear rubber hose and a flathead screwdriver and walked back out to the street to the nearest sludge-stained car. Without explanation, she pried the gas flap open with the screwdriver, stuck one end of the rubber hose down into the tank and sucked at the other end until petrol appeared in the tube, then swiftly shifted the hose from her mouth to the container and filled it up. She got me to siphon the next one and the one after that and so on until both containers were full.

Then Mother tried the handles of all the SUVs and off-road vehicles we could find until the door of a blue Pathfinder opened. She paused and mumbled something before searching the glove box, the ashtray and finally under the floor mat where she found a key, then she climbed into the driver's seat and turned the starter. The petrol gauge jumped to half-full and the car churned, reluctant to start. She pumped the gas pedal and tried again and again and eventually, it sputtered and then roared into life.

The next morning, Bia was quiet but better so we climbed into the Pathfinder and drove off.

Where are we going? I asked.

Further inland, Mother said. To Fire Mountain.

It was quiet in the car, all of us mesmerised by the hum of the tires rolling over the pavement. From time to time, we stopped in another broken town to siphon gas and scavenge food. Bia watched us work. Since her migraine, she'd stopped brushing her hair and teeth, stopped washing her face and changing her clothes. She said good morning and good night but stayed mute the rest of the time.

Mother pointed to the billowing dark clouds like tentacles reaching westward, pulling the storm across the land like a giant octopus creeping along a seabed.

We have two days before the sky opens up, she said.

How do you know that? I asked.

Do you see the way the wind rushes the grass? The blood-red horizon in the morning? The way the sky thickens into a soup of more and more birds? Tineke, these things are our compass and our guide.

Bia shut her eyes and Mother drove on.

We crept and stuttered across the landscape driving day and night, crossing and re-crossing the flood line until we slipped into the outskirts of a city up to its knees in water. The birds were denser than ever. They waded in the shallows and circled overhead, screeched and tussled with each other. Mother stopped the car and got out for a closer look.

We must find a way across the river, she said. Her face was pale, the worry lines accentuated from days of sweat and minimal sleep. She touched my cheek with her hand then looked at Bia and frowned.

Will we make it? I asked.

She clasped her hands together but did not answer and in that

moment, wind from the east suddenly kicked up and all the bathing birds squawked and rose into the sky as one.

We jumped back into the car and raced through the city streets until we found a bridge that looked sound and sturdy above the wild torrent and when we reached the other side, Mother's shoulders relaxed and a hint of a smile crossed her face for the first time since leaving home. With the wind buffeting us from behind, we travelled like lightning to the other side of the waterlogged city and on through the silent suburbs and finally out into rural country. We drove over lumbering green hills and at a certain point, the green gave way abruptly to a sparse, flat emptiness, and it wasn't long before we found ourselves at a crossroads.

Mother stopped the car and pointed to a wide mountain rising up from the plains.

Fire Mountain? I asked

She nodded.

We all stared at it and as we did, something metallic flickered way in the distance and as we studied the flickering thing, a vehicle materialised from the haze. Bia sat up straighter.

Do you see that? Bia said. People!

Bia got out and we all scrutinized the horizon. One car turned into a glittering ribbon of metal shimmering in the sun.

Over here! Bia shouted and she waved her arms in the air.

Mother and I got out then, too. The birds were raucous and I noted how strange it was to see predator and prey in tight formation. Hawks next to sparrows, quail next to owls. Kingfishers and hummingbirds darting between them, and the whole motley crew moving as one flock. Mother gasped and I followed her stare to where a sharp blast of wind swept up the grit into a swirling dust devil. It grew taller and wider with debris and twirled away from us, gathering strength until it fell to the ground in disarray just as quickly as it had formed.

Which way do we go, Tineke?

You're asking me?

I see you seeing. I see you knowing. Where do we go next?

My heart thumped in my chest as I realised that I did know. I knew it like I knew my own name. I looked behind us to where we'd come from and saw the angry bruise in the sky. I looked in the direction that would lead us away from the mountain and doubled over with sudden pain in my stomach.

Mother put her hand on my back. We go to the mountain then?

I nodded and we both looked at Bia waving frantically at the line of cars coming closer and closer.

Mother kicked at the dirt. Bia, sweetheart?

Bia turned and faced us and the smile on her face was enough to make me smile, too, before Mother said, We have to go now.

And I knew before Bia knew. I felt it in my whole body and was suddenly lightheaded and nauseas and more afraid than ever before. I knew that we would say goodbye right there at that crossroads and that it would be forever. I ran to Bia and threw my arms around her and begged her to stay. You have to come with us!

Bia pushed me away. What are you talking about?

Mother said again, We need to go.

But there are people coming. We don't have to do this alone.

The first vehicle came into view: a pick-up with four people in the cab, a tarpaulin tied over the bulging contents of the flatbed. The driver nodded at us and drove past.

Wait, stop! Bia yelled and ran toward the road.

The cars followed until the last one in the convoy pulled up and a young man not much older than Bia leaned out the window. His face was sunburnt, hair greasy, right arm covered in scratches and dried mud. Follow us, he said. We're heading north away from the flood.

Bia looked at me and Mother. Come on, let's go.

We need to go to the mountain, Mother said.

The man shook his head. There's nothing there.

Bia looked at Mother and her eyes pleaded with us.

It's hard to understand, I said. But we have to go to Fire Mountain.

We aren't meant to follow them.

Bia looked at Mother and then at me and her face crumpled. You're just like her now, Tin. She went up to the man in the car and asked if there was room for her to join him and he nodded. I'm going, she said. Safety in numbers. Isn't that what you always said?

Mother let her tears flow freely.

I don't want to say goodbye, Bia said. You can come, too.

We can't go with you.

Bia hugged Mother and when she pulled away, Mother held her by the shoulders and looked straight in her eyes and said, I love you. Be safe. Bia nodded then broke free from the grip, hugged me and when she tried to pull away, I held her tighter until the man in the car honked the horn and we broke apart.

The last I remember of Bia is the sound of the door creaking as she opened it and standing with Mother as we watched until the truck was little more than a trick my eyes played with a spot way in the distance.

4

Mother stared straight down the barrel of the road that cut the plains in two. To one side, the ground crawled with fire ants and spiders and hard-backed beetles while on the other, water stretched stagnant and rank right up to the asphalt's edge. At the foot of the mountain, we stopped for the night under a stand of cottonwoods. Aside from the cars that had taken Bia away,

we'd seen no one else.

I looked at the backseat and imagined my sister staring out the window. Mother sobbed and leaned into me, her whole body heaving and shuddering. It's okay, I said. She'll be okay. But we both knew that wasn't true so I said, I'm here, I'm here, and she cried harder in the truth of it. Eventually, she breathed deeply, pulled away from me, composed herself, and closed her eyes. As she slept and the dark stole the light, I watched hundreds of birds settle in the trees and cover the ground surrounding us until my own eyes drooped and I, too, fell asleep.

We woke in the night to thunder that made the car rattle and fierce lightning that streaked out across the sky, a web of electricity shooting in all directions before finally grounding. Thousands of birds of all shapes and sizes jockeyed for clear space while Mother held my hand tightly and whispered fast prayers before turning on the car.

We followed the gravel road up the mountain as it switched back on itself time and time again, crept up and out from the scrubland and into thick stands of towering pines and eventually entered a small clearing. I got out. In the twilight of dawn, I saw how the congested trail of birds that had been with us since we left home now appeared ragged and spare as the weakest stragglers pumped their wings furiously to catch up with the others. Way in the distance, high above the spot where we'd last seen Bia, I counted at least a dozen spindly tornados racing across the flat, tearing at the ground and sucking floodwater up into the sky. Lightning cracked and popped and swarmed the mountain.

By the time I made sense of the signs, there was nothing I could do but watch. The wind blew in like a freight train and the pines bowed as the gales forced their way up the slope. White hot electricity ripped through the sky and with each strike, trees splintered and split then smoldered hot in the aftermath.

Tineke! Mother yelled from the car.

Pine needles mixed with stone shards and grit swirled and stung as they struck my legs and in that moment a single thunderbolt thick as one of the surrounding trees struck at the car, flipping it into the air where it twisted and turned and eventually landed hard on its roof. The metal crumpled on impact and lightning struck again, tossing the vehicle like a leaf caught in a powerful squall. Thunder boomed and the sky opened. Marble-sized hail crashed down causing immediate welts on my exposed skin and drumming deep dents into the near-ruined Pathfinder.

The earth trembled beneath the onslaught and Mother hung limp and contorted by her seatbelt. I crawled over. She bled from a head wound that matted her hair.

I've seen this day, Tineke. You'll be okay, she whispered. Just follow the birds.

Then lightning struck again and I was tossed aside as the vehicle sprung into the air and smashed into a trio of trees.

I found Mother unconscious, reached out and placed two shaky fingers against her neck. And the world went silent.

5

I didn't move all day. Lightning scratched through the sky and stabbed at the earth and the hail came and went and came again. Through it all, I sat there stunned and defeated. I gave into sleep as the earliest signs of night crept up on me and that's when I heard the first crackle and pop of pine cones and twigs succumbing to fire.

The rains Mother promised did eventually arrive, but only later after nearly every tree had been burnt black, after the grasses were razed and the landscape left scorched. Mother's hand dangled from the window of the crushed car and her body was stiff in the driver's seat. I looked away and through my tears saw the forest engulfed in red and orange flames. Thick smoke billowed from the mountain's crown into a now bird-less sky.

The blaze tumbled down the hillside, gobbled up trees like they were tinder dry, flared up and stood tall with rippling arms of flame setting the woodland alight. Whole clusters of trees went up in seconds and with each advance, the fire grew stronger.

Too tired and empty to move, I sat and watched the wildfire leap in great strides, listened to the wood fibres as they pulled apart and broke. The saplings sizzled as spark and ash swirled around, and a dry, hot wind whipped through the branches, fanning the flames. Soon, I was choking on smoke and encircled by a swaying ring of ferocity. The car ignited.

No! I cried and ran toward it.

A great gust of wind rushed past me and the flames blew back to feed on a nearby thicket, but the damage was already done. There was nothing I could do to save Mother from being consumed. I backed away as the fire ballooned and looked up. A lone hawk. The first bird I'd seen all day. It rose and circled then pumped its wings and flew out of sight. A tattered seagull followed close behind, so very far from the coast, and then not long after, a flurry of shabby backyard birds fluttered past.

Follow them, I said out loud, and then I looked with new eyes at the fire dancing around me. Sparks rose with the plumes of smoke and inch by inch, the flames advanced in an ever-tightening circle. There was a tremendous bang as the car's petrol tank exploded and the blast knocked me to my back. A slender white heron soared overhead. I picked myself up off the ground, looked one last time at the car engulfed in flames, and stepped toward the fire.

The blaze twisted into grand spirals and majestic sweeps of orange, yellow and white. It roared and the wood screamed. I stepped closer. The loose ends of my hair singed and the heat scorched my throat. I walked

slowly. Deliberately. Closer and closer to the wall of fire. My hands and face blistered and still I pressed on. The flames towered strong and tall but as I lifted my leg to take the fatal step, the fire recoiled just slightly. I raised my arms out wide and took another step. The same thing happened. And with each successive step, the fire retreated and soon a way through appeared.

And I ran.

Through the howling firestorm even as my eyelashes turned to ash and my skin burned red and the rubber on the soles of my shoes melted. I ran past white-hot trees fuelling the heart of the inferno and didn't stop until the flames began to ease slightly and then relented and eventually ceased to exist altogether. I ran and ran until the forest turned from black char to smouldering bronze and eventually plunged into an abundance of lush, fresh green. Only then did I drop to the ground, let the cool air wrap around me and dared to look up.

A thin trickle of birds flew through a blue sky. Geese and magpies, pigeons and petrels. I smiled and cried at once. Then I put one foot in front of the other and followed them.

Elizabeth Ferguson is a native North Carolinian who graduated from the MA English program at San Francisco State University. She is an emerging writer. Recent literary publications include Flash Fiction Magazine, Blue Moon, Ligeia Magazine, and Parhelion. These works may be connected to through elizabethfergason.com.

Soup Day

Elizabeth Ferguson

He is a handsome man still living with his parents in middle age. Seems smart enough. His ears are large and shaggy. The elbows are familiar. An aside: I recognized a man once by his elbows, not this one—my alleged father—but my cousin’s husband, Desmond. Des with another woman at the Dairy Queen.

This one chooses the rocking chair but doesn’t rock. He crosses his legs, uncrosses them then asks if I’d like soup. I follow him to the kitchen. He doesn’t shuffle like the crazy guys in the movies, like Boo Radley or Chief Bromden, but there is something in the gait, something that is not quite right. He is tall enough but no giant. Thinnish. My choices are Campbell’s chicken noodle or tomato. The first time I phoned him, he hung up on me.

Are our eyes the same? Same round blue.

In the kitchen, his high forehead wrinkles a little as he lifts the spoon from the pot and tastes the soup, and when he sets the bowl down in front of me, his hands are steady. He pulls a chair out and sits down heavily as if the soup making has been a day’s labor.

Does he lift his chin a little when he declares almost proudly, “I’ve had fourteen electroshock therapy treatments. Seven times two is fourteen. And seven, as you know, is God’s perfect number?” I do know this, for I too, am fond of the number seven.

He flattens his hands along the table top and there it is, the piece of me I’ve been looking for in this man who is a stranger, and yet, according to every test, my father. My hands. Long, narrow, freckled. Same slim fingers, same oval nails. The joints of his knuckles whiten. He leans forward, urgent.

“It is not me,” he says. “I tell you it’s not.”

Shayna Bruce is an emerging photographer/visual artist residing and growing her craft in Lexington, KY. She believes in synchronicity and as an homage, calls her photography business *Captured Synchronicity*. Shayna believes that her camera will lead her to explore and reside in many beautiful places and looks forward to the journey that the universe has in store. Aside from photography, Shayna loves music, animals, nature and unapologetic authenticity. Shayna is a long-time vegan and earth advocate. The work that Shayna creates is heavily inspired by music, poetry, film, and folklore, and then blended with her own unique experiences. Shayna's photography work has previously been featured in *The Sun Magazine*, *Witch Way Magazine*, and *Oddball Magazine*. You can see more of her work at CapturedSynchronicity.com and you can follow her work on Instagram [@Captured_Synchronicity_](https://www.instagram.com/Captured_Synchronicity_)





Her Mask

The work featured in this issue is a self-portrait 2-piece set titled "Her Mask."

This set was created to convey the feeling of inauthenticity that so often lingers around the artist's mind. This set explores my own emotions surrounding living life authentically and presently. I took these in my home studio, only to test new equipment at first, but was inspired by a mask laying atop of the costume bin nearby. In my experience, happy accidents tend to make the best work. These were shot at 50mm using a self-timer shutter release on a tripod and the images were post black and white converted.

M.C. Childs' poetry has appeared in Asimov's, Andromeda Spaceways, Bracken, Grievous Angel, Liminality, The New Pacific, Strange Horizons and many others. In 2019 and 2018 he took second place in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association contests. He is dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of New Mexico and the author of the award-winning urban design books, The Zeon Files, Urban Composition, and Squares: A Public Space Design Guide.

The Starlight Theater - Restaurant & Saloon

Terlingua, Texas
M.C. Childs

Chips & Homemade Salsa \$3.95

In the dirty-bourbon heat of novas
starlight transmutes to quicksilver
and casts its new essentia out
in a net of thinnest nebula.

Traditional House Margarita - Rio Grande Tequila, Triple Sec, house made
sweet & sour \$6.50

The turn-of-the-20th-century pyrometallurgy
of the Marfa and Mariposa,
the Lindheim and Dewees,
the California, and the Excelsior mines
distilled 1000 flasks of mercury
and a mesquite metropolis of 3000.

They burned for half a century,
left tailings and retorts, stacked stones
and crosses in the desert scrub, and
the walls, roof and flickering ghosts of The Starlight.

Large Mixed Green Salad with Grilled Quail \$17.95

Even the most attenuated attraction
of dust for dust agglomerates
new stars, spins new planets -
rocks laced with sweet and sour metals.

Prickly Pear'ita - Patron Silver and Prickly Pear Nectar \$11.00

R.V. kerouacs, ranch hands, sunburnt off-duty ICE,
and other parishioners of the desert
unwind their sparse orbits, pack The Starlight,
concoct civilization for Saturday night.

Tequila Marinated Quail \$22.95

Alkaline hot springs infused
Upper Cretaceous Grayson clay and Lower Cretaceous Devils River
limestone
laying down riffs of cinnabar.

Desert Moonrise - Cuervo Gold, Triple Sec and Blue Curacao \$8.75

Burning their brand from Albuquerque to Austin,
the pyrometallic band scintillates
tequila-shot polkas, mercurial two-steps,
blast furnaces of feedback & finesse.

They ignite the Starlight.

PLEASE, NO SEPARATE CHECKS

Entrees from the Starlight menu

The Lullabied Sky

M.C. Childs

Mid-morn the windmill murmured.

Sweeping up the storm's
dust, Em found them sparkling,
stashed under Dot's bed - inexcusably
ruby slippers.

Hand-upon-her-heart Em
dislodged them from their revery.
Susurrant, the slippers
on the pine floorboards were
like nothing else in Kansas.

Instantly insistent, the windmill's
jabber and clank turned
Em dizzy.
Her sister's daughter...
Her sister's lost shoes...

In the Five & Dime phone booth

M.C. Childs

25 sweaty cents
to contemplate Ma Bell's
white-linen-apron dial tone
splattered with cosmic microwave static
from the Big-Bang beginning of time.

Armstrong orbits overhead.

A worn quarter more
for enough dilated time to explain to Lisa's Dad
who I am and why I called and endure
his silent solar flux X-raying my marrow,
before he calls her to the phone.

Minutemen are stabled in their silos.

Another two bottom-of-the-pocket dimes
to monitor the quantum foam in her house –
probabilistic particles popping
in and out of existence -
before she risks, "Hello?"

Multiverses shimmer.

Addison Rizer is an administrator in Phoenix, Arizona. She's most interested in writing stories about isolation, engagement, and the distances between these two states. She loves reading, writing, and movies critics hate.

We Float Alone

Addison Rizer

My mother plants Blazing Stars that bloom in late summer. She wants butterflies. She wants four feet of flowers. She wants not to live in this apartment with a balcony overlooking a public pool. She wants love to mean kindness. She does not get what she wants.

My mother wears only white when she isn't at work. At work, she wears a smile. At work, her uniform is pink and short. At home, she wears white and doesn't smile, but she doesn't frown either. At home, everything about her is blank. This is not a bad thing, though I wish I knew what her laughter sounded like. I wish I knew what my laughter sounded like, too.

At midnight, she hovers over me on the couch where I pretend to sleep. Where I face the glass doors of the balcony and hope to dream of sky but never do. Where she can tell me her secrets and pretend they do not weigh me down. She whispers, "Yesterday was heavy. Put it down."

She is talking to herself. I do not know what she means most midnights. I spend my afternoons lying beside the towering flowers and staring up. My back warms quickly from the heat of the deck. I wish the clouds were made of flowers. I wish they smelled sweetly. But we don't get what we wish here. We tell sleeping bodies about our dreams and in the darkness, they die.

My elbows know all about sleeping on the floor. My knees know all about how it hurts to dream of softer places. How blood springs even when you're thinking of pillows, of cushions, of clouds.

When my mother gets home from work, she beckons me inside. Away from the sky whose arms stretch so very far it could carry anything. A teacher once read us a story of a man who carries the sky on his back, but I never believed it. The sky is full of arms. Don't you see them stretching for miles? I suppose it is all about perspective.

When my mother gets home from work, she asks me about the butterflies while she rubs eucalyptus cream into her swollen knuckles. For hours she'll sit there and rub and wince. Sometimes it is ginger. Sometimes it is aloe vera. Always, it is painful.

So, I sit beside her and I lie. I tell her there were one million winged things that day. I lie and tell her there was only one. These are miracles to her,

I think, and I know miracles cannot be the same twice over. I must invent hope for her. I must help her let go of her day. I am not concerned about yesterdays. I hope she has already put those down.

There are hardly any butterflies most days. Still, there are some. I make up this reality. I invent butterflies.

I turn myself into a thing with wings and follow my mother to work so I can see her smile at guests who do not leave a tip. Guests who make fun of the way she has trouble gripping the coffee pot. How her hands shake. I no longer want a smile from her, if this is what it takes.

I turn myself into a thing with wings and die in one day. This is the cost of the distances I long to cross. Myself to my mother, my mother to a better place.

There is a hole in the armpit of my favorite t-shirt, but I wear it anyway. I pretend I can't lift my arms. I pretend I can't fly, but that I could, once. That I knew what it felt like to be weightless. Losing that is better than not having had it at all. My mother knows how to knit when she is angry enough to not care about the hurt, but she doesn't know how to mend torn things. These are two different skills.

On the weekends, I sit on the balcony and smell chlorine. Hear laughter. Want to jump and be weightless again. Then, remember I never was. She promises me when it gets dark, we will go swimming. Go driving until sunrise. Just go. But, the dark comes late this time of year. The time of year with purple flowers. The time of year she falls asleep on the couch before sunset. The time of year she promises me everything.

In the winter, there are never any promises. I know better than to believe the summer. It is a liar to us all. It is the taste of sunlight. It is what freedom ought to feel like. We know we will only ever dream of escape. We have always lived in places with more than four walls. With ceilings all the way to the sky. With miles to go to touch dirt.

My mother sleeps on the couch wearing all white when it is too warm for the loneliness of her bedroom. She is frowning now, even in her sleep. I will not wake her, even for a butterfly. I have seen her eyes when she looks at them. It is not love. She spends one weekend planting flowers to bring butterflies, but they are never for herself. I am too cowardly to tell her I don't care about them. I want to feel the hug of the sky. I wish I was part of it. But, I tell her about wings. These are almost the same thing.

It is nearing midnight and my mother snores. Below, a woman swims facing up. The stars stare and so do I. I watch her and think of my mother, a long time ago, in the dark of sleep. A bed-time story I still weep to think about, so I think of it always. A story she did not want me to hear. A story about drowning together. A story that ended, "When we float, we float alone."

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Chemistry or God

Lisa Trudeau

Electric, ours, the nascent day unfurls
like a frond. We are lit by cosmic rays,
nourished by bounty left on every plate.
While others sleep we reckon city stars –
true and not - cockroaches purring in trees,
rats turning treasures in pink articulations
reminding me you are more beautiful
at night. So awake. So fearlessly bright.

There were a few things wrong

a tangle of veins on my temporal lobe benign although the imp
 of migraine liced its nest
 there between right eye and attenuated bone
beware of pregnancy warned neurologist one who called me Felicia
so of course I forgot fattened with luck Angioma slept
while postpartum woke an abyss dear god
 you smiled and I feared my hands
 every oncoming car promised violent relief
bipolar doesn't go away warned psychiatrist one who brined me in meds
so I fled misbehaved pretended well until
the day I couldn't stop imagining the split
 of a small skull dropped to ground
 and understood forever sick I am
white knuckled back to no-harm-done but thought-stained
chemistry or god I praise whatever barred my cage

Stephen O'Donnell has previously had short stories published in Five on the Fifth, SHORT Fiction Journal and The Dime Show Review amongst other places.

Ceratotherium

Stephen O'Donnell

She could see the needle of blue smoke rising out on the island. Tithe smoke. They would already be inland, moving down the coast. They had not come in years. She had hoped they might have died out. They had come once before but she had been much younger. Had been prepared then.

When she wakes shivering, she goes to the bathroom and pisses into the deep soil that fills the bathtub. Touches a tomato above her head, growing there on a trellis. Wipes with a wad of dock leaves and pulls up her pants and goes back to her room.

She crouches on the floor, whetting the head of the axe to a fine edge. Then she gathers the other things she will need. The waterbottle. The sunshade. The spike, sure and narrow as a conductor's wand. Fashioned from the wreck of a downed satellite. A rubber golfclub grip for a handle, moulded into the shape of her clenched fist. Bleached white by years of sweat.

She talks to herself as she packs the small bag.

Dangerous to go out during the day. You know this. And without the wood none of it will be working in a week. Pure thermodynamics. You know this too. You do.

She hangs the spike from her belt. To know the weight of it again.

Good enough for a piercing wound, she says. Eyes or the vitals or it's goodnight to all this glamour.

She can feel the ache around old wounds. The sea swallows the shore. White swells have risen around the old promontory, which now really is an island. The ribs of ships rising from the surf like rusting whalebones. A change in the weather is coming.

At the window she stops to gaze at the fenced garden. The high walls and the opaque roofs. The vague pink forms of the pigs as they root in their troughs. The inner greenhouse, separated by thin bricks from the swine. Where grow beans and tubers. She watches the ice melting on the roof and drip into the filtration system.

She recites the names of her dead grandchildren and then she recites the names of her dead children. She has not spoken to another human in more than a decade.

In the dark hallway a full length mirror hangs askew. Smashed and

missing pieces like a glass jigsaw. When she crosses the hall she stops and examines herself for the first time in an age.

You've become old, she says. And uglier. Grey hair. Yellow teeth. Lucky there's no one to see, huh?

She laughs. Her laughter is a stranger's laughter.

#

She moves into the thicket of jungle, across ground that had once been manicured public lawns. The corroded iron fencing is only a faint suggestion beneath the layer of vines, massed and heavy upon the metal. There are no suburbs now, no cities. Only ruins swallowed by moss and vine. She can hear bees in the trees above her, the lifting and settling of them like a murmuring wave. She watches the chaos of their work and then goes about her own.

Moving downwind, dragging her crude sled, she halts often. At the call of a strange bird. A change of the breeze. The forest deepens. The deadfall is hidden beyond the next thicket. She has found many bones here before. The bloodied traces of kills. Today there are no disturbed plants. Perhaps no fresh kills. Perhaps they have moved on.

She reaches the deadfall and works quickly, hacking the branches to crude logs and piling them upon the sled. Hurrying against the fading light. Hurrying against the twilight. The dark night of the new carnivores, long are their claws, white are their teeth.

#

She hauls the sled toward the old coal chute and sends the logs tumbling down into the darkness. Then she descends the basement stairs with a careful haste. She picks up a few logs and feeds them into the open mouth of the generator. She rakes the embers there. Soon the wood is smoking, burning.

She sits back, sweating from the effort, and wipes her face with a grimy palm. Then she rises and goes to the wall and presses the riotssystem alarm. She hears the shutters grind above her head.

Still there, she says. But goddamn those solar cells. No, get it right, get the root of the thing. Goddamned battery acid. Get it right.

#

In her dreams she is trapped in strange doorless rooms where cloaked forms press at a windows made of flesh, those beings of unfamiliar colour and design, fractals and incomparable geometrics. She tries to scream but her jaw hardly moves, stuck like an insect in molasses.

It is a long time before she is properly awake. She lies watching the light behind the curtain until thirst drives her from the warmth of the bed.

She sets the rifle on the bed and strips it to composite parts and cleans and greases each part carefully. The sun is already rising now. There is no cloud cover. The water will be burnt out of the filtration lanes soon.

#

At dusk they cross the housing estate roofs, all shoulders and sinew. Four of them, prowling low to the roofs. Flowing black shadows. She sits at the narrow window slit, watching their approach. Her heart numb. Empty now of fear or hatred or terror.

But what is this now? Is it still Felis catus? Or is it something else now? Felis catus in extremis.

I don't care anymore, she whispers. The tame thing gone wild. She charges the gas canister into the rifle and flattens the dart into the open chamber. Then she closes the bolt and slides the rifle forward and braces her cheek to the stock.

#

In the morning she stands on the roof, examining their pad prints. Huge black crows wheeling high above her head.

She follows their tracks down from the roof and onto the road.

The entire estate is a game trail.

The wardrobe filled with khaki that she had worn and repaired and worn again. She has watched her children die in in the spread of the new ebola strain that swept the country. They said lemurs were the reservoir. Vector unknown. A long time ago. Hardly recognises the distant city skyline now.

The roof filled with caged potatoes, the basement breeding mushrooms, fed on the pigs slurry. An ecosystem, balanced and fragile as any other. The devil's own work to keep it all going. Constant reckonings, like a ship lost at sea. The calculating wore her out. Taxed her, took her back to her university years. A long step. Mucking out the giraffe house in the high stench of the summer heat.

She watches the sunset. Whistles the tune of the old children's chant.

New ebola. Old ebola. I just want to rock and rolla.

Their signal fires are closer now.

#

She sits deep in the chair, feels the pill begin to work down inside herself. A knot in the bowels. She begins to sweat. She races for the pot. As she shits she is swallowed in a blazing web of colour that rises from the floor and engulfs her, engulfs the room. A volcano of colour and sensation bursts inside her, rising up from the hot mess of her guts. She slumps sideways on the pot and just laughs, riding a wave of pure chemical pleasure, her eyes huge and white, rolling like buoys in her upturned skull. Her bowels quiver and she groans in pleasure.

O for music, just one song. To feel a baseline surge.

When she first found them she had burned through them, for days she would sink with her mind submerged in a fog of hazy grayness. A hard flat nothingness. The wilful frying of her synapses. Hoping for an aneurysm or something else as swift. Cardiac arrest in the middle of the night.

She saves them now for when she is low. When the nights are longest. Uses them sparingly. It has been more than a year, she thinks. The bottom of the bag is in sight.

She dances in darkness, dances on her own. Under the euphoria she knows the truth. They are coming.

#

Were you not witness to the firesmoke of the high justice?

I saw your smoke, she said. She has made up her face to face them. From the pulp of her plants she reddened her lips and darkened her cheeks, her eyes.

She wears it now like armour.

Those were the fires of the high justice. Who owns all lands from the horned hills to the edge of the manxes' salt marshes.

I pay no tithe to eggs, she said. Let the fool himself come and collect whatever he thinks owed.

They grinned at one another. Small slivers of rotting flesh between the dancing electric light of their fangs.

Is that how you wish it? Do you know us, child? Our authority is passed from the blinded one to the high justice to us.

I know what ye are.

We are men without hungers.

Ye're not men. I remember men. You are shapeless as water. You are eggs.

We can violate worse than any man. Though it would provide us nothing. And still we do it gladly.

Eunuchs, she shouted. I did not vote for any king or justice or whatever name a tyrant chooses. I will never submit to such rule. The land was not always ruled so.

Heresy, the smaller one hissed. To speak of such things.

It was not ruled so, she shouted.

Witch, the second said. You speak treason against the high justice. He snapped out the glowing weapon of his tachyon taze. Your crimes are answerable.

Then come inside eggs, she said, backing slowly into the shadows of the stairwell. Come inside. Come eggs. Taste death.

They both hesitated a second and looked at one another. The first one nodded. This link has been proclaimed. The higher ones aware. The price be paid by this one. Or else we must pay.

Do you hear that, the second shouted toward the block of flats. Your tithe must be paid. Come, brister. Charge your arms and we will collect.

They had activated their meat scanners. A hunters lust as they entered the stairwell. The nanotech lining of their teeth pulsing blue like neon jellyfish.

They called softly to her, their augmented voices tinkling to a musical pitch.

We are coming, delicate one. We will pull the yellow bones from your thigh and feed you your own marrows.

They had not been opposed in more than a decade. The thrumming core of living computing now fed their pleasure cortexes, heightened their senses. They noted and disregarded the narrow sliver of nylon fishing line, stretched taut a half inch off the floor. They advanced down the dark hallway. They had been hunting frightened peasants for too long. One of their boots snagged the line. There was a huge metallic crash behind them in the darkness. They turned in time to see the feral cat slink, torsional from the darkness, its lip curled into a low snarl.

Up on the second floor she had squeezed between the elevator doors and dropped down the shaft onto the roof of the old elevator. She pulled the door behind her and crouched, listening to their screams.

She retrieved the rifle and waited behind the sealed door of the third floor. She had watched the holoscan pulse through the lower floors. No residue of anything living. She ventured slowly down the dark hallway stairs.

There was not much left of the eggs. One lay in large meaty pieces, much of the flesh rendered clear to the bone. She followed the largest blood trail, out into the sunlight, to half a body. The ruined face already buzzing with flies. The dull blue glow of the dying cybernetic core exposed among the grey meat at the back of the broken skull.

Where's your fucking cynetics now? Where're your fucking legs?

Bloody pad prints led across the lot, into the undergrowth. It was already growing dark. She hurried back inside and punched the input to lower the shutters.

When she shut the main door and she breathed a deep sigh. The dark shape of the bodies at her feet.

She slung the remains of the eggs down into the pigpen. She shuddered. *Think of their foundry.* Don't make the skag any fuckin worse, she said. The pigs will thank you.

She swung the hatch shut.

#

There will be more coming. How long would it take you?

A day, she says. Less.

And you worked so hard to make the place liveable. but always she had told herself she could leave it as easy as pressing a button.

Now take up the bag. The pigs and the plants they might leave alone. Perhaps not.

You can trap more pigs, cultivate more plants. Different ones.

Mushrooms grow easy. And what was that old joke he'd always tell?

Treat 'em like women, she says Feed'm shit and keep them in the

dark.

She sprays DEATH TO DESPOTS on the wall of the flats, and signs it with the mark of the old resistance from what she could remember of it, and thought the sign would give them pause for a moment. *Rubber headed bastards.* The sky free of dronelight as she left dragging the off kilter sled behind her.

She had programmed the pig pen doors to swing open once the sun was high. *Good luck piggies.* She thinks about coming back and herding them with her when she found a place.

They're hardy beasts, she says. You know that.

Somewhere nearer the sea would be nice. The air was foul near the salt marshes when the tide was low.

As she drags her sled through the abandoned streets she finds herself stung by memories of her youth on those streets, running through the dust of the apartment development on Washbourne. The hat shop on Boone. The fountain at the bottom of Van Nies. This is not a place to live any more. A mausoleum that stirs memory like dust.

She hauls on, fifteen miles that day, her bones aching and her hips worn where the leather sled harness cut her. Rubbing her chin and watching for drones while she rests.

Plastic rags caught on a bit of wire. Fluttering like silk. Eastern breeze. Flapping over the outgrown trace of a cornfield. Memory of silk on her skin, lovers' fingers in the pad of her palm.

Get on you old fool, get on before night falls and the darkness takes you.

Her memories of before are remote now, remoter to her that it seems they do not belong to her at all. *I don't know that woman. Nine years, nine years for the bone cells to replace themselves. Nine years ago I wasn't even me on a biological level, cellular level.level. Except for the grey matter. The mind, that has always been you.*

The sky down to a red glow and the land pure darkness, reflecting no light as if in dreaming. *There are enough bad things out there. Enough of your daydreaming luxuries. This is real. Reality with fangs and claws and a thousand things worse and crueller than the last, this is what will drag you down and tear out your heart.*

She has driven them off before. She could do it again. But goddamn Jesus she is tired.

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They Will Understand

Chaya Nautiyal Murali

When I was in first grade, my teacher had us write daily journal entries. A sentence or two, on whatever topic we chose, and an accompanying illustration on the bottom half of the page. Most of the time, I had no idea what to put down on the paper (I possess an unwriterly aversion to journaling). More daunting still was the mandate to draw something. Even at that age, I knew I was not a good artist. Of all the entries I must have made on the 200-odd days of that school year, I remember only one:

“Today after school, my mom is going to teach me how to write in Tamil.”



The “drawing” was a clever workaround—it was actually a Tamil character, *pa*, the only one I knew at the time. Hieratic-appearing as it was, it made an excellent decoy drawing.

The Tamil lesson never happened that day after school. Who knows why. For all I know, I may have invented it for the sake of the journal, a precocious attempt at visualizing the thing I wished would come to pass.

A couple years later, the four of us received our Green Cards, securing our residency status, which could mean only one thing: our first family trip to India. Our parents purchased the tickets, a circuitous route from the Midwest to LA to Kuala Lumpur to Taipei, I think, and finally to Madras, which was technically Chennai by then. Subsequent journeys would be much shorter, only one stopover unless derailed by delays. It didn’t occur to me until years later that that first trip, bouncing across the country and the ocean and the International Date Line, was designed to save money, not time.

I remember anticipating the trip while having no idea what to expect. It had been four years since we moved. That first trip was our longest one, days stretching into weeks into months with our relatives in a place my sister and I knew but hardly remembered, or not at all. Our parents found a few

diversions to occupy our time: a game of Duck Hunter on a cousin's aged video game console; dozens of Archie comics on another cousin's bookshelves; singing lessons in the South Indian classical Carnatic style; and Tamil lesson books meant for children many years younger than us.

The books came in varied conditions. Some were dogeared and softened from wear, hand-me-downs from cousins who no longer needed them. Others were shiny-bright, covers laminated and crinkly, filled with garishly saturated illustrations. We accumulated countless Tamil lesson books over the course of my childhood, often buying a couple new ones every time we went to India, and studied them in our relatives' living rooms.

Vowels came first. Amma pointed to each letter, intoning its sound, and we'd repeat after, long vowels following their short counterparts:

அ-ஆ, இ-ஈ, உ-ஊ, எ-ஏ, ஐ, ஒ-ஓ, ஔ
ah-ahh, ee-eeee, oo-oooo, eh-ehhh, ai, oh-ohhh, ow

Afterward, we'd try our hand at writing the letters, our fingers curling and twirling and guessing at proportion and line and curve. I remember a few of the illustrative photos: அ came with an *amma*, a mother, sari-clad, braided hair gleaming with oil, smiling benevolently and holding a tray of snacks. இ came with an *eee*, a fly, its transparently winged body circumscribed by a single sound.

Consonants came next, winging through Tamil sounds like a pinball in a machine:

க, ந, ச, ஞ, ட, ண, த, ட, ப, ம, ய, ர, ல, வ,
ka, nga, cha, nya, ta, na, tha, na, pa, ma, ya, ra, la, va,

ழ, ள, ர, ன
zha, la, ra, na

Then came the Sanskrit consonants that don't exist in Tamil, *ja* and three types of *sa* and even a *ha*. There are five "n" sounds in Tamil. Two "r" sounds, one of which, when doubled, turns into a "tr." Three "l" sounds, one of which is completely unique and sounds so unlike anything else in the world that it is transliterated as *zha*. Spoken, it sounds almost like an unrolled, Western "r." Many times, I have asked my mother to explain these multiplex consonants. Well, she'd respond in Tamil, the simple *na* you say softly. The two-loop *na* you say with more pressure. The three-loop *na* you say with more pressure still. And so on through all of them. Clear as mud. (Mud, incidentally, is *ser* in Tamil, which is just one syllable short of *seri*, the ubiquitous word for "Okay," but not the type of "okay" that a so-so movie is,

but the type of “okay” you repeat to your mother so she’ll stop haranguing you about something.)

I learned the Tamil letters again and again, and eventually memorized them all. I still occasionally confuse a few letters, but I can passably read stop signs and business names and my own name. நில் *nil* on a red octagonal background: “stop.” ஓயின் ஷாப் *oyine shaap* on a forest green rectangle with pictograms of martini glasses and bottles emitting bubbles: “Wine shop.” Liquor store. Reading my name, சாய முரளி, was pretty much a piece of cake. I had to learn how to turn *ma* into *mu* and *la* into *li*, which made it easier to read other words with those sounds. (One summer when I was in India, my grandmother’s bedroom wall had a calendar bearing a photo of the elephant-headed deity Ganesh and a word that started with the *mu* I knew from my last name. It took weeks for me to figure out that the word on the calendar was *muthugu*, back [as in, the posterior part of your torso]. The calendar was a free one from a business. What business would print a calendar simply with the word “back” on it? And why would my grandmother choose to put it up on her wall?)

Writing my name was another challenge altogether. I had trouble remembering which of the two *ras* to employ, which of the three *las*. When I would ask my mother, she’d tell me, the “small” *ra* and the “medium” *la*, of course. Can’t you hear that it’s *la* and not *la*?

I couldn’t.

#

My father says that when we first moved to America, my sister and I, then aged seven and four, refused to speak anything other than Tamil. I cannot imagine this now that English is almost all we speak. We still occasionally use Tamil when we want to communicate in secret, like when we are shopping and don’t want to baldly discuss price tags and discounts. Both of us still understand the language near completely. When I am addressed in Tamil, I can carry on a passable conversation.

In my early twenties when I was in India for my cousin’s coming of age ceremony, his mother introduced me to some of her friends. Standing there, wrapped in a sari, hair folded into a braid, *bindi* on my forehead, I chatted with them, told them where I was from, what I was studying, my age, my parents’ names. The chat was superficial, banal, but the ladies were bowled over by my command of Tamil. They marveled to my aunt that it was so very nice to see a young person who had grown up in America that could speak the mother tongue. Instead of being flattered, I was a little annoyed. Was it so astounding that a person like me could learn to speak the language she was born into? If my Tamil, conversationally fluent but undeniably limited in scope and fluidity and vocabulary, was this impressive, what were my peers doing? How could we be letting our language go without a fight?

#

I like to describe the various states of India as sort of like Europe. Many states, especially those in the south, are delineated by the language spoken by their inhabitants. That language, in turn, becomes a sort of ethnicity. I speak Tamil, and I am Tamilian. People who speak Malayalam are Malayali. Those from Gujarat are and speak Gujarati. And on it goes. Language is culture, ancestry, and identity. Centuries of arranged marriage within carefully proscribed communities has meant that up until very recently (I'm talking my generation), most South Asians had parents who spoke the same dialect of the same language. I make a habit of decoding fellow South Asians' surnames and facial features to pinpoint their origins on the subcontinent. I recognize the habit is a bit regressive, anachronistic, maybe even puerile, but it lends a sense of order to my world: This person is from this state, speaks this language. Their family must eat these foods at home, celebrate these holidays, wear these traditional clothes. To equate language with culture with religious practice with identity is to make the inheritance of that identity simpler.

When I was weighing whether to marry my now-husband, one of my biggest concerns was the implications of marrying someone whose mother tongue was Hindi. What would it mean to live in a household where Tamil stood no chance of being the *lingua franca*? To raise my children in that household? In so many ways, Hindi is the dominant language, North Indian culture the dominant culture, in Indian America – the Bollywood movies we watch, the foods we eat at restaurants. South Indian culture so often is reduced to a punchline: the comical pelvic thrusting in our movie songs, the darkness of our skin, the daunting speed with which we speak. Wouldn't marrying a North Indian mean pushing my language even further to the sidelines? Wouldn't that be a betrayal?

#

In college, I took Hindi as a second language. I would have chosen Tamil if it were offered, but it wasn't. The professor was a short Gujarati woman with flowing black hair and an arm full of silver bangles. She biked to campus every day, reflective Velcro wraps glinting on her ankles like more shiny jewelry.

Learning the Devanagari alphabet was the first task:

क ख, ग घ, च छ,

ka kha, ga gha, ca cha, and so on. The letter h took on a whole new meaning here, directing me to aspirate the consonant, put some breath behind it to make it sound distinctively North Indian. South Indian languages don't contain those sounds. When I learned to spell my name in Hindi, my professor told me to use the second *cha*, च, the one with the aspiration. But I'm South Indian, I told her. We don't make those sounds. How can my name be spelled with a sound that doesn't exist in my language? She told me to trust her. Using the first *ca*, च, would create a nonsense word, a jumble of letters that

did not make a name.

My professor told me I spoke Hindi with a South Indian accent.

#

When we were kids, our male cousins used to tease my sister and me about our American accents. In falsettos, they'd mimic our Tamil with comically exaggerated American pronunciations. Rolled *ra*'s flattened out and floppy, *na*'s rendered with the tongue lolling about in the oral cavity instead of anchored to the hard palate. Syllables lazily stretched. The lighthearted mockery drove us crazy. Stop it, we'd whine. Don't remind us that we're different. *We're trying.*

#

One day in my teens, I came to the sudden realization that the Tamil words for "tamarind" and "tiger" sounded exactly the same: *puli* and *puli*. I approached my mother in the kitchen, where she was, as usual, cooking. How can you tell the difference, I asked her. She explained it like the most obvious thing: tiger had a softer *li* than tamarind. She demonstrated: *puli* versus *puli*. I gave her a blank stare.

#

At the age of twelve, I resolved to learn the numbers in Tamil. One through ten were easy, but beyond that, things got complicated. I tried to draw logic from the digits that came together to make numbers. There were repetitive elements in the base ten system: *pathu* for ten, *nooru* for a hundred, *aayiram* for a thousand. Thirty was *mupathu*, the "mu" from *moonu*, three. Three hundred was *munooru*. Three thousand *muayiram*. But I had trouble telling fifty and eighty apart: *ampathu* and *empathu*. More confusing still were ninety and nine hundred, *thonnooru* and *tholaayiram*. They defied the patterns, skipping ahead to the next order of magnitude. And why did five hundred, which should have combined *anchu* and *nooru*, have an interloping "ai" sound, turning it into *ainooru*?

Once again, I asked my parents about these inconsistencies. Once again, they didn't understand the confusion. I felt, as I often did, that I was somehow missing something.

#

As a teenager, I became obsessed with song lyrics. I scrawled them in the margins of my class notes, lexical doodles for a girl who couldn't draw. The Postal Service was a favorite. So were PSAPP and Frou Frou and Death Cab for Cutie and The Strokes. I was enchanted by their rhythm and their cadence and their meaning, evocative phrases to convey adolescent emotion. My obsession extended to Indian music as well. Bollywood lyrics crowded the margins, Hindi alongside English. I had my favorite Tamil songs, too, but I could never understand what they meant. Hindi I could cobble together from movie subtitles and friends who were native speakers. But Tamil, the language I supposedly learned first, remained stubbornly obscured, like trying

to make out an image through a frosted glass window. I caught the occasional stray word or phrase: green parrot, dear, insect, moon. But I could never string them together in a sentence, a paragraph, a story. The meanings were mystifying. So was my inability to discern them.

#

When my sister and I were small children and invited friends over to play, my mother always insisted on speaking to them in Tamil: Eat more, Do you want more, What happened. Her choice of language was not one of necessity. In fact, my mother speaks English well enough that she has worked as a clinic receptionist, a bank teller, an insurance claims adjuster. She is articulate, her pronunciation clear. She just prefers Tamil. With our many friends who were not Tamil-speaking, we'd remind her, "*Amma*, they don't speak Tamil, talk to them in English." Her response was always a casual, inexplicable, "They will understand."

Nowadays, she does this to my husband and brother-in-law, Indian men who are not Tamilian. For them, Tamil is as indecipherable as Vietnamese. They try, sometimes, to flex their skills. My husband has learned to say "food" (*saapaad*) and exclaim "what is this?" (*enna da, thi?*). My brother-in-law has learned to say "shall we go," (*polama*), though he sometimes confuses it with the name of a mixed rice dish (*pulao*), to comical effect. I recognize that it is a sort of cruelty to surround a person with words they cannot understand. But the older I get, the more I appreciate my mother's insistence on using our mother tongue. If we don't speak it, who in our family will? If we don't speak it, how will our children and grandchildren know it as their inheritance? So I speak it still around my husband. I speak it still to my dog and my nephew and niece. They will understand.

#

Once, when I was in college, I overheard a friend speaking to his mother on the phone. He employed his first language, Bengali, from the northeastern end of the subcontinent. When he hung up, I told him how beautiful his language sounded. He laughed, said he spoke a village dialect that he found rough, unrefined, nowhere near beautiful. But Tamil, he was quick to say, sounded even worse to him, so many sounds rattling against one another. "Like rocks in a box."

#

Most of peninsular India's landmass originated from Gondwana, the southern hemisphere's prehistoric supercontinent. Hundreds of millions of years ago, before language even existed, a section of Gondwana broke off and began drifting slowly towards the Eurasian supercontinent to the north. The landmasses collided, the northern edge of what would become the Indian subcontinent diving beneath the southern edge of Eurasia. The top layer of the diving rock sliced away like a piece of sashimi, rising above the fray, bending back southward to form much of the Himalayas.

South of these ostentatious peaks there is a large, stable triangle of elevated land that nests within the Indian peninsula. A triangle within a triangle. It is bordered to the east and west by mountain ranges that meet at its southern apex, to the north by yet another mountain range cordoning it off. The plateau's early history is little known. Prehistoric peoples seem to have lived there, but the limited rainfall must have made farming difficult. What we do know is that the name of this structure, Deccan, derives from the Sanskrit word *daksina*. South.

I cannot seem to find confirmation of this theory anywhere, but I distinctly recall learning, at some point in childhood, that the Deccan Plateau allowed the dynasties, cultures, languages, and peoples of South India to develop for centuries with limited incursions from the north. Even if this fact is false, springing from my brain like an errant weed, the following fact is true: the Deccan plateau is the symbolic boundary between North and South India.

Funny the impact a few rocks can make.

#

My father rarely speaks to me in Tamil. When he does, and I reply in kind, the dialogue feels too suffused with intimacy.

I reserve most of my Tamil for my mother, for whom the words flow effortlessly. Lately I have tried to speak to her exclusively in Tamil, but this leaves me frustrated. I start out a phrase, trip over a verb, try to replace it with a homonym, feel my tongue flail about as it climbs over so many syllables, notice my accent sliding westward, and ultimately repeat my phrase in English, just to make sure she gets my meaning.

In the way of toddlers' parents, my mother and father decipher my rudimentary Tamil without correcting my mistakes. They understand what I mean; why bother rehashing how I said it wrong? Their easy indulgence is probably the reason why I constantly commit errors like the time I was in India and asked my much younger cousin, whose home was being remodeled, if the workers had come to "hit" (*adi*) his house yet, instead of "demolish" (*idi*), drawing his mildly derisive laughter. The combination of moving to the States as a four-year-old, never having formally learned Tamil, and the kindness (and, if I'm being honest, can't-be-botheredness) of my parents has left me in a perpetual preschooldom of my own first language.

#

In high school, on a lark, a fellow Tamil-American friend and I decided that, since I was more fluent than he was, I'd start "teaching" him Tamil. Every afternoon, we'd meet in an online chat box for our lessons. I would type phrases with the blinking cursor, hit enter, and watch them appear in our shared window. The English letters, though, couldn't accurately convey the melody of the words. How to put on digital paper the gentle almost-grunting emphasis we placed on every word ending in a consonant? How to

write *kootu* (a coconut-spiced vegetable stew) without making it sound like kootoo? And why was it that phrases like “I am eating” melded together into chimeric neologisms, all three words smashed together like a giant contraction minus the apostrophes, *saptindiruken*? And why did it seem there were so many ways to spell that contracted chimera? *Saapdindriken*, *saptindriken*, *saaptinnuiruken*?

My friend and I quickly abandoned our academic pursuit and went back to chatting about whatever we chatted about back then. Me teasing him with a silly nickname. Talking idly about school and our sisters and our families. We’d pepper our conversations with the occasional, easy-to-spell Tamil word, but never again attempted full communication.

#

After several months of studying Hindi in college, I was surprised by how easy it felt, how deftly the written interwove with the spoken and vice versa. Meanwhile, living in a dorm room and no longer surrounded by my parents’ Tamil, I felt myself drifting further from the language of my birth. I compensated in other ways, seeking out friends who were Tamil, discussing favorite foods and songs with them. I began a silly tradition of gathering all the Tamil-speakers at every South Asian Society event and taking an exclusive group photo. Our non-Tamil friends would cry foul, say it wasn’t fair that we were excluding everyone else, but we persisted. The photo was exclusionary, sure, but it was also necessary, to combat the prejudice and condescension and self-loathing that could arise from “rocks in a box” comments. In the photos from that time, our brown faces look directly into the camera, grinning and laughing and holding up a “T” for Tamil with our hands, as if saying “time out.”

What I really wanted was a time-out from the inexorable march of my language away from me. As I grew more fluent in Hindi, I felt that I grew less fluent in Tamil. All my life, that balance between English and Tamil had grown ever more uneven. Now another language was further tipping the scales. No matter how much Tamil I heard my parents speak, I still stumbled when formulating my replies. No matter how many times I listened to familiar Tamil songs, I still couldn’t make out the meaning behind the lyrics. Simply trying harder didn’t seem to be enough.

At one point during college, the Hindi course I took was under threat by the university. Low enrollment, poor professor reviews, whatever metrics the administration used to determine the worth of classes—it didn’t seem to be measuring up. Two men, themselves professors of South Asian languages, were dispatched from a university in Austin to evaluate the course. Our professor asked a few of her students, myself included, to answer questions for the Austin men. I don’t really remember what they look like, but I imagine them balding, tweed-suited, suede-elbowed, horn-rimmed. They were friendly, our conversation cordial. I spoke to them one-on-two, told them how

much I enjoyed the class, how skilled our professor was, the community she built among her students.

Somehow, the conversation meandered to my own background. Perhaps a bit too eagerly, I openly admitted that had Tamil been offered, I would have chosen it over Hindi, no question. I complained how difficult Tamil was compared to Hindi, how in just eighteen months of Hindi courses I could decipher the lyrics to most Bollywood songs, but in over twenty years of being and speaking and hearing Tamil, I still couldn't understand a Tamil prayer, read a Tamil poem.

Well, the Austin men said, that's because of the diglossia.

Come again?

Diglossia, they repeated. The phenomenon, peculiar to Tamil and Arabic and a handful of other languages, in which the written and formally spoken version of a language is distinct from the colloquial, everyday version. It's no wonder you can't read Tamil despite being effectively fluent and knowing the alphabet, they told me. That's not enough.

#

Once, after my discovery of diglossia, I was helping my mother pick jasmine flowers (*jaathipoo*) from the unruly bush planted in our front yard when it started raining. Under fat, gently splashing raindrops, we worked faster, hustling to capture every plump, bullet-shaped bud before the rain pummeled the bush. *Amma*, I asked her. I recently learned something weird about Tamil. Apparently the written and spoken versions are different? Do you know about this?

Oh sure, she said. When we speak Tamil, we are being colloquial. (She actually used that English word. Colloquial.) But when we write it down we stretch the words out.

For example?

Well, now, it's raining. She said: "*Mazhai peyyarthu*" That's how I say it to you. But if I were to write that same idea down, I would write "*Mazhai peygirathu*."

I stared at her, at once gratified and annoyed. Gratified because this finally explained what I had struggled with all my life, the inaccessibility of my own first language in ways that I could never put my finger on. Annoyed because this meant that it would never get easier to learn the language that is supposed to be my birthright.

#

In 1959, Charles A. Ferguson introduced the term "diglossia" into Western linguistics. As he defined it, diglossia is "a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language...there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature...which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most

written and formal spoken purposes but is not used...for ordinary conversation.”

Diglossia exists in dozens of modern languages: Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Kannada, Bengali, Sinhala. It exists in dozens of ancient languages: Ge’ez, Greek, Latin, Hebrew. And, of course, it exists in Tamil.

After the tweedy men from Austin taught me about diglossia, I felt the need to let others in on the secret, too. Any time the topic of language came up, I’d point out that my language, with its parallel tracks of written and formal, was more challenging than most. “Tamil is a weird language,” I’d summarize. Not as hard as Mandarin, with its many tones, but certainly more difficult than Spanish or French or Hindi. Learning it is simply not simple.

#

The last several years have taught me that I am fluent in Tamil. Maybe not comfortable, maybe not confident, but fluent. When my Tamilian best friend from college got married in Chennai, she put me in charge of communicating with the bus drivers who shuttled her Western guests from the hotel to the wedding venue. Sitting in her hotel room, a sheaf of attendance sheets and bus drivers’ phone numbers in my lap, I wasn’t sure she’d picked the right person for the job. But I found myself ably, if not gracefully, using my Tamil to make sure that everyone who needed to be on the bus was there. Nobody got left behind. The bus drivers understood what I was telling them. Everyone got where they needed to go. I even served as translator for the smaller group of college friends when we caught auto rickshaws and went to an ATM, a storefront selling bangles, a jewelry store where we gawked at gold.

I cannot deny that my Tamil is adequate. The trouble is that I want it to be more.

Often, I ask my parents to translate the phrases we come across. “What does *getti melam* mean?” I’ll say. It’s the music they play when something important happens during a wedding ceremony, they’ll reply. I am annoyed. I **know** that, I’ll tell them, but what does it **literally** mean? What do each of the words translate to? Somehow this question always baffles my parents. They give me paraphrase where I want denotation. The obvious solution is to go straight to the primary source myself, but here I run up against the original problem again. I can’t turn paraphrase into translation if the written word lives behind a smudged window.

I have always been a person obsessed with words. As a little girl, I collected long words like a magpie hunting for sparkle, ferreting away “otorhinolaryngology” to trot out like a parlor trick. In high school and college, I learned to love Shakespeare and the lyrical writing in contemporary novels. The way the words danced around each other, punning and rhyming and winking at the reader who looked closely—it made me want to be a writer myself. It made me scrawl song lyrics in the margins of my class notes. It

made me write my college entrance essay on the beauty of words.

To love words like this, yet remain incapable of deeply understanding Tamil, my own first language, is a constant sadness. I want to go beyond conversation, beyond pleasantries, to lyric and literature, diction and cadence, but I'm stuck forever learning how to read.

#

Recently, I went to visit that Tamilian friend who got married in Chennai. We spent the weekend eating, shopping, sightseeing in London, and cooing at her infant daughter. One night we sat around her dining table with her sister and another friend, all of us Tamil immigrant young women, and had one of those magical conversations labeled "girl talk." We covered love and marriage, our parents, our families, our split identities as immigrants. I brought up the stubborn inaccessibility of our shared language, and we covered those topics too. The fact that our parents never put us in Tamil classes, though they must have been available. The accents and dialects and nuances that betray caste, hometown, and education level, making it so intimidating to use Tamil in an unfamiliar setting. The politics tied up in the Tamil language that we couldn't begin to understand. The linguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies that drove us crazy yet made us feel tender. One friend remembered a joke her father used to tell:

"Two Frenchmen, two Germans, two North Indians, and two Tamilians are sitting in a room. The Frenchmen are speaking French. The Germans are speaking German. The North Indians are speaking Hindi. But the Tamilians are speaking English."

We laughed. Paused. Then carried on speaking English.

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 in hopes of resuscitating his long-neglected right brain. He's since published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in over 100 journals and anthologies in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. Publications include Barren, Columbia Journal, Ilanot Review, Lunch Ticket, Kestrel, The Atlantic, and The Manchester Review. In the past year, he wrote and acted in his first play; and, a nonfiction piece led to a role in a soon-to-be-released, high-profile documentary limited series. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five preschoolers—split their time between the DC suburbs and the West Virginia hills.

I Confess

Jim Ross

When I was a seven-year-old second grader, the nuns lined us up at the confessional in anticipation of first communion two days later. For two years, they'd been telling us that with every breath, we sin, every time we turn over in bed, we sin. As I got closer to the line's front, I still hadn't decided what to confess. Where do I begin? I wanted to say, paraphrasing Descartes, "I am, therefore I sin."

When the red "occupied" light blinked off and redhead Marie stepped out from behind the curtain to the left of the priest's booth, it was my turn. I parted the curtain, knelt down, and listened to Rita confessing from the kneeler on the other side. I couldn't quite hear what she was saying but she seemed sure of herself. Rita knew her sins. The priest mumbled something, shut the talking window on her side, and threw open the window on mine.

I told the priest, "I can't think of what to say."

"Have you prepared for your first confession?" he asked.

"I've tried."

"Has your father helped you get ready?" the priest asked.

"He's Protestant. He doesn't believe in confession."

"A Protestant, eh?" said the priest, "What else does he tell you?"

"Lots of things. Like a child isn't born with original sin."

"Well," said the priest, "what if I close this window and hear the confessions on the other side? Maybe while you're kneeling here you'll get some ideas about what you want to confess."

If I tried, I could hear every word. Seven people, mostly girls, gave their confessions. I took mental notes of the sorts of sins they confessed and did rough calculations of the average number of times they disobeyed, got angry, lied, cussed, looked at naked people in National Geographic, didn't do

homework, and missed Mass. It was exceptionally hot and I was worried that the Swiss cheese on the sandwich in my pocket was sweating through the bread.

The priest slid open the window and asked, “You ready?”

“Ready.”

“Then, go ahead, what would you like to confess?”

I confessed that I disobeyed, got angry, lied, and cussed, using a rough average of the number of times the seven on the other side fessed up to each sin. The priest said, “For your penance, say three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers and sin no more.”

Fat chance, I thought as I parted the curtain. Then I realized, even thinking “fat chance” was a sin. I couldn’t even stay sin-free long enough to say my penance.

A month later, I rode my bike to church for my second confession. A different priest was hearing confessions. I told him it had been a month since my last one. Believing that at each confession we were supposed to report all our sins since birth, I gave the same report as the first time, with minor adjustments. I remember saying I disobeyed fifty-three times.

He ejected out of his seat and screamed like an angry God. “You did what? Do you realize you’re on a fast road to Hell? Get out of here, go say a rosary, and think about what it’s going to be like to spend all eternity in Hell.”

I learned soon afterwards we only confess our new sins because when the priest forgives them, they go poof. That made things more manageable, though I probably could’ve kept sin tables to produce accurate lifetime counts, like batting averages.

By seventh grade, the nuns and priests considered me priest material, at least until the day Sr. Julianne, in an effort to prepare us for confession, asked the class, “What would you have to say for yourself if you woke up one morning and found yourself in Hell?”

Without hesitation, I said, “Well, I’ll be damned.” It never crossed my mind that I should confess making Sister Julianne cry.

In eighth grade, I was serving on the altar one Sunday when the angry God priest was saying Mass. At one point, my partner, Johnny, stepped up to the altar to move a four-pound prayer book from the right side to the left side. Johnny was a little early. Furious at such an egregious timing error, the priest reared back and threw a corkscrew punch and cut Johnny above the eye. He went flying. The priest moved the book back to the right side. When it was finally time to move the book to the left side, the priest beckoned to me but I didn’t budge.

After Mass, Mom told me that the angry God priest was “shell shocked from the war,” implying, “He can’t help himself.” Today we would say, “He has PTSD.”

I wondered, did the people who saw the priest punch out Johnny

confess the thoughts they had about it? Did Johnny confess getting a little ahead of himself? Did the priest confess punching a kid in the middle of Mass? Should I have confessed staying put and letting the priest move the book himself?

By high school, confessing got more dicey. It was hard to reconcile how spectacular wet dreams were with the notion that, first, I could be sinning while I slept and, second, if that's sin, sin feels so damn good.

In college, it didn't get easier. I didn't want to tell some celibate priest that I had impure thoughts and on occasion did something he might consider impure. My one semi-regular confessor smelled distinctly like week-old tuna fish salad. By senior year, I was going to midnight Mass every Sunday. It was commonly called "the drunk mass" because the priest and most of us sitting in the pews were drunk. One midnight, he gave a sermon demonizing everyone who wasn't Roman Catholic. Specifically, he said that only Catholics could attain salvation, and everyone else was damned to Hell.

I could've punched that priest out. Son of a Jewish mother and a Scottish Presbyterian father, Dad had been baptized a Baptist, confirmed an Episcopalian, and was as good as men get. Hearing such Catholic exclusivity unleashed a fury. I vowed I wouldn't return to Mass the next Sunday. Then I did. Three days later, I went to confession. I confessed only one sin: going to Mass on Sunday.

The dumbfounded priest asked, "Why are you confessing going to Mass as a sin?"

"Because it was against my conscience," I answered.

"For your penance," the priest said, "go straight to the chapel. There's a mass starting in ten minutes."

I went to Mass. I never went to confession again.

In subsequent years, it struck me how absurd it was that we were confessing our impure thoughts and actions to priests who not only entertained their own, but in many cases engaged in abominable acts, partly because they weren't allowed to become sexually healthy human beings.

Recently, I learned about a local priest who brings a German shepherd into the confessional with him. When a confessant enters, the dog stands at attention, ears perked, and listens attentively while the priest at his side dozes on and off. As the shepherd listens to each confessant, he responds not by barking or yowling but in a hum resembling song. Now and then, he nuzzles the screen, whimpers, or hums louder to convey sympathy. When the confessant stops talking, the shepherd doesn't say "Your sins are forgiven" or "Go sin no more." Instead, he conveys to each confessant, "It's okay. We're both creatures. I love you."



Night Rider

Jim Ross

The monarchs—this isn't one—get the attention. I get it, their migrations are famous, and fewer are surviving the migrations. They're a sort of canary in the coal mine of climate change, a common species whose survival is at risk. What does that say for us? The monarchs were plentiful two summers ago but were few and far between the summer past. Almost whenever I saw them, they were dive bombing the swallowtails, breaking up the action. Meanwhile, the swallowtails flourish in the absence of the monarchs. Of many varieties, most of the swallowtails are predominantly yellow, with decorations in black, blue, and red. And they're great posers, even as the sun begins to set, they linger. Sometimes, it seems as if they project their own light. Perhaps that's a trick we could imitate?

Originally from Los Angeles, **Michael Hardin** lives in rural Pennsylvania with his wife, two children, and two Pekingese. He is the author of a poetry chapbook, *Born Again* (Moonstone Press 2019), and has had poems published in *Seneca Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *North American Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Gargoyle*, *Texas Review*, *Tampa Review*, among others. He has recently finished his memoir, *Touched*.

Colibríes in Costa Rica

Michael Hardin

A glittering around the garnet feeders
at La Paz Waterfall Gardens.
We've already seen a pair of sloths.

Claire feels the shimmer of wings
against her cheek, she hovers
between the purple-crowned fairy,

the rufous-tailed, and the violet
sabre-wing with its curved beak
symbiotically evolved with heliconia.

For thirty minutes, we exist
in the kingdom of hummingbirds,
as magical as unicorns

and as hard to capture
with a photograph.

Rock Dove

Michael Hardin

It's Christmas Eve in Bryant Park,
colored lights adorn a tree.
We ask to have our picture taken:
the three of us as family.

A dule of pigeons
does not scatter before us,
just frames my wife and me,
our daughter in a stroller.

The affair is but six months ago;
we still can taste the anger
we hope the photo will blur.

In luminescent blue
the pigeon heads sparkle
promise through the misery.

Black-Capped Chickadee

Michael Hardin

At the feeder, they rank least.
The black cap is not a banditry;
they shuffle for nuthatch, titmouse,
the downy woodpecker.

Patience is their virtue,
they receive their seed in turn,
they don't complain.
They are bodhisattva.

I should learn from them:
the kids haven't rinsed the dishes.
my wife is late from work.

And what have I done?
Sat on the couch writing poems,
dinner is still unprepared.

Canada Goose

Michael Hardin

Around the pond at Town Park
I push my daughter's stroller.
She's one and a half
and won't remember this walk

or the fights and separation
that tear her parents apart.
We wend around the green shit
left by a wedge of goslings.

For a quarter mile, avoidance
is our sole concern. Geese
are not distinct from "birdies"—

her taxonomy is still simple
unlike that transition each night
between beds I pray she forgets.

AnnElise Hatjakes holds an MFA degree in fiction and an MA degree in writing from the University of Nevada, Reno. She lives in Reno, where she teaches English at a public high school. One of her stories was shortlisted for the Neil Shepard Prize in Fiction. Her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in Juked, Tahoma Literary Review, Drunk Monkeys, and decomP. She is currently completing revisions on her novel.

A Diminished Chord

AnnElise Hatjakes

There are some mornings you forget that you can't speak above a whisper. You forget too that the tattoo of the letter "A" crawls up your throat, its tip pointing to the small cleft in your chin, the cleft that you inherited from your mother. These punishments remind you of a book you used to read to your son. But instead of A is for apple, this version says A is for activist, A is for alien, A is for agitator.

Of course, Scarlet's Law is also an allusion to a book none of the men who crafted the policy ever read, though they are the kind of men who say they only read the classics. You imagine these men as young boys in the back row of the English class you used to teach. They were the ones who pulled on the girls' ponytails the second you turned to face the board and preemptively called out, "She started it." If they'd been in your class, you would have asked them to read this passage from chapter thirteen in front of the class: "Many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength." And the thought of their cheeks flushing tugs your lips into a smile.

But you have been marked, and there is nothing you can do to remove the mark save gymnastics of the imagination, images of your former self doing flips and memories of your former life contorting into a backbend. Very clever, the way they instructed the tattoo artists to draw the A's all the way up the chin so that they could not be covered using a scarf, but subtle enough so as to not be too much of a blemish on your appearance.

This morning, you make a cup of green tea from the stash that you secreted away last week. The flavor is sharp, and you have to take your time because since they severed the nerve to your vocal cords, swallowing has posed problems. It's hard to remember a time when these bodily functions required no thought at all. Last year, you screamed your son's name when he ran into the street to fetch a kite that the wind had pulled out of his hands. Your voice was so loud that it ricocheted off of your neighbor's garage door. Your son turned around to look at you and froze, but thankfully the driver

coming around the bend slammed on the brakes in time. You wrapped your arms around your son's small body, squeezed too tight, and said, "Don't you ever do that again." He cried, and you stopped his tears with the promise of sugar. You went into the house and split a pint of ice cream. What you would do to feel ice cream cold in your throat, which now feels like it's all rough edges, pieces of sandpaper forced into the shape of a funnel. If you were to yell out now, your words would not be discernible from even across the living room. It'd sound like someone shuffling across your grandparents' shag carpet in slippers.

Before this rally, which will likely be your last, you write three letters: one to your son, one to your brother, and one to the first stranger who will loot your home once you are detained. The letters undergo several revisions until all apologies, justifications, and pleas for forgiveness are removed. In their place are easy-to-follow guidelines on how to carry on without you and how to maintain your humanity in this new world. You outline who gets what, which resources are where, and who can still be trusted. You remove any remnants of sentimentality so that the letters are less likely to be confiscated as if wringing out a towel; droplets of *I love you's* and *I'll miss you's* fall to the ground in time with the tears you did not feel until just now.

Gunfire erupts somewhere outside and you instinctively run toward your son's room before you remember that he's already been taken from your home, which was redlined as nontraditional. You still don't sleep on your partner's side of the bed out of respect to the memory of her body's weight next to yours.

You drink the last of your tea and pack your bag with your remaining supplies before walking outside. You stare into the sun until your eyes ache. Someone screams, and you try to suppress the jealousy that makes your throat feel even drier than it already was, like you've swallowed a handful of sand. When you bite down, you swear that you feel some of those grains work between your back molars, but remember that it's the gritty dregs of the tea that you didn't strain. The scream is silenced by more gunshots, and you think of your neighborhood's former soundscape: ill-positioned sprinklers watering the concrete, garbage truck levers creaking, runners' feet thudding against the sidewalk, their dogs' paws producing lighter thuds in double time.

Other women emerge from their homes at the same time and join you until you are all one silent wall. You press forward, and as others join, you all walk in unison, but this does not look like a march. Each step is carrying a different kind of weight. And each A marks a different story. Soon, you are several rows deep, now a block of bodies that do not stop even when the gunfire gets louder. When the shrill screech of a loudspeaker and the instructions to stand down make you want to cover your ears. When the heat unsteadies you and blurs your vision. The man holding the loudspeaker says he will give two more warnings before you are detained or executed.

Now, you all come to a stop and speak with your hands as you had planned, and for the first time, you feel the power of your voice coming through your body.

We will not be silent.

Gene Twaronite is a poet, essayist, and author of eight books, including two juvenile fantasy novels and two short story collections. His latest book of poems is The Museum of Unwearable Shoes, Kelsay Books. Gene has always been fascinated by poetry's ability to convey entire worlds of thought and feeling within a few lines of compressed expression. A native New Englander, he is now a confirmed desert rat residing in Tucson. Follow more of Gene's writing at his website: thetwaronitezone.com.

Food Chain

Gene Twaronite

I was out walking my dog. It's not really a dog, but a banana slug. And most of the time, we move so slowly it looks as if we're standing still. I saw it in a pet shop and was immediately attracted by its bright yellow color and the fact that it would be a good fit for my small apartment. Its color also matched my sofa perfectly. I find, though, that people are more accepting when I tell them it's a dog rather than a slug. They're always coming up to me, asking what breed it is. "It's a miniature banana poo," I tell them. "It's adorable," they say. "Where is its head?" Inevitably someone will try to pet it and immediately pull back with a disgusted look. "Ugh! It's slimy! You should really wash him more often. Or is it a she?" Actually, it's a hermaphrodite, but that sounds way too technical for a dog conversation. So I tell them, "It looked like a she, so I decided to call her Sylvia. And she doesn't like baths." This morning it was the usual reminder about leash laws. "Your dog needs to be on a leash," said the local busybody, shaking her finger. "You don't want your little Sylvia running amuck and threatening other dogs, do you?" So I tell her, "A few months back, she was hit by a car and can hardly crawl now, but we get along alright. Her neck was broken in three places and it still hurts her to wear a leash." The real reason, of course, is that I could never find a leash that would stay on. She just oozes right out of it. "Poor little thing. You're so patient and kind. She's so lucky to have an owner like you." I smile and nod. "Thanks, well, we have to go now. Nice talking to you." I turned and resumed our walk when out of nowhere a raven swooped down and carried poor Sylvia away. I stared into the empty blue sky, thinking back to that first moment when I brought her home from the pet shop. At least she didn't suffer long. And her death would not be in vain, her tiny yellow body going to a better place, feeding the cycle of life. Guess she won't need her shots now. Wonder if the pet shop will take back the terrarium.

Having earned her MFA from San Jose State University in 2016, **Kym Cunningham** is currently pursuing her PhD in Creative Writing at University of Louisiana-Lafayette, assuming she has not yet been eaten by alligators. She has received multiple awards for her writing and has been published in more than two dozen literary journals and anthologies. Her debut essay collection, *Difficulty Swallowing*, was published by Atmosphere Press in 2019, following the publication of her poetry chapbook, *l'appel du vide*, in 2018.

that which is not nothing

Kym Cunningham

Begin with the skin, a language *based on oppositions*.¹ It was the first thing I saw: the tightness stretched over your shoulders, tension in that which ran underneath. Your hand was outstretched, reaching for something to hold, your body suspended before the fall in relief. It never occurred to me that beauty was juxtaposition, embodied.

My belly looks pale under your hand's caress, the darkest part of you against the whitest part of me, all a matter of exposure. It is impossible to look at you and not see the California sun threading your veins, skin emanating warmth, like the butter browned before bringing sugar to boil, a saltiness lingering. I feel a cramp of guilt every time we refer to you as caramel. I know we are making your skin consumable, something to be taken from you and eaten. Looking at you coats my tongue in sugar. This should embarrass me.

We don't talk about my skin the same way, but I wonder if it's because my skin is oil to your butter—something unapproachable, a barrier that never seems to go away. Easily separated from water. Unappealing. Something that resists.

Or maybe it's because every time I brush my fingers over your smooth warmth I can't help but think of square candies in plastic wrap and how you dissolve in my mouth the same way. And I wonder if being a writer makes me want to reveal this to you in the language we share, or if this is when language fails us. And I wonder if you not being a writer means you don't have the words, or don't have the relationship with words that I have, this desire to communicate that which seems uncommunicable becoming some animal urge that begins in my throat. You're just pink, you say and

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smile through crooked teeth. *The symptom is a metaphor ... just as desire is a metonymy.*²

Your mother offered me the gift of fire, diospyros kaki, the god-fire fruit. One of the oldest cultivated plants, introduced to California by way of Japan—of course. I had never eaten it before, couldn't remember if I had ever seen one even, and when she offered the sunset slices, I looked to you for reassurance. What is it? Kaki, you replied and I stifled a laugh at the fruit that sounded too much like caca. You smiled knowingly. Just eat it; you'll like it. You had long since realized I preferred the sweeter foods in life, astounded by the quantity I could consume in a single sitting: two pounds of grapes, ten clementines, a bag of dried mango—the kind of eating habits would have sent my theoretical dentist into a fit if I ever went.

I plucked the skinned quarter from the plate, almost dropping it when it slipped from my fingers. It tasted like maple syrup but better—straight fruit sugar, jello without the chemical aftertaste. I learned to strain the jelly through my teeth, always a sucker for consistency. That first time, I ate so many I almost made myself sick, my belly pressed heavily against the button of my pants, leaving an imprint. *Full because we always desire, futile because we are never satisfied.*³ Your mother sent me home with a paper grocery bag so full that one of the handles broke from the weight.

After I realized the peel was edible, I began eating kaki four, five at a time, plucking off the hardened clover leaves at the top, emptying the bag at a rate that astonished even you. I bought more at the grocery store, 3/\$1 because we lived in California, the land of plenty. The next time we visited your mom, I was a kaki expert; I could tell ripeness based on the feel of the orange globe in my hand. The softer they are, the sweeter they'll taste. But I'd found my preferred balance in the half-matured fibers, the ones with the greatest textural difference between the peel and the meat that remained whole against my teeth, not dissolving into mush at the hint of pressure to drip, unladylike, down my chin.

I will never forget the horror on your mother's face at the sight of my teeth against the persimmon's skin. The flesh gives way easy as the fruit disrobes for the mouth. Your mother peeled the skin off all fruit: kaki, apples, asian pears—or were they just pears in this context? I learned to call them pear-apples because qualifying them as asian made me uncomfortable. *To exist is to be called into being in relation to an Otherness.*⁴

Peeling makes them sweeter, you said when I asked. You explained that in Japan fruit is considered dessert. The desire is to render them as sweet as possible: flay the skin from the flesh, deconstruct the self from the Other.

But the skin holds all the nutrients, I argued, pushing for rationality.

² Lacan 439

³ Halberstam 939

⁴ Bhabha 187

Peeling them removes the healthiest part. Your mother looked at you, one eyebrow raised. You translated—I think. A small price to pay for a taste of life’s sweetness.

The only thing sweeter than a fresh persimmon-sans-skin were the kaki your mother dried or perhaps dehydrated: we never were clear on what she did before she stuck them in the freezer. She brought them out, her forehead creased in concern. She’s worried they’ve gone moldy, you said, looking at the blood-colored wrinkles lined in white. I took one, turned it over, brought fruit to my nose. Inhaled.

It’s just sugar, I said, surprised you couldn’t recognize kin. I opened my mouth for communion. Crystals the first thing that touches the tongue. A shock. I peeled away another piece, offering you knowledge of sugar and the forbidden fruit. You took it without question, mouth closing around my skin. We are destined to spend our lives toiling cursed ground.

*Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent.*⁵ After I left California, I found persimmons in the store, but they were divided: American and Japanese. I had never seen the American—a small pumpkin sharpened to the point of a heart. It was still more expensive than in the land of plenty, but I had gone too long without sugar and my tongue yearned for sweetness. An impulse, a luxury to remind me of the home buried in your mouth.

I didn’t realize the difference until I bit into the fruit and my mouth dried shut, as though I had stuck my tongue in sand. I rinsed my mouth with water from the tap. Maybe it wasn’t ripe enough yet? I waited three days before biting into another. My mouth desiccated a second time, and I threw the fruit out, offended. I had never been attacked by a fruit before.

The unripe American is an astringent. *If one fed the gods, the human race would be saved.*⁶

We return to your childhood home, where your mother has replaced you and your brother with Japanese tenants, dividing the rooms into a series of hallways and add-ons that resemble the mystery house fifteen minutes away. I am charmed by the complexity, how your home turned into one for so many. I look for secret staircases with a gleam in my eye. You shake your head. None of it is up to code. Your older brother—more practical—says you’ll have to tear it down when she dies. Sell the lot. Start fresh. You say nothing, but I see your fingers linger on the wood panels. I wonder what it means that your home is a place instead of a self or an Other.

*I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry home on my back.*⁷ It’s not that I don’t feel drawn to California, same-same but different from how I feel drawn to you, as if anyone could be drawn to a place the way we are drawn to

⁵ Anzaldúa 72

⁶ Anzaldúa 55

⁷ Anzaldúa 43

people. But maybe that's just my locational infidelity showing. It's just that I know what it is to be an outsider, that the question—where are you from—is asked not because of my skin, but because something about me shows the seams of belonging, the limitations of adaptation, the ability to forget oneself in relation to surroundings. I know the way I move is a facet of my whiteness, this belief in man-i-fleshed destiny that allows me to make home wherever I choose, given the right people. But I wonder if the question tastes different to you, if it makes you bristle under your tongue. You have never been from anywhere besides California. But even there the issue of belonging hangs in the air like the promise of rain.

We are the drought. It took me years to see the similarities because I always thought of fitting in as a matter of location. I didn't speak with a place's tongue; I didn't act with its hands, ergo the not-fitting-in. But the ways you spoke were as important as what you didn't say, like when I asked if your name was pronounced with or without an accent—E(a)rnest or Ernést. You said you couldn't hear the difference, although you were named for your father, Ernesto—sin acento. A father who left, who never taught you the words to the Spanish love songs he crooned on the guitar he passed down—with his name—to you, not to your brother, the first-born. *A tension of meaning and being.*⁸

You are embarrassed when we eat at the restaurant across from your old San José apartment, La Peñita, and they ask, algo de beber, the question that is not a question but an expectation. I reply en gringa, the metal bar in my mouth preventing the rolling rrrrs of a native speaker. A tongue burdened by honey. You stare down at the menu in silence, a calculated non-gesture. You already know what you want.

I could teach you Spanish, I offer. It might not be good but at least it'll be something. Your eyes blaze for a moment before you shrug. It's too late.

*Una herida abierta.*⁹ You feel the edges most clearly against your father, a great bear of a man, who walks us around his Las Vegas photography studio. He shows us his time-lapsed night skies, his rock formations, the days he spends trying to capture Nature that he never spent around you. He is delighted at my butchered translations of the descriptions of his pictures, smiling magnanimously, eyes sparkling. Your eyes are a desert, your mouth the horizon, biting your tongue to keep from cursing him for the language he never taught you. Desire is what gets caught in our teeth.

At least your mom taught you Japanese, I suggest, knowing your counter: I don't look Japanese. *An eye for an I,*¹⁰ we suffer *between mask and*

⁸ Bhabha 205

⁹ Anzaldúa 25

¹⁰ Bhabha 198

*identity.*¹¹ No matter how hard we try, belonging always seems wrapped up in appearances, the way identity feels only skin deep. It's the part of us that reflects in the eyes of others, assumptions blocking the reception of our speech. We see what we assume. We hear what we want.

*Identity [is] a compelling illusion, an object of belief.*¹²

Your mother taught me a few words at my prodding, like how to call you unchi a tama—poop head. I don't know if it's the word or my mispronunciation that makes you both smile the same way, lips wide and unabashed, eyes crinkling at the edges like almonds. You're both mindful enough not to laugh at me the way you laugh at each other, hand-over-mouth to cover your teeth. Until I met your mother, I thought your gestures were your own, the same way you thought my inflections were unique before you met my family. God you sound like your brother right now, you said once during a fight. I couldn't tell if you were annoyed at my stubbornness or at my refusal to not pull at gender's seams.

*It is remarkably easy in this society to not look like a woman.*¹³ The lines in my face and the angles of my cheeks sharpen in the half-light of a bar. I always thought I looked fragile in comparison to you, not realizing my hooded layers of jacket and shorn hair outline the similarities in our bodies. The bartender assumes we're just two dudes having a drink. The mis/translation of my smoker's voice makes us both laugh. We know it's not the first time this has happened. Your eyes lock on the scythes of my legs. It won't be the last.

I never feel embarrassed when it happens, although as I grow out my hair it happens less and less. I'm always curious at how self-conscious the other person appears once he realizes the mistake, if we can call it that, and I feel a kind of vicarious anxiety. I want to reassure him. *This is just an act.*¹⁴

But there can be no reassurance for the difference in the ways our bodies are treated: mine for being Woman in the right lighting, yours for being Brown under the blue/red flash of lights. I remember the first time you told me about being spread-eagled on the hood of a cop car. I saw your face against the grime, the muscles in your back rippling, the black gothic letters—all power to the people—rendered visible against the sweat soaking through your white t-shirt. It was the first time I realized how differently cops treated our bodies, how when they stopped me, asked me where I was going or who I was meeting, *the threat of the (mis)translation*¹⁵ for me might be arrest but for you could mean death. The taste of white privilege like saltines in my throat. Desiccated. I couldn't help but wonder at what point your body became a

¹¹ Bhabha 206

¹² Butler 520

¹³ Halberstam 953

¹⁴ Butler 527

¹⁵ Bhabha 203

threat.

Was it when you started lifting weights and rock climbing, building shoulders like boulders to be scaled? Was it when you turned 15, and your dad took you aside—one of few instances of paternal lucidity—explaining: do not resist. Was it when you started to question why you shouldn't resist, why resistance from me was less dangerous than resistance from you, or at least, that's what will be seen? I remember how difficult it was for me to imagine your body as dangerous. How it still is.

I have never felt safer than when my body is thrown against yours, *not comfortable but home*.¹⁶ It's something beyond comfort, something that begins in the smell of the dark curled inside your armpits and the way your throat catches light. It's the horizontal row of four moles under your left eye that lets me know you were marked for me from birth. *We're not supposed to remember such otherworldly events*.¹⁷

You're so dramatic, you say but can't hide your smile from me, no more than you can hide yourself. *The desire for Other is doubled by the desire in language, which splits the difference between Self and Other so that both positions are partial; neither is sufficient unto itself*.¹⁸ It's not that we are not self-sufficient without each other, but rather the splitting of ourselves around other people shows the breakages in manifesting Identity with a capital I/Eye.

He's just so quiet, people say about you—opposites attract. They are referring, I believe, to the fact that my voice fills whatever room I am in, although I do not think of myself as loud, just as I don't think of you as quiet, shy, reserved—any of the adjectives repeatedly used in your description. After all, I have seen you get into fights, scream, laugh until you cry—a volatility that mirrors my own—just as you have seen me sit days in silence, listening—a calmness no one would suspect. I know we only show parts of ourselves to other people, what we want them to see, but I can't help but think that they see you as reserved only after realizing your mother is Japanese, just as my whiteness leaks out into public spaces. Or maybe it's the fact that I am Woman and therefore should be quiet and reserved, and when I am not, my whiteness magnifies, expands endlessly. But you don't shrink against me. If anything, we melt. I wonder if the oil of my skin presents a barrier to the perception of others, something that clouds their eyes, plays tricks on them, refracts the light.

Because that is the difference, splitting the seams of Identity. You don't see me the way I want to be seen, the way I let others see me. You see all of me, even the things I try to hide from myself. I wonder, then, if in love the mask slips, and we become wholly ourselves, whatever that means.

In Spanish, a term of endearment for a partner is *mi media naranja*—

¹⁶ Anzaldúa 19

¹⁷ Anzaldúa 58

¹⁸ Bhabha 193

my half-orange. I always thought it a translation for the English version of better half. Now I wonder if it refers instead to the self that remains hidden except to those we love, to those who see us not split but whole as we are. A completeness that grows from the combination of juice and flesh. I offer you a slice and you hold nothing back. We change positions as *the signifier ... enters the signified*.¹⁹ The taste of you sweet and acid on my tongue.

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¹⁹ Lacan 417

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On Darkness

Jordan Charlton

At a campsite off an Oklahoma dirt road,
we settled in the cool of the night
amidst the buzz of cicadas, the coos of owls,
the evening breeze washing over us;
you in your hammock, rocking
sometimes to adjust your reading light,
or because I nudged you with my foot.

When this close to the elms, red cedars,
the oaks, you hear them sing a new song,
a gift only heard in the silence of night.
The sound is heaven and if you're fortunate,
you'll hear it more than once in a lifetime.
But I wasn't focused on the gift
that evening. What held my attention

while I lay in the dirt—was you
saying you felt more like a white woman
than a black one. And maybe it was because
you look like your mother; that I'd never pass,
though you could, if you chose; that I'd seen
too many like me, like us, I'd thought
sent into the earth, their mothers left childless;

maybe it was the fear of my mother childless;
the sight of fathers, like yours, dark as the night,
as the feeling of grief knowing your advice for survival
had been rendered useless. Maybe that is why
I did not realize, while lying in the dirt,
that if we had only remained silent
we could have heard God speak directly to us.

Joshua Storrs lives in Pittsburgh, where he makes comics, zines, and other things with his friends. His work has appeared in Jersey Devil Press, Barren Magazine, and others. His website is JoshuaStorrs.com, and his favorite animals eat trash.

The Puppet-King

Joshua Storrs

Three weeks before his seventy-eighth birthday, the king died peacefully in his sleep. The next day, he entered the throne room, sat down, and waved for the guards to let in the day's petitioners. Some court members were confused. They had seen his health deteriorating over the past months, but today he seemed fine. Better, even, than he had before. His stride was steady and confident and the rasp in his throat had all but disappeared. Those who stood close enough to him could smell frankincense and lemons.

Most distressed of course was the king's heiress. In the weeks leading up to the king's death, the princess had been caught filling miles of parchment with plans for her future kingdom. She'd picked out replacements for much of the royal court, including the physician to the king, the high clergy, and the court wizard. She bore no ill will towards her father, but on the day the king made his apparent recovery, the princess had to recluse herself in her chambers to keep her tantrum a secret.

Much of the court, however, breathed a sigh of relief, happy to have held on to their positions for a little longer. The master of ceremonies threw a festival to celebrate the king's miraculous recovery. The high clergy gave a rousing sermon of hope and thankfulness. The physician to the king and the master alchemist both claimed responsibility for the king's return to health, but neither of them dared to challenge the claims of the other for fear the court would surmise the truth: that neither of them had anything to do with it.

In reality, the king's continued presence on the throne was the work of the court wizard, who knew of the princess's plan to replace him. The wizard hadn't so much brought the king back to life as taught his corpse to walk and talk, animating him around the castle every day like a puppet. To avoid suspicion he tried to make the king act like he had before his death, and he used a balm made from frankincense and lemons to hide the smell.

But the wizard's new job security was not to last. About a week after the king's death, when the last petitioner was gone and the court was getting ready to retire for the day, the lights through the windows dimmed. The only thing left to illuminate the hall was the two hundred-or-so candles fixed to the columns and chandeliers. But just as the light dimmed, a breeze swept

through the hall, despite all the windows being closed. In a few seconds, each of the two-hundred-or-so candles winked out, and the court was left in almost total darkness. Before anyone could find a match, a new source of light appeared, first as a dull glow then slowly brighter. It undulated back and forth across every color of the rainbow. The light hit the columns and projected shadows up the walls, and as it filtered through the chandeliers it stretched tangled spider webs across the ceiling.

The light emanated from a point in the air above the throne, shifting from red to yellow to green, and so on. Some only saw a faint blur of light, but others could make out the vague shape of a man. The king's body looked up in reserved surprise, because it seemed to the wizard like the sort of thing the king would do.

A voice crept from the light across the hall, first a whisper, then loud and solid.

"Strange to see that face on the throne," it said. "When I'm certain I died last week."

Understanding dawned on some court members faster than others, but the wizard was quick to recognize what was happening. This could spell the end of his scheme. The court wouldn't accept the authority of his corpse-puppet for long with the king's ghost floating around.

"If I were corporeal right now I'd personally throw the person responsible for this down the palace steps right now," said the ghost. "But I trust you all will do that for me. Now, who—"

"Excuse me," said the king's body, interrupting. "Exactly who are you supposed to be?"

The ghost looked down at his body for a moment before he realized what was happening.

"Oh I see," said the ghost. "Someone thinks they're clever." He turned back to the court. "Someone shut this thing up."

"Is this a joke?" In a move of quick thinking, the puppet-king looked straight at the wizard. "Are you pulling a prank on us, wizard?"

"No, my lord!" said the wizard, talking to himself in the most absurd way imaginable.

"Because it's not very funny."

"Certainly not, my lord."

"Hey!" shouted the ghost, his colors cycling faster. "I'm the king, I'm dead, and I've come back to tell you that that thing on the throne is not me. Now enough of this. Do you know how difficult it is to assume spectral form after you're dead?"

The puppet-king rested his cheek on his palm like he was waiting for someone to stop annoying him.

"Is it harder than assuming spectral form when you're alive?"

Chuckles from the court.

The ghost stared dumbstruck at the court for a moment before speaking again.

“Oh my god if you all don’t . . .”

But the ghost’s voice was fading away, and they couldn’t make out the rest.

After a moment of bewildered silence, someone struck a match and began re-lighting the great hall’s two-hundred-or-so candles. As the light in the room rose, so did the noise. Murmurs grew to talking that grew to shouting and before long the great hall was churning with angry shrieks as each argument tried to be the loudest. Court members would change who they were shouting at mid-sentence, losing track of what and with whom they were arguing. By the time the last candle was lit, nobody had any idea where they stood or what their opinion was.

The master alchemist shouted at the spymaster that the ghost was only a complex optical illusion. The court justice, who had noticed the alchemist shouting at the spymaster, declared that the spymaster had placed an impostor on the throne in order to seize power. The spymaster (who was actually someone disguised as the spymaster today so the real spymaster could sleep in) told the court justice to go jump in a lake.

The princess didn’t shout anything, but simply squinted at the puppet-king for a while, then left. This worried the wizard, who had been trying to use the puppet-king to shout at everyone to calm down. But half the court was convinced they no longer needed to respect the king’s wishes, and the other half couldn’t hear anything anyway. After a while, the wizard gave up, and both he and the puppet-king retired for the day, leaving the great hall to boil down to an angry simmer.

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The next morning, the wizard entered the great hall just after the puppet king, confident that he could hide under the confusion for at least a few more days. But when he got there, the entire court turned and looked straight at him. Standing in the great hall, just in front of the throne and facing the court was the princess and another woman about the princess’s age. The woman was dressed in opalite robes that glittered with light, with an array of decorative baubles hanging around her neck. The wizard recognized her as a close personal friend to the princess. She was also the mage slated to replace the wizard once the princess came to power.

“Did you think we wouldn’t find you out, wizard?” bristled the princess. “You’re not the only one with magic here.”

The wizard made his face into a wide assortment of shocked and insulted shapes.

“Don’t play dumb,” said the mage, more to the court than the wizard. “A wizard can always sense the magic of another wizard, and I can assure everyone here that the court wizard has strung up our dear king’s body like a

marionette so he might seize the kingdom for himself!”

The wizard infused his voice with sputtering shock.

“Ridiculous! You’re just angry your father isn’t dead, so you’ve had your mage cook up a cheap illusion to hurry up your inheritance.”

The wizard knew he would never convince the court by having the puppet-king side with him on everything, so he made the puppet-king sit up, indignant.

“Watch your tongue, wizard,” said the corpse. “That’s my daughter you’re talking to.”

“Sorry your grace, but it’s obvious,” said the wizard. “The mage is even dressed in the same colors as the ghost.”

The heads of the court all turned in unison to the mage, whose robes indeed bore a strong resemblance to the specter’s lightshow. The mage puffed out her chest.

“I dress myself in the colors of the late king to honor his memory,” she said. “And to help him carry out his wishes so his spirit might pass on.”

The wizard rolled his eyes. The mage would know that this was not how ghosts worked, and was only saying this to win over the crowd. But similarly, the mage was right that a magician could always sense when spells were at play, and no spell was responsible for the king’s spectral appearance. The ghost was real, and both the wizard and the mage were counting on the court knowing next to nothing about their discipline.

“My spirit is still right here thank you,” said the puppet-king, “and doesn’t appreciate being talked about as if it isn’t.”

The mage continued the argument by encouraging the crowd to remember how sick the king had been, and to recognize that while several court members had claimed responsibility for his recovery, none of them could describe how they did it. In turn the wizard used both his voice and the voice of the puppet-king to sow doubt in the spaces between the mage’s words. How could anyone accuse the king of being dead when the king was right here to speak for himself?

“Because!” burst the princess, wheeling on the puppet-king and shoving a finger at him, “You’re not the king! You’re a sock puppet with the wizard’s hand behind your lips!”

The puppet-king leaned forward and smiled at the princess as if his daughter were still a child.

“If you really thought that, then why are you talking to the puppet?”

The princess whirled around and glared across the great hall at the wizard, who put his palms up innocently.

“This is stupid!” said a voice. The crowd looked around to see who had spoken. It was the spymaster (the real one), who today was dressed as a trumpeter. The crowd parted to give her room to speak.

“This is getting us nowhere,” she said, waving her trumpet back and

forth between the mage and the wizard. "We'll have to come up with a test to see which king is the real one."

"You assume the specter will return," said a voice from somewhere in the crowd. Probably the court justice.

"I assure you it will," said the mage. "The king cannot rest as long as this injustice persists."

"Baloney!" cried the wizard. "The only way you can say it will appear again is because you're the one conjuring it!"

Both the mage and the wizard started shouting at each other loud enough that nobody could make out what they were saying. This continued until the spymaster blasted them with her trumpet.

"If nobody has any better ideas," yelled the spymaster, "We should—"

"Ask them something only the king would know!" yelled a voice. The court justice again. The spymaster glared at him for a moment, but after a few calls of "herehere!", she gave in.

"Fine, worth a try. What should we—"

"But what question should we pose to them?" interrupted the court justice again. He ignored another glare from the spymaster, which missed him and was accidentally caught by the royal winemaker, who fainted.

"Ask him about his favorite play!" called the palace playwright.

"Too easy, everyone knows that!" said someone else.

"What's his childhood nickname!"

"A recurring dream!"

"Her majesty the princess ought to know a few personal details," suggested someone. "Have her think of a question."

"Right, and what would stop the princess from coming up with something only her mage would know?" complained the wizard.

"Everyone be quiet!" yelled the spymaster. Miraculously, everyone stopped talking.

"We need to send the king, the princess, the wizard and the mage out of the room while we think of a question. That way, whoever the fake king is won't have time to prepare an answer."

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the room. The court justice scrunched up his face, trying to come up with a problem with the spymaster's plan, but couldn't.

The wizard left without complaint, followed by the princess and the mage. The puppet-king gave a few half-hearted protests at the inconvenience but left with the rest of them all the same.

The four of them stood across from each other outside the doors of the great hall. Below them, the line of peasants waiting to petition the king stretched all the way down the palace stairs, through the gates, and around a corner. The line hadn't moved since the ghost appeared.

The wizard tried to keep his face in a neutral expression as he melted

internally with panic. The ghost would be able to answer any question with the truth, and he was having a hard time coming up with a clever way out of this. As he stood there fretting, the princess glowered at him.

"The king gave you the highest position you could ever hope for," hissed the princess. "And this is how you thank him? History will remember you as a usurper."

The wizard said nothing. There was no point in arguing with present company.

"A pretty cheap necromancer too," said the mage, smirking as she polished one of her necklaces with one sleeve. "I can smell whatever you've soaked him in from across the hall. Did you forget to compose a spell to stop him from rotting?"

Anger the wizard could ignore, but this was too much, especially considering what the wizard knew about the mage's background.

"The day I let a spoiled academy dropout tell me what is and isn't cheap magic is the day I take up card tricks," said the wizard. The mage seemed pleased to have gotten a reaction. "And you should look up the difference between necromancy and animation. It would be embarrassing if the new court wizard couldn't even tell one discipline from another."

The mage's smirk fell.

The court deliberated into the early afternoon. With every passing hour the mage had to expend more effort to hide his panic, and had less energy leftover to make the puppet-king act natural. By one o'clock, the king's body was standing stiff as a board, blankly gaping down the line of peasants. It didn't really matter. He wasn't trying to convince the princess or the mage anymore, and there wasn't anyone else around worth worrying about.

Finally, the four of them were invited back into the great hall. The court was silent as they watched them enter. Standing near the throne was the spymaster and the court justice. The wizard couldn't decide who made him more nervous, the court justice, who wore the expression of a man who thought he had just solved a very complicated riddle, or the spymaster who watched the puppet king with an almost mechanical focus and wore no expression at all.

They gathered around the throne. The court justice opened his mouth to speak, but stopped when a familiar breeze swept through the hall. Once again, the light through the windows dimmed, and every candle flickered out.

"Well?" said the king, once again casting the hall in shifting rainbows. "Have you figured it out yet? Or do I have to keep haunting you?"

The ghost looked around at the silent crowd until he saw his body, sitting once again in the throne.

"That's disappointing."

"Forgive us your majesty." declared the court justice. "But to discern

the truth of this matter, we must ask a question to determine your legitimacy.”

The ghost let his gaze shift over the wizard, the princess, and the mage, slowly assembling an understanding of the situation, then looked back to the justice.

“Very well, fine,” said the ghost.

“Your majesty, when the barbarian hordes descended from the west, you deployed your spies to impersonate the enemy messengers and confuse their tactics. Tell us, how were they able to decode the enemy ciphers?”

The question was technical, it was specific, and the only people who would know the answer would be the king himself, and the spymaster. The king’s ghost smiled and stared straight at the wizard, but before he could say anything, the puppet-king spoke.

“Right, like I’m going to divulge matters of intelligence for the sake of winning an argument with a fake spook.”

The ghost flashed his colors like lighting, “I will not be chided by my own corpse!” he thundered. “If you can’t keep your rotting mouth shut—”

“You’ll what?” yelled the puppet-king, standing up. “The nerve of this thing! I am the king and I will not be silenced by a puff of smoke.”

“Puff of smoke!”

The words of the two kings were lost in the mix of their bickering. The court justice turned to the spymaster.

“I could have told you your question wouldn’t work.”

Then, spreading his arms and addressing the kings.

“Your majesties!” he shouted. They both glared at him.

“Perhaps another question might be more suitable. If you would kindly tell us who in the court holds your greatest favor?”

Behind him, the spymaster rolled her eyes and gave up. As she left the room, the ghost said his favorite was the princess of course. The puppet-king said it was the court justice. Then they started fighting again, which continued until the ghost faded from the great hall and was replaced with evening light.

#

The following day, the master alchemist and the royal winemaker had prepared a special Merlot that they claimed could be consumed by those on the spectral plane and not by illusions, but when the ghost drank it, the wine only turned him bright pink as it passed through him and splashed across the floor. The alchemist had no idea what this meant, and declared the test inconclusive. The day after that, the physician to the king quizzed the two kings on the medical recommendations he’d issued over the years, but the puppet-king claimed these were too embarrassing to name, and the ghost couldn’t remember.

On the fourth day the puppet-king ordered the master of ceremonies to declare a flower-themed festival, and the great hall was covered in bloom. The throne itself was framed by a mountainous flower arrangement, the effect

being that a suffocating floral odor now covered any other smell that might have been in the room, from the faintest fart to something as foul as a rotting corpse.

The trials continued for about a week. Each day the wizard came up with different ways to either dodge the question or throw the real king's actions into doubt, and each day the ghost grew more and more annoyed. At night the wizard retreated to his library, working furiously to compose a spell to banish a ghost. The spell was so complicated and so difficult that the wizard scarcely had time for anything else. But on the seventh day of tests, he was finished.

When the wizard entered the court halfway through the day, the ghost was already there, hovering above the throne as always.

"—and if we take notes on their word choices, rhythms and syntax," the court jester was saying, "and cross reference that to court records from the year before, we should be able to—"

"This has gone on long enough!" shouted the wizard, marching straight for the mage, not even looking at the ghost. "I've discovered your secret, mage!"

Before the mage could react, the wizard grabbed one of her necklaces and yanked it off her neck. At the same time, he muttered the incantation he'd been working on all week.

All at once, the bounds between the corporeal and astral planes thickened, grew taut and solid. Anything straddling the barrier between the living and the dead was caught in a paralyzing shock, and was wrenched from material plane like a sheet from a clothesline. This took less than a second. All the court saw was the king's ghost freeze, then vanish.

The mage stared at the wizard, processing. It didn't matter that she could sense the wizard's magic. The court had just seen a trinket ripped away from her neck, followed by the ghost disappearing.

The lights in the hall returned. Silently, the court waited to see what their "rightful" ruler would do. The puppet-king stood.

"Guards," he said, calmly raising one arm and pointing to the mage. "Take this charlatan to dungeons." The guards moved towards the mage, and the puppet-king turned to point at the princess.

Then his arm fell off.

It dropped from his shoulder, slid out of his sleeve, and hit the floor with a squelch. The guards stopped and stared at the arm on the floor, oozing fluids, still pointing at the princess. Had the wizard not spent all week composing magic to dispel a ghost, he might have been able to write something to stop a body from decaying, but spectral banishment is tricky, and there's only so much time in the day.

#

Three weeks after his death, on what would have been his seventy-

eighth birthday, the king's daughter was installed as the new ruler of the kingdom. Half of the old king's court got to keep their jobs. Those who were replaced had almost invariably supported the puppet-king. The court justice was demoted to regional judge, the master alchemist had to open a small potion shop in the city, and the spymaster was replaced by a man who, a week later, looked a lot like the old spymaster dressed up as the new one.

The court wizard was thrown from the top of the palace steps. He was fine. His fall was cushioned by the line of peasants waiting to petition the king. They had been there a while. The line hadn't moved in over a week.

In the years since, the wizard has been sighted in various towns progressively farther from the capital, mourning the loss of his library and earning money with a wide array of optical illusions, "magical" perfumes, and card tricks.

A Welsh poet and artist, **Roddy Williams** now lives in London. His poetry has appeared in 'The North', 'The Frogmore Papers', 'Magma', 'The Rialto', 'Envoi', and 'The Stand' and was in the Great Weather for Media anthology 'The Other Side of Violet'. His first collection, BBC2, is due to be published soon.

Lovebirds

Roddy Williams

When you say *ketch*
instead of *catch*
it wakens something

Roosts of pigeons in my chest
disturb themselves
and flutter warmth across the ribs

It eggs a smile

Yesterday
you said
I don't know what I'd do without you

The pigeons featherwaved a comfort flush
as I rinsed plates

You'd watch The Walking Dead and eat Crunchies
I said
which was metatalk for

*My love is an ocean of starlings
carving arabesques
about you
constantly dying and being reborn
in new patterns*

Soramimi Hanarejima is a writer of innovative fiction and the author of Visits to the Confabulatorium, a fanciful story collection that Jack Cheng said, "captures moonlight in Ziploc bags." Soramimi's recent work can be found in [PANK], The Esthetic Apostle, Firewords and Tahoma Literary Review.

Maturity

Soramimi Hanarejima

Finally home after a long night out with friends, I am utterly drained, exhausted by attempts to hold conversation in the convivial din of the city's finest oyster house, followed by karaoke—which included *perfectly* harmonized pop-song duets with Wenderly, making the hours of solo practice with my home stereo system completely worth it. I just want to go to bed, but as I set my work bag down by the front door, it reminds me there's something I need to do first.

I head to the desk in the spare bedroom and pick up the envelope that contains my passport and the latest account statement—the documents I'll need to access my emotional trust fund. It matures tomorrow, and I can't wait to finally have *the rest* as my parents still call it—the half of their love, affection, pride, etc., they withheld, certain that emotional abundance would spoil me, resulting in overconfidence and entitlement.

With arms made heavy by fatigue, I put the envelope in my bag then head for the bathroom.

As I smear toothpaste across the bristles of my toothbrush, thoughts of the trust mentally time-warp me back into a school night long ago, when I was six years old, brushing my teeth and wondering what I'd be complimented on—looking forward to that warm nugget of praise I'd receive before bedtime. An encouraging comment from my mom or dad, perhaps followed by a tight hug (mom) or hearty thumbs up (dad) for an additional dose of delightful warmth.

From there, my mind takes me further back in time, to my initiation into that regimen by my mom's brief compliment, "Good job putting on your coat."

I had just finished getting ready for afternoon playtime and was pleased by her words. They held the usual glow of her pride and cheer, and I waited for more. But when she didn't elaborate as she normally did, the praise she had given felt abbreviated—curt, even, compared to the ample approval I was used to.

"Now, let's head out," was all she then said.

That left me puzzled, wondering if something was different—maybe we were in a hurry? But we made our way to the park just as leisurely as ever. Along that familiar route, I watched birds flit about the branches of trees flowering under a deep blue sky and forgot all about what my mom had and hadn't said.

Until dinnertime, when mom said, "I'm proud of how you put on your coat all by yourself this afternoon."

That seemed to have come out of nowhere. I had never received praise out of context before, and I was taken aback by the sudden, gentle heat of these words on my ears then heart.

There it is, I thought, recalling my confusion from hours earlier. Maybe she had forgotten to give me these additional sentiments earlier and remembered them while we were eating the spinach lasagna dad had baked.

I soon learned there had been no lapse in memory. From then on, every time I did something praiseworthy, mom and dad would briefly compliment me in the moment, then again towards the day's end. This established a pattern they continued to build: the division of their affirmation between the present and a later time. And gradually, they lengthened the time separating the immediate and delayed portions of their emotions.

"Remember that bird you pointed out, all huddled up on a high branch of an alder?" dad asked one evening a whole month after that hike when I'd found the roosting bird of prey. "I'm still amazed you noticed it and could tell us it was a spotted owl."

This remark was a radiant bundle of acknowledgment that let me know how significant that moment had been—and still was—to him. Surprising, since all he had said at the time was, "Nice!" So I hadn't thought much of the owl sighting, and it had all but faded from my mind during the weeks afterwards. The loss of that moment to the past was more than reversed by these bright words of postponed praise. They immediately revived that entire afternoon in my mind, showing me that the world was knowable and that I was excelling at getting to know it. I still remember how I had seen the owl as an apostrophe against the sky, then after dad's comment, saw it again in my mind's eye but as a comma on that thin branch, a line in the landscape I was trying to read, and now, I think that maybe I had unknowingly read it as such, pausing in my attempt to absorb the wooded terrain.

Shortly after I started third grade, my parents explained the trust: a safe place where they would save half of their feelings, so I would have them later—especially during what they called *difficult* times. I didn't protest or even ask any questions. At this point, I had been weaned off receiving substantial acknowledgment, craving only morsels of immediate approval. So having affirmation deferred for a number of years didn't bother me. The net effect was simply that I did more praiseworthy things, frequently garnering compliments and steadily building up the trust.

Now, after years of only partial approval and curtailed appreciation, the trust contains prodigious affirmation, holding the promise of propelling my life in new directions. Promises so close to being in my possession that over the past month, I've been daydreaming about what I'll do with this psychological boon: embark upon epic solo sojourns sustained by all their faith in me; launch grandiose creative projects with the backing of their confidence in my abilities; enter into relationships in which I am emotionally generous, secure in my psychological fortunes.

Whatever I end up doing, one thing seems certain: I will no longer need the affirmation of my supervisors at work, the esteem of my colleagues, social validation from friends prone to drama, pleasantries from acquaintances. I will be able to lead a lifestyle of emotional self-sufficiency, punctuated by bouts of psychological extravagance.

Once again, this prospect makes me giddy as I lie awake in bed for the few minutes before sleep comes.

When my alarm goes off an hour before the usual time, I reluctantly leave my bed, groggy and sluggish. I plod into the bathroom where the fatigue is quickly vanquished by thoughts of the turn my life is about to take. Then my recent daydreams are back in full force, and excitement launches me through my morning routine and out into the city.

Carried by jaunty strides down foggy streets, I arrive at my parents' preferred asset management firm just minutes after it's opened for business. Inside, I am soon seated in a plush armchair opposite the desk where an associate reviews the documentation I've brought in, then pulls up my account information on her computer. Once she finds everything to be in order, she escorts me into the vault, a cube of fluorescent light falling on a marble floor and walls tessellated with numbered compartments, like luxe train station lockers.

With the key she furnishes, I unlock the compartment in the left corner that my parents showed me—just twice, to assure me of the emotional plenitude awaiting me. The little metal door swings open, and I recoil at the dearth revealed. The scant, scattered bits of kudos recall the plates of picked-over entrées at the end of restaurant meals with relatives, bearing no resemblance to the luminous heap of pure emotions I saw the last time I was here, when I was in the tight grip of adolescence, new desires and judgments pressing upon my psyche.

"This can't be right," I tell the associate, my heart pounding as it sinks.

"Yes, how very peculiar," she says. "I'll check the records to see if your parents have made any recent transfers."

Though its meager contents hardly seem worth securing, I lock the compartment shut and follow the associate back to her desk. For long, silent minutes, she is focused on her computer screen, wielding a sharp gaze capable

of cutting right to any pertinent detail. The armchair now traps an uncomfortable warmth between its cushions and my body.

Finally, she says, “There must be some error. We’ll look into this and get back to you as promptly as we can.”

She gives me her card, gracefully like some token of concern or sympathy required by business etiquette, then off I go to work.

Throughout the twenty minutes of rush-hour subway riding that follows, I am accompanied by the dread that everything in the trust is gone forever, each lurch of the crowded train car threatening to catapult into oblivion my now tenuous daydreams of psychological affluence. When I get to my company’s building, I linger outside, wanting to call my parents but not wanting them to worry, then wanting to call someone else—all but dialing Wenderly—but not wanting to explain the trust. Afraid that it would influence how people think of me, I’ve never told anyone about the trust. Now this fear overpowers my need for moral support, leaving me alone with little else to do but head up to the office and dive into my usual work: the real-time cognitive editing of the anonymized call center staff members I’ve been assigned for the day.

Mere minutes later, I’m at my desk, headset on, my awareness filled with the conscious and subconscious thoughts of customer support specialists. As I settle into expediently identifying and eliminating emergent and latent negativities, the distress I so keenly felt is utterly ousted from my attention by the permuting plethora of scenes and phrases, vivid and vague, full-fledged and nascent. The work is a breeze, though hardly a refreshing one as I rid these call center employees of unproductive cognitive activity that ranges from daydream musings and personal concerns to the mental equivalent of eye rolling and imagined passive-aggressive repartee. I do this expediently not just because the work is trite, but also because once it’s done, I can move on to editing the attitudinal issues entrenched in these minds.

With the perspective afforded by my remote access, I can see the mechanisms underpinning various mental processes. Our training described this “wide-angle view” as a “side effect” of current thought auditing methodologies, which rely on cognitive dilation achieved by contractually obligating call center staff to keep an open mind when taking calls—ostensibly to better empathize with the customers calling in (though of course, deep in their terms of employment it says that such access may be used for “quality assurance purposes”). And I’m supposed to ignore the perceptual (and manipulative) reach afforded by this arrangement. But when I see problems I can fix, I can’t not fix them. Unresolved, they’ll bother me more. Especially the social anxiety and catastrophizing in the areas of Norene’s mind I’m privy to. So I’ve been eradicating the negative self-talk habit underlying these issues, and I want to finish that off in case she’s never assigned to me again in future rotations.

Norene is the easiest of the anonymized staff to recognize by her patterns of thought, thanks to her mental mannerism of referring to herself by name in her internal monologue. Which often comes into play when she's frustrated at herself and thinks things like, "Another slip-up already! Come on Noree, get it together!" This allows me to gauge the progress I'm making, more so than with others. I know when I'm dealing with her thoughts, and improvement is clear in the form of less denigration.

Once I get her self-talk readjusted, Norene can be more forgiving of her mistakes. She'll still have to build better habits of mind, but some of those should come naturally once her inner critic is subdued.

I make as many of these sorts of modifications as I can across the call center staff assigned to me, in hopes that the alterations will improve mental wellbeing over the long term. Even though this means getting naggy, scoldy reminders from my supervisors not to tackle deeper issues, so we don't "overextend" ourselves.

Norene isn't in my first batch, and instead, I tackle some insecurities creating anxious thoughts I don't recognize about

During my morning break, I head to the lounge for coffee, eager for the comfort of heavy flavors weighing on my tongue, like a thick blanket luxuriously swaddling my palate.

"You're trouncing it today!" Etsa says from the kitchenette area where she's washing out the mug she sips tea from throughout the day, as though it were her workplace pacifier.

In my mind, the soft heat of her cheery words is a hand landing on a bare shoulder.

"Averaging *fifteen* suppressions per minute," she adds, referencing our team's stats board.

"Yeah, great job, guys," Wern joins in from the couch in the corner. "Staff focus is twenty percent above baseline!"

The warmth of this recognition feels good, but I wish I could do without it. Not that I'd blow off their sentiments if I had been able to make my planned withdrawal from the trust, but having the option to spurn them would bring me substantial delight. Especially since the work itself isn't rewarding. Though once I get some of the staff's personal issues fixed, I'm sure that will feel fantastic—be more uplifting than anything anyone here could say.

Over the next couple days, my usual work routine simply keeps running its course, keeping my mind off the mystery of my depleted trust. I edit thoughts, take coffee breaks, slap hot high-fives with coworkers, get feedback from supervisors and go into deeper layers of thought at every opportunity—which pays off.

Norene's internal monologue improves steadily as I coax her mind to replace its long-standing modus operandi of frustrated self-deprecation with

observation and curiosity. And for this guy I call Twitchy (because of his jumpy thoughts), I get his mind to relinquish its restless worry over what callers might complain about next and preoccupying doubts over whether he has left some home appliance on. Then with Ms. Remembering Badly, I finally move beyond the constant obliteration of repetitive, intrusive thoughts about the awful breakup, and I get to work on clarifying for her what was and what (more importantly) wasn't good about that relationship.

Predictably, these efforts are discouraged by thinly veiled admonishment. Wern and other managers send me messages with assurances that they sympathize with my sympathies towards the call center staff, followed by stern requests that I refrain from engaging in “minimally relevant enhancements that could introduce unintended complexities.” This, when I'm honest, does hurt, disheartening me as intended—not enough to stop me but enough to slow my progress. I don't mind the extra work being thankless, but when it's put down, that's demoralizing.

At the end of the workweek, I get a phone call from the asset-management firm during my lunch break. It informs me that an investigation has turned up not the emotions I'm due but instead the unscrupulous—criminal, actually—conduct of an executive. Over the past several years, he appropriated emotions from my trust and other accounts.

“For use in his own parenting, to make up for a long period of neglect,” I'm told.

“In other words, these emotions are now part of someone else's life. Irretrievably,” I say to bring this explanation to its ultimate conclusion.

“Yes,” is all the answer I get.

I want to hurl my phone at the wall.

The call concludes with assurances that compensation will be delivered to me tonight if I am available. I confirm that I am, making a note to cancel my plan to see a movie with Junella and Quintoise after work.

Once the phone call is over, I just sit in my desk chair, entranced by a fantasy about finding the recipient of my childhood praise; stalking this teen (the age my imagination automatically picks for the executive's child) around a neighborhood of massive houses to the expansive, manicured campus of a private school or an upscale shopping center's glassy building; then watching body language and eavesdropping on conversations with friends to find clues of what's become of my parents' feelings for me, to see how they've been valuable to—or wasted on—this kid. Somehow, this fantasy (perhaps the futility of it) quells my outrage. I finish my sandwich, then get back to work.

After dinner, I sit on the sofa, expectant though not sure of what. Outside the living room window, the street darkens, and traffic ebbs as the evening goes on. Eventually, a black van pulls up to the curb. The driver, a courier in a black-tie uniform, exits and opens the sliding door of the van. He takes out a cardboard box the size of a milk crate, which he then holds at his

side by hooking his arm around it, fingers locking over the box's bottom edge by his hip. I'm already at the door when he rings the doorbell. Cordially he asks for a signature and presents me a clipboard with his free hand, the clamped pages flapping slightly in the evening breeze. After scribbling my name on the line with an emphatic x beside it, I hand the clipboard back, and he turns his torso to present me with the box. I place both hands under it and immediately feel heat pushing into my palms.

I take the hefty, toasty cardboard cube to my desk and cut through the packing tape that seals it shut. The top flaps fold out to reveal an envelope lying on a layer of bubble wrap. Within the envelope is a packet of papers, the first page of which is a letter. It reiterates the explanation I got over the phone with some elaboration, then describes the compensation procedure: a review of my fund's specific contents was performed to quantify their "net affect," which was then plugged into an industry-standard formula for calculating compensation. The letter concludes with the amount computed, another apology and information on who to contact if I have any questions or concerns. Ignoring the official signature at the message's end, my gaze snaps back to the amount: ten times the trust's original value in generic sentiments.

The stapled pages accompanying the letter is the deposit record for the trust, starting with this entry:

Distilled Form: Praise 99° 4mg

Original Form From Svaria: I love how you used bright colors in your drawing.

I try to imagine my mother years younger, saying these words that have long-since been rendered as inert text. It takes surprising effort to carry out the mental ventriloquism of getting an idea of her to give this compliment the way she would have to my elementary-school self, her voice full of fervid affirmation. Finally, I succeed. In my thoughts, this single sentence sounds perfectly clear and luminous. A vague memory emerges. In it, mom says, "Beautiful work on that picture of the lake," as she stands beside me hunched over my in-progress artwork on the kitchen counter. Is that the half of this praise I received as a child?

Longing, joy and gratitude spread through me and prevent me from reading further. As a chronicle of my parents' responses to my childhood accomplishments, these pages are now an inventory of what I will never get to fully feel. I will only ever have had one half of each emotion logged here. My parents felt so much, and now that's all gone.

Setting aside these papers, I stretch the bubble wrap, my impatient hands pulling in opposite directions until this bumpy plastic film splits apart to reveal the stunning brilliance of the emotional bounty. I've never seen so much all at once.

Curiosity nudges me into testing the generic emotions. A bit of nonspecific acceptance seems like a good one to start with. I take the little

lump of pure emotion in my hand and curl my fingers over it. A moment later, I'm enveloped in the cozy heat of belonging, like a hug but without the pressure on my torso, just the pleasure of incredible warmth and bright delight. This draws me into further sampling the box's contents. Before I know it, I am gorging myself, full-on luxuriating in anonymous pride, amorphous appreciation, vague joy, general gratitude—probably from people paid to watch films or read literature or practice mindfulness exercises to elicit these feelings. Their emboldening heat and electric energy spiral through me, my eyes and heart opened wide, my being expanded.

Of course, the swirling exhilaration doesn't make me feel any closer to my parents but does make me feel psychologically fortified, as though I've entered a futuristic age in which human contact has long been obsolete. The vitality pervading me is a visceral assurance that the box's contents are of a potency and quantity that can make all my recent daydreams realities. Though those daydreams are now less enticing, hollowed out by the permanent emotional loss.

Nonetheless, I will make them a reality. The emotions I do have now should be put to use. Good use. So first I will make myself impervious to disapproval and reproach with a steady intake of pride. To change the minds I'm assigned to my satisfaction, fixing deeply entrenched patterns of thought to gain some of my own pride before seeking psychological fortunes elsewhere. And this doesn't have to wait entirely until Monday. I can skip out on tomorrow's brunch get-together to draw up plans for remaining modifications I'll need to make for Norene and Twitchy. I'll tell Wenderly something has come up; she'll understand.

That can wait until tomorrow.

There is only one thing I need to do right now: revel in the rapture of emotional independence.

Shutta Crum's poems have appeared in literary journals since the 1970s; including Ann Arbor, (W)rites, The Wayne Literary Review, and The Huron River Review. Over the years, she has placed among finalists in the Current Magazine poetry competitions, and was awarded first place in 2004. These days, a number of her poems have appeared in the AAR2 (online Ann Arbor Review). Her first chapbook When You Get Here will be published in 2020. She has several children's books written in verse published by major publishers, including THUNDER-BOOMER! (Clarion/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) which was a Smithsonian Magazine Notable Book, 2009, and an American Library Assoc. Notable Book, 2010. Her website, for more information, is at: www.shutta.com.

We Meet for Coffee at a Crowded Cafe

Shutta Crum

We bend across the table—two huddled penitents.
Between us coffee, scones, and the dance of your hands
touching the salt and pepper, picking up and replacing
the menu in its metal cage, sweeping specters of crumbs
to the floor—as though dictated
by some mad ricketed choreographer.

I whisper, “Stop.” And press your palms into each other
in the warm cradle of my own. “Breathe. Look at me.”
I know, already, of the bruised jewels you wear
always hidden under cuffs—of the contract made real
with the pressing of his seal upon you.

It is always the subtle injustices one notices first.
Perhaps it was the precision of each of his syllables—
the authorial we angled into eddies of conversation—
as though your life was subtext.

Perhaps it was the we are fine smile that locks doors,
or the flat of his hand, low on your back
steering you swiftly by for the rare glimpse from friends.
But never through the crowds to this cafe.

Never here, where you have finally made your way
like some dazed animal come forward
to finger iron bars for the first time.

Sh-h-h. Drag your eyes from the crowd behind me.
Bow with me across this table. Over these simple coffees
we will plan a mutiny.

Candice Rankin is a creative, non-fiction writer, and poet. Her sonnet, "Modern Mistress of the Moon," is published in a book, Passionate Penholders by Wingless Dreamer. Candice has a love of language and is captivated by stories that expand the human spirit.



Concrete Escape

*Sometimes I want to sit
In this parking lot
Rowing a boat
And daydreaming
About going places*

